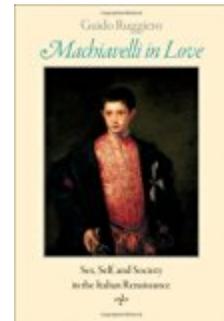


**Guido Ruggiero.** *Machiavelli in Love: Sex, Self, and Society in the Italian Renaissance.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. 304 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-8516-7.

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## Extracting Psychosocial History from Renaissance Literature

This fall, I sat in a meeting that advised graduate students in humanities on their grant applications. There floated by proposal after proposal, each projecting alert and sensitive readings of assorted cultural productions. But, ever and again, I kept asking the historian's classic Ws: Who, precisely, wrote, painted, sculpted, filmed, or otherwise created this thing you propose to study? When? Where? For whom? And what, precisely, is it? After the session, bemused, I wrote the program's alert director, bemoaning what I called "A Dearth of History," dire symptom, I suspected, of a surfeit of theory. The students seize any subject, I said, be it pop cans, graffiti, or immigrant novels; sprinkle it with a charismatic theory; shake once; and serve up as wisdom. It was a curmudgeon's lament.

The great virtue, to my eyes, of Guido Ruggiero's new flight of fancy, *Machiavelli in Love*, is that, all the while that it soars on wings of fancy, unlike those student projects, it keeps all the historian's ballast well stowed aboard. This is a veteran historian's book of literary speculation, an invitation to a reading of classic stories that keeps the basic Ws in mind. It is a senior scholar's plaything, taking liberties it knows it can afford because years of sober research vouch for good sense behind the play.

It is also, I suspect, a teacher's book. It favors texts that enliven an English-speaking classroom on Italian history both because they support good lessons and because they bring students into engagement with the Italian past. How better to stir up Anglo-Saxon students,

after all, than with tales, tragic or comical, that touch on passion, tenderness, deception, loss, or ribaldry! Readers of this review will spot pedagogical favorites as I scan the book.

At the book's center is an argument that the Renaissance self was less an essence than a performance, dictated by the several circles in which one operated. Men and women crafted selves, or varieties of self, to meet what Ruggiero, social historian of behavior, calls "consensus realities." So, if thirsting for an insider's tour of Niccolò Machiavelli's amatory soul, we must gird ourselves for disappointment. Indeed, if we yearn wistfully for that favorite topic of romance, a lover's feelings for a beloved, our frustration will double, as, in fact, most of what we see here is not what the Florentine thinker felt, thought, or did with a desired woman, but, rather, how he performed the role of lover for those who, in his world, really mattered to him, other men. This remark is not at all to reproach the book, as the performance of the lover's role varied with the audience, and its every aspect makes for compelling history.

The book begins with an introduction evoking Machiavelli, again in love, aged fifty-seven, and then takes pains to lodge sex under two banners: "performance" and "negotiation." The author aspires to revise Michel Foucault's claim that sex and identity were modern inventions. Instead, with a nod to Stephen Greenblatt's "self-fashioning," he stakes his claim that, rather than cultivate a single essential self, in the modern mode, Renaissance

Italians nimbly adapted all performance, be it sexual, social, or ethical, and all self-perception to assorted publics.

Then come assorted teachable classics. The first chapter visits Pietro Aretino's *Marescalco* (1533), a tale of a male-male "marriage" that invites meditation on the unstable nature of male sexual identity, as men moved across a very long, slow maturation toward late marriage, passing from passive sex with older men to the pursuit of women. Females, moving more swiftly to adulthood, escaped such ambiguities of role and status. The second chapter begins with thoughts on the place of play in sex and then evokes a devil theme, and blends meditations on a sixteenth-century trial for amorous possession with a rereading of Giovanni Boccaccio's "Rustico and Alibech," the irreverent story of the playful hermit who asked an innocent young wanderer to put his devil back in the hell between her thighs. Ruggiero sees in this tale more subversion, more theology, more intimations of a millennium of good-through-sex, and even perhaps more feminism than would readers who might stress the lighter ironies of its obscene sacrilege. The chapter then moves to Boccaccio's foil, a Counter-Reformation exorcism of a nun who played at sex with devils, and sets the more modern discipline and dislike of play against Boccaccio's earlier openness.

