POWER AND AGENCY IN PORTRAYALS OF GENDERED RELATIONSHIPS IN REGINA DI LUANTO'S *UN MARTIRIO* (1894) AND MEMINI'S *L'ULTIMA PRIMAVERA* (1894)

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the representation of stereotypical gender roles in the portrayal of female protagonists in two novels of nineteenth-century Italian writers Memini and Regina di Luanto. The aim of the project is to identify whether these two authors – with seemingly widely differing perspectives regarding women's standing in society- addressed in any measure the political and social issue of women's emancipation through their female characters, and if so, whether they might have meant to engender some reflection in this regard. In order to do that, I focused on two main research strands: firstly, I explored whether these authors' narrative strategies crafted developed characters, capable of inspiring empathy in their readership and potentially prompt further thought as concerned women's reality in *fin-de-siècle* Italy. Secondly, I analysed their two female protagonists in more detail, in order to ascertain the degree of agency conferred to them, and in what measure their portrayal conformed or attempted to subvert gender norms of the time. In fact, by drawing parallels between women's experiences and their female protagonists' vicissitudes, Regina di Luanto and Memini have expanded our knowledge of the period and shone a light on the *condizione femminile* in nineteenth-century Italy.

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Power and Agency in Portrayals of Gendered Relationships in Regina Di Luanto's Un Martirio (1894) and Memini's L'ultima Primavera (1894)

Introduction

The second half of the nineteenth-century marked a shift in perspective for women authors in Italy: many novels and short stories by women were written for entertainment value, but some provided quite an accurate and in-depth analysis of women's struggles in 19th-century society. They were thus extremely popular because they managed to touch topics that were close to their female readership's hearts, first and foremost their unequal relationship with men and lack of control over their own lives. Furthermore, this genre "offered women writers a means of addressing and engaging with the social and political issues [of the woman question]" and it "taught women readers to deal with their limitations and predicaments as wives and mothers" (Mitchell, 2014, p.5).

In the 19th century in particular, but also later on, "through the novel form, women writers responded to and mirrored the changing circumstances of women's lives and entered anew into the debate on women's place in society" (Russell, 1997, p. 229). Women writers at the time favoured romantic novels, mostly because the genre guaranteed them some space, while "real" literature was considered the prerogative of their male counterparts (Arslan, 1998, p.16); this also guaranteed them some financial independence. More and

more, women writers became creative in challenging the standard canon, and in defying social conventions through their characters.

My project focuses predominantly on *fin-de-siècle* Italian society, a moment of notable self-discovery for women on their path to emancipation. As I will further discuss in the first chapter, it's at that time that most organisations and associations for the furthering of women's cause were created or saw the most participation, such as the *Lega promotrice*

degli interessi femminili founded in 1879, the *Associazione nazionale per la donna* founded in Rome in 1897, and *the Unione femminile nazionale* opened in Milan in 1899. The debates on women's education and employment, and most generally, on their social standing were incredibly animated and wide-ranging, taking place not only in women's magazines like *La Donna*, but also in literary publications, such as *Nuova Antologia* and *La Gazzetta Letteraria*. Buttafuoco (1989) states that there was a constant tension in that period to redefine women's social and political standing: women's new role was hard to outline: while most activists at the time would agree that women needed to take a more active, independent role in society[1], most gender stereotypes were so deeply ingrained in the Italian people's mindset that women were considered at best inevitably different from men but complementary, and at worst, psychologically and physically inferior. Between these two 'tendenze', "[…] non ci fu, infatti, nell'Ottocento, una netta distinzione, ma si verificò un continuo passaggio dall'una all'altra; entro le loro sponde crebbero […] almeno due generazioni politiche di donne […]" (Buttafuoco, p. 364). These two presumed aspects of womanhood were obviously difficult to reconcile, and that is why Buttafuoco talks about these, not as clearly distinct, fixed perspectives, but as "tendenze" that created a long, complex debate regarding the social and political status of women in Italy. As I will explain

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[1] For further information, see the following: Pieroni Bortolotti, 1963; Russell, 1997; Tosco, 1878; Trivulzio di Belgioioso, 1866.

further in the following pages, the fluidity and ambiguity that characterise this debate, allowed the dissemination of new discourses around femininity; as wide-ranging as these theories were, they were also reflected in the two female characters that I'm going to analyse: "Through the novel form, women writers responded to and mirrored the changing circumstances of women's lives and entered anew into the debate on women's place in society' (Russell, 1997, p. 229).

The focus of my analysis will be the literary work of two Italian women writers, Ines Castellani Fantoni Benaglio (1849-1897), also known as Memini, and Anna Guendalina Lipparini (1862-1914) whose *nom-de-plume* was Regina di Luanto. In particular, I narrowed my analysis to their depiction of female protagonists in two novels, *L'ultima primavera* (1894) and *Un martirio* (1894). These two authors were chosen for several reasons, and I believe this will provide a more nuanced understanding of the time period and the *condizione femminile*. Much has been written about a handful of women writers in this period, such as Matilde Serao (Trotta, 2008, Abbondande, 2017, De Nunzio Schilardi, 1983, Fanning, 1993, Harrowitz, 1996, Mitchell, 2008), La Marchesa Colombi (Mitchell, 2008, Tartaglione, 2016, Nuvoli, 2020, Sanson, 2010) and Neera (Arslan, 1998, Mettifogo, 2011, Mitchell and Ramsey-Portolano, 2010, Ramsey-Portolano, 2004, Romanowska, 2013, Zambon, 2009); however, little is known about many other writers of the time. Therefore, we unfortunately have an incomplete picture when it comes to women writers' opinions regarding women's emancipation. By focusing on two authors such as Di Luanto and Memini, I hope to expand our understanding of the topic. First and foremost, the writers I chose provide two extremely different representations of womanhood: the first, chaste and virtuous, the second, independent and free-thinking. Secondly, while they both chose not to reveal their identities, their reasons might have been different; while Lipparini's novels were considered daring and

outside the bounds, at times, of society's views, Benaglio's were quite clearly within the boundaries prescribed at the time. In either case, though we cannot know for sure, it's likely that Benaglio understood the possible repercussions of stepping into a domain that was predominantly masculine, especially at a time when women were expected to remain in the private sphere. Thirdly, they both belonged to a similar background (upper-class the first, acquired nobility the second) and yet their protagonists were extremely different.

In order to explore these differences, I selected two women writers who would represent diverse ideas around women's place in nineteenth-century society. In particular, I will focus on their protagonists' power and agency, how and to what extent these authors sought to help their readership empathise with female characters, and what this adds to our understanding of women's social standing in this period. I will look, therefore, at how these characters' romantic relationships are portrayed, and at the degree of independence and agency those women were granted by their creators. I will also explore contradictions present in their writings as regards the *questione femminile*: how were dynamics between men and women portrayed? Were women depicted as powerless? And if so, are these works of fiction structured to help their readership empathise with these female characters in a way that would engender reflection on the *condizione femminile*? These are some of the questions I will endeavour to answer in my research. In so doing, I hope also to advance knowledge about two authors who are still relatively unacknowledged but who made significant contributions to Italian literature of the period. In this introduction, I will further clarify my overall argument, and also discuss the research context, my methodological approach and provide a literature review of secondary texts studied for this purpose, with the goal of providing a comprehensive overview to my study.

Contemporary Critical Discourses around Women in Literature and Methodological Approaches

When looking at the landscape of literary works by female authors in this time frame, it is essential to take into account two relevant aspects: the first is the absence of a formal, literary education of numerous Italian women writers, and how that impacted the quality of their work and their confidence when it came to "competing" with their male peers. The second, not less relevant, is an "anxiety of authorship" stemming from a lack of female literary forebears and models women authors could be inspired by and look up to. Virginia Woolf firstly posited in *A Room of One's Own* that women writers did not have a frame of reference (1929, p.39). In 1977, Elaine Showalter expanded on this concept by theorising that, while male writers subconsciously revise their own literature, women writers go through different stages in order to create their own female writing tradition (p.13): the Feminine (in which women writers would have imitated male models and tradition), Feminist (a rejection of male-dominated literature in favour of creating their own), and Female (a phase of self-discovery, and a search for identity). Then, in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Gilbert and Gubar theorised that, as in the 18th and 19th centuries there were simply not enough popular female authors to look up to, instead of feeling an "anxiety of influence", the artist's fear of his predecessor's impact on his own work (Harold Bloom, 1973, p. 6), women writers felt an "anxiety of authorship" (p.483). This notion suggests that women writers have suffered from a sort of performance anxiety, defined by a lack of relatable models in classic literature, a struggle to define their role and potential in their time, but also a strong sense of social and professional inferiority. As a result, women's literature was generally considered quite silly, in Italy and in other countries: as Lucienne Kroha states, "the woman

writer was perceived as nothing less than a trespasser invading a masculine domain, unless she confined herself to pedagogical writing (Kroha, 1994, p.17). Sibilla Aleramo, for instance, defined Italian women's fiction "stupida" (Aleramo, 1998, p.121), and George Eliot openly criticised women's fiction in her essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists", where she argued that these writers often mistook "vagueness for depth, bombast for eloquence, and affectation for originality" (Eliot, 1856, p. 455).

In the first chapter, I will discuss in more detail the lack of formal education for women, in general, and how this notably impacted their life choices; this would have affected women writers just as profoundly, given that school often did not impart much more than basic literacy. As a consequence, many women writers experimented; often they found no pleasure in school, and they dedicated most of their time to reading love-themed fiction, which they later tried to replicate (Arslan, 1988, p.16). In the first half of the 19th century, the few women who consistently published articles or novels were pioneers, and were often critiqued for having supposedly forsaken their primary occupation, which according to most was taking care of the home (Caesar, 2000, p.5). At the end of the 19th century, while being a writer had gradually become anything but a novelty, it was still an activity particularly criticised for a woman in Italy: "In Italia in qualche modo vive ancora sul finir del secolo l'idea di una eccezionalità e quella di una particolarità della donna scrittrice […]. " (Zambon, 1989, p.239). As I will discuss in the first chapter in detail, the most common objection to women writers was that women do not have the same intellectual capabilities as men (Mantegazza, Henry Maudsley and Lombroso), and thus would not be able to produce great works of literature, but also that women belonged to the private sphere and should not venture out of it. In fact, as popular writer Neera (pseudonym of Anna Radius Zuccari, 1846–1918), had written in 1876, "Togliete la donna alla casa, e non avrete più né casa, né donna" (in

Perozzo, 2013, p.350). While writing was considered more acceptable than other activities since it could take place inside the home, many still believed that it took women away from their main occupation, which had to be taking care of the home and their children, to indulge in romantic and self-indulgent fantasies (Arslan, 1988, p.16).

In the last three decades of the 19th century, however, the number of female writers and readers had significantly increased (Arslan, in Kroha, 1992, p.1), perhaps as a consequence of a slow-spreading acceptance of reading as an appropriate passtime for women. It is estimated that between 1870 and 1899, the number of women who were being published had, in fact, increased dramatically: 8,6% of published material at the start of the 19th century was authored by women, but by 1870, the number had increased to almost 20% (Perozzo, 2013, p. 347). Despite wide-spread criticism, there were also those who thought that women could be suited to the arts by virtue of their purportedly superior capacity of expressing emotion; for instance, an article published on the *Gazzetta Letteraria* in 1887 and titled *Poesia Femminile* states: "Perché non dovrebbero anche essere poetesse, se anzi il tranquillo ed imbelle esercizio dello scrivere pare ed è uno dei meglio adatti all'indole e alla vita femminile?" (Tomaselli, 1888, in Perozzo, p. 351). As mentioned at the beginning, most narratives by women of that time are termed "letture d'evasione" and were therefore written for entertainment value; however, as Arslan posits, the "letteratura muliebre" was not only leisure and a pleasant diversion but it played a specific role, but a:

> Legittimo intervento di analisi e di denuncia sociale, operato da donne per cui la scrittura era diventata uno status professionale, e sulle quali l'interesse dei contemporanei si appuntava, anche considerandole in sé come personaggi pubblici, su cui riflettere e di cui discutere: esse in sostanza costituivano una categoria sociale a sé, con ben definite peculiarità e caratteristiche(1986 p.16)

Women's literature, as defined by Arslan, was therefore almost a different literary genre, since it addressed a specific readership and handled topics that were particularly

relevant to women's condition in society. Its register was also significantly different, in that its tone was more familiar and often intimate than it was common in other literary texts of the time. In contrast to their male colleagues, women writers also tended to depict a "predominantly female world, one in which men formed the backdrop" (Mitchell, 2013, p.15). Despite the social value of these works, for the reasons cited above most of them are not masterpieces. As Zambon states, there were some common characteristics that many women writers shared and that they discussed when talking about their career:

> […] Lacune ritenute irrimediabili nella formazione culturale della persona; inadeguatezza del possesso di un proprio mezzo espressivo (compreso l'errore sintattico di inserire una virgola tra soggetto e predicato) […] In questa citazione sono dichiarati molti dei punti che le scrittrici tra Otto e Novecento pongono in luce quando riflettono, per raccontarle, sulle caratteristiche della loro formazione culturale(1989, p.288)

Therefore, characters often do not have much depth, plots were predictable, settings were often romanticised, and the overall quality of the work was low, more so when the author did not write based on her own vicissitudes and experiences. In fact, Arslan remarks that the most compelling novels were autobiographical, narratives such as Neera's *Una giovinezza del secolo XIX* or Sibilla Aleramo (1876-1960)'s feminist *Una donna* (p.17), which was published in 1906 (and therefore beyond the scope of this work). Due to these writers' precarious balance on the thin thread separating the genres of romance and popular literature, they have been often lumped together without distinctions and often critiqued as being talentless (Arslan, 2013, p.21), but compared to their male colleagues, they started at great disadvantage. However, talented writers like Neera, Aleramo, and others more than made up the absence of a formal education with an exquisite sensitivity to the struggles of the human's heart, a careful attention to detail and a remarkable self-awareness.

Also relevant to the popularity of these women and their work, is the fact that Italian literature and its representatives were quite elitist and distant from the needs of the common

people: their works were far from accessible, while women authors, being self-taught and with almost no training in the classics, were thought to understand “ordinary” Italians and their struggles better. Even Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), philosopher and historian of the time, was forced to admit that women authors’ frequently “confessional” register was far better suited to the new, rapidly expanding literary genre of the *letteratura popolare* than the more refined language of “high” literature used until then by male authors (1973, p.87). Popular writer Matilde Serao (1856-1927), in an interview with Ugo Ojetti published in 1895, revealed that she was aware of the language she employed, and how she had decided to make it into a strength, rather than a weakness: “Io credo con la vivacità di quel linguaggio incerto e di quello stile rotto di infondere nelle opere mie il calore […]” (Ojetti, in Mitchell, 2014, p.5). Serao, therefore, understood the limitations of her education, and she did not try to compete with her male colleagues on the same ground; but she defended her use of the language as a means of bonding with her (mostly female) audience. It is also possible that other female writers, in an attempt to be original and yet not competitive in the more traditional literary canon, kept to a more “confessional” writing style. This could also have had a secondary effect, to conform to the widespread gender stereotyping proliferating in those years and not be seen as antagonistically opposing what was perceived as the status quo. The fact remains, however, that as Kroha emphasises, women authors were “the ideal labour force for a publishing industry anxious to exploit the growing demand for readable books by a largely female public” (p.166), and were, therefore, destined to remain long-term in Italy’s literary landscape. As Perozzo states, between 1870 and the end of the century women’s literary production grew exponentially, with 8,62% of women writers in the first decade, to an impressive 19,88% in the last (Perozzo, 2013, p. 347); eventually, they went on to competing against men authors for popularity, if not always for quality.

The fact that most women writers had not had a formal education in the classics was obviously a disadvantage; the critiques and compromises they had to face in order to continue, especially for those that made of this profession their sole source of income, were not inconsequential. But in a way, since they did not receive a formal education, they also had the freedom to create and explore new means of expression; those who remained popular all throughout their lives, like Matilde Serao, whose works had been favourably received by both her readership and her male colleagues (Mitchell, 2008; Romanowska, 2016), were women who had found an ideal balance between innovation and approachability. And yet, even those who were indeed popular suffered from the inherent, unavoidable backlash caused by their mere presence in a predominantly male environment: as Neera wisely stated:

> Ognuno di essi [male writers] era ben disposto a festeggiare la scrittrice quando nel suo interno la considerava come un leggiadro pupazzetto del suo medesimo sogno, inoffensivo, divertente, forse utile. Ma è tutt'altra cosa se la donna diviene una rivale nella concorrenza. [. . .] Al punto in cui la lotta si impegna seriamente, la differenza del sesso è cagione di astio maggiore. È allora che la scrittrice si sente straniera in mezzo a quegli uomini inaspriti che hanno gettato la maschera della galanteria, ripresi dalla atavica brutalità dell'animale in guerra(Neera, 1904, in Croce, 1942, p. 832-833)

Another great obstacle on the path of women writers in the nineteenth-century was the distinct lack of a literary legacy to look back on. In fact, while women writers could have also potentially drawn inspiration from writers such as Germaine De Stael (1766-1817), George Sand (1804-1876), George Eliot (1819-1880) and Jane Austen (1775-1817), this list is still quite limited when comparing to an all-male literary tradition; it would also be difficult to establish whether Italian women writers, such as Regina di Luanto or Memini, had access to their work, and if so, in what measure. Many scholars have discussed the impact of literary tradition on writers' production, as well as what might be termed the psychology of literary history – that is, not only the feelings arising from having to confront their predecessors'

legacy and the unconscious assimilation of their past achievements, but also the inadequacies they would feel when faced with the traditions of genre and style (Eliot, 1975, and Kermode, 2000). A scholar of such literary psycho-history has been Harold Bloom, who, applying Sigmund Freud's theories to literary history, claimed that the artist's fear of his predecessor's impact on his [sic] own work, his "anxiety of influence", is the root dynamic of art, including literature (Bloom, 1973). As mentioned earlier, when it comes to women's literature, already Virginia Woolf had theorised in *A Room of One's Own* (1929, p.39) that women authors felt a radical fear of not being able to measure up against their male colleagues and their all-male literary tradition: how could they develop as artists without models? Female writers simply did not fit in, and had to find inspiration elsewhere. They had to confront precursors who were almost exclusively male, and therefore significantly different; their forefathers not only embodied patriarchal authority, but they also disseminated a very precise set of characteristics and boundaries for women, thus negatively affecting women writers' own view of their own potential. By reducing women (and therefore women authors) to a series of extreme stereotypes, they effectively caused an overwhelming conflict between women authors' sense of self and their creativity. Later on, in 1971, Art Historian Linda Nochlin also forwarded a similar argument, stating that "it was indeed institutionally made impossible for women to achieve artistic excellence" (p.24).

This theory is ideally suited to interpreting the controversial position in which Italian women authors found themselves in the 19th century: in fact, in that period we can find a vast array of women writers either aligning (or trying to align) with their literary tradition, or actively moving away from it, but also a wide number of women in-between: male critics of the time were quick to distribute stereotypes: an example would be the 19th-century critic Guido Menasci, who had "unabashedly declared his desire to find in the writings of women

the confirmation of gender stereotypes" (Kroha, 1992, p.3) by complimenting Neera's feminine writing style in an essay published in *Nuova Antologia* in 1901. Women authors in Italy had not only to deal with their trouble in identifying with their literary tradition, but also to confront the social pressures and gender prejudices to which women were generally subjected. Each of them adopted a different tactic. Some stayed out of the debate altogether, like Memini. Some, like Beatrice Speraz (1840-1923), were extremely critical in their novels and chose to write under a male pseudonym so as to be free in expressing their views; Speraz's work, whose pseudonym was Bruno Sperani, evolved in fact from resignedly narrating a "fatalità cieca che coinvolge – e travolge- I protagonisti dei suoi romanzi" to the rebellion and rejection of the "ingranaggio", destiny, which crushes the most fragile, and the most vulnerable in society (Colummi Camerino, 1994, p.75). Others writers, despite writing extremely thoughtful and delicate depictions of women at the margins, chose to disguise themselves as anti-feminist in public, like Neera (1881, 1886), Serao (1884), the Marchesa Colombi (1885)[2]. Most others contented themselves with the luxury of being able to write; and a select few, such as Regina di Luanto (who remained largely unacknowledged for many years despite being quite popular while alive), chose to actively challenge gender roles and stereotyped female characters by creating inspirational, thought-provoking fiction, while at the same time hiding behind a *nom de plume*. By selecting Memini and Regina di Luanto, therefore, I am engaging with quite a wide perspective: on one end of the spectrum, Di Luanto's independent, free-thinking and at times radical protagonists, and on the other, Memini's quietly determined, more "submissive" counterparts. Both belong to a varied and nuanced landscape of women writers trying to find their place in society: Memini's work is

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[2] For more information on the subject, please see: Fanning, 1993, Mitchell, 2008, Abbondante, 2017, Harrowitz, 1996, and Romanowska, 2013.

at times reminiscent of Serao's, Neera's or Colombi's, without quite the same political slant. Her goal seemed to be simply to narrate women's lives and a very specific demographic, that of upper-class society and its boundaries. The boundaries themselves were not outwardly denounced, and it is still hard to tell whether she meant to oppose them in any way. Di Luanto's perspective, on the other hand, seems to be to advocate for equality in a much more open way. Her *opus* conforms, to an extent, to the heart-wrenching narrative of novels such as *Teresa* (Neera, 1886), *In risaia* (Colombi, 1878), or *Il ventre di Napoli* (Serao, 1884), which could be considered literary models for this writer, given the timeframe; these focused, in fact, on different aspects of the female experience, such as the plight of unmarried women, the intolerable working conditions of rice weeders (the so-called *mondine*) in Northern Italy, and the often-tragic circumstances of those living in Naples' poorest areas. They were, therefore, discussing the conditions in which many Italian women suffered and toiled, a topic which was clearly important to Regina di Luanto as well; however, while these authors publicly condemned the emancipation movement and its agenda, perhaps in fear of retribution, Di Luanto chose to use a pen-name. Perhaps, as she might have sought to stay hidden to maximise the impact of her message, she had also been able to avoid negating her own convictions and enduring a backlash for her views. Therefore, the goal of my research, in light of the social and cultural framework described above, is to explore the extent to which these women authors may have been influenced by the social discourses on gender circulating at that time. In particular, I will investigate how narrative empathy might have been employed by Regina di Luanto to engender reflection and awareness on the *questione femminile*, and how in Memini's novel, *L'Ultima Primavera* (1894), interesting contradictions on women's agency emerge despite the author's seemingly deliberate avoidance of political debates. In comparing these two authors, which

are ostensibly at polar opposites when it comes to their engagement with the cause of women's emancipation, I seek to gain more insight into the complex, multifaceted debate around gender stereotypes in nineteenth-century Italy.

In order to engage with the richness of the material analysed in this work, I have adopted a feminist interdisciplinary methodological approach. Since the publication of Franca Pieroni Bortolotti's pioneering essay *Alle origini del movimento femminile in Italia* (1963), an important research strand has emerged that combines history (Buttafuoco, 1988 and 1989; Palazzi, 1996 and 1997; Gibson and De Giorgio, 1992) and literature (Zambon, 1988 and 2004; Arslan 1998, Folli, 1987 and 2000). These studies have been essential in helping to present the literary landscape and the social and historical complexity of the *questione femminile* in my research. In particular, the work of Lucienne Kroha (1992, 2000), Helena Sanson (2013, 2016) and Katharine Mitchell (2008, 2010, 2013, 2014), on widespread binary stereotypes of nineteenth-century Italy, have helped form a strong basis for my research and have allowed me to hone in on the intersections between gender and the social and political ramifications of being a woman in nineteenth-century Italy. In fact, by analysing the limitations placed on women's lives in both the private and public sphere, I have been able to explore exactly what agency and self-reliance might have looked like for a woman author at that time.

