

'Imaginary Homeland: Romantic Women Writers and Italy'

by Silvia Bordoni, MPhil

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Abstract

The aim of this work is to investigate the importance of Italy, as a real and imaginary country, in British Romanticism, particularly in women's writings. Since the heyday of the Grand Tour Italy has been approached as an alien and distant country, but also as a liberating and stimulating reality. Italy as an 'other country' constitutes an important element in the delineation of British Romanticism. The opposition between North and South, which was developed and consolidated by Romantic authors, constitutes the theoretical frame for this work. As part of southern Europe, Italy stands in opposition to Northern societies. North and South, however, are not simply in opposition; they merge and interconnect in the literary production of the time. Italy and Great Britain exemplify the dialogical connection between apparently irreconcilable opposites. In women's writings, Italy is exploited as an alternative imaginary setting onto which they can project their anxieties, their artistic ambitions and their dreams of literary success. The role of Italy in women's writings is important to demonstrate their participation in contemporary social, national and political issues. The work focuses first on travel reports and the real encounter with Italy. Then it analyses the imaginary figurations of Italy in Gothic literature and in poetry at the end of the eighteenth century. With the beginning of the nineteenth century, the idea of Italy as a morally liberating and artistically stimulating country is consolidated in the works of Stael and Byron. The representation of Italy as an ideal country for women artists makes their support of the Italian fight for independence particularly important. Since Italy represents a feminised and politically enslaved country, women associate its effort to gain freedom with their own struggle for political and social emancipation.

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*To my parents, Paola and Roberto, to my sister,
Daniela, and to my grandmother, Fatma.*

Introduction

Their [Italian] moral is not your moral- their life is not your life- you would not understand it- it is not English nor French- nor German- which you would all understand-[...] After their dinners and suppers they make extempore verses- and buffoon one another- but it is in a humour which you would not enter into- ye of the North.¹

Byron's reply to John Murray's request to write a book of manners about Italy is quite explicit. Byron discounts the possibility that the English- whom he derides as 'ye of the north'- could possibly understand Italian manners. At the same time he positions himself in a privileged situation, as one who has lived in the country several years. Thus, he is able not only to interpret Italian habits; he also feels utterly in harmony with the Italian way of living and thinking. Byron's long residence in Italy and his recurrent mingling with native people give him a special understanding of the cultural, political and social conditions of nineteenth-century Italy. Byron's multifarious and complex relationship with Italy epitomises the interest British Romantic writers showed towards this southern country, apparently so different from Britain. Byron's facility in self-negating his own national identity and his ability to transform his English origins into an expression of otherness reveal an intrinsic incompatibility between Italian and English customs. This condition of 'otherness' implies an inherent lack in the understanding of one's own culture, and the consequent need of looking away in search of fulfilment and completeness. At a general level, Byron's works are representative of the imaginary rendering of Italy in British literature. Byron's encounter with the Italian reality, as he records in his journals and letters, parallels his poetic re-constructions of the country in a way that clearly shows the gap between a real and imaginary Italy. Ideally, Italy appears as an

¹ *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie Marchand, 12 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975-82), vol. VII, pp. 42-43.

alternative, less monotonous reality than the rigorous, suffocating English environment.

Charles Brand and Kenneth Churchill have demonstrated how the use of Italy in British literature has been constant throughout literary history.² However, it is only with the advent of sentimental literature and with the intensification of travel movements that the interest in Italy acquires an exotic characterisation. Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1742) and *History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1754), along with Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768) changed the aims and ways of British tourism in Europe. The transformation of the Grand Tour from a journey of erudition and knowledge to a journey of experience and self-discovery involved the modification of the way travellers saw and lived in the country they visited. As Ian Littlewood has observed, Sterne and Richardson shifted the main concern of travellers to Europe from 'catalogues of pictures, monuments and churches', to a 'knowledge of the individual heart'.³ Following the new eighteenth-century sensibility, the traditional intellectual mapping of Europe is transformed into an emotional one. The shift of emphasis from the exterior to the interior affects Italy as one of the most common destinations of the Grand Tour. More specifically, it is from the second half of the eighteenth century that Italy acquires the status of a liberating and sensual country in the imaginary mapping of Europe. Goethe's *Italian Journey* (1788) stands as a manifesto for the liberating nature of Italian travel and for the status of the journey south as a sort of inner discovery: 'My purpose in making this wonderful journey is not to delude myself but to discover myself in the objects I

² Brand comments how the earliest influence of Italian literature dates back to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*; Charles P. Brand, *Italy and the English Romantics: the Italianate Fashion in Early Nineteenth-century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), pp. i-iv; Kenneth Churchill, *Italy and English Literature 1764-1930* (London: Macmillan Press, 1980), pp. 3-5. See also: Roderick Marshall, *Italy and English Literature 1755-1815: Origins of the Romantic Interest in Italy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934).

³ Ian Littlewood, *Sultry Climates: Travel and Sex since the Grand Tour* (London: John Murray, 2001), p. 56.

see'.⁴ In the last decades of the eighteenth-century the position of Italy in European geography became that of an emotionally and physically stimulating country, and its traditional characterisation as the land of art and erudition became of secondary importance.

In structuring my work I have been concerned with both the real and imaginary dimensions of Italy, since I think both are important for the delineation of the idea of Italy in British Romanticism. Recent criticisms on the connection between Italy and British writers tend to separate the two. Jane Stabler and Alison Chapman, for example, cautiously select for their works women artists who lived and forged in Italy their artistic personality, thus reiterating the pattern of Stael's *Corinne*.⁵ Other works are mainly concerned with travel literature, and prioritise a real physical encounter with the country over a literary and metaphorical transmutation of it.⁶ However, I felt that concentrating only on those women writers who actually travelled and experienced Italy would necessarily exclude a considerable portion of writings which are fundamental for an exhaustive analysis of the idea of Italy in British literature. Moreover, the two levels of literary productions, the descriptive and the representational, are associated. As will emerge clearly in the course of this thesis, travel literature was one of the primary forms of knowledge about Italy for those writers who never visited the country. The Italian settings of Radcliffe's novels, for example, or the poetic figurations of Italy in Hemans and Landon's poetry, came principally from reading of travel literature. At the same time, it is important to notice that most travellers arrived in Italy culturally prepared, that

⁴ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Italian Journey: 1786-1788*, trans. by W.H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer (London: Collins, 1962), p. 6.

⁵ Alison Chapman and Jane Stabler (eds.), *Unfolding the South: Nineteenth-Century Women Writers and Artists in Italy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). See also: Jane Stabler, 'Figuring Disorder: Women Travellers in Italy', *Journals of Anglo Italian Studies*, 6 (2001), 1-16; 'Taking Liberties: the Italian Picturesque in Women's Travel Writing', *European Romantic Review*, 13 (2002), 11-22.

⁶ The most recent publications include: Jeremy Black, *Italy and the Grand Tour* (London: Yale University Press, 2003); Clare Hornsby (ed.), *The Impact of Italy: the Grand Tour and Beyond* (London: The British School at Rome, 2000); Chloe Chard, *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour*:

is with a considerable knowledge of Italian literature and arts, which came itself from previous works of travel literature, but also from fictional representations. Thus, the real and imaginary intermingle in the construction of Italy in the works of British Romantics.⁷ In the case of women writings, the distinction is even more determinant in terms of the exclusion or inclusion of literary productions. In fact, while most male writers who wrote about Italy or used it for their fictional or poetic settings had travelled to the country as part of their bourgeois or upper-class education, only a small number of women writers were actually able to visit Italy. Thus, in order to avoid confining the analysis to only an inevitably limiting selection of writers, I have included and connected the writings of those women who travelled to Italy and those for whom Italy remained a distant, imaginary country. As Ian Littlewood has observed, 'the argument that Italy presented an alternative, less prosaic reality', highlights a link, clearly evident in the lives of women, between 'the lure of travel and the fantasies of displacement offered by reading and writing'.⁸ In other words, those who cannot physically move, can at least be transported into the Italian reality by novels and poems.⁹ Thus Italy, as an imaginary land and a literary trope, has for women writers and readers the same symbolic significance of travelling abroad: that of searching for an alternative, liberating, and stimulating 'other country'.

Travel Writing and Imaginative Geography 1600-1830 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

⁷ Byron's works are exemplary of this mingling of real and imaginary representations of Italy. Differently, for Shelley and Keats, who lived several years in Italy and died there, Italy remained mainly a poetic trope or a source of literary inspiration in their works. Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford: Calrendon Press, 1991); *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat, 2 vols. (Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); John Keats, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by John Barnard, 2 vols. (London: Penguin, 1988).

⁸ Ian Littlewood, *Sultry Climates*, p. 67.

⁹ Charlotte Smith, for example, in 1794 revealed how one of her most ardent desires was to visit the Italy she imaginarily re-constructed in some of her works: 'I do not mind dying, but I want to see the Alps, and Vesuvius first', Charlotte Smith's Letter to J.C. Walker, 25 March 1794, Hunting Library Manuscript; Kari Lokke, 'The Mild Dominion of the Moon: Charlotte Smith and the Politics of Transcendence', in *Rebellious Hearts: Romantic Women Writers and the French Revolution*, ed. by Adriana Craciun and Kari Lokke (New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 84-99, (p. 86)

An important element that needs to be clarified in the analysis of Italy is, in Adrienne Rich's formulation, its 'politics of location'.¹⁰ In particular, before attempting any study of the role of Italy in British literature it is fundamental to position the country geographically, culturally and historically in the context of British Romanticism. In doing so, we have to consider some specific binary constructions of European geography and culture, which became popular at the end of the eighteenth century and developed throughout the nineteenth century.

East and West

The distinction between East and West has become common and popular in many critical works on Romanticism.¹¹ The basic fact at the origin of this division is the rise of British imperial power during the Romantic Age. The consolidation of the British empire and the increase of commercial and cultural exchanges between Europe and the Orient seem to have emerged as distinctive aspects of British Romantic literature. In recent years, a lot of attention has been given to the representations of the East in British literature and its political and cultural implications. Some recent works tend to associate Italy with the East and interpret its use in British literature in terms of 'cultural imperialism'. Daryl S. Odgen and Mauro Pala, for example, argue that Byron's poetic depictions of Italy reveal the author's intentional orientalisation of the country.¹² In particular, Byron's emotional and fictional link with Venice may induce us to read some of his works in terms of the East/West oppositional construction, given the special position that the town had in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a

¹⁰ Adrienne Rich, 'Notes towards a Politics of Location', in *Women, Feminist Identity and Society*, ed. by Myriam Diaz Diocartez and Iris M. Zavala (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1985), pp. 32-47.

¹¹ See, for example: Nigel Leask, *British Romantic Writers and the East: Anxieties of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), Timothy Morton, *The Poetics of Spice: Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹² Daryl S. Odgen, 'Byron, Italy, and the Poetics of Liberal Imperialism', *Keats and Shelley Journal* 49 (2000), 114-137. Mauro Pala, 'From Place to *Topos*: Byron's Italy as Exotic Discourse', in

cultural and geographical crossroads between Orient and Occident.¹³ However, in his works on the figuration of the East in Western literature, Edward Said has clearly articulated the cultural and geographical contours of the Orient, and Italy is not included. Instead, in his analysis, Said refers to Italy as one of those countries that have been imperialistic at some point in their history, having had colonial possessions. Obviously, Italy cannot be associated either geographically or historically with the East.

In their analysis of Byron's poetic representations of Italy, however, Mauro Pala, Daryl Odgen and to some extent Jerome McGann, suggest that Italy is associated with the East in Byron's cultural geography and that, consequently, it is proper and useful to apply orientalist theory for interpretation.¹⁴ More specifically, as Odgen observes, Byron never entirely disentangled himself from an ambivalent ideological understanding of Italy as a problematic national and political entity that did not qualify as a fully legitimate part of the West. Byron's uncertain experience of Italy, Odgen continues, calls attention to an important division of the post-Napoleonic reality: that between an 'accelerating European imperialism' in the Orient and European nationalism in the Occident.¹⁵ Similarly, Mauro Pala observes how Byron's palimpsestic construction of Italy epitomises his (re)creation of the country as an orientalised place of the mind. As the author suggests, the study of 'the present state of Italian habits and literature' in *Childe Harold IV* turns into a 'labyrinth of external objects and the consequent reflections'.¹⁶ The multifarious facets that Italy acquires in its reflection into the mind of an English author position the country in a vulnerable situation, similar

Imagining Italy: Literary Itineraries in British Romanticism, ed. by Lilla Maria Crisafulli (Bologna: Clueb, 2002), pp. 165-182.

¹³ See, for example: Pfister Manfred and Barbara Schaff (eds), *Venetian View, Venetian Blinds: English Fantasies of Venice* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999); Ross Michael, *Storied Cities: Literary Imaginings of Florence, Venice, and Rome* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994); Tanner Tony, *Venice Desired* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁴ Jerome McGann, *Complete Poetical Works*, vol. I, p. 317. See also: Marilyn Butler, 'Byron and the Empire of the East', in *Byron: Augustan and Romantic*, ed. by Andrew Rutherford (London: Macmillan Press, 1990), pp. 63-87.

¹⁵ Daryl S. Odgen, 'Byron, Italy and the poetics of liberal imperialism', p. 116.

¹⁶ Mauro Pala, 'From Place to Topos', p. 166.

to the East. In particular, visitors who wrote about Italy felt the need to interpret and translate its reality for British readers. In this way, the mental mechanism at the base of literary reproductions of Italy and of the East may be similar.

Said's geographical mapping of Orientalism, however, is very clear. Referring to the division between East and West, Said asserts that:

On the fundamental ontological distinction between the West and the rest of the world there is no disagreement. So strongly felt and perceived are the geographical and cultural boundaries between the West and its non-Western peripheries that we may consider these boundaries absolute.¹⁷

Such a strict definition of Orientalism is not easily applicable to the Italian cultural position. If geographically the division between East and West can be clearly drawn, the cultural boundary is not as distinctive. As a consequence, geographically Italy cannot and does not belong to the East. As the same Said clarifies, the Eastern Mediterranean countries are Turkey, Egypt and Syria. Odgen and Pala's standpoint, however, seems to suggest that the cultural demarcation between East and West is much more flexible. In particular, if Italy is West in terms of modern geography, it is Orientalised for literary purposes. As a matter of fact, descriptions and use of Italy in the works of British women writers sometimes enter some paradigmatic constructions of the Orient. In particular, those women writers who never visited the country tend to construct an imaginary Italy which has some elements of the exotic.¹⁸ Radcliffe's claustrophobic and imaginary reconstructions of Venice, for instance, have a strong exoticised tone. Similarly, Landon's setting of 'The improvisatrice' with its sensual odours, bright colours, warm temperature and luxuriant nature carries an orientalised texture. It will also become clear in the course of the thesis, that the attitude of many British travellers and writers was one of superiority towards a politically enslaved and feminised country. Forms of 'cultural imperialism', or in

¹⁷ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 108.

Clery's expression of 'acquisitive admiration', proliferate in the use of Italy in British literature.¹⁹

Said himself has perceived that the cultural boundaries of the Orient are problematic. The Orient as 'exotic locale' is simply an intuition, an imaginary representation that can be enhanced by very different elements. As the author explains:

Popular Orientalism during the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth attained a vogue of considerable intensity. But even this vogue, easily identifiable with William Beckford, Byron, Thomas Moore, and Goethe, cannot be simply detached from the interest taken in Gothic tales, pseudomedieval idylls, visions of barbaric splendour and cruelty. Thus in some cases, the Oriental representation can be associated with Piranesi's prisons, in other with Tiepolo's luxurious ambiances, in still others with the exotic sublimity of late eighteenth-century paintings.²⁰

It seems that the major factor of disjunction between geographical and cultural division between East and West is historical. If the contemporary geographical and cultural division can be clearly elaborated, the two parameters mingle in the imagination of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers and readers. The Romantic fashion for Orientalization often brought artists to apply Eastern characters to Western countries. As one of the most popular destinations of European travellers, Italy easily enters this cultural re-organization of the East. The fact that the East became extremely popular in the first half of the nineteenth century is confirmed by this letter written by Byron to Moore: 'Stick to the East- the oracle, Stael told me it was the only poetical policy. The North, South, and West, have all been exhausted'.²¹ The poetic commercialisation of the East may be one of the reasons for Byron's and other authors' orientalising of the Italian landscape and culture. However, this clash between the real

¹⁸ See for example: James Boon, 'An Endogamy of Poets and Vice Versa: Exotic Ideals in Romanticism', *Studies in Romanticism*, 18 (1989), 333-361.

¹⁹ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian, or the Confessional of the Black Penitents: a Romance*, ed. by Frederick Garber, with an introduction and notes by E.J. Clery (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xii.

²⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Press, 1995), p. 118.

²¹ *Byron's Letters and Journals*, vol. III, p. 101.

geographical position of Italy and its literary representation is undoubtedly a source of disorientation. Although I see the orientalist imaginary constructions of Italy as important, I thought this was a theoretical frame too ambiguous to apply to the interpretation of the use of Italy in British literature. The fact that this orientalization is not always applicable to Romantic writings about Italy will become clearer in the course of this work and it will be revealed that different, and more important, theoretical parameters apply to the fictional renderings of Italy. As a result, I have found it more useful and pertinent to ground my analysis on another important Romantic pseudo-dichotomy, a more ancient geographical and cultural construction: the opposition between North and South.

North and South

The division of Europe between North and South is an old one, which better applies to Italy, since it does not create any ambiguity. In the context of European geography, Italy is physically and culturally a southern country. The differentiation between northern and southern Europe was first elaborated by Tacitus in the second century AD and then re-elaborated by the French authors Montesquieu and Bonstetten.²² Following this mapping of Europe, a climatically cold, and active north is juxtaposed to a warm and indolent south. The dichotomy develops on several levels. If the initial formulation of this theory involved a distinction based principally on geography, culture and ethnic origins, it later developed to include religious, social and literary differences. The subject became particularly popular in the second decade of the eighteenth century. Numerous theoretical reflections on the subject were being published, including Goldsmith's *The Traveller* (1764) and *A Comparative View of Races and Nations* (1756). Later in the century, James Beattie's *Dissertations Moral and Critical*

²² Tacitus, *Germania* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999); Charles Montesquieu, *The Spirit of Laws* (London: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1990) and Bostetten 'L'homme du nord et l'homme du midi', in *Etudes de l'homme, or, Recherches sur les facultés de sentir et de penser* (Genève: Paschoud, 1821).

(1783) and Richard Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762) discussed cultural differences in terms of northern and southern societies. In 1777 Tacitus' *Germania* was translated into English, and in 1797 William Godwin published his essays 'On history and romance' and 'On the influence of climate'. The tendency to idealize a northern type of society over a southern is common to all these works. In them, northern Europe generally appears as a climatically cold and unwelcome land, but with an industrious and productive population, while the warmth and luxuriance of southern climates make their population indolent and passive. The early formulation of this dichotomy suggests an attitude of superiority of the northern race over the southern one which will be at the base, for example, of the use of Italy in Gothic literature. As Beattie's and Godsmith's works suggest, English authors seem to position their country and culture in a hegemonic relation to other European countries, and particularly to southern ones, in view of the physical strength and intellectual abilities of the population. From this point of view, the oppositional construction between north and south is similar to that of east and west, since it implies a superiority of one kind of population over the other. The hegemonic perspective, in fact, is not only typical of British attitudes towards colonial imperialism, it is important also in a European context. Significantly, Harriet Ritvo argues that nationalism, exoticism and imperialism are closely interrelated. The author suggests that imperialism names a historical process by which 'an other conceived as exotic is represented and subordinated' for the purpose of strengthening the idea of nation-state.²³ The author also explains how imperialism, in Edward Said's expression, is the expansion of nationality, while exoticism is the 'aestheticizing means by which this expansion is converted into spectacle, to culture in the service of empire'.²⁴ In this way, Italy, although not part of the East, can naturally enter a discourse of the exotic which can be applied to southern countries as well.

²³ Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo (eds.), *Macropolitics of Nineteenth-century Literature: Nationalism, Exoticism, Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 3.

This same dichotomy was later elaborated and re-structured in Madame de Stael's *On Literature* (1800), *Germany* (1810) and fictionalised in *Corinne* (1807). In *On Literature*, Stael argues how European literature, and consequently culture and society, can be divided into Northern and Southern. Although Stael re-proposes Montesquieu's theory of climatic differences as fundamental, she elaborates her own differentiation in terms of literature and culture. Following Stael's opinion, the division between north and south is at the origin of 'two completely different kinds of literature', southern and northern, 'the literature that comes from Homer, and the literature that starts with Ossian'.²⁵ By dating this difference in a pre-Christian era, Stael argues how inevitably this division had important cultural and social implications along the centuries. What is important about Stael's re-proposition of this dichotomy, however, is the fact that she does not suggest any superiority of one term over the other. In Stael's elaboration, the northern and southern states are nationally, culturally, climatically, socially and religiously distinctive, but none is superior to the other. This important levelling of an original imperialistic attitude emerges clearly in *Corinne, or Italy* and in all later literature that takes inspiration from this novel. Works published after 1807 show the influence of Stael's theorization and display a sensuous, appealing, fascinating and artistically stimulating Italy, a country very different from the one depicted, for example, in Gothic literature. As a matter of fact, *Corinne* represents a turning point in the figuration of Italy in all European literature. For women writers, however, the transition between Italy seen as an alien and subordinate country to the idea of Italy as a sensuous and appealing land is less abrupt. In order to have a full understanding of the use of Italy in British literature, in fact, we need to be aware of another important dichotomy which was intrinsically related to the North/South division, one that involves gender differentiation.

²⁴ Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo (eds.), *Macropolitics of Nineteenth-century Literature*, p. 3.

Feminine and Masculine

In his articulation of the division between North and South, James Beattie introduces another important dichotomy, which is at the base of the geographical and cultural mapping of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe: gender. In his *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, Beattie argues that the inhospitable climate of northern regions creates a 'hardy race of men'. By contrast, 'warm and fruitful countries generally produce effeminacy and indolence'.²⁶ Beattie justifies this gender division in terms of climatic differences. Since in northern regions nature is less fecund, men have to work hard in order to provide the necessities for survival, while in southern countries, nature provides spontaneously the substance for living, thus making men both mentally and physically languid. The association between bodily strength and masculinity, and indolence and femininity was a stereotype deeply assimilated in eighteenth-century culture and society. Following this idea, northern industrious and active countries are characterised as 'masculine', while southern, passive and indolent countries are characterised as 'effeminate'.

Stael's re-vision of this North/South dichotomy, strengthens its gender implications. In *Corinne*, she clearly articulates the idea that England, as representative of northern countries, communicates an idea of strength, decisiveness, unity, and therefore masculinity. By contrast, Italy suggests an idea of passivity, feebleness and fragmentation, clearly associated with femininity. More specifically, the novel's construction of Italy as a feminine country develops on various levels: the Italian political enslavement, the Catholic religion, the absence of a public sphere, along with the idea of a fecund and

²⁵ *Major Writings of Germaine de Stael*, translated with an Introduction by Vivian Folkenflik (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 174.

²⁶ James Beattie, 'On Fable and Romance', *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, 2 vols (Dublin, 1783); vol. I, p. 255.

sensuous nature clearly characterise the country as feminine.²⁷ Furthermore, by associating Corinne, the woman of genius, with Italy, Stael proposes the country as the ideal place for women writers. In *Corinne*, Stael idealises Italy as a liberal place for women, in contrast to the more rigorous northern reality. The transition of Italy from an effeminate to a feminine country is an important one for its representation in women writings. If before the publication of *Corinne*, the feminine condition of Italy was seen in a pejorative way, after 1807, Italy became for women an imaginary and ideal homeland. More specifically, Italy was seen as a place where an alternative life, morally free and artistically productive, was not only acceptable but even encouraged in women.

As James Buzard makes clear in reference to the nineteenth-century habit of mapping Europe on a grid of sexual difference:

Italy thus charted becomes a woman of incomparable physical charms and mysterious, imperfectly controlled poetic powers: all things Italian, including the indigenous population, exude this quality before the enamoured male spectator from the North.²⁸

An important aspect to consider in the gender characterisation of Italy, as Buzard suggests, is the fact that not only foreigners interpreted it as feminine, but Italians themselves would figure the country as feminine. Filicaja's eighteenth-century sonnet, for example, was one of the most read and translated poems by an Italian author in British Romanticism. The sonnet symbolically associates the country with a beautiful, passive and victimised woman:

Italia! Thou, by lavish nature grac'd
With ill- starr'd beauty, which to thee hath been
A fatal dowry, whose effects are trac'd
In the deep sorrows, graven on thy mien.
Oh! That more strength, or fewer charms were thine,

²⁷See also: Caroline Franklin, *Byron and Women Novelists* (Nottingham, 2001), p. 20.

²⁸James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature and the Ways to Culture, 1800-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 61.

That those might fear thee more, or love thee less,
Who seem to worship at thy Beauty's shrine,
Then leave thee to the death-pang's bitterness.
Not then would foreign herds have drain'd the tide,
Of that Eridanus, thy blood hath dyed,
Nor from the Alps would legions, still renew'd
Pour down; nor would'st thou wield an alien brand,
Nor fight thy battles with the stranger's hand,
Still doom'd to serve, subduing, or subdued.²⁹

The figuration of Italy that permeates British literature in the Romantic period is that of a powerless and enslaved female, too beautiful not to be the object of imperialistic desires. The construction of Italy as a feminised country is the main reason at the origin of my choice of focusing predominantly on women's writings. It is also true that other countries were feminised in the imaginary geography of Romanticism, especially southern countries, like Greece, but also politically enslaved countries, like Ireland.³⁰ However, the long-lasting literary trope of Italy as a woman-country, and its popularisation with the publication of *Corinne*, place the country into a special position in women writers' imaginary mapping of Europe.

Other important elements have to be taken into account in the analysis of the use of Italy in British literature. In particular, the evolution of the idea of Italy in women's writings follows the transformation and development of the concept of nationalism throughout the Romantic Age. Linda Colley and Benedict Anderson privilege the idea that British national identity was constructed in

²⁹ Vincenzo da' Filicaja, 'All' Italia'; Translated by Felicia Hemans, 'Patriotic Effusions of the Italian Poets', *Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany* 8 (June 1821), pp. 510-519. In the Italian version of the sonnet, Italy appears clearly as a beautiful feminised land: Italia Italia, o tu, cui feo la Sorte/ Dono infelice di bellezza, onde hai/ Funesta dote d'infiniti guai./ Che in fronte scritti per grand doglia porte/ Deh fossi tu men bella, o almen più forte./ Onde assai più ti paventasse, o assai/ t'amasse men chi del tuo bello a I rai/ Par, che si strugga, e pur ti sfida a morte!/ Che or giù dall'Alpi non vedrei torrenti/ Scender d'armati, né di sangue tinta/ Bever l'onda del Po' Gallici Armenti;/ Ne te vedrei del non tuo ferro cinta/ Pagnar col braccio di straniera genti/ Per servir sempre o vincitrice, o vinta; *Poesie Toscane* (Firenze, 1707).

³⁰ See, for example: Caroline Franklin, 'Haidée and Neuha: Byron's Heroines of the South', *The Byron Journal* 18 (1990), 37-49; John Buxton, 'Greece in the Imagination of Byron and Shelley', *The Byron Journal* 4 (1976), 76-89; Longford Elizabeth, *Byron's Greece* (London: Weidenfeld, 1975); C.L. Innes, *Woman and Nation in Irish Literature and Society* (London: Harvester, 1993).

terms of opposition to other nations.³¹ In particular, in the last decades of the eighteenth-century British national identity was conceived in terms of the country's anti-French politics and its anti-Catholic characterisation. The formulation of national identity in terms of opposition is clearly visible in the writings of women at the end of the eighteenth-century. However, what is also perceivable in women's writings is the effort to overcome strict and sometimes artificial national and cultural boundaries. This tendency, which is only discernable in the writings of women at the end of the eighteenth-century, becomes predominant after the popularisation of Stael's works. More specifically, Stael elaborates a new idea of nationalism, one that is not based on opposition but on positive confrontation between different national entities. Still respecting the distinctiveness and specificity of nations, Stael condemns any form of nationalism that wants to impose one's identity over another. In other words, while she emphasises national differences, Stael rejects any form of national imperialism.³² By celebrating the possibility of choosing 'une patrie de la pensée' over any imposed idea of national belonging, Stael promotes forms of interaction and cooperation between different national and cultural entities. This idea emerges clearly in *Corinne*, where the heroine freely chooses to identify with the maternal Italian national identity rather than the paternal English one. In the novel, instead of promulgating the idea of nationalism constructed in terms of opposition, Stael celebrates nationalism in terms of confrontation and interaction. This transition is clearly assimilated in British literature in the first half of the nineteenth century, when concepts such as cosmopolitanism and national hybridism appear dominant in the writing of the most famous authors.

When dealing with the construction of national identity, I have predominantly focused on British national identity and on the idea of Britishness.

³¹ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London: Macmillan Press, 1980); Benedict Anderson, *Imaginary Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

Only at times, when the analysis is specifically oriented towards England, I have referred to English society and English culture. This is not the result of inaccuracy, but of the understanding that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the image of Great Britain as a politically united and culturally homogenous nation became popular, especially in relation to foreign countries, and for imperialistic purposes. As Linda Colley has explained, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Britishness 'was superimposed over an array of internal differences in response to contact with the Other, and above all in response to conflicts with the Other'.³³ Since Italy was often approached as Other, I found it was more appropriate to relate it to British national identity instead of linking it to specific Scottish, Welsh or Irish identities, except when it is explicitly mentioned in the works themselves. Furthermore, Italy is generally approached as a southern feminine and exotic country by British authors, thus making internal distinctions irrelevant for the analysis. Besides in Montesquieu, Goldsmith and Stael's division of Europe, Great Britain stands as representative of northern cultures and traditions as a whole, in relation to Italy as representative of southern countries.³⁴

As Homi K. Bhabha argues, with nineteenth-century literature begins a process of negotiating the idea of nationness in a way that authorises cultural hybridities.³⁵ More generally, multiculturalism is an important aspect of any nation and culture in moments of historical transformation. Women were particularly responsive to this new formulation of national identity, and they often used Italy in order to promote cultural and national interactions. This is a fundamental aspect of my work. If the initial idea was to insert my analysis in

³² Madame de Stael, *Germany; Major Works of Germaine de Stael*, ed. by Vivial Folkenflik (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

³³ Linda Colley, *Britons*, p. 6.

³⁴ I am aware, however, that the difference between Welsh, Scottish, English and Irish literature is an important aspect of British Romanticism, especially in its distinction between Celtic and Anglo-Saxon historical heritage. Yet, for the purpose of my analysis, this internal distinction becomes of secondary importance.

³⁵ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 2.

the binary oppositions of North and South, feminine and masculine, it soon became clear that what is predominant in women writings about Italy in the Romantic age is not division and separation, but rather interaction and cooperation. The mingling of British and Italian elements appears as an experimentation in the construction of national identity which has important cultural, social and even political implications.

Raymond Williams and Edward Said have demonstrated how culture, as the sum of 'intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development', is hardly ever pure.³⁶ More often, as Said explains, cultural identity is not only heterogeneous, but also extraordinarily differentiated. This unmonolithic definition of culture acquires particular relevance for the narrative of emancipation. Interestingly, Said observes, 'narratives of emancipation and enlightenment in their strongest forms were also narratives of *integration* not separation, the stories of people who had been excluded from the main group but who were now fighting for a place in it'.³⁷ To assimilate Romantic women's writings with a literature of emancipation seems appropriate. Political and social criticisms on the Romantic Age have clearly demonstrated that women, however participating in the cultural construction of Britain, were nevertheless excluded from the political and social debate.³⁸ Furthermore, as Nira Yuval-Davis explains, women have always held an ambivalent position with the collectivity. On one hand, they are often taken as symbols of collective unity; on the other, they are excluded from the collective 'we' of the body politics. In this sense, women retain an object rather than subject position. More precisely, as Yuval-Davis comments, 'womanhood

³⁶ Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1983), p. 90; Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. xii.

³⁷ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. xxx.

³⁸ See, for example: Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984); Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff (eds.), *Family Fortunes: Men and Women in the English Middle Class 1750-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987); Jean Elstain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Oxford: Robertson, 1981).

has a property of otherness'.³⁹ This marginalisation positions women historically as part of the 'minorities' that Said connects with a literature of emancipation.

With reference to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, Said explains how Romantic culture was far from being unitary and monolithic, or even autonomous. Most often cultures in general, and British imperialistic culture in particular, assume more 'foreign' elements, alterities, differences, than they consciously exclude.⁴⁰ From a similar perspective, Bhabha stresses how the liminal space in-between the designation of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs national and cultural differences.⁴¹ From this perspective, as Said explains, it is essential to stress the role of comparative studies in the panorama of contemporary criticism. The purpose of comparative literature is that of moving beyond insularity and provincialism and of seeing several cultures and literatures together, contrapuntually, so as to get a perspective beyond one's own nation and to see some sort of whole instead of the 'defensive little path offered by one's own culture, literature and history'.⁴² This thesis is not a work of comparative literature. My main concern has been to analyse the role of Italy and its culture in the construction of British Romanticism. Only at points the analysis acquires a comparative nature, especially when I turn to focus on Italian literary influence on women's writings. However, what has clearly emerged in the course of the analysis is that many of the texts I have examined are actually works of comparative literature themselves. The assimilation and adaptation of Italian elements to British literature, in fact, has a strong comparative connotation. Only through confrontation can foreign elements be assimilated into the mainstream literature and culture.

³⁹ Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage, 1997), p. 47.

⁴⁰ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 15.

⁴¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 4.

⁴² Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 49.

From a historical point of view, I have divided my analysis in pre- and post- Napoleonic imperialism, and pre- and post- *Corinne* in terms of literary history. Although the political condition of Italy does not evolve considerably in the course of the Romantic Age, the advent of the Napoleonic era has important consequences on British literature and, consequently, on its use of Italy. More precisely, Napoleon was the most threatening enemy of Britain; at the same time he was the tyrant who had enslaved Italy and reduced it to a French province. Thus, Italy becomes the terrain of the anti-Napoleonic campaign which dominates European culture in the first decade of the nineteenth-century. The division between a pre and post- *Corinne* figuration of Italy is important to show how erroneously Stael's novel is taken as the starting point of British interest in Italy. As the thesis will clarify, *Corinne* is actually the culmination of a Romantic interest in Italy that had started earlier, and specifically during the last decades of the eighteenth-century. The idea of Italy as an 'other' country that offers alternative experiences and unknown possibilities for British women, was intrinsic in many eighteenth-century works. In this way, *Corinne* is the result of a spontaneous evolution of an interest which was already an important part of pre-Stael and pre-Byronic literary productions.

The selection of authors and topics has been carefully meditated. As I mentioned earlier, the intention to focus principally on women's writings derives from the gender characterisation of Italy as a feminine country. Thus, the analysis inevitably centres on gender as well as cultural and literary interactions. In particular, the thesis demonstrates how women writers exploit the feminisation of Italy with the intention of strengthening their own literary authority and artistic subjectivity. Sandra Gilbert was the first to suggest a connection between the emergence of Italy as a feminine national entity with the consolidation of women writers' subjectivity in nineteenth-century Britain. In particular, as the author comments, English-speaking poets and novelists read 'the sunny, ruin-haunted Italian landscape and culture as a symbolic text, a

hieroglyph, or, perhaps, more accurately, a palimpsest of Western history'.⁴³ Hence, the transformation of Italy from a 'problematic country' in Europe, to the 'problem condition of femaleness'. In other words, Italy was progressively seen as an 'utopian motherland', where national and sexual differences seem to be annihilated.⁴⁴

The authors I have selected are among those whose use of Italy is consistent throughout their literary productions. At points, I have included authors who do not make an extensive use of Italy in their works but who have given a fundamental contribution to a certain topic. The topics I have selected are the most important for the delineation of a substantial analysis of the use of Italy in British literature. Most of the topics selected are important components of our current understanding of Romanticism; however the importance of Italy has rarely been taken into consideration. The first chapter focuses on women's travel literature between 1770 and 1830, and aims to give an idea as complete as possible of how Italy was addressed and represented in the writings of women. This real encounter with the country is fundamental for any subsequent imaginary renderings of it in other literary genres. The second chapter focuses on the use of Italy in Gothic literature. More specifically, I argue how the imaginary figuration of the country in women's novels is an important contribution to the Romantic discourse of nationalism and women's re-visionary approach to it. The third chapter focuses on the works of the Della Cruscans, with particular attention to their re-vision of the Petrarchan tradition. The Della Cruscan group started their literary career in Italy and the Italian poetic tradition influences much of their production. Through the link between the Della Cruscans and Petrarch the chapter expands to the analysis of the use of the Petrarchan tradition in the 'sonnet's revival' at the end of the eighteenth century, with particularly attention to women's poetry. From the analysis it will become

⁴³ Sandra M. Gilbert, 'From *Patria* to *Matria*: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento', *PMLA* 99 (1984), 194-209, (p. 195).

clear how the use of Italy in women's novels and poetry anticipates the role of Italy in Stael's *Corinne*. The fourth chapter centres on the reception of Stael's novel in British literature. In particular, I tend to stress the continuity between the precedent literary tradition with the story of *Corinne*. The migration of the character of the Italian improvisatrice into British soil generates different responses, all very important in the delineation of the subsequent use of Italy in British literature. Finally, the last chapter analyses the intellectual and ideological participation of women writers in the Italian Risorgimento. With *Corinne*, Stael had suggested an identification between the condition of the woman artist and that of the political situation of Italy. This identification reaches its apex with the Italian struggle for independence. Symbolically, women's writings about Italy acquire a specific patriotic tone that demonstrates how in the Italian fight for freedom women saw their own struggle for social and political consideration.

The work is mainly a product of literary history. I thought it was necessary to give pre-eminence to the importance of the literary context in the discussion of the role of Italy in British literature. The topics selected are all deeply linked to the social, cultural and political situation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. Therefore, I have found that anchoring the analysis to its historical context was of primary importance in order to give the reader a full view of the so called 'Italianate fashion'. However, I have included some literary theory when I felt that it was useful and necessary to articulate a deeper analysis of the texts, and to ground it to the contemporary theoretical discourse.

Contemporary criticisms on British literature have rarely approached the importance of Italy in Romanticism. The topic was first introduced and explored by Charles Brand, Kenneth Churchill, and Roderick Marshall, whose works have provided an important bibliographical support. The idea of an Italianate fashion

⁴⁴ Sandra M. Gilbert, 'From *Patria* to *Matria*', pp. 196, 198.

was then developed by Marilyn Butler's 'The cult of the south'.⁴⁵ Few contributions have appeared on the relation between individual authors and Italy, most famously Peter Vassallo's *Byron: the Italian Literary Influence* (1984), but also Edoardo Zuccato's *Coleridge and Italy* (1996) and Andrew Thompson's *George Eliot and Italy* (1998).⁴⁶ Nanora Sweet's work on Hemans and her relation to the Mediterranean countries is also an important contribution to the subject, along with Diego Saglia's works on the figuration of Spain in British Romanticism.⁴⁷ These are important contributions to the more general analysis of the role of the South in British literature. My thesis, however, focuses specifically on the use of Italy by British authors with special attention to women's writings, and it represents an innovative contribution to our current understanding of Romanticism, especially in its relation to and appropriation of other European cultures and literary traditions. In particular, it helps to see British Romanticism as a culturally and literary hybrid movement. Some works that link Italy with the topics selected for this thesis have also been published, particularly on Stael and Elizabeth Barrett Browning.⁴⁸ However, what all these works omit to do is to see a link between the presence of Italy in different genres and topics in Romantic literature.

This work is also an important contribution to scholarship on women writers. More specifically, by inserting the analysis of women's writings in a cosmopolitan dimension, I demonstrate women's fascination and engagement with international issues. At the same time, this thesis reveals how women perpetrate a literary dialogue with the Other which, although common to other

⁴⁵ Marilyn Butler, 'The Cult of the South', in *Romantic, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 113-137.

⁴⁶ Peter Vassallo, *Byron: the Italian Literary Influence* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984); Edoardo Zuccato, *Coleridge and Italy* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996); Andrew Thompson, *George Eliot and Italy: Literary, Cultural and Political Influences from Dante to the Risorgimento* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998).

⁴⁷ Nanora Sweet, 'The bowl of Liberty: Felicia Hemans and the Romantic Mediterranean' (University of Michigan, unpubl. Dissertation, 1994); Diego Saglia, *Poetic Castles in Spain: British Romanticism and Figuration of Iberia* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), *Byron and Spain: Itinerary in the Writing of Place* (New York: Mellen, 1996).

Romantic authors, is also distinctively feminine in its use and elaboration of Otherness. Furthermore, I take into critical analysis writers and works previously overlooked or marginalized in our current view on Romantic literature. These works, however, become of central importance in the analysis of the use of Italy in British literature. Similarly, I investigate well-known texts from a different historical and cultural perspective, thus adding new facets to their interpretation. Finally, this thesis highlights how the use of Italy is a fundamental aspect of British Romanticism, and how the obsessive presence of Italian subjects and settings in the works of women writers shows the importance of literary and cultural interactions in the Romantic Age. At the same time, it aims to enlarge and re-define the geographical, cultural and literary boundaries of British Romanticism.

⁴⁸ See individual chapters for full bibliographical information. These works are discussed in details throughout the dissertation.

Danger and Delight: Women Writing the Italian Landscape.

1.1 Feminising the Italian Landscape.

Italia! Oh Italia! Thou who hast
The fatal gift of beauty [...]
Oh, God! That thou wert
in thy nakedness
Less lovely or more powerful.¹

Byron's translation and incorporation of Filicaja's sonnet in Canto IV of *Childe Harold*, is emblematic of the eighteenth- and nineteenth- century attitude towards the country that the same poet defines as 'the garden of the world'.² The origin of the intellectual, political, and cultural interest that Romanticism shows in the multiplicity of the Italian reality largely lies in the aesthetic beauty of the land. This clearly appears in the writings of many poets and novelists of the time, and especially in the accounts of travellers. The travel writer Selina Martin, for instance, who spent three years in Italy as companion to her sister from 1819 to 1822, clearly understood, during her residence, that the Italian scenery was so captivating and so fascinating to English visitors as to be the first, if not the only, source of attachment to the country:

There is, I must allow, something so fascinating in the pleasures which all travellers find in this country more particularly, in the contemplation of its exquisite scenery, and its classical ruins, and in the freedom which they enjoy from many of the restraints of their own country, that I can hardly wonder that some, who have not thought enough of their duties at home, or of the dangers abroad, are induced to take up their abode here, though, at first, they merely intended to make a tour [...] but it too frequently happens, that a stay begun with this view, is continued till the

¹ Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), vol. II: *Childe Harold*, Canto IV, stanza XLII. For a description of the Italian life and literary production of Lord Byron, see: Peter Quennel, *Byron in Italy* (London: Collis, 1941); Peter Vassallo, *Byron: the Italian Literary Influence* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984); Caroline Franklin, *Byron: a Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 2000).

² Lord Byron, *Childe Harold*, Canto IV, stanza XXVI.

whole family acquire the habits, tastes, feelings, and principles of[...]Italy; or till matrimonial connections with foreigners (perish the thought) further widen the separation from their English homes.³

What is evident from Martin's considerations is that the very first reason which induces English people to travel to Italy is a strong attraction to its landscape. The 'exquisite scenery', decorated with ancient ruins, the warm climate, and the enjoyments of physical and cultural freedom can be considered as triggers which initiate an extra-ordinary experience. The risk, as the passage suggests, is that English travellers find themselves trapped in such a reality. As a consequence, what was first intended to be a short visit, in the form of a more or less conventional Grand Tour, could involve a permanent change for many visitors.⁴ Martin considers this destabilising experience as a danger for the integrity of English culture. In the worst of cases, the author observes, a journey to Italy could instigate English travellers to forget their own origins and customs, and to mingle with Italians, thus contaminating the purity of English society. This chapter will demonstrate how the effect of the destabilising experience of travelling to Italy is often the source of a social and cultural confrontation between the country of destination and the country of origin. As I will progressively demonstrate, women travellers tend to see Italy as a more intellectually and physically stimulating country than the domestic reality of England.

Before analysing the role of Italy in women's travel literature, it is important to stress that, since the seventeenth-century, Italy had traditionally been regarded as a feminised country. The feminisation of Italy was rooted in

³ Selina Martin, *Narrative of a Three Years' Residence in Italy 1819-1822 with illustrations of the present state of religion in that country* (London, 1828), p. 24.

⁴On this subject see, for example: Jeremy Black, *Italy and the Grand Tour* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003); James Buzard (ed.), *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature and the Ways of Culture 1800-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Edward Chaney, *The Evolution of the Grand Tour: Anglo-Italian Relations since the Renaissance* (London: Cass, 1998); Hornsby Clare (ed.), *The Impact of Italy: the Grand Tour and Beyond* (London: British School at Rome, 2000); Ian Littlewood, *Sultry Climates: Travel and Sex Since the Grand Tour* (London: John Murray, 2001), and John Pemble, *The Mediterranean Passions: Victorians and Edwardian in the South* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

the physical characterisation of the country as a beautiful and fecund land. Italy's 'fatal gift of beauty' is a clear sign of femininity in the Romantic aesthetic discourse, while its 'nakedness' hints at an idea of fragility and vulnerability.⁵ In Stanza XLII of Canto IV of *Childe Harold* quoted as epigraph to this chapter, Byron suggests that Italy should be less lovely in order not to be the object of imperialistic desire or, alternatively, more powerful. The idea of Italy that emerges from one of the most significant and famous works of Romanticism is that of a beautiful female entity, lovely naked, and defenceless.

The idea of Italy as a feminised, beautiful and passive land appears in numerous accounts, from seventeenth-century Grand Tourists to modern travellers.⁶ Already in 1617, for example, the travel writer Moryson Fynes addressed Italy in gendered terms:

Italy worthily called the Queene of Nations, can never be sufficiently praised, being most happy in the sweete of Ayre, the most fruitfull and pleasant fields, warme and sunny hills, hurtlesse thickets shadowing groves, Havens of the Sea, watering brookes, baths, wine, and oyle for delight, and most safe forts or defences as well of the Sea as of the Alpes. Neither is any part of Europe more inhabited, more adorned with Cities and Castles, or to be compared thereunto for tillage and husbandry.⁷

The passage describes Italy as the most beautiful of European countries, a 'queene of nations', whose natural beauties surpass any other country that the author had visited. A similar view emerges in Lassels' *Voyage of Italy* (1670). In it the author not only defines Italy as 'the *Eldest Sister* of all other countryes', but indulges in a detailed description of the abundance of 'Sun and Heaven'. The

⁵Following Edmund Burke's *Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, a beautiful object inevitably produces a feeling of love, sometimes of desire, in the observer. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by J.T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 91.

⁶For an extensive treatment of the classical practice of the Grand Tour, see: Christopher Herbert, *The Grand Tour* (London: Collins, 1987); Andrew Wilton, *The Grand Tour: the Lure of Italy in the Eighteenth century* (London: Tale Gallery Publishing, 1996) and Jeremy Black, *The British Abroad: the Grand Tour in Eighteenth Century* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 2003).

⁷Moryson Fynes, *An Itinerary, Containing his Ten Yeers Travell through the Twelve Dominions of Germany, Bohmerland, Switzerland, Netherland, Denmarke, Poland, Italy, Turkey, France, England, Scotland, and Ireland*, 3 vols. (London, 1617) vol. III, p. 105.

initial allegory of an indulgent Mother Nature is carried out through a series of permutations that figure Italy as human body, clearly female:

[...]The other parts of *Italy* are sweating out whole *Forests of Olive-trees*, whole woods of *Lemmons*, and *Oranges*, whole fields of *Rice*, *Turkey wheat*, and *Muskmillons*, and those Bare Hills, which seem to be shaven by the Sun and cursed by Nature for their barrenness, are oftentimes great with child of pretious *Marbles*[...]⁸

In this passage, the physicality of Italy appears in all its complexity. The land is rich and bare at the same time, while the focus on southern and exotic products reinforces the idea of Italy as 'otherness', a different and unfamiliar country. Most importantly, by depicting Italy as a woman carrying a child, Lessels overtly associates the country with femininity. In 1822, in his poem *Italy*, Samuel Rogers still addresses the country in the same terms as did Filicaja: "Oh Italy, how beautiful thou art!/[...]Thine was a dangerous gift, when thou wast born, the gift of Beauty".⁹ The feminisation of the Italian landscape was one of the most important sources of attraction for travellers.

The figuration of Italy as feminine acquires an important significance also in the characterisation of the relationship between traveller and land. Not only in the sense, as already discussed, that Italy was seen as a feminised country, but also in the creation of a correlation that implies a masculine gaze looking on a feminine land. Hester Piozzi clearly explains how the relation between visitor and land has an important gender relevance. The author, travelling in the company of her Italian husband, is fully aware that the bond that links traveller and land is not only a temporary one, since it usually lasts just for the short period of a visit, but is also an opportunistic one, as it implies an exploitation of natural beauty

⁸ Richard Lassels, *The Voyage of Italy*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1670), vol. I, pp. 2-3.

⁹ Samuel Rogers, *Italy: a Poem* (London: T. Cadell, Strand 1830), p. 41. Rogers' *Italy* became an important text of reference for later Romantic travellers to Italy. Mary Shelley dedicated her *Rambles in Germany and Italy* to him in 1843. For the importance of Samuel Rogers to Romantic poetry, see: Peter T. Murphy, 'Climbing Parnassus and Falling Off', in *At the Limits of Romanticism: Essays in Cultural, Feminist, and Materialistic Criticism*, ed. by Mary Favret and Nicola Watson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 41-58.

that would later be abandoned and forgotten. Piozzi describes this relationship in terms of sexual exploitation:

Others there are, who, being accustomed to live a considerable time in places where they have not the smallest intention to fix for ever, but on the contrary firmly resolve to leave sometime, learn to treat the world as a man treats his mistress, whom he likes well enough, but has no design to marry, and of course never provides for.¹⁰

The metaphor that Piozzi suggests is important in shaping the traveller's approach to Italy.¹¹ The image clearly positions the travelled land in subordination to the traveller. Most importantly, it strengthens not only the female gender of the land, but also the masculine gaze of the traveller. The dominant view since the Grand Tour and throughout the Romantic Age was that of a male visitor who enjoys and exploits the beauty of a feminised country.¹²

The master-mistress relationship between visitor and land is part of a more general aesthetic discourse. The eighteenth-century concern for aesthetic issues led to the formulation of the categories of the picturesque, the sublime and the beautiful. The interconnection between gender and aesthetic discourse is also important in the analysis of the travellers' approach to Italy. The Italian landscape was patently the embodiment of the aesthetic categories that were being discussed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A trip to Italy involved the possibility of viewing in first person picturesque, beautiful or sublime scenes. Scenic tourism was one of the reasons which brought so many British visitors to Italy in the Enlightenment and in the Romantic period. Starting from the Alps and travelling south to Naples, the standard itinerary of the Grand Tour offered the opportunity to come into contact with real views, the same that were illustrated in the fashionable paintings of Salvator Rosa and Claude

¹⁰ Hester Lynch Piozzi, *Observations and Reflections Made in the Course of a Journey through France, Italy, and Germany* 2 vols. (London, 1789), vol. II, p. 387.

¹¹ See, for example: Jane Robinson, 'With Foreigner Alone: Some British Women Travellers in Italy during the Fifteenth to Nineteenth Centuries', *Annali di Italianistica* 14 (1996), 182-192.

¹² Piozzi is referring specifically to Italy in this passage. The metaphor can be true for other countries. However, the feminisation of the Italian landscape, clearly strengthens this metaphorical construction.

Lorrain.¹³ Particularly, it gave a young gentleman the chance to verify his ability to read the landscape, following the aesthetic categories he had learnt as part of his education. In fact, one of the aims of the Grand Tour was, according to an aristocratic ideal, to form better Englishmen and to complete the education of young noblemen. However, as Elizabeth Bohls and Jacqueline Labbe have demonstrated, the aesthetic discourse that was being tested on the Italian landscape, was clearly gender-oriented, since in it the dominant point of view was masculine.¹⁴ Gilpin and Price's treatises on the aesthetic of the picturesque are constructed on the assumption that a male gaze is looking at a female land, which needs interpretation in order to display its most captivating sides. The same could be said of Burke and Kant's theorisation of the sublime and the beautiful in nature.¹⁵ As James Buzard observes, 'the aesthetic discourse was precisely calibrated in terms of class and gender and privileged the perspective of the enlightened rambler'.¹⁶ This class-gender privilege is clearly constructed on the basis of aristocratic male prerogatives. The picturesque practice of scenic tourism, for example, involved an action of correcting nature and deleting disruptive details thanks to the use of a Claude glass.¹⁷ This ability to manipulate and improve the land aesthetically was directly connected to the position the young gentleman would later occupy in society, that of a land owner. Keeping in

¹³ For an extensive treatment of the subject, see Elizabeth Manwaring Wheeler, *Italian Landscape in Eighteenth-century England: a Study Chiefly of the Influence of Claude Lorrain and Salvator Rosa on English Taste 1700-1800* (London: Cass, 1965); Jane Appleton, *The Experience of the Landscape* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1975); Bourassa Steven, *The Aesthetics of Landscape* (London: Belhaven Press, 1991).

