



<http://www.ucalgary.ca/hic> • ISSN 1492-7810
2008/09 • Vol. 8, No. 1

Thomas V. Cohen, *Love and Death in Renaissance Italy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. Pp. x + 310; illus. US\$27.50 (cloth). ISBN: 0-226-11258-6.

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God, according to the Athenian sculptor Praxiteles — so Thomas Cohen reminds his readers (by way of Carlo Ginzburg and Aby Warburg) — is in the details. And details aplenty abound in *Love and Death in Renaissance Italy*, both in the elegantly written text and the copious annotations. In many ways a companion piece to an earlier volume co-authored with his wife, Elizabeth S. Cohen, *Words and Deeds in Renaissance Rome*,¹ in *Love and Death* Cohen once again ventures into the archives of the papal governor of Rome, chief criminal magistrate and overseer of the city's largest police force. He returns and presents for his readers' consideration six tales of intimate betrayals of love and death, of sex and violence. The result is a thought-provoking volume, as much for Cohen's methodological musings as for the stories he tells.

But what stories they are. We meet the cunning and brutal Giovanni Battista Savelli, a petty nobleman who traps and butchers his wife, Vittoria, with her lover, Troiano (Savelli's half-brother, none the less), and then has to make peace with his more powerful in-laws; and the lovelorn Alessio Lorenziano, mooning over Lucretia Casasanta, a young ward in a convent, apparently promised in marriage to him but torn between an earthly and a divine calling. We next encounter the scheming, brawling Giustini brothers (Ascanio, Pompeo, Pietro Paolo, Cosmo, and Fabritio) and their sisters (Silvia, Cecilia, and the dying Vittoria), no less skillful if less violent in familial manipulation than the men, as they connive and clash over Vittoria's will and the scandalous marriage of the eldest, Ascanio, to the courtesan Laodomia; followed by the lecherous, bullying papal prosecutor Alessandro Pallantieri, whose taste for pubescent girls leads to the rape and abuse of the daughters of his socio-economically inferior neighbors, Cristoforo and Adriana Gramar. The last two chapters introduce a tangled love story involving yet another Roman nobleman, Giacomo Teodoli, his wife, Felice Maldenti, his courtesan-lover Cintia Antelma, and Lelio Perleoni, client to Felice but also increasingly unwilling accomplice in Giacomo and Cintia's apparent scheme to have his patroness poisoned; and finally, a strained relationship between Francesca, a governess and ex-wet nurse, Innocentia, her current charge, and Vespanio, her ex-nursling, who seduces and rapes Innocentia with the connivance of his former milk mother.

The stories entertain and repulse the reader, as do the Italian Renaissance *novelle*, to which they bear such a strong resemblance (or is it the other way around?). But Cohen's framing of and ponderings over the tales he recounts provide the essential intellectual interest of the book. He presents the stories in a vehemently purist microhistorical manner, refusing any attempt to co-ordinate the subject matter by thematic analysis or via an overarching thesis. He delights in teasing the reader and himself with unanswered and unanswerable questions. Cohen plays with the notion of textuality throughout, writing in a manner self-conscious not only of himself as author but also of the reader, who is regularly enjoined

to “listen” to the protagonists or “watch” as the tales unfold. He plays with form and technique: presenting the story of the Giustini family as a script for a soap opera, that of the lovers Giacomo and Cintia as an epistolary novelette, while matters of space and architecture dominate the discussions of the Savelli murders and the hapless Alessio Lorenziano.

Despite Cohen’s playful if rigidly microhistorical approach, larger themes and issues do emerge. He contributes some important and perceptive observations about the society and culture of Renaissance Italy not as it appears in the cultural production that dominates popular perceptions of the period but as it was lived on the streets and in the villages. He does so by his reading and adaptation of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of practice, and the French sociologist’s concept of everyday life as game played neither blindly nor calculatingly but semi-consciously on several fields at once — each governed by a different set of rules. The stories that Cohen relates emerge and assume historical importance at moments when these fields and their codes of conduct clash. Most prominent among these conflicts is between the sense of honor (which governed so much of daily life in early modern Europe) and Christian concepts of mercy and forgiveness. But Cohen also probes the permeations of familial solidarity, gender divides, and social rules and hierarchies. The stories highlight moments when protagonists manipulate, subvert, or evade the multiple obligations upon their behavior — playing off one against another. A particularly consistent theme is the ability of women — the Giustini sisters, Adriana Gramar, Francesca the treacherous ex-wet nurse — to find agency in a apparently hostile homosocial and stratified society and to attempt (not always successfully) to mitigate the bonds of gender and social inferiority that limit their actions.

Love and Death in Renaissance Italy provides an entertaining and important contribution to Renaissance social history. Like Bourdieu’s fields of play, it exists on several levels at once. On the surface, analysis and argument appear to cede primacy to narrative, as is often the case with microhistory. However, Cohen’s teasing commentaries — while not setting out a clear agenda or thesis — suggest and gently guide the reader toward the consideration of broader significances of the tales he recounts. Readers who delve beneath the narrative surface are rewarded by a detailed and informative study of sixteenth-century social practice and behavior.

Notes

¹ Thomas Cohen and Elizabeth S. Cohen, *Words and Deeds in Renaissance Rome: Trials Before the Papal Magistrates* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).