
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Lepage, John L. The Revival of Antique Philosophy in the Renaissance

Barry Torch

Volume 37, numéro 3, été 2014

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090679ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v37i3.22479>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Torch, B. (2014). Compte rendu de [Lepage, John L. The Revival of Antique Philosophy in the Renaissance]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 37(3), 300–302. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v37i3.22479>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2015

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

to the tyranny of the autocratic rule of the Duke of Athens, and again resurfaces in the early fifteenth century when the oligarchs (the Albizzi regime) exclude the people from government.

Machiavelli shows how a private citizen (Cosimo de' Medici) can corrupt the republic with wealth and subvert government through clientage. In his preface, Machiavelli declares his intention not to write a history like that of his humanist predecessors, Leonardo Bruni and Poggio Bracciolini, who focused on the city's external affairs and conflicts with other city-states. The government and internal politics of the republic are instead what warrant his full attention, since they offer the greatest lessons for organizing a new republican constitution for Florence. Written at the same time for the Medici overlords, the *Discourse* and the *Histories* must be read together as promoting two sides of the same argument for republican government, one a more practical, prescriptive treatise on the constitution and the other a record of the Florentine failure, when such a constitution is lacking or imperfectly implemented. By shifting attention from the justly lauded *Discourses on Livy* to the *Discourse* and the *Florentine Histories*, Jurdjevic reveals a much fuller picture of Machiavelli's republicanism, one that was grounded in the practical workings of Florentine government. Jurdjevic expertly shows how Machiavelli's ideas were firmly rooted in Florentine history and his particular historical context.

ANTHONY F. D'ELIA
Queen's University

Lepage, John L.

The Revival of Antique Philosophy in the Renaissance.

New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. Pp. xv, 281 + 14 ill. ISBN 978-1-137-28161-4 (hardcover) \$85.

John Lepage's book offers a new interpretation of how sixteenth-century European humanists engaged with their classical heritage. Focusing on the literary value of their works rather than the philosophical aspects, Lepage links the humanists' approach to classical texts with their tendency for witty authorship. He argues that by using wit, the humanists moved past the "cold logic"

approach of moral philosophy and focused on the values of human experience over ontology in the interpretation of ancient philosophers (x–xi). Working with literary themes rather than philosophical theses, Lepage’s work attends to the artistic elements of Renaissance humanism rather than solely to its weight as a coherent philosophical approach. This emphasis on the philosophical literature as rhetoric makes his work an impressive contribution to the scholarship of Renaissance humanism and its intellectual and cultural spread across Europe.

Lepage structures his book into a preface and five chapters, each of which has a particular theme. Chapter 1 looks at the idea of containment and containers in a broad and cultural sense. Imagining the human body as a container for ideas, emotions, and the soul, in parallel with the view of antiquity as a container to be opened and discovered (22), Lepage uses emblems and literature to highlight the “discovery” of the physical and mental world in the sixteenth century. Chapter 2 offers portrayals of thinkers, from Diogenes and Socrates to Ficino, Shakespeare, and Erasmus, and examines how such characters are described and satirized. He explores the ways humanists use these stock characters of philosophy in their text, and argues that their use as characters and archetypes helps the authors humanize and play with their subjects. In chapter 3, Lepage highlights two philosophers, Democritus and Heraclitus, and argues that Renaissance portrayals of these philosophers as melancholic and lonely affected how their ideas and images are described in art and literature. Chapter 4 engages with the humanist understanding of philosophy as an abstract category rather than something reified in an individual, contrary to his earlier highlighting of Democritus and Heraclitus as symbols of philosophy. Then, returning to the motif of chapter 1, Lepage suggests that philosophy was seen as a contained space wherein ideas and wit flourished as an “artistic conception or organizing principle” (137) rather than a coherent set of ideas that Renaissance humanists subscribed to and extrapolated from. Finally, in chapter 5, Lepage presents the Renaissance mind as a stage on which these archetypes, emblems, characters, and abstract ideas play. For Lepage, the mind is a “coping place” (175) where ideas are bandied about and discussed by satirized philosophers, rather than solidified into doctrine and statements. This witty approach, paralleling the ancient world of the philosophers with their own sixteenth-century world, plays with dominant cultural ideas of the sixteenth century and turns early modern Europe into an arena of wonder for its inhabitants. Lepage’s conclusion, on

the humanist association of moral philosophy with wit (194), places humanist writings into the camp of rhetoric rather than metaphysics, asserting that wonder and humour, not the search for dogmatic truth, were their primary inspiration and motivation.

This is a very impressive book: Lepage manages to cover literary ideas and tropes from antiquity to the sixteenth century throughout much of Western Europe in two hundred pages of text. He works well with the multiplicity of sources—largely literary and intellectual, but a few images are referenced and discussed—from many different regions of Europe, particularly from France, the Low Countries, and England. Lepage's use of endnotes, however, is not always helpful. Occasionally, information that might have served his argument, if located in the main body of text, gets lost in the endnotes—including important names in the field, and the debates themselves. His endnotes are sometimes difficult to follow due to the overwhelming amount of information they contain: page-long (or longer) discussions and analyses of texts that really belong in the chapter itself. Also, while he uses historiography and primary sources that complement each other very well, his main argument could have been enhanced by further engagement with the idea of humanism and its established scholars.

That said, Lepage's work—based on considerable research—gives an invigorating reinterpretation of the literary value of sixteenth-century, pan-European humanism. He successfully argues for a more nuanced understanding of how classical philosophy was transmitted in an early modern environment, noting that the rebirth of antique philosophy was not a sterile antiquarian endeavour. Lepage argues that the humanists learned how to turn ideas from both the past and present into literary satire. Their mockery of antique ideas and characters, such as the cynical Diogenes, gave the ancient world's ideas new life in the drastically different sixteenth century, fitting into politics and culture in a new and wondrous way. Regrettably short, Lepage's analysis is concise, strong, and readable, making it a great resource for scholar and student alike.

BARRY TORCH
York University