

## **Playing a Role: Confraternities, Drama and the Academy**

NERIDA NEWBIGIN\*

In 1785 the great reformer Pietro Leopoldo of Habsburg-Lorraine surveyed the duchy of Florence that he had inherited some twenty years earlier, and saw vast amounts of property in the hands of confraternities that were no longer active and meeting the obligations of their statutes. Confraternities were organisations of devout lay men (and sometimes women) that had flourished throughout Europe from the thirteenth century onwards. They had accumulated wealth principally through bequests of money and property, in return for which they undertook to say masses in perpetuity for the repose of the testator's soul. On a day-to-day basis they attended to the spiritual needs of the community and of themselves, either through penitential prayer, in the case of the flagellant confraternities dedicated to Christ Crucified, or through devotional hymn-singing, in the case of those dedicated to Our Lady of Praise (Santa Maria delle Laudi). Both kinds of confraternities took on other roles: taking part in the processions and celebrations of major feast days, poor relief, running hospitals and refuges for fallen women, dowering poor virgins, and burying the dead of their confraternity. From the early fifteenth century youth confraternities had appeared, and became actively involved in the Christian education of young men, who learnt within the confraternity forms of collective decision-making and record-keeping that they would use in adult life. In the sixteenth century, new Counter-Reformation devotions led to new confraternities that flourished in their turn, while the records of some of the

\* *Nerida Newbigin has held a Personal Chair in Italian Studies since January 2001. This article is based on her inaugural lecture given to the Arts Association on 29 August 2002.*

older confraternities show an aging membership, constantly worrying about how to raise numbers, raise money, and do something relevant.<sup>1</sup>

Pietro Leopoldo surveyed the confraternities and eyed their real estate. He brought in a consultant, the humanistic scholar and abbot Lorenzo Mehus, who wrote the report that Pietro Leopoldo wanted:<sup>2</sup> that the confraternities existed in name only and were not meeting their obligations. In response Pietro Leopoldo duly shut down all but six of them and confiscated their property. This group of the six most prestigious confraternities survived until the next great despot, Napoleon, who in 1808 reduced them to one, the glorious Archconfraternity of the Misericordia, to which Florentine men still give one day a month as ambulance paramedics.

It is to Pietro Leopoldo and to Napoleon that scholars of Renaissance Florence owe an enormous debt of gratitude. Florentines, perhaps more than any other community in Medieval and Renaissance Italy, were addicted to maintaining written records, in both public and private spheres. The statutes of the confraternities were based on communal and conventual statutes, and required the maintenance of membership lists, minutes, perpetual obligations, and double sets of account books with debtors and creditors, income and expenditure, all carefully reconciled. And when first Pietro Leopoldo and then Napoleon suppressed the confraternities, their archives were transferred to the relative security of the state's archives, and there they lie in wait for fresh young antipodean scholars.

The study of Florentine great men in political history and high art has become more and more crowded in the last forty years, and it is difficult for a young graduate to find a thesis topic. The study of confraternities, of ordinary people in groups, has however opened up new areas of social history. Confraternities provide new insights: into community and neighbourhood relationships among people who did not necessarily have political power; into artistic influence and taste, as the confraternities decorated their altars and their meeting rooms; into technological innovation, as the members became ever more ingenious in devising technical

marvels for the celebrations of their festivals; into the study of both sacred and secular music, as the confraternities employed gifted musicians to train them in polyphonic vernacular hymn-singing; and—I come to it at last—into my own field of theatre, for it was in the environment of confraternities first in Umbria and later in Tuscany and Rome that vernacular drama first appeared in Italy.

When Frederick May, the first professor of Italian at this University, and Jennifer Lorch, the young lecturer whom he recruited from London, first introduced me to Italian medieval drama in 1969, it was as a series of texts which had come to the attention of Italian scholars in the flurry of philological activity that followed Italian Unification. Ernesto Monaci, Alessandro D'Ancona and Vincenzo De Bartholomaeis had published texts, Benedetto Croce had dismissed them, and they did not become part of the literary canon. Frederick May, however, understood, just as the schools and youth confraternities of renaissance Florence had done, and the private schools of Sydney still know perfectly well, that while theatrical texts can be subjected to literary criticism, theatrical performance is one of the great means of combining the delightful and the useful: the delight of participation and performance, and the usefulness of achieving those generic skills of clear diction and effective self-representation, teamwork, creativity and role-playing that an arts education provides. Theatrical performance is the ultimate pedagogical tool, and one that sadly has been all but driven out of the Academy by continuous assessment on the one hand (which simply does not allow a student to take a term off for the educational purpose of being in a play); and by changes to student study and work patterns, which mean that very few of our students have the privilege of studying full time.

