



Review: Jennifer Mara DeSilva (ed.), *The Borgia Family, Rumour and Representation* (2020)

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Source: *Midlands Historical Review*, Book Review

Published: 08/11/23

URL:

<http://www.midlandshistoricalreview.com/jennifer-mara-desilva-ed-the-borgia-family-rumour-and-representation-2020>

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The Borgias are amongst the most notorious families in history and their sordid legacy has been a source of interest to historians for centuries. Indeed, a new history of the Borgia family appears in Italian Renaissance section of book shops every few years and all of these additions to the vast corpus of Borgia historiography inevitably tackle the question of the Borgia's legendary reputation. Tales of corruption, poison, and incest have elicited morbid fascination and forensic historical investigation in equal measure with the most recent scholarly examination of the Borgia myth being *The Borgia Family, Rumour and Representation* edited by Jennifer Mara DeSilva.

This collection of essays forms a fairly comprehensive investigation of the many aspects of the Borgia legend. It draws upon the expertise of twelve researchers who have worked on different aspects of this dark legacy from Cesare's alleged assassination of his own brother and Lucrezia's supposed incestuous relationships, to their father Pope Alexander VI purportedly buying the papacy and later accidentally poisoning himself in a plot to murder a cardinal. It is important to note however that this book is not an introductory work. Much of the book presupposes some familiarity with the history of the Borgias and the legends that surround them (two topics that invariably come hand in hand) in order to fully appreciate the scholarship present here. As well possessing as a general working knowledge of the history of the Borgias, much of *Rumour and Representation* is enhanced by a familiarity of certain seminal scholarly works like that of Michael Mallett which is clearly in the mind of many of the authors who contribute to this volume and remains to this day a good entry-point to the history of the Borgias.¹

Rumour and Representation consists of thirteen chapters, beginning with an overview of the legend of the Borgias by Jennifer Mara Desilva which serves as an introductory chapter for the rest of the book. The next three chapter concern

¹ M. Mallett, *The Borgias, The Rise and Fall of a Renaissance Dynasty* (London, 1971).

sexuality and honour; the first by Loek Luiten covers the relationship between the Borgia and Farnese families, while the next two chapters by Diane Y.F. Ghirardo and Sergio Costola examine Lucrezia Borgia's honour and her time at the Este court respectively. Chapter Five by William Keene Thompson regards the development of and reaction to a roleplaying game based on the 1492 papal conclave, which is followed by a chapter by Roger Gill on the *Appartamento Borgia* in the Vatican, and then an examination on depictions of Pope Alexander VI as the Devil by Katherine Fellows. The collection then takes a literary turn as Stella Fletcher examines the Borgias in English literature in Chapter Eight, before moving on to Hispanic literature in a chapter on the *Ballad of the Death of the Duke of Gandia* by Clara Marías. Three chapters then follow examining the life, death, and afterlives of Cesare Borgia; in the first Lucinda Byatt considers the reputation of the infamous Duke, followed by an examination of his death and burials by Alexander Mizumoto-Gitter, and Jennifer Mara Desilva adds another chapter to the collection with a look at Cesare Borgia in film. The collection then closes with a chapter written by Amanda Madden on the afterlife of the Borgias in the *Assassin's Creed* series of video games.

The chapters of this edited collection were developed from papers given at a conference that took place on the 9-12th July 2018 at the University of Winchester on the theme 'Sex, Sin and Madness: the Borgia Family in Early Modern and Modern Popular Culture'. This accounts for the wide range of topics encountered in this book, a skew towards discussions of popular culture, and a noticeable variance in the length of different chapters. The contributors range from doctoral students to well-established historians of the Italian Renaissance, indicating a continuing interest in the Borgias from across a range of generations of historians. These new studies pertaining to the Borgias give readers of this volume an insight into the most up-to-date scholarship on the family across a range of fields.

The strength of this approach is that the different chapters of this collection are of use to a range of different historians – there is valuable scholarship here for any researcher of the Borgias, regardless of their speciality, and there is also plenty of material for researchers of other topics who may wish to add discussions of Borgian history to their work. For example, Chapter Seven by Katharine Fellows on

Pope Alexander VI and the Devil, is useful to historians of the Reformation, while scholars working on games and history will find insightful material in Chapters Five and Thirteen by William Keene Thompson and Amanda Madden respectively. The fifth chapter being of particular interest to teaching and the thirteenth to the presentation of history in digital games. The chapters are uniformly well referenced with a good number of images throughout which help to bring the discussion of the Borgia legacy to life. Chapter 9 written by Clara Marías concerning the *Ballad of the Death of the Duke of Gandía* is especially replete with images of manuscripts and artwork, which add significant value to the presentation of her argument.

This edited collection represents an important chapter in the history of the Borgias. Indeed, it is unfathomable for anyone writing on the family to not cite several of the chapters from this book in their work going forward. The breadth of knowledge and depth of interrogation of sources is impressive, though it is worth noting that this book is perhaps best taken in conjunction with J.N. Hillgarth's 1996 article on the image of Pope Alexander VI and Cesare Borgia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.² This article remains one of the most comprehensive discussions of the Borgia legend within the centuries immediately following their deaths. Covering a large geographic field and a range of different sources, Hillgarth's article is a treasure trove of sources and it is evident that several authors in this book used this article as a starting point for their own research. While *Rumour and Representation* does build on many aspects of Hillgarth's work, it does not eclipse it entirely, and there also remains space for further investigations on the Borgia legend, especially in different geographic contexts.

The book treats the legend of the Borgias for what it is: sensationalist rumours born from the myriad motives of those who despised these individuals or sought to profit from their sordid representations. While it may be wide-ranging, well-researched, and representative of new scholarship in this field, it is hard to imagine that *Rumour and Representation* will be the last word on the Borgia legacy. The dark reputation of these infamous figures will continue to attract interest from

² J.N. Hillgarth, 'The Image of Alexander VI and Cesare Borgia in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries' in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 1996, Vol. 59 (1996); pp. 119-129.

both academic and popular sources for years to come, and one can only imagine that in ten years time popular culture will have spawned enough material to warrant further chapters in this book.