

SOLANDER

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More Than a Matter
of Words:
Reading in Translation

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Finding Caesar in Spain

Colonial Historical Fiction

**Unusual Settings for
Historical Fiction - do
they exist?**

**Elusive Creatures?
Female authors of African
historical fiction**

Anita Mason. Kate Furnivall. Shona MacLean. Quaestor2000.

blows through the joints of the doors, as well as the aroma of mint that floats in from the fields of the Villa P...

Colour and texture, too, play an important role both in her dress and personal belongings: for example, in the jewel-like theatre Marianna builds to celebrate her recovery from pleurisy, she chooses a riot of brilliant hues to “compensate for her deafness”, “the boxes lined with yellow damask with borders of blue velvet”.¹⁴ Synaesthesia, or the intermingling of different sensory perceptions, is a fundamental trope of the Baroque sensibility that pervades the Sicilian culture of Marianna’s time. Maraini uses these impossible images to evoke the landscape seen through Marianna’s eyes: “The jasmine and the orange blossom send their perfume upwards like diaphanous wisps of smoke that evaporate between the roof tiles... Nearer, at the bottom of the sloping valley, the outlines of the olive trees, the carobs, the almonds and the lemons give the impression they are all asleep.”¹⁵

It is not until the death of her “uncle husband” that Marianna at last gains freedom from her life of subservience: she learns to manage her estates and to love a younger man as she had never loved her husband. Eventually, she chooses the liberation of travel, accompanied by her servant Fila, who had been given to her as a gift from her father. Marianna, who questions the right of anyone to gift another with a human being, supports Fila’s desire to leave her and marry, but this will leave her alone. When she reaches Rome, she questions her “wish to wander” and instead longs for “something that belongs to the world of wisdom and contemplation, something that deflects the mind from its foolish preoccupation with the senses.”

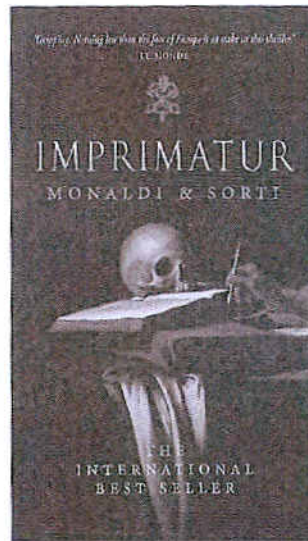
In the afterword to the edition printed by The Feminist Press, New York (2000), Anna Camaiti Hostert suggests that Maraini chose to set her story in 18th-century Sicily – which the author describes as “that island of jasmine flowers and rotten fish, of sublime hearts and razorsharp knives” – not only because of her childhood memories of the island, but also because it was dominated by a peculiarly “arrogant and hypocritical aristocracy, remarkable . . . in the cruelty of its oppression of both the poor and women”.¹⁶

Imprimatur

The last and certainly the most controversial of the Italian historical novels chosen for this round-up of translated works is Rita Monaldi and Francesco Sorti’s *Imprimatur*. This authorial duo are experts in their fields: Rita Monaldi in religious history, her husband Francesco Sorti a musicologist. Both had been journalists before they decided to write a novel “a quattro mani”. The months that followed were taken up with painstaking research before they actually started to write. They became “topi d’archivio”, archive mice, mining the documents for period detail: menus and recipes, medicinals, maps, the structure and appearance of palaces on a particular street corner. The results can be overwhelming at first, but the extraordinary picture that emerges provides the equivalent of a sensory immersion in the colours, textures, smells, tastes and sounds of 17th-century Rome, both above and below ground.

Harking back to Manzoni, Sorti noticed that a problem of many historical novels was that it was difficult to gauge where fact (“realta’ storica”) ended and fiction (“fantasia”) began. They set out to remedy this, inspired by their favourite authors. In an interview Sorti confirmed that the book does indeed draw on Boccaccio’s *Decamerone* (if only by dividing the narrative into days and the use of storytelling as a means of whiling away the time), as well as other Italian authors, notably Alessandro Manzoni and Eco (particularly, the device of discovering a manuscript that reveals the story – Eco goes as far as to dedicate *The Name of the Rose* “Naturally, to a manuscript”!). Francesco also mentioned their debt to Agatha Christie, presumably for general structure and dramatic tension created by the enclosed setting of the tavern rather than for any plot lines.