While Kroha explores the social standing of women writers, the implications of conforming (or not conforming) to the expectations of their male peers, and the struggle to form their own identity in such a male-dominated field (1992, 2000), Sanson and Ann Hallamore Caesar investigate the social mores disseminated by conduct books and their possible impact on young women (Sanson, 2016; Caesar, 2000). Mitchell and Sanson's work on the theory of separate spheres (2013), which advocated for the confinement of

women to the private realm and became quite popular in nineteenth-century Europe (Wells, 2009, p.519), has also been instrumental, as it allowed further investigation into the challenges faced by women who sought to explore their own identity outside of the domestic role assigned to them. Mitchell's research on women writers such as Neera, La Marchesa Colombi and Matilde Serao allowed me to better understand the complexity encapsulated by the multi-faceted world of nineteenth-century women's literature in Italy, as well as the supportive relationships and connections forged between them (2008, 2010, 2013, 2014). This, in turn, helped me to better understand Memini and Regina di Luanto's authorial choices by placing them in context, and placing other women's literature side by side to theirs.

To analyse Memini's and Di Luanto's novels, I have relied on several ground-breaking theories, such as Judith Butler's theory on the performativity of gender (1990). Beginning with Simone De Beauvoir's idea that "one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one" (1972, p.146), Butler posited that gender is not only a construction, it is a construction we create and reinforce ourselves through a "repetition of acts through time" (p.79); in other words, the way we present to the world, while largely due to social constraints and expectations, becomes our own experience of ourselves and a part of our identity, which is always subject to change. That is because gender cannot be a stable phenomenon, as it's directly impacted by a series of variables, including history. Butler also points out that the parameters that society uses to define gender become internalized gradually, over time: our performance is partly a reaction, an opposition to those, and partly an acritical assimilation of them. This notion of gender as a performance, alongside the concept of "change", is directly relevant to both Memini's and Di Luanto's work, perhaps in different ways: in *L'Ultima Primavera*, Memini's characters project a socially sanctioned, mostly unambiguous identity

that conforms to the expectations of their gender: the female protagonist is kind and particularly concerned with being (and appearing) reputable, despite her more straight-forward and honest private thoughts, while in Di Luanto's *Un martirio*, her protagonist visibly and painfully struggles to adapt and conform to the prescribed role of 'wife', until she feels forced to rebel, with tragic consequences. In both works, gender identity is 'performed' differently; not only is it interesting to evaluate the repercussions on these characters and on the possible ideas that these two authors might have wanted to share with their readership regarding women's standing in society at the time, I believe it is worth considering what views were subconsciously transmitted onto the page. For this reason, I have also utilized Fredric Jameson's theory of the political unconscious (1981) which "articulates the implicit political dimension of creative works" by hypothesising that "artistic works can be seen as symbolic solutions to real but unconsciously felt social and cultural problems" (Buchanan, 2010); this theory will help explore how the potentially unconscious ideas emerging from the novels discussed might be linked to the social and historical context in which the authors lived. This can only be achieved if we prove capable of "respecting the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural past while disclosing the solidarity of its polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles, with those of the present day" (Buchanan, 2010, p.2). In other words, while many parallels may be identified as concerns the social and political standing of women today, we can only compare and contrast if we correctly interpret the different social and cultural views of the time we're investigating. Jameson's belief, that political interpretation of a work of fiction should not be considered "as some supplementary method […], but rather as the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" (p.17) allows us to hypothesise that, in the construction of a novel, much may be political, and that what is not could still be a reflection

of the author's ideas and biases. Therefore, a cultural artifact such as literature, and more specifically, the decision to craft independent, strong-willed protagonists, for instance, may be not only significant in our understanding of that specific author, but also of that society, at that time. This notion was particularly useful when looking at Memini's opus, which seemed to almost deliberately avoid taking a stance as concerns the *questione femminile*; as mentioned above, Memini's privilege may have contributed to her choice, as it would not have felt as urgent a problem as perhaps to other women writers, but it could have also been a legitimate fear of serious repercussions on her career and on her financial independence.

In conjunction with the theories mentioned, I have also utilised the concept of narrative empathy (Konrad et al., 2018) to inform my textual analysis of *Un martirio* (1894) and *L'Ultima Primavera* (1894). Narrative empathy has been described as a "paradox of fiction": that is because, while it used to be generally understood that we must believe in the veracity of an occurrence in order to feel genuine emotions towards it (Radford and Weston, 1975, p.68; Walton, 1978, p.6), readers are aware that the events described are fictional. And yet, that is not an obstacle for sympathizing with characters and their experiences (Konrad et al., 2018, p.1); that has led scholars to believe today that emotion is not a consequence of real events, and that there has never been a paradox of fiction. Nonetheless, the debate generated by this theory has been a "valuable tool for exploring the nature of both imaginative and emotional responses to fiction" (Stecker, 2011, p.308, in Konrad et al., 2018, p.2): as concerns the two texts I will be focusing on, I have identified it as a valuable strategy to make readers feel more invested in the concept of women's emancipation. In fact, creating empathy in Di Luanto's *Un martirio* could have been knowingly used as a vehicle to generate interest in women's cause; however, as we will see,

Memini's use of it seems to be a mere literary device to hold the readers' attention, and it is uncertain whether she intended it to be more than that.

Finally, Raewyn Connell's social theory of gender (1987), which emphasises the historical nature of society and of class and gender hierarchies, has been instrumental when analysing these two novels: in fact, the concept of social structure as expressing the "constraints that lie in a given form of social organization [which] operate through a complex interplay of powers and through an array of social institutions" (p. 92) helps explain particularly well how hard it would have been for Italian women in the 19th century to break free of those societal constraints.

The first chapter will help contextualise the social and historical period, by focusing on women's education, widespread beliefs around women's intellect and role in society, their activism and the limited opportunities for employment they faced; The second chapter will initially focus on Regina di Luanto's biography, critical reviews and research, and then analyse her novel *Un martirio*. I will suggest that Di Luanto likely wanted to prompt reflection on the lack of power balance in gendered relationships of the time, and that this can be observed in her use of narrative empathy and through her female character portrayal, which clearly attempts to defy binary, stereotypical representations of the women. In the third chapter I will similarly first address Memini's life and opus, before focusing on *L'ultima primavera* (1894). Through textual analysis and a comparison of other women authors' work, including Di Luanto's, I will propose that despite this writer's apparent lack of engagement with the emancipation movement, her *oeuvre* still provides a window onto some of the issues faced by women at the time, even if limited to high-class society. In fact, if nothing else, the female protagonist of *L'ultima primavera* shows how even in the higher echelons of society women were often punished simply for employing their free will, particularly when they chose

to make unpopular decisions. Memini’s perspective is also fundamental in helping to depict the range of views available at the time when it came to women’s emancipation.

Chapter One: Contextualising Women's Socio-economical Status in Nineteenth-century Italy

This first chapter will contextualise my work by discussing the conditions under which women lived in Italy in the 19th century: for ease of reference, I have divided this context chapter into two broad sections: the first gives a more detailed account of the historical background and of women's education, while the second will look at more practical issues around the women's emancipation movement, women's activism and work. As gender is "an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements, and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society" (Zimmermann and West, 2002, p.23), it stands to reason that the women writers whose work I am going to analyse would have been influenced in their portrayal of gender roles and relations by the social environment they were brought up in; I am, therefore, going to explore and compare how this portrayal deviated from or conformed to the norm(s) of the time.

Historical Background

The education of women

> *La chiesa predica alla donna il principio autoritario, esclude ogni autonomia alla quale possa aspirare la sua intelligenza, le somministra la fede ed in pari proporzione le sottrae la ragione […] Il governo a volta sua da dei programmi, e da questi programmi è tolto con tenera sollecitudine tutto ciò che può insegnare alla donna a studiare ed allettarla a pensare. La chiesa e la scuola che sono fra loro eternamente in guerra, fanno alleanza offensiva e difensiva allorchè si tratta di procurare l'ignoranza delle donne(Mozzoni, 1870)*

Nineteenth-century Italy was an incredibly fertile time for the emancipation movement. As Mitchell and Helena Sanson have written "At the time of Unification, the doctrine of separate spheres between the genders continued to dominate Italian society" (2013, p. 2); women belonged to the private sphere, confined to their homes, while men's place was in the public sphere. However, despite the restrictions placed upon them, women were gradually gaining more freedom.

A powerful tool for the independence of women was education. Whereas in previous centuries women's schooling had been seen as dangerous and irresponsible, in the mid-1800s a new current of thought became popular: women needed access to knowledge, in order to contribute to the advancement of society; however, they were not meant to be public figures, but educators of the next generations. Education was thus a tool through which women were supposed to "give back" to their own country: as the contemporary critic Gabriella Romani states, "A woman was supposed to be educated not for her own sake, but so that she could become a civic-minded and morally irreproachable citizen, able in turn to

educate future generations of Italian citizens. […] Women's education was therefore viewed, at least in theoretical terms, as an investment in the country's cultural and economic future" (2013, p. 148). For this reason, Italian women of the 19th century found themselves in a better position, compared to previous times: burdens and limitations placed on their gender notwithstanding, they were far more independent than most women in previous times could have dreamed, and this paved the way to more open, public debates on the nature and role of women in society.

In the following section, I am going to explore the normative discourses around femininity and women's education that circulated in those years by focusing on three fundamental aspects: the role of school, the significance of conduct books, and the debates around emancipation sparked both by men and women intellectuals of the time. These three issues are interconnected through a dense web of stereotypes about the supposedly 'gentle' sex that greatly damaged women and their chance of accessing society as equals to men: the most relevant was the belief that men and women had characteristics inherent to their own sex that precluded access to the other's sphere. This notion was more noxious to women, since it prohibited a whole host of civic and political rights that were instead granted to men, but it also perpetuated false ideas about men's nature, such as their supposedly inborn distaste for raising their own children.

Gabriella Romani wrote recently: "[It was believed that] men belonged to the public sphere of production while women, frivolous and hedonistic, were concerned only with the domestic side of life, including entertainment in all its different forms" (2013, p. 150). The notion of the woman as an "angelo del focolare"[3] was also well accepted and considered by

[3] The "angel in the house", the original phrase brought to international attention by Coventry Patmore in 1854.

many as indisputably true (as we will see in the following sections), which explains why the issue of education was only recognised inasmuch it was a useful tool to society in its entirety, not as a "selfish" desire of self-improvement on women's part. A curious aspect of this century, particularly the second half, is without a doubt the proliferation of contradictions regarding gender roles and the precarious balance established by progressive thinkers and traditionalists alike; the first encouraged women to take a stance and claim their position beside men as equals, while the others remarked upon the necessity for women to step back from the small spaces they had conquered with so many struggles. However, both emphasised those inherent, pre-determined characteristics that separated men from women as the foundations of their argument. Women were different: considered either inferior or complementary to men. In many scientific circles, for instance, it was thought that women's brains were physiologically too different from men's to be able to sustain prolonged academic effort (Maudsley, 1874, p. 472; Chapman, 2020, p.403; Burstyn, 1973, p.79), which was clearly a counter-argument to the opinion that women should be allowed schooling and stemmed from the conviction that women were intellectually inferior. Progressive scholars such as Aristide Gabelli, on the other hand, stated that women and men should have been treated equally, but also remarked on those same perceived differences that in fact precluded women access to most areas of public life. In Gabelli's 1870 essay, "L'Italia e l'istruzione femminile'", he makes a clear distinction between the world of men and that of women, but he also explicitly describes how they are really interconnected: "Le due società sono congiunte fra loro da legami così intimi e così forti, che l'una influisce continuamente sull'altra [...]. Fatta la debita parte ai diversi uffici assegnati ai due sessi dalla natura, il valore dell'uno corrisponde a quello dell'altro, poiché inevitabilmente a vicenda si modificano e tendono a pareggiarsi" (1870, p. 147).

The notion of women’s and men’s opposite but complementary nature is extremely problematic: on one hand, it reinforced the limitations on women’s freedom by suggesting that they “belonged” to the confinements of domestic life by virtue of their nurturing disposition; on the other, it continued to demand undervalued subservience and sacrifice by asking women to educate Italy’s children, so that this very message was passed on to following generations. In the next section, I will expand more on the notion of women’s education and on the contradictory beliefs around gender, by focusing on the hardships encountered by women to get access to a more prominent public life.

Girls at School after Unification

I have briefly discussed in the previous section how society became more permissive with women as regards their education, and how this contributed to a slight improvement of their social standing. In this section I am going to examine the disadvantaged position of girls in schools and the difficulties they encountered.

During most of the 19th century, girls received a very informal education within either the walls of their home, a convent, or a private school; while wealthier families could afford to school their children by sending them to private schools or by hiring a tutor, members of the working class often had to improvise and teach their children some rudiments of mathematics or the alphabet themselves. “Prior to Unification, women’s education had traditionally been managed by the Catholic Church” (Mitchell, 2013, p.202). As the activist Anna Maria Mozzoni (1839-1920) stated in her ‘Discorso letto dalla signora A. M. Mozzoni per l'inaugurazione del liceo femminile di Milano’, “L'insegnamento della chiesa riguardo alla donna in Italia è rappresentata dal pergamo, dal confessionale e da 876 chiostri occupati

da 18178 suore dedite all'istruzione" (*La Donna*, 1870, p.1). That education did not always include learning to write or read, but was rather a collection of notions on how to perform domestic duties.

The National Institute for Statistics reports that the illiteracy rate in Italy in 1861 after the Unification of the peninsula was 78%, while women's was a staggering 84% (Genovesi, 2004, p.15). It is in that period that the State became more involved, and more deliberate efforts to extend education to the citizens were visible, starting with the Casati Law (introduced in 1859, which made the first two years of elementary school compulsory (and free) for boys and girls. Primary education became a responsibility of the town councils, while secondary education was a prerogative of the Regions, and Universities of the State. The Church continued to manage private schools (which were generally considered more prestigious). The last educational reform before Mussolini's time was promulgated in 1877, and was called the Coppino Law. This law increased compulsory primary schooling from two to three years, and allowed attendance for up to five years. As regards to secondary school, parents could choose whether to send their children to a *scuola tecnica* or to a *ginnasio*, also called *liceo*, but while pursuing a vocational school was still free, the *liceo* was the prerogative of wealthy families.

While it is true that illiteracy rates slowly decreased for both men and women -in 1871 it had fallen to 67.04% for men, while women's had been reduced to 78% (Genovesi, 2004, p.15)-, there was a strong disparity between the north and the south, where the State struggled to enforce the Casati (and later on Coppino) Law. The main issue was economic: many councils had no budget to finance primary schools, and that translated to no equipment and no teachers (Bertoni, 1965, quoted in Mitchell and Sanson, 2013, p. 202). The repercussions were severe, especially on girls. Mixed-gender schools were practically

non-existent and the councils lacked money to establish schools for girls; moreover, as Sanson states, “a general mistrust persisted among the lower classes about sending children, and especially girls, to school. Higher up the social ladder, parents continued to be much more concerned about the moral instruction of their daughters than with offering them opportunities for real intellectual development” (2013, p. 41). This mistrust, as we will see in the following sections, constituted the foundation of women’s disadvantage

In the last twenty years of the 19th century, in many western countries, including Sweden, the States, the UK, Switzerland and many others, women had finally gained access to universities and all professions. In Italy, access to university was legally recognised in 1875 by royal decree, but access to secondary school was limited until 1883; upper-class women who had graduated from university were still few, and most likely had to be thankful for their parents ’open-minded views. That said, the professions they could aspire to were extremely limited: they could be teachers (or preceptors), stenographers, secretaries, but not doctors or lawyers. Mostly, women who graduated from university had done so for education’s sake, and not in hopes of finding a better job.

The Influence of Conduct Books

A crucial instrument for girls ’education was the handbook of social manners, which in Italian is known as the *galateo*. Conduct books were part of a wide range of writing available to women, including etiquette books, romantic novels and periodicals, which consistently broadcasted a specific model of femininity. As Ann Caesar claims, “They offered a system of values and ideas […] and presented attributes which were fundamental

to a proper womanliness" (2000, p.28). These were overwhelmingly written by women, mostly popular novelists, essayists and journalists of the time such as Serao, Emilia Nevers, and Tommasina Guidi, and fed to women pseudoscientific accounts and notions of 'proper' female behaviour, delivering to their readers a precise moral framework. Although in general they were not addressed to women of a specific social class, because of the illiteracy rates discussed above, it can be safely assumed that most working-class girls would not have had access to them, or at least, not until the 1870s.

These publications can be considered the dominant model of the role girls were being taught to assume, although it's hard to say in what measure women did assume those roles: and while the books apparently espoused the value of woman's education and development, they in fact strictly restricted her within the confines of her home. Books such as Serao's *Saper vivere* (1900), Guidi's *Il libro della vita delle donne italiane* (1907) and many others, established a series of rules of conduct that affected the whole family, despite being addressed mainly to women: rules on socializing with members of the opposite sex, for instance, were established to protect women's integrity (whose value was tied to their reputation) more than their male counterparts. In middle- and lower-class households, daughters were raised in relative seclusion from males their age or older, except of course men who were part of the inner family. When unmarried, women and girls were chaperoned everywhere by an older male or female relative, be it the mother, the older sister or brother, an uncle, all to avoid any sort of contact between them and any man they might encounter in public. As Caesar states, "There was no opportunity for social intercourse between the sexes" (2000, p. 30). Marital status was the only way to escape a cage made of restrictions that encompassed their entire daily life, from their choice of friends, to their clothing, to the kind of books they were allowed to read, and much more. The emancipationist Maria

Mozzoni described the *galateo* as a logical development of religious precepts (1871, quoted in Caesar, 2000, p. 28), which meant that there was a substantial amount of overlap between Catholic notions of how a woman should behave and the ideas promoted through conduct books. The fact that authors of these volumes were almost always women is also relevant: not only the idea that knowledge was passed down from women to other women seemed to re-enforce the hierarchy between men and women, but it also seems to imply that they were divided by irreconcilable differences, and that each world had to take care of their own. The nature of conduct books was also quite contradictory: the model of femininity proposed was considered complementary to a woman's nature, but at the same time it clearly had to be cultivated: the notion of the "angelo del focolare" mentioned in the introduction was the perfect representation of the model of femininity espoused by these books: women were naturally sweet and devoted to men and their family, but they needed to be taught, paradoxically, how to support their husbands and children, how not to be vain or flirtatious but rather composed and respectful.

The *Dizionario d'igiene per le famiglie* by Paolo Mantegazza (which, despite the title, was addressed to women, rather than families), which was written with the collaboration of the well-known novelist Neera exemplifies my earlier statement: it presented chastity, modesty, shame, respect for the family and temperance as innately feminine virtues. Women were depicted as creatures raised to please and serve: "Uscito dai lembi dell'adolescenza, cento vie si aprono al giovinetto. Una sola alla fanciulla: l'amore" (Mantegazza and Neera 1881, p.33). Caesar writes that the proliferation of these writings, addressed to and about women, "manifested a widening gap between cultural constructions of femininity and women's lives" (2000, p.29). It is true that we cannot know how the rules of conduct prescribed by these books were affecting women's lives; however, the ultimate

aim of the authors was more likely to be a progressive reduction of this gap, and it in fact encouraged the readers to strive towards an unachievable and unrealistic ideal.

Women as irretrievably inferior to men

A widespread belief that often circulated along with conduct books, and was disseminated by positivists such as the criminologist and physician Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) and the prominent neurologist, physiologist, and anthropologist Paolo Mantegazza (1831-1910), was that women were simply incapable, physically and psychologically, of receiving an education similar to men's. Forcing them to learn something other than how to carry out their everyday duties would be too strenuous and would ultimately cause more damage than benefit (Rafter, 2012, p. 189, and Mantegazza, 1893, p. 13). Mantegazza was widely acclaimed by the scientific community in Europe, and his writings had incredible resonance: he had been trained as a physician at the Universities of Pisa, Milan, and Pavia; he would also become one of the first European anthropologists, and he would occupy the first chair of Anthropology in the Faculty of Arts of the University of Florence, founding the Italian Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology in 1869(Moruno 2010). Lombroso, on the other hand, was not supported by European academic circles (with the exception of the UK and Italy), but was still acclaimed in the States. In Italy, he founded the first Italian School of Positivist Criminology. Despite being considered still now as the father of Criminology, his theories proved to be scientifically not sound in many instances: as Nicole Rafter and Mary Gibson note in the first edited version since 1895 of his *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale*, Lombroso was convinced of women's inferiority compared to men, but

his “tortured logic” (Rafter and Gibson, 2004, p.10) could not argue successfully that women’s lesser involvement in crime was indeed another sign of such inferiority. In other words, Lombroso could not explain why his findings showed women less prone to criminal acts, despite being, in his view, clearly inferior to men. This pseudo-scientific belief in women’s inferiority had been integrated seamlessly into society at large, and it was not an Italian prerogative, either. In those years, in the UK, there were medical theories about a ‘menstrual disabili'ty, that supposedly could spawn a condition coined “anorexia scholastica” which was believed to be a debilitating thinness and weakness resulting from too much mental stimulus, especially during menstruation. This 'illness’ was invented by Sir James Crichton-Browne, M.D., who first wrote about it in the British Medical Journal in 1892 (Crichton-Browne, 1892).

The fact that many men of science believed unconditionally in women’s inferiority shows not only how profoundly it was embedded in society, and how difficult it would have been to question such a notion when even science seemed to support it, but it also shows the great influence of science in the age of Positivism. It is no surprise, therefore, that even accomplished women would uphold this perception openly; and there are, in fact, many written instances of women in Italy defending it. Anna Vertua Gentile (1845-1926), an Italian writer who authored the book *Letture educative per fanciulle*, wrote an article in the periodical *Vita Intima* in which she talked about a woman that had fallen seriously ill after pursuing studies that were indicated only to men (in Mitchell, 2013, p. 203); it’s not clear whether she really believed the anecdote was true, or whether she had made it up as a sort of cautionary tale, but in both cases it does not diminish the strength of its message.

Caterina Franceschi Ferrucci, a Catholic writer, poet and journalist, published several essays about women’s education, such as *Della educazione morale della donna italiana*

(1847), *Letture morali ad uso delle fanciulle* (1851), *Degli studi delle donne italiane* (1856) and others, and was the first woman to be a member of the Accademia della Crusca in 1871. She also directed for one year a school for young girls in Genova, the *Istituto italiano di educazione femminile*, of which she wrote the syllabus, and the essays she wrote were either directed to other teachers and school principals, or directly addressed to her pupils. Despite her engagement and passion, she also claimed that women and men were vastly different: "Gli uomini s'ebbero in particolar distintivo la forza dell'intelletto e la gagliardia delle membra: noi avemmo dalla natura a dote speciale la soavità degli affetti e la tenerezza del cuore" (1847, p. 162). She seemed to favour the idea of educating women for the sake of education, not as an instrument to gain an equal position to men; however, from her writings, she also claimed that women should know their place and not aspire to a man's career:

> "È stoltissima l'opinione di quelli, i quali vorrebbero che le donne avessero in comune cogli uomini gli uffici, e gli onori: sicché in luogo di attendere ai casalinghi lavori, e ad allevare i loro figlioli perdessero in gare ambiziose la pace dell'animo, la verecondia, e la dignità della vita" (1910, p.358).

In Ferrucci's words the concept of women's inability to keep up with men in education was maybe not as explicit as Vertua Gentile's, but it still comes through clearly. Both women were highly accomplished, and yet they are also clear examples of how pernicious these beliefs could be; the image of femininity that they both depicted fits seamlessly with their contemporaries' beliefs, and it is clear that their primary concern was educating women to be proper, responsible mothers of citizens, not certainly making them into *literati*. These notions were also reflected in society at large; several male linguists, writers and journalists wrote about whether women had a right to an education, and if so, what kind of education

they should be allowed to pursue[4]. Furthermore, it had become a topic of heated debate not only among men and women of letters such as Vertua Gentile and Ferrucci (who had had the good fortune of being born into wealthy families who had allowed them to pursue their studies), but also in groups of women advocating for equal civil and political rights.

