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Lady Morgan in Italy: A Traveller with an Agenda

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Abstract:

Lady Morgan (née Sydney Owenson) was a professional Irish traveller and travel-writer, who spent over a year on the peninsula. The travelogue *Italy* (1821) she was commissioned to write on the basis of the reputation she had acquired as a novelist (e.g. *The Wild Irish Girl*, 1806) and a socio-political writer (*France*, 1817), left a mark on Italy and on the understanding of Italy in Great Britain. Her writings, in fact, helped disseminate the ideal of a unified Italy and influence British and Irish public opinion in favour of Italy's aspirations to cast off foreign or domestic autocratic rule. Moreover, she used her travelogue to serve the cause of Ireland disguising a patriotic message about her home country under her many sallies about nationalism and the right to self-determination concerning Italy. The political impact of her book, unusual for a travel account written by a woman, was enhanced by Morgan's radical ideology, the gender bias of her observations and her original methods. The present article purposes to examine Morgan's double, feminine and masculine, approach of mixing solid documentation with apparently frivolous notes originating in the feminine domain of society news, commentary on the domestic scene and emotional reporting on social and historical events. Distrusting male-authored official history, Morgan gave a central place in her work to the informal sources from which she gathered her insights about Italy. Analysing how she came to obtain the contemporary input for elaborating her ideas will be the aim of this chapter which will dwell on the more worldly aspects of Morgan's sojourn in the peninsula focussing on the company she kept, the activities she partook of, the events of a domestic nature she witnessed.

Keywords: Anglo-Irish Literature, Italy, Lady Morgan (Sydney Owenson), Travel Writing

Among the professional Irish travellers and travel-writers who spent some time on the peninsula, the name of the author of *Italy* (1821), Lady Morgan (née Sydney Owenson), comes to the fore as one on whom Italy left a mark

and who, through her book, left a mark on Italy and on the understanding of Italy in Great Britain. Her writings, in fact, helped disseminate the ideal of a unified Italy and influence British and Irish public opinion in favour of Italy's aspirations to cast off foreign or domestic autocratic rule. The political impact of her book, unusual for a travel account written by a woman, was enhanced by Morgan's radical ideology, the gender bias of her observations and her original methods.

The keynote of Morgan's production prior to her visit to Italy had been to give life and visibility to Gaelic culture through her national tales and to contribute through literature to the construction of an Irish identity. After her journeys to France and Italy, she came to see that her brand of nationalism was part of the European drive to recognize national identity and that the greatest obstacle to the affirmation of this idea was a lack of freedom. Consequently, *Italy* is replete with examples of how freedom was oppressed by the church and by foreign and domestic autocratic powers and of how, in certain happy moments of the country's history (the republican ones, mostly), it had instead flourished, fostering an awareness of national identity. The travelogue traces the development of the idea of civic, social and national identity through history, imposed at times even violently by means of revolutions, and denounces the obstacles this idea encountered, highlighting the suffering of an oppressed people. In Morgan's mind, society had to be made aware of past and present achievements or injustices so that reforms could be implemented. This was the chief aim she hoped to achieve with her book.

A gendered bias is also an important component of *Italy*. The way Morgan experienced and represented the places she visited was determined by what she believed were essentially feminine components, 'affection' and 'sentiment': "I trust, however, that in a woman's work, sex may plead its privilege and that if the heart will occasionally make itself a party in the concern, its intrusions may be pardoned, as long as the facts detailed are backed beyond the possibility of dispute, by the authority of contemporary testimonies" (1821, I, 71). Next to the sentimental, feminine bias, thus, she also puts forward a masculine insistence on documentation as "the authority of contemporary testimonies". In this double, feminine and masculine, approach consists her originality, which distinguishes her travelogue from similar publications.

Italy intersperses historical chapters "firmly located in the masculine domain" of documented political writing, as Anne O'Brien notes (2003, 179), with other chapters originating in the feminine domain of society news, commentary on the domestic scene and emotional reporting on social and historical events (such as, for instance, the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799). The division, however, is deceptive because both domains represent "a platform from which she could express political views" (183). In reporting with a political bias on what was considered the feminine domain and in using what she deemed the privilege of her sex, as detailed above, Morgan illustrates the

chief tenet of her *Patriotic Sketches* that “Politics can never be a woman’s science; but patriotism must naturally be a woman’s sentiment” (1807, I, 12). Whether the term patriotism applied to her own or to a foreign country became increasingly irrelevant in her cosmopolitan outlook while much of what she wrote about Italy had implications for her own country.

Although she may appear frivolous, Morgan went about her fact-finding mission in a thorough and comprehensive way supplementing the information drawn from the documents she has consulted (most of them French) with the observation of facts and the integration in her text of the opinions of her Italian acquaintances. Her construction of Italy is, thus, filtered through an Italian gaze and shaped by the words and writings of like-minded contemporaries who shared her ideology (Sismondi, Ginguené, Breme, Botta, Rossetti, and many more).

Analysing how she came to obtain the contemporary input for elaborating her ideas about Italy will be the aim of this chapter. Her influential travelogue, *Italy*, has often been studied as a political or ethical text; the time has come to look at the more worldly aspects of Morgan’s sojourn in the peninsula focussing on the company she kept, the activities she partook of, the events of a domestic nature she witnessed. Distrusting male-authored official history and perceiving that Metternich’s Europe was experiencing an underground liberal agitation not documented yet and whose aim was the subversion of the Council of Vienna status quo, Morgan gathered her insights about Italy from informal sources to which she gave a central place in her work. Although she came to Italy with preconceived ideas and a blueprint of what she should write, the apparently anodyne and superficial aspects of her sojourn are the ones which changed her attitude and inspired her to adopt the influential positions she took towards Italy and, concomitantly, towards Ireland. Moreover the account of contemporary life inspires the more interesting and lively sections of Morgan’s *Italy*, allowing the reader to have a glimpse of Italian society in the Restoration period on the eve of the momentous events that would lead to the unification of the nation.

