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Book Review of Merchant Writers: Florentine memoirs from the Middle Ages and Renaissance

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in inspiration for Homer), and this entails altering texts so that the weak-tongued Thersites becomes an artful satirist. Milton's use of Homer (chap. 5), more overtly theological and political in tone, takes aim at both royalists and the failed commonwealth. For Milton the Iliad becomes the antidote to bickering councils whose ineptitude leads to a return of monarchy. Councils too often devolved into ambition, and ambition above all distorts perspective. Here the famous line voiced by Satan about better to reign in Hell directly contradicts Achilles's lament to Odysseus that he would rather be a servant in the land of the living than to be a king in the grave, something his own contentiousness had brought upon him. This is not to say that Milton seeks irenic docility, as his enumerated virtues leave out hope, for it can lead to idleness arising from complacency, and thus, in keeping with a theme of the chapter, humans must keep on the razor's edge, Milton's seeming golden mean.

Wolfe ends with Hobbes, who spent his latter years, barred from publishing on politics, translating Homer. Hobbes's Homer is the consummate monarchist, valorizing the character of Agamemnon, editing out any hint that any of Homer's characters (e.g., Achilles in the contention with Agamemnon over Brise伊斯) were his equal. Further, Hobbes emphasizes the futility of council if it exists for any other reason than for a covenant with its Leviathan, wherein said council acknowledges that it also is nothing other than just an iteration of the war of all. Hobbes's Agamemnon becomes Leviathan even to the point that he is the dispenser and source of property. In closing, I loved this text: a wonderful read, delightfully informative, and the kind of scholarship to which the academy should aspire.

Merchant Writers: Florentine Memoirs from the Middle Ages and Renaissance.
Vittore Branca. Trans. Murtha Baca.
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. vii + 407 pp. $75.00.

Reviewed by: Brian Jeffrey Maxson
East Tennessee State University

In 1986 the influential Italian historian Vittore Branca published his Mercanti Scrittori (Milan: Rusconi), a work that edited several unpublished Florentine ricordanze from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. For thirty years that book has been well thumbed by historians of the period for its editions of important texts by Giovanni Morelli, Buonaccorso Pitti, Bernardo Machiavelli, and others. Merchant Writers is a full translation by Murtha Baca of this important text for the Lorenzo da Ponte Italian Library, a growing series of books that features new English translations of significant Italian historical works. Baca's translation is lively, while the content of these ricordanze is so rich and accessible that they not only can provide an introduction to late medieval history to newcomers, but they also continually reveal new insights even to readers already familiar with these texts.

Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Florence is somewhat unique in its preservation of hundreds of ricordanze across the city's archives and libraries. Some of these texts are account books of credits and debits spanning months, years, or even decades. Others intermix financial matters with occasional notes on major family events (such as births and marriages) and major civic events (such as a joust held to commemorate a peace treaty, or a visit to the city by the pope, for example). Still others blur the boundaries between formal history writing and family record keeping, as an author involved in civic affairs recounts both the major political developments in and outside Florence in addition to the family's role in those events. Over the past sixty years historians have used these ricordanze for
seemingly every kind of study and from every type of methodological approach. Additionally, their inherent interest and their idiosyncrasy has led to the publication of many of the most striking examples in their original Italian. Of these, a handful of exceptional examples have been translated into English, typically in high-quality, partial editions designed for the classroom. The most well-known example is undoubtedly Gene Brucker's *Two Memoirs of Renaissance Florence* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), a book that translates large portions of the *ricordanze* by the Florentine patrician, gambler, and adventurer Buonaccorso Pitti, as well as those by Gregorio Dati, a social riser and recorder of more mundane births, marriages, and civic offices held. Another popular example is a partial translation of *Mer­chant scrittori* in 1999, also by Murtha Baca (*Merchant Writers of the Italian Renaissance* [New York: Marsilio Publishers]) which featured a limited sample of the juiciest highlights from that much longer work. Now, *Merchant Writers* provides English readers with the full text; it is a welcome development for Anglo readers intrigued by these shorter excerpts but who previously had few options for further reading in English.

