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**James Hankins. 'Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy.' Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020.**

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By carefully examining the many cultural, social, and economic contexts in which Dante was circulated, and the different characteristics of the readers for whom those editions were created and designed, Gilson offers his readers a work of the highest historical value. However, *Reading Dante in Renaissance Italy* is not only an exceptional text of contemporary Dante criticism. It is indeed an indispensable research tool and a fundamental model for future investigations on the history of the material reception of literary texts in the Italian Renaissance. There is no doubt that it will be read and consulted by many specialists, students, and non-academic readers in the years to come.

Natale Vacalebri, *University of Pennsylvania*

James Hankins.

*Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy.*

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020. XXIII + 736 pp. \$45.

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Is there in Italy, in the period comprised between the fourteenth and the sixteenth century, any “political thought” worthy of the name? Is it possible to find elements that have any traction from the perspective of political philosophy in the writings of Petrarch, Boccaccio, Leonardo Bruni, or Leon Battista Alberti – not to mention much lesser known writers such as Roberto Valturio or Mario Salamonio? Is there any room for these authors in the histories of Western political thought? James Hankins’s view, admittedly not the dominant one in current scholarship, is resolutely positive. For Hankins, not only did a truly political thought exist in Renaissance Italy, but it was also a coherent one, at least in its fundamental features. What all Italian Renaissance authors writing about politics had in common was a deep-rooted concern with the problem of moral education, a problem that was, in turn, firmly anchored in the concept of virtue. What Hankins calls “Italian humanist political thought” was “a movement stimulated by a crisis of legitimacy in late medieval Italy and by a widespread disgust with its political and religious leadership.” Italian political writers of the time all shared a wide, and often bitter, experience with tyranny, so that they took on the mission of rebuilding Italy’s “depleted reserves of good character, true piety, and practical wisdom” (p. XV). They also found in the classical world, which they worked industriously to revive, an inspiring model, full of examples of moral nobility, political wisdom, and selfless dedication to country. Whether in the capacity of political advisors (as in the case of Petrarch) or by actually occupying political offices (like Bruni), humanist political writers put moral reform at the very center of their political agendas, their mission being to build a new (even if revived from the ancients) and uncorrupt virtue politics.

In more than seven-hundred pages, Hankins’s book outlines the main trajectories of what can be considered as a comprehensive history of Italian humanist political thought. The book consists of twenty chapters, plus a conclusion and a section of appendixes. The first four chapters serve as theoretical foundation for the

following ones, which are more historical in nature. In the first section, the author presents an overview of humanist virtue politics, describes Italian humanist political thought as a movement not committed to any particular form of government (a feature distinguishing it from classical political thought), and discusses humanist concepts of tyranny. In the following twelve chapters, the author surveys the political thought of a sheer number of humanist thinkers (Petrarch, Bartolo da Sassoferrato, Baldo degli Ubaldi, Giovanni Boccaccio, Leonardo Bruni, Biondo Flavio, Ciriaco d'Ancona, Leon Battista Alberti, George of Trebizond, Francesco Filelfo, Francesco Patrizi, and Niccolò Machiavelli). Three appendixes complete the work (an English translation of Petrarch's *De vita solitaria* II, 9.19-22, where the author discusses political obligations; an English translation of Rinaldo Gianfigliuzzi's 1399 speech before the Florentine Priors, as reported by Leonardo Bruni in his *History of the Florentine People* XI, 75-78; and a most welcomed catalogue of Renaissance editions, translations, and compendia of Francesco Patrizi's political works).

