

# Bit Part or Leading Role? Confraternal Drama Studies in the Academy

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As one who has written on confraternal plays in churches in fifteenth-century Florence – but only on the Left Bank – I am aware of the absurdity of claiming that the study of confraternal drama is absolutely centre stage in the humanities curriculum. Even so, I shall work from the premise that research on confraternities and confraternal drama *is* relevant to institutional and national research priorities, and I shall argue that the trend towards “scholarship in teaching” is making it more possible than ever to break away from the literary canon and out of the literary exegesis mould of Language and Literature departments to bring exciting new research to students in programs of medieval or Renaissance or performance studies as well as to those in the traditional disciplines.

For this short exploration of some recent trends and future directions, I shall examine drama in a context that includes all forms of public and private confraternal and gild performance ranging from purposeful ritual to carnival entertainment,<sup>1</sup> and I am looking at a long Renaissance, from the very-early-modern fourteenth century through to the late seventeenth century. Confraternities preserved the trappings of late medieval lay piety through the rediscovery of antiquity and well into the sixteenth century and in some cases beyond the Council of Trent. They adapted the old subjects and the old forms to new exigencies and opportunities; they adopted new technologies to achieve spectacular effects;<sup>2</sup> they developed new devotions and new performances.

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- 1 Confraternal life, with its communal meals, its invocation of brotherhood in Christ, is a reenactment, a representation of the life of Christ and his disciples, and it should not surprise us that the re-enactment of scenes from the life of Christ formed part of confraternal ritual, beyond the simple breaking of bread and drinking of wine. Other forms of representation include, for example, the collecting of alms on Maundy Thursday by displaying costumed wooden statutes of the apostles, seated around the table of the last supper (as in the Sant’ Agnese and Spirito Santo companies in fifteenth-century Florence); the performance of a Passion play (as in the Gonfalone confraternity of Rome, from 1490 to 1539); pilgrimage to a Sacro Monte (which first appeared in Varallo in 1490), or participation in a Via Crucis procession (which first appeared in Seville in 1521; see Susan Verdi Webster, *Art and Ritual in Golden-Age Spain: Sevillian Confraternities and the Processional Sculpture of Holy Week* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 144).
  - 2 In some cases they even remodelled their meeting space – their *luogo* – to make it function better as a theatre. Modern historians use the term ‘oratory’ or ‘*oratorio*’ instead of *luogo*; the fifteenth-century French equivalent is *loge*, from which the English ‘lodge’ (hunting,

Although Italy is the domain with which I am most familiar, research on Italian and continental confraternal drama has made less progress in the last thirty years than research on English guild drama, and so I shall refer to deficiencies as much as to admirable examples.

Confraternities — *compagnie, scuole, Bruderschaften, guilds, confréries, cofradías* — rose to importance in the thirteenth century as mendicant preachers proposed to the laity new kinds of participation in the life of the church. Across fourteenth-century Europe, a subset of confraternities and guilds took the narratives and the rituals associated with holy days throughout the year and the lyric modes of their devotional hymns and transformed them into vernacular plays for performance on liturgical feast days, on summer saints' days and at carnival. These performances, in churches and cloisters, on pageant wagons and on fixed outdoor stages, came to involve huge collective effort and financial expenditure: in Florence, it is typically twenty to forty individuals working in their "spare" time for six weeks to prepare the play, for no financial gain, but rather for the joy of glorifying God and the Virgin, and for the pleasure of the city. Much food and wine was consumed along the way, and the performance was followed by a major banquet.<sup>3</sup>

In Britain, the study of such drama, performed by merchants' and trade guilds rather than devotional guilds, has enjoyed prestige in the academy, not least as the poor relation of Shakespearean studies. The records that have survived the Reformation are being gathered systematically, published and studied widely through the efforts of that most extraordinary institution, REED, or Records of Early English Drama, based in Toronto.<sup>4</sup>

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summer, ski) derives. The use of the term 'lodge' (as in masonic lodge) appears to be a later borrowing from the French. See Konrad Eisenbichler, *The Boys of the Archangel Raphael: A Youth Confraternity in Florence, 1411–1785* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998); Ludovica Sebregondi, "I luoghi teatrali delle confraternite fiorentine tra Sei e Settecento," *Teatro, scena, rappresentazione dal Quattrocento al Settecento*. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi (Lecce, 15–17 maggio 1997), ed. Paola Andrioli, et al. (Lecce: Congedo Editore, 2000), pp. 335–348.

