

Edith Saurer Fonds

Women writing about women: female politicisation and self-awareness in Italy (1796–1824)

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Project description

The French Revolution brought about a change in the political participation of women in Italy. This was mainly due to the arrival of French troops in Italy in 1796, when the monarchies of the *ancien regime* were overthrown and republics were founded inspired by the democratic principles of the Revolution. In the context of the new republican institutions – which lasted from 1796 to 1799, due to which the period is called the *Triennio* (triennium) – some women took an active part in the process of political decision-making: giving public speeches, writing in the main journals of the time and publishing writings to make citizens aware not only of the women's question but also of the process of democratisation in Italy.¹ France was an important model, but the political defeat of French women since 1793 – namely when female clubs were closed down and women were excluded from government affairs – was a burden, and the traditional role women had to play in society was reaffirmed at the Convention and the Committee of Public Health. In particular, the legislation on women's education produced by French republican institutions reverted to an education that reconfirmed the social role traditionally attributed to women as wives and mothers: an education far removed from the scientific and literary education provided in men's schools.²

Thus, although the French Revolution and France had been the models, the exclusion of women from the public scene in France did not discourage Italian women in 1796 from taking part in the democratic process involving Italian *patrioti* (patriots), as the politicians of the institutions of the *Triennio* termed themselves. It should be added that male and female literati of the time show in their writings and speeches a certain political disconnection. The vocabulary used in 1796 was still that of 1789, so it can be considered that Italian political rhetoric had not been updated in light of the deviations that the Revolution had taken in France with the Terror and the Directory.

¹ In this context are important the contributions of: Elisa Strumia, “*Rivoluzionare il bel sesso*”. *Donne e politica nel Triennio rivoluzionario (1796-1799)*, Napoli, Guida, 2012; Alessandro Guerra, «Il dilemma della partecipazione. Donne e politica nel Triennio repubblicano», *Sociologia. Rivista quadrimestrale di scienze storiche e sociali*, 2013, n. 2, p. 55-59.

² However, this aspect is also noticeable in Italy, as shown in Silvia Rosa, *Armi e coccarde, suocere e tiranni: narrazione e identità di genere nel discorso politico del triennio patriottico italiano, 1796-1799*, Pisa, PLUS-Pisa University Press, 2009.

This does not diminish the importance of the debate for the political emancipation of women and of Italy, which was a response to centuries of foreign domination. In particular, women's participation in the Repubblica Cisalpina (Milan) and the Repubblica Partenopea (Naples) was very intense. In these contexts, female writers took advantage of the exceptional nature of the moment to demand greater rights and equality for women within society, together with offering a general reflection on the events that were happening, which shook the consciences of many.

To give a few examples, in this revolutionary phase in Naples, by far the most central figure was Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel, a woman who played a leading role in the birth and institutions of the Neapolitan Republic, first with the armed struggle to drive out the Bourbons, and later in her work as a journalist.³ In fact, through the newspaper *Monitore Napoletano*, which she herself had founded, Fonseca Pimentel promoted a programme for the improvement of general society in terms of social equity and the equal and widespread education for men and women in all classes and territories of the Republic. For her political positions, she was executed by the Bourbon rulers in 1799, when the republic fell and the Kingdom of Naples was restored, before being overthrown again by Napoleon's troops in 1806.

An important contributor in Milan was Carolina Arienti, or Lattanzi, since she is often referred to by her husband's surname. She was a key figure not only in the *Triennio* but also in literary circles, as she was to be the editor of the most important women's periodical in the very early years of the nineteenth century and the third most-read periodical in the whole Kingdom of Italy, the *Corriere delle dame*. In 1797 Carolina had delivered, in front of a town committee in Mantua, a speech entitled *Schiavitù delle donne*,⁴ in which she demanded that women should have an active role in society, not limited to being faithful to their husbands and caring for their children, and also demanded that women should have equal rights and duties to men in law and education. These positions would then be presented, albeit in veiled form, a few years later in the pages of the *Corriere*, thanks to the inclusion of articles with progressive content, but without reiterating the radical positions expressed in the discourse on the condition of women. Noticeably, the periodical emphasises the call for more schooling for women, specifically on an equal footing with men. Nonetheless, in the pages of the *Corriere*, the force of Carolina's previous positions was lost, since the imperial atmosphere was different from that of the revolutionary years; but women's desire to be interpreters of the historical moment that was being experienced in Milan had not vanished.

