



Dickinson

<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com>

g/s/i is an annual peer-reviewed journal which publishes research on gendered identities and the ways they intersect with and produce Italian politics, culture, and society by way of a variety of cultural productions, discourses, and practices spanning historical, social, and geopolitical boundaries.

Title: Book Review: *Emotional Arenas: Life, Love, and Death in 1870s Italy* by Mark Seymour

Journal Issue: gender/sexuality/italy, 7 (2020)

Author: Diana Moore

Publication date: February 2021

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

Permalink: <https://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/20-emotional-arenas-life-love-death-1870s-italy>

Keywords: Book Review

Copyright information

g/s/i is published online and is an open-access journal. All content, including multimedia files, is freely available without charge to the user or his/her institution and is published according to the Creative Commons License, which does not allow commercial use of published work or its manipulation in derivative forms. Content can be downloaded and cited as specified by the author/s. **However, the Editorial Board recommends providing the link to the article (not sharing the PDF) so that the author/s can receive credit for each access to his/her work, which is only published online.**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

Seymour, Mark. *Emotional Arenas: Life, Love, and Death in 1870s Italy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 256. ISBN 978-0-19-874359-0. \$80.00 (hardcover).

In his latest work, *Emotional Arenas*, Mark Seymour adds to Oxford University's Emotions in History Series with a detailed investigation of the complexities and particularities of Liberal Italy—a period often neglected in comparison to the Renaissance, Fascist, or even Risorgimento eras. With his model of an emotional microhistory, Seymour contributes yet another method to the burgeoning field of emotion studies. His work centers on the brutal 1878 murder of Giovanni Fadda, a captain in the Italian army, by his estranged wife's lover, Pietro Cardinali. Later investigations revealed that Fadda's wife, Raffaella Sarceni, and Cardinali, an equestrian artist in his family's circus, had planned the murder hoping to free Sarceni of her unhappy marriage. During the course of the murder investigation, public prosecutors amassed a huge quantity of evidence, including letters, notes from witness interviews, and autopsy reports, which were subsequently stored in the Archivio di Stato in Rome and largely forgotten. Seymour utilizes these criminal investigation records, along with the extensive press coverage of the trial, as a rich archive for uncovering the lived experience of post-unification Italy. In doing so, he convincingly demonstrates the benefits of incorporating the methods of emotions history into larger historical narratives.

Following the “exceptional-normal” method of microhistory, Seymour uses the unusual circumstances of the Fadda case to effectively reveal the details and nuances of Italian social life in the 1870s.¹ He also proposes a new emotions history paradigm that justly recognizes the importance of spaces (both physical and virtual). With the “emotional arena,” Seymour posits that in certain spaces, “the experience and expression of emotions, and their staging and shaping, are likely to follow patterns distinctive to that space” (p. 12). Moving away from William Reddy's argument that each society had a dominant “emotional regime,” Seymour's work directs our attention to “the contours and boundaries of a specific society's emotionally variegated culture at a given moment” (p. 15). While the concept derives from Barbara Rosenwein's theory of “emotional communities,” Rosenwein's theory is grounded in groups of people and only allows for some overlap and permeability between groups.² In contrast, Seymour's concept focuses on space and allows for individuals to experience and navigate between a greater range of emotional standards within a given society.

Seymour structures each chapter around a different emotional arena of 1870s Italy. Chapter 1 explores the tensions and ultimate failure of Giovanni Fadda and Raffaella Sarceni's marriage as emblematic of the difficulties the Italian people felt discarding their traditional localized practices for the new values of the unified Liberal state. As Fadda and Sarceni rarely lived together, their marriage was mainly conducted via correspondence, which Seymour analyzes as “careful epistolary ‘performance’ of familial emotions” (p. 30). He skillfully uncovers the personal sentiments behind the structures of epistolary conventions, noting, for example, that while Fadda consistently adhered to the convention of inquiring about the well-being of his in-laws, the tone of these inquiries noticeably cooled as his marriage deteriorated. The following two chapters travel to the world of Fadda's murderer Pietro Cardinali. Through an examination of the Cardinali circus's visit to Sarceni's hometown of Cassano allo Ionio in Calabria in Chapter 2, Seymour discusses the titillating excitement of the circus for its small-town audiences as well as the atypical familial dynamics of the Cardinali family itself. In Chapter 3, Seymour then provides a detailed analysis of forty-four letters sent to Pietro Cardinali by four or five of his female admirers that shines light on women's amorous