¹⁴ Elizabeth Bohls, *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716-1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jacqueline Labbe, *Romantic Visualities: Landscape, Gender and Romanticism* (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 1998). See also: Angela Jones, 'More Than Pedestrian: Women Travelers, Self-Representation, and English Romantic Tourism' (University of Rochester: Unpublished Dissertation, 1996).

¹⁵ William Gilpin, *Three Essays: on the Picturesque Beauty, on Picturesque Travel, and on Sketching Landscape: to Which is Added a Poem, on Landscape Painting* (London: P. Blamire, 1794); Uvedale Price, *Essays on the Picturesque, as Compared with the Sublime and the Beautiful, and on the Use of Studying Pictures, for the Purpose of Improving Real Landscape*, 3 vols. (Farnborough: Gregg International, 1971); Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, trans. by John T. Goldthwait (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960).

¹⁶ James Buzard, *The Beaten Track*, p. 194.

¹⁷ Gilpin suggests the use of a Claude glass in his essay on the picturesque. This was specifically aimed to improve the view of nature and to make it the most similar to a picture as possible.

mind the views and the beautiful scenes he had encountered in Italy, he could then be able to improve his own piece of land.¹⁸ In this way, the practice of scenic tourism is directly linked with ownership, then with masculinity. Landscape appreciation, thus, trickled down to those who lacked the enormous resources to create their own private scenic preserves, especially women.

The fact that a male authoritative voice dominated the aesthetic discourse does not necessarily imply that women were excluded from it. On the contrary, as my analysis of women's response to the Italian landscape will demonstrate, women were partly involved in shaping the Romantic aesthetic discourse.¹⁹ As Bohls suggests, 'to the extent that sensibility encompassed the aesthetic capacities of taste, delicacy, and refinement, the aesthetic thus took on an ambiguously feminine gender'.²⁰ Moreover, aristocratic and middle-class women were at least entitled by their class, if not by their gender, to be confident with aesthetic theories. Their membership in Britain's polite classes, as Bohls comments, apparently entitles them to speak as aesthetic subjects, yet their feminine gender excludes them from a discourse which is overtly dominated by a masculine point of view.²¹ This ambiguity of inclusion and exclusion brought women writers to rely on the -masculine- language of aesthetic discourse in their travel descriptions. It is not surprising that Mariana Starke, author in 1794 of one of the first and most important guides to Italy, draws on a 'set' terminology when describing the Alpine scenery as 'awfully magnificent', and the mountains near Lucca as 'romantically picturesque'.²² Women travellers

¹⁸ Bohls observes how scenic tourists imaginatively recreated landscape by viewing, sketching, and describing it according to models derived from paintings, *Women Travel Writers*, p. 82.

¹⁹ See also: William Sydney, 'Mother Nature's Other Natures: Landscape in Women Writing 1770-1830', *Women's Studies: an Interdisciplinary Journal* 21:2 (1992), 143-162; Karen Lawrence, *Penelope Voyages: Women and Travel in the British Literary Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). The only aesthetic treatise attributable to a woman was the 1815 *Theory and Classification of Beauty and Deformity*, by Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck (London, 1815).

²⁰ Elizabeth Bohls, *Women Travel Writers*, p. 81.

²¹ Elizabeth Bohls, *Women Travel Writers*, pp. 18-19.

²² Mariana Starke, *Travels in Italy between the Years 1792 and 1798*, 3 vols. (London, 1802), vol. 1, pp. 4, 246. For a critical investigation of Starke's travel literature see: Jeanne Moskal, 'Napoleon, Nationalism, and the Politics of Religion in Mariana Starke's *Letters from Italy*', in *Rebellious Hearts: British Women Writers and the French Revolution*, ed. by Adriana Craciun and Kari Lokke

continued to rely on this language for their commentaries throughout the Romantic period. Selina Martin, travelling in 1819, called the view from the top of Vesuvius 'sublime' and the hill-top town of Orvieto 'picturesque';²³ Catherine Taylor described the 'picturesque' desolation near Rome, and 'truly romantic' scenery at Salerno;²⁴ and Anna Jameson declared that, if she had not visited Italy, she would never have actually understood the meaning of the word picturesque.²⁵ In spite of this conventionality in the use of aesthetic language, however, women's approach to the Italian landscape is distinctive in the range of emotions and reactions that they describe.

1.2 Women's approach to the Italian landscape.

As the previous section has demonstrated, 'Italy is, as most nineteenth-century writing seems to have agreed, a woman', and the subject of the travel and aesthetic discourse is conventionally masculine. As a result, women could only partially employ the male-eroticised and gendered approach to Italy.²⁶ In cases where the subject of the discourse is a female writer, the relationship between traveller and land is constructed on the same gender level, since the subject of discourse is female as is the object of interest. Consequently, the approach cannot be formulated according to Piozzi's model: the visitor is no more a master and the land no more a mistress. This difference demands the construction of another kind of relationship built upon the encounter between a female traveller and a feminine environment. In particular, the binary opposition between otherness and familiarity, implicit in any discourse of travel literature, is

(New York: State University of New York Press, 2001), pp. 161-190; Jeanne Moskal, 'Politics of Occupation of a Nurse in Mariana Starke's *Letters from Italy*', in *Romantic Geography: Discourses of Travel 1775-1844*, ed. by Amanda Gilroy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 150-164.

²³ Selina Martin, *Narrative of a Three Years' Residence in Italy*, pp. 92, 204.

²⁴ Catherine Taylor, *Letters from Italy to a Younger Sister* (London, 1840), pp. 82, 95-96.

²⁵ Anna Jameson, *Diary of an Enuyée* (London, 1826), p. 331.

altered in regard to Italy. What is 'otherness' for the male traveller, is more familiar for the female visitor.²⁷ If the gentleman coming to Italy is initially destabilised, and then enchanted by the luxuriant and beautiful Italian nature, the female traveller undergoes a different process. As the following sections will demonstrate, after an initial moment of destabilisation, women travellers find the Italian environment both physically and mentally stimulating, and Italy a place where they can express themselves more freely than in the English environment.²⁸

The initial reaction to the encounter with the Italian landscape is generally one of surprise and excitement. Frances Trollope's exclamation at the approach of the Savoy Alps on her way to Turin, 'Italy to be now seen for the first time, after a life passed in longings to look at her',²⁹ echoes Mary Shelley's comment at her return to Italy after years of distance and sorrowful experiences, 'the name of Italy has magic in its very syllables [...] every [Italian] name we hear satisfies some desire and awakens some cherished association'.³⁰ Such passionate excitement and heightened expectations are the keynotes of women travellers' response to Italy. As Shirley Foster remarks, 'Italy spoke to [women's] emotions and claimed their involvement in a much more deeply personal way'.³¹ This is epitomised in the account of one of the first women travellers who ventured to reach Italy: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. After spending some years in Turkey as the wife of the British Ambassador, at forty-

²⁶ In James Buzard, *The Beaten Track*, p. 134.

²⁷ See, for example: Saree Makdisi, *Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Marie Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturalisation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

²⁸ For the liberating effect of travel for women, see: Leo Hamalian (ed.), *Ladies on the Loose: Women Travellers of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1981); M. Davies and N. Jansz (eds.), *Women Travel: Adventures, Advice and Experience* (London: Harrap, 1990).

²⁹ Frances Trollope, *A Visit to Italy* (London, 1842), p. 7.

³⁰ Mary Shelley, *Rambles in Germany and Italy in 1840, 1842, and 1843*, ed. by Jeanne Moskal (London: William Pickering, 1996), p. 76.

³¹ Shirley Foster, *Across New Worlds: nineteenth-century women travellers and their writings* (London: Harvester, Wheatsheaf, 1990), p. 29.

seven years of age, in 1739, she crossed Europe alone to meet and live with her younger Italian lover, Francesco Algarotti:³²

Here I am at the feet of the Alps, and tomorrow I take the step which is to lead me into Italy. I commend myself to you in all perils like Don Quixote to his Dulcinea, and I have an imagination no less heated than his. Nothing frightens me, nothing diverts me a moment; absorbed in my own thoughts, neither the fatigues of the road nor the pleasures offered me in the towns have distracted me for an instant from the sweet contemplation in which I am immersed.³³

The fact that her young lover deserted her very soon and moved into Germany did not prevent her from loving Italy to such a degree as to spend the rest of her life there. Montagu's passage clearly epitomises the feelings and emotions that accompanied the first women travellers who, in the eighteenth century, ventured alone as far as Italy. The experience appears as a sort of epic adventure in Quixotian terms. Interestingly, Montagu identifies with Don Quixote, the active male adventurer, not with the domestic Dulcinea. In her imagination, the journey to Italy is associated with the male epic adventure of a knight, rather than with the passive feminine role. This implies that her journey to Italy is an opportunity to liberate physical and imaginative energies, otherwise suffocated in the traditional patriarchal construction of eighteenth-century society. In Montagu's view, travelling alone to Italy involved an adventurous experience far beyond the traditional geographical and moral limits imposed on women. It seems that Italy was the land of adventure and imagination for female travellers.

The intention which motivated women in their journeys to Italy was different from that of traditional male Grand Tourists. In Anna Jameson's *Diary of an Ennuyée*, for example, the narrator explains the motive of her travel as soon as she reaches the Italian land: 'I am not come to spy the nakedness of the land, but to implore from her healing airs and lucid skies the health and peace I

³² Isobel Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³³ Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, *Selected Letters*, ed. by Isobel Grundy (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 249-250.

have lost, and to worship as a pilgrim at the tomb of her departed glories'.³⁴ Significantly, Jameson has no intention to scrutinise and vivisection a naked land, like Grand Tourists used to do, but to enjoy the country in a beneficial way, so as to recover physical and intellectual strength. In this way, the relationship between traveller and land appears on a more equal level, since it does not involve any exploitation of the land, but simply the will to capture its healing effects.³⁵

As Jameson suggests, however, women were not excluded from the enjoyment of artistic beauty and from being interested in historical sites. For them, as well as for men, the journey to Italy meant the possibility of seeing in reality the country they had constructed in the imagination, through the filter of other literary works and of paintings. Hence, Italy was a country somehow known before arrival. Travellers saw their visit as an opportunity to encounter directly the sights and artefacts already familiar to them, thus initiating a process of recognition and confrontation that is peculiar of travellers' accounts of Italy.³⁶ The mingling of imagination and reality is combined, in Shirley Foster's words, with 'the joy of realising youthful aspirations, of living an experience, which in many cases, had become an almost obsessive ambition'.³⁷ For Romantic women writers, as for their age as a whole, Italy was a place where the outward eye saw for the first time scenes and objects that had been familiar through life to the imagination. On a deeper level, Italy stood for the 'fulfilment of desire and the possibility of physical expansion beyond the confines of normal life and it promised release from the prosaic conditions of domesticity and the enjoyment

³⁴ Anna Jameson, *Diary of an Enuyée*, pp. 227-228. Although this work belongs to the genre of travel literature, the author uses a fictional narrator, the Enuyée, who records her travel.

³⁵ See: Rose Gillian, *Feminism and Geography: the Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

³⁶ The study of Roman history and of the Italian arts and architecture were an important part of aristocratic and upper-class education. Thus, Italy was somehow a country known before an actual visit took place.

³⁷ Shirley Foster, *Across New Worlds*, p. 30.

of an alternative reality which both permitted and encouraged self-gratification'.³⁸

The fact that Italy constitutes a sort of escapist reality emerges clearly in the accounts of women travellers. The countess Marguerite Blessington, for instance, who toured the country in the 1830s, describes the way in which in Italy:

The imagination soars into regions of its own; and memory, as if touched by the wand of an enchanter, opens its long-hoarded stores, and enjoys them anew on the spots identified with the scenes and facts it treasured.³⁹

The connection between memory, imagination and reality that the author suggests, seems to develop the awareness of another level of apprehension from the normal, rational one- a more visionary and spiritual world, where emotional and physical excitement intermingle. The fact that women were conventionally associated with a spiritual and emotional realm in contrast with a rationalised male dimension makes them more appropriate interpreters of the Italian landscape.⁴⁰ As I will demonstrate in the following section on the Romantic re-interpretation of the classical Grand Tour, imagination came to play a fundamental role in the modern mapping of Italy and its landscape. In particular, after the publication of Mme de Stael's *Corinne, or Italy* (1807), women became primary interpreters of the southern Italian environment.

³⁸ Shirley Foster, *Across New Worlds*, p. 30.

³⁹ Marguerite Countess of Blessington, *The Idler in Italy*, 3 vols. (London, 1839-1840), vol. III, p. 283.

⁴⁰ On this subject see: Elizabeth Fay, *A Feminist Introduction to Romanticism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998); Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1998); Larry H. Peer and Diana Long Hoeveler (eds.), *Comparative Romanticisms: Power, Gender and Subjectivity* (London: Camden House, 1998).

1.3 Re-visioning the Grand Tour.

Jeremy Black observes how the practice of the Grand Tour was predominantly aimed at the cultural and aesthetic formation of the future British ruling class, that is of a masculine aristocratic elite.⁴¹ However, as the previous section has demonstrated, women were dynamic partakers of the Grand Tour and often important contributors to the travel reports that derived from it. Although a predominantly upper class and masculine practice, the Grand Tour included the active participation of women since the early eighteenth century.⁴² For women, foreign soils often held the promise of freedom from the strict laws and customs of English society. For most eighteenth-century women, in fact, Europe was a fantasy, an 'imaginative geography', represented in paintings, narrated in books, described in letters.⁴³ Italy had always held an important position in this imaginative geography.

With the publication of Madame de Stael's *Corinne* (1807), Italy became even more patently the ideal destination for British women travellers. In the catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris, *Corinne* was classified as a travel guide till the end of the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ Though this constitutes a clear de-centring of its importance as a Romantic novel, it reminds us how Stael's work is also a travel guide, and how it was considered a work of travel literature for a long time. Byron carried *Corinne* with him on his first trip to Italy; similarly Anna Jameson structured her *Diary of an Enuyée* on Stael's novel, while Mary Shelley's emotional and intellectual description of the country visibly bears

⁴¹ Jeremy Black, *The British Abroad: the Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 2003), pp. v-vii. See also: Jeremy Black, *Italy and the Grand Tour* and Clare Hornsby (ed.), *The Impact of Italy: the Grand Tour and Beyond*.

⁴² Brian Dolan, *Ladies of the Grand Tour* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001).

⁴³ Brian Dolan, *Ladies of the Grand Tour*, pp. 17-18.

⁴⁴ For further information, see: Marie-Claire Vallois, 'Voice as Fossils: Germane de Stael's *Corinne, or Italy: an Archeology of Feminine Discourse*', in *The Novel's Seductions: Stael's Corinne in Critical Inquiry*, ed. by Karyna Szmurlo (London: Associate University Press, 1999), pp. 127-138.

the influence of Stael's work.⁴⁵ *Corinne* changed the way travellers, especially women, approached Italy. With *Corinne*, the process of aesthetic and cultural feminisation of Italy reached its apex. More precisely, as Jane Stabler remarks, after the publication of the novel, women travellers to Italy were aware of traversing a country which had been aesthetically created, even over-determined in their image.⁴⁶ In the imaginative geography of Europe, Italy became the feminine country par excellence, a place where women could escape from the narrow construction of English society.

As my analysis will clarify, the fact that Italy became an ideal destination for women travellers had important consequences on the construction of the Grand Tour as a typically masculine aristocratic practice. In particular, *Corinne* suggested a new approach to the Italian landscape, one that would not simply imply scenic tourism and erudition, but one that would involve an emotional and imaginative encounter with the country. In *Corinne*, imagination becomes the key for interpreting Italy. As a result, Italy acquires a double level of significance for tourists: a historical and aesthetic dimension and an imaginary and emotional characterisation. The first is the object of interest of the typical Grand Tourist, whose erudition, classical and aesthetic knowledge allow an intellectual reading of the Italian landscape; the second level of significance can be interpreted only through imagination. In this way, the masculine language of aesthetics that Grand Tourists typically employed, was turned into a more personal language of feelings and emotions that did not exclude women from its formulation.

Stael clearly associates the intellectual mapping of Italy with a northern masculine position, epitomised by Lord Nelvil and Count d'Eurfeuil in the novel, while she connects the imaginary approach with a southern feminine perspective, that of Corinne. When Corinne offers to act as a guide to Lord Nelvil in Rome, her intent is soon clear. Though, Corinne observes, with no doubt a

⁴⁵ *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie A. Marchand, 12 vols. (London: John Murray, 1978), vol. VII, p. 38. See the following sections for further details on Jameson and Shelley's travel works.

great number of scholars could easily be found in Rome, whose profound erudition might be of far more use to Lord Nervil, she is determined to make Nelvil not only appreciate the Roman ruins and architecture, but also to love the place that 'has always attracted [her] so imperiously'.⁴⁷ In order to be successful in this intent, Corinne needs to stimulate Nelvil's imagination and feelings. While showing to Nelvil the majestic architecture of Roman churches, Corinne directs his attention not to the mere physicality of monuments and works of art, but to the imaginative space between reality and feelings. In Saint Peter, for example, Corinne stresses the 'illusion' that its vastness generates; similarly, she diverts Nelvil's attention from the aesthetic appreciation of the Pantheon to the work of genius and imagination that created it.⁴⁸ By insisting on imagination, Corinne is promoting a revision of the traditional –masculine– Grand Tour. As she explains, the shift from erudition to imagination reveals a deeper level of significance:

I should have had you see our most beautiful buildings last, but that is not my method. I think you have to begin with the things that inspire deep and lively admiration if you want to develop sensitivity to the arts. Once experienced, this feeling reveals a new sphere of ideas, so to speak; the result is that you develop a greater ability to love and judge everything that recalls your first impression, even if it is of a lesser order. None of that going step by step, that cautious, delicately shaded way of preparing grand effects, is to my state.⁴⁹

Here Corinne is clearly re-visioning the traditional approach of the Grand Tourists and she is articulating a new emotional itinerary of Rome, one that stimulates the feelings of Nelvil, and finally makes him love the town and the country. In this way, Nelvil's appreciation of Rome is full and satisfactory: 'who ever felt the

⁴⁶ Jane Stabler, 'Figuring Disorder: Women Travellers in Italy', *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies* 6 (2001), 113 -126 (p. 118).

⁴⁷ Germaine de Stael, *Corinne, or Italy*, ed. and trans. by Avriel H. Goldberger (London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), p. 50.

⁴⁸ Germaine de Stael, *Corinne*, pp. 53, 55, 58.

⁴⁹ Germaine de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 57.

happiness I am tasting? Rome shown by you, Rome interpreted by imagination and genius'.⁵⁰

When the characters come to contemplate Roman ruins, Stael explains how the traditional intellectual reading of the Italian landscape is different from Corinne's. In particular, the rational and cold attitude of Count d'Erfeuil prevents him from a full appreciation of the site. He simply cannot see how people admire mere stones, when Europe is full of splendid and intact monuments:

I did my best to find something interesting in those ruins they make such a fuss over in Rome [...] but I do not see anything beautiful in all that. People are simply predisposed to admire those bramble-covered ruins [...] There is not one monument intact in Europe today that is more remarkable than those stumps of columns, those bas-reliefs darkened by time, that cannot be appreciated without scholarly erudition. A pleasure that costs so much study does not in itself seem so very keen to me.⁵¹

D'Erfeuil fails to perceive the richness of Roman ruins because his approach is based simply on erudition and intellect, typical of Grand Tourists. However, since he does not possess enough sensibility and enough knowledge of Roman history to appreciate the ruins, D'Erfeuil is blind to this spectacle. On the contrary, Lord Nelvil, thanks to Corinne, is able to use his imagination and to interpret these apparently insignificant ruins as signs of an ancient and prosperous civilisation. Corinne has taught Nelvil how to see ruins through a historical and emotional point of view:

Reading in history, the thoughts they provoke, do not act upon our souls like these scattered stones, these ruins interspersed with buildings. Eyes are all powerful over the soul: once you have seen Roman ruins, you believe in the ancient Romans as if you had lived among them. The mind acquires its memory through study; the imagination's memories are born of a more immediate and deep-seated impression that gives life to thought and makes us into a kind of witness to what we have learned.⁵²

⁵⁰ Germaine de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 56.

⁵¹ Germaine de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 91.

⁵² Germaine de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 64.

This shift from erudition to feeling has important consequences for women travellers. If women were traditionally excluded from the aesthetic and intellectual appreciation of the Italian landscape, since their education did not involve any historical or aesthetic knowledge, thanks to this imaginative approach, they can fully participate in the emotional appreciation of Italy. In this way, Corinne's revision of the traditional itinerary of the Grand Tour transfers women from a marginal to a central position in the mapping of the Italian landscape. If Italy speaks primarily to the heart, then women become privileged interpreters of the country. Even more importantly, the novel seems to suggest that the northern rational male visitor is not fully able to appreciate the Italian environment, if not under the help of a female, and in this case Italian, chaperon. Corinne is not only showing Nelvil the monuments and natural beauties of Italy, but she is actually interpreting the landscape for him. In other words, she is translating the southern feminine scenery for northern masculine travellers. As a consequence, women acquire the important role of interpreters of the imaginary world that lies beneath ruins and natural scenery. In *Corinne*, Stael proposes a feminine version of the classical Grand Tour, one in which women's significance is central to the interpretation of the Italian landscape.

This revisionist approach to the Grand Tour was already visible in travel reports by women at the end of the eighteenth century. However, it was only in 1815 with the peace of Amiens, that Italy became again a fashionable and easily reachable destination, and that women's travel reports proliferated. Under the influence of *Corinne*, the approach to Italy became more emotional and sentimental, and travel reports bear the signs of Corinne's imaginative approach. This emotional encounter with Italy transforms the country from a place of historical importance and a destination for learned people, to a 'world of Dream', and an ideal destination for any traveller in need of escaping from the rationality

of northern society into the country of imagination and feelings.⁵³ In particular, the descriptions of the crossing of the Alps and the journey to the South reveal how women's mapping of Italy joined intellect and feelings, erudition and imagination.

1.4 Crossing the Alps

Chloe Chard observes how a new geographical approach was first discernible in travel writing at the very end of the eighteenth century. This approach involves the view that travel is a form of personal adventure, holding out the promise of a discovery or realization of the self through the exploration of the other. According to this view, 'travel entails crossing symbolic as well as geographical boundaries, and these transgressions of limits invite various forms of danger and destabilisation'.⁵⁴ This approach is particularly suitable for the crossing of the Alps. This mountainous chain represents in the imaginative geography of Romanticism a physical as well as symbolic frontier. During the eighteenth-century practice of the Grand Tour the apex of the journey to Italy lay in the antiquity and splendour of Rome, and the Alps were considered only as a physical obstacle to be overcome in order to proceed in the travel. With the shift of interest from a detached cultural and artistic concern for Italy to a Romantic approach to the country, which focused more on emotional responses, the crossing of the Alps became the most fascinating and exhilarating experience of the journey. More specifically, in the Romantic imagination the Alps became the most truly sublime place in Europe. The ascent and descent of these rocky and imperious mountains involved a certain physical danger, which was the first

⁵³ Lady Emmeline Stuart-Wortley refers to Italy as a 'world of Dream' in 'Impressions of Italy', *Queen Berengaria's Courtesy and Other Poems* (London, 1838), p. 18, line 17. Electronic edition: <http://www.chadwyck.co.uk>.

⁵⁴ Chloe Chard, *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour: Travel Writing and Imaginative Geography 1600-1830* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 11.

source of the experience of the sublime as described in Burke's *Enquiry*. The Alps were 'terrible' enough to excite 'the ideas of pain and danger', considered by Burke as a fundamental source of the sublime. At the same time, the security of the crossing, the possibility of following a directed path in the company of a guide, made the experience safe enough to be 'productive of the strongest emotion', and to awaken a feeling of delight in the traveller, both important components in Burke's formulation of the sublime.⁵⁵

Furthermore, in the imaginary panorama of Romantic literature, the climbing of the Alpine peaks symbolically represented the poetic quest to reach heroic power and to elevate the poet's mind to a sort of divine condition.⁵⁶ The Promethean quest for creative potentiality, typical of the male Romantic hero, is symbolically associated with the conquest of the Alps, and hence with the possibility of extending poetic dominion. One reason Romantic poets are so obsessed with climbing mountains is that the activity perfectly emblematises, in Marlon Ross' words, 'the poet's charge of self quest and world conquest'.⁵⁷ Thus, mountain climbing and viewing are ultimate sublime experiences. The enterprise was frequently associated with the classical episode of Hannibal's unsuccessful passage through the Alps with his army of elephants and horses, as in Roger's *Italy*, or with Napoleon's entrance into Italy, as in Canto III of *Childe Harold*, in which Byron clearly constructs a parallelism between the poet's quest for creative power and the conqueror's quest for world possession.⁵⁸ In both cases, the Alps constitute the obstacle to be overcome in order for the poet/conqueror to reach his goal. The crossing of the Alps, therefore, was symbolically associated with masculine conquest and enterprise. This connection tends to

⁵⁵ Burke Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 57.

⁵⁶ Marlon Ross, 'Romantic Quest and Conquest: Troping Masculine Power in the Crisis of Poetical Identity', in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. by Ann Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 26-51; see also: Jacqueline Labbe, *Romantic Visualities*.

⁵⁷ In Anne Mellor (ed.), *Romanticism and Feminism*, p. 44. See also: Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁵⁸ Turner's famous painting 'Snow Storm: Hannibal and his Army Crossing the Alps' (1812), illustrating Samuel Rogers' *Italy*, epitomises the Romantic interest in the Alps as a site of political as well as poetic conquest.

circumscribe the experience to a masculine domain of strength and power, thus excluding women from it.

However, in the accounts of women travellers, the Alps are always encountered with great expectations. For women, very often accustomed to the domestic reality of Britain, the crossing of the Alps involved an emotional as well as physical strain that proved their ability to meet a powerful obstacle, and at the same time to be able to overcome it successfully. A sense of happiness and physical well-being often accompany the approach to Italy and the sight of the Alps. Mary Shelley on her way to Italy remarks that 'when I see these majestic ranges, I always feel happier'.⁵⁹ Dorothy Wordsworth mentions a similar sense of delight in her *Tour on the Continent*: 'the most delightful day of travelling that [Mary] and I had ever spent, for we were crossing the Alps and on our way to Italy'.⁶⁰ Similarly, approaching the Alps by the Swiss side, Mary Wordsworth makes an interesting note of Dorothy's reaction at the first sight of a snowy mountain: 'about five or six miles from Zurich we first came in sight of the snowy mountains. I had been asleep and was now pondering at the appearance, when D. (who had beheld it for some time, but only at that instant had satisfied her own mind that what she saw were not clouds but the Alps), gave a scream that made us think that something had happened'.⁶¹ The same reaction is possibly recorded in Dorothy's own words when she describes 'a cluster of mountain masses, till then unseen, appeared suddenly before me, black, rugged, or covered with snow. I was indeed awe-struck; and, while I sate for some minutes, thought within myself, now indeed we are going among the terrors of the Alps'.⁶²

⁵⁹ Mary Shelley, *Rambles*, p. 137.

⁶⁰ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Journals* ed. by E. De Selincourt, 2 vols. (London, 1941) vol. II, p. 337. For a critical investigation of Dorothy Wordsworth's work, see: Helen Boden, 'Matrilinear Journalising: Mary and Dorothy Wordsworth's 1820 Continental Tours and the Female Sublime', *Women Writing* 5:3 (1998), 329-352; Susan Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1987).

⁶¹ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Journals*, vol. II p. 325.

⁶² Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere Journals*, ed. by Pamela Woolf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 184.

The ascent of the mountains usually begins in green vales and proceeds in thick forests, then ends on rocky and barren peaks. An anonymous humorous poem records in 1796 that the journey through the Alps was not at all free from hardship:

[...]So we stuffed in a vile charabanc
 Be-jerked from our top to our toe[...]
Such twistings and jerkings there were,
 Predetermined to heartily bump us,
Zig-zag, like a dog in a fair,
 To all the four points of the compass.⁶³

Although the perils of the crossing of the Simplon and Mount Cenis passes were mitigated by the construction of new roads during the Napoleonic occupation, the route continued to be physically treacherous especially in winter and certainly very uncomfortable. In spite of Lady Morgan's observation in 1821 that 'all that had been dangerous, difficulty, and suffering, but twenty years back, was now safe, facile, and enjoyable, secure beyond the reach of thought',⁶⁴ the ascent did not actually lose any of its fascination and its sense of danger, especially for women used to much less adventurous daily experiences. In her *Journals*, Dorothy Wordsworth often comments on the harshness of the ascent: 'the ascent from the beginning is exceedingly steep and without intermission to the very summit',⁶⁵ and later in the passage she notes how 'the ascent was very laborious'.⁶⁶ Yet, the ascent had a sort of healing effect on her health, since it helped invigorate her limbs unused to physical exercise. Although she felt 'sick and weary' before starting the ascent, 'the change was marvellous; for when I began to climb the mountains the full possession of health and even youthful vigour seemed to have returned, and never again did I suffer a moment from

⁶³ 'Eliza', 'Tour to the Glacier Savoy', in *Eighteenth Century Women Poets: an Oxford anthology*, ed. by Rogers Lonsdale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 496.

⁶⁴ Lady Morgan, *Italy*, 3 vols. (London: Henry Colburn and Co., 1821), vol. I, p. 37.

⁶⁵ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Grasmere Journals*, p. 210.

⁶⁶ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Grasmere Journals*, p. 218.

pain or weakness, hardly from fatigue'.⁶⁷ This sense of physical strength is actually common to many accounts by women writers and it gives the impression that women were not less eager to discover and explore the Alpine landscape than men.

However laborious the climbing might have been, the expectations of magnitude and surprise were never disappointed. The panorama that could be contemplated from above the mountains is always recorded as worth the danger and the fatigue of the ascent. Reactions range from awe, enchantment, attraction, fear and a sense of natural majesty. The experience held all the components of a true sublime enterprise: astonishment, infinity, obscurity, terror and a sense of vastness and magnificence.⁶⁸ After climbing for two hours, Dorothy Wordsworth records the slow process of the ascent as a succession of feelings of surprise and delight:

We beheld the mountains of Simplon- two brilliant shapes on a throne of cloud- *Mont Blanc* lifting his resplendent forehead above a vapoury sea- and the Monte Rosa a bright pyramid, how high up in the sky! The vision did not burst upon us suddenly; but was revealed by slow degrees, while we felt so satisfied and delighted with what lay distinctly outspread around us that we had hardly begun to look for objects less defined, in the far-distant horizon.⁶⁹

When the ascent is completed, the panorama is revealed in all its power and fascination: 'the scene was truly sublime [...] we sat upon the summit of a huge precipice of stone to the left of the road- the river raging below after having tumbled in a tremendous cataract down the crags'.⁷⁰ Dorothy Wordsworth's account of the climb is actually very different from her brother's description in Book IV of *The Prelude*, where he reveals that only after questioning a peasant and observing his reaction he and his companion understood 'hard of belief', that

⁶⁷ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Journals*, vol. II, p. 326.

⁶⁸ See Edmund Burke, *Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 'The sublime', pp. 57-87.

⁶⁹ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Grasmere Journals*, p. 211.

⁷⁰ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Grasmere Journals*, p. 259.

they 'had crossed the Alps'.⁷¹ Dorothy Wordsworth, unlike her brother, never records being disappointed by the Alpine scenery. This is due to the different way in which she approaches nature and to the different role imagination plays in the two authors' descriptions. As Susan Levin observes, Dorothy's writing works with such direct relationship between the mind and the world that 'the immediate presence of the object seems necessary to her imaginative process'.⁷² The fact that Dorothy's imaginative process starts only at the direct encounter with the object avoids the disappointment that, on the contrary, is recorded in the Book VI of *The Prelude*. William's disappointment at having crossed the Alps without encountering the sublime scenes he had expected is the result of a confrontation between the imaginary idea of the Alpine landscape and the real encounter with it:

That day we first
Beheld the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved
To have a soulless image on the eye
Which had usurped upon a living thought
That never more could be.⁷³

According to Marlon Ross, the conquest of the Alps is a climatic moment of *The Prelude*'s quest, if not the climax itself. Yet, ironically, Wordsworth's moment of conquest does not occur in the process of climbing the Alps, nor on the summit of peaks, since the expectation of the imagination has rendered the crossing a failure. The full appreciation of the Alps occurs in the poem only at the moment of the composition, exactly fifteen years after, in 1804:

Imagination!- lifting up itself
Before the eye and progress of my song
Like an unfathered vapour, here that power,

⁷¹ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*. For a critical analysis of the different versions of Dorothy and William Wordsworth's accounts of the passing of the Simplon, see: Anne Mellor, 'Writing the Self/Self Writing: William Wordsworth's *Prelude*/ Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journals*', in *Romanticism and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Mary Jacobus, *Romanticism, Writing and Sexual Difference: Essays on the Prelude* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

⁷² Susan Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*, p. 76.

⁷³ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, 1850* (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1993), lines 453-456.

In all the might of its endowments, came
Athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud.⁷⁴

It appears that only through memory and the passing of time Wordsworth is able to re-vision this experience and recognize the full potential of the Alpine scenery: 'And now, recovering, to my soul I say/ "I recognize thy glory"'.⁷⁵ With the benefit of later years' hindsight, Wordsworth is able to acknowledge the danger of imaginary constructions and the resulting difficulty to match the ideal image with the real object, a problem which does not seem to belong to Dorothy's less symbolic approach to nature. Dorothy's reaction at the sight of the glacier does not show any sign of deception, as she finds it far more 'enchantingly beautiful' than anything she has the power to imagine. Dorothy calls into question the power of abstract imaginings at the same time of crossing, and not, like William, in later years: 'the mind is not satisfied with its own imaginings'.⁷⁶ She somehow reasserts the need to face reality, since, unlike William, she finds the imaginative productions unsatisfactory.

Considering the impressions that women record during the ascent of the Alps and the appreciation of its landscape in the context of the aesthetic debates on the sublime, it appears that women register what Thomas Weiskel defines as the first and second moment of a sublime experience. According to this influential formulation, the sublime moment is composed of a first phase, in which the mind of the observer keeps in relation with the object observed, since this relation is still habitual and harmonious. In the second phase, however, the object loses its familiarity and the 'habitual relation of mind and object suddenly breaks down'. This is basically due to a 'disproportion between inner and outer' caused by an excess, which in the case of the Alpine landscape, belongs to the object observed. The reactions to this misbalance usually range between surprise

⁷⁴ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, lines 525-529. See also, Margaret Homans: *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Bronte, and Emily Dickinson* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁷⁵ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, lines 532-533.

⁷⁶ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Journals*, vol. II, p. 215.

and astonishment. In the third and final phase, the so-called reactive, the mind recovers the balance by constructing a new relation between subject and object.⁷⁷ This formulation could be considered valuable also when the subject who observes is female. In this case, however, it is remarkable to note how the third phase of the sublime moment, notably the reaction to the misbalance between inner and outer, produces unexpected results. Let us take into consideration Lady Morgan's report of her Alpine experience in 1821:

Whoever has wandered far and seen much, has learned to distrust the promises of books; and must have often felt how far the unworn expectation starts beyond its possible accomplishment. But nature never disappoints. Neither the memory nor the imagination of authorship can go beyond the fact she dictates, or the image she presents if general feelings can be measured by individual impression. Italy, with all her treasures of art and associations of history, has nothing to exhibit, that strikes the traveller like the Alps which meet his view on his ascent to the summit of Mount Cenis, or the Simplon. That is a moment in which the imagination feels the real poverty of its resources, the narrow limits of its range. An aspect of the material world then presents itself, which genius, even in its highest exaltation, must leave to original creation, as unimitated and inimitable. The sensation it produces is too strong for pleasure, too intense for enjoyment. There, where all is so new, novelty loses its charm; where all is so safe, conscious security is no proof against 'horrible imaginings'; and those splendid evidences of the science and industry of man, which rise at every step, recede before the terrible possibilities with which they mingle, and which may render the utmost precaution of talent and philanthropy unavailable. Here experience teaches the falsity of the fact that the mind becomes elevated by the contemplation of nature in the midst of her grandest works, and engenders thoughts 'that wonder through eternity'. The mind in such scenes is not raised. It is stricken back upon its own insignificance. Masses like these sublime deformities, starting out of the ordinary proportions of nature, in their contemplation reduce man to what he is – an atom. In such regions nothing is in conformity with him, all is at variance with his end and being, all is commemorative of those elementary convulsions which sweep away whatever lives and breathes, in the general wreck of inanimate matter.⁷⁸

Lady Morgan's experience of the sublime reminds the reader of Kant's formulation. After a first moment of blockage, reason resists the blocking source

⁷⁷Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), pp. 23-24.

⁷⁸Lady Morgan, *Italy*, vol. I, pp. 38-39.

by representing its very inability to represent the sublime object.⁷⁹ At this point the imagination is awakened and the subject reaches a new state of balance. The reaction of Lady Morgan, is that of astonishment, but also respect in response to an incalculable otherness. The works of nature appear inimitable by the restricted power of man, who cannot even venture to control, or simply represent these surroundings. Man cannot master nature. In this situation, Lady Morgan argues, the mind is not at all elevated but, on the contrary, is reduced into insignificant pieces, thus man is nothing but an atom of an uncontrollable natural universe. For Lady Morgan, even imagination seems to be unable to contemplate such a mighty nature.

Mary Ann Browne records a similar reaction in her poem 'Mont Blanc'. In it the mountain is addressed by the poet with a deep sense of respect towards the powerful majesty it displays:

Monarch of mountains! In thy cloudy robe,
Thou sit'st secure upon thy craggy throne,
Seeming to lord it over half the globe,
As if the world beneath were all thine own.
No human eye can search its mighty source
No human thought its origin can trace
They can but see it rush into the vase
Heaven hath assign'd it in the vale below.⁸⁰

The poet shares with Lady Morgan a feeling of passivity, and clearly positions human beings in a relation of subordination to the mountain. After describing the scenery at sun set, with moonlight, and during a thunderstorm, Mary Ann Browne remarks on the strength and power of Mont Blanc, which remains unchanged and untouched by different meteorological conditions:

Amidst these changes, *thou* has stood unchanged;
And haply shalt for many a coming age.
Thou risest o'er the mountains round thee ranged,

⁷⁹ In Barbara Claire Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 3.

⁸⁰ Mary Ann Browne, *Mont Blanc and Other Poems* (London, 1827), 1-8. Electronic edition: <<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/-aezacweb/wrew.htm>>

As independent; and the tempest's rage
Cannot destroy thee; and thou oft shalt wage
War with the elements while time shall be
The wonder of the poet and sage.⁸¹

In fact, the poem is quite similar to the more famous 'Mont Blanc' by Percy Shelley. The two poems display a common set of images and language. Considering that Browne's poem was published in 1827, and that the young poet had never travelled among the Alps, we can assume that Browne was familiar with Shelley's poem.⁸² However, it seems clear that Browne's annihilation of the human mind is different from Percy Shelley's reaction articulated in his 'Mont Blanc'. In it, the sight of this mighty mountain and of its abyss generates at the beginning a sense of inferiority, which is soon transformed in creative energy thanks to the contribution of the imagination:

[...]and when I gaze on thee
I seem as in a trance sublime and strange
To muse on my own separate fantasy,
My own, my human mind, which passively
Now renders and receives fast influencings,
Holding an unremitting interchange
With the clear universe around;⁸³

Differently, the final stanza of Browne's poem reasserts the relation of subordination suggested in the first stanza. The poem ends by inserting the powerful and majestic Mont Blanc in a precarious universe, whose movement is ultimately controlled by God: 'thy stupendous height, must bow before the Lord of power and might,/ Must quake if touched by the hand divine'. A mightier

⁸¹ Mary Anne Browne, *Mont Blanc*, 83-89.

⁸² For biographical information see: *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. by Virginia Blain, Patricia Clemens and Isobel Grundy (London: Batsford, 1990); S. J. Hale, *Woman's Record; or, Sketches of All Distinguished Women, from the Creation to AD 1868 Arranged in Four Eras* (New York: Harper, 1870).

⁸³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Complete Poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Donald H. Reiman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), lines 34-38. For a critical investigation of the sublime in 'Mont Blanc', see: Frances Ferguson, 'Shelley's 'Mont Blanc': What the Mountain Said', in *Coleridge, Keats and Shelley*, ed. by Peter J. Kitson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), pp. 172-185; Aaron Dunckel, 'Mont Blanc: Shelley's Sublime Allegory of the Real', in *The Greening of*

power, the poet argues, will come to subjugate and humiliate the vigorous and apparently everlasting mountain: 'then even thou/must all thy stedfast dignity resign;/ And, headlong thrown, e'en thy gigantic brow/ Must kiss the earth thou frownest proudly over now'.⁸⁴ Browne clearly establishes a pyramidal relation in which men occupy the lowest position, subjugated and controlled by the force of nature, represented by Mont Blanc, which, in turn, is prey to the divine will and power. In Percy Shelley's 'Mont Blanc', the poet similarly comments on the temporality of 'all things that move and breath'. Nevertheless, the final stanza reaffirms the powerful position of Mont Blanc, which does not seem to be part of this universal movement of birth and death: 'Mont Blanc yet gleams on high; the Power is there,/ The still and solemn Power of many sights/ And many sounds, and much of life and death'. The tendency to dominate nature typical of a masculine Romantic tradition is absent in women's accounts of the crossing of the Alps.⁸⁵ Instead, the reader discovers an attitude of respect towards a majestic nature and the awareness of men's subjugation to it, probably a more familiar condition to women, whose authority was restricted in the cultural and political sphere of nineteenth-century society.

The resolution of the sublime moment takes different directions in women's experience of the Alps than it does in men.⁸⁶ Mary Shelley's suggestion that 'we must become a part of the scenes around us, and they must mingle and become a portion of us' is common to other reports.⁸⁷ In this way, the third phase of the sublime moment would originate what Patricia Yaeger defines as a

Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory, and the Environment, ed. by Scott Slovic (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2002), pp. 207-223.

⁸⁴ Mary Anne Browne, *Mont Blanc*, 91-94, 96-98.

⁸⁵ See: Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer (eds.), *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁸⁶ On women and the sublime see: Frances Ferguson, 'Legislating the Sublime', in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century British Art and Aesthetics*, ed. by Ralph Cohen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 128-147; Barbara Freeman, *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (London: University of California Press, 1995).

⁸⁷ Mary Shelley, *Rambles*, p. 213.

'horizontal sublime',⁸⁸ which creates the necessity to communicate with the environment and to avoid domination or, alternatively, in Anne Mellor's words, the need 'of love, reverence, and mutual relationship'.⁸⁹ This need is notable in Dorothy Wordsworth's descriptions of the Alpine landscape which, even in its most awesome environment, is always peopled by human beings, especially women. Just a few miles away from the peak of a mountain, she does not fail to record the presence of 'several women and girls [...] on their way to Lugano', or a bit later 'a quiet peasantry engaged in quiet occupation'; steep hills are never desolate, but scattered with churches or 'dark-eyed maids' passing by. Sometimes she even notices the dress of the female peasants she meets: 'we thought the head dresses of the women were graceful, a large white handkerchief cast over the head which, falling upon the shoulder, forms a partial screen for the face, much needed in this climate'.⁹⁰ Significantly, women's tendency to people the Alpine landscape is in contrast with the typical solitude of the Romantic poet's quest. Byron's description of the Alps in *Manfred*, for example, is dominated by a strong sense of desolation; similarly, Shelley's contemplation of Mont Blanc is overtly solitary. As Marlon Ross suggests, the experience of mountain climbing stresses the solitude of self-questing and gives the poet's self a sense of exclusivity.⁹¹ The need to distinguish oneself from the others, particularly from the average man, is a typical characteristic of the male Romantic hero in search for poetic success. This attitude is completely absent in women's accounts which, on the contrary, tend to create a continual interchange between the author and other people. Susan Wolfson reads this movement from

⁸⁸ Patricia Yaeger, 'Toward a Female Sublime', in *Gender and Theory: dialogues on feminist criticism*, ed. by Linda Kauffman (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 198-220, p. 204. The full development of this concept is expressed in the following terms: "women must create a new architectonics of empowerment – not through the old-fashioned sublime of domination, the vertical sublime which insists on aggrandizing the masculine self over others, but instead through a horizontal sublime that expands toward others, spread itself out into multiplicity".

⁸⁹ Anne Mellor, 'Immortality or Monstrousness? Reflections on the Sublime in Romantic Literature and Art', in *The Romantic Imagination: literature and art in England and Germany*, ed. by Burwick Frederick (Amsterdam: Radopi, 1996), pp. 225-239, (p. 52).

⁹⁰ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Grasmere Journals*, p. 212.

⁹¹ Marlon Ross, "Romantic Quest and Conquest", p. 44.

'I' to 'you' to 'all', characteristic of Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journals*, as an 'expansion of individual subjectivity into visionary community', which somehow justifies the need of female travel writers to relate with the world and the people around.⁹² The crossing of the Alps in women's accounts, therefore, instead of stressing the isolation of the self, tends to be an occasion for socializing.

Susan Levin observes how, while crossing the Simplon Pass, Dorothy Wordsworth is actually retelling William's account in *The Prelude* in her own words. The influence of her brother's description is acknowledged throughout the text. She often recalls William's description of the places; she traces 'that path which my brother had formerly paced'. She also brings her own past fantasies to the scene, for she has thought about 'pursuing the track of [William's] youthful steps'.⁹³ However, Dorothy often displays her own independent approach to the scene, and she is always eager to record her own impressions. More importantly, Dorothy's attention is differently directed. Instead of concentrating the observation and expectation on the mountains' summits, the most daring and dangerous elements of the Alpine scenery, Dorothy pays close attention to the middle region and its details. As her description of the appearance of Mont Blanc and Monte Rosa suggests, Dorothy's attention seems to concentrate on the closer objects:

The vision did not burst upon us suddenly; but was revealed by slow degrees, while we felt so satisfied and delighted with what lay distinctly outspread around us that we had hardly begun to look for objects less defined, in the far-distant horizon.⁹⁴

The attention to details is another device that in some ways gives Dorothy Wordsworth the possibility of a continual interchange between the outer world and the inner reaction to it, and it is also a way to personalize her own experience of the Alps. In particular, while ascending the mountains, she never

⁹² Susan Wolfson, "Individual in Community: Dorothy Wordsworth's conversation with William". *Romanticism and Feminism*, 139-166, (p. 145).

⁹³ Susan Levin, *Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism*, p. 102.

omits to describe what she sees on the way, even if the attractive view of the peak is already in sight: 'Its summits were enveloped with clouds: and, a little lower down, two masses of perpetual snow adhered to its side. The middle region is rich in woods, lawns, and irregular protuberances, interspersed with large spaces of rocky ground of iron-red and grey hue'.⁹⁵

Although only a fictional character, Emily St. Aubert shares a similar concern for Alpine details in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. While travelling over the Alps in order to reach Venice with her aunt and the villain Montoni, she mitigates the frightening view of Mount Cenis by composing a sonnet:

The weary traveller, who, all night long,
Has climb'd among the Alps' tremendous steeps,
Skirting the pathless precipice, where throng
Wild form of danger; as he onward creeps
If, chance, his anxious eye at distance sees
The mountain shepherd's solitary home,
Peeping from forth the moon-illumin'd trees,
What sudden transports to his bosom come!⁹⁶

Emily's discomfort with the solitary and inhospitable summits is connected to her longing for the sign of humanity that characterises the milder landscape of the slopes. What clearly transpires from women's accounts is the fact that they consider the vales a more suitable and pleasant environment than the peaks. It is only when the rocky parts of the Alps are left behind that the female traveller's appreciation of the landscape becomes full and delightful. Following Emily's path down Mount Cenis, it is remarkable that a deeper appreciation of the passing scene is possible only when the strong feelings of awe and incumbent danger, typical of the peaks, are overcome:⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Journals*, p. 206.

⁹⁵ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Journals*, pp. 206, 212, 217, 243.

⁹⁶ Anne Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, ed. by Bonamy Dobrée (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 165.

⁹⁷ On women and the picturesque, see: Stephen Copley and Peter Garside (eds.), *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics Since 1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Sydney Robinson, *Inquiry into the Picturesque* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991); Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

Who may describe her rapture, when, having passed through a sea of vapour, she caught a first view of Italy; when, from the ridge of one of those tremendous precipices that hang upon Mount Cenis and guard the entrance of that enchanting country, she looked down through the lower clouds, and, as they floated away, saw the grassy vales of Piedmont at her feet, and beyond the plains of Lombardy extending to the farthest distance.⁹⁸

The fact that Ann Radcliffe never actually crossed Mount Cenis, justifies the imprecision of her geography, especially the fact that from Mount Cenis the traveller could not possibly see both Piedmont and Lombardy. However, what is relevant in this passage, is Emily's longing for 'the plains' of Italy. From reading the travel writings of John Moore and Hester Piozzi, which inspired Radcliffe's Italian settings, along with Salvator Rosa's paintings of sublime landscapes, the author probably understood that a true appreciation of the landscape began during the descent. The desire to reach the Alpine vales that Emily shows, could correspond to the description of the descent of the Italian side of the Alps in Hester Piozzi's *Glimpses of the Italian Society*: 'going down [...] is, after all, an astonishing journey, and affords the most magnificent scenery in nature, which, varying at every step, gives new impression to the mind each moment of one's passage'.⁹⁹ The milder tones of the landscape during the descent suit more the aesthetic appreciation of women, since the destabilising masculine experience of the summits gradually develops into a softer and more variegated appreciation of the slopes. By focusing on the descent rather than the ascent, women seem to prefer a landscape that enters a milder dimension, thus allowing them a certain freedom of expression, both in terms of descriptive language and of emotional response.¹⁰⁰ In her poem 'The Passage of the Mountain of St. Gothard', Georgiana Cavendish records in 1793, how delightful is the view of the pastoral landscape after the bareness of the peaks:

⁹⁸ Anne Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, p. 165.

⁹⁹ Hester Piozzi, *Glimpses of the Italian Society*, p. 44.

My weary footsteps hoped for rest in vain,
For steep on steep in rude confusion rose:
At length I paused above a fertile plain,
That promised shelter, and foretold repose.

Fair runs the streamlet o'er the pasture green,
Its margin gay, with flocks and cattle spread;
Embowering trees the peaceful village screen,
And guard from snow each dwelling's jutting shed.¹⁰¹

Similarly, Dorothy Wordsworth's descent ends in a 'perfect enjoyment' of a landscape that calls to mind 'the Vales of Paradise'.¹⁰² Even the fictional narrator of Anna Jameson's *Diary of an Enuyée* does not record the passing of the 'marvellous, the miraculous Simplon', since 'everybody has said already, everything that can be said and exclaimed', but cannot help commenting on the descent, no matter how commonly described it was: 'in our descent, [...] the valley widened, and the stern terrific features of the scene assumed a gentler character'.¹⁰³ The traveller then reached the 'beautiful village of Davedro', with cottages and vineyards spread over a green slope, between the mountains and the torrent. As the narrator points out, the loveliness of this spot struck the traveller particularly for its contrast with the 'regions of snows, clouds, and barren rocks', to which the eyes had been accustomed for hours.¹⁰⁴ Maybe, as Mary Shelley suggests, the more variegated nature, characterised by 'meadows of green, [...] hills covered with low vines or woods of poplar beech & ash streams', reminds the traveller of England.¹⁰⁵ Or, simply, as the two following stanzas from Anna Seward's 'Address to Woman' (1810) would seem to advocate, the vales were a more suitable environment for women, one that

¹⁰⁰ Women, in fact, seem to be more confident in using the semantic domain of the picturesque and the beautiful rather than of the sublime. See: Jane Stabler, 'Taking Liberties: the Italian Picturesque in Women's Travel Writing', *European Romantic Review* 13 (2002), 11-22.

¹⁰¹ In Roger Lonsdale, *Eighteenth Century Women Poets: an Oxford Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), lines 61-72.

¹⁰² Dorothy Wordsworth, *Grasmere Journals*, p. 250.

¹⁰³ Anna Jameson, *Diary of an Ennuyée*, p. 43.