Returning to 1799, the republican drive was stifled by the temporary return of the Habsburg monarchy in northern Italy, the Bourbons in the South and the rulers of the central Italian states. Napoleon then succeeded once again in imposing his rule over Italy: but this time, it was no longer a case of help being given to Italian

³ Maria Rosaria Pelizzari, «Eleonora De Fonseca Pimentel: Morire Per La Rivoluzione», *Storia delle Donne*, 4, no. 1, 2009, p. 103-121.

⁴ Carolina Lattanzi, *Della schiavitù delle donne. Memoria della cittadina Lattanzi letta alla Accademia di Pubblica istruzione in Mantova*, 14 Mietitore, Anno I della Libertà d'Italia, Mantova, 1797.

patriots by the troops of the French Republic led by General Bonaparte. This Bonaparte was the conqueror of the national armies of the Consul and later Emperor Napoleon. Once power had been consolidated, the Empire left little room for the political participation of women in the public sphere and reaffirmed the conventional role of women in the family and social environment.

Consequently, in the imperial years *per se* in Italy (1804–1814), there was a dormancy of emancipationist and political women's writing. In this period, however, women wrote about women and women's issues, without the radical strength of the writings of the revolutionary period. They did so in the periodicals of the time, in private correspondence and above all by compiling biographical collections of great women of the present and the past. My project is intended to test the thesis that women, feeling crushed under the weight of Napoleonic censorship and a return to a strongly male-dominated society, used licit but more disguised means to advance the struggle for emancipation and to push for greater involvement of women in society.

Somehow, the women who participated in the democratic governments of the republics realised that the context had changed dramatically and that it was no longer considered legitimate for them to take part in political life. They therefore had to put a brake on the impetus that had characterised them in the *Triennio*, but the ideas and awareness of themselves, and of the role they should play in society, did not disappear. How is it possible to explain that in fact, after the Napoleonic years and when the Risorgimento drive in Italy was pressing, there was an impetuous entry of women into the public scene? This presence was certainly weaker than in other European contexts, partly because of the weight of Catholic morality and nationalism, which saw women's political participation as a loss of their maternal and educative role.

Methodology

This research project is still at an early stage. First of all, the research project will start with a review of the literature internationally on women's politicisation in the modern and contemporary age, in order to see the European context in which to place the phenomenon of the Italian case. In this way, I aim to understand how the political and social discourse undertaken by women towards women in the European context was structured, so as to have the right tools to analyse and confront the primary sources concerning the Italian case. After that, it will be important to thoroughly investigate the literature produced in Italy on this topic in order to identify what may be the common threads or inconsistencies in the long term.

The primary sources of this work will be mainly printed sources, examined in light of the public involvement resulting from the release of these writings. First, I will focus on the analysis of the public speeches made during the revolutionary *Triennio* (1796–1799) in the republics that emerged from the descent of the French revolutionary army into Italy. I will analyse a *corpus* of public speeches, including the above-cited speech of

Carolina Arienti given in Mantua in 1799. Another important speech is that by Annetta Vadori, given in Venice in 1797, explicitly entitled *Discorso della cittadina Annetta Vadori pronunciato nella Società di Pubblica istruzione in occasione che fu invitata a pronunciare il giuramento solenne: vivere libera o morire* (Speech by Annetta Vadori, a citizen of Venice, delivered at the Society of Public Education on the occasion when she was invited to take the solemn oath: live free or die).⁵ I will make a textual and comparative analysis of these and other speeches made at that time. It will be essential to analyse the newspapers of the *Triennio*, among which the women's magazine *La vera Repubblicana* stands out: despite being a periodical edited only during the 1799 in Turin by a male editorial staff, it contained an impressive selection of female writings and correspondence.⁶ It will also be important to analyse the already mentioned *Monitore Napolitano*, established in Naples in 1799, where Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel wrote.⁷

It will be important to compare these publications with those of the later imperial phase. First of all, I will carefully peruse the *Corriere delle dame* during the years of Carolina Arienti's editorship, from 1804 to 1818. This was the only women's newspaper published in Italy at the time, which is why it had an audience beyond Milan and its environs. I will also look at the many almanacs and publications designed for a female audience, which were very successful at the time.⁸ Private correspondence will be a valuable source in this project to enable a comparison between the public image and the private thoughts of the women of the time. This type of source can be problematic in terms of availability, but it has a consolidated historiographic tradition in Italy.⁹ By examining these published and unpublished contributions, I will try to highlight the political and social content.

