Conversion on the Scaffold: Italian Practices in European Context

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Rome 1581: Montaigne and the Execution of the Bandit Catena

11 January 1581 was a fine day in Rome. That morning, Michel de Montaigne, recently arrived in the city, had gone out on horseback when he encountered a procession accompanying a condemned man to execution. Montaigne stopped to watch the sight.¹ It was Catena, a bandit notorious for the number of murders to his name: as many as 54, according to the Avvisi di Roma (‘News from Rome’) printed a few days later. In his Journal, the travel diary that Montaigne’s secretary kept on his behalf, every detail of the scene that morning was carefully described. France too had its own public executions at the time, but they were different. And it was the differences that Montaigne noted down: what struck him, in comparison with French customs, was the display of piety in the Roman ritual, which transformed the city into a scene of conversion.

At the head of the procession was a large crucifix draped in a black cloth, and the condemned man was surrounded and followed by a good number of men dressed in a cowl, their eyes covered by a hood of the same fabric. Montaigne was told they were gentlemen and persons of standing. They were members of a confraternity that accompanied criminals along the route to the scaffold and buried their bodies. Two of them were next to Catena on the cart taking him to the place of execution. The others followed on foot. Catena was a swarthy man around thirty years old, a gang leader notorious throughout Italy for his crimes, which, it was said, included killing two Capuchin friars after forcing them to deny God.² All this seemed hard to imagine from his present appearance, concentrated on prayer and with a devout and contrite demeanour. He enjoyed


² Thus read the Avvisi di Roma dated January 11, quoted in D’Ancona A. (ed.), L’Italia alla fine del secolo XVI: Giornale di viaggio di Michele di Montaigne in Italia nel 1580 e 1581 (Città di Castello: 1889) 232. According to the Avvisi dated January 14, there were more than 30,000 spectators.
a protected status in the streets set aside for the ritual. The onlookers could not see his face, because the two members of the confraternity concealed him from them behind an image of Christ: they let him kiss it continually while they spoke to him of holy matters. And they held it up in front of him right up to the moment, when, before the Sant'Angelo Bridge—the place set aside for executions—the executioner let him drop from the scaffold and hanged him. There was nothing remarkable about his death: he made no movement and said nothing. Immediately afterwards, his body was taken and quartered. Once the sentence had been carried out, one or two Jesuits or other members of religious orders clambered onto some makeshift pulpits and began preaching, inviting the large crowd in attendance to meditate on the example of the religious death they had just witnessed.

Montaigne observed that the death penalty was ‘simple’ in Rome (he may have been thinking of the crueller scenes in France) and that the ‘rudesse’ came after the execution. The violence of the Italian executioner was unleashed after death on the condemned man’s body, and those present, who had watched the hanging in silence, cried out feelingly each time the axe cut into the corpse. He underlined this observation when he described the incident again in chapter 11 of Book II of the *Essais* for the 1582 edition, and drew from it some reflections on the death penalty to which we shall return. Here it is worth noting that Montaigne did not dwell on the issue of religious comfort. As a recent scholar has astutely pointed out, ‘one of the most striking aspects of Montaigne’s engagement with pain is its almost complete lack of a religious dimension’.3

But, meanwhile, the travel notes collected in his *Journal* provide an opportunity for seeing through a curious traveller’s eyes a scene that was common in Rome and other Italian cities: that of executions and their close connection with conversion. At the time of this document confraternities of devout laymen, which had their own churches and chaplains, organized the executions in Italian cities. They had to prepare the condemned man for his fate, staying with him the night before and offering religious consolation, persuading him to accept the death penalty as a penance for his sins and as a decree of divine providence that offered him the chance of dying forgiven and ready to rise to heavenly bliss.

In the case of the lowest criminals and murderers, it was an itinerary that was made to coincide with a conversion. If the comforters’ arguments had an effect, then the priest would come forward to hear the penitent’s confession.

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3 Van Dijkhuizen J.F., *Pain and Compassion in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: 2012) 216. I thank Prof. Wietse de Boer for calling my attention to this work.