Eric V. Snow Review of Trexler May 13, 1992 Dr. Chojnacki HST 863

Recently, with the increasing use by historians of methodologies borrowed from other disciplines, such as anthropology, literary criticism, and philosophy, old historiographical subjects have been getting innovative but potentially problematic treatments. One good example of this trend is Richard C. Trexler's Public Life in Renaissance Florence,[1] which puts ritual, ceremony, and liturgy at the center of Florence's political and social life. While perhaps this is inevitable for a 550+ page book focusing upon the subject of ritual to tend to overemphasize the subject's importance, this book is valuable for correcting the neglect of ritual in the extant literature on Renaissance Florence, and for showing its everyday political and social significance in that culture.

Trexler primarily describes fourteenth through sixteenth century Florence's use of ritual and ceremony in a broad variety of areas, both public and private. Indeed, it was hard to know where the private uses of ritual ended, and the public ones began (p. 216). He starts with a broad overview of the main source of ritual for Florence: the ceremonies, liturgy, and sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. He describes how patrician families would compete with one another by how much they would spend to honor the divine, while at the same time getting their coats of arms placed in easily-noticed, strategic locations in churches. Then he described rituals as used in communication, by (re)analyzing the famous Datini-Mazzei letters, or in devotions by Giovanni Morelli. Shifting to broader, more public rituals, he describes how Florence used civil processions and events to influence diplomats and other nations' or cities' foreign policy. He maintains a "ritual revolution" occurred between 1470 and 1530 in Florence.

Trexler very strongly and convincingly challenges the old Burckhardtian notion of Renaissance Florence's culture being largely secular and individual-

[1] Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1980.

istic in character. By showing what a hold devotions to the Catholic Church's elaborate hierarchy of saints and the Virgin Mary had on the populace (rich, middling, and poor), he shows the city of humanism was very much still in the thrall of medieval superstition. Astrology's popularity ran rampant, eliciting Savonrola's comment that Florentines believed more in astrology than in God (p. 79). Interestingly, although Trexler seems to be very secular-minded himself, he is not critical of the Florentines' constant search for and creation of the holy, their use of "graven images" to gain contact with the divine, the widespread cult of the Virgin, the interpretation of omens, and other similar activities. His attitude seems to be in the tradition of William James, who saw a value in the instrumental use of religion, even if the object of devotion cannot be proved to exist scientifically (see Trexler, p. 65, 92). His antipathy to Lutheranism, which would destroy this rich heritage of rituals (or pagan-derived superstitions) in the name of a direct personal relationship with the Father and the Son, and which emphasizes faith as opposed to actions (such as rituals), shows up occasionally (p. xxvi, 71).

For Trexler, the individualism of Florentine merchants took a definite backseat to their need to use relatives and make friends with others in the commune in order to gain protection against enemies who would use the powers of the state to punish them. Trexler reads Lapo Mazzei, the notary and friend of the rich merchant Francesco Datini, as a political consultant who gave advice and recommended rituals to Datini so he could navigate through the treacherous shoals of Florentine politics. Trexler deals with the interesting ethical problem of Florentines seemingly insincerely feigning the experience of certain emotions initially, and later actually beginning to experience them. He convincingly maintains much of what was written by Mazzei to Datini amounted to verbal rituals, and cannot be taken at face value (p. 132-133, 151). Trexler seems to be overstating how disinterested

past historians have painted Mazzei in reference to the classical Aristotelian model.[2] Gene Brucker, in his brief summary of this friendship, quotes Mazzei as saying the following: "Francesco, I am not bound to you as Orestes to Pylades, or Damon to Pythias, who for the sake of friendship sought to die for the other. Nor am I like the men of Sardanapolis, who were friends for gluttony and profit."[3] With such a quote, Brucker is rather pointedly drawing attention to Mazzei's "moral moderate" stance of having both self-interested and altruistic reasons for his friendship with Datini.