Women's education according to emancipationists

In the 19th century a varied spectrum of opinions on women's role in society circulated among all social classes, and their education was also a widely discussed topic. Obviously no emancipationists consciously believed in women's inherent inferiority to men, or they would not have advocated for equal civil rights, but the cultural construction of femininity which Caesar mentions (2000, p.28) on the topic of conduct books had such resonance in their lives, and to such an extent, that even women emancipationists of the time struggled to recognise it, let alone subvert it. Most of them were thus convinced of the existence of the inescapable differences of women from men, and that each gender should

[4] Mario Alighiero Manacorda, a contemporary critic, cites in a journal article a passage of the newspaper Il Repubblicano from 1848 that states: "Più che l'educazione dell'intelletto, alla donna è necessaria l'educazione del cuore", demonstrating how commonly those convictions were spread in 19th century society (Manacorda 1989, p. 2).
Scholars were not immune to them, either. Niccolò Tommaseo, who was a linguist, journalist and essayist of the time, as well as the editor of a *Dizionario della Lingua Italiana* in eight volumes (1861–74), of a dictionary of synonyms (1830) and other works, remarked more than once on woman's role in society. In one of his well-known works, he states: "Sappia ella principalmente i dogma della fede. Cresciuta, un po' di qualche libro religioso legga ogni giorno.[…] Affezionala ai lavori e ai conforti domestici" (1872, p. 76)
Luigi Capuana (1839-1915), an extremely popular novelist of the time, had a similar opinion as well. In discussing the rise of female novelists, he claimed that not only most women were absolutely incapable of talent, but that even if some were ambitious enough to try, they would never catch up, and forever be second: "Esse mettono nella loro opera d'arte un elemento tutto proprio, la femminilità; ma niente di più. […] Io poi sono convinto che nell'avvenire, nel lontano avvenire, le donne saranno quel che ora sono gli uomini: ma allora gli uomini saranno tutt'altri; e la distanza rimarrà uguale a quella di oggi. Allora gli uomini lasceranno alle donne l'occupazione di scrivere romanzi, liriche, tragedie, commedie, e, se ci avranno preso gusto, poemi; ma esse, aggiungo, non creeranno nulla di nuovo, perché non ci sarà altro da creare nelle forme dell'arte. Sarà un'eterna ripetizione, fino a che non si stancheranno; cosa un po' improbabile: le donne sono ostinate" (Capuana 1988, p.20).

contribute to society in their own way; others refrained from disagreeing, as doing so would cause them trouble.

Two women that exemplify this struggle are Anna Maria Mozzoni and Alaide Gualberta Beccari (1842-1906), whom Caesar, when talking of an "emancipationist literature" (2000, p.28) parallel to conduct books, defines as pioneers. Mozzoni is regarded even now as the founder of the woman's movement in Italy. She was born in a family of high society, and her parents let her free to study any topic that interested her. Despite being sent to a Catholic boarding school in Milan when she was young, she observed religion only from afar and with almost clinical detachment: "Non mi ritengo appigliata a nessuna setta, a nessun sistema, a nessuna scuola. Non credo all'infallibilità del Papa, ma rinnegando questa, non sostituisco quella di Mazzini, né di nessun altro" (Mozzoni, 1870). In 1864 she wrote the essay *La donna e i suoi rapporti sociali*, which she dedicated to her mother, who had instilled in her the desire for knowledge and had shown her the "comun pregiudizio che alla donna interdice il libero pensiero" (Mozzoni, 1864). Her activism was remarkably unapologetic; the critic Rinaldina Russell writes about her: "while predicating female solidarity above class division – for all women are victims regardless of class distinctions – Mozzoni believed that no amount of philanthropic activity, as practiced by cautious feminists, would achieve equality for women" (1997, p.89). She considered emancipation to be a conquest made through work, a realm that had always been men's dominion. The only way to be equal to men, therefore, was through the rejection of the traditional role of mother and "angelo del focolare".

Despite having worked with and respected one another (Mozzoni wrote often on Beccari's periodical *La Donna*), these two important activists were not of the same opinion when it came to women's gendered "nature". To start with, Mozzoni had quite a strong

adversity to the Catholic Church and its doctrine, as demonstrated by the citation at the beginning of this chapter, while Beccari was a religious, patriotic woman: Beccari firmly believed in love, solidarity and sacrifice as universal principles that would support women into uniting the nation: “La donna dev’essere l’iniziatrice dell’avvenire di ogni nazione” (Beccari, 1868). She also held the view that men and women were created different from one another, and that they should work together in order to achieve greatness and compensate for the other’s weaknesses. Women had to reach for their potential by taking up occupations of every kind and conquering new, public spaces, although it is worth noting that they were not exempt from being mothers and taking care of the home: “La donna ha doveri nella famiglia, ha doveri nella società, ha doveri in faccia alla patria. Essa è figlia, essa è sposa, essa è madre; […] La missione della donna, collo sviluppo delle odierne aspirazioni, è pure di diversa natura” (1868) Beccari therefore believed firmly in the inherent femininity in each and every woman. They were the “angelo di conforto, consigliere, inspiratore dell’uomo” (Beccari, 1868, p.1). Beccari was a great supporter of Giuseppe Mazzini’s, and her ideas clearly reflect it; Mazzini firmly rejected “any difference in status between men and women” (Falchi, 2012, p.3), believing that both had a patriotic duty towards their country: “L’uomo e la donna hanno, come quei due Popoli, funzioni distinte nell’Umanità; ma quelle funzioni sono sacre egualmente, necessarie allo sviluppo commune” (Mazzini, 1860, p.75). Mozzoni, on the other hand, was far more drastic: she claimed repeatedly in her writings that women had been deprived of the chance to know more only so that they could focus on being attractive and pleasant: “E le dice [the family says to the daughter]: l’ora di studiare è finita, l’ora di piacere comincia” (Mozzoni 1870). Therefore, she knew that the set of feminine characteristics held by so many in such high

esteem was anything but innate, while for Beccari, feminine and masculine qualities were, much as in Mazzini's eyes, naturally different but complementary.

Mozzoni and Beccari were thus not exactly on the same page when discussing how a "proper" woman should be, but the gendered, stereotypical model of woman broadcasted on almost every publication was almost ubiquitous and hard to confront. Mozzoni's position on women's role in society was therefore quite uncommon and radical for the time even among other emancipationists; but Beccari was in her own way quite nonconformist, too. Despite her obvious religious faith (Pisa, 1985) and her gendered view of women, she was not a supporter of religious institutions such as convents, nor did she endorse those traditional education methods that Mozzoni contested with such passion; in fact, she had actively questioned them by promoting in *La Donna* numerous initiatives about the progressive approach, developed by German pedagogue Friedrich Wilhelm August Fröbel (Gazzetta, 2006). This Froebelian approach was extremely critical of Catholic schools and their inflexible, dated methods, advocated mixed gender classes and was strongly opposed by conservative educators.

As mentioned previously, there was not complete agreement among emancipationists about the level or quality of education that women had to aspire to: for instance Rosa Piazza, who worked together with Beccari on *La Donna*, thought there was a need for professional schools that would prepare young girls for a job "adatto al loro sesso" (Gazzetta 2006, p. 46), but that would not keep them away from the family, where Piazza and others believed most of a woman's activity should be focused.

Erminia Fuà Fusinato, poet, educator and patriot, was willing to go a bit further, advocating women's education as essential and explaining how it could offer an alternative

to women who could not marry and were in need; Fusinato also believed that "l'emancipazione femminile consiste tutta nell'emancipare la donna dall'ignoranza e dal bisogno" (Fusinato 1880, p.113), identifying in a better education the only worthy goal to which women should aspire. On the inconsistencies relative not only to the topic of education, but also to the fragmentation of opinions inside the emancipation movement, the contemporary critic Azzurra Tafuro has written that the emancipation of women, as promulgated in this period by emancipationists like Beccari and others already mentioned, was "Più esercizio di virtù che acquisizione di diritti" (2011, p. 148). Tafuro claims that these women had a somewhat contradictory ideal of woman in mind, an ideal that seemed to oppose and enforce stereotypical gender roles at the same time: women should have civil, legal and political rights, but respect the role nature has assigned to them. They should be better educated in order to better serve the Country, not for themselves. They should aspire to an equal social standing to men, but not forget their place. In practice, to most emancipationists, women had to gain men's social standing without giving up what made them inherently females; to others, women had to be educated so that they could better fulfil their obligations to their family and their Country, but not necessarily better their own status.

The belief that both sexes had pre-determined characteristics, which should be preserved in the run towards the recognition of civil rights, was both a stronghold of the group of emancipationists and its greatest contradiction, although a few exceptions remained, such as Mozzoni, mentioned earlier, Melvina Frank, and Luisa Tosco (1815-1888). Melvina Frank, fervent supporter of Mozzoni's political activity and contributor to the periodical *La Donna*, wrote that the many differences between men and women were to be attributed only to the social advantages inherent in being born male, and not to a supposed different brain or sensibility, which was radically different from what was being expressed by

other emancipationists (Frank, 1878). Of a similar opinion was Luisa Tosco, another contributor to *La Donna*, who stated how the only difference between men and women in early history had been physical strength. Men had equated intelligence with strength, and had therefore started to regard women as inferior, placing a huge burden of responsibilities on their shoulders and taking away their rights (Tosco, 1875). Tosco also theorised that the virtues now attributed to women, such as the tame, shy, gentle nature, were a direct consequence of men stripping all independence from them and leaving them in a condition of subservience: "Dalla debolezza nacque la timidità, qualità di cui l'uomo assai si compiacque" (Tosco, 1875).

This incredible variety of opinions inside the same movement for the emancipation was typical of the 19th century. Based on the volume of essays and articles published by women at that time, it seems that many emancipationists of the time swung between fighting for total recognition of women's civic rights and supporting orthodox conventions of how a 'proper 'woman was supposed to behave and what her priorities should have been; the significance and effort to the cause was varied depending on women's perception of themselves and their role in society, which was clearly undermined by pseudo-scientific notions and a general, widespread belief in the necessity of keeping the status-quo. However, as Gazzetta claims, the second half of the 19th century was one of the first instances where women were collectively conscious of their social standing (2006). The vast assortment of opinions relative to the condition of women and their education is a testament in itself to the struggle of nineteenth-century emancipationists in Italy. The absence of a united front was one of the main reasons why the efforts far outweighed the results.

Donne al Lavoro

La costruzione dell'Italia unita si era fondata su Silvia [G. Leopardi, A Silvia, 1828] e su Lucia [A. Manzoni, I promessi sposi, 1825-1827], creature angelicate e pure, ideali femminili che non avevano trovato sbocco nella maturità. […] Entrambe elaborate intorno agli anni Trenta dell'Ottocento avevano costituito, per tutto il secolo lungo, un modello della donna italiana: cattolica, pura, dedita alla vita domestica, fedele(Dau Novelli, 2011)

In nineteenth-century Italy, the debate around the role of women in society was open and growing in complexity. As we have seen in the previous section focused on female education, the ideas that circulated at the time were either picturing women as different, but complementary to men, or biologically and intellectually inferior. Truly radical viewpoints were few, as even the most outspoken advocates for women's rights, such as Beccari and others, found it hard to stray from the notion of a binary representation of the two genders as a natural distinction to emphasise (Pisa, 1975). However, part of the reason why it's difficult to analyse the condition of women in the second half of nineteenth-century Italy is that it was an extremely lively time for change, and social class, along with family wealth, had quite a relevant role in defining how an individual's life would play out. Women of the working class were afflicted by extremely tough working conditions, whereby they were employed in factories while also doing housework, while noble and middle-class women had less freedom of movement, but a more comfortable life (Dau Novelli, 2011). From an economic perspective, Italy was beginning to industrialise, which in turn was fundamental to the introduction of women to the job market; not only that, it contributed to the creation of the first trade unions, and the emergence of debates around the employment of women and their role in society (Pieroni Bortolotti, 1963). There is, therefore, quite a discrepancy between those binary gender stereotypes and the varied conditions of women in nineteenth-

century society. On one hand, the narrative of the *angelo del focolare* was very popular, and a particular emphasis was placed by conduct books, light literature and similar "educational" media on a humble, dedicated, meek female model; on the other hand, though, a significant number of women of the lower classes had started to work and earn a salary to help their husbands support the family, even if in worse working conditions than men (Pieroni Bortolotti, 1963, Gazzetta, 2006, Zamperlin, 2009).

The late 19th century also saw women employed in massive numbers in more 'intellectual jobs', such as stenographers, switchboard operators, office employees; in particular, primary school teachers were much in demand (though poorly compensated for their long hours) as a result of new laws (like the Legge Casati, 1859, and the Legge Coppino, 1876), designed to improve literacy for boys and girls. Male teachers were not allowed to teach in all-girls schools, especially since some of the subjects were an exclusive prerogative of women, such as housework and needlework, therefore the number of female teachers grew exponentially. In 1913, women constituted 70% of primary school teaching staff (Zamperlin, 2009, p. 220). In this section I will touch on different issues regarding women and their role as workers, analysing the condition of working class and middle class women, with a focus on different ideas circulating at that time regarding women's salaried work. In particular, I will show how fundamentally class impacted on a woman's decision to join a working environment, which career choices were available, but also which actions were undertaken by women activists to improve working conditions.

Teachers, stenographers, and other female-dominated careers in Italy after Unification

Only a handful of scholars have explored female-dominated careers in Italy in this period, so I have mostly used data collected by Patrizia Zamperlin in 2009. Right before the Unification, female literacy was at an all-time low: in the Veneto region, for instance, there were 1615 male primary schools as opposed to 118 all-girls schools, and the situation was not dissimilar in other regions (Trotto, cited in Zamperlin, 2009, p.215). As mentioned above, a profession that started to be in demand after 1861 had been the *maestra*: working long hours and for a lower salary than their male counterparts, their responsibilities also varied considerably depending on the municipality. In some cities, like Udine, only unmarried women were hired, and in the event of marriage they were immediately fired: the reasoning behind it was that only women who were physically pure would possess the intellectual honesty and propriety fundamental to mould young minds, although, since they were celibate women, people often gossiped that the reason they would choose work over marriage was that they enjoyed being 'libertines'. Accusations regarding their supposed propensity for theft and corruption were also quite numerous, to the point where some women attempted suicide (Dei, 1994).

Women teachers had also an added obligation compared to their male counterparts: they were considered a second mother, "premurosa, prima che colta, saggia prima che sapiente, presenza vigile più che guida autorevole" (Zamperlin, p. 221). Together with the children's actual mothers, they were supposed to instil in young minds duty to their country, honesty and industriousness. Zamperlin emphasises that this onus did not preclude a

careful attention towards the children's studies, and in fact they often subscribed to periodicals such as *Il Corriere delle maestre elementari* in order to keep up to date and improve the quality of their teaching. Not dissimilarly to male elementary teachers, they quite often joined political associations in order to lay claims to their right to retirement benefits, to vote, and others.

Other important career opportunities that became available to middle-class women were those of stenographers, telegraphers, office employees, secretaries, and similar. A common denominator was the extremely low salary; in only a few years, seeing as women could be paid as little as 40 cents a month, compared to men's monthly salary, which was up to 600 cents (Zamperlin, 2009, p.218), employers were employing mostly, if not only women. Moreover, most middle-class men, despite having the same level of education, preferred to search for other, more fulfilling jobs. Training classes were available for all the aforementioned careers, and were often compulsory. They taught the future employee the basics of the job, but a working-class woman could only have dreamed of entering the job market as a stenographer, or a secretary; most of them would not have been able to finish school, so due to their low literacy, the only available choice would have been working in a factory, or working from home as a seamstress, or a laundress, or helping their husbands in the fields. In the north of Italy, a particularly common job was also that of the *mondina*, the rice weeder. Interestingly enough, even though those new, more intellectual job opportunities, such as teachers and secretaries, had become a popular choice for educated, middle-class women, there was no trace of them in textbooks and materials for school up until the end of World War II. In those books, Zamperlin states, the only jobs that women were pictured doing were only those of the farmer, the laundress, the house wife, and only rarely, the nurse (2009, p.225) It is clear that, despite the rising number of working women

and their growing participation in the public sphere, female labour was not seen as something that ought to be encouraged in children, proof that society at large still disapproved of anything that would drive women away from what was considered their rightful place, il focolare.

Women were also performers in theatre, silent film and at the opera; the *diva* - such as Carlotta Marchionni (1796-1864), Adelaide Ristori (1822-1906), Giacinta Pezzana (1849-1919), and, of course, Eleonora Duse (1858-1924), to name just a few - “had a celebrity following and was idolized by (mostly) women while othered as the “dark continent” by entrenched patriarchal societal structures and mysoginy (Mitchell, 2021, p.34). While it was not an easy profession by any means, Laura Mariani states that there was, at the time, “un contesto nutrito di attrici brave, amate dal pubblico” (2017, p.5), who mostly had inherited this career and that had been placed on a stage fairly young (p.13). It was a stressful, draining occupation, particularly as actresses had to draw a hard line between their public and private spheres: in public there were higher expectations placed on them regarding their physical appearance, which had to be flawless and alluring, while in private they were expected to look like any other respectable middle-class working woman in order to protect their reputation. In fact, at the time it wasn’t unusual for actresses to retire early or to take long breaks, even for years: for instance, Pezzana left the stage for almost eight years, Duse for twelve (Mariani, p.16). Women directed as well, such as Francesca Bertini (1892-1985) and Elena Notari (1875- 1946), Italy's first female director and one of the most prolific of her time, but there were not many. Moreover, some female writers became so captivated by the theatre to write numerous reviews before trying their hand at writing plays, such as the aforementioned Matilde Serao (Mitchell, 2021, p.99).

Worhty of mention are also the many women who worked as journalists in periodicals and newspapers: the increased literacy rates, in women as well as men, had determined also a rise in women readers who regularly read magazines for women. Many popular women writers at the time (such as Serao, Colombi and Neera) published in *Nuova Antologia*, *Fanfulla della Domenica* and other newspapers (Mitchell, 2014, p.33). Overall, as popular as these authors might have become to their readers, it should be noted that society still frowned upon women who chose to not focus exclusively on their domestic duties.

Anna Maria Mozzoni, Anna Kuliscioff and the debate about women's rights

It would be impossible to examine the conditions of 19th century Italian women workers without at least mentioning the debate between Anna Maria Mozzoni (previously mentioned in the chapter on women's education, pp. 22-29) and Anna Kuliscioff, two activists that considered gender equality essential to the advancement of society. Anna Maria Mozzoni, as we mentioned previously, came from a noble family and from privilege; from her perspective, education was the primary means of propelling Italy into the future: "Il sollevamento morale ed intellettuale della donna è innegabilmente uno dei bisogni più sentiti e più confessati del tempo nostro" she wrote, and that being cautious to demand for equality, like more moderate women predicted, would not accomplish much (Mozzoni, 1866, p.8).

Anna Kuliscioff (1853-1925) was one of the first women in Italy to have graduated in Medicine, but also a very active Socialist militant. One of her most relevant works is "Donne proletarie, a voi: per il suffragio femminile", published in the socialist periodical *Avanti!* in 1913, in which she detailed the reasons why women, particularly working-class women,

should be allowed to vote. Kuliscioff had an extremely multifaceted perspective around female emancipation, as her socialist background no doubt influenced her: she believed that women and men had to work together for equal rights, in factories and in society at large, because gender oppression was a manifestation of broader forms of oppression, which were social and economic (Galbusera, 2015, p. 32). It is clear that Kuliscioff saw inequality in much broader terms than simply gender-related, and in fact she firmly believed that, in order to obliterate those pernicious sexist stereotypes, access to equal working conditions was vital: "Mi pare quindi, che solo col lavoro equamente retribuito, o retribuito almeno al pari dell'uomo, la donna farà il primo passo avanti ed il più importante, perché soltanto col diventare economicamente indipendente, essa si sottrarrà al parassitismo morale, e potrà conquistare la sua libertà, la sua dignità ed il vero rispetto dell'altro sesso" (Galbusera, 2015, p.43)

A paradox of which Kuliscioff was aware, was that the more women gained visibility in the public sphere, the less access and decisional power they seemed to obtain. She was not wrong: despite there being a majority of women, rather than men, working in industrial and agricultural areas all over the country (ISTAT, 2018), universal suffrage for women was finally obtained much, much later than for men, in 1946. She considered the dominion of men over women in a time where women had consistently advanced to be anachronistic, and she believed that the next fundamental steps were an eight-hour working day, an equal salary to men, the freedom to use their earnings as they wished, the abstention from industrial and agricultural work in the last two months of a pregnancy, and a fixed minimum salary for homeworking. These would ensure economic freedom, and subsequently, independence from men. Unlike Anna Maria Mozzoni, who considered herself an ardent feminist, Kuliscioff had not quite espoused the feminist cause, which she believed to be

classist and concerned mainly, if not exclusively, with middle-class women, whom she thought were already rather privileged (2015, p.106). Kuliscioff and Mozzoni's on-going debate around emancipation was always quite passionate, but what Kuliscioff really could not fathom was "[…] il sincero idealismo di qualche diecina di donne che si illudono di combattere sul serio per l'emancipazione della donna – anzi di tutte le donne, dalla contessa all'umile operaia […]" while abstaining from joining any political faction (2015, p.103). Kuliscioff believed the concept of fighting for women's rights without a political party to carry their grievances and proposals to the Parliament utopian at best, if not decidedly naïve: from her perspective, the Socialist party had successfully campaigned for a legislation that would benefit women workers, and at last, in 1902, new laws that ensured safety checks, maternity leave, and other important measures were passed. When Mozzoni opposed protective legislation, arguing that "it turned women labourers into a subordinate class" (Russell, 1997, p. 51), Kuliscioff become convinced that the proletariat and their needs (particularly women's) had to be prioritised before an abstract "questione femminile" that only seemed to benefit noble and bourgeois women. In reality, Mozzoni and Kuliscioff's beliefs were more alike than they would have been willing to admit: Mozzoni (and her League) joined in 1888 the *Partito Operaio Italiano* (Kuliscioff had refused her entry to the Socialist Party), and she had always been quite hostile towards the industrial bourgeoisie, "[…] che va ogni dì più sostituendosi alla vecchia aristocrazia" as she mentioned in a letter to Salvatore Morelli (1876).

More moderate emancipationists, such as Alaide Beccari and the contributors to her periodical, *La Donna*, also discussed the topic of women's working rights from different viewpoints, but their ideas, while broad-ranging, could ultimately be summed up into a main, quite restrained, argument: women had a right to access a better education, to earn as much

as men for the same job, and a right to a career in any field they desired; this last point, however, was the most debated over (along with the dispute over suffrage and civil rights), as some felt that some jobs would counterproductively take women away from the true expression of their femininity, which was taking care of their family. Some, such as Malvina Frank, advocated for careers that would permit them to work from home (which was already happening in many middle-class households, where women worked as seamstresses, lace and shirt makers or doing all kinds of needlework), while others promoted a fairer division of household chores between spouses and supported women's right to pursue any career that would intellectually empower them (Beccari, 1886). The main issue that Kuliscioff found with these ideas, was how abstract they were: most debates were lacking suggestions as to how they could empower women in practice, in current society; and although at least Mozzoni's beliefs were not as far from Kuliscioff's as it seemed, ultimately it was difficult to see concrete proposals in these women's writings. In a way, Kuliscioff was right: Mozzoni's *Lega* and other feminist organisations had failed in their main endeavour, which was to gain the administrative vote: all legislative proposals on that issue were rejected (Minghetti 1861, Lanza 1871, Nicotera 1876-77, Depretis 1882).

It is fair to say that women's circumstances in the second half of the 19th century were definitely less dire than they had been only fifty years prior, particularly for the middle class, which had seen the most change. They had started to gather, to organise associations to promote women's rights such Mozzoni's *Lega promotrice degli interessi femminili* founded in 1879, the *Associazione nazionale per la donna* founded in Rome in 1897, the *Unione femminile nazionale* opened in Milan in 1899 and the *Consiglio nazionale delle donne italiane*, created in 1903, which was part of the *Consiglio internazionale femminile*. More job opportunities had opened to women than ever before, and though working conditions were

hard, it was the first of a series of small steps towards the recognition of equal rights. Social class and privilege could make a huge impact on whether women had the chance to work, depending on their level of literacy; they were not yet able to choose a job, or indeed whether to work at all, since they required permission from their husband or their father to make that decision. In 1919, however, there was a partial opening to public servant positions, which had previously been men's prerogative, and the legislation around the husbands 'authority was repealed, so that women did no longer need explicit, written permission from their spouses to choose a career.

Most fundamental transformations happened in the twentieth century, but there is no doubt that the women of the late 19th century paved the way for what was to come. Having provided an overview of some key issues which were impacting on women at the time, I now move forward to focus on Regina di Luanto.

