

The introduction surveys the origins of confraternities and describes the role of religion in Monzese society, explaining how different time periods brought about changes in several religious laws. Each of the chapters that follow focuses on a specific confraternity within the city, presenting information about the customs and costumes typical of that particular group. The third chapter, for instance, talks about the Order of the Umiliati, whose traces can be found in the city to this day, and how it established a school system and a health care system that were available to all those in need. Worthy of mention is also the eighth chapter, which focuses on the Confraternity of Saint Bernadine, later known as the Confraternity of the Gonfalone, a sodality who cared for criminals condemned to capital punishment. The ninth deals with The Roman Order of the Holy Trinity of the Redemption of Slaves, which worked to free Christians enslaved by the Turks. The eleventh examines the Confraternity of Death, dedicated to the practice of flagellation and to other pious and charitable acts. Chapter sixteen examines the importance of the Virgin Mary in Monzese society, and discusses Marian confraternities in the city. The last chapter focuses on the processions honouring God that came to replace the annual carnivals and served as an act of contrition for all society.

The volume's appendix contains a catechism from the School of S. Marta, an itinerary of sixteenth-century processions, and several documents listing the rules and duties of three of Monza's confraternities. The documents selected by the author offer a direct insight into the life of particular confraternities as well as into the role each played within Monzese society. The itinerary of processions gives the exact times and locations at which the various processions were to begin and the places where they were to pass, while also explaining what was to be sung and recited along the way. The book is enriched by numerous pictures and a detailed map of the city pointing out the location of confraternities.

Although encyclopedic in a way, Fassina's volume is an excellent starting point for a more intensive examination of confraternities in Monza as well as a reliable overview of the lay religious situation in this Northern Italian town during the premodern period.

Lucia Galluzzo
Dept of Italian Studies
University of Toronto

Newbigin, Nerida. *Feste d'Oltrarno. Plays in Churches in Fifteenth-Century Florence*. Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 1996. 2 vols. xv, 794 pp. ISBN 88-222-4444-3. L. 176,000

Fifteenth-century Florentine sacred plays, the *sacre rappresentazioni*, were performed in confraternity oratories and in churches both as a devotional expression and as religious spectacle. Although highly popular in their time, they have remained largely misunderstood in our time and have been misrepresented within theatre scholarship pertaining to this period. As Newbigin suggests in the intro-

duction to her two-volume study, current scholarship on *sacre rappresentazioni* has rested upon the faulty assumption that religious plays printed in the last decades of the fifteenth century provide an accurate reflection of how such plays were performed in the earlier part of the century and in the context of religious festivities (*feste*). By reconstructing the individual performances of the *feste*, Newbigin uncovers the staging practices and conventions upon which these plays were based and offers valuable insights into the vicissitudes that characterize the life of Florence's popular theatrical genre. As a result, the early *feste*, whose texts circulated in manuscript form, can be more fully and accurately distinguished from those *sacre rappresentazioni* that were staged and which were subsequently printed during the last decades of the fifteenth century for the benefit of a wide lay reading public.

Newbigin focuses upon three important plays produced by confraternities in fifteenth-century Florence: the Annunciation play performed by the Compagnia della Nunziata at the church of San Felice in Piazza, the Ascension play performed by the Compagnia di Santa Agnese at the Carmine, and the Pentecost play performed by the Compagnia dello Spirito Santo delle Laude, *detta del Piccione*, in the church of Santo Spirito. In her first volume Newbigin reconstructs the performance history for each of these plays. In volume two she provides four valuable appendices, each containing the source material used in her study. In particular, she provides modern critical editions of the plays and transcribes relevant contemporary confraternity and commune records relevant to these performances. All contemporary accounts of the three *feste* are analyzed vis-à-vis financial ledgers in order to determine the accuracy of eye-witness accounts and, by extension, the accuracy of scholarly criticism based upon such accounts. For example, using confraternity ledgers and inventories to reconstruct the Sant'Agnese Assumption *feste* "diachronically," tracing the evolution of its equipment over fifty years, Newbigin finally finds support for Abraham of Suzdal's 1439 description of the play's performance only in the accumulated evidence of fourteen years of ledger entries (p.93). Conversely, current scholarly theories concerning staging practices for the *feste* are subjected to careful and extensive scrutiny. For example, in reconstructing the performance history for the *festa* of the Annunciation, Newbigin notes that Zorzi and Lisi's 1975 scale model of its stage set, though quite valuable, nonetheless attributes certain qualities to the *mezza palla tonda* (the "dome") that find no basis in either Vasari's 1568 description of the machinery nor in Abraham of Suzdal's 1439 account of the performance (p. 25).

