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Calaresu, Melissa and Helen Hills (eds.). New Approaches to Naples, c.1500–c.1800: The Power of Place

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[See table of contents](#)

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Calaresu, Melissa and Helen Hills (eds.).

New Approaches to Naples, c.1500–c.1800: The Power of Place.

Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. 286 + 45 ill. ISBN 978-1-4094-2943-2 (hardback) £58.

The edited volume by Calaresu and Hills is one of many recent works trying to rectify the neglect of Neapolitan history. As stated in their introduction, the editors seek to redress “the comparative disparagement and undervaluing of Naples” (1) with a work divided into three parts: “Disaster and Decline”; “Topographies”; and “Exceptionality.” In the first essay, John Marino traces the origins of the historiographical divide between north and south and calls for a new approach to early modern Italian history. He argues that “...northern and southern Italy were intimately related, not in terms of the dualism of the ‘two Italies,’ but as integrated parts of economic, social, political, and cultural systems based on similar rules and rituals constantly appropriating and assimilating products and peoples peninsula-wide...” (14). Marino demonstrates that early modern Italians did not see themselves as divided into north and south. Nineteenth-century thinkers, trying to explain southern Italian “backwardness,”

constructed an ahistorical interpretive paradigm that has framed most modern scholarship. In the second essay, Helen Hills examines the baroque treasury chapel of San Gennaro as a re-evaluation of place, “brought into being through new interrelationships of holiness and matter” (32). Hills engages the visual complexity of the chapel as a manifestation of the intense power of place. The third essay in part 1 examines the relationship between print and the plague in 1656. Rose Marie San Juan argues that votive print images that circulated in Naples actually undermined rather than reinforced Neapolitan authorities because the images exposed the precarious nature of life outside of the civic or religious order.

In part 2, three scholars explore cultural and political aspects of early modern representations of Naples. Harald Hendrix outlines the shift from symbolic to documented locations of illustrious poets. Histories of Naples testify to the struggle for the cultural and historical soul of Naples, between the city’s religious sites and its pagan heritage. Dinko Fabris explores the topography of Neapolitan music, reconstructing the music collections in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Naples and tracing them to their current locations throughout the world. The strategic acquisition and expansion of Bourbon royal sites is the topic discussed by Helena Hammond, who ably demonstrates how Bourbon monarchs manipulated the landscape to their own political ends, i.e. wrestling territorial control from feudal barons.

Part 3 engages the prevailing stereotype of Naples as an exceptional, even exotic, place. In the first essay, Paola Bertucci discusses scientific study in Naples and the role of Ferdinando Spinelli, prince of Tarsia, who opened his library and museum to the public in 1747. The Palazzo Tarsia, a centre of scientific learning and literary sociability, became one of the favourite destinations for educated elite on the Grand Tour. Calaresu examines the vaunted images of Neapolitan street sellers, arguing that the Neapolitans as much as foreigners actively cultivated these stereotypes. In the final essay, Anna Maria Rao traces the historiographical tradition that has seen Naples through the lens of modernization. This teleological approach to Neapolitan history has created a paradigm of “lost opportunities” in comparison to more progressive northern and central Italy. Rao chronicles the durability of Neapolitan stereotypes and topics (saints and holy water, devils and Paradise, sulphur and Vesuvius to name a few) that mark most scholarly studies.

Although the individual essays are well-researched and make important contributions in their area of expertise, the non-Neapolitan specialist, the target audience of the book, might be disappointed to find that the “new approaches” to Naples address very traditional Neapolitan subjects, albeit informed by the most current scholarship. The editorial decision to present new methodological approaches to well-studied Neapolitan topics tends to reinforce the stereotypes the scholars are trying to challenge. The editors could also be held to task for what they decried in their introduction—the undervaluing of the Italian south as a whole—for none of the essays ventures outside the city of Naples. In their call to bring southern Italian history into the mainstream of Italian studies, the editors could have produced a truly new approach by including a variety of subjects from the entire kingdom. Florentine and Venetian scholarship, for example, increasingly integrates the *contado* and *terraferma* into the survey of these Renaissance states, and our understanding of the capital as well as the hinterland has been greatly enhanced as a result. By not including any essays from the vast Kingdom of Naples, the editors missed an opportunity to expand the field, give suggestions for future research, and place the city of Naples in a comparative context.

The many contributions of this book, as well as the lacunae, indicate that there is much work to be done to rectify the disparity not only in the quantity of northern and southern Italian studies but also in the historiographical tradition that forms the basis of this quantitative gap. This neglect stems from the long-standing bias toward a cultural history that seeks signs of “modernity” in urban and cosmopolitan centres. The history of southern Italy deserves more scholarly attention, and until we have more studies on a wider range of topics we will not be able to appreciate the complexity of the Italian Renaissance. The essays gathered by Calaresu and Hills, along with the recent volume of collected essays edited by Tommaso Astarita, *A Companion to Early Modern Naples* (Brill, 2013), demonstrate the vibrancy and increasing importance of Neapolitan studies.

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