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Title: Book Review: Italian Masculinity as Queer Melodrama: Caravaggio, Puccini, Contemporary Cinema by John Champagne

Journal Issue: gender/sexuality/italy, 3 (2016)

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Publication date: December 2016

Publication info: gender/sexuality/italy, "Reviews"

Permalink: http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/15-italian-masculinity-as-queer-melodrama-caravaggio-puccini-contemporary-cinema/

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Champagne, John. *Italian Masculinity as Queer Melodrama: Caravaggio, Puccini, Contemporary Cinema*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp. xii, 266. ISBN 9781137474803. $100.00 (hardcover). $95.00 (paperback). $79.99 (ePub).

Balzac, Stendhal, and Wilde have all written of Italy and Italian men as being ruled by passion and romance, or, in a word: melodramatic in nature. In *Italian Masculinity as Queer Melodrama*, John Champagne explores this perception of melodrama as a national aesthetic of queer masculinity from Caravaggio to Özpetek. Since the enduring trope of the melodramatic Italian man has traditionally linked Italian masculinity with an 'othered' sense of femininity on the European stage in the 19th and 20th centuries it has made Italy and Italian men synonymous with a hyper sexuality. The lasting presence of this trope, Champagne argues, has crystallized Italy's international reputation as "a place of sexual licentiousness" (4), or as Derek Duncan has put it, "a hot-bed of sodomitical practice" (*Reading and Writing Italian Homosexuality* 2006, 3). We can see that this stereotype persists today, where even as recently as this past June, Frank Bruni wrote an op-ed for the New York Times entitled, "Penne and Prejudice," writing, "If there's a gayer country than Italy, I haven't ogled it. I don't mean demographically gay. That's unknowable. I mean spiritually gay. I mean the self-conscious style and gaudy opera of the place."[1]

Champagne aims not to perpetuate this stereotype, but to investigate the importance of melodrama as a dominant mode of representation in Italy since the 17th century. He argues that the trope of the hypersexual and passionate Italian man is ripe for a concurrent analysis of melodrama, masculinity, and queerness. Through an examination of the works by Caravaggio, Puccini, Grimaldi, Amelio, and Özpetek, Champagne resists essentialism by arguing that "melodrama becomes a significant mode through which modern Italian masculinity is articulated" (8), and it is because of melodrama's aesthetic properties that this masculinity has the potential to be characterized as queer.

Champagne introduces the theoretical architecture of melodrama and masculinity by way of Caravaggio. The first chapter engages with a tradition of scholarship that characterizes Caravaggio's work as realistic; instead, Champagne argues that it might be more accurately described as melodramatic. He focuses on four central conventions to melodrama that he locates in Caravaggio's work: the "problematization of mimesis" (35) by way of allegory, the "crisis of vision" (39) inherited from the renegotiation of the image in post-Tridentine artistry, the use of narrative theatricality within painting, and the injection of "social protest" (47) into aesthetics. Following Peter Brooks (*The Melodramatic Imagination* 1995) and Martin O'Malley (*Trent, What Happened at the Council* 2013), Champagne argues that these conventions arose much sooner than critics of melodrama believe, constituting a "new affective terrain in the Counter-Reformation" (33). He defines this terrain and its aesthetics by an "inchoate sense of loss," a phrase which he borrows from Michael Fried's *The Moment of Caravaggi*o.[2] This sense of loss, he argues, is best described alongside Freud's notion of melancholia—an affect that Jonathan Flatley has importantly tied to aesthetic production during the height of literary modernism[3]. He thus begins chapter two with an analysis of melancholy alongside Caravaggio's "scenes of defeated male bodies in some canvases, excessively embodied male figures in others, and, in the most violent scenes of Christ's

[1] Bruni, Frank. "Penne and Prejudice." *The New York Times*, June 1st, 2016.
[2] Michael Fried. *The Moment of Caravaggio*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.
[3] Jonathan Flatley. *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.

