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## ITALIAN AMERICAN MASCULINITIES

*Fred Gardaphé*

Because masculinity tries to retain its hegemony by passing itself off as normal and universal, rendering masculinity visible becomes essential for its analysis and critique.

—Josep M. Armengol<sup>1</sup>

The Italian American man is the result of the interaction of centuries of Italianate masculinities coming into contact with the variety of masculinities that have come to make up the American man. The results of these encounters are more varied and complex than the stereotypical art and media representations of the Latin lover, the brutish bully, and the flashy gangster that have dominated American culture since the early 1920s. Over the years, theories of masculinity have all fallen short of describing the plurality of possibilities of Italian American masculinity, and in fact provide us with nothing more than categories that confine explanations and distort the very realities they try to describe. I offer the following discussion of historical performances of Italian American masculinities in the hopes that they will help us better understand the complexities involved in gender identity and the politics implicit in the creation and expression of gendered identities.

### Roots

A quick look at history reveals the Italian roots of these masculinities and helps us understand its evolution from Europe to the United States. Descriptions of Italian masculinity go back as far as ancient Roman times. The writings of Cicero and Tacitus tell us that men were expected to protect the honor of the family and preserve their public esteem by monitoring the purity of their wives and daughters. Any instance of dishonor, or *injuria*, required that the offended man take responsive action—often violent—against the woman (daughter, wife or sister) and the man who had led her into dishonor. Such action was not only expected but, until recently, sanctioned by Italian law.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, Italian manhood became an ever-changing distillation of all the cultures that invaded and occupied the Italian peninsula. Codes of Italian manhood as they had developed by the sixteenth century were outlined in Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* (1528) and Niccolò Machiavelli's *The Prince* (1532), both originally designed for nobility but eventually influential at all levels of Italian society. According to these works, a man was expected to handle his problems with coolness and detachment and to control his public behavior. This idea meant not simply looking good in public but keeping strangers from knowing what was going on in one's mind.

The concept of *figura*—one's "public figure"—stemmed from the need to protect oneself from one's enemies. Self-control had to be achieved in such a way as to appear effortless—an

achievement called *sprezzatura*. Another imperative of Italian manhood was *omertà*, or silence—a term derived from *ombredad*, the Spanish word for “manhood,” that actually means more than simply keeping quiet. Italian men have been expected to express their manhood through actions rather than through words. An Italian saying is that “Le parole sono femmine e i fatti sono maschi”: words are feminine, actions are masculine. Masculine action was to be displayed publicly.

Because Italy was constantly invaded and ruled by foreign powers, the Italians found social stability through *l'ordine della famiglia* (“the order of the family”), in which the father was patriarch and the rest of the family deferred to his authority. Richard Gambino saw traditional relationships between Italian males and females as “the product of centuries of pragmatic experience”:

males and females are not contradictory beings (or “classes” caught in some historical dialectic where gender is the equivalent of Hegel’s war between spirit and matter or of Marx’s warring economic classes). Instead, the concept is that males and females are complementary. True, they have not been equal. But in our efforts toward equality, it makes all the difference whether we see the genders as doomed to eternal power struggles or as complementary expressions of the same species.<sup>2</sup>

Within this order, the mother, who ruled within the home, set up a relationship with her male children quite different from those of other cultures. Responsible for socializing the children, the Italian mother used her sons as buffers between home and the outside world, between her and other men. Through devoted attention extending into adulthood she exacted unconditional and unwavering loyalty, resulting in the son’s perception of having incurred an irreparable debt requiring constant attention to the family’s and her needs. Mass emigration during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century would threaten this long-standing order of the family and bring Italian notions of masculinity into contact with those of the United States.

### Forging Masculinity in America

Most Italian immigrants were men who came to make money and return to Italy. Many of these men lived with fellow Italian workers or boarded with Italian families. Those back home thought that the absence of women’s refining influences and traditional social control would leave immigrant men susceptible to corruption and inclined to turn their corrupting behavior toward American women. Similar concerns among Americans generated literary and media characterizations of Italian immigrant men as dark, dirty and dangerous strangers.

