

# The Moral and Civil Primacy of Italian Women. Female Models between Italy and Europe in the Era of the Risorgimento

*Maria Pia Casalena*

## 1 Biographies, Gender Roles and National History in the Risorgimento

As the entire nineteenth century in Europe, the Italian Risorgimento used biography as an instrument and vehicle of education and instruction. To the merit of instilling historical knowledge (although very schematic and simplified), especially about the significant events in the nation's history, biography added the merit of clearly showing the triumph of the virtues and the condemnation of the vices. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, and especially in the Restoration decades, a new repertoire of public and private values was elaborated, in the light of which to judge the actions and behaviours of the men and women of the past. Actually, this repertoire did not only include truly modern components, such as patriotism, nationalism, the worship of civil and political liberties, which derived from the new atmosphere created between the French period and the Congress of Vienna. In the inventory of the virtues that had to be taught to men and women in the first decades of the nineteenth century, some values came from tradition. These were validated by a new interpretation of national history and became a moral and domestic, affective and spiritual equivalence of the new Italian civilization, which aspired to consolidate itself in the concert of European nations based on the merits acquired both in the past centuries as at the turn of the nineteenth century (Banti 2005).

Since the Enlightenment, private conduct and domestic manners had acquired unprecedented significance in passing judgment on individuals and peoples. Civic and warlike courage and self-sacrifice in the battles for freedom should be reflected in praiseworthy manners such as respect for parents, a regular and faithful marital life, the proper fulfilment of parental duties (towards children, both boys and girls), a serious and honest career and, last but not least, a certain commitment to the poorer classes. Above the private and public virtues worthily stood an honest Christian faith, cleansed of the stains of

bigotry and superstition, which in turn reinforced enthusiasm for the progressive fate of civilization and the nation.

Interpreted and combined in several ways by several writers of the first half of the nineteenth century, sometimes more related to the Italian, Roman and Catholic heritage, sometimes more in line with the dictates of the “new morality” of the illustrated matrix perfected in the pedagogical masterpieces of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Bizzocchi 2001, 2007), these were, in any case, the ingredients forming the galleries of the illustrious historical figures. These figures were meant to form, through biographies, especially the younger generations (Porciani 2002). Moreover, this is where a twofold problem arises.

On the one hand, Italian manners and history had to contend with the heavy legacies of the dark ages that, from the *Histoire des Républiques italiennes* [The History of the Italian Republics] by Jean Charles Léonard de Sismondi, mostly coincided with the early modern period (from the sixteenth century to the early eighteenth century, or perhaps even up to the nineteenth century), which had seen the decline of all manifestations of private virtue or public ethics along with political freedom and independence. As Roberto Bizzocchi has recently pointed out in an excellent essay, Chapter 128 of the *Républiques*, with a denunciation of the Spanish evil influence, the corruption of marriages and the decadence of any form of public-spiritedness, proved to be a heavy burden for the nationalist intellectuals who wanted Italians to develop some sort of patriotism after 1814. Furthermore, if Chapter 128, which instead denounced above all the decline of religion after the Council of Trent, perceived the intervention in a short time of an already famous scholar like Alessandro Manzoni involved in defence of the national spirituality (Manzoni 1819), it seemed more challenging to claim the purity of the Italian manners during the centuries of Spanish rule. Moreover, this was already a problem for those who wanted to propose progressive reviews of the virtues and merits of the Italians: what could be said about the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries? Despite all, had there been virtuous and worthy Italians – both men and women?

The other issue is directly related to gender. After Rousseau's *Emile* and after the era of French codes, it had also become necessary to design and rethink female models. For the patriotic and honoured Italian men, women should be companions: mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters, pure and exemplary in both private and public sphere, respectably educated, lovers of the fatherland and mothers of future excellent Italians (Banti 2000; D Amelia 2005). It was – at least from what the strictest biographical canon of the Risorgimento seemed to be – a new type of woman, generated from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Where could historical models be taken from? Moreover, above all,

what women of the centuries denounced by Sismondi could be redeemed and presented as ideal mothers of the Italian women of the Risorgimento?