Passion" (56). He then goes on to argue that all of these male bodies contain a visual ambiguity made possible by their melodramatic sensibility, and it is the ambiguity itself that has sparked continuous debate over the presence of a "homosexual sensibility" in Caravaggio's oeuvre. Champagne argues that the melodramatic invocation of ambiguity allows a critic to "decipher" rather than "decode" (49), thus encouraging a reading strategy that resists the universal in favor of the contingent. Through an analysis of this ambiguity Champagne isolates the melodramatic techniques that create it: chiaroscuro, emphasis on gesture and the body, a theatricalized composition, and Manichean juxtapositions of saints and sinners, all of which produce a visual "eroticization of the male body" (80).

Chapters 3 and 4 bring the reader two centuries forward in order to explore the ways in which melodrama made its way into Giacomo Puccini's operatic performance. These chapters bring into further relief the melodramatic convention of social protest and opera's ability to incorporate the melodramatic effects of music alongside stylistic modernism. Drawing further from the crisis of the sacred in the wake of the Counter-Reformation discussed in the first chapter, Champagne suggests that the modernist devices (e.g. repetitions, doublings, delays) involved in *Tosca* inaugurate a new era of melodramatic sensibility. Additionally, Champagne demonstrates throughout both chapters how musical motifs can be implemented throughout the work in various ways to emphasize not only the Manichean distinction between good and evil, but also the depth of affect residing within the characters, both of which resonate with the melodramatic sensibility. Champagne finishes the fourth chapter with a consideration of different rewrites of the male characters in *La Rondine* asserting that Puccini's excessive revisions are symptomatic of the crisis of masculinity that existed at the turn of the century.

In chapters 5 and 6 he turns to the cinematic work of Aurelio Grimaldi, Gianni Amelio, and Ferzan Özpetek in order to grapple further with the interaction of affect and masculinity in a new era of gender dynamics and in a new medium of visual artistry. Following Derek Duncan's claim that "queer Italian cinema" offers spectators a space of "affective relationality" (148) that extends beyond the borders of national cinema, Champagne engages with Grimaldi's *La discesa di Aclà a Floristella* (1992), Amelio's *Le chiavi di casa* (2004), and Özpetek's *Mine Vaganti* (2010), arguing that they queer liminal space between men and national borders by way of the very same melodramatic techniques that he discusses throughout much of the book.

Italian Masculinity as Queer Melodrama provides an original perspective on the sorely understudied and seldom put together themes of queerness, masculinity, and melodrama (at least in Italian studies). It leaves the reader to ponder several entry points in Italy's cultural history to further explore masculinity's complexity: Caravaggio and the upheaval of post-Tridentine society, Puccini and the precarious position of masculinity at a time dominated by psychoanalysis and sexology as heuristics of gender and sexuality, and the end of the previous millennium with the influence of a "post" gay liberation society on filmmakers who are out of the proverbial closet. Champagne's study might have benefitted from more historiographical analysis to complement his sustained engagement with queer theory. Moreover that engagement might have been strengthened by a discussion of queer affect theory. For instance, Champagne makes no mention of Lauren Berlant's recent work, *The Female Complaint* (2008), or *Cruel Optimism* (2011), both of which prominently feature integrated analyses of melodrama, affect, and queerness. Among the many facets to her argument in *Cruel Optimism* she claims that "melodrama consoles its audience with an aesthetic of transparent embodiment and emotional performance that produces continuity with the very past that is dissolving" (157-158). Implied here is the tension between body,

mind, and historicity in the aestheticization of emotion from bodily experiences of affect. This tension saturates Berlant's work on affect and melodrama providing a trove of theory that has particular relevance to Champagne's ongoing discussion of ambiguity, aesthetics, and male bodies. These points aside, *Italian Masculinity as Queer Melodrama* is a compelling study that expands our conceptions of genre and gender in Italy; one that will serve as a catalyst for more work on queerness and the complexity of Italian male subjectivity.

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