Review of Reviving the Eternal City: Rome and the Papal Court, 1420-1447 by Elizabeth McCahill

Brian Maxson, East Tennessee State University

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Gaborik prepares the audience for translations that ‘at times read more smoothly’ than the originals do’ and ‘in this demonstrate an attention to “speakability” analogous to Bontempelli’s’ (p. lxxv), such choices and many others suggest that the opposite may also be true. Nevertheless, there is no benefit in systematically picking apart a translation, since any translation is made up of countless decisions that need to be considered as a whole rather than separately. And, as a whole, each of these translations does convey the complexity of Bontempelli’s theater, including some utterly lyrical moments, such as the translation of the Chorus of the Earth in Cinderella:

Life, another day / extinguished, another night / comes to light. / One by one the stars come. / One missing still. / That star / forever will be missing, / until the last of nights. / When that star appears / alone in the sky it will dwell. / The entire sky will be that single star. (pp. 70–71)

Or the philosophical musings of the Innkeeper in Watching the Moon, in a scene that Bontempelli considered quite problematic but that fortunately he decided to keep and that Gaborik translates masterfully:

Jupiter savior! In thirty years of dwelling in this corner of the atom, everyone has taken me for an innkeeper. You are the first passers-by in these turbid places who realizes that I am the sediment of a philosopher, who understands this animal species. When I was still a man, and I was living far away from here, everyone mistook me for a philosopher, and no one had realized that the base of my destiny was to be an innkeeper. (p. 17)

Or, in Stormcloud, the highly evocative translation of ‘nasce o morire è la stessa cosa’ as ‘passing into life or passing on to death is the same thing’ (p. 54).

More than anything else, what stands out in this volume is Bontempelli’s ability to concoct situations (such as that of a woman who engages in a deadly struggle against a cruel moonlight, or that of a cloud that kills children) which, while they break through the confines of the ‘real,’ still retain the power to move us deeply. And as Gaborik maintains, these plays do ‘contain exciting performance possibilities,’ as expressed also by the excellent choice to include archival material (stage designs and scenarios). This volume is sure to spark interest not only among Bontempelli and Futurism enthusiasts, but among theater artists as well.

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Reviewed by: Brian Jeffrey Maxson, East Tennessee State University, USA

Elizabeth McCahill’s Reviving the Eternal City offers a cultural and intellectual history of the papacies of Martin V (1417–1431) and Eugenius IV (1431–1447).
Traditionally, scholars have assumed that the Renaissance papacy and, as a consequence, the Renaissance in Rome began with the patronage of Nicholas V around the mid Quattrocento. Consequently, Renaissance historians have focused their studies on later popes, while medieval historians have tended to study earlier ones. The result is that the artistic and literary patronage, as well as religious reforms and other ordinarily well-trodden historical subjects, are surprisingly neglected for the early 15th-century papacy. McCahill’s book joins Luca Boschettò’s recent tome on Eugenius IV (Società e cultura a Firenze al tempo del concilio, 2012) to correct this unwarranted neglect. McCahill offers a wide-ranging, well-written book that shows the transitory nature of the papacies of Martin V and Eugenius IV. The book clearly shows that many developments associated with Renaissance Rome found their seeds during the decades between 1420 and 1447, even as earlier practices also maintained a strong presence during those years.

McCahill divides the book into six thematic chapters. After an introduction to situate the reader in early 15th-century Rome, the first chapter examines how Pope Martin V interpreted Rome, with particular emphasis on Niccolò Signorili’s Descriptio urbis Romae and Masolino’s triptych the ‘Miracle of the Snow.’ McCahill argues that Martin V worked with the new nobility in Rome to promote their and the city’s interests. The pope played a key role in the city’s fabric, but did so neither as a ruthless tyrant nor as the Renaissance prince that popes would later become. Chapter 2 turns to the papal curia under both Martin V and Eugenius IV. The chapter focuses on common themes espoused across several humanist works, especially by Poggio Bracciolini. Here it is argued that typical humanist topics – such as the negotiation between the leisure of study and demands of high-ranking secretaries, as well as the benefits of the liberal arts touted in humanist dedications versus the frustrations disclosed in many humanist texts – reflect not just literary tropes, but reality for many curial humanists.

