

# In the Name Of God and Profit

ANNE FREMANTLE

THE MERCHANT OF PRATO, by Iris Origo.  
Illustrated. Alfred A. Knopf. \$7.50.

If only anyone had, during one average life, daily recorded the price of wheat or the temperature of weather, before the dailies did it, a whole new area of ancient, or medieval, or renaissance history would be available. Francesco di Marco Datini, who lived between 1335 and 1410, and left behind him one hundred and fifty thousand letters, five hundred account books and ledgers, three hundred deeds of partnership, four hundred insurance policies, together with several thousand bills of lading, letters of advice, bills of exchange, and checks, almost achieved this.

Thanks to the luck that all these papers were concealed for five hundred years in sacks within a dusty recess under the stairs in his own house in Prato, near Florence, Datini has provided some such record and infinitely more besides. The witty and wise scholarship of the Marchesa Origo has deftly pieced together, from the myriad musty pages (some nibbled by mice or worms) a mosaic as shining as any that glow in the cathedrals of Datini's country, as alive as the *pointillistes* ever rendered any living landscape.

What a "small, busy, earthy society" is the world of Boccaccio and Sacchetti reflected, echoed, and mirrored in these letters. Francesco di Marco Datini, the son of a poor taverner, left his home in Prato at the age of fifteen, barely a year after

both his parents were carried off by the plague, and, on foot, made his way across the Alps to Avignon to seek his fortune with one hundred and fifty florins as his whole inheritance. Throughout his long and amazingly successful life—the bequests he made to his native city



were the foundation of its riches and he is still today, as his fourteenth-century statue testified, Prato's first citizen—Datini was aware of only two realities: trade and religion. And because he is nearer to us than to "le moyen age, énorme et délicat," as Paul Verlaine called it, these realities stand very definitely in that order. Even at the end of his life, his saintly friend Ser Lapo Mazzei could not persuade Datini to reverse the emphasis. "To treat God as a master and the world as a servant—that is a thing we can and must do," Ser Lapo urged Datini and, in "the purest Tuscan of the *trecento*," begged his friend's wife Margherita to tell her husband at a propitious moment, "when he is at peace with a quiet mind," to "put an end, if he can, to his vile and worldly dealings. . ."

But money, as the Schoolmen knew, has a certain infinity. Of all else, the end is surfeit: of greed for food or drink; of lust; even of cruelty, as the ingenious Nazis themselves found. But to the love of money there is no limit, and at the end of

his life Datini had not profited at all by the warning given him in his youth: "Crave not for all, crave not for all!" Though Datini's account books reveal "inconsistency rather than avarice," his friend Ser Lapo's warning went unheeded: "Fetter not your soul in such tight bonds, that if in the next life you are asked for tidings of the world wherefrom you came, you can only answer, in shame: 'So busied was I with building, I could not see life itself!'"

THAT NOTE—of *angst*, of anxiety—brings Datini very close, perhaps too close for comfort, to our own psychiatrist-ridden millionaires. In this "saga of trade, with a merchant for hero" the atmosphere is darkened by a smog with which we are all too grievously familiar: The *malinconia* constantly mentioned in the letters both of Datini and of his wife is not "melancholy" but "anxiety." When he was over sixty Datini wrote to his wife: "Destiny has ordained that from the day of my birth I should never know a whole happy day." And elsewhere: "I am so vexed with many matters, it is a wonder that I am not out of my mind—for the more I seek, the less I find." His doctor warned him: "You write to me touching the great unease which torments both your body and soul. I know not what I could say that would serve to make you take a little ease. . . ." And when Datini is over seventy the same doctor is still concerned most of all with his patient's state of mind: "To get angry and shout at times pleases me, for this will keep up your natural heat; but what displeases me is your being grieved and taking all matters so much to heart. For it is this, as the whole of physic teaches, which destroys our body, more than any other cause."

Datini is contemporary too in that he was aware, from his youth up, of the causes of this malady he would not, could not, cure. As a fifteen-year-old at Avignon he started his wildly successful career by dealing in armor, feeling "no scruples about providing arms simultaneously to both sides." He enters impartially in 1368 a sale of arms worth sixty-four *livres* to a lieutenant of Messire de Turenne, and a sale of fifty "cuirases for brigands" to defend the Com-

