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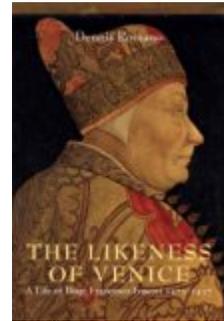
Dennis Romano. *The Likeness of Venice: A Life of Doge Francesco Foscari, 1373-1457*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007. xxvi + 468 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11202-3.

Reviewed by Alison A. Smith (Department of History, Wagner College)
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This is a remarkable book. Dennis Romano's biography of Francesco Foscari not only gives us an elegant and persuasive account of the doge's public and private life but also provides us with a compelling account of some of the most important decades in the history of the Venetian Republic and the development of the Renaissance state system. Foscari's reign, one of the longest of any Venetian doge, lasted from 1423 to 1457. During this time, Venice consolidated its control over the mainland territory it had conquered at the very beginning of the fifteenth century in an effort to contain the expansionist threat of the Visconti in Milan. Called on to lead one of the wealthiest and most powerful European states, Foscari grappled with urgent fiscal, diplomatic, and military challenges caused by nearly constant warfare and shifting alliances with Italian states. He was a man of great intelligence and personal ambition as well as a consummate politician with particular skill as an administrator. Notwithstanding the length and achievements of his reign, Foscari was deposed by the Venetian Senate just before he died and just after his son Jacopo was tortured and exiled from Venice. Foscari has been regarded as a tragic figure ever since, the subject of plays, an opera, and innumerable morality tales. His story has been used to promote both the myth of Venice (beginning with Bernardo Giustinian's famous funeral oration) and the anti-myth (which highlights oppression and lack of freedom in an increasingly authoritarian early modern Venice). In the final chapter of the book, Romano examines the way in which George Byron, Giuseppe Verdi, and Eugène Delacroix, among others, handled the Foscari story, and grapples with the interpretive problems faced by the biographer of this enigmatic and extremely important figure.

Romano's decision to use the phrase "The Likeness of Venice" as the book's title reveals the approach he takes to his subject: given the importance of the word "imago" in contemporary political discourse about the doge, he pays close attention both to the range of images projected by Foscari to his world and to the images projected onto Foscari as the embodiment of the Venetian state. The doge "was like an icon, transmitting the power of St. Mark to his people," and he "embodied" the spirit of the Republic (p. xxi). Given the nearly complete absence of more conventional private records (letters, memoirs, etc.) for Foscari, Romano analyzes his building projects to deepen our understanding of the man. His writing moves fluently between political narrative and iconographical analysis, and his interpretation of these physical remains moves beyond mere iconography to include insights derived from recent scholarship on material culture. He argues that Foscari was intimately involved in planning the chapel of the Madonna in the Basilica of San Marco, because of his close personal ties with the procurators and *primicerio*. Building the chapel reinforced Venice's traditional ties to the Virgin and focused Marian devotion in the city on San Marco, the doge's own church. Throughout the book, Romano's explanatory framework credits the power of relics, saints, and votive masses in the eyes of contemporary Venetians, and he argues that Foscari's personal piety and devotion to the Virgin drove many of his most important decisions as doge.

The other three major monuments analyzed by Romano—the Porta della Carta framing the ceremonial entrance to the Ducal Palace, his family palace, Ca' Foscari, and Foscari's tomb in Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari—contain much more explicit and complex messages about Foscari's public and private identities. It is this dis-



cussion of Foscari's manipulation of republican, imperial, and chivalric symbolism—both in his building projects and in his politics—that provides thematic continuity for the biography and also contributes important insights into the transformation of Venetian power during the fifteenth century. As Venice faced the challenge of creating and defending a mainland empire, it had to respond directly to feudal and imperial systems of domination that were used by the Holy Roman Emperor, the Pope, and other Italian princes. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the “imperial dogeship” created by Foscari, and describe several important ritual moments in which the doge and government of Venice needed to adapt creatively to the new set of symbols and practices to assert their authority over the subject cities. They gradually adopted the iconography of Roman imperial triumphal arches as well as the flamboyant Gothic style preferred in the cities newly subject to Venetian rule. Romano reminds us that Foscari became the imperial vicar of the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund in 1437 (he did this by proxy; the investiture ceremony occurred in Prague), thereby bringing Venice into the feudal framework for diplomatic relationships used in most of mainland Italy and legitimizing its conquest of the Terraferma. Foscari's many decisions to adopt imperial imagery and ritual to emulate the display and extravagance of mainland princes (most famously, perhaps, in the marriage of his son Jacopo, described here in detail) were in constant tension with the more corporate republican ethos embraced by his peers in Venice. Yet Romano argues that because the doge was the “imago” of Venice, “that elision of doge and state meant that Foscari's efforts to increase the visibility of the dogeship were simultaneously and inseparably efforts to increase the power and prestige of Venice” (p. 177).

Having written two very successful books on the social and economic history of Renaissance Venice (*Patriarchs and Popolani: The Social Foundations of the Venetian Renaissance State* [1987] and *Housecraft and Statecraft: Domestic Service in Renaissance Venice, 1400-1600* [1996]), Romano understands the social and economic complexities of the world that Foscari and his fellow politicians had to navigate. He, therefore, argues persuasively that the drama of Foscari's life was played out against increasingly bitter divisions within the patriciate between rich and poor nobles. Rather than follow the traditional narrative and attribute Foscari's political troubles at home to straightforward vendettas, Romano shows how these divisions were exacerbated by the strains of constant warfare, and eventually led to the threat of factions. His meticulous analysis of the deliberations of the Senate and Venice's other deliberative bodies reveals the growing power of the Council of Ten, “a response in large part to the new exigencies of war and international diplomacy, factors demanding a strong executive and tight secrecy” (p. 305).

This impressive biography provides a new and indispensable account of the first half of the fifteenth century from the point of view of the Venetian Republic, providing important details about individuals and episodes that are otherwise hard to find in a single modern historical account of the period in English. As Romano points out, it was “a place and time overflowing with extraordinary personalities” (p. 329). His readable prose makes this period come alive, and he tells his story both dramatically and patiently, weaving together the various strands and actors in a way that is both coherent and accessible.

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