1. *Sojourn in Italy*

The journey to Italy of Sydney Morgan and her husband, Sir Charles, took place between May 1819 and May 1820 with a period of several months of preparation in London and Paris where Sydney immersed herself in the study of Italian history and literature and tried to refresh her Italian in which she had been tutored by a friend of her father’s in her school days. The diaries and letters collected in *Passages from my Autobiography* (1859) and *Memoirs* (1862) indicate how, even before she and her husband, Sir Charles, had left Dublin, they were getting ready for Italy through a serious program of studies. “We are deep in the lore and literature of old Italy”, reads an entry in her

diary dated August 1818, “[but] we want to get at living Italy as she now is, after the passage of so many recent and important events” (Morgan 1859, 2).

Morgan’s immersion into “living Italy” through a year-long stay, her classical itinerary¹, the participation in many day-to-day events, as well as her social connections, determine the nature of the book and of her engagement with the present. Although she made sure she saw all the sights a tourist is expected to see in Italy, she also engaged with the Italian Other trying to assimilate into the community, achieve a thorough understanding of the situation and form an opinion of her own. Indeed, her sojourn in Italy was denoted by greater social engagement than is customary with other cultural travellers.

2. *Genesis and Purpose of Italy (1821)*

Morgan’s *Italy*, hovering on the borderline between description and interpretation, guidebook and personal diary, pamphlet and history, was written in the wake of her controversial *France* (1817), an account imbued with sympathy for revolutionary and Napoleonic France and caustic about the nation as it was after the Restoration. *France* made waves in Great Britain and gave her a reputation of being a Jacobin, attracting a lot of abuse for Morgan. Friends and admirers, however, as she wrote in her diary, were asking for “a repeat performance” (1859, 186) which this time should regard a country that had also emerged from the Napoleonic adventure, Italy. Invitations to write about Italy also came from prominent figures of the target country itself. In a letter to her sister, Morgan reports that “My two Italians [Confalonieri and Capponi, whom she had met in Paris] urged our visit to Italy, and said ‘they only asked such a book as ‘France’ adding ‘and with such feelings of sympathy with the oppressed as in your Irish novels’” (*ibidem*). This was to be the book her publisher, Henry Colburn, commissioned for the substantial sum of two thousand pounds and which was published in 1821.

Morgan’s residence in Italy, thus, was of a professional nature. She came to Italy as a reporter, not just as a passer-by or a mere tourist like many who crossed the Alps in those days. Travelling to Italy for her was not a rite of passage as it had been for the young men of the classical eighteenth century Grand Tour, but it certainly provided the occasion for honing her political ideas and sharpening her sense of national identity. Her agenda was that of “aiding the great cause, the regeneration of Italy” (1859, 131). Like a doctor, she felt the pulse of the country, detecting signs of disease and signs of change (such as an impatience for the restored governments and the emergence of a

¹ The Morgans’ tour covered Turin, Milan, Genoa, Bologna, Florence, Rome, Naples, the Adriatic coast, Loreto, Verona, Padua and Venice.

sense of national identity). Diagnosis and prescriptions were to be made by conveying up-to-date information and impressions in order to elicit sympathy for the oppressed and for those that wanted to escape the restoration of the ancient regime sponsored by the Holy Alliance. On the other hand, however, *Italy* boasts a heavy historical apparatus that dwells on the wrongs suffered by Italy but also suggests (in the wake of such a historian as Simonde de Sismondi) some remedies to be found in the republican past.

The influence of the beliefs Morgan held and of the people she met resulted in a book whose ‘business’ was to go beyond the practically-oriented transmission of facts of mere travel writing. She had an ethical and political agenda, that of doing “good by telling truth according to our impressions” (1821, I, 124) in a book that would have a far-ranging effect. By revising current interpretations of Italy, denouncing the past and present sufferings of the country, underlining the actual state of degradation and repression and highlighting the achievements of the past Napoleonic era and of its modernising project, she purposed to prepare the English-speaking public for the new developments which were brewing during her stay.

Morgan’s passionate affirmations that her book was written to serve the cause of Italy have also, however, another motivation. Besides serving the cause of Italy, she used her travelogue to serve the cause of Ireland disguising a patriotic message about her home country under her many sallies about nationalism and the right to self-determination concerning Italy. I have argued elsewhere that “[b]etween the lines regarding the political and social conditions of the various states of the Italian peninsula, there lurks a tacit comparison of the plight of Italy and that of Ireland” (Badin 2006, 334).

Morgan’s socializing, described amply and narcissistically in her travelogue and her autobiographical writings (*Passages from my Autobiography* and *Memoirs*) provides more than gossipy information. The rituals of society – balls, receptions, *conversazioni* – she took part in, the plays and operas, church ceremonies and charity events she attended, the excursions and the holidays she enjoyed led to an understanding of the manners and customs of that society and, through her reflections on the social and moral codes of the guest country, to an understanding of her own. Even the peculiarities of social conventions, domestic arrangements or details of dress and furnishings become in her eyes signifiers of political realities. As I have argued, “Such is Lady Morgan’s political passion that she reads signs of Italian oppression or conversely of the patriot’s love in the most unexpected everyday events” (Badin 2006, 343). Customs, social manners and culture, people and their doings, landscape and the arts, all are tropes or symbols of a political reality through which she attempts to capture the essence of the country. As O’Brien argues, “she saw in art a social context, she saw in landscape a historical *drapeau*, she saw in society divisions and classes, and she saw in culture the voice of the people” (2003, 178).

3. *Social Life in Italy*

As the Grand Tour – and the forms of travel that followed it – had a leisurely pace, there were multiple occasions for socializing either among the British visitors and expatriates who were present in Italy in large numbers or with that portion of Italian society that mixed with foreigners and could speak English. Entertaining and being entertained, participating in *conversazioni*, mingling with the locals for an evening at the opera were an essential part of a stay abroad and so it was for Morgan, with the advantage that her knowledge of French acquired through a Huguenot education, opened many other doors for her, allowing her to mix with the mostly French-speaking Italian intelligentsia. Thus she did not limit herself to the artificial community of British expatriates with their patterns of sociability exported to Italy from London, but congregated with the Italians. She was not a resident but she resided long enough in some Italian cities not only to participate in the usual social activities of visitors but also to make friends and become involved with political questions.