However, the real inspiration for *Imprimatur* was a real-life historical figure, Atto Melani (1626–1714), a *castrato* spy and composer who, during the course of his eighty-eight-year-long life, acted as secret agent for popes, monarchs and cardinals and played a key role in Italian and European politics during the 18th century. Sorti said that he first came across Melani in his work as a musicologist, but the true scope of this man’s activities only became clear later. Melani was much more important as a political figure than as a singer. His real vocation was to become a spy and diplomat. He entered the court as a *castrato* and this enabled him to build a reputation as one of the select voices of the period, as well as gaining an *entrée* to circles that would otherwise have been beyond his reach. It was the injustice of history’s treatment of Melani – he rose from poverty to become one of the richest and most influential men in Italy, but then sank back into complete oblivion again after his death – that prompted Monaldi and Sorti to start writing in the first place.



Imprimatur is set in September 1683, a precise date that marks an outbreak of the plague in Rome and led to a multifarious group of individuals being quarantined inside the Locanda del Donzello. Sorti and Monaldi based their characters on a real document listing the names of the people staying at the inn, a building that still exists. Outside the microcosm of the inn, rulers across Europe are waiting for news from Vienna which has been besieged by the Turkish armies of Kara Mustapha. Benedetto Odescalchi, now Pope Innocent XI, has embarked on a mission to save the city and Christendom from the menace of Islam with the help of Catholic Europe. However, among those incarcerated in the inn is Atto Melani, a spy in the service of the French king Louis XIV. Once Melani has enlisted the services of the dwarf apprentice who narrates the story, the two succeed in escaping the inn through a secret labyrinth of underground tunnels, and with the darkly comic help of Rome’s untouchables, the *corpisantari*, they reveal a plot to assassinate the pope himself. One aspect to the book that will appeal particularly to music lovers is that the events are cadenced to the music of Luigi Rossi, Robert Devisé (De Visée), Lully and, of course, Corbetta’s *rondeau* “Les Barricades Mystérieuses” which plays such a crucial part in the plot.



Rita Monaldi & Francesco Sorti

But what makes this book stand out is the discovery of documentary evidence for papal underhandedness of spectacular proportions. Prior to becoming pope, Benedetto Odescalchi financially backed William of Orange, a leading Protestant ruler and Stadtholder of Holland and Zeeland, so that in effect, funds from the Odescalchi coffers resulted in the invasion of England in 1688 and the deposition of the Catholic monarch James II. This discovery is woven into the story as the motive that prompts

Dulcibeni's assault on the pope.

However, this is fact, not fiction, and the present-day effects have

proved infinitely more devastating than either author could ever have imagined – literally reaching across the centuries to affect the publication of their work.

Without going into too much complex detail, this discovery – according to Sorti – “seriously annoyed” the Vatican which – in the wake of the 9/11 atrocity – had been searching for a symbolic act and had decided to canonise Pope Innocent XI for his triumphant stand against the Turks and Islam in 1683. It is not clear why the Vatican was so surprised to discover this link to William of Orange, given that a loan of some kind has always been rumoured to have existed. What this book does, however, is to give actual details of the pope's two-faced wheeler-dealing and, moreover, of this most “unsaintly” sin, namely, aiding heretics! In an annotated appendix, Monaldi and Sorti describe the Vatican accounts in detail and provide archival references. One wonders whether the documents have now been secreted away, as has long been the practice with so many other “sensitive” documents?

