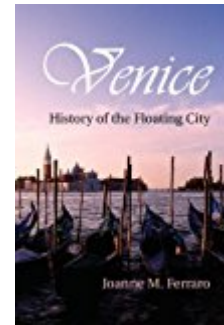


Joanne Marie Ferraro. *Venice: History of the Floating City*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 300 pp. \$28.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-88359-7.

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Published on HABSBURG (January, 2014)

Commissioned by Jonathan Kwan



## A Complete History of Venice?

Joanne Ferraro is rightly considered among the foremost Anglophone historians of Renaissance and early modern Venice. Her first monograph was an outstanding scholarly study of the terraferma city of Brescia, in which she mined archival sources to provide a detailed and revealing picture of relations between the elites of a wealthy provincial city and the authorities in Venice.[1] She subsequently moved into history of gender and the family, producing two brilliant books, one on marriage—in which she used court cases to cast light on the dynamics of gender relations in non-noble Venetian families—and a second—also using court records and a microhistorical approach—to cast light on gendered power relations and attitudes to sex and sexuality in Venice and its imperial hinterlands.[2] Ferraro's contribution to our wider understanding of Venice and its empire puts her on a par with historians such as Brian Pullan, Stanley Chojnacki, and Eric Dursteler at the forefront of our understanding of Venice. And yet I have to confess more than slight disappointment with this book. This is perhaps ironic, given that I shall be requesting that all my second-year students, studying a course with me on the Venetian Republic, c.1450–c.1575, purchase a copy of it, for it is without doubt the best general introduction to Venice at the height of its powers that I know. The treatment of the patrician class and citizenry, of religious minorities and lay confraternities, of gender, power, art, commerce, and myth are all thorough, intelligent, and

based on exhaustive knowledge of extensive secondary literature, buttressed by her own deep knowledge of the archives. The problem is that this excellent treatment only extends to a period roughly encompassing the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. When Ferraro ventures out of this comfort zone, she is on much less sure footing. In her treatment of the origins of Venice she seems solid enough—although, since this period lies outside my own field of competence, I hesitate to pass judgment—but when she trespasses into the eighteenth century and beyond, the book loses its way. In short, if, as will doubtless be the case for many readers, one's primary interests lie in Venice before the (alleged) decline of the Republic, this is a wonderful, and at times brilliant survey; if one hopes for a complete history of the city up to the present day, it is far from reliable, often misleading, and has many gaps.

Of course, Ferraro is in good company in her patchy treatment of Venice in the late Republic and in the years after it lost its independence in 1797. The medievalist Thomas Madden, for example, has recently published a work entitled *Venice: A New History* in which the subtitle—at least insofar as the book's treatment of the last three centuries is concerned—is a complete misnomer, including little or nothing that is new, and a great deal that bears scant resemblance to anything that experts on eighteenth- to twentieth-century Venice would recognize as history.[3] Ferraro's work is much better, but things begin to go wrong when she steps into the eighteenth

century. This is immediately clear from her lengthy chronology at the start of the book. This is divided into two sections, a general list of key moments, episodes, and events, and an additional section on architecture, art, literature, and music. What is included in both lists is often arbitrary and odd. Thus 1608 has the phrase a “Cold winter,” and 1609 “Calvinists in Venice”; we are additionally told that 1709 was characterized by “Icy temperatures in Venice.” As the eighteenth century progresses Ferraro’s choice of dates become increasingly peculiar. Thus, for example, we are told that the Caffè Florian opened in 1720 and that 1938 saw the introduction of fascist racial legislation, but there is no mention of the Napoleonic annexation of Venice in January 1806, or, more significantly, of Venice’s incorporation into the new Kingdom of Italy in 1866. Strangely, Ferraro’s chronology tells us that the First Italian Republic was proclaimed in 1969, which would have made an interesting prelude to the *autunno caldo*, were it not for the fact that the establishment of the republic had taken place almost a quarter of a century earlier. Given Ferraro’s interest in extreme weather conditions, she might have profitably mentioned the 1966 flooding, the worst in Venice’s history, but she does not. The chronology of the arts and architecture is similarly patchy. Thus we are told the dates of various buildings—clearly one of the books that Ferraro has read dealing with the years after 1797 is Deborah Howard’s excellent architectural history of Venice, which also becomes remarkably weak in the pages that deal with the post-1797 era—but really significant cultural dates are omitted.[4] If one followed the priorities of this chronology, the writings of Ugo Foscolo (mentioned just once in the body of the book in an aside that misleadingly describes him as an “intellectual”), Ippolito Nievo, or Gabriele d’Annunzio; the work of historians such as Samuele Romanin, Heinrich Kretschmayr, or Pompeo Molmenti; the paintings of Ettore Tito (or for that matter William Turner or Claude Monet) are less important than Richard Wagner’s death, or Marcel Proust’s writing of *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-27) or, for that matter, the construction of a brewery on the Giudecca and the redesign of the Caffè Florian in 1858. Moreover, why are the first performances of Gioachino Rossini’s *Semiramide* (1825) and of Claudio Monteverdi’s *L’incoronazione di Poppea* (1643) included in the general chronology? If they are of special significance, they presumably possess it because they are important pieces of music.

