

Melissa Calaresu and Helen Hills, eds. *New Approaches to Naples c. 1500–c. 1800: The Power of Place*.

Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2013. xvii + 260 pp. \$119.95. ISBN: 978-1-4094-2943-2.

Though the growing number of publications on the cultural history of Naples appear to indicate its slow but steady emergence from under the long shadow of the “golden triangle” of Florence, Venice, and Rome, none of these publications states its reformative program as openly and confidently as the volume under consideration. As one of the largest cities in Europe, second only to Paris and later London, Naples was an undeniable center of cultural activity; Miguel de Cervantes, who had been stationed in the city as a young soldier, would later speak of “Nápoles la ilustre,” dreaming to return. Having suffered too long, as the editors indicate, from a “glamorization” as “excessive, dangerous and exotic” (1), there can be no doubt that Naples deserves more and more original scholarship. The present book opens up a number of interesting perspectives.

Even if the editors rightfully note the fragmented nature of current scholarship on the cultural history of Naples, this might be less the case for its political history. John Marino’s insightful analysis of the marginalization of Southern Italy in the

opening essay builds upon important recent scholarship. Laying bare the idea of modernity as a guiding “interpretive concept,” he challenges the reader to think of alternative ways to conceptualize European history and Naples’s role in it. From the art historian’s point of view, Helen Hills’s discussion of the “materiality of holiness” in the chapel of San Gennaro is particularly relevant. By focusing on the material richness of the chapel, she singles out precisely the quality that from the very start of the discipline — Jacob Burckhardt spoke dismissively of “das prunkliebende Neapel” — has been at the origins of the scholarly neglect of Neapolitan Baroque art and architecture. Discussions of print culture by Rose Marie San Juan, focusing on depictions of the 1651 plague, and city guides by Harald Hendrix further illustrate that Neapolitan visual and literary culture cannot be understood as mere derivatives but have dynamics of their own.

Notwithstanding the broad period indicated in the title, most contributions focus on the eighteenth century. Indeed, in comparison with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this is a period that has received more scholarly attention in general and one might, in fact, see here an echo of the one moment in Neapolitan historiography that has been evaluated largely in positive terms, namely, that of the Neapolitan enlightenment. If this makes these contributions no less interesting, it is questionable if the “chronological impasse between scholars of so-called ‘early modern’ . . . Naples and those of the eighteenth century” (3) is herewith successfully addressed. In any case, it is clear that with the ascension to the throne of the Bourbon kings of Naples, the cultural field changed decisively. In her discussion of Claude-Joseph Vernet’s *The King Hunting on Lake Patria* (ca. 1746), Helena Hammond shows — in an argument reminiscent of Martin Warnke’s *Politische Landschaft* — how this apparently idyllic painting is steeped in royal politics of land appropriation. Melissa Calaresu, focusing on the works of the little-studied artist Pietro Fabris, discusses the active role played by images in the formation of Neapolitan stereotypes. These stereotypes, she argues, are not exclusively the result of the perception of the grand tourists; rather, Neapolitans themselves consumed, and thus actively contributed to such images, specifically in the popular *presepe* figures.

As might be expected from a volume of its kind, not all of the contributions live up to the expectations set by the introduction, and it might be argued that their diversity highlights the fragmented nature of current scholarship rather than resolving it. If there is a red thread to be found, it is the recurrent reference to images, not as purely artistic objects, but as being deeply enmeshed, even actively participating in historical developments. It is therefore a pity that the poor quality of the color reproductions makes some of the related arguments difficult to follow. Having said this, it should be stressed that the book succeeds in addressing a number of pertinent issues. As such, it provides a significant contribution to the study of Naples’s cultural history, because of the insights it provides, but even more so because of the questions it raises.

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