The problem of building new galleries of illustrious Italian women had already arisen in the Kingdom of Italy (1805–1814), even before the last volume of the *Républiques* – published in Paris in 1818 – was available (Casalena 2018). However, perhaps the problem was already Sismondi, this time together with Pierre-Louis Ginguené, an illustrious historian of Italian literature in the Paris of the Empire. In fact, since 1811, the fascicles of the *Biographie Universelle Ancienne et Moderne* [Universal Biography Old and New] (Chappey 2013) had been published in Paris. Although promoted by conservative Catholics like the Michaud brothers, the *Biographie* included Sismondi and Ginguené as biographers of the illustrious Italian men of politics and literature. The work got close attention in the Italian peninsula, so much so that as early as 1822, a few months after the conclusion of the original, a translation enriched with many voices was published in Venice, designed precisely to redeem the virtues and merits of Italians of an especially recent past (Casalena 2012). Thus, it was clear from the first fascicles that Sismondi (but also Ginguené) was mercilessly condemning all politicians who had arrived after the end of medieval communes, from minor provincial lords to entire famous dynasties such as the Medici of Florence. It was the prefiguration, through biographies, of his interpretation of Italian history in the last volumes of the *Républiques*.

There were some women in the condemnation, both in the reported centuries and in the Middle Ages. Suffice it to say that the revered Matilda of Tuscany, a member of the House of Canossa, was portrayed as an authoritarian and bigoted margravine. In short, if exemplary Italians had died before the fifteenth century, there had never been virtuous Italian women, at least not in the political field, according to Sismondi. Nor in the history of literature, according to Ginguené, except for very few examples.

Thus, the reconstruction of galleries of Italians on the peninsula, and especially of exemplary Italian women, adapted to contemporary needs and context, should be guaranteed, even if it started from not very encouraging premises. Ginevra Canonici Fachini tried it with her work *Prospetto biografico delle donne italiane rinomate in letteratura dal secolo XIV fino ai giorni nostri* [Biographical Perspective of Italian Women Recognized in Literature from the Fourteenth Century to the Present Day], openly controversial towards the prejudices of foreigners and inspired by the patriotism of a woman of culture, close to the Carbonari (Canonici Fachini 1824). In 1824, the work had great success, and the author became quite well known. However, the significant undertaking would come from the capital of the book, Habsburg Milan, which

had just recovered from the traumas of the 1820s (Meriggi 1987). Also, in Milan, the capital of translations, the Italian version of the biographies of Laure Junot, Duchess of Abrantès, a distinguished and controversial author and a famous figure of the Napoleonic establishment and now a successful memorialist, was published (Toussaint 1985; Autin 1991).

However, why did Anton Fortunato Stella's publishing house, already very strong in translating and disseminating French novels, choose an unfinished work featuring almost exclusively female celebrities related to Napoleon I's life and difficult to propose to the Italian women of the Restoration? The project was much more ambitious. Abrantès was famous, and to the lives of famous women already present (French, but also English and Russian), a long gallery of famous Italian women could be lined up, who would immediately have demonstrated the even "superior" virtue of the women of an oppressed nation and respond in a dignified way to all the condemnations, criticisms, prejudices of any Sismondi, Ginguéné or Morgan (Verga 2011; Banti 2011).

The result was remarkable: a long series of famous Italian women, from pre-Roman antiquity to 1830, quickly stood out for their merits over other European women, especially Protestants. In addition, there was something good about France (and even Spain) in her work, compared to the heretical and barbarous north of Europe. In this regard, the five volumes of *Vite e ritratti delle donne celebri d'ogni paese continuata per cura di letterati italiani* [Lives and Portraits of the Celebrated Women of All Countries] achieved even the most unthinkable of goals: to demonstrate the historical excellence of Italian women and to reassess with a sense of proven superiority the entire Catholic civilization of southern Europe, including the Counter-Reformation and the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, against the presumption of the Protestants and the "barbarians of the North," starting with Sismondi (Bolufer 2000; Pellegrin 2004).

## 2 From Napoleonic Europe to the Primacy of Italy in Catholic Europe

Anton Fortunato Stella employed many of the most famous writers from Milan and the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia, and other Italian regions and states (Berengo 1980; Albergoni 2006; Albergoni 2011). Specialists such as Gaetano Barbieri (already famous as a translator of Walter Scott's historical novels) took charge of the translation of Laure Junot Duchess of Abrantès' biographies. In turn, authors such as Michele Sartorio, Ambrogio Levati, Defendente Sacchi, Luigi Carrer, Francesco Ambrosoli and especially Ignazio Cantù wrote the lives of Italian women. These authors had different political and religious ideas.