The social dimension of her stay had been prepared as accurately as the cultural one in the months spent in London and Paris before setting off for Italy. Besides reading and studying the language, she had also tried to meet as many Italians as she could. Looking at her guest book of this period, she felt flattered by the variety of Italian names registered:

There were, too, the Neri and Bianchi from Florence, Imperialists and Nationalists from Lombardy, and Guelphs, Ghibelines and Carbonari, with romanticists and classicists from all parts of Italy [...]. How prettily these historic-poetical names write down among the O's and the Macs of my 'native troops!' The Strozzi and Frangipani, and Pucci, and Piasasco, and Ugoni and Pozzo, and Cinetelli, and Castiglione, and Pepe – all connected with struggles for liberty, and with illustrations in letters, both in modern and ancient times. (Morgan 1829, 142)

These sorts of contacts and the letters of introduction the Morgans were given, opened for them the doors of the best salons and aristocratic and intellectual circles of the cities they visited, thus allowing them to obtain an insider's view of the cultural and political climate of the day. In return, Morgan spoke highly of Italians and of Italian hospitality, contradicting current views about the lack thereof. *Italy* can, indeed, be read as an elaborate thank-you-note to all the people who were kind to her.

Morgan, especially in the letters addressed to her sister, often brags about the extraordinarily warm welcome she received in Italy. According to her, they were “the only strangers for whom the Italians make dinners” (1862, II, 119). The couple received invitations to balls and receptions in private palaces, to evenings in the *casino* or *Circolo dei nobili* the exclusive clubs of the aristocracy, and to that particular form of entertainment and instruction represented

by salons and *conversazioni*. Carriages were put at the couple's disposal so that they could indulge in the pleasures of the Corso, the driving up and down the main avenue of a city in order to see and to be seen. They were also offered the use of a box for their evenings at the opera or at a playhouse. In Florence, Capponi put an apartment in Palazzo Corsini at their disposal. Their new friends organized outings for them (such as an escapade from Milan to Pavia and another to Genoa) and helped them find a summer house on Lake Como where the Milanese escaped from the heat of the summer. They were, indeed, covered with all sorts of attentions. In reporting the courtesies they received, Morgan certainly displays great vanity, but as Walchester argues (2007, 139, *passim*), her celebrity abroad also allowed her to express unconventional and dangerous views and therefore had to be highlighted as in the following examples:

The Count Confalonieri, and his lovely Countess, came to us the moment of our arrival, and from that moment attentions, visits, friendship, and services on all sides. Madame Confalonieri began by taking us to the Corso, and introduced us at the Casino, where the nobility are exclusive [...]. Not only the Liberal party have visited and invited us, but the Austrian Commander-in-Chief have been to see us, and we have spent an evening there. (Morgan 1862, II, 93)

In Florence the Countess of Albany, Bonnie Prince Charlie's widow and Alfieri's lover (Morgan half-jokingly calls her "the legitimate queen of England") kept "the seat of honour vacant for [her]" in her celebrated salon which vied with Madame de Staël's in Coppet (*ibidem*, 116-117). The highlight of the Morgans' stay in Turin was the welcome they were given when they visited the university in the company of Count Prospero Balbo, then Vice-Chancellor. Classes were interrupted so that the professors could meet the celebrated author and her learned husband. The account she gives of the event in a letter to her sister, brimming with pride and amusement, reflects Sydney's self-indulgent delight in being honoured in such a way:

Count de Balbo, minister, [...] as head of the university, gave orders that all the professors should attend to receive us. At the University, imagine my shame to see all the learned muftis in their robes, each in his department, receiving us at the doors of their halls and colleges. In the Cabinet of Physique, they prepared all sorts of chemical experiments for us, &c. &c. These poor gentlemen were under arms three days for us. (*Ibidem*, 92)

Although Morgan realized that the attentions they had received were due to the influence "of the illustrious person under whose sanction we visited the university", yet she "remained deeply impressed with a sense of the kindness and patience of the learned individuals, who so cheerfully quitted more important avocations to contribute to our information and entertainment" (1821, I, 41).

In relating many similar occasions, the middle-class Sydney not only flaunts the high regard in which her rank, fame and intellectual gifts were held abroad but compensates for the fact that in the eyes of her fellow countrymen she was still a former governess, the daughter of an impecunious actor, who pretended to belong to the elite. Morgan, however, was not aware that even her so-called friends exchanged comments in which we may detect a note of perplexity for her exuberant and brash character. That same Count Confalonieri who gave her such a warm welcome and exchanged so many friendly letters with the Morgans even from his exile, sounds less than enthusiastic when he writes to Capponi: “Ella è un’ottima donna; ma a dire il vero, non ho grande opinione del suo criterio e del suo tatto, e ne tengo una migliore del suo spirito, e del suo cuore principalmente” (“She is an excellent woman but, to say the truth, I have no great opinion either of her common sense or of her tact, although I have a much higher opinion of her spirit and, especially, of her heart”, Confalonieri 1911, 126).

Pellegrino Rossi, the politician and jurist, and later Minister of Justice of the Papal States, accused her of reporting gossip about him and wrote to Confalonieri “[C]erto quando consimili indegnità si ripetono a un donna dal calibro della M. potrei sospettare che lo si fosse fatto per un fine anche più indegno” (“Certainly when such ignominies are recounted to a woman of M.’s disposition, I could suspect that it was done with an even more ignominious purpose”, *ibidem*, 349). Most of the time, however, her social relations confirmed the idea she liked to cultivate about herself as that of an aristocratic radical who, like Madame de Staël, fought her battles with the pen and witty conversation.

The “flurry of pleasures” that greeted the Morgans in the first major city where they sojourned, Turin, is indicative of the rhythm of their social life while in Italy. A letter to Lady Clark, Sydney’s sister, well illustrates the whirlwind of those first days in Italy:

I must give you one of our days at Turin. From nine to twelve, morning, we received visits from professors and literati who accompanied us to see the sights. Every one dined at two o’clock. Between four and five, regularly, the Countess Valperga called for us in an open carriage, and we drove to see some villa near the town. By seven o’clock we were back for the Corso, where all the nobility drive up and down till the opera begins. From thence we went to a coffee-house and had ices, and then to the Opera, where, the whole night, visits were received, and everything was attended to but the music; by eleven we were at home. (Morgan 1862, II, 92)

