Cohen, Elizabeth S. and Thomas V. Cohen. *Daily Life in Renaissance Italy.*

In this volume, Elizabeth and Thomas Cohen present an engaging and wide-ranging study of everyday life in the palaces, houses, and hovels of early modern Italy. As part of the Greenwood Press’s “Daily Life” series, this book will serve admirably as a social history textbook, particularly given its intermingling of historiography with original research.

Cohen and Cohen begin with fundamentals; they define each of the terms in the book’s title (“daily life,” “Renaissance,” and “Italy”) in an effort to erase any preconceptions a student might have about the history of this Mediterranean peninsula. “Renaissance” is perhaps the stickiest of these terms, and since Cohen and Cohen use it in a strictly temporal sense, their Renaissance is naturally different from the traditional Burckhardtian understanding of blossoming individuality, which they call an overstated cliché. Indeed, by comparison, the Cohens develop a persuasively rich and organic definition of Renaissance individualism which they link to networks of kin and kin, social institutions and hierarchies, all of which provided room for agency and “nuanced self-expression” (87). Agency, agonism, and the exigencies of honour take the foreground in this depiction of Renaissance Italians. Cohen and Cohen paint an image of a deeply familiar (or ‘face-to-face’) society, one that saw honour as a “conservative” ethic (99), allowing Italians to preserve the delicate bonds holding families, friends, and society together. At the same time, honour was constantly threatened by pervasive, uncontrollable, and often unexpected forces and so teetered in fragile balance between conservation and ruination. The question of early modern honour is clearly important in the Cohens’ treatment of Italian social history, though it is only one of many issues they treat in such a way as to address the existing historiography while also adding valuable new impulses to current debates.

*Daily Life in Renaissance Italy* confronts the reader with a society that is at once familiar and foreign. Cohen and Cohen provide a number of primary-document vignettes that illustrate the people, topics, and issues under discussion. One such vignette (33) profiles Ginevra Rossi, the wife of a Roman candy-maker, who miscarried her baby and later died after competitors of her husband Guglielmo arranged a surprise guild inspection of their candy shop during the Christmas rush, forcing Ginevra to climb up and down stairs, dragging crates and boxes before the inspectors. Claiming that the strain of the inspection precipitated his wife’s death, Guglielmo took his competitors to court, asking 500 scudi to compensate for his wife’s care of children and shop, 2000 scudi for her skill as a candy maker, and 4000 scudi for her beloved companionship. The story rings with pathos while at the same time it illustrates several facets of a Renaissance artisan’s family workshop. Many of these vignettes will similarly catch the reader’s interest and, in the context of the Cohens’ arguments and insights, will offer an opportunity for students to think critically about history. This book works consistently to encourage students new to premodern history to interact thoughtfully with the
past, to question their modern assumptions, and to approach Renaissance Italy from interesting and provocative perspectives.

One of the great accomplishments of social and cultural history in the past thirty years has been to facilitate the confluence of multiple theoretical and methodological approaches to early modern Europe. The Cohens, both of whom have contributed significantly to the historiography of early modern Italy, make intelligent use of a variety of approaches in this book. Typical of this text is its ability to synthesize many of these strands in a chapter such as “Dangers,” in which the authors treat the varieties of forces that threatened the existence of early modern Italians from the supernatural to the natural to the man-made. Daily Life in Renaissance Italy examines the basic structures of society in chapters called “Who Was Who,” “Family and Other Solidarities,” and “Hierarchies.” The analyses informed by anthropological concepts are fresh and readable, illuminating Italian society from peasant to prince. Cohen and Cohen treat ‘high’ and ‘low’ with careful attention to the peculiarities of social difference, but also with a keen sense of interaction between all levels of society. The book also dedicates two chapters to ‘life cycles,’ tracing the lives of Renaissance Italians from cradle to grave. The division between the two chapters comes at marriage, when the privileges and responsibilities of adulthood finally eclipse the comparably carefree years of youth. The authors offer more detailed treatments of related topics in chapters on “Moralities,” “Keeping Order,” and “Media, Literacy, and Schooling.”

Readers of this book will also encounter chapters dealing with “Spaces,” “Time,” “Houses, Food, and Clothing,” “Disease and Healing,” “Work,” and “Play,” all topics that infrequently find their way into textbooks of the Italian Renaissance (though they are much needed), and suit the purview of this book very well. The authors are obviously familiar with the important new work currently being undertaken in these fields of study; it is encouraging to see such themes so comfortably incorporated into the Cohens’ vision of the Renaissance. Theirs is a vision many readers will enjoy both for its enthusiasm and its efforts to enlist students in the critical and imaginative work of Renaissance history, “a rich adventure of the mind” (297).

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The matter of patronage in the making of culture continues today to be a major driving force, functioning, as it does, under diverse guises — philanthropy, commissions, sponsorship, bequests, donations, to name a few. Much is known on the subject of male patronage in relation to powerful Italian mediaeval and Renaissance families. Catherine King, through her attentive research, sheds new light on the role of women in this important cultural promotional activity. Her