Newspapers and other popular accounts frequently associated Italian immigrants with urban crime and disorder. In the late nineteenth century, Henry James depicted Italian workers in Boston as physically intimidating;<sup>3</sup> film images of the 1920s and 1930s emphasized the exotic, oversexed sensuousness of Rudolph Valentino and the crude criminality of Rico Bandello in *Little Caesar* (1931). The news of the 1920s offered sensationalized accounts of presumed anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, and of the dapper lifestyles and defiant masculine behavior of such gangsters as Al Capone, Lucky Luciano and Frank Costello. Through these accounts, the American media used the Italian American man—and especially his body—to symbolize hypersexuality, crime and other breaches of status quo civility.

While thousands of Italian men were busy leaving Italy, popular models for masculinity developed through the figure of the Maciste.

Maciste, by the actor Bartolomeo Pagano, appears for the first time in the 1914 film *Cabiria*, then he starred in five movies during the war and another twelve between 1919 and 1926. He became a character loved by the public, a reassuring icon of powerful and muscular masculinity through his body shape and statuesque poses, because of this, it seems difficult not to compare this image with another of his contemporary, the also powerful and muscular Benito Mussolini.<sup>4</sup>

The Maciste of Fascist-era Italy found its way into American culture through the figure of Charles Atlas. As early twentieth-century industrialization brought more women into areas that were traditionally male, men began to depend on physical development to maintain a sense of power and manliness. The dehumanizing effects of industrialization decreases the need for skilled labor, and the mass influx of immigrants all created new challenges for young boys trying to become men. Bodybuilder Charles Atlas—born Angelo Siciliano in Acri, Italy—preached that the road to economic and social success began with physical development. His popular fitness and health program offered a way for millions of young men trapped in factory and office jobs to achieve this new masculinity through exercise.<sup>5</sup>

Renaming himself Charles Atlas after spotting a poster of the Greek god Atlas holding the world, he won the “World’s Most Beautiful Man” contest in 1921, and went on to win a national muscle-building contest the next two years in a row, earning him the title of “World’s Most Perfectly Developed Man.” At 5 feet 10 inches and 180 pounds, with a forty-seven-inch chest, his physical measurements were judged by experts to be masculine perfection. Atlas modeled for artists; parts of his body have been reproduced for more than seventy-five statues around the world. In 1927 he published his total fitness and health program and created a correspondence course that promised to help other “weaklings” transform their bodies as well. Ads were placed in boy’s magazines and comic books with headlines like “Are You a Red-blooded Man?,” and “Yes! I Turn Weaklings into He-Men,” suggesting that young boys could become self-dependent, powerful and attract women just like their favorite superheroes.

Social expectations of masculine performance in Italy did not conform to this body-building figure of the macho man. Public displays of homosocial physical affection among men—including greetings with hugs, kisses on the cheeks, and sometimes, even on the mouth—were common in Italy and continued in the United States. Considered entirely compatible with heterosexual masculinity in Italian and Italian American culture, such gestures further fueled suspicions of Italian Americans’ manhood among American non-Italians, especially in the context of rising concerns over homosexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This public behavior was often displayed during religious festivals as the men who would share the burdens of carrying statues, huge platforms and towers, would hug, kiss and cry in each other’s arms at the culmination of rituals. Young boys selected to participate demonstrated their manliness by enduring Christ-like pain and suffering with other men. With roles for men and women separated, these events reveal the order of the community and serve as opportunities for gender training that often countered American expectations of manhood.

Connections to the family order remained as central to Italian American manhood as it had been to Italian manhood. Similarly, the traditional Italian gender dichotomy, by which the world outside the home was considered a manly domain, whereas the domestic front belonged to women, as in most Western societies, survived during the earliest immigration

to the cities of the United States. Because movement outside the home raised the potential danger of moving into neighborhoods controlled by other ethnic groups, Italian women were more likely to bring work into the home than to work outside the home, whereas men publicly displayed their manhood by protecting the home turf from external threats. Young Italian American men sometimes formed street gangs for this purpose. This expression of traditional Italian manhood in the American city soon attracted the attention of sociologists interested in such urban problems as juvenile delinquency, and the resulting studies reinforced stereotypical associations of Italian American men with criminality.

During and after World War II, Americanization increasingly transformed traditional Italian manhood and drew Italian American men from the margins of American life to positions of public fame and middle-class respectability. Nearly five hundred thousand Italian Americans sought to prove their masculinity, their dedication to the American way of life, and their loyalty to the United States by serving in the armed forces. Old-fashioned male/female divisions of domain and labor began to break down as women started taking jobs traditionally held by men. Increasingly, public images of Italian American manhood, based on the examples of men who succeeded economically and in popular culture, became more positive: Joe DiMaggio and Frank Sinatra, for example, brought the Italian *bella figura* into a national spotlight for emulation by American men. When increasing numbers of Italian American men joined the exodus from ethnic urban neighborhoods to suburbia and work took the fathers away from the home, Italian family dynamics changed dramatically as the foundations of the old world patriarchy began to weaken.

