

Reviews

The Art of Executing Well. Rituals of Execution in Renaissance Italy, ed. Nicholas Terpstra. Early Modern Studies 1. Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2008. Pp. xiv, 354 + 20 figures, 1 graph, 5 tables. ISBN 978-1-931112-88-8. US.\$24.95.

This collection of six articles and three different sets of texts is a unique and innovative contribution to scholarship on early modern Italian comforting confraternities. Assembled under the expert guidance of Nicholas Terpstra with contributions from an international team of scholars, it offers a well-focused analysis of the rituals, practices, iconology, and philosophy that not only characterized but actually underpinned the work of confraternities dedicated to helping the condemned come to terms with, and then face their imminent execution. While in other areas of Europe such comforting was carried out by members of the clergy, on the Italian peninsula it was often lay men who assumed this unenviable responsibility—though not without the occasional interference from the Church or the State, as Terpstra notes in his contribution to the collection (esp. pp. 150–152).

Starting in Bologna in the 1330s, but then spreading rapidly to cities such as Ferrara, Florence, Venice and Rome, the idea that fellow lay men should comfort the condemned caught the imagination of the urban population in Italy's most advanced and prosperous cities. This led to the creation of comforting confraternities that quickly became a key participant in the theatre of justice that was enacted with frightening regularity and frequency well into the late eighteenth century. As Terpstra tantalizingly suggests in the concluding paragraph of his introduction (p. 9), perhaps it was exactly because of such lay participation in a task as mentally and spiritually challenging as the *conforteria* that Italian political and cultural leaders were able, in the eighteenth century, to advance a more humane understanding of the relationship between crime and punishment. In November 1786 the Grand Duchy of Tuscany became the first sovereign state in Europe to formally abolish capital punishment. Perhaps it is also not a coincidence that just over a year before, in March 1785, it also abolished all confraternities, including the confraternity of Santa Maria della Croce al Tempio and its famous comforting sub-group, the "Blacks."

In the first article in the collection, "Scaffold and Stage. Comforting Rituals and Dramatic Traditions in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy" (13–30), Kathleen Falvey examines the intersection of comforting rituals and religious plays in late medieval and Renaissance Italy. A revised and expanded version of her 1991 article in *Crossing the Boundaries: Christian Piety and the Arts in Italian Medieval and Renaissance Confraternities*, the current version uses the Bolognese and Florentine texts published in chapters 7 and 8 of this collection to argue for a "profound correspondence ... between dramatic traditions and the efforts of dedicated laymen to transform a brutal penal event, public execution, into a ritualized and very 'real' re-enactment of the death of Christ or one of the martyrs" (14). Falvey's contribution

(both then and now) is of fundamental importance for an understanding of just how “dramatic” and theatrical a public execution was, complete with scripts, roles, music, performance, stages, and action. Everyone, including the crowd, had a part to play. While it may seem strange to open a collection of articles on comforting confraternities with a piece on theatre, the decision to do so was profoundly correct—a public execution was a theatrical performance that called on everyone to perform his/her role to perfection for the ultimate success of the production and the greater good of the people and institutions mounting it. The cathartic experience was meant to cleanse, and thus purify, society and the individual. As such, the “theatre of death” and the role of the comforters who helped to turn death into salvation was profoundly important for everyone concerned.

In chapter 2, “Comforting with Song. Using *Laude* to Assist Condemned Prisoners” (31–51), Pamela Gravestock examines the songs, or *laude*, used by the comforters and shows how “their structure and thematic focus helped to alleviate a [condemned] person’s fears, to direct his attention away from earthly matters, and to ensure he was well prepared for his ensuing fate” (42). Even though very few such *laude* have survived to the present day, Gravestock is able to use the incipits we do find in several confraternity manuscripts and the texts of the few *laude* that have survived to advance her argument and prove her point. A table of 141 incipits found in manuscripts of the Bolognese comforting confraternity of Santa Maria della Morte reveals the extensive use of such *laude* by the confraternity, but also their variety and singularity.

In chapter 3, “Mirror of a Condemned. The Religious Poems of Andrea Viarani” (52–71), Alfredo Troiano focuses our attention on the case and execution of a nobleman from Faenza, Andrea Viarani, found guilty in 1469 of conspiring against the life of Borso d’Este, duke of Ferrara. What is particularly interesting about the Viarani case is that the condemned man found time in prison to pen three religious poems to help himself prepare for his inevitable fate. These are exceptional texts, for they offer an insight into the mind and spirit of a condemned man awaiting execution. What is ironic, is that the poems are not found in the manuscripts of the Ferrarese confraternity that comforted Viarani, but in those of the Bolognese confraternity of Santa Maria della Morte, which clearly used them as part of the “resource materials” that were made available to the comforters when assisting the condemned. The three poems are published in English translation as an appendix to the article (72–78).

In chapter 4, “In Your Face. Paintings for the Condemned in Renaissance Italy” (79–97), Massimo Ferretti examines the shape, format, and iconography of the *tavolette*, the little hand-held painted tablets that were used by the comforters to help the condemned focus on his “dramatic” role as pseudo-martyr and to tune out all the noise and the people around him. As in the case of the *laude*, very few *tavolette* have survived to the present day—a factor of their function and their nature. Ferretti examines the few specimen that have survived, some with connec-

tions with the Bolognese confraternity of Santa Maria della Morte, and expands on their iconography and significance.

