

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



DeSilva, Jennifer Mara, ed. The Borgia Family: Rumor and Representation

Allyson Burgess Williams

Volume 43, Number 3, Summer 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1075310ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i3.35328>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Williams, A. (2020). Review of [DeSilva, Jennifer Mara, ed. The Borgia Family: Rumor and Representation]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(3), 297–300. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i3.35328>

contemporains un moyen d'accès à l'hébreu (ou au grec). Eran Shuali analyse ensuite la bible hébraïque de Sébastien Münster (1534–1535) qui représente une tentative particulièrement ample et aboutie de rendre accessibles à la chrétienté les textes originaux de l'Ancien Testament.

Deux derniers textes closent ce beau volume : Olivier Millet offre un très bel article, fort érudit et documenté, sur Pierre Robert, dit Olivétan, qui traduit la Bible en français à partir des originaux hébreux et grecs dans sa fameuse œuvre parue en 1535. Annie Noblesse-Rocher propose un texte très intéressant sur la traduction en langue vernaculaire au début du XVI^e siècle, rappelant, comme en introduction, le temps long dans lequel les traductions de la Bible au XVI^e siècle doivent se comprendre : « L'élan humaniste vint couronner les premiers essais médiévaux et redonner droit au texte lui-même de la Bible, hors de la tradition des bibles historiées » (p. 328). En appendice, 15 illustrations rappellent l'exposition organisée par la médiathèque de Troyes-Champagne Métropole à l'occasion de ce fort beau colloque.

MARIE BARRAL-BARON

Centre Lucien Febvre (EA 2273)

Université de Franche-Comté

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i3.35327>

DeSilva, Jennifer Mara, ed.

The Borgia Family: Rumor and Representation.

London: Routledge, 2019. Pp. 304. ISBN 978-0-3672-1085-4 (paperback) \$39.95.

Rodrigo Borgia (Pope Alexander VI, 1431–1503) and his children Cesare and Lucrezia were members of one of the most notorious families in Western history, reputed to have been incestuous, sexually depraved, and sadistic murderers. The Borgia “Black Legend” was started by the pope’s enemies during his life, and was promulgated by his successor, Pope Julius II, anti-Spanish factions, and Florentine-centric writers such as Francesco Guicciardini and Niccolò Machiavelli. Later, Protestant reformers cited Pope Alexander VI as exemplifying the sin and corruption riddling the papacy. In the nineteenth century, Victor Hugo, Alexander Dumas, and Gaetano Donizetti embellished

Lucrezia's biography, making her the ultimate wicked poisoner-vixen. Recent historians have started to separate fact from fiction, but Borgia stories continue to permeate popular culture in literature, the visual arts, films, television series, and video games. The essays in this volume, beautifully contextualized by Jennifer Mara DeSilva's introduction, stem from a conference in Winchester, UK in 2018. They examine various aspects of the mythos of the Borgia family, and the needs that the Borgia legend has served over time.

Using primary sources, three essays re-evaluate sixteenth-century perceptions of the Borgia family. Loek Luiten clarifies the symbiotic nature of the pope's relationship with Giulia Farnese and her kin. It was doubtless prestigious for the Orsini/Farnese families to be in the inner circle of Alexander VI, but these kinship ties were also crucial to the pope when negotiating alliances.

Diane Ghirardo traces the history of Lucrezia Borgia's reputation. Despite blows to her honour struck by the detractors of Pope Alexander VI and his son Cesare, and a cover-up involving an illegitimate child, she married into the noble families of Naples and Ferrara, and was much admired. Most of the damage to her character occurred in subsequent centuries; even twentieth-century writers have accused her of affairs with Francesco II Gonzaga (whom she rarely encountered) and the scholar/poet Pietro Bembo, whose courtly "love" letters have been misinterpreted.

Sergio Costola asks whether instances in which Lucrezia Borgia withdrew from courtly life or refused to be available for public scrutiny were an attempt to create female agency, and could be likened to contemporary performance art. The larger context here is that courtly life in general was highly performative for both sexes, and that all participants were acutely conscious that their dress, speech, and every move were examined, and they behaved accordingly.

