

Clorinda Donato. The Life and Legend of Catterina Vizzani: Sexual Identity, Science and Sensationalism in Eighteenth-Century Italy and England

Wanda Balzano

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Clorinda Donato. *The Life and Legend of Catterina Vizzani: Sexual Identity, Science and Sensationalism in Eighteenth-Century Italy and England.* Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020. Pp. 347. ISBN 9781789622218.

Professor of French and Italian at California State University, Long Beach, Clorinda Donato is an eighteenth-century scholar who researches knowledge transfer through translation and genre adaptation in encyclopedic compilations, and who also works on gender in medical and literary accounts. The intersections of all these areas of expertise are essential for undertaking the task of researching what has been hidden for a long time. Minor texts tend to fall through the cracks of literary and cultural landscapes not only because of the incongruous and challenging nature of their categorizations but also because individual knowledge is often too compartmentalized to allow for organic analyses that focus on a variety of fields encompassing the medical field, social mores, the use of different languages and genres across specific geographies and histories. It is therefore thanks to this expertise and interests that this book has materialized. *The Life and Legend of Catterina Vizzani* focuses on the anatomist Giovanni Bianchi's Italian source text (written in 1744) describing the young Catterina Vizzani, who dressed as a man and became Giovanni Bordoni, and on John Cleland's 1751 fanciful translation of the story, in such a way as to help the modern reader chart sexual politics both in transcultural and in transhistorical debates.

The last 45 pages of the book, forming an appendix, are the centrepiece of the study and need to be read before the main chapters. They contain three texts centering on the story of Caterina Vizzani/Giovanni Bordoni: (1) as written for the first time in Italian by Giovanni Bianchi, (2) as it was re-presented a decade later in a sensationalized English version by John Cleland, and (3) as more accurately rendered in modern English by the author of this volume. Translation is at the heart of this book's argument: "The volume considers Bianchi and Cleland's motivation to tell the Vizzani/Bordoni story as either a narration of empowerment or as a cautionary tale against the backdrop of evolving sexual opinions in Europe that weighed scientific research against social practice and cultural norms" (v).

With its scholarly discussion distributed in nine chapters, the methodology of this study resembles the work of an anatomist and a physiologist, whereby the body that is being dissected is that of the story of Catterina Vizzani/Giovanni Bordoni, with the goal of closely observing the structure and function of its various accounts and parts, and how they relate to each other. Beginning with the

biography of Giovanni Bianchi, an eighteenth-century anatomist man of letters (while, in a reversed mirror image, Clorinda Donato appears to be a literary scholar writing about medical accounts), the volume presents the Italian anatomist's open-minded view of same-sex love and women's public expression in the context of the literature of science and sexuality in eighteenth-century Italy, taking into consideration historical European precedents. The story of Catterina/Giovanni is also analyzed in the novelistic prose of eighteenth-century Italy, with a special appreciation of Boccaccio among men of science and letters, while Cleland's and Bianchi's writing of queer desire is understood within the larger frame of their respective crossing of national boundaries (Cleland in Italy and Bianchi in England). The translation of the transgendered familial and working spaces of Catterina/Giovanni is carefully considered in the economy of the technologies of gender identities in eighteenth-century Italy and England, with a conclusive view that sees British and Italian thinking about gender ultimately coalesce in the work of Cleland and Bianchi, as well as their unique characters and places in the world of European letters.

Bianchi's account of Catterina/Giovanni is dissected and presented by Donato in a way that identifies three distinctly gendered moments: (1) Catterina as lesbian at the age of fourteen, and forced to flee after being caught with her friend and lover Margherita; (2) Catterina as Giovanni Bordoni, seeker of employment and transiting in different Italian cities, while donning a leather dildo under his clothes to both perform sexually and construct his virile appearance; (3) the third gendering moment, in which Catterina/Giovanni aspires to form a new kind of family, is sadly thwarted through violence culminating in Catterina/Giovanni's death. These gendered transitions and their perceptions in society are very relevant to modern scholarship, considering that the study of gender, queer theory, and sexual preference in Italy still needs to be thoroughly investigated and understood, particularly in regard to the eighteenth century. In fact, the predominant view of Italy as the preferred site of the Grand Tour has for a very long time overshadowed many other realities and perspectives, including the natives' own view of their country in these sexual terms and narratives.

Clorinda Donato's scholarly work unveils a complex scenario. While John Cleland's translation of Bianchi's text is an exercise in literary and cultural adaptation, which is the obvious result of almost 200 years of Europe's engagement with the perception of decadent Italy, as well as the implementation of English-centred imperialistic theories, Bianchi's original goal in his narrative is to offer a true

interpretation of a fluid idea of human sexuality. Bianchi treats homosexuality and transgendered states as legitimate conditions of knowledge (advocating for same-sex, transgendered, and polyamorous relationships throughout his career). Instead, Cleland exploits eighteenth-century anxieties about gender attribution, and specifically women passing as men, as he creates and reproduces (as in the case of Bianchi's novella) narratives that explicitly condemn the depravity of character of those perceived to embrace gender fluidity. It is not that Cleland was not conversant in the anatomy of sexual desire; rather, he chose to downplay the medical details and scientific aspects of the text he was bringing to his English-speaking audience. Through his translation he pointedly evokes the Italian "exotic," reinforcing stereotypical notions of Grand Tour perceptions in the mind of the British reader. For Bianchi, Catterina's body is a site of clinical, religious, and social identification/misidentification within an Italian context. For Cleland, Catterina's translated body, refashioned as a function of his own exigencies, offers a reductive reading as a site of titillation and abhorrence, corruption and dissolution.

Among the most interesting sections of the present study is chapter 6, as it offers a close analysis of the transgendered familial and working spaces of the main actor in this remarkable story as well as the corresponding spaces of its narrators. The text sets here the operating table, with the dissection of five (usually heteronormative) spaces: the home, the church, the piazza, the hospital, and the anatomist's cabinet. The transgressor coincides with the transgendered, while the original writer of the story contributes to destabilize the spaces occupied by the transgendered subject through his queer narration.

Bianchi's account of Catterina Vizzani/Giovanni Bordoni questioned the supposedly stable relationship between sex, gender, sexual desire, and sexual practice in a way that addresses some of the most important debates being conducted in queer theory today—the nature of sexual identity, its history, roots, and relation to other factors contributing to identity formation. Although the volume (whose title oddly does not include the names of both Catterina and Giovanni) could have benefitted from a closer engagement with contemporary transgender theory, this is an extensive, well-argued, meticulously researched study, where the wide-ranging eighteenth-century corpus of knowledge (the *other* body at the centre of the book) is brought to bear on a fascinating intersectional text and story, in different languages and intercultural contexts. The books that attempt to reconcile culture and science in regard to the body in the context of Italian and European Enlightenment culture are currently very few, and this volume, in its pioneering

quality, will surely stimulate further research to grow at this intersection and beyond it.

WANDA BALZANO

Wake Forest University