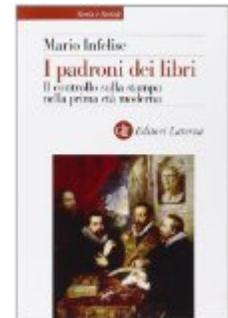


Mario Infelise. *I padroni dei libri: Il controllo sulla stampa nella prima età moderna.* Rome: Editori Laterza, 2014. 226 pp. EUR 22.00, paper, ISBN 978-88-581-1105-5.



Reviewed by Angela M. Nuovo

Published on H-Italy (October, 2015)

Commissioned by Maartje van Gelder (University of Amsterdam)

In a field of what is one of the fundamental themes of modern historiography—techniques of control over book production and the reading of books—Italian scholarship has focused hitherto on ecclesiastical censorship. The already large number of contributions to this subject swelled after 1998 when the Archive of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith opened its archives to researchers, providing them with an abundance of new material and a host of individual cases that could be analyzed in detail. But these contributions, even recent ones, were not all free of the ideological preconceptions that were typical of nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiography, when an image of the Counter-Reformation was formed in which the oppressions of the Inquisition not only led Italy into a phase of cultural decline but also were particularly damaging for the book industry. That this received image has now been superseded is due in no small part to the discipline and the methodology of the history of the book; historians of the book (Paul F. Grendler above all) first showed how, from the very first

decades of the publication and implementation of the indexes of prohibited books and the establishment of church control over book production, Venetian publishing proved to be supremely adaptable to the new circumstances, managing to capitalize on them to achieve even wider growth.

By contrast, the question of state control and prohibition within Italy has been more marginal: it is difficult to focus clearly on the matter in the Italian historical context, where individual states never attained the political and territorial dimensions of major European monarchies. Their initiatives for control of publishing as a consequence had less range and impact. Yet the question is of striking relevance for the Venetian Republic, which had the largest printing industry in the whole of Italy and was still, from the end of the sixteenth century throughout the first half of the seventeenth (the period examined in this book), one of the main centers in Europe for publishing and printing. Mario Infelise's study, which takes up and revises much of his previous and miscellaneous published work on the subject, is the first

to examine the prohibition of books on the part of the state and other secular authorities. He focuses on the dialectical relationship with ecclesiastical censorship of the Venetian Republic, the only state in Italy that was hostile to all forms of papal interference in anything that went beyond the struggle against heterodox religious beliefs. In particular, Venice mounted a determined and skillful defense of its own prerogatives related to two legal instruments in the sector of printing and publishing—licenses and privileges—which had been honed over many decades of experience in the control of this sector and had shown themselves to be the best way of underpinning its continuing development. As the sole Italian state capable of conceiving and maintaining a strategic political approach to the printing and publishing of books (it was also obviously in the city's own interests to protect so profitable a commercial activity), the Venetian Republic succeeded in keeping under its own control the crucial right to grant licenses to print—this, despite the proscriptions in the Roman Indexes and the rigid systems imposed in order to obtain an ecclesiastical *imprimatur*. Even in Venice, the church's prerogative to decide on the publication of religious texts was beyond dispute but for all other types of work the idea that the inquisitor should have the final say was rejected.

The story told by Infelise begins more or less where Grendler left off, in other words, from the negotiations for the acceptance of the Clementine Index in Venice (1596).[1] The index was allowed to be published in the city, which naturally required a license from the authorities. At the height of the most repressive period of the Counter-Reformation, Venice fought hard against supine acceptance. The indignation felt by Pope Clement VIII at Venice's attitude and its implicit defense of the interests of the city's printers was fueled by his growing irritation at Venetian booksellers' lack of obedience, which was even punctuated by outbreaks of violence.

Yet the conflict either never broke out completely into the open or was glossed over, since the interests of Venice and Rome were convergent: both cities were convinced of the need not only to resist Protestantism but also to set up the most efficacious system of control possible over their subjects' thoughts and ideas, something that would be impossible, as Giovanni Botero had shown, without the aid of religion. But the question still remained open who had the last say over the control of Venetian publishing. Throughout the course of the sixteenth century, debate had raged over the validity of Rome's privileges within the Republic, which Venice continued to deny. The pope tried to use his "universal" privileges to keep the printing of the post-Tridentine versions of liturgical texts (and it was above all these texts he was concerned about)—such as breviaries, missals, and catechisms—under his control and to promote the printing industry in Rome to make sure he could call on the unquestioning services of a large number of printers. The first goal was only in part attained (partly as a result of Paolo Manuzio's shortcomings as the printer chosen for the production of the new texts). As for the second goal, the evidence is clear that the Italian printing and publishing sector, which had up until then been dominated by Venice to the exclusion of all rivals, saw the emergence of another significant center for its activities in the papal city.