At the end of my fourth year, Frederick May—already ill with the diabetes that would take him in January 1976—took to Canberra a student theatre group, with a mixed programme from the medieval and humanist drama to the avantgarde, as part of a campaign to create a Chair of Italian at the Australian National University. A Nativity play, composed for a fourteenth-century

confraternity in Perugia, was the charming second half, but since the Ambassador had left at interval, the programme fell slightly flat, and the Chair has never been created. But I was immersed in the kind of practical scholarship that has shaped my professional life.

Like every aspect of his engagement with writing and ideas, Frederick May's approach to drama was empirical. Scholarship and philological rigour are essential in establishing a reliable text, but after that, one has to read as much as possible, and then some;<sup>3</sup> try any approach; make connections where possible; and if all or any of these lead to insights, to the text and into one's self, then go with them. Theatre studies as a theoretical discipline did not yet exist (May had argued unsuccessfully for a Chair of Theatre at Leeds); and in a field where the raw data is yet to be discovered and defined, there is more than sufficient evidence that theory may well lead us astray.

When I eventually returned to medieval drama, after a doctoral thesis on Italian renaissance comedy, I began with philological problems. I sought out texts of anonymous Florentine *sacre rappresentazioni* that had lain unstudied in Florentine libraries for 500 years, and I prepared editions of them, under the guidance of the legendary Raffaele Spongano, now in his ninety-eighth year. I am still working on that project.<sup>4</sup>

These plays, although charming and limpid in their use of the Florentine vernacular, can support no great superstructure of literary criticism; and despite the example of the scholars of Early English Drama, Italian critical discourse—still dominated by the ghost of Benedetto Croce—is reluctant to engage with that vast body of vernacular *cantari* and *rappresentazioni* by the great and prolific poet, *Anonimo*. For Italians, there was and is no career to be made by offering critical interpretations of the plays through essays or performance. For outsiders, however, the opportunities are there, and outsiders are welcomed into areas that Italians themselves have been reluctant to touch.

I subsequently turned from the texts to the contexts of these plays, and resolved to settle once and for all the question of who performed them, where, when, how and why. For English drama,

this task has been under way methodically since the nineteen-seventies, when Margaret Rogerson of this university teamed up with Alexandra Johnson of the University of Toronto to publish all the extant records in the public domain for the city of York and its play cycles. That project became the REED Project, Records of Early English Drama, based in Toronto,<sup>5</sup> and it now covers the whole of Britain, providing an abundance of information on the financial organisation and official regulation of plays and all forms of playing from court masques to Robin Hood. Scholars working on Dutch and French drama have made important, if limited, attempts to document the plays of Rhetoricians' Academies in the Netherlands and Confréries in France, but for the most part the early drama of continental Europe lacks the prestige that the early English drama enjoys as preceding Shakespeare, and, despite the wealth of documentation that is preserved, it has not received the attention that it warrants.

Since 1983 I have toiled in the State Archives in Florence. Over the years I have formed an intimate relationship with the individual members of the confraternities that put on plays, and I have found points of correspondence between their activities, 'to the glory of God and the Virgin, and for the pleasure of the City', as they say in one of their grant applications, and those of the various associations that I am part of. From a close reading of their account books, I feel I now understand, and can share with others, how the church of Santa Maria del Carmine, for example, was the scene of an annual play of the Ascension of Christ, and subsequently of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary; and I can show how the plays disappeared when the city's administration, increasingly under the domination and control of the Medici family, interfered.<sup>6</sup>

The Feast of the Ascension, forty days after Easter, was a particular devotion of the Carmelite church of the Carmine: the order had been founded on the mount where the Old Testament prophet Elijah had been carried up in a fiery chariot, prefiguring Christ's ascent into heaven. The earliest record of people acting out the Ascension in the Carmine dates to about 1390, when the witticism of an eyewitness is reported. Christ's ascent to Heaven,

on rope and pulley, is so slow, he says, that he can't possibly be there yet, because he's still on his way.