¹⁰⁴ Anna Jameson, *Diary of an Ennuyée*, p. 43.

would give the security and the intimacy the mighty summits of the mountains lack:

Stay in the shelter'd valley low,
Where calmly blows the fragrant air,
But shun the mountain's stormy brow,
For darken'd winds are raging there.
[...]
Rash Man, for glory's fading wreath,
Provokes his early, timeless doom,
Seeks every varied form of death,
And desperate hastens to the tomb;
[...]
Stay in thy vale;- no wild affright
Shall cross thy path, nor sullen care
But go not to the craggy height,
The dark, loud winds are raging there!¹⁰⁶

Clearly, Seward suggests that the 'craggy height' of manly endeavour is closed off to women, and it represents an unsuitable, even an unnatural dimension for them. What is left to them is a valley depicted in the poem as soft and mild, and only for female inhabitants. More symbolically, if the Alpine peaks are 'another metaphor of masculine potency, which, through association, reinvests the poetic vocation with power and influence', women's preference of the valleys is related to their exclusion from the domains of masculine power and poetic activity.¹⁰⁷ However, as the poem suggests, the relegation of women in the vales prevents a common danger of the masculine poetical quest, symbolically associated with the climbing of the Alps: the danger of falling. According to Marlon Ross, the height of the mountains represents both the ascent of the imagination and the ever-present threat of falling, or 'the absorption into nature's overriding power'.¹⁰⁸ By positioning themselves in the vales, women seem to choose consciously a safer and more harmonious setting for their poetry, one that does not involve either

¹⁰⁵ Mary Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley*, ed. by Paula Feldman and Diane Scott-Kilvert, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), vol. II, p. 352.

¹⁰⁶ Anna Seward, *The Poetical Works of Anna Seward, with Extracts from her Literary Correspondence*, ed. by Walter Scott, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: John Ballantyne & Co., 1810), vol. II, pp. 176-178.

¹⁰⁷ Marlon Ross, 'Romantic Quest and Conquest', p. 44.

¹⁰⁸ Marlon Ross, 'Romantic Quest and Conquest', p. 44.

the effort of the ascent, or the danger of a possible fall. The continuation of the journey towards the south, with the exception of the harsh landscape of the Appenines, would give women plenty of sunny vales and luxuriant meadows to confront. As the following section will demonstrate, women's appreciation of the transalpine regions reveals how the encounter with Italy is intellectually and emotionally stimulating.

1.5 Travelling South

The sensuousness and richness of the landscape are important sources of fascination for women writers. More specifically, it is when nature becomes more fertile and sensuous that Italy displays to the eyes of British women travellers all its potentiality for physical and mental freedom. The comparison between the gloomy and cold northern environment dominates the tone of some of their accounts. In a letter written in 1823 near Genoa, Mary Shelley addresses Jane Williams just before her return to England, after Percy Shelley's death. She describes the scene as 'a complete garden', the excess of cultivation being wonderful, 'pergolas of grapes have French beans growing beneath their shade- & the fields are all divided into small strips sown with corn or vegetables & shaded by olive fig or pear trees- often in the midst of a podere [farm] a fierce torrent rushing down from the hills'.¹⁰⁹ The richness and variety of the Italian vegetation creates in the traveller's mind an implicit comparison with the uniformity and bareness of the English landscape. The abundance of verdure, for example, struck the imagination of Anna Jameson who, accustomed to 'noble forests of English oaks' or 'grove of beeches and elms', cannot help but recognise the extraordinary productivity of the Italian land: 'but it is true notwithstanding that the olive, and cypress, and cedar, the orange, and the

citron, the fig and the pomegranate, the myrtle and the vine, convey a different, a more luxuriant feeling to the mind'.¹¹⁰ The metaphor of Italy as a pregnant woman that Lasslels' *Voyage* suggested, appears here in all its power. Very often 'the abundance of the soil and clime is poured upon the stranger's eye in panniers of muscatel grapes, of melting autumnal fruits, and of flowers' in such a strong way to excite a sensuous reaction in the traveller.¹¹¹ The senses, especially taste and smell, are stimulated in an unfamiliar way, and often awaken suddenly after a period of relaxation. Hester Piozzi is particularly astonished by the size of Italian cherries and plums; their flavour 'far exceed' any domestic exemplary; the 'wild grape, raspberry, and azoroli' invite every sense and promise every joy to the author. When she begs her husband to stay longer than expected in the countryside, and delay their departure for Rome, Piozzi is delighted in testing the new wine 'as it ran purple from the cask'; she enjoys 'caressing the meek oxen', and feels 'sensations so unaffectedly pastoral that nothing in romance ever exceeded [her] felicity'.¹¹²

The appeal that the countryside and its fecundity exerts on women often creates a sense of saturation. Anna Jameson's *Enuyée*, recollecting the experience of the day in the countryside near Rome, finds herself unable to describe her feelings: 'I scarce know what to say, now that I open my little book to record my own sensations: they are so many, so various, so painful, so delicious- my senses and my imagination have been so enchanted, my heart so very heavy- where shall I begin? There was beauty beyond what I ever beheld or imagined'.¹¹³ The inability to articulate one's emotions and thoughts is at the origin of a feeling of destabilisation and loss of control which, very often, is strengthened by a sense of physical instability. The same *Enuyée* commenting the journey to Mola of Gaeta, observes that 'her senses were blinded and dulled

¹⁰⁹ Mary Shelley, *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. by Betty Bennet, 3 vols. (London: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), vol. II, p. 342.

¹¹⁰ Anna Jameson, *Diary of an Enuyée*, p. 334.

¹¹¹ Anna Jameson, *Diary of an Enuyée*, pp. 334, 335.

¹¹² Hester Piozzi, *Glimpses*, pp. 51, 197.

by dejection, lassitude and sickness'.¹¹⁴ Mary Shelley, who spent the June 1843 near Sorrento, remarks that 'the heat is excessive. Every one appears to be seized with feverish illness: nobody wishes to eat or move'.¹¹⁵ This lack of bodily control, however, seems to be different from the inner destabilisation of the self that is typical of the Alpine region. The device of transferring loss of control from the sublime to the beautiful, in terms of landscape, is somehow favourable for women, since if the beautiful 'is set up as the site of perilously effeminating forces', in Burke's idea, it also helps women to recover in full a subjectivity that had been weakened by the masculine experience of the sublime.¹¹⁶ In Burke's *Enquiry*, after describing the physical cause of love and the 'melting and languor' that the view of a beautiful object excites, the author embarks on an explanation of such a marked physical effect:

It is almost impossible not to conclude, that beauty acts by relaxing the solids of the whole system. There are all the appearances of such a relaxation; and a relaxation somewhat below the natural tone seems to me to be the cause of all positive pleasure. Who is a stranger to that manner of expression so common in all times and in all countries, of being softened, relaxed, dissolved, melted away by pleasure?¹¹⁷

If the subject of such experience is a woman and the object is a feminised beautiful nature, the result seems to be a pleasurable melting of the two terms. In fact, it is not uncommon to find in women's descriptions of the Italian landscape an inclination on behalf of the subject to be part of the object, and project oneself in a harmonious nature. At Naples, for example, the *Enuyée* records her experience of effeminating loss of purposefulness as pleasant, if not ecstatic:

I stood upon my balcony looking out upon the lovely scene before me, with a kind of pensive dreamy rapture, which if not quite pleasure, had at

¹¹³ Anna Jameson, *Diary of an Enuyée*, p. 315.

¹¹⁴ Anna Jameson, *Diary of an Enuyée*, p. 310.

¹¹⁵ Mary Shelley, *Rambles*, p. 376.

¹¹⁶ Chloe Chard, *Pleasure and Guilt*, p. 122.

¹¹⁷ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, p. 135.

least a power to banish pain. [...] All my activity of mind, all my faculties of thought and feeling, and suffering, seemed lost and swallowed up in an indolent delicious reverie, a sort of vague and languid enjoyment, the true 'dolce far niente' of this enchanting climate.¹¹⁸

At Naples, a similar reaction is recorded in verse by Lady Emmeline Stuart-Wortley. In this case the soothing effect of nature does not only provide a sense of well-being, but it also helps to erase negative thoughts:

Let me enjoy this soothing scene awhile,
And learn to smile in mighty Nature's smile.
Let me lay down my burthening wearying cares
And breath the freshness of these buoyant airs;
And for a time-although that time be brief-
Forget I am the thrall of care and grief!¹¹⁹

In this stanza, nature becomes a sympathetic feminine presence, which helps the poet to forget her own cares and to enjoy a physical and mental happiness.¹²⁰

Shirley Foster observes how women travellers to Italy tend to experience a feeling of pleasurable release and spiritual renewal, and how they frequently employ the motif of rebirth or transformation in order to describe this mental and physical condition.¹²¹ This spiritual well-being is usually felt when memory, vision and reality are simultaneously called into life by an actual landscape view, as in this passage from Lady Morgan's *Italy*: 'memory, no longer deadened by external impressions, sends forth from "her secret cells" a thousand fanciful recollections [...], then the dream of many a youthful vigil is realized; and scenes long gloated over in poetic or romantic pages, gradually form and incorporate, and take their local habitation among real existences- objects of delight to the

¹¹⁸ Anna Jameson, *Diary of an Enuyée*, pp. 261-262.

¹¹⁹ Lady Emmeline Stuart-Wortley, *Impressions of Italy and Other Poems* (London, 1837), p. 94.
Electronic edition: <<http://www.chadwyck.co.uk>>

¹²⁰ Italy was considered the perfect destination for improving not only physical, but also mental health. Particularly, Italy could help 'to destroy diseases of the imagination, owing to too deep a sensibility', often attributed to women. David Humphry, *A Discourse, Introductory to a Course of Lectures on Chemistry, Delivered to the Theatre of the Royal Institution* (London, 1802), p. 24.

¹²¹ Shirley Foster, *Across New Worlds*, p. 41.

dazzled eye, as once to the bewildered imagination'.¹²² The experience of travelling in Italy, therefore, did not simply fulfil all the visionary anticipations of the travellers, but became itself a visionary journey. The landscape is often evocative of a sort of dream-like condition. Shelley compares the ecstasies she feels while looking at the mountains around Lake Como to dreams from heaven, while Stuart-Wortley compares Italy to an after-dream: "Italia! In thy loveliness supreme,/Thou seem'st more fitted for an after-dream,/ E'en than a present vision!".¹²³ Interestingly, Anna Jameson makes clear that it is not only the visible picturesque of Italy which generates a feeling of well-being: not 'her fervid skies', 'her sunsets', nor 'her soaring pine-clad mountains', nor 'the azure seas', nor 'her sunny fields', but 'it is something more than these, something beyond, and over all'.¹²⁴ Writers, in using the analogies of dream and vision, seem to introduce the reader into another level of apprehension from the normal, rational one, and Italy appears as the doorstep to this alternative dimension.

Such 'moments of revelation' appear almost in every Italian account by women writers. It is a sort of epiphanic moment in which a universe beyond reality is revealed, and in which women become somehow full of existence, intoxicated with life. Throughout her *Rambles*, Shelley periodically recollects moments of revelation, usually occurring while she contemplates the southern landscape. Mary Shelley had her own map of Italy in mind while travelling. This was an emotional geography based on the memory of her residence in the country and on the joys and sorrows she experienced. From her place of retirement in Sorrento, she often lingers in contemplation of the view from her balcony facing the sea. Comparing this view to other beautiful places she has visited in Italy, she perceives a difference in the moment and in the place, since 'in all others it was like seeing a lovely countenance behind a dusky veil; here the veil is withdrawn, and the senses ache with the effulgent beauty which is

¹²² Lady Morgan, *Italy*, vol. III, p. 364.

¹²³ Elizabeth Sewall Missing, *Ivors*, 2 vols. (London, 1856), vol. II, p. 240.

¹²⁴ Anna Jameson, *Diary of an Enuyée*, p. 338.

revealed'; from the same balcony, addressing her imaginary correspondent, at sunset, she reveals how 'in other places a sense of tenderness, a softening influence, has fallen on my heart at that time; but here, the glory of absolute immeasurable beauty mantles all things at all times'.¹²⁵ It is as if the beauty of the landscape conceals the superficial level of nature, but at the same time reveals a deeper dimension beyond it.

In Anna Jameson's *Diary* this epiphanic moment usually corresponds to the simultaneous co-existence of the travel motifs James Buzard identifies with stillness, non-utility, saturation, and picturesqueness. While analysing travellers' reports from Italy in the nineteenth century, Buzard observes how the condition of stillness refers to the 'ennobling feeling, recorded in luminous moments when the traveller is alone to savour a place's poignant or powerful reverberations of beauty, sublimity, or significance'.¹²⁶ From a balcony facing the Bay of Naples, in a condition similar to Mary Shelley's, the narrator records a state of physical inactivity accompanied by a sense of saturation:

To stand upon my balcony, looking out upon the sunshine, and the glorious bay; the blue sea, and the pure skies- and to feel that indefinite sensation of excitement, that superflu de vie, quickened every pulse and thrilling through every nerve, is a pleasure peculiar to this climate, where the mere consciousness of existence is happiness enough.¹²⁷

The condition of non-utility is typical of the tourist travelling Italy in search for pleasure and relaxation. A similar situation occurs to Lady Emmeline Stuart-Wortley, near Naples, where she records how the communion with Nature is the source of a feeling that fills 'the heart with dream-like happiness!', a condition even more welcomed when unexpected:

When thus [the Nature's self] hath o'erflowed
From her great glorious Soul into our own,
While love is heightening every feeling's tone

¹²⁵ Mary Shelley, *Rambles*, pp. 370, 375.

¹²⁶ James Buzard, *The Beaten Track*, p. 177.

¹²⁷ Anna Jameson, *Diary of an Enuyée*, pp. 239-240.

How sacred when it thus seems deeply given;
A more immediate gift- from yon bright Heaven!¹²⁸

This stanza suggests that the state of peaceful harmony with nature and the universe is seen very often as a blessed moment, a heavenly condition. Paradise is actually a metaphor often employed by women in their description of the most enchanting Italian sceneries. Particularly, the Italian landscape appears as paradise when it displays its most sensuous and 'feminine' attributes. Hester Piozzi describes the countryside near Naples as 'an earthly paradise, where delicacy and softness subdued every danger, and general sweetness captivated every sense'.¹²⁹ In this image Piozzi seems to associate Paradise with a scenery where the feminine features of sweetness and delicacy subdue the masculine attributes of danger and harshness. Similarly, Anna Jameson records her movement from the wild and gloomy interior into the fecund and luxuriant plains as a descent to Paradise: 'then came such glimpses of Paradise! Such soft sunny vallies and peaceful hamlets- and vine- clad eminence and rich pastures'. The indolent Enuyée is also captivated by the land near Rome in a way that makes her exclaim: 'this land was made by nature a paradise'.¹³⁰ Mary Shelley's impression at the sight of the Bay of Naples and its promontories descending into the sea is recorded with a sense of novelty and uniqueness that only a Paradise could possess: '[here] God has let fall upon earth the mantle of glory which otherwise is gathered up among the angels!'.¹³¹ Lady Morgan travelling from Itri to Mola of Gaeta, suddenly comments how 'a paradise is opened in the wild'.¹³² The association between the Italian landscape and Paradise, seems to demonstrate how women's appreciation of Italy becomes intellectually and emotionally productive precisely when its natural scenery displays its most fecund and sensuous side.

¹²⁸ Lady Emmeline Stuart-Wortley, *Impressions of Italy*, p. 93.

¹²⁹ Hester Piozzi, *Glimpses*, p. 217.

¹³⁰ Anna Jameson, *Diary of an Enuyée*, p. 207.

¹³¹ Mary Shelley, *Rambles*, p. 372.

¹³² Lady Morgan, *Italy*, vol. III, p. 143.

As the analysis of women's approach to the Italian landscape has so far brought to evidence, it seems that after a first moment of destabilisation, caused by the confrontation with the powerful and dangerous Alpine landscape, women gradually recover their intellectual and emotional stability. More specifically, after facing the masculine experience of the sublime in a feminine way, women experience a sense of freedom enhanced by the beautiful landscape. The next section will analyse women's description of the return to England. In particular, it will highlight how the abandonment of an Eden-like reality for the more familiar, but also less attractive, north generates an explicit confrontation between the Italian and the English reality.

1.6 Afterwards

The moment of leaving Italy is usually a melancholy one in women's travel literature. When the traveller pays only a short visit to the country, the farewell is marked by the regret of leaving behind a delightful experience. In other circumstances, however, when the traveller has spent many years in the country, the adieu to Italy acquires dramatic tones. In the first case, the awareness is that the tour of Italy would be an irreplaceable experience. On her way back to Grasmere, Dorothy Wordsworth, having travelled not farther than Milan, has 'some pensive regrets, for the treasures of Italy unseen, and probably never to be seen by us'.¹³³ Before she leaves Italy, Anna Jameson's *Enuyée* remembers when she used to listen in England to the reports by travellers freshly returned from Italy, and to consider them as exaggerations. Now, with the hindsight of her own journey, the tones of their descriptions do not seem anymore inappropriate: 'and, in conclusion, let it be remembered by those who are inclined to smile (as I have often done) when travellers fresh from Italy rove

almost in blank verse, and think it all as unmeaning as "lutes, laurels, seas of mild, and ships of amber!".¹³⁴ On the moment of leaving the country, Lady Emmeline Stuart-Wortley composes a poem, 'Adieu! Thou glorious Italy', in which, besides expressing her regret, she describes how vivid the memories of her stay would be imprinted in her mind:

Bright land of Picture, Sunshine, Melody,
Farewell!- I bear deep memories dear, of thee,
Stamped, strongly stamped, within my very heart,
Not to decline, oh! Never to depart! ¹³⁵

Even if the poet will be physically displaced from Italy, her mind and heart will still keep her memory alive. In this way, the fresh memory of Italy is soon transformed in the mind of the woman traveller into an idealised reality, an alternative space to escape to when the domestic reality of Britain becomes too oppressive.

The farewell to Italy was particularly sorrowful for Mary Shelley who, having left England when only sixteen, could not rejoice at the thought of returning there as an adult woman, with a morally ambiguous past. Moreover, Italy treasured all her memories of a happy past spent with people she beloved, not least her dead husband and her children. In her journals and letters, the painful moment of the departure in 1823 is recorded with tragic accents:

I love Italy- its sky canopies the tombs of my lost treasures- its sun- its vegetation- the solitude I can here enjoy- the easy life one can lead- my habits now of five years growth- all & everything endears Italy to me beyond expression. The thought of leaving it fills me with painful tumults- tears come into my eyes- I prognosticate all evils. ¹³⁶

In Mary Shelley, the remembrance of Italy acquires a strong comparative vein, since the environment that the traveller has found in the country is overtly in

¹³³ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Grasmere Journals*, p. 263.

¹³⁴ Anna Jameson, *Diary of an Enuyée*, vol. II, p. 336.

¹³⁵ Lady Emmeline Stuart-Wortley, *Queen Berengaria's Courtesy, and other poems* (London, 1838), p. 18, lines 17-20. Electronic edition: <<http://www.chadwyck.co.uk>>

contrast with the domestic situation. In other words, once the traveller is back in England the comparison between the two realities- Italian and English- that had often kept implicit during the journey, becomes explicit. Sometimes the contrast between Italy and England is developed on a physical level, since the different weather and landscape are the primary elements at the origin of the nostalgia for the left country.

Shirley Foster observes how, when once back in England, women started to organise their memories and to write the accounts of their travels, the impulse was not only dictated by the potential income of publication, but by deeper reasons. According to Foster, 'recreation of the foreign reminded of an alternative existence'; it was a mode of self-definition, confirming the sense of new identity; it allowed both self-exploration and challenge to convention within the context of 'objective' literature.¹³⁷ Very often this parallel existence left behind was seen as more positive and liberating than the domestic life of England; generally, it was seen as beneficial in terms of physical and spiritual well-being. This often enables a process of idealisation of the 'other country', Italy, in contrast with a more conventional and less stimulating English society. The Enuyée's thought of returning to her 'dear England' and its 'fire-side enjoyments' is immediately followed by the regret of leaving Italy. For her 'languid frame and sick heart', the 'pure and elastic air "redolent of spring"'; the 'reviving sun shine and all the witchery of these deep blue skies' seem to have had a positive effect.¹³⁸ Mary Shelley seems to agree on the beneficial influence of the Italian environment and, back in London in 1823, she proclaims her own lack of concern as to whether or not the feeling that Italy offers her greater freedom can in some way be assessed and justified:

Why am I not in Italy- Italian sun & airs & flowers & earth & hopes- they are akin to love enjoyment freedom- exquisite delight- if they are not

¹³⁶ Mary Shelley, *Letters*, p. 318.

¹³⁷ Shirley Foster, *Across New Worlds*, p. 23.

¹³⁸ Anna Jameson, *Diary of an Enuyée*, p. 240.

them they are masked unto them- but here all wears the hue of grimmest reality- a reality to make me shriek upon the ear of midnight.¹³⁹

The depression that Mary Shelley expresses soon after her return to England may be connected with the physical, intellectual and moral freedom that she had experienced in Italy, a condition which can hardly be recreated in the gloomy and suffocating reality of her native country, where she has to gain the social respectability that she had lost at the time of her elopement with Percy Shelley. Another passage from this journal, written during the same unhappy phase of Mary Shelley's life, reveals more clearly the specific need that the author invokes in order to endorse such expressions of desire for superior freedom: the need for self-exploration, self-discovery and self-realisation. A complaint about 'the imprisonment attendant on a succession of rainy days' in London is followed by a description of Genoa which suggests not only an imaginative freedom, but also a greater possibility of self-fulfilment :

I can hardly tell but it seems to me as if the lovely and sublime objects of nature had been my best inspirers & wanting these I am lost. Although so utterly miserable at Genoa, yet what reveries were mine as I walked on the road and looked on the changing aspect of the ravine- the sunny deep & its boats- the promontories clothed in purple light- the starry heavens- the fireflies- the uprising of spring- then I could think- and my imagination could invent and combine, and self become absorbed in the grandeur of the universe I created- Now my mind is a blank- a gulph filled with formless mist.¹⁴⁰

The fertile and luxuriant nature so much described and appreciated in the accounts of women travelling to Italy seems to be, for Mary Shelley, a source of sublime investigation and the access to a deeper level of reality. The epiphanies that derived from the contemplation of nature seem now to be lost forever, not only because the favourable condition of a traveller in a foreign country, free from any domestic restraints, is lost, but also because the natural environment itself appears no more suitable for introspective meditations. Back in England the

¹³⁹Mary Shelley, *Journals*, vol. II, p. 469.

¹⁴⁰Mary Shelley, *Journals*, vol. II, p. 476.

author seems to live in a 'strange phantasmagoria', and only Italy 'was reality';¹⁴¹ she thinks of herself as 'exiled' from the Italian beloved scenes, and England has become 'a prison' to her.¹⁴²

The travel back from South to North does not only involve a physical movement, but also a mental and spiritual displacement that seems to steal away from women the possibility of self-expression and of self-discovery that they had gained in Italy. In another journal entry, always after complaining about the foggy and rainy English weather, Mary Shelley longs for the physical and spiritual well-being she experienced in her Italian years:

I have now been nearly four months in England and if I am to judge of the future by the past and the present, I have small delight in looking forward. I even regret those days and weeks of intense melancholy that composed my life at Genoa- yes – solitary and unbeloved as I was there, I enjoyed a more pleasurable state of being than I do here. I was still in Italy, & my heart and imagination were both gratified by that circumstance. I arose with the light and beheld the theatre of Nature from my windows- [...] the resplendent sky was above me- the mountains were invested with enchanting colours [...] there was morning & its balmy air; noon and its exhilarating heat- evening and its wondrous sunset; night and its starry pageant both on heaven and earth [...] then my solitary walks and my reveries- they were magnificent, deep, pathetic, wild and exalted- I sounded the depths of my own nature.¹⁴³

It is remarkable that, in the memory of the author, the recollection of Italy always passes through a state of physical and sensuous awakening, and then reaches a mental and spiritual harmony, which is the origin of a process of self-exploration. It seems that the author is trying to reconstruct in her mind the same process that she went through during her stay in the country. The comparison between a liberating Italy and a suffocating England becomes in Mary Shelley an overt contrast. Italy, the realm of tranquillity, natural beauty and imagination can only be mentally re-evoked in the gloomy and unstimulating England. The images of physical movement and natural contemplation, amplified by the opposition past/present, helps to create an even more idealised

¹⁴¹ Mary Shelley, *Letters*, vol. II, p. 395.

¹⁴² Mary Shelley, *Journals*, vol. II, p. 471.

¹⁴³ Mary Shelley, *Journals*, vol. II, pp. 470-471.

construction of Italy as the land of dreams, 'a divine place' where women can experience bodily and spiritual freedom. The next chapters will investigate how the idea of Italy as a liberating place for eighteenth- and nineteenth- century women was extended to narrative and poetic production.

From nationalism to cosmopolitanism: Italy in Gothic fiction.

2.1 The idea of Italy in Gothic Literature.

Could Nature's bounty satisfy the breast,
The sons of Italy were surely blest [...]
But small the bliss that sense alone bestows,
And sensual bliss is all the nation knows.
In florid beauty groves and fields appear,
Man seems the only growth that dwindles here.
Contrasted faults through all his manners reign,
Though poor, luxurious, though submissive, vain,
Though grave, yet trifling, zealous, yet untrue,
And even here contaminate the mind,
That opulence departed leaves behind.¹

These lines from Oliver Goldsmith's *The Traveller*, published in 1764, exemplify the typical contemptuous Grand Tourist's attitude to Italy the first chapter partly explored. At the same time, it emblematises the modern Italian character, which would appear recurrently in novels published in the last decades of the eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth century.² As I will demonstrate in this chapter, the ambivalent English point of view on Italy is not simply a central element to some of the most important Gothic novels, it is also a point of departure for a discourse of nationalism which finds in the Romantic Age its origin and development.³ Before discussing the importance of Italy in Gothic literature and its discourse of nationalism, however, it seems important to place

¹ Oliver Goldsmith, *The Traveller*, lines 111-122, in *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Arthur Friedman, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), vol. III, p. 253.

² Retrospectively, already in the first decade of the eighteenth century the idea of Italy as a contradictory country, a sum of artistic opulence and cultural decadence was strongly discernible in Addison's *Letters from Italy* (1701) and *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* (1705). The evolution of the idea of Italy in British literature passes through important texts, such as Charles Middleton's *Letters from Rome* (1729), and especially Samuel Richardson's *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1754).

³ The number of Gothic novels and dramas set in Italy or dealing with Italian characters is impressive. In addition to works by major authors, such as John Moore, William Godwin, M.G. Lewis, Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelly, Byron and P.B. Shelley, a great numbers of less-known authors wrote novels

Italy in the cultural context which is at the origin of the development of Gothic fiction, notably the revival of chivalry and romance. James Watt and Michael Gamer argue how the term 'gothic' had various meanings in the eighteenth century, depending on the context it was applied to.⁴ The word 'gothic' was commonly associated with a 'non-specific period of ignorance and superstition, from which an increasingly civilised nation had triumphantly emerged'.⁵ After the publication of Richard Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762), 'gothic' became clearly connected with a 'medieval' world in opposition to a 'classical' world.⁶

Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* was the first gothic novel to be set in Italy. The popularity of the novel brought to the attention of British intellectuals and readers a new imaginary version of Italy. Walpole's setting recreates a distant and dark reality where superstition, corruption and decadence rule. In the preface to the first edition, published anonymously in 1764, Walpole specifies how the work 'was found in the library of an ancient Catholic family in the north of England'.⁷ Apparently, the author goes on, the manuscript had been printed at Naples, in the year 1529. However, a further displacement of time occurs in the story related in the manuscript: 'the principal incidents are such as were believed in the darkest ages of Christianity; but the language and conduct have nothing that favours of barbarism'.⁸ The anonymous author supposes the story to have happened between 1095 and 1243, a period between the first and the last crusade. Significantly, the setting and the events of the story are deeply linked to Italian history and culture. Although the manuscript was found in the library of a prestigious English family, the story and the characters are entirely Italian. The link between English and Italian culture passes through different historical ages. The story presumably

set in Italy or with Italian characters. See Kenneth Churchill, *Italy and English Literature 1764-1930* (London: MacMillan Press, 1980).

⁴ James Watt, *Contesting the Gothic: Fiction, Genre and Cultural Conflict 1764-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 1-3; Michael Gamer, *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 48-49.

⁵ James Watt, *Contesting the Gothic*, p. 14.

⁶ Michael Gamer, *Romanticism and the Gothic*, p. 49.

⁷ Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*, ed. by W. S. Lewis, with an Introduction and Notes by E. J. Clery (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 5.

happened some time in the course of the Middle Ages, but the manuscript was printed at Naples in 1529, a date which corresponds to the Italian flourishing of letters and arts. The reasons why such a manuscript was found in the library of an English family are apparently of no importance to the author. The only possible connection is religion. We know that this ancient English family is of the Catholic faith, the same that prevailed in the culture and politics of sixteenth-century Italy, when the manuscript was composed. Religion links English and Italian culture: from an age of Christianity which unified northern and southern European countries- the time of the story- the setting extends to a sixteenth-century post-reformist Europe, where a Protestant north became opposed to a Catholic south- the time of composition of the manuscript- which is in turn connected to the recent discovery in the library of an ancient Catholic family. The link between England and Italy somehow justifies the author's will to publish such a story of 'miracles, visions, necromancy, dreams, and other preternatural events' in a modern enlightened Protestant country.⁹ More specifically, the 'air of the miraculous' that dominates the story is excused by the fact that England had historically experienced the same 'darkest ages of Christianity' which the manuscript describes in an Italian setting.¹⁰ The ancient Catholic family of England actually reminds the readers that superstition and credulity were once common in England as well as Italy, and that traces of that past can still be found in the present. At the same time, by insisting on the displacement of time and place of the story, Walpole's preface suggests a disjunction between past and present, Italy and England, which would become an issue central to a large part of Gothic literature.

In order to understand fully the role of Italy in Gothic literature, however, it is important to enlarge the cultural context of analysis. As Walpole points out in his 1765 preface to the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto*, the Italian setting of

⁸ Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, p. 5.

⁹ Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, p. 6.

¹⁰ Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, p. 6.

the novel serves as a point of departure for the author's ambitious project of creating a new form of romance:

It was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern. In the former all was imagination and improbability: in the latter, nature is always intended to be, and sometimes has been, copied with success. [...] The author of the following pages thought it possible to reconcile the two kinds.¹¹

Two of the main elements of gothic literature are thus unified in Walpole's prefaces. In the first anonymous edition the author asserts his will to revive an ancient age of Christianity and its manners and values, while in the second he declares his intention to blend ancient and modern forms of romance. In this context, the use of Italian setting and characters acquires an important position in the cultural panorama at the origin of Gothic literature. Italy, in Walpole's prefaces, constitutes a perfect setting for the restoration of those ancient feudal and Christian traditions at the base of the eighteenth-century revival of chivalry; at the same time it seems a suitable setting for a new form of romance, where past and present amalgamate.

The first author to re-evaluate the Gothic era and its cultural expressions had been Richard Hurd with the publication in 1762 of *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*.¹² Robert Miles observes how the letters were a 'bold departure from the commonplace neo-classical denigration of all aspect of the Gothic era as senseless barbarism'.¹³ In Letter I, Hurd explicitly questions the classical condemnation of Middle Ages: 'the ages, we call barbarous, present us with many a subject of curious speculation'.¹⁴ Interestingly, as in Walpole's prefaces, the author presents chivalry and romance as two deeply connected institutions: 'What, for instance, is more remarkable than the Gothic chivalry? Or than the spirit of Romance, which took its rise from that singular institution?'. However, the author explains, chivalry 'was a fire which soon spent itself', while Romance 'burnt long, and continued its

¹¹ Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, p. 9.

¹² Richard Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, ed. by J. Morley (London: H. Frowde, 1911)

¹³ Robert Miles and E.J. Clery (eds.), *Gothic Documents: a Sourcebook 1700-1820* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 67.

light and heat even to the politer ages'. In particular, Hurd argues that some of the greatest geniuses of Britain and other countries 'were seduced by those barbarities of their forefathers', and were even 'charmed by the Gothic Romances'.¹⁵ He brings forward the example of Ariosto and Tasso in Italy, and Spencer and Milton in England to support his idea that the Gothic Romance is 'peculiarly suited to the views of a genius and to the end of poetry', in spite of modern philosophers' scepticism.¹⁶ What is significant is the fact that Hurd, like Walpole, had first associated the revival of chivalry and romance with both an Italian and an English literary tradition. The process of rediscovery of ancient values follows in Hurd the same pattern as in Walpole's prefaces. The attempt to create a new form of Gothic romance starts with a re-evaluation of feudal and chivalric systems following the example of sixteenth-century Italian and British authors. Like the manuscript of Walpole's preface, the content of the modern Gothic romance is medieval in terms of time and setting, but is filtered through the imagination of the first great modern authors. In both Hurd and Walpole's arguments, Italy stands as a turning point between feudal traditions and modern sensibility. It also becomes a suitable setting for the encounter of chivalry and romance, that is for the modern form of Gothic romance.

The fascination with the medieval set of values was renewed in the 1780s with the publication of James Beattie's *Dissertations Moral and Critical* in 1783 and Clara Reeve's *The Progress of Romance, Through Times, Countries, and Manners* in 1785. Both texts emphasise the importance of re-evaluating ancient traditions, and the evolution of chivalry into romance. The authors consider the medieval world as a crucial moment for the meeting, confrontation and amalgamation of the northern feudal society and southern literary traditions. Beattie, for example, argues that the subversion of the Roman Empire by the Goths and other northern populations gave

¹⁴ Richard Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, p. 79.

¹⁵ Richard Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, pp. 79-81.

¹⁶ Richard Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, p. 81.

origin to an age of religious superstition and of fabulous literary tradition.¹⁷ In other words, the age of romance was born from the combination of northern feudal institutions and a Latin tradition of fabulous tales. A similar connection is suggested in *The Progress of Romance*. Clara Reeve argues that romance was initially introduced in the western world through the Crusades, and particularly through the influence of the Saracens on Spanish, French and Italian literary traditions. However, the author proceeds saying that Chivalry, which was the substance of Romance, existed among the Goths, and that it received new strength and vigour under Feudal establishment.¹⁸ The meeting between northern social institutions and southern literary traditions in the Middle Ages seems to be one of the most important elements in the origin of the Gothic romance. It is not surprising, therefore, that Italy, and southern Catholic countries in general, became the principal settings of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic literature.

The revival of chivalric values assumed particular importance after the French Revolution, and especially after Edmund Burke's publication of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790. Commenting on the 'disaster fallen upon' the queen of France after the last violent events of the revolution, Burke states that 'the age of chivalry is gone' with all its set of values and traditions:

Never, never more shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom. [...] It is gone that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honour, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil, by losing all its grossness.¹⁹

All this system of opinions and sentiments, Burke claims, had its origin in the ancient chivalry, whose influence reached modern generations. 'If it should ever be

¹⁷ James Beattie, 'On Fable and Romance', *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, 2 vols. (Dublin, 1783), vol. I, pp. 250-254.

¹⁸ Clara Reeve, *The Progress of Romance through Times, Country, and Manners; with Remarks on the Good and Bad Effects of it, on them Respectively*, 2 vols. (London: W.Keymer, 1785), vol. I, p. x.

totally extinguished', Burke argues, 'the loss will be great'.²⁰ From this point of view, after the events of the French Revolution, the ancient system of chivalry would be completely overcome by a modern sensibility based on personal interest and disrespect for class and sex. The majority of Gothic novels written after the French Revolution, in fact, would be set in the past and in foreign countries. Italy, in particular, became, along with Spain, a place onto which British writers could project their own cultural and social anxieties without political implications. In other words, setting a Gothic novel in France during the 1790s involved a political reflection on the last events of the revolution and the general social turmoil it caused all around Europe. To set a Gothic novel in Italy or Spain, on the contrary, did not necessarily involve a political position. This also implied that in those countries where the effects of the French Revolution were less strongly perceived, the ancient system of chivalric values was somehow more visible in society and culture.

As Maggie Kilgour observes, Burke demonstrates that the modern individual needs grounding in tradition and that the present cannot be imagined in abstraction from the past.²¹ In this way, the culture and tradition of the medieval world become fundamental for the definition of a modern sensibility, since it compares a society where 'one is defined by interdependent relations with others', rather than in 'vulgar bourgeois competition'.²² In the second half of the eighteenth century, works of travel literature described Italy not only as a place where signs of classical history survived, but as a place where society was strongly linked to its medieval past, and where the hierarchical system of feudality still survived in the Catholic church and in small states. The shift of interest from a classical Italy to a more decadent view of the country is a common feature of many works published during the second half of the eighteenth century. Edward Gibbon's *Journey from Geneva*

¹⁹ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event*, ed. by Conor Cruise O'Brien (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 170.

²⁰ Edmund Burke, *Reflections*, p. 170.

²¹ Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of Gothic Novel* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 26.

to *Rome* published in 1764, the same year of Walpole's first publication of *The Castle of Otranto*, had already mapped Italy as a country of ruins, where the signs of a medieval age of superstition and obscurity were much more visible than the glories of a classical past. The same view is renewed in 1788 with the publication of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. This text, like Reeve and Beattie's reflections on chivalry and romance, focuses on the turning point which separates classical from modern history, precisely on the historical moment when northern barbaric tribes encountered the southern Roman civilization, thus enabling a process of confrontation and integration. The most influential texts for Italian settings and characterisation in Gothic novels were John Moore's *View of Society and Manners in Italy* (1781) and Hester Piozzi's *Observations and Reflections* (1789).²³ Before the 1790s some important Gothic novels were published. Among the most important were John Moore's *Zeluco* (1789) and William Godwin's *Italian Letters* (1783), which first introduced Italian characters as passionate and revengeful.²⁴ Publications of gothic novels with Italian elements proliferated between the 1790s and 1830s. Besides the most famous works by Ann Radcliffe, an enormous amount of Gothic novels were set in Italy, among which were many written by women.²⁵

From a historical point of view, Gothic literature reached its apex at the end of the Enlightenment period, a key moment for the emergence of a Romantic view over history and nations.²⁶ Gothic literature thus provides a link between a classical age and a romantic one through the exploration of human emotions and fears. In

²² Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of Gothic Novel*, p. 11.

²³ For a detailed reading of Hester Piozzi's *Observations and Reflections* see the first chapter.

²⁴ John Moore's works on Italy reveal quite a controversial attitude. While in *View of Society and Manners in Italy* the author suggests an overall positive idea of Italy and Italians, in *Zeluco* he re-proposes the idea of a cruel and revengeful villain as the main character.

²⁵ See, for example, S. Lee, *The Two Emilys* (1798); Ann Ker, *The Heiress of Montaldo* (1799); J. Hinckley, *The History of Rinaldo Rinaldini* (1801); R.W. Elliston, *The Venetian outlaw* (1805); Charlotte Dacre, *Zofloya* (1806) and *The Libertine* (1807); Mary Ann Radcliffe, *Monfrone* (1809); Ann Hatton, *Sicilian Mysteries* (1812) and *Cesario Rosalba* (1819); Catherine Smith, *Barozzi; or the Venetian Sorceress* (1815); and Selina Davenport, *Italian Vengeance and English Forbearance* (1828).

²⁶ Elizabeth Napier, *The Failure of Gothic: Problems of Disjunction in an Eighteenth-century Literary Form* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. xi.

Maggie Kilgour's words, 'the gothic originates in a sense of historical difference, and the desire to transcend it by recovering a lost past'. Thus, the term gothic could be used to alienate the past as a dark age of feudal tyranny, or it could be equally used to idealise a golden age of innocent liberty. The gothic becomes 'haunted by a reading of history as a dialectical process of alienation and restoration, dismembering and remembering'.²⁷ In this context Italy appears as an alien society which bears the traits of a common history. More specifically, Italy reminds English readers of an ancient chivalric and feudal past when the northern population amalgamated with southern culture in the process of creating a modern unified Christian society, before differentiation of faith and values occurred. At the same time Italy, as representative of past culture and religion, is there to remind Britain that those times of superstition and intellectual darkness are over, and that a new age of liberty and enlightenment has started. This ambivalent attitude towards history, which tends, on one hand, to recover past common values, and on the other to reject them as surpassed, is an important element in Gothic literature, and especially in its use of alien nations. As Walpole's preface to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto* pointed out, the present incorporates a past which seems culturally alien and geographically distant. The ancient Catholic family of England conserves a sixteenth-century Italian manuscript telling a medieval story. Thus, the present can never detach itself from the past: the gothic is inseparable from its precursors, and the Protestant middle class from the Catholic aristocratic ancestors it often demonises. At the same time, as I will argue in the next section, the separation between past and present, between alien and domestic, is at the base of an important process of construction of national identity which dominates the Romantic Age. British writers' tendency to recover a common European past in order to reject it as alien and surpassed is the main aspect of Gothic literature's fascination with, and repulsion from, Italian religion and culture.

²⁷ Maggie Kilgour, *The Rise of Gothic Novel*, pp. 11-12.

2.2 Discourse of Nationalism in Gothic literature.

Linda Colley suggests that the powerful attraction that southern Europe exerted over British intellectuals actually strengthened the 'sense of identification with their [own] culture and politics, out of a desire to assert and confirm the prejudices and position that they themselves already held'.²⁸ The process of definition of national boundaries became particularly important towards the end of the eighteenth century, when wars in Europe and colonial conquests all over the world forced Great Britain to redefine and re-elaborate its own idea of Britishness.²⁹ As Linda Colley observes, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, Britons were encouraged to define themselves collectively against a hostile Other, and especially against France during the Revolution and Napoleonic wars. Britons defined themselves as Protestants 'struggling for survival against the world's foremost Catholic power'; they also defined themselves against the French as 'they imagined them to be, superstitious, militaristic, decadent and unfree'.³⁰ This is also true for Italy and Italians. Although not directly engaged in conflict with the different Italian political realities, Britain was ideologically in opposition to what Italy and its culture represented.³¹ As a country politically corrupted and enslaved, first by Napoleon, then by the Austrians in northern regions and by the Spaniards in the south, Italy represented a sort of antagonist country for the liberal and democratic British government.³² More importantly, Italy, as the most representative country of the Catholic faith, was the first religious enemy. It was

²⁸ Linda Colley, *Britons, Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 165.

²⁹ In this chapter I am referring most of the time to a British national identity. As Linda Colley has clearly demonstrated, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the idea of Britishness became a fundamental element of unity and strength for Great Britain, especially in its imperialistic conquest and in its relationship with other European countries. When I analyse specific settings in the novels, however, I turn to more circumscribed national identities; *Britons: Forging the Nation*, pp. 5-6.

³⁰ Linda Colley, *Britons, Forging the Nation*, pp. 35, 55.

³¹ Before the first Italian campaign of Napoleon in 1796, the Italian territory was divided among the Spanish in the south, the kingdom of Savoy in north-west and in Sardinia, the Prussians in Tuscany and the Austrians in Milan.

³² Napoleon formed the Italian kingdom under French government in his second Italian campaign in 1800 and occupied a large part of the territory previously under Austrian and Prussian authority.

the only country where the Pope not only preserved his religious authority, but still exerted his political and economic power over a large part of its territory.³³

National identity, Peter Sahlins has written, 'like ethnic or communal identity, is contingent and relational: it is defined by the social or territorial boundaries drawn to distinguish the collective self and its implicit negation, the other'.³⁴ This is to say that men and women decide who they are by reference to whom and what they are not. In this way, Italy and its inhabitants become to British eyes the Otherness to compare with and define against. The tendency to create national boundaries through negation rather than affirmation of identity is a common element in a large part of Gothic literature. The propensity to 'define themselves as a single people not because of any political or cultural consensus at home', but rather in reaction to the Other beyond their shores, is a fundamental component of Gothic novels set in continental Europe.³⁵ Considerations and discussions over national identities were actually diffusing all around Europe between 1770 and 1830. As Colley notices, in a large number of European states a broad debate about the boundaries and meaning of nationality took place, along with a conscious attempt to enshrine and glorify national culture and folkloristic traditions.³⁶ By the end of the eighteenth century Italy and Italians were seen as representative of a specific nation and culture by other European states. Even if the precarious political situation of the country did not allow a precise geographical contour of the nation, its ancient cultural tradition, the use of a common language, along with a collective predominant religion and a shared classical past, clearly delineated Italy as a nation to the eyes of its neighbouring European states. In particular, works of travel literature throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries referred to Italy as a culturally and historically well-defined country.

³³ The Pontifical State covered a large portion of central Italy and survived throughout the Napoleonic Wars, often constituting an important ally to anti-Napoleonic coalitions.

³⁴ Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: the Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenées* (Berkeley: University Presses of California, 1989), pp. 5-6.

³⁵ Linda Colley, 'Englishness and Otherness: an argument', *Journal of English Studies* 4:2 (1992), 30-45, (p. 31).

³⁶ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation*, p. 85.

Significantly, many works on the ideology and theory of nationality agree in defining the nation as a malleable construction, whose boundaries and identities are elastic and adaptable to different ages and contexts.³⁷ Benedict Anderson, for example, defines the nation as 'an imagined political community', whose members have common features, but never come to know each other.³⁸ Similarly Gellner argues that 'nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness', but it is a process which invents nations where they do not exist, and he compares true cultural communities with artificial political nations.³⁹ Anderson positions the birth and development of the modern idea of nation in the second half of the eighteenth century, when the traditional importance of dynastic realms and religious communities was questioned by much social and political turmoil all around Europe. According to the author, 'to think and imagine a nation became possible' by the end of the eighteenth century.⁴⁰ This is an essential point for the analysis of the use of Italy and Italian characters in Gothic literature. Although, as I argued earlier, the most important sources for description of the country and characterisation of its people in works of Gothic literature came from travel reports, many gothic novelists never visited Italy. Consequently, the image of Italy and Italians we come across in novels of the Romantic Age is the product of travel descriptions and of imagination. This implies that the Italy we find in Gothic novels is in most cases an imaginary construction, thought in relation to British reality and society. As Anderson observes, the roots of nationalism follow ambiguous directions. On one hand, nationalism is based on love of one country and on the exaltation of its merits; on the other, the root of this love often lies in 'fear and hate of the Other'.⁴¹ When the

³⁷ See, for example: John Lucas, *England and Englishness: ideas of nationhood in English poetry 1688-1900* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1990); Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London: Sage Publications, 1997); Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: a cultural history 1740-1830* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo (eds.), *Macropolitics of Nineteenth-century Literature: Nationalism, Exoticism, Imperialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

³⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 8.

³⁹ Gellner Ernest, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Balckwell, 1983), p. 14.

⁴⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 22.

⁴¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 141.

Other is a southern European Catholic country that the novelist never visited, the imaginary construction is easily based on opposition. By exaggerating differences and divergences, the comparison easily turns into an antithesis. However, Anderson proceeds, the nation came to be imagined, modelled and adapted also on the base of 'inspirational love', which means on the base of common characteristics.⁴² As the first section anticipated and my analysis will demonstrate, discourses of nationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries bear an evident ambiguity: besides the wish to rediscover common origins and a shared glorious past, British authors and intellectuals willingly define their modern country in terms of difference and opposition to other countries.

Romantic women writers, held an ambiguous position in the construction of national identity. Angela Keane has argued that, although women writers have rarely been taken as representatives of 'Romantic Englishness', they acquired important positions in the definition of the idea of Englishness, and more generally of Britishness in terms of social and cultural constructions.⁴³ The numerous novels written by women which focus on national discourses in the last decades of the century, demonstrate how women's interest and ideological participation in the construction of national identities were important, if not fundamental.⁴⁴ However, women's point of view often differs from the hegemonic masculine perspective exemplified by Goldsmith's text. Significantly, women's marginal position in society and in culture is frequently at the origin of a redefinition of the idea of Britishness and Otherness. In particular, women novelists tend to compare women's conditions in different countries, and to investigate possibilities which, however alien and unfamiliar to British society, may constitute potentially liberating alternatives to a masculine oriented society that is likewise alien for women. This redefinition of Britishness and Otherness is an important aspect of Gothic literature, since, after

⁴² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 142.

⁴³ Angela Keane, *Women Writers and the English Nation in the 1790s: Romantic Belongings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 1-2.

⁴⁴ See, for example: Ann Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation: Women's Political Writings in England, 1780-1830*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

the publication of Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, the genre was extensively dominated by women writers.⁴⁵

2.3 North and South: defining cultural imperialism.

An important aspect of the eighteenth-century discourse of nationalism is its centring on differences and similarities between northern and southern countries. As I will discuss later in the chapter, most Gothic literature uses stereotypical construction of southern Europe and its inhabitants.⁴⁶ The idealisation of a northern type of society over a southern culture of romance is at the base of the hegemonic point of view in Gothic literature dealing with continental settings. In a 'Comparative View of Races and Nations', Goldsmith argues for the superiority of Britain over other European countries, particularly Italy. He first addresses the traveller who, after many years of absence, revisits Britain. After claiming the joy that the traveller feels at revisiting his native country, the author argues that 'the spot which gave [the traveller] birth, how rude, how barbarous soever, has beauties beyond the most charming scene that ever art improved or fancy painted'.⁴⁷ Specifically, the traveller's native country is identified with Britain, while the beautiful scenes abandoned are associated with the Italian 'vales of Caprea', 'the orange-groves of Naples' or the 'luxuriant shades of Pisa'. However, what at first seems to be a nostalgic return to the site of childhood and affection is soon transformed into a nationalistic declamation of Britain's good qualities:

Happy Britain, happiest of countries! Happy in thy climate, fertility, situation, and commerce; but still happier in the peculiar nature of thy laws

⁴⁵ See, for example: E. J. Clery, *Women's Gothic from Clara Reeve to Mary Shelley* (Tavistock: Northcote House and English Council, 2000); *Varieties of Female Gothic*, general ed. Gary Kelly (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2002).

⁴⁶ Numerous theoretical reflections were published during the eighteenth century: Goldsmith's *The Traveller* (1764) and *A Comparative View of Races and Nations* (1756), James Beattie's 'On Fable and Romance', *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, 2 vols. (Dublin, 1783) and Richard Hurd's *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762).

⁴⁷ Oliver Goldsmith, 'A Comparative View of Races and Nations', *Royal Magazine*, June 1760, in *Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Arthur Friedman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 66.

and government. Examine every state in Europe, and you will find the people either enjoying a precarious freedom under monarchical government, or what is worse, actually slaves in a republic [...].⁴⁸

According to the author, Britain seems to possess a sum of physical, social and political qualities which makes it the most successful nation in Europe. The superiority of Britain is, again, measured against Italy in terms of climatic difference. Goldsmith argues that Britain enjoys a more moderate climate than Italy, and concludes by saying that these are only 'some of the many advantages we enjoy above the rest of mankind'.⁴⁹ Goldsmith's view is clearly representative of the hegemonic British attitude towards other countries, in this case towards other European countries.

As I explained in the introduction, matters of climate seem to be at the origin of numerous theories about the differences between northern and southern cultures in the eighteenth century. James Beattie argues that the hardship of northern climate demands 'industry' in order 'to obtain even the necessaries of life', thus it creates a strong and efficient population.⁵⁰ Where the climate is cold, Beattie continues, men require a continual exertion, vigilance of mind and bodily labour. On the contrary, the fruitful climate of southern countries creates an indolent and languid population, for 'there neither art nor labour is necessary to procure what is requisite to life'. In this context, 'both the mind and the body are apt to grow languid for want of exercise'.⁵¹ What is especially worthy of attention in this passage, as I already suggested, is the gender relevance of the differences between north and south of Europe. As the author clearly states, northern populations are characterised by physical strength and quickness of mind, while southern people are mostly described as indolent and 'effeminate'. As Michèle Cohen points out, in the course of the eighteenth century masculinity was

⁴⁸ Oliver Goldsmith, 'A Comparative View', pp. 67-68.

⁴⁹ Oliver Goldsmith, 'A Comparative View', p. 68.

⁵⁰ James Beattie, 'On Fable and Romance'; *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, 2 vols. (Dublin, 1783), vol. I, p. 255.

⁵¹ James Beattie, 'On Fable and Romance', pp. 255-257.

becoming more sharply defined against femininity.⁵² Furthermore, as Goldsmith argues in his essay, British culture distinguishes itself from the rest of Europe, 'by [its] superior accuracy in reasoning', and Britons 'are in general called the nation of philosophers by their neighbours of the continent'.⁵³ In eighteenth-century culture, reason was another important attribute of masculinity in contrast with women's natural inclination for feelings and emotions.⁵⁴ By separating British ability to reason from other countries, Goldsmith re-confirms the masculine traits of British culture. In terms of national identities, this division involved a definition of Britain as a masculine nation in opposition to other, effeminate, nations, particularly France. Gender became an important issue in the definition of national characters after the French Revolution. According to Linda Colley, the outbreak of an increasingly radical revolution in a nation viewed as peculiarly 'feminine' and susceptible to female influence brought Great Britain to identify itself as a traditionally masculine society.⁵⁵ Similarly, Tim Fulford argues that in the last decades of the eighteenth century, Britain longed to demonstrate its power and manliness against the French and their effeminate culture.⁵⁶ This gender definition of masculine Britishness against effeminate Otherness can be easily extended to Italy. As Goldsmith's text has highlighted, Italy epitomises the common view of southern countries and therefore, in Beattie's terms, it represents an indolent and effeminate culture. This division of Europe is particularly relevant for the analysis of women's fiction dealing with national issues in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In their analysis of Britishness in its relation to Otherness, women novelists have clearly in mind that there is an issue of gender at stake. In particular, by choosing to compare British culture with other European southern

⁵² Michèle Cohen and Tim Hitchcock (eds.), *English Masculinities 1660-1800* (London: Longman, 1999), p. 3.

