
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Parker, Deborah. Michelangelo and the Art of Letter Writing

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Volume 34, Number 1-2, Winter–Spring 2011

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1106424ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v34i1-2.16188>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Prodan, S. (2011). Review of [Parker, Deborah. Michelangelo and the Art of Letter Writing]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 34(1-2), 286–288. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v34i1-2.16188>

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in their text *Italian Renaissance Art* (1997). Ironically, some colleagues have hesitated to adopt it for classroom use because they feel there's too much of that 'other' stuff and not enough on the familiar trio and the familiar names. Sigh. Their more Burkhardtian 'Italian Renaissance' is another invented tradition that, like the modern Siena palio with its acrobatic flag-throwers and vortical horse race, becomes so familiar, romantic and evocative and we easily fall for thinking that it's the real thing.

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Parker, Deborah.

Michelangelo and the Art of Letter Writing.

New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xii, 156 + 11 b/w plates. ISBN 978-0-521-76140-6. \$74.13.

Deborah Parker's *Michelangelo and the Art of Letter Writing* fills an important gap in Michelangelo studies. As the author herself explains, the fifth and final volume of Michelangelo's indirect correspondence was published only seventeen years ago in 1994 and it is not just the artist's letters that demand re-examination in light of the recently completed *carteggio indiretto*, but also earlier biographies that have depended, to greater or lesser effect and degrees, on these letters and the vicissitudes of their critical tradition.

Parker's insightful four-chapter study aims at explicating key aspects of the artist's epistolary rhetoric and the interests or investments to which they point. It begins most appropriately with a review of select Michelangelo biographies from different points in history and an analysis of corresponding portrayals of the artist to which the pens of these various biographers gave rise.

The first chapter, "The Role of Letters in Biographies of Michelangelo," focuses exclusively on the periods of the Renaissance, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Parker reveals how both the transmission history of the letters and vested interests of different biographers influenced their characterization of the artist. Specific attention is given to biographies by Giorgio Vasari (1550, 1568), Hermann Grimm (1860), Aurelio Gotti (1876), John Addington Symonds (1892), and Giovanni Papini (1952). Though Ascanio

Condivi's 1553 biography is mentioned, it is not submitted to analysis in this chapter. The discussion of more recent biographies consists in a brief handling of E.H. Ramsden's Introduction to her translation of Michelangelo's letters, and to book-length studies by George Bull (1995), Anthony Hughes (1997), and William Wallace (2009). Parker furnishes a particularly sensitive reading of the biographies by Vasari and Symonds; her analysis of Vasari is consistent in its conclusions with earlier scholarship by Paola Barocchi and Paul Barolsky. Because this chapter discusses the impact of positivism, Neoclassicism and Romanticism on the reception of Michelangelo's letters, it constitutes an important contribution to Michelangelo studies more generally.

The remainder of *Michelangelo and the Art of Letter Writing* provides an alternative reading of the letters to their customary treatment "as sources for biographical reconstruction or the dating of artworks" (2). In the ensuing three chapters, Parker substantiates her claim that Michelangelo was as much "a fabulist" in his letter writing as Vasari was in his *Vite* (46).

Chapter two, "From Word to Image: Epistolary Rhetoric and Artistic Form," turns to a discussion of what Parker rightly identifies as the three key traits of Michelangelo's writing — the use of aphorisms, repetition, and contrast: aphorisms as a means of giving advice or as a tool for structuring an argument, and repetition, through such devices as polyptotons and hyperbole, to achieve opposition in his texts. Highlighting these traits, Parker argues that a good portion of Michelangelo's letters constitute a "crafted performance" (64) demonstrating the author's "keen sense of audience" (70). This chapter additionally includes twenty-three images and a discussion of Michelangelo's art to which his letters are juxtaposed and compared so as to reveal his "predilection for contrast" as "a deep structuring principle" of his worldview (81).

The *topos* of enslavement is traced through Michelangelo's correspondence in chapter three, "From Experience to Expression: Representations of Captivity in Michelangelo's Art, Poetry, and Letters." In this micro-study, Parker identifies a recurrence of certain linguistic constructs in the artist's correspondence — the words "*fatica*" (toil), "*obbligato*" (obligation) and "*servire*" (to serve), in particular — that demonstrate the artist's association of art with servitude and duty. This chapter serves as a valuable complement to Neoplatonic analyses of Michelangelo's works. It also constitutes a salutary reminder on the importance of keeping Michelangelo's daily life firmly in mind when examining or

speculating about more intimate, and so less obviously attested, aspects of his character.

Another series of key words and clusters are examined in the fourth chapter, “Michelangelo’s Words: Saying, Doing, Meaning,” which focuses on the recurrence of terms like “*animo*” (mind) “*volontà*” (will) and “*intendere*” (to understand/to mean). Parker reveals that one of the artist’s primary concerns seemed to be articulating his intentions, comprehending those of others, and harmonizing the two. Honour and profit are also discussed in the letters and in light of Florentine culture of Michelangelo’s day.

In *Michelangelo and the Art of Letter Writing*, Parker successfully identifies “prevailing tendencies in the way Michelangelo chooses to express himself” (144). Ultimately, she arrives at similar conclusions to those studying his poetry: Michelangelo writes in a concise manner, now conscientiously, now spontaneously, with the twin penchants of developing a single concept or maxim within a given text, on the one hand, and of fleshing out the same idea in varied, or even opposing ways, across different ones, on the other.

If a criticism of this volume were to be ventured, it would be that Parker does not discuss the implications of her work for the field of Michelangelo studies more broadly. Though she identifies a place for her contribution at the beginning of her volume, she does not then reflect upon it at the end. What ultimately emerges from Parker’s analysis is the characterization of Michelangelo as a man tormented by, yet dutifully committed to serving through toil, those to whom he is bound by obligation (family, patrons, and often, friends) — individuals whose desires and expectations, much like his own, he is troubled to understand as well as to meet. This portrait alone renders *Michelangelo and the Art of Letter Writing* a valuable addition to the field.

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