The broad range of subjects covered, both chronologically and thematically, makes it difficult to engage thoroughly with Hankins's book. I shall therefore concentrate on the chapters on Petrarch and Boccaccio, since these prove to be of greatest interest to the readers of *Bibliotheca Dantesca*. Petrarch occupies a prominent position in the book. He is the subject of two different chapters (5 and 6). His importance within Hankins's account of Italian humanist political thought cannot be underestimated. Not only does Petrarch fit very well into the mainstream of this movement, but he can also be considered as a sort of father figure of humanist virtue politics. By engaging with a variety of his works (from private letters to poetic compositions, both in Latin and Italian vernacular), Hankins shows that Petrarch was the first one to draw attention on the fact that virtue politics has to do with the moral disposition of the ruler rather than with a particular form of government. For Petrarch, Hankins argues, "it is the mens, the moral disposition of the agent, that governs the moral quality of an act and determines whether a law, or an action governed by law, is praiseworthy" (p. 156). Thus, educating the political leader, or the ruling elite in charge with the administration of power, becomes the essential task of Italian humanist political thinkers, regardless which particular regime or constitution is in place. In this sense, Petrarch anticipates one of the central tenets of humanist political thought: to conceive of virtue politics as transcending any commitments to particular forms of government. Since virtue politics is about the moral character of the ruler/s, and not about the way in which institutions are shaped, it proves compatible with different, even contrasting, regime types. Hankins also shows that Petrarch's commitment to moral reform is by no means undermined by his insistence on solitary life as a higher kind of existence. Not only is the *otium* described by Petrarch an ideal of private life specifically attuned to literary men, but he also states very clearly that no life can possibly gain greater divine approval than the one devoted to serve one's country (p. 181).

The need to reform human nature is also at the center of Boccaccio's political reflections, although his positions are colored with a much darker pessimism than Petrarch's, and with true disgust for the politics of both Florence and Italy. Boccaccio's works that bear the most on political thought, his *Consolatory Letter* to Pino de' Rossi and his *De casibus virorum illustrium*, were both penned in the aftermath of his self-exile in Certaldo in the late 1350s. This followed the failure of

the aristocratic coup in Florence, in which a group of malcontents, including Boccaccio himself, attempted to overthrow the popular regime. From outside the political arena, Boccaccio starts thinking about politics from a more theoretical, non-partisan perspective, thus resembling his mentor Petrarch. Like him, Boccaccio called for a total reform of the true *materia prima* of politics, that is human nature. In the prologue of his *De casibus*, dedicated to his beloved friend Mainardo Cavalcanti, a Florentine ennobled by his public service, Boccaccio makes it clear that “no republic would ever be sound without morally sound men to govern it” (p. 198). Like Petrarch, and like many other humanist political thinkers that would follow, Boccaccio sees the achievement of virtuous politics not as a question of which particular constitution to choose, but as a question of how to best rebuild the moral character of the ruler. Boccaccio’s views of virtue politics offer a vantage from which to observe the “modernity” of Boccaccio’s political thought – an aspect, as Hankins points out at the beginning of the chapter, which has been traditionally questioned by scholars. This does not mean, of course, that there are no features in his political thought that are “backward looking” – as Hankins puts it (p. 215). These seem to be mainly two: first, the notion that the power of kings is derived from and limited by the express consent of the people; and second, the general pessimism suffusing Boccaccio’s accounts of the exercise of political power, and his way of looking at it as intrinsically dangerous and corrupting to the health of men’s souls.

*Virtue Politics* has a twofold merit: to make new materials available to scholars, and to pose the “old ones” new questions. The author handles a vast and often heterogeneous set of texts and authors, one with which scholars of political thought are hardly at ease. Hankins finds an intelligent thread to unify different kinds of literary works, and to make good sense of what may at first sight appear as an un-systematic cultural movement. More than that, this book gives Renaissance political thought the place it deserves within the history of Western political thought.

Tommaso De Robertis, *University of Pennsylvania*

*The Marriage of Philology and Scepticism: Uncertainty and Conjecture in Early Modern Scholarship and Thought.*

Gian Mario Cao, Anthony Grafton and Jill Kraye, eds.

Warburg Institute Colloquia. London: Warburg Institute, 2019. 256 pp. \$54.50.

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This set of essays results from a conference at the Warburg Institute, organized to investigate the connections and conflicts in humanist scholarship between the philological tools they used to establish correct texts of their sources on the one hand, and the contents of some of those texts on the other. In this case, the particular content of interest is philosophical scepticism. Sceptical texts and thought generated both interest and controversy among Renaissance and early modern scholars, and