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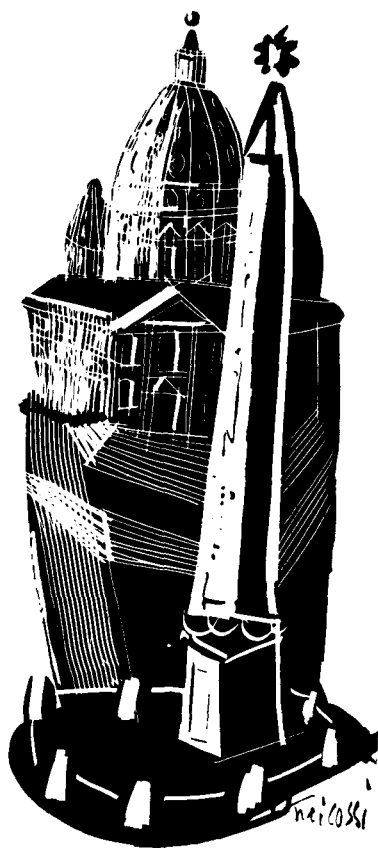
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mune of Fontes against Turenne's companies. For whatever the misfortune—plague, pestilence, or famine—that afflicted his neighbors, Datini makes his pile. As he put it, "I would keep my foot in both stirrups." Yet towards the end of his life he wrote to one of his factors, "You are young, but when you have lived as long as I and have traded with as many folk, you will know that man is a dangerous thing, and that danger lies in dealing with him." Datini always profits by war, and yet he prays: "Please God these countries of ours will be at peace, that trade can flow once more."

THAT trade managed to flow in spite of wars, robbers, tyrants, plagues, bad roads, and rascals, Datini's vast correspondence amply shows. His was not one of the great commercial houses: He was no Fugger nor yet an Alberti, but the files of his Barcelona and Valencia branches show almost daily exchanges with the Majorcan agencies, and he had constant and uninterrupted dealings with Paris and London, Bruges, Nice, Arles, Perpignan, Lisbon, Rhodes, Alexandria, Tunis, Fez, Cirencester, Burford, Venice, and Germany. "There are letters in Latin, French, and Italian, in English and Flemish, in Catalanian, Provençal and Greek, and even a few in Arabic and Hebrew. Moreover, all these letters have one thing in common: Every event they report—a battle or a truce, a rumour of pestilence, famine or flood, a Pope's election or a prince's marriage—is noted only with a view to its effect upon trade." The enormous, international importance of wool is most notable and, perhaps, the two next most important commodities (after arms) were salt and slaves. "Two German ships," reported Datini's agent in Ibiza, "arrived on the 13th from Flanders, and load salt from Germany . . . All here marvel at their coming—so long a road, only for salt!"

From the Black Sea and the Balkans come iron, wax, alum, sandalwood, resin, furs; from Barbary leather and wax; gall-nuts from Rumania. Slaves sold by their parents for a crust of bread, or kidnaped by Tartar raids or Italian sailors, were supplied from all around the



Mediterranean. They were in great demand—especially female children about ten.

### The Man and the Wife

After thirty-three years abroad in Avignon, Francesco di Marco Datini finally left France and returned to his native Prato in January, 1383. The Pope's return from Avignon to Rome in 1378 had deflected much of the luxury trade to Italy, and Datini, who had married a Florentine girl, Margherita di Domenico Baldini—who brought him no dowry but "youth, good looks and good breeding"—followed his best customers home. The relationship between Datini and his young wife is the core of the Marchesa's book, for no such detailed and intimate correspondence between a man and a woman in the fourteenth century has survived elsewhere.

Here the Datinis give us all the bitterness of the barren, the loneliness of the separated, and the friction of the frustrated, recorded in many hundreds of letters. The reason for their constant writing to each other was itself a sad one. Soon after his return home, Datini found Prato too small for his activities. He left

his wife in the great house he had built while he yet had hope of children, and moved to Florence, only fifteen miles away. Once, or even twice a week, "together with the washing, which was done in Prato, and the fowls, eggs, and vegetables, which were sent from the farm to Florence or Pisa . . .," the letters went up and down on mule-back.

For all her youth—Datini was twenty-five years her senior—and her inability to produce an heir, Margherita was no Griselda, and could object to her husband's illegitimate children, and yet soften and bring up his daughter Ginevra as her own. She was quite as businesslike as her husband, and managed her household, her "pack of little girls"—many of them slaves—with meticulousness. However, the Datinis fought together so publicly that their friends reproved them for it. Domenico di Cambio boasts: "My wife pampers me, as I do her. Not like unto you, who are always wrangling with yours."

Yet at the end, Datini commends his wife. After the Duke of Milan had threatened Florence and devastated all the farms, when the emergency was over Datini wrote Margherita: "That you have ordered the house in a fashion to do you honour, pleases me. The wise may be known in times of need." And the old merchant is as wily as the hunted fox which ran inside the walls of Florence when the scared citizens shut the gates in the face of the men and dogs pursuing, for he bids his wife have a bushel of wheat ground at once, for the *Signoria* had lifted all duties on food entering the city. "Send the flour speedily . . . that I may make some money out of the Commune, which has made so much out of me," he writes.

