

## John Shearman: Raphael in Early Modern Sources

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It was in Rome in 1983, at the unforgettable conference commemorating the five-hundredth anniversary of Raphael's birth, that John Shearman's project to produce a revised and expanded version of Golzio's classic book, *Raffaello nei documenti*, was publicly announced. Twenty years later, we hold the remarkable results of that undertaking in our hands, and mourn the loss of its author – the only person who would ever have taken it on, or have had the intellectual stamina and physical perseverance to complete it. Probably only those closest to John know what a toll the project took on his health. It has proved to be the last, crowning achievement of his publishing career. Reflecting on that extraordinary career, Nicholas Penny and I, writing John's obituary for *The Burlington Magazine*, were struck anew by the *exemplary* character of his books, each of which in some way set new standards for its genre: the two-volume monograph on Andrea del Sarto, described by an exacting critic, John Pope-Hennessy, as "the fullest and most systematic catalogue raisonné yet produced", the brilliantly stimulating short book redefining Mannerism, the exhaustive study of the Raphael Tapestry Cartoons, the Catalogue of the Early Italian Pictures at the Royal Collection, and *Only Connect*, John's Mellon Lectures at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, which reconfigured the ways we talk about the triangular relationship between artist, viewer, and work of art. And now *Raphael in Early Modern Sources, 1483–1600*, the collection of primary documents and Renaissance source material concerning Raphael, which treats the publication of documents as an enterprise of reasoned cataloguing and ruminative interpretation.

It seems that the only category of art-historical book which John did not take on or re-shape to his vision was the exhibition catalogue, which in the last thirty years or so has come to be almost the dominant genre in the field. But this

is no accident, for John grew to dislike more and more the modern mania for the block-buster exhibition, believing it to be largely unjustifiable to move fragile works of art around the world, even in the pursuit of greater art-historical understanding. Thus he was particularly delighted to contribute to the volume on Valerio Belli published by the Centro Palladiano in Vicenza in the year 2000, since this was the 'virtual' catalogue of the type of exhibition he most favoured – one which had never taken place.

In his discussion of the celebrated but possibly fictive letter from Raphael to Castiglione, which he has rechristened 'Signor Conte', John movingly evokes a category of humanistic letters intended as portraits – depictions of minds or souls. John's book, which so sadly proved to be a posthumous publication, in many ways also constitutes a self-portrait. Like all portraits of the recently deceased, it serves to increase our grief but at the same time to mitigate it, reminding us of the extraordinary qualities, the erudition, the charm and the occasionally exasperating idiosyncrasies of the departed friend. It is impossible to read the introduction to the book, itself a highly idiosyncratic essay, without hearing John's voice, as in those reflective preambles to conference papers or lectures, in which, before dazzling his audience with his command of the subject and its literature, he took his colleagues gently but firmly to task for their methodological shortcomings.

John's friends and ex-pupils have spent a good deal of time since last August consoling one another by remembering his characteristic sayings. There was a whole category of Shearmanisms addressed to his graduate students, some of them requiring translation from English into American to become comprehensible to a transatlantic audience. One was that a Ph.D. adviser was "not a fruit machine" (i.e. a "slot machine", in American), in other words that you

could not feed in a coin and expect to receive the jackpot, your research already done for you. Nevertheless, no-one could have been more generous than John as a fount of references to obscure bibliography or unpublished archival sources, usually written in a spidery hand on small scraps of paper, or, latterly, on Post-it stickers. John was in fact the first person I knew to use Post-its and catch on to their scholarly potential, and I remember arriving to stay with him in Princeton in the early 1980s to find the mounds of new books on his coffee table bristling with stickers – he tended to prefer white over yellow. He was always thinking of his students and colleagues as he read, and I was intensely moved to be given by his widow Kathy Brush, when she was clearing the house in Cambridge Massachusetts, one such Post-it apparently addressed to me from beyond the grave. It's perhaps not surprising then, though it is certainly striking and remarkable as one goes through the pages of these Raphael volumes, that so many of John's students and friends have reciprocated his generosity by contributing new documents and citations.