There were also more peaceful activities which provided a lot of food for thought. Like true Italians, the Morgans often participated in *conversazioni*, evenings spent in brilliant debates among hand-picked congenial guests around a famed host or hostess like the Countess of Albany in Florence, Countess Valperga di Masino in Turin or Marchese Berio in Naples. A brilliant conversationalist, Morgan appreciated those spaces in Florence, Naples and Venice, in which new currents of philosophical, literary and political opinion were circu-

lating while she complained that “in Rome a *conversazione* is an assembly where nobody converses” (1821, II, 403). Neither domestic nor openly political, a salon was the proper sphere for female agency. Mostly ruled by women, literary salons and *conversazioni* were often cosmopolitan spaces fostering an exchange of ideas and values and, in the nineteenth century, of patriotic sentiment and political engagement. To a cosmopolitan feminist like Morgan they offered a model of gendered history in the making. Moreover, she enjoyed the opportunity these gatherings offered her to shine in spite of her linguistic disability. But above all they became her chief sources of information about contemporary issues which could not be found in written texts. In the days before the circulation of daily press, the *conversazioni* were a weather glass of cultural and political change and a privileged window on public opinion and on the perception of what made the country tick.

While the description of social life in *Italy* is never an end in itself and provides a glimpse of things of greater import, so does the absence of a proper social life. In cities like Milan, Morgan notes that social life was conducted mainly outdoors (the Corso, the Opera and the *Caff *) since large gatherings in private houses in the Austrian-dominated regions would attract the attention of the secret police: “The Milanese are aware that their house, if open to such indiscriminate society as must make up a crowded assembly, would forward the views of that fearful espionage which [...] has now become the bugbear of Lombardy” (1821, I, 63). In spite of this, the contacts established in this city under siege were the strongest and they were to continue years later, when many of Morgan’s friends were suffering from the consequences of the upheavals of 1821 which she had seen in the making. The social connections she acquired during that year were to blossom in her patronage of Italian exiles,² which confirmed her political engagement, but they would also inspire her to establish a salon of her own in her Dublin residence at 35, Kildare Street. Morgan’s salon, alongside her attempt to bring Italian opera to Dublin, are an expression of the flowering of a cosmopolitan society in Ireland.

4. *Italian Contacts*

The people Morgan consorted with in that year were her most important sources of information and indoctrination. Thanks to her extrovert character and to her letters of introduction, she could count on a wide circle of acquaintances and made the most of the relations she established with all classes of people. To her great surprise and satisfaction, some of the intellectuals that frequented

² The Marshall Osborn Collection of The Beinecke Library of Yale University holds a substantial collection of letters addressed to Lady Morgan, some of which, by former Italian acquaintances mostly in exile, have been published in Badin 2011.

Italian salons belonged (like herself) to the middle classes. While the *parvenue* Lady Morgan could cite proudly the honours she had received from the aristocracy, her democratic self was pleased to note:

We had an opportunity of observing, that merit and talent are there a full substitute for quarterings and *crachats*; that in the saloons of the palace Masino, the Planas, the Carenas, the Borsons, were associated with the descendants of feudal Counts and gothic Barons; while the liberal and philosophic minister, Balbo, and the ultra, but very agreeable, De Maistre, disputed amicably upon points of literature and poetry, however they might differ upon politics. (1821, I, 59)

The scientists and academics mentioned above gathered in the salon of Countess Valperga di Masino who was a great philanthropist and a hostess renowned for her intellectual gifts and for her hospitality. She belonged to a class of moderate dissidents who had bridged the passage from the Napoleonic era to the new conservative state and who, having been shaped by French influences, were actively or passively opposing the more retrograde aspects of Restoration despotism and preparing to reform and liberalize the new state. Pleased though part of this intelligentsia was with the return of the King, they could not forego the advances that had been obtained in fifteen years of French government and they expressed their dissatisfaction by joining those Masonic lodges that had had such an importance in the Piedmontese Enlightenment. The Morgans who were also Freemasons³ could thus obtain a privileged insiders' view of the ideas and of the schemes that were being aired. In the first part of the nineteenth century, Freemasons in Italy aimed at bringing about the fall of the temporal power of the Church and establishing governments inspired by reason and a secular ideology. The Morgans shared these ideals and Lady Morgan's personal pantheon included aristocrats or plebeians, provided they cared for the public good.

The leading light *in absentia* of Turinese society was Vittorio Alfieri whose memory was still alive among the many people who had known him and those for whom he was a model. Morgan's sojourn in Turin reinforced her cult of that democratic aristocrat who fought his battles with his writings bequeathing "to posterity the expression of his hatred, his pity, and contempt of a government and court, whose existence were incompatible with the independence he adored, and the vocation he had adopted" (*ibidem*, 51). Morgan, too, liked to think of herself as invested with the high mission of opposing culture to despotism and of becoming, through her works, the spiritual guide of the nation. The atmosphere she found in Turin was a source of inspiration and encouraged

³ Morgan and her husband had been received in a Masonic lodge in Paris during their second visit there, as she recounts in *Passages from my Autobiography* (1859, 290-291, 300). Although she did not take this too seriously and relates it in a humorous tone, being a Freemason helped in establishing contacts in Italy.

her to imitate in her writings “the wild and noble petulance of well-founded indignation” (*ibidem*).

Conversations with Alfieri’s successors in Turin were not her only source of inspiration. She was also presented with articles and pamphlets that provided her with material on which to base her critique of the current government and a more articulate idealization of the early Napoleonic era, based on an understanding of the reforms introduced by the French. Some of the detailed suggestions for improvements and reform that she offered in her text, for instance, can be traced to Fernando Dal Pozzo’s *Opuscoli Politico-legali d’un Avvocato Milanese originario Piemontese*. After an evening in Turin conversing with her, the eminent jurist and politician sent her his anonymously published work, being aware, as he wrote in the accompanying letter, that she was not afraid of “politico-juridical topics” and that she was inspired by the “sublime idea” of knowing the localities she visited in depth instead of being content with the external aspects of a country or with the opinions of only one social class (Badin 2011, 48)⁴. This is but one example of how her association with the Piedmontese intelligentsia provided amusements as well as ideas to appropriate and prompted much food for thought.

