

## Book Review: Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy by James Hankins

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### Recommended Citation

Tomaselli, Michael J. () "Book Review: Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy by James Hankins," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 95 : Iss. 3 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol95/iss3/9>

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**Hankins, James, *Virtue Politics: Soulcraft and Statecraft in Renaissance Italy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019. 768 pages. Hardcover, \$45.00.**

Harvard University Professor of History James Hankins has produced both the most comprehensive study of political thought in the humanist tradition and a scathing indictment of the current research paradigms of Renaissance Studies. Hankins begins *Virtue Politics* by carefully articulating the purpose of his work and the context in which it was created. In the introduction, the author explains that *Virtue Politics* began as an attempt to connect a series of lectures made over the past fifteen years on varying perspectives on the humanist tradition. While this would typically create an unnecessarily exhaustive approach, Hankins provides exact context for the work as a careful articulation of the cumulative weaknesses within Renaissance historiography. From that point, Hankins urges academics to look to past sources previously labeled as empty rhetoric for a deeper understanding of the cultural standards present in Renaissance Italy. Previous works had dismissed rhetoric as a hyperbolic conversation positioned as propaganda of the age. While Hankins acknowledges the underlying interpretation of the fallacies found in the hyperboles of the humanist tradition, he makes the argument that the dismissal of the extremes of the statements does not require their complete expulsion.

In order to support his plea, Hankins provides a near onslaught of examples of how different interpretations can be illuminated by the previously neglected sources. *Virtue Politics* is a work that can be grouped by stages of Hankins' argument. Hankins covers larger abstractions in the beginning of the work as a means to ease the reader into the idea of more specific interpretations later in the work. *Virtue Politics* begins with foundational figures in the humanist tradition, like Petrarch, and assumptions commonly made in reference to the political thought of the time. Hankins continues to navigate different abstractions such as the role of the state, or how

to define the concept of the “republic.” These are subjects with a wide range of accepted interpretations, making it simple to place another among them.

Once the groundwork is laid, Hankins examines nine different humanist thinkers over the course of the subsequent twelve chapters. Hankins moves from characters such as Boccaccio, who wrote prolifically on the hypocrisy and dangers of status to the rational mind (p. 193). Hankins then moves his comparison to Leonardo Bruni’s *History of the Florentine People*, through Cyriac of Ancona’s views on democracy (p. 305) and Francesco Fidelfo’s views on the Spartan Republic (p. 360). These examples work to show the variety of interpretations that can be found by analyzing the connections made. By doing so, Hankins illustrates how specific examples of these previously neglected sources can logically reveal new information. Hankins concludes with the exception that proves his hypothetical blindness in the field: Niccolò Machiavelli. Machiavelli was a figure that was so intricately connected to the political machinations in Florence that he was the natural lens of study for the field of Renaissance Studies. By including this perspective, Hankins chooses to highlight that the field of Renaissance Studies has been attempting to answer important questions, but by limiting the sources used the field, has unintentionally sterilized interpretations.

*Virtue Politics* is best understood in the context of the academic discourse in the field of Renaissance Studies. Hankins expertly combats a variety of scholarly criticisms not likely suited for general audiences outside of the field. This does not undermine the validity of the work, but prefaces appropriate context in which it should be read. Contextually, Hankins builds his work as the ideal primer for a historiographic study of the Renaissance, wherein the reader can see the complete conversation to which Hankins is speaking. Hankins’ work will prove to be the cornerstone of historiography courses for years to come.

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