Two of my favourite Shearmanisms were produced by the architectural historian and critic, William Curtis, my friend and contemporary at the Courtauld Institute in London. He remembers John, in his elegant Robert Adam office at Home House in Portman Square, tapping out his pipe on the small bronze copy of Verrocchio's equestrian statue of Colleoni he kept on his desk, and commenting with a little cough: "I'm not sure that would stand in a court of law". Or again, in the Print Room at the British Museum, looking at drawings, and responding to some over-confident suggestion: "Yes, it is quite a good argument but, as in the aviation industry, there should always be more than one strut holding up the wing." The forensic analogy and the reference to aeronautics tap into some of his lifelong preoccupations. He taught us to approach art-historical problems in the spirit of detection, but also to build up our arguments like structural engineers. One of John's preferred hortatory tropes for his graduate students was to tell them that the difference between superficial research and the real thing was like the difference between strip-mining and hewing deep down at the coal face. Well-prepared Ph.D. students should be reaching bedrock, which could mean the works of art, especially seen in the light of technical examination, but also and perhaps above all the archival documents or the original sources. Actually one should add to this the early bibliography – I am not quite sure how to stretch the mining metaphor here, perhaps by evoking the slow progress of the lift bringing both miner and coal back to the surface – for John was increasingly dismayed by art historians' tendency to read only the recent literature. And one of the most remarkable things about the Raphael book is John's ability to locate every past judgment about a document

within its intellectual context in the historiography of the subject.

As John explains in the introduction, the book began as addenda and corrigenda to Golzio, and his computer files were called 'Golzio' right up to the last minute. Vincenzo Golzio's admirable work provided the model for the book's chronological limits, which 'skids to a halt' in 1600, and Golzio also moulded the criteria for what categories of written evidence to include. Thus John has followed Golzio's slightly eccentric decision to treat inscriptions on paintings as documents (but only if they are dated) and has extended this to inscriptions on prints related to Raphael. But he has widened Golzio's net to include sources to do with the completion, reception and use of Raphael's works, and encompassing Raphael's property and family as well as his artistry and its products.

However, John abandoned Golzio's thematic divisions – the physical separation of the earlier book into discrete sections on Raphael's life and work, his poetry, biographies of him, critical writings and encomiastic verse about him – and unified all his sources and documents in chronological order under the known or attributable year of their composition or publication. Each piece has its own commentary in which John explains his interpretation of the text and its implications. Latin or Greek documents with some literary pretensions are translated into English. For each item a formidable bibliography follows, described by John himself as "sometimes of a tiresome and apparently ostentatious length". The 'Signor Conte' letter to Castiglione alone has a bibliography of over 550 items.

John's explicitly stated model for the structure is that of an oeuvre catalogue of works of art – and if this is a catalogue, it is certainly *raisonné*. The alternation of chunks of text and sometimes lengthy commentary – quite a different arrangement from Golzio's minimal footnotes – makes this a much more personal publication than one might at first expect. It is clear that John's judgments are opinions, not the last word on the subject, and that those prepared to do battle with the bibliography are welcome to take up the interpretative challenge. Like all John's books, then, *Raphael in Early Modern Sources* is an exemplary publication which sets new standards for the field. It is clear, however, and John explicitly states this, that he would not have wanted it to be treated as a bible: he would have liked us rather to argue with it on individual points – always supposing our arguments were well grounded – and, above all, to add to it.

The catalogue model extends to the treatment of items taken to be inauthentic, listed under "False documents". In fact, the model here is really more like the category of 'rejected attributions' in a catalogue raisonné, for although there are a large number of evident fakes, quite a few of these rejected items are perfectly genuine documents

which have simply been wrongly attached to Raphael's name. Some recently discovered documents which fall into this category have courteously been included in the main text on the grounds that time is needed for them to be 'digested'.

Mention must be made of the Indices, for these are the key to using the book, especially since documents relating to particular works are not grouped together unless they are chronologically consecutive. The Dean of Harvard, Jeremy Knowles, remembers finding John in his office a year ago hard at work on the index, and expressing surprise that he should be doing this task himself. Characteristically, John's response was couched in architectural terms. The index was the way into the book, and he was not going to build a fine house and then let someone else put in a cheap front door. He would not consign this, or any other substantive part of the project, to a research assistant. But he was, of course, hugely appreciative of the scholarly editorial work done on the manuscript by Julian Kliemann at the Bibliotheca Hertziana and of the care taken with the volumes at Yale University Press. All readers will feel gratitude to them, and also to the Max-Planck-Institut, and the Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft for financial support which has made it possible to produce such handsome books, well-printed in legible type on good paper.

