

Reviews

William J. Connell and Giles Constable. *Sacrilege and Redemption in Renaissance Florence: The Case of Antonio Rinaldeschi*. Toronto: CRRS Essays and Studies, 8. Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2005. Pp. 125. 28 colour plates. ISBN 0-7727-2030-4.

This vivid micro-history recounts the sad story of Antonio Rinaldeschi, a Florentine who in 1501, having lost his money and even some items of clothing while gambling at the “Fig Tree” tavern, cursed the Virgin Mary and hurled a lump of dry dung at her image in a moment of drunken despair. Unfortunately for Rinaldeschi, a part of the dung remained stuck to the Virgin’s diadem; otherwise his gesture of drunken defiance might have gone unproven. Although it was night time and the street was quiet, a boy saw and identified the unlucky Antonio. Rinaldeschi fled, but the authorities rapidly apprehended him, at which point Antonio compounded his crime and betrayed his guilt by trying unsuccessfully to resist arrest by stabbing himself. Despite his injury, Rinaldeschi was carried off to prison where he repented of his misdeeds and made a full confession to the Eight of the Balìa, who condemned him to be hanged from the window of the palace of the Podestà. Although the archbishop of Florence ordered that the image be cleaned, a small piece of dung resembling a rosette still remained in her diadem, leading the faithful to interpret this as a divine sign. Not surprisingly, the somewhat insignificant neighbourhood image began to grow in fame and assumed a new and important role in the community, leading to a veritable cult of the desecrated image and the attribution of various unspecified miracles to it.

In their analysis of the incident, Professors Connell and Constable rely on quite a variety of sources, from legal to religious, from popular to visual, in order to contextualize the incident and interpret its outcome. Their primary visual source is a series of six vivid scenes set in three panels depicting Rinaldeschi’s sin, redemption and salvation. They are particularly unusual in that they tell the story in a vivid comic-strip manner. Connell and Constable argue that the artist was strongly influenced by images of Christ and by the lives of the saints that were available in Florence at the time of the panel’s creation in 1502.

As they delve into the significance of this strange incident, Connell and Constable find that the Rinaldeschi case raises many interesting questions for historians. Rinaldeschi’s main crimes were blasphemy, sacrilege and attempted suicide, but none of these was, at that time, a capital offence. So why was Rinaldeschi executed at all, especially in the light of his confession and obvious repentance? The two scholars suggest that the case must be seen in the context of the history of Florence at that time. This was a time of upheaval: Florence had recently undergone a campaign of spiritual revival and moral cleansing under a government strongly influenced by the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola (1494–98). Savonarola’s preaching had a profound effect on the moral and spiritual mood of Florentine society that

lasted after his demise. The sin of blasphemy against the Virgin would have been particularly offensive given the fervent spirituality of the time. Cases of informal lynching for blasphemy may well have influenced and possibly intimidated the court into passing its harsh sentence on Rinaldeschi. In fact, records tell that Rinaldeschi himself feared the mob, preferring immediate execution to the possibility of mob lynching.

Connell and Constable note the differences between civil and religious law, with the Church tending to be more forgiving than the state. Although some jurists argued for the sentence of death for such crimes as gambling, blasphemy and attempted suicide, most recommended being more merciful. Roman law itself required two eyewitness accounts for a conviction—in Rinaldeschi's case there was only one. They note that in Florence the Eight of the Balia was at that time flexing its muscles and testing its limits against the jurisdiction of the Podestà of Florence and other sources of power, and this case may have been chosen to set an example. Nevertheless, Rinaldeschi's obvious remorse, full confession and subsequent acceptance of his death give the impression of a martyr's death rather than the death of a criminal.

This impression is borne out by the painting itself. While it depicts devils influencing the drunken gambler to commit sacrilege, it depicts angels accompanying him at his death by hanging. Closely associated with this, the key figures depicted in the scenes of his confession and absolution are his comforters, in this case the Company of Blacks, members of a Florentine confraternity who attended criminals at their execution in order to support and comfort them in their final hours. The San Miniato Codex kept by the Company of Blacks recorded Antonio's case and is therefore one of the important sources both for the story of Rinaldeschi and for the role that this confraternity played in attempting to save the souls of convicted criminals and comfort them in their final moments.

This extensively researched and well-written book examines the case of Antonio Rinaldeschi from a variety of perspectives, thus providing the general reader with a profound and fascinating insight into this case. Scholars of early modern confraternities will be especially interested in the volume's description and discussion of the comforting ritual that attended the unfortunate victim of Florence's justice.

Mary Hewlett, Lucca, Italy

David M. D'Andrea. *Civic Christianity in Renaissance Italy. The Hospital of Treviso, 1400–1530*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007. Pp. xiii, 214, b/w images. ISBN 978-1-58046-239-1. US\$ 75

Studies of brotherhoods and confraternities in Medieval and Renaissance Italy are becoming a not secondary part of scholarly examinations of this historical period. David M. D'Andrea's book on a confraternity in Treviso, a city just north