Chapter Two: Regina di Luanto and the subversion of femininity

Tant'è; questo avanzo di romanticismo, che stride tanto col positivismo ideale e reale del tempo nostro e che dura agonizzante nella retorica della quale un uomo crede necessario far uso nella corte a una signora, mi pare davvero grottesco.
"Libera!" (1895)

Regina di Luanto (*nom de plume* of Guendalina Lipparini Roti) was a talented woman writer, who, along with others such as Neera, Grazia Pierantoni Mancini (1841-1915), Matilde Serao, Ada Negri (1870-1945), Beatrice Speraz, became quite popular in the second half of the 19th century for narrating the troubles and disadvantages which characterised the condition of women (the so-called *questione femminile*) in Italy. As Antonia Arslan states, her work and the work of many other women writers constitutes an extremely important aspect of the literary landscape of the second half of nineteenth-century Italy (1998, p. 43); this is not only because its quality, given the mainly auto-didactical education of most of these women, ranges between the average and the exceptional, but also because of the noticeable increase (from 12% in the 1870s to 18% in the 1890s) of novels by women that was published in that period (Perozzo, 2013, 233). The range of this opus is such that I consider it an extremely important piece of the puzzle to understand the *questione femminile*. Most importantly, I believe it gives some insight as to the complexity and variety of ideas that circulated at the time regarding the status of women in society.

Di Luanto's narrative choices were defined by the literary critic Luigi Russo a "morboso successo" (1923, p.122); The many positive reviews of her work clearly indicate

how popular she was[5]. And yet, Regina di Luanto is mentioned in only a few anthologies before and after her death, in 1914[6]. A relevant example, which allowed me to read the main novella analysed in my research, is “Le scrittrici dell’Ottocento. Da Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel a Matilde Serao” (Sanvitale ed., 1995) which contains brief biographical notes and the work *Un martirio*. Since then, nothing much was written about her until 1980, when Giuliana Morandini published a compendium of women writers titled *La voce che è in lei*. If it had not been for Morandini’s work, Regina di Luanto would have probably been forgotten for a long time, but it’s Emanuela Cortopassi’s unpublished doctoral thesis *Regina di Luanto (1862-1914)*, written in 1997, that has really detailed most of what we know about this writer’s life and literary production. Her thorough research in several libraries and archives brought to light a more comprehensive account of Regina di Luanto’s life, and corrected some assumptions that other scholars have made in the past, including the supposition that the writer had been born in Bologna, or Florence (she was actually born in Terni), where she lived most of her life. The biographical notes in the next section were originally uncovered by Cortopassi, as other accounts of her life have not been the most detailed.

Much speculation still exists as to her political leanings and opinion of the emancipation movement, as we do not possess private writings that could share some light on the matter. However, it can be observed that her fictional protagonists had quite modern

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[5] See: *Rivista italiana di Scienze, di Lettere, Arti e Teatri* (1891), 16th January, n. 1; *Rivista italiana di Scienze, di Lettere, Arti e Teatri* (1892). 30th November, n. 11; *Rivista italiana di Scienze, di Lettere, Arti e Teatri* (1895) 8th March; *Rivista italiana di Scienze, di Lettere, Arti e Teatri* (1903) 31th August 1903, n. 7-8; *Rivista italiana di Scienze, di Lettere, Arti e Teatri (1910) 26th June, n. 6; E' morta "Regina di Luanto"* (1914). In *“Il* Nuovo Giornale”, 13th September.

[6] Catanzaro, C(1890) La donna italiana nelle scienze, nelle lettere e nelle arti. Dizionario biografico delle scrittrici e delle artiste viventi. Firenze : Biblioteca editrice della Rivista italiana.
Villani, C(1915) Stelle femminili. Dizionario biografico. Napoli; Roma; Milano: Società Editrice Dante Alighieri. Rovito, T(1922) Letterati e giornalisti contemporanei. FORGOTTEN Books. Russo, L. Manacorda, G(1958) I narratori (1850-1957). Milano; Messina: G. Principato. Casati, G(1924) Manuale di letture per le biblioteche, le famiglie e le scuole. Milano: R. Ghirlanda. Casati, G(1926) Dizionario degli scrittori d'Italia: dalle origini fino ai viventi. Milano: R. Ghirlanda. De Blasi, J(1930) Antologia delle scrittrici italiane dalle origini al 1800. Firenze: C. Cherubini. Bandini Buti, M(1941) Poetesse e scrittrici. Milano : EBBI, Istituto editoriale italiano Tosi

aspirations, and their search for knowledge and accomplishment was portrayed as progressive and the distinctive trait of a (future) advanced society; her “positive” male characters were extremely supportive of this quest, either being portrayed as encouraging partners, benevolent teachers, or both. As we will see in this chapter, a positivist outlook on society and a modern approach to gendered relationships are specific and unique traits of this author, which set her apart from most of her female writer contemporaries and make her one of the most enlightened writers of her literary landscape. Worthy of notice and exploration are her protagonists’ sense of self-awareness, desire for autonomy and equal standing in society, as opposed to more conservative female characters in novels by most of Regina di Luanto’s peers.

In this chapter we will explore this author’s distinctive approach to gendered relationships by focusing on female agency and gender stereotypes in her novels while also relating her narrative choices to other female authors of her time. I will show also how, while she did not write political essays, Regina di Luanto’s message remains a powerful political statement for equality and a deliberate attempt to overcome binary representations of gender. In order to investigate this, I will draw from theories such as the political unconscious (Jameson, 1981), narrative empathy (Petraschka and Konrad, 2018) and Raewyn Connell’s social theory of gender. This chapter will also include some biographical notes on Regina di Luanto, contemporary research on her most successful novels, and an analysis of her work *Il martirio* in relation to her other novels and work by some of her female peers.

Biographical notes

Guendalina Chiara Gilda Lipparini spent her youth in Terni, where she was born in 1862 in a wealthy family, but later moved to Rome, where she met the Embassy vice-consul Alberto Roti, whom she married in 1881. Since then, she was known as the Countess Roti, as her husband was from a noble family. She later moved to Florence, where her husband's family was from, and there she published a collection of short novels, *Acque forti* (1890) under the pseudonym we know today, which was an anagram of Guendalina Roti. The short novels were written "con stile scorrevole e brioso, ritraenti aspetti di vita contemporanea, con al centro figure femminili" (Cortopassi, 1994, p.13). She also contributed to two magazines, *La Donna, rivista quindicinale illustrata (not to be confused with Beccari's magazine by the same name)* and *Rivista italiana di scienze, di lettere, arti e teatri* for a few years. Her contributions in *La Donna* were mostly about fashion and good manners, but also two short stories were published respectively in 1906 and 1907, *Un Natale del capitano* and *Un regalo di Natale*. *Rivista italiana di scienze, di lettere, arti e teatri* also published two of her short stories, *Dolor ex ipsa vindicta* (1891) and *Navigando* (1891). A review of *Acque forti* also strongly encouraged the readership to buy the collection, which was printed by the publisher Barbera(in Cortopassi, p. 13-14)

Her first (and possibly most popular) novel *Salamandra* was published only two years later, in 1892. The publisher was Luigi Roux, of Turin, with whom she would have a life-long working relationship: all of her following works were printed by his publishing house. The central theme of *Salamandra* was female sexual frigidity, and as can be imagined, quite the daring topic in nineteenth-century Italy; and yet, the reviewer of *Rivista Italiana* praised it as a "lavoro di polso, fatto con ogni accorgimento d'arte" (in Cortopassi, p.17). After

Salamandra and her second work, *Ombra e Luce* (1893), Regina di Luanto was already considered an accomplished writer. She wrote several novels in the following years, such as *La scuola di Linda* (1894), *Un martirio* (1894), *Libera!* (1895), *La prova* (1896), and *Tocchi in penna* (1898). In the same year, her husband died in Brazil, where he was royal consul of Italy. As a thirty-six year-old widow with no children, she decided to move to Pisa, where she met her future husband-to-be, the jeweller Alberto Gatti, whom she married in 1911. After writing several more novels, such as *Gli agonizzanti* (1900), *La servetta* (1901), *Il nuovissimo amore* (1903), she moved to Milan, her final place of residence, with Gatti; however, it seems that she spent only the winter there, while in spring and summer she travelled to Cannes, Nice, Venice and to the lakes (Maggiore, Como). According to Cortopassi (p.5), she was protective of her privacy and quite secretive, so only close friends might have known she was the famous author Regina di Luanto. However, we do know that her identity had not been disclosed, as in one of her first reviews, the author encouraged her to come forward and disclose her identity(*Rivista italiana di scienze, di lettere, arti e teatri*, 1891, n.1)

In September 1914, at the age of fifty-two years old, Guendalina Lipparini died in Milan. *Il Nuovo Giornale* celebrated her as “La scrittrice più audace, più avanzata, più arrischiata che abbia avuto l’Italia letteraria dell’ultimo ventennio” (1914, n°9), and several national and local newspapers also reported the news, as a testament to her popularity and to her readership’s appreciation of her work: *Il Corriere della Sera*, *Il Secolo*, *Cronaca di Milano*, *La Nazione*, *Cronaca di Firenze*, and last but not least, *Rivista italiana di scienze, di lettere, arti e teatri* (in Cortopassi, p. 20).

Overview of literary criticism and narrative themes

As mentioned, Cortopassi's work analysed this author's most important novels, identifying several key themes that would inform later research (Åkerström, 2002, 2006, 2007). In her view, most of Regina di Luanto's opus is structured on apparent opposites: particularly, the dichotomies religion/science, love/marriage, society/individual. Not only that, Cortopassi helpfully identified a common pattern in this writer's work, which is the portrayal of a positive female character (usually the protagonist), a positive male character (which may serve as a supporter, or a benevolent teacher) and two or more negative characters. However, despite this seemingly simplistic approach to characterisation, the antagonism between positive and negative characters is not fixed or worse, sterile: "esso dà luogo, invece, ad un confronto che auspica l'integrazione reciproca, anche se non può avere un riconoscimento pieno nella società" (p.121). In fact, one can say that personal growth is one of the main traits of Di Luanto's female protagonists; with one or two exceptions (as in *La scuola di Linda*, where the main character Linda's "growth" can only be described as an ascent, or rather, descent from naiveness to cynical disillusion and vanity), her women look for and appreciate knowledge and honesty.

Their interest towards their readings, their studies and their tendency to admire and elevate science and progress, are in stark contrast to other women author's main female characters, such as Matilde Serao's *femme fatale* Lucia (*Fantasia*, 1883), who ruthlessly cares only about herself. Serao expressed time and time again her resignation in regards to women's standing in society and in fact conformed (at least publicly) to a binary view of female and male "innate" qualities (see Pozzato, 1979, Madrignani, 1983, and Fanning, 1991), which compelled her to elevate submissive women characters in her work, and to

portray independent, strong women as cynical and egotistical. As critic Judith Jeffrey Howard pointed out, despite Serao's long and successful career, "there were no Matilde-Serao-lady-journalists in her work" (1975, pp. 68–9). Kroha writes in this regard: " Since many of them [women writers] earned a large part of their income from mainstream women's journalism, they had to tread lightly through a minefield of sensitive issues. Not surprisingly, […] their political positions, for the most part, were anything but radical, and often contradicted their imaginative writings" (2000, p.167). Matilde Serao, Neera, and the Marchesa Colombi are three examples of women writers of the time who had to balance their views with mainstream society as they were well-known; Di Luanto, on the other hand, having decided to stay away from public view, had clearly far fewer compunctions, and could afford to be as controversial in her work as she wished. Moreover, we know she did not depend financially on her work, given her social status, so she was altogether free from repercussions. That gave her complete sovereignty over her process, which for the time was a true luxury. Therefore, she openly supported Positivism and progress in many of her pieces (*Libera!*, 1895, *La prova*, 1896, *Il nuovissimo amore*, 1903), while religion was mostly absent. Cortopassi stresses in this regard: "Gli ideali morali cui si ispirano [her female characters], non trovano alcun riscontro in forme di religiosità tradizionale, ma sono il risultato di una visione della vita improntata a un'etica della responsabilità individuale" (1997, p. 135). Individual responsibility, as opposed to Serao's sacrifice, submission and suffering, was also a pretty distinctive trait of Di Luanto's "positive" characters.

I would add that even spirituality was regarded with suspicion by this writer; in *Un martirio*, the husband, Corrado, has a friend, Stein, who dabbles in the paranormal, but this is portrayed by the author as a ridiculous farce, at best, and a dangerous scam at worst. I cannot say for certain that this perspective is unchanged in all the writer's work (as it was

not possible to locate copies of all her publications), however, it is a stance that does reflect this time's positivist outlook on religion, whereas science is portrayed as an essential tool to the survival and betterment of society. Therefore, seeing as individual responsibility is a fundamental part of these protagonists 'ethics, the traditional Christian values inspired by the virgin Mary, such as self-sacrifice, abnegation, and repression of sexuality, find no place in Di Luanto's work.

When discussing positivism in nineteenth-century Italy, it is essential to remember that, along with scientific progress and a diminished faith in religious institutions, new theories on the supposed biological inferiority of women had also become quite popular. Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871) had reached the "conclusion" that woman's evolutionary development was slow, when compared to man's, and other scientists agreed: Mobius wrote *On the Physiological Debility of Women* (1898), while Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso (as mentioned in the previous chapter on women's education) wrote *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale*, which argued that women were naturally predisposed towards corruption and immoral behaviour (1893, p.36). Otto Weininger (1880-1903), who wrote *Sex and character* (1903), later stated that "only the male element in emancipated women that craves for emancipation" (p.68), as all intelligent women possessed many male characteristics, physical or otherwise (p.65). What is interesting to note is that, despite the popularity of these theories in scientific circles, and Di Luanto's already mentioned propensity towards positivism, she did not seem to ascribe to ideas of gender difference, or indeed, inferiority. She, very carefully, maintained a positive perspective on science and its wonders, while simultaneously rejecting Lombroso's theories on women's supposed inferiority. If we consider this writer's women characters, in fact, we can see an admirable attempt at removing stereotypical gender "differences" from her work

and at creating characters who are "whole" and not simply male or female. Kroha talks of a male "anxiety generated by the potential for a blurring of gender boundaries" which "undoubtedly accounts for this obsession with establishing difference" (in Panizza, Wood, 2000, p.165) between men and women. Not only that, if scientific theories of the time are to be considered, male intellectuals and scientists seemed even more concerned with establishing women's inferiority in terms of both physiology and psychology. And yet, despite the popularity of these theories, Regina di Luanto created fictional relationships which, in many cases, go beyond the stereotypical gender differences advocated by the science of the time, while still appreciating the contribution to progress that science delivered.

Cortopassi and Åkerström both agree that this writer's comparison between light and dark, science and religious values is a key motif of her work (Åkerström, 2006, p.61); I concur with their statements, and would add that society is also often portrayed as a counterpart to science and progress, an expression of the worst human features: hypocrisy, selfishness, and degeneration of moral values. Especially for women, Regina di Luanto's portrayal of society has quite a negative connotation: familial and societal duties bind women (and men, to a lesser extent) to a life of self-sacrifice through marriage, as highlighted by the author in several of her works, such as *Per il lusso* (1912), but particularly in *Un martirio* (1894) and *Il nuovissimo amore* (1903).

Another *leitmotif* in her novels that reflects her ideas on women's role in society is that aiming to marry for love is a recipe for disaster: having married up the social ladder, her novels and personal experiences were based in the world of the aristocracy (with the exception of the novel *La servetta*, 1901, and short stories such as *Un Natale del Capitano*, published in *La Donna* in the Christmas edition of 1906), where marriage was romanticised by many young girls as the ultimate step to which they should aspire. And yet, Regina di

Luanto portrays marriage as a limit and a burden, a convention, or a business transaction that should be treated as such. Åkerström observed that issues such as divorce and the overarching power that husbands had over their wives and children in nineteenth-century Italy were a popular topic of discussion for women and often a theme in literature, or articles in periodicals: "Le aspettative nuove delle donne […] erano ovviamente troppo importanti per non avere forti ripercussioni anche nella letteratura" (2007, p.149). However, while many women writers of the time, such as Neera or Matilde Serao, "described" in the manner of *verismo* the harrowing conditions in which often women lived, Regina di Luanto brought to her novels a fresh perspective on how she believed society should evolve to meet both men and women's needs: in fact, in her work there is frequently conflict between the female protagonist and society. In *La scuola di Linda* (1894), the main character is raised in an élite environment that gradually corrupts her morals and turns her into another beautiful, yet vain and shallow doll in an aristocratic mansion – "Un romanzo di formazione al negativo", as Cortopassi describes it (p.45); in *Il nuovissimo amore* (1903), Mina Argenti struggles against the association of marriage and love perpetuated by society, while Antonia de Gurnesi does the same in *Libera!* (1895). In *Un martirio*, the newlywed Laura is forced to confront the realisation that her husband's expectations (and by extension, society's) as regards her role in his life are extremely limiting: as he has a very poor opinion of educated women, she is not allowed to be anything more than a glorified maid in her own home. While we have no confirmation of this, Regina di Luanto may have been initially inspired by Neera's L'indomani (1889), published only a few years prior, which had a similar premise: a young wife struggling to adapt to married life and to her husband's expectations. However, while Neera's novel has a markedly positive resolution, the same can't be said for Di Luanto's tragic novel.

Regina di Luanto never wrote articles on women's emancipation, which can perhaps in itself be seen as a choice not to be (outwardly) politically involved. As she wrote under a pseudonym, it could be that she feared she'd be recognised; regardless of the reason, we will never know how she really viewed the emancipation movement, but given the premise of all her novels and short stories (that is, the evolution of people into an egalitarian society, led by science and progress), it seems likely that she would have been a supporter. In her work at least, she advocated strongly for change. Her protagonists are advocates as well, for reason and progress; they study, they read, the have faith in science, and they are not blind to their own faults. In her last novel, *Per il lusso* (1912), two sisters, Stenia and Fulvia, debate women's condition, and while one claims to be incapable of being brave and defying expectations, the other encourages her to give up the idea of marriage (which will not make her happy) and to leave town together instead:

"Io sono decisa a lottare ed a vincere... vieni con me," — proseguì impetuosamente — "Ci aiuteremo, ci consoleremo, ci incoraggeremo a vicenda... so che nella via dove sto per mettere piede, incontrerò ostacoli, difficoltà enormi, maggiori forse di quanto già mi aspetto... Non importa, andrò avanti lo stesso... ma se invece di essere sola avrò una compagna che dividerà con me gli stessi pericoli e gli stessi dolori, mi pare che sarà per tutte e due un sollievo ed un'arma di più di difesa" (p. 197)

Here, as in other novels, Regina di Luanto highlights the need for women to be independent and responsible for their own lives, thus showing quite a controversial concept for the time: that any relationship should be based on a mutual choice, rather than necessity. Marriage also, according to Di Luanto, should either be a business transaction in which both partners consciously participate or a choice dictated exclusively by the feelings of both, not societal expectations, and not the desire to be a dependant, cared for and protected, but ultimately powerless.

A brief digression is here necessary to clarify the legal context of marriage in Italy, to better understand the historical and social context in which Di Luanto wrote. Before 1865, the “Tribunale criminale del Vicario” (an ecclesiastical institution) handled all disputes between man and wife; this tribunal, operated “in diretta concorrenza […] con le multiformi istituzioni laiche che costellano il panorama della giustizia di Antico Regime” (Dezza, 2016, p.247). As Domenico Rizzo states, this tribunal highlighted the necessity of reciprocal fidelity and respect within a marriage: “Un precetto a vivere onestamente – sotto pena di misure più severe – inflitto alla moglie si accompagna più spesso a un precetto rivolto al marito affinché assolva ai propri doveri” (Rizzo, 2003, p.21). So in a sense, while the husband was considered the master of the house and of whoever lived in it, according to ecclesiastical law there existed a mutual obligation within marriage that could be almost seen (for the time) as equity. For instance, a wife’s fidelity was only due inasmuch her husband provided for her and her children.

After 1865, however, the Codice Pisanelli came into being; while it ostensibly stated that “Il matrimonio impone ai coniugi la obbligazione reciproca della coabitazione, della fedeltà e della assistenza” (art. 130), the only duty to which a husband was really bound was that of not living with a lover in the same house he shared with his wife (Rizzo, p.23). Therefore, while before the Codice Pisanelli a woman would be protected if, for instance, she had to leave an abusive husband, after 1865 there was no legal justification for the same; if she so wished, she would have needed her husband’s permission, which an abuser would not grant, and usually she would have to pay a sum to the husband if she was released from her duties. If she did not have any money, or her husband did not consent to a separation, a number of months in prison was a common punishment (Rizzo, 2016). According to the Codice Pisanelli then, a husband’s dominion over his wife was absolute.

Regina di Luanto was born in 1862, only three years before that law was instituted; however, her perspective on marriage was more similar to that mutual respect and enforcement of duties within a marriage that was more typical of the earlier years of the 19th century. With that in mind, her novel *Un martirio*, which I will focus on in the second half of this chapter, appears to be a strong indictment of the unlimited powers granted to men by the law. Di Luanto will continue to criticise the institution of marriage also in later novels; in *Il nuovissimo amore* (1903), which has been termed as a "psychological" work by Cortopassi (p.17) because of the many pages dedicated to exploring the divergence of physical and spiritual love, an extremely disenchanted and cynical young woman, Mina, falls in love with a man who is not her husband. As mentioned before, marriage is regarded as a business association, not a product of affection and intimacy: "Saremo due associati in un'opera comune e se sapremo attenerci ognuno al nostro compito, potremo sperare in buoni risultati... Vedremo!" says Mina's lover when talking about his future wife(p. 296)

Love, on the other hand, is depicted as a noble feeling that requires neither carnal acts or practical conventions or ties to make it real:

> Così dalla analisi spietata, che di loro stessi andavano compiendo, spinti da un acre bisogno di fondersi, d'immedesimarsi l'uno nell'altro, scaturiva chiara e luminosa la prova di una perfetta corrispondenza che aboliva fin la necessità d'ogni intesa apparente. Essi, infatti, non avevano bisogno di parlare per capirsi; un fluido imponderabile pareva emanare dai loro spiriti e trasfondere loro una reciproca comprensione(1903, pp. 159-60)

While in her earlier works, such as *Salamandra*, physical intimacy is sought after and considered paramount to a relationship (the protagonist Eva is incessantly looking for love, physical and emotional, without ever finding it), in *Il nuovissimo amore* Mina loves with her whole heart, but her deep intimacy with her lover is in spirit only. Despite a somewhat

sentimental rendition of love, what is remarkable in this novel and others by Luanto, is her keen observation of human interactions; her conclusion that the institution of marriage was damaging for her female contemporaries emerges in different novels in different ways.

From a certain perspective, Regina di Luanto does not have much in common with other female writers of that period: her vast array of women characters constantly subverted gender stereotypes, not only by not endorsing a single ideal of femininity, but by actively fighting to break free of them. Cynthia Duncan stated that “Women writers in the 19th century portrayed their female characters as mothers or as purely spiritual beings (without a body), in keeping with dominant discursive practices of the times” (1994, p.6). While I believe Duncan’s words to be a generalisation (we know of so many women authors who did anything but, including Di Luanto), her statement does account for literary figures such as the *angelo del focolare* and the common tendency to de-sexualise women in that period, with the exception of the figure of the *femme fatale*, which was used to caution them against defying their feminine duties. It was, indeed, possible to write about women in a less stereotypical fashion: Regina di Luanto’s opus is proof of that. However, her work was harshly criticised in religious and moderate publications such as *La Tavola Rotonda* and *Civiltà Cattolica* because of the perceived scandalous nature of her work: “Intanto si tengano per avvisati i lettori, e specialmente i custodi della gioventù. Quando nel passare innanzi alle vetrine delle librerie, vedranno ivi in mostra su qualche libro il nome di Regina Di Luanto, non che stender la mano, se ne ritirino come merce appestata” (Tavola Rotonda, 1893). And again: “L'autore del romanzo *Salamandra*, l'autrice anzi, se lo pseudonimo femminile non mente, dimostra in questo lavoro una facoltà letteraria, che per farmi intendere chiamerò pittrice, per la quale credo valga la pena di parlar di un'opera, del resto, a parer mio, sbagliata da cima a fondo” (Civiltà Cattolica, 1898). On the other hand, she was also

extremely popular and received substantial praise. In *Rivista di Roma*, the following was written about her:

I romanzi di Regina di Luanto sono sempre un avvenimento letterario. L'audacia di questa scrittrice, che affronta impavidamente i problemi più ardui della società contemporanea e sa rivestirli di una forma d'arte veramente affascinante, è nota ormai a tutti i lettori(1903)

Her works seemed to try and discredit the negative connotations so widespread in Italy regarding the idea of the "new woman", which was viewed by many as a symptom of the degeneration of values in Italian society; on the contrary, in countries such as the UK and northern Europe, this "new woman literature" had become quite prolific (A relevant example is Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, 1879). A student of Cesare Lombroso, Scipio Sighele, went as far as to write an essay about the emergence of these "new" women, independent and disinterested in marriage: " La donna che chiede l'amore libero è cieca e nemica inconscia del suo sesso," he wrote, "perché l'amore libero per lei significa un periodo di libertà seguìto dalla certezza dell'abbandono e della miseria" (Sighele, 1898, p.195).