However, I will focus on analysing those sources that represent the most under-researched aspect of the research project, namely the biographies of famous women written by other women. The biographical genre was widespread, but although there have been important contributions in this field,¹⁰ the topic of biographies

⁵ Cf. *Il "Veneto governo democratico" in tipografia. opuscoli del periodo della municipalità provvisoria di venezia (1797) conservati presso la biblioteca della deputazione di storia patria per le Venezie*, Venezia, Assessorato alla pubblica istruzione, 1990, p. 92.

⁶ Elisa Strumia, «Un giornale per le donne nel Piemonte del 1799: "La vera repubblicana"», *Studi storici*, 30, no. 4, 1989, pp. 917-946.

⁷ Anna-Maria Rao, «Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel, le Monitore napoletano et le problème de la participation politique», *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, no. 344, avril-juin 2006, p. 179-191.

⁸ Giuseppe Sergio, *Parole di moda. Il «Corriere delle dame» e il lessico della moda nell'Ottocento*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2010.

⁹ *Per lettera. La scrittura epistolare femminile tra archivio e tipografia. Secoli XV-XVII*, ed. by Gabriella Zarri, Roma 1999; Giulia Calvi, Roberto Bizzocchi, Alessandra Contini, «La scrittura epistolare femminile», *Quaderni storici*, Vol. 35, no. 104 (2), 2000, p. 505-519.

¹⁰ Cf. Patrizia Gabrielli, «Biografie femminili e storia politica delle donne», *Italia Contemporanea*, 200, 1995; Alceo Riosa, *Biografia e storiografia*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 1983; Società italiana delle storiche, *Discutendo di storia: soggettività, ricerca, biografia*, Rosenberg & Sellier, 1990; Gianna Pomata, «Storia particolare e storia universale: in margine ad alcuni manuali di storia delle donne», *Quaderni Storici*, 1990, n. 74, p. 341-385. For France Daniel Madelénat, *Le biographie*, PUF, 1984; *Le biographique*, «Poétique», n. 63, 1985; *Le désir biographique* (Colloque de Nanterre, 1988), dir. PH. Lejeune, Publidix, Université Paris-X, 1989 («Cahiers de sémiotique textuelle», 16); *Entretiens sur la*

written by women in the modern and early contemporary age has not yet been addressed historiographically.¹¹ Additionally, the biographical genre has been framed as being on the margins of historical discourse, and there is a lack of reference bibliography that would contextualise its importance. It is therefore timely to examine just how women wrote about other women and the subtext, if any, of this literary genre that found a new fortune between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a subtext that I will attempt to highlight. Suffice it to say that even the *Corriere delle dame* had a long column that presented episodes from the lives of illustrious women of the past.

In any case, I will make a census of this type of source, but the culmination of the discussion and the chronological limit of the project will concern the work of Ginevra Canonici Fachini, titled *Prospetto biografico delle donne italiane dal secolo decimoquarto fino a' giorni nostri* (Venice, 1824). This work was quite successful and echoed in the main literary periodicals of the time, since, in its introduction, it responded polemically to the Englishwoman Lady Morgan's book, *Italy*.¹² In particular, I will explore how the male reviewers judged the work and the portraits made by Canonici Fachini, as well as which personalities the author selected and excluded.

In general, researching the disguised means by which women undertook politics at a time when this was not allowed is certainly not easy. However, I will overcome this obstacle by perusing the *corpus* of documentation that I have identified thanks to bibliographic tools. I will therefore begin by sorting through the primary sources identified, contextualising the biographies of the authors and the social, political and literary contexts in which they operated. This is necessary because of the diversity of the contexts of pre-unification Italy, a diversity that Napoleon's standardisation attempted to smooth out but that the shortness of the years of domination did not resolve. I intend to test preliminary outcome achieved in this phase of the research project by means of a seminar or an initial, pilot article, to enable the opportunity to discuss these issues with the academic community and to incentivise the continuation of my research. Subsequently, I will present the results of the research in a definitive study, as a step towards possibly extending the research theme toward a monograph or proposing a comparative study with other European realities.

