



**Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg.** *The Pinocchio Effect: On Making Italians, 1860-1920.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. xv + 431 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-77448-0.



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## Culture and History in Liberal Italy

It is curious but perhaps not coincidental that the titles of two recent books on Italy at the turn of the twentieth century include “Pinocchio,” the name of the famous puppet in an Italian children’s story from the 1880s. Two reasons may explain the allure of Pinocchio as an icon of Italian history between unification and fascism for Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, the author of the book under review, and Carl Ipsen, whose *Italy in the Age of Pinocchio: Children and Danger in the Liberal Era* appeared in 2006. First, both the representation and reality of childhood changed dramatically in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Europe as elementary education became compulsory, minors were legally banned from the workforce, and the state developed social services to protect children. Italy was no different from other European nations in this regard but the history of childhood in Italy, despite a small group of excellent Italian-language studies, remains relatively undeveloped. Second, interest in Pinocchio may signal a hopeful sign that research on the literature and history of liberal Italy is beginning a dialogue in which literary critics, like

Stewart-Steinberg, study texts within wider contexts and historians, like Carl Ipsen, incorporate fiction as primary sources. Such an interchange will enrich our understanding of an Italian era that, as Stewart-Steinberg points out, is “strangely under-studied and under-theorized” within the general European fin-de-siècle (p. 1).

Pinocchio was a puppet without strings and therefore provides an apt symbol for post-unification Italy whose future, according to Stewart-Steinberg, was bedeviled by the tensions between determinism and freedom. Which would—and should—predominate in “making Italians”? Within this rather broad theme, the author argues for the centrality of two specific anxieties: about appropriate methods of childhood education and about failures of “masculine performativity,” or the ability of men to govern their families and the new nation. To explore these anxieties, the book focuses on a series of works by novelists, positivist criminologists, and educators within a heavily theoretical framework drawn mainly from literary criticism. Historians may be less interested in this theoretical framework and Stewart-Steinberg’s detailed

exegesis of literary interpretations of Pinocchio than in her welcome analysis of a series of writers whose works have not yet been fully explored.

Chapters on Maltile Serao and Edmondo De Amicis offer the analysis of one novel from each writer to illuminate larger issues in post-unification Italy. Serao's *La Conquista di Roma* (1885) typifies a large corpus of parliamentary novels—a post-unification genre—that featured the new figure of the deputy on the journey from his provincial hometown to the young Italian legislature in Rome. While I would have appreciated documentation on the larger universe of parliamentary novels—for example their number, timing, and typical themes—this chapter adds a rich dimension not only to our understanding of Serao but also to the history of anti-parliamentary sentiment as it blossomed at the turn of the twentieth century. For the journey of Serao's protagonist is not triumphant but instead a descent into the corruption and vanity of Rome, represented by his mistress, a *femme fatale*. In the case of De Amicis, the author directs our attention from his famous and recently over-cited work, *Cuore*, to the little-known serialized novella, *Amore e ginnastica* (1891). Debates about the proper approach to physical education, a subject introduced to Italian schools by Francesco De Sanctis, provide the framework for an erotic story about the attraction of a hapless accountant for a pedantic and domineering female gymnast. Through her detailed deconstruction of this novel, Stewart-Steinberg confirms the argument of Gaetano Bonetta that the Italian preoccupation with physical fitness did not begin with fascism's emphasis on youth and vigor but can be traced back to the late nineteenth century. Both novels speak to a crisis of masculinity as the male characters lose their freedom and control over their lives to feminine forces.

Positivism is represented in chapters on Scipio Sighele and Cesare Lombroso. A criminologist known especially for his work on criminal crowds and juvenile delinquency, Sighele warned against the dangers of suggestion that spread irrational criminal behavior among members of a crowd and from men to their female accomplices. His work is again read as exposing the failure of the post-unification male subject, especially in his role as father. In the face of paternal failure to protect children, Sighele called for state intervention to prevent juvenile delinquency, as did many others in the early child protection movement. The analysis of Lombroso emphasizes his interest in graphology, or handwriting analysis, and spiritualism, or the practice by mediums of recalling the spirits of the dead. Although marginal to his professional

career as a doctor and criminologist, both subjects illustrate the complexity and richness of Lombroso's enormous written *oeuvre*, much of which still awaits interpretation. Stewart-Steinberg argues that Lombroso's interest in criminal signatures points to his wider fascination with writing in its many forms—including graffiti and tattoos—as classificatory signs of normalcy/deviancy. Her analysis, however, overemphasizes the importance of writing in relation to other signs of criminology (including art), particularly among a population with relatively low rates of literacy during the decades after unification. I strongly disagree with her inaccurate assertion that Lombroso had little interest in law or the detection of criminals, a point not needed in order to highlight the importance of her innovative discussions of his graphology and spiritualism.

The final two cases in this wide-ranging but in some ways amorphous book concern women, perhaps a contradiction to the author's initial portrayal of Italian intellectuals as ignoring women in their anxiety about male performativity. The first case examines a range of writings about infanticide, a social problem that concerned jurists and physicians throughout Europe. As sympathy for infanticidal mothers increased in the late nineteenth century, punishment may have become less severe in Italy, although much more research into court records is needed to support the book's argument that infanticidal women took on the characteristics of the *mater dolorosa* and therefore received immunity from public opinion and the courts. There is a slippage here between infanticidal women, who were indeed punished as prison records attest, and unwed mothers, who more clearly benefited from increasing state support to the point of becoming, according to Stewart-Steinberg, the prototype of the Italian welfare mother (p. 228). Finally, two chapters trace the career and ideas of Maria Montessori, a towering figure in both Italian and international education. Arguing that Montessori combined positivist science with Catholic ethics to shape a unique and powerful pedagogy for her *case dei bambini*, the first of which opened in 1907 in Rome, the book makes a strong case for the importance of education in post-unification Italy and adds to the already rich literature on Montessori.

Stewart-Steinberg's reading of these post-unification intellectuals is sophisticated and injects a theoretical framework and literary analysis so often missing from historical studies. Yet she does not always avoid the pitfalls of an author creatively trying to combine two fields, and her promise to put texts into historical context does not always do justice to the latter. For example, her state-

ment that writing in an Italian prison was a forbidden act, in relation to Lombroso's study of graphology, is the kind of rhetorical overstatement that irks the social historian because it is not supported by the study of other types of documents outside of texts (p. 264). In fact, published government statistics document the number of letters written by inmates to their families and the prison administration's archive contains letters of complaint from inmates. That prisoners were allowed to write letters does not of course disprove the author's main point, that self-expression was not encouraged in prison. But it points to a simplification of historical analysis which contrasts with the sophistication and complexity of the literary analysis.

Finally, the book's introduction argues that the discourse of post-unification intellectuals sought to construct Italians as post-liberal, modern subjects in a manner that contradicts the myth of Italian backwardness compared to the rest of Europe. While this is an intriguing idea, as a historian I would have liked a more precise distinction between liberalism as a political philosophy and an implemented policy. In terms of periodization, did liberalism characterize only the short-lived era of the *risorgimento* or did Italy, with its late unification, skip it altogether? Despite such questions, I would recommend *The Pinocchio Effect*, with its combination of literary analysis and history, as necessary reading for Italianists in both fields.

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