In the following section, I'm going to explore in more depth the constant struggle to subvert social norms performed by Regina di Luanto's women characters, and their drive to gain some sort of control back in an environment that has raised them to be passive and docile. In particular, I am going to analyse female agency and power (or lack thereof) in gendered relationships, with a focus on *Un martirio*, which is perhaps this author's most moving work. I will also explore theories on narrative empathy, and its link to authorial intent: while Regina Di Luanto carefully avoided exposing radical political ideas in magazines and journals, I believe that her fiction had the precise purpose of helping her readership empathise with women's struggle, and potentially, helping them to picture the possibility of a free, egalitarian future.

***Un martirio*: A tragic struggle for self-determination**

As mentioned earlier, Di Luanto's female characters represented real-life struggles for many women of the time, and her narration denounced stereotypically female and male roles, behaviours and obligations; it also proposed to offer her readership an alternative approach to gender relations. I will argue in this section that the portrayal of gendered relationships constructed in this work of fiction (and others by the same writer) not only represented a critique of real relationship struggles, but that that the portrayal of strong, independent women characters meant to offer the possibility of a better, fairer society.

I will also draw on studies regarding fictional (or narrative) empathy (Gallagher, 2012, Livingston and Mele, 1997, and Teroni, 2019), which stated that emotional responses to fiction, when congruent with the story as told by the author, are absolutely to be expected. Empathy has been defined by Gallagher as:) "1) a primary, non-reducible, other-directed feeling of concern or interest that (2) is characterized by a clear distinction between empathizer and the other person, that (3) targets the other's situated experience and (4) consciously ascribes that experience specifically to that other" (2012, p. 377). In particular, he claims as important features of empathy that "the empathizer must be led to care about the target's affective life because of context" (p.374), and that while some may be able to experience vicariously by placing themselves in the other's shoes, for most "there is no empathy unless both target and empathizer experience some affective state" (p.376). In *Un martirio*, specifically, but also in most of the works written by Di Luanto, both conditions manifest themselves: Di Luanto uses narrative strategies to encourage empathy in her audience by narrating a particularly excruciating series of events and by portraying Laura throughout the novel as almost defenseless against her husband's will. Moreover, the

"affective state" that target and empathiser both need to experience is constituted, when placed in context, by the social inferiority and vulnerability shared by many Italian women of the period. Despite the many significant differences between middle class and working class women, many women would have been able to empathise with Laura, as a strong basis of their social and political condition was constituted by their gender. Based on this premise, it can be observed that, whether the writer explicitly meant to prompt an emotional response to the protagonist's plight or not, the diaristic style of *Un martirio* would have worked well to elicit such emotional response in Di Luanto's (mostly female) readership; and that would probably prompt reflection on the unequal standing of women in nineteenth-century Italy.

As Katharine Mitchell states, "Italian domestic fiction offers an implicit feminist intervention by subtly questioning women's prescribed roles as wives and mothers" (2014, p.15) Regina Di Luanto fits well in this perspective; I will show here, however, that this author was far less subtle than most of her peers, and that her views of societal expectations were quite radical for a woman writer of that period. It is in fact not a coincidence, that while the works of Neera, La Marchesa Colombi and Matilde Serao were widely praised by conservative literary critics such as Luigi Capuana (1839-1915), Benedetto Croce and even by positivist scientist Paolo Mantegazza (in Mitchell, 2014, p.19), Di Luanto's novels were negatively criticised almost as much as they were celebrated: as we've seen in the previous section, she was accused of corrupting the minds of young girls and women alike, by writing of female sexuality, marriage, adultery and much more in a subversive fashion. Lucienne Kroha described the ambiguity of the period very well, arguing that "opportunities for self-expression were greater than they had ever been before and a variety of economic, political, social and literary forces were pushing women toward forms of consciousness that were profoundly threatening to the status quo" (1992, p.10); and yet, as observed by the popularity

of more “moderate” women writers, the pushing against the status quo of authors such as Di Luanto and activists such as Anna Maria Mozzoni and Melvina Frank, who also advocated for a complete revolution of women’s rights and freedoms in 19th century society, was very much frowned upon. That may very well be why Regina di Luanto was considered “una scrittrice audace” (Il Nuovo Giornale, IX, 13 settembre 1914) when she simply shed light on the contradictions and injustices that characterised gendered relationships of the time.

Un martirio is considered one of the best works of Regina di Luanto; it was written in 1895, and is the only work of fiction by Di Luanto that has been republished recently, in Sanvitale’s anthology, in 1997. Written in the diary form, Cortopassi has noted how the style contributed to make more of an impact on the reader, by allowing them to empathise with Laura, the main character:

> Con l’impiego del discorso in prima persona e con l’uso dell’indiretto libero, sia pur limitato all’area della breve reazione emotive, viene reso l’inquieto alternarsi di domande di una psicologia fragile, prigioniera di se stessa e di una concreta situazione oppressiva (1994, p. 49)

Its language flows freely, and its style is reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s stream of consciousness narration; while as a technique it may be employed differently, in both authors the purpose is that to attempt to replicate a character’s innermost thought process, which Di Luanto is fairly successful at in *Un martirio*. Antonio Iliano explained well how the diary form can help the readership empathise with the characters: “L’analisi introspettiva assimila un desiderio di solidarietà che si manifesta nelle successive cadenze interrogative rivolte prima, direttamente, alla presenza viva e attuale delle lettrici, e poi, indirettamente, a tutto il pubblico di lettori e fruitori del romanzo” (2001, p.12).

Laura is a young woman who has recently married university professor Corrado. Having only lived with her mother and sister, and feeling intimidated by her new husband, for whom she nonetheless feels a deep affection, she decides to start a diary that will hopefully help grant her insight into married life, and into her own feelings in regards to this new role while helping to stem her loneliness.

Laura describes herself almost immediately as a fragile-looking little thing (Martirio, p.797) as a way to justify her husband's condescending and dismissive behaviour, which she finds hurtful, even though she believes it to be a mere consequence of her timid, shy personality. In more than a few passages, she states that if she were stronger, more assertive and interesting to converse with, surely Corrado would treat her more as an equal. Here, the power structure appears to already be immovably set, with Laura apparently condemned to a subordinate position. As narrative empathy appears to mainly work through an "affective state" (Gallagher, p.376) shared by the two parties, we could hypothesise that by starting the novel in this way, Di Luanto might have wanted to create a foundation which many women readers would have at least partly identified with. In fact, Laura is portrayed from the beginning as "una creaturina fredda ed insignificante" (p.799); her build and shy demeanour, coupled with fragile physical and mental health, seem to represent the perfect victim to inspire empathy in her readership. Moreover, a fragile woman who still found the strength to defend herself and to attempt to stand up to her husband more than once, would have inspired not only sympathy, but also respect. Her body is not described in detail, but we get the impression that she looks younger than her twenty-something years, and not particularly feminine. In fact, when she attempts to seduce her husband, in hopes that he'll finally see her as his equal, as a grown woman, Corrado mocks her: "Che bambina! Ti sei vestita per me? Va là! Potevi risparmiarti la fatica!" (p. 806). Not only has she failed in the

attempt, but Corrado does not hesitate to let her know that she's only proven to be the child that she was struggling to rid herself of. The fact that she is, indeed, younger and inexperienced only enhances her feelings of powerlessness as she is embarrassed at her naiveté and lack of life experience.

Schmetkamp et al(2019) state that a character "expresses and represents a perspective that is narrated within a narrative, scripted by an implicit or explicit author" (p. 4); if so, that would necessarily imply that a character, despite its fictionality, is strongly connected to its author and would broadcast at least some of the author's perspective on a certain topic. In this particular case, I believe that creating a fragile, submissive female character who then ceaselessly fights against her abuser, might be a message, subconscious or deliberate, to Di Luanto's readership, that women should fight for their freedom. Whether this was a conscious decision of the author or not, it's hard to discount the likely link between such a negative depiction of marriage in this novel – alongside the explicit hints directed at her readership in other works by the same author about the importance of self-determination- and Di Luanto's private thoughts. As Jameson stated, "there is nothing that is not social and historical-indeed, […] everything is 'in the last analysis' political" (p.21); therefore, while we cannot be completely sure of Di Luanto's intentions, there certainly is a coherent perspective about the need for women to conquer independence and self-reliance in her whole opus, a thread that runs from her earlier to her latest works, even if expressed through different characters. The plot runs along Laura's sometimes still, sometimes tumultuous life happenings and captivates its readership by reeling it in through the young woman's growing awareness of her subordinate position in her marriage, her struggles to become someone her husband could respect and view as an equal, and finally, her desperation at being unable to pull herself free.

Within the first few pages, Laura starts to realise that her husband really has quite a low opinion of her: “Io mi convinco sempre più che Corrado non mi creda buona a nulla; io non gli ispiro che l’affetto condiscente che si ha per un essere inferiore” (p.799). And yet, she often does not recognise Corrado’s responsibilities regarding his own behaviour towards her: “Sta ’a vedere che, se è stanco, dovrebbe far dei complimenti con sua moglie!” (p.803), “Se in qualche lato è un po’ manchevole, la colpa è unicamente mia” (p.803). Undoubtedly, the author was trying to pull the readers ’heartstrings: it is in fact easier to sympathise with a young woman who not only is not aware she’s being taken advantage of, but who is also so committed to working on herself and her insecurities.

For several diary entries, Laura’s feelings alternate between frustration and shame for not being a stronger, more noteworthy person in the eyes of her husband, and melancholia for lacking stimuli and genuine affection; her routine is extremely monotonous, due partly to her shyness and difficulty in forming bonds with other people, and partly to her husband, who seems to require a maid rather than a partner. Sometimes, she questions Corrado’s intentions and behaviours, but more often than not, she folds back and returns to blaming herself.

Sexual relations are also problematic. Laura states more than once that it repulses her, and she attributes the problem to Corrado’s mechanical attitude toward it: “

Nei suoi rapporti affettuosi con me conserva la stessa regolarità con cui adempie ai suoi doveri d’ufficio. Ebbene, questo mi ripugna […] Resto passiva, chiudo gli occhi… ma nell’anima mia tumultuano strani sentimenti, quasi mi pare in quell’attimo di avere ribrezzo di Corrado! (p.804)

In fact, she recognises how young she married, how inexperienced she still is, so she blames Corrado’s lack of sensitivity and passion. In this *novella*, Di Luanto puts forward the

idea that for Laura, affection and a close relationship are natural precursors of sexual intimacy; however, this is not a blanket idea that she applies indiscriminately to all her female characters. In fact, it seems to be merely an individual preference: Eva Perelli, one of Di Luanto's first female protagonists (*Salamandra*, 1892), experimented with a lover to see if she could develop romantic feelings through sexual intercourse, and Mina Argenti of *Il nuovissimo amore* (1903) sees a definite schism between physical love and its platonic counterpart. What so clearly transpires between the pages of *Un martirio*, on the contrary, is that Laura's dissatisfaction stems from lacking an intellectual and sentimental union with Corrado, rather than just a physical one. An interesting parallel here can be drawn between Di Luanto's diverse representation of female sexual preferences, and positivist ideas regarding female sexuality: in particular, if we observe the work of two of the most popular positivist scientists of nineteenth-century Italy, Cesare Lombroso and Paolo Mantegazza, we will notice several discrepancies, but also similarities, which demonstrate the variety of ideas and beliefs circulating at the time. As mentioned in the context chapter, Cesare Lombroso was a renowned positivist anthropologist and founder of the Italian School of Positivist Criminology; in his and Guglielmo Ferrero's book, *La donna delinquente: la prostituta e la donna normale* (1893), Lombroso categorised women into either "normal", "prostitutes", or "criminals". According to his theories, "Normal" women were passive, maternal, and lacked not only a sex drive, but mental acuity; "prostitutes" and "criminals", on the other hand, were always sexually deviant, and lacking in maternal feelings and compassion. While these ideas were far from original, even back in 19th-century Italy, Lombroso's work was "significant for its scientific pretensions and the large group of students and followers who perpetuated his ideas in Italy and abroad" (Gibson, 2004, p.90). This caused notable trouble to the movement for emancipation: Italian feminists of the time,

as Gibson reports, had always put their faith in science as a way to combat religious doctrine, but both religion and science “appeared to be united in prescribing the inferiority of women. In addition, because promulgated by a man of the Left, Lombroso’s message deprived the fledgling feminist movement of a much-needed ally” (p.101). Paolo Mantegazza’s theories, on the other hand, were different: neurologist, physiologist, and anthropologist of incredible editorial success, he believed that not only women had a stronger propensity for pleasure, but that there was nothing criminal or deviant about it (Mantegazza, 1880, p. 48-49). In fact, he was against the abolition of prostitution, which he considered a “necessary evil” and in *L’arte di prender marito per far seguito all’arte di prender moglie* (1894) he explicitly encouraged women to carefully select their future husband by meeting and getting to know many prospective spouses. As Laura Tasca states, however, his success in Italian scientific circles was far more modest; while his books “furono adottati da socialisti e democratici, che ne diffodevano I precetti igienici e morali in giornali di orientamento mazziniano e anticlericale” (2004, p. 318) and were read widely by the working class, they were harshly criticised by many Italian intellectuals and the catholic Church. Lombroso’s theories, by contrast, were far more popular; he published often on publications such as “*Nuova Antologia”*, which was widely read by the educated classes, and, as Mary Gibson notes, since positivist criminologists were “what we call today public intellectuals, eager to popularise their findings and to influence legislation” (p.99), he was often invited to comment on many subjects unrelated to crime.

Regina di Luanto’s view on female sexuality seems to be at odds with the predominant views of the time (which were also Lombroso’s); her protagonists, as mentioned above, have differing approaches to sex, but none are portrayed as shameful. In *Un martirio*, in particular, we can observe that Laura’s “ribrezzo” is not for the practice itself,

but for the lack of affection and intimacy shown by her husband, who engages in the act regardless of her lack of explicit consent and enthusiasm. This perspective is reminiscent of Mantegazza's view that sexual intimacy between people who love each other is fundamental: "cuore e mente si combaciano in un amplesso , sessuale per l'origine , ideale per l'altezza a cui giunge" (1873, p.131). The expression "cuore e mente" is emblematic of the fact that both have to be involved for sex to express love and affection; incidentally, this is what Laura finds lacking in Corrado's "rapporti affettuosi". However, the author does not embrace Mantegazza's views fully, as in *Salamandra*, Eva Perelli engages in sexual intercourse with men for whom she feels no affection. It becomes apparent that Regina di Luanto sought to explore different perspectives regarding female sexuality; it's probable that she had access to Mantegazza's and Lombroso's theories, but she did not conform to either fully, choosing instead to explore the kaleidoscope of women's sexual experiences without judgement.

Sexuality, however, does not appear to be the focus of most of her novels, and in fact, it seems that the evident inequality of gendered relationships and the institution of marriage were at the core of her opus. *Un martirio* seems to have the function of a cautionary tale, especially when taking into account the words of another protagonist of Di Luanto's, Antonia:

> Due creature che si incontrano e si uniscono per spontaneo impulso, debbono essere libere di separarsi, quando si raffreddi nell'una o nell'altra l'affetto che le aveva dominate. Allora soltanto si può sperare di sfuggire alle piccole viltà ed alle miserie, che troppo spesso avviliscono la piú forte delle passioni umane(*Libera!*, 1895, in Morandini, p.194)

Laura, however, is not free to go; in fact, when she realises what a trap her marriage is, the distaste and repulsion for Corrado grow despite all of her effort into making peace with the unfortunate reality of it, while Corrado deliberately disregards her struggle as

unimportant. It is clear that the *quality* of their connection does not matter to him even though we do not have access to his thoughts. His marriage is a convenience which he would never give up, and Laura, a precious commodity, the key to a comfortable life. Here, Regina di Luanto chose to disregard practical considerations: her protagonist does not think about how to free herself; she likely already knows that the only legal way to separate from her husband is to pay a sum of money (that Laura would not have) and to obtain his consent (also very unlikely). Regardless of what the law dictated at the time, the author seemed to want to say that marriage was not a true partnership, and it could not be, as long as women were trapped in their roles of servants. "Sia in *Libera!* che in *Il nuovissimo amore* Regina di Luanto propone l'idea che l'amore debba essere libero da ogni vincolo, e dunque anche dal matrimonio" states Åkerstrom (2002, p.5); and that seems to be at the core of this author's opus, freedom to be, to love and to live according to one's beliefs.

Laura's troubles in her marriage derive from the fact that she is not free, not free to be in an equal partnership with the person she loves, and not free to leave once her feelings have changed. Her character portrayal shifts throughout the novel; Laura goes from being insecure and reliant on her husband's words to questioning their relationship more and more, especially as regards her own inability to make decisions about her own life. In fact, at the beginning of the novel, Laura is everything a conduct book would have suggested for a newly-married young woman: she's submissive, happy within her role as a homemaker, extremely eager to please her husband, with no doubts that she was made as a woman to serve her man. The stereotypes that define her seem almost fixed and fit perfectly within the pre-conceived concept of "woman" advertised at the time: as Butler clarifies, "when the relevant 'culture' that 'constructs' gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny

formulation" (1990, p.11) – however, the crafty evolution of her character structured by Di Luanto leave no doubt that those stereotypes are, indeed, all a construction. Laura begins by questioning herself and her motives, unsure as to why she's so unhappy despite the work she's put into fitting the mold of 'angel of the hearth', and slowly that construction starts to show cracks: eventually, the illusion is broken as she grows to completely disavow the institution of marriage as a tool of oppression, to the point of actively rebelling against any of its precepts. Her final act, that to place her own need for space and self-determination over her husband's command (and over the law of the time) to be sexually available finally breaks her free; though the repercussions are tragic, as we'll see, Laura is finally serene.

Cortopassi highlights here that the first cause of the protagonist's unhappiness is a clash between her expectations and her husband's regarding their marriage: "da un lato Corrado sceglie il matrimonio, spinto dal desiderio pragmatico di poter avere un luogo tranquillo dove ritemprarsi delle fatiche della vita esterna. All'opposto, per Laura, il rapporto con l'altro si delinea come un investimento totalizzante di aspirazioni e desideri [mortificati, my addendum]" (p. 51). However, I do not entirely agree: Corrado does not just want a quiet place to rest, he wants control and sovereignty over Laura, who, in his eyes, is there to serve him. This will be made clearer later, as he decides to have sexual relations with their maid while Laura is unwell after a miscarriage. When Laura finds out and confronts him, Corrado dismisses his own act: "Sono un uomo, e… Mi è capitata quella ragazza fra le mani, e il bisogno… […] Basta, quello che è stato è stato, il meglio è non pensarci più" (p. 852). There is no apology for what he considers perfectly logical behaviour, nor appreciation for Laura's hurt and disgust; in fact, he often belittles Laura's feelings and demands her complete obedience based on the premise that she does not know her own mind, that she is just a child: often he calls her "piccina" or "bambina" to mortify her and to impose his own authority.

Another male character of Di Luanto's often behaves with the same condescension, Mina Argenti's husband of *Il nuovissimo amore*. While he is not as abusive as Corrado, their innate belief in their wives' inferiority seems to be the same: when, for instance, Mina confesses her feelings for another man, he initially reacts with anger and jealousy, but upon reassurance that she has not been physically unfaithful, he calms down:

Egli la interruppe, con un gesto magnanimo di generosità; le andò vicino, le mise amorevolmente una mano sul capo e mormorò: sono io che devo farmi perdonare di avere dubitato, fosse pure un secondo, di te! Perché ti conosco troppo, Mina, e so che lotterai e vincerai anche questo affetto, che forse la tua testina esaltata ti dipinge con colori esagerati(Il *Nuovissimo amore,* p.306)

Mina is an adult, but the way her husband refers to her and to her "testina esaltata" dismisses her thoughts and behaviours as though she could not possibly be responsible for them. Also noteworthy is the fact that while Mina's physical fidelity is the most important thing to him to the point of discounting Mina's affection for another man, Corrado does not think Laura is justified in being angry and repulsed by his betrayal. After they talk, he's frustrated that she has not wanted to reconcile with him, as if his was an unimportant, little error that she should move past without issue: "Egli pareva disposto a concedermi il suo perdono [as she had not been available to him because of her illness] e doveva sentirsi così magnanimo, che il mio brusco rifiuto lo ha colmato di maraviglia, tanto che è uscito dalla camera offeso, lasciandomi affranta, a singhiozzare convulsamente!" (*Martirio,* p. 852). Furthermore, when Laura develops a close friendship with her doctor, he is not focusing exclusively on whether there's been physical relations between them (there has not), but he is outraged that there exists a relationship at all, whether that is only platonic or not, and forbids her from continuing it: "M'imponeva di cessare i troppo frequenti colloqui appartati col dottore, di essere meno sdolcinata […] Quindi soggiunse, in tono di minaccia, che se

non gli avessi dato ascolto avrebbe provveduto altrimenti" (p.863). Di Luanto likely wanted to point out the inherently unbalanced nature of marriage: while a wife's duty, according to the law, was that to be obedient, submissive and faithful, loyalty was not expected of a husband, as his needs and desires always trumped hers. As Rizzo states regarding the Codice Pisanelli, "Rispetto al matrimonio e all'adulterio il marito non potrebbe essere "parte", le cui colpe rendano rinegoziabili i termini fondativi del patto tra liberi individui, e restare al tempo stesso saldamente a capo, guida e nume tutelare del patto stesso" (2003, p. 25); in other words, the husband could not have been conceived as the supreme head of the family if his power was subjected to limitations of any sort. Corrado, who puts his wishes ahead of Laura's throughout the novel, is proof of the abject consequences of such unlimited, unchecked power over another human being. In fact, it's not only the law that permits Laura's subordinate position; as Connell theorises, institutions determine structures (such as marriage) which, in turn, create power unbalances – however, one can not but take into account the psychological pressure exerted by "the ways people create emotional links between each other, and the daily conduct of emotional relationships" (1987, p.165). In other words, Laura's feelings would have been manipulated and influenced by Corrado's conduct, and they would have affected her own, rendering her ability to make independent choices even more difficult. Her husband's gaslighting and demeaning behaviour throughout the novel directly causes self-doubt and apprehension in her, which do not allow her to think clearly.

Laura also describes in several diary entries how she is forced to be the "conduit" in Corrado and his friend Max Stein's *séances* with the dead. As usual, Laura tries to cooperate to please her husband; but after several sessions that inspire terror and a general sense of *malaise*, Laura escapes to her bedroom and locks the door behind her. Corrado bangs on

the door a few times, clearly furious, and calls her without success. Laura stays in the dark for several hours, waiting for her husband's friend to depart. When she finally leaves her room, Corrado is waiting for her, and calls her "ridiculous" for being scared; her protestations that she does not feel comfortable in these sessions is worth nothing to him, as he states: "E se io lo permetto, non basta? Mi pare che io sia al caso di giudicare meglio di te…" (p.814). Whenever she attempts to act according to her own instincts or to protect herself, he vilifies her. This shows, along with the previous example, a pattern of abusive psychological behaviour that, slowly but surely, deprives Laura of her (already weak) self-confidence and inevitably, of her health.

