

**East Tennessee State University**

---

**From the Selected Works of Brian J. Maxson**

---

November, 2014

# Review of Notable Men and Women of Our Time

Brian Maxson, *East Tennessee State University*



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/brian-maxson/26/>

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paolo Giovio. *Notable Men and Women of Our Time*. Edited and translated by Kenneth Gouwens. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013. xxi + 760 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-05505-6.

Reviewed by Brian J. Maxson (East Tennessee State University)

Published on H-Italy (November, 2014)

Commissioned by Matt Vester

Kenneth Gouwens's edition and translation of Paolo Giovio's *Notable Men and Women of Our Time* is a major addition to the ongoing I Tatti Renaissance Library series published by Harvard University Press. The I Tatti series seeks to make available the most important neo-Latin texts surviving from the Renaissance and early modern period. Following the model of the Loeb Classical Library, the books are set at a reasonable price, feature facing page Latin and English translations, and come in a sturdy cloth binding. Over the past decade the series has included well-known works such as Lorenzo Valla's *On the Donation of Constantine* (1440) as well as texts never before edited, let alone translated, like Francesco Filelfo's *Florentine Discussions on Exile* (c. 1440). Kenneth Gouwens's massive translation of *Notable Men and Women* falls in between: a text not translated into any language until 2011 and available here in English for the first time.

Paolo Giovio wrote his text in the aftermath of the sack of Rome by imperial troops in 1527, although the work remained unfinished at the time of the author's death some twenty-five years later. Gouwens argues that the content of the book was very much a product of its time, with a strong focus on the liberty of Italy from foreign powers. After the early 1530s it was clear that the political and literary conversation had moved away from this topic and thus Giovio too moved on from this work by the end of the decade. Subsequently, *Notable Men and Women* remained unpublished even in excerpt, with each of the three books surviving in single, separate sixteenth-century manuscripts. After being published in part during the eighteenth century, it was not until 1984 that a complete Latin edition of the text finally appeared in print. The current interest in editing and publishing Renaissance neo-Latin texts led Franco Minonzio to prepare a careful and thorough Latin edition with Italian translation, published in 2011. The Latin text in Gouwens's edition deviates in some places from that of Minonzio, and the two editions also differ in that

Gouwens has emphasized readability in the Latin text, while Minonzio emphasized a much more exact reproduction of the manuscript witnesses. With the publication of Gouwens book, Giovio's treatise, unfinished by the author and unpublished for nearly five centuries, ironically now exists in two fine Latin editions and two modern languages.

The book is organized along three dialogues that purport to take place over three different days in late 1527. On the first day the interlocutors Paolo Giovio, Antonio Muscettola, and Alfonso d'Avalos begin their conversation on the island of Ischia. They comment upon the ill fortune suffered by Rome at the hands of imperial troops and then ponder the reliability of astrology, a tangent that quickly turns into a condemnation and the conclusion that Italy's then-present troubles were the result of the decisions, actions, and quality of men. The three interlocutors decide to investigate whether or not their age possesses men of inferior quality than in the past, beginning with military men. A list, praise, and short description of many contemporary and near-contemporary military men follows, with various tangents scattered throughout on the power of fortune; the value and characteristics of Italian fighters versus German, French, and Spanish ones; gambling; and others. The first dialogue concludes with a long laudatory section on the commander Ferdinando d'Avalos, marquis of Pescara and husband of Vittoria Colonna.

The second and third dialogues turn towards literary figures, both men and women. The surviving copy of dialogue 2 begins mid-sentence and with a discussion of poets. Dozens of men are described, with brief tangents on topics such as why precocious poets do not usually live up to their full potential. A discussion on the reasons why vernacular literature seems to have become so prevalent transitions the dialogue to a long list of vernacular poets. This list is followed by similar descriptions of orators and other writers considered worthy of note,

sections again featuring various short and long tangents. The dialogue ends mid-sentence after turning to learned literary men outside the Italian peninsula. Dialogue 3 features praise of illustrious women. The usual description of various famous and little-known figures is introduced by a section on the varying treatment of women by different historical and contemporary cultures. The interlocutors conclude that the unjust treatment of women has led to their less distinguished record than men, rather than innate differences between the sexes. Having defended the potential of women, the dialogue turns to examples where this potential has clearly been reached, with examples provided for cities throughout Italy and beyond. Many of these sections are introduced by interesting descriptions of the customs and stereotypes associated with gender relations in each city. The dialogue concludes with a long encomium to Vittoria Colonna.

Kenneth Gouwens has done a tremendous job with a difficult treatise. All three dialogues contain repetitious lists of individuals—be they military commanders, male or female writers, or scholars—with whom all but a handful of specialists will be unfamiliar. Gouwens provides a short explanatory note for each figure, and that these notes total roughly a hundred pages of text suggest both the editor's thoroughness and the number of people discussed. At times in the treatise Giovio lists names at such rapidity and length that the reader risks losing interest in identifying them further. It is not that the Latin text or English translation is to blame: Gouwens set out with the goal of readability in both languages and accomplishes this with much success. Moreover, the choices made regarding Latin spelling and punctuation make Giovio's style more accessible to modern readers trained primar-

ily using classical texts, words, and grammars, while the English has flavor and variation, a true accomplishment when rendering a work with strong panegyric qualities into another language. The problem is not with the modern editor, but with the original author Giovio: the barrage of named individuals reflects the genre in which Giovio chose to work as well as the unfinished nature of the dialogues.

These comments aside, the text does, nevertheless, hold significant interest. Historians of literature and learning will find the discussions in dialogues 2 and 3 valuable, while historians of ideas should not miss the treatments of national groups and liberty throughout the book. The various tangents in the text are oftentimes fascinating. In addition, bluntly, it borders on the absurd that a figure of Paolo Giovio's stature does not already have his writings accessible in any number of languages. A favorite of several popes and princes, Giovio was familiar with and counted among the literary greats in Italy during the first half of the sixteenth century. Despite his prominence and position, until this book only a section of one of Giovio's major works—part of his *Elogia virorum illustrium* (1546)—has hitherto appeared in English. Giovio's *Histories* (1550-52) still exists only in Latin, a fate shared by too many other large but important Renaissance and early-modern historical works. *Notable Men and Women of Our Time* provides a well from which historians can draw pieces of evidence on any number of topics, in addition to glimpses of hundreds of individuals, many of whom deserve to be better known. Kenneth Gouwens and the editors behind the I Tatti Renaissance Library are to be commended for another fine edition and translation in this important series.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

**Citation:** Brian J. Maxson. Review of Giovio, Paolo, *Notable Men and Women of Our Time*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. November, 2014.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=41948>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.