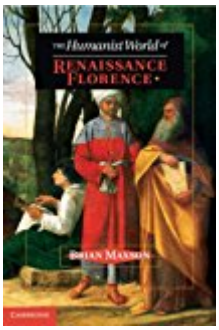
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brian Jeffrey Maxson. *The Humanist World of Renaissance Florence.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. x, 301 p. ISBN 978-1-107-61964-7.



Reviewed by Patrick Baker

Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (July, 2016)

Two questions have long stymied Renaissance historians: why did humanism succeed, and how did it spread from an exclusive group of literary aesthetes to broader society? A novel and thought-provoking answer has now been offered in the form of Brian Maxson's *The Humanist World of Renaissance Florence*. In a nutshell, Maxson argues that humanism succeeded in Florence because it became indispensable to successfully participating in the city's public life, and that it was not the littérateurs but their elite audience who were responsible for the social diffusion of humanism.

Thematically, *Humanist World* is devoted to the relationship between humanism, social status, and power. To good effect, Maxson consciously adapts the title of his own book from that of the last major study on this topic: Lauro Martines's *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists*. Lauro Martines, The Social World of the Florentine Humanists, Princeton 1963. Like Martines, Maxson takes a sociological approach. But whereas Martines investigated one particular social group, Maxson focuses on individuals and their learned relationships across social lines. He reconstructs these evanescent human ties prosopographically, tirelessly investigating personal letters, key literary texts like Vespasiano da Bisticci's *Vite*, archival sources, specialized studies on individual Florentines, and evidence of book ownership, borrowing, and copying from manuscripts and library inventories. On this basis, he argues that participation in the humanist movement was much larger and much broader than has heretofore been realized, that it infiltrated the upper classes and even seeped down into the middling levels of Florentine society. As opposed to Martines, therefore, who concluded that humanists had their own distinct social world in Florence, Maxson maintains that the city was so thoroughly infused with humanism by the end of the Quattrocento as to constitute a veritable humanist world.

Working against the grain of current studies on humanism, which tend to be oriented towards intellectual and literary history and thus become absorbed with "exceptional humanists" (p. 3) and their literary production, Maxson constructs a center-periphery model that focuses instead on

individuals who would normally be considered on the margins, if not off the radar. In his view, core members, while the creative engine of humanism, were very few and were not the main actors in humanism's social diffusion. In contrast, those on the periphery were far more numerous and were in fact far more important for the spread and enduring success of humanism in Florence. The core members, "the people with the deepest humanist learning" (p. 10), who made their primary contribution in the form of original writings in Latin, Maxson calls "literary humanists." On the other hand, he dubs "social humanists" the "thousands of active participants in the humanist movement who studied classical and humanist texts but who themselves were not part of its core members or prolific writers" (p. 4). Social humanists include "less prominent patrons, less talented orators, less learned classicists, Latin-illiterate readers of humanist and classical works in vernacular translations, and everything in between" (p. 4). Why the label "social" for such individuals? Because they participated in humanism socially, either through meaningful personal contacts to literary humanists, or through the application of moderate humanist interests and abilities in important social situations, especially those that could be classified as civic rituals: domestic political debates, weddings and funerals, cultural performances, and preaching. Social humanists preferred to read works written by others, in particular ancient works, and to hear the eloquent words spoken by their contemporaries. Oratorical performance was an essential form of production and consumption for social humanists.

In his final four chapters, Maxson uses diplomatic oratory as a case study for how social humanists engaged in humanism and what effect this participation had on humanism's entrenchment in Florentine society. He demonstrates that throughout the fifteenth century humanist oratory was increasingly offered as a prestigious cultural gift at important embassies. The basic requirement for diplomats had traditionally been that they have high social status. Now, however, as the charm of classicizing eloquence grew, so did the need to master its forms – at least well enough to deliver or appreciate a ceremonial oration. Thus high-status Florentines had to add some mastery of humanist eloquence to their résumé in order to continue filling this form of political post. They thereby became social humanists, and it was these social humanists with elite status who drove the spread of humanism in Florence. By the second half of the Quattrocento, humanism solidified its place in diplomacy thanks in large part to the consolidation of power in the hands of a small number of major players (Milan, Venice, Naples, the papacy, the emperor), significant embassies to which required the cultural gift of humanist oratory. The final step in humanism's ascension came with another political development, this one domestic: the open exercise of Medici rule. As is typical for monarchical regimes, under Lorenzo 'the Magnificent' fidelity to the ruler became more important than traditional social status as a criterion for filling major civic offices. Thus for the first time it became possible for a humble literary humanist like Bartolomeo Scala to hold these offices and to represent the city as a diplomat on the most significant embassies. In this way, the requisites of civic ritual, especially diplomatic oratory, led to the broad diffusion of humanism in Florentine society, and humanism became a means to the elevation of social status.