Post-World War II developments in Italy brought out images of masculinity that countered the Fascist *Maciste*, through the daring and cunning actions of the Resistance fighters and through the deconstruction of the body powerful hero via the *inetto* (the inept, incompetent version of masculinity). Film scholar Jacqueline Reich sees the *inetto* of twentieth-century Italy as emerging “beneath the façade of the *bella figura*. The Italian male is ‘good at being a man’ precisely because he masks the *inetto* through the performance of hyper-masculinity: protection of honor, procreation, and sexual segregation.”<sup>76</sup> The *inetto* surfaces in characters played by the likes of Alberto Sordi and Marcello Mastroianni—who combined with it qualities of the Latin lover.

Popular culture representations of Italian American masculinity continue to stereotype it, but they nonetheless provide useful windows on ethnicity and masculinity in contemporary American culture. Such 1970s figures as Don Vito Corleone (*The Godfather*, 1972), Rocky Balboa (*Rocky*, 1976) and Tony Manero (*Saturday Night Fever*, 1977)—all defined through physical power and aggressiveness, criminality or overt sexuality—can be seen as attempts by Hollywood filmmakers to ethnicize troublesome characteristics of traditional patriarchy under feminist attack by associating them with old world ethnic cultures.

Franco La Cecla in his study of Italian manhood, *Modi Bruschi* [Rough Manners, 2000], provides one of the most useful approaches to the study of contemporary Italian masculinities: “One becomes a man only by strenuously working to escape maternal influence. Adolescent males face an extremely difficult and painful passage. They must erase from their bodies the ‘effeminate’ influence of their mothers and the other women of their community, replacing them with ‘rough manners.’”<sup>77</sup> Thus, the rough play of childhood gives way to the tough work of manhood. La Cecla, through a Freudian lens, theorizes that since the state of grace is perceived as feminine, the young man must find a way to be, in a sense, “disgraced”; this state of disgrace, according to La Cecla, must be achieved alongside of and in front of other men. In brief, masculinity is a public performance, and until a young boy displays his manhood through disgrace, he is considered to be a boy. La Cecla goes on to say that this form of masculinity manifests itself in the Macho pose; the origins of machismo can

be found in Mexican culture. Chicana scholar and writer Ana Castillo tells us, “The word macho means to be male or masculine. Machismo then is that which is related to the male or to masculinity. Machismo, as associated with Mexican culture for the social scientist, is the demonstration of physical and sexual powers and is basic to self-respect.”<sup>8</sup>

As we know through Freudian thought, in almost all cases the rough boys must separate themselves from the world of women in order to achieve the label of man, and yet once they enter this world of men, they seldom develop skills that would move them beyond settling solely for simple survival in a material world. This limited development manifests itself in the growing distance between men and their feelings simply because sensitivity to others’ needs challenges the logic that built patriarchal power in the world. To protect males from the “contamination” of feelings, society fosters the separation between what is male and what is female.

La Cecla helps us to see this need for separation when he speaks of masculinity in Sicily during his youth:

Masculinity at that time and in that place . . . expressed itself as a strange combination of boldness and isolation. . . . One became a male “jerkily,” reacting to and never escaping the physical embarrassment of adolescence. A real male is a bit awkward, rough, tough with his body. If he remains graceful—Peter Pan, who could fly—or rounded in his movements, then he would remain in sweet childhood, dream in his mother’s lap. He must lose that “grace”; he must become “graceless,” “disgraceful.”<sup>9</sup>

One of the ways this state of “disgrace” can be achieved involves a man’s position regarding physical and psychological violence.