Chapters 3 and 4 turn explicitly to the papacy of Eugenius IV. Eugenius endured multiple crises during his papal tenure, such as the rival Council of Basel, the antipope Felix V, Eugenius’ flight from Rome in 1434, and constant war against the various political powers of Italy. In Chapter 3, McCahill again turns to humanist texts by papal curialists for insights into humanist views and recommendations for negotiating this tumultuous period. In works by both Poggio Bracciolini and Leon Battista Alberti are found traces of the ambiguity and uncertainty of the period. Here again, McCahill argues that humanist recommendations were more than literary tropes: they were heartfelt attempts to improve their surroundings through their studies. Chapter 4 moves to efforts and recommendations for religious reform under Pope Eugenius IV. The pope’s keen interest in the Observant Movement of mendicant friars, cardinal Domenico Carpanica’s establishment of a school, Poggio’s praise of several cardinals for secular virtues, and Alberti’s descriptions of the ideal bishop are all examined. Across all four men, the image suggested is of a desire for small, in-house reforms of the Church, rather than the larger-scale changes called for by Eugenius’ contemporary critics and much later reformers.
The final two chapters address two different ways that Pope Eugenius IV sought to symbolically assert his power over the church and the city of Rome. Chapter 5 looks at the pope’s use and interest in formal rituals. McCahill argues that Eugenius IV rarely appeared in public rituals, but those that he did perform in Florence and then in Rome sought to assert his authority. She contrasts the magnificence of Florentine rituals with the more subdued processions in Rome itself before turning to rituals between the pope and other powerful religious and secular leaders. Here again, the pope used formal ceremonies to assert himself at the pinnacle of the religious and even temporal hierarchy, while symbolically subjugating other powers to him. The book’s final chapter examines Pope Eugenius IV’s building efforts in Rome as revealed in *Rome Restored* by Biondo Flavio and the patronage of Filarete’s doors for old Saint Peter’s cathedral. According to McCahill, Biondo’s book on the city of Rome urged the pope to restore, rather than continue, the Rome of the past. Rather than a dialogue with the Roman nobility, Biondo presents the pope as occupying the seat and control over the Roman Empire. Similar ideas are found in the doors of Filarete paid for by the pope. Here, as in other projects, the pope sought to use his patronage to cement his hold over the city of Rome, the Church of Christendom, and beyond. After Eugenius’ death, McCahill argues that Renaissance humanism became more valued by popes, who themselves became scholars in their own right. Their increasing interest in the studies of humanists ended the greater freedom of the humanist secretaries to compose works as they saw fit, as a more controlled literary environment took hold in the curia.

This book has a number of strengths, not the least of which is its thoughtful consideration of numerous little-known humanist texts. McCahill’s analyses are keen and well grounded in both the intellectual and social context from which they originated. The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters are particularly strong, with their integration of reforms and practices versus literary calls for change; examinations of papal ceremony using methodologies from social and cultural historians; and seamless use of both intellectual and artistic sources, respectively. Nevertheless, a few quibbles inevitably remain. For example, chapters and even sections sometimes read like very strong independent essays, but are harder to piece together into an argumentative whole. Additionally, the book usually considers the intellectual and social contexts of texts, but has much less to say about the political, specifically diplomatic, contexts of papal actions or the writings and writers in the papal curia. Such contexts could provide primary motives behind action, and as such may have added another level of analysis to those artfully described by McCahill. Yet, make no mistake that these are quibbles of a genuinely interesting and well-written book. The book’s range, interdisciplinarity, and consistently thoughtful approach should warrant a broad readership among historians of Renaissance Italy and beyond.