By 1422, when their account books begin, the Confraternity of St Agnes was responsible for the play. Even though the play was performed only once a year, the Carmelite friars allowed the brethren of the Confraternity enormous liberties. The church was divided in two by a masonry rood screen that separated the friars' choir stalls from the rest of the church. On the left of the rood screen the Confraternity built a *castello* or castle, representing Jerusalem, which remained in place all year round. It was probably a very old-fashioned representation, with an open room at the top, representing the Cenacle or 'Upper Room' of the Last Supper, where Christ will return for a last meal with his Mother and Disciples before his Ascension. On the right hand side they constructed the *monte*, the Mount of Olives, from which Christ ascended into heaven (Fig.1).

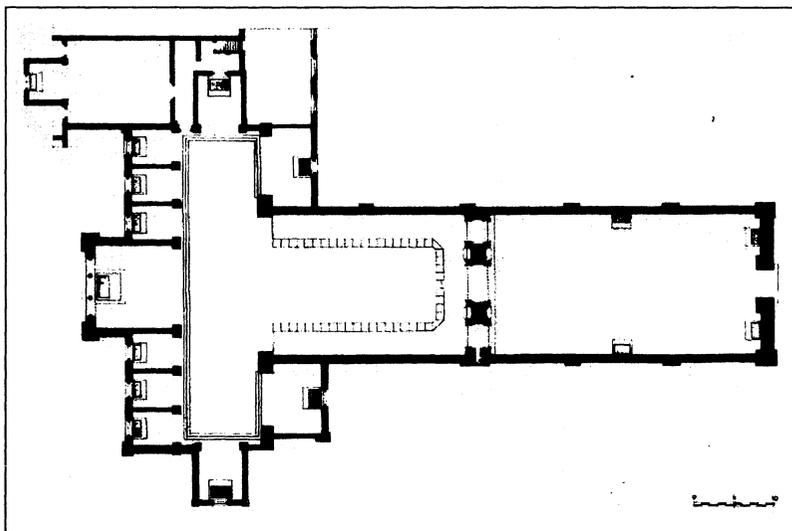


Fig.1: Church of Santa Maria del Carmine, floorplan.

Up in the roof of the church—unfortunately destroyed in the great fire of 1771 and rebuilt with a barrel-vault ceiling—the Confraternity constructed two further playing spaces: Heaven, in a niche above the high altar, and Paradise directly above the

Mount of Olives. To access this walkway in the cantilevered section of the roof space, the Confraternity constructed a spiral staircase, still visible in the fourth pilaster from the front of the church on the eastern side, and this staircase gave them access from their meeting rooms at ground level to the playing space on the rood screen and into the roof.

Preparation for the performance began immediately after Easter each year, and lasted the full forty days. It began with the kind of working bee that every volunteer group, and even the odd academic department, knows: buying brooms, and arsenic to poison the rats in the roof, getting new keys made to replace the keys that had been broken or lost; testing and upgrading the equipment. From expenses for these upgrades and from inventories, we form a clear picture of what the play was like.

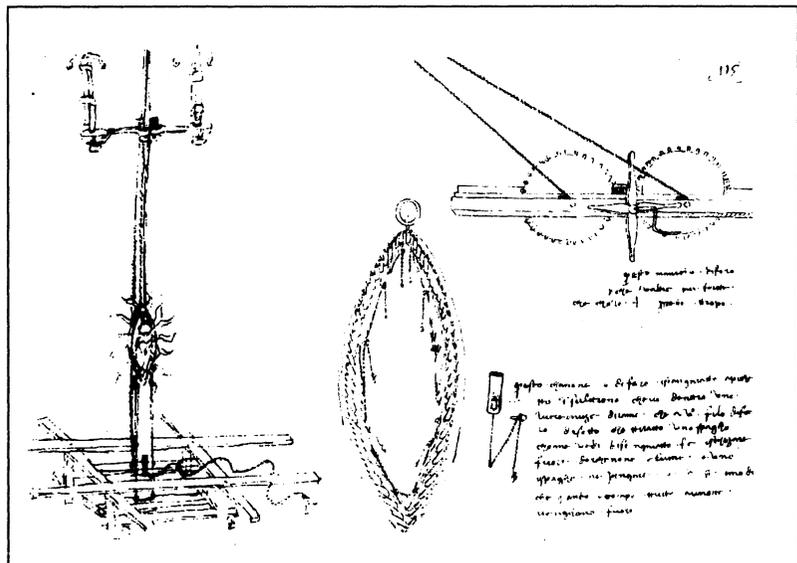


Fig.2: Buonaccorso Ghiberti's sketches of the disappearing-light device, c.1470. From his *Zibaldone*, Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, MS. Banco Rari 228, f.115v.