The socialites she met in Milan and some other cities (especially Naples) were more politically engaged than her Turinese friends and some of them belonged, like Federico Confalonieri, to the movement of the Carboneria. It was through Confalonieri, an old acquaintance from her Paris days, that she came in touch with the journal *Il Conciliatore* (1818-1819), a bi-weekly publication under the editorship of Silvio Pellico, which spread liberal ideas while launching Romanticism in Italy. The dispute opposing Classicists and Romanticists, at the heart of the concerns of *Il Conciliatore*, is amply summarized in chapter XVII of *Italy*, “Literary Disputes in Italy”, actually written by Sir Charles but reflecting also his wife’s sentiments and incorporating many of Pellico’s and Breme’s views. A sign of the friendship Confalonieri and the other editors of the journal bore the couple was the publication in issue 83 of the journal, of a long article by Rasori on Sir Charles Morgan’s philosophical and scientific work.

⁴ In his letter of 10 May 1819, Dal Pozzo writes: “Vous m’avez fait l’honneur de me dire que des discussions politico-legales ne vous effrayaient pas tout-à-fait, et que même elles étaient du goût de Monsieur votre mari. Je n’espère cependant pas que vous aurez le courage, avec votre imagination riante, de vous arrêter longtemps dans ces déserts, hormis qu’une plus sublime idée, véritablement digne de vous, ne vous y engage; celle de connaître véritablement les localités, plus que ne fait ordinairement la foule des voyageurs, qui ne considèrent que l’extérieur des nations, qui ne voient que la capitale, et qu’une seule classe de la société” (Badin 2011, 48). Morgan repeatedly mentions and praises Ferdinando Dal Pozzo’s pamphlet on the benefits of the revolutionary system in Piedmont. Later on, when he was an exile in London, he contacted her again and a friendly exchange of letters followed. Dal Pozzo was one of the first and most explicit in evaluating positively the impact of Morgan’s travelogue and in recognizing her role in favour of Italy.

The journal was financed by Count L. Porro Lambertenghi, in whose house the group met, and its contributors, besides Pellico, were Confalonieri, Porro Lambertenghi himself, Ludovico Di Breme, and many other intellectuals involved in the political and philosophical life of their times. Having been censored several times, the journal was eventually suppressed by the Austrian police. By 1821 many of its editors were jailed or exiled and the heroic phase of Italian Romanticism came to a premature end. Not, however, without having transmitted some of their ideals to Lady Morgan through, for instance, Ludovico Di Breme, the father of Italian Romanticism, whose “deep affections were concentrated upon the regeneration of Italy and its re-union into one *corps de nation*” (Morgan 1821, I, 57n.). In *Passages from my Autobiography*, she was to reminisce about the thrilling climate of those days: “The terrible hereafter, which pursued them from their palaces to their dungeons, was then undreamed of in their laughing philosophy, for they were full of hope and enthusiastic expectations of the liberation of their glorious native land at no distant period” (1859, 185n).

As the mother of the national tale and the collector, before Moore, of ancient Irish airs, Morgan could well sympathize with the linguistic and cultural nationalism of these early Romantics, admiring their endeavours to recover a national literary tradition and condemning in their wake the disregard for the models and the subject matter of the past she had witnessed in the literary production of her Italian contemporaries:

The Italians, notwithstanding the example of Dante, Ariosto and their followers, have been compelled to renounce the idea of a national literature, and have confined their poetic efforts for a long series of years, to reproducing, in an endless succession, the mythology and sentiments of antiquity; to the entire neglect of all those noble and spirit-stirring subjects, which were offered in the history of the middle ages, when Italy had a political existence. [...] [T]o hold up the transactions of the middle ages as subjects for literary composition, is to turn the public attention upon those virtues and those glories which remind the Italians that they had an ancestry. It is placing before their eyes the blessings of independence, and the substantial comforts which accompany liberty”. (1821, II, 137-139)

The promotion of historical themes, especially those going back to the age of the republics and the Lombard League, reminds us of how much Morgan owed to Sismondi, the common source of inspiration of *Il Conciliatore* and of her own views. It was but a short step, in their minds, from an ideal of linguistic and literary unity as was to be found in the past, to political unity. Breme’s assumption that “all’unico vero sistema letterario tien prossimamente dietro l’unico sistema intellettuale e morale d’un popolo” (“a thorough literary frame of mind will be closely followed by the only acceptable moral and intellectual frame of mind of a people”, Breme 1979, 97) is echoed in Morgan’s “There are very few instances in which the political and literary enthusiasm are not found together” (1821, II, 140).

The objective of the journal was to make Italians aware that the nation had always existed as a linguistic and literary entity and all that was needed was to awaken national conscience through literature as a means to reaffirm identity. The notion was fully shared by Morgan as proven by her fiction and the opinions she upheld. The literary battles waged by the nascent Romanticism could actually be interpreted “as a means of energising their countrymen” (1821, II, 139) through an ideological campaign against Austria even while they promoted moral and economic reforms. Indeed, reforms, in the Irish author’s views, were a way to show love for one’s country. “It is not difficult to conceive”, writes Morgan, “[...] that the advocates for an innovation in literature should be found among that description of persons who are zealous for political reform” (140).

On this account, Morgan drew a flattering portrait of some gentlemen-manufacturers, gentlemen-farmers and gentlemen-reformers who, especially in Lombardy and Tuscany, had founded their success on trade and profit-making activities even while entertaining enlightened attitudes towards their dependents and dreaming of reforms that would improve the community. Their civic virtues made them appear in Morgan’s eyes as the new patriots of Italy, an example to be followed. Conversations with them were the source of her understanding of economic life and necessary reforms. The Marchese di Breme (Ludovico di Breme’s father) in Piedmont, Federico Confalonieri and Porro Lambertenghi in Milan, Gino Capponi and Cout Ginori in Florence, although belonging to ancient and glorious families, did not “dream away life” in “luxurious lethargy” like many aristocrats (*ibidem*, 41) but contributed to modernizing the country by introducing new machinery and services in industry, farming and urban life, such as the application of steam to transport and better illumination of cities by gas. Morgan particularly admired the advances in education represented by Lancastrian schools which several of her friends sponsored, having brought the idea back from England. Factories like Ginori’s porcelain manufacture, La Doccia, for one, were “the object of a benevolent citizen, seconded by a liberal fortune, and ennobled by patriotic intentions, and by liberal and philosophical views” (42).

It is a consequence of what Kucich defines Morgan’s “feminized cosmopolitan outlook” (2009, 154) that her interpretation of patriotism is not simply equivalent to nationalism but also an affirmation of civic virtues such as fostering reforms and promoting wellbeing.

