



Joanne M. Ferraro. *Venice: History of the Floating City*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Maps, illustrations. 310 pp. \$29.99, paper, ISBN 978-1-316-60661-2.

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Commissioned by Donna Sinclair (Central Michigan University)

Venice has, of course, long fascinated scholars, artists, and most romantics at large; it is not difficult to understand why this is the case. The city's beauty and rich history have never failed to attract droves of visitors wishing to experience its "sighs of utter astonishment as sky and sea paint the landscape, changing the palette in rhythm with breaking light. Domes, rooftops, and towers glint and glaze in the summer, retreating mysteriously like ghostlike forms during the dark and misty winter. All the while the water mirrors the atmosphere, yielding tantalizing glimpses of Byzantine, Islamic, and Gothic styles" (p. xvii). Joanne M. Ferraro offers this physical assessment of Venice in the first paragraph of her preface, over the course of which she describes the myriad reasons why the city long ago cast its "enchanted spell" on her and became her "home away from her U.S. home" (p. xv). It has indeed been both Ferraro's passion for Venice and immense talent for original research that have helped her become one of the preeminent Renaissance and early modern historians of the city and its environs. She has made monographic contributions to our understanding of the Venetian Republic's relationship with provincial elites in Brescia (*Family and Public Life in Brescia, 1580-1650: The Social Foundations of the Venetian State* [1993]), gender relations in Venice's non-noble families (*Marriage*

Wars in Late Renaissance Venice [2001]), and gender's role in shaping power dynamics and sexual attitudes in both Venice and parts of its land empire (*Nefarious Crimes, Contested Justice: Illicit Sex and Infanticide in the Republic of Venice, 1557-1789* [2008]). To this Ferraro has now added *Venice: History of the Floating City* (originally published in 2012, and now available in a reprint edition), the merits of which only further cements her place among the foremost scholars of this world-renowned city.

The publication of Frederic C. Lane's *Venice: A Maritime Republic* in 1973 initiated a new era in the field of Venetian studies. Lane reached beyond the works of earlier generations of historians to emphasize the vital role a strong republic and well-developed commercial network and navy played in centuries of Venetian success. Ferraro makes it clear from the start that her history draws on a "broad range" of the enormous amount of scholarship inspired by Lane's book over the last forty or so years, as evidenced by her impressively long bibliography (nine and a half, single-spaced pages with small print!). Also impressive is the author's extensive use of the holdings of Venice's Archivio di Stato in creating her history, which is something fellow historians have come to expect from her exhaustively researched earlier works. Ferraro skillfully synthesizes much

of the abovementioned material into a largely coherent and insightful narrative of eight chapters dedicated to various aspects of Venetian history: cityscape, naval prowess and maritime commerce, ruling class, identities and modes of socialization, material life, the self-constructed “myth of Venice,” the city’s wayward subjects, the city’s seventeenth- and eighteenth-century decline, and a short epilogue on post-republican Venice (1797 on). She chooses to emphasize four specific themes throughout these chapters “that are timely and important in the postmodern age: the construction and evolution of identities; the multiculturalism of material life; social hierarchy; and gender as a cultural construction” (p. xix). This thematic approach is refreshing for many reasons, none more important than that it leads Ferraro to expand on historians’ regular focus on city politics and maritime prowess to include discussions of how a historically underappreciated litany of peoples, both foreign and domestic, contributed to the rich tapestry of Venetian history. This is indeed a running focus of her book, in which she rarely goes many pages in a row without describing how the arrival in Venice of Crusading adventurers, Christian pilgrims, employment and pleasure seekers, and gentlemen on the Grand Tour or Venetian contact with Germans, Slavs, Greeks, Albanians, Armenians, Arabs, Mamluks, Egyptians, Persians, Ottoman Turks, etc., affected the trajectory of the city’s history.[1] Another strength of Ferraro’s approach is that she is able to weave her extensive knowledge of early modern Venetian family and gender history into her narrative. As a result, the book pointedly gives Venetian women of all social ranks a central place in the city’s history and development. This is especially the case for the author’s research period, early modern Venice, for which Ferraro provides excellent insight into both the rights granted to and restrictions imposed upon women of whatever class.

