Quaderni d'Italianistica

Introduction

Marco Piana

Volume 42, numéro 2, 2021

Strange Encounters in the Italian Baroque

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094637ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i..v42i2.39689

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0226-8043 (imprimé)
2293-7382 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce document

Piana, M. (2021). Introduction. *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, *42*(2), 5–13. https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i..v42i2.39689

Introduction

Marco Piana

This special issue of *Quaderni d'Italianistica* explores the centrality of the strange, the weird, and the Other in the Italian Baroque period.[1] Widely known (maybe to a fault) as an age of strangeness and grandeur, the Italian Baroque and its coils deeply enmesh with religion, philosophy, and the world of the arts and sciences. In the midst of it, we find a common fear, loathing, and curiosity for the Other. This special issue thus investigates cases of baroque alterity, attempting to unravel the complexity of the early modern Italian mind.

The late sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries are a complex and vivid cultural chapter in the history of Italy, a period often described as both skeptical and spiritual, brutal and urbane, theatrical, passionate, sensual, and logical at the same time. As a product of this period of significant changes and doubt concerning religion, politics, and society, the Baroque saw in otherness one of its main protagonists. From the ideal inhabitants of fantastic worlds to the far civilizations of Asia, Africa, and the Americas, from Counter-Reformation depictions of the divine to discoveries in the world of science and medicine, the Italian Baroque was a world in continuous dialogue with alterity and novelty. In the words of Irlemar Chiampi: "The Baroque, crossroads of signs and temporalities, aesthetic logic of mourning and melancholy, luxuriousness and pleasure, erotic convulsion and allegorical pathos, reappears [today] to bear witness to the crisis or end of modernity" (508). Following this logic, what role did the Other play in this turmoil of aesthetics and theory? What was alterity's contribution in this excessive, ornate, transhistorical and transcultural "conceptual Babel," as defined by Walter Moser (11)? What forms of otherness endured the transition from the Renaissance

[1] The special issue employs the term "baroque" to define a period of extravagant artificiality and ornamentation in post-Renaissance European art and literature and to characterize the Catholic Counter-Reformation's doctrinal and iconographic strategies. Although the work of twentieth-century academics like Heinrich Wölfflin, Eugenio d'Ors, Walter Benjamin, and Gilles Deleuze helped free the baroque from the constraints of strict chronology, the term can go beyond mere discourse analysis and help us understand the culture and works of the age commonly referred to as the Baroque period.

to the Baroque? Which ones transitioned from the Baroque to the Enlightenment? What are the new forms of alterity that characterize the Italian Baroque? This collection of articles examines some of these cases and draws on a burgeoning body of research on modern religion, art, and literature to address the vital question of how fears and desires towards the Other evolved and persisted in the Italian Baroque.

Strange Monstrous Gods

As Mieke Bal has recently argued, in its materiality and bodiliness, baroque epistemology undermines resolution, gropes towards fragmentation, overgrows, and exceeds (11). In the twilight of the Grand Narrative of the Renaissance—with the European Catholic man at the centre of divine creation, keeper of the key to geometric perfection—baroque thinkers, authors, and artists found themselves unable to confidently place the various Others they encountered in a system that allowed them to make accurate judgments about themselves. Faced with an expanding and diverse world, with more and more identities emerging in all their fascinating diversity, the Italian Baroque had to confront itself with unnerving fundamental questions that threatened to undo millennia of philosophy, theology, mythology, and folklore. In the wake of these telluric changes, how could Counter-Reformation Italy understand the world? How could it understand its place in the divine chain of being? How could it understand Others? In this alleged crisis of hegemonic thoughts with regards to God and humans, Italians paid renewed attention to the Other, the odd, the uncanny—figures that never disappeared from popular culture, but that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were somehow kept at the borders of high culture and the court. The giants in Luigi Pulci's poem *Morgante* (1478–83), which represented a brave last attempt at ennobling the medieval tradition of popular epics, return in François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1530s–40s) and in the works of other writers of the time. Teofilo Folengo's macaronic Muses echo in the rhymes of Tassoni's *La secchia rapita* (1622) and in the masks of Commedia dell'Arte. Abandoning the heavens of the gods of geometrical harmony proper of High Renaissance culture, the post-Tridentine Italian imagination embraced a realm of marvellous creatures and monstrosities. The Titans have retaken Olympus and feast upon the spoils of their divine sons.