Expected outcome

biographie, dir. F. Marmande et É. Marty, Séguier, 2000. Among the many foreign works on Biography and Gender, see *Writing lives: conversations between women writers*, ed. By M. Chamberlain, Virago, 1988; *Revealing Lives: Autobiography, Biography and Gender*, ed. By S. Groag Bell and M. Yalom, State University of New York Press, 1990.

¹¹ In this sense is important Elisa Brilli, «Nuovi soggetti e vecchi paradigmi. Una ricognizione sulle biografie di donne (Italia, 1995-2005)», *Dentro/ fuori, sopra/ sotto : critica femminista e canone letterario negli studi di italianistica*, Ravenna, Longo, 2007.

¹² Donatella Abbate Badin, *Lady Morgan's Italy: Anglo-Irish Sensibilities and Italian Realities*, Accademica Press, 2007; Franca Sinopoli, «Da Corinne alle "altre": per un confronto tra Lady Morgan e Ginevra Canonici Fachini», *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica*, 1, 2010, p. 31-44; Tatiana Crivelli, «Deh, non opinare, o Signora, così spregevolmente di noi: l'Italia illustrata dalle italiane», *Altrelettere*, September 2012, p. 4-24.

The title of my research project is a homage to Mary Jacobus' 1979 work, *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, which collected a series of essays by various authors in an innovative approach to the theme of women's writing.¹³ I have therefore decided to propose an ideal association, because, in analysing the bibliography on women's and feminist writing and women's political participation in Italy, a gap immediately emerges. There are in fact a few works that deal with this theme in the years immediately following the French Revolution, and there are many works on the female presence in the Italian Risorgimento.

The impression has consequently been created that in the years following the arrival of Napoleon's troops in Italy (1796), or rather from the imperial phase to the Austrian Restoration, and then until the outbreak of the Italian independence and Risorgimento movement, women barely participated in public life. In fact, women used veiled means of participating in political discourse that were more suited to the traditionalist climate of those years. I intend to address this gap by precisely delineating the presence and methods of women's participation in public discourse, as well as by highlighting the originality of their participation. If historiography has dealt with the involvement of women in the revolutionary, or rather republican, phase in Italy, it seems that the presence of women in the imperial years remains obscure.

My most ambitious objective is to consolidate, at a historiographic level, the idea of the politicisation of women in Italy immediately after the French Revolution, and above all to show the original ways in which the protagonists of that period chose to express this awareness and politicisation even during the Napoleonic era and the Restoration – and therefore before the Italian Risorgimento uprisings, as argued by certainly very valid historiographic analyses. It will be important to place this emancipation in parallel with that of other European realities: for example, to draw a parallel between the Italian reality and that of the nations whose empires followed one another in Italy, namely France and Austria.

It is therefore relevant to identify what models these women writers had on the subject of emancipation and political rights. On these aspects, I was prompted to further investigation by discovering a striking fact about the text considered to be one of the first and most important contributions to women's attainment of civil, social and political freedoms, namely Mary Wollstonecraft's work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* of 1792. This work was translated into French in 1792 and into German in 1798, while in Italy it was only translated by Franca Ruggieri in 1977.¹⁴ It is true that educated Italian women could read French, but it is also true that the French edition in Italy today is almost impossible to find, a sign of its non-existent circulation in the 1790s. I intend therefore to examine the causes for this lack of circulation.

¹³ *Women writing and writing about women*, ed. by Mary Jacobus, New York, Routledge, 1979.

¹⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft, *I diritti delle donne*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1977. It should be noted that in the Italian version the title has been translated in the plural, and not in the singular as in the original version («woman»).

Finally, this research will compare the political debate in which women participated during the above-mentioned *Triennio* period with that which immediately preceded and followed the 1820–21 risings in Italy, which definitively inaugurated the Risorgimento period in Italy. In particular, regarding women who participated in the life of the patriotic secret societies under the Carboneria, what had been their experience in the previous two decades?¹⁵ Was there a direct link between female participation in the French years in Italy and these female patriots? Another goal I intend to achieve is to demonstrate that it is a misinterpretation to consider the contribution of Italian women in social and national politics as tardy compared to their colleagues in other countries. Ultimately, if the documentation confirms the clues gathered so far, I will try to show how the Risorgimento movement had its roots in the revolutionary era in Italy precisely because of the joint participation of women and men in political and social debate.

¹⁵ Cf. Giulia Cilloni, «La partecipazione delle donne al movimento cospiratorio risorgimentale», *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny*, LX, 2, 2013, p. 225-237.