### Challenging Masculinity

Contemporary images of Italian American manhood have surfaced in reaction to women’s, gay, and men’s liberation movements which have increasingly challenged male monopolies on economic opportunity by calling on men to become more domestically engaged, urging them to become more sensitive and emotionally expressive, and by suggesting that bread-winning and heterosexuality does not define all the possibilities for male identity. Recent studies have shown that performances of Italian masculinity are changing. David Tager and Glenn E. Good of the University of Missouri—Columbia, conducted what has been called the first empirical study of Italian masculinity. Entitled “Italian and American Masculinities: A Comparison of Masculine Gender Role Norms in University Students,” their findings “cast doubt on the accuracy of prevalent American stereotypes of Italian men as patriarchal, macho, violent, and domineering, the type of Mafioso image presented in *The Sopranos* and *The Godfather*,” and young Italian men feel less threatened by the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities.<sup>10</sup>

Al Pacino and John Cazale, known for their portrayals of tough (or in Cazale’s case, trying to be tough) gangster sons in *The Godfather*, reflected these changes in the roles they played in the film *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975). Pacino as Sonny Wortzik, a bisexual man and Cazale as Sal Naturile, a transgender man (see Figure 34.1) rob a bank in order to pay for Sal’s transgender operation. From 1981 through 1987, Daniel J. Travanti portrayed the soft-spoken and sensitive anti-macho police lieutenant Francis (Frank) Xavier Furillo in the television series *Hill Street Blues* (Figure 27.2). These depictions challenged earlier monolithic notions of the tough Italian American male.



Figure 34.1 John Cazale and Al Pacino in *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975). Photo: Artists Entertainment Complex/Ronald Grant Archive/Alamy Stock Photo.

In spite of the changes in mediated Italian masculinity, many Italian American men continue to evidence traditional European patriarchy, and this is often perceived as the “natural” order of human life, something passed on from generation to generation within a society based on patriarchal power relations. The result is that young men rarely challenge this system simply because they can’t see it, something brought out by Josep M. Armengol in “Gendering Men: Re-Visions of Violence as a Test of Manhood in American Literature”:

Very often, men do indeed appear to remain unaware of their gender, probably because the mechanisms that make us privileged beings tend to remain invisible to us. Nevertheless, the traditional conception of masculinity as the “invisible” norm only helps perpetuate social and gender inequalities. After all, invisibility is the very precondition for the perpetuation of male dominance, since one cannot question what remains hidden from view.<sup>11</sup>

When all you can see in major media are stereotypical representations of system-approved versions of masculinity, it’s no wonder that young men grow up to defend and maintain the hegemonic system of power. What’s needed for things to change is exposure to alternative ways of performing masculinity. In the space that remains I bring your attention to some alternatives presented in Italian American literature.

By mid-twentieth century, traditional notions of American manhood began to be challenged by the sociopolitical ramifications of feminism and gay liberation. The Italian American man evidenced a traditional communal sense of manhood derived from a European model that confronted an American individualistic model of manhood. Therefore, he made a good foil for these new ideologies. The idea of using violence to establish and maintain honor was still being clung to, even as the efficacy of patriarchy was disappearing as early

as the eighteenth century in Northern Italy, and more than a century later in Italy's South. The failure of traditional notions of Italian masculinity can be found in many novels about the Italian American experience, especially in authors such as John Fante and Mario Puzo.

Rocco Marinaccio, in his essay, "Tea and Cookies. Diavolo!": Italian American Masculinity in John Fante's *Wait until Spring, Bandini*," has identified one of the reasons traditional Italian masculinity did not work in the United States. Svevo, the father of the novel's protagonist Arturo, is an immigrant from Abruzzo who attempts to adapt to the American ways of men and fails.

To be an American man risks failing as an Italian man. But continued allegiance to Italian values risks a potentially more, dire fate. As the quasi-sexual imagery of the phrase implies, "making America" secures for the immigrant man fruits of conquest that testify to his masculinity. Assimilation thus becomes a test of manhood, and failure to assimilate is failure to be a man in the cultural context that seems to matter most: the dominant American one. From this cultural logic emerges what we might call an ethno-misogyny, in which aspects of a devalued Italian identity become feminized; thus Svevo, in his pursuit of assimilation, consistently repudiates Italian values as unmanly, a repudiation that involves repressing his Italian identity as a threat to his tenuous self-conceptions not simply as an American but as an American man. *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* is Fante's response to this ethno-misogyny, an impassioned defense of traditional modes of Italian masculinity devalued in American culture and a blistering condemnation of the American values adopted by the ultimately tragic Svevo.<sup>12</sup>

Svevo is very much like many of the male characters in Italian American literature who lack the power to succeed in America by performing Italian masculinity.

