

Homosexuality in
Italian Literature,
Society, and Culture,
1789-1919

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Edited by

Lorenzo Benadusi, Paolo L. Bernardini,
Elisa Bianco and Paola Guazzo

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Resolve to be thyself; and know that he who finds himself, loses
his misery.

Matthew Arnold, 1852

It seems certain that a femininely functioning brain can occupy a
male body, and *vice versa*.

Jas G. Kiernan, M.D., 1891

Una nuova coscienza si formò in lui: tutta la tela di un passato
mai conosciuto si distese d'innanzi a suoi occhi: delle memorie pure e
soavi di cui egli non poteva aver fecondata la sua vita vennero a turbare
dolcemente la sua anima. Erano memorie di un primo amore, di una prima
colpa; ma di un amore più gentile e più elevato che egli non avesse sentito,
di una colpa più dolce e più generosa che egli non avesse commesso. La
sua mente spaziava in un mondo di affetti ignorato, percorreva regioni mai
viste, evocava dolcezze mai conosciute.

Iginio Ugo Tarchetti, 1869

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PREFACE

This collection of ten scholarly essays deals, in accordance with its title, with the theme of homosexuality in nineteenth century Italy, or, rather, in the “long” Italian nineteenth century, from 1789 to 1919. The French Revolution initiated the process of the unification of Italy, a long and tormented path that eventually culminated in the Italian victory in 1919, and the extension of the national borders so as to include territories that, since then, belonged first to the Italian Kingdom, and, from 1945, to the Italian Republic.

The unification of Italy was a political process that took place when Italian society, culture, customs, and usages were dramatically changing, under the influence of local and foreign movements. For a long period of time, historiography almost exclusively dealt with the political aspects of the Italian nineteenth century. Over the last decades, however, social, cultural, and intellectual historians have begun to take into account many other facets of a very complex century, a time in which Italian society, apparently “frozen” since time immemorial, rapidly altered. Modernity clashed with tradition(s), and the long, overwhelming presence of Catholicism slowly faded.

Almost inevitably, Italian society in its entirety, in all its components, from peasants to noblemen, from the clergy to the middle class, the emerging “*borghesia*”—especially in the North—had to confront new ideologies, philosophies, fashions and ideals, which eventually brought about a substantial change, and, over a long period, the definitive transformation of Italian society.

The sphere, or realm, of sexuality was not immune from those abrupt and unexpected changes. The century of secularisation also secularised, so to speak, the sexual life of the Italians. Rigid Catholic morality abandoned the scene, and a freer sexuality was enjoyed—beyond the traditional boundaries of the married couple—by larger and larger portions of the Italian population. A revolution in sexuality—certainly still affecting the urban masses more than to the majority of Italian people, who were mostly still farmers—had, as a collateral effect, a multiplication of the genders. Italians, as never before, and rarely afterward, multiplied their sexual identities. The division male/female traditional became outworn, and, in some circles, even went out of fashion. Homosexuals, bisexuals, transvestites,

transgenders, hermaphrodites, and other creatures of uncertain sexual and personal identity, powerfully enter the Italian panorama.

This is, beyond doubt, a global phenomenon. The age of positivism, scientism, psychoanalysis, atheism and secularisation affected the whole world, from the USA to Japan, in an extremely dramatic way. The combination of traditional society, agricultural economy, and social control by the Catholic Church, made Italy both more open to rapid changes, and more reluctant to accept them. This contradiction is only ostensive. More than ever, nineteenth century Italy is a state, or before 1870, a “number of little states”, whose citizens cluster in very different mutually exclusive classes, an emerging urban middle class, on the one hand, and, on the other, the relatively immutable mass of farmers. The changes affected the urban, cultivated, learned bourgeoisie. Sexual “perversions,” new ways to think about sex and practice it accordingly, new genders, rebellious—as well as outrageous—behaviours and attitudes marked the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and the first decades of the following. With the end of WWI, and the advent of Fascism in 1922, an extremely impoverished and destitute country was in desperate need of new values. Fascism meant, above all, and at least initially, a powerful *rappelle à l’ordre*. As such, in a line of thought (and action) which inspired Nazism and other dictatorships, Fascism aimed at “purifying” Italian morality, by getting rid of the burdens of past centuries, from *Dekadenz* to nihilism, from sentimentalism to eroticism. Homosexuality, transvestitism, and other forms of sexual “deviations” met with growing disapproval. Fascism was the apex of social and intellectual trends firmly established in Italy since the early nineteenth century, and more intensively after unification (1861). While a number of intellectuals were in favour of laxity and promiscuity, the official state-driven science, sociology, criminology, anthropology, condemned those new behaviours. In a normally lay- and occasionally even atheist context, scientists endorsed, *nolens volens*, and re-affirmed the “old”, traditional Catholic morality. They even reinforced those moral views in that they saw homosexuals, and other “deviants,” as a threat to society more than to morality, as powerfully disruptive elements in a social order that had to be preserved by all means.

The storm brought about by the French Revolution and its lay ideology was obviously apparent. Even lay champions of the new secularised state eventually fought a fierce battle against “anomies,” irregularities of whatever sort. Social control and a fight for uniformity, once the task of Catholicism, became, almost unaltered, that of laymen defenders of the new

independent—also from the Church, not just from foreign dominations—Italian state.

This collection of essays attempts to shed light on “homosexuality” and forms of less traditional sexuality, by approaching the theme from different disciplinary and interdisciplinary angles, so as to tackle an elusive subject in the most convincing and detailed way, and through a panoramic view.

In the introductory essay, the three editors of this volume, Lorenzo Benadusi, Paolo L. Bernardini, and Paola Guazzo, address general questions related to nineteenth century Italian history and historiography. They also address some revealing, typical cases in the rich and blurred panorama of nineteenth century Italian sexualities. The aim of the introductory essay is to discuss, but above all, to present both new trends in historiography, relevant to the theme of the volume, and the complexity of the subject itself, by showing and commenting upon some particular situations and personalities.

