own St. Luke. It is a strategic and clever positioning of the artist in that it both praises his patron's taste and in doing so fully incorporates himself to his patron's aesthetic.

Sight and visuality in Netherlandish painting is not a new topic, but it is observations such as the loggia reflection that make this book both refreshing and useful. Rothstein puts the pictorial density in the context of contemporary thought, drawing heavily on writers such as Ruusbroec, Grote, and Gerson. (It is Gerson whose idea of the *vitae* described above provides the framework for chapter three).

Although there are common threads among the chapters, one still wonders what, aside from their renown, links these paintings in such a way that they would comprise a single book. The answer, and it is an enlightening one, is not simply that the term “reflexivity” appears in every chapter. It is that the reflexive elements of the paintings or “play signals” (184) have become an intellectual point which draws artist and patron closer from their opposite sides of the transaction. Or, in Rothstein’s own words: “In each case, painters promote themselves by advancing shared rather than competing expectations [of their patrons], and by underscoring the efficacy of their responses to the challenges posed by those expectations” (187).


Thomas V. Cohen’s *Love and Death in Renaissance Italy* is a compelling and stimulating book which aims to blend historical accuracy with a critical investigation into the social life of Renaissance Italy. Departing from a careful examination of the court papers of the Roman governor of justice during the second half of the sixteenth century, the author singles out six piquant cases of awful crimes and illicit passions taken from the state archives of Rome. The book’s strength is to illustrate every single trial in an individual chapter, introduced by a narrative reconstruction of the historical facts which are then followed by brief excerpts from the actual written proceedings. As the author rightly points out, “these court papers are marvellous cultural documents; they open windows onto modes of thought and speech and tell
precious stories about how sixteenth-century Italy worked’ (4). The task, however, is replete with obstacles and Cohen is perfectly aware of the difficulties that arise in deciphering most of the trials: “they have meandering lines of twisting plot and unexpected knots where several fates entwined and snarled. At the center, often, is some mishap or catastrophe, the corpus delicti that spurred the trial. And all around the crisis lie the fragments of many lives, some tightly bound and others linked only by the caprice of connection to the crime” (5). These important issues may explain why each chapter begins with the case’s historical reconstruction reported in narrative style. In the manner of an omniscient narrator, Cohen introduces the protagonists’ different roles, describes their social ambience, customs, and behaviours, and exposes their vices by recounting their intimate desires and anxieties. In doing so, the writer succeeds in drawing the reader’s attention as a proven story-teller by translating the forensic if cold description of a criminal trial into novella-like terms.

After this fictional introduction, the book’s style often turns to the first person and allows the protagonists to speak in their own words. This shift in the narration proves to be particularly effective in that it draws directly from the voices of the real characters, reciting their speeches almost verbatim. Thus brief abstracts from the court papers are skilfully exploited as direct testimonial evidence and put into the mouths of the very same protagonists. This historical documentation helps Cohen to delve into some of the most intricate cases of sexual crimes in the domestic life of Renaissance Italy, evaluating at the end of each trial the actual roles and responsibilities of both the victims and the guilty and even making a moral lesson out of them for the reader’s benefit.

Among the most notorious criminal cases taken into account from the state archives in Rome after 1550, we are told of betrayed husbands prosecuted for murdering their adulterous wives, of bloody revenges for sexual abuse, of rapes with illicit appropriation and robbery, all facts that shook the very heart of the city’s social and domestic life and seem to recall that kind of Italian novelistic literature that inspired the plot structure of much Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. In writing all this, as the author concedes, “readers will sometimes feel as if they have strayed into a story by Boccaccio, Sercambi, Bandello, or some other Italian short-story writer. The old novelle imitated life. Meanwhile, life itself, at some remove, aped novelle’” (13).

Among the author’s strategies as both historian and narrator, there are in
the book’s structure several intervals used for instructive comments, almost a devised space for a moral reassessment, placed either at the beginning or at the end of each chapter in order to offer a moral lesson. The close reading of the legal documents of the Roman court proceedings thus becomes an important occasion for reconsidering the social life of the most famous city-state of Renaissance Italy in light of some uncovered cases of forbidden desires and unrestrained vices which characterized part of the city’s social history. Cohen’s own comments implicitly emphasize this role of the historian as a moralist and teacher, a notion that is also graphically expressed in italics as an introductory note or coda to each chapter. These remarks also serve as the necessary link with the subsequent parts of the book, binding them all into a unifying didactic pattern. This methodological feature in the book’s strategy may also arouse some queries in the reader’s mind. Can the often fragmented pieces built up to construct each story always be sufficiently complete and instructive to become a suitable subject for didactic purposes? And what is the author’s own assurance for a faithful historical reconstruction? The truth is that throughout the book Cohen turns out to be both an objective historian and too sympathetic a writer. And this may be interpreted as both a flaw and a demonstration of his achievement. He provides his narratives with painstaking details and appears genuinely struck by the human suffering which covers at times the sordid crimes he discloses from the secrets of the court archives. Cohen’s effort is surely praiseworthy, and the final description of the “textuality of text,” albeit widely defined and unisolated from its historical contexts, is a model for young scholars. Elegantly written as a collection of thrilling short stories and erotic novelle, this book is at times much more appealing owing to the alluring efficacy of its narrative style and didactic strategy than to the real success of its historical documentation. But this is perhaps the book’s real achievement as well as the author’s most natural aspiration.


The omnipresent Barberini bees depicted on the surfaces of major Ba-