

## Italy's Eighteenth Century: Gender and Culture in the Age of the Grand Tour

**Review Number:**

871

**Publish date:**

Sunday, 28 February, 2010

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**ISBN:**

9780804759045

**Date of Publication:**

2009

**Price:**

£53.95

**Pages:**

504pp.

**Publisher:**

Stanford University Press

**Place of Publication:**

Palo Alto, CA

**Reviewer:**

Melissa Calaresu

Italy's 18th century was peopled with *castrati*, *cicisbei*, and *virtuose* according to this new book on gender and culture in the age of the Grand Tour. The perspective on and variety of the characters introduced in this volume are quite extraordinary – musicologists, literary scholars, and historians of art and science present mathematical prodigies, entrepreneur artists, and a curious wax modeller, among others. Some of these women are well-known to historians of the Grand Tour and some less so but what characterises most of them is their activity and persistence in a period in which women were defined by their weaknesses, intellectual and physical. Most of the men who appear in the volume, by contrast, are characterised by their resistance or indifference -- neglectful or dead husbands (with the exception of Angelica Kauffman's consort), sceptical *philosophes*, and recalcitrant academicians. The *castrati* are the exception but they only proved what many in the 18th century believed – that Italy was the place where not only women become men but men became women.

This is a long and scholarly book with 13 chapters and an introduction by one of the three editors, Paula Findlen. Read from cover to cover, it works as a kind of kaleidoscope of elite cultural life in some of the urban centres of northern and central Italy, from the beginning to the end of the 18th century. It privileges questions of gender and focuses, in particular, on women as painters, poets, and writers who read and wrote and were read and written about. It is their activity which defined them although they also appear as objects of pornographic desire. The focus on women has encouraged a necessary and welcome consideration of their

lives within their families. These are not simply stories of exceptional women. All of them were bound by their obligations as mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives and the fullness and distractions of their lives outside of the realm of ideas, words, and images are integrated in to each of the chapters, almost without exception. Such a consideration also extends to Martha Feldman's chapter on the *castrati* and on the role of their families by birth or by adoption in their careers. In fact, the 'wholeness' of the book comes partly from this emphasis on networks, for example, the network of cosmopolitan readers across Europe, the network of salons and *conversazioni* which Grand Tourists visited, the network of Arcadia and its colonies, the network of women promoting other women, and, of course, those of patronage and family.

Almost all of the chapters have a person at their centre, so the book is a kind of a prosopography of Italian cultural life, but one in which the reader has a strong sense of their wider networks of support and resistance as well as of their daily and domestic lives, for example, in the descriptions of the activity of the households of Rosalba Carriera and Angelica Kauffman in the chapters by Catherine Sama and Wendy Wassyng Roworth, or the weariness and strains of having to maintain the finances or public profile of their families as in the cases, respectively, of two Venetian women, Luisa Bergalli and Giustina Renier Michiel, described by Susan Dalton and by Sama. The result of this focus on gender is that no central character is studied entirely on her or his own, living in the world of the mind, with their books and correspondents as company, as so many conventional accounts of enlightened personages have been written – unless, of course, they have chosen this path such as anatomical wax modeller, Anna Morandi Manzolini, who seems, in Rebecca Messbarger's suggestive chapter, curiously undistracted by family concerns after her husband's sudden death as she focuses on what she really wants to do, that is, provide an accurate description in words and depiction in wax of the male reproductive system.

The contribution of this volume, argues Paula Findlen, is to suggest an alternative path to study Italy in the 18th century between the conventional images which dominate the historiography of the Enlightenment on one side and the Grand Tour on the other. In particular, she would like to give Italians greater agency in this multi-faceted collection as not simply objects of desire, curiosity, and exoticisation but as agents embedded in their own local practices and communities. The volume does this very successfully but the accounts and images of the Grand Tour remain central to many of the essays. Findlen writes, 'Rather than simply revisiting the caricatures of Italian society perpetuated by the accounts of Grand Tourists, we should analyze them in relation to documents internal to this culture. If the eighteenth century, as many scholars have suggested, was the period in which the Italian peninsula developed new, stronger, and more diverse connections to many other parts of Europe, then one of the goals of studying this century should be an exploration of the dialogue between foreign and indigenous views of Italy' (p. 7). With this focus, and despite these intentions, the extent to which this volume can not help but pander to 'the whole louche, lubricious, and luminous fantasia that was *settecento* Italy', as one reviewer writes, testing her powers of alliteration on the dust cover of the hard back edition, needs to be discussed.

The men (and some women) working hard for reform in this period and connected up to the print, academic, and social networks of the European enlightenment responded to the conventional images of Italy found in the pages of Samuel Sharp's *Letters from Italy* (1766) or Joseph-Jérôme Lalande's, *Voyage d'un françois en Italie* (1769). Ferdinando Galiani, for instance, whose life and work linked him up to the wider enlightened movement, wrote in despair of the way foreign travellers visited his native city, Naples, and the lesser known Neapolitan, Michele Torcia, attacked Lalande directly, ridiculing the extreme conclusions about the city to which the obsession of foreigners with *castrati* could take them.<sup>(1)</sup> The enlightened movement in Italy, in fact, provides less ballast in this volume than it could have, and in particular, a significant amount of recent scholarship in Italian on the reform movement is absent in the footnotes. References to Harold Acton's *The Bourbons of Naples* which was first published in 1956 or Eric Cochrane's 1961 study of the Tuscan academies in this period suggest either that the publisher wanted to reduce the number of references in Italian or the editors wanted to highlight more sharply the dearth of scholarship on 18th-century Italy in English which this volume is trying precisely to address.