There is thus much to celebrate in Ferraro’s thematic approach to Venetian history, but this

approach also proves to be somewhat of a hindrance to the cohesion and flow of her book. The chapters are clearly arranged to provide an overarching historical chronology of Venice for readers, but the author’s thematic approach tends to muddle frequently this chronology by shifting discussions, for example, from the events of one century to those of another and then returning to the first. This chronological fluctuation tends to try readers’ concentration, as they attempt to follow the intended argument of a given chapter, which is unfortunate, because these arguments are always sound. The fact that Ferraro’s expertise is early modern Venetian history is apparent in this book, as her discussions of this period are unquestionably the most thorough in it. There is however an uneven overall treatment of historical periods in the work, intentional or otherwise. The author’s discussions of Venice’s foundation and subsequent commercial expansion in the book’s early chapters are solid, but chapter 3’s treatments of the city’s medieval transition from dukedom to oligarchic commune and the development of its regional state are less detailed and engage, at times, in the abovementioned chronological hopscotching. Ferraro, furthermore, informs readers in her preface that the “focus of this history remains the Republic of Venice, while only brief attention is given to the modern period” (p. xx); she is certainly true to this promise. The author devotes only a fourteen-page epilogue to the complicated history of Venice after the Republic’s fall to Napoleon in the spring of 1797. Ferraro clearly acknowledges making a conscious choice to devote her examination of Venetian history to earlier centuries, so critics should refrain from overemphasizing the point. Yet one cannot help but wish that she had dived a little deeper into post-republican Venice than several short sections on the significant political developments of the city, the headings of which lend an out-of-place, romantic air to them: “Fading Glories,” “The Winged Lion under France and Austria,” “Venice Joins the Young Italian Nation,” “Venice in Peril: The Twen-

tieth Century,” and “The Eternal Allure.” Beyond this, I would imagine that both students and scholars alike of post-republican Venice, among whose ranks I admittedly do not belong, would be disappointed to discover that there is only a single book referenced in the entire epilogue.[2]

One of Ferraro’s clear aims is that this book will expose its readers to as many aspects of Venetian history as possible; she is quite successful in this pursuit. Her volume includes two appendices concerning the ebb and flow of Venice’s population, both during the Republic and in the city’s post-republican historic center. She also provides several useful teaching aids to assist the journey of nonspecialist students through the history of Venice and its empire. A glossary of appropriate terms, including those in the Italian and Venetian languages, republican governmental offices, place names, etc., helps readers fill in any knowledge gaps they may have concerning the important terminology needed to navigate Venetian history. These same readers will appreciate Ferraro’s inclusion of five different maps relevant to Venetian history: Venice in the twenty-first century; the major trade routes between Europe, North Africa, and Asia; Greek locales under Venetian control at various times; greater-Asian trade routes; and Venice’s mainland empire after 1426. Also welcome is the inclusion of informative suggestions for further reading at the end of every chapter, as well as a series of gray-shaded inserts strewn throughout the chapters that provide readers with additional information on historical figures and events (the Polo family, Francesco Morosini), maritime-related matters (ship construction, galleys, gondolas), arts and literature (Veronica Franco, Sara Coppia, Sullam, Arcangela Tarabotti, Carlo Goldoni), ritual practice (Venice’s annual marriage to the sea), Venetian urban life (taverns and inns), imported trade goods (the use and abuse of chocolate), religious practice (Orthodox Christians), and more, which are appropriate to the topic under discussion at the time. The inclusion of a detailed chronology is also a useful reference

guide, although its title, “Chronology of Historical Events,” does not do it justice, seeing as its focus is not only historical events but also dates of importance in the fields of architecture, art, literature, and music. The inclusion of the above features do make Ferraro’s book more accessible to nonspecialists, but at the same time much of the work’s body text does not cater to general readers to the same degree. The text in fact, while informative and well written, does create something of an identity crisis for the book. Most of chapter 5, titled “Material Life,” for example, reads very much like a textbook chapter, presenting readers with straightforward descriptions of various aspects of Venetian material culture, under such section titles as “Worldly Goods and Home Furnishings,” “New Food, Drink, and Pharmacoepia,” “The Meaning of Food,” and “Clothing and Representation.” Quite a few other sections of the book, in contrast, deliver well-developed and insightful arguments using technical language that gives one the impression that the author is addressing a community of specialists.[3] This is perhaps a nit-picky criticism, and Ferraro is certainly effective in communicating her message in both delivery formats, but it does lead readers to wonder at times who the author’s target audience for this book is: specialists, the general public, or maybe both.