The sessions continue, in fact, even after she gets pregnant; until one evening, while trying to escape Stein's grip, she stumbles and falls. For several diary entries she'd been more and more aware that her health was deteriorating, but the pregnancy had brought so much joy to her that she'd found the strength to stand up to the two men. Unfortunately, however, the fall causes a miscarriage that deeply scars Laura: "Ma non lo sa che l'unica mia speranza, che l'unico sollievo della mia vita era quel bambino che doveva venire, quella creatura che si andava formando nel mio ventre e che mi hanno strappata, distrutta, come hanno distrutto tutte le mie più care speranze e le mie più care illusioni?" (p. 835). Even then, Corrado does not show particular interest in her wellbeing, but as a consequence of her miscarriage, she finally meets doctor Giorgio Santini. The good doctor will become a close confidante of Laura, and a true friend. He comforts her and truly looks after her, but also gives advice meant to restore some optimism in her; however, despite his good intentions and genuine affection towards her, he is not truly capable of understanding Laura's plight. Regina di Luanto shows us that even well-intentioned men could not fully empathise with women's condition of inferiority. After the miscarriage, for instance, Santini

tries to lift her spirits but his words are insufficient: “Certo, il suo dolore è giustificato, e lo capisco benissimo: Ma non bisogna poi esagerare” (p. 835). In this instance, he has no idea of what precipitated Laura’s ill-health apart from the miscarriage, the sessions of spiritism with Stein, her terror and hallucinations when she’s alone at home, her lack of appetite and good sleep; and yet, to call her nervous breakdown after the miscarriage an exaggeration, is simply a lack of empathy and awareness of the constraints a woman’s life presented. In other episodes, as well, he demonstrates that he does not really understand: once, Laura refers to herself as a little bird in a cage that she cannot leave, and Santini not only does not recognise why she might feel that way, he conveys to her that she does not understand what feeling trapped by one’s own life feels like: “Mi sorprende che lei, signora Lauretta, possa pensare queste cose! Come può saperle? Le lasci a noi, poveri padri di famiglia, poveri lottatori della vita; lei, in fin dei conti, non è un poco come l’uccellino che canta quanto vuole?” (p.839). His point of view is that she has nothing to complain of, because a man has married her: the lack of meaningful employment or aspirations or her lost chance to become a mother do not even cross his mind. He does not realise that Laura’s only occupation, that of being a wife, might not be fulfilling enough for her; even her dearest friend, who genuinely cares about her, is not capable of understanding her plight. Granted, he does not know how lacking a husband Corrado is, but he does not want to know, either; when Laura tries to explain, he claims that it’s her own fault, for projecting her own ideas about romance and love on an unsuspecting man (p. 840). The profound loneliness and hopelessness that accompanies Laura throughout the novel is endless and without relief; slowly her health declines more and more, until she’s a ghost of herself and her mental breakdowns happen more and more often. Even though she’s aware that her physical ill-health is a consequence

of her psychological torment, nobody else seems to realise that her marriage is the cause of it, not even doctor Santini.

The turning point in this short novel is represented by a crushing blow inflicted on Laura by her husband: while they're vacationing with doctor Santini's family and other acquaintances, Corrado becomes increasingly aware and displeased at the rumours circulating about a suspect romantic affair between Laura and doctor Santini. He does not seem interested in ascertaining whether it's true, but he is clearly irritated that the gossip will ruin his reputation: "Aveva notato che la mia intimità col dottore assumeva un carattere poco conveniente" (p.862). Corrado forbids Laura to spend time alone with the doctor, but she deliberately ignores the order for a few days: "Con qual diritto vuol egli, che volontariamente ha distrutto l'affetto e la stima che io gli portavo, privarmi dell'unico conforto che io abbia?" (p. 863). However, Corrado's retaliation to her attempt at independence is swift and terrible: after a violent outburst, he decides they will leave early to visit some friends in Maremma, which has a devastating effect on Laura's psyche and body: "Ruppi in singhiozzi, e, colta da un terribile accesso convulsivo, caddi priva di sensi" (p. 865). Against the doctor's advice, Corrado ignores Laura's state and resolves to depart a few days later, which precipitate her first violent thoughts toward him:

> Provavo, al cospetto di mio marito, una ripugnanza, un ribrezzo invincibile, e, strano a dirsi, un desiderio furioso di fargli del male, di strozzarlo. Era forse l'accesso che ricominciava, infatti sentivo di perdere ogni padronanza su me stessa, gli urli che frenavo facevano ressa alla gola per uscire; il bisogno di mordere, di graffiare, che invano tentavo di dominare, cresceva di minuto in minuto, s'imponeva: il mio corpo aveva contrazioni e fremiti indipendenti dalla mia volontà, e a poco a poco, come se questa fosse stata sopraffatta, vinta da un'espressione generale dei nervi e dei muscoli, mi sollevai d'un colpo solo sul letto e… non so più nulla (p. 865)

This is the first time that Laura does not merely focus on protecting herself, but has to actively fight against the urge to attack him; it is obviously brought forward by such intense

distress that she faints again. Her health is declining at a rapid speed at this point in the novel, and the author seems to use these more and more frequent "accessi convulsivi" to signal Laura's incapability to cope with the loss of control over her life. Nothing seems to move Corrado to reconsider, not even the severe threat to his wife's health; this in itself shows how her dominion over her is absolute, beyond even a doctor's advice. He can decide over her body and her psychological and physical needs at his leisure, as even in a life and death situation she has no decisional power over herself. Her desperate tries to gain back a measure of that power, such as rebelling against his directive to not see the doctor alone, are crushed with no recourse. Regina di Luanto seems to want to convey how extensive a husband's power over his wife was; even the apology that Laura issues consequently, with the hope that he'll forgive her and let her stay, is fruitless. The entries in the diary become more delirious as Laura lies in bed without sleeping, without resting, terrified of her husband's lack of compassion. When she resolves to talk with the doctor, hoping that he'll help her explain to her husband how innocent and harmless their relationship is, she receives another blow: not only the doctor ultimately agrees with Corrado that a friendship such as theirs is dangerous, because it could lead to an affair (which Laura denies vehemently), he requests her to obey her husband and to depart with him. The betrayal is shocking and, again, contributes to her health decline, but she resolves to comply with his wishes and to disregard her own in the name of her friendship with him. After all, she does not have a real choice: a wife is, by law, "obbligata ad accompagnarlo dovunque egli creda opportuno" (Codice Pisanelli, Art.131). Laura is again denied agency, not only by her husband, but by her dearest friend. It is made worse by the constant infantilisation operated on her by the two men: despite her very valid counter-arguments to the doctor's point of view, he dismisses her feelings: "Creda, Lauretta, nella sua bontà, nella sua ingenuità ella

non giudica con esattezza le cose. Si affidi a me, dia retta ai miei consigli; e poichè mi ha dato prova di volermi tanto bene, in nome di questo io le chiedo un sacrificio" (p.868). Doctor Santini deliberately manipulates her into acquiescing with his request, because he, too, recognises the damage to her husband's reputation. Again, her ill-health is dismissed in favour of obedience to a husband that does not care for her, and she is completely powerless to stop it.

A few days pass before they leave, during which Laura barely rests; after their arrival in Maremma, Laura realises that there is only one bedroom in the house that Corrado has rented for them in the countryside. Corrado insists that it's time they return to their "consuetudini", which Laura reacts to with disgust and terror, refusing to get into bed with him. Another violent outburst by her husband ensues, who seems convinced now that the reason she will not sleep with him or engage in sexual relations is that she was, indeed, conducting an affair with doctor Santini. Afterwards, he turns off the light and leaves her to sit in a small chair, where she spends the night in terror that he'll change his mind and drag her into bed with him. The lack of sleep and the continuous psychological attacks have left her in a state of complete prostration, but she still resists: the need to take back control in her life, even if only by a miniscule amount, is stronger than her body's need for rest. The first night will be terrible, but Laura is temporarily soothed by the idea of asking Corrado to leave for Bologna to see her mother and sister; when Corrado refuses the next morning, she resolves to spend another night awake in the dark, sitting on that little chair, but hallucinations brought on by her nervous exhaustion exacerbate her already thin grip on reality. She sees Stein, staring at her in the dark with his green eyes, and hears the murmurs of spirits in the dark, but nevertheless, she persists: "Ho il corpo rotto dalla stanchezza… ma resisterò… voglio resistere" (p. 871).

Di Luanto's portrayal seems to deliberately juxtapose the apparently weak girl of the first few pages to the woman she's grown into, or rather, the effects of a tremendous will to survive on her psyche. Her courage and her powerful act of resistance are impressive; and yet, Di Luanto shapes the events so that the readers will know that Laura's struggle is futile. In fact, at no point in the novel the audience glimpse a positive shift in circumstances, possibly so as to remark the inescapable quality of the institutionalised power granted to her husband by virtue of his gender. As Anthony Giddens also remarks, "we have to grasp what I would call 'the double involvement' of individuals and institutions: we create society at the same time as we are created by it. Institutions, I have said, are patterns of social activity *reproduced* [my emphasis] across time and space" (1986, p. 4); therefore, it is not that Laura does not fight hard enough – after all, we can say that she fights to her death-, it is that institutionalised structures and its practices, such as marriage, are reinforced through time by individuals, and vice-versa. Any individual wanting to break free, on their own, is more often than not doomed to fail. This is also compounded by Connell's research, although she introduces the possibility of introducing major, deliberate changes in practice to weaken such structures (1987, p.95): if we apply this concept to Di Luanto's authorial intent and political message, we could hypothesise that, while Laura's rebellious acts do not improve her own condition, they could, potentially, create change through Di Luanto's readership, and over time, weaken the institution of marriage as it was at the time.

The next entry is the last of that year, where she recounts the last fight with her husband: after an initially milder approach, Corrado insists: "Ora è tempo di finirla: non vedi che non ti reggi? […] Questa sera verrai a letto e faremo la pace…" (p.871), but when Laura does not give in, his anger is swift and merciless: "Oh! Smettiamola con questi capricci inqualificabili. Lo vedremo questa sera". Calling her defense of her bodily autonomy a

tantrum is further demonstration that Corrado does not see her as an equal, and possibly not a human being with needs and the right to decide over her own life. Laura does not outwardly respond to the threat, but in her diary she writes, ominously: "Ebbene sia; lo vedremo […] Finalmente è troppo… è troppo…". The brief cliff-hanger has the desired effect; the reader knows something terrible has happened, both because of Laura's refusal to bow down and defiant attitude, but also at her admission that she's at the end of her tether.

In the next and final chapter, Laura is in a mental asylum; it is not immediately clear what happened, but when she recalls her months in prison before her trial, admitting, "Non avevo più coscienza di nulla" (p. 873), we have confirmation of her fate. It is the last step in her progressive, but inevitable, loss of control and power over herself: her freedom of movement, which was already severely restricted by her marriage, has now been irrevocably withdrawn by the State. Possibly, the worst indictment of her husband is that she's happier now, in an asylum, than she ever was while living with him: "Io non ne soffro, come, ripeto, non ho sofferto nei mesi passati in prigione" (p. 873). Compared to the misery, the nervous breakdowns, the isolation she felt with Corrado, living in a *manicomio* is experienced as a welcome comfort: she is allowed to see her mother and sister often, whom she could only visit rarely before, and her living quarters are pleasant, with a lovely view of the mountains behind Siena and a garden full of bright flowers.

She recounts the months in which she was so depleted, both psychologically and physically, that she would spend days staring into space, with no energy to engage in any activity, including writing in her beloved diary. The severity of her exhaustion hints to the brutal trauma experienced, and even though a reprisal of her writing seems to be a positive note at first, it is almost immediately clear to the reader that her lack of appetite and energy, combined with more nervous crises, point to her slow but inevitable decline. After dreaming

of Corrado for what presumably is the first time, we learn that she has killed Corrado by shooting him with the revolver he kept in the night stand. The ghost of Corrado yells at her to repent, but she refuses: "Io non ero in diritto di difendermi da chi mi aveva insultata, avvilita, da chi mi aveva negate tutte le gioie a cui potevo pretendere? […] Fui l'istrumento incosciente di una giustizia più alta" (p. 879). This is perhaps the furthest point from the Laura of the first few pages, who was always doubting herself and justifying her husband; here she makes no apologies for her behaviour, despite committing what at the time would have been considered perhaps the worst crime a woman could enact. Killing her husband is her ultimate act of rebellion. It is telling that she feels she had no other recourse, but as Connell states, "practice cannot escape structure" (187, p. 163): as in, Laura could not escape the social structure that guaranteed her husband's sovereignty over her, she could only either remove herself from the equation altogether by killing him (or herself), or she could resign herself to her fate and stay. The overarching power of the law, which had given Corrado complete freedom of action over her, was in turn sanctioned by the social structure of the time: "the subordination of women, and superordination of men" (p. 163).

After the nightmare, her condition worsens further. She spends several days in bed, unable to write more than a few sentences at a time, and she is visited by doctor Santini for the first time, which elicits joy and enthusiasm in her; she still is not able to leave her bed, but she interprets his visit as a sign that she is better, that she will soon leave. From her words, it transpires the profound emotion her friend is feeling. At her question: "Oh! Potrò dunque andarmene?", he replies: "Oh! Sì! E più presto di quanto ella non crede". While the reader realises what the doctor actually means, Laura interprets the sorrow in his eyes as worry that she'll be alone once she's out. She seems unaware that she is not merely unwell, but that she is, in fact, dying; the thought does not come to her, not even when her sister

Amelia finally visits, after months of absence, or when her mother suddenly is allowed to visit every day. A few more shorter and shorter entries follow, and finally, a doctor's statement of her death.

The truncated, abrupt conclusion is particularly impactful: the audience is immediately reminded that there are no positives left in the vicissitudes of this woman's marriage, only the colossal waste of a young person's life and the repercussions of a deeply patriarchal society. As we will see in the next chapter, the lack of a happy ending is a common thread in the work of Italian women authors of the *fin de siècle*, a decision that in Regina di Luanto's case was almost certainly a statement, if perhaps not overtly political, of denunciation of the status quo.

Chapter Three: Memini’s Fabulous World of High-Class Society

In the last section, I focused on agency and power in gendered relationships in Regina di Luanto’s novel *Un martirio*. I argued there, by drawing on Jameson’s theory of the *political unconscious* (1981), that Di Luanto’s portrayal of gendered relationships would have cast a light on their profoundly unbalanced nature and showed how a fairer connection between the genders (two, in line with the political and social beliefs of the time) would have improved society. I have looked at the text through the lens of Connell’s social gender theory, which helped to define the power imbalance between the characters as a product of structure (institutions) and practice (which reinforces structures through individuals over time). Finally, I also showed how the diaristic style of *Un martirio* served to elicit an emotional response in Di Luanto’s readership that had the potential to encourage reflection on those relationships, basing my statements on studies that focused on the impact of narrative empathy.

In this section, I will compare *L’ultima primavera*, by Memini, with Regina di Luanto’s *Un martirio*; I believe these two authors could be placed on opposite ends of a hypothetical spectrum of feminist consciousness of the time, as different as they were. And yet, there are definitely shared characteristics in their writings that suggest more exploration is needed. In particular, I will claim that, despite Memini’s apparent lack of interest in advancing women’s standing in society or indeed, in expressing her views through her work, she still showed how a woman’s agency and self-determination would be limited, even in the fabulous world of high-class society that she brings forth. In fact, Memini may not have overtly sought to advance women’s emancipation, and yet *L’ultima primavera* increases our knowledge of the period and highlights the complexity of the issue. As Hallamore-Caesar states, “Alongside

their legal and political subordination, they had to contend with the social and ideological pressures exerted over them to conform to the norms of respectability" (in Mitchell, 2014, p.230): before Unification, the few women who consistently published articles or novels were pioneers, and were often critiqued for having at least apparently forsaken their primary occupation, which according to most was taking care of the house. Similarly, at the end of the 19th century being a writer was still an activity particularly criticised for a woman in Italy, even though, as Zambon states, it was anything but a novelty: "Non è affatto una cosa così rara e peregrina alla fine dell'Ottocento pensare a una donna scrittrice: tutto il corso del secolo, in Europa e oltre Atlantico, ha visto realizzate molte di queste 'carriere'. Ma forse non normalizzate" (1989, p.239).

As we've seen, the most common objection to women writing was that women did not have the same intellectual capabilities as men (see the views expressed by Mantegazza, Henry Maudsley and Lombroso cited in the context chapter), and thus would not be able to produce quality work, but also that women belonged to the private sphere and should not venture out of it. Even though it was not an activity that physically removed women from the house, the implication was that women should not engage in business, as that was not a suitable occupation for them. These limitations were far-reaching and had real-world consequences for many women authors of the time; and while Memini, as we will see, had the financial means to travel and write to her leisure, other factors could have contributed to her decision to write under a *nom-de-plume* and to not expose herself to public scrutiny. Another aspect that might have contributed to Memini's choice not to address the social standing of women directly could have been insecurity around being largely self-taught and lacking literary models. As mentioned in the introduction, an "anxiety of authorship" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979), combined with the struggles mentioned above, explains the varying

degrees to which women writers in general, and Memini in particular, might have chosen not to be outwardly political and in the spotlight: a general belief in women's need for respectability and demureness seems to have played quite relevant a part in Memini's portrayal of female characters, and yet, we might say that they ultimately are the cause of the main character's ruin in *L'ultima primavera*. In this chapter, I will first provide some information on Memini's life and opus to better contextualise her work; I will then introduce *L'ultima primavera*, comparing its representation of women characters to those of other women authors, including Regina di Luanto.

Biographical notes

We do not know much of Ines Castellani Fantoni-Benaglio's life. All that is left is her obituary in the magazine *Il Marzocco*, dated May 1897 and written by her dear friend and literary peer, Neera. Her obituary was also used as a source for the article in Emporium, also dated 1st May, 1897 (Vol. 5, n.29, p. 398-399). Memini was born in Azzate, where she'd also been raised. She was from an aristocratic family, and had lived in many Italian cities thanks to her mother, who had wanted her daughters to experience as much as possible. She was then married to her cousin, the count Benaglio of Bergamo. Neera mentions "dispiaceri domestici" and a long illness (it is not certain when), after which she apparently moved to Rome for a few months, to then return to Lombardy. Her friend describes her last years as a "procella ruinosa" that weakened her considerably until she finally passed. Neera describes her as a shy, empathetic soul, who had started writing "quando scrivere era la vocazione di pochi e leggere il diletto di molti" (n.15). Her first novels were *Estella e Nemorino* and *Tramonto e Zenith*, which were unpublished. She then wrote Mia (1884), *La*

Marchesa D'Arcello (1886), *L'ultima primavera (1894),* and finally, *Mario* (1898). She wrote in several periodicals, "Perseveranza" and "La Gazzetta Provinciale" of Bergamo and was skilled at writing literary critiques, helped by her knowledge of foreign literature (Emporium, p.398)

Carlo Villani and Maria Bandini Buti also provided the same brief biographical notes in *Stelle Femminili* (1916) and *Poetesse e Scrittrici* (1941-42) respectively, excerpted from her obituary. Antonia Arslan mentioned her in her article about the periodical *Vita Intima* (2004) with which Memini had collaborated, and Chiara Marin referred to her in her article on women art critics in nineteenth-century Italy. There has not been any research on her literary work so far; however, I will show in this chapter how her female protagonists, particularly in *L'ultima primavera*, show an interesting perspective on women's position in nineteenth-century society that is worth exploring. In the following chapter, I will discuss how Memini's protagonist, Elisa, contends with her agency as a woman in high-class society, the limits imposed by herself and by society on her conduct, and to which degree her "freedom" as a widower defied societal expectations regarding women's place in society.

***L'Ultima Primavera*: Respecting Social Boundaries and Gender Expectations**

Memini's literary production is not so far removed from the the *romanzo rosa* (comparable to the French *feuilleton*), which the Encyclopedia Treccani defines as a popular genre characterised by fairly one-dimensional characters, a female protagonist who is the subject/object of a scandalous and usually torrid romance, plot twists designed to shock and to captivate the audience, and a predictable happy ending (Treccani, 2013). Given how long the genre survived, it can be difficult to pinpoint its exact characteristics given the permutations it has gone through and the cultural differences which have animated the genre in different countries and eras. Despite the less racy tone of Memini's novels, there are many points of contact; moreover, a pedagogical intention can also be detected in her portrayal of female lead characters, who not only easily fit within prescribed social norms (or are punished when they don't), but who also represent the role model of the morally irreproachable, good-natured, poised, beautiful woman. Rak (1999) offers a good explanation of the main ingredients of this genre: "Il romanzo rosa lavora su una doppia spirale a tre fasi che articola la sequenza *impulso*, *etichetta* e *strategia matrimoniale* in parallelo alla sequenza superficiale *visione*, *ostacolo*, *unione"* (p.7, italics not mine) – by this definition, we'll see that Memini's *L'ultima primavera* fits quite well within these parameters, with only one, glaring exception: its ending. In fact, the protagonist, Elisa, seems to be punished for giving into her desires and for going against societal expectations, so she certainly does not get the positive resolution expected in the genre. However, if we consider that the romanzo rosa works as a "rassicuratore delle mentalità" (Rak, 1999, p.8), then we might understand Elisa's lack of a happy ending as a deliberate writer's choice to fulfill the

mild pedagogical intent mentioned earlier: cautioning young women from pursuing their aspirations.

L'ultima primavera can be said to belong to the "letture d'evasione" of the time (Arslan, 1998, p.42) as almost certainly the main aim was that to entertain, not to provide a structured argument against social injustice; nevertheless, it also portrayed the limitations of a lone woman in high society. Therefore, *L'ultima primavera* and its mild social commentary could still be said to fit in that substantial production by women writers of the time who portrayed women's suffering and unequal position in society, such as Neera and Serao, but who could not imagine change in a positive way: "Women writers of domestic fiction – consciously or otherwise – were tapping into debates on the role of women in the new Italy" (Mitchell, 2014, p.21). Unfortunately, we do not know enough about Memini to draw any conclusions as to her beliefs concerning the *woman question*. Given her literary production and her close friendship with Neera, we might speculate that she was not an emancipationist, or at least, not a radical one. She definitely was not an activist, as she did not publish essays or articles in periodicals about women's rights; moreover, while some of her peers were more or less openly addressing at least some political and social issues that were close to women's hearts in their novels, Memini's work did not. She did not even address her readership at the beginning of her novels, as many of her peers, such as La Marchesa Colombi, Neera, and Matilde Serao used to do, which would have given us some insight as to the reasons she was writing or how she felt regarding women's standing in society.

If we agree with Chris Beasley's statement that late 19th century, first-wave feminism advocated for a "universal standard for social and political rights and selfhood" (2005, p.18), *L'ultima primavera's* lead female character, Elisa Serramonti, would undoubtedly be in a

grey zone: she is indeed lucky enough to be financially independent, but it is never considered or mentioned how extraordinary that privilege is. Equally, it is not a privilege she has earned, but rather a direct consequence of her husband's passing. In this regard, the novel is substantially different from the works of Regina di Luanto, who, as we've seen, strongly advocated through all her novels for a re-definition of perceptions concerning gender: Di Luanto's characters were often women who sought independence and freedom of movement and action, even and particularly if their position was very vulnerable, while Memini's, if they rebelled at all, usually were defeated by the events and led back to the status quo. Undoubtedly, there are points in common with the *romanzo rosa* such as the dichotomy of the virtuous female lead character and the promiscuous antagonist who has 'stolen' her love; however, the novel more aptly qualifies as a "romanzo psicologico-sentimentale" which Arslan defined as works where "spesso non appare una conclusione positiva per gli attori della storia, ma un ritorno all'"ordine" vissuto con rancorosa soggezione, il riconfermarsi delle norme sociali che le protagoniste hanno infranto – o tentato di infrangere" (2013, p.26). The moral struggle to which the main character succumbs, to then be punished by her social environment, is a defining characteristic, along with the ambiguity between the semi-legitimisation of her guilty passion and her struggle to be 'proper'. Arslan also states in this regard:

"Le protagoniste, travolte e in definitive annientate dal cedimento all'emozione amorosa, possono tuttavia contare su una certa complicità delle loro autrici […], che si attua in termini di sotterranea ambiguità del tessuto narrativo, giovato su due piani, il ricostituirsi dell'ordine sociale turbato e insieme la sollecitazione di una simpatia, di un'affinità profonda determinata dalla comune condizione femminile" (p.27).

Similarly, in *L'Ultima primavera*, the character of Elisa finds herself defeated by the circumstances, but as we will see, it is difficult to state with any certainty what message (if

any) Memini would have wanted to convey to her readers: did she want to punish her character's transgressions, to imply that women should content themselves with what they had? Or was Elisa's last-minute resolve simply too late to change her fate? It is indeed possible that the novel's tragic ending could be a warning to her audience to seize the moment when possible, to not let societal expectations lead you to regret and unhappiness; however, given the other elements of this work, it is as likely that ending on such a dramatic note was simply a strategy to increase engagement. In the following pages, we will explore these questions and investigate Memini's authorial intent.

