
Renaissance and Reformation

Renaissance et Réforme



Gavitt, Philip. Gender, Honor, and Charity in Late Renaissance Florence

Sarah M. Loose

Volume 34, Number 4, Fall 2011

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1106087ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v34i4.18663>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Loose, S. (2011). Review of [Gavitt, Philip. Gender, Honor, and Charity in Late Renaissance Florence]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 34(4), 146–148. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v34i4.18663>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2012

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

entre auteurs, éditeurs et autres « co-élaborateurs » des nouveaux documents électroniques ne sont-elles pas aussi en pleine négociation, en voie d'évoluer vers des modes d'opération qui ne se sont pas encore cristallisés ? « Qui écrit » aujourd'hui sur le Web, les blogues, sur les réseaux sociaux, ainsi que dans le monde en plein essor de l'édition électronique, alors que la parenthèse Gutenberg semble être en voie de se refermer ? Des études rigoureuses comme celles-ci sur le moment où s'ouvrirait cette même parenthèse pourraient certainement apporter une contribution significative à la réflexion.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS VALLÉE, *Collège de Maisonneuve*

Gavitt, Philip.

Gender, Honor, and Charity in Late Renaissance Florence.

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. x, 280. ISBN 978-1-107-00294-4 (hardback) \$90.

In this engaging new study, Philip Gavitt returns to issues raised in his previous work on charity, children, and family in Renaissance Florence. Taking up the question of families, Gavitt seeks to explain the abandonment crisis and proliferation of new charitable institutions dedicated to women and girls in late sixteenth-century Florence. Blending social, religious, institutional, political, and gender history Gavitt offers a carefully constructed picture of the challenges faced by Florentine families, the Medici government, and the city's hospitals and convents as inheritance laws clashed with social realities. Gavitt argues that the rise in child abandonment coincided with the development of a status culture of consumption and that families, in order to preserve their honour and patrimonies, had to work within this status culture while still providing for children who fell outside the lines of inheritance. Viewed in this light, charitable institutions played a crucial role in the lineage strategies of Florentine families of all social classes.

Before discussing charitable institutions and lineage strategies, Gavitt first addresses various contexts, including the social and economic crises of the sixteenth century, Medici government reforms and state-building, and late Renaissance ideologies of discipline and civility. These contexts established,

Gavitt's second and third chapters proceed to examine in detail the discord between Florentine inheritance law and the realities of sixteenth-century family life. According to Gavitt, the laws that dictated how property could be passed down did not conform to the social and economic realities of the Tuscan marriage market, but in order to maintain their honour and nobility Florentine families needed to abide by inheritance law. At the same time, families also sought ways to subvert the system in order to support children disadvantaged by the law. Although the motivation behind these family strategies is often identified as a gender ideology common to the Mediterranean, Gavitt argues it should instead be called a "lineage" ideology. The dialogues and essays of sixteenth-century scholars on family and marriage, including Leon Battista Alberti, Leonardo Bruni, and Torquato Tasso among others, provide evidence of this lineage ideology. During the late sixteenth century these scholars emphasized not only the preservation of household and lineage, but also the safeguarding of family honour. The regulation of the household, they argued, was tied to the regulation of the state. Furthermore, just as preserving lineage was part of maintaining household order, part of preserving state order was the use of charitable institutions to "house anomalous casualties of the rigidity of the inheritance grid." (87)

Gavitt's final chapters examine the plight of these "anomalous casualties," or the women and children who, as part of family strategy, were placed in charitable institutions. Here Gavitt's work makes a useful contribution to the growing body of scholarship on the plight of homeless and abandoned boys, while his two chapters on women help to provide a more thorough understanding of the challenges they faced. Gavitt describes the options of abandoned children, showing how institutions such as the Ospedale degli Innocenti provided a wide range of educational and career opportunities for boys and sought to make provisions for the future of young girls. Girls who could not marry were, however, a problem, as were young widows and women fleeing abusive situations. A number of institutions arose to cater to these groups, such as the Casa della Malmaritate and the Ortabello women's asylum. Convents were also an option, but the post-Tridentine debates around the confinement of women made it more difficult for families to use convents for their own ends. As stricter rules of enclosure were enforced (and as norms of lineage required confinement to preserve family honour) it became financially and administratively impossible to permanently confine increasing numbers of

women. In the end, Gavitt argues, the discipline and confinement meant to save women instead left some groups, especially older women, more vulnerable.

The relationship between discipline and charity is a thread that runs through and, according to Gavitt, is at the heart of his argument. Indeed, it is the idea of discipline that ties his argument together. Chapters dedicated to state formation, inheritance law, and convents may at first seem odd in a book about late Renaissance charity. However, they are necessary to Gavitt's argument that social order depended on the preservation of family honour through lineage ideology, and that charitable institutions were often used as a resource to provide for children while maintaining family honour. Of course, as Gavitt shows, strategies involving charitable institutions such as the Innocenti did not always work. Whether they worked or not, however, Gavitt's argument makes it clear that families often turned to these institutions as a viable solution for lineage problems.

Gavitt's work is based on an extensive and impressively wide array of archival sources and is well grounded in the historiography of the field. The case studies of individuals, families, and institutions offered in each chapter not only serve to illustrate his points, but help to bring his arguments to life. While some comparison to other places in Tuscany and across Italy (Venice, in particular) is offered, further comparison of lineage ideologies across Italy is one area that could receive more attention. Overall, this is an outstanding work which shows that charitable institutions were not just a resource for the poor, but also played a crucial role in the lineage strategies of Florentine families and the state's efforts to create a civil, disciplined society.

SARAH M. LOOSE, *University of Toronto*

Holtz, Grégoire.

L'Ombre de l'auteur. Pierre Bergeron et l'écriture du voyage à la fin de la Renaissance.

Genève: Droz, 2011. 552 p. ISBN 978-2-600-01435-9 (relié) 178 \$

Pierre Bergeron est présenté par la plupart des bibliographes du Grand Siècle non seulement comme l'auteur du *Traité de la navigation et des voyages*