3 Robert L. A. Clark, "Charity and Drama: The Response of the Confraternity to the Problem of Urban Poverty in Fourteenth-Century France," in *Le Théâtre et la Cité dans l'Europe médiévale*, ed. Edelgard E. DuBruck and William C. McDonald, special issue of *Fifteenth-Century Studies*, 13 (1988): pp. 359–369; Nerida Newbigin, "Cene and Cenacoli in the Ascension and Pentecost Companies of Fifteenth-Century Florence," in *Crossing the Boundaries: Christian Piety and the Arts in Italian Medieval and Renaissance Confraternities*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute, 1991), pp. 90–107; Gervase Rosser, "Going to the Fraternity Feast: Commensality and Social Relations in Late Medieval England," *Journal of British Studies* 33 (1994): 430–446.

4 For a full account of REEDS's activities, see their website, [www.chass.utoronto.ca/~reed/reed.html](http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~reed/reed.html).

I know of no similar project in Europe. For continental Europe, scholarship of Dutch and Spanish drama remains mainstream, but for other parts of both Eastern and Western Europe, scholars are often marginalised within their disciplines and much of the best research is coming from relatively youthful *emeriti*, who have retired early to the humanist dream of *negotium in otio*. In Italy, for example, a succession of charismatic teachers and researchers have proposed the creation of archives and later databases of medieval and Renaissance theatre: Eugenio Battisti (1924–1989), Fabrizio Cruciani (1941–1992), Ludovico Zorzi (1928–1983) all died prematurely before taking concrete steps towards creating such a resource. The truth is that for Italy there is such a wealth of documentation, still to be located and identified in civic, ecclesiastical and confraternal archives, that a centralised archive would do no more than scratch the surface.

The earliest extant vernacular plays are the *laude drammatiche* of the flagellant confraternities of fourteenth-century Perugia and Assisi. They range from dramatised hymns for daily devotion to play-cycles that extend over several days at Christmas and Easter, and they are gathered into *laudari*, or anthologies that served the full year. Despite the formation of a Centre for the Documentation of the Flagellant Movement in Perugia, no critical edition of these texts has appeared, and we are in a state of almost total ignorance of how, where and for whom the Umbrian confraternities performed their plays. A young Italian scholar, Mara Nerbano, continues to work on texts, confraternal archives and on chronicle sources,<sup>5</sup> but for the fourteenth century it is not at all clear which texts belong to the private, collective devotions of the *confratelli* in their oratories, and which – like the *Passion* in later centuries – were already being performed in the main square of Perugia, surely one of the most “theatrical” in Italy. And until civic and confraternal records are examined systematically, we will know nothing of the relationship between the *confratelli*, the plays, the city and the urban landscape.<sup>6</sup>

So what are these resources and what are the current trends and future directions? The resources are firstly the archives of the confraternities themselves.

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5 Mara Nerbano successfully identifies the church of San Giovanale in Orvieto as the scene of the Creation play in the *Laudario* of Orvieto: “Spazialità drammatica e spazialità reale nel *Laudario* di Orvieto,” *Medioevo e Rinascimento*, 6 (1992): 1–21; and “Il *Laudario* di Orvieto: spazialità drammatica, spazialità reale e contesto figurativo,” in *Teatro e storia*, 8 (1993): 241–277; see also her “Cultura materiale nel teatro delle confraternite umbre,” *Teatro e storia: Annali* 4, 12 (1997): 293–346; and “‘Funus in Perusio’: Arte, drammaturgia e devozioni in tempo di peste,” *Teatro e storia: Annali* 7, 15 (2000): 163–212.

6 The conferences organized annually since 1975 by Federico Doglio and the Centro Studi sul Teatro Medioevale e Rinascimentale in Viterbo, Anagni and Rome have dealt with a wide range of medieval drama, but confraternities have been all but absent; the four European Medieval Drama conferences convened by Sydney Higgins in Camerino with the express purpose of studying performance have encouraged every aspect of performance analysis based on both texts and archives.