Although John writes in his introduction that the purpose of these volumes is not to gather new material, but to re-evaluate what we already have, this is of course an unduly modest assessment of the myriad discoveries to be found here. Simply in numerical terms, as John puts it, he has been "enabled . . . to enlarge Golzio's corpus of sources from about three hundred and sixty to well over one thousand." Many of these have been published by John and others in the intervening years since the reprint of Golzio's book with addenda in 1971, but there is also a large quantity of real *inediti*. Throughout Raphael's career, adjustments have been made, the context filled in and the record set straight on apparently small but cumulatively important points. It is crucial to know, for example, that the contract for the Monteluce altarpiece can be dated 1505, rather than 1503, and that Raphael became a Scriptor Brevium in 1511, not in 1509.

In comparison with other great High Renaissance artists such as Michelangelo or Titian, the documentary record for Raphael's life and career is quite sparse – which makes it all the more important that every scrap of evidence be as carefully scrutinized as it is here. There are very few surviving contracts for Raphael's paintings, and not very many records of payments to him until the Roman years. There are absolutely no contracts or payments for the large number of works he painted between 1504 and 1508 for Florentine patrons, partly because these were mostly private works and probably executed on the spot. Looking at the

early sections of the first volume reminds one how little we would know of Raphael's development without Vasari's crucial biography.

Considering Raphael's enormous fame in his own lifetime and afterwards, not to mention his friendship with some of the greatest letter writers of his age, what has always seemed so surprising is the paucity of surviving correspondence. Indeed, after John's skeptical eye has been at work – and others have of course been skeptical before him – very few certain letters remain. There are the two Raphael wrote to his uncle Simone Ciarla in Urbino in 1508 and in 1514, and a brief memorandum written to Domenico Alfani on the back of a drawing in Lille of 1507–8. Then, of course, there is the celebrated letter to Leo X on the antiquities of Rome, partially written by Castiglione, which is the subject of the longest and most complex commentary in these volumes. If one compares this scanty record with the four volumes of letters to and from Michelangelo in the exemplary publication by Renzo Ristori and Paola Barocchi, the contrast is instructive in a number of ways. Even if Michelangelo had died as Raphael did at the age of thirty seven, we might still have seventy to eighty letters by him. (That is to say, eighty letters written before the end of 1512 survive.) But of these, only three were written to recipients outside Michelangelo's immediate family: all the rest are to his father and his brother. Raphael had lost both his parents by the age of eleven in 1494, and all his siblings died as small children. Although he addressed Simone Ciarla, as "Carissimo quanto patre" (1508) or "Carissimo in locho de patre" (1514), he evidently did not enjoy writing letters to his maternal uncle (or, perhaps, anyone else?), "considerando", as he complains, "quanto è fastidioso lo scrivere quando non importa". He went on in this same letter to berate his uncle: "voi, che tutto il dì havete la penna in mano e mettite sei mesi da una lettera a l'altra"; it is interesting how much the exasperated tone resembles that of Michelangelo's family letters. Simone died the same year as Raphael, so by this reckoning we might imagine that the two men could have exchanged around eighty letters during their respective lifetimes after Raphael left Urbino. But we have only the two that Raphael sent, and none at all that he received.

Although Raphael several times combined drafts of poetry with drawings, he does not seem to have made a habit, as Michelangelo did, of using abandoned drafts of letters for drawing, even though such drafts must surely have existed, if we may judge from the surviving letter to Simone Ciarla of 1508 (the 1514 one is now lost), which is perfectly penned in an extremely careful hand but contains a curious spelling mistake best explained as an error of transcription. ('profetessa' for 'prefetessa'). The memorandum to Domenico Alfani is on the back of a drawing, but is not an excep-

tion to this rule – for the drawing is actually a squared-up modello sent to Alfani for translation into an altarpiece (now in the Galleria Nazionale dell’Umbria, Perugia).

The relative to whom Raphael probably felt closest was his first cousin Girolamo Vagnini, referred to by Castiglione as his “fratello cugino”. A fragmentary biography of this interesting cleric, also known as “il prete di Raffaello”, can be compiled by using John’s index to refer back to the relevant documents, several of them previously unpublished. Vagnini runs right through Raphael’s career from beginning to end, witnessing, for example, the last payment for the St Nicholas of Tolentino altarpiece in Città di Castello in 1501, and collaborating in the arrangements for the tomb in the Pantheon after Raphael’s sudden death. (He is named on the inscription as “Raphaeli propinquo”, one who supplemented Raphael’s endowment of the chapel, of which he was the first chaplain). Raphael made over his post of papal scriptor in 1518 to Vagnini, who seems to have inherited the artist’s papers, to judge from the fact that Castiglione suggests in 1522 that Vagnini might be able to supply a copy of the letter on the Villa Madama. Vasari knew of him as “un non so chi prete da Urbino suo parente” who, along with Giulio and Penni, inherited Raphael’s “cose”. But then he fades from the record, taking with him his tantalizing inheritance.

