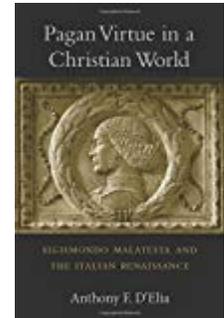


**Anthony F. D'Elia.** *Pagan Virtue in a Christian World: Sigismondo Malatesta and the Italian Renaissance.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. x + 355 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-08851-1.



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Anthony F. D'Elia's new book investigates the pagan elements of the humanist literature produced at the court of Sigismundo Malatesta in the mid-fifteenth century. D'Elia argues that the ubiquity of paganism within this literature shows a tension between the classical, pagan world prized by leading humanists and their patrons, and the Christian world and its ideals that these humanists and patrons inhabited. The book introduces the famous condemnation of Sigismundo by his enemy Pope Pius II and rejects its veracity, even as D'Elia sees grains of truth in at least the presentation of Sigismundo to the outside world as a pagan hero straight from Greek literature. The book provides an interesting and readable account of several fascinating but little-known humanist texts from the Malatesta court, and D'Elia's mastery of the classical sources used by these humanist authors shines through the pages. On the one hand the book adds the perspective of Neo-Latin literature to scholarship on the Malatesta, a family usually approached from the archives or art history. On the other hand, the book's literary fo-

cus largely leaves it to the reader to contextualize the book's interesting conclusions within the rich existing literature on Renaissance religion, paganism, magic, masculinity, and mid-fifteenth-century papal politics.

The book is structured around eight thematic chapters and a conclusion. D'Elia begins by introducing Pius II's reverse beatification of Sigismundo and exploring the legend it inspired in literature and historical scholarship up to the mid-twentieth century. Chapter 2 turns towards the courtly culture and art of Sigismundo's Rimini, with particular emphasis on proposed areas of influence taken from Ferrara, Florence, Rome, and Venice. Chapter 3 argues that Greek literature in particular was influential at the court of Rimini. D'Elia contends that several central aspects of Greek literature, such as educational, athletic, and warrior ideals, were adopted to praise Sigismundo and shape his literary image.

The next three chapters of book turn more explicitly to specific characteristics adopted in the

epic poem *Hesperis* by Basinio of Parma and a treatise on the art of war written by Roberto Valturio. Chapter 4 looks at Sigismundo's embodiment of Greek ideals on the battlefield as depicted in these two texts. Here, Sigismundo protects what D'Elia calls Italian "nationalism" against the Spaniard Alfonso of Aragon, which Sigismundo accomplishes more through pagan virtues than Christian ones. The next chapter continues the argument that Sigismundo embraced a presentation of himself as a pagan. D'Elia brings forth literary depictions of Sigismundo's reliance on astrology, omens, pagan sacrifices, and potential rejection of the immortality of the soul. Chapter 6 continues the argument by looking at the treatment of Sigismundo's depicted devotion to his mistress Isotta degli Atti. In addition to his "erotic and pagan" love (p. 216), Sigismundo is depicted attempting magic to contact Isotta, whom Basinio's poem pretended had become sick and died, although in reality she remained alive and well at the time of the work's composition.

The argument wraps up across the final chapters. The seventh chapter looks at potential critiques of Sigismundo by Basinio, Valturio, and also outsiders. D'Elia brings out passages from Basinio's epic poem that may show Sigismundo doing blameworthy actions or acting unjustly, as well as more reserved praise of Sigismundo's military prowess by Valturio and the Florentine Gianozzo Manetti. The final chapter turns from literary texts to a brief account of the final years of Sigismundo's life, particularly Sigismundo's employ in armies against Pius II; Sigismundo's attempt to gain the employ of the Ottoman Turks; and Sigismundo's entry into papal service under Pius's successor Pope Paul II. The book's conclusion places the pagan culture of Sigismundo's court into a broader historiographical argument about the praise of pagan culture and values in fifteenth-century writings, a thread that Machiavelli would pick up in the sixteenth century.

*Pagan Virtue* offers a literary viewpoint on a man often studied from the perspectives of art history and politics. D'Elia has uncovered, summarized, and interpreted several little- or unknown Latin works produced at the Malatesta court. Making these difficult Latin poems, which D'Elia often quotes at length and in translation, better known to historians is a praiseworthy accomplishment in and of itself. Also intriguing are D'Elia's arguments about the the image presented by the patron Sigismundo across the literature and visual arts created at his court. D'Elia convincingly claims that Sigismundo's pagan presentation of himself made him particularly susceptible to the specific types of critiques lodged against him by Pius II. Finally, the conclusion that Sigismundo's culture at Rimini points to a broader revival of unabashed literary praise for pagan culture among fifteenth-century writers suggests a new context in which to place a well-known writer like Machiavelli as well as less studied contemporaries.

These noteworthy accomplishments could potentially have been even stronger through a broader inclusion of source material and secondary scholarship outside of humanist studies. For example, Pope Pius II's condemnation of Sigismundo, a document to which the book often refers, is only briefly contextualized within the politics of fifteenth-century Italy. Situating this context alongside the literature so ably addressed would potentially add further nuance to the book's arguments. The book's thematic structure enables D'Elia to treat Sigismundo's court and various themes as monolithic entities. This structure allows for interesting, general points about Sigismundo's embrace of a pagan identity in literature. However, the structure also removes the sense of distance and difference between texts or possible changes in Sigismundo, his court, or his position over the thirty years covered in this book. The book offers innovative conclusions on topics of interest to current historians--religion, magic, gender, and politics--but D'Elia often leaves

it to the reader to discern how his conclusions might fit into studies by social, cultural, and political historians. In some areas recent scholarship may add more precision to some of D'Elia's major points. For example, scholars of religion, magic, and the Church might find further nuance to labels like "Christian" and "pagan," even as this greater nuance may or may not alter D'Elia's central conclusions.

This book, in conclusion, offers a strong addition to the historiography on the cultural patronage of Sigismundo Malatesta. The degree of classical imitation embraced by court poets around Sigismundo Malatesta is remarkable, and this book adds a new element to discussions of Sigismundo's artistic patronage as well as his role in Italian and particularly papal politics. The book suggests that a pagan revival may have foreshadowed the far more influential thought of Niccolò Machiavelli, a man who was notorious for his ambivalence toward the Christianity of the early sixteenth century. Taken together, the book adds new evidence to the emerging portrait of the true range of religious experience, acceptance, and presentation in fifteenth-century Italy.

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