

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



### Ross, Sarah Gwyneth. *Everyday Renaissances: The Quest for Cultural Legitimacy in Venice*

Matteo Soranzo

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against imperial authority, rather than for supporting the Florentines *per se* (43); Henry died in 1313, not 1314 (43); and, while John XXII later declared a crusade against Ludwig IV of Bavaria, there is no evidence to suggest that Clement V ever considered using such a measure against the Luxembourg (43).

As such, it is difficult to recommend Rollo-Koster's book. While undergraduate students may find it an easy enough read, they should be advised to treat its claims with scepticism. Specialists will simply find it frustrating.

ALEXANDER LEE

University of Warwick

**Ross, Sarah Gwyneth.**

*Everyday Renaissances: The Quest for Cultural Legitimacy in Venice.*

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016. Pp. 235. ISBN 978-0-674-65983-4 (hardcover) US\$49.96.

Building on a scholarly trend inaugurated by Christopher Celenza and followed, more recently, by Brian Maxson, Ross's remarkable study sets out to examine Renaissance humanism not only as the intellectual pursuit of learned elites but also as a cultural practice entrenched in the social life of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian cities. By interpreting a documentary corpus comprising inventories, testaments, account books, and other archival materials stored in Venice, Ross presents a strong and theoretically informed discussion of the benefits attached to the *studia humanitatis* and their pursuit among artisans, retailers, parish priests, physicians, and what Maxson has recently called "social humanists"—non-professional scholars who often strived to define and enhance their status through intellectual means. The goal of this pursuit—as the author, in a critical dialogue with Pierre Bourdieu, calls it—was "cultural legitimacy," that is, a fluid and socially diversified display of "belonging to a lineage defined by commitment to intellectual, literary, or artistic matters" (8).

The book is structured into two parts of two and three chapters respectively, which explore the problem at stake from a quantitative and qualitative angle. Chapter 1 investigates the references to books and other literary objects listed in household inventories of Venetian families. While the results as far as the spread of literacy in Venice are only mildly surprising if compared to other

European centres, the social distribution of Venetian book-owners offers many exciting insights. Artisans such as goldsmiths and stone-cutters, the author demonstrates, often owned collections of books not limited—as one might assume—to devotional materials. Physicians and pharmacists surpassed patricians in the number of books owned and the vastness of their interests. The diffusion of humanistic ideas thus turns out to be a much broader phenomenon than the pastime of a scholarly elite. Further substantiating the point by looking at the diffusion of classicizing names among relatively uneducated families, the chapter shows how Venetian humanism was actually a deeply rooted and socially diversified phenomenon.

Chapter 2 analyzes a corpus of wills in search of what is defined as “testamentary humanism.” Borrowing analytical tools from various disciplines interested in self-writing, including Jewish Studies and Queer Theory, Ross demonstrates that declarations of humanism were most prominent among people of sub-patrician status and that the most eloquent “testamentary humanists” were parish priests and, most importantly, physicians—a category particularly vulnerable to criticism and in need of validation. While these conclusions lead quite smoothly to the biographical approach deployed in the last three chapters, one wonders if there might be some tension in how the term “humanism” is used. Although generally clinging to P. O. Kristeller’s neutral definition, Ross occasionally echoes the Renaissance grand narrative and its emphasis on the incompatibility between Christian values and ancient pagan virtues (see, for example, pages 69 and 130). While this might make sense when dealing with physicians, it becomes quite problematic when considering that many “testamentary humanists” were also ordained priests. Chapter 3 focuses on Nicolò Massa, a physician and, it turns out, aspiring man of letters. Looking at Massa’s published works but also, and most importantly, at his testament, the chapter evaluates this man’s interest in the humanistic education of his children, his love for books, and the snippets of Stoic wisdom scattered through his papers as parts of a social strategy aimed at acquiring cultural legitimacy. Linked on the one hand to the disputed status of medicine in early modern culture and, on the other hand, to the revival of the ancient conception of philosophy as a spiritual exercise, Massa’s literary interests and acquaintance with humanistic literature emerge as social practices provided with practical purposes that went beyond aesthetic or abstractly intellectual ambitions.

Chapter 4 examines the testament penned by Francesco Longo, the son of an apothecary who became a university-trained doctor and the father of a wealthy and highly-educated family. After a close-reading of Longo's unusually eloquent will, filled with allusions to ancient history and inspired by Stoic ethics, the chapter astutely investigates its author's possible motivations in trying to enhance his social status by displaying humanistic learning and taste. Looking at the unusually rich documentation surrounding Longo's matriculation at the University of Padua, for instance, the chapter examines the difficulties this man had to overcome in order to leave behind his artisanal origins, and the role literary culture played in making this possible. Delving deeper into Longo's ways of dealing with an incapacitated son and a daughter who was a nun, moreover, the chapter further illustrates the practical function philosophy could play in the life of ordinary people.

In chapter 5, Alberto Rini's account books, with their frequent displays of literary bravura and artistic connoisseurship, give additional evidence of the penetration of humanistic ideals outside of elite-circles. Countering the assumption that Venetians, differently from Florentines, did not write books of *ricordanze*, the author makes a strong case for the account book as a site of multiple genres not limited to family history. Interspersed among recipes and bills, one finds in Rini's books acute analysis of current historical events and gems of Stoic wisdom, which give evidence of the sense of confidence and understanding that humanistic education could bring to even its more modest practitioners.

Historians of Venice and Italy in general will certainly benefit from Ross's thoroughly documented and theoretically informed look at a forgotten facet of Renaissance humanism. It is the more literature-oriented scholars, however, who might gain the most from this book's brilliant insights on the material aspect of, and social value attached to, literary and artistic objects. After all, the forgotten words of Longo, Massa, Rini, and their "everyday Renaissances" suggest that when Petrarch emphatically promoted a course of studies that would have finally equipped readers to know themselves in the mirror of Antiquity, his was not just a rhetorical flower or an erudite allusion tailored to a restricted elite.