

# ‘Here I let live, and am let live’

## Germaine Greer and Italy

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In 2013 the University of Melbourne purchased the archive of Professor Germaine Greer.<sup>1</sup> Now part of University of Melbourne Archives, the collection currently fills 487 archive boxes, occupying 82 metres of shelf space at the repository in Brunswick. The enormous task of processing the collection is being undertaken by a team of four archivists. To date, 17 series of records have been listed.<sup>2</sup> But as Professor Greer continues to work, her archive of course continues to grow, and so future deposits are scheduled.<sup>3</sup>

The collection documents Greer’s diverse career as an academic and

writer, performer in film, television and theatre, public intellectual and environmentalist. It also records many aspects of her personal relationships with friends, lovers, family, colleagues, students and fans.

Italy infuses the Germaine Greer Archive. Records about Greer’s Italian homes and gardens, her Italian lovers, her research in Italian libraries and museums, her Italian cooking, Italian translations of her books, her travel writing about Italy, her interactions with Italian feminists, and her views on the superiority of Tuscan herbs, sunrises and bumblebees can be found across most

series. For Greer, Italy was a place of refuge, happiness and sensual delight. ‘People ask if I find it easy to work here’, she wrote of Tuscany in an essay for *The Sunday Telegraph* magazine in 1987. ‘I should think not indeed. Here I let live, and am let live.’<sup>4</sup>

The archival records—letters, books, diary entries, research notes, photographs, home movies and television shows—demonstrate that Italy, Italian people and history, and the Italian language itself have been central to Greer’s life.<sup>5</sup> Greer’s Italian-language interviews with film director Federico Fellini, opera tenor Luciano Pavarotti and writer Primo Levi need to be understood in this context. By the time Greer interviewed Levi in Turin in 1985, she had already accumulated two decades of intimate knowledge of Italian culture and people.

Greer was born in 1939 and learned to speak Italian when she was at primary school in the Melbourne bayside suburb of Mentone. In response to a query from University of Melbourne Archives, Greer said:

When I was in the sixth or seventh grade at Sacred Heart School, two Italian girls joined our class ... I immediately started asking them to teach me Italian vocabulary. The first word I



Previous page: Germaine Greer's stone house in Montanare di Cortona, between the medieval town of Cortona in Tuscany and the border of Umbria, c. 1979–94. 2014.0054.00428, Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives.

Greer owned the house from 1973 until 1994.

asked them for was 'matchbox' (there being one on the desk); the answer was 'scatola di fiammiferi', which seemed a bit of a mouthful. They then asked me to teach their mother English, so I went to their house every Saturday afternoon. I managed to learn Italian but I did not manage to teach Mrs Baldi English. In all I managed to teach her two sentences, viz: 'I wait for my daughter' and 'I wait for my husband'. There was no formal arrangement. I got hold of an Italian grammar of 1905 and taught myself what were already obsolete usages, more suitable to reading Dante than reading a newspaper.<sup>6</sup>

Greer also said that she was 'helped in learning my languages by the fact that my father used to bring home the various collections of extracts from the *Reader's Digest*, i.e. *Sélection du Reader's Digest*, *Das Beste aus Reader's Digest* and *Selezione da Reader's Digest*.' She sat the Italian exams for matriculation, which meant she had to travel to the university, as Italian was not part of the curriculum at her school, Star of the Sea College in Gardenvale.

In 1964 Greer left Australia to take up a Commonwealth Scholarship to study at the University

of Cambridge, beginning her doctoral research into Shakespeare's early comedies the following year. The archive contains her research notebooks, including one named 'Marciana' after the library in Venice where she worked. These notebooks have now been digitised and are available online.<sup>7</sup>

But Greer's love affair with Italy went beyond manuscripts and books. In 1966 and 1967 she had an Italian boyfriend, Venetian architecture student Emilio Manaru. The Emilio Manaru correspondence file contains about a dozen letters, all in Italian, from Manaru to Greer. It also contains a polaroid photograph of Greer, and many drawings and pieces of ephemera such as hair, matches and coins.<sup>8</sup> These delicate tokens of love, and the letters that accompany them, are waiting for a bilingual researcher to decode them.

