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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Claire E. Honess, eds., Verina R. Jones.** *Le Donne delle Minoranze: Le ebreo e le protestanti d'Italia.* Torino: Claudiana, 1999. 335 pp. (paper), ISBN 978-88-7016-308-7.



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**Published on** H-Italy (October, 2000)

*Le donne delle minoranze*, a collection of essays edited by Claire E. Honess and Verina R. Jones, springs from a 1998 conference at Reading University which proposed to challenge the reductive image of a monolithically Catholic Italy. Focusing on the experience of Protestant and Jewish women from the Early Modern period to the modern age, the volume's twenty-seven essays pose a series of key questions concerning these two female communities. As the editors point out in their short preface, both Protestant and Jewish women shouldered the burden of a dual identity - of gender and community. At the same time, they were twice-marginalized by that identity, as women and as religious minorities. What models were available to Jewish and Protestant women in a dominantly Catholic culture? How did these women constitute and express their religious and gender identities? The essays in this volume attempt to address these important problems, while at the same time pointing out the broad areas of women's history which have until recently been largely ignored by scholars. Such gaps are, in themselves, testimonials to the ways in which these two communities have been excluded from historiography.

In "Chiavi di lettura della storia protestante al femminile," the second essay in the collection, Bruna Peyrot points out that the history of Protestantism among

women in Italy is one of chorality, not individuality. It seems somehow fitting, then, that this volume should be a heterogeneous one, composed of essays that focus on a variety of aspects of non-Catholic women's experience over the centuries, with approaches that range from the historical to the sociological (for example, Manuela Consonni's piece on oral history in Auschwitz, "Auschwitz: le donne del Blocco 10. La storia orale come documento storico," (309-320). All but one of the essays are written in Italian (the exception is Kenneth Stow's "The Jewish Woman as Social Protagonist,"(87-100). The emphasis of these essays is primarily historical in nature, although three pieces do focus on writers (Francine Daenens on Olimpia Morata (101-112), Corinna Da Fonseca-Wollheim on Sara

Copio Sullam (159-170), and Adalgisa Giorgio on Edith Bruck (297-308). The volume's major subjects are introduced in three general essays: Anna Foa's "Le donne nella storia degli ebrei in Italia" (11-30), Peyrot's "Chiavi di lettura della storia protestante al femminile" (31-44), and Susanna Peyronel Rambaldi's "Mogli, madri, figlie: donne nei gruppi eterodossi italiani del Cinquecento" (45-66), all of which are helpful both for their synthetic approach to their subjects as well as their brief reviews of the literature (and lack thereof) in each area.

Foa, for example, points out that the study of Jewish history has privileged the Medieval and Renaissance periods, leaving much “terreno oscuro” particularly in the post-Emancipation period. She attributes these blank spaces, in part, to the general problems encountered in introducing the category of gender into the study of history. Foa proposes, therefore, to give a brief overview of “what we know” about the history of Jewish women in Italy, while pointing out some of the many questions that have yet to be answered. She devotes the remainder of her essay to sections on Jewish women and power, their roles in public and private spheres, and their access to wealth and learning.

Similarly, in her essay on Protestant women, Peyrot laments the general lack of scholarly attention to this community (although she notes some exceptions, including Grado Merlo’s *Identit valdesi nella storia e nell storiografia*) and proposes to offer some avenues for future research. Peyrot notes that many studies of Catholic women focus on such prominent figures as saints and mystics, and thus have a particularly individual character. The history of Protestant women, on the other hand, has been largely left unexamined, argues Peyrot (“...non stato ignorato, quanto piuttosto tenuto in sottofondo”, 31), perhaps because it is seen as a largely collective history, one of “persone normali, quotidiane” rather than of celebrated individuals (37). Peyrot’s proposed “chiavi di lettura” for future study include the emergence of identity in the various strains of Protestantism and the impact of state recognition of religion on women’s social progress. To what extent, finally, Peyrot asks, was – and is – the experience of Protestant women in Italy different from that of other Italian women?

Finally, Peyronel Rambaldi’s essay on heterodox women in the Cinquecento shows that, like men, women were deeply affected by the vast spiritual and intellectual “fermento” that characterized the first half of the Cinquecento. As Peyronel Rambaldi points out, there is a kind of irony in the fact that our knowledge of these women stems largely from their presence in such documents of repression as Inquisition records – although few trials are actually devoted to women. Rather, they are named in the trials of others, often accused of having participated in evangelical meetings or discussions (Peyronel Rambaldi notes, however, that in most cases the responsibility for their transgression is seen as that of a husband, brother, father). Peyronel Rambaldi goes on to analyze the roles played by women in these Inquisition documents, noting finally that they often appear in the less sympathetic role of denouncer and devoting sev-

eral paragraphs to the implications of this role in the exercise of power. Finally, Peyronel Rambaldi closes with a brief, general discussion of the idea of “eterodossia al femminile.”

These three opening essays are useful to general readers or those acquainted with only some of the groups the volume addresses. The remainder of the essays are devoted to more specific problems, and proceed more or less chronologically from the Cinquecento to the Novecento, culminating with the Holocaust. The essays cover a range of issues; while it is impossible to refer to each of them here, they include such diverse topics as Ariel Toaff’s examination of female violence and marital relationships in Renaissance Jewish culture (“Mogli violente e mariti picchiati nell’Italia ebraica del Rinascimento” (67-76), Michela Catto’s study of heresy in the convents of sixteenth-century Udine (“Eresia, indisciplina e libri proibiti: i monasteri femminili di Mekinje e di Udine nel Patriarcato di Aquilea del XVI secolo” (113-124), and Monica Moniati’s look at Jewish women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “Le ”emancipate“: le ebreo italiane fra Ottocento e Novecento” (243-254). The volume concludes with a transcript of the Round Table session held at the original conference with Foa, Peyronel Rambaldi, Peyrot, and Tullia Zevi, and raises some of the collection’s most provocative questions. Following a discussion of the links that can be drawn between communities through a shared history of marginalization, repression, and persecution, the participants emphasize the importance of memory, speaking in particular of the centrality of the Shoah after 1945 in terms of the creation and transmission of memory. They also question whether belonging to a minority helps or hinders women’s advancement—“il progredire della condizione femminile” (323).

In addressing such problems, *Le donne delle minoranze* attempts to link together past, present, and future in a discussion of women, gender, religion and history that in its very heterogeneity can help us continue to discover women’s history. The drawback to this varied approach, however, is that readers are not likely to find all the essays equally useful. While the overviews of Protestant, Jewish and heterodox communities will help orient general readers, for example, specialists may find them overly broad or lacking in development. Conversely, other essays may be too specific in scope for any but the specialist reader. Finally, while *Le donne delle minoranze* constitutes, as the editors point out, a long-overdue attempt to consider the experience of Protestant and Jewish women comparatively, the essays themselves, while

comparative in terms of their juxtaposition with the others, tend to be very self-contained. Such problems, however, are perhaps unavoidable in essay collections in general, and particularly in those seeking to bring together such a range of subjects and approaches.

Certainly, in spite of these limitations, *Le donne delle minoranze* is a welcome contribution to both Italian Stud-

ies and the study of the religious and social history of women, helping to enrich our understanding of these female communities.

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**Citation:** Meredith Ray. Review of Honess, Claire E., eds., Verina R. Jones, *Le Donne delle Minoranze: Le ebreo e le protestanti d'Italia*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. October, 2000.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4618>

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