From the very opening of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* (1969), we gain a sense of the author's concern that the ability of an Italian sense of masculinity cannot survive transplantation to the United States. Recalling David Gilmore's three roles that have defined masculinity in many of the world's cultures—their ability to demonstrate that they can procreate, provide for and protect their families—we can see that fulfilling those responsibilities becomes a challenge to the Italian immigrant male in Puzo's novel.<sup>13</sup> The undertaker, Amerigo Bonasera, cannot protect his daughter, singing sensation Johnny Fontane cannot provide for his family, and Nazorine, the humble but noble baker, cannot enable his daughter to procreate with the man of her choice. These are problems that these men wouldn't face in Italy, or if so, not on their own. To solve these problems in the United States, they must go to see Don Vito Corleone, the head of the symbolic larger family. But what kind of man is Don Vito Corleone? When his beloved godson Johnny Fontane is reduced to a whimpering fool, Don Vito violently shakes him demanding "What kind of a man are you? Is this how you turned out, a Hollywood *finocchio* who cries like a woman?" (See Color Plate 24.)

What a surprise it must be to all those who modeled their manly American literary, film and television gangsters on Don Vito Corleone to find out that his character was really based on a woman! Women have always had a hand in fashioning the male identity, but in *The Godfather*, novel and films, the great American gangster was humanized in ways never before imagined. Puzo's revealed this in the Foreword to the 1996 reprint of *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1965):

Whenever the Godfather opened his mouth, in my own mind I heard the voice of my mother. I heard her wisdom, her ruthlessness, and her unconquerable love

for her family and for life itself, qualities not valued in women at the time. The Don's courage and loyalty came from her; his humanity came from her. Through my characters, I heard the voices of my sisters and brothers, with their tolerance of human frailty. And so, I know now, without Lucia Santa, I could not have written *The Godfather*.<sup>14</sup>

Puzo does present us with quite a different male in the figure of Don Corleone. From the outset of *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, Puzo developed female masculinity through the figures of Lucia Santa and her daughter Octavia in ways that suggest that the women are enacting masculine roles quite naturally to fill voids left by the men in their lives, who ultimately present masculinities that have failed to perform. If the home is the place where the family is nourished and strengthened, traditionally through acts performed by women, then Vito Corleone represents a male version of this role, just as Lucia Santa in *The Fortunate Pilgrim* was a female version of a man's role. Yet, Puzo is too traditional, at least in his drama, to stray far from the violence-based identity of Italian American masculinity; he was trying to create a bestseller with his novel and in the United States that meant his protagonist had to be male. In this way, he follows the traditional ways of depicting men in America's mass media.

The Italian American man has usually signified nothing but trouble in American culture. From the sweaty workers on the Boston Common who frightened Henry James, to the exotic Rudolph Valentino's sensuous strides across the silver screen into the hearts of American women, from the cocky strut of dapper gangsters across television screens, to the gold-chained disco dude played by John Travolta, the Italian American man has been called upon whenever a breach of status quo civility needed to be displayed, especially through the body.

Proper social places for the Italian American male and female is the central problem of Louisa Ermelino's first novel, *Joey Dee Gets Wise* (1991). In the Prologue, a woman who lives in the Little Italy of New York City's Greenwich Village gives birth to a girl and asks that the afterbirth be taken outside. Alfonsina, the Italian born midwife, refuses to do that because she believes that the afterbirth must remain in the home, for "the woman stays in the house." The afterbirth of a male child can be taken outside because, as Alfonsina says, "No one wants a man who stays home, a *ricchione*, under his mother's skirts."<sup>15</sup> The word *ricchione* is an important choice here, for it is derived from the Calabrian word *arrichià*, which means to wish for the *irco* (male goat). A *ricchione* refers to a female goat in heat (the Italian suffix *-one* is often used to derive a derogatory word), and in this case refers to a man who wishes to mount another man. Thus, in the Old World ways, a mother who wanted a strong son would not want him to be associated with the place and work of women.

Joey Dee, the novel's protagonist, begins as a gangster "wannabe" and ends up defying the tradition in which he was raised. Not wanting to be a "pantsspinner," like his father—a man who does the same thing over and over each day to make a living—Joey Dee drifts toward the gangster types who run his neighborhood. In the hands of Ermelino, Joey Dee transitions from gangster-in-training to new Italian American man. Joey Dee, in fact, becomes wise by learning the power of women and then using it to defy the patriarchal power forces of his neighborhood. This change is reflected as his religious allegiances shift from God the Father, to female saints like St. Lucy. In the end, he learns to feel, and ultimately must leave his neighborhood to understand those feelings.