By mid-1967, the romance with Manaru was over and Greer travelled alone—with her portable red typewriter and many books—to Calabria. She spent three months living in an abandoned stone building whose floors were 'ancient terracotta tiles, crazed into a million fissures ... the walls were coated with velvety whitewash. There was no running water, no electricity'.<sup>9</sup> By the end of this journey, she had completed the

typescript for her PhD on 'The ethics of love and marriage in Shakespeare's early comedies'. She graduated in 1968.

Greer returned to Italy in the aftermath of *The female eunuch's* publication in the United States in 1971, an event that transformed her from English-literature academic and variety television-show star into international feminist celebrity. One memorable night, Greer had dinner at the Aga Khan's place in Sardinia, sharing a table with Princess Margaret and Lord Snowdon ('Tony and Meg'), theatre impresario Michael White, and writers Kenneth and Kathleen Tynan. Kenneth was the literary manager of the British National Theatre; he would commission Greer to write a new version of *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes' play about women's sex strike in the Peloponnesian War. Traces of this night and Greer's epic scooter journey—across the island, over to the mainland by ferry, then back up to Tuscany—can be found in the Early Years and Print Journalism series.<sup>10</sup>

Between 1971 and 1972, Greer stayed, intermittently, in a small house near Il Palazzone, a mansion built by Cardinal Silvio Passerini (1469–1529) to impress the Medici. One of the cardinal's descendants, Count Lorenzo Passerini di Cortona,

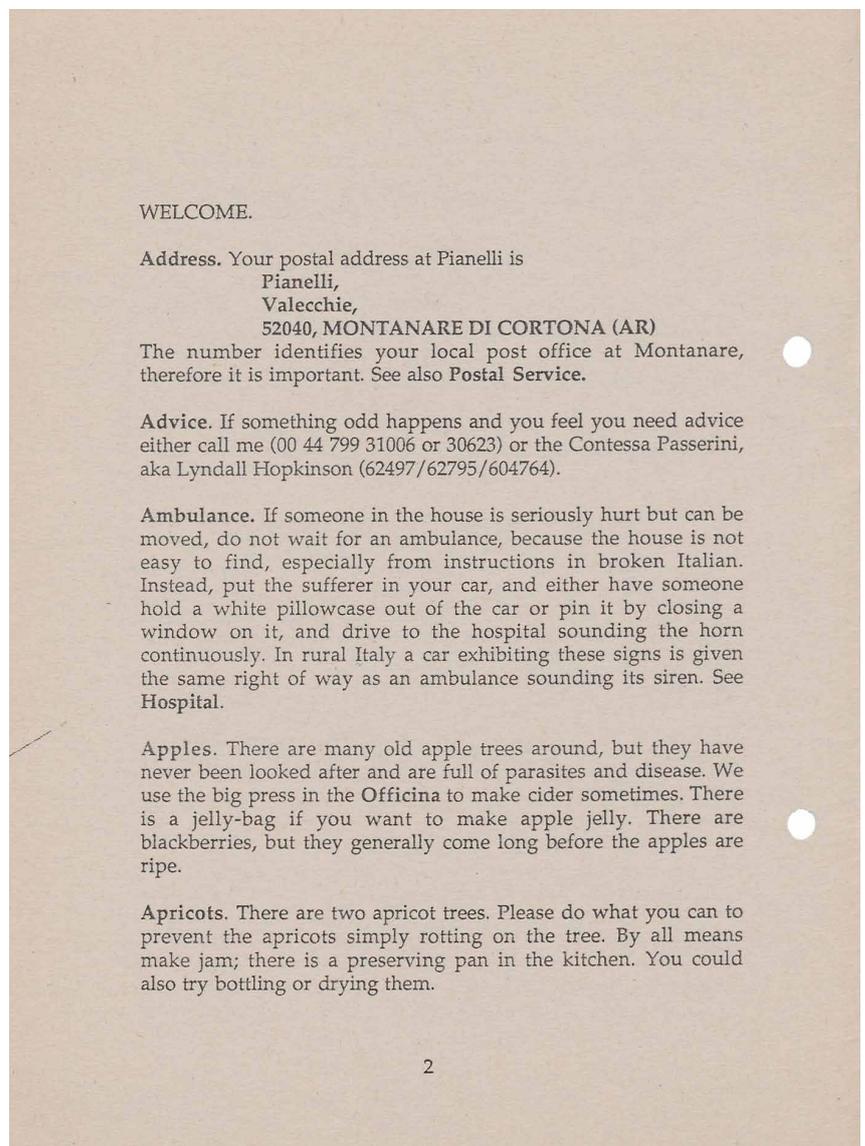
Germaine Greer, 'The unaccompanied guest at Pianelli', 32-page typewritten booklet. 2014.0045.00629.00001, Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives. Available at <https://digitised-collections.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/19283>.