However, in the end, due to the number of biographies written by the Catholic Cantù (Ambrosoli 1975), the gallery of Italian women acquired a remarkable confessional, almost Philo-Tridentine imprint. So did the fact of how female readers should behave. However, fundamental values were shared, such as reforming women's studies and the necessary creation of literature written by women (fiction and poetry, but especially pedagogical literature) in Italy. The "new morality" values – marriage for love, self-denial linked to the maternal role, patriotism, and spirit of sacrifice – were also shared. These same values were presented, with much stronger assertions, in the biographies signed by the most famous women writers of the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia: Bianca Milesi Mojon, Isabella Teotochi Albrizzi, Adele Curti and Giuseppina Poggolini (Casalena 2003).

Only the first volume of the original work and the few biographies written by Laure Junot of Abrantès remained intact. In the end, out of the 112 biographies included in the five volumes, 37 were Italian. Abrantès herself had written about Mary of Medicis. Later, in Milan, figures from different eras were progressively added, from Ermengarde, wife of Charlemagne, to Giuseppina Tornielli, a Piedmontese philanthropist and contemporary of Carlo Alberto, King of Piedmont. Italian women formed the largest group, along with French women. As will be seen later, the Milanese edition was not limited to adding national biographies but also biographies signed by Italian or foreign writers, many voices about other French and even Spanish or Russian women, and some mandatory tribute to the women of the House of Habsburg. Nevertheless, biographies signed by men, although heterogeneous, were quite different from biographies signed by women, starting with the choice of characters.

Male authors collaborating with Stella made many common decisions. Of course, they refuted critics in line with Sismondi but also tried to confer a certain autochthony on the "new moral," replacing Genevan Rousseau (Capra 1990) with the local enlightened academics, from Arcadia theorists of "good taste" to Vico, Muratori, Parini, Verri and Romagnosi (Sofia 2011), to Alessandro Manzoni. Thus, Italy vindicated not only its merits but also a perfectly national modernity, which was enough to make people forget certain moments of moral crisis. The French Revolution was primarily a memory to delete, and neither was much spared from the Napoleonic Empire in the history of Italian civilization. Almost all the women chosen as models had died at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This was already a big difference from the importance of the Napoleonic era celebrated in the original by the Duchess of Abrantès.

There were not only Italian authorities and models: the biographies added by Lombard writers, from Chateaubriand and his *Martyrs* (who influenced Ignazio Cantù in particular, but not only) to the historical novel in the style of Scott with

his heroines inspiring heroic feats, to the French novelists Cottin and Genlis (not by chance they became biographical models) had echoes of a vast and composite European culture (Casalena 2018, 2019). Thus, the passions of the moment were reached, from the “good taste” and the eighteenth-century “civilization”: family, nation, but also the religion of the Pope and Empire (France 2011). On the other hand, there were the controversial idols, although rarely mentioned explicitly: especially Sismondi and Ginguené and, in general, the treatment of Italian history disseminated by the *Biographie Universelle*. This is shown, among others, by the biography of Matilda of Canossa included in the fourth volume, where an anonymous author presented the countess as a model even of the purest nationalism, precisely for being Christian and loyal to the Pope:

From the greatness of philosophical knowledge, observing human affairs, we know well that every kind of error is possible for our immortal spirit until it is deposited in the fragile earth, so it would not be strange to venture to say that, among the many beautiful gifts that Matilda had, the fault of passionate affection or reprehensible condescension was one of them. Few would have more than her the right to indulgence, but even fewer deserved to be accused with the slightest suspicion. It does not seem unlikely that, alongside her devotion to popes, there was always a spasmodic affection for people [...]: that the tiara was the only splendour that could attract her, who could believe a similar extravagance? [...] Thus, she remained passionately attached to the interests of Rome. (Abrantès 1836–9, IV, 66)

Once again, according to Sismondi, if Spanish times could have corrupted men, it was women who had safeguarded national virtue in their husbands. As Eleonora d’Este had done according to Nicolò Cesare Garoni: “The vital spirit of those illustrious women revived the virtue that slept in those masculine bodies. How much work they had experienced to always stay on the straight and narrow path of glory, virtue, decorum, and usefulness for the country. History does manifest itself in a thousand ways” (Abrantès 1836–9, V, 57).

Instead, it was Michele Sartorio who explained all the educational purposes of the work in the preface and anticipated the fundamental characteristics of the “new Italian woman” to be formed, beyond all the controversies of the time:

The time is not far off when legislators will seriously address women’s education, the protection of civil laws, the imposition of duties and the guaranty of happiness. [...] If there were not more women cultured enough to appreciate their judgment or noble enough in their manners

to inspire genuine respect, the societal opinion would have no healthy power over men's actions. [...] Women without vivacity in conversation and knowledge in literature usually have a better pretext to be exonerated from their duties, and uneducated nations cannot be free but often change their leaders. (Abrantès 1836–9, I, 6)

What was the background of this “new woman” worthy companion of the Italian Risorgimento man? Furthermore, what “Risorgimento” was it about?