In Tuscany, they were suppressed, not, as one might have thought at the time, by heathen barbarians, but by men who saw clearly the kind of use that future historians might make of them. In other parts of Italy and in Spain, for instance, many of the confraternities that reformed themselves after the council of Trent were until recently or are still in existence and their archives are preserved almost intact. These archives hold untold wealth of documentation: names and dates, deliberations, petitions, indulgences, bequests, transactions and expenses. I believe that it is worth systematically transcribing, checking, indexing and publishing – electronically if not on paper – all such documentation, so that it is available to a far wider range of scholars.

Much can be gleaned from civic and confraternal records, from chronicles and memoirs, about plays and performances, the relationship of the players with their neighbourhoods and families and with the civic and ecclesiastical authorities, their use of space, their technical triumphs and disasters, the hypochondria and tantrums of the actors, what they ate, the nails and string they used, and how they paid for it all. But confraternity archives do not, on the whole, have texts of plays, or direct descriptions of performances. It is only rarely possible to match a play text with a description or an expense account with any degree of certainty. As a result, the texts that do survive, as literature at least *in potentia*, have for the most part been taken out of that context and often with inadequate attention to chronology. Many scholars have been forced to rely on modern printed sources, and are unable to look back past the “invention of tradition”<sup>7</sup> that came with the creation of the European nation states in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, and was furthered in Italy, as Medina Lasansky has shown so effectively, by the Fascist regime.<sup>8</sup>

It is essential to return to archives and manuscript collections to re-examine and interrogate the evidence. Have the documents been read accurately? Are the old editions of dramatic texts comprehensive and representative? What more can be learnt about performances that have been noted in the old compendia? In particular, how did performance interact with prestige, piety, power, place, painting and popular culture? For every European city where civic, ecclesiastical and confraternal records have survived the mindless ravages of war and of nature, this research can be done, and there are literally hundreds of theses waiting to be written in Italy alone. Konrad Eisenbichler has set an example, in his 1998 monographic study of the Florentine youth confraternity of the Archangel

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7 See Eric Hobsbawm’s “Introduction: Inventing Tradition,” and his concluding essay, “Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1870–1914,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. E. J. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1–14 and 263–307.

8 D. Medina Lasansky, “Tableau and Memory: The Fascist Revival of the Medieval/Renaissance Festival in Italy,” *The European Legacy* 4 (1999), pp. 26–53.

Raphael, founded in 1411 and finally closing its doors in 1785.<sup>9</sup> Moving from dramatic literature (and formation in a language and literature discipline), he has painstakingly matched the documents of the archives with texts of plays, and read those plays carefully. Dramatic texts are rich in iconographical detail and social commentary, but they are not just to be dipped into by historians and art historians: they belong to the realm of the imaginary, and have a complex set of generic conventions, a vocabulary and grammar of characterisation, of gesture, of scenography that changes significantly over time and must be understood in context.

The Florentine Purification company follows a similar trajectory, as Lorenzo Polizzotto's study, to be published early in 2004, will reveal.<sup>10</sup> They were pioneers of the genre of the moral *sacra rappresentazione* in the fifteenth century, ceased doing plays after the Pazzi conspiracy caused a general tightening of control on meetings and public space, and returned to playmaking only in the early sixteenth century, that is, after the return of the Medici. In the sixteenth century, the plays continued in the "youth" confraternities, even though the youths became significantly older. The Purification company's records for 1517 note the performance of the "*fiesta* or to put it better the comedy of Judith."<sup>11</sup> Like their contemporaries, they moved from collectivity to patronage and secured the services of a writer with literary pretensions; they moved from shambling narrative to more seamless use of time and space; they become quite consciously part of the literary and theatrical culture of the whole city that is straining to catch up with radical new developments in the courts of northern Italy.

The whole issue of the relationships between confraternities and the new secular theatrical groups has yet to be addressed. It was Paul Oskar Kristeller who drew our attention, back in 1969, to the fact that the statutes of sixteenth-century literary academies are modelled closely on those of confraternities, and to the probable relationship between these different forms of social (and particularly male) bonding.<sup>12</sup> The Accademia degli Intronati of Siena is an example of how a literary academy crossed over into theatre: from 1529 through to 1589, it was responsible for a series of ground-breaking comedies, that explored themes of female identity, cross dressing and disguise, incest, love, and marriage. We are

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9 Eisenbichler, *The Boys of the Archangel Raphael*, cited n. 2.