¹ Edoardo Grendi, “Micro-analisi e storia sociale,” *Quaderni storici*, vol. 12, no. 35(2) (1977): 506-20.

² Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

adventures and interior lives. In Chapter 4 Seymour moves on from the circus to the sphere of death, focusing on three very different deaths: Fadda's mother, the first king of Italy Victor Emmanuel II, and Giovanni Fadda himself. Though Seymour's rich archival sources reveal Fadda and Sarceni's individual reactions to Victor Emmanuel's death, this chapter relies more heavily than the others on preexisting scholarship, particularly for the argument that the collective mourning of Victor Emmanuel's death played a pivotal role in fostering a sense of Italian national identity and unity. Seymour concludes with a chapter on the murder trial and the emotional arena of the courtroom.

By revealing the state's attempts to nationalize Italy's emotional arenas, Seymour offers a valuable perspective from which to explore the culture wars of the nineteenth century. While other scholars have already demonstrated the new state's desire to supplant the Catholic Church in such areas as marriage, education, charity, and the law, Seymour adds an analysis of the state's intentional manipulation of feelings as part of their campaign. In his discussion of the Fadda trial, for instance, he persuasively shows how the state tried to determine the rules, boundaries, and procedures of the court while simultaneously using its emotional power to further incorporate "a tendentially indifferent set of citizens" into the national project (p. 201). Though it is a minor focus of the book, Seymour also positively contributes to studies of Southern Italy by providing a vivid recreation of the "dense texture and complexity of social connections" in southern rural and small-town life (p. 76). The testimony of Sarceni's Calabrian neighbors in particular, offers readers a clearer understanding of the lived experience of this understudied area.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the work, however, is how Seymour complicates our understanding of Italian women's inner lives and sexual desires in the post-unification period. He argues that the much-noted cultural obsession over women's sexual purity coexisted alongside "the richly emotional and sexually allusive literary and operatic models of the era," in which women were both sexualized objects for the male gaze and sexually-desiring subjects (p. 79). Seymour clearly shows how not only women on the margins of polite society, like those in the circus, but also more conventional women took inspiration from these sexually desiring figures. Through their covert love letters to Cardinali seemingly average women fashioned "virtual emotional arenas" of heightened emotions and temporarily escaped from the confines of everyday scrutiny (p. 80). The inclusion of these secret letters, the kind typically destroyed and unavailable for a historian's view, is a major strength of the work. Seymour also shows how the Fadda trial brought up questions of female desire and whether or not Fadda's potential sterility and impotence prompted Sarceni to take a lover and order her husband's murder. He convincingly demonstrates that at least some portions of the Italian public believed in and supported a woman's right to sexual desire. Well-respected lawyer and future Minister of Justice Enrico Pessina, for instance, defended Sarceni's right to sexual gratification by declaring that without "fire" the marital "love goes cold; the radiant conjugal home becomes a frozen cavern" (p. 197).

Emotional Arenas should interest not only scholars in the history of emotions, but also those studying the nation-building process, the culture wars of the nineteenth century, the Southern Question, and women's history. As the chapters remain largely self-contained, they could easily be assigned in undergraduate or graduate courses on these or related subjects. Chapter 5 on the courtroom would be useful in a class on the history of crime and punishment while Chapter 3 on the love letters would add value to a women's history course. Finally, though his research is grounded in the specifics of 1870s Italy, his scholarly approach and method of emotional history could be easily transferred to the study of other periods to great effect.

DIANA MOORE

John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY