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## **Review of The Life and Legend of Catterina Vizzani: Sexual Identity, Science and Sensationalism in Eighteenth-Century Italy and England, by Clorinda Donato**

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## Review of *The Life and Legend of Catterina Vizzani: Sexual Identity, Science and Sensationalism in Eighteenth-Century Italy and England*, by Clorinda Donato

### Abstract

Review of *The Life and Legend of Catterina Vizzani: Sexual Identity, Science and Sensationalism in Eighteenth-Century Italy and England*, by Clorinda Donato, written by Ula Lukszo Klein. Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment, Liverpool University Press, 2020, 347 pp., 3 b/w images. ISBN: 978-1-789-62221-8

### Keywords

Catterina Vizzani, Catherine Vizzani, John Cleland, Giovanni Bianchi, transgender representation, anatomy, history of sexuality

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Clorinda Donato. *The Life and Legend of Catterina Vizzani: Sexual Identity, Science and Sensationalism in Eighteenth-Century Italy and England*, Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment, Liverpool University Press, 2020. 347 pp. ISBN: 978-1-789-62221-8.

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While many of us who study the history of sexuality are familiar with the life story of Catterina Vizzani, later known as Giovanni Bordoni, from John Cleland's 1751 translation, anglophone scholarship has been limited by the lack of a widely available, modern translation of author Giovanni Bianchi's original Italian biography of Vizzani. With the publication of *The Life and Legend of Catterina Vizzani: Sexual Identity, Science and Sensationalism in Eighteenth-Century Italy and England* by Clorinda Donato, this situation has changed dramatically. Donato's book makes available an accurate and unbiased modern translation of Bianchi's original Italian biography of Vizzani/Bordoni. Her work in Italian archives, previous work in eighteenth-century studies of gender and sexuality in both the English and Italian contexts, and linguistic abilities bring to life Bordoni's original text, unmediated by Cleland's editorializing. Beyond this important contribution, though, the book centers its argument and analysis within the context of trans studies, reading Bianchi's original testimony as an important early text that sought to understand, sympathetically and openly, transgender persons like Vizzani/Bordoni and transgender identity more generally. Bringing together histories of the Grand Tour, anatomy and dissection, sexuality and gender, translation studies, and much more, this book weaves together a fascinating narrative about Vizzani/Bordoni, biographer Giovanni Bianchi, and English translator and commentator John Cleland. *The Life and Legend of Catterina Vizzani* makes available a new critical text for the growing field of trans eighteenth-century studies, and its discussions of women's sexuality and bodies make it a valuable addition to women's history and sexuality studies more broadly.

The book has much to offer both scholars already familiar with Cleland's text, as well as those who are approaching the story of Vizzani/Bordoni's life for the first time. The introduction gives an overview not only of the state of scholarship on female cross-dressing, gender performance, and the history of anatomy, but it also gives an in-depth summary of Bianchi's original text and Cleland's translation. It thus highlights the different approaches that the authors take to their subject; the actual text of the three publications—Bianchi's Italian original, Donato's modern translation, and Cleland's eighteenth-century one—are included at the end of the

book. Subsequent chapters consider Bianchi's life and role in the burgeoning medical and anatomical community of eighteenth-century Italy; an analysis of Bianchi's early publication celebrating same-sex male love and polyamory; a brief history of the study of "generation" and anatomy in Europe; a comparison between Vizzani/Bordoni's life story and the celebrated story of Spanish "lieutenant-nun" Catalina de Erauso; and several other chapters that analyze different aspects of Bianchi's and Cleland's texts, finishing with the primary text and the two translations. The differences between Cleland's translation and the original text are highlighted for readers in Donato's analysis throughout the book, but ultimately readers can make their own judgements as they read the texts themselves.

The amount of information is at times overwhelming, and it is evident that the project is the culmination of significant time in Italian archives. Certainly, the information and sources here present a challenge to those of us who work primarily in one linguistic and national context, as Donato's work reveals quite clearly the benefit and necessity of working in a transnational and transcultural context when "doing" the history of sexuality and gender. Translations of letters between Bianchi and other Italian anatomists of the time regarding Vizzani/Bordoni's story, information about Bianchi's role as an antiques appraiser for Englishmen on the Grand Tour, and the discussion of Bianchi's overall career as a medical man and a man of letters whose reputation suffered from his determination to challenge gender binaries in his writing paint a much larger and richer picture of the author of Vizzani/Bordoni's biography than we might previously have known or suspected. Further, the book reveals the transcultural nature of science and anatomy studies in the eighteenth century.