10 *Children of the Promise: The Confraternity of the Purification and the Socialization of Youths in Florence, 1427–1785*, announced by Cambridge University Press for March 2004.

11 "E feccáñanssi [per la festa *cancellato*] per me' dire chomedia di Iudit che si fé la domenicha matina del charnecciale che fumo a di 14 febraio 1517 la quale feccáñano e donorno a la chonpangnia e festaiuoli che furono fatti sopra el parato e quali furno questi [seguono 10 nomi] tutta dieci paghorono detta spesa" Florence, Archivio di Stato, Compagnie Religiose Soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo, 1646 [Purificazione], f. 214 v.

12 Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Lay Religious Traditions and Florentine Platonism," in *Studies in Renaissance Thought and Letters* (Rome: Storia e Letteratura, 1969), pp. 99–122.

still dealing here with collective performance rather than patronage, with the performance group – whatever its rhetoric – as the primary beneficiary of that collective activity. By the 1540s, however, professional theatre had appeared: new legally constituted companies of actors who performed for financial reward a new genre of theatre: the *commedia dell'arte*. But it is important, for Italy at least, to understand that all of these modes co-existed. Within confraternities and, as Elissa Weaver has shown in her 2002 study of convent theatre,<sup>13</sup> within female convents, secular developments were assimilated into the chaste entertainments of carnival.<sup>14</sup> Music, an essential part of confraternal devotion, was no less central to their theatre in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as the *confratelli* performed oratorios and music drama on devout themes.

In Paris, the Confrérie de la Passion was not as fortunate. They had just completed the first purpose-built theatre in modern Europe when, in 1549, the authorities banned their plays.<sup>15</sup> They were able, however, to lease the performance space to secular theatre in the new classicising style from Italy.

In the Low Countries, on the other hand, we find the formation of “Chambers of Rhetoric” in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in which the *rederijkers* or rhetoricians, poets, playwrights and actors, for the most part non-professionals, create literary and dramatic performances for festivals and ceremonial occasions. The *abele spelen* combine two clear traditions: the medieval confraternity tradition of fifteenth-century Flanders and the humanist tradition of rhetoric and philology; they are sufficiently “modern” to continue to flourish until the end of the seventeenth century, and to adapt to and even flourish in a Renaissance and Reformation context. Reformation

The study of contemporary confraternal performance, particularly the Holy Week rituals of Southern Italy and Spain, and of course Latin America, is currently the domain of the social anthropologist, but there is no doubt that anthropology has led social historians – and the model for Italian Renaissance Studies is Richard Trexler – to new understandings of Renaissance documents. In the quest for “relevance”, it is *de rigueur* to apply insights gained from the study of the past to our understanding of the present. Confraternity scholars will have important contributions to make in the formulation of public policy for commu-

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13 Elissa Weaver, *Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

14 On the most prolific of these authors, Giovan Maria Cecchi and his relationship with the confraternity of the Arcangelo Raffaele, see Eisenbichler’s monograph and also Bruno Ferraro.

15 On the great French Passions, see Jean-Pierre Bordier, *Le Jeu de la Passion: le message chrétien et le théâtre français (XIIIe–XVIe s.)* (Paris: Champion, 1998); Elisabeth Caron, “Les Passions du bas moyen âge français,” *Le Moyen Français* 38 (1998) 125–138; on the Confrérie de la Passion after the 1548 edict, see Isabelle Martin, “La Guerre des Théâtres à Paris (XVIe–XVIIIe),” *Revue d’Histoire du Théâtre* 49 (1997): 345–355.

nity arts, local government and the use of public space, education and welfare generally; and since *confratelli* were prevented from continuing as members if they took up arms or if they were not at peace with their neighbours, perhaps even as peacemakers.