The articles included in this special issue offer an assortment of oddities, where alterity is often framed between the ever-shifting roles of strangers, monsters, or deities. Strangers, gods, and monsters embody experiences of alterity that

carry us to the brink of the known. As such, they mark the line of demarcation that separates the discovered world from a transnational *terra incognita*, the place in the map where the compass of faith, logic, and society is no longer useful. As keepers of the threshold between Self and Other, they are meant to destabilize our established categories and challenge us to rethink ourselves. In these essays, the theme of the "stranger"—stretching from the ancient notion of "foreigner" (*xenos*) found in the articles by Artico and Leta to the alienation of madness (Sabbatino) and old age (Ardeni)—often works as a limit-experience for humans trying to define themselves in line with or against others. "Monsters," like the gluttonous Pulcinella (Reizen), the portentous *monstrum* that is the lunar peacock in Galileo's *Starry Messenger* (Reese), and the demons in Bartoli's *Asia* (Frei and Madella), also signal the Baroque's gusto for borderline experiences of the unmeasurable and unfathomable, as a reminder to the logical ego of the Renaissance that one is never entirely in control. Bartoli's hellish characters, moreover, remind us of the numinous power and mystery that intersects Baroque alterity with the divine. On this subject, the articles in this issue underline how the Italian Baroque indulged in the godly and saintly othering of women, depicted as inhuman entities, as beings who exceed the grasp of male understanding and bid readers to kneel either in fear or in devotion (Ardeni, Laiena, Kubas). All in all, the strangers, gods, and monsters that inhabit the Italian Baroque reveal themselves to be tokens of fracture within the human psyche. They show us how humans are split between conscious and unconscious, familiar and uncanny, identity and alterity.

Structure

The articles in this issue are grouped around three major themes: the encounter with the local and foreign Other (Part I—Strange(r) Encounters), women as the Other (Part II—Encountering the Female Other), and the Other in scientific advancement (Part III—Dissecting Otherness).

I. Strange(r) Encounters

This section begins with a sharp example of baroque otherness encompassing the monstrous, the demonic, and the foreign. In their co-authored article "'The Devils Sang Matins So Properly': Francis Xavier's Close Encounters with Demons in Daniello Bartoli's *Asia* (1653)," Elisa Frei and Laura Madella focus on Daniello Bartoli's description, in his *Asia* (1653), of Saint Francis Xavier's encounter with a series of demonic entities. By investigating Bartoli's sources within and outside

the Jesuit experience, Frei and Madella recreate an intertextual land/soundscape that provides a revealing example of Baroque efforts to signify the indigenous Other. Continuing our reflection on the realm of the Other as *xenos*, Tancredi Artico's "Rappresentare gli inglesi. Forme e funzioni della diversità riformata nel poema epico-cavalleresco tra Manierismo e Barocco" investigates the portrayal of the English after the Anglican schism of 1534. Unlike the indigenous Other of Bartoli's *Asia*, Artico's work underlines how the othering of the English in the Italian Baroque epic is an ideological construction centred on the idea of the re-barbarization of formerly Catholic lands and, in so doing, epitomizes the Catholic othering of Protestant Europe. While the indigenous otherness in Bartoli's *Asia* is an allegedly primal world waiting to be saved through conversion, England's "betrayal" of the Catholic Church is portrayed as a subtle and progressive return to paganism, corruption, and barbaric cruelty.

While the Italian Baroque is strongly involved in the othering of the indigenous as well as the schismatic and reformed stranger, it is also aware of the need to address local forms of alterity. The last two articles of this section deal with the stranger in language. Both contributions focus on Naples and linguistic alterity within and outside the city and kingdom. Karen Raizen's article centres on Carlo Sigismondo Capece's early eighteen-century *pulcinellate*, that is, Commedia dell'Arte *lazzi* focused on Pulcinella. While Capece's plays use classic Commedia dell'Arte tropes, they also offer their spectators a rich serving of humour based on multilingual wordplay. More specifically, Pulcinella repeatedly misunderstands foreign speech and interprets it as culinary vocabulary. Pulcinella's misunderstandings of the words spoken by French, Spanish, and Ottoman characters, all historical occupiers of or threats to the city of Naples, are used by Capece to establish Pulcinella as an unwitting defender of Neapolitan language and culture against foreign influence and domination. In addition, however, Pulcinella's mouthfuls also speak to Capece's and his Arcadian Academy's disdain for baroque Naples and its linguistic diversities. As a result, Capece's Pulcinella becomes a symbol of local, popular alterity: an emblem of the linguistic and literary production in the local vernacular by a population impoverished with respect to food, agency, and voice.

In a seamless dialogue with Raizen's linguistic reflections on Pulcinella, Nancy L. Canepa's article "*Votata a llengua nosta*: Baroque Naples and the Language Question" looks at Naples as a realm of linguistic and literary experimentation. Seventeenth-century Naples was, in fact, a centre of experimentation between traditional literary Italian in the Bembian and Petrarchan modes, and the development of local dialects as "alternative" literary languages with their own distinct

canons. During this period, writers such as Giambattista Basile (1566–1632) and Giulio Cesare Cortese (1570–1622) produced a remarkable corpus of original masterpieces in the local dialect. Translations of Italian and Latin classics, old and new, were published in Neapolitan and treatises and paratextual material in praise of the Neapolitan, language were widely distributed. Through her analysis, Canepa demonstrates how the dialogue between Neapolitan language and culture and Italian hegemonic tradition that originated in the late Renaissance resulted in polemical or parodic conflicts and raised profound questions about "proper" boundaries of literary languages and genres.