When the manuscript was accepted for publication by Mondadori, there was no suggestion that this was anything other than a first novel by two unknown authors. But after its publication in March 2002, the book quickly rose up the bestseller lists, reaching fourth place by mid April in a list printed by the *Corriere della Sera*. It soon sold out. It was at this stage that events took an unusual turn: a second print-run was ordered but was delivered four weeks late; bookshops complained of readers clamouring to get hold of copies to no avail, and internet booksellers were flooded with enquiries. Then, in the summer of 2002, a well-known Catholic historian published an unusually hostile review in a Milan-based newspaper, *Il Giornale*. It was, say the authors, as if the lights went out and all Italian media coverage ceased. The Vatican boycott was in full swing. By March 2003, given that the book had disappeared from the Italian market and no copies were being sold, Monaldi and Sorti asked Mondadori to terminate their contract and decided to take the book abroad.¹⁷

Since then *Imprimatur* has become an international bestseller, published in forty-five countries and twenty languages. Like many bestsellers, it has given rise to a secondary wave of “anecdotal” publications trying to account for this publishing mystery and clamorous example of political and religious censorship.¹⁸ *Imprimatur* is the first of seven books. The second and third have already been written and published

in Italian (outside Italy) and other languages, although not yet English; meanwhile, the authors are working on the fourth.¹⁹ The titles of all the books are taken from the saying “*Imprimatur secretum, veritas mysterium. Unicum ...*” The authors translate this as follows: “Even when a secret is printed, the truth is always a mystery. It remains only –”: the rest of the phrase is a conundrum waiting to be solved! All the books feature Melani's involvement in various key events. The books continue to be bestsellers in the rest of Europe, but bookshops in Italy refuse to stock a single copy. Tancredi's famous comment in *The Leopard* (“if we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change”) certainly did not refer to censorship, but in this instance it seems appropriate since the Vatican's *Index of Prohibited Books*, instituted in 1559 and formally abolished in 1966, is clearly still in operation.

On a closing note, it is interesting that in an interview both Sorti and Monaldi remarked on the difficulty of making the leap from Europe to English-speaking markets. This is backed up by the figures: *Imprimatur*, their controversial first novel, appeared in Italian in March 2002; it was then translated into Dutch and French that same year, into Spanish, Czech, Hungarian, Portuguese, Bulgarian, Greek, and Romanian in 2004, into Polish and German in 2005, and finally – six years later – into English in May 2008.²⁰

So, what should we make of these historical novels translated from Italian? In an excellent introduction to a recent edition of *The Name of the Rose*, David Lodge writes: “only a very few novels [...] have become major bestsellers not only in their own countries, but in translation as well, and it is a particularly difficult feat for books translated into English from other languages to achieve since Anglophone readers [...] tend to be lazily incurious about new work from other cultures.”²¹ These are just a handful of the best in translation, and all that is needed is a little curiosity to discover many more.

Notes

1. *The Cambridge Companion to the Italian Novel*, Peter F. Bondanella, Andrea Ciccarelli (eds.) (Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 7.
2. Alessandro Manzoni, *On the Historical Novel*, translated and edited by Sandra Berman (University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p.60. [<http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/historicising/HopkinsC.htm>]
3. Archibald Colquhoun died aged 51 in 1964 (*The Times*, Obituary, 24 March 1964, gives details of his extraordinary life). Prior to translating Lampedusa's masterpiece, which was published in 1960 and revised in 1961, he wrote a life of Manzoni: *Manzoni and his times* (1954). Colquhoun went on to be the dialogue consultant for Visconti's lavish film version in 1963 starring Burt Lancaster, Alain Delon and Claudia Cardinale.
4. *Word, Text, Translation: Liber Amicorum for Peter Newmark*, Gunilla M. Anderman, Margaret Rogers (eds.), *Multilingual Matters* (1999), p. 124.
5. *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, Peter France (ed.) (OUP 2000), p. 315.
6. O. Classe (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation into English*, p. 799; Giorgio Bassani was the editor who accepted the book for Feltrinelli.
7. Giuseppe di Lampedusa, *The Leopard* (London 1960), pp.126, 201, 173.
8. *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation into English*, O. Classe (ed.), p. 799.

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