In the first chapter of the volume, Laura Schettini sheds light on the key subject of sexual ambiguity. The essay amply demonstrates the interaction between urban cultures and sub-cultures, in this case related to “low life” and the slums that grew along with the new cities, and individual destinies. Schettini’s focus on some criminal cases, in particular that of a certain Giuseppe B., accused of a number of crimes. The new urban scenery, the need for money to survive in dire times and contexts, brings about a true revolution in Europe, but especially in Italy, where urbanisation is a recent phenomenon.

Charlotte Ross, in the second essay of the present collection, deals with the work and ideas of Paolo Mantegazza. Mantegazza (1831-1910), was one of the most famous and appreciated scientists in the age of the Italian unification, and was also a fervent patriot and staunch defender of the political entity born out of the *Risorgimento*. He was one of the most enthusiastic among Italian supporters of Darwin’s theories. Mantegazza’s positions on same-sex relations, especially lesbian, are extremely ambiguous, and certainly mirror the difficulties that the new science had to face when dealing with new behaviours in a rapidly changing society. In any case, even if Mantegazza tried to explain, more than condemn, the new sexual behaviors, he was a conservative who tried to “educate” and enlighten the new Italian citizens, giving them ample arguments in favour of “traditional” sexuality.

Mantegazza’s ambiguous attitudes towards same-sex, lesbian relations, find an echo in the large body of literary works produced in Italy on

homosexual themes, and with gay and lesbian characters, from the last quarter of the nineteenth century until the advent of Fascism.

In her essay, Maya De Leo examines the literary image, or myth, of the woman-vampire. Lesbian sexuality, in the work of several minor or not-so-minor authors, was connected with vampirism. What at the beginning was an expression of moral condemnation slowly became a way to titillate the imagination, and a true sub-genre of lesbian fiction, for the very interested feminine as well as masculine readership, that was as popular as it was dangerous. It is worth recalling that the nineteenth century saw not only a change and diversification in the number of genders, but also, and primarily, the emergence of new roles and images of woman as such.

The problem of identifying sexual and homosexual identities emerges in the essay of Giovanni Dall'Orto, the fourth in this collection. Dall'Orto examines the complex layers that constitute the real and ideal types of male homosexual. He begins with a discussion of the "Mediterranean model," which recurs so often in our book, in so many instances and forms; later on, Dall'Orto confronts the vast literature on Italian homosexuality so as to debunk common bias, as well as to highlight common grounds and starting points. He finally describes the evolution of the Mediterranean model, subject to the influences of fashions, and cultural twists and turns.

Barbara Pozzo, in her essay—the fifth chapter of this volume—deals with the legal context. Pozzo outlines the guidelines of nineteenth-century legislation on homosexuality, normally within criminal codes, and reconstructs the eighteenth-century background and ideological origins of those legislations. Without the Enlightenment, and the changes in legal attitudes which the movement brought about—thus reflecting the general changes in mentality and attitudes of late modern society, on the eve of the French Revolution—the Italian codes of the nineteenth century would not have been more tolerant towards practices such as homosexuality, as well as suicide. Pozzo shows, however, how difficult the process of Italian legal codification and juridical modernisation, actually was. The same code could have different geographical applications, and, even with respect to homosexual practices, the different Italian legal backgrounds, as well as legal sources—deeply rooted in a long past of mostly foreign dominations—mirror, once again, the different, contrasting, contradictory socio-political realities that, by an act of violence, were forcefully unified from 1859 to 1919.

While a legal context is of paramount importance for understanding the plight and lore of homosexuals and homosexuality in nineteenth-century Italy—as well as everywhere else—it is also necessary to critically analyse

some peculiar places, cities or small towns, that are anthropologically and culturally related to homosexual practices and traditions.

The two subsequent essays in the collection—the sixth and the seventh chapter respectively—deal with two “special places” in the history of Italian, or rather, Mediterranean homosexuality.

Eugenio Zito deals with island of Capri. A sea resort since Roman times, a splendid gem of the Mediterranean, Capri was a playground not only for rich Germans and British looking for sexual adventures; it was also the place where genders were perpetually looking for a definite fixation, or identity. Zito demonstrates well the ambiguity of the local population, vis-à-vis foreigners, and amongst themselves. In this essay, the links between aesthetic and the erotic strongly surface. The same idea of “beauty” has several applications, and as many nuances.

From an anthropological perspective, Mauro Bolognari deals with the Sicilian historical city and sea resort of Taormina. This is the object of the ninth chapter of this book. Taormina presents many similarities, and a number of variations, compared to Capri. Bolognari analyses sexual behaviours in Taormina in relation to the life and activities of Baron von Gloeden, a quite eccentric figure, photographer, and German nobleman born in 1856, who died in Taormina in 1931. How did the locals react to the presence of “Barone Guglielmo”? Was he trying to sexually abuse, or exploit, the young men of Taormina? How is “art,” in this case photography, related to sex and sexuality, along with a sort of Orientalism in action? Bolognari undertakes an in-depth investigation of the web of social relations in the area, and the relevant historical, as well as cultural framework. The portrait of Taormina which emerges from the essay and the personality of von Gloeden, are fascinating, full of ambiguities, and quite telling of the impact of foreign ideas, techniques, and personality, in a small village of fishermen, later totally transformed by the tourist industry.

The essay that follows this—the eighth chapter of the book—by Ilaria Bohm, deals with the “Italian background” of the famous relationship between Violet Edmonstone and Vita Sackville-West. Once again, places and atmosphere determine a sexual and sentimental relationship. A tale of tormented homoerotic love finds one of its settings in Bordighera. The Italian Riviera, close to the French border, plays a role in shaping sentiments and approaches between the two British women. Life and literature intertwine.