Of course, a focus on the reform movement would have privileged men over women for it was male reformers who concerned themselves with legal reform and agricultural innovation in the 18th century. The

opportunities for women, who did not have access to a university education in law and political economy, to contribute to the debates traditionally studied by scholars of the Enlightenment were limited. In contrast, the greater opportunities for literary women reflected the relative openness of the academies and salons in Italian cities, and several chapters such as Maria Pia Donato's informative chapter on Roman salons or Elisabetta Graziosi's chapter on women and academies catalogue their achievements as hosts, poets, and academicians in these less restrictive contexts. As Paola Giuli points out in her chapter on *improvvisatrici*, the celebrated performances of women as improvisers of verse have been written out of the story of the Italian Enlightenment by historians who considered improvisation as 'an aberrant expression of eighteenth-century superficiality and penchant for empty theatricality' (p. 305), far from the more serious concerns of drafting laws and draining swamps. The focus on gender in this volume therefore brings a greater fullness in our understanding of enlightened culture in Italy by focusing on alternative spaces and modes of enlightened sociability which included and welcomed women.

In her introduction, Findlen emphasises the need to consider 'how local practices and foreign perceptions interacted' (p. 31) and, for this reason, the images and accounts of the Grand Tour determine, if not the narrative then, some of the *topoi* in this volume, for foreigners were obsessed with the social and sexual curiosities of Italy such as the *cicisbei* and *castrati*. However, these caricatures of the reviewer's *fantasia*, cited above, are placed carefully in the legal, moral, and social realities as well as aesthetic conventions of the period in the chapters by Roberto Bizzocchi and Roger Freitas. Grand Tourists also marvelled at the intellectual and social liberties granted to women in Italy. The exceptionalism of women such as Laura Bassi and the Agnesi sisters and the theatricality of their performances as knowledgeable women, however, are tempered in the chapter by Maria Cavazza by placing them within the limits of expectations of modesty, family pressures, and life choices for women in this period which, in turn, were reinforced in contemporary paintings of religious women as described by Christopher Johns. And, finally, Findlen's chapter on the cross-dresser and lesbian, Caterina Vizzani, gives life to an erotic character of the 18th century while placing the translation and consumption of her image within the medical and printing cultures of Britain and Italy. These chapters, in particular, engage not only with the social realities of gender and gender relations in Italy but also with their representation, that is, with the way that contemporary images of women jostled against the exceptionalism of a few.

*Italy's Eighteenth Century* is a powerful volume which makes an important contribution to our understanding of the contours and shape of enlightened culture in Italy through the lens of gender. It introduces new paradigms and explores new source material by moving beyond a series of texts which have dominated conventional accounts of the Italian enlightenment to a consideration of the space, material culture, and gender relations of enlightened sociability and exchange. It does, as the introduction promises, open up new pathways for new research – for example, by showcasing the recent work and publishing projects of scholars such as Findlen, and Messbarger in the history of science and by providing a platform for literary scholars and musicologists to take an equal part in writing the history of Italy's 18th century. The volume does this all without abandoning entirely the old paradigms and source material of the Grand Tour. Whether one likes it or not, we could not write a history of the Italian enlightenment without the Grand Tour which is why the absence of a chapter specifically on Naples is so noticeable. One wonders why the editors chose Rome over Naples, like Angelica Kauffman when deciding where to set up permanent residence (p. 158), as the cultural centre of the book. Smaller urban centres such as Venice, Bologna and Florence are also included in the volume but the place of Naples in the itinerary and culture of the Grand Tour at the end of the century can not be entirely ignored. Recent efforts have been made to incorporate and integrate the history of the south within Italian and European history and play down the city's exceptionalism in modern historiography.<sup>(2)</sup> One hopes that further research on Italy's 18th century will include a full-length study of the Neapolitan scientific prodigy, Maria Angela Ardinghelli, and will replace the literary and often intemperate accounts of the poet and journalist, Eleonora Fonseca Pimentel, and the Queen of Naples, Maria Carolina, to reveal a fuller account of enlightenment culture in Naples which this volume has done so successfully for the rest of the peninsula. *Italy's Eighteenth Century* is an impressive model of sisterly collaboration across continents and, more importantly, a model of the way gender can challenge, transform and form historical narratives from within.

## Notes

1. Cited in M.T.Calaresu, 'Looking for Virgil's tomb', J.Elsner and J.P.Rubiés (eds), *Voyages and visions: Towards a new cultural history of travel* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999), pp. 151-55.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For the recent workshops entitled, 'Exoticizing Vesuvius? Formations of Naples c.1500–present', held in Cambridge and York in 2009, financed by the AHRC, and the intention to form a Neapolitan network of scholars across disciplines and chronologies, see: <http://www.york.ac.uk/depts/histart/naples/index.html> [2][Back to \(2\)](#)

The editors intend to respond to this review in due course.

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