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Grieco, Allen J. Food, Social Politics and the Order of Nature in Renaissance Italy

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(along with their eventual large and small screen adaptations), as well as a vast array of film and television productions, beginning with the 1953 *Knights of the Round Table*, which ushered in the modern age of Hollywood adaptations of the Arthurian saga. Whether considering Arthurian adultery on the silver screen, representations of Camelot in a series of comic strips, appropriations of Avalon in themed weekends at contemporary Renaissance fairs, the use of Arthurian tropes in popular fare like *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *Spamalot*, and *Knightriders*, or in fantasy film franchises like Indiana Jones, *The Lord of the Rings*, Harry Potter, and *Game of Thrones*, Fee's focus remains set upon how succeeding generations can see reflected in the various iterations of Arthuriana (tailored to suit contexts and objectives) the oblique reflection of their own dreams and aspirations. The Grail, from this perspective, is simply a cup representing hope, while Arthur provides a canvas upon which we can paint portraits of our better selves, since his steadfast pursuit of the ideal good speaks to our own internal desire to achieve perfection—both in ourselves and in our world.

Carefully proofed and handsomely presented with fifty illustrations—almost half of which appear courtesy of the British Library, but none of which are indexed with complete source information—the book serves as a testament to its author's tangible passion for all things Arthurian. As an affordable overview for generalist readers and genre enthusiasts, *Arthur* successfully does its part to proselytize that passion.

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Grieco, Allen J.

Food, Social Politics and the Order of Nature in Renaissance Italy.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. Pp. 327 + 41 ill. ISBN 978-0-6742-4408-5 (paperback) US\$31.

A pioneer in food studies, Allen J. Grieco provides an interesting and erudite insight into Renaissance food culture. His book, a collection of previously separately published articles and book chapters, is organized in three sections. Part 1, "The Renaissance Table in Theory and Practice," contains the longest

chapter (1), providing a description of table manners and habits at the time, and three case studies (chapters 2, 3, 4) connected to the meals and dietary uses of three different institutions: the *Mensa della Signoria* in Florence, the Court of Urbino, and the *Ospedale degli Innocenti* (a charitable institution), again in Florence. Part 2, “Social Distinctions, Dietary Theory and Classificatory Systems,” offers three chapters (5, 9, 10) dedicated to a theoretical and historical treatment of the social value of food in the Renaissance (especially as a means of social distinction) and three others (6, 7, 8) devoted to three case studies (fish, wine, and fruit). Part 3, “Food in Literary and Visual Discourse,” is dedicated to the role of food in pictorial and literary representations, with chapters 11–14 focusing on birth scenes, last suppers, the narrative theme of the eaten heart (with particular emphasis on the *Novellino* and the *Decameron*), and the figure of the hermit (in both literature and painting).

Both Christiane Klapisch-Zuber’s foreword and Grieco’s introduction and chapters deal in detail with the methodological problems of food studies, which include the lack of available sources and the tendency to interpret food in the past with the same categories we use today. As for the sources, the main problem is the consistent lack of surviving documents concerning everyday meals and, on the contrary, the relative abundance of evidence for exceptional meals, which thus could easily be misunderstood as the norm by today’s readers. Even the sources that appear most neutral—i.e., cookbooks—can turn out to be unreliable, as they do not necessarily portray dishes that were actually cooked and served, or at least not consistently. As for the problem of perspective, Grieco is always careful in underlining how food, far from being a simple biological need, “is actually a complex social and cultural construct, characteristic of different historical periods and geographic locations” (15). In Grieco’s essays, food is always treated with attention to its social, cultural, and historical dimensions, as well as the medical understanding of its effects on the body.

Given the methodological difficulties of his discipline, Grieco makes a wide and eclectic use of both historical and artistic sources, and is very careful in employing them in their own context. When providing a historical source, such as the *spesa minuta* of the *Ospedale degli Innocenti* (a list of everyday expenses), Grieco devotes time to explaining its significance and its limits, highlighting not only what the list includes but also what it leaves out, and why. Similarly, when employing narrative or poetry as sources, Grieco explains carefully that

they are not meant to be taken literally, but can be understood only as part of a wider, complex, allegorical pattern—keeping in mind that realism is a controversial feature of literary texts.

Another important aspect of Grieco's book is the pre-eminence given to the cultural context of food in the Renaissance. Chapter 5, most notably, and the whole of part 2 focus on the cultural reasons at the basis of dietary choices, of their differences between social classes and professions, and the philosophical theories underlying them. Grieco explains carefully why certain foods were deemed as noble and others, such as vegetables, as vile (and thus more appropriate for a peasant's diet), as well as why certain foods were served together, or in a specific order. As Grieco argues, "there was something like a code that made a meal either noble or poor, and [...] this code was not based on personal preference but rather on ideas about food shared by most people" (110). While it might seem senseless to us today, "the idea that the rich and poor were meant to eat in very different ways [...] was grounded in the prevailing worldview, according to which there existed a series of analogies between the natural world created by God and the world of human beings" (110). Most interestingly, chapter 6 is dedicated to wine, and traces eloquently the differences between the current understanding of winemaking—and wine tasting and pairing—and the medical principles that regulated these activities in the Renaissance.

Grieco's book collects articles written and published during a period of twenty years and intended as self-contained case studies. While this kind of operation usually risks the creation of inhomogeneous and even repetitive books, Grieco's work is coherent in its scope and in the sources it takes into account, and the material is organized quite harmoniously. By providing a great variety of different examples and sources while at the same time adopting consistently rigorous critical tools, Grieco's book proves to be a comprehensive and insightful contribution on the subject of food culture in the Renaissance.

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