

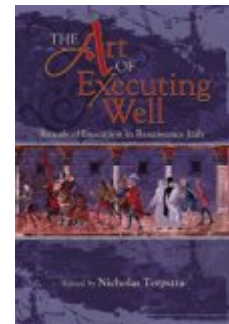


Nicholas Terpstra, ed. *The Art of Executing Well: Rituals of Execution in Renaissance Italy*. Early Modern Studies Series. Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2008. 360 pp. \$48.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-931112-87-1; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-931112-88-8.

Reviewed by John Hunt (University of Louisville)

Published on H-Law (December, 2009)

Commissioned by Michael J. Pfeifer



Piety and Pathos in the Piazzas of Early Modern Italy

Public executions in premodern Europe unleashed a myriad of emotions among their participants. From the point of view of political authorities, they reaffirmed the power and justice of the state and provided it with a sense of satisfaction in avenging slights to its honor and authority. Among the crowd, ambivalent feelings of joy, contentment, and fear were invoked depending on the political context of the execution. Likewise the condemned criminals themselves felt a jumble of emotions ranging from fear to remorse as they lived out their last moments before a jeering crowd.

Most histories of early modern justice and capital punishment have focused on the public aspects of executions—the vengeance of the aggrieved, the justice of the state, and the theatrical experience of the crowd. Nicholas Terpstra's edited volume, in contrast, examines the piety and pathos felt not only by the condemned criminals but also by members of confraternities who sought to calm these criminals during the night before their execution. The task of these laymen, called comforters, was to assuage the fear of the criminals and to get them to accept both their fate and the justice of the state. Terpstra and the other authors underline this unique aspect to northern and central Italian religious and social life—the employment of the confraternity members, rather than friars and priests, in attending to the spiritual needs of those condemned to death. These laymen participated in the confraternities both from religious conviction and a desire to gain political and social prestige

within the ruling elite.

The first half of the book is devoted to a collection of essays on the art of comforting by established and up-and-coming scholars in various disciplines. These essays serve as an extended and diverse introduction to a core document of the tome: the *Comforters' Manual*, a book produced in two parts during the fifteenth century that advised lay brothers of Bolognese Compagnia della Santa Maria di Morte (colloquially known as the Company of Death) in the proper techniques in serving condemned criminals on the eve of their executions. The second section is rounded out by additional primary sources associated with the *Comforters' Manual*: *laude*, that is, hymns sung by confraternity brothers and criminals alike and adages used by company members to get the condemned men to accept their fate and confess their sins.

The *Comforters' Manual* was produced in Bologna by members of the Company of Death to aid them in their task of alleviating the fears of condemned men during their last night on earth. The first book of the manual, most likely written during the first half of the fifteenth century by a friar or priest, deals with more abstract theological questions on salvation and penance. The second book, probably composed by a member or members of the company during the second half of the fifteenth century, offers more practical advice on helping the condemned. Although written in the fifteenth century, manuscript copies were made and used

throughout sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Bologna and throughout northern and central Italy by other comforting confraternities. Essentially it was a practical guide to the *ars moriendi*, the art of dying well, hence, the title of the book, *The Art of Executing Well*, which meant getting the prisoner to confess his sins and preparing him for a Christian death.

This translation, the first complete one in English, is based largely on a copy of the *Comforters' Manual* found by Alfonso Troiano at the Yale Beinecke Library. Shelia Das prepared the translation in consultation with other manuals. In addition, Das, along with Terpstra, also translated the supplementary materials found in subsequent books of the manual. Book 3 provides a list of *laude*—hymns and prayers sung by both prisoners and lay brothers—used to assuage the terror of the impending execution. Although no manuscript has the same *laude*, Das and Terpstra translate the ones found in the Yale manuscript. Book 4 contains a list of proverbs and sayings on death and penance—drawn mostly from biblical, classical, and patristic sources. Once again, each manual selects a different set of proverbs, in both Italian and Latin.

The second half of the *Art of Executing Well* also includes two primary sources related to public executions and comforting. The first is Luca della Robbia's account of the last night of two Florentine patricians arrested and condemned for conspiracy against the restored Medici regime. The second is two popular ballads by the poet Giulio Cesare Croce that commemorated two public executions in sixteenth-century Bologna. The translators of both sources—Alison Frasier for the former and Meryl Baily for the latter—attempt to situate them in the context of comforting literature. Frasier presents della Robbia as a personal comforter to his friend, the patrician Pietro Paolo Boscoli, who is depicted as preferring della Robbia's company to the hymns of the lay brothers of the Florentine confraternity, Santa Maria della Ascensione. She then places the execution within the political and religious controversies that surrounded the restoration of Medici power in 1513. Baily takes a more popular approach. She situates the ballads in the emotions they could provoke: pathos for the execution of two patrician lovers, scorn at the execution of a Jewish murderer. She sees them as a kind of moral voice of the streets.

