

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Ruggiero, Guido. Machiavelli in Love: Sex, Self, and Society in the Italian Renaissance

Nicholas Terpstra

Volume 34, Number 1-2, Winter-Spring 2011

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1106428ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v34i1-2.16192>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Terpstra, N. (2011). Review of [Ruggiero, Guido. Machiavelli in Love: Sex, Self, and Society in the Italian Renaissance]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 34(1-2), 298-300.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v34i1-2.16192>

Alois Riegl and the Baroque”), situates Riegl’s ideas on the Baroque in the context of their time. A second contribution by Arnold Witte (“Reconstructing Riegl’s *Entstehung der Barockkunst in Rom*”) addresses the complexities of interpreting Riegl’s text and original notes while a third essay by Andrew Hopkins (“Riegl Renaissance”) treats the reception of the book. Collectively these essays offer a very fine addition to a text that is certain to open further enquiry on the late ideas of this important art historian.

GREGORY DAVIES, *McMaster University*

Ruggiero, Guido.

Machiavelli in Love: Sex, Self, and Society in the Italian Renaissance.

Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. Pp. x, 285. ISBN 13-978-0-8018-8516-7 (hardcover) \$25.

Guido Ruggiero is the historian who has done the most to shape our current understanding of sex and violence in Renaissance Italy. Reaching deep into the Venetian archives, and particularly into criminal court records, he has drawn out evidence of how Italians constructed behavioural boundaries and how they dealt both personally and socially with violations of those norms. This is the hard edge of sex and violence, stiffened and complicated by the contexts of crime, court, and discipline, and always coloured by them. It gives us a view of sexual identity that Foucault would recognize, a construct built out of forms of discipline and with an often hollow centre.

In this collection, Ruggiero aims to move from the hard edge of conflict and discipline to see how sex figured in the lives of those who took it as a form of pleasure, enjoyment, and entertainment. Conflicts here are more about performance than about honour. More to the point, conflicts are not the defining centre of the story. Ruggiero aims instead to capture a broad range of shared understandings and assumptions about sex, and to show how Italians used these to shape the way they understood their own experiences and presented their selves to others. To get at this idea of socially-constructed sexual identities, he frames the concept of ‘consensus realities’: that is, the imagined, performed, and shared understandings about sex that were operative within groups. To

ensure that these aren't static, he emphasizes that an individual might share different consensus realities with different groups, and that these might change at different times and particularly at different stages of life.

Ruggiero argues that an individual like Machiavelli was known to his friends in terms of these realities. They were negotiated & performed in self-fashioning, and they incorporated a potential for social discipline — your group held you to an identity and kept you in line, and so enabled you to live up to a particular reality.

These identities do emerge in court records, but Ruggiero turns in this collection to a different range of sources in order to recover consensus realities that take a more creative and celebrative view of sexuality. He works with three forms in particular. The first are the novellas, short stories, and popular plays that constitute renaissance storytelling. They rely on stereotyped characters and stock situations, but in fiction as in life, particular deeds stand out from the stereotype and point to more complex and individual identity. Sex is alluded to playfully and often through double entendres. The second set of sources are the erudite classical comedies that were popular in the early Renaissance and that give way to less formal *commedia dell'arte* by century's end. Very mannered, they suspend traditional morality without abandoning it, and function as a prism giving a multi-hued look at sex as playful and something to be celebrated. The third set of sources are letters, which were literary and self-consciously 'fashioned'. Ruggiero is particularly interested in letters circulating in groups that show how consensus realities were framed, and how they shaped and disciplined self-presentation.

The question with all these literary forms is determining whether they show self-presentation or simply the mannered or deliberate imitation of classical forms. It's impossible to tell but Ruggiero deals with this openly to show that he's conscious of being something of an interloper in literary scholarship. Less interloper than mediator, because he aims in this collection to suggest ways of rereading and rethinking some familiar texts to see how they might reveal consensus realities. So, for instance, Aretino's *Il marescalco* can be read as conveying the more positive and tolerant view of male-male sodomitical relations that must have existed as a consensus reality alongside the more traditional legal and theological condemnations. In particular, it shows male sexual identity as something that evolves over the life span. Reading sources like Boccaccio's *Decameron* together with items from the Venetian archives

that may be overtly condemning let us recognize sex as playful, celebrative, and full of pleasure. Perhaps too full, because these and other sources also depict the troubles that result from too much access to sex, and particularly men's vulnerability in face of hungry and canny women. That stereotype can be turned, self-deprecatingly, to excuse, explain, or manipulate situations — as we see in some of Machiavelli's letters to Francesco Vettori when he is in his forties and outside politics. Machiavelli depicts himself comically as both a victim of his own passions and yet a successful lover, and his friends are in on this self-deprecating and hardly 'Machiavellian' image of male identity.

Ruggiero describes his chapters as essays, and they have precisely that fresh, allusive and illuminative character. He encourages us to tease more out of familiar sources, and by approaching these canonical texts with a fresh eye and a curiosity shaped by years in the archives, he draws more out from the spaces between their lines. Ruggiero demonstrates that what's unsaid and implied puts a different cast to the words on a page, and he offers rereadings that are suggestive and persuasive. He disciplines his readings with three criteria: they must stay close to the internal demands of the text, stay close to the context, and find meanings that open up critical thinking about the text and allow more sheer pleasure in the encounter with it.

Given his experience with the broad social range found in court records, it would be helpful to hear more from Ruggiero on how we might find some way of integrating precisely that range of class and gender into our re-readings. The pens writing the lines that we peer between are usually held by men of a certain station and experience. The pleasure they imagine, project, and share carries the shadings of their privilege. Yet the reality for many women was that sex was hardly consensual. A startling number of women experienced rape or assault as a reality or a fear, and it would be intriguing to see whether and how that shaped consensus realities for the different genders and classes of Italians.

Ruggiero is aware that social historians haven't always been able to convey the renaissance joy of sex, and in this collection he aims to give us some of that celebrative pleasure. With essays that are fascinating, provocative, and highly suggestive, he succeeds beautifully.

NICHOLAS TERPSTRA, *University of Toronto*