
Rosetta

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E. Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empire. Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul*, Ithaca (NY) and London, Cornell University Press 2012

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Review: Eric R. Dursteler, *Renegade Women. Gender, Identity, and*

***Boundaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean.* Baltimore (MD), Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. Pp. xiv & 222. 7 monochrome illustrations and 3 maps. ISBN 978-1-4214-0071-6 (Hbk) \$55 (£35).**

Review: E. Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empire. Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul.* Ithaca (NY) and London, Cornell University Press, 2012. Pp. xxii and 323. 8 monochrome illustrations and 1 map. ISBN 978-0-8014-4907-9 (Hbk) \$45 (£28.50).

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The archives of Venice are a valuable source for research on both early modern Christendom and the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman archives in Istanbul have also been opened to researchers since the 1950s and an extensive body of scholarship on the Ottomans is now readily available. As such, Ottoman-Venetian relations have steadily become a more inviting area of research for historians of early modern Venice, including the two authors reviewed here.

Eric Dursteler's *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Johns Hopkins, 2006), received particularly incisive reviews from Maria Pia Pedani and Ebru Turan.¹ *Renegade Women* has the same geographical and chronological scope; moving between Venice and Constantinople during the unusually long

¹ Ebru Turan, *Review of Dursteler, Eric R., Venetians in Constantinople.*, H-Turk, H-Net Reviews. June, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=30565>

Maria Pia Pedani, *Venetians in Constantinople by Eric R. Dursteler.*, *Mediterranean Historical Review*, vol. 23, issue 2, (2008), pp.193 – 195.

peace from 1573 to 1645 (page ix).² However, it is not a general study, but a series of what Dursteler variously refers to as 'stories', 'microhistories', 'tales' (pages ix – x), 'life sketches'

(p.105) and 'microbiographical sketches' (p.117).

Dursteler has 'taken liberties' with the term 'renegade', having 'expanded it to encompass not only women who converted from Christianity to Islam[,] but all women who transgressed boundaries of any sort – political, religious, gender, social – and in any geographical, ideological, or theological direction' (page ix). 'Modern scholarship on renegades has focused disproportionately on men' (page ix). 'While there is a growing body of literature on the Mediterranean, the women who inhabited its islands and coasts have received little attention. [...] This book attempts to remedy this oversight, but even more, as the subtitle suggests, these tales provide greater insights into the experiences and conditions of women specifically, and culture and society more broadly, in the early modern Mediterranean' (page x).

Dursteler has abandoned 'the traditional format of historical prose – introduction, body, conclusion', substituting a brief 'Preface' for a substantive introduction in order to 'keep the women and their stories center stage' and 'reserve the foreground for the narrative' (page x). The desired result is for 'these "thick narratives" to touch on structures and mentalities that may offer broader insights into the cultural world of the early modern Mediterranean' (p.105).

The first of the 'microhistories' concerns Beatrice Michiel, the sister of the famous Venetian renegade and Agha of the Gate (Chief White Eunuch), Gazanfer Agha. Dursteler disagrees with the suggestion that Beatrice 'was sold by her husband to her brother in exchange for ready cash' (p.10). Instead, he argues that her conversion to Islam was her own 'rational choice' (p.11), while her subsequent claim of coercion was a 'self-serving' means of gaining

² See also:

Daniela A. Hacke, *Review: Renegade Women by Eric Dursteler.*, *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 2 (2012), pp.576 – 578.

Céline Dauverd. *Review of Dursteler, Eric, Renegade Women.*, H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. February, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37071>

Tamar Herzig, *Renegade Women by Eric Dursteler.*, *Mediterranean Historical Review*, vol. 29, issue 1 (2014), pp.103 – 105.

sympathy with the Venetian magistrates in the dispute over her Venetian estate and the custody of her sons (p.15).

Chapter Two presents the cases of Elena Civallesi and Mihale Satorovic, from opposite sides of the Dalmatian frontier. Both girls were from prominent families and became the subject of high-level diplomatic disputes when they rejected arranged marriages. They both found refuge in the Casa delle Zitelle, a special convent in Venice for 'virgins in peril' (p.46.f). The Venetian authorities went to great trouble and expense in order to protect these girls, at great risk to peaceful relations with the Ottomans (pp.55, 58, 74).

Chapter Three concerns Maria Gozzadini and her daughters, who took ship and fled Ottoman Milos for Venetian Corfu. Maria was the widow of a military commander in a Christian-Muslim mixed marriage that was probably socially advantageous to her family. Her husband had married off their eldest daughter to the kadi (judge) of Milos and the custody of the other two passed to their Muslim uncle, not their mother. However, Christian 'piety' and 'public charity' demanded that Venice should not repatriate the women (p.99, p.102). The Ottomans only dropped their demands after the kadi and all the officials involved were given a series of substantial gifts and bribes (p.103.f).