The most numerous positive examples date back to the Renaissance. Italian women had had a Renaissance and had been protagonists of the Renaissance. From Sofonisba Anguissola to Vittoria Colonna, women artists and poets of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries wrote about and personified true love and the fatherland and religion of the forefathers. A triumph of talent and feminine virtue that biographers located in the most renowned poets of Arcadia two centuries later, in Corilla Olimpica – who was crowned as poet laureate on Capitol Hill. From this splendour and excellence, a new start was required, forgetting the excesses of the Revolution and the most bigoted manifestations of the Catholic faith (Asor Rosa 2009). The ideal was a woman – a bourgeois woman indeed, not a peasant or a worker – whom the father encouraged in the study: not to turn her into an unbalanced genius and all madness and passion, but into a woman cultured, refined and successful in public, who nevertheless always had a dignified marriage, motherhood, and mercy as her goals.

Marriage had to arise from a pure and selfless feeling, not be the fruit of family alliances. Husband and wife should have the same affection and respect and share interests and activities (Bizzocchi 2019). On the other hand, the domestic sphere went far beyond the physical confines of home: Italian women could and had to publish their writings, undertake serious studies, and even dedicate themselves to philanthropy or, if the occasion required it, even to the state government. However, they had to remain women and Italian, what is to say, good daughters, good wives, good mothers, good Catholics and good patriots (Mori 2011). Even the study of sciences could be accepted in the nineteenth century but provided they were combined with public and private virtues, as the life of the Bolognese physicist Laura Bassi shows: “Being in public office, she necessarily had to participate in meetings and events, receive visits and deal with people who wanted to meet her. Thus, she acted under the circumstances and, indeed, her heart accompanied her since she was an excellent consort and an affectionate mother and began to embrace her marital condition. [...]” (Abrantès 1836–9, III, 117).

As for Ignazio Cantù, he precisely recovered the time of the Counter-Reformation as an era of incredible feats, not only ecclesiastical but also

feminine. Saint Charles Borromeo had as a friend Eleonora Gonzaga, a worthy Habsburg and a mainstay against the Reformation in a Lombardy that had already lost freedom but never lost faith:

[...] she received the most precious reward, a letter from the Cardinal of Milan congratulating her on her mercy and promising her the inescapable reward of heaven. A letter from the Cardinal of Santa Prassede, the cornerstone of faith in Lombardy, the soul of the Council of Trent, the dismay of the infidels: how could it not be a valuable reward for a woman as religious as Eleonora? (Abrantès, 1836–9, v, 119)

In short, nineteenth-century women had to study and not renounce any of the public and private commitments they had to fulfil. The “new Italian woman” could be a famous intellectual and a great scientist, or even a woman of government and politics if the family required it. However, she had to remain purely “Italian,” what is to say, virtuous in private, religious and honest in public. A “new Italian man” model was also derived indirectly, but no less intensely. Together with these women, the young males of the peninsula had to cultivate serious studies, filial affections, civil and political passions, and a non-authoritarian conjugal love beyond the legitimate differences in legal status between husband and wife. Young males had to marry for love; male children had to respect their parents and love their fatherland and religion; and finally, fathers had to encourage and watch over their daughters’ studies and never impose their own choices on their destiny. In short, these “new Italians” were ready to die in war but also for religion and were no less virtuous in intimacy than their female companions. It seemed to be a mainly Italian way that went back to the purest Catholic spirit and linked it to the progress of national civilization and modernity, which would prove to be suitable for men and women.

Some biographers went even further. Marriage should be an option, and it could be avoided or rejected when advised by other activities or interests or in the absence of worthy candidates. This is how Sofonisba Anguissola was justified by her biographer Vincenzo Lancetti:

[...] as she turned thirty, the august teachers suggested that she would get married. However, absorbed in the exercise of her art and gifted with sensible manners and virginal modesty, she seemed not to have a tireless desire that nurtured marriage, much less that she made it apparent. Moreover, when they suggested that she gets married (something that might seem like an order in her situation), she asked for nothing more than to marry in Italy. (Abrantès 1836–9, II, 56)



Although evoking the figure of the Nun of Monza (Manzoni's *The Betrothed* was already a bestseller in the 1827 first edition) served to condemn the cruelty of a father who wanted to impose his choices on his daughter, it remained true that even convents could be worthy places for the exercise of feminine virtues even in the nineteenth century, as long as there was a sincere vocation and free choice. Therefore, although very few, there was no lack of historical examples of illustrious nuns, such as Leonarda Giustinian. This nun was a saint because she performed real miracles. However, she was also a model of patriotism because, with her pure faith and virtues, she redeemed the fourteenth-fifteenth century Venice so devalued by Daru and, once again, by Sismondi.

