
The literary and political history of Italy in the Middle Ages and Renaissance is full of famous exiles: Dante, Petrarch (through his father), Cosimo de’Medici (briefly) and the Alberti, just to name the most celebrated. These men, either singly or in groups, had an important effect on the intellectual and political landscape of the peninsula and reflected a kind of notoriety — or glory, if only posthumously — on the very cities that expelled them. They saw their exiles in different ways; they adjusted to the experience individually; and they voiced their responses characteristically, depending not only on their own sense of their banishment but also on the wider context of their worlds. What exiles can tell us, then, constitutes an important insight from a distanced perspective on the society, laws, politics, and mentality of Medieval and Renaissance Italy, or, as Randolph Starn has described it, a contrary commonwealth in which the dominant values of a community are seen in mirror image or, subsequently, as inverted images of the past, kept alive by men whose attachment to superseded institutions or ideals required that they be divorced from the mainstream of their societies.

Starn begins by observing that Italy was a land made for exiles, especially before the fifteenth century. There are rugged terrains, mountain fastnesses, maritime enclosures and impenetrable marshland. The political units were fragmented, providing places of refuge for fuorusciti in towns very close by. Political and social instability added to the numbers of these exiles, in particular during the Middle Ages, and their numbers in turn increased the instability. Thus, not only famous examples of exiles but a large corpus of legal documentation exists to attest to the role played by the citizens of the contrary commonwealth.

Also, Starn identifies correctly the much broader implications of exile to such a society. The polis of Medieval and Renaissance Italy was a very closed, integrated world comprising not only citizenship but also the extended family or consorteria, guild, faction, neighbourhood, parish and confraternity. To be cut off from such a network of personal support was not dissimilar to excommunication: your sense of self was diminished and the burden of your punishment increased. Theirs was a society that recognized easily and brutally who belonged and who did not.

The response of many exiles to this situation was to create an anti-state, a real contrary commonwealth by organizing themselves into groups with elected officials, seals, armies, envoys and all the psychological supports of intermarriage and interdependence. These societies of exiles illustrate both the large number of men (and their families, on occasion) banished by the state and the nature of their response. By or-
ganizing they had recourse to military force, the ability to deal with potentially helpful foreign powers, the necessary psychological support of family, marriage and patronage, and a renewed sense of self as a member of a community. Equally, these communities could turn to brigandage or piracy to live or, more usually, attack their native cities through raids, conspiracy, sabotage or subversion.

Such a situation exacerbated the political and social instability that had precipitated the widespread use of exile as a punitive remedy initially. All Ghibellines were criminals in Guelf States and all Guelfs in Ghibelline towns. Guilt by association rather than deed became commonplace. Exile became a hazard of political faction or office. And, ultimately, it became quite simply the rather brutal indicator of who was in and who was out of power: the concept of a loyal opposition able to live quietly within the same state was clearly incomprehensible.

Starn continues by tracing this experience of exile in the much changed environment of the growing Italian territorial states. Before the fifteenth century, exile was a function of the fragmentation of the peninsula. Power did shift and many exiles returned, only to banish their enemies in turn. Support was readily available from jealous neighbouring towns or by Guelf or Ghibelline allies or even by the intervention of the pope or the emperor himself. With the consolidation of the states of Italy beginning approximately with the fifteenth century, this context changed. Exiles had to travel farther; peninsula-wide loyalties of Guelf or Ghibelline meant little; resident diplomats made mischievous subversion or treaties more difficult; and the growth of communal bonds beyond those of family, class or faction altered the way in which exiles were perceived and perceived themselves.

Consequently, the righteous burning anger of Dante is replaced by resignation. The literature of exile ceases to be the curses and prophecies of bitter foes awaiting their turn at justice but becomes a revival of the moralizing classical genre of the consolatio, offering comfort in adversity. This ancient literary form infused the values of humanism into the experience of exile because it counselled the virtues of resignation, the power of words over violence and constantia, the example of the suffering of heroes of antiquity rather than the retribution which Dante accorded to the historical characters of his native city. Petrarch’s writing of De Remediis utriusque fortunae in the fourteenth century really restored the genre of consolation to life. He even practiced his principles and consoled Giovanni Colonna, just as a century later Poggio Bracciolini consoled Cosimo de’ Medici.

The logical conclusion of this development is the patriotism implicit in the vita civile of writers such as Leonardo Bruni. Resistance to the patria is always wrong, never right; and, if exiled, the virtuous man must accept his fate with quiet resignation, while still loving his native land. Exile had lost its accepted quality of righteous anger, becoming instead a sacrifice that a citizen makes to his community until it sees fit to restore him.

Starn concludes with an epilogue in which he identifies the battle of Montalcino as the last significant example of the contrary commonwealth. Indeed by 1559, that community of Republican, anti-Medicean fuorusciti was more of an historical atavism than a powerful force. Armed with idealism and righteous resistance, they were crushed by the reality
of power and the centralized, territorial monarchy of Duke Cosimo I, who saw death not distance as the natural punishment for enemies of the prince.

This small book, then, is a remarkable insight into the world of Medieval and Renaissance Italy. It adopts the perspective of whose who lost in the game of politics and investigates the city-state from without. Most of the information comes from north-central Italy, but the examples are used judiciously. There are also excellent notes reflecting wide research in legal, literary as well as historical sources.

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Joachim of Fiore’s life and reputation continue to fascinate the modern reader in much the same way as they did his contemporaries. His prophetic imagination and his spiritual audacity have struck a responsive chord through the centuries. His writings, however, are dense and difficult. They presume in the reader a familiarity with the intricacies of twelfth-century theological speculation and a willingness to learn Joachim’s idiosyncratic vocabulary of interpretation. With these difficulties in mind, the authors have set out to study “spiritual perception and history” in Joachim’s writings.

The strength of this book is in the three chapters which describe Joachim’s “spiritual understanding” (spiritualis intelligentia). Chapter Two, “The Basic Patterns and Interpretations of Joachim of Fiore,” provides a useful introduction to Joachim’s method of Biblical interpretation and his peculiar use of the terms status, tempus, and etas to describe historical periods. In Chapter Four, “The Trinity and History,” we are shown Joachim’s spiritual understanding at work, using the actions of the Trinity in history as a means of interpreting the human past, present and future. Chapter Five, inappropriately titled “The Five Great Works of Christ” (these five works are mentioned only in the last pages of the chapter), illustrates Joachim’s method of Scriptural exegesis with respect to the actions of Christ and the Holy Spirit in history. Although poorly integrated with one another, these three chapters offer a useful introduction to Joachim’s writings and a sensitive appreciation of his doctrine.

The remaining chapters are less successful. They are intended to discuss Joachim’s life (c. 1), his literary sources (c. 3), and his continuing influence (c. 6). None of these contributes anything new to our understanding of Joachim or the context in which he wrote. This is particularly regrettable as the authors have admonished us in the introduction that: “To appreciate fully the significance of Joachim of Fiore’s contributions, the historical state of mind before and during his time must be understood.” Far from undertaking this task, the authors have been content