If Ferraro’s chronology does not inspire confidence, then her text on Venice from the eighteenth century onwards does not either. I shall elaborate on why this is

the case in a moment, but I want to stress that it is especially surprising and disappointing because the rest of the book is so good. Ferraro could perfectly well have missed off most of the last two chapters and produced the best general history of Venice from its origins to the fall of the Republic to be available in English. Since she is clearly not sufficiently interested in the later period to address the literature, why has she bothered to dedicate any pages to it at all?

Why then do I consider Ferraro’s discussion of the last 250 years so inadequate? The problems do not begin simply with the fall of the longest-lived republic in history in the face of French aggression. Ferraro’s treatment of eighteenth-century Venice’s political and economic system is breathless, and does little justice to the extremely difficult diplomatic and military situation in which the Republic found itself in the face of growing British and French naval power, and the predatory nature of the Habsburgs. The now dated but still fundamental work of Jean Georgelin, which did so much to change our vision of a moribund republic, is significantly absent from the bibliography. So too are older works such as Roberto Cessi’s study of the events surrounding the treaty of Campo Formido.[5] While I would not cavil hugely with Ferraro’s conclusions about Venice in the eighteenth century, it is disappointing to see so much emphasis on cliché: thus we are told that “Florian’s was an elegant establishment that served exotic drinks in porcelain cups with sugared pastries and chocolates. There philosophers like Rousseau held debates, lovers held trysts, rogues like Casanova seduced women, and masked figures celebrated Carnival in disguise, acting out fictitious roles” (p. 193). While Ferraro treats us to passages such as this, there is little on the (sometimes) genuinely reforming nature of the eighteenth-century Venetian state. Andrea Tron—known as “El paron,” and the greatest Venetian statesman of the *settecento*—is portrayed simply as a defender of noble privilege and an advocate of a return to more commercial activity. The fact that he introduced ecclesiastical reforms more energetic and far-reaching than those of Joseph II or Pombal passes without mention. Similarly, Angelo Emo, the architect of successful eighteenth-century naval reforms, and the man behind largely successful measures against North African piracy, warrants no mention. While aware that Venice was not in economic free fall, Ferraro seems to subscribe to a rather teleological view of Venice’s increasing commercial, political, and military marginalization, so that when the youthful Bonaparte arrived in 1797, “The Republic expired with little ado” (p. 202). This

hurried treatment of the collapse of the Republic misses much that can cast light on the nature of Venice and its mainland: the bravery of the Veronese population, who rose against the excesses of French control; the fury of many in the popular classes who would gladly have resisted the French had popular rebellion not been curtailed by the Venetian authorities; the realism (or cowardice) of the patricians who recognized that such resistance would bring only bloody reprisals and the imposition of extortionate reparations by the brutal Corsican; the opportunistic (or maybe misguided) idealistic celebrations of bourgeois sympathisers with the new order who saw the chance to wield power. Ferraro simply hurries over this material as if it were of no real significance. At the very least it casts fascinating light on the late Republic. The first period of Habsburg rule, however, is dispatched in six misleading lines (less than one per year of the *prima dominazione*), in apparent ignorance of the definitive study of this era written by Michele Gottardi.[6]