Dursteler's Conclusion considers the significance of these 'simple stories' to the 'long historiographical tradition' of 'Mediterranean scholarship' from Fernand Braudel to Horden and Purcell (p.105). He contrasts these 'ambitious "Olympian" historiographical manifestos' with 'much more modest histories *in*, rather than *of*, the Mediterranean', which 'narrowly treat a specific region, city, or topic' and 'rarely address the broader question of Mediterranean unity' (p.106). Dursteler claims to have bridged the gap here 'in a study that focuses microscopically on the local yet places it into a broader, macroscopic Mediterranean context' with 'tendrils of comparison' reaching beyond the immediate geographical settings to 'Romania, France, Spain, and North Africa' (p.106).

The book 'is also Mediterranean in that, while not explicitly engaging the debate on Mediterranean unity, one of its foundational assumptions is that amid great diversity and complexity, there are commonalities that make the Mediterranean a useful tool of analysis'. Dursteler believes this allows us to overcome both 'narrow' national historiographies and 'the over-magnification of religious alterity and antagonism that often distort our understanding of Islam and Christianity, and instead to discern a more connected, multifaceted, and complex Mediterranean world' (p.106).

More specifically, 'this book represents an initial attempt to study gender from a truly Mediterranean vantage point' (p.107). 'Looking at the lives of these women in detail and comparatively across the expanse of the Mediterranean, reveals many similarities in their experiences with marriage, divorce, motherhood, childhood, agency, patriarchy, honor, religious identity, dissimulation, conversion, and the manipulation of frontiers' (p.108).

Dursteler's alternative to the 'traditional historical monographic approach' (p.105) recalls Natalie Zemon Davis's *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). Dursteler only refers to this book incidentally (p.128, n. 26), but he should have paid heed to its critical reception, since reviews identified shortcomings that also apply to his own experiment: a 'belated statement and strained application of the thesis' and the need for 'a more sustained comparative analysis'.¹ Indeed, Dursteler's 'tendrils of comparison' are little more than occasional endnote references. The main text contains four references to France and Spain, but none to North Africa. The single paragraph on 'Romania' is not comparative at all, but context for the career of Elena Civaletti's Moldavian suitor, Stefan Bogdan (p.51). A 'truly Mediterranean' comparative study would have required the inclusion of other 'microhistories' from further afield.

Dursteler criticises others for not addressing the question of Mediterranean unity, but on the same page (p.106) he openly admits to not addressing this question himself. He is also at odds with Horden and Purcell, who make the Mediterranean 'an object of research *rather than* an analytic tool' with their 'fourfold model' of economic and geographic factors. For them, Mediterranean unity 'is *not* that of ecological or *cultural* types so much as of connectivity between structurally similar [...] micro-ecologies' with a 'unique concentration of factors that are *not* themselves peculiar to the region' [my emphases].² Dursteler nonetheless assumes that similarities in economic and social structures support claims of

¹ Anne Jacobson Schutte, *Review: Women on the Margins by Natalie Zemon Davis*, *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 50, no. 1 (1997), pp.347 – 349; Christine Adams, *Review: Women on the Margins by Natalie Zemon Davis*, *Journal of Social History*, vol. 30, no. 2 (1996), pp.541 – 543.

² Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Mediterranean and "the New Thalassology"*, *The American Historical Review*, vol. 111, no. 3 (2006), pp.722 – 740: p.726.f, pp.732 – 735.

'shared patterns' in 'popular cultural attitudes regarding gender, honor, and religion', including Richard Bulliet's 'Islam-Christian civilisation' (p.108.f, n.14).

If Dursteler misappropriates Horden and Purcell, then he blatantly misrepresents Braudel, whose description of the Venetian '*limes*' was not a 'simple binary view', which 'ignores the region's complexity'. Indeed, Dursteler himself illustrates this 'complexity' with two examples provided by Braudel (p.36, n.1, n.2). Further, it is worth asking, if Braudel's use of the Latin word '*limes*' is so objectionable, then why does Dursteler himself repeatedly describe the same frontier as a 'liminal region'? (pp.38, 81, 102).

Dursteler gives minimal acknowledgement to those who have previously written about these particular 'microhistories'. Scrutinising his endnotes reveals previous studies by Maria Pia Pedani, Cristian Luca, Michela Dal Borgo, Natalie Rothman and Mario Nani Mocenigo. Dursteler misses a golden opportunity to clearly acknowledge all such existing studies when he writes: 'These are stories of women [...] who have remained generally unknown to us' (p.107). Identifying the source of Dursteler's quotes is not always easy, because he does not necessarily make the first reference in an endnote the source of the preceding quote in the main text (e.g. p.4, n.11; p.17, n.78). The reader must therefore chase up several different references in order to identify one quote.