2. *Encountering the Female Other*

The second section of this special issue focuses on women as Other. The predominant theme of these three articles is the duality that is applied to women in the Italian Baroque. As Serena Laiena's article title states, women are often depicted as a mirror of aberration and a paragon of divine virtue. By placing women in a pantheon of saints and a band of monsters, the baroque authors analyzed in this section tend to strip them of their human nature, forcefully othering them, pushing them beyond the frontier of the knowledgeable and into *terra incognita*. In the first article of this section, Viola Ardeni analyzes how seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary fairy tales represent women's old age as an unacceptable monstrosity. Her analysis focuses on two sources: the tale "La vecchia scortecata," featured in Giambattista Basile's Neapolitan collection *Lo cunto de li cunti* (1634–36), and its sister tale "La Fola dla Vecchia Scurtgà" from *La chiaqlira dla banzola*, the Bolognese translation of Basile's text written by Teresa and Maddalena Manfredi with Anna and Teresa Zanotti in 1742. In both tales, the encounter between a pair of elderly women and a monarch who blindly and obsessively desires them brings forth baroque anxieties associated with death and decay as well as deep-rooted stereotypes regarding women's bodies. By contrasting Basile's work with its first translation by four women almost a century later, Ardeni underlines a continuity of thought with regards to old women that transcends the geographical and chronological gap of the works and the authors' gender.

The second article in this section, Serena Laiena's "'Specchio hor di Lucifero, hor di Cristo': Giovan Battista Andreini's Mary Magdalene and the Debate on Professional Theatre," investigates the reception of early modern actresses through a reading of *La Maddalena* (1617), a religious play by the Comico dell'Arte Giovan Battista Andreini (1576–1654). Laiena reads the play as a baroque reflection on

the oxymoronic perception of actresses and a critique of relativism in assessing their morality. Despite the progressive recognition of theatre performance as a profession, early modern actresses were, in fact, still seen as the antithesis of the Counter-Reformation's ideal woman. Their body was often branded either as an instrument of the Devil or as a means of divine redemption—depending on the boundaries set by contemporary society. Laiena thus uses the figure of Mary Magdalene, an emblem of the Counter-Reformation, to show how Andreini tackles the alleged otherness of early modern actresses, humanizing and professionalizing them.

Dovetailing Laiena's work, Magdalena Kubas offers an examination of the "portraits" of four women saints included in Francesco Pona's La *Galeria delle donne celebri* (1633)—Magdalene, Barbara, Monica, Elisabeth of Hungary. She points out how Pona, a physician by profession, saw the otherness of these women, and appears to delight in dissecting both the natural and miraculous aspects of female sanctity. In light of Pona's dual analysis of female sanctity, Kubas examines the renewed interest in the ancient and medieval saints following the Council of Trent, combined with the great contemporary debate known as *querelle des femmes*.

3. Dissecting Otherness

The last section of this special issue is dedicated to the relationship between otherness, doubt, and scientific advancement in the Italian Baroque. Counter-Reformation Italy was a laboratory for significant discoveries in many scientific fields. Galileo Galilei and Giordano Bruno are just two of the names that come to mind when describing this period of advancement, skepticism, and fear of what lies beyond ancient authority. In his article, Matteo Leta analyzes the figure of Albumazar, the protagonist in the comedy *L'Astrologo* by Giovan Battista Della Porta. Leta's article reveals how Della Porta's character, based in part on the Persian astrologer Abu Ma'shar (787–886 CE), one of the greatest minds of the Abbasid court in Baghdad, fits the stereotype of the early modern charlatan, whose portrayal was very popular in Renaissance and baroque theatre. According to Leta, the othering of Albumazar's tricks is for Della Porta a way to defend himself against accusations of witchcraft and to show the truthfulness of his scientific positions. Therefore, through his comical antithesis, Della Porta seeks to legitimize his own scientific theories among his peers and in the face of scrutiny from the Holy Office.

In the second article of the section, Eileen Reeves provides an analysis of a precious detail in Galileo Galilei's *Starry Messenger*. In his treatise, Galileo describes the shadows found in lunar craters as "deep blue eyes in the peacock's tail" and as "glass vessels which, still glowing with heat, are submerged in cold, and take on a fractured, wavy veneer" (Galilei, *Opere* 3.1.65). Reeve uses these images to emphasize the "othering" of elusive sensory data into artistic imagery typical of baroque art. The constrains Galileo encountered in describing his findings became an incentive for him to explore his own fervid imagination while attempting to convey the meaning of complex scientific discoveries, such as infrasounds.

