

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Cohen, Thomas V. Roman Tales: A Reader's Guide to the Art of Microhistory

Justine Walden

Volume 46, Number 3-4, Summer–Fall 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110403ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i3.42707>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Walden, J. (2023). Review of [Cohen, Thomas V. Roman Tales: A Reader's Guide to the Art of Microhistory]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 46(3-4), 543–545. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i3.42707>

© Justine Walden, 2024



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Cohen, Thomas V.

Roman Tales: A Reader's Guide to the Art of Microhistory.

Microhistories. New York: Routledge, 2019. Pp. 224. ISBN 978-1-1386-3693-4 (hardcover) US\$136.

Thomas V. Cohen's *Roman Tales* meticulously analyzes episodes in the fluid urban cityscape of early modern Rome to reflect upon the socio-political structures that animated early modern Italy. Cohen's work also provides a much-needed point of reflection upon how we go about writing about and teaching students how to "do" history.

In chapter 1, Cohen lays out his theoretical aims, which is nothing less than reinvigorating microhistory as a historical method. Summoning the usual roster of seminal microhistorians, Cohen explains that microhistory plumbs past anomalies to reveal the quotidian and its limits. A practice though not a discipline, good microhistory links "small things to larger trends and structures," freely drawing upon an eclectic array of disciplines to decode historical minutiae in their manifold plurality, at once rendering the past both "more familiar and more strange" (200). For Cohen, microhistorical methods have the added benefit of allowing room for writerly stylings and requiring reader engagement. In the sixteenth century, the Roman Tribunal, the Papal States' highest criminal court, recorded trials verbatim, thus its records lend themselves to granular analysis. Cohen helpfully concludes the chapter with useful pedagogical recommendations: students can begin to learn to "do microhistory" by generating timelines and lists of *dramatis personae*.

Chapter 2 recounts a dinner party and stone fight to unpack Jewish-Christian relations in early modern Rome. Considering events in frameworks temporal, social, institutional, and legal, Cohen reflects on Rome's "bicephalous" government and the Jewish ghetto's porosity, reading the stone fight through an ultimately anthropological prism as a mode of gift-giving: an exchange which widened the necessarily narrow channels of Jewish-Christian interaction. In chapter 3, the conjurings of four women and a priest reveal that folk devotional practices persisted in spite of Catholic Reformation crackdowns. "Afterthoughts," a section which concludes each chapter, reflects upon "high" and "low" magic and the episode's gendered contexts. The tale ends inconclusively, but this is par for the course: "microhistory is parsimonious with neat ends" (59).

Cohen freely filters his narrative through personal anecdote, as when a visit with his aspiring filmmaker son spurs chapter 4, an interpretation of five public run-ins between armed Spanish embassy representatives and Roman police. The scuffles stem in part from disputes over honour, petty debts, and alleged embassy immunity, but overall, figure Spain as bent on demonstrating papal weakness in his own backyard. Chapter 5 considers how patronage from a cardinal allows a heterodox, unhinged, and very vocal hermit to remain ensconced behind St. Peter's Basilica. Cohen uses the hermit's peregrinations and histrionics to illuminate diverse facets of piety and religious politics. In Chapter 6, the family of the little person Giovanni Battista consigns him to a Renaissance court then reclaims him. The author ruminates upon what dwarfs "meant" during the Renaissance: "to his family, he may have seemed a person, at least partly" (133). Chapter 7 deploys the rhetorical conceit of a talking bolt of velvet to consider Jewish-Christian trust and exchange. Cheeky puns (annoyed, the velvet is "rubbed the wrong way") fringe the activities of tailors and go-betweens in the Roman netherworld of petty trade. In chapter 8, a shady married couple convinces an adolescent girl to abscond from her parents' home, exposing the fluidity of early modern sexual relations and the precarity of female honour. In chapter 9, a ten-year-old boy finances a feasting spree with his master's gold. Punctuated by clever narrative stylings ("So who brought an end to Francesco's career in crime? Not the banker! Not the cook!"), the story recovers children's agency while pointing to their surprising lack of supervision in the past.

Cohen's writing is mercifully jargon-free; his familiarity with urban Rome's fabric, institutions, and mores impressive. Some readers might balk at Cohen's chatty authorial voice or didactic apostrophizing ("Notice how..."). Cohen's near-obsessive attention to episodic detail can exhaust even the curious reader, and at times, a more compact rendering of events would suffice. One might also question which contexts Cohen explores and which he skirts. For example, he meditates little upon constructions of violence and masculinity and leaves fallow a range of questions about theology, performativity, and Renaissance selfhood, which his evidence might illuminate. Cohen's footnotes refer almost exclusively to archival sources, and so are not especially useful as guides to secondary literature.

Yet *Roman Tales* provides both a welcome teaching tool and significant corrective. Cohen hopes that microhistory's omnivorous approach, eclectic

curiosity, and room for narrative inventiveness will breathe life into an “industrial” model of scholarship that has resulted from the push for productivity within the academy. Moreover, in recent years, many history departments have dispensed with positions devoted to studies of Europe and dedicated attention to the early modern so as to carve out space for a more global and multicultural remit. The shift has good intentions and is not lacking in certain merits. However, the approach can often lead to the disastrous result of privileging the modern and non-Western that can cause history students to leave baffled as to the rather earlier origins and underpinnings of contemporary global developments and at a loss when it comes to interpreting archival materials. Cohen’s call for a return to the privileging of the particular provides a welcome counterbalance to these pitfalls. Select chapters help provide insight into a critical period of historical development that is still poorly understood and will be useful as teaching tools. The greatest value of Cohen’s book, however, is to remind us of an indispensable approach to writing history; one which, at its best, is startlingly illuminating and shot through with delight.

JUSTINE WALDEN

University of Madison-Wisconsin

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i3.42707>