NOTES FOR A HISTORY OF THE PRINTED FESTIVAL BOOK IN RENAISSANCE ITALY

Summary

Around 250 festival accounts were printed in Italy during the Renaissance. There was much variety in form and content, ranging from short journalistic bulletins reporting single events to elaborate accounts of extended wedding entertainments or whole triumphal progresses. Illustrative woodcuts remained rare even late in the period. Official, commissioned accounts were less numerous than free-lance ones.

The rich printed festival accounts and illustrations that appeared all over Western Europe in the seventeenth century drew upon more than a hundred years of more modest development after the invention of printing. Most of this early development took place in Italy, in France, and in Flanders rather than in Germany or Scandinavia, not, certainly, because of a superiority in printing technology but because of cultural differences. Italy had the central role in large part because of its precursory, avant-garde role in classical revival, which affected pageantry along with all artistic activities, and also because of the richness of its court life and the variety of its civic forms. (It is true that Germany, with its small princely courts and vigorous free imperial cities, offered some competition in the second distinction.) Italian princes and republican governments alike, not to mention the papacy, became eager to record the public manifestations of their civic spirit and magnificenza.

There were also, of course, manuscript antecedents, both for the printed narrations of pageantry and for the woodcut illustrations. Elaborate, decorated accounts had sometimes been drawn up by hand for the private libraries of the protagonists or as a gift for august personages who had not been present (and whom one might

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I use the term “festival book” to indicate separately printed accounts of several kinds of civic events, of which the principal are: (1) triumphal entries or parades, (2) dynastic marriage celebrations, and (3) state baptisms and funerals.

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be eager to impress). A particularly handsome example in the Herzog August Bibliothek at Wolfenbüttel is an account of the entry of Francis I into Lyon in 1515, with miniature illustrations. Republican signoria might also keep records of festive events, albeit drier ones. Records in city halls were meant principally, perhaps, to provide a source of ceremonial precedents for future occasions, although there must have been also some desire to preserve the memory of special civic glories. Richard Trexler has edited the Florentine Libro cerimoniale dealing with local pageantry between 1450 and 1522.

A different sort of report was drawn up by traveling citizens for the information of their home governments. Venetians, ambassadors or just merchants, were particularly zealous in sending accounts of events of pageantry all over Europe so that the Signoria at home could comb them for clues about changing alliances and other political developments. In the period covered by Marin Sanudo’s published Diarii, 1496-1533, Venetian travelers informed the government of St. Mark about Louis XII’s various entries into Milan and into Genoa, the pomp of Francis I’s meeting with Leo X in Bologna, the latter’s reception in his home city of Florence, several events of pageantry during Charles V’s meeting with Clement VII at Bologna in 1529-30, and a host of other festive occasions, both in Italy and abroad. Many additional reports of this sort concerning different years may still be seen in manuscript at the Venetian Archivio di Stato. Similar epistolary accounts, now generally called avvisi, are in the state archives of Florence, Milan, Genoa, Modena (regarding also Ferrara), and, presumably, in the Archivio Segreto of the Vatican. Avvisi meant for the court of Urbino have found their way into the Vatican Library, along, surprisingly, with a number of others destined for the Fugger company’s headquarters in Augsburg.

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2 Ms. Extravagantes 86.4.