Similarly, with a view to establishing the precise relationship between the *sacre rappresentazioni* and the *feste*, Newbigin assesses relevant play texts such as Feo Belcari's *Annunciation* in terms of their appeal to a more verbal, as opposed to a visual registry of meaning. In this way, the emergence of the new narrative form of the *sacre rappresentazioni* may be detected and more fully understood against the backdrop of the older confraternity *festa*. Newbigin later extends this analysis to include a consideration of the printing press and its impact on the dissolution of dramatic form (p. 41): with the emergence of an insatiable reading

market in the 1480s, earlier versions of the plays became “garbled,” contributing to a highly syncretic product. This further troubled efforts to classify the *feste* and to identify their staging conventions.

The formidable task of reconstructing fifteenth-century staging practices for these confraternity *feste* proves most interesting when the author’s analysis radiates outwards, entertaining questions such as the *feste*’s relationship to other art forms. For example, in discussing the unique practice of staging the Annunciation in San Felice from the right rather than from the left, Newbigin offers a convincing argument which situates the iconography of the San Felice *festa* as a possible source for Fra Filippo Lippi’s famous painting of the Annunciation (c. 1439) in the Palazzo Doria in Rome—because of the similarities between the three *feste*, Newbigin suggests, the former Carmelite friar would have been necessarily aware of the practice at the Camaldolese church of San Felice in Piazza (p. 17).

Conversely, Newbigin’s reconstruction benefits from the judicious use of paintings as explanatory sources. When trying to ascertain the nature and use of the Pentecost font for which only cryptic descriptions surface in ledger and inventory accounts, Newbigin turns to the Pentecost in the Spanish Chapel in the Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella. As the painting suggests, the font is placed outside the gates of Jerusalem and provides “with its whirligigs and shower of fireworks a symbolic baptism for the gentiles who are converted by the Apostles” (p. 194). Above all, it must be noted that the more difficult reconstructions would be strained or wholly incomplete if not subject to analysis of a theological nature. For example, the Sant’Agnese confraternity’s Ascension play performed at the church of the Carmine relies upon the use of a *Castello*, the upper part of which resists identification and understanding (p. 99). The rubric for Feo Belcari’s *Ascension*, however, provides the answer: it indicates that the play opens with a tableau depicting Christ with his mother and the apostles eating in the cenacle. Newbigin identifies this cenacle as the “Upper Room of the Last Supper on Maundy Thursday and the Upper Room in which the Holy Ghost will descend upon the Apostles on Whitsunday” (p. 99). The cenacle, Newbigin explains, shares the same position as the *Castello* of the Pentecost *festa*, thereby continuing the “fourteenth-century iconographical tradition of the Pentecost.” The supper evidently underscores Christ’s love and humanity, occupying a central position at Ascension no less so than at Pentecost.

More than simply expanding our understanding of the *nugola*, the *monte*, or the famous Pentecost fire tubes, Newbigin’s analysis—traversing as it does the fields of fine art, hermeneutics, theology, physics, architecture, dramatic literature, politics, history, and theatre—provides insight into the religious sensibility that characterizes fifteenth-century Florentine imagination and highlights the vital role played by confraternities in mounting the elaborate religious plays that were an integral part of that sensibility.

Teresa Simm
Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama
University of Toronto