This is the first page of Greer's alphabetically arranged booklet for friends staying at her Italian house.

was married to Greer's friend Lyndall Hopkinson. The yellow carbon copies of Greer's letters from this time all list Il Palazzone as her address.

From 1973 until 1994 Greer owned Pianelli, a stone house in Montanare di Cortona, between the medieval town of Cortona in Tuscany and the border of Umbria. The little house (pictured on page 17) had belonged to a chestnut gatherer: 'part of it was built as a kiln to dry the chestnuts to make flour'. It came with about eight acres of 'tiny fields surrounded by woods'.<sup>11</sup> At first, Greer divided her time between England and Italy. In the frenetic post-*Eunuch* years, Italy was a place for quiet recovery. 'Pianelli at last', she writes in her Langham diary on 11 July 1975.<sup>12</sup> From 1979 to 1983, she lived in Tulsa, Oklahoma—where she was founder and director of the University of Tulsa Center for the Study of Women's Literature—and Italy. In 1986 she bought The Mills, her country house at Stump Cross, Essex, and for the next eight years lived in either semi-rural England or semi-rural Italy.

Greer was a generous host. In the summer of 1990, when she was unable to be at Pianelli, she loaned the house to colleagues from Newnham College, Cambridge. The archive contains a delightful 32-page



Germaine Greer's Italy, 1971. Three polaroid photographs of Greer playing with a kitten at Il Palazzone (2014.0054.00412); First page of a seven-page typescript, probably related to the magazine *Effe*, hand-annotated in black ink by Germaine Greer (2014.0044.00218); Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives.

typewritten booklet written by Greer. 'The unaccompanied guest at Pianelli', which begins with 'Address' and ends with 'Wine', contains entries on everything from gathering firewood, to bees, to what to do in a medical emergency (pictured on page 19).<sup>13</sup>

The letters Greer wrote from Il Palazzone and then Pianelli (the latter on custom writing paper marked *Pianelli, Valecchie*) contain lyrical descriptions of the doings of the house, its people and its pets (cats Boogaloo and Busy, and a loathed dog, Violetta, who came with the property), its wild animals (snakes, bats, bees, butterflies), its garden and the landscape that surrounded it. Letters documenting life at Pianelli are scattered throughout the Correspondence series, in particular the files on Gillon Aitken (Greer's agent) and the poet Gay Clifford. They can also be found in the Early Years series by searching under subject headings such as 'Italy', 'Tuscany', 'Pianelli', 'Cortona (Tuscany)' and 'Il Palazzone'. 'The book of Pianelli', which Greer made for Gay Clifford, is an exquisite record of the friendship between these two women and the importance of Pianelli to both of them.<sup>14</sup>

Lisa Barboni, who was Greer's Tuscan housekeeper from 1971 until 1994, makes many cameo appearances

in letters, print journalism and photographs in the archive. Lisa was a Communist, like many other Cortonese, and this was one of the things Greer loved about her. 'My housekeeper preferred her food to be genuine; she applied the same moral, rather than aesthetic, criterion to the old-fashioned vegetables she grew and the rabbits she raised in hutches by her back door', writes Greer of Lisa's refusal to buy local wine because it was *s sofisticato* (adulterated).<sup>15</sup> Barboni made her own wine from 'trampled grapes and nothing else bar the wild yeasts that grew on their skins', Greer writes in a 2004 'Country Notebook' column for the *Daily Telegraph*.<sup>16</sup>

Many of the pictures in the Photographs series are of Pianelli. Greer took hundreds of photographs of Tuscan wildflowers, butterflies and other insects. The series also contains snaps of people who visited Pianelli or lived there, including John Byrne, Gay Clifford, John Attwood, Jeffrey Smart, James Hughes-Onslow, Barry Humphries, Jeslyn Medoff, Thomas Sterling, Vivienne and Richard King, Michael (Tchaik) Chassay, Renee and Ruby Kemp, and Barry Kay. Others who passed through include Lyndall Passerini (née Hopkinson), Claire Sterling, Thomas Sterling, and Christine and Bamber Gascoigne.