*Merchant Writers* contains ten different *ricordanze* by fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Florentines; however, the majority of the text is taken up by accounts by Paolo da Certaldo, who was an acquaintance of Boccaccio; Domenico Morelli, who was active in the years surrounding the turn of the fifteenth century; and Buonaccorso Pitti, who was Morelli's contemporary. Paolo da Certaldo's text consists of 388 pieces of advice and witicisms on most aspects of late fourteenth-century life. Giovanni Morelli's text combines a history of the Morelli family, biographical profiles of Morelli's ancestors, and a history of Florence during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, particularly, but not exclusively, pertaining to events of war and diplomacy. Buonaccorso Pitti's well-known diary follows. Here Pitti details his many adventures in Italy, France, and beyond as a merchant, gambler, and familiar of the most powerful French nobles. Several shorter texts are also included in *Merchant Writers*. A text by Domenico Lenzzi details government efforts to control grain prices during a time of famine in 1329. Donato Velluti describes his rise to favor and his distancing himself from the Duke of Athens in Florence in the 1340s. Goro Dati describes his business dealings in Valencia as well as his moral vows at the turn of the fifteenth century. Around the same time Francesco Datini's will provides for the establishment of a secular home for the poor in Prato. Bernardo Machiavelli's text describes efforts to cover up an unintended pregnancy of an unmarried servant girl, as well as Bernardo's efforts to buy and bind books, and to educate his sons (most notably, a young Niccolò Machiavelli). The book concludes with a biographical portrait of Vittore Branca, the original editor of these texts and a leading historian of Boccaccio during the twentieth century.

This book will deservedly introduce more readers to the fascinating *ricordanze* left behind by Renaissance Florentine merchants. The book is designed for general readers and as such is generally light on notes and bibliographical references. At times minor errors appear in the footnotes, such as the wrong title for a secondary citation or the confusion of two different Florentines by the same name. Another quibble is that it is impossible to tell where a text has been excerpted and where it has been included in full: compare, for example, the Brucker edition of Gregorio Dati's diary with the much shorter version published here. But these critiques are overshadowed by this book's true accomplishments: For non-specialists, this translation introduces a vast body of writings, most of which were previously inaccessible for readers without Italian. As such, the book will hopefully lead new people to the exciting world of late medieval and Renaissance Italy, to the original Italian texts, and then, ultimately, to the archives and libraries themselves. It is hoped that
a paperback version for classroom use (similar to Lauro Martines and Murtha Baca’s *An Italian Renaissance Sextet* [New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1994] in the same series) will soon follow.

The Great Siege of Malta: The Epic Battle Between the Ottoman Empire and the Knights of St. John. Bruce Ware Allen.

**REVIEWED BY:** Ronald H. Fritze
Athens State University

The siege of Malta in 1565 is a story of high drama, heroism, endurance, and the fog of war. It is a story that has been told before but it is also a story worth retelling. That is what Bruce Ware Allen does in his new account of the siege. The siege lasted for four months from the middle of May through the middle of September. It was an excruciating four months full of vicious fighting conducted in the grueling heat of a Mediterranean summer.

Allen quite rightly does not jump right into the siege. Forty percent of the book deals with the lead-up to the Turkish attack. The Ottoman sultan Suleiman the Magnificent’s decision to attack Malta was a long time in the making. Many considerations went into his decision. The sixteenth-century Mediterranean was not a safe place to sail; it was infested with corsairs or pirates, both Muslim and Christian, who preyed on merchant ships and coastal towns of the opposite religion. The Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, also known as the Knights Hospitaller, were counted among the most active and aggressive of the corsairs. After they were driven out of the last Crusader enclave at Acre in 1291, they set up their headquarters on the pleasant isle of Rhodes, which also happened to be one of the most heavily fortified places on earth at that time. There they raided Muslim shipping in the Mediterranean as the power of the Ottoman Turks grew. In 1480, the Ottoman sultan Mehmet II tried but failed to capture Rhodes. Suleiman the Magnificent made a second assault on Rhodes in 1521 and succeeded, forcing the Knights to evacuate their stronghold. Ultimately the Emperor Charles V gave them Malta for their new home.

Meanwhile, Charles V, who was both Holy Roman Emperor and king of Spain with vast possessions in Italy, came into increasing conflict with Ottoman expansionism in the Balkans and the Mediterranean. His allies were the Papacy, Genoa, and the Knights of St. John, while Venice and France engaged in either neutrality or veiled pro-Ottoman actions. The Knights were intrepid and ruthless predators, and in the spring of 1564 managed to capture the Ottoman royal galleon, *Sultana*, in the course of a trading voyage. It was a double blow and insult to the Ottoman court. Besides being Suleiman’s personal property, the *Sultana* had been full of valuable cargo belonging to Suleiman’s daughter Mihrimah, the eunuchs of the Harem, and various concubines. The Knights had made enemies of people who had intimate access to the ear of Suleiman. Strategic considerations also made Malta a worthy target for Ottoman aggression; its strategic location would provide Suleiman a commanding position against the Christian nations of the Mediterranean and it would allow him to exercise greater control of his independent-minded North African clients and vassals.

An Ottoman fleet larger than the Spanish Armada was sent against Malta under the joint command of Piali Pasha over the fleet and the vizier Mustapha Pasha over the army. The great Muslim corsair leader Turgut would join them with additional thousands of North African troops. Joint command proved to be problematic with Piali and Mustapha