The ninth and final chapter, by Lorenzo Benadusi, deals with the changes, somewhat epochal and definitely substantial, brought about by WWI. Did the fights in trenches, the triumph of masculine prowess, affect

the same notion, and the moral evaluation of homosexuality? Benadusi is very cautious in determining the real bearing of those changes, and keen to establish the actual conditions in which homosexual behaviours emerge, more or less stigmatised by society. Certainly, the First World War caused major turmoil, and strong changes, in Italian society and culture. A new sensibility, new approaches to life and literature, as well as the dramatic economic crisis, not only paved the way for Fascism, but also brought about substantial changes in mentality and attitudes. Those changes, the new dire situation, affected the practice of homosexuality, and the societal, as well as individual attitudes towards it.

This volume might have ended here. However, we decided to include a final essay, not as a chapter, but rather as an appendix. It is a short essay, in Italian, by Antonio Castronuovo. Castronuovo, an established writer and essayist, deals with, or rather debunks the myth of a homosexual Pinocchio. It is a fascinating flight into the mysteries of one of the masterpieces, or rather, of the most read and known works of Italian literature, no less important and famous than *I promessi sposi* by Manzoni, or *Il bel Paese* by Antonio Stoppani, works where homosexuality is strictly banned.

While this collection covers substantially many aspects and facets of the subjects, shedding light on some key ideas and personalities, mentalities, places and settings, much ground is left to be covered. This is true, however, for many themes and subjects in the vast social, anthropological, economic and cultural history of nineteenth century Italy. Shaken and stirred up by the unification process, Italy was, even more than by unity, shattered by social, cultural, and intellectual storms, coming from Protestant culture, atheistic philosophies, literary currents and, from within, from the demographic explosion, its cognate phenomenon of mass migration, and the loss of power suffered by the Church, at least toppled as a centralised power.

New ideas clashed with old traditions that died hard. The new sexualities, the many genders, many more than three—the colours of the Italian flag—that emerged, are both a symbol of modernity and characters in a mighty drama, that counted all the layers as characters, and the two traditional genders, that comprised the traditional backbone of Italian society.

The storm of modernity is still, for better or worse, ravaging Italian society, and the process of modernisation is far from being a foregone acquisition, or a stable advancement.

NOTE ON THE COVER IMAGE

Vincenzo Gemito was one of the most eccentric, tormented, and underrated sculptors of the *Ottocento*. Born in Naples in 1852, since the very beginning of his long career (he died in 1929) he stood up against academic sculpture, and formed a circle of “rebels”, which included artists such as a Vincenzo Buonocore, Ettore Ximenes, Giovanni Battista Amendola, Achille D’Orsi. He suffered from mental illness, had a complex personal life, and spent a long time in Capri to recover. He was immensely prolific, and able to depict in the most realistic way not only himself—there is a very great number of self-portraits, with different techniques and styles—but also the society that surrounded him; Neapolitan lower classes, fishermen, gamblers, tramps. Although his works were not meant to titillate homosexual instincts, or to address customers interested in the ideal type of the Mediterranean boy (sexual prey), they can certainly serve this scope too. His “scugnizzi,” Neapolitan boys of the lower classes, made him famous all over Europe. In terms of his personal life, we know that early in his life he had a special friend, Antonio Mancini, alias Totonno, a boy of his age who probably inspired Gemito when he sculpted his first masterpiece, “Il giocatore di carte” [The Card player] in 1868.

“Il pescatore”—later reproduced in several other sculptures, with a number of variations—was a bronze piece which Gemito sculpted in his new atelier in the Archeological Museum of Naples. Alphonse Goupil, quite an influential critic in Paris, opened the golden doors of the “Salons” to him. At the Salon of 1877 he exhibited his works of 1874-1876, the young fisherman sitting on a rock, holding his catch in his hands; a small fish. The success was enormous. Gemito moved to live in France, with his wife and his friend Totonno, leading a *menage à trois*, quite smoothly, in Poissy.

“Il pescatore” is a masterpiece, combining elements of classical sculpture with free invention, irony, and sensuality. The extreme realism verges on the realms of pure imagination. It comes as no surprise that many authors, including the famous writer Alberto Savinio (*Narrate, uomini, la vostra storia*, 1942) devoted pages to him, as an icon of Mediterranean *sensiblerie* and Italian realism, as a great master relating everyday life as “heaven inhabited by devils” (according to Benedetto Croce) that was Naples at that time.

Among several descriptions of the sculpture at the Bargello in Florence—a reproduction is displayed at the Lourdes, too—the short one by American sculptor and artist Kelly Borsheim stands out for clarity, introspection, and the ability to catch, so to speak, the “soul” of this bronze:

I love the natural gesture of this bronze figure sculpture. I like that the patina is not what my foundry calls “cowboy brown” or worse—shiny. I love the way the boy’s toes are gripping the mound he is squatting on. I can remember this feeling of slowly sliding down the side of the muddy river bank, while trying not to.

I love how the fingers of the boy’s left hand radiate out from the palm, while he uses his right hand to get a better grip on the slippery fish. I adore his exaggerated downcast eyelashes that catch the light enough to show off the boy’s concentrated face. The lips? I cannot decide if they are exhaling with the gripping effort of his hands or if he is inhaling with the thought of “I gotcha!”

If one compares Gemito’s works, with, for instance, the frescoes of the “Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn” of Naples, it is possible to begin to reconstruct a universe of (hidden, nuanced, complex) homosexuality, or rather, sexuality, in contemporary Naples. The frescoes, depicting mostly anglers, are the results of the joint efforts of a German homosexual couple, Hans von Marées and Adolf von Hildebrand, and were completed within a few months in 1873 of, in the same year as, Gemito’s fisher-boy.

It is very likely that the same creator of the Zoological Station, the scientist, and notable champion of Darwin’s theories, Felix Anton Dohrn (1840-1909), had an interest for same-sex relations. In his youth, he extensively roamed sea resorts, and islands, always with male friends. He visited Helgoland with Ernst Haeckel, Millport in Scotland with David Robertson, and spent the winter of 1868 in Messina, Sicily, with another friend, the Russian scientist Nicolai Miklukho-Maklai. It was in Messina that they conceived of filling the world with “Zoological Stations”—half hotel, half laboratory, opened to all the scientists of the world interested in proving the truth of Darwin’s theory.