Italy also let Greer mourn her father Eric (Reg) Greer. Reg died in 1983, just as Greer was about to leave England for Brazil, where she was filming a documentary for the BBC. 'For six months, I was in a muddle, especially as my work schedule made it impossible to grieve for him in the right way', she wrote in *Vogue* in 1986. 'Then I was sent to the southern shore of Sicily. I decided to put on black for my father as the custom of Sicily requires.' People immediately began asking Greer 'for whom I was wearing *lutto*, and listened gravely as I told them all about him'.<sup>17</sup>

Greer has written dozens of articles about travelling in Italy. One amusing piece, published in Ethiopian Airlines inflight magazine *Selamta*, is on the benefits of travelling to Italy in winter to avoid the horrors of Florence in summer, where 'other people's heroin-sodden children drape themselves all over the Ponte Vecchio'.<sup>18</sup> In 1994, she recorded a grand tour of Venice for the BBC. She recalls taking her godchildren there and dining at Caffè Florian, and discusses her dreams of retiring in Venice.<sup>19</sup> In 1988, the year Greer interviewed Fellini, she also interviewed Plácido Domingo; Lord Snowdon's photographs of this encounter (contact sheets and several prints) are in the collection.<sup>20</sup>

Purtroppo il corpo femminile  
 attualita. Non potremmo negare qu  
 mentire. Non potremo pretendere ch  
 esiste come soltanto perizia dell'ea  
 personalita ovvero dell'anima; invec  
 suo, esprime il suo <sup>proprio</sup> carattere carnos  
 testifica (?) l'esperienze fisiche m  
 che quelle spirituali. Inutile dunqu  
 l'immagine del nudo serve come ritrat  
 o che ~~non~~ il togliere i vestiti chial ~~non~~ i valdvi  
 spirituali. *Lady Home Companion*



Non voglio dire ~~che~~ per questo che non c'e motivo  
 del ~~che~~ farsi rappresentare al nudo;  
~~che~~ l'illustrazione dei fatti fisici devvono  
 importanti di quelli del rappresentare



Se neghiamo l'importanza del corpo  
~~che~~ nei solchi della chiesa odiatrice  
 atrice piu accanita della donna.  
 uno dei mezzi piu riusciti nel  
 la genialita della donna; gli  
 rtantà della sua vita <sup>fisica</sup> sono stati  
 la pudicità; <sup>la pudicitia, il pudore, la inesperienza.</sup> il suo libidine, il  
 ai ptoutu sfogare nelle opere d'arte.

uso d'impudicitia funziona a moda  
 in cui la donna dovrebbe sentirsi  
 realizzarsi al massimo, sorge la vergogna ed  
 ella ~~non~~ balbetta, si confonde, tace.

Nel cinquecento in Inghilterra le donne nubile  
 portavano il vestito scollato e i  
 spalle; subitio dopo ~~mostrarsi~~ mari  
 il seno e portare la ciuffa. Men  
 il corpo era proprio suo; una vol  
 al marito ed il suo vestito diven  
 noi quanto femministe, e quanto d  
 commerciale. ~~Il~~ corpo femminile, imponevamo  
 azione del corpo femminile, perpe  
~~in~~ solecismo, rinchiudiamo il co  
 nella cassaforte, facendone aumen  
 e quindi pa possibilità massima



Beyond the intimate domestic milieu and the journalism, the archive contains evidence of Greer's importance in Italy as a feminist, activist and scholar. There are records relating to four Italian-language editions of her books: Bompiani's 1971 translation of *The female eunuch*; a late-1990s paperback edition of *The female eunuch*; *The whole woman*; and *The boy*, which was published simultaneously in the United Kingdom and Italy.<sup>21</sup> Greer collected, or was sent, selected Italian-language publications. The Early Years and the Ephemeral Publications series contain early copies of *Effè*, an Italian-language feminist magazine published from 1973 to 1982, and correspondence between Greer and *Effè*'s founding editor, Adele Cambria.