⁵³ Oliver Goldsmith, 'A Comparative View', p. 85.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) for contemporary argumentation for and against.

⁵⁵ Linda Colley, *Britons*, p. 253.

⁵⁶ Tim Fulford, *Romanticism and Masculinity: gender, politics and poetics in the writings of Burke, Coleridge, Cobbett, Wordsworth, De Quincey and Hazlitt* (London: MacMillan Press, 1999), pp. 7-9.

countries, women tend to exploit this gender division in order to discuss their roles in British society.

As Beattie's and Goldsmith's works suggest, British authors seem to position their country and culture in a hegemonic relation to other European countries, and particularly to southern ones, in view of the physical strength and intellectual abilities of its population. This hegemonic perspective is not only typical of British attitude towards colonial imperialism, it is important also in a European context. Although Great Britain never attempted to conquer Italy, its exotic characterisations and cultural traditions are often viewed and appropriated with an imperialistic purpose, which is that of ameliorating the British nation. This attitude, which E.J. Clery defines as 'acquisitive admiration', involves an act of appropriation by British travellers of what they consider positive aspects of other cultures.⁵⁷ Goldsmith's text is again exemplary: after declaiming the superiority of Britain over other countries, the author claims that by travelling, 'Englishmen could make [themselves] more useful to society'; particularly they 'could mend that country in which [they] reside, by improvements from those which [they] have left behind'.⁵⁸ In relation to Italy, for example, this position values Italian artistic and literary traditions, while it despises Italian common people and society. The attitude of the British traveller is clearly judgemental. In this way, the aim of travelling is to acquire new knowledge in order to become a better British citizen and in order to improve British society. This form of 'cultural imperialism' is at the base of many Gothic novels.

Radcliffe's novels propose a similar hegemonic point of view. In particular, the English travellers' perspective in *The Italian* not only strengthens the idea of Italy as Other, it also suggests a cultural, social and political superiority of one country over the other. The contrast between Englishness and Italianess is revealed in the Preface, which provides the frame for the story. In it the reader is informed

⁵⁷ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian or the Confessional of the Black Penitents: a romance*; ed. by Frederic Garber, with an introduction and notes by E.J. Clery (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xii.

⁵⁸ Oliver Goldsmith, 'A Comparative View of Races and Nations', p. 68.

that 'about the year 1764, some English travellers in Italy, during one of their excursions in the environs of Naples, happened to stop before the portico of Santa Maria del Pianto, a church belonging to a very ancient convent of the order of the Black Penitents'.⁵⁹ The shift of a few years into the past helps the reader to contextualize the story. The English travellers, in fact, appear soon to be typical aristocratic Grand Tourists journeying through Italy at the time when this practice was at the peak of its popularity, that is before the French Revolution and the beginning of Napoleonic wars. The magnificence of the building excites so much admiration that 'the travellers were curious to survey the structure to which it belonged'.⁶⁰ The first reaction to a setting so peculiarly unfamiliar is admiration, which, in turn, generates a feeling of curiosity and a need to explore the spot. It is then that the travellers meet a strange human figure passing by who strikes their attention. They soon discover him to be an assassin who has found asylum within the church. The Englishman's reaction clearly reveals astonishment: 'An assassin [...], an assassin and at liberty'. The cultural clash is then further developed: 'This is astonishing! Of what avail are your laws, if the most atrocious criminal may thus find shelter from them? But how does he contrive to exist here! He is, at least, in danger of starvation?'.⁶¹ As their Italian friend replies that there are always people willing to assist those in need, the Englishman's comment is one of incredulity: 'I can scarcely credit what I see now!'.⁶² This frame establishes the dualistic relation which pervades the whole novel. The traveller's attitude towards Italian reality appears to be one of superiority. The Englishman's astonishment at the inconsistency of Italian laws and at the impunity given to assassins is mainly produced by his awareness of belonging to a country where laws are usually observed and where assassins are always punished. The English tourist's gaze is somehow self-validating of his cultural superiority. This approach separates what is good and appreciable in Italian culture, in this case the beautiful façade of the

⁵⁹ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 1.

⁶⁰ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 1.

⁶¹ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 2.

church, from what is negative and dangerous, the assassin, and it emblematises the ambivalent English approach to Italy, based on one hand on 'acquisitive admiration', and on the other on fear and revulsion. Nevertheless, the English tourists willingly agree to read the manuscript that their Italian friend hands to them, thus revealing how the cultural difference is a source not only of astonishment but also of curiosity. This ambivalent attitude towards Italian culture and customs is a fundamental aspect of *The Italian*. The determination to explore an alien reality is the origin of a process of confrontation which is implicitly carried out throughout the novel. In fact, although all the characters in the novel are Italian, the narrator's point of view is clearly English. In particular, the initial frame establishes an English leading perspective which looks out onto a foreign society. This important aspect of the narrative gives English readers the possibility of identifying with a precise point of view from the beginning of the story.

More importantly, the process of confrontation between two controversial realities encourages readers to interrogate their own culture and national identity. The Other, embodied in the preface by the assassin, is initially introduced as different and suspicious to the eyes of English travellers: 'he was of a tall thin figure, bending forward from the shoulders; of a sallow complexion, and harsh features'.⁶³ The travellers' reaction exemplifies the ambivalent attitude towards alien, and particularly exotic, civilization. The initial curiosity soon turns into a will to discover more about a society which, however unfamiliar and even repulsive, remains fascinating. According to this perspective, the aim of the novel is that of revealing the secret of an alien nation to the curious English readers of the manuscript.⁶⁴ In the imaginative geography of Gothic literature, Italian culture and places are judged by those who represent another world and another culture. However, English subjects looking over Italian objects are not always constructed

⁶² Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 2

⁶³ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 1.

⁶⁴ Cannon Schmitt defines the pleasure of exoticism as the tendency to describe the Other in terms of stereotypical construction. Cannon Schmitt, 'Techniques of terror, technologies of nationality: Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*', *ELH*, 61: 4, (Winter 1994), 853-76.

in terms of superiority, and the Italian character in the novel is able to interact with the main point of view.⁶⁵ Symbolically, the mysterious Italian assassin reacts to the English travellers' curiosity: '[he] had an eye, which, as it looked up from the cloak that muffled the lower part of his countenance, seemed expressive of uncommon ferocity'.⁶⁶ The act of looking back of the assassin represents the possibility given to the alien element to express itself, though always within the dialogical frame established by the dominant point of view. Elaborating Mikhail Bakhtin's narrative theory, Paula Backscheider argues that every text has a space within it for the Other, for opposition and for whatever occupies the position that is not expressive of the dominant.⁶⁷ In a way, the narrative of *The Italian* is apparently constructed on the opposition between English and Italian values. In point of fact, the space that the dominant point of view allows to the other within the novel is limited. Yet, the communication between the two sets of values is active in the narrative. As my analysis will demonstrate, English and Italian values are not always in opposition: sometimes they intermingle. The confrontation between what is representative of English society and what is representative of Italian culture brings to the surface differences and similarities at the same time, thus creating the possibility of a mutual interchange, which criticisms on Gothic literature have rarely taken into consideration.

⁶⁵ Diego Saglia, 'Looking at the Other: Cultural Difference and the Traveller's Gaze in *The Italian*', *Studies in the Novel*, 28: 1, (Spring 1996), 12-37, (p. 14).

⁶⁶ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 1.

⁶⁷ Paula Backscheider (ed.), *Revising Women: Eighteenth-Century 'Women's Fiction' and Social Engagement* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 6.

2.4 Delineating Otherness: *The Italian, or the Confessional of the Black Penitents*.

When Ann Radcliffe decided to set her fifth and most successful novel in Italy in 1797, she had at least two famous predecessors: Richardson and Walpole. Samuel Richardson's *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, published in 1754, was the first romance mingling English and Italian characters. In the preface the author divides the characters into three categories: men, women and Italians. The Italians are passionate and violent, people who are ready to stab for love and run mad for jealousy. 'Confidants, orange groves, temples; the apparatus of confinement and torture; persecution by the Church and state; disguise and assassins' already characterised Italian settings.⁶⁸ However, while Richardson and Walpole had set their stories in Italy principally with the aim of creating a historically and geographically distant environment, Radcliffe is deeply engaged in the exploration of national differences. The 'otherness' of Italy is the constant theme of *The Italian*, and it is a source of terror and delight.

Ellena and Vivaldi are both representative of English values. Throughout the novel the hero and heroine's behaviour while they face various difficulties is almost always impeccable. They clearly epitomize middle-class values, with which the eighteenth- and nineteenth- century readers could easily identify. However, all characters are theoretically Italian, except the English travellers who frame the story. The clash between national values and national identities is only implicitly carried out in the novel. Radcliffe, in fact, never brings to the surface an open reflection on national differences. The choice to name the villain and protagonist 'the Italian' is the only clear sign of nationality in the novel. Yet, on a symbolic level, the distinction appears clear from the beginning. By the time Ellena and Vivaldi are forced to face persecution and injustice, the reader has already

⁶⁸ Samuel Richardson, *Sir Charles Grandison*, ed. by Jocelyn Harris (London : London University Press, 1972), p. xvii.

perceived that the hero and heroine are clearly more representative of an English set of values than the other characters in the novel.⁶⁹

Ellena is the typical innocent heroine of Gothic literature. From the beginning of the story she appears to be the sum of conventional feminine traits. We know she strikes Vivaldi for her 'sweetness and fine expression', for her air of 'delicacy and grace', but also for her beauty and her 'elegant mind'.⁷⁰ Ellena's most prominent characteristics are almost completely in accordance with the idea of feminine propriety: modesty, humility, delicacy and chastity. Her behaviour is always decent and sensible, she can control her emotions, even when she is forced to cope with difficult and dangerous situations. She is a simple person, 'innocent and happy in the silent performance of her duties and in the veil of retirement'.⁷¹ Although her features are of a 'Grecian outline', her physical appearance is more typical of northern countries having 'dark blue eyes' and fine silky hair.⁷² Her education follows the standard eighteenth-century learning which was reserved to women. She can embroider finely, she can play the lute for entertainment, and she can easily sustain a conversation in society. English middle-class women reading the novel would easily recognize in Ellena the embodiment of their own principles of education and lady-like behaviour. However, Ellena is not simply the product of a conservative upbringing. From the narrator's description the reader also knows that her eyes 'sparkled with intelligence', and that her ability to interpret events is more developed than would be expected in a young girl.⁷³ Moreover, Ellena is an economically independent woman. Her orphaned condition forces Ellena to work for a living. This circumstance, most unusual for eighteenth-century women, is clearly

⁶⁹ See: Diego Saglia, 'Looking at the Other: Cultural Differences and the Traveller's Gaze in *The Italian*'; Cannon Schmitt, 'Techniques of Terror, Technologies of Nationality: Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*'.

⁷⁰ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 5.

⁷¹ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 9.

⁷² Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 6.

⁷³ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 6.

seen as positive, and the fact that Ellena is making a living out of her ability to embroider 'did honour to her character'.⁷⁴

As a matter of fact, Ellena's character is not only chaste and humble, but also extremely strong and attentive. Her sense of justice and dignity, for example, prevents her from accepting passively the moral and intellectual violence the abbess of Santo Stefano imposes on her. She defends her rights and independence of mind with a strength and an awareness utterly inconceivable for a eighteenth-century girl, whether in the oppressive and evil Italian society, or in the liberal and democratic English environment. At the same time Ellena is able to maintain a level of rationality uncommon for a woman with little experience. For example she refuses to marry Vivaldi secretly till she sees it as the only way to gain her liberty, and only after Vivaldi's suffering and prayers have demonstrated the loyalty of his attachment. When a prisoner of Schedoni and Spalatro, she perceives the danger of the situation and she is even able to anticipate her enemy's moves. Ellena's character is probably the offspring of a broader contemporary debate on the education of women. To a certain extent, she is the educational product of Rousseau's *Emile* (1764), one of the most conservative texts on female education published in the course of the eighteenth century.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, if Rousseau's principles may be at the base of Ellena's conventional education, her cleverness and inquisitive mind may have been inspired by Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792).⁷⁶ By depicting Ellena as chaste, timid and domestic, but also clever and astute, Radcliffe seems to demonstrate the limitations of the traditional education, not only for the alien and foreign society of

⁷⁴ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 9.

⁷⁵ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. by Barbara Foxley (London : J.M. Dent, 1992). Chloe Chard has proved that Radcliffe was familiar with the text in her introduction to *The Romance of the Forest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. xxiii. For an extensive analysis of the influence of Rousseau on Radcliffe's novels see: Norton Rictor, *Mistress of Udolpho: the life of Ann Radcliffe* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999), pp. 112-115; Robert Miles, *Ann Radcliffe: the Great Enchantress* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 153-154.

⁷⁶ For an extensive analysis of the controversial relationship between Wollstonecraft and Radcliffe see Norton Rictor, *Mistress of Udolpho*, pp. 156, 166, 169, and Robert Miles, *Ann Radcliffe*, pp. 117, 144, 153, 154.

Italy, but also for the familiar English environment.⁷⁷ After all, novels such as Mary Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman, or Maria* (1798), dealt with situations of imprisonment and domestic violence in an English context, thus demonstrating that danger for women was much closer than the Italian exotic setting of Gothic literature.

The transformation Ellena undergoes when she is under pressure, reveals a highly unconventional attitude for a proper lady. Yet, the principles that lead her to such unconventional behaviour are always within the boundaries of Englishness. Ellena's rebellious attitudes are the result of her strong sense of justice and hatred of inequity. When she refuses to obey the commanding will of the Abbess, she is in fact asserting her superiority of principles and values over an envious and evil alien authority. After refusing either to take the veil or to marry an unknown man, Ellena thus addresses the abbess:

Having said this, I am prepared to meet whatever suffering you shall inflict upon me; but be assured, that my own voice never shall sanction the evils to which I may be subjected, and that the immortal love of justice, which fills all my heart, will sustain my courage no less powerfully than the sense of what is due to my own character. You are now acquainted with my sentiments and my resolutions; I shall repeat them no more.⁷⁸

Ellena's determination is the result of her hatred of injustice. She refuses to succumb to an authority which she considers evil and alien to her principles. In this passage, Ellena clearly represents the English sense of justice and individual freedom measured against the Italian tyrannical power of the Catholic Church. In this sense, Radcliffe shows how women are as representative of English values as men. The encounter with the Italian corrupted and despotic reality seems to help women to show their national belongings. At the same time it stresses how limiting their positions within the English nation are, and how women's intellectual abilities

⁷⁷ Critics such as Marilyn Butler, Janet Todd and Eleanor Ty have positioned Radcliffe between Burkean ideals and radical beliefs. Ty, for example, argues that Radcliffe's romances 'can be read as attempts to subvert or challenge the notion of benevolent patriarchy and the ideological construction of the docile, delicate eighteenth-century woman', *Unsex'd Revolutionaries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), pp. 23-30.

remain mostly undeveloped. Radcliffe seems to use Italy to critique English society, especially women's marginal position in it. In this way, the role of the Italian setting becomes complicated. What is at first a stereotypical view of an evil south and an alien uncivilised society becomes an indispensable context for the improvement of women's intellect and consciousness. In effect, Ellena shows her mental and spiritual abilities only when she is forced to cope with difficulties. It seems that the heroine who embodies the English idea of feminine propriety is able to step out of the conventional path when an unfamiliar situation occurs. As a result, English feminine values of domesticity, humility and docility seem to be inappropriate to face uncommon danger. Gothic heroines are put into a position where only by interpreting and understanding the situation can they get out of danger and save their lives. In this sense, the Italian environment with its evils and injustices becomes a suitable setting for female improvement. In other words, Italy provides the challenging situations that middle-class English women lack in their domestic environment, thus allowing them to show their neglected abilities. If Ellena, with her limited and practical education, is able to interpret and understand difficult and alien situations, then middle-class English women could potentially be able to cope successfully any dangerous circumstance.

The co-existence of intransigent otherness and domestic sameness is at the base of a larger confrontation between foreign and domestic in a historical period particularly important in the formation of the English nation and the elaboration of the concept of English national identity. Gothic novels, like sentimental novels, advance the cause of England and Englishness by means of opposed characters, and intensify the opposition by setting the action in an anti-nation and pitting the protagonists against monstrously 'other' antitypes. As Schmitt observes, Ellena is recognizable as English only because she is defined against the foreign.⁷⁹ Anna Letitia Barbauld notes how Radcliffe's 'living characters correspond to the scenery:- their wicked projects are dark, singular, atrocious. They are not of English growth;

⁷⁸ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 84.

their guilt is tinged with a darker hue than that of the bad and profligate characters we see in the world about us'.⁸⁰ Foreignness in *The Italian* is concentrated in the character of Schedoni. He epitomises the ambiguity of Italian characters, since he stimulates a feeling both of repulsion and attraction in the reader. At first he appears to be the typical villain. He is a heap of negative traits: evil, wicked, opportunistic, vindictive, jealous and murderous.

As Mario Praz observes, evil and wicked Italian characters originally spring out of Elizabethan dramas, and specifically from Shakespeare, Jonson, Fletcher and Marlowe.⁸¹ The revival of Elizabethan drama at the end of the eighteenth century may be at the origin of the popularity of the Italian villain in works of Gothic literature and drama throughout the Romantic period.⁸² After Walpole's Manfred in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), William Godwin's epistolary novel *Italian Letters* (1783) proposes a similar passionate and vengeful character. John Moore's *Zeluco* (1789) and Ann Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* (1790) are just two examples of the proliferation of Italian villains in British Romantic literature. The phenomenon takes on a stronger impulse after the publication of William Roscoe's *Life of Lorenzo de' Medici* (1795) and *The Life and Pontificate of Leo X* (1805), where the author describes carefully and with historical accuracy sixteenth-century Italian life, and re-introduces the figure of the Macchiavellian hero. By the time Radcliffe came to write *The Italian*, however, John Moore had already published his *Views of Society and Manners in Italy*, where he clearly denies many stereotypical constructions of Italy and of Italians as murderous and powerful people.⁸³ The author comments on how 'travellers are too apt to form hasty and unfavourable opinions of national characters', since they find 'the customs and sentiments of the inhabitants of the

⁷⁹ Cannon Schmitt, 'Techniques of terror, technologies of nationality', p. 855.

⁸⁰ Anna Letitia Barbauld, 'Mrs. Radcliffe', *The British Novelists*, 50 vols. (London: Printed for Rivington and Others, 1810), vol. XLIII: I, p. viii.

⁸¹ Mario Praz, *The Flaming Heart: Essays on Crashaw, Macchiavelli; and other Studies in Relations between Italian and English Literature from Chaucer to T.S. Eliot* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1966), pp. 90-146.

⁸² Kenneth Churchill, for example, comments how 'the villains re-invigorated the "Macchiavellian" figure of the Jacobean dramatists and suggested malice and mystery in every hooded figure in the Italian streets' (*Italy and English Literature*, p. 18).

foreign countries very different from their own'.⁸⁴ Difference is the first source of suspicion, and travellers are ready to consider foreigners 'as erroneous, and conclude that those who act and think in a manner so opposite to themselves, must be either knaves, fools, or both'. Having criticised the traveller's common attitude towards alien people, Moore gives his own opinion of Italians:

From the opportunities I have had, my idea of Italians is, that they are ingenious sober people, with quick feelings, and therefore irritable; but when unprovoked, of a mild and obliging disposition, and less subject to avarice and envy than most other nations.⁸⁵

Radcliffe was aware of the superficiality of national stereotypes and she created in Schedoni not simply a villain but a psychologically elaborated character. As the *Monthly Mirror* commented in 1797, Schedoni is not only a repulsive character, but he is also attractive and fascinating: 'Schedoni is a villain with great energy, with strong passions, and inordinate pride; sometimes softened by the feelings of humanity, but preserving the firmness of his mind in the most trying situation, and the ferocity of his disposition even in the hour of death and punishment'.⁸⁶ The misfortune of his life had developed a 'gloomy pride' in Schedoni and had transformed him into a very solitary and mysterious character. Nevertheless, in spite of his strangeness and isolation his mysterious personality attracts the interest of people: some 'loved him, many disliked him, and more feared him'. His physical appearance strikes the English traveller for its foreignness and its unfamiliarity:

His figure was striking, but not so from grace; it was tall, and though extremely thin, his limbs were large and uncouth, and as he stalked along, wrapt in the black garments of his order, there was something terrible in its air; something almost super-human.⁸⁷

⁸³ John Moore, *View of Society and Manners in Italy*, 2 vols. (London, 1781), vol. II, pp. 377, 378.

⁸⁴ John Moore, *Views of Society and Manners*, vol. II, p. 459.

⁸⁵ John Moore, *Views of Society and Manners*, vol. II, p. 460.

⁸⁶ *Montly Mirror* 3 (March 1797), p. 157.

⁸⁷ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, pp. 34-35. For a more detailed analysis of Schedoni's physiognomy see John Graham, 'Character Description and Meaning in the Romantic Novel', *Studies in Romanticism* 5 (1996), 208-218.

His physiognomy typically reflects the evil of his soul, and his facial characteristics are clearly non-English: 'there was something in his physiognomy extremely singular [...] It bore the traces of many passions, which seemed to have fixed the features they no longer animated'; a habitual gloom and severity marked the lines of his countenance and 'his eyes were so piercing that they seemed to penetrate, at a single glance, into the hearts of men, and to read their most secret thoughts'.⁸⁸ Schedoni's physical and psychological traits are clearly foreign, especially if compared with Ellena and Vivaldi's countenance. Within the boundary of the imaginary geography of Europe, Schedoni is a typical product of southern countries, where the excess of passions and of uncivilized behaviour seem to be the dominant cultural traits.

Andrew Smith argues that the status of the Other in Gothic literature is usually the result of the tendency of society 'to exclude as "evil" anything radically different from itself or which threatens it with destruction, and this conceptualisation, this naming of difference as evil, is a significant ideological gesture'.⁸⁹ In *The Italian*, the English point of view is dominant throughout the narrative, but it is also undeniable that the Other is given a possibility not only to express itself, but also to explain its evilness, and eventually to redeem its position.⁹⁰ Half-way through the story, the mysterious character of Schedoni starts to be revealed to the reader in his complexity. Although always a murderous, opportunistic and evil character, in the course of the long scene at the Inquisition, Schedoni appears as a victim himself of injustice, and particularly of the adulterous behaviour of his wife, and the consequent misfortune of his family. Thus, the evil monk turns from persecutor into victim. More generally, Schedoni as representative

⁸⁸ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 35.

⁸⁹ Andrew Smith, *Gothic Radicalism: Literature, Philosophy and Psychoanalysis in the Nineteenth Century* (London: MacMillan Press, 2000), p. 34.

⁹⁰ In 1798 Nathan Drake observed how 'every word and every action of the self-accusing Confessor, whose character is marked with traits almost super-human, appal and delight the reader, and it is difficult to ascertain whether ardent curiosity, intense commiseration, or apprehension that suspends almost the faculty of breathing, be, in the progress of this well-written story, most powerfully excited'

of Otherness turns out to be different from what the English dominant point of view had thought. The initial looking back of the Other to the English tourists in the Preface started a dialogical relation between the two nations which goes beyond oppositions and stereotypical constructions. The Italian has been given enough space in the text at least to question the English initial, superficial prejudices. Only after the Other has revealed the complexity of its identity, can the reader make a judgment of it.

The dialogical relation between Other and familiar seems even to find a close interconnection. For a certain portion of the narrative, readers suppose Ellena to be the daughter of Schedoni, an assumption which would be only later denied by Olivia, Ellena's mother. However, for the length of three chapters, the possibility of relating Ellena and Schedoni is seriously taken into consideration. It seems that the pure, timid and virtuous Ellena can be the offspring of the evil and repulsive Schedoni. In this sense, Ellena, as representative of the English system of values, could potentially be the progeny of an Italian villain. If we consider this possibility in the wider eighteenth-century context of the origin of Gothic literature, that is the revival of interest in the Middle Ages and its encounter of northern chivalric values with southern romance, Schedoni could represent an ancestral component of English culture. As in the case of Walpole's preface to *The Castle of Otranto*, Radcliffe envisions the possibility of linking English and Italian societies by reminding the reader how evil and passionate characters have, after all, been once part of English society. The fact that Ellena is not actually Schedoni's daughter prevents a further development of this interconnection. However, the moment Schedoni suspects his relation with Ellena is an important one, since it marks the change in the villain's attitude. Schedoni becomes as protective towards Ellena as he was cruel before. He makes every attempt to save her from the Marchesa's rage and he now uses his power over the Marchesa to convince her of Ellena's merits, thus promoting her marriage with Vivaldi. The close meeting with northern values,

('On Objects of Terror', *Literary Hours: or Sketches, Critical, Narrative, and Poetical*, 3 vols.

exemplified by Ellena and Vivaldi, has changed Schedoni's attitude. In the course of the narrative, the Italian villain has been transformed into a positive and fascinating character. This change could be read as a sign of 'cultural imperialism', and Schedoni's improvement could be interpreted as a result of English efforts to impose a sense of justice and duty over Italian culture. However, at this stage of the analysis, it is important to stress Radcliffe's use of Italian setting and characters in order to meditate on national identities, and in order to attempt a re-formulation of national and gender roles.

2.5 'Monkish Superstition': Catholic politics in *The Italian*.⁹¹

Religion was an important element in the definition of national identity. As Mark Camuel remarks, Protestantism had been a fundamental constituent of British nationality since the time of the Reform, in the sixteenth century.⁹² Anglicanism, therefore, was an important national connotation and was defined in its original anti-Catholic connotation. One of the most important characterisations of Great Britain was its being in opposition with the corrupt, superstitious and archaic Catholic faith. This religious antagonism is mostly constructed around a northern post-Reform Europe on one side, and a southern religiously outdated Catholicism on the other. Many critical works on Gothic literature have pointed out how religion, and especially the view of an evil and corrupt Catholic authority, is one of the most important elements of Gothic novels.⁹³ By deciding to set the plot in a Catholic country the Gothic author usually wanted to evoke a world of superstition, mystery, corruption and injustice, deeply associated with a distant historical period. As Mary Muriel Torr argues, a novel set in the eighteenth century in a Catholic country was

(London: Longman, 1820), vol. I, p. 273).

⁹¹ The expression 'Monkish superstition' is employed by Mary Muriel Torr in *Catholicism in Gothic Literature: a study of the nature and function of Catholic material in Gothic literature in England (1762-1820)* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1946), p. 18.

⁹² Mark Camuel, ' "Holy Hypocrisy" and the Government of belief: religion and nationalism in the Gothic', *Studies in Romanticism* 34:4 (Winter 1995), 507-530, (p. 509).

automatically associated with a medieval plot.⁹⁴ This happened because the majority of British readers could imagine a society governed by Catholic authority only in an archaic culture. The expression 'monkish superstition', as Mary Muriel Torr explains, was commonly used to define not only Catholic institutions, but also the culture and society connected with them. In light of this, the eighteenth-century reader's approach to a novel set in a Catholic country necessarily involved a 'sense of relief that the modern world had been delivered from the fanatic superstition of earlier times'.⁹⁵ A new post-Reformist age of reason had supplanted an old Catholic age of superstition.

Significantly, the aim of many gothic novels which dealt with the Catholic faith was to remind readers how lucky British society was to have surpassed the dark ages of superstition and to have moved into an enlightened society. As a result, the oppositional relation between Anglicanism and Catholicism intended to highlight English values by comparing them with an often exaggerated evil Other. Religious difference was in fact a major division between European countries and often led to alienation and antagonism. In this respect, Italy was regarded by Protestant nations as the epicentre of spiritual corruption, mainly because it was the country which contained the Vatican State, the centre of papal power. Yet, nineteenth-century readers of Gothic literature show an unusual fascination with the scenarios of religious, and particularly Catholic, systems of subversion and oppression.⁹⁶ Quite paradoxically, it seems that monastic settings populated by savage monks and wicked nuns, who bring violence upon innocent victims, found an enthusiastic readership.

Critical works on *The Italian* have often described the novel as anti-Catholic.⁹⁷ Unquestionably, Radcliffe voices prejudices and exploits stereotypical

⁹³ See for example, Kate Ferguson Ellis, 'Ann Radcliffe and the Perils of Catholicism', *Women's Writing*, 1:2 (1994), 161-169.

⁹⁴ Mary Muriel Torr, *Catholicism in Gothic Literature*, p. 7.

⁹⁵ Mary Muriel Torr, *Catholicism in Gothic Literature*, p. 21.

⁹⁶ Mark Camuel, ' "Holy Hypocrisy" ', pp. 515-516.

⁹⁷ See, for example, Diane Long Hoeveler, *Gothic Feminism: the professionalization of gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontes* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998), p. 52; Ann McWhir,

constructions and preconceptions about Catholicism.⁹⁸ However, Radcliffe's approach to the Catholic church, and especially to its hierarchical establishment, reveals an ambivalent attitude of repulsion and fascination. As in the case of stereotypical constructions of Italian characters, Radcliffe had probably assimilated John Moore's *A View of Society and Manners in Italy*. In it the author describes the condition of the Church in Naples, the same setting Radcliffe chose for *The Italian*. As the title *The Italian, or the Confessional of the Black Penitents* suggests, Radcliffe's novel is deeply impregnated with religious elements. A large part of the story is set in convents and monasteries, while a long section deals with the tribunal of the Inquisition. The importance of Catholic elements in the novel is revealed from its beginning. The English travellers, in fact, decide to investigate the story of the mysterious 'person with folded arms', mainly because the magnificence of the church of Santa Maria del Pianto excited admiration and curiosity. In the course of the story the reader meets numerous religious men and women, many of them evil and corrupted characters. In addition to the villain Schedoni, who is a monk belonging to the order of the black penitents, and who represents the most strikingly corrupt and evil side of the Church, Catholic otherness is embodied by many 'inglorious monks and nuns', who clearly depict the church hierarchy as dishonest and unscrupulous.⁹⁹ The nuns at the Convent of Santo Stefano, for example, are characterised by 'a gloomy malignity, which seemed ready to inflict upon others some portion of the unhappiness they suffered'.¹⁰⁰ Ordinary nuns are most of the time victims themselves of the evil Catholic machinery, which forces many young women to abandon the world and confine themselves within the convent's walls. Their evil is somehow the result of envy and frustration, generated by a life of sacrifice and privation. In *The Italian* then, and in most Gothic

'The Gothic Transgression of Disbelief: Walpole, Radcliffe, and Lewis', in *Gothic Fictions: Prohibition/Transgression*, ed. by Kenneth W. Graham (New York: Ams Press, 1989), pp. 29-48.

⁹⁸ Norton Rictor, for instance, defines Radcliffe as 'almost virulently anti-Roman Catholic' (*Mistress of Udolpho*, p. 115).

⁹⁹ Mary Muriel Torr, *Catholicism in Gothic Literature*, p. 109.

¹⁰⁰ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 66.

literature, what is judged as evil and corrupt is the whole system of the Catholic Church and its major authorities.

Catholic materials in Gothic fiction serve the element of melodramatic sentimentality and their principal function is 'to create wonder' by stimulating the imagination of English readers unaccustomed to a Catholic set of values.¹⁰¹ Although the function of Catholic details in *The Italian* seems to validate this assumption, the novel also analyses Catholic materials in its complexity of hierarchical relations. Characters who have authority and power within the Church are always the most wicked and proud. The Abbess of Santo Stefano, for example, is the personification not only of corruption, but paradoxically of attachment to the material world she has renounced in taking her vows: 'this abbess, who was herself a woman of some distinction, believed that of all possible crimes, next to that of sacrilege, offences against persons of rank were least pardonable'.¹⁰² By attempting to marry far beyond her social sphere, therefore, Ellena is guilty of a terrible crime, aggravated by her insistence in defending her innocence and her rights. Consequently, the treatment the Abbess gives to Ellena is particularly cruel and vengeful. To English readers, the submission to an utterly artificial hierarchical system is one of the most incomprehensible elements. English society, in fact, was historically based on liberality and democracy. The possibility of being subjugated to an evil and unlimited power is probably the most frightening experience that Ellena, and British readers with her, can undergo. John Moore makes this point clear in his *A View of Society and Manners*. In the section dedicated to the description of the Venetian Inquisition he observes how:

The Tribunal of State Inquisitors has the power of deciding without appeal, on the lives of every citizen belonging to the state; the highest of the nobility, not being excepted. They keep the keys of the boxes in which anonymous information are thrown.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Mary Muriel Torr, *Catholicism in Gothic Literature*, p. 120.

¹⁰² Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 67.

¹⁰³ John Moore, *A View of Society and Manners*, vol. II, p. 174.

The scenes dealing with the Roman tribunal of the Inquisition in *The Italian* partly recreate the limitless influence that the tribunal had when the Papal state was at the utmost of its power, that is in the sixteenth century. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Tribunal still existed but had lost most of its power, and was strictly effective only in Papal states. However, Vivaldi's captivity in the tribunal prison and his trial demonstrate how the idea of a powerful ecclesiastical authority was still clearly vivid in the mind of British people. As John Moore notices, the most appalling trait of this tribunal was its inquisitive methodology of investigation. This followed an utterly paradoxical logic, independent from any influence of the state system of laws. To the liberal British society this power is completely unconceivable: 'Can you think you would be perfectly composed, and easy in your mind, if you lived in the same state with persons who had the power of shutting you up in a dungeon, and putting you to death when they pleased, and without being accountable for so doing?'¹⁰⁴ To some extent this is what happens to Vivaldi in *The Italian*. He is arrested for having interrupted a monk- Schedoni- during his religious devotion and, most seriously, to have kidnapped a novice- Ellena. What is most striking to the British imagination is the subtle system of conspiracy which leads to the acceptance of a culture of persecution and terror, completely alien to human nature. Actually, this inquisitional system of government was a reality much more contemporary than the historically distant age of the Inquisition. In post-revolutionary France, the charge of treason was the chief instrument of rule by terror. In this period the typical procedures of government control were inquisitorial and mysterious, based on an arbitrary system of spies, arrest on suspicion, indefinite imprisonment, physical and mental torture, trial under the mere presumption of guilt, and the omnipresent threat of execution. Vivaldi's process at the Inquisition follows a similar pattern of interrogations, secret information, physical and mental tortures. The Catholic Italy that the novel so

¹⁰⁴ John Moore, *A View of Society and Manners*, vol. II, p. 176.

carefully depicts symbolically becomes a country where contemporary political and religious fears are recreated and analysed.

Another important negative connotation of the Catholic Church for Protestant people was the corrupt link between religious and political authorities. After the glorious revolution, English government had clearly separated church power from state sovereignty, proclaiming them to be operative in different fields of society, the spiritual and the political. On the contrary, in Italy the Catholic Church still exerted a powerful influence on the affairs of the state and on national politics. It was like a state within the state, and very often a tyrannical one, whose powers extended far beyond religious matters, and whose interests were clearly economic and political. Schedoni's subtle manipulation of the Marchesa and the Neapolitan nobility epitomizes the Church's ability to use its spiritual power for material purposes. As Claudia Johnson points out, the greed and repressiveness of the Catholic Church brings moral decay to the state. The unruly alliance between Church and class interest justifies evil schemes by alluding to 'public decency' and 'public good'.¹⁰⁵ In *The Italian*, for example, Schedoni and the Marchesa's plans to kill Ellena after the failure of other attempts to separate her from Vivaldi, are always justified by class interest. In this way the Church allies itself with the nobility in preventing 'indecorous' union among different social classes. This degenerate alliance between Church and nobility is at the origin of an exchange of goods and property between the two most inefficient components of modern society. While visiting Naples, for instance, John Moore could not avoid commenting how 'the number of priests, monks, and ecclesiastics of all the various orders that swarm the city is prodigious'. He goes on to explain that 'the clergy are in possession of considerably above one-third of the revenue of the whole kingdom of Naples'. However, all this wealth accumulated in churches and convents is utterly unproductive and is 'of as little use to the kingdom and its inhabitants as if it still

¹⁰⁵ Claudia Johnson, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 123.

remained in the mines of Peru'.¹⁰⁶ To the eyes of the modern bourgeois and capitalistic British society, the unproductive richness of the Papal state is not only incongruous with its spiritual power, but it also seriously damages the general economy. Economically, Catholicism was disastrous and its population of idle monks and nuns drained the state finance, while the common people were kept in a condition of poverty, ignorance and inertia. In the geographical division between northern and southern Europe, the ineptitude and debauchery of the Catholic Church is at the base of the precarious economic and political situation of southern European countries. Since a lot of the country's property, money and richness lie in the hands of a corrupt clergy, in turn allied with an unproductive nobility, the general economic condition of the country is necessarily ruinous. The Protestant northern culture, on the contrary, promotes an industrious and stable society, which advocates productivity and despises idleness. As James Beattie suggested, the productive and laborious northern race is in contrast with a southern indolent and lazy population, in this case clearly exemplified by the numerous inefficient religious men and women.

However, in spite of this overall negative view of the Catholic Church, the idea of Catholicism that emerges from an attentive reading of *The Italian* is not completely negative. John Moore had already noticed how 'the stories which circulate in Protestant countries concerning the scandalous debauchery of monks, and the luxurious manner in which they live in their convents, whatever truth there may have been in the formerly, are certainly now in a great measure without foundation'. He also points out how most Roman Catholic priests and monks 'are themselves most sincere believers' and have a 'benevolent disposition'.¹⁰⁷ Amiable nuns and monks are present throughout *The Italian* and surpass in number the evil religious characters, though they are less powerful and less evident. The Abbess of the convent of Santa Maria della Pietà, for example, is always very affectionate towards Ellena, especially after her only protector's death. Ellena and Vivaldi's

¹⁰⁶ John Moore, *A View of Society and Manners*, vol. II, pp. 157-158.

escape from Santo Stefano is possible only with the benevolent help of an ascetic monk found in the recess of the convent. Similarly, the Ursuline convent near the lake of Celano where Ellena finds hospitality after her elopement with Vivaldi is a peaceful community of benevolent and devoted nuns, ready to help and assist visitors. The Inquisition itself is after all a less frightening and unfair tribunal than had initially appeared, since, after many enquiries and a long trial, the truth emerges and Vivaldi is eventually liberated, while Schedoni is imprisoned.

What is interesting to note is how Radcliffe analyses religious institutions in relation to women's position in society. In spite of the author's general agreement with the predominant Protestant view of Catholic institutions, a close reading of the novel reveals a different perspective. In particular, the author seems to suggest that women's position within the Catholic Church is not utterly deplorable to the British female readership. By dedicating a lot of space within the novel to women's religious life, Radcliffe appears to suggest an alternative view of alien religious institutions. As I argued in the previous sections, women's marginal position in society is often at the origin of an unconventional view of national identity. In the case of religious differences, the Italian Catholic society could, after all, propose to women alternative positions. This idea clearly emerges in the third volume of the novel. In it the author seems to take into consideration the attractiveness of a conventual life for women. After many different vicissitudes and problematic situations, Ellena eventually finds protection within the walls of Santa della Pietà, while Vivaldi is still on trial at the Inquisition. This convent gives the impression of being an oasis of peace and benevolence among the injustices of an evil world:

If the soothings of sympathy and the delicate arts of benevolence could have restored the serenity of her mind, Ellena would now have been peaceful; for all these were offered her by the abbess and the sisters of the Santa della Pietà. [...] to the wisdom and virtue of the superior, the sisterhood was principally indebted for the harmony and happiness which distinguished them. This lady was a shining example to governesses of religious houses, and a striking instance of the influence, which a virtuous

¹⁰⁷ John Moore, *A View of Society and Manners*, vol. II, pp. 376, 377, 382.

mind may acquire over others, as well as the extensive good nature that it may thus diffuse.¹⁰⁸

The attractiveness of this peaceful reality of a female community based on an authentic feeling of sisterhood has rarely been taken into consideration by modern criticism on *The Italian*. The tranquillity of a life without either economic or familial cares, however unnatural and secluded, had a vivid fascination for women. The idea of being protected from a society which marginalizes women and gives them little economic and political importance would not seem so repulsive to eighteenth and nineteenth-century women.

Eugenia DeLamotte argues that to Protestant eyes, the condition of women in convents is utterly unnatural because of its isolation from the world and from the normal duties of a woman.¹⁰⁹ The story of women hidden from the world as if they were dead, with no identity but a religious name was of course frightening. However, convent and nunnery were also objects of desire. In particular, these institutions could constitute alternative realities to single Protestant women in England. When not ruled by an evil and jealous abbess, a convent could after all be a place of refuge, where women with no means of financial support could find protection, thus avoiding prostitution and workhouses. In *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* (1695), Mary Astell had already suggested how women's conditions and education could be improved in religious communities. The link between religion and women's education was then developed by Hannah More's *Strictures on Female Education* (1799), where the author argues the importance of a rigid Christian education for young women. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Anna Letitia Barbauld's 'On Monastic Institutions' suggests that, in some cases, monastic life could be a good choice for women: 'a young female, whom accident or war had deprived of her natural protectors, must, in an age of barbarism, be particularly exposed and helpless. A convent offered an asylum where she might be safe at

¹⁰⁸ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 299.

¹⁰⁹ Eugenia DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night: a Feminist Study of Nineteenth-century Gothic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 20.

least, if not happy'.¹¹⁰ This statement confirms that British women's attitude towards a monastic life was not necessarily one of condemnation and aversion. More generally, the alternative possibility of escaping a society which gave women little freedom, and confined them to domestic roles could be seen as an attractive option. Ellena's forced choice either to take the veil, or to marry the person that the Marchesa had selected for her as a husband may at first appear cruel and unjust. However, for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women readers it would be clear that Ellena was after all put in a position to choose between two alternatives, a possibility often denied to them. In fact, in most cases, women would have been simply compelled to marry the man of their father's choice, thus being consigned to a loveless marriage and to a life of misery, sometimes of violence.¹¹¹ The possibility of living in an entirely female community within the church and apart from a masculine-oriented world was not more unnatural than a forced married life in domestic seclusion.

In sum, Radcliffe's decision to re-set a surpassed 'age of barbarism' in eighteenth-century southern Italy seems to conceal hidden significances. As in the case of Schedoni's ambivalent characterisation, the author's ambiguous attitude towards monastic life reveals a deep anxiety about gender and nation. Italy, as alien Otherness, appears at first as a suspicious and exotic reality. Yet, after a closer investigation, the opposition between familiar and unfamiliar reveals a dialogical dimension in which the Other appears less dangerous and evil. It seems that by looking at the Other not from the dominant masculine point of view, but from the socially and politically marginal female perspective, women writers are able to read in the Other positive aspects, thus indirectly enabling a re-vision of British society and the place it reserves for women. As this reading of Radcliffe's

¹¹⁰ Anna Letitia Barbauld, 'On Monastic Institutions', *The Works of Anna Letitia Barbauld, with a Memoir by Lucy Aikin*, 2 vols. (London, 1825), vol. II, p. 211.

¹¹¹ On the condition of women in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, see: Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987); Lawrence Stone, *The Family: Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1990); J. Perkin, *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century*

The Italian suggests, the possibility of integrating differences is an important element in women's re-visionary construction of national identity. Charlotte Smith and Mary Julia Young's novels represent a step farther in the process of confrontation and interconnection of national elements. Within this process women's conditions in different social backgrounds represent an important factor in the evaluation of Great Britain and of foreign nations.

2.6 Beyond National Boundaries: Charlotte Smith's *Montalbert*

While Radcliffe's discourse of nationalism in *The Italian* develops an implicit comparison between Englishness and Otherness, Charlotte Smith's *Montalbert* (1795) proposes an overt interaction between Italian and English elements. The novel is not among the most famous by the author, and has received very little critical attention. The plot of the story suggests an interesting meditation on the limits of national identities and artificial cultural boundaries, and it is particularly appropriate to this chapter since it openly confronts and integrates English and Italian cultural elements. Like *Desmond* (1792), *Montalbert* is an important example of Smith's effort to surpass national barriers. In it national boundaries are crossed and re-crossed several times, and international marriages and Anglo-Italian relations dominate the plot. Unlike *Desmond*, where the French fallen woman is kept out of English borders, in *Montalbert* the Italian fallen woman is integrated into English society. In spite of her being born in southern Italy, Mrs. Vyvian is married to a wealthy Englishman and has three children who have grown up in England. We later discover that Mrs. Vyvian before being forced into marriage for economic reasons, had had an illicit relationship with a former lover, the

England (London: Routledge, 1989); Nina Aurebach, *Communities of Women: an Idea in Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

offspring of which was an illegitimate daughter, Rosalie, who was secretly entrusted to a neighbouring family.¹¹²

The important space that Charlotte Smith dedicates to considerations about national characters and the possibility of overcoming national differences gives to the novel a relevant position in the context of eighteenth-century national discourse in fiction. The contemporary critical response was overall tepid. *The Analytical Review*, for example, described *Montalbert* as 'a pleasing tale well told', and perceptively commented on its unity of design.¹¹³ Yet, it also regrets the lack of feelings and vivid descriptive passages typical of her earlier novels. *The Critical Review* perceived the whole novel as a defence of virtue and praised its narrative.¹¹⁴ Little attention, however, was given to its cultural and national interactions, and it was mostly associated with the numerous romances published by women in the last decades of the century. Modern criticism of the novel tends to stress the limits of patriarchal families and the enslaved condition of women in different contexts. Carroll Fry, for example, stresses biographical elements in the novel, especially the condition of women in marriage and under tyrannical husbands and fathers.¹¹⁵ Similarly, Loraine Fletcher emphasises the subtle criticism of marriage in the novel, while Katharine Rogers argues that women's limited freedom in the novel is at the origin of ingenuous and dangerous behaviours.¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, in my opinion, *Montalbert's* focus on the family in different contexts and circumstances is only a metaphor to discuss greater political issues, particularly national and religious questions.

The interaction between English and Italian elements in *Montalbert* is developed both on cultural and religious levels. At the beginning, the novel seems

¹¹² The plot of the novel is similar to a gothic romance. The focus on national identities and interactions, however, is an important and recurrent element. Following Gary Kelly's categorization, the novel could easily be associated both with a gothic romance and a novel of manners, *English Fiction of the Romantic Period 1789-1830* (London: Longman, 1989).

¹¹³ *The Analytical Review*, 22 (July 1795), p. 60

¹¹⁴ In Loraine Fletcher, *Charlotte Smith: a Critical Biography* (London: Palgrave, 1998), p. 247.

¹¹⁵ Carrol Fry, *Charlotte Smith* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), p. 124.

to re-propose the oppositional relation between England and Italy typical of Gothic fiction. The plot starts in England, in 'the chalky hills of South Downs'. In the first volume, Italy appears only as a distant country, a foreign reality whose image reaches Rosalie through the filter of Mrs. Vyvian. Significantly, both Mrs. Vyvian and Rosalie are soon presented as alienated from the social and cultural English provincial environment. Mrs. Vyvian's sense of isolation is mainly due to her insensitive husband who not only neglects and disrespects her, but even alienates her children from her. Religious difference is an important source of division in the family. We are told that Mrs. Vyvian's spirit has been saddened by her husband having renounced his Catholic religion in favour of Anglicanism, and by having her children brought up Protestant, in spite of his initial promise not to do so. Rosalie's alienation from her family is even more striking. Her refined and noble character is utterly in contrast with the narrow-mindedness of the family, whose only concern is to marry her advantageously. The sense of isolation and estrangement that predominates in the first part of the novel is connected to the two heroines' feeling 'outcast'. It is important to stress that, in terms of national identity, both women have Italian origins and that they have been forcibly transported into England and compelled to live in a foreign society. There is an evident clash here between imposed national identities and cultural origins. Mrs. Vyvian and her illegitimate daughter have been forced to suppress their natural Italian inclinations in order to acquire an imposed English national identity.

In a sense, Rosalie's feeling of estrangement is the source of her attraction to Montalbert. Montalbert is Mrs. Vyvian's nephew, the son of a wealthy Englishman and an extremely religious Italian mother. Montalbert's presence as a foreigner in an English environment is generally welcome, and he easily integrates into English culture. However, Montalbert's foreignness is perceptible not only in his being Catholic in a Protestant environment, but also in his personality. Though he

¹¹⁶ Loraine Fletcher, *Charlotte Smith*, p. 245; Katharine M. Rogers, 'Inhibitions on eighteenth-century Women Novelists: Elizabeth Inchbald and Charlotte Smith', *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 11 (1997), 63-78, (p. 77).

behaves in a gentlemanly way to Rosalie, and he is passionately and deeply in love with her, he shows a strong impulsiveness which is in opposition to the balanced and rational behaviour of English characters in the novel. We know that 'Montalbert was of a warm and impetuous temper', and that he had never yet been emancipated from the 'government of an high-spirited and impetuous mother'.¹¹⁷ The domineering attitude of his mother makes him even more eager to marry Rosalie in secret and to pursue independently what seems to constitute an important event for his future happiness.

Montalbert is often looked upon as foreign and alien to the English society by the most naive characters in the novel, such as Mrs. Lessington, Rosalie's step-mother. Mrs. Lessington comments that Montalbert 'could hardly be called an Englishman, for, in the first place, his mother was a foreign lady, and, though his father is an Englishman, he has lived chiefly abroad, and this gentleman has never been in England above half a year at a time'.¹¹⁸ Interestingly enough, to Mrs. Lessington's eyes, Montalbert's father's Englishness is questioned by his long residence abroad and his marriage with a foreign lady. In a broader context, the risk of bastardising English culture was connected to the practice of the Grand Tour. Sometimes, as in the case of Montalbert's father, travelling abroad carries the danger of 'destabilisation', with the implication of losing English sense of national identity, and the even greater danger of mixing with other cultures and nationalities. Montalbert is actually the product of Italy and England, that is of national and cultural contamination. Although he was born and educated in Italy by an authoritative Italian mother, his father is a wealthy Englishman with 'a very fine seat in the north of England, and a great fortune in the family'.¹¹⁹ The fact that Montalbert and his brothers will inherit a considerable portion of English property implies that a good part of English wealth could end up in the hands of foreign people, with different education and different manners, thus endangering the

¹¹⁷ Charlotte Smith, *Montalbert: a Novel* 3 vols. (London, 1795), vol. I, p. 173.

¹¹⁸ Charlotte Smith, *Montalbert*, vol. I, pp. 50, 54.

¹¹⁹ Charlotte Smith, *Montalbert*, vol. I, p. 56.

integrity of English national identity and English wealth. As Eugenia De Lamotte explains, the fear of unity with some terrible and alien Other is at the base of many works of Gothic literature.¹²⁰ This fear is often transferred to a psychological, religious and epistemological context. Montalbert's cultural and religious diversity is the result of his father's dangerous refusal of English national identity in favour of a more cosmopolitan background. However, this decision carries significant economic and political consequences, since it implies a transfer of property and wealth from English to foreign hands. This concern for maintaining the English ruling class nationally pure brings about the inevitable consequence of seeing the other as an enemy. On the contrary, Smith's unconventional views suggest a re-definition of national identity on the basis of cultural and national interconnections. This attention to internationalism, and to the mingling of cultures and religions, is an important aspect of the novel, and it constitutes a complex reflection on national identities.

The emphasis on the union between diversities becomes particularly interesting in reference to English society. The narrator's view of English culture and society is, in fact, clearly limiting, especially for women. Mr. Lessington and Mr. Vyvian are utterly tyrannical and evil characters. The first wants to force Rosalie into an unhappy marriage with an uneducated and villainous clergyman only for the sake of economic security, while Mr. Vyvian often mistreats and offends his gentle and affectionate wife. The criticism here clearly centres on marriages, and especially arranged marriages, which often turn into tyrannical and oppressive social constructions for women. The physical imprisonment of Gothic heroines, and Rosalie herself later in the novel, endure in Italy symbolically turns into a captivity within a despotic family in an English context. Both Rosalie and Mrs. Vyvian are estranged from the reality they live in. Mrs. Vyvian is alienated from her own family for being a Catholic and for being Italian; her husband and children consciously force her into isolation for her difference. Similarly, Rosalie's alienation from her

¹²⁰ Eugenia DeLamotte, *Perils of the Night*, p. 23.

family brings her isolation and misery and it is one of the main reasons of her attraction to Montalbert's different manners: 'Oh! Montalbert, how different are your manners from those of the people I am condemned to live among!'¹²¹ To Rosalie, Montalbert was 'one of the most elegant and agreeable men she had ever conversed with', and his personality is strikingly superior to that of the other English characters in the novel.¹²² Rosalie's acceptance of marrying Montalbert secretly is strongly influenced by her familial environment, and by her feeling of non-belonging to her circle of people. In other words, the two heroines are both outcasts in the English society, one for her religion and foreignness, the other for her feelings and sensibility. What is central to the story, however, is the fact that Rosalie and Montalbert decide to act rebelliously against social conventions, and to overcome the divisions between nationalities.