In chapter 5, “Consolation or Condemnation. The Debates on Withholding Sacraments from Prisoners” (98–117), Adriano Prosperi tackles a series of fundamental questions in the treatment of the condemned: should one offer them the help and support of religion and, after execution, should one pray for their soul? If an individual is alienated from the civic community because of his crimes against society, is he also not alienated from the spiritual community? As Prosperi points out, “in the tradition of Christian Europe, the power to punish was founded on the Christian conception of sin: God placed the sword of justice in the hands of Christian princes to impede the consequences of sin” (107). In this case, in an age when sin and crime were, for all intents and purposes, synonymous, how could a sinner/criminal be forcibly removed from society but, at the same time, rehabilitated and reintegrated into the Church?

In chapter 6, “Theory into Practice. Executions, Comforting, and Comforters in Renaissance Italy” (118–158), Nicholas Terpstra examines comforters’ manuals and other archival information to determine what sort of crimes were being prosecuted in Renaissance Bologna, how many people were executed for them, how were such executions carried out, how did comforting rituals and ideals change over the course of the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, and, lastly, who were the comforters and why did they willingly assume such an onerous responsibility. Although the questions are many, Terpstra’s well focused analysis provides a vivid picture of public executions that also reveals some very interesting facts. For example, “out of the almost one thousand people who lost their lives [in executions], only thirty-four were women” (122). Clearly gender was a determining factor. Also, as we might expect, the vast majority of the condemned were “outsiders,” that is, non-Bolognese, “often young adults, who drifted into crime as they tried to survive in an alien city, and who lacked the financial resources and personal networks that would allow them to negotiate commutation of their penalties” (122). Provenance, age, and economic condition were thus also important factors on whether one would ascend the scaffold or not.

The following three chapters (183–339) are comprised of English translations of some of the contemporary documents discussed in the previous pages. Thus, chapter 7, presents an English translation by Sheila Das of the Bologna comforters’ manual (193–275), a sampling of the *laude* and prayers found in it jointly translated by Das and Terpstra (275–288), and the “Authorities” or collections of sayings drawn from classical, biblical, or patristic sources that were at the disposal of the Bolognese comforters (289–292). Chapter 8 offers a translation by Alison Knowles Frazier of Luca della Robbia’s description of the comforting and then execution of two Florentine noblemen, Pietro Paolo Boscoli and Agostino Capponi, found guilty on 22 February 1513 of conspiring against the life of Cardinal Giovanni de’ Medici who, less than a month later, was to become Pope Leo X (293–326). The ninth and last chapter offers a translation by Maryl Bailey of Giulio Cesare Croce’s

two “laments” or ballads, one on the execution of two unfortunate young lovers, Lodovico Landinelli and Ippolita Pensarotti, found guilty of having poisoned Ippolita’s father who had been contrary to their affections (327–335), the other on the execution of Manas, a Jew, for his involvement in a murder (336–339).

This volume is a veritable icebreaker in the ocean of confraternity studies, opening a path and showing the way not only for the study of comforting confraternities, but also for a more nuanced examination of the rituals of death, the nature of public executions, and shared concepts of justice (and service!) in pre-Enlightenment Italy. Its combination of scholarly articles and texts in translation will serve not only to advance scholarship, but also to educate university-level students in the social and spiritual history of early modern Italy.

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Le confraternite laicali in Umbria in età moderna e contemporanea. Storia istituzionale e archivi. Atti dell’incontro di studio—Perugia, 27 marzo 2007, a cura di E. Bianchi, Perugia, Soprintendenza Archivistica per l’Umbria, 2010. Pp. 215. n.p. ISBN 970-88-95436-16-6.

L’interesse storiografico per le confraternite non è mai mancato a cominciare dai tempi del Muratori (*Antiquitates Italicae Medii Aevii*). Senza dubbio però negli anni 60 del XX secolo—in concomitanza con l’“età” del Concilio Vaticano II e con l’affermarsi dell’approccio sociologico all’argomento—l’impegno di studio verso queste forme socio-aggregative s’incrementò notevolmente. La raccolta dei lavori del Meersseman—il celebre *Ordo fraternitatis*—apparsa nel 1977 fu una sorta di punto di arrivo e di partenza perché si avvertì con maggiore vigore l’importanza delle associazioni confraternali come spazio aperto ai laici (uomini e donne).

Cinque esempi possono essere sufficienti per dare l’idea dell’attualità e del fervore di studi e ricerche che ruota attorno all’argomento “confraternite.” Il volume di Marina Gazzini, *Confraternite e società cittadina nel medioevo italiano*, apparso nel 2006; *Studi confraternali. Orientamenti, problemi, testimonianze*, a cura della stessa Gazzini, apparso nel 2009; nel 2008 (settembre) si è svolto presso la Normale di Pisa il convegno internazionale sul tema “fraternità e barriere” coordinato da Adriano Prosperi e Nicholas Terpestra (di cui si attendono gli atti); presso la Deputazione di storia patria per l’Umbria è tornato in auge il Centro di studi e di ricerca sul movimento dei Disciplinati (con articoli nel *Bollettino* e con appositi *Quaderni*); e come una sorta di strumento di raccordo in mezzo a tante pubblicazioni ricordo la rivista *Confraternitas*.

Se il medioevo è l’età nel corso della quale le confraternite si formano e s’impongono per la loro diffusione e per la loro capacità di attrarre fedeli, l’età moderno-controriformistica non fu certo da meno, anzi! È il caso di dire che il fenomeno s’incrementò notevolmente. Alle varie fraternite d’istituzione medievale si aggiunse una quantità sterminata di “compagnie” diffuse in modo capillare nelle