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**Mayer, Thomas F. The Roman Inquisition on the Stage of Italy,  
c. 1590–1640**

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**Mayer, Thomas F.**

***The Roman Inquisition on the Stage of Italy, c. 1590–1640.***

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. Pp. 361. ISBN 978-0-8122-45783-8 (hardcover) \$79.95.

Thomas F. Mayer was an erudite sleuth in the archives of the Inquisition; few on this side of the Atlantic knew its papers as well as he did. Sadly, *The Roman Inquisition on the Stage of Italy* is Mayer's last book, completed when his health was failing. Mayer knew his remaining time was short; for lack of time and strength to polish it, he gave us a book that is deeply flawed and frustrating to its intended users. Let me swiftly catalogue the book's flaws and then pass on to its contents and uses. The signal weakness is a chaotic argument, both in the large and in details. To expound the workings of the Inquisition, or of any court, a scholar must stand back and lay out the larger scene. What were the strategies and tactics of the tribunal, and what were those of the assorted suspects, witnesses, and accessories to the judicial tale? Good court history requires both synoptic vision and an eye for the fine structure of a case's progress. What Mayer has produced here, instead, looks less like history than chronicle, as detail tumbles after detail, almost as if he had been writing from a tall stack of note-cards. The reader desires to see the author's argument, an exposition that expounds a layered history. But, in the author's near absence as expounder, the book is vexingly opaque. Meanwhile, the prose is laden with rogue pronouns that have no clear antecedent and swarms with names of persons whose identity is at best bewildering, as if the author were in dialogue not with us but with his notes and files. Imperfectly vetted, the text also sometimes mistranslates Latin or Italian. For lack of a strong editorial hand by Mayer or some other scholar, the work is hard indeed to read and not always altogether easy to trust.

What then does the author claim? The Inquisition, writes Mayer, was tied to larger politics of state. He makes the argument in six chapters, the first two on Naples, the second two on Venice, and the final pair on Florence. The first chapter traces the slow progress of Rome's campaign for influence in Naples, in the face of the viceroy and of the local archbishop. Spain's power is too great and Rome's officials make slow headway; at times the nuncio is more effective than the *commissari* of the Roman Inquisition. Mayer touches on the story of the aspirant noble divine, Giulia de Marcos, and Stanzione Figueroa, an official who taxed clergy and whose imprisonment and extradition to Rome the crown

long opposed. It is a tale of wrangling over authority, to be repeated in succeeding chapters. The second chapter is given completely to the thirty-year judicial affair of Tommaso Campanella, where, again, jurisdictional struggles between Naples and Rome (pope, Congregation of the Inquisition, Naples agents of the Holy Office, and the nuncio, in discordant concert) sputter on and on. Mayer argues that, in the end, the Holy Office came out the stronger.

The first of the two Venetian chapters regards the aftermath of the Interdict, when Rome wants to punish theologians who backed Venice; and Venice, Mayer argues, was generally effective in their protection. Some of these theological rebels are tempted by Rome's offer of a soft reconciliation, but the Franciscan Fulgenzio Manfredi is first pardoned and then condemned and executed, so the path back to Rome was risky. The second Venetian chapter focuses on Giordano Bruno, on the Paduan Aristotelian Cesare Cremonini, some of whose books were smothered, and on Marcantonio de Dominis, bishop of Spalato, who backed Venice, fled to England, wrote on the church's constitution, died in Rome while on trial, and, post mortem, burned at the Minerva. Mayer notes of these cases that, whenever Venetian protection faltered, Rome might win.

Both Florentine chapters are given, almost entirely, to the thirty-year papal campaign against Rodrigo and Mariano Alidosi, feudatories loyal to the Medici who had snubbed the Inquisition's police. So tenacious was Medici protection that it took the church three decades to suppress them and acquire their little fief. The Alidosi dossier is incomplete but full of testimonies about local grudge and connivance, and it clearly deserves more careful, canny reading than Mayer—who merely summarizes at length things said in court, in the order of their deposition—could give it.

What lessons can we draw from this book's vast jumble? First, that the Inquisition struggled incessantly against rivals, both lay and ecclesiastical. Second, that it improvised. Third, that popes often took part in its single cases. Fourth, that it often preferred secret dealings and veiled solutions. How much of the Roman Inquisition's gradual rise to prominence we can lay to clear-sighted policies and how much was just improvised on the fly is a question the book fails to engage in systematic fashion. One is left wondering what Mayer might have achieved here if time and strength had remained on his side.