The last article of the section and the entire collection is dedicated to Tomaso Garzoni da Bagnacavallo's *L'ospidale de' pazzi incurabili* (1586). In his essay, Marcello Sabbatino introduces this pivotal work of erudition on madness and mental illness—a visit to a hospital/magical palace containing wondrous literary and historical examples of madness. As Sabbatino explains, Garzoni's hospital is both a place of containment and a place of charity, as well as a place for scientific education and a stage for crude entertainment and showmanship, where folly is dissected, compared, and sold to the public as a curiosity. In this sense, *L'ospidale* is a work that falls between Renaissance erudition and baroque showmanship, where science is delectable, and all delights hide a (sometimes dark) lesson.

Awesome Encounters

While reflecting on Rudolf Otto's (1869–1937) concept of the *numinous*—a profound emotional experience he argued was at the heart of world religions—the author C. S. Lewis (1898–1963) wrote:

> Suppose you were told there was a tiger in the next room: you would know that you were in danger and would probably feel fear. But if you were told "There is a ghost in the next room," and believed it, you would feel, indeed, what is often called fear, but of a different kind. It would not be based on the knowledge of danger, for no one is primarily afraid of what a ghost may do to him, but of the mere fact that it is a ghost. It is "uncanny" rather than dangerous, and the special kind of fear it excites may be called Dread. With the Uncanny one has reached the fringes of the Numinous. Now suppose that you were told simply "There is a mighty spirit in the room," and believed

> it. Your feelings would then be even less like the mere fear of danger: but the disturbance would be profound. You would feel wonder and a certain shrinking—a sense of inadequacy to cope with such a visitant and of prostration before it—an emotion which might be expressed in Shakespeare's words "Under it my genius is rebuked." This feeling may be described as awe, and the object which excites it as the *Numinous*. (3–4)

Lewis's musings are extremely useful in describing the role of the Other in Baroque Italy as evidenced in the articles of this special issue. As these articles have suggested, it is not hard to see how the Italian Baroque was somehow trapped into a labyrinth of numinous experiences—mysterious doors leading to rooms possibly inhabited by dangerous creatures from faraway lands, perhaps by ghosts of their own making. Just like in Garzoni's *Ospidale*, however, the rooms of said labyrinth seem to take the shape of a fractured *Wunderkammer*, a cabinet of curiosities full of extraordinary oddities to fear, discover, and enjoy, rather than an array of ominous horrors. In the twilight of Renaissance rigour and at the dawn of Counter-Reformation grandeur, the baroque Other shines in its opaque perlaceous imperfection, deforming any object reflected on its surface. Newly discovered lands and peoples, recently lost allies, local or foreign languages, extraordinary (or extraordinarily ordinary) women, stars, satellites, infrasounds, psychotic outbreaks—the imperfect pearl reflects and magnifies it all, and sends our own image back to us, with an enhanced sense of the uncanny. The feeling this encounter generates may be described as awe, and the object that excites it as the strange.

University of Calgary

Works Cited

Bal, Mieke. "Baroque Matters." *Rethinking the Baroque*. Edited by Helen Hills, Ashgate, 2011, pp. 183–202.

Benjamin, Walter, and Howard Eiland. *Origin of the German Trauerspiel*. Harvard UP, 2019, https://dx.doi.org/10.4159/9780674916357.

Chiampi, Irlemar. "The Baroque at the Twilight of Modernity." In *Baroque New Worlds: Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest*. Edited by Lois P. Zamora and Monika Kaup. Duke UP, 2010, pp. 508–528, https://dx.doi.org/10.1515/9780822392521.

Deleuze, Gilles. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. U of Minnesota P, 2015.

Folengo, Teofilo. *Baldo*. Harvard UP, 2007.

Galilei, Galileo. *Opere*. Edited by Antonio Favaro, Giunti Barbèra, 1890–1909. 20 vols.

Lewis, C. S. *The Problem of Pain*. Samizdat UP, 2016.

Moser, Walter. "The Concept of Baroque." *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2008, pp. 11–37, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27764241.

Ors, Eugenio, Agathe Rouart-Valéry, and Frédéric Dassas. *Du Baroque*. Gallimard, 2000.

Otto, Rudolf. *Autobiographical and Social Essays*. De Gruyter, 2015, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110814767.

Pulci, Luigi. *Morgante: The Epic Adventures of Orlando and His Giant Friend Morgante*. Indiana UP, 2000.

Tassoni, Alessandro. *La secchia rapita: 2, redazione definitiva*. Antenore, 1990.

Wölfflin, Heinrich. *Principes fondamentaux de l'histoire de l'art: Le problème de l'évolution du style dans l'art moderne*. Pocket, 2016.