Significantly, they both decide to renounce their imposed national identities and to recreate their personalities more freely and independently. By marrying Montalbert with a Catholic rite, Rosalie not only acts unconventionally and maybe impulsively, but she also consciously gives up her oppressive familial and national background. At the same time Montalbert's marriage is an act of rebellion against his tyrannical Catholic mother and her prejudices towards Protestant countries and people. However dangerous and morally debatable this move might be, it has a deep significance in terms of national boundaries. While in Radcliffe's novel the interaction between nationalities and cultures is only covertly attempted, Charlotte Smith's reflection on national matters is much more direct and open. By envisaging the possibility of mixed marriages, the author suggests how secular prejudices and cultural differences can be actually overcome in the new generations. The enterprise appears even more daring if put in its historical context. In 1753 Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act was approved in Parliament. The act prohibited clandestine marriages and religiously mixed marriages in order to keep the increasing capital in the hands of English Protestant families and to avoid its

¹²¹ Charlotte Smith, *Montalbert*, vol. I, p. 75.

dispersion . Rightly, Rosalie 'had heard, but in a vague way, that such marriages were not valid', and by her agreement to marry secretly a Catholic man she put her reputation in danger.¹²³ Montalbert's argument in favour of the union reconfirms the limits of national laws in support of a more cosmopolitan and independent view:

Admitting, my dearest love, that it were as you have heard, would not such a marriage be binding to me? Might it not at any time be renewed according to the laws of any country where we may reside, when I shall be wholly at liberty? And it is material to you what restrictions are laid upon such marriages in England, if your husband looks upon other laws binding to him?¹²⁴

English law does not prevent Montalbert and Rosalie from acting in accordance with their feelings, thus obeying their own will and at the same time overcoming the limits which national identities impose.

Angela Keane observes how in her fiction of the 1790s, Charlotte Smith undertook a critique of 'things as they are' in English society, and allied herself tentatively with the ideas of the cosmopolitan patriots and with Godwinian radical philosophy.¹²⁵ *Montalbert* clearly represents Smith's will to discuss the restrictive notion of national identities and her attempt to enlarge national boundaries towards a more universal and cosmopolitan ideal. In his essay 'Of the influence of climate', William Godwin had argued against the idea that certain physical and climatic aspects influence the politics and government of a country. Particularly, he argues against the assumption that 'it is impossible to establish a system of political liberty in certain warm and effeminate climates'. On the contrary, he promotes the universality of liberal values, and attributes the 'causes which suspend its progress', not to climate, but to the 'watchful and intolerant jealousy of despotic

¹²² Charlotte Smith, *Montalbert*, vol. I, p. 96.

¹²³ Charlotte Smith, *Montalbert*, vol. I, p. 164.

¹²⁴ Charlotte Smith, *Montalbert*, vol. I, pp. 165-166.

¹²⁵ Angela Keane, *Women Writers and the English Nation in the 1790s: Romantic Belongings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 8.

sovereigns'.¹²⁶ Charlotte Smith's fascination with the idea of the cosmopolitan patriot and universal liberal values emerges in several of her novels. In the preface to *Desmond*, for example, Smith clearly explains her concern with important contemporary national and social issues:

Nothing appears to me more respectable than national pride; nothing so absurd as national prejudices. – And in the faithful representation of the manners of other countries, surely Englishmen may find abundant reason to indulge the one, while they conquer the other.¹²⁷

One of the aims of the novel, Smith seems to argue, is to stimulate in the readers a meditation on matters of nationality. In particular, what Smith recommends is a re-consideration of the traditional way of looking at the Other, in terms of 'natural enemy' and to foreign people as 'naturally [English] foes'. Smith's intention is to decry national prejudices, while promoting national pride, and to promulgate a re-definition of otherness as well as Englishness.

Another important trope that dominates Charlotte Smith's 1790s novels is exile. This, as Angela Keane remarks, can be attributed both to a general Romantic preoccupation with a condition of alienation and to the more particular impact of revolution and war on the discourse of national belongings.¹²⁸ In *Montalbert* the theme of exile occupies Rosalie's Italian stay. After the marriage, Montalbert is recalled in Italy by his mother, and a few months later he asks Rosalie to join him. At first Rosalie approaches Italy enthusiastically, and sees it as an exotic and beautiful country, where she can finally attempt to live free from her family's constraints. However, her stay soon turns into an exile. Rosalie feels as alienated in Italy as she was in England. She lives in isolation in Sicily, while Montalbert is summoning up the courage to tell his tyrannical mother of his marriage with an English Protestant woman. In Italy Rosalie gives birth to a son, the offspring of her

¹²⁶ William Godwin, 'Of the influence of climate', *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Modern Morals and Happiness* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 146-153.

¹²⁷ Charlotte Smith, *Desmond*, ed. by Antje Bland and Janet Todd (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2001).

¹²⁸ Angela Keane, *Women Writers and the English Nation*, p. 89.

international and unconventional union. The situation soon degenerates and her alien condition is worsened by the unfamiliarity of the country and the culture. Events are precipitated by the earthquake in Messina, and Rosalie and her infant are left alone to cope with an unknown reality. Rosalie's sense of despair is deep and all her hopes of escaping a suffocating family in England culminate in a gothic adventure, with her life in continual danger. Interestingly, Rosalie attributes the cause of her misfortunes uniquely to Montalbert's mother's national and religious prejudices, which only prevent her from being accepted as a legitimate wife: 'I should not have been despicable in the eyes of Montalbert's relations- I might have been received by his mother with pride and pleasure; but now I am an outcast and have no right to claim the protection of any human being'.¹²⁹ Her being an outcast first in England and then in Italy seems to be the result of outdated social and cultural prejudices. While in England she felt displaced because of her family's social discrimination which prevented her from marrying above her class, thus changing her economic condition. Similarly, the principal cause of her estrangement from Italian society lies in Montalbert's mother's bigotry and in her inability to accept Rosalie's different religion and culture. It seems that the main obstacle to happiness in the novel is the lack of communication between strictly determined national and social categories.

Angela Keane points out that Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution of France* had brought together the images of the land and the constitution in the familial unity of the nation-state.¹³⁰ From this point of view the family, as a social institution representative of national unity in a smaller scale, should tend to strengthen social, cultural and national boundaries. In *Montalbert* the roles of all these boundaries are open to question. The interconnection between social classes and nationalities is an important issue in the novel. The predominance of mixed marriages brings to the surface hybridism rather than purity. What Charlotte Smith seems to suggest is that in the post- Revolutionary Europe divisions of class and

¹²⁹ Charlotte Smith, *Montalbert*, vol. II, p. 117.

nation are no longer strictly respected. On the contrary, the union between what is familiar and what is other, however precariously and dangerously pursued, appears to be a significant sign of both social and national progress. After the turmoil of the French Revolution, Smith suggests a reconsideration of social and national boundaries, and she sees the family as a suitable space for experimentation. The result is the creation of a new modern idea of a cosmopolitan society, where national identities are reformulated and amalgamated.

After the earthquake, Rosalie finds herself first in the hands of banditti and then kidnapped by the evil count Alozzi, Montalbert's friend, and imprisoned on the coast of Calabria, where she experiences the dangers and fears of a true Gothic heroine. The sense of suffocation and passivity she experienced among her English family becomes in Italy a real imprisonment commanded by an even more authoritative and cruel tyrant than her father was. At this point of the novel it seems that Rosalie and Montalbert's attempt to create an international family, beyond national divisions, has failed. To put it another way, it seems that fantasies of familial and national reorganisation are fatally destroyed, especially for women. In fact, the condition of Rosalie does not at all improve after her marriage and her exile in Italy; it actually becomes more complicated. This would suggest that conditions for women are the same throughout Europe and that the will to construct a cosmopolitan family does not really bring any good to women. Specifically, the overcoming of national divisions and prejudices does not necessarily imply an improvement in women's social conditions, since they remain victims of the same patriarchal prejudices and limitations. At this point in the novel it seems that there is no actual breakout for women, and that social and cultural prejudices are much more powerful than national boundaries. Charlotte Smith's rebalancing of good and evil among Italian and English society and her attempt to overcome national and religious differences, however, are important steps in the discourse of nationalism. While Radcliffe's interaction between Italian and English

¹³⁰ Angela Keane, *Women Writers and the English Nation*, p. 5.

elements was only indirectly attempted, Smith clearly suggests a possibility of enlarging and re-defining national boundaries, however unproductive this might be for women. After all, Italian society does not seem to be more evil or alien to women than English society. The fact is that women appear to be outcast in any social and cultural environment.

Nevertheless, *Montalbert* ends happily. Eventually, Montalbert and Rosalie reconcile, creating the happy, international family they wished to have. Angela Keane suggests that the idea of a cosmopolitan family in the novel is 'little more than a romantic ideal, which is pursued by her ingenious protagonist at the expense of quotidian, local concerns'.¹³¹ However, Smith suggests a reconsideration of social, cultural and national boundaries by choosing the family as a suitable space for experimentation. It is important that Smith willingly challenges the traditional, stereotypical and limiting constructions of national identity. The predominance of mixed marriages brings to the surface national hybridism rather than purity. The interconnection between social classes, religions and nationalities seems to suggest that in the post-revolutionary Europe divisions are no more strictly respected. On the contrary, the union between what is familiar and what is other, however precariously and dangerously pursued, is a significant sign both of social and cultural progress. In Smith's nationally hybrid families, however, women's conditions do not seem to improve considerably. Though women appear to have the possibility to re-invent their national identity, to expand the limits of their domestic roles and presumably to have more freedom of movement across different countries, for them nationality remains practically a limiting label. Yet, what clearly emerges with respect to women, is a different idea of Otherness. After all, Italy is not more alien than England to women. In Smith's novel, the other for women does not seem to have any national identity, since it simply lies in the oppressive patriarchal culture common to many eighteenth-century European societies. Mary Young's *Right and Wrong*, argues a similar point in a different way.

2.7 From Villain to Hero: Mary Julia Young's *Right and Wrong*

Mary Julia Young's *Right and Wrong, or the Kinsmen of Naples*, published in 1803, is another example of women's concern with issues of nationality. Like *Montalbert*, the novel suggests an investigation of national identities which goes beyond stereotypical constructions. In this novel, the author seems to partake Smith's support of national pride but also her rejection of national prejudices. The plot exemplifies the significance of national belongings; at the same time it stresses the importance of overcoming national boundaries and embracing a more international set of values and experiences. Mary Julia Young, was a poet and a novelist living in London. She published her first novel, *The Family Party*, anonymously in 1791, and later in 1793 a collection of poems, *Adelaide and Antonine*, with her own name. Most of her works reveal a concern with international issues and an interest in confronting different cultures. *Adelaide and Antonine*, for example, is a sentimental tale in verse about French refugees to England's 'hospitable shore', while *The East Indian, or Clifford Priory* (1799) is a novel which mingles gothic elements with national and religious discourse. A Gothic plot is also proposed in her last novel, *Donalda, or the Witches of Glenshiel* (1805). She also wrote several other pieces of poetry, translations and the life of actress Anna Maria Crouch in 1806. She considered *Right and Wrong* her most successful novel.¹³²

The plot of *Right and Wrong* develops in four volumes. Overall the story is well constructed through the use of anticipations and dissemination of clues, which intensify the reading, and allow the reader to foresee the final climax. The main two characters, Lorenzo and Frederic, are apparently two orphaned cousins adopted by an aristocratic Neapolitan uncle. However, mysterious comments about the real origin of the two cousins are disseminated throughout the first two

¹³¹ Angela Keane, *Women Writers and the English Nation*, p. 94.

¹³² Virginia Blain, Patricia Clemens, Isobel Grundy (eds.), *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present* (London: Batsford Ltd, 1990), p. 1201.

volumes. The story develops through intrigues, love affairs, gothic attempts at murder and imprisonment till Frederic successfully escapes from his cousin's evil plotting, and reaches the shore of Wales, at the beginning of the last volume. Here he finally finds hospitality, liberality and generosity everywhere, and especially with the noble Welsh family of Sir Llewellyn. He falls in love with the young Llewella, who is destined to marry a distant relative of Italian origin she has never met, but whom her father and mother had chosen as her companion from her birth. The Italian relative turns out to be the evil Lorenzo, who so eagerly wanted to kill his cousin Frederic. However, a sudden turn in events, reveals that the true Italian relative of Sir Llewellyn is not Lorenzo, but the liberal and generous Frederic, the offspring of Llewella's uncle and an Italian wife he had secretly married during his long residence in Italy.¹³³

Lorenzo di Rozezzi and Frederic Duvalvin, both nephews of the Conte Pliantini of Naples, are from the beginning introduced as antagonistic characters, and as representative of two different attitudes towards people and society in general. Lorenzo is the typical ambiguous Italian character, master of the art of flattery and adulation, who enchants women and entertains men in society, while his 'eyes disagree with [his] expressions', and 'jealousy and scorn' are deeply hidden in his glance.¹³⁴ Conversely, Frederic 'possesses beauty and elegance without vanity, learning without pedantry, dignity without pride'; 'his humility is noble, his sincerity is polite, and his courage is the silent magnanimous offspring of philanthropy'. In short, 'no mortal composition can be more exquisitely harmonized than in Duvalvin's, and Heaven adorned it with a soul so pure, that it seems to throw a divine radiance around him'.¹³⁵ This 'celestial' being is utterly in contrast with the Neapolitan aristocratic environment he lives in. His aunt and uncle always scorn his philanthropic behaviour, and criticize his continuous attempts to help

¹³³ Like *Montalbert*, the novel is difficult to categorize. The plot would suggest the novel to be a romance. However, with its mixture of national issues, gothic elements and descriptions of foreign and domestic manners, the novel embraces a large spectrum of subjects.

¹³⁴ Mary Julia Young, *Right and Wrong; or, the Kinsmen of Naples*, 4 vols. (London, 1803), vol. I, pp. 8-9.

people, thus bringing troubles and economic problems to the family. By contrast, Lorenzo's selfish and inconsiderate behaviour is praised as exemplary, since it accords with that of the other aristocratic Italian youngsters. For having given assistance to a poor mule driver, and causing delay to the visit to a noble woman, for example, his aunt sees Frederic as 'mean and ridiculous'. Frederic clearly appears as the good hero of the story, an utterly positive character, who feels alienated and isolated from the oppressive and egocentric world of the Italian nobility. Like in Smith's *Montalbert*, the status of outcast characterises the protagonist, and it is predominant in the first part of the novel. However, at this point in the narrative, Frederic is known as Italian. His origins are never discussed. His identification with the orphaned nephew of Count Pliatini positions him at the same level of Lorenzo and other aristocratic young people of the Neapolitan society.

Paula Backscheider suggests that a common practice in eighteenth-century novels by women was that of introducing the hero as other, particularly by exploiting the technique of making the narrative point of view that of the other.¹³⁵ Since the narrator of the novel remains detached from the story and only rarely attempts some intrusions in the form of moral comments, the main point of view in the novel is entirely Italian and centres especially on the two main characters' oppositional personalities. As a result, both hero and anti-hero are Italian, and of similar social and familial extractions. However, at this stage of the narrative, Frederic is a character completely different from the traditional Italian characters in British literature. In comparison to Radcliffe's Schedoni, for example, although psychologically less elaborated, Frederic is utterly a positive character, almost perfect in his behaviour. His being- erroneously- considered as entirely Italian throughout the narrative, with the exception of the few last chapters, brings to British readers a new Italian hero, which inverts the traditional narrative

¹³⁵ Mary Julia Young, *Right and Wrong*, vol. I, p. 13.

¹³⁶ Paula R. Backscheider, *Revising Women: Eighteenth-Century Women's Fiction and Social Engagement* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 10.

assumption of Italian characters as villains or anti-heroes. Frederic's faultless behaviour is associated with his being non-British throughout the novel. In other words, his being- apparently- Other in terms of national and cultural belongings does not prevent him from behaving honestly and magnanimously. The singularity of Frederic's principles is probably the most striking sign of distinction between him and other people of his rank. The difference between Lorenzo and Frederic is mainly based on matters of national identity:

Duvalvin thinks haughtiness disgraceful to a man of sense, however exalted his rank may be in the world. You [Lorenzo] seek applause and patronage from the great; he, self-approbation, by patronising the distressed- you are a *bigot* to your religion and country; he is a *citizen of the world*, he wishes to emulate the virtues of every nation, and fears not to abjure the errors of his native land.¹³⁷

The concept of citizen of the world was particularly widespread among intellectuals in the last decades on the eighteenth century. Thomas Paine discussed the importance of transcending national boundaries and embracing a more European dimension which would support liberal government and democracy not just in Britain, but in other countries with more unstable political situations.¹³⁸ Being a citizen of the world involved a defence of human rights and liberty beyond the patriotic attachment to one's country, its religion and its politics. The citizen of the world opposes bigotry in favour of an openness of mind which embraces humanity and accepts its different social, political and religious points of view. Frederic's tendency to 'emulate the virtues of other nations' and 'abjure the errors of his native land' would give him, later in the novel, the possibility of feeling at ease among foreign people and in different countries, simply by virtue of his liberal principles. Goldsmith suggests a similar definition of 'citizen of the world'. In the author's opinion, travels should 'make one individual more happy in himself, or

¹³⁷ Mary Julia Young, *Right and Wrong*, vol. I, p. 17.

¹³⁸ Thomas Paine, *Political Writings*, ed. by Bruce Kuklick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). John Lucas observes how the concept of the 'citizen of the world' actually developed throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century through authors such as Dryden, Johnson, Addison,

more useful to society', and he adds that this is possible only by 'enlarging one's mind, and make the man who now boasts his patriotism, a citizen of the world'.¹³⁹ Following this idea, travelling would aim to level those distinctions which separate mankind, thus enabling people to surpass the limits of national boundaries and fanatic attachment to one's country. By virtue of this, a universal love for mankind should replace or integrate any form of nationalism.

Frederic's sense of uneasiness among the Italian aristocracy becomes even more striking when compared to his approach to British people and society. At the beginning of the third volume, Frederic manages to escape from the isolated prison in which Lorenzo had confined him as a result of his jealousy. It is at this point of the novel that his British adventure starts and that the focus of the plot shifts from the analysis of Italian society and manners to one of British ones. By contrast, Italy becomes a distant and foreign country, only mediated through Frederic's memory and remembrances. His physical banishment is actually a concrete exemplification of his spiritual and mental alienation from the environment. Frederic feels that he is 'to be banished by force, like a criminal, from his native land'.¹⁴⁰ Yet, exasperated by his cousin's envy and cruelty, Frederic consciously decides that self-exile is the only solution. As soon as he succeeds in escaping his cousin's prison, he manages to reach a vessel on its way back to Ireland and he implores the captain to 'bear [him] far from Italy- for there death will meet [him]'.¹⁴¹ The Irish crew's friendliness and sympathy appear strikingly in contrast with the Italian environment Frederic had just left. He left a country where no one wanted to befriend him because of his generosity and where his own relatives wanted to banish him; now, among these foreign people, he feels utterly at ease and considers the environment much more familiar than the Neapolitan society.

Pope (*England and Englishness: Ideas of Nationhood in English Poetry 1688-1900* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1990), pp. 11-33).

¹³⁹ Oliver Goldsmith, 'A Comparative View of Races and Nations', *Royal Magazine* (June 1760), p. 68.

¹⁴⁰ Mary Julia Young, *Right and Wrong*, vol II, p. 151

¹⁴¹ Mary Julia Young, *Right and Wrong*, vol. III, p. 108.

Frederic decides to pass for the son of a Briton whose small fortune obliged him to seek an asylum in Italy and who now, having lost his parents, wishes to reach his relatives in Britain. This parallel construction of exiles is particularly interesting. In this imaginary correspondence, Italy is the country which hosts British people of small fortunes, while Britain becomes the land of exile for Italian people of good fortune. The geography of Europe becomes crossed by imaginary links between northern and southern countries. According to this view, northern countries welcome people exiled from southern countries and vice versa. This correspondence will turn out to be exact by the end of the novel. In fact, Frederic's invented British father exiled in Italy will become a real British father banished to Italy by his own family for misconduct. Frederic, in turn, is banished to Britain by his family for excessive prodigality. In some ways, Italian and British societies appear complementary, since one welcomes and accepts what the other rejects. Frederic's father had been exiled to Italy because of his unconventional behaviour for British society. Similarly, Frederic's self-exile is motivated by his 'eccentricities', alien to Italian society. Both characters somehow act as 'seam' between the two cultures by creating a connection between the inside and the outside, between otherness and familiarity. As I argued in the first two sections, this imaginary link between North and South of Europe is a fundamental aspect in the evolution of Gothic literature. By constructing a web of exiles, Young clearly enters a tradition that wants to redefine pre-conceived ideas of national belonging and imposed cultural identities. What emerges from this plot, is that the two characters seem to be free to choose their most congenial country in spite of their natural and biological origins.

The fact that Frederic sees British people and British society as familiar is undeniable in the text and becomes clear with the proceeding of the narrative. Significantly, the narrator constructs the two parallel settings, that of Italy and Britain, in terms of symbolic correspondences. Frederic lands on Welsh shores and reaches the castle of Sir Llewellyn, a close friend of the Irish captain. Here he soon

feels at home. Sir Llewellyn's daughter, Llewella, first sees him asleep in the garden and playfully enchains him with a crown of flowers. This gesture is significant if compared with the condition Frederic has escaped from. The real chain that his cousin had put around his hands in Italy in the attempt to murder him are symbolically transmuted into a flowery chain in Wales. The significance of this act becomes soon more explicit. Frederic is welcomed to the castle and restored to his health with loving attentions both by Sir Llewellyn and his daughter. Frederic is invited to 'be as free from restraint here as if he was in his own house, and to banish, if possible, every uneasy thought from his mind'.¹⁴² Sir Llewellyn is 'more and more happy' in Frederic's society and 'he desired [him] to make Llanmere his *home*'.¹⁴³ The comparison between Italy and this remote corner of Great Britain then becomes overt:

Frederic wished indeed to make a home of Llanmere- he almost forgot Italy; his soul, after having struggled the pangs of sickness, and the horrors of a dismal sepulchre, seemed now to enjoy a blissful Elysium- he loved and was beloved [...] Frederic's affectionate heart glowed with filial love for the baronet, whose disposition and manners were far more congenial to his own, than the Conte Pliatini's.¹⁴⁴

Llanmere is an oasis of perfect love and respect. Sir Llewellyn is a man of good management and generosity, who provides for the needs of every cottager in the environs of his castle. Frederic's sense of charity and sympathy for people in distress, which was one of the main sources of his sense of alienation in Italy, is now transformed into normality in Llanmere, where no one is in need of help. In other words, Frederic's 'eccentricities' become common attitudes in British society. In this way, the hero is progressively associated with British values. What was an unconventional Italian hero becomes during the narrative a more familiar hero, whose principles are specifically in tune with British society. More precisely, the

¹⁴² Mary Julia Young, *Right and Wrong*, vol. III, p. 178.

¹⁴³ Mary Julia Young, *Right and Wrong*, vol. IV, p. 15.

¹⁴⁴ Mary Julia Young, *Right and Wrong*, vol. IV, pp. 15-16.

good Other becomes familiar, while the bad Other becomes more and more alienated and distant.

Young's choice of Wales as an antithetic country to Italy may have different origins. On one side, the depiction of Wales as a sort of perfect reality, where democracy, respect and peace dominate society, in contrast to a tyrannical and disrespectful Italian context may strengthen the idea of Britain as an exemplary country in its entirety. This, as Linda Colley has suggested, demonstrates the growth of a 'sense of Britishness' in nineteenth-century literature, and the spreading of the idea of Great Britain as a unified and strong nation, especially when compared with an alien Other.¹⁴⁵ On the other side, as Gerard Carruthers and Alan Rawes have recently argued, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature shows a tendency to exoticise marginalized Celtic culture.¹⁴⁶ Young's creation of an exotic Wales in contrast to an equally exotic and artificial Italian setting, could be the result of a fashionable orientalisation of both domestic and foreign realities. In either case, however, the use of Wales as a counterpart to Italy has a similar effect. As Carruthers and Rawes observe, in the Romantic period the Celtic is reinvented and re-appropriated in the service of Britishness. At the same time, Celtic peripheries become the 'ideological, idealized location of international nationalism'.¹⁴⁷ In *Right and Wrong*, Wales becomes the site of national awareness, but also of international exchange. By presenting Wales as a perfect and idealised reality, Young re-elaborates the idea of the superiority of British culture over southern countries. At the same time, she clearly promotes the need of cultural and national integration.

The final climax of the novel, when Frederic and Lorenzo reunite and the former is revealed to be a relative of Sir Llewellyn, the chosen husband of Llewella, is simply a confirmation of what the reader had long suspected. Frederic is the offspring of a Welsh aristocrat, Sir Glynvale, and an Italian woman. He had been

¹⁴⁵ Linda Colley, *Britons*, p. 5.

¹⁴⁶ Gerard Carruthers and Alan Rawes (eds.), *English Romanticism and the Celtic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 10.

exiled to Italy since he refused to conform to his family's strict habits and to obey the order of 'never to marry a foreigner'. Glynvale disobeys his father's will and marries a beautiful and virtuous Italian woman with whom he has a child just before her death. Frederic's identity had to be kept secret till Glynvale's father's death; only then he could be recognized as the legitimate inheritor of the family's estate and allowed to marry Llewella, following their parents' agreement. In this way, Frederic's congeniality with the British society seems to be a genetic matter. Similarly, his alienation from the Italian aristocratic environment is the result of his being half British and half Italian, and thus influenced by liberality and good nature. The fact that he is destined to marry a Welsh noblewoman somehow restores him to the nationality which is predominant in his character, while Lorenzo's marriage with Llewella's cousin re-proposes the pattern of mixed marriages.

The ending of the novel seems to suggest that only in balancing the two national components, the Italian and the British, can a condition of stability and happiness be achieved. In Young's novel, as in Smith's *Montalbert*, the family is exploited as a sort of experimental terrain for national crossing. However, Frederic Duvalvin is a much more positive character than Montalbert, although both are of British-Italian origins and both educated in Italy. Mary Julia Young's discussion of national identities suggests that national crossing is a positive attempt to overcome boundaries. However, only by becoming a citizen of the world, can men realise the importance of universal values and recognize the good in every culture and society. In this way, the Other is not simply a stereotypical construction based on differences, but an interesting subject for constructive comparisons. As Roland Barthes observes, neither culture nor its destruction is attractive, it is the seam between them that makes a text important.¹⁴⁸ Thus, national identities undergo a process of redefinition and enlargement. The 'right and wrong' of the title

¹⁴⁷ Gerard Carruthers and Alan Rawes (eds.), *English Romanticism and the Celtic World*, pp. 3, 13.

¹⁴⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 6-7. Barthes expresses this concept in reference to Sade's novels. However, as Coral Ann Howells suggests, the idea can easily be extended to the interpretation of other Gothic novels. 'The Pleasure of the Woman's Text:

symbolise the wrongness of national isolation and the rightness of national interconnections. In Smith and Young, British identity is no more constructed in opposition to Otherness but rather formed on the basis of integration. This results in the attempt to create an ideal citizen who is able to recognize good and evil in every nation beyond the rigid and artificial construction of national belonging. Charlotte Smith and Mary Julia Young overtly attempt what Ann Radcliffe had only timidly suggested: the value of international community and the need to re-define national identities as well as social roles.

2.8 Otherness in women: attempting a gender re-vision.

Angela Keane has extensively demonstrated the importance of women in the construction of national identity.¹⁴⁹ However, women's discourse of nationalism involves a confrontation between different cultures and societies with specific attention to women's conditions. In this way, Otherness is not always negative or uncivilized. On the contrary, an attentive reading of the three novels I have taken into consideration reveals how women writers portray female Otherness not always with negative connotations. By looking to women's position in foreign society, in fact, women enable a process of re-evaluation of the English idealisation of femininity. Claudia Johnson has defined a process of 'gender redefinition' which is an important component of 1790s British cultural context.¹⁵⁰ The transformation that society undergoes in the last decades of the eighteenth century under the influence of an increasingly sentimentalization of culture demands a redefinition of gender roles. The result of this remodelling of gender, as Johnson observes, is often the creation of 'equivocal beings', who assume both traditional masculine and

Ann Radcliffe's subtle transgressions in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian*', in *Gothic Fictions: Prohibition/Transgression*, ed. by Kenneth W. Graham, pp. 151-162, (p. 153).

¹⁴⁹ Angela Keane, *Women Writers and the English Nation in the 1790s: Romantic Belongings*.

¹⁵⁰ Claudia Johnson, *Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s* *Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. x-xi.

feminine characteristics.¹⁵¹ In most Gothic novels, however, this gender-crossing is deeply linked with nation-crossing. More specifically, as I will demonstrate, the redefinition of traditional gender roles in Gothic literature often implies a redefinition of national identities. The 'equivocal being' that results from these crossings is not only gender ambivalent but also nationally undetermined, since acquires traits belonging to different conventional genders and to different national stereotypes. The interrelation between gender and nation becomes a central element in the construction of woman's subjectivity. This interaction is clearly visible in *The Italian*, in the character of the Marchesa di Vivaldi.

The marchesa is introduced as the anti-type of Ellena. Her aristocratic origin characterises her as proud and jealous of her importance within the family and society: 'she was of violent passions, haughty, vindictive, yet crafty and deceitful; patient in stratagem, and indefatigable in pursuit of vengeance, on the unhappy objects who provoked her resentment'.¹⁵² Her reaction at Vivaldi's choice of the humble Ellena as a partner for life is excessive and passionate. However, her resentment is not simply a state of mind, it is the origin of wicked and elaborate plots against Ellena. With the help of the evil Schedoni, the Marchesa skilfully organises Ellena's imprisonment in the convent of Santo Stefano. After the failure of this plot, she carefully plans Ellena's murder. The Marchesa's evil and deceitful character could be read as the result of gender crossing. Her strength of mind, her powerful influence and lack of true feelings are utterly against the eighteenth-century conventional idea of femininity. These attributes were, on the contrary, commonly assumed to be masculine. The Marchesa has nothing of the chaste, timid and good disposition of Ellena.

In the imaginary gothic geography of Europe, the Marchesa is clearly the product of southern climes, where excessive passions and evilness are common features of society, while eighteenth-century British society reveals a strong prejudice against the public display of extreme and violent passions, especially in

¹⁵¹ Claudia Johnson, *Equivocal Beings*, p. 6.

women.¹⁵³ Women's behaviour in society was supposed to keep within the boundary of decency and domestic propriety. As Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* had suggested, women's misbehaviour could have serious effects on the stability and efficiency of the whole nation. In the author's opinion, women's gender alteration might be the primary cause of the ruin of a nation and its traditional values.¹⁵⁴ Burke argues that this had been the case in the course of the French Revolution. He portrayed the French Revolution as a breakdown of the gender contract by which state power was disseminated in customary, familiar and attractive forms.¹⁵⁵ By refusing to keep within the domestic boundaries of feminine propriety, women had gone against the social and moral assumptions at the base of national order and respect. Women's monstrous behaviour is not only the cause of gender-contamination, it is, most importantly, at the base of national pollution. Burke's female horrors are described in terms of 'incest, whorishness, and bodily monstrosity'.¹⁵⁶ As Angela Keane has argued, women's position within the nation involved the important duty of keeping the state 'racially pure', and avoiding dangerous nation-cross.¹⁵⁷ French women had not only destroyed the legitimacy of the state by refusing to be weak, dependent, beautiful and maternal, they had also bastardised national identity by sexual misbehaviour. From this point of view, the Marchesa is the product of both gender and national amalgamation. Her furious and unmotherly attitude is the result both of acquisition of typical masculine elements and of her being born in a evil and unregulated southern environment. The Marchesa is a monstrous alteration of the British idea of femininity. Nevertheless, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women readers of *The Italian* might have perceived how this evil female character was, after all, extremely powerful and

¹⁵² Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 7.

¹⁵³ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, pp. xii-xiii.

¹⁵⁴ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France and on the proceedings in certain societies in London relative to that event*, ed. by Conor Cruise O'Brien (Oxford: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 174.

¹⁵⁵ Tim Fulford, *Romanticism and Masculinity: Gender, Politics and Poetics in the Writings of Burke, Coleridge, Cobbett, Wordsworth, De Quincey and Hazlitt* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999), p. 47.

¹⁵⁶ Tim Fulford, *English Masculinity*, p. 52.

influential. The Marchesa can easily control both Vivaldi and Ellena's lives. Her aristocratic power finds a forceful ally both in the evil state and in the corrupt church. As Radcliffe tells us, the Marchesa's assemblies are among 'the most brilliant and voluptuous' of Naples, and she can patronise influential people in the state and in the Church.¹⁵⁸ Although evil and disrespectful, the Marchesa is undoubtedly a fascinating character, whose power and strength could easily be attractive to British women, unused to feminine power in society. In this case the cultural and gender interaction creates a character who, though negative, can be an attractive alternative to the British idea of feminine propriety and domestic responsibility.

Women's marginal positions in society seems to mitigate their sense of attachment to a nation which allows them only limited freedom. The concept of national identity is for women often a restrictive label, since the national idea of femininity does not allow them freedom in the social and cultural context. By attempting a comparative analysis of the idea of femininity in different countries, women writers seem to suggest a re-definition of pre-defined gender roles. This looking at the Other in terms of female roles in society allows women to contemplate alternative positions to the British domestic idea of femininity. In *Right and Wrong*, for example, women's positions in the apparently perfect and extremely democratic Welsh oasis is likewise restricted. Sir Llewellyn's liberality towards the people who live in the environs of his castle, along with his devoted love for his daughter, do not prevent him from forcing Llewella into an arranged marriage that she ardently resists. Although a much more tolerant and respectful society than the Italian one, the Welsh community does not allow any freedom to women. Frederic's sense of alienation from his Italian family which is turned into a feeling of familiarity in the Welsh environment does not extend to women who appear even more enslaved in the British ideal of patriarchal family. In fact, two

¹⁵⁷ Angela Keane, *Women Writers and the English Nation*, p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, p. 165.

contrasting ideas of femininity emerge in the course of the novel in the characters of the Italian Corinna l'Abandoni and the Welsh Llewella.

Corinna is a young wealthy Italian widow who, after the death of her husband, has inherited a large fortune and who now entertains men in her huge villa transformed into a boudoir. Corinna is, in the author's imagination, a female creature who can exist only in a country particularly free in terms of morality and sexuality. As the narrator frequently points out in the course of the novel, Corinna's liberal morality is no obstacle to her being accepted by society and even admired both by men and women:

She is remarkably nice in the choice of her acquaintance; money cannot purchase her favours, because she is too rich to want any addition to the immense fortune left her by an old merchant to whom she was married very young; since his death she has devoted her life to pleasure, but has never lost her consequence in the opinion of even her discarded admirers.¹⁵⁹

Corinna had initially been destined, like many women in the eighteenth and nineteenth century all over Europe, to marry very young a rich old merchant. However, what is more interesting is her sudden change of destiny. Obviously, she becomes a rich widow early in life and, instead of renouncing the pleasure of the world, she devotes her life entirely to the pursuit of it, in terms of 'sexual pleasure'. She receives different men every night. Many people among the Neapolitan nobility have been her lovers. Even the pure and benevolent Frederic cannot resist the charms of l'Abandoni. First introduced to her by his evil cousin, Frederic soon becomes an habitu  of Corinna's boudoir and becomes enslaved to the pleasure she gives him. The passage is worth quoting in full:

A servant conducted [Frederic] through a labyrinth of the most aromatic shrubs, to a beautiful building surrounded by roses and myrtles; it was in the form of a temple, the cupola supported by pillars, on the top stood Cupid, a golden arrow just ready to fly from his bow; over the portico was engraved on a scroll 'the Temple Of Venus'. When he entered the luxuriant beauties that surrounded him seemed to announce it the real abode of the

¹⁵⁹ Mary Julia Young, *Right and Wrong*, vol. I, p. 100.

amorous goddess; [...] in a moment a curtain sprung up, and discovered a recess lined with mirrors; - here on a sofa of crimson satin, covered with fine muslin richly ornamented with lace, lay the enchanting representative of the Cyprian Queen.¹⁶⁰

The Cyprian Queen is of course Corinna, whom the narrator describes as a luxurious queen of love and passion. Corinna's choice of committing her life to sexual pleasure would hardly be acceptable in British society. Corinna's sensuous and sumptuous use of her body is a typical product of southern countries where the warmth of the climate and the abundance of natural beauty instigate physical pleasure. Corinna's peculiar behaviour would be utterly condemned by the northern domestic idea of female propriety. On the contrary, the Neapolitan society not only sees her as a respectable woman, but it also admires her and attends her 'Temple of Venus' without shame. Although an example of rectitude and honesty, Frederic himself cannot resist Corinna's charms, which, as the narrator explains, are not only physical, but also intellectual: 'one of the loveliest women nature ever formed hung fondly on his arm, and entertained him by a conversation so new, so varied, so replete with wit, taste, and judgment'.¹⁶¹

Corinna's sexual and intellectual freedom is openly in contrast with the woman who would be the object of Frederic's love on Welsh land, Llewella. She is depicted in terms of opposition to Corinna. Significantly, she represents a different idea of femininity, one that is more convenient to British morality and society. Llewella is an entirely domestic, pure and chaste young woman whose education and accomplishments fully agree with female propriety. Frederic is particularly attracted by those characteristics that most differentiate Llewella from Corinna:

Since Duvalvin first beheld the beautiful Llewella [...], she was never absent from his thoughts; her lovely features, her elegant form, were alone sufficient to captivate a disengaged heart; but when he recollected her modest blushes, trembling anxiety, gentle, soothing voice, her tears and tender cooes, his whole soul was enchanted, and he compared Llewella to the mother of mankind, in her first state of beauty, innocence, and love.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Mary Julia Young, *Right and Wrong*, vol. I, p. 111.

¹⁶¹ Mary Julia Young, *Right and Wrong*, vol. I, p. 129.

¹⁶² Mary Julia Young, *Right and Wrong*, vol. IV, p. 4.

The contrast between Llewella and Corinna is at this point striking. While Corinna is the exemplification of female sensuous and sexual powers, Llewella is so chaste, innocent and modest that she reminds Frederic of the Virgin Mary. Unquestionably, these two women represent two different ideas of femininity. More specifically, they are the products of two different social and moral attitudes. To nineteenth-century British readers, Corinna would naturally appear as foreign. She is an alien creature, while Llewella's domestic education would clearly suit British idea of feminine propriety. However, what is perhaps more interesting is the author's attempt to compare different cultural attitudes to women. By proposing such an unconventional character as the Italian Corinna l'Abandoni, Mary Young introduces to British readers an alternative idea of femininity, one which would allow women economic and sexual freedom.

Mary Young's contribution to national characterization is extremely important in view of the publication of Stael's *Corinne or Italy* in 1807. *Right and Wrong* introduces for the first time the idea of Italy as a liberating environment for female subjectivity. Corinna represents sexual liberation for women in the same way that Corinne represents intellectual and artistic success. Llewella symbolises British values in the same way that Lucile, Corinne's English sister, exemplifies British ideal of femininity. In both cases women's freedom to express their personalities without restraint is possible only in a southern Italian environment, particularly in a society which is less morally restricted and judgemental than the British one. This pattern becomes particularly important if inserted in the imaginary division of Europe into northern and southern countries. In this context, the gender division of Europe that Beattie and Goldsmith's texts suggested acquires a special significance for women writers. Britain's definition of national identity in terms of masculinity, as opposed to other countries' effeminacy of manners, provides women writers with an imaginary feminine south onto which they could project alternative ideas of femininity. If stereotypical constructions identified Italian

characters as evil, villainous, jealous and violent, when it comes to women, Italy seems to propose various ideas of femininity and different social roles for women. However restrictive, women's possibilities in the Italian society seem to be more variegated, ranging from evil or angelic nuns to sexually liberated Corinnas. As subsequent chapters will illustrate, the division between a northern severe idea of femininity and a southern liberating environment would be the main topic in women's poetic productions about Italy in the first half of the nineteenth century.

'To love, to suffer, and to part': women re-writing the Petrarchan sonnet.¹

3.1 The development of the Petrarchan sonnet.

In the poetic tradition the sonnet represents the single most important Italian contribution to the development of European lyric. Recent criticisms have highlighted how the birth and evolution of this poetic form symbolically correspond to the birth and evolution of the modern conception of lyric poetry and subjectivity.² Before starting a close study of the romantic revival of the sonnet and its connection to the Petrarchan tradition, it seems necessary to draw a short overview of its position in the history of lyricism, and particularly to focus on the continuity of the tradition of the sonnet from Italian to English literature. As Wilkins observes, the term Petrarchism is generally taken as representative of 'productive activity in literature, art, or music under the direct or indirect influence of the writings of Petrarch, the expression of admiration for him, and the study of his works and their influence'. In a more restrictive sense, it means 'the writing of lyric verse under the direct or indirect influence of Petrarch'.³

Petrarch's *Canzoniere* is the first unified collection of love lyrics to have been produced in a modern European vernacular. Central to the experience which it records is Petrarch's love for Laura, a platonic sentiment, whose evolution is entirely confined to a spiritual dimension. For the first time in the history of modern literature, the lyric 'I' of the poet appears in the sonnet in all its complexity and contradictory aspects. Love has deprived the man of any

¹ Anne Hunter, 'Laura'; *Poems* (London, 1807), line 15.

² See for example: Paul Oppenheimer, *The Birth of the Modern Mind: Self, Consciousness, and the Invention of the Sonnet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Leonard Foster, *The Icy Fire: Five Studies in European Petrarchism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Heather Dubrow, *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and its Counterdiscourses* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995); Michael R. G. Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet* (London: Routledge, 1993).

³ E. H. Wilkins, *Studies in the Life and Works of Petrarch*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 280.

certainty and stability. As Spiller comments, Petrarch's complex lyric subjectivity became 'a mode of being in a form of discourse that few could escape if they tried to speak of love' for a long time in the history of European literature.⁴ As a lyrical instrument meant for meditation and self-reflection, the sonnet brings to the surface the inner conflict of the modern man, divided between a public image of strength and reliability, and a private reality of emotional insecurity and anxiety. In other words, the sonnet became a space in which emotional problems could find a suitable and morally acceptable expression and resolution.

Women sonneteers are rare both in England and Italy before the eighteenth century. Mary Moore argues that the construction of gender and eroticism intrinsically connected with the Petrarchan sonnet could have been an obstacle for the publication and circulation of women's love sonnets.⁵ Nevertheless, a few women did write them, a fact that highlights a sort of continuity with the Romantic revival, so strikingly dominated by women poets.⁶ While analysing women's love sonnets, it is important to stress the fact that this was a 'transgressive form of writing for them', and that in writing love sonnets women challenged the traditional cultural resistance to the expression of female erotic desire.⁷ Yet, in the eighteenth century the sonnet became one of women's favourite poetic forms. In particular, as I will demonstrate, the sonnet became a poetic means that gave women the possibility to enter an ancient and established literary tradition. In this way, women poets could insert their compositions into a well-known and universally recognised mode of expression, thus strengthening their poetic voice. In order to do so, women writers took

⁴ Michael Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet*, p. 45.

⁵ Mary Moore, *Desiring Voices: Women Sonneteers and Petrarchism* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), p. 3.

⁶ Lady Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (1621) is the only English love sonnet sequence by a woman before the eighteenth century. In a wider European context, the most famous sixteenth-century women sonneteers are Louise Labbé in France, and Vittoria Colonna, Gaspara Stampa and Veronica Gambara in Italy. Mary Moore, *Desiring Voices*, p. 2.

⁷ Mary Moore, *Desiring Voices*, p. 5.

Petrarch and his sonnets as exemplary of an erotic poetic tradition.⁸ Romantic women writers widely translated and imitated Petrarch; they wrote biographies, novels and poems centred on his unfulfilled love for Laura and on his poetic success.⁹ By 'usurping' Petrarch's poetic subjectivity, women indirectly showed not only their poetic abilities, but also their capacity to enter an erotic discourse of passions and desires traditionally associated with men. Most importantly, by exploiting the Petrarchan tradition, women also attempted a re-vision of its secular characterisations.

3.2 'The sonnet's claim': Petrarch and the Revival of the Sonnet.

The Romantic revival of the sonnet was a massive literary phenomenon which covered almost a century of poetic production.¹⁰ Robinson and Feldman have demonstrated how the sonnet was one of the most favourite poetic forms among Romantic authors, and especially among women.¹¹ All the major Romantic poets participated in the critical debate concerning the pattern of the sonnet and its stylistic aspects, which spread rapidly in the last decades of the eighteenth century, and continued until the beginning of the Victorian Age. Many poets also wrote sonnets in this period and experimented with the form.¹² Critics tend to date the beginning of the revival with the posthumous publication in 1775 of Thomas Gray's sonnet 'On the Death of Mr. Richard West', whose

⁸It is interesting to note that Petrarch is taken as representative of the love sonnet tradition, much more than Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton. The popularity that Petrarch achieves in eighteenth-century Britain is unequalled by any other sonneteers in the history of British literature.

⁹Besides the authors included in this chapter, other famous Romantic women sonneteers who acknowledged Petrarch's influence are: Amelia Opie (1769-1853), Susan Evance (1808-1818), Mary Tighe (1772-1810), Elizabeth Cobbold (1767-1824), and Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861).

¹⁰See, for example: Heather Dubrow, *Echoes of Desire: English Petrarchism and its Counterdiscourses*. As Stuart Curran observes, after the popularity of the sonnet in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the form virtually disappeared from British literature since, in Johnson's words, it was 'not very suitable for the English language', *Poetic Forms and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 29.

¹¹Paula Feldman and Daniel Robinson (eds), *A Century of Sonnet: the Romantic-Era Revival 1750-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) pp. 3-18.

¹²Among others, Samuel Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Robert Southey and John Keats wrote and published sonnets.

composition dates back to 1742.¹³ The form was then popularised by Thomas Warton (1728-1790), and later by Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784), the first sonnet sequence of the Romantic period, and William Bowles' *Fourteen Sonnets* (1789).¹⁴ The revival was initially marked by a will to adapt the form to a modern sensibility, but turned soon into a debate over the importance of the original Petrarchan structure as the dominant and most legitimate one. Stuart Curran observes how the sonnets which initiated the revival were 'sonnets of sensibility', and he remarks how the original form was 'bended, stretched, reshaped, and rethought' over a century of experimentations.¹⁵ The more modern content of the sonnet, however, was constructed around the 'sweet and indissoluble union between the intellectual and the material world', a merging that had its first origins in the Petrarchan tradition.¹⁶ In this way, the traditional Petrarchan form of the sonnet is incorporated into and innovated by the Romantic production of sonnets, thus constructing an important continuity between the poetic tradition of fourteenth-century Italy and Romantic Britain. The phenomenon of the popularisation of the sonnet spread through the publication of individual books of poetry, in periodicals, anthologies, annuals, gift books and even novels. A common element among the diverse productions of sonnets, as Robinson explains, was the author's intention to focus on 'the intensity of feeling, the clarity of perception, and the harmony of language'.¹⁷ Petrarch's sonnets were commonly taken as the most suitable examples of the achievement of a perfect balance among these elements. More specifically, the sonnet revival was constructed upon a renewed interest in Petrarch's poetry and

¹³ See, for example, Daniel E. White's 'Autobiography and Elegy: the Early Romantic Poetics of Thomas Gray and Charlotte Smith', in *Early Romantics: Perspectives in British Poetry from Pope to Wordsworth*, ed. by Thomas Woodman (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 1998), pp. 57-70. Also Stuart Curran and Daniel Robinson's works cited in this section date the beginning of the revival with Gray's publication.

¹⁴ For a detailed genealogy of the Romantic sonnet see Ann Wagner, *A Moment's Monument: Revisionary Poetics and the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996) and Brent Raycroft, 'From Charlotte Smith to Nehemiah Higginbottom: revising the genealogy of the early Romantic sonnet', *European Romantic Review* 9: 3; (Summer 1998), 363-392.

¹⁵ Stuart Curran, 'The Sonnet', in *Poetic Forms and British Romanticism*, p. 30.

¹⁶ Stuart Curran, *Poetic Forms*, p. 37.

a rage for translating his sonnets into English. The majority of eighteenth-century anthologies of sonnets included a lot of translations and imitations of Petrarch's poems, besides compositions by modern authors. The prefaces to these anthologies, not only contained various theoretical reflections on this poetic form and its origins, but, most importantly, seemed to associate the Petrarchan tradition with women's conspicuous production of sonnets.

Capell Lofft's five-volume anthology *Laura: or Sonnets and Elegiac Quatuorzains*, published in 1814, was one of the most complete collections of the period.¹⁸ The editor clearly assimilates the Petrarchan tradition with women's massive production of sonnets. In the Preface, Lofft justifies his choice of naming the anthology 'Laura', by claiming it 'an affectionate and respectful remembrance of Petrarch, and of that mysterious passion to which we owe the fact that the sonnet has such celebrity'.¹⁹ The editor goes on to praise the Petrarchan sonnets to which 'we are indebted for the taste and refinement formed and diffused by his delicate and cultivated Genius, by whose peculiar amenity, purity, tenderness, calm and graceful elevation, the *style*, the *poetry*, the *sentiments* and the *manners* of Italy, and progressively of Europe, have been so happily influenced'.²⁰ After declaiming the importance of the Petrarchan tradition for the development of European lyricism, Capell Lofft further explains his choice of naming the collection after Laura. He argues that, since 'many female poets have graced this elegant department of poetry, many of whose beautiful production will be found in these volumes', he thought that to dedicate the collection to one of the most famous women in the history of literature would be a homage to women poets.²¹ Significantly, Lofft is the first to recognise the important connection between women sonneteers and the Petrarchan tradition, particularly the character of Laura.

¹⁷ Paula Feldman and Daniel Robinson (eds.), *A Century of Sonnets*, p. 3.

¹⁸ Stuart Curran, *Poetic Forms*, p. 37; Paula Feldman and Daniel Robinson (eds.) *A Century of Sonnets*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Capell Lofft, *Laura: or Sonnets and Elegiac Quatuorzains* (London, 1814), p. ii.

²⁰ Capell Lofft, *Laura*, p. ii, italics in the original.

A similar association between women and the Petrarchan sonnet, even if less explicitly, is carried out in the Preface to another important anthology of sonnets published in 1803: *Petrarca, a Selection of Sonnets from Various Authors with an Introductory Dissertation on the Origin and Structure of the Sonnet*. In it, the editor George Henderson claims the importance of the Italian origin of the form, especially of the Petrarchan structure.²² Even if the association with the increase of poetic production by women is not overtly acknowledged, the selection of sonnets included in the anthology shows how the editor was aware of the importance of women's contribution to the revival. Besides the classical sonnets of Surrey, Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton, the editor selects various male sonneteers of the time, among them Bowles, Warton and Drummond, along with the most famous women sonneteers: Mary Robinson, Anna Seward, Charlotte Smith. Though male poets outnumber women poets, women's sonnets outnumber men's, thus suggesting that the editor considers women's production of sonnets more important from a qualitative point of view. For both editors, the most substantial elements at the origin of the Romantic sonnet revival appear to be the development of women's poetry, the interest in Petrarch, and in his love for Laura, whose interrelationship this chapter aims to stress and analyse. By connecting these three elements, Capell Lofft and George Henderson draw a clear picture of what at the time appeared as a disordered and confusing fashion for the sonnet

Women's contribution to the revival was important not only in terms of compositions, but also in terms of critical reflection over the form and its position in the Romantic literary landscape. Charlotte Smith's 1775 introduction to *Elegiac Sonnets*, for example, suggests a re-definition of the form following a modern sensibility, rather than anchoring it to its strict classical structure, while Anna Seward's preface to her *Original Sonnets* (1799) claims the importance of

²¹ Capell Lofft, *Laura*, p. ii.

