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Marsh, David. Giannozzo Manetti: The Life of a Florentine Humanist

Steven Teasdale

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Marsh, David.

Giannozzo Manetti: The Life of a Florentine Humanist.

I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019. Pp. x, 310. ISBN 978-0-674-23835-0 (hardcover) US\$52.

The past few decades have witnessed a resurgence in English language scholarship related to the fifteenth-century Florentine humanist Giannozzo Manetti. The translation of the *Vita* of Pope Nicholas V by Joseph O'Connor and Christine Smith in 2006, the numerous studies and translations of Stefano Baldassari, an international conference in Florence in 2007, and the publication of four volumes in Harvard's I Tatti Renaissance Library series all attest to the ongoing vitality of academic interest in this previously neglected Renaissance humanist.

David Marsh has supplemented his own contributions to this renewed study of Giannozzo Manetti with the first modern biographical of this fascinating polymath. The book is first and foremost an intellectual biography, centred on summaries and analyses of Manetti's literary output that are presented in a chronological manner. Marsh provides brief outlines of each work, punctuated with translations of crucial passages, notes the classical antecedents for each text, and identifies the contemporaneous persons mentioned in the works. The chapters are chronological but are also demarcated geographically—Florence, Pistoia, Venice, Rome, Naples, and so on—following the peregrinations of Manetti in his service to various Italian polities. This technique allows Marsh to discuss the composition of each work within its specific geohistorical context. The ultimate result is a succinct and approachable compendium of the output of a single Quattrocento humanist, one that will certainly become an indispensable guide to a large, varied, and still understudied corpus of Giannozzo Manetti.

Manetti was, in some sense, a “late bloomer”: he was forty years of age when he completed his first literary work, the *De secularibus et pontificalibus pompis* (1436). Marsh provides an introductory chapter that details his participation in a myriad of political and economic offices of the Florentine republic before his transformation into a humanist intellectual. The subsequent chapters highlight the multifaceted and flexible character of Manetti's humanism: these include encomia, panegyrics, histories, biographies, funeral orations, polemics, and biblical translations. Sometimes Manetti appears to embody the classic

civic humanist of Hans Baron. Marsh illustrates, for example, how his orations to the Venetians, Genoese, and Sienese were composed contemporaneously with his diplomatic duties in these various locales and delivered directly to local audiences of political and diplomatic figures. The classical motifs in these works were not merely rhetorical flourishes but were also intended to have real and immediate political influence. At other times Manetti appears to embody the humanist as “orator for hire” described by Jacob Siegel and subsequent critics of Baron. Marsh demonstrates his ability to deftly navigate the complex and continually changing political world of the middle Quattrocento, particularly seen in his early criticism and later support for the policies of Alfonso V of Aragon. Manetti was furthermore an important figure in expanding the sphere of humanist literary criticism, moving beyond classical Latin literature to engage directly with Greek and Hebrew texts. Marsh suggests that his biographies of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio demonstrate a “sympathy with local vernacular traditions” (43) and that Manetti intended to broaden the notion of humanism through serious engagement with the vernacular. His late period treatise *De terremoto* (1457) engages with the physical world by considering the 1456 earthquakes in central Italy. It combines a comparative analysis of historical seismic events with a humanistic evaluation of classical and ecclesiastical sources related to earthquakes resulting in a work that, according to Marsh, “tempers his scientific erudition with theological conviction” (162).

The final chapter considers his posthumous influence. Marsh suggests that Manetti’s lack of philosophical rigour might have led to the ignorance of his work after his death in favour of Bruni, Alberti, Ficino, and other contemporaries. This is a work of rehabilitation, however, and the author suggests that his literary methodology is one that looks towards the future, and by “conjoining classical erudition and religious piety, Manetti’s writings anticipate the Christian humanism of Erasmus” (191). Some readers may remain unconvinced, but Marsh provides the roadmap for them to further examine such assertions by recourse to his voluminous literary output.

Marsh could have provided more social context: it might have been useful, for example, to know the composition of the audiences for the various orations, and how they might have been received. A summary list of the works and manuscripts in question, like the one provided by Heinz Willi Wittschier in his *Giannozzo Manetti: Das Corpus der Orationes* (Köln: Böhlau, 1968), might also have proven useful. These are, however, minor concerns. A documentary

appendix provides about fifteen pages of source material in Latin with English translation. The extensive bibliography covers both published editions of primary sources as well as digital materials that are exclusively available online.

This biography represents an important contribution to the study of fifteenth-century Renaissance humanism. The aspiring Manetti scholar will find it an indispensable gateway to further study of the primary sources. David Marsh has provided an approachable, well-organized, and commendable work that will become a cornerstone for future studies of Renaissance humanism and Giannozzo Manetti.

STEVEN TEASDALE

University of Toronto

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