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Rombough, Julia. *A Veil of Silence: Women and Sound in the Renaissance*. Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 2024. Pp. 256. ISBN 9780674295810. \$ 55.00 (hardcover).

During the 16th and 17th centuries, concerns about the effects of urban noise on the body and soul led Florentine civic and religious authorities to enact sound legislation, specifically directed at girls and women. *A Veil of Silence: Women and Sound in the Renaissance* investigates the deeply gendered and class-defined soundscapes of early modern Florence. Drawing upon a wealth of archival materials from institutions of refuge and reform, as well as court records and private correspondence, Julia Rombough examines how sound and silence were perceived to influence moral, physical, and spiritual wellbeing—and how they were leveraged as instruments of identity affirmation and control. The author asserts that “women’s institutions, and their soundscapes, were at the center of the intersecting social, political, and religious shifts that define early modern Florence” (5). Rombough’s study focuses on sites of enclosure such as the Orbatello home for impoverished widows, the Malmaritate home for “badly married” women, and the Convertite convent for repentant sex workers, viewed as crucial for understanding societal changes during the period of Medici rule and Catholic reform.

The book opens with an ample introduction outlining the historiographical context of late Renaissance sound legislation, followed by four chapters. Chapter 1, “Space: Communities of Girls and Women,” profiles the institutions that housed girls and women, the reasons for their enclosure, and auditory practices employed to maintain order. Chapter 2, “Noise: Urban Soundscapes and Gender,” considers the sounds girls and women heard daily and their reactions through an examination of archival documents related to three specific groups: women sex workers, unruly male youths, and aggressive men. Chapter 3, “Sound: Bodily and Spiritual Health,” analyzes texts (conduct manuals, health treatises, and spiritual writings) that reveal how early modern Italians interpreted sounds and their respective impacts. Chapter 4, “Silence: Sonic Regulation, Gender, and Reform,” examines the application of sonic regulations and attempts to enforce silence around institutions of enclosure. Rombough’s conclusion is neatly scaffolded and efficiently distills the vast amount of information presented. The volume contains a helpful introductory note on dates, currencies, and measurements. It is also replete with images that complement the text and help readers to better understand the urban topography and soundscapes discussed.

A Veil of Silence offers a unique perspective of late Renaissance Florence through the sonic experiences of girls and women as they relate to moral, social, and religious rectitude. Rombough approaches the notion of gendered space by highlighting often-overlooked components of early modern urban life. While previous studies have explored the role of music in monastic settings, for instance, Rombough redirects attention to less-studied sonic practices and their wide-ranging sociocultural effects. The author shows how gendered spaces shaped individual and collective identities and how shifting political and religious dynamics were central to designating these sites as venues in need of sonic discipline. Rombough explains that “women’s institutions stood as symbols of carefully guarded femininity and of civic and religious order” (66–67) and that unregulated sounds “threatened to dissolve the carefully constructed social, spiritual, sexual, and sonic boundaries that institutional and urban officials worked to uphold” (86). Though the success of these regulatory measures was limited, their persistence indicates an enduring belief in auditory regimes as tools for maintaining control. And despite physical enclosure and imposed regulations, these institutions were never entirely insulated from “noise pollution,” whether it entered from outside or originated from within.

Rombough’s book is thoughtfully organized, well researched, and convincingly argued. The prose is clear and easy to follow, with well-placed subsections that guide readers through the content

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and ensure smooth transitions between topics. Archival documents constitute the majority of the sources consulted (letters, legislations, court documents, etc.), and anecdotal references bring to life the sounds that resonated throughout early modern Florence's buildings, piazzas, and streets. Rombough identifies inherent research challenges—such as gaps in historical records, gendered mediation, and partial or incomplete testimonies—and she clearly outlines the methodological approach taken “...this book is less interested in what early modern Florence actually sounded like and much more interested in what sonic descriptions reveal about social relationships, spatial experiences, and bodily practices” (24). The author skillfully leads readers through the stratified Florentine sonic ecosystem and shows how perceptions of “noise” varied among groups within the same soundscape (elite vs. nonnoble, male vs. female, and religious vs. lay). Rural environments receive brief attention, and the analysis moves beyond spaces of confinement to consider other immaterial sonic expressions of social identity such as loud gameplaying, the strategic ringing of bells, and the clamor of coaches.

Though centered on the sonic lives of girls and women in early modern Florence specifically, this book engages with a range of interconnected themes including gender identities, individual and collective identities, civic and ecclesiastical politics, and forced monachizations—among others. Rombough neatly situates these topics within the larger discussion of sensory discipline and the defining of early modern social boundaries and prescribed gender norms. The archival sources selected highlight the instrumentalization of sensory experiences on the part of civic and religious authorities. Consequently, this book offers valuable insights into the social, political, and religious dynamics of 16th and 17th century Florence by exploring relationships between genders, between religious and laypersons, across generations, and among different social classes. Furthermore, Rombough's approach is interdisciplinary and makes meaningful connections with related areas of study such as migration history, national identities, and conceptions of “otherness.” Thanks to its interdisciplinary scope, this volume is well-suited for use across an array of academic fields including history, Italian studies, religious studies, political science, philosophy, sociology, sexuality studies, musicology, gender and women's studies, and Mediterranean studies—and this list is by no means exhaustive.

A Veil of Silence: Women and Sound in the Renaissance is an enjoyable read and a welcome addition to the field of early modern studies. This volume lays important groundwork for comparable research in other contexts and invites readers to think critically, and more broadly, about how sensory experiences influenced sociopolitical and religious politics that in turn shaped—or sought to shape—individual and collective lived experiences in the early modern period.

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