To make matters worse, Ferraro has all but ignored the now copious literature on Napoleonic rule and the second Austrian domination, not to mention liberal Italy. Since this is the period of Venetian history to which I have dedicated most of my career, I might be accused of taking this too much to heart. But there is wonderful research on this period, research that is not only just as valuable and interesting as the overpopulated field of early modern Venetian studies (where I feel a law of diminishing returns set in long ago), but also that casts light on the city we know today, whether as tourists or, indeed, as scholarly habitués of Venice's archives and the libraries. The whole final chapter—and Ferraro dispatches the period from 1797 to the present in just fourteen pages—seems overly dependent on a mere handful of texts: Deborah Howard (herself no expert on Venice in its postrepublican phase) on architecture, Margaret Plant's excellent although not unproblematic cultural history, and, apparently, Paul Ginsborg's classic study of the 1848–49 revolution.[7] Ferraro neglects the literature on how Venice's patrician elites failed to negotiate the transition to foreign and, indeed, Italian rule, on the economy, on the art and culture of the city, on the reorganization of the church, on policing, on reading circles and tourism, on the Arsenale, and so on.

Unfortunately, there are numerous statements about Venice's modern history which are misleading. Let me just take the pages 204 to 207. The Frari may have been closed as a religious house under Napoleon, but it was under the Austrians that it opened as the Venetian archives.

France did not “give” Venice to Austria at the Congress of Vienna. Daniele Manin was not a Jew (unless one wants to use the sort of ethnic classifications that might have appealed to certain elements in Nazi Germany): his grandfather's family had converted in the eighteenth century. Nor was the talented leader of the 1848 insurrection especially “successful”: he was one of those many brilliant youngish, university-educated men who moved towards revolutionary positions in the restoration precisely because there were not the careers to accommodate their talent. The invocation of the “principle of monarchy” in 1848 was a result of the mainland plebiscites and the (abortive) hope that Piedmontese aid would materialize in the struggle against the Austrians; it was not a result of the want of republican cohesion, which continued to endure throughout 1848–49, and was arguably made rather worse by the flirtation with the House of Savoy. While the Italians were far from successful in their 1866 campaign to seize Venetia, Ferraro's text would suggest that they played no part at all in the conflict. Yet the 1866 war is usually referred to in Italy as the *terza guerra di indipendenza italiana*, and witnessed massive mobilization at land and sea. Venetia may have voted (overwhelmingly) to join the Kingdom of Italy in 1866, but the excessively abbreviated way in which this episode is treated—there is little doubt that the plebiscite was heavily rigged, the question is simply over how far this distorted the final vote—masks the very real problems of integrating Venice into the newly united state.

Ferraro's breathless checklist of names of those who engaged with Italian culture suggests that she has plundered the work of Margaret Plant rather than actually engaging with books by the authors or looking at paintings by the artists she cites. In this rapid dash, she fails to entertain other ways in which Venice has come to intrude on our cultural imaginations (surely film needs to be mentioned); and economic problems, demography, and ecology are skirted over with such rapidity that they might as well have been omitted entirely. Significantly, too, Ferraro is not only brief but often misleading when she deals with culture. For example, the notion that Lord Byron explained the fall of Venice on “Venetian hubris and tyranny” (p. 205) is far too simplistic: a cursory acquaintance with *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–18), Byron's two Venetian plays, and his “Ode on Venice” (1818) would reveal that his engagement with the Republic's past was extremely complex, informed by extensive reading, and presented in different ways at different times and for different audiences, and according to his own psychological and emotional states. Read his let-

ters and his view of the “fairy city,” “the greenest island of my imagination,” and the “Gehana of the waters” becomes even harder to unravel. Similarly John Ruskin did so much more than decry the “city’s physical deterioration” (p. 205): he made friends with the Austrian officer who had organized the bombardment of the city during 1849, and hated modern Venetians (amongst whose number he sometimes included any born since the early fifteenth century). And Leopold von Ranke did not gain access to the Venetian archives in 1827 but in 1828. I could prolong this list, but these examples indicate the unreliability of Ferraro’s text.