When the moment came for Christ's ascent into Heaven, he stepped into *il ferro degli angeli*, a metal almond-shaped frame (Fig.2). As he stepped in, he depressed a lever that caused lighted

candles to be pushed out of the tubes in which they had been concealed, so that he was surrounded by light. He was then winched up diagonally from the rood screen in the centre of the church to Heaven above the high altar. His metal frame was supported on ropes that were tensioned by a large quantity of 'lead plates in a gutter'—in much the same fashion as overhead railway wires are tensioned with concrete weights.

As Christ ascended, Heaven (*Cielo*) opened to reveal God the Father, 'pavilioned in splendour and girded with praise'. In front of a structure anchored to a tiny opening above the high altar, an actor, or rather, a member of the Confraternity, was suspended in stirrups, his face hidden by a God-the-Father mask. Around him, in the vertical plane, circled the wheels of Heaven: the planets were represented by lamps placed behind flasks of saffron-tinted water; stars were created by mirror-balls; hundreds of lamps were lit and choirs of angels—boys and girls—sang hymns of praise to greet him. But there's more ...

The Biblical account of the Ascension continues: 'Two men stood before them in white apparel: who also said: "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, that is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as yet have seen him go into heaven".' (Acts 1.11). For this, the Confraternity activated a second celestial location, Paradise (*Paradiso*), directly above the rood screen on the right. A second figure clothed and masked as God the Father appeared in Paradise, and two angels descended to the Mount of Olives, addressed the disciples and ascended again.

The adult who played Christ and the boy-Angels who 'went on the ropes' were singers from the cathedral choir, and were rewarded with a gift of hose, with silver hooks and ties and leather soles. The skilled craftsmen who worked on the equipment were paid for labour and materials. But all the rest of the participants were members of the Confraternity who did all the preparations for no financial reward. Funds were available, from Confraternity reserves and from a levy of fourpence a day on the city's tax collectors. These funds were spent on oil, candles and fireworks for the illuminations, the refurbishment and improvement of

equipment, the hire of ostrich feathers for the angels' wings, the hire of wigs and beards, the washing of angels' robes, on flowers to decorate the church, and, above all, on food and wine for the *festaioli*, the people working on the play, right through the six weeks of preparation and then a big party afterwards.

What (besides the promise of a party) inspired the Confraternity to do these plays? Without doubt, the members of the Confraternity felt pride in ownership of their *festa*, and strove to do better year by year, and better too than their brother confraternities, or their rivals, in San Felice in Piazza (which did the Annunciation play) and in Santo Spirito (which did the Pentecost play). They were motivated too, according to their application to the Commune for a subsidy, by a desire to honour God and the Virgin Mary, the city's principal protectors, and to provide pleasure for the citizenry. There is no doubt that the citizenry took pleasure and pride in the spectacles, and enjoyed the protection of its patrons, which they gave in accordance with the honour done to them; but I believe that the principal beneficiaries were the brethren themselves, who established and consolidated family, neighbourhood, and commercial networks through their participation in the plays.

The modern university, like the confraternities that came under Pietro Leopoldo's scrutiny, is being asked to justify itself. When I apply for research grants to pursue research on Florentine confraternities, I am asked to demonstrate that such research is in the public interest. I am invited to integrate my research into my teaching programme at the same time as providing courses that are relevant to the needs of students. But where do confraternity studies belong? How do they fit into a discipline of Italian Studies, when the old definitions of Italian Language and Literature are breaking down?

On the one hand, students are asking universities to make good the deficiencies of language teaching in the secondary system, where only exceptional schools have been able to maintain the prestige of languages and attract enthusiastic and excellent students. As a result, in first semester 2002 the constituent Departments of the School of European, Asian and Middle Eastern Languages and Studies provided introductory courses in language

and culture for well over a thousand students. The provision of these courses has become absolutely essential, but these students require huge resources, and only a small proportion will continue their language studies past first year.

On the other hand, the Faculty of Arts mission statement offers the so-called 'language Departments' a stronger invitation than ever to participate fully in the discourse of the social sciences and the humanities. Italian language is not the end in itself: it is one tool among many which open up worlds of ideas, not just through literature but through all aspects of creativity and learning. Amongst those ideas is the idea of brotherhood, *confraternitas*. From a study of confraternities and their activities we learn about how people behave in groups, and how social cohesion is constructed and maintained. From their ordered structure and their carefully reasoned statutes we glimpse a world in which living in a community brought with it obligations not only to one's immediate cohort but to all members of the group, from the *ottimati* to the *sottoposti*, from the powerful elite to the disenfranchised subproletariat. From the pleasure they took in charity, devotion, performance and celebration, we gain insight into our own desire for the pleasure of participation, communion and celebrating together. And when all this is done, we can act their plays: our students can share with the young men of confraternities five hundred years ago and more the acquisition of those generic skills of teamwork and self-presentation that figure so prominently in our teaching mission.