Like the second chapter, the third is also contrapuntal; it parallels two sexual failures, one in art, the other from life. It sets a trial about an abbot who failed to keep his concubine against the stage character "Captain Fear" (Capitano Spaventa, perhaps better translated as "Captain Fright"), a heroic prodigy of prowess who eventually flags and can no longer content all the Amazons in bed. The abbot's tale was more tangled. Ruggiero, here as elsewhere in the book, comments on what he calls "microstrategies of power" that could arise, for instance, when magic and sexual desire intersected with other forces. The expression nods to how, especially for women, who had few other resources, sexual desire and the occult, both things arcane and baffling, helped bend or bind the men. Clerical concubines, given their ambiguous status, might often need such powers. But, in Ruggiero's tale, the power in doubt is not female but male; the abbot brandishes the courts, charging magic to fetch back his long-standing woman. In this microhistory, magic, healing arts, and love itself figure as strategies and ploys of female agency.

In Ruggiero's fourth chapter, Machiavelli is still off stage. We have a social-historical meditation on Antonio Manetti's famous tale about Filippo Brunelleschi's cruel

prank against Grasso the carpenter. In this notorious *beffa*, the future architect of the duomo, with his cronies, is said to have convinced a local craftsman that he was in fact another man. The clever ploy, Ruggiero asserts, manifested *virtù*, adroit mastery that gave honor and ascendancy.

In the rest of the book, Machiavelli is again central. The fifth chapter begins with an argument that the streak of ribaldry in his correspondence with Francesco Vettori is far less incongruous with sober talk of high politics than many scholars might think. It helped smooth over Machiavelli's envy and frustration when his better-placed friend failed to rescue him from his fall from grace. Desire, sex, love poetry, and love talk all here figure as performances, and as topoi, as indeed does old age, a theme that Ruggiero finds running through the famous letter where Machiavelli, actually just forty-four, reports to his friend that he has written a treatise on princes. There follows an extended meditation on the sexual themes of the letters, and on the play of assumed and attributed identities. Tricks and ploys and identity flips all feed the letters' ironic sense of play. The historian then moves to a reading of *La Mandragola*, where Ruggiero contends that Machiavelli himself figures in two main characters, Callimaco the over-hot young lover and Nicia the silly cuckold, whose names contain fragments of his own. Machiavelli is here, like many Italians, young and old at once; maturity, among men, Ruggiero notes, is brief, and among women long.[1] Ruggiero then reviews Machiavelli's *Clizia* as, again, life writing.[2]

The sixth big chapter ponders *virtù* in assorted good stories—a Sermine novella, Boccaccio's tale of cruel Tancredi of Salerno, and Matteo Bandello's suicidal rape victim, Giulia di Gazuolo—finding a suppleness in *virtù* that could palliate the rigors of plain honor. It then ponders *virtù* as an antidote, for Baldassarre Castiglione, to a courtier's effeminacy. An epilogue returns to Machiavelli and the female sex, with *Belfagor*, one last devil in a book with many and one last chance to write playfully about a playful author.[3]

A social historian, Ruggiero aspires to bridge the gap between two disciplines, one his own and the other literary. He does well when looking to the social and giving art its setting in the world. The other direction is harder; can one use literature to parse the world itself? Obviously, it makes sense to try. But I, a social historian, reading Ruggiero on the power of *virtù* to deflect, inflect, and soften honor, asked myself: but did Italians actually ever evoke, or use, the notion? I had, I thought, almost

never met the term. So I pulled from my files thirty-five sixteenth-century trials both long and short, thousands of pages of transcription, containing the voices, via scribes, of hundreds of men and women of every social station. I found the occasional legal term: “by virtue of the contents of the papal brief” and so on, but just two other instances, one a “*virtù*” in a love poem and the other the claim by a papal prosecutor that his young bastard son sang and danced “*virtuosamente*.” Otherwise, I found nothing. My first conclusion: caution when reading high letters to retrieve low social facts.

## Notes

[1]. Machiavelli composed *La Mandragola* in 1518, but it was not published until 1531.

[2]. Machiavelli composed *Clizia* in 1525, but the comedy was published in 1537.

[3]. Some critics argue that Machiavelli composed *Belfagor* as early as 1518, but the first edition using the author’s name was published in 1549.

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