The profits, however, of medieval trade, seem, in the face of so

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many and great dangers, to have been pitifully small. After a three-year wait, the highest return seems to have been 8.92 per cent. The details of the insurance policies are fascinating—slaves could not be insured against suicide, for example—and so too is the wonderfully elaborate system of double-entry book-keeping. Marchesa Origo deals brilliantly with the whole complex structure of taxation, with the system of loans, and the problem of usury. Poor Datini sadly complains after fifty years of “so much labour” that he has reached a point where taxation has so reduced him that “methinks if a man stabbed me, no blood would issue forth.”

But the wealth of detail about the trading companies, the structure of medieval finance, together with the delightful accounts of food, drink and physic, are subordinate to the personalities that emerge: those of the bad-tempered, avaricious, anxious Datini, of his querulous, unsatisfied wife, of the serene and saintly family friend, and of the various sychophantic or devoted hangers-on.

The historian, as the Marchesa Origo quotes, is like the ogre in the fable: Where he smells human flesh, there is his quarry. One is left, after all the inventories of two fur linings made of dormice, or of gentleman's gloves not to be worn to wheel barrows, with a feeling of having met and known Ser Lapo, with his “finest little curly badger,” and Margherita, who each day saw her husband “doing things that make me swell up a dozen times,” and, above all, the ink-stained Datini, who never heeded his friend's warning that “measure is God's demand and no immoderate thing was ever pleasing to that eternal equity,” but who wrote on the first page of his great ledgers: “In the name of God and profit.”



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## India between Two Worlds

JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH

THE NATURE OF PASSION, by R. Prawer Jhabvala. Norton. \$3.75.

Last winter we spent three months in India. Our life both in Calcutta and on our travels was mostly with Indians. It was a wonderful introduction to the endless fascinations and complexities of Indian society, but it wasn't a substitute for Mrs. Jhabvala's book. I realize this is extravagant praise, but that is what it is meant to be. For anyone who has been to India or is going (as well as for all who can't go) this novel is just about perfect.

One reason it is important is that no westerner going to India is likely to meet the author's people. A serious visitor will meet lots of professors, politicians, journalists, and civil servants. An ultra-serious visitor may go to the villages and sample the life there. But Mrs. Jhabvala deals with another and quite anonymous segment of Indian society—the businessmen and moneymakers and the routine civil servants and their innumerable wives, children, in-laws, cousins, and coreligionists.

MRS. JHABVALA's people have the same problem E. M. Forster dealt with some thirty years ago in *A Passage to India*. They are still suspended between two worlds. Some belong to the world of the women's quarter, of the extended family, of profound filial piety and obedience, and also of phenomenal avarice and unblushing corruption. And some belong, or yearn to belong, to the new world of colleges, elegant and tasteful saris, dancing, dinner parties, and, if not cocktails, at least sherry. This is also the world of the Second Five-Year Plan and government files and public service and fiscal morality. However, there is a change from Forster's day. In Chandrapore there was agony. In Mrs. Jhabvala's New Delhi there is only tension, and it is even possible to laugh at much of it.

To an amazing degree, the life of modern India is influenced and even dominated by the people who came as refugees from East Bengal and

West Punjab. The uprooting and movement released vast wellsprings of energy and ambition.

### Cast of Characters

Lala Narayan Dass Verma is a displaced Punjabi who came to Delhi ten years ago and became exceedingly rich by a scrupulous attention to his contracting business and discriminating bribery of all who would help him get contracts. Lalaji is a good man. He is respected in his community and he, in turn, respects its ancient and intricate rules. So do his wife and his older sister and one of his sons and that son's wife. But there is another son who is a civil servant and who subscribes to the new code of honesty—even where his father is involved. And a third son loves a restaurant called the Rendezvous and yearns to study in England or America, or at least to go abroad. And the youngest daughter has danced and been kissed, and would like to know the man she is to marry. Here are the seeds of conflict. As everyone knows, the Indian soul is made of very sensitive tissue, and Mrs. Jhabvala presides joyously over tearing it.

IMAGINE some Indians will think she goes too far. The incredibly foolish young members of the *avant-garde*, the stuffy civil servants, and, to a lesser degree, the elderly profiteers all receive merciless treatment. But her compatriots should, I believe, think of her as a brilliant craftsman who knows the uses of caricature. As part of her craft she is also deft, elegant, and amusing. The book is important, not because the author set out to prepare a social document but because she knows her business as a storyteller. She knows, among many other things, that a good story needs a solid problem.

The struggle between new and old in India is not an unequal one. As Mrs. Jhabvala shows, the old society has great sources of strength and vitality. But her book itself is a vivid demonstration of the power of the challenge.