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Cortigiana (review)

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Pietro Aretino. *Cortigiana*.

Translated by J. Douglas Campbell and Leonard G. Sbrocchi
Carleton Renaissance Plays in Translation. Dovehouse. 158. \$10.00

Pietro Aretino (1492–1556) wrote in a large variety of literary genres: the short story, the epic, familiar letters, the ascetic tale, lyric poetry, satire, comedy, and tragedy. Although much of his production is not lacking in aesthetic value, it has been for many years the object of unfavourable criticism, stemming mainly from the author's questionable reputation, which has haunted him over the centuries. The 'divine' Aretino, as he was called by Ludovico Ariosto, was subjected to a systematic attack on his person and was judged exclusively from a moral standpoint.

For centuries, literary critics have judged his works without always having read them, copying from one another and basing their opinions mainly on the general moralistic opinion held of Aretino by various defamers, who derived it from his libellous diatribes and sonnets, most of which are attributable to Aretino's former friends.

In the last forty years, however, Aretino scholarship, in Italy and abroad, has been successful in shedding new light on Aretino's literary production by avoiding extremes and attempting to offer a more accurate and more carefully thought out exegesis of it. But it is his dramatic works that have received most of the favourable criticism. Of his plays, one to which Aretino probably dedicated much of his artistic energy was the comedy *Cortigiana* (*La cortigiana*), which, written in 1525 (a revision was printed nine years later, in 1534), has been described as one of the most remarkable plays of the century.

The *Cortigiana*, as we read on the back cover of the translation by J. Douglas Campbell and Leonard G. Sbrocchi, 'focuses on the aspirations, affectations, and delusions of two foolish gentlemen, who, to achieve their desires, place themselves in the hands of unscrupulous servants – with predictably disastrous consequences. Combining elements of New Comedy, *commedia erudita*, and improvisational street comedy, *La cortigiana* also draws on Castiglione's then unpublished *Cortegiano* to create a telling dissection of Roman courtiers and a vivid portrait of a worldly Roman society.'

Campbell and Sbrocchi's English translation of *Cortigiana* is an especially welcome and important addition to the excellent Carleton Renaissance Plays in Translation series. Interest and research in the area of Italian Renaissance comedy (but this is true for any other literary genre) can be fostered only if we have at our disposal works edited with the utmost critical accuracy and in dependable translations. It is within the ongoing re-evaluation of the comedy of the Cinquecento that this translation of *Cortigiana* finds its justification. *Cortigiana* is one of the most significant

comedies of the Italian Renaissance, and yet it had to wait almost five hundred years to be translated into English.

The volume contains a select bibliography (of primary sources and secondary studies) and a rich and insightful critical introduction by Raymond B. Waddington with notes on a great number of relevant issues such as Aretino's life and theatrical production, the two *Cortigiana* texts, the title and language of the play *La cortigiana* and the *commedia erudita*, Rome and Italy from 1517 to 1527, the New Golden Age of Leo X's Rome, Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* and *La cortigiana*, and on Pasquino (Aretino's alter ego in the mid-twenties) and pasquinades. Finally, in his last introductory note (entitled *Holding the Mirror Up to Nature*), Waddington demonstrates how 'in the multiple reflections of the mirror that is *La cortigiana*, the audience sees themselves, Rome, and, not least, a portrait of Pietro Aretino' (43). The text of *Cortigiana* (consisting of a prologue and five acts, each divided into scenes) is followed by useful textual annotations.

The translation is based on the 1525 single manuscript of *Cortigiana*. The translators are to be commended for translating the text directly from the *editio princeps*, since it is the only authoritative text of *Cortigiana*. Campbell and Sbrocchi's English translation is very clear, accurate and philologically sound; indeed, the linguistic subtleties are sensitively preserved. This book will definitely be of great help to English-speaking scholars interested in this most important comedy. (MICHAEL LETTIERI)

Gary K. Waite. *Reformers on Stage: Popular Drama and Religious Propaganda in the Low Countries of Charles V, 1515-1556*
University of Toronto Press 2000. xxii, 364. \$78.00

This study focuses on the role of the Chambers of Rhetoric and their plays in religious, orthodox or dissident, propaganda. These literary guilds were widespread by the end of the fifteenth century and contributed greatly to religious and secular urban culture. They participated in religious and civic celebrations and their poetry and drama competitions were often lavish events.

The Chambers provided opportunities for exchanging views and ideas. Their members came together from a love of rhetoric, poetry, or drama; their main aim was to voice emotions and ideas in beautiful, accomplished language for entertainment and instruction.

Soon after Luther's writings reached the Low Countries, the Rhetoricians became involved in religious debates about the shortcomings of the established Church and the new religious ideas. Plays discussed the importance and the behaviour of priests, the importance of the Sacraments and the benefit of experiencing God's Word directly through the Bible.