In spite of public displays of often intense affection between men, a great deal of homophobia exists within Italian American male culture, though not always to the same extent as found in other ethnic American cultures. Homosexuality, though more accepted in the Greco-Roman-based culture of Italy than the United States, represents a threat to the family order because it does not contribute to the strengthening of the family through procreation.

Still, many Italian American homosexuals have gained acceptance from their families who become supportive of their sexuality and invite their contributions to the family.

One of the ways traditional models of masculinity are deconstructed through fiction is by exposing the prison that socially acceptable ideals of masculinity create around the very people who seem to benefit most by the power dynamics they create. Work by gay writers reveals this prison. As long as the gay community is ignored, heterosexuality and its discontents remain in the forefront of social consciousness. Much energy is expended at keeping the gay community out of public discourse and social consciousness. Pierre Bourdieu points this out when he writes:

The particular form of symbolic domination suffered by homosexuals, who are marked by a stigma which, unlike skin color or female gender, can be concealed (or flaunted), is imposed through collective acts of categorization which set up significant negatively marked difference, and so create groups—stigmatized social categories. As in some kinds of racism, this symbolic domination takes the form of a denial of public, visible existence. Oppression in the form of “individualization” comes through a refusal of legitimate, public existence.<sup>16</sup>

Robert Ferro, a gay writer of Italian American descent captures this dynamic in his novel, *The Family of Max Desir* (1983). The novel focuses on the mother/son relationship as she buffers his father’s fear of Max’s homosexuality and reveals the father trapped by his own expectations of what a man should be.

It had been clear to him since high school that all directions toward intimacy with men were strictly policed—all the mis- or half-understood expressions, gestures, symbols and rituals that represented sex and that, if pursued at length, might lead to it. For Max this meant the existence of a line down the middle of all his connections with men, a point beyond which it was forbidden, or at least dangerous, to go. . . . It was clear also that he had no choice in the matter other than the repression or manifestation of these desires, for they came unbidden; they could not be change or altered, only repressed or disguised.<sup>17</sup>

Although Max’s father comes to tolerate, if not totally accept, his son’s homosexuality and his relationship to his male lover within the confines of the family, he fears how this will be perceived by his male friends and business associates. This is revealed when a tapestry of the family tree that includes Max and Nick hangs on a ground-floor wall of the family’s home. The father moves it upstairs before he entertains other men from the community; when Max confronts his father, he justifies his action by saying: “Whoever heard of two men being on a family tree together?”<sup>18</sup> This act causes an estrangement between father and son that is resolved only after the mother’s death and after the father has served a stint as a Catholic monk. So the man who believes in and performs traditional and socially acceptable models of masculinity is trapped by the narrow confines of such definitions of manhood. And nowhere is this trap more obvious than in Rachel Guido deVries novel *Tender Warriors* (1986).

The focus of the novel is the father’s mistreatment of his son because he doesn’t conform to the old man’s sense of masculinity: “The old man never liked Sonny, just because he hadn’t been able to be just like him. As though that were something to wish on anybody. All that macho Italian stuff and Sonny just too sweet for it.”<sup>19</sup> His sister Rose, who has left the home, wishes “she had it in her to save him from what she knew was inevitable, because even then the old man was ridiculing Sonny for being skinny or afraid of things, calling him a sissy

and a crybaby when all Sonny was, was soft on the inside and filled with a lot of love that wouldn't come out right except with Momma."<sup>20</sup> DeVries recognizes the damage that men who can only see traditional macho as the model for manhood can do to young boys as they grow into their own.