It is not straightforward, however, to assess with any degree of accuracy the dimensions of this shift toward Rome. The figures on which Infelise bases his estimates are not entirely convincing, since they are calculated on the basis of single titles (or editions) of works, which, in line with current principles of cataloguing, can consist of any bibliographical entity, from a single sheet to a corpus of legal tracts published in a folio edition comprising twenty-nine volumes.[2] In particular, the comparison of the Roman and Venetian output is badly distorted by the fact that *Edit 16*,[3] the national union catalogue of sixteenth-century Italian editions, includes, quite legitimately, the

highest number possible of official publications issued by the papacy—proclamations, indulgences, privileges, edicts, and the like—all or most on single sheets, while a long-standing tradition of cataloguing—which seems today increasingly questionable—creates a single record for multivolume editions, a form of publishing almost wholly confined within Italy to Venice. Take, for example, the works of Alonso Tostado in twenty-eight volumes, published at huge expense in the same fateful year of the Clementine Index, in 1596.[4] If we take into account the—on average—larger size of Venetian editions together with what were almost certainly far higher print-runs than those for Roman editions (in part because of Venice’s easier access to supplies of paper), it is entirely probable that Venetian printing in quantitative terms continued to far outstrip Roman production, as was indeed the impression at the time among the scholarly acquirers of books. As far as the table of printing licenses that were granted is concerned (p. 62), it would be more appropriate perhaps to compare the number of licenses granted each year not only with the year’s entire printed output but also, more specifically, with first editions, which required a license as a matter of course; once again, it is unfortunate that electronic databases as they are currently set up do not allow us to make such comparisons effectively.

In his examination of the well-known occasions when relations between Venice and the papacy broke down completely (the most famous episode was the Interdict of 1606-1607), Infelise shows convincingly that Venice’s opposition to the Holy See was expressed in terms of principle (above all thanks to Paolo Sarpi but also, later on, to Fulgenzio Micanzio) rather than the actual practice of granting licenses, where in effect the Republic never substantially contested any of the Inquisition’s prohibitions, while at the same time allowing the publication of many Hispanophile and monarchical texts that could be seen as detrimental to Venice’s reputation. That economic considerations in Venice were always regarded as of

paramount importance is also shown by the fact that largely anti-Venetian works were still allowed to be published as long as it could be shown they would sell well: in other words, the interests of the city’s printers were protected. The intransigence that had given rise to some dangerous conflicts between the late sixteenth century and the early seventeenth century gave way to more flexible and nuanced positions reflecting a greater realism. While it is true that the possibilities for personal freedom were far greater in Venice than in any other Italian state, the plan to bring printing and bookselling entirely under secular control, excluding the church and strengthening the absolutist credentials of the state, similar to what would shortly occur in France, was a step too far for Venice. As Infelise states, “trying to create an absolutism without being an absolute monarchy and using the institution of an aristocratic republic founded in medieval times” proved to be impossible, not least because of divisions among the city’s patriciate and the church’s ability to maintain its control over the minds of the faithful (p. 128).

It is Paolo Sarpi, the central figure in the discussion of church-state relations in the early modern age, who provides Infelise with a point of reference in building up a complex and detailed historical picture, based on a profound knowledge of the relevant Venetian archives and characterized by subtle analysis and astute judgment. Sarpi dominates the first and most important chapter in the book (“Il principe è tutto”), but his ideas cast a long and enduring shadow over all subsequent anti-papal decisions taken by the Republic and thus they also permeate the second half of Infelise’s volume. There is an especially illuminating exploration of the initial fame followed by long neglect of Sarpi’s writings: regarded as highly dangerous by the Inquisition, they became, after a certain date, a source of embarrassment for the Republic itself, to the extent that his works were no longer republished and the man himself was subject to a systematic *damnatio memoriae*. A

symmetrical but opposite movement in Sarpi's fortunes took place in Protestant countries, where his increasing fame led to editions and translations of his works, resulting in a deep and enduring influence (see Infelise's discussion of John Milton on pages 206-208).