The “Stazione Zoologica Anton Dohrn” is still open and active in Naples.

INTRODUCTION

IN THE SHADOW OF J. J. WINCKELMANN: HOMOSEXUALITY IN ITALY DURING THE LONG NINETEENTH CENTURY

LORENZO BENADUSI
PAOLO L. BERNARDINI
ELISA BIANCO
PAOLA GUAZZO

Aims and structure of the introductory essay

This introduction, written jointly by the three editors of the volume, aims primarily at defining the subject of the present work within the broader context of Italian historiography of the long nineteenth century. By “Italian historiography” of the “long nineteenth century,” we mean historiography, written by Italian as well as non-Italian scholars, about Italy before and after its unification; roughly from 1789 to the end of WWI (1919).¹

Obviously, this volume does not, and cannot, cover all the possible aspects and facets of the several topics related to homosexuality. Even if

¹ This volume was first conceived in May 2013. Since then, the literature on homosexuality in the long nineteenth century, in Italy and elsewhere, grew quite substantially. The editors could not take into account, obviously, all the most recent developments on the subject, as well as in the field in general. Since this introduction, however, was the last piece of the volume to be written, some of the most recent literature on this subject is discussed, or at least hinted at, here. We wish to thank, for their invaluable help in the final stage of the preparation of the manuscript, Prof. Dr. Elisa Bianco and Dr. Francesco Mascellino, both at the University of Insubria (Como, Italy).

we chronologically limit, as we indeed do, the extent of the research, there are so many sub-themes, figures, writings, events and debates related to homosexuality in Italy from 1789-1919, that it would be impossible to address all of them, unless an extensive encyclopedic work were to be compiled. These papers touch upon a good number of subjects, inviting, at the same time, fellow scholars to conduct further research. In this introduction, however, we intend also to offer a rather comprehensive overview of the subject and beyond that, of the implications, and perspectives, of the research on homosexuality; as a practice, and in theory, as a crime, and as a free act after 1889, the year of the new, and quite innovative, Italian Criminal Code.

In so doing, we mention, and briefly discuss, some figures and sub-themes not dealt with extensively (or at all) in the papers of the present collection, or elsewhere in the growing literature on this theme. We understand that this is unusual for an introductory paper, but we also agree with each other that this choice can be regarded as a further research aid, and stimulate discussion, even if we deliberately infringe upon the standard rules of an introduction, turning it, at least partially, into an autonomous essay or paper. This introduction therefore serves the goal of introducing both the subject and the papers, in as much the papers presented cover some of the infinite aspects of the subject.

The “*Ottocento*”: Limits and perspectives of traditional historiography

The study of the Italian “*Ottocento*,” the long nineteenth century beginning with the French Revolution, in 1789, and ending with the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, has traditionally and what is more, strongly, been oriented toward political and economic history. Contrary to other European states, Britain, France, and Spain, for instance, Italy, along with Germany and Greece and other states (including all the Latin American ones), was created as it is now, as a single unified State, during the long nineteenth century. The French Revolution paved the way for the Napoleonic occupation of Italy, which reshuffled the Italian borders after a long time, giving birth, *inter alia*, to the first, albeit ephemeral, state bearing the name of “*Repubblica Italiana*” (1802-1805). Under various labels, “*Risorgimento*,” “*Unificazione nazionale*,” “Creation of Italy,” the process of state-formation which ended in 1861, when the Kingdom of Savoy was rendered the Kingdom of Italy, to last until 1948, drew almost the exclusive attention of Italian as well as non-Italian historiography. Most historians who dealt with the “*Ottocento*,” attended to the unification

process; mainstream, centralist historiography views, and continues to view, this process favourably, while a growing number of historians dissent, and form a “revisionist” school that challenges the ways unification was actually implemented, as well as its immediate and long-term outcomes. The “invention” of Italy, as one of its moderate critics—Roberto Martucci—in a much discussed book, claimed that the unification process occupies the historiographical efforts of those who still deem the unified State, modelled after the first Republic of France, a good and viable political entity. “Dissenters,” revisionist historians, on the contrary, by highlighting all the past and present problems of this state, endorse, more or less explicitly, a number of parties and movements aimed at “*re-thinking* Italy.”²

Some of those movements and small parties are in favour of a federal State, others champion a confederate state, while others still, more radical, are fighting for the independence of Veneto, Sardinia, Lombardy, Sicily, Trentino and Friuli, thus paving the way for a potential, long-term, dissolution of the Italian State created in 1861. All these divergent positions returned to the stage, powerfully, with the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the unification, in 2011. A number of historians began to open the perspectives, by working not only on the “State”, but also on the Italian “Nation”, notably Alberto Mario Banti, probably the most important Italian historian of the “Risorgimento” active in Italy today.³

Beyond the Italian borders, nineteenth-century historians focused on subjects still relevant only to the Italian unification process, including culture and language. The most comprehensive and recent synthesis of the Italian “*Ottocento*”, *The Force of Destiny*, by a British historian, Christopher Duggan (2007) (who unfortunately passed away while we were writing this introductory essay, in November 2015, at the age of 58) is still centered upon the political, cultural, social and economic events which eventually caused Italy to become, from a “geographical expression” (like “Scandinavia”), a real State.⁴ It is a good example of conservative, traditional historiography, since, after all, the birth of the

² See Roberto Martucci, *L'invenzione dell'Italia unita* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1992).

³ See Alberto M. Banti, *Sublime madre nostra. La Nazione italiana dal Risorgimento al Fascismo* (Roma: Laterza, 2011); and Banti, *La nazione nel Risorgimento. Parentela, santità e onore all'origine dell'Italia unita* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000).

⁴ See Christopher Duggan, *The Force of Destiny. A History of Italy since 1796* (London: Allen Lane, 2007). American edition, 2008.

new Italian state is considered by Duggan something which is actually needed and overall positive.

