

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



**Sgarbi, Marco. Francesco Robortello (1516–1567): Architectural
Genius of the Humanities**

Marco Faini

Volume 43, numéro 1, hiver 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070216ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i1.34136>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Faini, M. (2020). Compte rendu de [Sgarbi, Marco. Francesco Robortello (1516–1567): Architectural Genius of the Humanities]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 43(1), 282–284.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v43i1.34136>

iceberg, and how he used his practical skills of fifteen years at seas as well as the mathematical knowledge evident in his logbooks and school workbooks (14, 149–71). The epilogue ends on the verge of the nineteenth century; the nautical manual has become a student textbook (14, 173–84). Classroom and shipboard continue to dwell in tension in search of technical education.

Each maritime nation in western Europe contributed to navigation. For instance, in its expansion across the oceans, Spain had valued the *piloto*, and Amerigo Vespucci was the first *piloto mayor* in 1508 (17). In Dieppe, Denys, who transformed French navigation, saw theory as coming before practice (63). The graduates of the RMS affected other institutions in England but were also recruited for more general mathematical knowledge in other places like Virginia and Russia (112). In the eighteenth century, the Dutch nautical manuals became more specialized and had smaller audiences; the increasing mathematical skill of sailors did not necessarily raise their social status (146–47). Riou combined good judgment and meticulous computations (171). Schotte concludes her accomplished book with a reminder of and tribute to the importance of navigators for science, communication, and practice, and their role as links in global history and local history: working men whose voices “offer a vital new chapter in the story of how science develops in the wider world” (184).

JONATHAN LOCKE HART

Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies
Victoria College, University of Toronto

Sgarbi, Marco.

Francesco Robortello (1516–1567): Architectural Genius of the Humanities.

New York: Routledge, 2020. Pp. x, 183 + 7 b/w ill. ISBN 978-0-3672-2487-5 (hardcover) US\$155.

Marco Sgarbi’s volume is the first monograph devoted to the humanist Francesco Robortello and his multifaceted intellectual production. The main body of the book is divided into six chapters, each accompanied by an articulated bibliography detailing Robortello’s works referenced in the chapter as well as the primary and secondary sources (manuscript and in print). While the first chapter accounts for Robortello’s life and works, each of the following

five is dedicated to one of the disciplines pertaining to the *studia humanitatis* in which Robortello engaged during his life: topics, rhetoric, poetics, history, and moral philosophy. The novelty of Sgarbi's approach is that he considers these disciplines, expounded by Robortello in both manuscript and printed works, as part of a philosophical system aimed at bridging philosophy and humanism. To put it in the author's words, "Robortello is in fact performing for the language arts an in-depth philosophical inquiry aimed at uncovering a unitary methodology capable of explaining in a coherent and cohesive manner all discourse-related disciplines" (8). This is the main assumption of this book; it is, however, also worth observing that the case of Robortello allows the author—himself an expert of early-modern Aristotelianism—to assess certain outcomes of Aristotelian philosophy in mid-sixteenth-century Italy. Robortello emerges as a fascinating thinker able to move freely within an Aristotelian conceptual frame, reaching theoretical results well beyond the boundaries of Aristotle's thought.

Robortello lectured in Lucca, Pisa, Venice, and Padua, where he was an acclaimed professor and a belligerent one at that; his fights, one of which ended up in an assault that left him seriously wounded, were often less connected with personal reasons than with disagreements over the approach to learning and scholarship. Sgarbi repeatedly stresses the novelty of Robortello's method. Such novelty resided in the idea of a common structure underlying all language arts. This structure is represented by the topics, explored by Robortello in a text titled *Discorso dell'origine, numero, ordine et methodo delli luoghi topici* (A Discourse on the origin, number, order, and method of topical places), preserved only in manuscript copies. The topics should be a "universal tool based on the forms of reasoning, previous to any rhetoric being established," reflecting "the natural workings of the mind" (63). Robortello identifies four basic "places" or forms of reasoning—based on the possible relations of a subject with its predicate—from which every other logical relation can be deduced. Each of these four basic relations can be subdivided into further divisions. Robortello applies this method to all language arts such as, for example, rhetoric, in order to produce "solid knowledge" (86). In doing so, he frequently resorts to "diagrams, schemes and graphic trees" which "are [...] not simply a way of organizing knowledge but must also reflect the processes of the mind in subdividing given problems and in generating possible solutions" (86).

Robortello is deeply concerned with the problem of truth and knowledge in the so-called language arts, which cannot have the same degree of certainty of scientific knowledge. This concern is in turn connected to the pressing issue of the public good, the goal that all language arts ultimately share. Robortello is deeply interested in the ways in which the philosophical discourse can be popularized and made accessible even to the lower strata of the population. He therefore reflects on how the peculiarities of the different disciplines can be effectively used to educate an audience of non-specialist readers; he explores, as Sgarbi carefully explains, the relationships, the similarities, and the differences between the language disciplines (for example, between rhetoric and poetry, or between poetry and history, or rhetoric and history) and their peculiarities. In his conception of a systematic form of philosophy, Robortello not only demonstrates an unusual and highly innovative approach; he also advances new ideas and theories concerning momentous problems, such as the role of passions in poetry and history, and the difference between the types of catharsis produced by poetry and history. Because of his preoccupation with truth as the goal of language disciplines and the privileged way to obtain moral benefices, Robortello is also the author of possibly the first attempt at a methodological reflection on history aimed at overcoming skeptical criticism.

The peculiarity of Robortello's thought and his groundbreaking methodological shift is that the language arts are considered no longer as autonomous but rather as co-operating with "the one true philosophy capable of appealing not only to the chosen few [...] but to the entire population" (160). This philosophy is moral philosophy, the culmination of the whole system. Moral philosophy resides in prudence, the ability to take correct decisions and act morally. In this light, language arts concur in the "constitution of the political order legitimated not by force or wealth, but by the good that comes from knowledge" (177).

Sgarbi's book succeeds in reconstructing the overarching meaning of Robortello's philosophy and showing its novelty, while also discussing the connections that the parts of this system have with previous and contemporary theories. This book will appeal not only to scholars interested in Aristotelianism and humanism, but also to those dealing with the history of politics and the larger question of truth in the early modern time.

MARCO FAINI

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia / University of Toronto