



Roscioni, Lisa. *La badessa di Castro. Storia di uno scandalo*

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Roscioni, Lisa.

La badessa di Castro. Storia di uno scandalo.

Biblioteca storica. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017. Pp. 250. ISBN 978-8-8152-7367-3 (paperback) €20.

Drawing on a variety of historical sources, Lisa Roscioni provides her readers with an account of the affair that Elena Orsini, abbess of Castro, allegedly had with Francesco Cittadini, bishop of Castro. The affair, which came to light in 1573 when the abbess delivered herself of a baby boy, was rendered famous in literature by Stendhal's novel *L'abbesse de Castro* (1839).

Setting aside Stendhal's fictionalized narrative, Roscioni points out that in 1557 Elena Orsini, the daughter of the count of Pitigliano, had entered a Cistercian convent founded in Viterbo by her aunt Girolama Orsini, duchess of Parma. In 1566, the convent and its nuns were moved to Castro, the capital of a Farnese duchy. The move was not to Elena's liking, because, as Roscioni shows, in Castro people were dying of malaria. Three years later, Francesco Cittadini, newly appointed bishop of Castro, arrived in town; he, too, was unhappy, but in his case it was because he missed the elegant life he had led in Rome. To make matters worse, Cittadini soon made enemies for himself when he banned local citizens from grazing their animals in grasslands owned by the diocese.

In 1573, news spread that the abbess had given birth to a boy, allegedly the son of Bishop Cittadini. The matter was very sensitive for two reasons: first, because of Elena's position as a member of the noble Orsini family and as Cardinal Alessandro Farnese's cousin; second, because it could affect the succession in the county of Pitigliano, where the Orsini, Medici, and Farnese families had claims. Concerned about news of the scandal and the actions the local *podestà* (chief magistrate) might take, Cittadini sought the assistance of many influential persons to ensure that Elena's trial would take place in the Roman tribunal of the *Auditor camerae* and not the Holy Office. Cittadini also asked the auditor of the Apostolic Chamber, Cardinal Alessandro Riario, to summon him to Rome to defend himself from the accusations levelled against him. Cittadini, who had been accused of sacrilege, was hoping (Roscioni hypothesizes) that the pontiff and his collaborators would be more lenient towards him because they all belonged to the same ecclesiastical caste.

The trial lasted less than a year, from September 1573 to May 1574. The investigation revealed that there had been three sexual encounters between

Cittadini and Elena, which all took place in the convent, and that Elena had given birth to a baby boy in July 1573. A few days after the birth, the child was entrusted to a monastery in Viterbo where he died almost immediately. Elena told Cardinal Riario what had happened and admitted everything. Cittadini, for his part, maintained that he was not the father of the child.

The trial ended, as was often the case at that time, without a final judgment due to lack of sufficient evidence. There was, however, an “extra-judicial solution” (98) by way of a peace agreement between the Cittadini and Orsini families. Through the mediation of Cardinal Carlo Borromeo, a friend of Cittadini’s, the bishop was temporarily transferred to a parish in Milan while Elena had her monastic vows dissolved and was betrothed to a brother of the bishop. The marriage never took place because Elena died before it could be celebrated; some have speculated that Elena died of grief at the death of her child, others that she was poisoned. As Roscioni points out, although the Orsini family had found a solution to the scandal through a marriage of convenience, the situation for Elena would not have been good; had she married and lived a full life, the shame she had brought upon herself would have dishonoured her and her family for life. Such was not the case with men. After a few years, Cittadini resumed his duties, though he never again returned to Castro.

Having reconstructed the historical facts behind the story of the abbess and the bishop, Roscioni tries to determine what sources Stendhal might have used for his own fictional rendering. She identifies one of these in a manuscript entitled *Successo occorso* datable to sometime after 1649. The manuscript reported the case, but expanded on it with imagined details meant to make the narrative attractive to a reading public. Roscioni suggests that Stendhal had probably also consulted the trial records, but is not certain of this. She then points out how, behind the case of the trial manuscript, there is the complex and fascinating problem of the nineteenth-century trade, often illegal, in manuscripts and rare books. The sources that inspired Stendhal’s novel reveal how a certain type of “Italian identity” was developed during the nineteenth century, due in part to the trade in manuscripts and rare books and to foreign novelists such as Stendhal who used these sources as treasure troves for their own fictionalized narratives of life in Italian courts and monasteries.

By pointing out the fictional reconstructions around the unhappy story of Abbess Elena and Bishop Cittadini, and by shedding a more accurate historical light on these events, Roscioni allows us to enter into the historical and

social context of the sixteenth century and to consider at least two important problems raised by the edicts of the Council of Trent: first, the question of enclosure (*clausura*) of nuns which, according to the council, needed to be enforced more strongly in order to avoid scandals; second, the church's control over its clergy. Roscioni's book also highlights the way social class and gender expectations played their part in the early modern period. Owing to his social class and gender, a man such as Bishop Cittadini could regain his lost honour and return to active duty, while a woman such as Abbess Elena (murdered or not) was obliged to relinquish her position and agree to a face-saving marriage of convenience.

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Shakespeare, William.

***A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Ed. Grace Ioppolo.**

Norton Critical Editions. London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018. Pp. xxvii, 231. ISBN 978-0-393-92357-5 (paperback) £7.99.

A recent addition to the Norton Critical Editions, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, edited by Grace Ioppolo, is a wonderfully accessible resource for teachers and students of Shakespeare. Ioppolo's Introduction provides various frameworks with which readers can approach the play, including the historical context of Shakespeare's England, his literary sources, and the composition and publication history. Its comprehensiveness far exceeds what is found in the average critical edition; it encourages readers to consider how intersections of race, gender, and society figure into the play. Ioppolo even points out the "exciting" possibilities of post-colonial readings and modern adaptations of *AMND*. Ioppolo's experience working on textual transmission, the history of the book, and manuscript studies is evident in the intricacy of details she provides. She also discusses audience reception and later adaptations of the play in an intriguing and straightforward manner.

Appended to the playtext is a collection of critical commentaries that speak to the play's production and reception, cast and characters, and important connections between *AMND* and other Shakespearean plays. Whereas Samuel