Ferraro and Cambridge University Press have produced a physically handsome and well-organized volume, full of educational components that complement the body text well. In addition to the abovementioned features, this book contains forty-five illustrations of important pieces by Venetian artists, sculptors, architects, bronze-smiths, etc., as well as sixteen photographs of some of Venice’s significant churches and *palazzi*, most of which Ferraro took herself; it is a shame that only the latter photos are in color, but the move is no doubt an understandable cost-saving measure. Ferraro’s enthusiasm for Venice and its history radiates from the text, as does her refreshing brand of humor, which she expresses on

many occasions throughout the book. While describing certain times of the year, such as Carnival, during which civic officials tolerated comical disorder and the mocking of authority in order to protect communal values and justify political, religious, and gendered hierarchy, she muses: “Commoners who could afford the costumes dressed as the doge or as patricians; courtesans wore the jewels of married ladies; and women dressed as priests. One could even imagine mice chasing cats down alleyways, as they do during Carnival masquerades today” (p. 98). She furthermore ends a discussion of the power of Catholic feast days to transform the piazzas and great monuments of Venice into emotion- and drama-filled public theaters by quipping that, having accomplished their underlying purpose of capturing spectators’ loyalties and infusing them with a sense of religious piety and civic pride, “the crowds then scurried off for the real fun: to watch the famous fistfights on Venice’s bridges, where men pummeled one another and knocked each other off bridges as excited fans cheered them on” (p. 144).

It is however unfortunate that this book’s so many good features must share space with others that distract readers from fully enjoying them, the biggest culprit being the lack of careful copyediting. On at least two occasions, for example, the Church of the Redentore is misspelled as “Rendentore” (pp. 141, 195). On another occasion, the architect Angelo Scattolin receives a third “t” in his name, “Scatttolin” (p. 211). There is also the occasional letter left out of a word, thus altering or making nonsense of a sentence’s meaning. This is the case, for example, in a passage discussing the Venetian Senate’s engagement of “Palladio to design the church of the Redentore and promised to hold an immense procession *very* year on the third Sunday in July”; the author presumably meant the italicized word to be “every” (p. 157, emphasis added). There is furthermore at least one misstatement of fact, which appears in the information box on Veronica Franco. The text informs readers that Franco lived from 1580 to

1625, when in fact she lived from 1546 to 1591 (p. 148). Another minor but irking feature of the book concerns its layout, particularly the curious placement of some illustrations, charts, and maps. These illustrations sometimes appear more than one page turn away from the discussions about them in the body text, and on more than one occasion multiple page turns are necessary to match up an illustration with its accompanying discussion. The worst offender by far is Ferraro’s discussion of figure 36, Paolo Veronese’s *Feast in the House of Levi*, which appears in the text seven pages after the painting itself!^[4] This occasional splitting up of illustration and discussion is, again, a minor inconvenience, and perhaps has some legitimate explanation attached to it, but it does tend to disrupt readers’ momentum in progressing smoothly through the book.

Despite any quibbles one may have with Ferraro’s book, in the final analysis, it is an otherwise important, thought-provoking, and informative volume. The author’s enthusiasm for and deep knowledge of Venice and its history shines through from the beginning to end, which is not surprising, considering her status as one of the preeminent historians of Venice, especially for the early modern period. Ferraro’s treatment of the “Floating City” will undoubtedly appear on the syllabi of history, geography, and other disciplines’ courses for years to come; truth be told, I am certainly planning to include it on my reading list the next time I teach a course on Italian and/or Mediterranean history.

Notes

[1]. This is especially true in the first half of Ferraro’s book.

[2]. Although Ferraro lists several books on various aspects of Venetian history in the further reading section at the end of the epilogue, there are only two footnotes appearing in the text. The first refers readers to a University of Toronto Libraries website on which the epilogue’s opening quote from William Wordsworth appears. The

second cites Margaret Plant's *Venice: Fragile City, 1779-1997* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

[3]. One finds examples of this in Ferraro's discussions of the Fourth Crusade; seduction and rape, marriage, and unwed mothers; and the role of marriage preservation in Venetian mythmaking.

[4]. Veronese's painting appears on page 152, but its accompanying discussion does not appear until the middle of page 159.

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

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