



Mac Carthy, Ita. The Grace of the Italian Renaissance

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Mac Carthy, Ita.

The Grace of the Italian Renaissance.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. Pp. xiii, 246. ISBN 978-0-691-17548-5 (hardcover) US\$35.

Ita Mac Carthy, writing about the three Graces, begins with two epigraphs: one by Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who in 1759 writes, “In Athens, the Graces stood on the way up to the holiest places” and urges artists to make offerings to them; another by Friedrich Schiller, who in 1793 writes, “The Greek myth attributes to the goddess of beauty a belt possessed of the power to endow the one who wears it with grace, and to obtain love. This goddess is accompanied by the goddesses of grace, or the Graces” (1). In her Prologue, Mac Carthy proceeds to interpret the fresco of April, the month of grace, in the *Salone dei mesi* or the “room of the months” in Ferrara’s Palazzo Schifanoia (1). According to Mac Carthy, the goal of the April fresco is to depict the Este court in terms of beauty, love, and the material and immaterial elements of grace in a “social order founded on giving, receiving, and giving back,” as can be seen in Italian usage during the Renaissance—graceful (*grazioso*), grateful (*grato*), giving thanks (*rendere gratia*) and saying “please” (*di gratia*)—and in the humanist energy to restore Latin and promote Tuscan as the modern literary language of Italy (8). For Mac Carthy, even though “Francesco del Cossa paints grace with grace, he fails to receive grace in return,” and she concludes that when he stated his case to Borso d’Este, he spoke for fifteenth-century courtiers, court ladies, craftsmen, poets and artists who sought but seldom found proper credit at court: “the problem of what happens when the grace personified and idealized in the figure of the three Graces meets with nothing but ingratitude” (11). Grace and disgrace are part of the history of grace in the Renaissance, and grace has a “seemingly endless capacity to be incorrigibly plural” (11).

Mac Carthy’s book, as she says in chapter 1, examines “grace” as an intricate keyword of the Italian Renaissance, a word that plays an important role in “discussions of the individual pursuit of the good life and in the collective quest to determine the best means to a harmonious society” (12), in debates concerning the soul’s salvation and the best way to live at court, in the humanist effort to forge a shared literary language, and in the work of writers and artists to represent the potential of humankind—while also being a topic and “an instrument of persuasion” (12). In her study, Mac Carthy aims to

explore grace, its “semantic abundance” and its crossing of boundaries between art, literature, politics, social discourse, theology, and gender relations (13). She asks whether there was an Italian Renaissance, and observes that in this period the *questione della lingua* expressed the quest for *italianità*, and talks about the longstanding questioning of the term “Renaissance” (13–14). I would add that such designations as “early modern” and “modern” are often problematic, too, and are often used as shorthand and an entry into a time or query.

Moreover, Mac Carthy sees “grace” as giving a perspective on sixteenth-century Italy, having become “a locus of encounter and conflict between different ways of conceiving of the visual arts” (15). Her book traces how grace moves in the aesthetics, ethics, society, and culture of sixteenth-century Italy; it reflects “on ‘this idea of grace’ as a whole” and makes “sense of its lasting ability to move, to persuade, and to effect real change” (17). For Mac Carthy, individuals use “grace,” chameleon and intangible and not settling into language, in specific historical and cultural contexts. She distinguishes individual uses of grace. The Schifanoia *Allegory of April* shows its classical pedigree, associates love with poetry, and represents a benevolence passing “from the graceful to the grateful,” whereas Baldassare Castiglione describes grace as that “certain air” and affability that courtiers and court ladies learned in order to gain the favour of princes. Raphael, in his turn, views grace as concealing the effort of art behind a veil of nonchalant ease (19). Contrary views of grace to which Mac Carthy appeals are those of Michelangelo Buonarroti and Vittoria Colonna in which it is God’s reward for work and devotion, and the grace of Christ cannot be learned nor earned, so that artistic or spiritual grace is divine (19). Mac Carthy compares ideas of grace and appeals to metaphors as a method to permit “discrete manifestations of grace to speak for themselves,” which is a poetic and artistic way to interpret (26). What Renaissance artists and writers from Francesco del Cossa to Torquato Tasso thought of grace is a concern for Mac Carthy, who, in that context, employs close analyses of texts and images from del Cossa, Castiglione, Raphael, Ariosto, Lodovico Dolce, Colonna, Tullia d’Aragona, Michelangelo, Moderata Fonte, and Tasso. In her narrative, Mac Carthy seeks “messy moments,” what elsewhere I have called the messiness of the text (26).

Chapter 2 relates grace to the humanist revival of antiquity, the quarrels about religion, and the debate of language as part of rethinking the secular and the sacred, while in chapter 3, Renaissance grace begins in Castiglione’s *Libro*

del cortegiano (1516) and Raphael's portrait of Castiglione (1514–16) (30, 50). In chapter 4, Mac Carthy explores how Vittoria Colonna and Tullia d'Aragona break the connection between grace and beauty as expressed in male discourse (76). Chapter 5 examines Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* (1532) in terms of literary grace, and of Lodovico Dolce calling Ariosto the poet of grace (114). In Chapter 6, Mac Carthy discusses how Michelangelo and Colonna cultivate an image of intense working artists who reveal rather than conceal their labour, a Christian vision of the artist receiving the gift of God's grace (142). The Conclusion examines both prudence in Tasso's *Il malpiglio* (1585) and grace as a way to survive and thrive, and for women to cultivate pleasure for themselves through the inner grace of eloquence and intellect, in Moderata Fonte's *Merito delle donne* (1592). Mac Carthy closes her exploration of a plural grace with Tasso's nostalgia and Fonte's regeneration (181). The book begins and ends with the three Graces, seen here in their perennial dance in del Cossa's spring, and with April as the month of grace (187). Mac Carthy gives us a rich and perceptive study of grace in word, image, and beyond in sixteenth-century Italy.

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Machiavelli, Niccolò.

***Machiavelli: Political, Historical, and Literary Writings.* Ed. Mark Jurdjevic and Meredith K. Ray, trans. Meredith K. Ray.**

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019. Pp. viii, 334. ISBN 978-0-8122-2433-7 (paperback) US\$34.95.

The edition by Mark Jurdjevic and Meredith K. Ray, with translations by Ray, is an excellent volume of political, historical, and literary works by one of the great thinkers and writers of the Renaissance. Although Ray is the translator, "Note on Translation and Selection of Texts" provides an unattributed statement of method:

The selection of texts presented in this translation is intended to guide the reader through the arc of Machiavelli's political and literary life: from