
The Bernard Berenson Lectures on the Italian Renaissance were launched in 2006 at Villa I Tatti, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies. Edward Muir served as the inaugural speaker, and this volume represents the fruits of those lectures in an elegantly produced, well-written essay. Muir makes an interesting set of arguments regarding the interwoven nature of cultures now often studied as the provinces of separate academic disciplines: natural science, philosophy, literature, and music.

Muir’s chronological focus covers the period spanning from 1591 to 1660. The former year marked student riots against the Jesuits in Venice, which led eventually to their expulsion from the lagoon city; the latter, the end of the *Accademia degli incogniti*, or “Academy of the Unknowns,” an institution whose members embodied many of the tendencies under study. Muir’s study brings to light a number of factors that coalesced in the Veneto during this period that, taken together, present a picture of a society where certain traditional pictures regarding the history of science need to be amended; where a variety of proto-Enlightenment libertinism developed; and where early opera flourished because of these conditions.

As to the history of science, Muir begins by highlighting the relationship between Galileo Galilei, who spent some of his formative teaching years at the University of Padua (Venice’s home university), and Cesare Cremonini (1550–1631). Cremonini is far less well known than Galileo. When he is remembered, it is often as a thinker who said famously that looking through Galileo’s telescope gave him a headache (as reported by Paolo Gualdo in a letter to Galileo after Galileo’s 1610 publication of the *Sidereus nuncius*). Accordingly, Cremonini is frequently viewed as the stereotypical representative of an outdated philosophical culture that was willing to ignore empirical evidence: the ‘last scholastic.’ Yet Cremonini was paid twice as much as Galileo at Padua, he and Galileo were friendly associates, and in many respects Cremonini was no adherent of tradition. Indeed, he was even a target of the Jesuits because of the manner in which he taught Aristotle, wherein he maintained that, at least according to Aristotle, the human soul could not be said to retain individual immortality after death.

This controversy caused the Venetian Jesuits to come into conflict with Cremonini and the University of Padua, but there were other factors involved in the Jesuits’ struggles with the Venetian authorities. Not least was the fact that the Jesuits appeared to be stealing students from Padua, who were attracted to Jesuit education for a variety of reasons, including more individual attention and more classroom hours (p. 31): “whereas the professors in Faculty of Arts at the university delivered between sixty and seventy lectures per year, at the Jesuit college each
instructor gave three hundred, in addition to the time spent on daily repetition and organized monthly debates.” Resentments eventually peaked, and the Jesuits were expelled from Venice. Yet the story of Galileo’s and Cremonini’s relationship went beyond their common university experiences.

Both Cremonini and Galileo belonged to an Academy: the Accademia degli Ricoverati; and both were subject to inquiries from the Inquisition, being jointly denounced in 1604. Cremonini’s error had been his position concerning Aristotle and individual immortality; he continued to be denounced throughout his career. Yet Cremonini never met the same fate as Galileo. For Muir this fact was the result of Cremonini’s remaining in the Venice-Padua orbit, so that he continued to have the protection of the Venetian senate, whose members more than once defended him from the Inquisition. Galileo by contrast, upon decamping for Florence, did not enjoy the same sort of protection.

Cremonini represents both a cause and a manifestation of a specific style of thought that took hold in the Veneto, a kind of intellectual Nicodemism whereby one could hold certain private beliefs and even espouse them in certain contexts, provided one acted according to certain broad norms of social convention: “Intus ut libet, foris ut moris est” (“Inwardly as you please, outwardly according to convention”), as one of Cremonini’s favorite maxims ran (according to his pupil Gabriel Naudé). Muir sums up this first chapter well: he argues that the basic conflict in the Veneto between the Jesuits and thinkers like Cremonini was both context-specific and emblematic of a larger cultural clash that has waxed and waned in the West. On the one hand, one saw thinkers who believed in a “universal program open to all” that emphasized “basic skills over intellectual flexibility” (p. 59) and served as a standard formation of character that would make a uniformly educated citizenry possible. On the other there were those who “did not necessarily agree on fundamental truths, other than their commitment to open-ended methods of inquiry.”

For a time in the Veneto, then, it was the latter set of intellectual norms that dominated, which helped both to frame and to give rise to the development of libertinism, the subject of the book’s second chapter, and early opera, which occupies the book’s final chapter. As to libertinism, Muir begins his treatment with Ferrante Pallavicino’s work The Celestial Divorce, published in 1643 (in Ingolstadt, tellingly). Jesus Christ is depicted wanting to divorce his “bride,” the Catholic Church. God the Father sends Saint Paul down to earth to investigate, and Paul returns scandalized both by the conditions under which the Church operates and the morality of its members, advocating that the Father grant the divorce. Representatives of other churches, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, offer themselves, but Christ rejects them all. There was a market for this type of work. Pallavicino’s chief patron in Venice, Giovanni Francesco Loredan (1607–1661), founded the Accademia degli Incogniti, which became a key locus of libertine practices in Venice. These practices included