The first woman to receive an academic degree in Italy, Elena Cornaro Piscopia, also belonged to the Republic of Venice, almost always approached by Luigi Carrer. In this case, too, spinsterhood is legitimate, but because after all, this woman was a great "priestess" of orthodoxy in the century of the scientific revolution:

More unique than anything that has been said about her youth so far is the vow to remain a spinster for her entire life. First, age-related recklessness could explain this resolution had it not been renewed over the years until her death. In fact, for someone who paid so little attention to deafening gatherings and the most common of pastimes that even showed an actual abhorrence for one thing and another, it was natural that she – to dedicate herself entirely to cultivating the spirit – would flee from a bond that imposed many particular obligations on her and made it difficult, if not impossible for a woman, to exercise her intellect. (Abrantès 1836–9, v, 227).

In short, if it was true – for Cantù, Carrer, Ambrosoli and many other authors – that Italian history had had some moments of crisis and decadence, it was equally valid that models of feminine excellence had not lacked even in those moments. As Sartorio claimed, it was time for the peninsular states – mainly the House of Habsburg – to improve women's social and legal status. They are highly original positions and can also seem extraordinarily modern in some ways. However, with few exceptions, it was always part of the fate – idealized as it was – of wives and mothers.

Particularly interesting are, precisely, for this reason, some of the biographies written by women, who sometimes took their requests much further, especially in terms of studies and career.

Bianca Milesi Mojon, already an illustrious writer, translator and pedagogue for some time (Arisi Rota 2010), was very explicit about the true inclinations of fathers and husbands towards the intellectual aspirations of their women. As

she wrote in her biography of the scientist Maria Gaetana Agnesi, prejudices had to be definitively eradicated:

[...] [Maria Gaetana Agnesi] proved that higher education and actual knowledge do not prevent women from exercising domestic virtues, contrary to the false rumour circulating among ordinary people. We must confess that Agnesi might have been the most fruitful example for women [...] if her father [...] had prepared her to become a model for brides and mothers, being this status the natural culmination of female destiny. Nevertheless, if it can be called that, censorship is more aimed at the times than at her father. (Abrantès 1836–9, II, 47)

Even more controversial was Isabella Teotochi Albrizzi, perhaps together with Bianca Milesi Mojon and a few others, the most famous woman of letters of the first decades of the nineteenth century (Malamani 2010):

Education, universal opinion and, to a great extent, nature itself prevented half the human species from learning science and letters at any time and in any country. Then those few women had to overcome all the challenges of nature and all social difficulties, and unable to contain their liberal soul and fervent ingenuity that were projected to a noble purpose, they knew how to transcend those austere limits that men imposed on them – I do not know if I am right – because of their natural superiority or arrogance. (Abrantès 1836–9, II, 137)

Young Italian women still had many obstacles against them, according to these female authors. It was no longer about Sismondi, Spain, or the Counter-Reformation, but about Italian manners not yet prepared to inaugurate new destinies of female life (Soldani 1989). Studies, in particular, remained a forbidden target unless public law and private law were profoundly reformed. Milesi and Teotochi had gone beyond the intentions of the work. In turn, they were educating and patriotic wives and mothers, but not always under the canons of Italian virtue. They were two powerful voices that, however, remained isolated in the five volumes. Young Italian women had behind them many examples of female excellence (in all fields and all periods of national history), and from these examples – and some of the examples dedicated to other countries –, they had to assume specific learning: they had the right to study under their fathers' care and choose a life partner. However, whatever role they played in society or politics, they should always and above all be mothers and educators of wise and prudent citizens and, at best, of patriots loyal to the Catholic God and the nation.

