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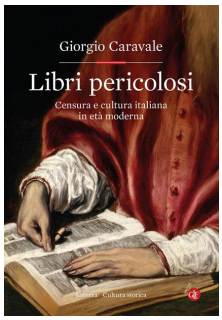
Giorgio Caravale
Libri pericolosi

Review by: Emily Michelson



Authors: Giorgio Caravale
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In its earliest historiography, the Counter-Reformation was depicted as stifling and repressive – a cabal of elite, paranoid institutions bent on imposing strict doctrinal conformity on its faithful and punishing outliers in the harshest terms. Yet counter-narratives have consistently responded with portrayals that give more agency to laypeople or expose the weak spots in ecclesiastical institutions. Caravale's *Libri pericolosi*, a comprehensive view of religious censorship in Italy and its consequences, moves us helpfully beyond these poles by combining both perspectives. In Caravale's telling, censorship is both the key element that preoccupied the Counter-Reformation's representatives – the Curia, clerical elites, major institutions – and also a force that powerfully shaped the mentality of Italy's varied, unruly readers, elite and otherwise. This book is not a simple history of the *Index of Prohibited Books*, or the Congregation of the Index, the Papal committee that regulated censorship from 1572 – although Chapter Three offers a useful overview of the founding and development of these institution. Instead, it is a cultural history of censorship imposed but equally, of censorship received, absorbed, manipulated, resisted, or internalised.

Caravale's book has three primary purposes. First, it seeks to present censorship as an activity that infused Italian society, rather than one limited to the Congregation of the Index and the titles in its sights. Caravale presents censorship as a collective enterprise that encompassed many types of players besides official censors, and many varieties of censorship beyond official rulings. This portrayal is meant to respond to older historiography that imagined an Italian society passive and flattened under an unvaryingly suppressive church. In his telling, censorship was a variable activity at all points. In its transmission, it could be misdirected, unsuccessful, scattershot, or extreme. In its

reception, it could be self-imposed, feigned, undermined, or misconstrued. Expurgation, the intermediary stance, was even more fluid and difficult to quantifyor trace. Second, the seeks to remind us that in the first age of print, the fate of the book was fragile and uncertain. It lacked key concepts such as proprietary authorship, intellectual property, and fixed content. So much variability in early modern printing felt dangerous and reckless to church authorities, already unnerved at the ease with which heretical books from the Protestant north found purchase in Italy. The establishment of the Index, along with imprimaturs and other measures of supervision, represented attempts to get ahead of the curve. At the same time, the very qualities in the book trade which so alarmed authorities also made the regulation of content nearly impossible.

Third, and most important, Caravale's book argues that the force driving most censorship efforts was a deep-rooted horror of the populace. This aspect of Caravale's argument yields some of the book's most vivid chapters. The clerical elite despised the «*semplici e ignoti*», and feared the damage they might wreak on themselves and others from obtaining knowledge above their station. To those in power, information in the wrong hands was a terrifying concept. Caravale suggests that it was precisely this fear that drove most censorship legislation in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Italy. The history of censorship, in his hands, is thus equally a history of a binary class division. Elites could usually get access or permission for almost any book they wanted, no matter how censored it was; they had connections, and they were trusted. Lower classes were prohibited from reading almost anything except the most simplified devotional literature, the kind that did not require the reader to make decisions. The Congregation embarked on a «vigorous offensive» against the vernacular, often banning works in Italian while permitting them in Latin. This practice held for both sacred and secular literature. On religious matters in particular, a principle of «*santa simplicità*» aimed to ensure that laypeople knew as little as possible.

