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William J. Connell and Giles Constable. *Sacrilege and Redemption in Renaissance Florence. The Case of Antonio Rinaldeschi*. Essays and Studies 8. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2005. Pp. 125. 28 illustrations (8 b&w; 20 colour).

Serendipity is a phenomenon familiar to historians. Sometimes serendipity is found in the past, in an event or person's action that might appear innocuous, but somehow leads to astonishing results because of a unique context or a convergence of circumstances. Another kind of serendipity can occur when an historian stumbles across documents, evidence, or historical connections that could not have been planned or anticipated, but illuminate some unexpected or unimagined aspect of the past. This kind of serendipity is often associated with microhistories, those studies of individuals or events that normally do not find their way into the historical record.

The story of Antonio Rinaldeschi is the welcome result of serendipity and a fine example of collaborative research between William J. Connell and Giles Constable. Independently, each scholar knew of a separate thread of evidence for the story. Connell had uncovered some new historical documents in a California archive that discussed an unusual legal case from sixteenth-century Florence. Constable had seen a series of paintings in a Florentine museum that portrayed a remarkably similar event. Together, they have produced a work that demonstrates the value of collaboration between historians and is an exemplar of historical research at its best.

The event that lies at the centre of this study is gripping and surprising. In 1501, in Florence, a man named Antonio Rinaldeschi spent some time at the tavern called The Fig Tree. The reports do not indicate how long he was there or if he were intoxicated; he had, however, been gambling and had lost a considerable amount of money and some clothing. After leaving the tavern, ruminating about his losses and cursing the Virgin for his bad luck, he passed a painting of the Annunciation. In disgust, he picked up some horse dung and threw it at the picture of Mary. Then, perhaps startled by the immensity of his actions, he fled the city and sought refuge at a Franciscan convent outside of Florence. Throwing dung at an image of the Virgin was tantamount to blasphemy and so an investigation ensued. A boy identified Rinaldeschi as the culprit and he was tracked down in the convent garden. In order to avoid arrest, he tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide, was apprehended, and taken to the Bargello to be tried by the Eight for Security. After apparently confessing his guilt, Antonio Rinaldeschi was hanged from a window of the Bargello itself, rather than at the usual place of execution. Meanwhile, the image was cleaned. A piece of dung, however, had miraculously left a halo around the Virgin's head that would not go away, with the result that almost immediately a popular cult grew up around the Madonna de' Ricci, as the image was known.

Connell and Constable have reconstructed these events from a variety of

sources: the record of the sentence of the Eight, records from the Confraternity of the Blacks that ministered to prisoners about to be executed, and documents from the *opera* that developed almost immediately to maintain the shrine of the Madonna de' Ricci. They also closely examined a painting, dating from 1502, that portrays the Rinaldeschi incident in nine separate vignettes. Thus there are multiple sources for the events, sources which were both contemporary or near contemporary and which, importantly, were generated independently. One of the strengths of this volume is the inclusion of full-colour illustrations of the nine panels of the painting, along with the relevant documents in both their Latin or Italian original and in English translation. This allows the reader to follow the historical analysis step by step, assessing Connell and Constable's interpretation of the evidence.

There is much in this episode that is worrisome. Why ever would Rinaldeschi have been executed? None of his apparent crimes—gambling, blasphemy, attempted suicide—were capital offenses and they were usually met with leniency. Surely Rinaldeschi himself must have been startled when his relatively minor act of disgust and defiance at his gambling losses escalated into a popular uproar, followed by pursuit, a trial by the Eight, and finally a death sentence. This is where the delicate and erudite historical analysis of Connell and Constable shines forth. By reading the episode carefully and finely against the contemporary context, they demonstrate how Rinaldeschi's small act of personal frustration, which in another time and place might well have gone unremarked, in fact exposed underlying social, religious, and political tensions across Florentine society. It was through serendipity that the inconsequential act of an unremarkable individual assumed larger social meaning. By analysing the currents of political and religious discontent in Florence in 1501, the authors reveal this to have been a brief period of resurgent popularist politics and Savonarolan sympathy. As a result, the image of the Madonna de' Ricci which Rinaldeschi had desecrated became a potent symbol for Savonarolan sympathisers who moved quickly to attest to its miracles and to house it in an appropriate oratory. Many other aspects of the tensions of the period produced a context against which the initially incomprehensible sentence and execution of the unlucky Rinaldeschi can now be understood.

This short volume, with only 70 pages of text supplemented by illustrations and documents, is a wonderful example of the art and science of history. As such, it has remarkable potential in the classroom, not only to illuminate and bring to life aspects of Renaissance Florentine society but also to reveal to students how "to do" history. It is an excellent introduction to the close reading of texts, the use of multidisciplinary approaches, the need to examine an historical problem from multiple perspectives and in detail, the importance of reading against context, and finally, and perhaps most importantly, the utter necessity to understand the past in its own terms. In sum, this is an excellent book for students and scholars alike.

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