The almost total absence of letters means that it would be quite impossible to write a modern biography of Raphael except as an historical novel. It is salutary to remember that we have very little evidence about his character or personality beyond what Vasari tells us, which is certainly coloured by his tendency to impose a moral framework on his biographies. If we exclude the 1504 letter from Giovanna Feltria which describes Raphael as “discreto e gentile” and generally amiable, one of the few clues to his character is the 1514 letter to his uncle, which, it must be said, is disagreeably materialistic, boastful and overbearing (that it now seems mildly sexist is only to be expected). While no-one should be judged by their intolerance of their relatives, and Raphael’s causes for irritation – a misguided attempt to marry him off to an unsuitable local woman – were no doubt extreme, nonetheless one catches a glimpse here of the steely ambition and opportunism concealed behind the perfect courtier’s velvet charm.

The lack of letters to, from and about Raphael has proved an irresistible temptation to forgers. John’s book for the first time collects together, contextualizes and provides an extended study of the falsification of Raphael documents, and this fascinating and absorbing story takes up two thirds of the introduction. Just to tell the nineteenth-century part of it required a virtuoso display of John’s skills at finding his way through the obscurest corners of the old literature.

If John is correct, this is a story which starts extremely early, in the years immediately following Raphael’s death,

and has continued right up until our own day, producing around forty outright forgeries, including Comolli’s spurious biography. The motives for forging Raphael documents are seen to be essentially of three types: a desire to present a coherent picture of Raphael’s mind and artistic personality; a need to make a polemical point; and financial greed, pandering to and profiting from scholarly vanity. Although these overlap to some extent, there is an overall chronological shift from one to another, and only in the mid-nineteenth century does the market for autographs seem to have become sufficiently heated to produce a financial demand for fakes.

The most puzzling cases are really the pre-nineteenth century ones – the ‘Signor Conte’ letter, allegedly from Raphael to Castiglione of c. 1514, published by Dolce in 1554; the supposed letter of recommendation from Giovanna Feltria della Rovere (the Prefetessa) to the Florentine *Gonfaloniere* for life, Piero Soderini, in 1504, published by Bottari in 1754, and the letter and sonnet addressed to Francesco Francia, published by Malvasia in 1678. For none of these is there a surviving manuscript, an absence which, John notes, should always put us on our guard. In the case of Malvasia, the need to produce documents in order to ‘demonstrate’ that Francia knew Raphael and his work long before the arrival of the S. Cecilia altarpiece – whose superiority, Vasari tells us, gave the Bolognese artist a fatal shock – is so clear that their invention would seem on a par with Vasari’s own celebrated critical anecdotes, of which the Francia one is a typical example. Thanks to the researches of Giovanna Perini, John has the additional evidence of the draft of the sonnet to Francia in Malvasia’s hand, where the Bolognese writer seems to be making corrections as he goes along in the manner of an author rather than a scribe. I find myself convinced by John’s argument, but admirers of Malvasia will probably always consider him wrongly traduced.

That the ‘Signor Conte’ letter is a sixteenth-century fiction seems all but undeniable. It presents Raphael as an artist with a fully articulated Neoplatonic viewpoint, and an enviably allusive facility with literary language echoing Dante and Petrarch. The only question would seem to be whether it was made up as John believed by Castiglione around 1522 or in the circle of Dolce and Aretino around 1550, as Christof Thoenes has argued. John has classified it as Castiglione’s tribute to his friend, a ‘portrait of the mind’ and has not placed it with the fakes. At all events, it appears to belong to the history of critical response to Raphael rather than in his biography. However, the text can be seen as the equivalent of the words put into the mouths of real participants in imaginary dialogues, such as Castiglione’s own *Cortegiano*, and even if it was indeed composed by Castiglione, it might contain elements of views he had heard Raphael express in less elegant ways.