There have for many years been fine books to read on Venice in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For anyone with a working knowledge of Italian there are entertaining and accessible introductions to the city under Napoleon and the Austrians works by the journalist and historian Alvisè Zorzi.[8] More scholarly readers might as a first point of call also turn to a number of comprehensive multi-author works—significantly absent from Ferraro’s bibliography—such as the works edited by Silvio Lanaro and by Mario Isnenghi and Stuart Woolf.[9] There is also now a brilliant online journal, *MDCCC 1800*, dedicated principally to Venice in the nineteenth century (with some articles in English). For those who speak no Italian, there is still plenty to read, including my own works and those by Paul Ginsborg (cited but apparently barely read, and certainly not digested by Ferraro), Robert Hewison (whose book on Ruskin shows the power of the city’s past for the Victorians), and Kate Ferris (who tells us much about the city in the interwar period from a fascinating variety of perspectives).[10] Richard Bosworth’s soon-to-be-published study of the city since 1866 will add still more richness to our understanding. But if one wants to know about Venice in the last 250 years, Ferraro’s book provides a cursory and problematic guide.

There is some debate in creative writing courses about whether Mark Twain’s famous injunction to “write what you know” is good or bad advice. However, I am sure few would disagree that for historians it is probably wise not to write about what you don’t know about. Ferraro is not alone here: it amazes me how many people presume to pronounce on modern Venice from a position of ignorance. Joanne Ferraro knows a great deal about early modern Venice and has written a truly wonderful survey of it: if this is what you want, buy this book because I doubt it will be bettered in English for many years to come. However, to judge by the content of the final few pages of this book she knows very little about

Venice from the later eighteenth century onwards. Her CUP editors would have been well advised to steer her away from touching the topic. I worry, however, that there is the danger that people who, on seeing the name of this highly respected scholar on this book’s spine, will assume that the work is reliable guide. Ferraro’s work, alas, is simply misleading for the period after 1797. I find it a great pity that a scholar I hugely admire spoils a good book with so weak a coda.

#### Notes

[1]. Joanne M. Ferraro, *Family and Public Life in Brescia, 1580-1650: The Social Foundations of the Venetian State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[2]. Joanne M. Ferraro, *Marriage Wars in Late Renaissance Venice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), and *Nefarious Crimes, Contested Justice: Illicit Sex and Infanticide in the Republic of Venice, 1557-1789* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

[3]. Thomas Madden, *Venice: A New History* (New York: Viking Books, 2012).

[4]. Deborah Howard, *An Architectural History of Venice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

[5]. Jean Georgelin, *Venise au Siècle des Lumières* (Paris: Mouton & École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1978); and Roberto Cessi, *Campofornido* (Padua: Antenore, 1973).

[6]. Michele Gottardi, *L’Austria a Venezia. Società e Istituzioni nella Prima Dominazione Austriaca. 1798-1806* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1993).

[7]. Margaret Plant, *Venice: Fragile City, 1797-1997* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); and Paul Ginsborg, *Daniele Manin and the Venetian Revolution of 1848-49* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

[8]. Alvisè Zorzi, *Napoleone a Venezia* (Milan: Mondadori, 2010), and *Venezia austriaca, 1797-1866* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1985).

[9]. Silvio Lanaro, ed., *Storia d’Italia. Le regioni dall’unità a oggi. II. Il Veneto* (Turin: Einaudi, 1984); and Mario Isnenghi and Stuart Woolf, eds., *Storia di Venezia. L’Ottocento e il Novecento. L’Ottocento. 1797-1918* (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana/Treccani, 2002).

[10]. Robert Hewison, *Ruskin on Venice: “The Paradise of Cities”* (London: Yale University Press, 2010); and Kate Ferris, *Everyday life in Fascist Venice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

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**Citation:** David Laven. Review of Ferraro, Joanne Marie, *Venice: History of the Floating City*. HABSBERG, H-Net Reviews. January, 2014.

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