At the same time, writers and historians, from Veneto to Sicily, once again powerfully challenged the unification process, reaching a wider audience than ever before, as in the case of a best-selling author, Pino Aprile, the author of the best-seller (and long-time seller) *Terroni*, or the journalist Giordano Bruno Guerri.

On the one hand, historiography's intense focus on the political aspects of Italian history in the long nineteenth century has shed light on a variety of events, figures, processes, so that very little territory remains uncovered by books, articles, or symposia. On the other hand, cultural, intellectual, and (for some areas) social history of that period, in spite of a growing number of works, has been marginalised by political history, or, in a number of ways, as only a subject of investigation only because it relates to, and interplays with politics. The Italian "*Ottocento*" was no less rich, in terms of culture, and intellectual life, than, to quote but one example, Victorian England. The latter, however, heir of a well-defined and stable state spanning centuries, and the centre of the most powerful empire in world history along with the Roman Empire, has been the subject of plenty of cultural and intellectual researches. The same for France. The attempt to re-examine even Italian political history of the long nineteenth century by shedding light on hitherto neglected subjects in cultural, social history, and the history of mentalities and ideologies, can be extremely rewarding, both in terms of outcomes, and of methodology.

Suicide, homosexuality, and other "anomies"

This volume is part of a project—undertaken by the Chair in Early Modern and Modern European History at the University of Insubria, Como—that examines "marginal" or apparently less substantial subjects in Italian history of the long nineteenth century. Among the first outcomes of this project, a volume on suicide that precedes this one, and, in a number of ways, deals with a very similar theme.⁵

Suicide and homosexuality, as forms of "anomies," to quote the French sociologist Durkheim, who wrote at the end of the nineteenth century and was powerfully influenced by Italian authors and medical schools, and

⁵ See *Voglio Morire! Suicide in Italian Literature, Society and Culture 1789-1919*, eds. Paolo L. Bernardini, Anita Virga (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2013).

referred, to be precise, only to “suicide”, cognate phenomena. In the context of modern and pre-modern Italy, before and after the unification of 1861, they both powerfully reveal the contradictions, tensions, antagonisms and dead ends of Italian society, at the crossroad of modernity.

Italy, on the eve of unification, and right up to the present day, is a fragile compound torn among a number of different powers. “Unified” ideally centuries ago by the Catholic Church, but, at the same time, also over centuries, divided politically among a number of fiercely competing states, and foreign occupations, during the long nineteenth century she is exposed to strong, pervasive conflicts. The leading, most substantial one, reflecting in itself all—or almost all—the others, is that opposing the State (in-the-making) and the different, existent states, to the Catholic Church. In the shadow of this conflict, a number of others emerge, never definitely resolved.

One crucial contradiction, as stressed in his long career by Gianfranco Miglio, is that between the legal system of the Savoy Kingdom on the one hand, applied, after 1861, to all the little or not so little states incorporated into the newly established Kingdom of Italy, with a number of exceptions—including the decriminalisation vs. criminalisation of homosexuality, as we will see in this volume—and the multiple, various local legal traditions, on the other.

Within this major conflict, however, another stands out. It is the conflict between the Catholic, “traditional” elements (or even “soul,” in some cases) of the ancient Italian codes, or legal traditions, and the new French-style of codification. This conflict becomes evident when the Criminal Code of the Savoy Kingdom had to be applied all over Italy. The Savoy Code of 1839 was a very conservative code, very much influenced by Catholic doctrines, and included the criminalisation not only of suicide—decriminalised in a number of European states, including France, a while since—but also of homosexuality. When the Italian state had to extend the validity of this code to the former Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, conquered and annexed in 1860, legislators—but especially politicians—decided not to apply the articles related to homosexuality to Sicily and Campania. Were the Bourbon laws and customs more “liberal” and tolerant than their Savoy counterparts? When the Zanardelli Code of 1889 simply ignored homosexuality—*de facto* and *de iure*, thus, decriminalising it—can we say what was said when the Greek customs, much more refined than the Romans, overwhelmed the latter, slowly but definitely, i.e.: *Graecia* (or rather: *Magna Graecia*) *ferum victorem cepit*?

This is only one of questions posed, and possibly answered, in this volume. These are crucial problems in the century of unification. While

Catholic morality, more or less reflected in codes, but certainly strongly present and pervasive in society, customs, uses, with different nuances, and occasionally major differences according to geography and local traditions, fought its battle against the emergent state and its twofold drive toward secularisation, other, “foreign” cultural factors and actors enter the Italian scene. This arrival does not simplify, but rather complicates, the panorama. Italy becomes the playground, and battleground, for different modes, ideologies and customs, in the storm caused by the secularisation process and the fiercely ambiguous resistance to it. Is the legal decriminalisation, eventually, both of suicide and homosexuality, a victory of secularisation, and does this mark the end of the fight? In fact, this is not the case.

The end of a juridical process does not mute the social tensions, stigmas and pressures, and if the condemnation does not come from a tribunal, it comes from society. Fascism, in its attitudes both towards suicide, and especially towards homosexuality, as one of the editors of this volume has shown, brings back to the fore all the knots of Italian history, certainly not severed or somehow suppressed by a simple political act, namely of “unifying” Italy.⁶

While the past comes back with a vengeance, with Fascism and its ambiguous, interesting relations with the Church, the Italian scene, in the long nineteenth century, is extremely vivid, for all these conflicts at least have a clear outcome.

There is a variety of extremely interesting positions, events, figures, tragedies, and comedies that take all place under the Mediterranean sun, as far as homosexuality concerned.