### 3 From Italy to Europe: The Redemption of the South versus the Barbarism of the North

When reading the five complete volumes published by Stella, it is observed that Italian women shone in all centuries, even in the “dark” centuries, by virtue, ingenuity, domestic affections, and the public commitment developed in the most varied ways. In short, the Italian edition went far beyond the original intentions of the Duchess of Abrantès. With the biographies, she pretended to celebrate above all the time of the Consulate and the Empire, and therefore a multitude of French women who had lived between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whose main virtue had been to be related to Napoleon I and support him in his great civilizing work. Not everything was invalidated. The condemnation of the Jacobin Terror remained without any concessions, by which Napoleon himself had restored law and order, as well as wise freedom. However, periodization had changed considerably in the Italian program, which, as mentioned, was aimed above all at rescuing an almost thousand-year-old history of female dignity and national dignity, with an emphasis mainly on the Renaissance and the reformist eighteenth century.

At this point, we must focus on women from “other” nations, who also make up most of the biographies in the Milanese edition. In fact, in addition to the portraits of Madame d’Abrantès, Italian writers had also added the lives of famous women, mostly French, but also from other European and non-European countries. Moreover, each life was closely linked to an interpretation of the respective national history that changed concerning the absolute centrality of the Napoleonic era of the first volume, the only one written by Abrantès. Something else remained in the Italian edition: the original intention of the author to demonstrate the excellence of her country, through its women, in comparison with other European nations, in addition to dividing the latter between potential “sisters” and sworn “enemies”. In the Italian edition, the scheme provided by Abrantès was heavily modified, as we will see. However, the emergence of an idealization of Latin and Catholic Europe from Italy to Spain was necessary, including a profound homage to Austria, and only Austria, in the “North”.

First of all, as mentioned, Abrantès’ female models belonged almost exclusively to the Napoleon Bonaparte family. Letizia was the perfect mother of the modern hero:

She is, in my opinion, a most remarkable woman – perhaps the most remarkable I ever knew – for her courageous firmness in misfortune, her dignified and admirable mildness in prosperity, and her resignation

under the bitter affliction she has borne during the last eighteen years. For, knowing what she now suffers, I cannot compare this latter period with that during which she was only unfortunate. This is a different and more bitter trial, and if the accents of despair have sometimes been wrung from the lacerated bosom of Napoleon's mother, who among us can be surprised? (Abrantès 1834, 4)

Josephine had been the ideal wife, also ready for the supreme sacrifice for the good of her beloved and the Empire (I, 182–9). So far, all the options are explained by the same biography of Abrantès. In order to build a genealogy of these nineteenth-century heroines, she chose to exalt figures such as Joan of Arc (the great Frenchwoman of the Middle Ages) or Charlotte Corday (the heroine of freedom in the dark years of Terror), and then pay an intellectual and sentimental tribute to Madame de Staël (even though being the protagonist of a confrontation with Napoleon I) in the name of the purity of her family affections and her literary merits. However, the true greatness of these French women derives, above all, from the comparison with the other figures present in the original.

From England, Abrantès stood out from Jane Grey to Mary Tudor and Anne Boleyn. All were carriers of vices, devoid of virtue, dissolute in customs, fierce in government or ambitions, and above all, heretical in religion because they were followers of the Anglican schism (Casanova 2014). From the north came Christina, Queen of Sweden, as another example of great negativity because she was incredulous and crazy. Only negative examples came from Russia, among them Catherine II: not the enlightened sovereign of the eighteenth-century myth, but a woman guilty of atrocious crimes, ambitious to the point of ferocity, incapable of governing and devoted to the most despicable vices.

Having separated Catherine from her favourites, [...] Orloff, Potemkin [...], and having placed her in a century in which the novelty of real women [...] far from arousing complacent amazement should provoke universal horror and spite; Catherine [...] had she been able to emulate the glory of Peter and share with him the title of the Great? Moreover, is this august title given to her by her contemporaries the result of glorious and laudable deeds? (Abrantès 1836–9, II, 78–9)

If the Protestant or Orthodox “North,” always in the hands of tyrants, was completely disfigured in comparison with France, not much better was Spain, a country that had “betrayed” the civilizing mission of Bonaparte. The echo of *Gil Blas*, an eighteenth-century bestseller who mocked the Spain of the

previous two centuries, resonated clearly in the only biography dedicated by Laure d'Abrantès to a Spanish woman: Doña Catalina de Erauso. This woman was a nun without a vocation. She escaped from the convent and disguised herself as a man in a series of fights, crimes, and sins until an unlikely final conversion. In short, no nation had ever had women (and a history) worthy of France's. However, the Catholic ruling made the judgment on Spain (and incidentally on Italy) a little more lenient and comprehensive. On the other hand, England was the embodiment, with its numerous queens, of absolute evil, on a par with the empire of the tsars.