Rather than having one introduction, Terpstra has opted to take an interdisciplinary approach by having six essays examine the art of comforting from different angles—art, music, theater, religion, and politics. The first

four essays can be grouped together as tools the comforters used in their task of alleviating the fears of the condemned. Kathleen Falvey examines the relationship between passion plays and the art of comforting. Both sought to assuage the fears of death and to help an audience connect with the tortured bodies of Christ and the Christian martyrs. On a similar note, Pamela Gravestock examines the 141 *laude* found in extant manuscripts of the *Comforters' Manual*. Like passion plays, they identified the prisoner with Christ and the martyrs. Emphasizing the *ars moriendi*, they were designed to take the prisoner through stages of penance and confession and to divert his mind from family and material concerns. Troiano gives an inside look by examining the scaffold poems of the condemned bureaucrat Andrea Viarani, who was beheaded in Ferrara for conspiring against Duke Borso d'Este. While in prison he produced poems that contrasted sharply with the satirical poetry of the contemporary gallows poet Francois Villon. Instead of sardonic irreverence, Viarani reflected on death and offered advice on contrition and piety. Massimo Feretti looks at another instrument that comforters used to assuage the fears of prisoners—*tavolette*, small tablets with pictures of Christ and other martyrs. The comforters showed the condemned these images throughout the night but particularly during the long walk to the scaffold in order to divert his or her attention from the sight of the crowd and its jeers. Often they were used in conjunction with *laude*.

The last two essays deal less with tools of calming the condemned than with the motivations behind the comforter's task. Adraino Prospero examines the medieval debate on whether the sacraments and last rights should be administered to condemned prisoners. Throughout the Middle Ages, both church and state authorities argued for withholding the sacraments to these men, but starting in the fourteenth century, coeval with origins of the comforting confraternities, the church began to articulate a more compassionate view by allowing remorseful prisoners access to the sacraments. This clashed with the perspective of the state, which proved reluctant in saving the souls of criminals. A compromise had been established by the sixteenth century: the church would take care of the souls of the condemned; the state would condemn their bodies. The main goal of the comforters then was to help the condemned avoid a double death of both body and soul.

In the last essay, Terpstra examines crime, public execution, and comforting in sixteenth-century Bologna. First, he examines the nature behind executions from the

1540s to the end of the century. Earlier in the century, condemned criminals tended to be traitors–partisans of the recently ousted Bentivogli family in Bologna. Later in the century—a period wracked by famine and economic troubles—executions for more ordinary crimes of theft and murder rose dramatically. Many of those executed were marginalized outsiders, impoverished young men from the countryside and nearby towns. The second half of the essay focuses on Bologna’s comforting confraternity, the Company of Death. Terpstra sees a gradual shift in the sixteenth century with company membership becoming a monopoly of the social and political elite of the city. These members of the elite tended to be representatives of a religious spirit that sought to reform the city and followed a post-Tridentine mind-set. As Terpstra says, their goal was not only to get the condemned to accept their fate but also to get them to accept the religious and political orthodoxy and its justice. More-

over, this extended encounter of the city’s elite with condemned criminals causes Terpstra to posit that this may have prepared lay Italians to accept Cesare Beccaria’s arguments against capital punishment during the Enlightenment. He notes that several decades after the publication of Beccaria’s *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764), the Grand Duchy of Tuscany abolished capital punishment.

This is a thought-provoking work on several levels and can be used for many purposes. Scholars from all disciplines will be able to draw inspiration from it as the primary sources and essays are filled with ideas that could be further developed. Moreover, it would make a useful text in graduate student courses on violence, justice, and ritual in the early modern world. My only complaint is the lack of a definition of “ritual.” It is a term that is frequently used by all the authors, but one that is never adequately defined in the context of the comforter’s task.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-law>

Citation: John Hunt. Review of Terpstra, Nicholas, ed., *The Art of Executing Well: Rituals of Execution in Renaissance Italy*. H-Law, H-Net Reviews. December, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25672>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.