HORODOWICH, Elizabeth — Language and Statecraft in Early Modern Venice.

In Language and Statecraft in Early Modern Venice, Elizabeth Horodowich examines numerous connections between language — and more often the spoken word — and Venetian political culture in the sixteenth century. She demonstrates that Venetian political anxiety, whether caused by sharply rising numbers of recent immigrants to the city, the presence of marauding foreign armies, or more purely internal tensions between aristocrats at the top of the social ladder and those further down, always manifested itself, among other ways, in attempts to regulate, control, and thereby dominate language and speech. The Venetian government was particularly sensitive to the ways in which mastery of the rules of language and a monopoly over the terms and boundaries of its proper use were a particularly effective political tool for shoring up elite hegemony in a contestatory republican setting. Her analysis considers the intersection of language and politics from several perspectives. The first chapter surveys the linguistic component of the broader pan-Italian genre of Renaissance conduct literature. Books such as Castiglione’s Il Libro del Cortegiano and Giovanni della Casa’s Il Galateo laid out detailed and widely influential rules governing aristocratic and courtly speech. Horodowich interprets such texts less in terms of a literary preoccupation with the rhetorical theories of classical antiquity, or literary debates over the relative merits of Latin and the volgare, and more as a fundamentally social and political attempt by Italian elites to define themselves in the midst of the Italian Wars and their related growing sense of powerlessness. By complicating and then mastering elaborate rules of linguistic etiquette, Italian elites, whose elevated position lacked the legal and military foundation typical elsewhere in Europe, both defined themselves as a group and attempted to demonstrate their superiority (if only to themselves).

The second chapter turns to Venice, looking in particular at the Esecutori Contro la Bestemmia, the magistracy established in 1537 to investigate and punish blasphemy. Horodowich provides abundant evidence to support David Lawton’s argument that blasphemy emerges as a controversial issue in direct proportion to the degree to which its surrounding society is internally divided. She concludes that the Venetian government established the blasphemy magistracy as a response to a sudden escalation in the immigrant population in Venice, the result of shifts in the city’s domestic economy and Venetian military defeats on the mainland. The magistracy’s records reveal an unsurprisingly distinct tendency to identify blasphemy with the city’s most recent and unwanted immigrants (and a tendency not to punish noble blasphemers). In addition, and somewhat more surprisingly, the magistracy occasionally expanded its jurisdiction to include the punishment of purely secular verbal insults made by non-nobles to nobles.

The fourth chapter looks in more detail at the legal punishment of insults. Horodowich considers examples from several additional archival sources — the Council of Ten, Avogaria di Comun, Signori di Notte al Criminal, and Provveditori sopra le Pompe. The records of these magistracies reveal the
government’s aggressive patrolling of servants’ speech, coarse talk by gondoliers, and other members of Venice’s labouring classes. The government concentrated the vast majority of its coercive power on the prosecution of insults against nobles. Horodowich plausibly connects this development with the increasing monopolization of the government by an ever smaller aristocratic oligarchy. The government defined itself in terms of its noble class and hence viewed insults towards individual nobles as conceptually synonymous with assaults on the government itself.

Chapters 5 and 6 shift the focus from law to culture by considering the role of gossip in Venetian public life and the speech of Venice’s famously eloquent courtesans. Both chapters are good examples of the anxieties and contradictions that accompanied Venetian awareness of the political implications of speech. While gossip was generally condemned as a frivolous and potentially destructive form of distinctly female speech, it nevertheless was an essential method of political deal-making and intelligence-gathering in the ostensibly masculine culture of republican politics. Similarly, Venetian courtesans, who sold verbal companionship as well as sex, were clearly in fundamental violation of the codes of conduct championed in advice literature, which tended to speak with one voice on the primacy of female silence. Yet their fame as eloquent interlocutors and the degree to which Europeans flocked to Venice to seek them out not only contributed to the city’s economy but also constituted what Horodowich calls “a type of diplomatic link between Venice and the rest of absolutist Europe” (p. 18).

One of the book’s core arguments is that historiography on European state-building has tended to overlook language as an important category of analysis. While there may be relatively few studies of state-building as linguistically oriented as Language and Statecraft in Early Modern Venice, it is difficult to imagine many dissenting voices to that thesis. The centralizing states of the west were constantly communicating and justifying the expansion of their powers, and control over speech and language was always central to that process. In spite of the book’s assertion of an argument that few would contest, however, it is fascinating to see Horodowich’s nuanced and subtle historicization of the argument in its Venetian context, making the book an important contribution to state-building literature.

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On March 6, 1944, Paul Triquet of the Royal 22e Régiment learned that he had been awarded the Victoria Cross, the British Commonwealth’s highest decoration for valour in battle, making him the first and, as it turned out, only French Canadian to receive the award during the Second World War. The