

Review of The Grace of the Italian Renaissance, by Ita Mac Carthy

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The Grace of the Italian Renaissance. By Ita Mac Carthy. Princeton-Woodstock: Princeton University Press. 2020. 272 pages. \$35.00 / £30.00 ISBN: 9780691175485 - Hardcover

The Italian Renaissance, as is well known, is one of the most significant cultural developments in early modern history and civilization. If one can summarize this exceptional period of intellectual and artistic creativity in keywords, the first ones which immediately come to mind are antiquity, beauty, *dignitas hominis*, *disegno*, grace, and rebirth. One of these crucial Renaissance ‘signals’, namely grace, is chosen by Ita Mac Carthy as a splendid case study.

The volume consists of six chapters —some of which have already appeared in print — preceded by a Prologue where the aesthetic, ethical, and moral attributes associated to the word ‘grace’ are introduced with a discussion on the iconography of Francesco del Cossa’s *Allegory of April* (1469), in the *Salone dei mesi* (Room of the months) of Ferrara’s Palazzo Schifanoia. In the opening chapter, “A Renaissance Keyword”, the author explores the abundance of meanings associated with the definition of grace in the fields of aesthetics, literature, literary criticism, social ethics, and theology. Key metaphors associated to the “mobile and multifaceted force” (p. 24) inherent to the notion of grace are discussed: the imageries of the chameleon and of the rainfall have been rightly selected by the author as among the most meaningful ones. The former serves to better capture the “ever-present and ever-changing concepts of delectation and delight” (p. 24) carried by grace, while the latter conveys a spiritual connotation that, after St. Augustine’s use in *De Trinitate* (4.i, 2), signifies the gift of God which is not rendered to merit, but freely given. As is well known, this theological concept became the flagship of the Reformation.

The second chapter, “Grace abounding”, deals with the particularly important role grace played in the four main cultural settings introduced in the previous chapter: the humanist revival of antiquity; the sixteenth-century religious debates; the combination of those two in Christian classicism; and the so-called *questione della lingua*, which aimed to establish the ideal idiom of Italian culture. Noteworthy is here the *iter* through which the Greek origins of grace, “known as *charis*” (p. 31), prominently featured across an array of literary contexts, from Homer to Euripides, before being used by the writers of ancient Rome. In the Roman context, however, the moral and social force of *charis* was “expressed either as *venustas* or as *gratia*” (p. 32).

Chapter three, “Grace and Favour: Baldassare Castiglione and Raphael”, considers Castiglione’s *Libro del cortegiano* and Raphael’s art in order to understand how *charis*, *venustas*, and *gratia* were appropriated and redeployed in sixteenth-century Italy. In Castiglione’s treatise, which aims to depict in words the perfect courtier, Mac Carthy rightly observes that even though grace is described in many ways, the true source is clearly identified by Castiglione in the *sprezzatura*. This term is a purpose-coined word to identify “in all things a certain nonchalance (*sprezzatura*) which conceals all artistry and makes whatever one says or does seem uncontrived and effortless 1.26” (p. 52). The reader is then pertinently reminded that the language of grace elaborated in Castiglione’s fictional dialogue had a great influence also in sixteenth-century art criticism. Indeed, both Vasari’s *Le vite de’ più eccellenti artisti* (1550, and 1558), and Lodovico Dolce’s *Dialogo della pittura intitolato L’Aretino* (1557) are indebted to the *Libro del cortegiano* not just in terms of the language used to describe grace, but also with regard to the examples used to illustrate it.

Chapter four, “Grace and Beauty. Vittoria Colonna and Tullia d’Aragona”, is devoted to an examination of the notion of grace within a feminine perspective. The chapter opens with insights into Castiglione’s book 3 of the *Libro del cortegiano*, which examines the ideal court lady and the feminine supreme grace. It then analyses the work of Vittoria Colonna and Tullia d’Aragona, drawing attention to their opposite perception of grace: while the spiritual poetry

of the aristocratic Colonna accentuates the concept that “grace is of a saintly kind that disdains mere corporeal beauty” (pp. 78-79), by contrast, the poetic and philosophical reflections of the courtesan d’Aragona rejects grace’s celestial implications in favour of an earthly ambition.

Chapter five, “Grace and Ingratitude: Lodovico Dolce and Ludovico Ariosto”, looks at the author of the *Orlando furioso* both as a poet hailed as the sixteenth-century Italian master of poetic grace, and as a writer who penned in his work— specifically in *Satires* and in his emblems and mottoes of his *Furioso* — the ingratitude he suffered at court. By focussing on the analysis of the emblem page Ariosto used to embellish the first edition of the *Furioso* (1516), the reader is expertly guided through a stimulating perspective on the relationship between literary grace and courtly ingratitude. Worthy of note in this section are also the preliminary considerations on Ariosto’s literary merits conveyed by art theorist Lodovico Dolce, “whose thoughtful and extensive work on the *Furioso* represents a calculated response to the demands of the book trade” (p. 116) in sixteenth-century Italy. This chapter makes for a fascinating reading throughout.

The last chapter, ‘Grace and Labour: Michelangelo Buonarroti and Vittoria Colonna’, reflects on Michelangelo’s “most graceful grace”, while also giving insights into “the interpretation of grace in his life and in his art that conflicted and competed with the one that Raphael embodied” (p. 143). In the third part of this section, Mac Carthy’s brings Michelangelo’s grace into dialogue with Colonna’s religiousness, albeit with a somewhat cursory assessment of their theory of love absorbed in the theology of grace. Yet, the accurate emphasis on the Renaissance key concept of *sprezzatura* all the way through the chapter helps the reader to comprehend that Michelangelo’s effortless intensity of graceful style defied all comparison, even with Raphael, because, as Vittoria Colonna maintained, Michelangelo “surpasses every mortal expectation and makes his art a vessel of divine grace” (p. 180).

To conclude, Ita Mac Carthy’s book combines a literary, historical and aesthetic approach aimed at capturing the semantic energy, force, and contexts of the notion of grace in selected works and masters of the Italian Renaissance. It is an elegant artistic and poetic journey through the sixteenth century's world of *charis*, *venustas*, *gratia* and *sprezzatura*.

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