The supposed letter of recommendation from Giovanna Feltria della Rovere to Piero Soderini is a much more puzzling case. In it we find the Prefetessa, sister of the Duke of Urbino, introducing Raphael, the bearer of the letter, to the Florentine *Gonfaloniere* as a nice and well-mannered young man, son of a painter dear to the Urbino ruling family, who has decided to spend some time in Florence “per imparare”. The letter was published in his *Raccolta* of 1754 by the great *erudito*, Giovanni Bottari, who said he had copied it from an original in the Casa Gaddi; the letter was apparently sold in a specific sale by Sylvestre in Paris in 1856, but no more was subsequently heard of it. The letter aroused suspicion early on for several reasons, but mainly because the text as published by Bottari speaks of Giovanni Santi in the present tense as alive, whereas Pungileoni by 1820 had found firm evidence that he died in 1494. John details the strenuous efforts subsequently made to deal with this anomaly either by textual emendation of the published text or by casting doubt on Pungileoni’s account. John has no doubt that the letter was forged, but it is hard to see why Bottari should have done this, except that he may have felt he needed a letter about Raphael to start off his *Raccolta*. It may be significant that Bottari edited Vasari, and that the motive given in the letter for Raphael’s visit to Florence “per imparare” is very like Vasari’s statement “venne in questo tempo Raffaello ... a imparare l’arte a Fiorenza”. But introductory letters couched in exactly these terms were indeed written at the time: an example is the one written by Michelangelo from Rome for Alonso Berruguete to take to Florence in 1508, which begins: “l’aportatore di questa sarà uno giovine spagnuolo, il quale viene chostà per imparare a dipignere.” It should also be noted that when Bottari’s *Raccolta* was published, the genuine letter from Raphael to Simone Ciarla of 1508 referring to the Prefetessa and asking for letters of introduction to Soderini from Urbino had not yet come to light (it appeared in the 1770s). Although John may well be right about the falsity of the 1504 letter, there remains some doubt in my mind.<sup>1</sup>

The nineteenth-century forgeries allow for no such doubts, and the whole story of what John calls the “Roman scriptorium” that produced them, a story which he has scrupulously pieced together from a huge array of sources, is utterly fascinating. He shows how the publication of facsimiles of the 1508 letter provided models for forgers to follow, and how Girolamo Amati, an archivist gone to the bad, stole some Raphael documents and falsified others, while the ex-Nazarene Kühlen traded in both real and fake ones.

In a shady trade, as was said at the time, “les autographes volés sont les bons: ceux là au moins, sont authentiques”. Hermann Grimm seems to have been deliberately set up as the scholar most likely to authenticate the false documents. This targeting of art historians avid for new discoveries goes on, as we know, to this day.

An instructive section of the introduction deals with the ‘resistance to documents’ in the nineteenth century, and the correspondingly embattled faith in them on the part of scholars such as Gaetano Milanesi, a faith which Julius von Schlosser on occasion found naïve. Such resistance is also found in Giovanni Morelli’s and Bernard Berenson’s attitude to the scholars whom the Berenson circle dismissed as the ‘Kunstforscher’, and to Crowe and Cavalcaselle, who were unjustly condemned for their excessive reliance on written sources. By the 1890s the resistance was based on a formalist conviction that the connoisseur’s own visual response to the work of art must prevail over any kind of archival or written evidence. John’s distaste for this sort of approach underlay his increasing eschewal of critical fine writing, his growing reluctance to express his aesthetic responses in words. Nicholas Penny described this beautifully at the recent Harvard Memorial Service for John in his comment: “One might almost be forgiven for thinking that Walter Pater had found a way of disguising himself as Sherlock Holmes”. When I heard this I was reminded of what Roger Fry wrote about another great art historian, Herbert Horne, whose book on Botticelli set still unmatched standards for documentary art history. Fry characterized Horne as “a poet who, out of a kind of Quixotic bravado, posed as a dry-as-dust”, so that if he refused to communicate in print “his incomparable subtlety and directness of response to the quality of any work of art he encountered”, this was in itself the expression of a kind of secret aesthetic ideal.

In our Post-modern era, resistance to documents may be based on quite different grounds, on a programmatic distaste for the notion of historical truth and a preference for ‘theory’ over empirically based argument. John was no positivist, and did more than anyone to show how written sources must be historicized and interpreted rather than treated as raw fact. But he cites some eloquent words on this subject by another much-missed friend, Manfredo Tafuri, and I can think of no better way of concluding than to repeat them: “Siamo anche noi persuasi che nessuna ‘verità’ sia racchiusa nei documenti: tuttavia, è a partire dalle ‘menzogne relative’ che essi ci tramandano che è necessario partire per costruire storie verificabili.”

<sup>1</sup> Tom Henry and Carol Plazzotta have come to similar conclusions independently, and have cited the letter as genuine in the forthcoming

catalogue of an exhibition at the National Gallery, London, opening in October 2004.