With Sonny, though, Dominic's rage took on a different more insidious form: one of ridicule and the art of humiliation, of emasculation in its purest, most vicious manner, as only male can do to male. Rose had thought about this often, the small and more deep ways her father had tormented Sonny—laughing at his sensitivity; calling him a sissy or a girl; trying, forever trying, to impose on his son that limited social imperative of prescribed maleness. Rose remembered her father's stories about growing up Italian during the Depression and thought she could in some way understand Dominic's need to be so rigid in his definitions. She also thought the time had come for her father to at least begin to evaluate those definitions.<sup>21</sup>

In response to his father's endless ridicule, Sonny begins to gain weight, and finds that his father doesn't let up the psychological torment. What deVries captures here, better than most writers, is the insanity created by narrow notions of Italian American masculinity. The reader sees the father as the one who needs help. Later on we learn that Sonny suffers from an illness created by a condition that had gone undiagnosed and untreated until his early adulthood. By then, his mother is dead, and his only way of coping is to leave his father's home. When he does, and he stays on his medication, Sonny can survive, but when he goes off his medications, he loses touch with reality. That's when he begins to search for his dead mother, and in the process, devolves through violence into the type of man his father once wished he was; the trouble is, Sonny's violence threatens the very lives of the old man, as well as his sisters. Through this alternative image of masculinity, deVries brings us closer to seeing the danger that monolithic notions of manhood have on individuals and their family.

Whereas Puzo may have modeled Don Corleone on his mother, Annie Lanzillotto presents a real case of what happens when a woman performs aspects of masculinity. Judith Halberstam's work on female masculinity prepares us to read the power play involved when this happens.

I have no doubt that heterosexual female masculinity menaces gender conformity in its own way, but all too often it represents an acceptable degree of female masculinity as compared to the excessive masculinity of the dyke. It is important when thinking about gender variations such as male femininity and female masculinity not simply to create another binary in which masculinity is not simply the opposite of female femininity, nor is it a female version of male masculinity . . . very often the unholy union of femaleness and masculinity can produce wildly unpredictable results.<sup>22</sup>

In her memoir *L is for Lion* (2013), Lanzillotto (see her photo in the next chapter: Figure 35.1) creates just such a male identity by sporting a mustache made for her by a gay hairstylist from New York that she wears during her trip to Cairo, Egypt. Through it she enacts a female masculinity that fools many—but not all—of those she encounters. In her description of the experience she identifies and criticizes traditional Italian American performances of masculinity.

I felt like he just saved my life. Without knowing it, he gave me freedom. I walked out onto Atwells Avenue. Now I could be an asshole Italian American man just like the rest of them. Even the giant iron pine cone hanging under the arch over the

avenue looked smaller to me now. The moustache felt about as comfortable as a bra, it had the same gender-signifying tug. But I was pleased. I had to try it out. I crossed the street, got into my car, and drove slowly. At the red light, I stared at a man in the car next to me. He looked away. Is that all men had to do? Just stare you down? This was powerful. I looked in the rearview mirror. Even in the rearview mirror I could exude the power to the driver behind me. The moustache looked like I was born with it. It was me.<sup>23</sup>

When she arrives in Cairo, she experiences a few days as a woman and finds that she is constantly harassed by men who stalk her and expose themselves. After she dons the moustache and male garb, she passes rather successfully as a man in the Arab country while walking down the street with her friends, so much so, in fact that she has to remove her disguise when the local police do an about-turn to investigate why a “native” man is walking down the street with nonnative women. Through this and other examples of female masculinity enacted by Lanzillotto, we see macho posturing as performance, something that helps us ask the right questions that will help us reframe what we see as Italian American male.

### Conclusion: Recreating Italian American Masculinity

To change men's lives [one needs] more than recognition of the limitations and negative effects of our present ideals of manhood. There also must be a recognition and reinforcement of positive alternatives to traditional masculine ideals and behaviors.

Josep M. Armengol<sup>24</sup>

We need to understand that variations of performing masculinity have always existed, as R. W. Connell tells us:

The history of masculinity . . . is not linear. There is no master line of development to which all else is subordinate, no simple shift from “traditional” to “modern.” Rather we see, in the world created by European empires, complex structures of gender relations in which dominant, subordinated and marginalized masculinities are in constant interaction, changing the conditions for each others' existence and transforming themselves as they do.<sup>25</sup>

To map out new ways of thinking about Italian American masculinity we need to know history, as Rudolfo Anaya suggests, in order to move beyond it: “The essence of maleness doesn't have to die, it merely has to be understood and created anew. To recreate is evolution's role. We can take an active role in it, but to do so we have to know the history of false behavioral conditioning.”<sup>26</sup> We can see this “false behavioral conditioning” by looking at the way the Italian American male has functioned in American storytelling.