Italian intellectuals, who signed almost all the biographies of the other four volumes, did not think so. They certainly did not try to redeem the image of England, and the life of Elisabeth Tudor, written by Lorenzo Martini, was full of criticism in both the public and private spheres. Only Mary Stuart, one of the main characters in Martini's story, was saved from the British Isles. He decided to tell her story, clearly referring to the more traditional legends of holiness and martyrdom.

Indeed, the Milanese writers had to exalt Austria. The first original biography was an exaltation of Maria Theresa of Austria as "maternal" daughter, wife, mother, and empress:

[...] María Teresa wanted more free moments to dedicate to the memory of her lost companion. Thus, she gave her son much of what would henceforth belong to diplomatic relations and limited herself to making more exclusive use of her attributes to make her states happy in the face of all kinds of administrative improvements. She possibly also did it to protect herself from the consequences of the devastating scourge of war. [...] Her pain did not leave her for the rest of her life; her rooms were forever wrapped in mourning. (Abrantès 1836–9, II, 31–6)

Moreover, the same authors also found a way to redeem Russia, albeit without trying too hard to find a heroic figure: they chose the wife of the very Christian Tsar Paul I himself, who in practice had only had the merit of being involved in a lot of charity work.

On the other hand, Spain and modern Spanish women were considered with much more sympathy, as evidenced by the very brief portrait of a heroine of national freedom that lived at the time of the Napoleonic wars. She was Agustina of Aragón, an unknown heroine of the nation and the Catholic religion, much less known and less educated than the illustrious Italian women recovered from the medieval and modern centuries. Furthermore, in 1808, Spanish women had also left cloistered monasteries to serve in the name of

modern values and religion much more favourable to freedom (Musi 2004). The popular Agustina had been among the heroes of the Spanish resistance during the siege of Saragossa:

Palafox buried the worthy heroes killed in that war and thought of rewarding the few braves who had survived. Among them was Agustina, but how to reward this young woman who had played such an essential role in saving Zaragoza? Ashamed, Palafox told her that she was left with the option of a sign of honour. The young woman, flushed, replied that she only wanted to retain her artillery rank in the army and the privilege of carrying the civic shield of Zaragoza on her arm. (Abrantès 1836–9, III, 126)

The “new” Spain, the Spain of Cádiz and the monarchy-religion-nation trino-mial, was undoubtedly a “sister nation,” although it lagged behind Italy and France on the path of civilization. The condition of women clearly showed this. However, the quintessential “sister” had to be France if Catholic prejudice prevailed. But what France? Represented by what women? And identified with what centuries of history, kings, wars, or protagonists?

The writers of the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia also proved unanimous in this regard. Except for the Napoleon era celebrated by Abrantès, it was necessary to avoid the Great Revolution altogether and return to the Enlightenment Age, even to the Catholics of the century of Louis XIV. If Italy had had the women of Arcadia and “good taste” before the storm of the turn of the century, France had had the educators as a positive example and the regents or ladies of the court as a negative example. In other words, it was debated between Madame Pompadour and Madame Campan, between Madame de Maintenon and Madame de Genlis, to close with two rare examples of the preservation of virtue in the dark years of debauchery and after the Revolution. The first was a *salonnière* of a proven Catholic faith, and as such worthily represented by Ignazio Cantù:

She always showed lively respect for the Catholic religion [...]. Nevertheless, she had never dared to publicly profess this religious respect, which d’Alembert called clandestine piety. However, in the last year of her life, she showed no respect and revealed the secret, encouraged to a high degree by the pure senses of faith that, by then, had become a sign of weakness of spirit and a blank of the poet’s epigram and the philosopher’s censorship. (Abrantès 1836–9, V, 165)

As for the others, the corruption of morality in the Palace of Versailles was such that it degraded not only women but also men and even kings, as evidenced by

the parable of Madame de Lavallière: “[...] the king wanted Vallière to become a Carmelite. She knew it and no longer hesitated to embrace this position. [...] From that point on, she announced to her friends that she was determined to retire to the Carmelites of San Giacomo [...]” (Abrantès, 1836–9, II, 197).