²² George Henderson (ed.), *Petrarca: a Selection of Sonnets from Various Authors with an Introductory Dissertation on the Origin and Structure of the Sonnet* (London, 1803), pp. viii-ix.

her effort to write one hundred sonnets all in respect of the Petrarchan metre and rhyme schemes.²³ One of the main reasons for *Elegiac Sonnets'* critical and popular success is to be ascribed to the modern definition the author suggests.²⁴ In the Preface to the first and second editions, Charlotte Smith defines the sonnet as 'no improper vehicle for a single Sentiment', mainly inspired by 'very melancholy moments', and she supports the choice of a personal and original form by the opinion of 'very good judges, that the legitimate Sonnet is ill calculated for our language'.²⁵ On the other hand, Anna Seward's emphasis on the legitimate structure of almost all the sonnets included in the 1799 edition of *Original Sonnets*, suggests how her poetic skills are a sign of distinction:²⁶

Prais'd be the Poet, who the Sonnet's claim,
 Severest of the orders that belong
 Distinct and separate to the Delphic song,
 Shall venerate, nor its appropriate name
 Lawless assume. Peculiar is its frame,
 From him derived, who shunn'd the city throng,
 And warbled sweet thy rocks and streams among,
 Lonely Valclusa!- and that heir of fame,
 Our greater Milton, hath, by many a lay
 Form'd on that arduous model, fully shown
 That English verse may happily display
 Those strict energetic measures, which alone
 Deserve the name of Sonnet, and convey
 A grandeur, grace and spirit, all their own.²⁷

In this sonnet on the sonnet the poet clearly establishes the poetic supremacy of the 'legitimate' form and of the poets who respect and imitate it, and are thus associated with Petrarch and Milton. Consequently, women who wrote legitimate sonnets were in fact demonstrating how their poetic skills were equal to those of

²³ Daniel Robinson, 'Reviving the Sonnet: Women Romantic Poets and the Sonnet Claim', *European Romantic Review* 6 (1995), 98-127, and Stuart Curran, *Poetic Forms*, pp. 29-55.

²⁴ *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. by Stuart Curran (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. xxv.

²⁵ Charlotte Smith, 'Preface to the first and second editions'; *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, p. 3. The popular idea that the sonnet was 'not very suitable for the English language' came from Johnson's 'Sonnets', *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1755).

²⁶ Anna Seward, *Original Sonnets on Various Subjects; and Odes Paraphrased from Horace* (London, 1799), p. iii.

²⁷ Anna Seward, *Poetical Works* (London, 1810), Sonnet LXIV.

Petrarch and Milton, and superior to those poets who opted for 'illegitimate' sonnets, claiming the Italian form to be too difficult for the English language.

Although they follow different traditions and claim the superiority of one over the other, it is significant that, in writing sonnets, women ask for a special recognition in the poetic production of the time. The more we proceed towards the turn of the century, the more evident becomes the need to distinguish oneself from the countless sonneteers that dominate the literary market. The apologetic tone that characterises some of the prefaces to women's collections of sonnets, for example, is but another device to show that their sonnets are worthy of the readers' attention.²⁸ In the prefaces to the first five editions of *Elegiac Sonnets*, for instance, Smith adopts an apologetic tone that seems to be unnecessary to a collection so successful that went through six editions in fifteen years. In the preface to the first edition, Smith suggests that her sonnets have been published only thanks to her friends' 'multiplication of copies' of her poetic 'attempts'. Similarly, in the preface to the second and third editions, Smith confirms her debt to those friends 'whose exertions in my favour, rather than to any merit of my own', have made the collection publishable. Smith, however, specifies that the second and third editions are the result of the good reception that the public had given to the first edition. Though Smith subtly directs the attention to the public instead of focusing on the merit of her compositions, the former is a logical consequence of the latter. Smith also explains that she has attempted some sonnets on the Italian model, 'with what success I do not know'. This demonstrates how her poetic voice is independent from those 'very good judges' that consider the Italian form ill suited for the English language that she had mentioned in the preface to the first edition. With her decision to use the Petrarchan tradition, Smith consciously communicates her will to enter this well-established literary tradition; at the same time she shows her ability to adapt it

²⁸ The apologetic tone, as the following argument will discuss, is but a way to demonstrate that women can actually write successful sonnets in the Petrarchan mode, the most difficult form for the English language.

to her own sensibility.²⁹ Some decades later, Mary Johnson, author of *Original Sonnets and Other Poems* (1805), writes in her Preface that 'at a period when almost every village produces its Poet, and almost every cottage its Sonneteer, I must too sensibly feel my inferiority in the scale of comparative merit not to dread, from an enlightened and unbiased public, a prohibition from the already full-stocked precincts of Parnassus'.³⁰ Johnson's sense of inferiority is inconsistent with her effort to write the whole collection in strict Petrarchan rhyme. The important fact is that female authors feel the need to justify their ambitious but successful attempts to enter a poetic tradition historically dominated by male authors. This means that, however apologetic their tone is, their intention is to use the Petrarchan tradition for strengthening their poetic voices.

The same issue is much more courageously and directly faced by Mary Robinson in her 1796 preface to the love sonnet sequence *Sappho and Phaon*. In it Robinson makes clear her will to distinguish her poetry from the numerous sonneteers that proliferated at the end of the century. At the same time, she makes clear that by using the Italian sonnet and by re-writing the Petrarchan tradition, she wants to enter this same tradition in an authoritative and creative way. After explaining that 'it must strike every admirer of poetic compositions, that the modern sonnet, concluding with two lines, winding up the sentiment of the whole, confines the poet's fancy, and frequently occasions an abrupt termination' she claims that for the purpose of writing a sonnet sequence the legitimate sonnet helps to form 'in the whole a complete and connected story'.³¹ What Robinson seems to be willing to communicate to the reader is that her compositions are clearly different and superior to 'the variety of authors who have written sonnets', among whom, 'few deserve notice'.³² By distancing her

²⁹ On Smith's construction of a 'public persona' in her Prefaces to *Elegiac Sonnets*, see: Jacqueline Labbe, *Charlotte Smith: Romanticism, Poetry, and the Culture of Gender* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 1-22.

³⁰ Mary Johnson, *Original Sonnets and Other Poems* (London, 1805), p. 1.

³¹ Mary Robinson, *Sappho and Phaon*; *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems*, ed. by Judith Pascoe (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2000), p. 144.

³² Mary Robinson, *Sappho and Phaon*, p. 145.

work from the fashionable production of sonnets by 'school-boys and romantic-scribblers', who think 'a sonnet a task of little difficulty', Mary Robinson overtly aligns herself with the major sonneteers, among them Milton and Petrarch:

Sensible of the extreme difficulty I shall have to encounter in offering the world a little wreath, gathered in that path, which, even the best poets have thought it dangerous to tread; and knowing that the English language is, of all others, the least congenial to such an undertaking, I only point out the track where more able pen may follow with success; and where the most classical beauties may be adopted, and drawn forth with peculiar advantage.³³

In linking her production to the dominant male poetic tradition, Robinson claims the importance of her contribution in a literary field, that of the love sonnet, historically dominated by male poets. In women's hands, the 'Sonnet's claim' is actually an attempt at 'self-canonization', one of the first in which women poets showed that they could match skills with male poets in an arena earlier closed to them.³⁴

As it has emerged from my analysis the revival of the sonnet was seen as a typical female-dominated phenomenon.³⁵ Petrarch was commonly considered as the most authoritative voice in the field of this poetic form. His sequence of sonnets was often imitated and translated with the purpose of anchoring the production of modern sonnets to a tradition so historically fundamental for the development of modern European lyricism. However, Petrarch's collection of

³³ Mary Robinson, *Sappho and Phaon*, p. 146.

³⁴ The popularity of the sonnets among women poets was a source of embarrassment for many male poets. In his preface to Bowles' *Fourteen Sonnets* (1789), for example, Coleridge recognizes in Bowles and Smith the two sonneteers who most successfully express the new sensibility. However, Coleridge's participation in the female dominated sonnet revival is the source of embarrassment in his following comments on this poetic form. By the time he completed his *Biographia Literaria* in 1817, in fact, Smith's authority had been entirely replaced by Bowles' style of poetry, which is 'so tender', but also 'so manly'. The importance of Smith had been completely dismissed in favour of the more masculine poetic authority of the Oxford-educated clergymen in 1817, when the production of sonnets had been clearly dominated by women poets. William Bowles, *Fourteen Sonnets, Written Chiefly on Picturesque Spots during a Tour* (London, 1789), pp. 1,2; *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, 1817, James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (eds.), 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), vol. I, p. 17.

³⁵ William Wordsworth's approach to the sonnet has, like Coleridge's, an anti-feminine motivation. See: Stuart Curran, *Poetic Forms and British Romanticism*, p. 39; Lee M. Johnson, *Wordsworth and*

sonnets was not only important in terms of the establishment of an aesthetic definition of the form, but also in terms of his crucial position in the evolution of love poetry.³⁶ Women's use of Petrarch was often deliberately intended to give credit and power to a female poetic subjectivity under construction in the Romantic Age.

3.3 The Della Cruscan and the use of Petrarchan imagery.

The phenomenon of the revival of the sonnet took place in a cultural environment which, starting with the second half of the eighteenth century, is known as the 'Age of Sensibility'. The transformations in culture and society made possible the proliferation not only of the sonnet as a poetic expression of sensibility, but also of love and erotic poetry, which are inherently connected with the Petrarchan tradition. As Jacqueline Labbe and Stuart Curran have demonstrated, the popularisation of romance as a literary genre is linked to the renewed interest in Romance literature and to the fashionable reintroduction of chivalry and courtly love language in poetry.³⁷ The publication of poems that re-elaborate and re-vision the Petrarchan imagery and the system of Renaissance courtly love proliferates in the last decades of the eighteenth century. What Jerome McGann has defined as a poetics of sensibility corresponds to the cultural

the Sonnet (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde, 1973), pp. 10-22; Philip Cox, *Gender and the Romantic Poets* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 42-50.

³⁶ C. P. Brand observes how Petrarch was one of the Italian 'favourite lyric poets, and his merits and defects were discussed frequently in the critical literature of the Romantic Age', and he adds that 'people read his poetry often in the original because it was fashionable to do so'. As his study demonstrates, the interest in Petrarch spread throughout the Romantic Age and involved all the major Romantic authors. Besides Coleridge and Wordsworth, also Keats, Scott, Landor and especially Shelley showed an interest in Petrarch's poetry. Brand stresses how Shelley preferred Petrarch to any other Italian poet and that 'he had his works constantly in hand'. He considered his poems to be 'like spell which unseal the inmost enchanted fountains of the delight which is the grief of love'. Brand claims that Petrarch's influence on Shelley's poetry is considerable and traces echoes of his works in 'The Defence of Poetry', 'The Mask of Anarchy', 'The Triumph of Love', and also in 'Adonais' (C. P. Brand, *Italy and the English Romantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), pp. 93-97).

³⁷ Jacqueline Labbe, *The Romantic Paradox: Love, Violence and the Uses of Romance, 1760-1830* (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 2000), pp. 48-50.

shift from a 'sensible mind' to a 'feeling heart'.³⁸ As the author explains, along with tears, sympathy, sorrows and suffering, erotic language is at the base of the way people relate to their social context in a new way. The focus on human beings who 'think through their feelings', as the author points out,³⁹ not only creates a mind/body relation, but also positions women in a central place, following the Augustan period's assumption that women were 'sensible but not reasonable beings'.⁴⁰ With regard to the poetry of sensibility, Stuart Curran argues that it is at the base of a literature of psychological exploration, whose 'primary impulse is introspective'.⁴¹ As the previous sections have shown, the revival of the sonnet was related to this new wave of self-exploration and self-reflectiveness in which women, for the cultural assumptions of being emotional creatures, held an important position.⁴² As Barker Benfield acknowledges, the fashionable interest in the system of courtly love was an important aspect of the sentimentalising process which gave women the power to manipulate and rule a male universe.⁴³ Women's importance in the revival of the sonnet is therefore related to their central position in the revival of Romance literature.

It is interesting to note how both revivals, the sonnet's and romance's, find their origin and support in the Petrarchan tradition and its Italian background. Stuart Curran points out that 'the etymological root of Romanticism [...] is romance', and he argues that 'the term by which we retrospectively define the period simply honours the primacy of romance in British poetry during this epoch'.⁴⁴ However, as the works of Charles Brand and Kenneth Churchill demonstrate, the Romantic interest in romance is deeply rooted and supported by the interest in Italian narrative and lyric poetry, among which Petrarch and

³⁸ Jerome McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 4.

³⁹ Jerome McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility*, p. 7.

⁴⁰ Alan Richardson, 'Romanticism and the Colonization of the Feminine', in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. by Anne Mellor, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 13-25, (p. 14).

⁴¹ Stuart Curran, 'The I Altered', in *Romanticism and Feminism*, pp. 185-207, (p. 197).

⁴² The literary production of sensibility was overtly dominated by women's works, especially before the publication of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* (1798).

⁴³ G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 287.

the sonnet play a fundamental role.⁴⁵ The best-selling poetry of the Della Crusicans, in particular, was constructed upon the revival of interest in Romance literature and, at the same time, it made a conspicuous use of Petrarchan imagery and of the sonnet. Significantly, the poetry of the Della Crusicans is exemplary of the connection between the revival of the sonnet, the renewed interest in Petrarch and the Italian cultural and literary background.

The Della Cruscan circle was obviously related to the Italian environment, since it was created in Italy in the summer 1785 when Robert Merry, Hester Piozzi and William Parsons found themselves in Florence, idly enjoying the 'Italian sunshine'.⁴⁶ Although the name Della Crusca has a political connotation, since it was meant to commemorate the suppression of the liberal Accademia della Crusca by Duke Leopold of Tuscany in 1783, thus symbolising the opposition of the poets to the repressive Tuscan government of their day, the main subject of their poetry was love.⁴⁷ Their first collection, *The Florence Miscellany*, was intended as a literature of leisure to while away an afternoon, and contained also some poems by Italian poets and translations, among which were some of Petrarch's sonnets. The volume was imported to England at Robert Merry's return in 1787 and continued in an epistolary form in *The British Album* between 1788 and 1794.⁴⁸ In England, the Della Crusicans' poetry assumed a strong erotic connotation and acquired notoriety. Other poets joined the original Italian group, among whom were Edward Jerningham, Samuel Rogers, Hannah

⁴⁴ Stuart Curran, *Poetic Forms*, p. 129.

⁴⁵ C.P. Brand, *Italy and the British Romantics*, pp.71-108, and Kenneth Churchill, *Italy and English Literature 1764-1930* (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 1980), pp. 1-10. Brand refers specifically to the poetry of Dante, Petrarch, Tasso and Ariosto.

⁴⁶ Hester Piozzi (ed.), *The Florence Miscellany* (Florence: G. Cam, 1785), p. 6.

⁴⁷ Brian Moloney observes how only later, in the 1790s, with the publication in England of *The Laurel of Liberty*, Robert Merry and other Della Crusicans launched a vigorous attack on Leopold of Tuscany, 'expressing comments much more severe than usual British travellers in Italy' ('The Della Cruscan Poets, the *Florence Miscellany*, and the Leopoldine Reforms', *Modern Language Review* 60), (1965), 48-57, (p. 56).

⁴⁸ For an extensive analysis of the Della Crusicans' activity in Italy and England see: W. N. Hardgreaves-Mawdsley, *The English Della Crusicans and Their Time 1783-1828* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967).

Cowley, and later Mary Robinson when, as Judith Pascoe suggests, the phenomenon started a process of feminization.⁴⁹

Although Brian Moloney observes that nothing specifically Italian characterises the Della Cruscans' poetry, except a 'tenuous connection with the Petrarch-Laura situation', the Italianess of the movement was evident to contemporary readers and to the members themselves.⁵⁰ *The Florence Miscellany* is the result, in Piozzi's words, of a 'reciprocation of confidential friendship and mutual esteem' between British and Italian authors.⁵¹ Piozzi presents the work to the public as a mere collection of occasional verses written while enjoying the southern and warm Italian weather:

Why we wrote the verses may be easily explain'd, we wrote them to divert ourselves, and to say kind things about each other; we collected them that our reciprocal expressions of kindness should not be lost, and we printed them because we had no reason to be ashamed of our mutual partiality.⁵²

In spite of Piozzi's effort to demystify the work, *The Florence Miscellany* was enthusiastically received by Italian critics, who tended to emphasise the importance of the Anglo-Italian collaboration. In *Novelle Letterarie*, for example, Marco Lastri, an Italian member of the Della Cruscans, comments:

Rara combinazione e gloriosa per la Nazione Inglese! Quattro Viaggiatori, o Cavalieri erranti, tra i quali una Dama, lasciato il Tamigi, s'incontrarono accidentalmente sull'Arno, dove in quell'aura stessa che rispondeva un tempo alle voci armoniche di Dante e del Petrarca, risponde alle loro, essendo tutti e quattro Poeti. Sono i loro nomi, Madama Piozzi, ed i Cavalieri Bertie Greatheed, Roberto Merry, Guglielmo Parsons.⁵³

⁴⁹ Judith Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality: Gender, Poetry and Spectatorship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). See the following discussion on the feminisation of Della Cruscans' poetry.

⁵⁰ Brian Moloney, 'The Della Cruscan Poets', p. 48.

⁵¹ Hester Piozzi, *Observations and Reflections Made in the Course of a Journey through France, Italy and Germany*, 2 vols. (London, 1789), vol. I, p. 275. The Italian authors included in the *Florence Miscellany* are: Lorenzo Pignotti, Count Angiolo d'Elci, Marco Lastri, Ippolito Pindemonte and Giuseppe Parini.

⁵² Hester Piozzi (ed.), *Florence Miscellany* (Florence, 1785), p. 8.

⁵³ Marco Lastri, *Novelle Letterarie* (Firenze, 1785), pp. 673-676. 'It's a rare and glorious combination for the English nation! Four travellers, or wandering 'Knights', among which a Lady, left the Thames and accidentally met on the river Arno, where, the same air that had once responded to the harmonious voice of Dante and Petrarch, now respond to their voice, being all four Poets. Their names are: Lady Piozzi, and Sirs Bertie Greatheed, Robert Merry, and William Parsons' (my translation).

The passage clearly presents the Della Cruscans in terms of Anglo-Italian collaboration. By emphasising words such as 'dama' and 'cavaliere', however, Lastri seems to characterise the Della Cruscans' activity as reminiscent of the system of courtly love.⁵⁴ The connection is made even more explicit by the creation of an imaginary poetic dialogue between the English Della Cruscans and the two most famous Renaissance Italian poets: Dante and Petrarch. In effect, *The Florence Miscellany* is marked by the influence of Italian literature, both in terms of stylistic constructions and thematic choices. Following Jerome McGann's opinion, the 'entire movement took the meridian graciousness of Italy as a point of departure', and its production enters the eighteenth-century tradition of sentimentality which Sterne initiated and first linked to Italy.⁵⁵ In a similar way, Michael Gamer defines the Della Cruscans' production as the first important eighteenth-century English engagement with Italian poetry, which anticipates later English experimentations with Italian improvisation so popular in British poetry at the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁵⁶ This is an important connection especially if we think that poets such as Byron and Shelley were quite familiar with the Della Cruscans' poetry.⁵⁷ In particular, the association with the Italian tradition of improvisation and of extemporaneous verse puts Della Cruscan activity at the source of British authors' fascination with this poetic form. It is not by chance that Hannah Cowley, herself a member of the Della Cruscans, repeatedly defines their verses as spontaneous and improvisational,

⁵⁴ Though the titles of 'Cavaliere' and 'Dama' were still commonly used in spoken Italian in the eighteenth century, the recurrent use that Lastri makes of these words in a short paragraph could be read as evocative of Renaissance courtly manners. These words, in fact, traditionally belong to the fifteenth and sixteenth-century courtly language.

⁵⁵ Jerome McGann, 'The Literary World of the English Della Cruscans', *Fins de Siècle: English Poetry in 1590, 1690, 1790, 1890, 1990*, ed. by Elaine Scarry (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 95-122, p. 101.

⁵⁶ Michael Gamer, ' "Bell's Poetics": *The Baviad*, the Della Cruscans, and *The Book of the World*', *The Satiric Eye: Forms of Satire in the Romantic Period*, ed. by Steven E. Jones (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 31-54, p. 33.

⁵⁷ See Jerome McGann, 'The Literary World of the English Della Cruscans', p. 99.

due mainly to the speed of their compositions.⁵⁸ To put it in another way, the Della Cruscan's poetry is at the origin of the popularisation of Italian improvisation so dear to nineteenth-century women writers, and their use of the Petrarchan tradition as the principal means of expression connect two among the most important elements of influence of Italian literature and culture on British Romanticism.⁵⁹

The fact that the Della Cruscan were consciously following the example of the troubadours and the Italian *Dolce Stil Nuovo* of Dante and Petrarch, was also evident in their later publications, especially in *The British Album* (1790). The basic assumption common to these poetic traditions is a heterosexual erotic exchange. The emphasis on sensuous experience and 'bodily life activity' expressed in the poetry of the Della Cruscan, is based on the same mechanism of 'bodily responses to external stimuli', of 'delineating forms of social relations and psychological interaction' that are expressed, in other terms, in Petrarch's *Canzoniere*.⁶⁰ The destabilization of the love experience is the main topic of the popular Della Cruscan poetry; furthermore, the use of symbolism and imagery is very similar to the Petrarchan language of love, only more overtly eroticised. However, in Della Cruscan poetry women appear as agents of poetry themselves, thus creating a dialectic that is absent in the Petrarchan tradition. This implies that under the influence of the new sensibility, erotic formalities appealed both to men and women. More specifically, as Judith Pascoe argues, several of the conventions established by Della Cruscan poetry were suitable for women, such as the possibility of anonymity and the focus on affections and emotions.⁶¹ Hester Piozzi makes explicit the importance of the Della Cruscan for women poets:

⁵⁸ Hannah Cowley, *The World* (Dec. 22, 1787). See also: Michel Gamer's 'Bell's Poetics', p. 36.

⁵⁹ See Chapter 4 for an extensive discussion of the influence of Improvisation on British Romantic literature.

⁶⁰ These expressions are used by Margaret Anne Doody in 'Sensuousness in the poetry of the eighteenth century women poets', *Women's Poetry in the Enlightenment*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999), pp. 3-32, (pp. 4-5).

⁶¹ Judith Pascoe, *Romantic Theatricality*, p. 72.

This Fashion makes well for us Women however, as Learning no longer forms any part of the Entertainment expected from Poetry- Ladies have therefore as good Chance as People regularly bred to Science in Times when *fire-eyed Fancy* is said to be the only requisite of a Popular Poet.⁶²

By making poetry a means of entertainment, and not simply a vehicle for learned people as Enlightenment poetry typically was, Piozzi explains, the Della Cruscan have made poetry, and the sonnet in particular, more accessible to women poets and readers, who were traditionally excluded from masculine 'Learning'. This is an important point that makes Della Cruscan poetry one of the first Romantic productions that equalizes male and female poets. Furthermore, in Della Cruscan poetry, women not only are able to write poetry and to respond to their admirers, but they also hold a very different position in men's sonnets, being transformed from unattainable and spiritual creatures into earthly and sensuous beings. In particular, the role that women acquire in Della Cruscan poetry is very different from the image of the angelic woman that Petrarch presented in his works. This enhances a re-visionary approach that transforms Della Cruscan poetry in an attempt to re-write an established tradition. As a result, the Petrarchan language of love typical of the sonnet is converted into an eroticised poetry in the Della Cruscans. Here is, for example, the sonnet 'Melissa' that Benedict writes to his pen-lover in order to establish and reinforce their romance:⁶³

Her dark-brown tresses negligently flow
In curls luxuriant, to her bending waist;
Her darker brows, in perfect order placid,
Guard her bright eyes, that mildly beam below.
The Roman elegance her nose displays-
Her cheeks- soft blushing, emulate the rose,
Her witching smiles, the orient pearls disclose:
And o'er her lips, the dew of Hybla strays.
Her lib'ral mind, the gentler virtues own;
Her chaste'n'd wit, instructive lore impart;

⁶² Hester Piozzi, *Thraliana: the Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (later Piozzi) 1776-1809*, ed. by Katharine Balderston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942), p. 790.

⁶³ Edward Jerningham contributed to *The British Album* as 'Benedict'.

Her lovely breast is soft compassion's throne,
And honours temple is her glowing heart.
But I, like Patriarch Moses, praise and bless
The Canaan which I never shall possess.⁶⁴

The language of this sonnet is clearly artificial. Yet, it is also self-consciously erotic and reminds the reader of the intensity of courtly passion. Interestingly, this sonnet could be read as a sort of parody of Petrarch's few descriptions of Laura. In sonnet 75 and 133 of *Canzoniere*, for example, Petrarch describes Laura's eyes as a source of love, compassion and sweetness, and in sonnet 90, one of the few in which Laura appears in her corporeity, Petrarch describes her 'loose and curly hair', her 'gleaming eyes' and her 'lovely face' which inspire pity and sympathy:⁶⁵

Erano i capei d'oro a l'aura sparsi,
che'n mille dolci nodi gli avolgea;
e' l vago lume oltre misura ardea
di quei begli occhi, ch'or ne son sì scarsi;
e' l viso di pietosi color farsi,
non so se vero o falso, mi pareo:
i' che l'ésca amorosa al petto avea,
qual meraviglia se di subito arsi?
Non era l'andar suo cosa mortale,
ma d'angelica forma; e le parole
suonavan altro che pur voce umana:
uno spirto celeste, un vivo sole
fu quel ch'i vidi; e se non fosse or tale,
piaga per allentar d'arco non sana.⁶⁶

The angelic beauty of Laura has been turned in Benedict's sonnet into the exotic and sensuous beauty of Melissa. Benedict transforms the chastened body of Laura in an eroticised object of desire. Though some courtly love conventions are still present, such as the comparison between Melissa's cheeks and a rose, or the praise of her liberal mind and chastened wit, these same conventions are directed to emphasise the sensuousness and eroticism of her body. The sonnet is actually an imaginary picture of a woman's body, and very little is left to the

⁶⁴ *The British Album*, (London, 1790), vol. II.

⁶⁵ Francesco Petrarca, *Il Canzoniere*, Sonnet 90.

imagination of the reader. The angelic appearance of Laura has apparently nothing to do with the sensuality of Melissa's body, her exotic darkness and her 'witchery smiles'. Laura's eyes, which are the primary source of Petrarch's love, are converted in Benedict's sequence of sonnets to Melissa in the more sensuous and erotic 'balmy and rosy lips' as the most attractive part of a woman's face.⁶⁷ In Della Cruscan's imagery the female body clearly undergoes a process of eroticisation.⁶⁸

In the sonnet entitled 'Melissa's retirement', the intent is still parodic, though even more evocative of Petrarchan language and imagery:

Ah me! Why heaves my breast with frequent sighs?
 What chills my heart with such unusual fear?
 Why steal the tears, unbidden, from my eyes?-
 Why sink my wearied spirits in despair?
 The fatal cause, alas! I know too well!
 Far from my arms you, cruel I mean to go:
 Hence, hence my unavailing sorrows flow:
 But,- can I live to hear you say 'farewell!'
 Yes, I shall live, to grief a wretched prey-
 For, when your presence cheers the calm retreat,
 My moans the widow'd dove will oft repeat,
 And ev'ry gale will sighs of mine convey!
 Then go!- But think of him who, sad, - forlorn-
 Here pines and sickens for your dear return!⁶⁹

Sonnet 273 of *Canzoniere* describes how painful and dramatic is Petrarch's separation from Laura after her death. The language Benedict uses for his unwanted farewell to Melissa is of course more passionate and extreme, but the experience of destabilization is similar for both speakers. The loss of mental and sentimental stability is the first instinctive reaction of the lover at the parting from the object of his attraction. The language of exaggeration belongs to both

⁶⁶ For the translation see, Charlotte Smith, *Elegiac Sonnets; The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. by Stuart Curran; sonnet XIV. The translation is reported and analysed at p. 146 of this chapter.

⁶⁷ *The British Album*, 'To Melissa's Lips', vol. II. For an analysis of the symbolic importance of 'the eyes' in Petrarch's sonnets, see: Donaldson Evans Lance K., *Love's Fatal Glance: a Study of Eye Imagery in the Poets of the Ecole Lyonnaise* (University, Mississippi.: Romance Monograph inc., 1980).

⁶⁸ In particular, in the Della Cruscan's poetry, the traditions of the French troubadours and the Italian Dolce Stil Novo have been deprived of its chastity and of its prudery, which were typical of a time when Christianity was central to culture and society.

traditions, with the difference that in Petrarch the emphasis lies on a spiritual level, while in Benedict corporeality is the predominant dimension. The erotic mechanism is in fact very similar. As Jacqueline Labbe notices, in the poetry of the Della Cruscan, as in the Petrarchan tradition, love is continually deferred; each sonnet contains 'a burst of desire' which is entirely consummated in the shape and space of the sonnet itself.⁷⁰ In some ways, the fourteen lines of the poem represent the only bodily dimension of the romance. The fact that in Della Cruscan sonnets love is entirely expressed in words, since the lovers never meet, gives the sonnet a prominent sexual and erotic character. Most importantly, by using the Petrarchan tradition as a standpoint for a new modern version of love poetry, the Della Cruscan seem to validate their own poetic achievements and to strengthen the link between novelty and tradition.⁷¹

Having highlighted the connection between the Della Cruscan, the Italian poetic tradition and the rise of women's poetry, it is important to stress how William Gifford, one of the most ardent opponents of this new wave of poetry, uses these three elements to invigorate his critique. A careful reading of *The Baviad and Maeviad* (1798), the two volumes in which Gifford describes what he perceived as 'the vacuousness' of Della Cruscan writing, shows the role both gender and Italy play in it.⁷² Although *The Baviad* is principally an aesthetic critique of the Della Cruscan, in it Gifford clearly associates the success of this poetry with the feminization of poetry, a process he clearly finds disturbing. Interestingly, he connects this feminization of poetry to the Italian origins of Della Cruscan poetic sensibility. In his introduction to *The Baviad*, Gifford defines the success of Della Cruscan poetry as an 'epidemic malady [...] spreading from

⁶⁹ *The British Album*, 'Melissa's Farewell', vol. II

⁷⁰ Jacqueline Labbe, *The Romantic Paradox*, p. 51.

⁷¹ The link between the Della Cruscan and Petrarch is actually overtly acknowledged in *The British Album*, where the poets include numerous translations from *Canzoniere*.

⁷² For an extensive analysis of Gifford's *The Baviad*, see: Michael Gamer, "Bell's Poetics", pp. 36-48.

fool to fool'.⁷³ However, it soon becomes clear that this epidemic malady is an 'infection' coming from the South of Europe, particularly from Italy:

The first cargo of poetry arrived from Florence [...] and was given to the public through the medium of this favourite paper [*The World*]. There was a specious brilliancy in these exotics which dazzled the native grubs, who had scarce ever ventured beyond a sheep, and a crook, and a rose-tree grove, with an ostentatious display of 'blue skies', and 'crashing torrents', and 'petrifying suns' [...]. From admiration to imitation is but a step. Honest Yenda tried his hand at a descriptive ode, and succeeded beyond his hopes; Anna Matilda followed [...] The fever turned to frenzy: Laura Maria, Carlos, Orlando, Adelaide, and a thousand nameless names caught the infection; and from one end of the kingdom to the other, all was nonsense and Della Crusca.⁷⁴

In Gifford's words, Della Crusca, as the initiator of the movement, caught this 'infectious disease' in Italy and brought it to England, thus contaminating a lot of other people. Once the movement has spread in England, however, it does not lose its foreignness and all the participants acquire exotic names. When we come to the text of *The Baviad* itself, Gifford makes clear that women have an important responsibility in the creation and spreading of this new poetry, especially in the person of Piozzi and her 'bluestocking'd friends'.⁷⁵ When Gifford complains of 'a specious brilliancy in these exotics, which dazzled the native grubs', therefore, he clearly underpins the idea of an exotic feminised poetry which colonises a stronger- more masculine- native poetry. In other words, Della Cruscan poetry is criticised for being feminine and Italian at the same time, thus overtly confirming a connection between the revival of the Italian lyric tradition and the feminisation of poetry.

⁷³ William Gifford, *The Baviad and Maeviad* (London, 1798), p. xii.

⁷⁴ William Gifford, *The Baviad*, p. xi.

3.4 Women re-writing the Petrarchan tradition.

The Romantic revival of the sonnet and the popularity of Petrarch increased consistently after the publication of Susanna Dobson's *Life of Petrarch, collected from 'Memoirs pour la vie de Petrarque'* (1775).⁷⁶ The book is a biography of Petrarch, translated and adapted from the 1764 biography of the French author Jacques de Sade⁷⁷. The publication and circulation of the *Life of Petrarch* popularised the character of Petrarch as a man and a poet, and it also brought along a modernisation of his life and thought. One of the most direct intentions of the biography was to sentimentalise Petrarch's life, and to emphasise the emotional side of his life. In this way, Petrarch not only appears as the first modern poet, but as a truly Romantic character, whose personality and life are exemplary of a new sensibility. While introducing the life of Petrarch, Susanna Dobson comments:

And perhaps few characters have felt in a stronger way the advantage of well-regulated dispositions than that of Petrarch's, from the contrast we behold in one particular of his life, and the extreme misery he suffered from the indulgence of an affection, which, though noble and delightful when justly placed, becomes a reproach and a torment to its possessor, whenever directed to an improper object.⁷⁸

Petrarch's life is entirely read and interpreted under the light of his encounter with Laura, and his unremitting love for her becomes the central and most important aspect of his life.⁷⁹ Although Petrarch's life was characterised by important political and literary activities, Dobson entirely relates them to his inner passion and love for Laura. In this way, Petrarch's life is made appealing

⁷⁵ William Gifford, *The Baviad*, lines 45-46.

⁷⁶ Susanna Dobson, *Life of Petrarch, collected from Memoirs pour la vie de Petrarque* (London 1775)

⁷⁷ Sade Jacques Francois Paul Aldonce de, *Memoirs pour la vie de François Petrarque* (Amsterdam, 1764)

⁷⁸ Susanna Dobson, *Life of Petrarch*, p. xvii-xviii.

to those modern readers of sensibility, whose main interest lies on feelings and emotions:

To susceptible and feeling minds alone Petrarch will be ever dear. Such, while they regret his failings and consider them as a warning to themselves, will love his virtues; and touched by the glowing piety and heart-felt contrition which often impressed his soul, will ardently desire to partake with him in those pathetic and sublime reflections, which are produced in grateful and affectionate hearts, on reviewing their own lives.⁸⁰

Dobson seems to suggest that Petrarch's sentimental life, although set in fourteenth-century Italy, can be taken as exemplary for the experience of a modern person of sensibility. Yet, the character of Petrarch bears an intrinsic ambiguity.⁸¹ Although a man of literary success, a political mediator between the affairs of the most powerful states and kingdoms in fourteenth-century Europe, he was in private a man divided between forbidden passions and duty, between the need for public success and private seclusion.⁸² In Spiller's more effective words, 'the man who deliberately sought the remoteness of the valley of Vaucluse, north of Avignon, to be happy growing vegetables by the stream', at the same time intrigued and manoeuvred with complete success, 'to have himself crowned poet laureate, with the approval of King Robert of Sicily, at a lavish ceremony on the Capitoline Hill in Rome in 1341'.⁸³ As the author comments, 'the selves of Petrarch are many and varied' and they all transpire in his poetic production, and especially in his sonnets, so popular in the Romantic Age.⁸⁴ The fact that much of his scholarly production and political engagement are consciously overlooked by eighteenth-century readers of his works, only strengthens the malleability of Petrarch's character. Women writers' choice of

⁷⁹ It is interestingly to observe how the tendency to sentimentalise Petrarch's life is completely absent in De Sade's original biography.

⁸⁰ Susanna Dobson, *Life of Petrarch*, p. xxi

⁸¹ Michael Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet*, p. 46.

⁸² A good biography of Petrarch is: Morris Bishop, *Petrarch and His World* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1964).

⁸³ Michael Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet*, p. 46.

⁸⁴ Michael Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet*, p. 47.

Petrarch as an inspirational model for modern love poetry, shows their intent to enter an established literary tradition in an authoritative way. At the same time, by choosing one of the most famous Italian poets laureate as a model, women poets demonstrate their poetic ambitions, and anticipate the Corinne-like dream of becoming women poets laureate. As Isobel Armstrong observes, a typical feature of women writing poetry in the eighteenth century, is their ability to create and mediate feminine subjectivity through remaking traditional genres and poetic language.⁸⁵ By appropriating a long and powerful poetic tradition such as the Petrarchan one, women are able to enter the Romantic poetic landscape in an assertive and successful way.

What made Petrarch such a fascinating character was probably the complexity of his sentimental experience. Petrarch's *Canzoniere* is dominated by love and its destabilising effects. The poet presents himself in his entirety, making his moments of discomfort and feebleness the central motif. As a man totally subdued to passion and the power of love, Petrarch speaks a language dominated by feelings, emotions and affections. This language, in turn, was the language culturally associated with women, whose rationality was considered secondarily to feelings. By assuming the identity of Petrarch's poetic speaker, women poets intend to enter a feminine realm of affections through the use of a literary masculine personality. As Dobson comments, masculine and feminine traits harmoniously coexist in Petrarch's character. She observes how Petrarch's figure 'was so distinguished, as to attract universal admiration', and how in his portraits he appears with 'large and manly features', that bespoke 'all the genius and the fancy which shone forth in his works'.⁸⁶ Interestingly, Petrarch's manly features coexist with his feminine inclination to be dominated by passion and feelings: 'his temper was on some occasions violent and his passions headstrong and unruly', which were soon followed by 'repentance and

⁸⁵ Isobel Armstrong (ed.), *Women's Poetry in the Enlightenment: the Making of a Canon 1730-1820*. (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1999), p. viii.

⁸⁶ Susanna Dobson, *Life of Petrarch*, Book II, p. 33.

remorse'.⁸⁷ In some ways, Petrarch's character combines the traits of a violent and passionate hero with the refined and elegant sensibility of a man of feelings. By quoting extensively from Petrarch's letters, Susanna Dobson demonstrates how the poet's passion for Laura was a pure and honourable sentiment, condemnable only for its excessiveness: 'I take heaven as witness that there was never anything dishonest in my affections for Laura, never anything reprehensible in them but their excess. I wish all the world could see my love with as much clearness as they can her face'.⁸⁸ The focus on the poet's love for Laura as the central element of his life helps women to enter the Petrarchan lyric tradition and to appropriate and elaborate a language of feelings, which has traditionally been connected with the feminine sphere. At the same time, the accent on Petrarch's masculine characteristics avoids the danger of 'feminising' his character, and consequently of labelling his poetry as too 'effeminate' for being recognized as fundamental in the history of European lyricism.

Mary Moore points out how love poetry had historically been a forbidden field of composition for women, and how women's erotic discourse remained problematic for centuries.⁸⁹ In translating and imitating Petrarch's sonnets, women poets were able to re-write and adapt to their own perspectives a poetic tradition. This ability to 'manipulate' the Petrarchan lyric tradition is evident, for example, in Mary Robinson. Robinson's interest in the Petrarchan tradition originates from her participation in the Della Cruscan's movement. She joined the correspondence in 1791, when her poetic career was only at the beginning, and she replaced Anna Matilda (Hannah Cowley) in the position of Della Crusca's (Robert Merry) pen lover. She soon absorbed the Della Cruscan's interest in the Petrarchan tradition and she entered the correspondence with the fictional name of 'Laura Maria'. By choosing the name 'Laura', Robinson not only anticipates an

⁸⁷ Susanna Dobson, *Life of Petrarch*, Book II, p. 34.

⁸⁸ Susanna Dobson, *Life of Petrarch*, Book II, p. 324.

⁸⁹ Mary B. Moore, *Desiring Voices*, pp. 4-5.

interest in Petrarch's lyricism, which would characterise a large part of her poetry, but she also foretells her intention to enter it from an unusual point of view, which is that of the silent and unassertive Laura.⁹⁰ In her long poem 'Petrarch to Laura', for example, Mary Robinson's use of Petrarch's lyric voice allows her to enter the field of love poetry, and at the same time to re-write the story of Petrarch and Laura in a personal way. As the author explains, the poem was inspired by Dobson's biography. The impression that Robinson gives of Petrarch is, again, that of a passionate Romantic hero, a Manfred of the fourteenth century:

Ye silent haunts, ye dark embow'ring shades,
Lone shaggy wilds and melancholy glades;
Ye mountains black'ning o'er the thorny vale;
Ye lucid lakes that trembling meet the gale;
Ye gloomy avenues of dire despair,
Dear last asylums of long-cherish'd care;
Eternal solitude! Where LOVE retires
To bathe his wounds, and quench his fatal fires;
Where frantic, lost, forlorn, and sad I go
A wand'ring pilgrim in a maze of woe;
Oh! To your deepest caverns let me fly,
Breathe a fond pray'r, and 'MIDST YOUR HORRORS DIE.⁹¹

Mary Robinson informs the reader that this long poem (304 lines) is supposed to have been written during Petrarch's retirement at Vacluse a short time before Laura's death. Petrarch's recurrent retreats in the countryside near Avignon in order to restore his mind and his feelings through a close contact with nature, far away from the source of his distress, is one of the most appealing aspects of Petrarch's life to eighteenth-century readers. As the above passage from Mary Robinson suggests, Petrarch's approach to the natural landscape is transformed into a proto-Byronic search for solitude and forgetfulness in sublime settings.⁹² Dobson's choice of a passage from Petrarch's letter confirms this attitude: 'The more desert and savage the scene

⁹⁰ See next section for a more detailed analysis of Mary Robinson's use of Laura.

⁹¹ Mary Robinson, *Poems, 1791* (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1994), p. 188.

⁹² Especially in *Manfred* Act I, Scene II, lines 1-30; and Act II, Scene II, lines 1-12.

around me, the more lively is the form which presents herself to my view. The mountains, the woods, and the streams all see and witness my anguish: no place is so wild and savage, where I am not pursued by love!'.⁹³ Dobson goes on to explain that sometimes he 'called death to his succour', and that 'the idea of death and the uncertainty of what might be his state hereafter filled his soul with trouble'.⁹⁴ In this way, Petrarch's evocation of death acquires another important Romantic connotation. The connection between love sorrow, oblivion and death is exploited in Mary Robinson's poem:

Ye roseate banks o'erhung with waving trees,
That moan responsive to the murmur'ing breeze;
How cold, how desolate your shade appears,
A path of misery thro' a vale of tears.
Now pale Despair hangs brooding o'er your bow'rs,
Absorbs your sweets, and withers all your flow'rs;
Strips the thick foliage from your verdant shades,
And spreads eternal darkness o'er your glades;
No more for ME your sunny banks shall pour
In purple tides ripe Autumn's luscious store;
No more for ME your lust'rous tints shall glow,
Your forests wave, your silv'ry channels flow;
Yet 'midst your heav'n my wounded breast shall crave
One narrow cell, my SOLACE and my GRAVE.⁹⁵

The theme of a sorrowful speaker, whose passions blind his ability to appreciate nature and life is common to many Romantic characters, first of all Byron's *Manfred*.

The fact that Petrarch is seen as a proto-type of a Romantic hero emerges also by his being very often associated with Werter, one of the most fashionable Romantic characters in the last decades of the eighteenth century. In numerous collections, in fact, translations of Petrarch's sonnets are connected with translations and imitations from Goethe's *Werter*.⁹⁶ The association is made explicit in Charlotte Smith and Anne Bannerman's

⁹³ Susanna Dobson, *Life of Petrarch*, Book I, p. 86.

⁹⁴ Susanna Dobson, *Life of Petrarch*, Book I, p. 90.

⁹⁵ Mary Robinson, *Poems, 1791*, p. 189.

⁹⁶ *Werter* was first published in 1774 ; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werter*; ed. by Michael Hulse (London: Penguin, 1989).

collections published respectively in 1775 and 1800. By translating and writing sonnets in imitation both of Petrarch and Werter, the poets focus entirely on the expression of a passionate Romantic sensibility and the destabilizing experience of love. Bannerman's translation of Petrarch's sonnets is exemplary of the adaptation of a Renaissance language of love to a more modern poetic voice:

Once more, ye balmy gales! I feel you blow,
Again, sweet hills! I mark the morning beams
Gild your green summits; while your silver streams,
Thro' vales of fragrance, undulating, flow:
But you, ye dreams of bliss! No longer here
Give life and beauty to the glowing scene;
For stern remembrance stands, where you have been
And blasts the verdure of the blooming year!
O Laura Laura in the dust with thee,
Would I could find a refuge from despair!
Is this thy boasted triumph, Love! To tear
A heart, thy coward malice dare not free,
And bid it live, when every hope is fled,
To weep, among the ashes of the dead?⁹⁷

Though the subject is fairly faithful to the original sonnet 6 of *Canzoniere*, the language Bannerman employs has been entirely adapted to a modern point of view. The overall tone that transpires is much more passionate and ardent than the original one. The elegant and balanced Petrarchan imagery has been transmuted in a powerful declaration of love and despair. In the original sonnet, for example, Laura is only metaphorically evoked in the word 'l'aura' (air) which in the Petrarchan set of metaphors coincides with Laura (l'aura=Laura).⁹⁸ In Bannerman's sonnet Laura is not only twice directly addressed, but she also becomes the indirect addressee of the final question. This is an important element of the adaptation. The Petrarchan sonnet is usually conclusive, since its purpose is to contain the moment of destabilisation within a definite poetic space. By ending the sonnet with a question, Bannerman suggests that the passions and emotions of the speaker do not actually close within the

⁹⁷ Anne Bannerman, *Poems* (Edinburgh: Mundell and Son, 1800), Sonnet VI from Petrarch.

⁹⁸ See, for example: Morris Bishop, *Petrarch and His World*.

composition. In this way, the space of the poet's emotional turmoil expands and becomes unresolved, revealing a more insecure and problematic personality. Importantly, Bannerman's attempt to make Laura's presence evident in the sonnet shows a timid intention of re-visioning the Petrarchan tradition. In particular, Bannerman's re-writing of Petrarch's sonnets involves a reconsideration of Laura's position in them. As I will demonstrate in the next section, this re-visionary attempt is an important part of women's appropriation of the Petrarchan tradition.

The issue of adaptation and imitation of the Petrarchan tradition becomes particularly complex for women poets. As Moore remarks, 'even when men and women use exactly the same words, they are not speaking from the same position and hence they are not really saying the same thing at all'.⁹⁹ The fact that by using Petrarchan themes women are actually exploiting a poetic tradition in order to express their own feelings and desires, otherwise suppressed by cultural assumptions on feminine propriety, is an important aspect of their sonnet writing. As a consequence, while approaching women's translations and adaptations of Petrarch, the reader should keep in mind that a certain re-visionary perspective is a strong connotation of the rewritten sonnet or poem. Let's take into consideration, for example, this passage from Mary Robinson's 'Petrarch to Laura':

Fix'd to the earth with trembling zeal I gaz'd
Each passion waken'd, and each sense amaz'd!
Involuntary sighs, too soon confess'd
The struggling tumults lab'ring in my breast;
No thought sublime on my rapt feelings hung,
No sacred eloquence unchain'd my tongue;
ALL, ALL WAS LOVE! While thro' my burning brain
Rush'd a fierce torrent of convulsive pain;
From my dim eyes celestial radiance stole,
While howling demons grasp'd my sinking soul,
Guilt's writhing scorpions twining round my heart,
Enflam'd each wound, and heighten'd every smart;
In vain I sought Religion's calm domain,

⁹⁹ Mary Moore, *Desiring Voices*, p.12.

And at her footstool pour'd my hopeless pain;
The priestess frowning on my impious pray'r,
Check'd the bold suit, and hurl'd me to despair.¹⁰⁰

This is one of the most pregnant passages of the whole poem, in which the complexity of the speaker and the power of passions are displayed in all their effectiveness. A first interpretation of the passage suggests that Mary Robinson is here rewriting with her own words and poetic skills the confusion of feelings and the destabilisation of mind of Petrarch's condition of an unreciprocated lover. However, by reading the passage from a gender perspective, which reminds us that the author is female, the meaning of it acquires other significances. First of all, what emerges is that the female author is using a language of passions and eroticism commonly condemned as inappropriate for a lady, and thus she dares to tread upon an unusual, if not unconventional field for women poets. But, even more interestingly, in doing this, Mary Robinson is implying that women's approach to the experience of love and eroticism is not different from men's. The subjectivity of the speaker, in this case a male speaker created by a female author, shows a complexity and a subtlety which demonstrate how women can successfully reproduce in poetry the destabilising experience of love. The fact that Mary Robinson's poem is neither a translation nor an imitation of Petrarch's poems, but an original composition, which simply takes inspiration from Petrarch, further acknowledges the author's ability to enter a literary field, that of love poetry, traditionally confined to male authorship. To put it in another way, what Mary Robinson is demonstrating in this poem, is how female subjectivity and authorship can be as complex as men's.

Mary Moore observes that 'since culture limited women's subjectivity and agency', women's attempt at rewriting the Petrarchan tradition 'explores subjectivity but also names and shows the cultural processes by which

subjectivity has been undermined'.¹⁰¹ Women's poetic speakers, therefore, write from a different standpoint, even when they simply appropriate a male experience, since their method of writing implies a revision of traditional gender roles and cultural stereotypes. This process is clear, for example, in Charlotte Smith's use of Petrarch. Smith's translation of some of Petrarch's sonnets is in the first place a sign of alignment with a male poetic tradition, with the effect of reinforcing the poet's sense of literary identity. Curran observes how the fact that Smith produced studied variations on Petrarchan themes in the very first edition of *Elegiac Sonnets*, and that later she headed her second volume with an epigraph from Petrarch, 'should alert the reader to her awareness both of the conventions of the traditional sonnet sequence and the effect of her revising it'.¹⁰² However, what Curran defines as a process of 'ventriloquization' of the Petrarchan tradition, actually involves, in my opinion, an astute re-writing of it. Smith's choice of the final lines of Petrarch's sonnet 268 as the Epigraph to volume II of *Elegiac Sonnets* gives an important frame to the whole collection: 'Non t'appressar ove sia riso e canto/ Canzone mia, no, ma pianto:/Non fa per te di star con gente allegra/ Vedova sconsolata, in veste nigra'.¹⁰³ This epigraph foretells and justifies the sorrowful and disconsolate tone of the elegiac compositions. Deborah Kennedy suggests that the mourning tone of the compositions is to be ascribed to a 'sense of loss' typical of women: 'women are in a continual state of mourning: for what they never had, for what they can't have in the present'.¹⁰⁴ However, the choice of this line as epigraph has a more precise implication for Smith. The epigraph identifies the speaker with a widow, that is a woman who has lost her love, thus positioning the dissatisfaction of the poetic voice in an erotic discourse: what the speaker actually lacks and

¹⁰⁰ Mary Robinson, *Poems 1791*, p. 189.

¹⁰¹ Mary Robinson, *Poems 1791*, p. 12.

¹⁰² *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, p. xxv.

¹⁰³ In Stuart Curran's edition the translation of the epigraph is: 'Flee serenity and renewal; approach not, my song, where there be smiles or singing, no, only tears: it will not do for you to remain among happy people, disconsolate widow, clothed in black'

mourns enters an erotic sphere, which is effectively inserted in, and inspired by, the Petrarchan tradition.¹⁰⁵ The epigraph, however, acquires an even more specific significance, if we connect it with Smith's preface to the sixth edition. As Labbe has recently argued, the prefaces are important in establishing Smith's public personae.¹⁰⁶ By informing the readers of her financial problems and the injustices that she and her children have endured for the dissipations of a neglectful husband, Smith clearly wants to present herself as a woman in distress, who needs the economic support of any potential buyer of her sonnets. It is important, however, to stress the fact that Smith uses the Petrarchan tradition for exactly the same purpose, that is to emphasise her condition of a woman in distress, and thus to sell more copies of *Elegiac Sonnets*.¹⁰⁷ As a result, the epigraph is to be read as an appendix to her Preface. Petrarch's lines are there to remind the readers that her sonnets are to be read as the poetic lamentations of a miserable woman. The epigraph works as a connection between Smith's public persona of the Preface and Smith's poetic persona of the sonnets. Even more importantly, the epigraph suggests that the use of other speakers in the collection, such as Petrarch and Werter, is only functional to her condition.

Sonnet 90 is a translation of one of Petrarch's most famous sonnets, in which he describes Laura.¹⁰⁸ In it the two subjectivities, Smith's 'woman in distress' and Petrarch's 'unreciprocated lover', intermingle in such a way that the second amplifies the first:

Loose to the wind her golden tresses stream'd,
Forming bright waves with amorous Zephyr's sighs;

¹⁰⁴ Deborah Kennedy, 'Thorns and Roses: the Sonnets of Charlotte Smith', *Women's Writing* 2:1 (1995), 43-53.

¹⁰⁵ Sylvia Mergenthal, 'Charlotte Smith and the Romantic Sonnet Revival', in *Feminist Contributions to the Literary Canon: setting standards of taste*, ed. by Susanna Fendler (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), pp 65-75.

¹⁰⁶ Jacqueline Labbe, *Charlotte Smith*.

¹⁰⁷ Jacqueline Labbe, *Charlotte Smith*, p. 11.