For many years the macho had been the predominant way Italian American masculinity has been portrayed in literature and film. However, over time, many male writers have been involved in redefining Italian American masculinity, but their work has remained in the shadows. What interests me, and for the purposes of my argument here, is what it is Italian American artists are saying, and how they are redesigning notions of Italian American masculinity. There are many doing the brave work of dismantling the armor of macho with a sensitivity that enables them to connect to what they feel and to express those feelings.

Notions of masculinity may be changing ever so slowly in the real world, but in the world of fiction, they've been shifting away from the old fashioned notion of the dominance of heterosexuality as the major way of determining U.S. manhood. Early Italian American writers knew the power of the mother and novelists like Puzo celebrated it before they felt the pressure to perform a version of masculinity that was more expected and accepted in the United States. The masculinities of the gangster have long overshadowed the works of Italian American writers that present different views of Italian American masculinity. Greater exposure to public versions of masculinity that include the importance of intellectual development and sensitive expression of thoughts will go a long way in enlarging the scope of possible masculinities presented as models for young boys.

In the works I have just presented the protagonists come to such a development through a serious consideration of what has traditionally been called feminine. The way to new performances of masculinity begins with a better sense of the impact a mother has had on the development of a young man. As the connection between young men and their mothers is brought out in the creative works of men and women, I believe the notion of what it means to be a man, in Italian American, or any other ethnic American culture, will change from the violent type of the traditional male into a more mature figure of masculinity.

### Further Reading

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### Notes

- 1 Josep M. Armengol, "Gendering Men: Re-Visions of Violence as a Test of Manhood in American Literature," *Atlantis*, 29.2 (December 2007), 75–92 (76).
- 2 Richard Gambino, "Gender Relations Among Italian Americans," *Italian Americana*, 16.2 (Summer 1998), 196–207 (197).
- 3 See Henry James, *The American Scene* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907), 223.
- 4 Elena dell'Agnese, "'Tu vuo' fa l'Americano': la costruzione della mascolinità nella geopolitica popolare italiana," in *Mascolinità all'italiana. Costruzioni, narrazioni, mutamenti*, ed. Elena dell'Agnese and Elisabetta Ruspini (Turin: UTET, 2007), 3–34 (12–13); Pierre Sorlin, *Italian National Cinema 1896–1996* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
- 5 Dominique Padurano, "Charles Atlas and American Masculinity, 1910–1940," in *Making Italian America: Consumer Culture and the Production of Ethnic Identities*, ed. Simone Cinotto (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 100–116.
- 6 Jacqueline Reich, *Beyond the Latin Lover: Marcello Mastroianni, Masculinity and Italian Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 9–10.
- 7 Franco La Cecla, *Modi bruschi: antropologia del maschio* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2000), 39.
- 8 Ana Castillo, *Massacre of the Dreamers* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 66.
- 9 La Cecla, *Modi bruschi*, 41.
- 10 David Tager and Glenn E. Good, "Italian and American Masculinities: A Comparison of Masculine Gender Role Norms," *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, 6.4 (2005), 264–274 (270).
- 11 "Gendering Men," 2. Armengol draws from two sources in this quote: Anthony Easthope, *What a Man's Gotta Do: The Masculine Myth in Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1986); and Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).
- 12 Rocco Marinaccio, "'Tea and Cookies. Diavolo!': Italian American Masculinity in John Fante's 'Wait Until Spring, Bandini,'" *MELUS*, 34.3, *Racial Desire(s)* (Fall 2009), 43–69.
- 13 David Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 48.

- 14 Mario Puzo, "Preface," in *The Fortunate Pilgrim* [1965] (New York: Random House, 1997), xii.
- 15 Louisa Ermelino, *Joey Dee Gets Wise* (New York: Kensington Publishing, 1991), 1.
- 16 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 118–119.
- 17 Robert Ferro, *The Family of Max Desir* (New York: Plume, 1983), 53.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 119.
- 19 Rachel Guido deVries, *Tender Warriors* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1986), 19.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 49.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 100–101.
- 22 Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 28–29.
- 23 Annie Rachel Lanzillo, *L Is for Lion: An Italian Bronx Butch Memoir* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013), 194–195.
- 24 Armengol, "Gendering Men," 79–80.
- 25 R. W. Connell, "The History of Masculinity," in *The Masculinity Reader*, ed. Rachel Adams and David Savran (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 245–261 (254).
- 26 Rudolfo Anaya, "'I'm the King': The Macho Image," in *Muy Macho: Latino Men Confront Their Manhood*, ed. Ray Gonzalez (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1996), 57–74 (73).