The second one was Madame Roland, who was guillotined for showing her enthusiasm for private and public virtues. Michele Parma, one of the most “feminist” Milanese biographers, told her story:

What and how many contrasts in women's life events considering their influence on family and public morality and their importance according to legislative improvements and their enhanced titles to the esteem and hopes of society! At this point, [...] opinion proves beyond any doubt that women can and must cooperate in the noblest enterprises of civilization. Nevertheless, it seems to have put a double curse on the shoulders of these creatures considering, in addition to their joint participation in common evil, they were always the targets of particular and violent misfortunes [...]. (Abrantès, 1836–9, IV, 229)

Ultimately, if the “sister nations” were France, Spain, and Austria, only the latter had maintained religious integrity and political and civil enlightenment, as evidenced by the history of its famous women. Spain had recovered, and with it its women, but it had to regain much ground. The Enlightenment and Napoleon had come from France, which means political, civil, legal, and moral modernity; furthermore, Italy had already found them mainly on its own. And then France had not been able to reconcile them well with the Catholic religion and the continuity of good government. Its famous women were either evil geniuses or unhappy and persecuted heroines of virtue.

And Italy? Italy surprisingly came first in the race of values and civilization along with Habsburg Austria. It always had honourable women and never really was ruined by Spanish influences or the most reactionary Catholicism. In fact, by the end of the seventeenth century, Italy was home of “good taste” and good government, and the women of Arcadia became worthy heiresses of the Renaissance poetesses and “mothers” of the very Catholic writers and scientists of the late eighteenth century and the “new Italians” of the Risorgimento.

Valuable women had existed in all stages of Italian history, and in fact, Italian women had already had their own moral, if not legal and institutional, Risorgimento. Virtuous in the private sector, learner by vocation, wise and cautious in government, religious and devout in the first place, Italian women and Italy had entered modernity even before the French conquest. Sismondi was wrong, so was Abrantès with her watchful eye on Napoleon I. She had not captured either the pre-existing excellence in Italy or the awakening of Spanish women.

#### 4 From the Models of the 1830s to the “Long Quarantotto of Italian Women”

Leaving aside some surprising statements about the legitimacy of spinsterhood or the substantial liquidation of the ecclesiastical career, the Milanese censors could rest easy (Palazzolo 1990). There were no ungodly, armed, conspiratorial, or revolutionary women in the Risorgimento's pantheon of Italian women. Moreover, the private virtues, beginning with being mothers and wives, remained indispensable even in the face of an (unlikely) profound reform of the laws and public careers. Moreover, the five volumes published in Milan would easily be presented in Naples in 1839, further evidence of a solid exchange of views on the fate of the peninsula (and its women) (Trombetta 2008).

Guide to the Mediterranean, monarchical and Catholic Europe, which finally knew how to reconcile modernity and tradition, authority and freedom, enlightenment and devotion, Italy, moderate and devoted to the House of Habsburg, only asked for one more step on the road to reforms. Furthermore, if Italy redeemed its history from the dismissive criticism of Protestant foreigners, it was certainly not to legitimize a revolution. Italy was a patriot but prudent, modern but wise, ingenious but judicious, as were the Italian women in all centuries. The model for it was the eighteenth century of the reforms, not the Jacobin Terror nor the Napoleonic wars. Deeply and sincerely Catholic, Italy wanted emancipation and not liberation. Thus, neither bigoted and corrupt like Spain of Don Carlos and Philip II, nor heretical and cruel like England of the schism or Russia of the partition of Poland, Italy was a candidate to be par excellence the first civilization of southern Europe in manners, historical merits, and civic and patriotic virtues. The gallery of Italian women testified on its behalf; the history of past centuries testified on its behalf. Related to France and Spain, Italy would not follow their liberal excesses as it had not followed their liberticidal excesses.

Italy and Austria, Italian and Austrian women (and Polish women subjected to the Habsburgs), could continue to lead together the flame of civilization in northern and southern Europe. Especially in Italy, as some authors claimed, it should not take long to regret the Middle Ages, which were undoubtedly not more civilized or liberal than the present. Moreover, the Risorgimento of the Italian nation could be moderate, Catholic, loyal, and prudent, as the “true” Italian women have always been and as the “new Italian women” would be, finally called to act as role models for the French and Spanish sisters. Thus, amid a decade of reforms, at the height of moderatism, on the eve of the exploitation of the national Catholic-liberal program, after the failure of revolutions



and conspiracies, against the threats of democracy, the Italian peninsula had to project itself in the present and the future. The Italian “new women,” in fact, would have been protagonists, in the private and especially in the public sphere, less than ten years later, in the brief *Quarantotto* blessed by Pius IX, a moderate Catholic monarchist and above all proud of their “moral and civil primacy” and a past that no longer had taints or declines (Soldani 1999).

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