The state/church tensions are at a certain point overshadowed by the emergence of Positivism, and the old Catholic and Protestant negative attitudes against suicide, and homosexuality (and a number of other behaviours), are first demolished, and later on analysed, in a lay- and “technical” fashion, by the “new science.” The scene is devastatingly fascinating. What happens in Italy, thanks to her dialectical history, her long-term contradictions, her being the unfortunate playground for combatants of different ideological, as well as real, armies, make the peninsula and the Italian islands an exception in a rather dull (if compared) European scenario. Under this perspective, the political events are overshadowed by the “life of the spirit,” to quote Hegel. Political events

⁶ See Lorenzo Benadusi, *The Enemy of the New Man. Homosexuality in Fascist Italy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).

might well influence this “life,” but leave ample space for a tensions and ideas, offspring of the former. Our present is still full of this embarrassing inheritance.

To give but three examples: Does the strong homophobia present in southern Italy, even among the youth, come from a reaction to a traditional laxity towards homosexuality, that was at the origins the stereotype of homosexuality as “the Italian vice,” or rather the “Mediterranean vice” with reference to central and southern Italy, and some “Northern” exceptions, like Venetian “gondoliers,” or the students of the University of Padua?

Or else, does the idea of the “Latin lover,” a truly heterosexual performer, originate from the reaction to the identification of the homosexual as “inverted,” “*invertito*,” born and bred by Italian sociology?

Or, finally, does the idea of the (Italian) Mediterranean as a “place of vice”, remotely or less remotely relate to a conception of the “South,” bordering Orientalism, as a place of laxity, including legal laxity, for the Bourbon laws did permit homosexuality, and even the Savoy code admitted the exception (thus, respecting the local traditions), when the central government decided not to apply to Sicily, Campania, Calabria, Puglia and Basilicata (and also Sardinia, where the Criminal Code was not extended at all) the articles of the 1839 Criminal Code otherwise applied in northern Italy?

Historiography re-awakens: new trends in Italian historical research

The objective importance of the theme “sexuality-homosexuality,” and its vibrant, international, contradictory Italian setting, before and after the unification, inevitably brought historians and critics to the study of this subject. As homosexuals, conceived of as a “minority,” all over the world, suffer from discrimination related to homophobia, it is quite natural that a number of writers approached the history of homosexuality from a very “engaged,” occasionally polemical, perspective. This is true also of the nineteenth century, although, for a number of reasons, the twentieth, and the current century, are also at the centre of historiography debate. In Italy, we must first mention the immense work carried out most recently by Giovanni Dall’Orto, and, in the past, by Massimo Consoli (1945-2007). Both non-professional historians, they wrote extensively on homosexuality in history, aiming at the broader public and with keen attention to detail, figures, and events. Their form and style of writing, polemically and politically engaged, did not and do not ignore accuracy and offers,

particularly in Giovanni Dall'Orto's last monumental work, a deep and panoramic understanding and overview of homosexuality and homosexuals, gay and lesbian, in Italian history, with a notable focus on the nineteenth century.⁷

Thanks to Consoli and Dall'Orto, we can now approach and study a variety of characters, and events, linked to homosexuality (and its enemies) on Italian soil. To Massimo Consoli, among other things, we owe the reappraisal of such an epoch-making figure in the history of homosexuality as Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825-1895). Ulrichs was the classical philologist at the origin of the mysterious concept of “*urning*,” considered one of the first champions of the gay rights movements, whose life and legacy is indissolubly bound to Italy, where he spent the final years of his troubled life.

Professional historians follow ideological writers, as often happens in cases of delicate, problematic, and “sensitive” issues—homosexuality is the prime example, while suicide is very close—basing their research on the equally immense traditions of the history of sexuality, where Foucault, whose pioneering works nowadays run the risk of being ignored, still keeps the lion's share.

In more recent years, Chiara Beccalossi paved the way for the research on post-unification homosexuality in Italy, with a monograph (comparing Italy and England) and a very recent edited collection.⁸

The collection, published while this book was in the final stage of preparation, approaches the history of “sexuality” in general, in the long nineteenth century. While our approach focuses exclusively on homosexuality, this collection rightly locates homosexuality within the broader concept of “sexuality”, with all the implications relevant to this methodological choice. The first historian to stress the exceptional role played by Italy in the debates on homosexuality in the nineteenth century, is probably the doyen in the field of the history of homosexuality, Australian Professor Robert Aldrich (1954).

In a pioneering work of 1993, Aldrich studies the powerful attraction felt by European intellectuals, writers, and especially painters, for the Mediterranean as a place of sexual freedom, where the old classical, Greek

⁷ See Giovanni Dall'Orto, *Tutta un'altra storia. L'omosessualità dall'antichità al secondo dopoguerra* (Milano: Il saggiatore, 2015).

⁸ See *Italian Sexualities Uncovered*, eds. Valeria P. Babini, Chiara Beccalossi, Lucy Riall, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Chiara Beccalossi, *Female Sexual Inversion. Same-sex Desires in Italian and British Sexology, c. 1870-1920* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

and Latin tradition, of tolerance, acceptance, or at least “neutrality” with respect to homosexuality, happily mixed with the current tolerant legislation. A legislation that was preserved even after 1889 when the Zanardelli Code repealed the Savoy Code, and was effectively introduced and applied in the former Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.⁹

Six years later, Ulrichs died in poverty but with the respect of his contemporaries in L’Aquila, a Bourbon city until 1860, while the “*settentrionale*” (he was from Pavia) and Senator Luigi Pissavini was put on trial for homosexuality by the Italian Senate itself in 1888, one year before the implementation of the Zanardelli Code, that, probably, could have saved him from disgrace.¹⁰

None of these works, however, is a case study. In-depth studies of homosexual practices are more frequent for the Renaissance or even the Middle Ages, with the unrivalled monograph on Renaissance Florence by Michael Rocke, and many others on the various cities, city-states, republican and small political entities that constituted ancient-regime Italy, before 1861.¹¹

In this volume, we tried to discover and assess a number of cases, and discuss a number of problems, issues, even paradoxes. However, ours is above all an invitation to further research. As in the case of suicide, the research on homosexuality is *ex se* interdisciplinary. History of science accompanies history of mentalities, legal history goes together with socio-economic history, and the history of literature and the fine arts. For this reason, it is difficult for a single scientist to cover all the ground. Collective works might help, and this may justify, at least partially, the effort in publishing them.