Research in confraternal drama is not exclusively document and text based, since for the process of understanding the dynamics of collectivity and the workings of the text there is absolutely no substitute for attempting to perform the plays. Medieval plays can range from the unspeakably tedious to the transcendent, and there can be no doubt that some of the texts that survive have done so because nobody got them down from the shelf again after their first performance. Humour, for example, may appear only in performance: Saint Christina is ripped to pieces and her tongue is cut out, but only when we see her continue to speak, ever more eloquently, can we delight in her suffering and the salvation that comes from it.

The performance of the York plays in the city of their origin, the Toronto plays performed by the *Poculi Ludique Societas*, Femke Kramer's Theatre Company Marot in Groningen, the English plays performed in university departments throughout the English-speaking world, though conceived in the contexts of nineteenth-century medievalism, all bear witness to the creative interaction between scholarship, teaching and learning, and in many cases Christian faith. It is hard to find such enthusiasm for amateur performances in Italy and France. An exception is the Passion play performed every four years in Sordevolo, in Piedmont. It is a wonderfully hybrid creature: it adapts an eighteenth-century printing of the fifteenth-century Passion performed by the *Gonfalone Confraternita* in the Roman Colosseum, and presents itself as "antique"; in reality the first performance dates to the 1850, and it belongs to that romantic "invention of tradition" that I have already mentioned.<sup>16</sup> Like all voluntary spectacles it is groaning under the burden of health and safety legislation and public liability insurance costs that will in all probability soon make such performances almost impossible.

So where can confraternal theatre be taught and studied in the academy? For Italy, although we could expect that the principal research and teaching should be done in within the Italian academic system, it appears that there are no PhDs in progress on confraternal theatre, and very few scholars are working on any forms of theatre dating before 1500.<sup>17</sup> Foreigners are more likely to find the months on

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16 The web site for the 2005 performance is already activated: [www.passionedicrosto.org/](http://www.passionedicrosto.org/).

17 The research is principally philological: Ignazio Baldelli, Angela Terrugia, Rosanna Bettarini, the Centro di Documentazione del Movimento dei Disciplinati in Perugia, and more recently, Mara Nerbano on the Umbrian confraternities and their drama; Anna Cornagliotti and more recently Marco Picat on the *Passione of Revello*; Ludovico Zorzi, Elvira Garbero Zorzi, and, most recently, Paola Ventrone on the Florentine material.

end that it takes to work through the archival documents, but is it appropriate for a graduate student to invest years of archival research in the study of a phenomenon in a single city? Clearly a number of very successful projects have been completed along these lines. Works of quite extraordinary depth and breadth have been produced: Susan Verdi Webster's study of Holy Week processional sculpture (and much more) in Golden Age Seville; Blake Wilson's study of the *laudesi* confraternities of fifteenth-century Florence.<sup>18</sup>

But what about undergraduates? Within a conventional "foreign language and literature" program, the study of this kind of material will have difficulty finding a place. But where material is available in English, confraternity theatre, drama and spectacle are successfully taught in my own university as a visiting spot in Performance Studies, Art History, Medieval Studies and Renaissance History. Students find them interesting but do not choose to do end of term projects on the topic.

I wish to finish by touching on the research that I am doing jointly with Barbara Wisch. For several years now, we have been studying the Roman confraternity of the Gonfalone, which from 1490 to 1539 performed its Easter plays in the Colosseum, using the ruins of the tiered seating at the south-eastern end as its stage. The archive of the confraternity was deposited in the Vatican archive in the late nineteenth century and has recently been catalogued and reordered; quite exceptionally it contains a series of texts of the plays, as they changed from year to year. We have little information about the plays before they moved to the Colosseum; but it is clear that the move represents an extraordinary intersection of different ambitions: late medieval devotion, theatrical awareness, humanistic interest in the antique (under the overpowering influence of Vitruvius and Alberti), the desire to control a structure that symbolised Rome's eternity and transform it into Jerusalem, the desire to imitate Christ's Passion in action, words, music, and to share in the rituals of brotherhood. Acting on faith, the Confraternity of the Gonfalone, at least, had no doubt about its dramatic role and its position, centre stage in the biggest theatre of them all.

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18 For Verdi Webster, see n. 1; Blake Wilson, *Music and Merchants: The Laudesi Companies of Republican Florence* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1992).