

ARTICLE

Italy Made in Britain: Contemporary British Perspectives on Italian Culture

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This special issue of *Modern Languages Open* is about how contemporary Britain perceives and imagines Italy, and how it mirrors itself in Italy's image. It aims at interrogating the current clichés about Italy, showing how imagery about the country is multi-faceted and prismatic, highlighting areas of dialogue as well as tendencies towards stereotyping. It problematizes the images of Italy as it is seen in various layers of British society – from the media, to film, to politics – showing how the construction of the southern European country still corresponds to a horizon of expectations more than to reality. Initially inspired by the one-day conference *Italy Made in England*, held at the University of Warwick on 22nd February 2014 and funded by the Warwick Humanities Research Centre, this special issue emerges from an ongoing dialogue among a group of scholars whose work focuses on the interaction between Italian and British culture.

"The Italy perceived by the British travellers is – at the least – "half-created" by them. Or, to put it in less romantic and more fashionable terms: it is a construction, an "Italy made in England"

M. Pfister, *The Fatal Gift of Beauty: The Italies of British Travellers*

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Today's Italy attracts international attention for a variety of reasons, ranging from socio-economic issues – its political instability and struggle to overcome the economic crisis, together with increasing consciousness of Italy's issues around gender and racial inequality

– to questions focusing on artistic production and cultural relevance – see, for instance, recent international awards going to films such as Paolo Sorrentino's *La grande bellezza* and Alice Rohrwacher's *Le meraviglie*, as well as the transnational success of the television series *Inspector Montalbano* or *Gomorra*, or of books such as Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels generating what has been called 'Ferrante fever' (McVeigh). Since our original conference in 2014, developments on the international scene have led to new observations about Britain's relationship with Italy and with Europe more broadly, and pressing concerns have been raised that are relevant to the national identity questions addressed in this special issue, most obviously as a result of the Brexit referendum. The success of Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement in Italy has been compared to the rise of populism in other European countries, and comparisons have also been drawn between Italy's former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and current US President Donald Trump (Jebreal; Foot). Some have seen the Italian millionaire and media mogul as the forerunner of the rise of Trump, an argument that resonates with that made by Bill Emmott, former editor of *The Economist*, in his keynote address at the *Italy Made in England* conference, in which he suggested that Italy could be seen as a pioneer for the Western world, rather than in terms of the traditional belatedness attributed to the peninsula. As this special issue also shows, Italy is a nexus of constructions that alternatively provides positive and negative examples that the British and the wider English-speaking world have used to reflect and try to understand their own anxieties and desires. Giving attention to the (mis)perceptions of Britain in relation to its European counterpart and to the distortions in Britain's own self-image that these bring to the fore appears all the more urgent in the light of the Brexit process and the rise of anti-European and isolationist feeling in Britain today.

Whilst a large amount of scholarly attention has been devoted to the image of Italy through the centuries,¹ little has been written so far on how the British world perceives Italy today and how it has done so over the last few decades, whereas we focus here precisely on contemporary and very recent narratives, (re-)examining a number of stereotypes and impressions of the peninsula in today's Britain. The time period covered goes back to the 1970s and 1980s – with Maccaferri and Costa's articles examining British perceptions of Italian politics in those decades – then moves forwards through the 1990s and into the first two decades of the new millennium, looking at how Italy has been portrayed in the British press with reference to discourse analysis and issues of translation (Filmer), travel writing on Italy by British broadsheet journalists (Willman), the performance of Italian identity for the British audience by the chef and television personality Gino D'Acampo (Wall) and, finally, a recent documentary on Italy made by the aforementioned Bill Emmott entitled *Girlfriend in a Coma* (Bassi). Whilst this special issue addresses different areas of contemporary culture – the press (tabloids, broadsheets and weeklies), travel writing, politics, television and film – similar themes run throughout the six articles. Tropes and stereotypes that have been used for centuries to highlight the differences between Britain and Italy – and between north and south – resurface in new forms, and may be used to praise or to criticise. Italian culture may be viewed negatively to confirm British superiority, or, conversely, it may be an object of admiration or a source of pleasure that brings to the fore British limitations, and the very same aspects may even be 'read' or performed in these contradictory ways simultaneously for different ends.

¹ In particular, the relationship between Shakespeare and Italian culture has been extensively explored; see, for example, D'Amico or Marrapodi 2000, 2004 and 2011. Alternatively, scholarship has focused on Italy's illustrious past and how it impacted on Britain, whether the golden age of the Italian Renaissance (Hale), or the era of the Grand Tour (Hornsby). Similarly, the 'Internationale Forschungen zur Allgemeinen und Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft' series by the Dutch publisher Rodopi deals with Italy through the centuries: from Pfister to Sandrock and Wright. Recent volumes by Carter and Sutcliffe deal with nineteenth-century perceptions of Italian unification.

The first two contributions focus particularly on comparisons between the British and Italian political scenes. Maccaferri shows that, whilst Italian communism was a source of inspiration for the Labour Party in the Thatcherite period, British discourse on Italy still relied on a series of binary oppositions to set up 'Britishness' against 'Italianness'. In the same period, Italy was conversely being used as a negative paradigm to help understand British decline, which Costa analyses in his article. Yet, once again, we can see that how British commentators used the Italian example depended on simplistic oppositions between the two national identities, although these could be manipulated for different agendas, as illustrated by Costa's analysis of the complex relationship that the politician Dennis Healey displayed towards Italy.

From the 1990s onwards, it was Silvio Berlusconi's politics that drew attention from many British commentators, providing easy examples of Italy's backwardness in relation to Britain, which Filmer analyses through the three categories of anti-gay, sexist and racist, exploring British news discourse in the year 2013–14 and how translation and framing techniques had an impact on reporting on Italy. Willman's article maintains this focus on the British press but through an analysis of how three broadsheet journalists – Tobias Jones, John Hooper and Tim Parks – have also engaged in travel writing that often displays a subjective, partial, even exoticising gaze on the peninsula, which problematises their role as commentators on Italian issues in respected publications.

The final two articles in this special issue move into visual culture through the medium of television and a documentary film. Unlike the other contributions included here, Wall focuses not on perceptions of Italy through the lens of a British gaze, but on how an Italian in Britain – Gino D'Acampo – has performed his national identity and the stereotypes related to it in ways that have brought him both advantages and disadvantages. Finally, Bassi shows that the gendered metaphor in Emmott's documentary *Girlfriend in a Coma* harks back to a centuries-old characterisation of Italy as weak and feminised, in need of stronger capitalist powers to 'rescue' it from its recent crisis.

The interdisciplinary approach of this issue of *MLO* has a double effect: opening Italian studies up to a transnational perspective, and presenting Italy as a model for finding a methodology for different nations and disciplines to examine the export of culture abroad. By including specialists from a diverse range of fields, we aim to broaden our understanding of what Italian studies are (or might be), as well as to probe wider questions about the nature of the reception and of the fragmentation and standardisation of cultural features beyond national borders in today's world. Scholars have recently engaged with more interdisciplinary perspectives to read the peculiarity of Italy as a way of addressing wider questions, as seen in the 2014 Society of Italian Studies Interim conference, *Interstitial Italy: Reassessing Global Questions Through the 'Peculiar' Italian Case*, or the activities of the AHRC-funded network 'Transnationalizing Modern Languages', which has examined interactions between Italy and other cultures across the world through exemplary case studies. Considering this broader picture, this special issue could not be timelier in its aim to contribute to ongoing debates in the academic sphere, especially around the boundaries of Italian studies.

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