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Hankins, James. *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy*

Amanda Madden

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Hankins, James.

Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy.

Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019. Pp. xxiii, 736. ISBN 978-0-674-23755-1 (hardcover) US\$46.

Since Hans Baron's *Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), scholars of Renaissance Italy have argued with varying degrees of certainty that humanist literature was designed specifically to teach the ruling elites how to practise statecraft. Much of this work has been philological—tens of thousands of words have been spent on words like humanism, virtue, republic, and civic with an eye towards understanding shifts in concepts; some of this work has been in areas such as intellectual history and the history of philosophy. Other scholars have focused on the cultural milieu in which these works were produced.

James Hankins, who has spent a forty-year career studying these works, argues in the preface to his most recent (and one could argue most definitive) work on the subject, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy*, that we only have a partial picture of humanist political writings, despite the multitude of work done on men like Niccolò Machiavelli, Francesco Guiccardini, and Lorenzo Valla. Even less well understood than the size of the corpus is the foundational underpinning of humanism, what Hankins calls “a movement of moral and civic reform” (xii). Specifically, he argues that humanism was a movement of moral and political reform in response to crises of legitimacy, widespread loss of faith in political and religious leadership, and tyranny both oligarchical and republican (xv). This is the sort of thesis that feels self-evident once it's said aloud and, in this work, Hankins says this both well and at length.

Indeed, *Virtue Politics* gives an impressive and thorough tour of Renaissance humanism from Petrarch to Leonardo Bruni to Machiavelli. He gives a detailed overview of many of the foundational (and slippery) concepts grappled with in studies of Renaissance Italy—the nature of concepts like *respublica*, *virtue*, the *popolo*, the political elite, tyranny, and even absolutism, a term which doesn't often appear in discussions of the politics of Renaissance Italy. To make these arguments, Hankins synthesizes some of the political thought in hundreds of humanist works he has examined over the course of a career. Some of these texts have only been partially studied; some of these texts haven't been studied at all. Hankins argues that this lacunae is due to the focus on political

works in the vernacular that are far less numerous than those in Latin, and, as he argues, less prestigious. Among these neglected texts he numbers Biondo Flavio's *Roma Triumphans* and Petrarch's letters to Charles IV, which he discusses at length. He also notes that some of the more frequently pored over texts of the period, most often in works of social, cultural, and literary history, including dialogues, advice manuals, biographies, geographies, and even treatises on household management have a great deal to say on political thought. Enter Hankins's impressive synthesis of a dauntingly large body of literature.

Hankins is clear on the central trend of most if not all of these works. As he argues, the goal of the humanist program of education was both political and a response to politics. The main argument of these works was "that cities needed to be governed by well-educated men and women of high character, possessed of practical wisdom, and informed by the study of ancient literature and moral philosophy" (xiii). If this phrasing sounds familiar to even the most superficial readers of humanist literature, it's because it is. Yet often scholars fail to take these statements at face value; instead, they focus on humanist rhetoric and Hankins argues for a more literal interpretation.

Virtue Politics takes twenty-one chapters to comprehensively address humanist political thought. Along the way, Hankins addresses important components of this thought, including morality, the role of wealth and the wealthy in politics, concepts of honour and virtue, how to prevent tyranny, and notions of sovereignty. Hankins points out that many of these concepts have been misinterpreted or obscured by the modern impulse to trace backwards a republican genealogy and pinpoint the origins of the notion of liberty. To reset, so to speak, the first two chapters introduce humanism and the concept of virtue politics.

Virtue politics, as Hankins defines it, "focuses on improving the character and wisdom of the ruling class with a view to bringing about a happy and flourishing commonwealth" (37). In this program, sovereignty and the legitimacy of the state are inextricably bound with "the virtue of rulers and especially their practice of justice, defined as a preference for the common good over private goods" (37). To understand this notion, he outlines the thoughts of those he considers to be key thinkers—Francesco Petrarch, Giovanni Boccaccio, Leonardo Bruni, Biondo Flavio, Cyriac of Ancona, Leon Battista Alberti, George of Trebizond, Francesco Filelfo, Francesco Patrizi, and finally, Niccolò Machiavelli. In his examination of their thoughts, Hankins argues that Italian humanist political thought possesses an overarching unity irrespective of

factions, governments, and rulers. The overarching trend of this thought is the improvement of the political elites and, as a consequence, the state in its myriad forms (xii). One should not mistake this as a reforming impulse, however. Instead, it was a way of thinking about politics that centred on virtue.

Hankins is convincing in his arguments and this is the sort of book that redefines a field, in both the answers it gives and the questions it poses. What could easily have become a three-volume study, Hankins has managed to fit into 500 pages, not including appendices, indexes, and a bibliography. This is both a strength and weakness of the work. Indeed, there is enough material here to furnish fodder for a generation of conversations, and *Virtue Politics* will undoubtedly launch seminar papers and dissertations.

In addition to a bibliography and indexes, the book also contains several useful appendixes that include a translation from a selection of Petrarch's *De vita solitaria*, 2.19.19–22, "Petrarch on Political Obligations"; a translation of Rinaldo Gianfigliuzzi's speech before the Florentine priors in 1399 contained in Leonardo Bruni's *History of the Florentine People*, 11.75–78; and a list of "Renaissance Editions, Translations, and Compendia of Francesco Patrizi of Siena's Political Works." Given the breadth and depth of literature discussed throughout the text, the "Index of Manuscripts and Archival Documents" was particularly useful and, again, underscored the wealth of source material consulted over the course of a career for this book. *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy* is a career book; in other words, it is a book that shows the sum of a career and puts on display the detailed investigation of sources that can only come with decades of thought and research.

AMANDA MADDEN

George Mason University

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