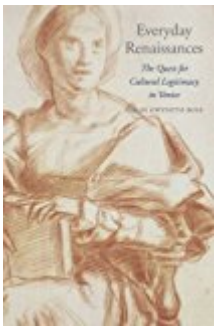
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Sarah Gwyneth Ross. *Everyday Renaissances: The Quest for Cultural Legitimacy in Venice.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. 256 pp. $49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-65983-4.

Reviewed by Laura Carnelos

Published on H-Italy (February, 2017)

Commissioned by Matt Vester (West Virginia University)

In *Everyday Renaissances*, the author explores how "Venetian men and women living outside the circles of power" experienced and represented the Renaissance. According to her thesis, the education of these ordinary people was "a gift, not a given," and they were able to find a way to participate "energetically" in Venetian culture (p. 1). Learning from the works of Renata Ago, Robert Darnton, Nancy Siraisi, and many other scholars, Ross has analyzed more than 4,000 archival documents (3,005 sixteenth-century Venetian testaments and 1,227 household inventories), manuscript *ricordanze,* and printed literature in order to identify different forms of access to, hopes for, and uses of what she calls "cultural legitimacy," which is in her words "a measure of honour connected to educational and literary attainment," and the power to reshape one's self-perception and reputation (p. 5). The book is divided into two parts: the first one maps "the worlds of literary consumption and aspiration" (p. 22); the second one focuses on three physicians as three different case studies.

In the introduction, the author defines the concept of "cultural legitimacy," introduces her protagonists, and describes the sources, mainly documentary, which she has examined to demonstrate that "the Renaissance mattered to everyday people" (p. 2). In the first chapter, Ross describes her methodological approach to study, and so reassess, literary life in Venice in the light of humanistic priorities. Io order to understand how Venetian men and women belonging to the urban middle ranks experienced the Renaissance, she considers those household inventories and last wills and testaments in which they clearly express their literary interests. Thus, out of a total of 1,227 inventories found in various archives in Venice, she identifies 221 cases (18 percent) in which books for reading are mentioned. Removing from this list of 221 those inventories which refer only to religious books and those in which fewer than five items are numbered (five books is considered to be a minimum number of books constituting a "collection"), she restricts the field of her research to 101 individuals. From this total, she calculates

that a considerable percentage of these people, 27 percent, were associated with the medical profession, mainly as physicians (pp. 31-32). Apart from physicians for whom an average-sized library consisted of 140 volumes, other occupational groups who stand out as book owners are lawyers, secretaries, priests, pharmacists, notaries, retail merchants, and artisans (pp. 36-37). By comparing these professional categories with those identified by Susan Connell and Marino Zorzi, who have both worked on Venetian inventories (see the references on p. 187n6), the author affirms that "the diversity of these sixteenth-century Venetian book owners reveals both continuity and change in the city's history of literary consumption" (p. 42). In the second chapter the author takes into consideration testators who in their wills make literary references to others or themselves, and who also show concern for the education of their relatives (p. 52); all together such wills number less than 2 percent out of 3,005 wills the author has examined (p. 72). Also in this case, she finds that physicians stand out for their obsession with education. So, according to the evidence examined by Ross, the medical profession constitutes the most important social group practicing what the author calls "testamentary humanism."

In line with this new discovery, in the second part of the book the author depicts three physicians, Nicolò Massa, Francesco Longo, and Alberto Rini. Massa was a well-known member of Venice's College of Physicians and his case is representative of the "battle for honour in a late Renaissance urban world" (p. 81). The "literary credentials that this circle of physicians possessed" (p. 90) are clearly demonstrated by the number of citations from the classical literary canon which Massa's colleague, Alvise Luisin, inserts into his ***Dialogo intitolato la cecità,*** which was published in 1569 to celebrate his by then elderly colleague (Massa was about eighty at that time and he was blind). While Massa left images of himself as a man of letters in his printed works, the second physician looked at by Ross, Francesco Longo, drew a portrait of himself in his wills. Longo, probably the author's favorite character in the book inasmuch that she has decided to dedicate it to him, obtained his doctorate in medicine in Padua in 1535 and, like other humanists, inserted claims of cultural legitimacy in his will, but "less in fretful passages of self-glorification and more through philosophical lessons" (p. 112). Alberto Rini, on the other hand, the third physician, recorded in his ledgers his cultural priorities and activities, such as collecting recipes for medical cures and books, as well as major events which occurred in Venice and elsewhere in Italy. He sought cultural legitimacy by recording as in a diary his and his family's lives and achievements, by transcribing chronicles and sermons, and by creating a private and predominantly literary library.

However, it must be pointed out that in this study the author is building on shifting sands. Making documents "talk" is not a straightforward task and, as she herself shows, evidence similar in kind can lead to quite different readings (pp. 29-30). This is particularly true of wills and inventories where a full book list is quite rare; more often, a merely generic quantity of books found in the house at the moment of death is mentioned without going into much further detail. It is thus a somewhat precarious assumption to make, on the basis of a large number of documents, that an entire occupational category has the same literary tastes or that the books which are referred to were actually read and used by the person who wrote the will. Nevertheless, it is clear from the preface that the author's aim is rather different: her main objective is to show that "members of the Venetian College of Physicians sought myriad ways to prove their humanistic credibility" (p. 93) or, in other words, to prove their cultural legitimacy in Venice. It would have been very interesting if the author had physically identified surviving copies of the books owned by these physicians and studied the marks of ownership in them, as a number of significant bibliographical projects are

currently doing (for example, Material Evidence in Incunabula, or MEI, which uses social/professional categories as one of its classifications of ownership evidence) or had introduced more examples of non-physicians in her survey in order to understand better differences and similarities with other professional groups, especially perhaps those occupying a lower social position than physicians. Furthermore, some account should be taken of the fact that literary culture could also be transmitted in other, not necessarily written forms (see for example the studies of Marina Roggero as well as the outcomes of the project "Italian Voices" at the University of Leeds, 2011-15).