

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



DeSilva, Jennifer Mara, and Pascale Rihouet, eds. *Eternal Ephemera: The Papal Possesso and Its Legacies in Early Modern Rome*

Miles Pattenden

Volume 44, Number 1, Winter 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081158ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37068>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Pattenden, M. (2021). Review of [DeSilva, Jennifer Mara, and Pascale Rihouet, eds. *Eternal Ephemera: The Papal Possesso and Its Legacies in Early Modern Rome*]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(1), 229–231. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37068>

DeSilva, Jennifer Mara, and Pascale Rihouet, eds.

Eternal Ephemera: The Papal Possesso and Its Legacies in Early Modern Rome.

Essays and Studies 45. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2020. Pp. 304 + 42 ill. ISBN 978-0-7727-2520-2 (paperback) \$49.95.

The *possesso*, the ceremony by which the pope “took possession” of the Lateran basilica (and, by extension, the city of Rome), is perhaps the best known of all the papacy’s temporal rites. That no volume dedicated to its study or analysis has appeared in English or Italian makes this collection an especially valuable addition to literature that already included important essays by scholars such as Irene Polverini Fosi, Paola Torniai, and Martine Boiteux. The studies included here, like those earlier efforts, also situate early modern *possessi* within a wider nexus of Roman *feste*, which have been critiqued by (among others) Fabrizio Cruciani, Marcello Fagiolo, Maria Luisa Madonna, and Maria Antonietta Visceglia. Pascale Rihouet’s accessible introduction describes how all this scholarship has evolved, via Moroni and Pastor, from the *possesso*’s original historian, the old antiquarian fusspot Francesco Cancellieri (1751–1826). Indeed, Cancellieri’s urtext treatise on the subject from 1802, with which this collection engages extensively, is important in its own right, for it could well be said to have popularized the fashion for study of papal ceremonial overall.

Besides Rihouet’s introduction, six contributions grace these pages. Two are preoccupied with problems of space. Jasmine R. Cloud catalogues the progress of the different early modern *possessi* through the Roman Forum, a contested area that underwent “Christianization” over the course of the sixteenth century. Antonella De Michelis discusses Paul III’s revisions to the itinerary to the Forum’s north, in particular as part of an effort to incorporate into it the Palazzo San Marco (transformed by his erstwhile namesake Paul II). Patricia L. Reilly and Pascale Rihouet’s essays do something different: they offer close readings of some of the innovative art forms associated with *possessi*. In Reilly’s case, the focus is on *chiaroscuro* decorations that adorned arches mocked up on the processional route. Rihouet, by contrast, appraises Giovanni Guerra’s printed illustration of Sixtus V’s 1585 *possesso* and, by extension, that image’s many imitators and successors. Finally, a brace of essays by Jennifer DeSilva and John M. Hunt explore the *possesso*’s role as a vehicle for articulating aspects of Rome’s “moral economy.” This term, borrowed from the English Marxist

historian E. P. Thompson, refers to the collective values and expectations that churn around in a society and can be articulated and contested on ceremonial occasions. DeSilva's essay takes the negotiation of precedence in Leo X's *possesso* as its point of departure, but Hunt's ranges widely across the various *possessi* of the early-to-mid seventeenth century to highlight both the *popolo*'s chief concern (grain) and papal efforts to show awareness of the need to satisfy it. Both DeSilva and Hunt thus conclude that the *possesso* was the pope's opportunity to establish for his people how he would rule, but also theirs to tell him how his rule should be. Alas, what they also make clear is that the time both sides had to forge this dialogue within the ritual was often all too brief.

Eternal Ephemera's somewhat quixotic title plays on Rome's celebrated soubriquet as *la città eterna*. However, it also draws deliberate attention to the constancy of an event whose manifestations, and material culture, were nevertheless momentary and potentially intangible. Extraordinary effort and substantial material resources were poured into choreographing a spectacle that visualized order but lasted only one day. There is irony to be teased out here, even if a particular *possesso*'s hold on social memory could still endure for more than an entire pontificate. The editors are to be congratulated for producing a work that, overall, without doubt, extends a fresh new reading of this ceremony's significance and also of its intersections with different aspects of papal power and Roman life. The Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies is also to be commended for facilitating such a large number of detailed illustrations to accompany and explicate the text. If this reviewer has quibbles, they are minor and mostly about what is not included here rather than what is. For instance, a more substantial effort to place the *possessi* of the period 1500–1650 in wider chronological context would have been very welcome. The *possessi* from this period were already far and away the best studied; and the perennial difficulty papal historians have of situating the copious Renaissance and baroque scholarship within a wider historical arc is not really overcome this time. A clearer explication of some of the basics would also not have gone amiss, especially when we consider that this is likely to be the first point of reference on the subject for colleagues and students not *au fait* with Italian. Reilly draws attention to a fascinating passage in Johann Burchard's Diary about the process by which the temporary arches that festooned the processional route in 1503 were erected, but this languishes on pages 127–28: I would have

enjoyed encountering this sort of information in the introduction as part of a fuller initial description of what actually went on.

Yet, such objections are probably churlish. This is a substantial achievement and ought to whet appetites for further detailed analysis of the more arcane dimensions to papal ritual still. As Rihouet acknowledges in her introduction, the *possesso* currently lacks the in-depth, comprehensive exploration of its visual representations that it surely deserves. One would think she is the ideal person to provide that, and it is gratifying to read that the full run of *possesso* prints from 1589 down to 1846 forms the subject of her current research.

MILES PATTENDEN

Australian Catholic University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i1.37068>

Di Benedetto, Sergio.

«*Depurare le tenebre delli amorosi miei versi*». *La lirica di Girolamo Benivieni*.

Università della Svizzera Italiana: Istituto di Studi Italiani, Officina 5. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2020. Pp. xi, 310. ISBN 978-8-8222-6706-1 (paperback) €35.

This is a detailed examination, long overdue, of the 1500 edition of poetry with prose self-commentary by Girolamo Benivieni (1453–1542), a pivotal figure in Florence at the time of Lorenzo the Magnificent, Savonarola, and philosophers Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. Prior to Di Benedetto's monograph, the sole book-length study on Benivieni dated from 1906. In the intervening century scholars have published briefer studies on specific aspects and sub-genres of the Renaissance author's poetic production, or on prose works by him that are inscribed in other literary genres. Now, with his thorough analysis of Benivieni's voluminous tripartite prosimetrum, Di Benedetto does not simply fill a lacuna in Benivieni scholarship but, with excellent philological and hermeneutical skill, he provides new and more profound interpretations of the author and the overall meaning of his poetry.

Carefully dissecting the 1500 edition from beginning to end, he conveniently divides the discussion into sections with clear headings that indicate the chief topic or current reflected in each group of poems under consideration. Di Benedetto identifies the important sources, not simply literary