With an extensive use of the archives together with numerous other sources, the author reconstructs the history of a war of tactical positioning between Venice and Rome, with alternating periods of crisis and détente according to shifts in the internal politics of the Republic (depending on which faction gained most support from the Venetian patriciate); the international situation (with phases when alliance with Rome was necessary, alternating with phases of open conflict); and the economic and entrepreneurial strength of Venetian printers, a category that during the period surveyed in Infelise's book went from a peak of book production (in the 1580s and 1590s, as shown by their presence at the Frankfurt Fairs) to what was the lowest point in the history of Venetian printing and publishing, the collapse in production following the great plague of 1630. The subsequent revival in the sector's fortunes was focused on the group of free-thinking intellectuals who formed the Accademia degli Incogniti, centered on the figure of the nobleman Giovanni Francesco Loredan. At least half of the notable book production of the period was financed by the Accademia, especially by Loredan himself, who applied for the highest number of privileges during these years. In what was overall a faltering sector starved of finance, Loredan relied on a group of small-scale printers to produce his publications. With examples typical of the period, such as Loredan or Ferrante Pallavicino, Infelise provides a wide-ranging survey of the book trade in Venice in one of its least studied periods, especially problematic for interpretation because of the absence—unlike previous decades—of any leading publishers whose presence dominated and shaped the surrounding scene. There is much information here, such as that relating to licenses,

for example, or on the customs certificates recording the importation of books, which has never been published and which it would be of extreme interest to consult in depth, perhaps in digital form. A mere index of names—all that is provided—is hardly sufficient in a work that is so full of new insights and information that all readers would like to be able to access more easily. Nor, alas, as in all Laterza editions, is there a bibliography giving details of both the primary and secondary sources that have been used (the former are very numerous and mostly unpublished).

After the direct clash of the two powers during the Interdict, the Republic neither wanted nor could afford to sustain an open conflict with Rome over the control of printing, resorting instead to using legal subtleties and ambiguities to preserve, at least formally, its own sovereignty while conforming to the *imprimatur* issued by whoever was the inquisitor of the moment. The sheer detail of Infelise's study has the effect of reshaping radically our sense of the impact of the two systems of censorship, enabling us to identify all the stratagems (such as books with false imprints) that were variously employed and to some degree promoted or at least tolerated by the secular authorities, in order to circumvent the ecclesiastical prohibitions. In any case, it was not only the state that operated with efficacious secrecy. The church, too, learned to proceed "with discretion" (not by chance in the case of juridical works with tendencies toward Gallicanism), and rather than publishing edicts banning unwelcome publications, which would have attracted attention to books the church hoped would disappear silently from view, the church made unannounced raids on bookshops to sequester copies. Such discretion avoided publicity (unwelcome to the hierarchy for a variety of reasons) and enhanced the effectiveness of sequestrations (which were always to be carried out "privately and with prudence," as Rodolfo Savelli has shown).[5] Thus, in striking contrast to the situation at the end of the sixteenth century, the practical control of books be-

came a matter of skirmishing and tactical positioning between the two opposed sides, leaving vast areas where the Inquisition's control failed to function, as the fluctuations and contradictions of the evidence assembled by Infelise show. With great skill Infelise traces the nuances and contradictions of the various positions as he continually sifts official proceedings, records of preparatory debates, and more private exchanges of views; the picture he draws is of a complex and unstable situation, which nevertheless managed to achieve its own kind of equilibrium or stability within which the revival of printing and publishing from the 1650s onward could take place.

Notes

[1]. Paul F. Grendler, *The Roman Inquisition and the Venetian Press, 1540-1605* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), recently republished in 2015 as a paperback print-on-demand from Princeton University Press.

[2]. *Tractatus universi iuris, duce, & auspice Gregorio XIII Pontifice Maximo, in unum congesti*, 29 vols. (Venice: Societas Aquilae, 1584) (*Edit 16*, CNCE 32225).

[3]. *Edit 16*, <http://edit16.iccu.sbn.it/>.

[4]. Alonso Tostado, *Opera omnia*, 28 vols. (Venice: Sessa, 1596) (*Edit 16*, CNCE 29613).

[5]. Rodolfo Savelli, *Censori e giuristi: Storia di libri, di idee e di costumi (secoli XVI-XVII)* (Milan: Giuffr , 2011), 244-246.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-italy>

Citation: Angela M. Nuovo. Review of Infelise, Mario. *I padroni dei libri: Il controllo sulla stampa nella prima et  moderna*. H-Italy, H-Net Reviews. October, 2015.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43262>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.