The book by Monica Azzolini, *The Duke and the Stars* deals, as its subtitle *Astrology and Politics in Renaissance Milan* indicates, with a specific aspect of the Renaissance political, social, and intellectual history, that is, with the connection between astrology and everyday life in one of the political, cultural and economic centres of the Renaissance Italy. The model on which Azzolini bases this connection is Milan’s ruling family, the Sforzas, in the second half of the fifteenth century. The main source from which Azzolini draws is abundant material from the “Archivio di Stato di Milano,” which Azzolini discovered in the summer of 2002. These documents provide a good insight into the social, political, diplomatic, military, and private life of the Sforzas, aspects that were all tinged by, and interwoven with, astrological influences.

This book presents a continuation of Azzolini’s studies of specific aspects of Renaissance life. Previous essays such as “The Political Uses of Astrology: Predicting the Illness and Death of Princes, Kings and Popes in the Italian Renaissance,” “Anatomy of a Dispute: Leonardo, Pacioli and Scientific Courtly Entertainment in Renaissance Milan,” and “Leonardo da Vinci’s Anatomical Studies in Milan: A Re-examination of Sites and Sources” announce the themes that constitute the core of her new book. However, the book also introduces some new elements. The focus now lies on one family, its power, and the role astrology played in the political and private decisions of its members. The book is replete with references to particular cases and events in and around the family Sforza, which with its many concrete examples give special weight to its claims, including the thesis that astrology was more consulted in times of crisis than otherwise.

The book is divided into five parts, which provide independent case studies. The chapter titles are: “The Science of the Stars: Learning Astrology at the University of Pavia,” “The Making of a Dynasty: Astrology under Bianca Maria Visconti and Francesco Sforza,” “Astrology Is Destiny: Galeazzo Maria Sforza and the Political Uses of Astrology,” “The Star-Crossed Duke: Gian Galeazzo Sforza and Medical Astrology,” and “The Viper and the Eagle: The Rise and Fall of Astrology under Ludovico Sforza.”

The principal case study is based on the newly discovered archival material, which contains data about books that circulated among professors and students as well as inventory lists from the library. On the basis of these sources, Azzolini tries to reconstruct the connection between the *Corpus Aristotelicum*...
and the curricula of astrology at the University of Pavia, where astrology was a part of the educational system. The Sforzas were tightly connected with that university, mostly as patrons, benefactors, and service users of physicians and astrologers affiliated with it – their services were much sought after at the court of the members of this powerful family. Astrology was particularly used in medicine (diagnosis, prognosis and treatment of illness) and in politics. In politics, astrology had a wide application, including private aspects of life such as choosing a spouse or the determination of the best time for the consummation of a marriage and the conception of offspring. The author shows that all forms of astrology used by Renaissance political figures in public life, i.e., the astrological intelligence, was a generally accepted as a completely legitimate source of information in the process of decision-making.

Azzolini insists on a holistic representation and understanding of history: a complete understanding of singular historical events consists not only in a particular understanding of the events themselves, but also in a general view of all influences that contributed to the causal chain leading to and from these events. As a consequence, this book also questions the adequacy of our traditional historiographic understanding of Renaissance history, especially in its military, diplomatic, and political dimensions, given that it tends to neglect several influential aspects such as the ‘spirit of the time’ and the variety of ‘worldviews’. Although not all Renaissance political figures embraced astrology, it clearly was part of a general worldview according to which celestial objects and events have a crucial influence on the terrestrial sphere. To be sure, there is also evidence for a weakening of astral determinism with its limited view of human freedom, resulting in the view that “astrological influences inclined but not necessitated men to act in a certain way” (p. 185).

In her endeavour to place astrology in its objectively valid historical context, Azzolini spends much energy on a careful interpretation of original archival documents, mostly correspondence, and on a contextualisation of political circumstances with respect to the presence of astrology. Such a careful scrutiny of the sources documents that astrology played an uneven role for the Sforza family. Francesco, for example, relied on astrological predictions far less than his sons, Galeazzo and Ludovico. In her work, Azzolini combines a macro-perspective with a micro-perspective, showcasing aspects of personal relations that existed between patrons or users of astrological information, on the one hand, and scholars who produced mathematical calculations and made interpretation of celestial inclination.

Leaving aside some shortcomings in the literary style, thanks to Azzolini’s scholarly precision and meticulousness, which she combines with a holistic