Ebru Turan criticised Dursteler's first book for its tendency to overcome preoccupations with conflict by simply going to the other extreme and exaggerating the extent of peaceful coexistence (see endnote 1). The same fault is evident in *Renegade Women*, as Dursteler specifically seeks connections and 'commonalities' rather than 'alterity and antagonism'. Yet he also emphasises the importance of personal agency asserted through 'rational' choices (p.10.f, 34, 56.f, 109.f) and the importance for public honour of protecting women (p.66.ff, 74, 92.ff, 113.f).

These parallel lines of argument are somewhat at odds. First, if the Venetian authorities were taking serious political risks by refusing to repatriate fugitives and if they needed to expend such large sums on protecting 'virgins in peril' and buying off the Ottomans, then there must have been a genuine threat of Ottoman reprisals. The argument for public honour therefore

undermines the argument against antagonism. Second, if crossing religious and political boundaries 'could confer a degree of agency' (p.34), then they must have reflected significant differences. Conversely, if there were no important differences, then crossing the frontier was not a very significant act. This inconsistency is most striking when we try to visualise Dursteler's metaphors: The boundaries were 'porous and malleable' (p.109), but also played a 'pivotal' (p.105) role as 'fulcrums' (p.109), which provided 'leverage' (p.111). How could anything 'porous and malleable' ever provide effective 'fulcrums'? The argument for personal agency therefore undermines the argument for 'commonalities'.

If these arguments are inconsistent, then some of the evidence for religious 'commonalities' is superficial. Instances of Christian 'dualistic self-deception' are not 'the same' as Islamic 'taqiyya' (p.17.f), because such dissimulation is clearly condemned in the Bible and openly condoned in the Koran. Similarly, the belief 'that Mohammed was the Holy Ghost' (p.40) is not evidence of syncretism, but an Islamic interpretation of the Gospel of John (14:16) claiming that the final divine revelation through Mohammed was promised by Jesus. Muslim reverence for Mary (p.80) is also based on passages in the Koran designed to encourage Christians to follow Islam.

Dursteler's presentation of marriage law is noteworthy. Islamic marriage law is introduced as making divorce easier for women (p.13.f), but then Muslim disregard for existing Christian marriages seems more significant (p.45.f, p.100.f), since it was still very difficult for a woman to successfully initiate divorce from a Muslim marriage (p.82.f). Dursteler draws the false conclusion that a reform to prevent forced marriage shows this was more common in Christendom than in 'Islamic regions' (p.50). Could the absence of any such Muslim reform actually be evidence that forced marriage was not condemned in the first place, so the frequency of its occurrence was ignored? Later, he mentions there was no minimum age for Islamic marriage and the only limit on a husband's conjugal rights was that his bride was physically able to 'support intercourse' (p.81.f). 'Nine was considered the age of puberty, which made a girl marriageable' (p.81), but these were only lunar years and this was based on the precedent set by Mohammed's marriage to Ayesha, not physical maturity. 'In theory [...] she could have repudiated her husband at puberty' (p.82.f). What about in practice?

Ultimately, Dursteler acknowledges only two significant differences. First: 'For Fatima, the possibility of obtaining a divorce in the Ottoman Empire only difficultly obtainable in Venice factored into her decision to leave'. Second: 'the existence of uniquely Christian female

religious institutions not present in the Islamic world played an important role...’ (p.116). These brief concessions follow two false conclusions: ‘The women studied here found an acceptable place “poised between... religions” ...’ (p.116); ‘These women’s religious choices were voluntary and intentional, not a product of compulsion [...] In other words, Mediterranean women might resist or embrace conversion out of belief, self-interest, fear, or compulsion’ (p.115). These women were clearly affiliated to either Christianity or Islam. Voluntary intent is evident on the part of Elena, Mihale and Maria, ambiguous for Beatrice and largely absent for Elena’s parents. Putting the words ‘fear, or compulsion’ at the end of a list is no substitute for a balanced analysis.

‘Trans-imperial subjects’ is Natalie Rothman’s term for migrant commercial brokers, religious converts and official interpreters.³ She aims to ‘capture the ways in which trans-imperial subjects straddled and helped broker linguistic, religious and geopolitical boundaries across Venetian and Ottoman imperial domains’ (p.3). ‘[T]he formulation of a sharp, pre-existing and absolute dichotomy between “European” and “non-European” epistemologies [...] cannot account for the sustained nature of most colonial engagements and for the role of intermediates in calibrating and recalibrating the boundaries of the very units they claim to mediate’ (p.5.f). However, Rothman does not seek to ‘anachronistically celebrate the early modern Mediterranean as a site of multiculturalism’ and emphasises ‘the context of rivalry and tacit collaboration’ (p.13.f).

