

this kind of use, at least at the introductory levels. It is certainly a volume that any scholar of sexuality and gender in the Middle Ages will want to have on her or his shelves.

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**Gene Brucker. *Giovanni and Lusanna: Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence, with a new preface.* University of California Press, 1986; rpt. 1988 & 2005. pp. vii + 138.**

When Gene Brucker's *Giovanni and Lusanna* was first published in 1986, it was hailed as belonging to "new scholarly territory."<sup>1</sup> Microhistory was a relatively nascent field of historical inquiry in the 1980s, and despite initial fears of over-generalizations and insularity, it was quickly gaining a wide following. The ability of these snapshots from the lives of ordinary men and women to bring history to life suddenly made the past much more exhilarating and accessible to those both in and outside the discipline. David Herlihy put it best when he asked: "When may we expect the movie?"<sup>2</sup> Reviewers of *Giovanni and Lusanna* at once ranked this fine work among the likes of Carlo Ginsburg's *Cheese and the Worms*, Natalie Zemon Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre*, and Judith Brown's

*Immodest Acts*. Although these texts have since been joined by a number of other similarly outstanding works of microhistory (for example, Judith Bennett's *A Medieval Life*, or Robert Bartlett's *The Hanged Man*), these few works, including *Giovanni and Lusanna*, are still the most widely read and compelling of their genre.<sup>3</sup> The reasons for this are twofold. Most obviously, it is rare to stumble across such an inspiring and well-documented case in the archives. But more important still, there is much more to these books than just a good story. Brucker, like Ginsburg, Davis, and Brown before him, is capable of teasing out the subtle details that make sense of the lives he is examining and help us to understand the meaning and individuality of these ordinary men and women in the world in which they lived. Only an accomplished scholar, well grounded in the institutions and social structures of the past, like Gene Brucker, can help us to appreciate the courage of Lusanna di Benedetto, daughter of a Florentine artisan and widow of a linen-cloth manufacturer, when she chose to challenge Florence's social and political hierarchies by initiating a suit against Giovanni della Casa, son of a wealthy merchant family, who she argued was, in fact, her husband.

Initially, Lusanna and Giovanni's relationship was nothing out of the ordinary. In the world of Renaissance Florence, where men married for profit and usually many years after they became sexually active, love often took place outside of marriage.

Although it is unclear who initiated the relationship, Lusanna and Giovanni fell in love while she was still married to Andrea Nucci. Their affair took place behind closed doors for the next few years, much to the disconcertment of their friends and families, until Lusanna's husband died. At his sister's urging, Lusanna's brother seized Andrea's death as an opportunity to press Giovanni into marriage, and thereby make "an honest woman" of her. Giovanni agreed, but on condition that their marriage be kept secret out of fear that his father might disinherit him for marrying a woman so obviously below him on the social scale. For a time, the two were happy in their clandestine union; witnesses testified to frequent retreats to the countryside where the couple delighted in long walks and public festivities, openly behaving as husband and wife. When Giovanni's father died a short while later, Lusanna expected that they would now make their relationship public; instead, feeling the pressures of his rank and family, Giovanni turned his back on Lusanna, and married the daughter of one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in Florence. Only after Lusanna realized that she could not convince him to give up this bigamous marriage did she turn to the church for help.

As many teachers have discovered over the last twenty years, *Giovanni and Lusanna* is the ideal text for teaching students about women and marriage in the Renaissance world. Lusanna stands out from other Florentine

women of the period in both her bold and unconventional attempt to combine love and marriage and her unwillingness to be victimized. Although she did eventually lose her suit, she demonstrates that not all Renaissance women were the docile, domestic creatures we are so frequently faced with in the writings of Renaissance intellectuals. Lusanna's case, however, has much more to offer the student of the Renaissance. While Lusanna's experience may have been atypical, the structures, traditions, and hierarchies she fought were typical; thus, *Giovanni and Lusanna* does much to detail the usual process of courtship, marriage, and community involvement in a highly-stratified, patriarchal, and politically-attuned society. It also offers critical insight into the sexual reputations of women. Despite ecclesiastical and courtly literature that equate a woman's chastity with her worth, Lusanna's reputation and standing in society seem to have been little affected by her well-known relationship with Giovanni. As Brucker points out, after her husband's death, several suitors of high standing competed for her hand, not knowing that she was already secretly married to Giovanni.

The 2005 edition of *Giovanni and Lusanna* differs from previous ones only in the inclusion of a new preface. Brucker takes the opportunity to address criticisms of both his earlier work and microhistory in general. In particular, he refers to a 1989 review by Thomas Kuehn, which attacked Brucker for naively accepting the testimonies in this suit, rather

than seeing them as mere constructs designed to win a court case.<sup>4</sup> Since 1989, microhistory, and case studies in general, have become a normal part of the world of historical study. From this vantage point, Kuehn's early censure of this "new" history comes across as gratuitous and highly cynical. With twenty years of success behind *Giovanni and Lusanna*, Brucker can now confidently attend to those critics of microhistory and dismiss their concerns. As Brucker notes, the criteria for microhistories is no different than for other histories; all historians share the same responsibility to weigh the evidence: "There is little neutral or value-free data available to us; we must use our judgment, our sense of the parameters of interpretive possibilities, of what is plausible and what is not. And we must be willing to admit in some cases that we cannot explain an act or an event or a motive" (viii). Brucker's thoughtful and judicious negotiation of the evidence in the case of this fateful marriage upholds these standards. Even more, he has produced a highly readable and compelling story that has provided students for the last twenty years with a brief glimpse of what life was actually like for women in Renaissance Florence. Students for many years to come will continue to delight in the love, passion, and deceit surrounding the lives of Lusanna and Giovanni.

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## END NOTES

1. Guido Ruggiero, rev. of *Giovanni and Lusanna: Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence* by Gene Brucker *Speculum* 62.4 (1987): 912.
2. David Herlihy, rev. of *Giovanni and Lusanna: Love and Marriage in Renaissance Florence* by Gene Brucker. *American Historical Review* 92.1 (1987): 163.
3. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983); Judith Brown, *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986); Judith Bennett, *A Medieval Life: Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock, c. 1295-1344* (Boston: McGraw-Hill College, 1999); Robert Bartlett, *The Hanged Man: A Story of Miracle, Memory, and Colonialism in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004).
4. Thomas Kuehn, "Reading Microhistory: The Example of *Giovanni and Lusanna*," *Journal of Modern History* 61 (1989): 514-34.