The plot of *L'ultima primavera* revolves around a female character, the Countess Elisa Serramonti, whose love story with a younger man, Roberto Rescuati, ends unfortunately, due to her reservations about going public with their relationship. Elisa is portrayed as a woman who has learned to live on her own, undoubtedly the privilege of being a widow of considerable means; she is independent and has cultivated a sizable group of friends and acquaintances with whom she spends time, without being a socialite. This is somewhat uncharacteristic of Memini's novels, as most of her lead characters (such as Mia, La Marchesa D'Arcello, or Carina D'Orno) are either married women, or young and about to marry. However, as Neera stated in her preface to *Mario*: "Tutte le protagoniste dei romanzi e delle novelle di Memini, mutate nei nomi, invariabili nel tipo" (p. VII). She concurred that Memini's female leads followed a "type" that was likely meant to be "inspirational" to women readers: pure of spirit, kind and morally irreprehensible. And yet, Elisa Serramonti is somewhat more progressive a character than her predecessors: forty years old, she has given up on romance, is initially comfortable on her own, and seems happier trying to find a husband for her young friend, Marina, rather than worrying about her own situation. There are other two main female characters, Marina D'Accorsi and her mother Ginevra, who are

not particularly well-developed, and seem to serve the main purpose of highlighting the protagonist's exquisite nature.

Marina, who is the daughter of the Duchess Ginevra D'Accorsi, is a young woman who is fully aware of the importance of marrying: in fact, she has devoted her existence to finding a husband, to the point where she has perfected a range of attractive facial expressions and smiles through practice in the mirror (UP, p.6). However, it takes her a long time to find a man interested in marrying her. Many find her cold and detached despite (or maybe because of) her efforts and beauty; her mother even states: "Oserei persino dire una cosa. Come al solito, sei troppo bella" (p.10). While the comparison with Elisa's "effortless charm" is inevitable, Marina is portrayed instead almost as the living contradiction that etiquette books proposed: as mentioned in the first chapter, though femininity was described as an innate quality of women, it clearly had to be cultivated, or young girls such as Marina would not have needed to "practice" it. As Butler would define it, "[gender] identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (1990, p. 25), yet this author did not seem at all aware of (or willing to investigate) the irony of the concept of an innate feature that had to be created. When analysing character portrayal in this novel, there does not seem to be an intention to subvert pre-conceived notions of femininity. Despite their clearly superficial nature, I could not discern whether Memini simply did not factor in their development, whether her focus was mainly Elisa's tale (in other words, whether it was a narrative flaw born out of authorial inexperience), or whether she was simply projecting personal biases onto her female characters. All of Memini's female characters execute different expressions of femininity, whether that appears as Ginevra's *femme fatale*, Marina's detached sophistication, or Elisa's elegant poise. However, if these characters were real people, we might attribute a specific intention behind what Butler

considers a “laborious process of becoming naturalized” (1990, 126), or the careful inner crafting of one’s personal identity: Ginevra’s rejection of those idealised feminine traits, for instance, would have complicated reasons behind it, and that would apply to Marina and Elisa’s gender ‘performance’ as well. The issue I encountered in my textual analysis is that those reasons are never investigated in the novel, which consigns these characters to the rather one-dimensional role of ‘backdrops’ to the virtuous protagonist. As such, there does not seem to be a precise authorial intention behind such portrayals, but rather, an unfortunate collection of gender biases that Memini could not help but pour into her female characters. In contrast, Di Luanto’s protagonists are generally depicted so as to match the role assigned to them: In *Un martirio*, as we’ve seen, Laura shows extreme psychological growth throughout the novel to complement the troubling vicissitudes she has to overcome, and her character is well-rounded, a credible representative of a feminist *bildungsroman*. It becomes apparent that Di Luanto likely tried to offer models of subversive women characters to her readership. As willful and determined as her protagonists are, however, they are still realistic: they still move within the same repressive boundaries, and their power resides in allowing themselves to make choices, even extreme ones, in order to maintain as much of their own identity as possible.

Despite their obvious flaws, however, Memini’s characters do show us a reflection of the stereotypes of the time when it comes to gender performance: this author may have wanted to point out that practicing grace was an exercise in futility, given the inevitable comparison inspired by Elisa and Marina’s different personalities, but it may also have had a pedagogical purpose for young women out there: women had to look effortlessly charming, and a poor attempt would have not only driven eligible men away, but also had an impact on one’s reputation. Marina is in fact considered cold and not a good prospective wife, as a

friend of Elisa remarks: “Bellissima. Egli rende piena giustizia ai pregi fisici della vostra amica. Una sola cosa gli parve insufficiente in lei. — E cosa? — L’anima, cara Contessa” (p.36). The other relevant female character, the Duchess Ginevra D’Accorsi, is instead portrayed as insensitive and matronly, but with an exuberant sexuality: her affairs with young men are numerous, and end as abruptly as she wishes, with rarely any regard for her partners’ feelings. Elisa never expresses her disagreement with that conduct except in the privacy of her thoughts; however, given her portrayal as a role model of sobriety and good demeanour, her judgement of the Duchess’ conduct appears even stronger. The three characters could almost be placed at key points on a hypothetical, sliding scale of ideal female conduct, with Elisa in the centre: while Marina is cold and remote and Ginevra is promiscuous and vain, Elisa is painted as women’s role model, warm, approachable, yet poised. In Memini’s almost unfalteringly stereotypical representation of her protagonists, women were usually either a model or a cautionary tale: it is therefore evident that women characters’ gender ‘expression’, as carefully constructed as they might have been in this author’s works, seemed to simply reflect her own understanding of how a woman was supposed to behave, rather than communicate a personal indictment of fixed social norms and their impact on women’s lives.

The first turning point of the novel occurs when close friend Tecla Rescuati asks Elisa to introduce her son, Roberto, to the aristocratic circles of Florence and to be his mentor, initially Elisa agrees only to help her friend; she remembers Roberto as a child, and has no idea of the person he’s grown-up to be, but she remembers him fondly. When he is sent to her, she immediately realises that the young man is polite and affable, but that he does not share an interest in all the activities and topics of conversation she and her friends deem appropriate, and that re-shaping him into the intellectual gentleman his mother would prefer

would be unreasonable. So she elects to guide him gently, rather than forcing him to spend time with older people he does not feel a connection with. After a momentary period in which she sees him rarely, he grows accustomed to visiting her more and more often, and a close connection develops between the two. Elisa, like many women characters in these novels, initially hides from herself and others her growing feelings for him, refusing to acknowledge them as romantic: "Ella amava Roberto… sì… ma come si amava un figlio, nulla di più. A furia di dirsela, di ripetersela, […] Elisa se ne fece una specie di convincimento" (p.248). Then, she shames herself for falling in love with a twenty-five year old man, and decides to never express them: " Ebbene, -mormorò. - Soffrirò… ecco tutto…Ma nessuno saprà… nessuno!" (p.258). The omniscient narrator allows the readers to understand that Elisa is terrified at the prospect of being shunned from her social circle, and of the repercussions it would have on her friendship with Tecla and on Roberto's future, which she thinks would be irredeemably damaged by even the suspicion of a romantic connection with her. She feels so humiliated at the prospect of being honest about her feelings, so embarrassed by the potential gossip that she does not really think about confiding in her friend or confronting her own prejudice. As conventional as the storyline is, there is a defining moment in which Elisa realises she cannot live with the decision she made, and decides to visit her friend Tecla, Roberto's mother: "È la donna che parla, la donna che ama, che spasima, che sente vano ogni sforzo per tollerare ciò che ella stessa ha compiuto, che rinnega il suo eroismo e si confessa vinta e trascinata dal suo amore verso le vie, gli scopi, l'essenza di ogni vero amore!" (p.353). When she receives her blessing, she returns to Florence to win him over; however, ultimately it does not make a difference as he has started an affair with Ginevra D'Accorsi, who ironically, is not only older than she is, but is also the woman of dubious morals whose behaviour Elisa secretly disapproved of.

An interesting feature of the novel is the evident discrepancy between what is explicitly articulated and what is merely implied. In this universe, relationships rarely go beyond appearances and good manners; everyone knows and gossips about others' circumstances but there is hardly ever a friendly exchange where two people reveal how they really feel. The Duchess, for instance, regards affection without ulterior motives as unnatural: "Un affetto *gratis*… vuoi dire? Ebbene, infatti, perchè no? È capace di tutto quella contessa Elisa" (p. 11). Similarly, dislikes are hidden beneath a bland semblance of amicability, particularly between women: Ginevra and Elisa never share an unkind word and maintain civility at all times, yet, their distaste for each other is made really clear. This portrayal of relationships in high society is vaguely reminiscent of Regina di Luanto's *La scuola di Linda* (1894), but while Regina di Luanto's representation of that world was incredibly critical, Memini was writing about a society she had grown up in and that she clearly saw in a favourable light despite its shortcomings. In fact, Elisa's character embodies the qualities that high society found important for a woman: manners, poise, beauty. Her novels are an ode to those lost values she saw in the aristocracy, and so many of her female and male characters represent them.

Another facet to the hypocritical importance of appearances is the concept of reputation. Elisa noticeably disapproves of the Duchess' behaviour, to the point of feeling "una curiosa sensazione di sforzo intimo" (p.14) when having to shake hands with her; moreover, she is clearly thinking in alignment with the "world", which said of the Duchess "tutto ciò che si può dire di poco lusinghiero sul conto di una donna" (p.14). Here it is the whole world that has a negative opinion of the Duchess; however, when it is mentioned later in the novel that Elisa living alone had sparked gossip, it is the term "cattive lingue" (p.54) which is used. The way "blame" is assigned is, in my estimation, noteworthy. In fact, in this

instance, neither Ginevra nor the Duchess conform to the prescribed social norms of good behaviour: Elisa lives alone and independently, without a man to depend on, and Ginevra, despite being married, has free reign over Florence's high society. And yet, Ginevra's behaviour is considered worthy of reproach, but Elisa's is not; this may imply on the part of the author that following these norms closely would have allowed the occasional blunder, and shows how reputation would have had a substantial impact in society. In fact, while Elisa's aunt, Balbina, insists a few times that Elisa come live with her to avoid the *male lingue* (pages 54, 254, 312), Elisa is, in fact, able to refuse without conspicuous harm to her reputation. This notion, of course, is extremely unrealistic, as in truth, the concept of reputation was an incredibly effective means of social control, not only for women, but at large (Rizzo, p.232). Interestingly, up until the 19th century, in Italy the concept of 'fama' in its negative meaning had also judicial value: a person could be tried and sentenced (also) on the basis of the *vox populi*[7] : in fact, prior to the liberal age, "massima, si diceva, era stata la confusione tra morale e diritto" (Rizzo, p.217). Fortunately, this occurrence had become obsolete in the 19th century: "Alle istituzioni liberali, di contro, lo scandalo non interessa" (Rizzo, p.217), but the power inherent to a threat to someone's reputation was still, evidently, quite well-established. The *male lingue* could, in fact, cause one to lose one's job, custody of their children, and more (p. 233); in Elisa's case, it would have 'only' precluded her the chance to a fulfilling social life, but it would have been terrifying enough to impact her choices. More importantly, loss of reputation would imply an upending of everything that a character such as Elisa embodied: if we consider that gender identity is a "compelling

[7] For more in-depth research into the ties between the judicial system in the liberal age and the concept of fame and reputation: Rizzo, D(2003) ' L'Impossibile Privato: Fama e Pubblico Scandalo in Età Liberale', Quaderni Storici, Vol. 38, No. 112 (1), pp. 215-242. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43779374 (Accessed: 17-01-2022).

illusion, an object of belief" (Butler, 1988, p. 520), then necessarily it follows that a model of femininity would not be so anymore if she lacked any of the requirements – in this case, her reputation. What's more, if there was a pedagogical intent behind creating this 'perfect' character – and if Memini believed that a good reputation was a fundamental part of being a "proper" woman, she could not create a female character that would tarnish her own reputation, as she would lose its role as a model of feminine virtues. Alternatively, Elisa might have not been crafted to be a role model; in that case, it's possible that her unrealistic portrayal was part of the author's intention to write something of a fairy tale, with the mere desire to entertain her audience with the uncomplicated, yet forbidden tale of Elisa's inevitable heartbreak. Based on the evident simplicity of the plot and its one-dimensional characters, it would seem that indeed, if there was any other purpose to this novel, it would have been a subtle warning to women trying to conceive of a life away from the status quo. Even Elisa's small acts of apparent rebellion - such as the previously mentioned decision to live alone despite Balbina's advice - look more like a poetic licence taken to avoid disruption of the idealistic tale Memini constructed, rather than a subtle political message to subvert social expectations.

Closely connected to the theme of appearances discussed so far is the importance of boundaries in one's behaviour, which is highlighted, more or less directly, in the whole novel: having a relationship with a younger man seems an incredibly critical one to cross for Elisa, and its significance may not have been lost to the reader of the time. In a way, it meant rejecting the prescriptive social norms and conventions on which women relied on to survive. Firstly, the general perception would have been of Elisa taking Roberto 'off the market' for the many young girls who were looking for a husband; and secondly, it was scandalous for a woman to pursue a relationship with a young man who should have inspired maternal

feelings in her, not romantic ones. That is also compounded by the fact that Elisa does believe her feelings to have originated in her mentor-like relationship with Roberto: “Nel cuore di una donna che non ha avuto figli e che ama, se ama un uomo più giovane di lei, il sentimento materno non può rimanere escluso” (p.249). Maternal instincts were also considered a typical female trait in nineteenth-century society that women could not avoid. Inevitably, those women who rejected that stereotype would have been considered ‘men-like’, or worse, ‘monstrous’. It is not a coincidence, in fact, that many ‘monstruous’ women characters through the literary ages were as far from the many stereotypes associated with ‘proper’ women as possible[8]: Part of the role assigned to women was that to bear and raise children; not to have any, or not to want them, would have inevitably characterised a woman as not “woman-like”, and therefore unacceptable.

Moreover, despite the emergence of the New Woman (discussed in the first chapter), “the unresolved issue of women's apparently unchangeable relation to children and family persisted with a stubbornness that ultimately proved impervious to both the reality of women's lives and the creations of imagination and desire” (MacPike, 1989, p. 396); in fact, since Unification, a political and cultural rhetoric of nation-making had also assigned women a primary role in bearing and educating Italians (Soldani, 1989; Fanning, 2012; Sanson, 2012), which seemed to make child-bearing an inevitability difficult to oppose. In the specific case of *L’ultima primavera*, we read how the younger Roberto inspired maternal feelings in Elisa as that was seen as a physical inevitability of being a woman; Memini does not seem to disagree, and the unfortunate ending she crafts, in which Elisa ultimately has to give up her love, could be read as a natural consequence of a relationship that the author herself

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[8] For a more in-depth analysis, see: Gilbert and Gubar, 1979.

did not think was founded on ‘true’ romantic feelings of love, but merely a displacement of those maternal instincts so often applauded in nineteenth-century society. In many ways, therefore, in this work of Memini’s – although it could be applied to most of her opus -, women characters tend to act within the confines of the social expectations and gender norms of the time; rather than describing them as trapped in those boundaries, which we can confirm in Regina di Luanto’s novels, Memini does not appear to want to challenge any of the stereotypes she engages with, be that of the *femme fatale* or the *angel of the house.* Nonetheless, her work provides an interesting window into social mores of the time outside of the work of women activists, allowing us to further our understanding of the debates around women’s political and social standing.

<u>Female Agency and Power in Nineteenth-Century Italian Society and in *L'Ultima Primavera*</u>

The concept of power imbalance between men and women was discussed by several Italian emancipationists in the late nineteenth-century. As with most facets of the complicated *questione femminile*, viewpoints on the causes of female subordination and the ways to overcome it were many and wide-ranging. For instance, Memini and Regina di Luanto clearly had differing viewpoints when it came to portraying agency; despite belonging to the same social class and approximately the same time period (Memini was slightly older), their conclusions regarding women's place in society could have been wildly opposite, especially if we consider their protagonists' personality and life choices. As women share only a symbolic "location" in the group of socially marginal individuals, based on the inherent differences in their work discussed so far, these two authors probably do not have that much in common when it came to perspectives on the issue of women's standing in society.

The Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell, whose social theory of gender emphasises the historical nature of society and the power of class and gender hierarchies, discusses social structures as a pattern of constraints that inhibits a certain class/community of people: "The concept of social structure expresses the constraints that lie in a given form of social organisation […] these constraints on social practice operate through a complex interplay of powers and through an array of social institutions (Connell, 1987, p.82). As Maharaj exemplifies, "The gendered division of labour, for example, counts as a social structure precisely because, operating as it does through institutional mechanisms like the differential skilling and training of women and men, it forecloses a whole range of job options to women[…]" (1995, p.52), thereby severely limiting their freedom of choice and their

independence. It's not a coincidence that many emancipationists of nineteenth-century Italy (but also in other European countries such as the UK) strongly advocated for equal wages as an instrument to the emancipation of women. However, it's also important to highlight that, if by our contemporary standards we think of the workforce as a group working mainly *outside* the home (except, of course, for housework), most nineteenth-century Italian men and women were farmers, so the distinction between work and family was blurred, particularly for women; in fact, as Perry Wilson pointed out, the division that contemporary feminist scholars have made regarding the split between the public and private spheres, and the consequent relegation of women to the domesticity of the home, might be a slight over-simplification (2004, p.2). It is true that, in middle-class families, women often worked from home while men worked in the outside world; however, for most of the population, women had a double responsibility: that of taking care of the home and children, and their work in the fields or in factories. The separate spheres ideology, which was so popular at the time, could therefore be considered more of a prerogative of the middle class than the working class.

In those thorny circumstances, with so many voices expressing their opinion on women's subordination, it's not surprising that female authors would have communicated, consciously or otherwise, a sometimes discordant message. Regina di Luanto, for instance, whose assertive female protagonists seem to be a manifestation of her desire to portray equality, still discussed marriage in terms of a 'business association' to avoid the disappointment and heartbreak of being in love with a man who had power over you, such as Mina Argenti in *Il nuovissimo amore* (1903). Romantic love, according to her protagonist Mina, was to be lived *outside* marriage. Here, Regina di Luanto proposed a compromise, rather than dare to dream; however, there is still evidence of a deep reflection on (and

rejection of) the social mores of the time. Memini's characters, on the other hand, were not generally portrayed with much agency or power over their own lives, with the exception of Elisa in *L'ultima primavera;* but then again, her independence is only partial, as she is still subject to cultural norms of femininity and the very real threat of a social scandal. In this novel, the female protagonist has much more power over her own life than many women would realistically have had in her circumstances at the time, as we've seen in the previous section. It's not a power she has earned either, but rather, it was given to her by a turn of events. However, the only way this is addressed is through one statement made by her aunt, which simply states how Elisa is comfortable with her life and able to make her own decisions. This independence is not celebrated, but rather dismissed; contrary to Regina di Luanto's many female characters who conquered and rejoiced at their independence, whether it be emotional or financial, or rallied against the injustice of having their subordination used against them, Memini's narration never openly discusses either.

A passage that exemplifies this in *L'ultima primavera* is a scene in which Elisa hears of Marina's engagement to a wealthy prince, and decides to visit her. Elisa is clearly upset at the prospect of her young friend marrying a man in his sixties, particularly at the idea that the marriage was arranged out of convenience, rather than love; she thinks back to her own marriage, and how she had accepted out of filial obligation and sense of duty, and realises that it was a "sacrilegio" (p.271). When she asks Marina whether she'll take some time to reflect before accepting, to make sure it's what she wants, Marina objects that her friend would not have asked her to wait before accepting an offer of marriage in the past, when it was Elisa who introduced to her many gentlemen with that exact prospect in mind. Elisa replies: "Marina, […] in tutti quei casi... tu avresti potuto amare. E ora? interroga il tuo cuore, Marina, interroga tutta te stessa" (p.271). It is a powerful moment of self-discovery for

Memini's lead character, and yet, it comes to a woman who, as we've seen, has a vast amount of privilege: as a wealthy widow, who has already fulfilled the social obligation of marriage, she can afford to think of it as more than a business contract or a lifeline. It is her young friend who brings her back to earth from her considerations:

"Non sia in pena per me, Contessa; questo matrimonio colma tutti i miei voti, e quelli di mia madre. Tutto a questo mondo non si può avere. E l'amore. Oh! L'amore!... Ebbe un bel riso perlato in cui suonava un amarissimo scherno" (p. 272).

Love, in Marina's opinion, does not factor into the choice; there are echoes of Regina di Luanto's protagonist Mina in *Il nuovissimo amore* (1994), who also believes marriage to be merely a social contract to fulfil while cultivating a romantic, but platonic relationship on the side. However, while Mina complies with her duties with serenity, believing that romantic love does not have a place in a marriage, Marina is cynical and detached. Her cold indifference seems like a mask, where sometimes her disillusionment filters through: that "amarissimo scherno" with which she laughs at the mere notion of love.

While as readers we may expect Elisa to rally against her friend's cynicism, or to at least hold steady in the privacy of her mind about her convictions, she instead folds by realising both of them are unhappy: "Stettero mute un istante, raccolte ognuna nell'intensità delle proprie angoscie. […] Ora sì, sapevano, e forse in quel momento ebbero pietà l'una dell'altra!.." (p.273). Marina is then described as "padrona del suo destino", as if to claim that the only freedom women can have, is to be aware of their situation, to claim the choice of not rocking the boat. As contemporary readers, it might seem a harrowing consideration, especially when we consider that Regina di Luanto's bold protagonists, created by a writer with a similar social background, fight strenuously for agency and power over their own lives. Memini's narrator, on the other hand, commends the dignity of accepting one's fate, possibly

condemning her female character(s) to a stagnant, helpless life. However, as Butler states, "construction is not opposed to agency; it is […] the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible" (1990, p.187). That is to say, that while we, as human beings, consolidate our constructed identity by performing it over time, by gaining awareness of this we can begin to make choices and express our agency within the boundaries we've been set, or reject the boundaries as much as we believe possible. If we consider Laura of *Un martirio*, her desperation to regain a semblance of control and her growth as a character, we can clearly see that eventually she removes herself from the social structure that oppressed her by killing her husband. As she was incapable of reshaping her marriage from the subordinate position she was in, she only had two options: that of staying, and accepting her fate, or leaving in the only way she felt she could have, based on the precepts of the time. That choice allowed her to express her agency, however traumatic the consequences. Memini's characters, on the other hand, choose differently, but they do choose: while most of their actions are not political, and while, as we've said, this writer did not seem inclined to engage much with the debate in her work, in this particular instance we can see a similarity with Di Luanto, perhaps, in the way she allowed her characters to claim their choices. Furthermore, in *Un martirio* it becomes obvious that "performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect" (Butler, 1988, p.528), but the author seems to want to convey that it may still be worth it to reclaim one's sense of identity, and to potentially enact change, however small; while in *L'ultima primavera*, Marina -and by extension her friend Elisa, who approves of her stance- expresses her agency to reaffirm the status quo and "provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all" (Butler, 1988, p.528).

Elisa – or Memini, through her character's mouth- further explains her view so:

> Senonchè, ora, nella serena normalità delle sue parole, c'era come una nuova dignità, una forma di riservatezza, un *noli me tangere*, che aveva veramente qualcosa di regale, che si elevava sovrano, imperante sulle confuse rovine d'una passata debolezza, rinnegata ora e dominata, per sempre(UP, p.273)

It's almost as if Marina, by claiming that choice as her own, while simultaneously believing that she has no other, has won an awful war against her own emotions, her own vulnerable sentimentality. Her reserve, her quiet dignity, are depicted by the author as a triumph instead of the defeat it might actually be viewed as. Finding comfort in accepting, rather than fighting against a system that wants women deprived of agency and power over their own lives, was actually quite a common view, espoused by other women writers of the time; an example of this could be found in Matilde Serao's words:

> Io so, come tante altre donne sanno, che come sono composte e ordinate le leggi nella società moderna, non vi è felicità possibile per la donna, in qualunque condizione ella si trovi: né nel matrimonio, né nell'amore libero, né nell'amore illegale… e so anche, come tante altre donne sanno, che tutto si dovrebbe mutare nella società, nel cuore degli uomini e nei fatti umani… e so che nessuno muterà tutto e che, allora non vale la pena di mutare niente (Serao, 1901, in De Nunzio Schilardi, 1983, p.277).