Whichever way, indeed we turned in Milan, we found traces of the ardent but rational patriotism, with which a little band of nobles, with whom those truly excellent persons are intimately connected, are unceasingly occupied in bettering at once the moral and the physical aspect of their country and are preparing it to receive that liberty which, however apparently remote in the present most unhappy moment, by the very nature of things, cannot long be delayed (Morgan 1821, I, 123).

Such civic virtues were particularly developed in women, whose history Morgan tried to tell in her unfinished work, *Woman and Her Master* (1840) where, in Kucich' words, she argues that "women's social interventions prove vital in forwarding the causes of civilization, national reform, and international peace" (2009, 156). Given that much of her time in Italy was spent in female company, encounters with open-minded women were particularly important for the fervent feminist. The examples she had the opportunity of observing, whether negative or positive, led her to refine her ideology concerning the fight in favour of liberty and against oppressive institutions, the former in her eyes including also the emancipation of women. Admittedly she found fault with much she saw concerning the feminine condition, which confirmed her belief that, as I have argued elsewhere, "women could not blossom if their sex was oppressed by patriarchal institutions and there could be no free women if there was no free nation" (Badin 2007, 166).

Thus, the negative representations she often gives of Italian women are not dictated by contempt but by her criticism of an oppressive society and by her advocacy of a proper education and a stronger role for them in the social and economic life of the country. Women of the idle and moneyed classes, such as "the ladies of the *Biscotini*" in Milan, who went about distributing sweets to the poor, often became the target of her satire. As a professional woman, she viewed their charitable role, imposed by the Church and by an unenlightened patriarchal aristocracy, as making them marginalized and subservient subjects. Similarly she blames Italian women (much out of hearsay rather than from direct experience) for succumbing to the practice of *cicisbeismo* and (surprisingly) for neglecting their maternal role. Their behaviour, however, is again interpreted as the result of "the demoralizing bigotry, which was calculated to make women concubines and devotees, but which could not produce good wives and good mothers" (Morgan 1821, I, 115).

Many of her negative constructions were derived from literature and widespread clichés. Actual encounters with Italian women helped change her mind and refine her ideas about Italian society. The charm, elegance and vivacity characterizing "the ladies of Milan" was attributed by her to "the promptitude with which their fine organization has responded to liberal and improved institutions" (Morgan 1821, I, 168), in other words, those introduced in the revolutionary and Napoleonic era. Whenever among the nobility of Italy, she encountered what she esteemed to be educated and virtuous women enjoying a normal family life, she expressed surprise and took this as an opportunity for underlining the positive effects of the modernisation and enlightenment brought about by the French. Thus Marchesa Pallavicini's family in Genoa is an emblem of the "improvements which have taken place in the moral and domestic habits of the people, once so universally accused of having none" (252). Thanks to that liberal noblewoman who had privately organized performances of Alfieri's tragedies, "a new image" was presented in the salons of a Genoese palace:

A family of three generations, a young and lovely mother, occupied with the care and education of her children, an youthful, *an attached* husband, and an anxious and amiable grandmother presiding over all. [...] No *cecisbeo*, no *patito*, no meddling confessor! Such were the effects of that recent *disturbance of social order*. (*Ibidem*)

The mere existence of such families is a display of ‘patriotism’ and promises a revolution that from the domestic sphere will spread to the whole social and political body of the nation.

The library of Casa Trivulzio in Milan, an unusual addition to “the Marchioness’s own suite”, affords an image of healthy morals and emancipated and cultivated females, holding the same promise as the Pallavicini household in Genoa:

[W]e found the young ladies of the family cultivating all the arts with diligence and success; forwarded by their governess and masters, and presided by their father and mother: in a word, one of those blessed scenes of domestic education and endearment, supposed only to be found in England, and certainly unknown in Italy a few years back. In the study of the ladies Trivulzi, existed the true antidote to heartless intrigue and idle dissipation. (*Ibidem*, 121-122)

Besides women in their family environment, Morgan also encountered several intellectual women who elicited her admiration and influenced the shaping of her beliefs. In Turin Morgan was at the bedside of a fellow poet and author of national tales, Diodata Saluzzo, contessa di Roero di Revello, in poor health at the moment of her visit, whose experiments in historical narrative and her use of the Italian vernacular instead of French, as was customary in Piedmont, introduced the Irish writer to some of the crusades of Italian Romanticism. Although one was a conservative and the other a Jacobin, they were brought together by cultural nationalism, by feminism and by the influence of Madame de Staël. Both had put their literary profession above family life and had created strong and emancipated literary heroines. Morgan appreciated Diodata Saluzzo’s romance, *Gaspara Stampa*, and the volume of her poems, *Versi di Diodata Saluzzo Rovero* (1816), which the author had sent her. Morgan’s enthusiasm induced Lord Byron to read it too. In spite of Diodata’s illness, their encounter must have been lively and instructive since Morgan commented: “but neither sickness nor pain had dimmed the brilliancy of her conversation, nor paralysed the activity of her acute and inquiring mind” (Morgan 1821, I, 43). Met at the beginning of Morgan’s sojourn in Italy, Diodata Saluzzo was one of the examples which would make the Irish author affirm that “Italy has produced more learned women than any part of Europe” (292), a fact that was confirmed by the many portraits of women hanging in the ante-room of the library of the Institute of Arts and Sciences in Bologna. Admiringly – and, as a feminist, proudly – Morgan tells her readers that “the chairs of the university, down to the present

day, have been occasionally filled by female professors” (291) which was not the case in Great Britain.

Both negative and positive impressions drawn from her observation of female society turn, thus, into a pretext for political commentary. The issue of Italian women allows her to lash out against aristocracy for its numbing effect on society and, implicitly, on women’s role and status. As a woman who had risen in the social ladder solely thanks to her education, she could make a plea for proper female education as a way to counteract the influence of church and government, that used religion and ‘superstition’ to control and marginalize women. The example of the women she had met through her socializing supported her belief.

