

Nerida Newbigin. Making a Play for God: The Sacre Rappresentazioni of Renaissance Florence. Vols. 1 and 2

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Nerida Newbigin. *Making a Play for God: The Sacre Rappresentazioni of Renaissance Florence*. Vols. 1 and 2. Toronto: Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2021. Pp. 1039. ISBN 9780772725011.

The two volumes by Nerida Newbigin present themselves, right from the introduction, as the recapitulation of all the work produced by the author concerning the Italian *Sacre rappresentazioni* over the course of five decades, starting with her doctoral thesis and covering the period of her career as a professor at the University of Sydney, even after becoming emerita. Thus, these volumes take up theories proposed in the course of her studies, review them, clarify them, and even amend, reject, or reformulate them completely. Moreover, the two texts are in constant dialogue with all those who have studied the subject, both when Newbigin agrees with them and when, instead, she is “disinclined to adopt” (267) the most accepted theories (for instance when discussing the ideas, supported by Ventrone, Polizzotto, and Delcorno, about the main purpose of youth confraternity plays).

The volumes deal with almost all the texts of the sacred representations, both in manuscript form and in the first printed publications and analyze the extra-literary aspects that are linked to these representations. For this reason, the author makes forays into the field of economic history, when she reconstructs the structure of the sets starting from the expense lists of the confraternities; in the field of visual arts, when she investigates the way representations were staged to create the most amazing scenic effects; and the field of architecture, when she reconstructs a description of the machines that were used. Regarding the analysis of the texts, Newbigin examines the transmission of texts, reconstructing the passage from oral to manuscripts to printed texts, where she also benefits from the help of contemporary secondary texts. As for the accessibility of the texts, Newbigin provides a series of useful references to electronic online tools that allowed her to move from handwritten notes during her doctoral research to an immediate, high-resolution consultation of texts available from miles away. As for the meaning of what is conveyed by the texts, the author uses her knowledge in theology and philosophy, explaining the main point of some passages; and uses her studies on Florentine political life when she retraces the laws and decrees, but also the customs and the official (and non-official) visits, which provide the motivation to put on stage the representations.

Newbigin’s work can thus be read in two ways. As a definitive work of consultation, it provides a useful reference for all the scholars who want to deepen

one of the texts dealt with in the book. For each text, in fact, the author provides a history of its formation, a reconstruction of the scenic representations made, and an analysis of the themes. To complete this apparatus of study for researchers, at the end of the second volume, three tables report the list of all the *frottole* and representations in manuscripts, in prints, and their sales, while another appendix provides all the unpublished cited documents. Both volumes are accompanied by an iconographic apparatus, offering images from painting to architecture, from miniatures to bas-reliefs, from manuscripts to printed texts; while a 100-page bibliography concludes the work, which therefore acts as a roadmap for all those who want to know the status of studies on the subject to start their own research.

The second way to read these texts is as a history of literature: in fact, the two volumes cover the entire history of this genre, from its formation to their contemporary heritage. In an introductory section, the scholar explains the criteria she used for the transcription and for the translation of manuscripts (essentially based on the best possible understanding, proposing these books be read not only by an audience of specialists). In the first chapter, Newbigin explains the difficulty of finding manuscripts coeval to the first *rappresentazioni*, which often had the form of a procession with texts and images, rather than actual representations. In the second Chapter, she reconstructs the history of the first stagings—those which took place inside the churches during the main Florentine feasts. In the third chapter, the scholar gives an insight into the representations staged by young brotherhoods, trying to investigate the pedagogical motivations that these implied. In the fourth chapter, Newbigin provides the history of the places where the scenes were represented—the *edifici*—which are increasingly transformed into theatres. The fifth chapter focuses on open-air representations, while the sixth chapter shows the historical evolution toward printed texts, with all that this entails for those who wrote the representations (since the text becomes fixed and literary, instead of fluid and devotional), but above all for those who benefit from the representations, no longer seen or heard, but now mostly read in silence. In the second volume, the seventh chapter analyzes the first authors of *rappresentazioni* known by name, even if sometimes better at promoting themselves as writers (this is the case of Belcari, according to Newbigin) than to stage actual performances. The eighth chapter follows the evolution of the printed texts, investigating the illustrated editions, while the ninth chapter investigates the crisis of the sacred representations coinciding with the affirmation of the republic of Savonarola. The last chapter, the tenth, concludes the literary history of this genre by considering the “afterlife of the plays.”

Ultimately, the greatest merit of these two volumes is perhaps that of recapitulating the state of the art of studies on the subject at the moment, not acting as an endpoint, but rather as a beginning: the author herself often indicates the theories that should be rediscussed and those that would need more evidence, drawn from studies as broad as possible and not limited to the written text, and which may also involve “a new generation of scholars in Italy and abroad” (8).

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