The fact that a reality like Renaissance Florence (or Venice) allows an in-depth study even of homosexuality, is justified on the basis of historical conditions. Florence is a much smaller, much better defined political entity, not only than Italy (after 1861), but also than most of the Italian states after the end of the Renaissance, and the almost complete occupation of Italy by foreign powers after 1559. Other exceptions constituting well defined political entities were the Florentine and Lucca

⁹ See Robert Aldrich, *The Seduction of the Mediterranean. Writing, Art, and Homosexual Fantasy* (London-New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁰ One of the editors of the present volume, Paolo L. Bernardini, is currently working on the first edition of the proceedings of the Pissavini Trial, held in their entirety in the Archives of the Italian Senate, section “Regno.”

¹¹ See Michael Rocke, *Forbidden Friendships. Homosexuality and Male Culture in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Republics, of Venice and, partially, Genoa, and the Papal States, where, however, there are less archival sources available, in contrast to Venice and Genoa. What Rocke unveiled, however, was the fact that homosexuality was so widespread in Florence, so as to interest more than half of a population of 43,000, which very telling, obviously, also for the future of Italy, on the eve of, and after, unification. The fight of the Church against sodomy, homosexuality, and the “sins of the flesh” broadly conceived, in the face of a more lay and tolerant state authority is a long story in the Italian lore. Unification shakes a very unstable terrain; it does not in fact change either action or actors. Whatever is new, Positivism and racism in science, Darwin(ism) and Lombroso, or Romanticism and Positivism in arts and literature is solidly grafted onto an existing path, a path that is complex and tormented, since time immemorial.

The homosexuality of the Saint: the case of Giovanni Bosco (1815-1888)

If there are no major tensions between competing powers (normally, the Church and the state), attempting to gain control over a political entity at the expense one of the other party, there are no major intellectuals backing up, with theories and ideologies, those two parties, and, so to speak, life rolls on smoothly. Unfortunately, Italian history is torn by rivalries, and the one we just mentioned, between Church and state(s), mirrors many others, historically, to quote but one, the violent contrast between those championing the Popes, and those defending the absolute rights of the Emperor.

When a balance is finally, painfully found, as in Renaissance Florence, or in Venice, we witness the strange phenomenon of sodomy from one side extremely widespread as a common practice, and, from the other, condemned in theory, and in tribunals, regularly and saliferously. Renaissance Florence was far from politically stable, and the accusation of homosexuality almost inevitably had a political background, rooted in cruel rivalries among the few families ruling the republic. In case of long, political, painful, twisted, tormented evolutions and changes, no agreement can be established between the competitors; no truce reached. Since, for a number of reasons, Italy is still developing, its century of birth, object of our research, offers a number of instances where the conflict explodes.

If in time of quiet, and truce among the competing powers, homosexual practices in the Church—typical of the all-male, or all-female communities, including the army and the navy, or the schools, the hospitals etc.—go unnoticed, much less than demonic contacts or other

exceptional events, in the case of the less quiet *Ottocento*, historians fiercely dispute between the real, imagined, or altogether absent homosexuality of Giovanni Bosco, a giant in the rich pantheon of the *Risorgimento* saints.

He died in the same year as Senator Luigi Pissavini, 1888, but while Pissavini fell into complete disgrace for his (alleged) homosexual intercourses, Giovanni Bosco, the founder of the mighty Congregation of the Salesiani, true leaders in education at the global level, was beatified and eventually sanctified.

What is interesting, for historiography, is not to assess whether Giovanni Bosco was homosexual, or occasionally had homosexual intercourse, or not at all. What is immensely interesting, and disquieting, is that his alleged homosexuality can be used, from within the Church, and from radical enemies of the Church too, for ideological purposes. The origins, and the first emergence, of most of the contemporary Italian polemics, to a greater or lesser extent fierce or moderate respectively, related to homosexuality, have to be traced back to the long nineteenth century.

This is true for whatever, or almost whatever, affect the current ideological debate in Italy, and struck, deeply, the Italian political consciousness, both on the individual level, and on the more vague and undetermined “national” one. The problem, and the case of Giovanni Bosco is extremely revealing, is not whether homosexual practices actually took place, along with paedophilia, cognate attitudes and relevant behaviours; it is not even whether Bosco’s pedagogical ideals, made explicit in hundreds of publications, imply homosexual practices.

What makes homosexuality “problematic” is its own entry into the polar tension originated in competing ideologies of power, which might use homosexuality as a tool, among many others, to defame and eventually defeat the enemy. This peculiarity brings nearer, once again, suicide to homosexuality. With a major difference: while by killing herself-himself, the subject subtracts her/himself from the battle, homosexuals are alive: they can be brought in front of a tribunal, burnt at the stake. This makes a huge difference.

The immense posthumous fortune of Giovanni Bosco, beatified and sanctified from 1929 to 1934, would have been completely different, had he committed suicide. In the end, his sexual behavior was not so important, at least not for the Church, and went unnoticed for a century or so. The importance of his alleged homosexuality lies elsewhere: thanks to it, whether real or fake, the Church and the believers can legitimately reopen the debate on homosexuality and Catholicism, which has been alive,

occasionally dormant, since time immemorial. The long nineteenth century revamps old quarrels, and, above all, reopens extremely old wounds.

The homosexuality of the improvisor: Tommaso Sgricci (1789-1836)

The case of Tommaso Sgricci reveals a number of other issues (not so different from those related to Don Bosco, if seen with a keen eye). He lived a little longer than Giacomo Leopardi (1798-1837), whose alleged homosexuality occasionally resurfaces: did the miserable young man fall in love with the brilliant Ranieri; did they have a relationship? The myth of Leopardi's homosexuality is similar to the myth of his suicide. Did he kill himself by eating a disproportionate quantity of ice cream that accelerated the decay of his terribly ill body, also affected by diabetes? They are both myths, not so far from a possible reality. Sgricci and Leopardi both lived in the first half of the nineteenth century. The impulse given by political unification; Positivism and Darwinism; phrenology and dandyism; to the theme and status of homosexuality, is dated from 1861 onward. In a way, pre-1861 Italy is a quasi-perfect extension of the Old Regime. This justifies, *inter alia*, the chronology chosen by Beccalossi for her pioneering work. Next to nothing happens before 1861 (this is partially true also for what concerns "suicide" in practices, theory, and even statistics). Homosexual behaviours, should they not cause scandals, were peaceably tolerated, almost everywhere.