On the other hand, Morgan’s negative national stereotyping and generalizations about Italian women so angered a contemporary Italian writer, Ginevra Canonici Falchini, that she purportedly addressed her Irish counterpart a letter which she used as a preface to her *Prospetto biografico delle donne italiane rinomate in letteratura dal secolo decimquarto fino a’ giorni nostri. Con una risposta a Lady Morgan risguardante alcune accuse da lei date alle donne italiane nella sua opera l’Italie* (1824). The Italian intellectual’s work is a precursor of Morgan’s own proto-feminist *Woman and Her Master: A History of the Female Sex from the Earliest Period* (1840) which, like Canonici Fachini’s history, bore out the belief that the female sex had been excluded from (literary) history by an unsympathetic master narrative. Had the two women met, they would have found much in common and seen that after all they shared similar views about women. This virtual encounter across cultures points to the difficulties of interpreting correctly the Other’s intentions, a divergence that can be corrected and transformed in cross-fertilization when an actual encounter occurs.

5. *Opera, Church and Artists’ Studios*

Salons were not the only places from which Morgan drew her sense of the moods and tensions smouldering in the country. As an Irish actor’s daughter (her father, Robert Owenson, had been the founder of the Dublin National Theatre), it should not surprise us that many of Sydney’s evenings were spent at the Opera or at a playhouse. This, after all, was also the favourite pastime of the Italian upper classes, as Morgan notes: “[I]n Italy, the Church and the Opera were on a par; and both were resorted to, by the higher classes, as a resource against the tedium of lives devoted by political institutions to the most disgraceful idleness” (1821, II, 246).

Attending a performance in one of the mythical theatres, such as La Scala in Milan or San Carlo in Naples, was indeed a tourist must, offering foreigners the possibility to enjoy the music, admire elegant women dressed in the latest French fashion and mix with local society in the boxes and in the foyer without depending too much on conversation in a foreign language. For the

radical author, however, it was more than that: every performance offered an opportunity for detecting signs of foreign oppression or conversely of the patriots' love of liberty hidden in the most unexpected details of a show. "The state of a national theatre", she wrote, "may be taken as no unfair barometer of public opinion, as well as of national taste" (1821, I, 102). This was in line with the opinions of cultural historians who see nineteenth century melodrama as a means of diffusion of a nationalist-patriotic discourse. Consequently, she fills both *Italy* and her *Memoirs* with pointed accounts of the theatrical life of the age which testify that it had a subtle and cautious political colouring even before Verdi galvanized his audiences with the patriotic messages of his operas. Drama and the opera became pretexts for a running commentary on society, history and politics.

The physicality of theatres offered, to her eyes, the occasion for subtle forms of sedition. A playhouse such as the Scala, in spite of "the foreign soldiery" guarding the doors and the "gens-d'armes [...] conspicuous among the audience in the pit", is described by Morgan as the place where conspiracies are started: "there alone, amidst the openest publicity, can privacy find an asylum against the intrusion of espionage. The box is sacred [...] and the numerous "arie di sorbetta" [...] with their accompaniments [...] drown the whispered conversation, whatever may be its tendency" she writes (*ibidem*, 94). Morgan herself, a frequent guest in the box of Federico Confalonieri and of other editors of the *Conciliatore*, must have overheard such conspiratorial conversations.

The content of the fashionable melodramas of the age, and even of the operas of the 'divine' Rossini, however, failed to stimulate her political consciousness. Tired of "insipid pastoral dramas" and of the *opera buffa* she felt that public feeling and taste called "for something not yet attained, and that probably would not be permitted" and went on to propose the country's "own history, (tragic in every page)" as a source of "fine themes" for melodrama (*ibidem*, 103). Very soon the libretti of Italian opera would indeed turn to domestic history and be charged with political innuendos. Some of the titles of mid-century operas seem to derive directly from Morgan's list of suggestions. *I Lombardi alla prima Crociata*, *Simon Boccanegra*, *I vespri siciliani* by Verdi are all national tragedies which lent themselves to double entendre.

Meanwhile, however, Morgan found that, rather than the opera, the best suited theatrical form for conveying a political message was the *ballet d'action*. This new choreographic form, very popular in Italian theatres towards the end of the eighteenth century, lent itself particularly well to guarded communications about political issues. Morgan describes a satirical *ballet d'action* set in Rome, a "bold and quite extraordinary" play or pantomime which represented a "mode of attacking the strong-hold of superstition" represented by the Church (*ibidem*, v. 77) or a performance seen at La Scala of *La vestale* by Salvatore Viganò, a *choreo-drama*, privileging mime and action and which, in Morgan's opinion, perfectly suited the times which required political opinion to be carefully hidden:

[A] habit of distrust, impressed upon the people by the fearful system of espionage, impels them to trust their thoughts rather to a look or an action, than to a word or a phrase. It is not easy to denounce a smile or to betray a beck; and communications are thus made, over which the police holds no control. (1821, I, 98)

The fate of “the unfortunate priestess of Vesta” indirectly denounced all forms of repressive institutions (be they the Church or the government) which might not be condemned openly. Morgan was equally prudent. She, too, ‘trusted’ her explosive thoughts about Church, government and revolution to the apparently innocent device of travel writing. Under the pretence of describing polite conversation, socializing, visiting theatres and admiring works of art she conveyed her own and her interlocutors’ critiques of Italian institutions, potentially dangerous to be broached directly. Moreover her writing about a foreign country often hides thoughts about her home country. Her readers, however, were not dupes nor were the critics who attacked her.

A very Italian form of entertainment on which many travellers dwelt, was the performance of *improvvisatori* in salons and theatres (but sometimes even in the street). Morgan enjoyed those ex-tempore poets who would improvise verses on subjects proposed by the public and who gave free vent to their own and the audience’s concerns. Gabriele Rossetti (the father of Dante Gabriel and Christina), was in Morgan’s eyes “one of the best, and certainly one of the most amusing ‘improv[v]isatori’”. She had the opportunity of seeing him in action in Naples in the salon of Marchese di Berio accompanied on the piano by Gioacchino Rossini and noted “He assured us, that having once uttered his inspirations, he could not write them down, nor even remember a word” (1821, II, 405). Considering the Jacobin violence of Rossetti’s published works and the attacks they contained against the Bourbon Monarchy and the temporal power of the Church, one might expect that the source of amusement he provided was tied to a political stance which would have delighted his Jacobin admirer, Lady Morgan.

