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Enlightenment - (Enlightenment Correspondences, a
TORCH Network for Research on Eighteenth-Century
Letters, University of Oxford)**

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► **To cite this version:**

Pierre Musitelli. The Correspondence of the Verri Brothers (1766-1797) and Newly Edited Online Resources on the Italian Enlightenment - (Enlightenment Correspondences, a TORCH Network for Research on Eighteenth-Century Letters, University of Oxford). 2016. hal-02433709

HAL Id: hal-02433709

<https://hal.science/hal-02433709>

Submitted on 12 Feb 2024

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The Correspondence of the Verri Brothers (1766-1797) and Newly Edited Online Resources on the Italian Enlightenment

Posted on [March 21, 2016](#) under [Network Events](#)

By Pierre Musitelli (École normale supérieure, Paris)

The correspondence between Pietro Verri (1728-1797) and Alessandro (1741-1816) Verri, two brothers from the enlightened Milanese aristocracy, is one of the major epistolary legacies of the Italian Enlightenment. It unfolded over more than 30 years, from 1766 to 1797, and, despite unrecoverable losses, especially in the early years of the 20th century, it still contains over 3,800 letters. It is an accurate and vivid reflection of the intellectual and political history of the last decades of the Ancien Régime, from the “Age of Reforms” in Italy to the French Revolution and the invasion of Piedmont and Lombardy by Bonaparte. Historian Giuseppe Ricuperati considers these letters “an extraordinary dialogue between two of the sharpest and most enlightened Italian minds, each brother reacting to contemporary events in his own way, making diverging choices out of a common history and culture.”¹

Throughout these years, the *Carteggio* had several functions: the first was to spread news and political information along a route between Rome and Southern Italy, on the one hand, and Milan and Vienna, on the other. Some excerpts were read and shown in Milanese aristocratic circles by Pietro and in Roman salons by Alessandro. The *Carteggio* was well-known for the quality of its information, and although the Verri brothers often used ciphers, their letters often bear traces showing that they were intercepted and opened by Milanese or Roman authorities.

The letters also fulfilled a private role, as the brothers shared news about their sentimental lives, marriages, about births or mourning in the family, moments of doubt or personal crises. They also fulfilled an editorial function, each brother sending his manuscripts for the other to read, amend and revise. It also had an intellectual import, as the brothers sent books along with their letters. Pietro, for example, sent large numbers of pamphlets by Voltaire to Rome, along with Shakespeare’s complete works in French, as well as some of the volumes from the Livorno edition of the *Encyclopédie*. Lastly, and especially for Alessandro, the correspondence had a vital financial function: Pietro sent him money, since he had no resources of his own in Rome.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this correspondence is the debate on the European Enlightenment and its evolution. The debate gathered momentum as the intellectual rift between the two brothers widened. Pietro, a Milanese statesman and ardent reformist, remained a staunch republican throughout his life and hoped the French Revolution would take a constitutionalist turn, while Alessandro, a self-appointed defender of throne and altar,

¹ G. Ricuperati, “L’epistolario dei fratelli Verri”, in *Nuove idee e nuova arte nel ’700 italiano*, Rome, Atti dei convegni linnei, 1977, p. 274.

contended that political passions, embodied by the *philosophes*, were dangerous, and he advocated the values of counter-revolution during the last months of his life.

The first months of the *Carteggio*, dedicated to Alessandro's trip to Paris and London (with Cesare Beccaria, the author of *Crime and Punishments*, and at the invitation of the *Encyclopédistes*), and its last years (1782-1797) were the objects of remarkable critical editions offering reliable and stable versions of the texts.² For the rest of the correspondence, researchers must work with an incomplete and relatively outdated edition published between 1910 and 1942, in which the text is often erroneous, as it was subjected to alterations and even censored in its crudest or most wanton details.³ Today, a new prospect for research is the creation of the online platform "illuminismolombardo.it", edited by Gianni Francioni (University of Pavia), an internet archive that will give scholars access to major sources on the Northern Italian Enlightenment. A wider audience will be able to see the results of two recently completed editorial projects: the *National Editions* of the works of Cesare Beccaria (including his letters) and of Pietro Verri⁴. The platform will include the revised complete edition of the correspondence of the Verri Brothers. The first volume of the *Carteggio* (1766-1767) is already [available online](#), as well as all the [essays from the Caffè](#), along with the complete collection of the journal [Studi settecenteschi](#) (1981-2010, 30 vol.) edited by G. Francioni. Texts and letters by Paolo Frisi, Alfonso Longo, Giuseppe Gorani, Giambattista Biffi will be added later, making this portal the promise of renewed research on this major legacy.

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² *Viaggio a Parigi e Londra* (1766-1767). *Carteggio di Pietro e Alessandro Verri*, G. Gaspari ed., Milan, Adelphi, 1980 ; *Carteggio di Pietro e Alessandro Verri*, in *Edizione nazionale delle opere di Pietro Verri*, 2ª serie, vol. VII: 1782-1792 (G. Di Renzo Villata ed., Rome, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2012) and vol. VIII: 1792-1797 (S. Rosini ed., Rome, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2008).

³ *Carteggio di Pietro e Alessandro Verri* (1766-1782), E. Greppi, A. Giulini, F. Novati and G. Seregni ed., Milan, 1910-1942, 12 vol.

⁴ *Edizione nazionale delle opere di Cesare Beccaria*, L. Firpo and G. Francioni ed., Milan, Mediobanca, 1984-2009, 16 vol.; *Edizione nazionale delle opere di Pietro Verri*, G. Barbarisi, R. Pasta et al. ed., Rome, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2003-2015, 6 vol.