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Review of Cultures of Charity: Women, Politics, and the Reform of Poor Relief in Renaissance Italy

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Terpstra, Nicholas. Cultures of charity: women, politics, and the reform of poor relief in Renaissance Italy. Harvard, 2013, 379p bibl index afp ISBN 9780674067097, $49.95

Terpstra (Univ. of Toronto) uses a thematic approach to argue that Bologna was a trendsetter in approaches and institutions aimed at helping the poor between roughly 1450 and 1700. Innovative approaches to poor relief in Bologna reached a highpoint in the mid-16th century before political, economic, religious, and social changes brought the city more in line with less novel developments elsewhere. The author attempts to interject women into the center of studies on early modern poor relief, even as he works to remove the linearity of other works on the topic. Terpstra succeeds admirably on both counts. Much of his book involves a contextualized examination of the Opera Pia dei Poveri Mendicanti, the principal Bolognese body charged with overseeing poor relief. As the author states, the book complements a growing historiography on premodern approaches to the poor, such as the work of Brian Pullan and Philip Gavitt on other areas of Italy. A beautifully written, thought-provoking book that is a delight to read. Summing Up: Highly recommended, Upper--division undergraduates and above.

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