During Morgan’s trip to Italy, performances of all kinds, be they sung, spoken or danced, rehearsed or improvised, élitist or proletarian, in a theatre, in the street or in a church, became a vantage-point from which to observe society and a privileged way to become involved emotionally in the political issues of which plays and operas are a more or less open vector.

Undoubtedly the most popular source of entertainment for northern, Protestant travellers was provided by the Church. Tourists would flock to Rome during Holy Week and vie for invitations to St. Peter’s and the other Basilicas. Morgan herself was not immune from the pleasures of clerical company and she raves, for instance, about the charm of Cardinal Consalvi in whom “lay-graces so blended with Church dignity” (*ibidem*, 213). No travel account is complete without a description of the pomp of the fabulous rituals and Morgan mixes sarcasm and indignation in submitting ceremonies as

well as religious architecture, art and music to her scathing investigation. Observing them elicits the most contemptuous conclusions regarding the temporal power of the Church, as well as its opulence, greed, hypocrisy, and – a source of much sarcasm – its irrational practices that all tend to indicate the Church as the chief culprit in Italy's degradation. Constituting the bulk of Morgan's text and the source of her most virulent criticism of Italian institutions, they are a topic too vast to be confronted here. Suffice it to say that Morgan would have approved of Marx's saying that religion was "the opium of the people" distracting them from the real issues – their poverty and the prevarication they were the victims of. Morgan understands this well and finds sociological explanations for the phenomenon of the Italian taste for pomp:

In Rome [...] and in most Catholic countries on the continent, the people denied all interest in public affairs, and condemned to poverty and inactivity by their political institutes, seek resource, and find almost their only recreation, in the ceremonies of the church: the priesthood, by celebrating the forms prescribed by their rituals, conform to the wishes of the lower classes, and they forward their influence, while they perpetuate the errors on which it is founded. The *dictum* of the church, in both instances, is nearly the same – the relaxation of its forms depends upon the greater or lesser illumination of the people. (*Ibidem*, 78)

While the contemplation of artistic objects, especially, as is often the case of religious artistic objects, often elicits comments inspired by politics, the frequentation of artists' studios (another activity popular with foreign travellers and residents) fills Morgan with the mournful thought that she lives in an age "when there are few to admire, fewer to encourage, and none to purchase" (*ibidem*, 230). The philistinism of the Italy of the early nineteenth century, so much in contrast with the Maecenatism of the past, reminds her of Ireland where the talent of an artist such as Raphael Morghen, who asserted he had Irish origins, "might perish in oblivion, or wither in neglect" (58) because of the indigence of the country. These melancholy considerations, however, did not keep her from drawing great pleasure from the visit to Antonio Canova's studio in Rome or that of Lorenzo Bartolini in Florence, "one of the first portrait-sculptors in Italy" as he is unquestionably one of the most fashionable (59) who made the busts of many English personalities including Lady Morgan's and, on her recommendation, Thomas Moore's (see figs. 1, 2 and 3 below):

The studio of a sculptor is always a delightful place to visit: that of Signor Bartolini is particularly so to an English traveller, because it is 'a brief abstract and chronicle of the times' and country to which it belongs. [...] Here [...] the Jacobinical head of the author of Florence Macarthy stands close beside the cranium of an ultra-royalist reviewer. (*Ibidem*)



1 - Lorenzo Bartolini, Lady Sydney Owenson Morgan (1845-1850), marble, unfinished. Archivio immagini Museo di Palazzo Pretorio, Prato - ph. Antonio Quattrone

2 - Lorenzo Bartolini, Lady Sydney Owenson Morgan, plaster mould. Galleria dell'Accademia, Firenze



3 - Lorenzo Bartolini, Thomas Moore (1845-1850), marble. Archivio immagini Museo di Palazzo Pretorio, Prato

6. Conclusions

Morgan's socializing provided many occasions of pleasure and a boost to her vanity as well as opportunities for shaping original opinions based on her observations of what was in the making or under discussion in Italy. The description of the people she encountered and her reactions to the social events in which she took part are, by far, the liveliest and most interesting sections of the travelogue and the ones in which she conveys impressions of Italy different to those that were current at the time. *Italy* is not only a record of a bowed people but also of a lively generation of active men and women possessing a sophisticated political culture. By making their aims known, Morgan, with an eye also to her own country, makes a plea for reforms and even insurgency. *Italy*, as Stuart Curran writes, it is an invitation "to secure for the country and its culture its further liberation from the twin empires of Austria and the Papacy, and thus to allow it to regain the character of the republican institutions that had accompanied the growth of the Renaissance in Italy" (2002, 150).

In the rhetoric of nationalism that Morgan espoused both in her Irish romances and in her travelogues, the subjugated country, be it Ireland or Italy, is often represented as a fallen or violated woman who could only be redeemed by "the masculine energy of its 'sons'", as Kathryn Walchester writes, adding that "the specific source for the re-masculinization of the population is at this point unidentifiable" (2007, 169). Morgan, however, does actually identify individuals and groups, male and female, capable of asserting control. The role of "saving sons" was played in her eyes, for one, by the active reformers mentioned above, and, especially, by those pioneers of the Risorgimento, "disinterested and brave individuals, who undertook the defence of their independence" (Morgan 1821, II, 397-98) enthusiastically preparing the uprisings that were to break out in Naples and in the Piedmont-Lombardy area shortly after the Morgans had left Italy. There was, however, also a role to be played by women as the country needed feminine values next to masculine energy. The Irish writer strongly believed that "[t]he society in which woman holds no influence is in the last degree degraded, and even disorganized; for the influence of woman is a 'right divine'" (471). The many women Morgan identified as working a slow revolution in their family lives, in education and in literary production were also joining in the renovation of the country and forwarding what Morgan calls "the great cause of peace and humanity" (90).

Morgan's book is dedicated to these "saving" sons and daughters, as she declares, rejecting all criticism of the press:

Their briefs of condemnation [...] are now but waste paper; while days and nights passed in the societies of Geneva, Milan, Florence, Bologna and Naples, are entered in the records of the heart, and are at once the reward and stimulus of exertions, which, however inadequate, have never been made, but in the full conviction that they tended to forward the cause of truth and of virtue. (*Ibidem*, 398)

Linking the purpose of her book to the individuals who inspired her is the best recognition of the important role sociability represented in the making of *Italy*.

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