

Michael O'Connell, trans. *Three Florentine Sacre Rappresentazioni: Texts and Translations*.

Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 404; Early European Drama Translation Series 1. Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2011. xxvi + 250 pp. \$53. ISBN: 978-0-86698-452-2.

This small but significant group of texts for the Florentine religious theater can be an important tool for scholars and students of Renaissance culture, literature, and theater studies. The authors of the texts translated by Michael

O'Connell are among the most relevant of the genre: Feo Belcari and his *La Rappresentazione di Abramo e Isacc* (*The Representation of Abraham and Isaac*); and Castellano Castellani, with two texts, *La Rappresentazione della Conversione di Santa Maria Maddalena* (*The Representation of the Conversion of Saint Mary Magdalen*) and *La Rappresentazione del Figliol Prodigio* (*The Representation of the Prodigal Son*). O'Connell provides an introduction in which he outlines the historical context of the religious theater in Florence and then, for each text provides a context particularly useful for the reader wishing to read texts-sources of the golden age of Renaissance Florence.

The term *sacre rappresentazioni* (sacred plays) refers to a variety of texts from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries composed in octaves (the typical verse of Florentine sacred plays). The genre later evolved into the so-called spiritual comedies of the Cinquecento. Usually, the content of a sacred play is announced, both in the text and in the performance, by an "announcing angel," though at times, such as in Castellani's text, the announcer might be another character who may accompany himself on an instrument. O'Connell points out that the Florentine *sacre rappresentazioni* "typically involved considerable elaboration of the bare bones of scripture or largely fictionalized accounts of the lives of saints" (viii), mainly from the *Golden Legend* by Jacopo da Voragine. Positioning the Florentine religious theater in the larger frame of the European religious theater, O'Connell says that the *Sacre rappresentazioni* were "smaller in scale than the mystery cycles" but "they nevertheless achieve a concentration of psychological realism that is frequently astonishing" (vii).

Feo Belcari composed the text for the performance of the *Annunciation* play, a seminal spectacle staged in 1439 at the time of the Council of Florence. The person responsible for the stage set and special effects was the architect Filippo Brunelleschi, at that time engaged in the construction of the dome for the cathedral. The council brought to Florence the cultural and political leaders of the Christian East and this, in turn, had a profound impact on Florentine (and Italian) culture in the fifteenth century. Because Belcari's *sacra rappresentazione* of *Annunciazione* was seen by participants at the Council and influenced Florentine theatrical culture, the translation into English of one of his works, *The Representation of Abraham and Isaac*, is quite important for scholars and students of the period.

Castellano de' Castellani was an intellectual who first followed Savonarola, but then realigned himself with the Medici restoration. He was one of the most prolific writers of *sacre rappresentazioni*. A priest and a professor of law, he is one of the most representative authors of the genre. The English translation of his *Figliol Prodigio* is one of the merits of this volume. The language of Castellani's *Rappresentazioni* is richly sprinkled with many contemporary proverbs that present a difficult task for a translator. O'Connell overcomes the difficulty by providing explanations of some of the most unusual ones, thus adding an important scholarly element to his work.

The three texts in this book belong to the great tradition of Florentine *Sacre rappresentazioni*. O'Connell sets the background for our understanding of these

sacred plays and places them in the appropriate historic perspective. Perhaps, in analyzing and contextualizing the *Sacre rappresentazioni*, O'Connell did not illustrate thoroughly enough the political aspects present in this theatrical genre, devoted not only to the teaching of religion or to the training of young performers, but also to the delivery of political messages.

Some of the deepest, most fascinating, or rather impossible nuances of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Florentine cannot be translated: nevertheless, Michael O'Connell's work and his notes make the volume an excellent instrument for scholars and students of the Renaissance who want to gain an insight into the religious theater of Renaissance Florence.

GIANNI CICALI  
Georgetown University