The Women and Literature series further testifies to Greer's knowledge of Italy's literary history, as well as its language. It holds research files on several early Italian poets, as well as Italian-language research notes and materials, including a battered 1954 edition of Gaspara Stampa's *Rime*, Italian-language criticism of the works of Sappho, a photocopied poem by Faustina Maratti Zappi, and press clippings about 19th-century poet and dancer Teresa Bandettini Landucci. Greer's contributions to

specialist scholarly publications, such as to the edited collection *Poets and teachers: Latin didactic poetry and the didactic authority of the Latin poet from the Renaissance to the present*, published in Bari by Levante, are further evidence of her deep knowledge of Italian history. Greer wrote a chapter called 'Safe sex in the seventeenth century: The Pseudo-Petronius and the Cavaliers'.<sup>22</sup>

The Speaking series unveils Greer as a celebrated Italian scholar. In 1992, she won the Mondello Prize (Premio Mondello Internazionale), one of five writers awarded equally in the section for foreign writers. In 2000, Greer agreed to give two lectures in Venice, in exchange for a business-class airfare to Venice. The lectures were titled 'L'Italia di Shakespeare', given on 12 February for the opening lecture of the academic year at the Ateneo Veneto, and 'Gaspara Stampa and Lady Mary Wroth', given on 15 February at Ca' Foscari for the Dipartimento di studi linguistici e letterari europei e post-coloniali. The Ateneo Veneto is a prestigious learned society that promotes science, literature, art and culture. Greer was the first woman in the 188 years of its establishment to give the inaugural lecture. Local newspaper *La Città Venezia* reported on Greer's lecture under the headline

'Greer, prima donna all'Ateneo Veneto'.<sup>23</sup> Even though Greer no longer had a home in Italy, her skill as an Italian speaker remained sharp enough to deliver major scholarly lectures.

The column Greer wrote about 'falling out of love' with Pianelli, her beloved stone house in Tuscany, is among the finest pieces of writing in the Print Journalism series. Federico Fellini had called Pianelli Greer's 'fairy castle'. It was a place of quiet exaltation. Greer was not a celebrity there; she was herself. But Pianelli got electricity. Fellini bought Greer a generator, 'mainly because he was frightened of bats'. Other appliances followed. Rich American neighbours cut down trees, while rich Italians 'build swimming pools so that they can live in the Etruscan hills as others do in Laurel Canyon'. The wild became suburban. Woods rotted. Loggers diverted streams. 'Though I appeared to flourish, my roots there had rotted away with the chestnut trees and the great oaks and the bones of my old cats under the cypresses.'<sup>24</sup> By the start of the 21st century, Greer was writing columns about her new piece of land: the rainforest at Cave Creek in southern Queensland. Perhaps these roots will go deeper, even, than the ones she put down in Tuscany.



Germaine Greer's homemade device for distilling wild plants and aromatics at Pianelli, 1986. 2017.0026.00018, Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives.

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Researchers are welcome to use the **Germaine Greer Archive** at University of Melbourne Archives. For more information, see <http://archives.unimelb.edu.au/germainegreer/home>.