Many critics[9] believe that behind this defeatist statement were hidden Serao's doubts regarding the actual feasibility of acquiring political and civil rights for women in the short-term. Abbondante, in particular, highlights the difference between "uguaglianza formale" and "uguaglianza sostanziale" between the sexes, and clarifies that Serao "criticava un'idea di uguaglianza che fosse solo di facciata, di un'uguaglianza sbandierata ma non concretamente realizzabile e soprattutto non inclusiva" (2017, p.62). It is, therefore, quite likely, that when Serao stated "Assicurare alla donna il diritto sacrosanto di vivere, darle i

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[9] Bibliography: see Fanning, 1987, 2002, 2012; Abbondante, 2017; Harrowitz, 1996; Romanowska, 2013.

mezzi per esercitarlo, questo, se accetto la parola, è femminismo" (in Trotta, p.58), she meant exactly that. Effectively guaranteeing women's independence was more difficult than maybe most emancipationists of the time would have admitted, and Serao was not the only one with this view: many women writers disdained the feminist movement because of its abstractness and rejection of femininity (Russell, 1997, p.89). Other popular writers, such as La Marchesa Colombi and Neera, also shared the same perplexities, to different degrees. Neera shared with Serao an apparently pessimistic and conservative view on women's rights, at least in public, but interestingly, her novels focused almost exclusively on the struggles and hardships in women's daily life. In *Battaglie per un'idea*, in which she discussed the subject, she wrote: "La natura ha voluto che la donna amasse perché l'uomo non ha tempo d'amare; ha voluto che soffrisse perché l'uomo non ha tempo di soffrire" (1898, p.71), highlighting her awareness of how unfair and precarious women's position in society was, but also her unwillingness to shake the status-quo: in the short story Falena (2011), for instance, she seems to condemn the tremendously harsh reality of women prostitutes, but she never backed a demand for political reform. Similarly, the Marchesa Colombi's opus reflected the author's sympathy for working-class and middle-class women's place in society, which did not translate into civil rights(1876, p.398) This may demonstrate how deeply-rooted gender stereotypes ran, and how strongly they affected society at large, including educated women who would have only benefitted from equality; whether they actually believed that women do not belong in the public sphere is not as relevant as their belief that they had no choice but to disseminate these notions in wider society. It could also be pointed out that by contrast, di Luanto's viewpoint, filtering through her works, was quite radical for the time.

Memini's portrayal of agency in the passage above, therefore, contrasts sharply with Di Luanto's lead character in *Un martirio*: while Laura is initially naïve and quite innocent, she not only develops an awareness of the great injustice caused to her, but also the desire to overcome her situation and to fight against her husband's wishes. Elisa's idealistic notion of marriage, on the other hand, resembles young Laura's at the beginning of *Un martirio*, before reality crashes in. Laura, however, is a young woman not yet experienced enough of life and relationships to realise straight away that her husband is using her, whereas Elisa's life has been cushioned by her wealth, the love and respect of a father figure who wanted the best for her, the privilege of a "brotherly" love with her husband, and finally, an incredible amount of independence. Elisa's life can be seen, in fact, as Laura's dream. If we take these two radically different representations of marriage (provided we take into account that Laura was from the middle-class while Elisa had married up), it can be said that the two authors likely had different purposes: Memini's novel touches upon women's subordinate position, but ultimately the writer glorifies them for their sacrifices and reinforces the status quo. In fact, Marina's incessant search for a husband is ultimately fruitful, while Elisa, who initially rebelled against social mores by falling in love with a younger man and choosing to act on them, is left unrewarded despite her courage. The ending may have had the purpose of cautioning women about the costs of straying from prescribed social expectations, but not necessarily; just as Regina di Luanto's Laura in *Un martirio* takes charge of her life and suffers a tragic end, Memini might have sought an emotional reaction in her readers that would have prompted a reflection on women's inability to take the rains without consequences. Both novels attempt to arouse empathy for their female protagonists, though in different ways, and potentially, with different objectives: *Un martirio* was written in the first person and in the guise of a secret diary, while the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist

of *L'ultima primavera* are communicated through the omniscient narrator's voice. However, while Regina di Luanto succeeds in that endeavour, as we've seen, Memini's attempt is somewhat lukewarm, due mainly to the fact that Elisa herself is not developed enough as a character to inspire much pity. A point in the text where it is clear that the audience is meant to feel empathy for Elisa's troubles, and possibly a sense of injustice, too, is definitely the ending paragraph:

Elisa non si era mossa. Solo, tre volte, con un crescendo sommesso, stridente, echeggiò nella sala un nome, un appello, un addio, disperato come quello di un'agonia: Roberto! Roberto! Roberto! Poi... più niente... — Finita, l'ultima primavera! (UP, p.392).

However, while the empathy provoked by the circumstances in which Di Luanto's protagonists found themselves was likely meant to draw attention to and inspire reflection on women's subordinate position in society, it seems clear that in Memini's novels, including *L'ultima primavera*, it is merely a literary device to keep the audience captivated. This can be observed in this last paragraph, in which the emphasis is placed on the protagonist's feelings of hopelessness and distress, achieved also through the open ending; at no point in the novel do we find contemplation about the future or about Elisa's choices and what they mean for her, a single woman fending for herself in nineteenth-century society, which ultimately limits Memini's work to a rather simple love story. Memini's effort to inspire empathy in her readers is also rather limited, as it focuses on three main events, almost in complete isolation from the rest of the narration: the moment Elisa realises she is in love with Roberto and her consequent panic, her decision to let him go, and her final realisation that she's lost him forever. However, as her character lacks substance, the momentary pity elicited in the reader is not as poignant or long-lasting as that provoked by the vicissitudes of Di Luanto's characters. As Coplan has stated, "the reader empathizes but also reacts to

what is learned through empathizing and to information he has access to that characters may not (2004, p.149): There is no reflection on her circumstances, which would potentially prompt the reader' contemplation of her own situation, and no internal debate on her unique life as a young widow in high-class society, which would have still provided information about the character and might have helped to connect to it. Furthermore, readers would have probably been able to tell that some features were unrealistic, such as Elisa's lack of concern about living alone and providing gossip fodder, and would have likely found it hard to relate, unless they belonged to the upper-class themselves. It follows that, if upper-class readers, with their considerable social privilege, were the only ones likely to reflect on Elisa's circumstances and to relate to them, *L'ultima primavera* could hardly work as a tool to encourage reflection and change. Therefore, while it's true that there are some small signs that this author was indeed aware of the perilous condition in which many women found themselves at the time, as mentioned in the previous section, it seems likely that Memini did not have a political agenda, per se, but rather meant to entertain with a light, highly-readable story.

It is true that the character of Elisa is slightly less stereotypical than other characters by the same author: Memini portrayed her as a woman that was never interested in marriage in the first place, happy to live with her father and to care for him: "Padre e figlia erano felici ed Elisa non si rammentava che alla sua età, a ventiquattro anni, ella avrebbe potuto essere da tempo maritata. Non ci pensava, ecco tutto" (UP, p.49). Given her social class, her status, that painted her as an odd, discordant voice in a world where women's goal was that to marry. Her friend Marina wholeheartedly pursues it despite her many failures. However, that is not to say Elisa has a strong opinion either way: she puts up no objection to being married once her aunt finds her a husband: "Ella accettò fiduciosamente quello sposo, le cui qualità

erano indiscutibili, e che aveva comuni con lei e col padre suo tante idee e tante simpatie" (p.51). This ambivalence between her obedience at following the path her aunt has laid out for her, and her disinterest in marriage, could be a wink to Memini's more progressive readership; however, given that women at the time depended on a good marriage to survive, Elisa's disinterest, or rather, lack of urgency in getting married, and then later, her relationship with her husband, which is described as "dolcemente fraterna" and nothing more, further reinforces her doubtless privilege. Her privilege is not even acknowledged directly: not through her female character's mouth, and not through Memini as the narrator. The only mention comes from her aunt Balbina, who writes in a letter to acquaintances that Elisa "in complesso può vivere come le pare e piace, e questo è senza dubbio un gran conforto, nella sua difficile e delicata posizione" (p.55).

However, this brief note hardly takes into account how rare Elisa's situation actually was. Whether it be consciously on the part of the author, one of her female characters acknowledged that a woman alone was always at risk of ruining her reputation, which in turn would have meant destitution and loneliness: Elisa's saving grace was the fortune her husband had left her. Furthermore, women in nineteenth-century Italy were only entitled to a small portion of their deceased husband's patrimony, and only if their husbands had written them into the will or if they were at risk of complete destitution (Delmedico, p.169). Elisa has the means to completely renovate her flat, and also still owns several properties; given that her father was not a man of great means, it's unlikely it could have been a dowry, so it follows that those assets were presumably left to her by her husband. Therefore, the fictional character of the novel is further accentuated. Yet, instead of portraying the injustice many unmarried or widowed women suffered, or indeed emphasising how extraordinary Elisa's situation really was, Memini chose to avoid the financial issue in her narrative; she focused

instead on Elisa's so extraordinary countenance that even gossip had not hurt her, stating that eventually rumourmongers had given up (p.54). The assumption that living with "amabile dignità" would be enough to safeguard a woman's reputation is obviously problematic; it is impossible to tell whether it was consciously played out in the novel for educational purposes, or if it is a message she communicated unintentionally. However, in a society in which women's behaviour and role was policed, enforcing the message that "proper" behaviour was rewarded only reinforced stereotypical gender biases and contributed to confine women to a very limited sphere of influence. Moreover, even though widowhood was a step above being unmarried (Neera's portrayal of the "zitellona" in 1896 novel *Teresa* is a prime example of the social plight of spinsters in 19th century Italy), it was still a very harsh condition to be in. According to Palazzo (1990, p.454), "The pattern of female-headed dwellings […] suggested that they belonged to the most needy groups of the population", which highlights how uncommon Elisa's circumstances really were. Palazzo also states that it was uncommon for widows to be the heads of the household in the upper classes and the aristocracy; "as a rule, family interests would dictate dependent forms of residence for such women […] and re-entry into the original or affinal family or remarriage" (p.454). It follows that Elisa's independence and easy life were very much a work of fiction: moreover, Elisa's way to work through her grief for her husband's and father's deaths by buying a house in Florence and spending time decorating it to her taste would have seemed striking and out-of-place to a working-class female reader.

Despite this astonishing amount of independence, Elisa's character does not show much agency in the beginning: she is first uninterested in marriage, but she acquiesces so as to make her father and aunt happy, then lives her life as she pleases once she becomes a widow because she can afford to. While writers such as Virginia Woolf would have

considered her financial independence already a substantial first step towards self-emancipation (1929, p.13), her privilege does not seem to be considered extraordinary by the writer herself, as Elisa hardly takes notice or pride in her self-reliance, and is not portrayed as an ideal to aspire to. Therefore, rather than being influential and inspirational for women readers of the time, it feeds into the concept of a fairy tale, where the only severe trouble of a woman's life is winning her love's affections.

I'd argue that the most noteworthy acts that denote agency as an individual are two: the first is a passage in which Elisa explicitly forbids her aunt from interfering with her and Roberto, by arguing that she is fully capable of handling her own relationships. This denotes self-reliance that is not explicitly connected by Memini to Elisa's privileged financial situation, and yet shows how that has translated into a feeling of autonomy and self-confidence. The second, is the moment in which Elisa makes the decision to win Roberto back and to ignore the repercussions on her -and his- reputation. Ultimately, both have a limited impact on the events that will conclude the novel; Memini does not reward Elisa for that show of independence, but rather her tragedy unfolds despite (or perhaps because of) her choices.

L'ultima primavera is undoubtedly one of the most successful novels written by Memini, as it contains elements, as I've discussed, that if better developed could have contributed to an interesting work of literature. There are certainly instances where the author appears to be aware of the debates around the *condizione femminile*, such as the choice to portray her protagonist as a woman who does, occasionally, push back against the limitations forced on her gender at the time. After all, Elisa is a character who mostly lives her life according to her own choices, and while this is not out of the ordinary – especially when considering other women's literature of the 19th century-, it is certainly a development from her previous novels, where female characters, and especially

protagonists, were depicted as the epitome of all gender expectations placed on women. Moreover, Memini's effort to create some empathy towards the protagonist, even if not particularly successful for the reasons discussed above, still shows on the part of the author potential sympathy for women's predicaments. It is quite clear that her lack of engagement with the issues around female emancipation is deliberate; the crafting of the novel itself carefully avoided potential issues, resulting in an entertaining, at times emotional work. Yet, even a work of fiction apparently so out of touch and so conforming to gender stereotypes, has the potential to show a unique perspective on what it could mean to be a woman in nineteenth-century Italy; Memini's brief forays into the narration, such as Elisa's reflection on 'accepting' a future by deciding to turn it into a deliberate choice, or her decision to ignore potential repercussions to win back Roberto, do talk to us about some of the limitations and impositions forced on women's lives at the time. This might suggest that while this author, like many others, showed a predominantly conservative perspective in her work, she was aware of at least some of the struggles of her gender and willing to -subtly- discuss them.

Conclusions

In this thesis, I have focused on two female authors, Regina Di Luanto and Memini, who, in their own respects, have provided decidedly interesting perspectives on the condition of women in nineteenth-century Italy. As stated in the introduction, these two authors were chosen because of the diverse female representation they offered: one, more likely to be intentionally subversive, the other, more representative of nineteenth-century binary notions of gender. My intention was to explore how these two authors conceptualised female agency in gendered relationships, whether there were any points of contact in their characterisation of women protagonists, but also how they described gender roles within their own work, how and in what measure they might be affected by prescribed notions of femininity that circulated in society at the time. In order to do so, I focused on two specific novels. Di Luanto's *Un martirio* was chosen as a representative of her oeuvre and the seemingly constant battle that her female characters fight in order to promote a more equal, constructive relationship between men and women in society: her protagonist undergoes life-changing vicissitudes that allow her to reclaim her agency in an extremely powerful way, and that prompted exploration. Memini's *L'ultima primavera*, on the other hand, was chosen because it's somehow detached from this author's production: her main character executes an interesting balancing act between the social expectations she feels she needs to fulfill, and her own desires. As their representations of womanhood are so different, I sought to analyse whether these two authors portrayed self-power in positive terms, to present an alternative model of femininity that readers could explore or aspire to imitate. In order to do that, I also focused on whether these works of fiction might be structured to help their

readership empathise with their protagonists, and whether they might be trying to engender reflection on the social and cultural standing of women of the time.

Undoubtedly, there is much beyond the scope of this research, such as the authors' true intentions; while it seems likely, based on the details collected, that Di Luanto intended to generate interest in the debate and that Memini most probably simply meant to offer some light-hearted entertainment to her readership, the substantial lack of information on their lives does not allow us to confirm either for certain. What we do know, is that women authors faced great disadvantages when speaking in favour of the emancipation movement, which prompted some of them to adopt pseudonyms in order to feel less constrained about what they wrote. This is the case of Regina di Luanto, whose reviewers often cautioned against reading her novels; an example of such a review stated: "I suoi racconti brucerebbero le dita delle fanciulle innocenti" (1891, in Perozzo, 2013, p.537). Memini, on the other hand, seemed to have chosen a pseudonym for other reasons, perhaps simply she did not want to be known as a writer; however, despite the lack of a political message, Memini's works still show how even a highly privileged fictional woman still had to carefully weigh her options ahead of making choices about her own life if she wanted to avoid repercussions. Moreover, she displayed – albeit somewhat superficially- the impact of the societal expectations placed on her gender despite, or perhaps also because of, her privilege as an unattached woman. In fact, we have seen how perhaps this author had a slight pedagogical intent, certainly not to rouse her readership to action, but to educate young women on how to behave properly in order to 'fit' in nineteenth-century Italian society.

By comparing these two authors, profound differences have emerged that I believe further understanding, not only of the emancipation movement, but also of the wide, multi-faceted debate that women were having at the time regarding their role in society. In fact, it

became obvious during the course of this project, that even women such as Memini, who did not openly take part in the conversation, were not able to disengage altogether from it. One of the ways in which Memini – subconsciously or otherwise- acknowledged prejudiced societal expectations is by constructing the character of Marina, who, as we've seen, has practised to perfection the smile she offers to every marriage prospect. While as readers it becomes clear that this careful mask is an illusion, and an unsuccessful one at that, the author steers clear of engaging further with the notion of gender performance that was required of women. It is unclear whether the artificial poise displayed by this character was supposed to engender reflection on the expectations placed on women, who had to appear flawless to their prospective husbands, or whether Memini simply meant to juxtapose Elisa's natural charm to Marina's overly-practiced deception. Ultimately, even though the scene had the potential of deconstructing some of those preconceived notions, it remains superficial. Similarly, the protagonist Elisa shows some traits of independent thought; her decisiveness when choosing to live on her own after the death of her husband, or the final pursuit of the young lover she'd initially rejected. However, such actions are met with brutal retribution by her creator, who not only does not grant her a happy ending, but seems to want to push her readership to question whether expressing one's own agency is wise. In fact, Elisa's self-reliance is never acknowledged or praised, her privilege never discussed: while she is somewhat less stereotypical than the other female characters of Memini's opus, the impression is that these traits were at best a simple narrative tool to create suspense and conflict before the final resolution, or perhaps a cautionary tale to warn women to be wary of straying too far from the status quo. Memini's authorial choices were therefore quite different from Di Luanto's, seemingly without the open intention to provoke reflection on women's emancipation; however, they are still quite informative as they show the

pervasiveness of some gender biases in the 19th century, namely the importance of cultivating femininity and of accepting one's role in society. These ultimately seem to be conveyed by Marina's decision to accept a loveless marriage and to claim that decision as hers, regardless of external pressures, but also by the protagonist's final decision to ignore potential repercussions and to allow herself to pursue Roberto again. Interestingly, while the first is hailed as strong and dignified by the author as the third-person narrator and through Elisa's private thoughts, the second precedes the painful rejection with which Memini terminates the novel. These narrative choices, as I've previously clarified, could have been born out of the simple intention to create suspense and a lasting impression on the readership, but they undoubtedly convey that the author was indeed aware of the limitations placed on women at the time, even when high-born; clearly, even if she was not entirely willing to engage with the debate, she was at least prepared to hint at it. It is not possible, for obvious reasons, to determine where Memini stood as regards women's emancipation; whether she was worried about the success of future novels if she expressed even partial agreement to some of the movement's concerns, or whether she held no hope that they would create lasting change. However, even if her stance seemed to be mostly conservative, *L'ultima primavera* still discussed agency (or its lack thereof) in the life of a young, privileged woman; if anything, this highlights the complexity of the debate and how current and relevant its issues were, even for women who ostensibly did not care about advancing the movement's agenda.

Di Luanto's *Un martirio*, on the other hand, is a powerful indictment of social structures such as marriage, who granted men absolute, unchecked power over their wives; the whole novel is crafted so as to guide the reader from a relatively quiet, if unexciting home situation, to a progressively darker and hopeless tale of abuse and violence that ends only

when the victim, Laura, murders her husband in an act of self-defence. While in L'ultima primavera the return to the status quo and a resigned acceptance of women's fate (Elisa's lonely existence and Marina's marriage to an older man she's not in love with) seems the key message that transpires from Memini's novel, Di Luanto's empowered protagonist struggles to her last breath against the boundaries that have been placed on her and openly reclaims her husband's murder as a choice she would willingly make again. This author not only discusses physical violence and confinement in *Un martirio*, she actively exposes gaslighting and psychological abuse as powerful tools of control that Laura's husband, Corrado, systematically employs to keep her in check. The novella successfully engages the readership through the diary form, which Regina di Luanto likely utilised to help the audience sympathise and connect with the protagonist; the first-person narration is also particularly effective at highlighting the damage caused by Corrado's traumatic actions on Laura's vulnerable and young psyche. The novel also uncovers the infantilisation operated on women at the time, and their lack of a support system: the protagonist is, in fact, not only abused by her husband but preyed upon by his friend, who attempts on multiple occasions to use her as the unwilling conduit of his and Corrado's séances. Not only that, the family that Laura intimately seeks to visit to escape her home situation, consisting of her mother and sister, are never made aware of what actually occurs in Laura's marriage; finally, the only friend she ever confides in, Dr Santini, never really seems to understand that Laura is a victim, and often coaxes her into acquiescing to her husband's requests without ever knowing what the consequences might be. He de facto assumes that Laura is being childish and immature on account of her age, and that her rapidly declining health is merely a product of her weak constitution and not something more. Di Luanto creates an extremely hostile environment for her protagonist to exist within, but the most frightening factor is that the

audience finds it immediately relatable, and most importantly, realistic. In fact, her circumstances are not terrifying because they're beyond the scope of what readers at the time might have imagined, it is terrifying because it's a concrete, real example of the profound inequality that many women suffered within their own households. The nightmare that Laura finds herself in is possibly the condition in which many women of the time found themselves, stripped of any agency and gaslit into resignation.

Ultimately, both Regina di Luanto and Memini offered a portrayal of their protagonists that showed the many limitations and boundaries which women were subjected to in nineteenth-century Italy. While they might have had different intentions as regards their novels, and perhaps even different perspectives on women's emancipation, what emerges from their work is certainly similar: in order to exist and to be accepted, women had to fit into a role that drastically constrained their agency and their freedom of choice. This is self-evident even in a highly-fictionalised account such as *L'ultima primavera*, where widowhood, for instance, is portrayed as a great chance to live independently, or where reputation does not significantly impact the protagonist's social life. It can certainly be said that there are not many points in common between the characters of Laura and Elisa, and I've explored in depth the many differences in the previous chapters; however, both protagonists are, to different extents, subverting expected notions of femininity. Laura is certainly the most transgressive as concerns gender performance: her transformation from docile and meek wife to her open and constant rebellion against Corrado's rule is impressive and heart-breaking. Therefore, Regina di Luanto crafted a character that desperately rejected the role she'd been assigned: while Laura's perspective on marriage is initially extremely positive, her growth as a woman also means shedding those preconceived ideas she'd had about wives as *angeli del focolare*. Her relentlessness and desperation in trying to gain a measure

of agency over her own body and company is decidedly unladylike for the times, and so is her refusal to acknowledge defeat. However, Elisa is also, to some degree, rejecting some traditional traits attributed to women at the time: her financial and social independence, whether hard-won or not, was a deliberate choice of the author, and so was her final refusal to let gossip or her own fear interfere with her feelings for Roberto. Whether Memini's intention was perhaps to show from a somewhat mediocre and lukewarm 'verist' perspective the challenges of exercising their freedom of choice, or whether she meant to caution women against challenging the status quo, we cannot know, and certainly not from examining a single novel. However, this project was not about investigating intentions: through the portrayal shown by Memini we can acknowledge that this author could at least conceptualise a different way of life for a woman. In a way, we could also hypothesise that Elisa's downfall and tragedy begins when she finds herself developing romantic feelings for another person, as she was portrayed as fairly content previously, when living on her own and making full use of the independence acquired when her husband died. This point of view is also undoubtedly an interesting avenue to pursue – and could be explored in the future by analysing and comparing previous works of Memini's from a feminist perspective. As concerns Regina di Luanto's *oeuvre*, there is still much to investigate regarding her portrayal of gender roles and particularly, of femininity; a fascinating opportunity of further research would be to examine the evolution of this author's strong female characters, perhaps also chronologically. It can certainly be stated, therefore, that while there are not many points of convergence between Memini's and Di Luanto's representation of female agency, and that their purpose in presenting these different models of femininity was not the same, they both shed light on the gender stereotypes and societal expectations of the time; whether they opposed them or not, whether they sought to inspire thought or entertain an

audience, their work as female writers of that “galassia sommersa” (Arslan, 1998, p.13) certainly created opportunities for debate and reflection.

This thesis has explored different facets of the emancipation movement, outlined the social and cultural context in which women lived in nineteenth-century Italy, and analysed two works of fiction whose writers greatly contributed to the debate on the questione femminile, whether they had taken active part in it or not. Both Memini and Regina di Luanto, regardless of their popularity in life, are part of an immense literary landscape of women authors which, if further studied, will greatly improve our understanding of the debate on women’s rights in Italy at the time.

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