Roger Gill argues that the Appartamento Borgia decorations reflect serious religious, political, and intellectual interests, and are not lascivious. Katharine Fellows analyzes visual and literary depictions of Alexander VI as the devil in drama and visual material. For Barnabe Barnes's Jacobean play *The Devil's Charter* (1607), she outlines a larger context for anti-papal/anti-Borgia sentiments, including a medieval tradition identifying popes with Satan. Her discussion of a flap woodcut of Alexander as the devil needs a slight correction: its original version appeared in Germany in 1555 (not France circa 1500), followed by a Swiss broadsheet version in which the sins of the pope are laid

out in French. Indeed, this broadsheet might be one of Barnes's sources. Stella Fletcher continues with literary history in her informative study of Borgia-themed works in Britain.

Clara Marías explores the Hispanic legacy of the Borgia mythos. The "Ballad of the Duke of Gandía" concerns Alexander VI's second son, Juan Borgia, Duke of Gandía, who was mysteriously murdered in Rome in 1497. Marías affirms the importance of oral traditions, tracing the various iterations of the ballad that promulgated the story. It originated in Spain, but spread throughout the Mediterranean and North Africa among far-flung Hispanic/Sephardic communities in exile.

Several essays focus on the reputation of Cesare Borgia. Lucinda Byatt identifies shifts in Machiavelli's opinions about Cesare Borgia and argues for a reading of *The Prince* as moral irony. She juxtaposes Machiavelli's 1502–03 war dispatches praising Cesare Borgia's courage, verve, and skill (his *virtù*) with his tone in *The Prince*, in which his praise shifts to blame. Cesare erred in relying on the fortune of his father and foreign armies; if he had developed his own resources and managed his alliances better, he might have retained his state.

Alexander Mizumoto-Gitter identifies Cesare Borgia's multiple burial sites in Viana, Navarre, showing how his remains served numerous functions. His original tomb helped to legitimize the reign of his wife's relatives in Navarre. Cesare's later exhumation and reburial at the bottom of the cathedral steps was an act of shaming and revenge. When reburied near the cathedral doors in 1953, his body became a historical monument and tourist attraction.

Jennifer Mara DeSilva explores how Borgia history was manipulated to fit the needs of mid-twentieth-century filmmakers responding to the Motion Picture Production Code. Scripts including a pope with his children would not have been approved, thus, Alexander VI disappears, and dramatically fictionalized lives of Cesare Borgia and his sister Lucrezia were presented. In addition, Cesare's failed attempts at conquering Italy would have been read as a corollary to the fascists whom Americans had helped vanquish in World War II.

A final theme is the effect of Borgia material on education. William Keene Thompson devised a *Reacting to the Past* immersion game based on the Papal Conclave of 1492. In studying for their roles, students engage deeply with historical personalities and issues. Since Alexander VI is not always elected pope in the game-play, the mutability and complexity of history is underscored. Amanda Madden discusses the popular computer games *Assassin's Creed II*

and its sequel *Brotherhood*. Although the plotline perpetuates the Borgia Black Legend, the immersive nature of the game in which the world of Renaissance Italy is painstakingly rendered has a powerful effect on players. History comes to life and participants are actors within it, often leading them to further explore the history of the period.

The scholarly apparatus of the contributions might have been strengthened by deeper research and more rigorous editing in places; important references are sometimes missing. In sum, however, the collection makes a valuable contribution to Borgia knowledge and historical methodology.

ALLYSON BURGESS WILLIAMS

San Diego State University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i3.35328>

Di Teodoro, Francesco Paolo.

Lettera a Leone X di Raffaello e Baldassarre Castiglione.

Biblioteca dell'«Archivum Romanicum». Serie I: Storia, Letteratura, Paleografia 503. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2020. Pp. xii, 72 + 32 ill. ISBN 978-8-8222-6677-4 (paperback) €23.

The general public usually thinks of Raffaello Sanzio as first and foremost a painter, creator of some of the most iconic masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance. Specialized works in historic preservation and conservation, however, occasionally describe Raffaello as a public official appointed by Leo X to map out and preserve the remains of ancient Roman buildings from the injuries of time and ignorant mobs. One of the many merits of Di Teodoro's book is that it clarifies the origins of what is ultimately a myth, while at the same time assessing Raffaello's undeniable and still enduring contribution to the practice of historic preservation. By referring to Raphael as *magister* and *praefectus*, Di Teodoro explains, Leo X was not thinking of a modern-day "Ispettore Generale," as anachronistically thought by some eighteenth-century readers of papal documents. Nevertheless, the project of crafting an exact *forma Urbis* for Leo X based on methods one might call scientific is indeed a milestone in the birth of modern notions of historic preservation. At the heart