As Maxson's study of diplomatic oratory shows, the distinction between literary and social humanists is a powerful heuristic tool for discussing, studying, and conceiving of humanism. Yet my own research, which takes a very different approach to understanding humanism Patrick Baker, Italian Renaissance Humanism in the Mirror, Cambridge 2015. , leads me to believe that the categories are in need of some refinement. First, they cannot account equally well for all participants in humanism. Maxson seeks to place important patrons in the realm of the literary human-

ists, but is it right to group Cosimo de' Medici with Leonardo Bruni? Cosimo is generally called a literary humanist, but once (p. 144) a social humanist. Cosimo was indeed a great patron of humanism, but he is not known for humanistic compositions, nor did literary humanists consider him part of their community. It seems more useful to create a third category for patrons like Cosimo, Alfonso 'the Magnanimous,' and Federigo da Montefeltro, who were very seriously interested in humanism and promoted it – indeed who shaped it through their ***patrocinium*** – but who cannot themselves be counted as literary figures. If by opening the "literary humanist" category to patrons Maxson expands it too broadly, he contracts it unjustifiably by underestimating the importance of teaching and a vast range of writings beyond the "treatises" to which he generally refers. Teachers of humanist eloquence who did not otherwise produce properly classicizing Latin writings, including Manuel Chrysoloras in Florence, were celebrated as core members of the humanist movement in and after their lifetimes. Maxson does recognize the teacher Luigi Marsili as a literary humanist (p. 25), but his steady focus on writings misleadingly implies that mere teachers of classical languages were less central to the movement than their student authors. Similarly, Latin translations from Greek were considered vehicles for training and transmitting classical eloquence, as were handbooks like George of Trebizond's ***Rhetorica*** and Lorenzo Valla's ***Elegantiae***. Strangely, Maxson demotes both of these titles to second-class literary status (p. 76) despite their popularity and absolute centrality to humanism and its mission of achieving classical Latin eloquence. To understand the literary humanists, one must take works like these as seriously as they did.

As for the "social humanist" category, it loses some of its significance by the end of the fifteenth century. For once humanism became part of the air elite Florentines breathed, it seems less helpful to class them as participants in the humanist movement. Maxson seems to suspect this potential difficulty: "others created learned connections seemingly by accident, an unavoidable offshoot of living in a society so permeated with humanism" (p. 39). Indeed, Maxson's attempt to put every individual with a connection to humanism, however tenuous, into the movement's fold is in itself dubious. His innovative method of tracking humanism's success precisely among such peripheral figures is enlightening, but it seems a stretch to consider all of them adherents of a 'movement' – a term that connotes intention, active involvement, and consciousness of belonging on the part of participants.

This issue is related to a serious methodological weakness in what is otherwise an outstanding study. Time and again, Maxson draws conclusions about the nature of social humanists and then, in light of the fact that social humanists greatly outnumbered literary humanists, applies these conclusions to the humanist movement as a whole. Thus he concludes that "Latin writers were rare in the humanist movement" (p. 7), that "the humanist movement was more about reading and studying classical works than writing new ones" (p. 76), and that "learned men and women viewed ephemeral oratorical performances as the key expression of a person's learning" (p. 16). Yet none of these conclusions applies to the literary humanists, who provided the impetus for the movement, who shaped its taste and standards, and who did indeed put an overwhelming emphasis on the production of eloquent Latin writings. Ultimately, Maxson believes that social humanists "differed in the degree of their interests and influence, but not in kind from their more learned contemporaries" (p. 4). I am not convinced, however, that literary humanists would have agreed with this statement, and it seems neither necessary nor justified to make conclusions about them based on their less learned fellows. To do so would be to privilege the periphery over the center, to judge the original by the epigone.

All criticism aside, this book represents a major contribution to humanist studies and should also be of interest to all early modern scholars. For if Kenneth Gouwens is right that "an entire generation of social historians has practically written humanism out of its narrative of the Renaissance" Kenneth Gouwens, Perceiving the Past: Renaissance Humanism after the 'Cognitive Turn', in: The American Historical Review 103 (1998), pp. 55–82, here p. 57. , Maxson demonstrates that the social – as well as the political and diplomatic – history of Renaissance Italy cannot be properly understood without humanism in the equation.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/

Citation: Patrick Baker. Review of Maxson, Brian Jeffrey. *The Humanist World of Renaissance Florence.* H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. July, 2016.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47305