Confraternities, like universities, are places where collectivity is everything. They strive to enshrine the highest values, to provide care and opportunity for all, to glorify themselves collectively, at the same time as being dependent on individual expertise and talent. In my own discipline of Italian Studies, the list of teachers and researchers who have enriched the lives of students and 'created new knowledge' is a very long one. I acknowledge here our collective debt to the first lecturer in Italian, Dr Baccarini, who in 1931 had the astonishing number of 178 students in Elementary Italian; to Mr Robert Shaw, who was appointed the first Lecturer in Charge of Italian in 1935 and nurtured the

Department for almost thirty years; to Frederick May, who took up the first Chair in 1964, whose generosity as a teacher remains unsurpassed, and whose reforms to degree structures in 1965 and to examination processes in 1969 quickly and painlessly became the norm for the Faculty; to Gino Rizzo, appointed in 1977, who connected the Department of Italian with the Italian business community and with universities and scholars in Italy and North America, and forged important on-going links that are vital to our international programme; to Giovanni Carsaniga, appointed in 1990, whose scholarship in Italian Romanticism, combined with an ongoing commitment to excellence and innovation in language teaching, has led the Department to new areas of research and performance.

We have a debt too to our benefactors: Sir Charles Nicholson and Dr Hugh McKay, for gifts of books and manuscripts to Fisher Library; Dr H. M. Moran and the Countess E. M. Freehill, who in 1931 each gave gifts of £1000 to establish prizes in perpetuity; Vivian Chalwin, Adrienne Lussu, Lou Klepak and Mario Benanzio, all of whom generously supported the Frederick May Foundation; the Italian Government and its representatives, and, more recently, the Cassamarca Foundation, for their ongoing support. Most of all, I acknowledge my own debt to my colleagues, who make up a wonderful Department.

The Department, like renaissance confraternities, will change and continue to reinvent itself in accordance with its circumstances. As the Faculty prepares for a forty million dollar refurbishment of the MacCallum/Brennan complex in the course of 2003, Italian has returned again to the Institute Building, the former Deaf, Dumb and Blind Institute on City Road, now looking far grander than it did when we were briefly exiled there in 1967. We are buoyed by the University's commitment to the Faculty and to our discipline, and in this sesquicentenary year we look forward to playing our role in the University's Bicentenary with optimism and vigour.

## Notes

- 1 The bibliography has multiplied in the last twenty years. A starting point might be: Ronald F. E. Weisman, *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence*, New York, 1982; Christopher F. Black, *Italian Confraternities in the Sixteenth Century*, Cambridge, 1989; John Henderson, *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence*, Oxford and New York, 1994; Konrad Eisenbichler, *The Boys of the Archangel Raphael: A Youth Confraternity in Florence, 1411–1785*, Toronto and Buffalo, 1998; and on confraternities and the arts: *Crossing the Boundaries: Christian Piety and the Arts in Italian Medieval and Renaissance Confraternities*, ed. Konrad Eisenbichler, Kalamazoo, 1991; *Confraternities and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Italy: Ritual, Spectacle, Image*, eds Barbara Wisch and Diane Cole Ahl, Cambridge and New York, 2000.
- 2 [Lorenzo Mehus], *Dell'origine, progresso, abusi, e riforma delle confraternite laicali*, Florence: Cambiagi, 1785.
- 3 May wrote in his application for the Chair of Italian in 1963, 'I am primarily an interpreter of literature and drama. The present bias of my writing has to be towards bibliography, a thoroughly congenial field of activity, but one which I regard as on the way to what interests me.' University of Sydney Archives, Frederick May.
- 4 *Nuovo Corpus di sacre rappresentazioni fiorentine del Quattrocento*, Bologna 1983. Another ten plays will appear early in 2003.
- 5 *Records of Early English Drama: York*, eds Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, Toronto, 1979. A second edition of this first volume will appear shortly; twenty volumes have now been published, and a further thirty editors are at work.
- 6 The results of this research are published in *Feste d'Oltrarno: Plays in Churches in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, 2 vols, Florence, 1996.