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Cecchi, Giovan Maria. Five Plays for the Archangel Raphael.
Trans., with an intro. and notes by Konrad Eisenbichler

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[See table of contents](#)

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Cecchi, Giovan Maria.

***Five Plays for the Archangel Raphael.* Trans., with an intro. and notes by Konrad Eisenbichler.**

Texts in Translation 14. Toronto: Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2020. Pp. 227 + 7 col. ill. ISBN 978-0-7727-2488-5 (paperback); ISBN 978-0-7727-2490-8 (e-book) CA\$21.95.

Eisenbichler's excellent translation of five of Giovan Maria Cecchi's religious plays is a great gift for early modern theatre scholars and broader audiences interested in the different theatrical genres Cecchi experimented with to challenge the skills of youths in confraternities in sixteenth-century Florence. Eisenbichler's extensive scholarship on Cecchi and confraternal drama (see *The Boys of the Archangel Raphael* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998]) underpins his translations of these plays composed for the Youth Confraternity of the Archangel Raphael.

His selection, conflating available manuscript and printed sources, follows festivals in the Christian liturgical year when the youth typically offered performances: *Act Suitable for Recitation in Front of the Nativity Scene*, performed on Christmas Eve (staged 1573), celebrates the birth of Christ; *La Dolcina* (staged 1585) is an "Everyman" confrontation of vice and virtue raising the dilemmas awaiting the faithful; *Cleopas and Luke* (staged between 1580 and 1587?) tells the story of Christ's resurrection and appearances to his closest followers; *Contempt for Love and Earthly Beauty* (staged between 1580 and 1587) was for the feast day of their patron Saint Mary Magdalene; as was *Duel of Active and Contemplative Life* (staged between 1580 and 1587), both paying homage to Saint Magdalene's exemplary penitence. Each selection represents sacred doctrine and events through eloquent texts showcasing the talents of the ensemble, and variously enhanced by scenic representations and other embellishments, including musical accompaniment.

The introduction sets up some important details about where and how the plays were performed. Cecchi's success is attested to by his vast output of plays commissioned by both secular and religious groups. Eisenbichler sets the scene with photos showing the former quarters of the Arcangelo Raphael Confraternity in Piazza Santa Maria Novella, and also provides a photo of a typical oratory to give a sense of how this long rectangular structure could be adapted for the presentation of plays. The title of *An Act Suitable for Recitation*

in Front of the Nativity Scene tells us that it is staged in front of the crèche with the Baby Jesus, which means that the actors would be ideally positioned to address the seated audience. The *Duel* and *Contempt* could be more flexibly staged, possibly in the round, using symbolic entrances and exits for heavenly or infernal characters. *Dolcina*, Eisenbichler suggests, might also have designated different spaces for good and bad. *Cleopas and Luke* could have used the three sets, or mansions as named in medieval and early modern theatre, to create the many different settings and convey the religious aura they each carried. As well, audiences might have been allowed to mingle for greater involvement. Although costumes were sometimes used, most characters wore contemporary clothes, possibly to appeal to audiences. Also noted is the widespread use of music in the popular form of the sung *laude*, and the frequent insertions of the new genre of vocal music, the madrigal, followed by evidence of an opera as early as 1585.

The first play, *An Act Suitable for Recitation in Front of the Nativity Scene*, is static in nature, with the actors speaking in turn, anticipating the widely popular musical oratorios of the following century, which became a hallmark of the confraternity Archangel Raphael. Eisenbichler notes that its special appeal lies in Cecchi raising the occasion beyond a religious celebration to create a quasi-mystical experience where the audience is invited to enter the action and join the singing as they process to kiss the Baby Jesus.

Dolcina follows the “Everyman” tradition where the young man as he becomes mature must undergo the process of choosing goodness over evil. Cecchi makes his allegorical characters interesting by having them verbally defend rather than enact their lifestyles. The drama becomes an intellectual debate intended to engage the audience. Along with the serious issues that are raised concerning the Counter-Reformation’s insistence on the necessity of both good deeds and faith to achieve salvation, there are some touches of humour. *Dolcina* herself, who represents “Human Frailty” (46), shows a certain irreverence in her long closing monologue when she agrees to enter a nunnery but refuses to take the oath of obedience.

Cleopas and Luke, an ambitious three-act play with many speaking and singing roles, follows an earlier *sacra rappresentazione* that brings together post-resurrection narratives from the four gospels enriched by additional scenes for heightened emotional effects. Cecchi’s masterful structuring of the action balances out the various characters and key events to build suspense as well as devotional awe.

Contempt for Love and Earthly Beauty features a mainly cerebral debate between Earthly Beauty and Penance on how to lead a Christian life. Eisenbichler believes that its appeal to the young males might have been its use of the recitation style, which also included parts that were sung and allowed friends to participate. With Saint Magdalene exemplifying penance after her conversion, the youths defended the renewed importance of penance as a sacrament in the Counter-Reformation church possibly in opposition to its rejection in the Protestant world.

Finally, *Duel of Active and Contemplative Life*, also dedicated to Saint Magdalene, comes more to life through a description of a baroque performance in 1624 where elaborate scenery, beautiful paintings, and costume changes represented the falseness of outward appearance and the monstrosity of sin. In the battle between the Contemplative over the Active Life, Peace appears to reconcile them closely with a Counter-Reformation message that both faith and good works were needed. The joyful Saint Magdalene ends the play hovering in the air, supported by Angels and calling on everyone to repent.

To briefly conclude, Eisenbichler's polished, evocative translations of Cecchi's plays capture a range of theatrical genres and innovative dramaturgy. These plays reveal the sophisticated acting skills of the youth performing them, including their representations of Saint Magdalene as a transformative figure for male as well as female sinners. This important collection enriches our knowledge of early modern theatre studies.

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