¹⁰⁸ Petrarch's original version of the sonnet in Italian is reported in the section on 'The Della Cruscan and the use of Petrarchan love theme', p. 132 of this chapter.

And tho' averted now, her charming eyes
 Then with warm love, and melting pity beam'd,
 Was I deceived?- Ah! Surely, nymph divine!
 That fine suffusion on thy cheek was love;
 What wonder then those beauteous tints should move,
 Should fire this heart, this tender heart of mine!
 Thy soft melodious voice, thy air, thy shape,
 Were of a goddess-not a mortal maid;
 Yet tho' thy charms, thy heavenly charms should fade,
 My heart, my tender heart could not escape;
 Nor cure for me in time or change be found:
 The shaft extracted does not cure the wound!¹⁰⁹

The content of the sonnet is similar to the original. Nevertheless, the presence of Smith's persona is visible in the use of images and the choice of words. The result is that the overall tone of Smith's composition is much more melancholy than the original. The accent on the lover's initial illusion of being reciprocated by Laura does not take the form of deception in Petrarch's sonnet. In the original, Petrarch simply expresses the impression that Laura's face had shown a sort of sympathetic regard, but that he might have been mistaken. The strong sense of deception around which Smith constructs her sonnet is only hinted at in Petrarch's version. The final couplet of Smith's sonnet is completely absent in Petrarch's. The original sonnet ends in a way which suggests that, even now that Laura's beauty is fading by the passing of time, Petrarch's love is not diminished, and that his wound still remains open. Smith's emphasis on the impossibility of alleviating this love sickness or changing the situation gives to the overall composition a tone of resignation which does not exist in Petrarch's sonnet. In other words, Smith has subtly re-visioned the original sonnet in a way that emphasises her condition of a 'woman in distress'. As in the case of Mary Robinson's rewriting of Petrarch's love for Laura, Smith's process of revision has important gender implications. By amplifying the sorrowful tone of the original speaker, and by associating it to her own condition, Smith displays her ability to enter an erotic discourse and to adapt it to her own purposes. Significantly, in doing this, she implicitly re-visions a masculine tradition which had overlooked

how the choice of an improper lover and husband might imply much more serious consequences for women than for men, consequences she had clearly discussed in her Preface to the sixth edition. Charlotte Smith's distressing economic situation, which often forced her into professional writing so as to provide maintenance for herself and her family, was caused by her being forced to marry a man who would soon ruin her fortune and family. The strong mark that the experience of an unhappy and unfortunate marriage leaves on the poet's life is also an important component of her poetry. By creating a sense of resignation and by stressing the feeling of deception, Smith's translation is actually suggesting that her own unhappy love experience is not simply the cause of psychological and emotional distress, but that it is also the source of her family's financial distress.

Charlotte Smith and Anne Bannerman's adaptations of the Petrarchan tradition are quite similar in terms of selection and use of imagery. Both poets, for example, translate sonnet 21 of *Canzoniere*. The two translations are similar in the way they transmute the Petrarchan experience into a modern female perspective; nonetheless, the two poems carry the signs of distinctive points of view. Here is Smith's version:

Where the green leaves exclude the summer beam,
 And softly bend as balmy breezes blow,
And where, with liquid lapse, the lucid stream
 Across the fretted rock is heard to flow,
Pensive I lay: when she whom earth conceals,
 As if still living to my eyes appears,
And pitying Heaven her angel form reveals,
 To say- 'Unhappy Petrarch, dry your tears;
Ah! Why, sad lover! Thus before your time,
 In grief and sadness should your life decay,
And like a blighted flower, your manly prime
 In vain and hopeless sorrow fade away?
Ah! Yield not thus to culpable despair,
But raise thine eyes to Heaven- and think I wait thee there'¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Stuart Curran (ed.), *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, pp 21-22.

¹¹⁰ *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, p. 22.

Smith's translation of the sonnet is dominated by the voice of a melancholy speaker, though the final couplet suggests a positive resolution. Yet, the general tone of the composition is balanced and elegant; passions are expressed in a moderate way and the speakers, both Petrarch and Laura, conserve a sort of dignified position. Let us now analyse Bannerman's version:

Mov'd by the summer wind, when all is still,
The light leaves quiver on the yielding spray;
Sighs from its flow'ry banks the lucid rill,
While the birds answer in their sweetest lay.
Vain to this sick'ning heart these scenes appear;
No form but hers can meet my tearful eyes;
In every passing gale her voice I hear;
It seems to tell me, 'I have heard thy sighs'.
'But why,' she cries, 'in Manhood's tow'ring prime,
In grief's dark mist thy days, inglorious, hide?
Ah! Dost thou murmur, that my span of time
Has join'd eternity's unchanging tide?
Yes tho' I seem'd to shut mine eyes in night,
They only clos'd to wake, in everlasting light'.¹¹¹

The language Bannerman uses is stronger and more passionate than Smith's. Her adaptation has transformed an elegant and balanced Renaissance sonnet into a powerful and vigorous Romantic poem. The elegant line 6 of Smith's poem- 'Pensive I lay: when she whom earth conceals'- has become a more direct 'vain to this sick'ning heart these scenes appear'. The heavenly appearance of the angelic Laura has been completely omitted in Bannerman's sonnet. Bannerman's Laura 'cries out' what seems to be an accusation to Petrarch, which has very little in common with the delicate and consolatory words of Smith's Laura. The 'grief and sadness' of Petrarch's 'manly prime' which 'like a blighted flower' signs the decay of his life has turned into a kind of incrimination of Petrarch's reaction to her death in lines 9 and 10 of Bannerman's sonnet. The reassuring tone of Laura who tells Petrarch not to yield to 'culpable despair', since they will be soon reunited in Heaven, where she already is, does not at all appear in Bannerman's version. On the contrary, Laura's intervention is neither

¹¹¹ Anne Bannerman, *Poems*, Sonnet I form Petrarch, p. 89.

restorative nor encouraging; she simply reproaches Petrarch for his attitude and has no pity at all for his sorrows. She is disappointed by the blindness of the poet, who does not seem to understand that her death means eternal life. Yet, there is neither will nor hope of a future reunion.¹¹² What is important to stress is the fact that the Petrarchan tradition plays a crucial role in the expression of a female lyric voice, and how the malleability of Petrarch's love experience is easily adaptable to different personalities and circumstances.¹¹³

As I have demonstrated in this section, the reinterpretation of Petrarch's sonnets is exemplary of the way women exploit an established lyric tradition in order to consolidate their own. In using the Petrarchan tradition women are able to enter an erotic discourse otherwise problematic. Moreover, the revision and translation of Petrarch's language in a way to exclude or include elements related to gender and, by alluding to and transforming myths that involve women, women poets, re-write poetic conventions from a different point of view. It seems that, by displacing their interest in the sonnet in terms of time, since they go back to its first origin, and in terms of place, since they enter into the Italian tradition, women are more free not only to make use of a masculine poetic voice, but also to personalise it. Women's choice of re-writing such an important moment in the history of Italian literature and culture seems to make them less vulnerable to the eyes of British critics and public. Instead of re-visioning the British poetic tradition and sonnet writing, women poets prefer to exploit a tradition which belongs to another time and another culture, thus entering into a cosmopolitan dimension. As the last section of this chapter will demonstrate, the connection between women poets, the Petrarchan tradition and

¹¹² It is interesting to stress how, literally speaking, Bannerman's sonnet is more similar to the original. In Petrarch's sonnet, for example, Smith's final lines which suggest a future reunion with Laura are absent. However, Smith's choice of language and words more faithfully reconstructs the general tone of Petrarch's sonnet.

¹¹³ To trace the reasons that might be at the origin of Smith and Bannerman's different translations would lead the discussion astray. Andrew Elfenbein suggests that the passionate and powerful tone of Bannerman's poems are due to an assumed lesbian nature of the author. As a consequence, in addressing Laura, Bannerman makes a conscious use of a homoerotic language, ('Lesbian and Romantic Genius: the poetry of Anne Bannerman', *ELH* 63:4, (Winter, 1996), 929-957).

Italy becomes particularly important when Laura is transformed from a silent and timid character into the first important example of an Italian woman poet.

3.5 Laura's voice: women re-visioning the Petrarchan tradition.

Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch's wife,
He would have written sonnets all his life?
(Byron, *Don Juan*, III, 8)

As numerous critical works on Petrarchan sonnets have already discussed, Laura is a passive, silent, and angelic creature in most of the poems contained in *Canzoniere*.¹¹⁴ Leonard Foster's study of European Petrarchism suggests that Laura is mainly the idea of virtuous love which does not surrender to passions, but sublimates itself in a sense of duty and honour.¹¹⁵ Nevertheless, in my opinion, Petrarch's picture of Laura is also concrete for the time. Laura is a real woman, physically present in Petrarch's life until her death in 1341, victim of the plague. Her physical beauty 'intoxicates' him and her presence generates both physical and spiritual desires. This suggests that the character of Laura, as described in Petrarch's sonnet, is marked by a certain ambiguity. This ambiguity clearly emerges in the sonnets that describe Laura as a scornful and cold woman, insensitive not only to Petrarch's affections, but also to his sufferings and sorrows. The angelic and heavenly creature turns into an 'enemy', a Medusa-like woman. The double-sided allegorical nature of Laura helps to figure her as a complete woman. This demonstrates that, although the figure of Laura has traditionally been associated with an angelic, pure and chaste woman, the reality of the character that emerges in Petrarch's *Canzoniere* is more complex,

¹¹⁴ See for example, Kahn Blumstein Andrée, *Misogyny and Idealization in the Courtly Romance* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1977); Sally McKee (ed.), *Crossing Boundaries: issues of cultural and individual identities in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999).

¹¹⁵ Leonard Foster, *The Icy Fire*, p. 3.

and includes a level of corporeality that has been traditionally underestimated.¹¹⁶ It is true, however, that Laura conforms to the vision of women at the margins of speech, since she hardly ever speaks in life, and she only says few sentences after death. It is also true that Laura's words are always Petrarch's invention and that her subjectivity is most often absorbed, conquered, idealised. However, the erotic power Petrarch attributes to Laura sometimes threatens male dominion; she consequently becomes a powerful presence who is actually in control of the situation. Besides, Laura is the origin and cause of Petrarch's poetic success along the centuries. The association between Laura and laurel, as a symbol of poetic celebrity, runs throughout *Canzoniere*, thus making Laura the main reason for Petrarch's success. Through Petrarch's poetry, therefore, Laura herself has been immortalised and celebrated.

The fact that Laura was not Petrarch's wife but a married and unattainable woman makes Byron's question in *Don Juan* absurd. Yet, however ridiculous Byron's question might appear, it is worth asking it, maybe in slightly different terms. What would have happened if Laura was not necessarily Petrarch's wife, but a sexually responsive woman who willingly reciprocated Petrarch's love? Would she have written sonnets herself and what words and language would she have used? Maybe, if Laura had been Petrarch's wife, *Canzoniere* would not have been written. But what would Laura have done? Or, in other words, what happens when Laura steps out of *Canzoniere* and starts rewriting the love sequence with her own voice? Barbara Estrin's study centres on this supposition, and tries to investigate what happens when Laura turns into a lover, and becomes an available woman. Estrin names a sexually-responsive Laura as Laura-Eve, who stands in opposition to the woman that Petrarch creates, who dismisses her sexual and poetic imagination by fixing her character

¹¹⁶ It is interesting to stress the fact that Laura-Medusa is as present in *Canzoniere* as the angelic Laura.

permanently in the masculine order.¹¹⁷ Estrin's study focuses on Renaissance poetry. If we move to Romantic women poets, we find that Laura speaks with the pen of Mary Robinson and Anne Hunter. To write from the point of view of the silent and chaste Laura is a bold decision for women poets. It not only implies the re-vision of an established poetic tradition, but it also opens the realm of the imagined woman's desires. The previous sections have demonstrated how the Della Cruscan's poetry was the first to re-vision the Petrarchan tradition in a way that included women as speakers of erotic discourse. *The British Album* was the first collection of sonnets to voice women as well as men. In some way, the Della Cruscan gave Laura a voice through the many women poets who participated in the movement and who wrote love sonnets. Capell Lofft's anthology had suggested a similar re-vision of the Petrarchan tradition. By including a good number of women sonneteers in the collection and by entitling it *Laura*, Lofft gave voice to the many Lauras that had been traditionally overlooked. Both Della Cruscan poetry and Lofft's anthology had transformed the ideal and silent Laura into a real woman poet, breaking the important boundary between women as objects and women as subjects in love poetry. Hunter and Robinson's efforts, however, are bolder. Their intention to re-write the Petrarchan tradition from Laura's point of view, turns the Della Cruscan's and Lofft's symbolic attempts into a more explicit and daring reconstruction of Laura's subjectivity in terms of feelings, emotions and poetic abilities. Symbolically, thanks to Hunter and Robinson, Laura breaks the bars of her literary prison, comes forward, and challenges Petrarch's poetic activity.

The longer poem written during the Romantic revival of the Petrarchan tradition by a woman in the position of Laura comes from the pen of Anne Hope Hunter. In fact, little is known about Anne Hunter. She was born in 1742, the eldest daughter of Mary Hutchinson and Robert Hume, uncle of Joanna Baillie. She married in 1771 a distinguished anatomist, John Hunter, and published

¹¹⁷ Barbara L. Estrin, *Laura: Uncovering Gender and Genre in Wyatt, Donne, and Marvell* (London:

Poems in 1802 and *Sports of the Genii* in 1804. William Beloe thought her a principal bluestocking, but not much is known about her supposed intellectual activity. She lived in poverty from her husband's death, in 1793, till Parliament bought the Hunterian Collection in 1799.¹¹⁸ Hunter's poem 'Laura to Petrarch' introduces a female speaker fully responsive to her lover's affections. The woman becomes in the poem subject of her own feelings, and she consciously uses a language of love:

O Friend too dearly lov'd, O name ador'd!
My fancy's idol, and my reason's lord!
In vain a powerful duty bids us part,
Thou still art present to this bleeding heart.
Could the light breeze beyond the mountains bear
The sighs of anguish, and the silent tear;
Could my sad thoughts be present to thy mind,
Where thy idea with my life is twin'd,
E'en thou content, wouldst own I stand the test,
And well deserve the heart I have possess'd.¹¹⁹

Laura appears here fully responsive; she shows affections as powerful and deep as Petrarch's. She is creating her own language of emotions to show and demonstrate how her life is strongly connected in mind and soul with her friend, and that only duty prevented their union. The few sentences that Laura says in *Canzoniere* are transformed into a long and accomplished poetic speech in which Laura, under the direction of a woman poet, finally finds her own way of expression. To give Laura the authority to create her own language of love implies that women are sexual beings as well as men, and that their passions are strong and their sufferings painful. Moreover, it demonstrates women's ability to successfully turn these emotions and feelings into verse:

Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 25-30.

¹¹⁸ *Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. by Virginia Blain, Patricia Clemens and Isobel Grundy (London: Batsford Ltd, 1990), p. 50. Additional information and critical material are also available in the *Scottish Women Poets of the Romantic Period* database: <www.alexanderstreet2.com/> ed. by Nancy Kushigian and Stephen Behrendt.

¹¹⁹ Anne Hunter, *Poems* (London, 1807), pp. 64-65.

Dull ling'ring time creeps sad and slowly on,
Health fades, and youth with all its charms are gone:
But love remains unfaded, unimpair'd,
Where hope's enchanting voice was never heard;
Yet restless wishes, ever anxious cares,
All she can feel who loves, and who despairs,
Were fair delights, compar'd to that dark hour,
When doubt shall whisper, 'thou art lov'd no more'.¹²⁰

Laura describes her life as sad and sorrowful had not Petrarch's love filled it with emotions. Every difficulty can be positively faced through the strength that love gives. The most dreadful moment Laura fears is when Petrarch's affection for her would be consumed. In the following lines she invokes death to spare her this sad moment, so that her 'agitated heart at peace is laid', and 'each quiv'ring nerve and throbbing pulse' will be at rest. Incredibly enough, Laura is not only emotionally responsive, but she is also physically affected by her love for Petrarch.

The final lines of Hunter's poem confirm that Laura's poetic activity is, like Petrarch's, the result of her love for him, and that his affection is central to her own life and poetic utterance: 'Thus to be lov'd, in anguish and despair,/is bliss beyond the joys a giddy world can share'. One of the few sentences that Laura utters in *Canzoniere*, 'I ' non son forse chi tu credi',¹²¹ - I am not perhaps who you think I am- reveals in the lines of Hunter's poem a personality as complex and as responsive as Petrarch's. Furthermore, by giving Laura a voice, Hunter creates a female speaker who poetically challenges Petrarch himself.¹²² Not only does she demonstrate her ability to write erotic verse, but she is also trying to create a tradition of love poetry of her own. Through the voice of the silent and remissive Laura, who has been for centuries only the object of Petrarch's erotic desire but never the subject herself, Hunter is trying to fill a poetic gap in women's love poetry, and to show that the lack of a female poetic tradition has mainly been the cause of cultural and social restraints. Had women been as free

¹²⁰ Anne Hunter, *Poems*, p. 64.

¹²¹ In Sonnet 126 of *Canzoniere*.

¹²² Barbara Estrin, *Laura*, p. 61.

to express their feelings and emotions in poetry as men, they would have established their own erotic discourse. Even the timid and chaste Laura would have responded to Petrarch's poems with her own voice. The dialogue that women writers establish with Petrarch's authority is an important aspect of their process of re-writing a masculine poetic tradition. If in the fourteenth-century Italy Petrarch could write erotic sonnets about his love for Laura and gain an immense and everlasting popularity out of his poetic production, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British women poets might also expect to gain approval, recognition and ultimately popularity for their poetic ability.

Mary Robinson makes a similar effort, even if in different terms. Her sonnet 'Laura to Petrarch' creates a Laura much less sexually-responsive than Hunter's. Nevertheless, the poem is an important attempt to voice Laura's poetic subjectivity. In Robinson's sonnet Laura invites Petrarch to abandon the path that leads to passion and to transform his feelings into friendship:

O solitary wand'rer! Whither stray
From the smooth path the dimpled pleasures love,
From flow'ry meadow, and embow'ring grove,
Where hope and fancy smiling, lead the way!
To thee, I ween, full tedious seems the day;
While lorn and slow the devious path you rove,
Sighing soft sorrows on the garland wove
By young desire, of blossoms sweetly gay!
Oh! Blossoms! Frail and fading! Like the morn
Of love's first rapture! Beauteous all, and pure,
Deep hid beneath your charms lies mis'ry's thorn,
To bid the feeling breast a pang endure!
Then check thy wand'rings, weary and forlorn,
And find in friendship's balm sick passion's cure.¹²³

Mary Robinson's choice of using the sonnet shows how her challenge takes place on the same poetic field, thus demonstrating that Laura's – and her- skills are equal to Petrarch's. The implications of Hunter and Robinson's attempt to re-write the Petrarchan tradition from Laura's point of view are fundamental in the development of British women writers' use of the Italian cultural and literary

tradition. Robinson and Hunter demonstrate how more devastating than unreciprocated love is the effect of the woman who loves, particularly, the woman who loves and writes sonnets. In voicing Laura, British women writers create the first Italian woman poet, an imaginary creature who can freely and successfully express her feelings. By transforming Laura into a woman poet, Hunter and Robinson, first saw the potential of the Italian literary and cultural tradition for the creation of an exemplary woman poet of success, a potential that the following generation of women writers would be ready to develop. In other words, they create a pre-Corinne character.

Mary Robinson exploits the association between women poets and southern Europe in general in the Petrarchan sonnet sequence *Sappho and Phaon*. In it, Robinson re-proposes one of the most important and well-known woman poets in the history of European lyric: Sappho. This work is another attempt to construct a female poetic tradition by rooting it in the past of a country universally recognized as illustrious for its poetic tradition. The process of re-voicing women poets of the past implies the possibility of re-constructing a poetic tradition which had been suppressed or overlooked. Interestingly, Robinson considers Italy and Greece as ideal countries for poetic success. In her preface to the sequence, the author argues how 'in less remote periods the bard has been publicly distinguished; princes and priests have bowed before the majesty of genius'.¹²⁴ She thinks Petrarch is a perfect example of this condition: 'Petrarch was crowned with laurels, the noblest diadem, in the Capitol of Rome: his admirers were liberal; his contemporaries were just; and his name will stand upon record, with the united and honourable testimony of his own talents, and the generosity of his country'.¹²⁵ The fact that Renaissance Italy was an ideal place for poetic activity is made clear in the following paragraph, where Mary Robinson overtly complains about the condition of poetry in her own country:

¹²³ Mary Robinson, *Poems 1791*.

¹²⁴ Judith Pascoe (ed.), *Mary Robinson: Selected Poems* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2000), p. 144.

It is at once a melancholy truth and national disgrace that this Island so profusely favoured by nature, should be marked, of all enlightened countries, as the most neglectful of literary merit! And I will venture to believe that there are both POETS and PHILOSOPHERS, now living in Britain, who, had they been born in any *other* clime, would have been honoured with the proudest distinctions, and immortalised to the latest posterity.¹²⁶

The 'other country' and 'other clime' suggested by Robinson can be easily identified with Italy and Greece, where Petrarch and Sappho, as the author suggests, received honour and celebrity. The poets and philosophers who would receive distinctions and immortality in 'any *other* clime' are clearly associated in the following paragraph with those 'illustrious countrywomen' who, however 'unpatronized by courts, and unprotected by the powerful', preserve in the path of literature, and 'ennoble themselves by the unperishable lustre of MENTAL PREEMINENCE!'.¹²⁷ To put it in another way, Italy as the country where Petrarch was crowned poet laureate, and where he received honours and immortal fame, would be a perfect place for those women who freely and independently wish to write poetry and to be recognised for their poetic value.

In connection to Robinson's Preface, the transformation of Laura into a woman poet acquires a clear Corinne-like significance. Through Laura, Robinson creates a potentially celebrated woman poet who can find in Italy the success that women are denied in Britain. Maybe, as the mentioning of Petrarch's coronation at the Capitol in Rome would suggest, the Italian woman poet could even become poet laureate. Robinson's use of the Petrarchan tradition anticipates the potential of Italy as an ideal country for women poets. In particular, by transforming Laura into a woman poet, and by connecting her to the stimulating Italian environment, Robinson prefigures the Corinne-like pattern. The displacement of erotic discourse seems to suggest that Britain and its poetic tradition are unsuitable for women's expression of love. As I have

¹²⁵ Judith Pascoe (ed.), *Mary Robinson*, pp. 148-149.

¹²⁶ Judith Pascoe (ed.), *Mary Robinson*, p.149.

argued in this chapter, many women writers consciously decide to exploit an established Italian tradition in order to voice their own poetry. The reason for this continental appeal is clearly explained by Mary Robinson in her Introduction. The indifference that Britain shows towards men, and especially women, of literary merits is one of the main reasons that forces women writers to create imaginary constructions of other countries, and to exploit their poetic traditions in order to gain recognition and authority. The 'national disgrace' that Mary Robinson mentions, justifies the need to evade a conventional poetic tradition that does not give women enough credit. In this particular context, Italy appears as a country where poetry had been valued and nationally recognised at least at some points in its history. In this way Italy becomes an ideal place where Romantic women poets can root their own poetic tradition.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Judith Pascoe (ed.), *Mary Robinson*, p. 149; capital letters in the original.

¹²⁸ Greece is used in a very similar way in *Sappho and Phaon*. However Robinson's mentioning of Italy and Petrarch in the Preface is very important for my argument.

The national politics of improvisation.

4.1 Genealogy of the Italian Improvisatrice.

She entered the Sala Capitolina at the sound of a thrilling symphony of drums and trumpets and was saluted by applause and cheers of 'long live Corilla'.¹

This passage describes the moment of utmost success in 1779 of Corilla Olimpica (1727-1800), one of the most celebrated Italian improvisatrici. Giovanni Carsanigra observes how the practice of extemporaneous poetry and improvisation was a tradition well established in Italy at least since the seventeenth century.² Occasionally, as in the case of Corilla Olimpica, women performing as improvisatrice achieved a great literary success. As Paola Giuli has largely demonstrated, Corilla Olimpica was a famous as well as equivocal literary figure.³ Of humble origins, Corilla Olimpica rose to such prominence that the most powerful European kings coveted her performances. She reached the acme of her career when she was crowned 'poet laureate' at the Capitol in Rome, the first and last woman poet to receive such an honourable, literary achievement. However, her celebrity was gained at the expense of her moral respectability, and her literary fame began being undermined soon after her crowning on the 31 August 1776. From the few contemporary comments on Corilla that have survived, we know that she was an ambitious and determined poet. In 1809, Charles Brack, an acquaintance of Corilla, writes: 'Corilla was a tall woman with

¹ In Paola Giuli, 'Tracing a Sisterhood: Corilla Olimpica as Corinne's Unacknowledged Alter Ego', in *The Novel's Seductions: Stael's Corinne in Critical Inquiry*, ed. by Karyna Szmurlo (London: Associated University Press, 1999), pp. 165-184, (p. 173).

² Giovanni Carsanigra, 'The Age of Romanticism (1800-1870)', in *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*, ed. by Peter Brand and Lino Pertile (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 399-405, (p. 404). The author notices how the absence of literary women from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Italian texts and anthologies is ascribable mostly to their excelling in areas marginal to the literary canon. The presence among them of many extemporaneous poets, like Teresa Bandettini (1763-1837), Fortunata Sulgher Fantastici (1755-1824) and her daughter Massimina (1788-1846), confirms women's preference for the oral code of literary communication.

a majestic bearing, fiery eyes and an imposing glance. Jealous and proud of her poetic talents, she believed she was superior to all the improvisers, her contemporaries'.⁴ Giuli points out how Corilla was extremely devoted to the cultivation of her genius and talents.⁵ Thus she justifies her poetic activity: 'Isn't it true that every man aspires to happiness and does all that is in his power to be so? [...] One cannot therefore condemn my desire to be happy by baring my talents to the world and by pursuing all possible means to cultivate them!'⁶ Her poems and letters show professional pride, confidence in her abilities, and unabashed conviction in a woman's right to pursue a literary career to the highest level of competence and recognition.

Many people of public relevance raised critiques on the value of Corilla's literary achievements due, in particular, to her morally ambiguous reputation. Corilla had consciously estranged herself from her family. She achieved literary recognition at the price of forsaking her past, and creating a new identity.⁷ As a consequence, contemporary critics condemned her pursuit of literary interest as a disgrace, and an act of pure selfishness. She was 'stigmatised as an unfit and immoral woman, a monster of egotism in fact'.⁸ This harsh, moral judgement brought along a devaluation of her literary achievement and, soon after the crowning, her artistic value was put under discussion. The very same day of the crowning, her friend Giovanni Cristofano Amaduzzi observed how: 'Corilla alone has been able to defend her cause, since most of her supporters have abandoned her and her closest friends are crushed [...] at this point one could say that she owes this honour to nobody but herself'.⁹ By the beginning of the nineteenth-century, Corilla still enjoyed some repute, but the opinion prevailed that she had not deserved the crown. Casanova, for example, expressed his

³ Paula Giuli, 'Tracing a Sisterhood: Corilla Olimpica as Corinne's Unacknowledged Alter Ego', pp. 165-184.

⁴ Burney, *Musical Journeys* (London, 1809), p. 129.

⁵ Paola Giuli, 'Tracing a Sisterhood', p. 170.

⁶ Paola Giuli, 'Tracing a Sisterhood', p. 170.

⁷ Corilla had left her husband and child in order to develop her talents.

⁸ Paola Giuli, 'Tracing a Sisterhood', p. 171.

admiration for the improvisatrice's gifts, but he did not consider Corilla worth crowning: 'Corilla was crowned poet laureate at the Capitol. The same place was chosen where our great Italian poets received their laurels, and it was a great scandal'. In fact, the author goes on, 'although Corilla's achievement was unique in its genre, since it did not consist of anything but a beautiful ornament, it did not deserve to partake of the honours rightly bestowed on Petrarch and Tasso'.¹⁰ Corilla's laurel crown should have been sufficient to win her eternal fame. Instead, it paradoxically undermined her reputation, and a slow erosion of her fame started soon after her death. By the end of the century, Corilla had almost disappeared from any literary record.

As a matter of fact, Corilla Olimpica did receive the laurel crown, an important symbol of poetic achievement at a national level. By examining the documents relating to the history of Italian improvisation, Gonda is able to state how the crowning was a highly prestigious honour.¹¹ Corilla was only the fourth Italian poet in 400 years to be so honoured, and the first woman.¹² The crown was not only conferred in recognition of a poet's cumulative achievements and fame, it also had national implications. Being poet laureate, implied being the most successful poet of the nation and, therefore, the most suitable to represent the nation's poetic glory. Consequently, the choice of crowning Corilla poet laureate implied the choice of her poetry and character as representative of Italy and the Italian literary tradition. By designating her the most successful poet of the country, Italy appeared as a liberal nation, one that could recognise and acknowledge women's artistic excellence. This is particularly relevant in a historical moment when literary reputation and artistic achievement were the only signs of national pride in a country politically enslaved.

⁹ In Alessandro Ademollo, *Corilla Olimpica* (Firenze: C. Ademollo e C. 1887), p. 281

¹⁰ Jacques Casanova, *Mémoires*, ed. by R. Abirached, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), vol. 1, pp. 698-99.

¹¹ Caroline Gonda, 'The Rise and Fall of the Improvisatore', *Romanticism: the Journals of Romantic Culture and Criticism*, 6:2 (2000), 195-210, (p. 205).

¹² Before her, Petrarch had been crowned in 1341, Tasso was chosen for coronation in 1595, but died before the ceremony could take place, and Perfetti, an improvisatore, was crowned in 1725.

In the history of Italian literature improvisation was not necessarily seen as a secondary literary activity.¹³ In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, improvisation was actually considered at the same level of written literary production. This explains why, among four poets crowned at the Capitol, two of them were principally famous for their extemporaneous compositions. As Joan DeJean confirms, improvisation was part of a highly prestigious oral literary tradition which, together with the oral songs of the troubadours, had been at the origin of the literature of romance in southern European cultures.¹⁴ As a matter of fact, the Italian improvisatori and improvisatrici became tourist attractions for foreign visitors. Since the days of the Grand Tour, British travellers coming to Italy were attracted and fascinated by this totally unknown practice. Very often tourists planned their journeys so that they could witness some improvisations in the major Italian towns. Hester Piozzi, for example, rushed into Florence in order 'to hear the fair Fantastici, a young woman who makes improvise verses, and sings them, with infinite learning and taste'.¹⁵ When Piozzi toured the country with her Italian husband in 1784, Corilla Olimpica, as the author explains, was still a very famous character, though her improvisations had become more rare and only privately performed.

[Fantastici] is the successor to the celebrated Corilla, who no longer exhibits the power she once held without a rival; yet to her conversations everyone still strives for admittance, though she is now ill and old and hoarse with repeated colds.¹⁶

Undoubtedly, many English travellers who gained admittance to Corilla's salon, went there expecting to witness a sort of 'feminine spectacle' in decline. Though she no longer improvised, Corilla was still seen as one of the most popular women in Italy. More importantly, foreign travellers saw her as a peculiarly

¹³ Giovanni Carsaniga, 'The Age of Romanticism (1800-1870)', p. 405.

¹⁴ Joan DeJean, 'Stael's *Corinne*: the Novel's Other Dilemma', *Stanford French Review*, 6:1 (Spring, 1987), 77-87, (p. 82).

¹⁵ Hester Piozzi, *Glimpses of Italian Society in the Eighteenth Century*, with an introduction by the Countess Evelyn Martinengo Cesaresco (London: Seeley and Co, 1892), p. 173.

Italian phenomenon, a product of southern society and culture. Hester Piozzi goes on commenting on Corilla's personality:

Corilla is gay by nature, and witty, if I may say so, by habit; replete with fancy, and powerful to combine images apparently distant. Mankind is at last more just to people of talents than is universally allowed, I think. Corilla, without pretensions either to immaculate character (in the English sense), deep erudition, or high birth, has so made her way into the world.¹⁷

The author further praises the character of Corilla and her immense success: the nobility, princes and princesses from all around Europe visit her house regularly; sovereigns have not only sought her company, 'but have been obliged to put up with slights from her independent spirit, and from her airy, rather than haughty, behaviour'.¹⁸ In other words, for the talented and gifted Corilla, it is easy to make exceptions to the moral rules of patriarchal societies. Particularly, visitors seem to understand that the character of Corilla, her unconventional choices and her extraordinary success have to be put into context, that of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Italy, a country where women's improvisation was a commonplace phenomenon. As Joanne Wilkes comments, women were usually silenced in most European societies, especially in the north.¹⁹ The fact that in Italy women were not only permitted to declaim publicly their poetic genius, but that they could also become successful and famous for their activity was inconceivable in the majority of other European societies.

Generally speaking, British travellers were often struck by the importance of some women in the Italian society. Women were at the centre of social entertainment. Hester Piozzi notices how 'a woman [in Italy] in every stage of life has really a degree of attention shown her that is surprising'.²⁰ The separation between a public masculine sphere and a private feminine one was

¹⁶ Hester Piozzi, *Glimpses of the Italian Society*, pp. 173-74.

¹⁷ Hester Piozzi, *Glimpses of the Italian Society*, p. 174.

¹⁸ Hester Piozzi, *Glimpses of the Italian Society*, p. 175.

¹⁹ Joanne Wilkes, *Lord Byron and Madame De Stael: Born for Opposition* (Ashgate: Aldershot, 1999), p. 57.

almost absent in Italy. The country's lack of political freedom, in fact, led men to share women's social engagements.²¹ Thus, theatres, promenades, dinners, conversations were social practices common to men and women. Women's importance in Italian society, however, is not limited to social entertainment. Travellers were also surprised at seeing women of intellect holding prominent positions in public learning, such as schools and universities. Lady Morgan, who by the time she came to Italy in 1819 was an experienced traveller, cannot help noticing how 'Italy has produced more learned women than any part of Europe'.²² While visiting the town of Bologna, Lady Morgan is exceedingly delighted in discovering that 'the chairs of the University have been occasionally filled by female professors', and she goes on naming all of them and praising their intellectual achievements.²³ The comparison with English society is almost inevitable for the author. While expressing her approval for women's erudition, she comments how 'in England, [it] is a greater female stigma than vice itself'.²⁴ Actually, Lady Morgan's critique of English confinement of intellectual women goes beyond general observations. The discovery of the important place that Italian society reserves to learned women enhances a series of reflections on female genius and English society. Lady Morgan observes how 'profound and recondite learning' is not always united to 'that of wondrous, that mysterious gift of Nature, called *Genius!*'.²⁵ She doubts that Byron, though he can speak Greek, or Moore who can write it, 'would have qualified for a professorship at Bologna',

²⁰ Hester Piozzi, *Glimpses of Italian Society*, p. 85.

²¹ A highly fashionable and criticized practice, for instance, was cicibeism. British travellers often noticed how women's tendency to be accompanied to public entertainment by men not their husbands was deeply immoral and denigrating of masculinity. See for example: Watkins Thomas, *Travels Through Switzerland, Italy, Sicily, the Greek Islands to Constantinople* 2 vols. (London, 1792), vol. II, p. 61; Marquis de Normanby, 'L'Amoroso', *The English in Italy*, 3 vols. (London, 1825), vol. I, p. 148.

²² Before travelling in Italy, Lady Morgan had visited Great Britain in 1808 and France in 1817. Lady Morgan, *Italy*, 3 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1821), vol. II, p. 24.

²³ Lady Morgan, *Italy*, vol. II, p. 25: 'Bologna, of all the Italian republics, seems to have the longest retained her learned women, and to have most venerated the powers of female intellect. The chairs of the University, down to the present day, have been occasionally filled by female professors', among which she mentions Maddalena Buonsignori, Bettizia Gozzani, Laura Bassi, Madonna Manzolina, and Clotilde Tambroni.

²⁴ Lady Morgan, *Italy*, vol. II, p. 26.

a place that was held by Signora Clotilde Tambroni, who had resigned only a short time before the author's visit.²⁶ This consideration is linked to a more specific reflection on the role of female genius in English society:

In Woman, genius and abstruse learning never yet went together: and it is gracious to believe that works, calculated to extend the sphere of fancy and of feeling, to open the springs of human sympathy, to correct the selfishness of human egotism [...] may flow from a woman's pen, without enquiring the sacrifice of [...] her better duties of wife and mother!²⁷

Accustomed to the morally rigorous English society, which measures women's values in terms of domestic duties and moral acceptability, Lady Morgan finds Italian society especially liberal. The fact that in Italy a learned woman could become a famous professor illustrates the possibility of reconciling erudition and professionalism with the domestic roles of wife and mother. This is particularly interesting in the case of a woman of genius. Lady Morgan, in fact, proceeds in her reflection by mentioning Cassandra Fedele, a Venetian girl, who was a famous improvisatrice of the sixteenth century, but also a dutiful wife and mother. Lady Morgan shows a strong fascination with the apparent possibility in Italian society of being a woman of genius without necessarily being judged as morally ambiguous and unworthy of affection.²⁸

The figure of the improvisatrice and improvisatore and its Italian setting were a source of attraction for many Romantic authors who travelled to Italy. In particular, after the publication of Stael's *Corinne, or Italy* in 1807, the practice of improvisation reached its utmost popularity among British authors. Percy

²⁵ Lady Morgan, *Italy*, vol. II, p. 26.

²⁶ Lady Morgan, *Italy*, vol. II, p. 26.

²⁷ Lady Morgan, *Italy*, vol. II, pp. 26-7.

²⁸ In his influential *History of the Female Sex*, Meiners does not consider Italy as a particularly liberal country for women. However he observes how, 'Italy produced in the eighteenth century and in the two preceding centuries, the greatest number of females distinguished for their proficiency in the languages, or as the connoisseurs and teachers of the most difficult sciences' (C. Meiners, *History of the Female Sex; comprising a view of the habits, manners, and influence of women, among all nations, from the earliest ages to the present time*, trans. by Frederic Shoberl, 5 vols. (London, 1808), vol. IV, p. 21, 267).

Shelley's description of Sgricci's performance is emblematic of the Romantic enthusiasm for improvisation:²⁹

Never was there such a marvellous exhibition of the power of human mind; it seemed that the imagination of the poet acted without the aid of his reason, and he scarcely seemed conscious of the words dictated to him by some superior power.- His gestures, the tone of his voice, his countenance completely directed by the living force of inspiration and continually expressing the various movements of soul of the characters, communicated to the soul of the spectator the passions that he was representing and by which his soul was by turn penetrated.³⁰

Shelley sees these extemporaneous poetic productions as a transfer of inspiration from a superior power to Sgricci, and hence to the public. In Shelley's imagination, the role of the improvisatore seems to be that of a mediator between God and the public. He then suggests that the poet is barely conscious of, and ultimately not responsible for, his own utterance: 'these strokes were not the poet's and it was rather a God who spoke in him, and created the ideas more rapidly than the human reason could ever have combined them'.³¹ Byron appears to have been more keenly aware of the importance of the context for improvisation. He comments how 'The talent of the improviser is quite a separate talent:- a consciousness of his own power, his own elocution- the wondering and applauding audience,- all conspire to give him confidence; but the deity forsakes him when he coldly sits down to think'.³² This idea validates the importance of the public display of talents for improvisation. In this way, the improvisatore becomes a sort of performing poet, whose process of inspiration is strictly connected to the presence of an audience, and to its ability to declaim verse.

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, improvisation had lost a great part of its popularity and its fascination, and it was progressively seen as a mark

²⁹ Sgricci was one of the most popular improvisatori in the first half of the nineteenth century.

³⁰ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Review of Tommaso Sgricci', translated by P.M.S. Dawson in 'Shelley and the Improvisatore Sgricci: an Unpublished Review', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 32 (1981), 19-29.

³¹ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Review of Tommaso Sgricci', p. 22.

of poetic inferiority.³³ It became devalued, increasingly seen as 'effeminate', because so many of its practitioners were women. Sgricci, for instance, was considered sexually ambivalent. English travellers who witnessed his improvisations were often impressed and disgusted at the same time. Byron writes of him as 'a celebrated Sodomite, a character by no means so much respected in Italy as it should be [...]. He is not known to have b_____d anybody here [Ravenna] as yet, but he has paid his addresses 'fatto la corte' to two or three'.³⁴ The fact that Sgricci became a famous improvisatore after Corilla's success, and that most of the extemporaneous poets of the period were women, seem to demonstrate how the practice of improvisation was progressively associated with femininity. As a result, male practitioners were increasingly seen as sexually equivocal, or 'freaks', as in the case of Sgricci, since they devoted themselves to a highly feminised poetic activity.³⁵ As I will discuss in the following sections on *Corinne*, the connection between gender, nation and poetic success becomes particularly important in the case of women improvisers.

4.2 The ideological background of *Corinne, or Italy*.

Let us try to take *Corinne* seriously; it was *the* book of the woman of genius.³⁶

³² In Thomas Medwin, *Conversations of Lord Byron* (1824), ed. by Ernest J. Lovell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), p. 137.

³³ Paola Giuli, 'Tracing a Sisterhood', p. 183.

³⁴ *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. by Leslie Marchand, 13 vols. (London; John Murray, 1973-1994); vol. VII, pp. 51-52.

³⁵ Caroline Gonda observes how the very process of poetic improvisation was a feminised one. Mary Shelley, for example, associates Sgricci's improvisation with the act of pouring forth the ravings of a prophetess like Cassandra. The association between improvisation and femininity is not simply a result of the link between poetry, prophecy and madness, like Shelley suggests, but is connected to the feminising force of possession, which is the most peculiar aspect of improvisation ('The Rise and Fall of the Improvisatore', p. 202; Mary Shelley, 'The English in Italy', *The Mary Shelley Reader*, ed. by Betty Bennett and Charles Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 352).

³⁶ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 173.

In her attempt to 'take *Corinne* seriously', Ellen Moers meditates on the origin of Stael's choice of setting the novel in Italy: 'Why Italy? May seem a foolish question, for what northern European needs an excuse to go south in search of sun? to know the land of *Mignonslied* where lemons grow?'.³⁷ In fact, the question 'why Italy' is neither foolish nor obvious. Moers' answer is unconvincing, and does not step outside the beaten track of the Grand Tourist: 'why Italy? Because Italy is a country where one lives openly in the open sun, and where the populace is always on hand to cheer artistic genius'.³⁸ Maybe, one may say, Moers, after all, does not take the novel seriously enough. Many other efforts have been made in recent years to justify the Italian setting of the novel.³⁹ However, very few critical analyses have gone beyond the usual path of the northern traveller who temporarily escapes from the strict, moralistic and cold northern society for a warm, open and morally liberal southern environment.⁴⁰ One of the main reasons for the Italian setting of *Corinne* was the fact that female improvisation was actually a wide-spread phenomenon all over the country. Most importantly, the fact that a real prototype of *Corinne* existed in the person of Corilla Olimpica may be enough to prove that, in terms of female genius and improvisation, Italy was an exceptional country in the European context.⁴¹

³⁷ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women*, pp. 200-01.

³⁸ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women*, pp. 202-03.

³⁹ See for example: Madelyn Gutwirth, *Madame de Stael, Novelist: the Emergence of the Artist as Woman* (London: University of Illinois Press, 1978); Clarissa Campbell Orr, 'The *Corinne* Complex', in *Women in the Victorian Art World* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 89-106; Jennifer Birkett, 'Speech in Action: Language, Society and Subject in Germaine de Stael's *Corinne*', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 7:4 (July 1995), 393-408.

⁴⁰ See for example: Geneviève Gennari, *Le Premier Voyage en Italy de Madame de Stael en Italy et la Genèse de Corinne* (Paris : Boivin & C., 1947).

⁴¹ Famous and celebrated women existed in other European countries, especially France. However, rarely did they achieve the public success and veneration that some women experienced in Italy. Emma Hamilton, for instance, is an exemplary case: the wife of the British ambassador in Naples, and lover of Horatio Nelson, her public performances in the form of 'attitudes' imitating ancient classical characters and famous sculptures made her an extremely popular character in Naples. See: Chloe Chard, *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); *A New Edition of Attitudes faithfully copied from nature*, ed. by Friederic Rehberg (London: Humphrey, 1807); Flora Fraser, *Beloved Emma: the Life of Emma Lladay Hamilton* (London: MacMillan Press, 1994); Herbert J. T. Baily, *Emma, Lady Hamilton: a biographical essay with a catalogue of her published portraits* (Portsmouth: Hard Publishing, 1993).

Nevertheless, in my opinion, taking *Corinne* seriously involves also an analysis of the author's social, political and philosophical ideas, which are at the origin of her choice of Italy and England as settings for her novel. It is not the purpose of this chapter to consider deeply Stael's prodigious philosophical and political production; however, any approach to the novel which does not take into consideration the wider context of its composition would necessarily seem superficial. Particularly, if we consider that Stael's theoretical approach to national cultures and societies was part of a wider and important ideological reflection, which invested all Europe at the end of the eighteenth and at the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, a general overview of it seems even more necessary. In her treatise *On Literature*, Stael first theorised her philosophical approach to Europe. By developing Montesquieu's theory of climates, Stael focuses on the link between land and people.⁴² Differences of climate generate the opposition between north and south. She explains how 'climate is certainly one of the main causes of differences between the images that delight us in Northern countries, and those we enjoy recalling in the South'.⁴³ This, she argues, inevitably has repercussions on culture, literature and society. In Stael's view, southern poets mix natural images with all the emotions of life, while northern people tend to be more concerned with pain than pleasure. As a consequence, southern people are inclined to express emotions rather than abstract thoughts, while northern people have a more fertile imagination and a strong tendency to melancholy. At this stage of her production Stael's interest seems to be more inclined towards northern literature: 'all my impressions and

As I will argue later in this chapter, I am aware that the idea of Italy that Stael's *Corinne* popularises is mainly an imaginary idea of the country. However, it is not the purpose of this chapter to analyse the actual condition of women in nineteenth-century Italy, since my principal concern is to investigate why such a view of Italy became popular among British women writers.

⁴² Charles Montesquieu (1689-1755), *The Spirit of Laws* (London: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1990).

⁴³ *Major Writings of Germaine de Stael*, ed. by Vivial Folkenflik (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 176. Stael does not only emphasise differences between northern and southern cultures; she argues how the two cultures and literatures have influenced reciprocally during centuries of evolution, p. 175.

ideas make me tend toward Northern literature'.⁴⁴ Stael's Anglophilia had already emerged in her *Considérations sur la Révolution Française*, where she praises England for its liberal society and takes it as exemplary for democracy and intellectual freedom.⁴⁵ Frank Bowman observes how Stael admired the seriousness of English political discourse and the fairness of legal eloquence, but deplored the silence of women who held no participation in social or political discussions.⁴⁶ In her *Considérations* she seems to connect political freedom with the advance of women in society:

The true character of a woman is to be known and admired in those countries which are free. Domestic life inspires all of the virtues in women [...] In England, a woman of the people feels rapport with the Queen, who has looked after her husband and raised her children, just as religion and morality requires of all wives and mothers.⁴⁷

Stael's idea of English women changed after her own prolonged stay in the country as a political refugee in 1793. In *On Literature*, she still writes that 'England is the country in the world where women are most truly loved'.⁴⁸ Still, Germaine de Stael could not have lived in England. According to Sir James Mackintosh, a close friend of hers, 'she admired the English, in the midst of whom she could not have lived'.⁴⁹ Women in England had little place in social life, and were 'accustomed to remain silent in the company of men, where politics are concerned'. Furthermore, women had no active personal existence; while men could have an active life, 'women must stay in the shadows'.⁵⁰ Stael

⁴⁴ *Major Writings of Germaine de Stael*, p. 178.

⁴⁵ Madame de Stael, *Considérations sur la Révolution Française* (Paris : Tallandier, 1983), chapter V, p. 154.

⁴⁶ Frank Paul Bowman, 'Communication and Power in Germaine de Stael: transparency and obstacle', in *Germaine de Stael: Crossing the Borders*, ed. by Madelyn Gutwirth, Avriel Goldberger and Karyna Szmurlo (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 55-68, (p. 61).

⁴⁷ In Eve Sourian, 'Germaine de Stael and the Position of Women in France, England, and Germany', in *Woman as Mediatix: Essays on Nineteenth-Century European Women Writers*, ed. by Avriel H. Goldberger (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), pp. 31-38, (p. 35).

⁴⁸ *Major Writings of Germaine de Stael*, p. 179.

⁴⁹ Sir James Mackintosh, *Memoirs of the Life of the Right Hon. Sir James Mackintosh*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1853), vol. I p. 406.

⁵⁰ In Eve Sourian, 'Madame de Stael and the position of women in France, England, and Germany' p. 36. Of the Italians, Stael thought 'they relish exaggeration in all things, and feel sincerely about

was deeply disappointed by the cold welcome that she received at her arrival in England. Accustomed to the public fame and the open conversations of French salons, Stael could not help being depressed by English indifference to her.⁵¹

Before her journey to Italy in 1803-1804, Stael had not paid any special attention to the country. In general, she was sceptical about the Italian political situation, its poverty, the ignorance of its population, and its Catholic religion.⁵² When she set out for the journey with Schlegel and Sismondi, however, she had already in mind to write a novel as a frame for her journey: 'I shall write a sort of novel that will serve as a frame for a trip to Italy and I think that many thoughts and many feelings will find their place there'.⁵³ At her arrival in Italy in December 1803, she was impressed by the warm welcome. As the daughter of Necker and as a major thinker, she was enthusiastically received by both the population and the Italian aristocracy. As Avriel Goldberger comments, Stael was deeply affected by the freedom with which she could express her thoughts and feelings in Italy.⁵⁴ She did not have to be reticent about any of her knowledge, and she could freely display all her talents. This helped her to shape the plot and the setting of *Corinne*. There she also met 'charming, educated, intelligent and passionate women', among whom were poets, talented women, professors, translators and, of course, improvisatrici.⁵⁵ Stael's ideas on improvisation had not been particularly supportive. In 1800 she commented how:

nothing. They are slaves to women, and yet strangers to any deep and lasting feeling'; *De l'Allemagne*, (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1968), translated by Glenda Sluga; 'Gender and the Nation: Madame de Stael or Italy', *Women's Writing*, 10: 2 (2003), 241-251.

⁵¹ Avriel H. Goldberger, 'Introduction' to *Corinne, or Italy* (London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), p. xxii. The author also observes how Necker had chosen William Pitt the younger as a husband for her daughter; however, she rejected the connection and refused to become an Englishwoman, p. xix.

⁵² Germaine de Stael had received a quite strict Calvinist education from her mother Suzanne Necker, which deeply conditioned her thoughts and writings. See: Madelyn Gutwirth, *Madame de Stael, Novelist: the Emergence of the Artist as a Woman* (London: University of Illinois Press, 1978); chapters 2 and 3.

⁵³ *Mme de Stael et J.B.A. Suard, Correspondance Inédite*, ed. by Robert de Luppé (Geneva : Droz, 1970), Letter of 9 April 1805, p. 25.

⁵⁴ Avriel Goldberger, 'Introduction', p. xxix.

⁵⁵ Madelyn Gutwirth, *Madame de Stael, Novelist*, p. 172.

The crowd of quite eminent improvisatori who make verses as quickly as you can speak is cited as a proof of the advantages of Italian for poetry. I believe, on the contrary, that this extreme facility of the language is one of its defects, and one of the obstacles it sets up for good poets seeking to perfect their style.⁵⁶

In spite of all these reservations, when Stael witnessed for the first time the improvisation of Signora Mazzei in Florence, she discovered 'a new poetic world of sensations and unknown emotions'.⁵⁷ She was eager to see Corilla Olimpica's successor, Amarilli, in Bologna, but she missed the performance. It was probably after witnessing Mazzei's improvisation, and after having heard about the long-lasting fame of Corilla Olimpica that Stael decided to make Corinne not only a poet, but an improvisatrice.⁵⁸ After these considerations, it becomes more clear not only why Stael chose Italy as a setting for the story of Corinne, the woman of genius, but also why she chose England as representative of northern countries. Thanks to her travels in both countries, Stael understood how Italy and England could be taken as representative of southern and northern societies, thus perpetrating a long-lasting geographical and cultural division of Europe. She recognized how the position of women was different in Italian and in English cultures. She compared the freedom of the Italian society with traditionalist and conservative English values. In particular, she juxtaposed the public display of feminine talents of the improvisatrice with the timidity, reserve and decorum of English women.

As Gutwirth observes, no modern heroine existed that even suggested what Stael had in mind to portray: feminine genius.⁵⁹ She had to invent such a vision herself, and yet endow it with the destiny of a tradition. Italy seemed for

⁵⁶ Madame de Stael, *On Literature*, in Caroline Gonda, 'The Rise and Fall of the Improvisatore', p. 197.

⁵⁷ Geneviève Gennari, *Le Premier Voyage de Madame de Stael en Italy et la Genèse de Corinne* (Paris : Boiven & C. 1947), p. 99.