Sgricci is the heir of the *siècle des Lumières*, a poet who loved boys more than girls, a common practice for poets and intellectuals in Venice, for instance Lodoli, who often practiced sodomy (incurring in Baffo's satirical condemnation), and also for one of the greatest intellectuals of the Venetian Enlightenment, Francesco Algarotti. Casanova had maybe one or two homosexual affairs, but he does at least partially deny this in his *Mémoires*.

The case of Sgricci, exiled from Rome for his behaviour, accepted back in Habsburg Tuscany, where he died at 47, is very telling of the difficulty in accepting homosexuality in Italian literary histories (in general, for some portions of Italian society). Notoriously and apparently exclusively gay, and with a life strongly determined by his sexuality, Sgricci enjoys a very questionable reputation even today. When, however, his first biographer Ugo Viviani devoted a lengthy book to him in 1928, he did not even mention his homosexuality. During Fascism, homosexuality was taboo, in a sinister parallelism, both for the Church, and the state. Once again, however, as in the case of suicide, can we legitimately ask

ourselves (and in general): Was homosexuality actually *relevant* to his work (and its interpretations)? Is the suicide of a writer relevant to the *understanding* of his/her works? We do not wish to answer such a question. However, we would like to stress the fact that it is an open question which should be addressed.

The long Italian nineteenth century is of paramount importance for all the questions it raises, more than for the answers it gave, all different and in opposition with the other. What is striking in two homosexuals, Sgricci and Ulrichs, mentioned before, whose lives were profoundly tied up with Italy, her present and particularly her past, is their attention to “language”; the linguistic dimensions of life.

For Sgricci, the rich and lively Italian of the “Commedia dell’Arte” and of “*improvvisazione*,” the oldest poetic form of expression dating back to Homer; for Ulrichs, Latin, which he wanted to resurrect as a real, spoken language, when the artificiality of Esperanto, Volapuek and other “invented,” artificial and unfortunate languages surface in Europe. They were both looking for a “natural” language, defending two traditional, historical languages, like Italian and Latin, for Ulrichs, the latter to be taken away from the Church monopoly.

No wonder that, deprived of their homosexual “element” (which is certainly a scandalous operation in the case of Ulrichs, so intensively devoted to the depiction and identification of a “third sex” in a number of writings), they are mostly remembered for sexually neutral features. The first was for being the last “*improvvisatore*,” the latter on the contrary, for being the champion of the (failed) cause to restore Latin as a commonly spoken language. Did (and if so, how) homosexuality “influence” their intellectual enterprise? Would it be legitimate, once again, to not even mention their sexuality when presenting their personality? Probably not. But other scholars may argue the contrary.

Jumping into modernity: A science for the degenerate, and the war against them

A concept firmly wedged within the intellectual constellation of the French Revolution and, in a broader perspective, in that of secularisation, “degeneration” was to be applied to men, women, races, nations, human and animal breeds, republics and monarchies, and at a certain point—after the concept was forged—circa 1868, also to “homosexuals.” The massive intervention of state-driven, often state-revering and state-serving science into the realms of the passions, and of sexuality, was, as in the case of suicide, devastating homosexuality too. In the last miserable years of his

life, Oscar Wilde visited Naples. Matilde Serao (and also, among many others, the Milanese anarchist Paolo Valera) wrote of this visit, an event quite talked about in general, for he was back in public again with his lover Alfred Douglas, causing a notable scandal (“Io tremo al solo pensiero che il flagello wildiano possa dilagare per Napoli,” wrote the author of *Il ventre di Napoli*, apparently sincerely alarmed). Not long before Wilde’s death, in Paris, on the 30th November 1900, an obscure Neapolitan physician, Pietro Fabiani, published *Il problema dell’omosessualità e di tutte le degenerazioni davanti alla scienza*, in which he strongly condemned “homosexuality,” and, considering it a mental as well as “physical” degeneration, conceived the possibility of a cure. Nine years later, he published a book, with “history and ranking”, of a number of “*pervertimenti sessuali*,” including necrophilia and vampirism. Homosexuality was among them, well positioned in the ranking. Pietro Fabiani was also an expert in sexually transmitted and sexual diseases, and an expert on hysteria.

A fervent defender of Italian patriotism and Italian regeneration after the war, Vito Massarotti- a native of Taranto, wrote *Nel regno di Ulrichs*, in 1913. *Appunti e considerazioni sull’omosessualità maschile*, published in Rome by Lux. His perspective and approach were those of a neuro-psychiatrist. Massarotti’s attitudes towards homosexuality, and suicide, are extremely revealing of the new positivist mentality: “to understand in order to cure” is his (and, tragically, *not only his*) ideal motto. While the Church and moralists condemn, the scientist must understand the mental disease, partially individual, partially caused by social influences, which leads to suicide, or to homosexual behaviours. Massarotti is alarmingly candid in his conclusions about homosexuals (who, contrary to the suicides, can still be saved):

Ancora quindi è necessaria la parola del medico illuminato, ancora necessario il diffondere le vere condizioni di questi esseri anormali, onde ci si difenda sì, ma non con il disprezzarli, bensì con l’aiutarli a superare nel miglior modo possibile gli ostacoli, le lotte che la vita loro preserva; nessuno deve azzardarsi di invelenire e percuotere questi malati di una sfera dell’attività psichica, così importante e grande, che invade tutta la nostra personalità, qual è quella sessuale.