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[See table of contents](#)

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Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

Azzolini, Monica.

The Duke and the Stars: Astrology and Politics in Renaissance Milan.

I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History. Cambridge, MA and London UK: Harvard University Press, 2013. Pp. xiii, 370 + 19 ill. ISBN 978-0-674-06663-2 (hardcover) \$49.95.

With this deeply researched book, Monica Azzolini reveals a predilection for astrology of all stripes in the fifteenth-century Sforza court. In fact, it was almost a saturation by the end of the century: the predictive arts played a crucial part in statecraft for the seventh duke of Milan, Ludovico il Moro, and this book skilfully traces a history of that science from the beginning of the Sforza dynasty in 1450 until its demise in 1499, interpreting astrology's role in learning, medicine, diet, and especially politics.

Azzolini notes that Renaissance astrology has enjoyed serious study lately, after having been consigned for so long to the shadows of scholarship—as if astrology seemed too credulous a pursuit for the humanist environment of the Italian quattrocento. This book acknowledges from the outset astrology's serious intellectual and cultural credentials in the period, and it fleshes out its many practical applications. A range of astrologically-inclined physicians, university scholars, and horoscopists orbited the Milanese court. Some of their names (like Annio da Viterbo, who corresponded with Galeazzo Sforza) are well known, while others (such as Ambrogio Varesi da Rosate, Ludovico's right-hand man) are new discoveries; they and a host of others played serious roles in informing Sforza decision-making. The results of Azzolini's research are exciting for how they sweep away cobwebs from episodes of Milanese history that have become dusty, either from lack of scholarly attention or from satisfied consensus: Francesco's conquest of the duchy in 1450, Galeazzo's assassination in 1476, Gian Galeazzo's mysterious death in 1494, and Ludovico's fall in 1499. In each of these episodes, Azzolini unveils an astrological context, and offers sophisticated arguments on its function. In this regard, Azzolini's book joins Jane Black's *Absolutism in Renaissance Milan* (Oxford, 2009) as part

of a new wave of English-language historiography offering fresh visions of how the Sforza consolidated and exercised their power.

Azzolini carefully interprets Renaissance attitudes to astrology: she makes it clear that it had both its supporters and detractors. Francesco Sforza, for one, seems to have been less taken with it than his wife or his successors. But as our author notes, no one living in this time and place could ignore it. Pre-modern astrology was like modern economic forecasting (this is a fruitful comparison Azzolini borrows from other scholars), and these kinds of predictive science frequently attracted a range of responses to which historians ought to be sensitive. To ask whether these rulers believed in astrology, she cautions, is reductive. Rather, astrology was one of many tools of political prospection and planning; these princes were keen to exploit any means that might reveal the next step, whatever it might be. Moreover, the Sforza did not even need to believe in astrology to take it seriously: astrological forecasts travelled far and wide, and the fact that they could be both *arcana imperii* and politically sensitive news meant that the dukes of Milan had to engage with them regardless of their personal convictions. The pitch of Azzolini's arguments recalls Tara Nummedal's canny interpretation of alchemists in her *Alchemy and Authority in the Holy Roman Empire* (Chicago, 2007). Like alchemists, astrologers were mostly good-faith professionals; their trade's core set of principles—albeit elastic and interpretable ones—demanded training and hard work. Princes understandably respected their mastery of recondite study, even if at times the practitioners failed to produce desired results.

Although there were those in the Renaissance who sniggered at astrology, Azzolini shows in her first chapter that it was an important part of university learning. Based in a solid body of classical, pseudo-classical, and Arabic texts, astrology was part of the syllabus of learning at the *studium* of Pavia. Using the student notebook of the Genoese Giovanni Battista Boerio, who later became a Tudor court physician, Azzolini reconstructs a likely curriculum of study (since none of it survives), and she reminds us of the epistemological chains that linked astrology to astronomy, geometry, medicine, and health. While astronomy became the ascendant science of the sixteenth century, in the fifteenth it was still a handmaiden to astrology: study of celestial motion could unlock deep mysteries of celestial influence. The close ties between the *studium* and the court—not least in the ducal library at Pavia's castle, which served as an

ersatz university collection, since Pavia had none of its own—proved a perfect channel for sharing celestial scholarship with the ruling caste.

Ludovico il Moro was the most avid Sforza consumer of astrological knowledge. By the mid-1490s, his queries to Ambrogio da Rosate became obsessive, and Ambrogio eagerly obliged his patron: the pair were, in Azzolini's words, symbiotic. When the catastrophes of the French invasion brought Ludovico down in 1499, his favoured astrologer fell too. Although this is where Azzolini's book ends, I can offer a brief coda to the story since her characters have recently jumped off the pages in my own research in Milan after 1500. For instance, when Ludovico recaptured Milan for a short period in 1500, he wrote to Isabella d'Este (the letter is in Mantua's Gonzaga archive) that he had re-entered his city at daybreak specifically on his astrologer's advice. And as for Ambrogio, he may have fallen into disgrace, but he appears to have remained active in Milan as a physician, though perhaps not as an astrologer. He resurfaces in documents in 1508 treating a Sforza noblewoman, and—if it is the same Ambrogio da Rosate—as late as 1517 he was labelled one of Milan's "primi phisici" on a mission to Monferrato to treat the marquis. Regardless, Azzolini chose the proper ending point, and readers will find in this volume not just a compelling account of the rise and fall of the house of Sforza, but new and important reflections on astrology's role in fifteenth-century politics.

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Bellitto, Christopher and David Zachariah Flanagin (eds.).

Reassessing Reform: A Historical Investigation into Church Renewal.

Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012. Pp. xii, 289. ISBN 978-0-8132-1999-8 (hardcover) \$69.95.

Christopher Bellitto and David Flanagin's newest collection is self-described as having two purposes. First, the volume acts as a Festschrift for the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Gerhart Ladner's *The Idea of Reform* (1959), striving to celebrate, critique, and reapply Ladner's methodology of reform in new scholarly ways. Second, the volume commemorates in a more quiet fashion the opening of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). Readers might be