- 1 'News from the collections: Germaine Greer Archive', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 13, December 2013, p. 51. The project was funded by distinguished alumni including businesswomen Carol Schwartz and Margaret Jackson, and the J.T. Reid Trust.
- 2 The 17 series are General Correspondence (2014.0042; 120 boxes); Major Works (2014.0045; 54 boxes); Women and Literature (2014.0047; 46 boxes); Print Journalism (2014.0046; 24 boxes); Speaking (2017.0009; 24 boxes); Early Years Academic, Performance, Writing and Personal Papers (2014.0044; 19 boxes); Photographs (2014.0054; 19 boxes); Publications by, With Contributions by, or About Greer (2014.0056; 13 boxes); Television (2017.0002; 13 boxes); Research and Reference Card Indexes (2014.0039; 11 boxes); Correspondence with Publishers (2014.0052; 7 boxes); Contraceptives, Cars and Gardens (2017.0026, 5 boxes); Annotated Reference Publications (2016.0137; 4 boxes); Ephemeral Publications (2017.0010; 3 boxes); Correspondence with Libraries (2017.0004; 3 boxes); Permissions (2014.0053; 2 boxes); Audio (2014.0040; 148 recordings); Audiovisual Recordings (2014.0041; 417 items, mainly DVDs and VHS recordings—these are being digitised for preservation; access will be provided in the supervised Reading Room at the Baillieu). For further details and links to finding aids, see University of Melbourne Archives, 'About the collection: An introduction to the Germaine Greer Collection at the University of Melbourne Archives', University of Melbourne, <http://archives.unimelb.edu.au/germainegreer/about-the-collection>.
- 3 University of Melbourne Archives, 'About the collection'.
- 4 Germaine Greer, 'Wish you were Greer?', *Telegraph Sunday Magazine*, July 1987, p. 56 (cutting held in 2014.0046.00181, Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives).
- 5 I thank my colleagues and fellow Greer archivists Sarah Brown, Lachlan Glanville, Sebastian Gurciullo, Kate Hodgetts and Millie Weber for their assistance with this article, which is an attempt to capture the ambient knowledge the Greer team has gained of Germaine Greer's Italy.
- 6 Germaine Greer, email to Rachel Buchanan, 16 November 2017.
- 7 See 'Germaine Greer's Shakespeare: Early writing', University of Melbourne Library Digital Collections, <https://digitised-collections.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/91820>.
- 8 Correspondence Emilio Manaru, 1966–67 (2014.0042.00523).
- 9 Germaine Greer, *The madwoman's underclothes: Essays and occasional writings 1968–1985*, London: Picador, 1996, p. x.
- 10 See files 1971 Lysistrata (4 folders), 1971–1972 (2014.0044.00170); Uneasy rider, *The Sunday Times*, 8: viii (2014.0046.00020); *Telegraph Weekend*, A princess condemned to live her life as a pantomime, DT149, 16/2/02 (2014.0046.00728).
- 11 'Germaine Greer on falling out of love', 'Home Thoughts' column, *Independent Magazine*, 18 May 1991 (cutting held in 2014.0046.00237).
- 12 Langham diary 1975 (2014.0044.00221).
- 13 Pianelli 1990 (2014.0045.00582).
- 14 'The book of Pianelli', red and gold photograph album enclosing photographs, correspondence, written commentary and poetry (2014.0054.00536). The album documents the friendship of Germaine Greer and Gay Clifford in the period 1973–78, and their shared love of Pianelli.
- 15 *Weekend Telegraph*, When wine's not worth it, DT277, 31/7/04 (2014.0046.00916).
- 16 Germaine Greer, 'When the wine's not worth it', *Country Notebook* column, *Weekend Telegraph*, 31 July 2004, printout from *Telegraph* website (2014.0046.00916).
- 17 All quotes from Germaine Greer, 'Letting go', *Vogue* [British edition?], May 1986, p. 117 (cutting held on 2014.0046.00163).
- 18 Italy in winter, *Selamta*, Winter 85 (2014.0046.00153).
- 19 Radio: Grand tour—Venice—19/07/94 BBC Radio 4 Bristol (2014.0040.00045).
- 20 Placido Domingo, *Domino Magazine*, vii.88 (2014.0046.00186).
- 21 See TFE (Italian) and Bompiani 1971 files (2014.0044.00154 and 2014.0044.00155) and search on subject headings 'Bompiani' and 'Leo Paolazzi' (the translator). For later translations, see 2014.0052 and search under 'Italian, foreign rights and translation'.
- 22 *Poets and teachers: Latin didactic poetry and the didactic authority of the Latin poet from the Renaissance to the present: Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Symposium of the Cambridge Society for Neo-Latin Studies, Clare College, Cambridge, 9–11 September, 1996*, Bari: Levante, 1999 (2014.0056.00052).
- 23 Ateneo Veneto, 2000 (2017.0009.00268).
- 24 GG on falling out of love, *The Independent Magazine*, 18.iv.91 (2014.0046.00237). See also *Aura* magazine, Baby article, May 2000 (2014.0046.00620) and *Tuscany—Independent*, 3/04 (2014.0046.00946).