At the heart of the book, however, is Donato's argument that Bianchi's text reveals a much more sympathetic attitude towards Vizzani/Bordoni and notions of sexual and gender nonconformity than Cleland's translation. Cleland's work, as many scholars have already noted, reveals an author unwilling to recognize Vizzani/Bordoni's trans identity, who is hostile to the very notion of trans identity as an identity at all, while also condemning their sexual preferences. Donato develops this thesis throughout the book, drawing attention to the significant differences between Bianchi's work and Cleland's translation and how these discussions fit into contemporary ideas about trans identity. Her interest and dedication to thinking about Vizzani/Bordoni as trans is significant, given the expanding area of study that is eighteenth-century trans studies today. Jen Manion's book *Female Husbands: A Trans History*, was also published in 2020, while numerous other books and publications in early modern and eighteenth-century studies are working to re-think gender and sexuality through the lens of

transness (in just the last few years we have seen the publication of the collection *TransGothic in Literature and Culture*, edited by Jolene Zigarovich (2018); the special issue “Early Modern Trans Studies” at the *Journal of Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 19.4, Fall 2019, and Julia Ftacek’s “Egg Hatching; Or, Letting the Eighteenth Century Be Trans,” in *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2021, pp. 577–8, to name just a few).

For Donato, “the conscious action of the individual’s choice to take control of sexuality and to act upon sexual desire and preferences in a text like Bianchi’s that publicly explores such issues establishes a clear line of demarcation in the evolution of the emerging subject, no less a transgendered [*sic*] subject, worthy of her/his own narrative in defiance of all forms of authority, ecclesiastical, medical and heteronormative” (28-29). Donato’s praise for Bianchi’s achievement, however, itself reveals that Donato is working, to an extent, with language that has fallen out of favor recently, with “trans” and “transgender” being the most accepted descriptive terms, and certainly preferred to “transgendered,” the word that Donato uses throughout this project. The term “transgendered” is today considered not only dated but also, by many in the trans community, to be offensive, as it suggests that transness is something that happens *to* someone or is a passing state of being. Similarly, occasional lapses, such as calling Vizzani/Bordoni a “transgendered Roman woman” (114), may give pause to readers, as the word “woman” here is used without comment—even as the most appropriate term for Vizzani/Bordoni’s identity at the end of the narrative, at least from a trans studies point of view, would be a “trans Roman man.” Donato’s lack of citation of trans studies scholars beyond Susan Stryker and lack of significant engagement with people doing trans eighteenth-century studies is, itself, problematic, as it reveals a lack of engagement with some of the most important voices in trans histories of sexuality today.

It is pertinent to note here that Donato’s book reveals to us how quickly the language and linguistic expectations are changing in the fields of trans studies and the history of sexuality. Literary and historical studies are swiftly altering with the introduction and greater awareness of terms and identities relating not only to transness, but also non-binary identities, genderqueer and gender fluid identities, asexuality, pansexuality, and polyamory—elements that themselves may allow us to rethink hybrid texts like Bianchi’s. Donato’s book brings to life Vizzani’s story as told by Bianchi, who, as Donato herself explains, was influenced by Boccaccio’s writings to produce a hybrid text that is neither biography nor autopsy report nor fully a novel, either, but something that draws on all of those genres. The fictionality of Bianchi’s text is, then, still awaiting further inquiry and analysis, made possible by Donato’s careful search to excavate Bianchi’s original

work and offer a modern and accurate translation of it. Her side-by-side comparisons of sections from Cleland's and Bianchi's versions are additionally of use in thinking about queer translation and issues of translating sexuality. Thus, even as the book does not entirely embrace the trans turn in queer and gender studies today, and it, perhaps in its enthusiasm, overlooks Bianchi's milder but still evident condemnation of Vizzani/Bordoni, it remains a fascinating and useful sourcebook for the work still waiting to be done in transnational trans studies of the eighteenth century.