

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Mellyn, Elizabeth W. Mad Tuscans and Their Families: A History of Mental Disorder in Early Modern Italy

Kevin Siena

Volume 38, numéro 1, hiver 2015

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088712ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i1.22803>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Siena, K. (2015). Compte rendu de [Mellyn, Elizabeth W. Mad Tuscans and Their Families: A History of Mental Disorder in Early Modern Italy]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 38(1), 186–188.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i1.22803>

Très riche, très documenté, doté d'un index *nominum* et d'un index *geographicum*, ce recueil d'articles offre un aperçu stimulant et renouvelé de la question de la terre natale dans les écrits humanistes. Les articles, qui n'ont malheureusement pas pu être tous cités ici, sont de haute tenue et l'ensemble crée un ouvrage stimulant. Enfin, à l'image du colloque dont il est issu, et dont Sylvie Laigneau-Fontaine souligne à plusieurs reprises la joie et l'amitié qui y présidaient, ce livre se lit avec un réel plaisir et un grand agrément.

MARIE BARRAL-BARRON

Université Paris – Sorbonne

Mellyn, Elizabeth W.

Mad Tuscans and Their Families: A History of Mental Disorder in Early Modern Italy.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. Pp. 290. ISBN 978-0-8122-4612-4 (hardcover) \$55.

Elizabeth Mellyn scoured Tuscan archives to amass a collection of three hundred court cases involving allegations of madness from the late-fifteenth to the mid-seventeenth century. In the vein of microhistory she recaptures the stories of ordinary Tuscans facing the dilemma of distracted neighbours or family members and writes a book that is more about communities and caregivers than about the mad themselves. Importantly, Mellyn uses careful reconstructions of these cases to argue against teleological explanations, whether whiggish or critical. The agents in her stories were not swept along by the rising tides of such modernizing forces as institutionalization or centralization. Rather, Mellyn shows that the courts were forums where community members and authorities negotiated solutions to immediate problems. A close reading of the evidence, Mellyn suggests, shows that these trials are best seen on a case-by-case basis, as family members worked with judges to hammer out solutions to confounding, pressing problems. Judges selected from a range of options over two centuries in ways that defy grandiose proclamations about change over time.

The first two chapters explore civil and criminal cases respectively and paint similar pictures. Whether courts were sorting through contests about who should control a family's property when alleged madmen threatened

to squander it, or dealing with public safety when distracted Tuscans acted violently, Florentine authorities repeatedly demonstrated a tendency to seek civic harmony. They often relied on families to care for their mad members, even when this meant placing potentially violent ones under house arrest. Mellyn's findings bolster the work of scholars like Akihito Suzuki who similarly explored familial care for the mad in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By exploring this dynamic for a much earlier period, Mellyn offers yet another nail in the coffin for Foucault's theory of an early modern "Great Confinement" of the insane. Issues of property loomed large in many of the cases she explores, and economic questions receive further attention in chapter 3. She links developing commercialization to economic definitions of madness, whereby the egregious wasting of money could be offered as evidence of insanity. She offers the useful term "patrimonial rationality" as a tool for thinking through how Tuscan authorities held to early modern visions of property that still recognized familial and multi-generational claims. By showing that this outlook continued to influence civil lawsuits despite the advance of the market economy, Mellyn offers another example of continuity over the period, a recurring theme of the book.

In the final two chapters Mellyn turns to medicine. The "Dog that Didn't Bark in the Night" is Mellyn's apt metaphor for her look at forensic medicine in late medieval and early modern Tuscan courts—for Mellyn shows that doctors only rarely testified in civil or criminal cases through the seventeenth century. Yet she still argues for "medicalization" as a useful paradigm for describing the development of the legal processing of madness. To do this, she makes a subtle argument that again comes from a careful reading of the primary sources. Medicine entered the courtroom much more frequently than *doctors* did. Jurists often heard testimony that couched madness in medical terms (rather than legal or spiritual ones) and which argued for its somatic roots. However, such testimony usually came from lay people, not doctors. The picture that emerges is one in which the laity was comfortable from an early date employing medical language to describe madness. (Mellyn is probably right to speculate that this trend likely began in the late Middle Ages, though she lacks a smoking gun.) Doctors would eventually assume a major role as expert witnesses in legal proceedings across Europe. However, this development was still a long way off. The rise of true forensic medicine in the modern sense seems better understood as a byproduct of professionalization

than of medicalization, for here we have an intriguing example of medicalization without doctors. And yet Mellyn's thesis remains suitably muted, because while medicalization occurred—in the sense that medical testimony became more common than before—medicine remained only one explanation of madness throughout the early modern age. The implications of lay medical testimony are potentially important for medical historians more generally, because it offers solid evidence at the ground level for what Andrew Wear once called a “shared medical culture,” namely, that early modern lay people and their doctors spoke the same language, because Galenic principles permeated early modern society from top to bottom. One is tempted to suggest that medicine was not yet “expert” knowledge in the sixteenth century because its basic principles were known to all. The fact that Florentine citizens felt confident invoking “melancholy humours” as a cause of madness—and that judges saw them as fit to make such proclamations without recourse to a doctor—is surely strong evidence that this may have been the case.

While it is intriguing to speculate in this way—and surely a sign of the value of this book for a wide readership—one wishes that Mellyn had pursued some of the implications of her findings in greater depth in her own conclusion. She reflects briefly on the foundation of Santa Dorotea dei Pazzarelli Florence's mental hospital in 1643, though not in ways that link it to her most important arguments, and then she sums up her book in three tidy paragraphs. One wonders whether the thrust of Mellyn's findings leads to this less-than-explosive conclusion. Change was not dramatic over time when it came to the handling of madness by Tuscan courts. Trials hinged on ad hoc decisions made by jurists seeking to secure community harmony. Such cases lend themselves to being read on a case-by-case basis rather than being fit into grand paradigms. Here is the real strength of this book: in a historiography long coloured by grand theories, Mellyn's findings offer a strong, well supported, and subtly crafted revision, one that reminds us once again of the value of painstaking archival research.

KEVIN SIENA

Trent University