An interesting concept of Trexler's work is how the merchant elite who ran Florence suffered from an inferiority complex due to their lack of noble blood and heritage. As a result, the merchant-patrician elite had to compensate by relying more heavily upon religious rituals, since trade was still seen as being an inferior, dishonest, demeaning calling in life. Only with the fear of God in both the parties agreeing to a contract could merchants trust each other. So merchants would go to religious settings such as churches to seal contracts, for the word of a trader could not be trusted, unlike that of an aristocrat (p. 112). Also to compensate for this sense of inferiority, Florence would strip the contrada and defeated, subject cities and towns of their relics and images in order to augment its own civic status and spiritual self-image at the latter's expense.[4] Such an emphasis by Trexler is insightful into the Florentine patriciate's self-identity especially for Americans, for since we are the heirs of a revolutionary republican, anti-aristocratic tradition, we tend to forget how much in the past aristocracy and kingship were the main sourcesof political legitimacy.

However, the foregoing analysis appears to be a serious overstatement. The Florentine patriciate did not always feel such a need for legitimacy based upon nobility and feudal titles. Also, many in the patriciate were

[2]Aristotle, in the Nicomachean Ethics, painted the classical ideal of friendship in which material utility was only a minor, secondary consideration.

[3]As quoted in Gene A. Brucker, Renaissance Florence (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1969), p. 110.

[4]Sometimes one gets the sense Trexler is saying the bourgeois merchants of Florence treated images and relics as commodities

the descendents of nobles. For while the landed magnates had been stripped of political power in 1293, they still had their wealth, and later intermarried with the nouveau riche merchant class, eventually creating a new, amalgamated patrician elite. Thus, many patricians could find such legitimacy through their genealogy. Unlike the merchant elite of most serene Venice, the Florentine patriciate had a strong noble component in it, which in the many years of the republic's life had been a source of much internal strife. As Humfrey Butters in his review of Texler's book put it:

> This is a clear picture (of the Florentine patriciate's inferiority complex); it is also a substantially inaccurate one. The landed interests of Florentine ottimati were of far greater importance, and their families of greater antiquity than Trexler allows; and since, on his own admission, by no means all of Florence's rulers were merchants, his description of them as 'politicians by necessity, traders by profession' is highly misleading. . . . Francesco Malatesta, Mantuan ambassador to Florence in 1502, had no hesitation in describing Florence's leading families as nobili . . ."[5]

Brucker notes carefully how in Florence's past trade had been held in disrepute, but he was still willing to say: "The two most respected professions in the city were the law and international trade."[6] Thus, although it would have been in a nascent form, Florentine merchants would have enjoyed some of the same kind of respect American businessmen and industrialists did in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which was in a culture totally lacking a titled aristocracy.

By placing ritual at the center of Florentine politics and social experience, Trexler delivers both a needed corrective and an overstatement of ritual's importance. For to know exactly how patricians tried to gain power and friends through various rituals and ceremonies helps to fill in our

[5]Humfrey Butters, Renaissance Quarterly, Autumn 1982, p. 469.
[6]Brucker, Renaissance Florence, p. 102.

picture of daily life in Renaissance Florence. On the other hand, by spending 550+ pages pounding away at this theme of ritual's importance, it is easy to start to overstate its importance overall. Calling the social conventions of gaining and keeping friends in Mazzei's letters "rituals" shows Trexler is using an expansive definition for the word. Nonetheless, Trexler's work is valuable for unearthing how rituals and ceremonies oiled daily life in Florence, as well as on the various annual holy days, such as Carnival and the observance of John the Baptist's feast day.

Trexler's work, while it contains a serious overstatement of some aspects of its thesis, is very valuable for putting the historiographical spotlight on rituals, ceremonies, and sacraments in Renaissance Florence's public and private life. He makes the mistake of excessively accentuating the merchant elite's inferiority complex vis-a-vis aristocrats, and the overall centrality of ritual in Florentine life compared to that of (say) earning a living. Pointing out how strong the medieval holdovers of religion and communal life is valuable for correcting Burckhardtian excesses. Thus, Trexler's work, including its innovative use of anthropological techniques, is well worth careful attention by all students of the Italian Renaissance.