The chronological scope of the book is ‘a watershed period in the history of the Mediterranean, [...] from the battle of Lepanto in 1571 to the end of the War of Crete in 1669’ (p.18). In addition to military, political and economic changes for both Venice and the Ottomans, there was also a hardening of religious divisions influenced by a wider process of ‘confessionalisation’ (p.21). The book’s subtitle, Introduction and Afterword all suggest that it gives equal weight to both Venetians and Ottomans (pp.10.f, 251), but it is actually concerned almost exclusively with Venice.

³ See also: Christine Isom-Verhaaren, [Review of Rothman, E. Natalie, *Brokering Empire*](#), H-Empire, H-Net Reviews. July, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36534>

Part I 'Mediation' examines migrant commercial brokers. They emphasised their personal loyalty to Venice, while also highlighting the skills and connections which made them valuable intermediaries for foreign merchants. Part II 'Conversion' concerns converts to Catholicism. Muslim converts emphasised changes to their personal circumstances, whereas Protestant converts emphasised spiritual transformation. Similar contrasts are found between the testimonies of male and female repentant renegades and between Jewish and Muslim female converts. Rothman finds that 'most converts eventually found themselves occupying the same status and trade they had held prior to their conversion' (p.146). Part III 'Translation' traces 'the emergence of specialised Public Dragomans, official interpreters employed by the Venetian Board of Trade to assist Ottoman subjects while sojourning in Venice' (p.165). 'Claiming specialised knowledge by virtue of their transimperial life trajectories and having immediate access to the highest echelons of the Venetian political elite [...] dragomans came to play a powerful role in defining who and what could be deemed properly foreign in Venice' (p.186). Part IV 'Articulation' explores 'the role of trans-imperial subjects in articulating ethnolinguistic taxonomies in the Venetian-Ottoman borderlands' (p.189). Merchants emphasised linguistic and religious differences in order to gain a more favourable status.

Rothman concludes that 'trans-imperial subjects [...] is a useful analytical category for understanding an intermediary group of individuals, neither fully Venetian nor foreign' (p.248). 'Understanding the trans-imperial dimensions of early modern cultural mediation thus helps document the emergence of boundaries now so ingrained that their very historicity is often forgotten. It also calls into question the motivations of those who benefitted – and still do – from naturalising the boundaries that, at the beginning of the period under study, were anything but natural' (p.251).

Rothman incessantly promotes the term 'trans-imperial subjects', which she repeats fifteen times in the 'Afterword' (pp.248 – 251). 'Trans-imperial' is an adaptation of 'transnational', but she only mentions that the term has 'become fashionable' without giving any explanation of its origins and usage (p.3, n. 7). She rejects the words 'nation' and 'citizen', since they invite teleological assumptions. Yet she is fully aware of the more flexible usage of the word 'nation', which is found frequently in the primary sources, so she is ultimately forced to use the word 'nation' anyway, along with numerous references to both 'subjects' and 'citizens'.

Chapter 7 demonstrates that contemporary use of the word 'Levantine' embraced all the various identities in Rothman's study, so *Levantine Migrants in Venice, 1570 – 1670* might have been a better title.

Rothman's remark about a 'trans-imperial field of power' appears to endorse a power theory of politics (p.14), while evidence for a rights theory of politics is dismissed as a 'myth' concealing underlying power relationships (p.123.f). Otherwise, Rothman's preference for abstruse language often makes her views unclear. In some cases, specialist terms are misapplied with extreme implications: 'trope' is applied to expressions that are meant literally, implying post-modern scepticism about truth and reality (e.g. pp.7, 99, 107); 'trajectory' is applied to people's lives, implying materialist determinism (e.g. pp.11, 114, 165). 'Life cycle' is used to refer to the lives of individuals, implying re-incarnation (p.120). In other cases she simply uses the wrong words: 'similarly' (page ix) instead of in contrast; 'undecided' (p.10) instead of ambivalent; 'imminent' (p.19) instead of terminal or inevitable; 'genealogy' (pp. 5, 26, 211, 215, 216), instead of etymology (p.240); while 'Positivist' is used to mean taking things at face value (p. 42 n. 42). As Clive James warned in *The Revolt of the Pendulum*: 'When the writer is getting all of the fee and the reader is doing at least half of the labour, the discrepancy can cause resentment' (p. 107).

Rothman's consideration of 'both consciousness of alterity and the technologies for regulating it' (p.13) contrasts with Dursteler's emphasis on 'commonalities'. Rothman's preference for power politics contrasts with Dursteler's 'recurring theme' of honour (p.92.f). Furthermore, Rothman does not address Dursteler's 'questions of agency' (p.110). Rothman's enthusiasm for anthropological theories may account for some of these differences. However, both authors seem to assume that clearly defined and strongly enforced boundaries are somehow inherently bad and that most significant religious differences are either invented or exaggerated to bolster the power of rival authorities.

Dursteler's weak structure and Rothman's garbled language help shield such assumptions from critical scrutiny.