This book was partly prompted by Caravale's awareness that other regions also regulated the written word, but very differently. Treating censorship as the key to the intellectual profile of the Italian Counter-Reformation allows him to venture broader conclusions, as he seeks to explain why attempts to control the dissemination of knowledge fared better in Italy that elsewhere. These reasons lie outside the world of book history, and are often political. Unlike elsewhere in Catholic Europe, in Italy few regions had the political strength to oppose or counter the Curia's censorship policies. Those that did, such as Venice, found it politically expedient to court Roman approval instead for other reasons. As a result, the Congregation of the Index lacked the kind of strong partnerships, seen in France and Spain, that could generate collaboration and compromise. The Congregation of the Index encountered few restraints. Caravale portrays censorship as a political tool of the papacy, who deployed it widely as a way of eliminating not only heresy but all material that might threaten papal power. He describes how the Congregation of the Index, driven by fear of lay knowledge and of their own political precarity, censored widely and bluntly. Even Italy's well-established tradition of anticlericalism, formerly considered benign, came under attack and, in a tense political climate, could offer little resistance. If some of the links between cause and effect appear tenuous on first reading, the detailed case studies make compelling food for thought. Caravale actively seeks to portray Rome's censorship practices as injurious to its population, especially compared to censorship elsewhere in Europe.

The author is at his best when describing the far-reaching and sometimes surprising consequences of the seeping culture of censorship. These include the increasing elision of entirely irreconcilable ideas, such as Jansenism, Quietism, and Lutheranism, in the minds of censors blind to nuance and distinction. In the same vein, Caravale suggests that the ban on vernacular scripture and much other religious literature led not to a more docile and reverent laity, but to a population more prone to superstition. He argues that the vastly different reading experiences of elites and non-elites, the result of unequal treatment significantly deepened social divisions more generally. These differences are clearest in his discussion of reading licenses, which granted exceptional permissions to read books on the Index. Requests for these survive in the thousands. Elite readers with connections could count on obtaining a license for any book they wanted, and usually ignored its time limits. Authors (and their families) could negotiate the censorship status of books they had written. For these groups, access to forbidden books thus formed part of a social economy of patronage, favor and recommendation. Readers from lower classes had no such options.

Caravale's outlook is equally grim in establishing the way that authors absorbed the mores of the *Index*, choosing to circulate their works in manuscript, give their references pseudonyms, publish abroad, or simply keep quiet. He writes morosely about the pious works offered as substitutes for forbidden texts – most notably, a *Decameron* where all the ladies are virtuous and all discussions focus on Christian compassion, with spiritual essays replacing each story. Caravale sees these rewritten works as part of a larger culture of changed reading habits, where the only fully acceptable books were both dull and doctrinaire, and where anxious and pious readers sent bibliographies of their entire libraries to censors, concerned to establish that they were acceptable. More secure readers, of course, could ignore the dictats of the *Index* with no fear. Building on his previous work, Caravale argues that the priorities of the Congregation of the Index shifted with increasing distance from Luther's Reformation. No longer concerned with blocking the flow of heretical ideas from abroad, they turned inward to monitor daily life, regulating behavior, suffocating humanist ambition, and promoting ecclesiastical culture.

No wonder, then, that the best surprises of the book lie in its fourth section, which deals with resistant reading practices in a growing culture of censorship. Caravale charts interstitial acts of human agency in straitened intellectual circumstances. Booksellers, as Piet van Boxel has also established, actively circumvented censorship. They deliberately left blank spaces visible in printed texts, included references to material that had been omitted, or sold optional inserts with expurgated texts. Expurgation offered a via media between acceptance and complete cancellation, and therefore also responded well to creativity. This is an area for fruitful further study.

Caravale has amassed extensive and compelling evidence that the less advantaged exercised real agency in their reading. Given these findings, it is surprising in a book about unequal privilege to see only brief mentions of two well documented populations: women and religious minorities, particularly Italian Jews. Both groups were engaged readers, and both were also deeply involved in the book trade. In addition, their reading and selling habits lie at the center of rapidly growing bodies of scholarship. Above all, their activities deeply concerned the Inquisition, so it is no digression to include them. These groups intersected with Caravale's binary categories in intriguing ways, and would have allowed him to amplify his argument and add more dimesion. To what extent did elite women readers evoke fear in the hearts of church officials because of their gender? How do Caravale's arguments about the turn to religious literature square with Virginia Cox's study of women's religious writing?[1] How did the Congregation of the Index address self-censorship within the Jewish book trade? To what extent did the *Talmud* burnings of 1553 play a role in the first formulations of the Index in the same years? These are questions that perhaps a further study can answer. In Caravale's hands it would be vivid and compelling.

[1] Virginia, *The Prodigious Muse: Women's Writing in Counter-Reformation Italy* , Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.