
Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Francesconi, Federica. Invisible Enlighteners: The Jewish Merchants of Modena, from the Renaissance to the Emancipation

Howard Tzvi Adelman

Volume 44, Number 3, Summer 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085849ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38023>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Adelman, H. (2021). Review of [Francesconi, Federica. Invisible Enlighteners: The Jewish Merchants of Modena, from the Renaissance to the Emancipation]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 44(3), 284–286.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38023>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2022

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

The logo for Érudit, featuring the word 'Érudit' in a bold, red, sans-serif font.

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Francesconi, Federica.

Invisible Enlighteners: The Jewish Merchants of Modena, from the Renaissance to the Emancipation.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. Pp. 355 + 15 ill. ISBN 978-0-8122-5314-6 (hardcover) US \$79.95.

The title of the book is ambitious but precise. It traces the cultural and social history of the Jews of Modena under the rule of the dukes of Este from the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 to the Napoleonic invasion in 1796, with the focal point being the establishment of the ghetto in 1638.

In creating an eloquent and cohesive narrative, Federica Francesconi draws on Modenese archival and Inquisitional sources as well as contemporaneous Hebrew documents. She integrates discussion about the role of women seamlessly into the narrative of the Jewish community, despite minimal available information which often consists of restrictions limiting their activities, such as sumptuary laws that required veiling in public. Francesconi presents the negotiations involved in each stage of women's lives. Most basically, marital strategies involved the dowry in the fullest sense of the word, meaning the obligations of both parties as stipulated in the marriage contract (*ketubah*), and other documents, sometimes prepared by a Christian notary, and a will, if there was one, that also might have been prepared by a Christian notary. Each negotiation involved its own strategy balancing honour, prestige, finances, Jewish law, social custom, and family considerations. Francesconi provides much material about the economic, romantic, and religious activities of women, including their involvement in the messianic movement of Sabbatai Tzevi. An institution that offered women their own space and opportunities for agency was the eighteenth-century women's confraternity, with the grammatically masculine name, *So'ed Holim*, Supporter of the Sick, which provided a wide range of social welfare assistance, such as dowries, loans, burials, food, and firewood.

Francesconi's presentation of the role of women in Modena reflects many kinds of negotiations involving Jews that demonstrate Jewish agency, but certainly not equality. Some of the most revealing, yet counterintuitive, aspects of Jewish negotiations were those with the governmental authorities, which included the creation and the location of the ghetto, the establishment of synagogues (a process that Francesconi delicately refers to as "escamotage," juggling or trickery), the frequency of attendance at required conversionary

sermons, the cost of residential privileges, and the acquisition of property outside the ghetto. Jewish merchants, moneylenders, and artisans negotiated with municipal guilds over matters such as setting up shop, closing on the Sabbath and then opening on Sunday, and becoming members of guilds, a rarity for Jews in other communities. In turn, Jews had to negotiate with rabbis over keeping their businesses open on the Sabbath under the supervision of Catholic employees.

Also surprising were negotiations that involved the Inquisitional authorities, which included plea bargaining and deal making over the censorship of books. An example of the intertwined relations between Jews and the Inquisition included a plan to fund a new headquarters for the latter, by which the Inquisition pre-emptively fined wealthy Jews in lieu of prison sentences that they might incur during the coming year.

Negotiations between members of the Jewish community and the Inquisition over prohibited books produced extensive inventories of the Hebrew, Italian, and Latin books possessed by Jews. Francesconi devotes significant attention to analyzing these libraries as recorded in Inquisitorial dossiers. Among the owners arrested and tried were Moisé Modena, a successful moneylender, and his son Aaron Berekhiah Modena, a kabbalist and poet who made major contributions to confraternity life by creating rituals for nightly prayer vigils and for the dying and the dead. Although there is not necessarily a correlation between books owned, read, and understood, the lists show the desire of the Inquisition to control the intellectual pursuits of Jews and Catholics, and the range of the rabbinic and secular literary interests of a Jewish businessman and a rabbi, both members of the family of Leon Modena of Venice, a family about which Francesconi brings much new information. Additionally, based on documentary material, she asserts, contrary to the widely held view, that Camillo Jaghel—a convert and censor who authored a manual for expurgating Hebrew books—was not previously the prominent rabbi and author Abraham Yagel De Gallichi, but rather his brother. Camillo Jaghel was himself summoned before the Inquisition to submit an inventory of his own suspect collection of books. This is a poignant example of a larger, paradoxical trend of inquisitors who ultimately had to appear before the Inquisition as defendants because of accusations about their own activities.

The arrival of the French in 1796, the establishment of the Cispadane Republic, and the election of Jews to the municipal council and the appointment

of one to the Parliament of the Republic, did not bring about the end of the ghetto. In July 1797, when the gates of the ghetto were removed, Catholics in Modena rioted, despite the fact that the Italian enlightenment was gaining momentum, or because of it. Previously, as Francesconi observes, the ghetto walls blocked the presence of Jews in Modena from view, but when the gates were opened the Jews became visible. For the rioters, and for many Christians during the nineteenth century, awareness of the presence of Jews created a sense of impurity and danger. Nevertheless, Francesconi traces the negotiations of Modenese Jews in their path to emancipation and citizenship. She follows the pamphlets produced in Modena in favour of toleration of Jews, particularly the *Discorso* by Moisè Formiggini, although like so many appeals for toleration it is limited to only the enlightened among them. Francesconi's introduction of such Italian works to the wider European discussion about the toleration of the Jews and the proposed limitations to it will help to stimulate further interest in nineteenth-century Italian Jewry and its engagement with what will become known as the (yet unanswered) Jewish Question. In *Invisible Enlighteners: The Jewish Merchants of Modena, from the Renaissance to the Emancipation*, Federica Francesconi has made an important contribution to tracing a representative but distinctive Italian Jewish community in the transition from the medieval to the modern period.

HOWARD TZVI ADELMAN

Queen's University

<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v44i3.38023>

Geng, Penelope.

Communal Justice in Shakespeare's England: Drama, Law, and Emotion.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021. Pp. xiv, 257. ISBN 978-1-4875-0804-3 (hardback) \$75.

Penelope Geng has written a significant book arguing that popular narratives of lay magistracy and communal justice provided a critique of professional common law, and maintaining that playwrights like Shakespeare participated in this resistance. The Inns of Court also encouraged the writing and performance of plays. Geng reads literary texts in terms of imagination, law, and politics