⁵⁸ Paola Giuli remarks in her 'Tracing a Sisterhood: Corilla Olimpica and Corinne', how Stael denied any direct relations between Corilla and Corinne. However, as the author clearly demonstrates, evidences seem to confirm that Stael not only knew and was inspired by Corilla's life, but that she read the description of her coronation at the Capitol in the *Atti* of the Libreria Capitolina in Rome, p. 167.

⁵⁹ Madelyn Gutwirth, *Madame de Stael: Novelist*, p. 204

Stael the most suitable setting for the fictional experience of a woman of genius. The Italian southern landscape, the prominent presence of women in society, and the political slavery of the country, were important elements for the determination of *Corinne's* setting.⁶⁰ Moreover, the long tradition of women improvisers, the public display of their talents, Corilla's success and her real crowning at the Capitol in Rome enhanced Stael's imagination. Interestingly, the majority of modern criticisms on *Corinne, or Italy* see the Italian setting as a 'utopia'.⁶¹ Of course, Stael's Italy is an idealised version of the real Italy the author encountered in her travels. These two sections, however, have brought to the surface the fact that Corinne's Italian experience is not totally the result of Stael's imagination. Some aspects of the novel have realistic origins. In particular, the striking similarity between Corinne's success and Corilla Olimpica's coronation suggests that Stael's choice of setting is not casual, but thoughtfully selected. More generally, Stael's experience of Italy shows the existence of a basic difference in the concept of femininity and women's social position between nineteenth-century Italy and England.

4.3 Cultural Interactions in *Corinne, or Italy*.

The senator took up the crown of myrtle and laurel he was to place on Corinne's head. She unwound the turban encircling her forehead, and all

⁶⁰ Political slavery was seen in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries as an element of feminisation of culture. Since men in Italy were necessarily excluded from any political activity and from leading positions in society, they tended to share women's interests.

⁶¹ Madelyn Gutwirth observes that Mme de Stael presents Italy as a 'utopian Arcadia', stressing the idealized characterisation of the country in the novel, *Madame de Stael, Novelist*, p. 215; similarly, Germaine Greer remarks how the setting of Stael and Landon's improvisatrici is an 'imaginary construction of Italy', *Slip-Shod Sibyls: Recognition, Rejection and the Woman Poet* (London: Viking Press, 1995), p. 272; in analysing Landon's poetic production, Angela Leighton defines Stael's Italy as imaginary, *Victorian Women Poets: Writing Against the Heart* (London: Harvester and Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. 45; Glennis Stephenson seems to share Isobel Armstrong's opinion that for nineteenth-century women poets, 'the movement to Italy is less important in itself than the association of women's poetry with an impassioned land or emotional space outside the definition and circumscriptions of the poet's specific culture and nationality', thus devaluing Italy of any precise national and cultural identity in the works of British Romantic women poets; in Glennis Stephenson, *Letitia Landon: the Woman Behind L.E.L.* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 56.

her ebony hair came tumbling in curls upon her shoulders [...]. No longer a fearful woman she was an inspired priestess, joyously devoting herself to the cult of genius.⁶²

This is the scene where Corinne, after a triumphal arrival at the Capitol, receives the laurel crown from a Roman senator. The coronation takes place at the beginning of the novel, in the second chapter. Corinne's talents, success and genius are taken for granted in Stael's novel. There is no need to demonstrate that Corinne is a woman of genius; her artistic ability and poetic achievements are never put under discussion in the novel. The main issue of the novel, therefore, is not to demonstrate that a woman of genius can exist and can be successful. The author never doubts it in the course of the story, and there is no reason for the reader to question Corinne's talent. What is under discussion is the treatment that different nations and societies reserve to the woman of genius. The point at issue concerns how a nation with its cultural, social and political values can influence the career of a woman poet. Traditionally, criticisms have highlighted the oppositional construction of the novel: Italy stands in opposition to England, and Corinne to Lucile. As I will demonstrate in this section, however, the novel's focus on national and cultural differences is only apparent. In effect, the plot of *Corinne* reveals the effort to overcome national distinctions and integrate seemingly oppositional cultural constructions.

Corinne is a half-English, half-Italian woman of genius: improviser, poet, writer, singer, dancer and actress, who is forced to leave a strict, domestic-oriented and morally imprisoning England for a more relaxing, liberal and sentimental Italy, where she obtains fame and public admiration. Poetic success, however, does not bring Corinne sentimental stability, especially when she directs her affections to an Englishman extremely devoted to his country and to moral and familial duty. Corinne dies of a broken heart in misery and solitude, after Lord Nelvil has abandoned her in favour of Corinne's English half-sister

⁶² Madame de Stael, *Corinne, or Italy*, translated and with an introduction by Avriel H. Goldberger (London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), p.32.

Lucile. Corinne's decision to abandon England- her fatherland- in favour of Italy- her motherland- is mainly due to the incompatibility of her character with English social customs. The opposition between the two countries is evident throughout the novel. After the death of her mother, the twelve year old Corinne leaves Italy and joins her father and her step-mother in England. The clash between an Italian up-bringing, characterised by freedom of manners and cultivation of artistic talents, and the strict and repressive English provincial mores is striking. Corinne's vivacity and artistic talents have constantly to be repressed in a society where conformism, domestic duties, and moral respectability are the only virtues expected in a woman. Corinne is shocked by English silence: 'Not a word was exchanged at the dinner table'.⁶³ Corinne's exceptional gift of improvisation is a shameful feature of her feminine character, something to be hidden and silenced. Her first ingenuous attempt to recite some famous Italian love verse causes the indignation of her step-mother and of the Englishwomen. Corinne cannot understand why men and women have to separate after dinner, since Italians can imagine no pleasure in social interchange without women. The only way for Corinne to survive in such an environment is clearly suggested by Lady Edgermond: 'you must try to forget everything that has to do with Italy. It would have been far better had you never known that country'.⁶⁴ Her father is aware of cultural differences, and his suggestions sound more convincing: 'household duties are a woman's only vocation [in England]. Your talents can help pass the time when you are alone; perhaps you will find a husband who will enjoy them', but he also adds, 'you would never find anyone to marry you if people thought your tastes were foreign to our customs'.⁶⁵ Marriage is everything for an Englishwoman, and Corinne's talents are of no use but for private entertainment.

Corinne docilely accustoms herself to English habits for several years. However, she cannot help wondering why she has 'to mourn [her] talents as if

⁶³ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 252.

⁶⁴ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 253.

⁶⁵ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 253.

they were misfortunes, whereas in Italy they were considered a gift from heaven'.⁶⁶ Cultural differences are at the origin of Corinne's feeling of estrangement from English society. Stael describes Corinne's decision to leave England for Italy after her father's death as a deliberate as well as inevitable choice. The mental process at the origin of Corinne's choice is actually a conscious vocation to poetic activity. The choice is not simply between Italy and England, but between a domestic and repressed life and an artistic and exhilarating career:

'What else is happiness but the development of our abilities', I thought to myself, 'is not killing yourself morally the same as killing yourself physically? And if mind and soul must be smothered, what is the point of going on with a wretched life that stirs up to no purpose?' [...]I believed I was made for another destiny.⁶⁷

From England, Italy appears as a vital, stimulating and joyful country. The movement from England to Italy follows symbolically the path from death to resurrection:

In a kind of ecstasy, I felt for Italy everything that love inspires- desire, enthusiasm, longing. I was no longer in control: everything in me was swept off toward my native land. I needed to see her, breathe her, hear her; every beat of my heart was a summons to my beautiful land, to my smiling countryside!⁶⁸

In England Corinne is simply a cipher, a faceless foreigner. Since the fatherland does not permit her to express her talents freely, she consciously heads for her motherland. In Italy she finds public success, she is admired and respected for her talents, she can be free and independent without compromising her morality. Corinne's free and independent condition acquires an even more extraordinary significance in relation to English men's pre-constructed set of moral and

⁶⁶ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 254.

⁶⁷ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, pp. 254-55.

⁶⁸ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 268.

domestic values. In trying to convince Oswald not to marry Corinne, his friend Mr. Edgermond makes his point very clear:

A woman like that is not made to live in England. Only Englishwomen are right for England [...] *what would you do with her at home? Do you picture your beautiful Italian staying alone while you hunt or go to Parliament? Dear Oswald, our women have domestic virtues you will find nowhere else.*⁶⁹

Interestingly, women's position in society is proportioned to men's political and cultural importance. Women, in Italy, are more free and independent because 'men have nothing to do but please women; so the more lovable women are the better'. On the other hand, in England 'where men have active careers', women have to stay in the shadow.⁷⁰

April Alliston observes how the trajectory of female desire has a geographical destination: the mother country, one whose social and historical borders are not defined patrilineally but where power, agency and identity are inheritable through female lines⁷¹ The interaction between gender and nation appears clear in the novel. Stael presents Italy as a feminised country under construction, with an illustrious past but no definite future. Italy in the novel is a fluctuating, suspended reality. It is a country in the process of definition, whose historical reality is mobile, permeable and undetermined. This reality is deeply in opposition with the static and secular English society. By declaiming and praising Italy as a liberal country which gives women the possibility of following an artistic career with no moral judgment, Corinne 'improvises' her own ideal country. More generally, through Stael and Corinne's imagination, Italy becomes a natural home for women, since it envisions their condition: enslaved, stranger

⁶⁹ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 133; my emphasis.

⁷⁰ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 133. The division between a politically active north and a passive south is an evolution of Beattie's division of Europe between an indolent south and an industrious north. See chapter 2 of this thesis.

⁷¹ April Alliston, 'Of Haunted Highlands: Mapping a Geography of Gender in the Margins of Europe', in *Cultural Interactions in the Romantic Age: Critical Essays in Comparative Literature*, ed. by Gregory Maertz (New York: State University Press of New York, 1998), pp. 55-78, (p. 56). See also:

to democracy, passionate, generous and instinctual. Italy is a country whose future is to be imagined and planned, a future in which women, like Corinne, may have a different role and position in society. In this way, Corinne and Italy appear as reciprocal signifiers: Italy represents women's desire and possibility for independence and success, while the successful and independent Corinne represents Italy's own desire for political and cultural emancipation.

What critics seem to have overlooked in the analysis of the novel is the fact that, although Corinne explicitly chooses to embrace Italian culture and society and to neglect her English origin, she is actually a bicultural character. What needs to be stressed is the dialogical construction of the novel. In spite of their oppositional relation, Italy and England interact within the novel. Since Corinne and Oswald are representative of the two cultures and societies, their relationship epitomises a potential interconnection between the two countries and their social and cultural ideologies. The fact that Corinne and Oswald feel an immediate reciprocal attraction is an important sign of national interaction. Though Oswald's values are deeply rooted in English society, he finds Corinne extremely attractive. In spite of his sceptical attitude towards Italian society and culture, Oswald seeks Corinne's company and admiration. In particular, Corinne's attractiveness lies exactly in her being different from an Englishwoman: 'and it was Corinne's spontaneity and absence of constraint above all that made her attractive'.⁷² Oswald's fascination for Corinne surpasses all rules of English modesty and decency. He loves Corinne in spite of her anonymity, and her role as public poet:

He had not even dared ask Corinne the secret of her name and fate, and yet his love for her grew stronger with each passing day. He never looked at her without being stirred; [...] he was alive to every word she said; she

Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁷² Angelica Goodden, *Madame de Stael: Delphine and Corinne* (London: Grant and Cutler, 2000), p. 74.

had not a moment's sorrow or joy that was not reflected in his own expression.⁷³

Of course, Oswald is always aware of Corinne's diversity and of the impossibility of fitting her character into English society: 'but even though he admired Corinne, even though he loved her, he remembered how little such a woman fit in with the English way of life, how different she was from his father's idea of a suitable wife for him'.⁷⁴

In spite of differences, Oswald's understanding of Corinne's character is deep and subtle at the same time. Although he tried to see her 'as an Englishwoman in [his] fantasies', he perceives that Corinne's uniqueness and exclusivity cannot be judged following the normal codes of society: 'but could anything compare with Corinne? Could the common run of laws apply to one whose genius and sensibility were the unifying bond of so many diverse qualities? Corinne was a miracle of nature.'⁷⁵ As in the case of Piozzi's evaluation of Corilla, Oswald understands that exceptions have to be made in judging Corinne as a woman. Cultural and national opposites, in effect, do attract each other in the novel, and need each other to reach completeness. For a certain portion of the novel Oswald shows clear intentions to marry Corinne. He even tries to convince Lady Edgermond to recognize Corinne, and to restore her dignity and name, so that he could honourably marry her. Stael clearly envisions and suggests that a bridge between the two cultures is possible in the novel, though compromises have to be made on both sides.

Corinne's attraction towards Oswald is even more evident. Corinne chooses Oswald as her lover and companion for life among a crowd of admirers from different countries. What is interesting, as in the case of Oswald, is that Corinne chooses him for his English qualities: reserve, apparent coldness,

⁷³Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 89. Lord Nelvil repeatedly comments that the anonymity of Corinne would be completely unacceptable in English society: 'Her last name was not known; [...] in England he would have judged such a woman severely', p. 20.

⁷⁴Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 89.

⁷⁵Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 105.

melancholy and deep feelings. Though several misunderstandings occur in the novel, Corinne and Oswald seem to understand each other deeply. Corinne's disappointment at Oswald's abandonment is so intense because she realises how strong their reciprocal understanding was:

What makes me most unhappy is that he alone understood me and perhaps he will find one day that I alone knew how to understand him. [...] Oswald was the only man on earth whom I could love.⁷⁶

The question why Oswald is the only man Corinne can love is an important one. Corinne's identity is culturally dual, since it includes both Italy and England, south and north. Although she clearly identifies with Italy, her English side is never totally repressed. The fact that she understood and loved Oswald is due to her ability to comprehend both northern and southern societies, though she rejected the first in favour of the second. Corinne's love and need for Oswald change her so much that she not only envisions the possibility of following him to England and becoming a domestic Englishwoman, but also questions her abandonment of her fatherland: 'Oh! Estimable country who should be my country, why did I leave you?'.⁷⁷ The set of values that seemed so clear at the beginning of the novel are almost reversed at the end. If the novel starts with the assumption that the liberal and free Italian society offers women better possibilities than the English domestic-oriented society, at the end of the novel these assumptions are no more valuable. Corinne dies in misery and loneliness, forsaken by everyone and unable to improvise. She dies in the same Italian society that welcomed and honoured her.

Doris Kadish remarks how in the novel finally England triumphs over Italy, and Oswald assumes the control of the novel by asserting male virility.⁷⁸ However, in my opinion, what seems to emerge from the plot is not the triumph

⁷⁶ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 371.

⁷⁷ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 346.

⁷⁸ Doris Y. Kadish, 'Narrating the French Revolution: the Example of *Corinne*', in *Germaine de Stael: Crossing the Borders*, ed. by Madelyn Gutwirth, Avriel Goldberger and Karyna Szmurlo (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 113-121, (p.118).

of one country over the other, but the need of cultural and national integration in order to improve women's condition in society. More precisely, the novel ends with the victory of patriarchy over women's freedom as a result of the failure of the effort to integrate gender, national and cultural differences. Italy, with its liberal society, its moral freedom and its worship of women is not enough to guarantee them a different existence. What is needed in the novel is the cooperation between different cultures and societies. Thus, women's search for independence and artistic expression acquires a cosmopolitan dimension. According to this view, what Corinne lacks in the novel in order to be happy is not simply love, but the love of an Englishman.⁷⁹ This implies that the Italian Corinne feels incomplete, and that she needs to re-establish her original unity by incorporating the English counterpart she had previously rejected. Thus, the message of the novel is not constructed upon division, polarities and separation between cultures and nations. It is, on the contrary, built upon the necessity of interaction and interrelation between different cultures. Only in this way can the cause of women's independence acquire a universal value. Although genius in a woman seems to be more problematic in the north than in the south, Corinne's search for identity is out of any geographical boundary. Corinne feels free because she is different and she is culturally dual. Her English experience is determinant for her full appreciation of Italian society.

Jennifer Birkett argues that Corinne's character and experience open the potential for something new, since she acts as a point where a multitude of different national, class, gender values intersect and interact.⁸⁰ If we consider Corinne within the context of Romantic heroines in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels, she clearly represents an evolution. As Gubar and Gilbert have

⁷⁹ In the novel Corinne is admired and courted by many Italian men. Prince Castel Forte would be ready to serve and accompany Corinne timelessly and he seems even willing to marry her. The fact that Corinne chooses to commit herself to an Englishman confirms the importance of cultural integration.

⁸⁰ Jennifer Birkett, 'Speech in Action: Language, Society, and Subject in Germaine de Stael's *Corinne*', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 7:4 (July 1995), 397-98.

demonstrated, the traditional Romantic heroine was enclosed in limited space.⁸¹ As my analysis of Radcliffe, Smith and Young's novels suggested, travel and movement for the Romantic heroine was troublesome, dangerous and risky. Differently, Stael's heroine is free to wander through nations, cultural constructions and social spheres, without actually belonging anywhere. Her multiple national identity does not seem to be a problem for Corinne. On the contrary, it is the main source of her independence, freedom and ultimately of her genius. In Stael's novel, for the first time movement for women is not dangerous anymore, but is a way to liberty and expression. In other words, Corinne is the first cosmopolitan heroine.⁸²

Cosmopolitanism and cultural integration in fact do not concern Corinne only. Despite Oswald's strong roots in English social and cultural values, Corinne's influence deeply changes him. Oswald is not the same after meeting Corinne. The domestic life he longed for does not satisfy him anymore. Lucile, the bride his father had chosen for him, a perfect example of English decency, timidity and reserve, does not make him happy. What would have been complete happiness before the meeting with Corinne is the source of frustration and dissatisfaction after Oswald's Italian experience. As a matter of fact, contamination does take place in the novel. Corinne's personality influences not only Oswald, but Lucile also, and especially the little Juliette. Corinne chooses Juliette as the inheritor of her talents. She teaches her niece all her skills, and she transmits to her the love for culture, music, poetry and improvisation. Juliette is the character in the novel that can potentially resolve cultural conflicts. In a way, she represents the new generation of women poets. Of course we do not know the story of Juliette. We can only imagine that she will be an Englishwoman with Corinne's talents. Thus, she potentially incorporates and

⁸¹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. xv-xlvi.

⁸² On the difference between a cosmopolitan and a national heroine, see: Esther Wohlgemut, ' "What do you do with her at home?" The Cosmopolitan and National Tale', *European Romantic Review* 13:2 (June 2002), 191-197.

reconciles in her character decency, privacy, timidity with poetic genius and artistic talents. Like Juliette, the after-Corinne generation of British women poets were deeply influenced by the novel's heroine. Stael's effort to spread a message of cultural contamination and cosmopolitanism was successful. As the following sections will demonstrate, British women writers used *Corinne* to enlarge the national boundaries of their poetry. Thanks to *Corinne* they discovered the potential and fascination of the south, and they incorporated its elements in their own poetry.

4.4 The British Reception of *Corinne, or Italy*.

Before the publication of *Corinne* in 1807, British readers had already encountered a similar character in Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl*, published a year earlier. Comparisons were inevitably made between the two heroines, the one an improvisatrice, poet, artist, actress and embodiment of Italian culture, the other a harpist, singer of old Irish lays and an enthusiastic patriot. Like *Corinne*, she recites verses and sings national songs while playing the traditional ancient Irish harp: 'She was alone, and bending over her harp; one arm was gracefully thrown over the instrument, which she was tuning; with the other she was lightly modulating on its chord'.⁸³ In fact, Glorvina, the young protagonist of Owenson's novel, is quite a different character from *Corinne*. She is a shy, timid and domestic girl. She lives at her father's castle in isolation; she hardly ever performs in public, but only for her family's entertainment. At the sight of a stranger, 'she blushe[s] to the eyes', and she has no ambition for public success and celebrity. Like *Corinne*, she is a national enthusiast, and she utterly identifies with her land, Ireland. Nevertheless, her love for her country is passively inherited from her father. She does not make any autonomous choice, she just seems to follow on the pathway that her father has prepared for her.

Though 'a talented girl', with a 'vivacious genius', and an 'enthusiast for all knowledge', she is a rather obedient, tamed and domestic creature. More importantly, as Clarissa Campbell Orr observes, the role of Glorvina is not that of poet, but that of an 'ardent patriot', a preserver of a 'derided and almost dying culture'.⁸⁴ Unlike Corinne, Glorvina never improvises, or more precisely, never composes verses. Her role is that of a preserver and transmitter of the old national Irish culture. As she herself explains in the novel, 'long before I could read, I learned on the bosom of my nurse, and in my father's arms, to recite the songs of our national bards, and almost since I could read, the Ossian of Macpherson has been the object of my enthusiastic admiration'.⁸⁵ Glorvina's genius is a domesticated one. Since her childhood she has been designated to acquire and transmit Irish national songs. What is interesting to stress, however, is the fact that women's nationalistic interest tends to be directed towards places and countries that are inscribed within the margins of a Europe that is beginning to define itself on a map drawn of shared but mutually exclusive boundaries. As Allison Alliston observes, Italy and Ireland are inserted within the margins of Europe, and they are denied clear geographical borderlines that would make them recognizable as cohesive and independent states.⁸⁶ As in the case of Corinne's identification with Italy, Glorvina's Irish nationalism is strengthened by the precarious political condition of Ireland.⁸⁷ The status of culturally strong, but politically and socially weak, countries helps women to sympathise and ultimately to identify with a condition similar to theirs.

⁸³ Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan, *The Wild Irish Girl: a National Tale*, with an Introduction and Notes by Kathryn Kirkpatrick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 68.

⁸⁴ Clarissa Campbell Orr, 'The Corinne Complex', p. 93.

⁸⁵ Sydney Owenson, *The Wild Irish Girl*, p. 115.

⁸⁶ April Alliston, 'Of Haunted Highlands: Mapping a Geography of Gender in the Margins of Europe', pp. 55-56.

⁸⁷ The possibility that *The Wild Irish Girl* had influenced Stael's composition of *Corinne* is highly improbable. Owenson's novel was published in 1806 while, as Geneviève Gennari and Madelyn Gutwirth point out, Stael had already in mind the skeleton of the novel during her journey to Italy in 1804. Furthermore, her journals and letters do not mention any reference to Sydney Owenson's *The Wild Irish Girl* in the years of its publication (*Correspondence Générale de Madame de Stael; text établi et présenté par Béatrice W. Jasinski* (Paris: Hachette, 1985) and *Selected Correspondence of Madame de Stael*, transl. and ed. by Kathleen Jameson (London: Kluwer Academic, 2000)).

Corinne, was translated into English the same year of its publication in late April 1807, and it was a phenomenal success.⁸⁸ It got through fourteen editions between 1807 and 1810, and it was published all over Europe. Contemporary British reviews generally welcomed the novel as a novelty and as the most successful work by Stael. British critics tended to focus on the character of *Corinne*, particularly its originality, its foreignness and its eccentricity. In 1807, the *Annual Review*, after praising Stael's virtues as a novelist, reminds the readers how 'in appreciating [*Corinne's*] merits, we must constantly bear in mind that the scene does not lie in England, but in Italy'.⁸⁹ The anonymous critic goes on explaining that 'nothing can be more improbable than the conduct of *Corinne*, or more unnatural than her character, if, [...] our country is to be considered as the epitome of general character, and as the standard of propriety for general conduct'.⁹⁰ He concludes saying that the portrait of *Corinne* is admirable; however, she is so remote from 'any character to which an Englishman could compare her', that she can only be found in a fairy-land.⁹¹ In the same year, *Le Beau Monde* reviews the novel by giving prominence to Oswald's point of view. To English eyes, *Corinne* appears as a 'dazzling meteor'. She is also a character who reconciles English standard ideas of femininity with the Italian unconventional view: 'a painter, a poetess, a musician, possessing all the beauties of an Englishwoman, and all the witcheries of an Italian'.⁹² Generally speaking, with the exception of a few negative comments and reviews, the novel was an immediate success and a literary phenomenon.⁹³ Maria Edgeworth called *Corinne* a 'work of splendid genius'.⁹⁴ Lady Morgan praised Stael's genius, and the fact that the 'female enthusiasm' of

⁸⁸ Angelica Goodden, *Madame de Stael: Delphine and Corinne*, p.64.

⁸⁹ *The Annual Review* 6 (1807), p. 673.

⁹⁰ *The Annual Review*, p. 673.

⁹¹ *The Annual Review*, p. 675.

⁹² *Le Beau Monde* 2 (September, 1807), p. 91.

⁹³ The conservative writer Jane Taylor, for instance, though admiring the novel, disapproved of the book's sexual immorality (Caroline Gonda, 'The Rise and Fall of the Improvisatore', p. 199).

⁹⁴ Angelica Goodden, *Madame de Stael*, p. 64.

her views was supported by her 'masculine independence'.⁹⁵ Fanny Burney became an open supporter and intimate friend of Stael, whom she had met and frequented during the author's stay in England. Anna Jameson considered Stael an extraordinary woman, and Corinne a remarkable character, while Mary Shelley planned to write a biography of Stael.⁹⁶ Ellen Moers has demonstrated how the novel influenced at least three generations of nineteenth-century women writers, from Hannah More and Jane Austen to Jane Carlyle, Maria Jane Jewsbury and George Eliot.⁹⁷ More recently, Clarissa Campbell Orr has defined the 'Corinne Complex' as a diffuse tendency by which women, who were seen at the time as operating within the Stael's tradition, assumed the role of interpreters of their national culture.⁹⁸ On the whole, *Corinne* became a metaphor for a general feeling of foreignness. This feeling included not only national, ethnic or geographical differences, but was extended to other types of alienation. Particularly, all those British women writers who felt alienated from the predominant social, cultural, and artistic milieu found in the novel an inspiring model. As a consequence, Italy became metaphorically a country where women could escape from patriarchal restraints, and where they could ideally find freedom of expression and artistic success. More subtly, after *Corinne*, the use of Italy by British women writers was a more or less direct way of criticising British culture and society. Symbolically, the real or ideal movement towards the

⁹⁵ Sydney Owenson, *Lady Morgan, France* 3 vols. (London, 1818), vol II, pp. 383-84. For more information on the intellectual influence of Stael on *Lady Morgan*, see: Mary Campbell, *Lady Morgan: the Life and Times of Sydney Owenson* (London: Pandora Press, 1988), pp. 84, 94-95, 138-39, 141.

⁹⁶ *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. by Betty T. Bennett, 3 vols. (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), vol. II, pp. 89-90, 105, 113, 115, 317. It seems that Mary Shelley abandoned the attempt after Benjamin Constant cautioned her against writing a full biography, well knowing it would be unsympathetically received in England (Emily Sunstein, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (Baltimore: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991)).

⁹⁷ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women*, pp. 173-178.

⁹⁸ Clarissa Campbell Orr, 'The Corinne Complex: Gender, Genius, and National Character', pp. 93-99.

south became a mythic journey of discovery, which implied an escape from an intellectual death in order to find personal liberation.⁹⁹

Byron's personality and production were deeply influenced by Stael's works, and by *Corinne* in particular. Joanna Wilkes has demonstrated the strong link between Stael and Byron, both in terms of personal friendship and of literary connection. Following Wilkes's opinion, Stael's influences are to be found in all Byron's major works, including *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan*.¹⁰⁰ Byron visited the Coppet's circle at Geneva several times in the summer of 1816. While writing *Don Juan* in April 1823, Byron was in correspondence with Lady Blessington first in London, then in Italy. From Lady Blessington's records of their conversations, we know that Stael and her works were often the object of discussion. Byron considered Stael 'certainly the cleverest of literary women, though not the most agreeable woman he had ever known'. He disliked her way of 'declaiming to you instead of conversing with you', and considered both *Delphine* and *Corinne* as 'very dangerous productions to be put in the hands of young women', since morally ambiguous.¹⁰¹ Teresa Guccioli, Byron's Italian lover, was very fond of *Corinne*. We know that Byron read the novel several times, and he annotated on Teresa's copy 'No' twice in correspondence of Stael's description of the strong demarcation of the social roles of the sexes. Wilkes observes how Stael and Byron shared an interest in European countries and literatures, and how their attitudes towards nationalism were quite similar. The author remarks how both supported individual national identities; at the same time, however, they promoted and worked in a deep cosmopolitan background.¹⁰² In particular, Byron and Stael share a common concern and fascination for Italy. Both authors were attracted to Italy for similar reasons: they mainly used it as a means of

⁹⁹ For a specific study of the reception of Stael's production in Britain, see: Rober C. Whitford, *Mme de Stael's Literary Reputation in England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, 1918).

¹⁰⁰ Joanne Wilkes, *Lord Byron and Madame de Stael: Born for Opposition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 1-25.

¹⁰¹ *Lady Blessington's Conversation of Lord Byron*, ed. by Ernest J. Lovell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 22, 25.

commenting on and criticizing England. Byron's remarks on the difference between Italians and English strongly echo Stael's considerations: 'The Italians do not understand English. Indeed how can they? For they are frank, simple, and open in their natures, following the bent of their inclinations, which they do not believe to be wicked'; while the English tend 'to conceal the indulgence of their [feelings], daily practice hypocrisy, falsehood, and uncharitableness'.¹⁰³

In the map of European literature, Corinne was for nineteenth-century women readers the female Childe Harold.¹⁰⁴ Corinne's energy, ambition and multifarious talents intrigued the European female public in the same way as Childe Harold did. The story and character of Corinne fuelled women's desires for a life beyond the narrow existence to which social expectations seemed to confine them. The connection between the characters of Childe Harold and Corinne is an important one for the construction of the ideal of the Romantic hero. However, in linking Stael's and Byron's productions one has to take into consideration their chronology. As John Isbell points out, 'almost nothing before *Corinne* had put *any* exceptional creative genius, man or woman, so gloriously centre stage: Ossian hints at it, Byron completes the process; but Byron wrote in 1812, after *Corinne*. Did Stael then invent the Romantic hero, and do so in the feminine?'.¹⁰⁵ The question is a fundamental one for the development of Romantic heroism.¹⁰⁶ If we consider the years of composition and the deep influence Stael had on Byron, Childe Harold seems to be a derivative of Corinne. More precisely, it would be the transformation of the cosmopolitan, nationalistic, multiple female genius of Corinne into its male equivalent. The evolution of Corinne into a male Romantic hero with similar characteristics would justify the fading of interest in the female improvisatrice in women's writings between 1810

¹⁰² Joanne Wilkes, *Lord Byron and Madame de Stael*, pp. 96-157.

¹⁰³ *Lady Blessington's Conversations of Lord Byron*, p. 29.

¹⁰⁴ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women*, p. 176.

¹⁰⁵ John Isbell, 'The Painful Birth of the Romantic Heroine: Stael as Political Animal', *Romantic Review* 87:1 (1996), 59-67, (p. 66).

¹⁰⁶ See also: Caroline Franklin, *Byron's Heroines* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

and 1821.¹⁰⁷ The most successful and widespread reception of *Corinne* started, in fact, after Byron's death with the poetic productions of Felicia Hemans and Letitia Landon. It seems that after the death of Byron and the decline of the Byronic hero, heroism could eventually return to be heroinism in the character and place of Stael's *Corinne*; hence, the proliferation of the Italian improvisatrice in the works of many women poets during and after the 1820s. As I will demonstrate in the next section, however, before 1822 *Corinne* was seen as a problematic novel. In particular, the first conservative reactions tended to re-assert the importance of English values and customs.

4.5 Corinne comes to England and Ireland.

The anonymous reviewer of *Le Beau Monde* comments how Stael's *Corinne* is a character 'an Englishwoman happily cannot comprehend', and laments that Stael 'should give us one of her own accomplished and fascinating heroines, in an English costume, adorned with English virtues, and English morality'.¹⁰⁸ The English equivalent of *Corinne* was, in fact, soon created in E. M. Foster's *The Corinna of England* (1809) and Ann Harding Raikes' *The Refugees* (1822). These two novels represent the first British reactions to *Corinne*. Foster and Harding's works perpetrate, and to some extent reinforce, the oppositional construction of southern and northern countries. However, what triumphs in both novels is not the liberal and artistic southern society but the moral and conservative northern one.

¹⁰⁷ The first work that clearly shows connection with Stael's *Corinne*, is Landon's 'Corinna', published in the *The Fate of Adelaide* in 1821. Earlier publications directly connected with *Corinne* are almost totally absent from British literature. On the contrary, poetic works inspired by *Corinne* proliferated after 1830s. See for example, Emma C. Embury (1806-1869), 'L' Improvisatrice', 'Madame de Stael', 'Stanza written after the second reading of *Corinne*', *The Poems of Mrs. Emma Catherine Embury* (1869); Emmeline Stuart- Wortley (1806-1855), 'Song of the Dying Improvisatrice', *Queen Berengaria's Courtesy and Other Poems*, 3 vols. (1858).

¹⁰⁸ *Le Beau Monde* (September, 1807), p. 92.

Foster's *The Corinna of England, or a Heroine in the Shade* published in 1809 is a parody of Stael's novel.¹⁰⁹ In it the anti-heroine is the eccentric, untalented and morally ambiguous Clarissa Moreton. She is a young inheritor of her father's fortunes. A spoiled child educated with no restraints and discipline, she thinks she is the most artistically talented woman of England when, in fact, she is but a proud and stubborn character. Her salon of intellectuals and artists is a mixture of freaks and miserable people, who see themselves as having artistic skills, but in fact they just live at Clarissa's expense. They all represent a parody of Corinne's multinational salon. The oppositional relation between Corinne and her half-sister Lucile, which dominates Stael's novel, is also at the centre of Foster's work, though in a reversed way. The young, timid, and chaste Mary Cuthbert, Corinna's orphaned cousin, becomes in Foster the real heroine of the story, or, as the subtitle suggests, 'a heroine in the shade'. On the contrary, Clarissa is clearly introduced as the anti-heroine, whose unusual and scandalous behaviour threatens to spoil and corrupt the innocent Mary. A strong supporter of Stael's first novel *Delphine*, Clarissa decides to name herself Corinna after reading *Corinne*. From this point on, the novel becomes an overt parody of Corinne's story. We soon discover that Clarissa Moreton does not have any artistic genius and she also lacks taste and understanding. She has only enough vanity to suppose that she is an extremely talented woman. The narrator comments how 'Miss Moreton's talents were calculated only for display'; there is nothing solid or substantial in her abilities, no depth of argument in her declamatory speeches. The artificiality of Clarissa's talents and the eccentricity of her behaviour are the result of the non-English education she has received. By presenting Clarissa Moreton as a caricature of Stael's Corinne, Foster seems to suggest that a liberal education has different results in England. While the liberal

¹⁰⁹ Mrs. E. M. Foster was already a famous novelist by the time she published *The Corinna of England*. She published fourteen books between 1795-1810. Her works include: *The Duke of Clarence* (1795), *Frederic and Caroline, or the Fitzmorris Family* (1800). *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English* notes that Mrs. Foster's views were conservative, and that *The Corinna of*

education of Corinne is somehow justified by her living in a country with more elastic moral customs for women, Clarissa's unrestrained up-bringing does not have any cultural or geographical justification. The different cultural and social context seems to play a fundamental role in the delineation of the two characters. If Corinne's talents are encouraged and nurtured in the artistically stimulating Italian environment, Clarissa's accomplishments are distorted and misled by the suffocating patriarchal English society. As a consequence, the natural artistic talents of Corinne are transmuted into artificial eccentric abilities in Clarissa. The result is clearly different: Corinne matures into a woman artist, whose genius is celebrated and worshipped throughout Italy, while Clarissa remains an eccentric, atypical, immoral young lady, and the object of derision. In this way, Foster seems to validate Stael's theory. The ridiculousness of Clarissa's character, in fact, is the result of a contamination between southern and northern elements. By receiving a liberal education in a morally strict society, Clarissa is turned into an outcast in her own country, since she cannot identify with the English model of femininity. Foster's re-elaboration of the cosmopolitan heroine suggests how cultural contamination has a dividing and destructive effect.

While trying to imitate Corinne, the Corinna of England decides to improvise a speech for the peasants of Coventry gathered to celebrate the ancient noblewoman Godiva. She actually instigates them to abandon their honest and humble jobs in order to pursue literary and artistic careers:

'Ye citizens of Coventry, free men of an ancient city, behold this day another woman speaks! Another woman asserts the glorious prerogative of her sex, the bold freedom of thought and of action, hitherto so exclusively, so unjustly associated with men alone! [...] People of Coventry, and I behold you sunk to a state of effeminacy and servitude! [...] Men! Possessed of capricious minds, of soaring genius, of depth of intellect; how do I behold you engaged?'¹¹⁰

England wrecks retribution on a travesty of Germaine de Stael's heroine (ed. by Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy (London: Batsford, 1990), p. 388).

¹¹⁰E. M. Foster, *The Corinna of England, and a Heroine in the Shadow: a Modern Romance* (London: Crosby, 1809), 2 vols. Chawton House Library, electronic version, <www.chawton.org/novels/corinna> vol. II, chapter xvi.

At the answer that they are engaged in providing bread for themselves and their children, and in 'honest industry', Corinna replies saying 'Shame, shame on these inglorious occupations', since men have arms 'to chisel out the hero's form,' and eyes that 'with Promethean fire can animate their works'.¹¹¹ The result of the Corinna of Coventry's improvisation is the instigation of a riot and public turmoil among the peasants. This includes Corinna being carried to her villa by her admirers, in a way that is a clear mockery of Corinne's acclamation at the Capitol: 'the horses were taken out of the carriage, men usurped their places; and the gratified Corinna of Coventry was drawn along, the idol of people'.¹¹² What is surprising, however, is Clarissa's explicit effort to assert women's rights to artistic and intellectual expression. Not even Stael's Corinne had ever dared to utter such a bold and direct declaration of freedom. However, the superficiality and unreliability of the heroine, along with the ridiculousness of the situation, reduce this apparently feminist attempt simply to another sign of Clarissa's eccentricity. The Corinna of England tries then to imitate Stael's heroine and to act as Corinne does in the novel. She, for example, prefers walking the streets of London unprotected instead of going in a carriage, since 'she had read *Corinne*', and 'in strict obedience to her model', she chose the pedestrian excursion: 'Corinne had walked over Rome with Lord Nelvil!'. In hearing of the illness of one of her reluctant lover's friends, Corinna runs to visit him since 'Corinne had gone immediately to visit Nelville on hearing his illness!', even if this means worsening her already scandalous behaviour and compromising her innocent cousin's reputation.¹¹³ The effects of all her actions are disastrous, and the Corinna of England dies tragically while trying to escape a fire. In *The Corinna of England*, Foster demonstrates the implausibility of Corinne's behaviour for English society, and the dangerous effects that the

¹¹¹ E.M. Foster, *The Corinna of England*, vol. II, chapter xvi.

¹¹² E. M. Foster, *The Corinna of England*, vol. II, chapter xvi.

¹¹³ E.M. Foster, *The Corinna of England*, vol. II, chapter xix.

reading of the novel could generate in young and inexperienced Englishwomen. In proposing a reversed plot, in which the exuberant unconventional female character is the anti-heroine, while the domestic, shy and ordinary woman is the heroine, Foster creates the English equivalent of Corinne's story. This novel is an important reaction to the publication of *Corinne* in Great Britain, since it emphasises the difference between a realistic English provincial setting and an idealised, cosmopolitan Italian society.

In Foster's novel the successful and talented Italian Corinne is transposed into English soil, and becomes a comic figure, an untalented, eccentric and immoral being. This view suggests that the two different ideas of womanhood that Stael proposes in *Corinne* are irreconcilable. Clearly, the public dimension of the south cannot be incorporated in the domestic structure of northern society. Ann Harding Raikes seems to reach a similar conclusion in *The Refugees, an Irish Tale*, though in a very different way.¹¹⁴ More specifically, Harding re-writes the story of Corinne from the point when the heroine meets Nelvil and falls in love with him. Constantia O' Brien, a talented improviser, poet and painter of Irish origins, is in Rome enjoying fame and success when she meets the Irish Albert de Courville, and the two fall irreparably in love. Costantia decides to renounce her talents and her fame in Italy to turn into a domestic and reserved Irish woman, the perfect bride for de Courville. In this way, Harding envisions a different destiny for Stael's Corinne. In particular, the author imagines how the story of Corinne would have been different if she had become Nelvil's wife and agreed to spend the rest of her life in a northern provincial setting.

¹¹⁴ Anne Harding Raikes (1781-1858) was born in Bath and married a Bristol merchant, who died young and intestate in 1805. Harding ran a school for 35 years and from 1818 published seven novels. *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English* observes how she was a conservative author and how 'her early high-minded, lofty, imperious heroines tend to need redemption through suffering; later works reward good girls', *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present*; ed. by Virginia Blain, Patricia Clements, Isobel Grundy (London: Batsford, 1990), p. 184. She is also the author of: *Correction: a Novel* (1818), *Decision: a Tale* (1819), *Dissipation: a Tale of Simple Life* (1827), *Experience: a Tale for All Ages* (1828), *Realities: not a Novel; a Tale from Real Life* (1825).

Although entirely of Irish origins, Costantia has a dark complexion, 'eyes of ebon blackness' and 'hairs of the raven's wing', typical of southern climes. She was 'endowed with talents of the most extraordinary kind', and from the earliest years 'she possessed the art of extempore poetry to a wonderful extent'.¹¹⁵ As a consequence, she chose Italy as an 'adoptive' nation, one that accepted, and promoted her talents, giving her fame and success:

Under its clear sky and warm sun, her vivid imagination glowing in the brilliant beauties of life's spring, expanded itself into all that richness and beauty [...] of southern climes. Drinking into the poetic spirit of the country, she sung impromptu verses, recited the best poets, and related the deeds of ancient Rome, in the flowing numbers of high raised enthusiasm.¹¹⁶

Italy has given her such a successful and independent life that she 'almost forgot she had any country or friends but the country that fostered her rare qualifications', thus selecting Italy as her 'almost' native country.¹¹⁷ When Constantia and Albert fall in love, the clash between southern and northern cultures is soon evident. Albert's concern that Constantia 'would not be loved in England' clearly mirrors Oswald's anxiety about Corinne's un-English behaviour. Although fascinated by a character 'so engaging, sweet, modest, and interesting', and although he says himself to be ready to 'worship her as a goddess', Albert cannot see Constantia either as a wife or as a mother. His fears, however, prove to be insignificant, since Constantia is ready to give up her career and her talents in order to become a devoted wife. Constantia feels that 'she can revere Albert as a husband', and that she will 'blend her tastes and sentiments with those of him', until her sense of independence would 'be flattered in following her husband's lead'.¹¹⁸ Albert's mother imposes two years of separation on the couple, so as to test their mutual attachment, and to 'convert' Constantia from an Italianised improvisatrice to a domesticated Irish

¹¹⁵ Ann Harding Raikes, *The Refugees, and Irish Tale*, 3 vols. (London: Longman, 1822); vol. I, pp. 123-124.

¹¹⁶ Ann Harding Raikes, *The Refugees*, vol. I, p. 124.

¹¹⁷ Ann Harding Raikes, *The Refugees*, vol. I, p. 124.

woman. After the two years have elapsed, Constantia has been turned into a perfect example of feminine propriety, with no public life and pretence to success, and the two can happily marry. Constantia's past as a successful poet is evoked several times in the course of the novel, and her transition to a domestic woman is often described in terms of a 'great sacrifice'. However, the full happiness of her new condition is never questioned. In addressing her husband, Constantia comments how 'the Constantia of [Rome] was yours, and for you became the Costantia of Carmors-town: her end is obtained, and her happiness complete'.¹¹⁹ Costantia's talents are now entirely devoted to the man she has chosen for life, her character domesticated, and her Italian success confined to the past.

Harding's re-writing of Corinne's story clearly suggests that a woman can domesticate her talents and genius in order to become a suitable mother and wife. In the novel the choice is described as natural and inevitable, one that will bring ultimate and durable happiness. The Irish equivalent of Corinne has resolved the apparently irreconcilable opposition between fame and domesticity by renouncing the former in favour of the latter. The cosmopolitan and talented heroine has been happily transformed into a nationalistic and conventional character. Like Foster, Harding seems to validate the idea that there is no place in patriarchal societies for unconventional and unordinary women, but only for chaste, pure and angelic women, like Lucile, Mary and the Costantia of Carmors-town. The triumph of the Lucile type of woman implies that the talented Corinne, the eccentric Clarissa and the gifted Constantia of Rome are unfitted for English and Irish societies. Their strangeness eludes the passive and domestic ideal of womanhood that northern societies seem to propose as the only acceptable model. When the plot of *Corinne* is elaborated by English women novelists, the

¹¹⁸ Ann Harding Raikes, *The Refugees*, vol. I, p. 173.

¹¹⁹ Ann Harding Raikes, *The Refugees*, vol. II, p. 242.

result is the triumph of English principles and customs over the Italianate freedom.¹²⁰

4.6 'Doth Genius Wander Through the World'

Susan Wolfson observes how after *Corinne*, it became easy and fashionable to speak of a female poetic genius.¹²¹ However, as Daniel Reiss points out, after the immense success of its first publication in English in 1807, *Corinne* became a progressively radical novel.¹²² Unsurprisingly, the work was condemned in England and America for its overt critique of Anglo-Saxon values and conservatism. Most of all, it was condemned as 'too feminist'. Introducing a strong, independent woman as a heroine was already a subversive move, but making her reject an English upbringing for a life of art in an Italian climate caused the novel to be 'a troubling intrusion into all Anglo-Saxon community'.¹²³ Writing about *Corinne* and on the model of *Corinne*, therefore, was not a conventional decision. In particular, the fact that *Corinne* was often taken as an inspirational model in spite –or because– of her foreignness, suggests the need of some women writers to symbolically expatriate in search of a poetic model. This movement abroad implies an implicit confrontation between the English idea of femininity and the alternative Italian construction of the woman poet.

Hemans and Landon are the first two women poets symbolically exiled from England into an imaginary Italy. The fact that *Corinne* had become a radical novel in the increasingly conservative English literary market, however, forced

¹²⁰ In his recent article, Erik Simpson argues the existence of a British counter-tradition to *Corinne*. Although the article reveals the importance of a conservative reaction, it clearly omits to acknowledge the influence of Stael's novel on British women writers ('"The Minstrels of Modern Italy": Improvisation comes to Britain', *European Romantic Review*, 14 (Sept. 2003), 345-367).

¹²¹ Susan Wolfson, 'Hemans and the Romance of Byron', in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Nanora Sweet and July Melnyk (Houndsmill: Macmillan Press, 2000), pp. 150-180, (p. 161).

¹²² Daniel Reiss, 'Letitia Landon and the Dawn of English Post-Romanticism', *Studies in English Literature*, 36:4 (Autumn, 1996), 807-827, (p. 815).

¹²³ Perry Miller (ed.), *Margaret Fuller, American Romantic: A Selection of Her Writings and Correspondence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. xxi.

both Hemans and Landon, as professional poets, to adapt the original plot to the English audience, thus securing the support of critics and the income coming from their readers. As Reiss observes, Hemans and Landon's poetic activity belongs to the post-Corinne and post-Byronic decadent phase of Romanticism.¹²⁴ In their productions, both poets show an obsession with distant and exotic settings, with blue skies, dark heroines and sensuous perfumes. In the 1820s and 1830s, however, distant settings, far and exotic lands were highly fashionable poetic subjects. The 'cult of the south' reached its apex in these years: writing about foreign heroines involved the possibility of gaining a huge audience, of becoming popular and, consequently, of earning considerable money.¹²⁵ However, as will emerge from my analysis, Hemans and Landon's fascination for the south is not simply the product of fashionable culture, but is a conscious will to enter the cosmopolitan discourse which Stael had initiated and Byron continued. Significantly, Landon's first publications in the *Literary Gazette*, were poems about the south, specifically about Italy and its poets: 'Rome' and 'Vaucluse'. On the other hand, Felicia Hemans was deeply responsive to the international politics of her days. She claimed German-Italian origins, and her Liverpool up-bringing marked all her poetic production with a cosmopolitan vein. She was familiar with the most important Italian authors and with some of the contemporary Italian writers. Both authors read Sismondi's *Historical Views of the Literature of the South of Europe* (1813), and *History of the Italian Republics* (1809-18), along with William Roscoe's famous *Illustration of the Life of Lorenzo de' Medici* (1822).¹²⁶ These works not only re-elaborate the theory of the

¹²⁴ Daniel Reiss, 'Letitia Landon and the Dawn of English Post-Romanticism', p. 810.

¹²⁵ See: Kenneth Churchill, *Italy and English Literature 1764-1930* (London: MacMillan Press, 1980), chapters V and VI.

¹²⁶ For a detailed investigation of Stael and The Coppet Circle's influence on Hemans' works see: Nanora Sweet, 'The Bowl of Liberty: Felicia Hemans and the Romantic Mediterranean', (Unpublished dissertation, University of Michigan; microfilm: 9332173). See also the introduction to *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose, and Letter*, ed. by Gary Kelly (Peterborough: Broadway Press, 2002), p. 17. For Landon see: Glennis Stephenson, *Letitia Landon: the Woman Behind L.E.L.* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 56-57.

influence of climate on culture and literature, but they also strengthen the idea of an artistically stimulating south.¹²⁷

Hemans and Landon were deeply influenced by Stael's works, not only by *Corinne*, but also by *On Literature* and *Germany*.¹²⁸ *Corinne* was such a fascinating character that both authors suggest a sort of identification with Stael's heroine. Hemans found the story of *Corinne* deeply inspiring for her own poetic subjectivity. Her letters show that her reading of the novel was careful and constructive. In a letter to a friend in 1828, for example, she acknowledges how *Corinne* not only represents an influential model, it also constitutes an instrument of self-discovery:

That book, in particular towards its close, has a power over me which is quite indescribable; some passages seem to give me back my own thoughts and feelings, my whole inner being with a mirror, more true than ever friend could hold up.¹²⁹

In quoting this extract, Henry Chorley remarks how in 'Mrs. Hemans' own copy of *Corinne*, a precise passage was marked with particular emphasis, and the words "C'est moi". In a similar way, in her poem 'Corinne at the Cape of Misena', which appeared in *The Amulet* in 1832, Landon suggests how *Corinne* is a sort of prototype for women poets: 'There is a power/Given to some minds to fashion and create,/ [...]such was Corinne', and she adds: 'Corinne/ Is but another name for her who wrote,/ Who felt, and poured her spirit on her lay.'¹³⁰ Landon also contributed to the 1833 translation of Stael's novel by Isabel Hill, for which she wrote the poetic passages of *Corinne's* improvisations, the first and only attempt

¹²⁷ As Susan Wolfson and Ann Mellor observe, Hemans and Landon were deeply influenced by Byron and his poetry (Susan Wolfson, 'Hemans and the Romance of Byron'; Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1993)). See also: Nanora Sweet, 'Lorenzo's Liverpool and Corinne's Coppet: the Italianate Salon and Romantic Education', in *Lessons of Romanticism: a Critical Companion*, ed. by Thomas Pfau and Robert F. Gleckner (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 244-54.

¹²⁸ *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose, and Letters*, ed. by Gary Kelly; pp. 23-24. Glennis Stephenson, *Letitia Landon: the Woman Behind L.E.L.*, p. 57.

¹²⁹ Henry Chorley, *Memorials of Mrs. Hemans with Illustrations of Her Literary Character from Her Private Correspondence*, 2 vols. (London: Saunders and Otely, 1837), vol. I, pp. 295-96.

to reproduce in verse Stael's prose writing. For Hemans and Landon, as for many women writers of the second Romantic generation, Corinne was not simply a fictional character but a sort of inspirational model. She was the first professional woman poet to achieve unconditioned celebrity, thus becoming the prototype of any woman who aspired to be a successful poet.

Landon's 'The Improvisatrice' (1824) and Hemans' 'Properzia Rossi' (1828) are two examples of how the story of Corinne was adapted to an English audience. In particular, the erasing of the national and cultural confrontation that is such an important component of the original plot, introduces to British public an entirely southern heroine. By transforming the cosmopolitan Corinne into a nationally pure heroine, Landon and Hemans avoid the danger of cultural contamination and an explicit clash between Italy and England's social customs. This confrontation would be inconvenient for their position as English women poets who need to gain the admiration of the reading public and the respect of critics. However, this movement from cosmopolitanism to nationalism does not necessarily reject issues of cultural differences. More precisely, the choice of shaping one's poetic work on *Corinne* may constitute a way to criticise indirectly English society and women's position in it. In the Advertisement to 'The Improvisatrice', Landon states the importance of Italy in the story she is presenting. Her attempt, she explains, is 'to illustrate that species of inspiration common to Italy, where the mind is warmed from earliest childhood by all that is beautiful in Nature and glorious in Art'.¹³¹ Landon proceeds in confirming the Italianness of her character: 'the character depicted is entirely Italian- a young female with all the loveliness, vivid feeling, and genius of her impassioned land'.¹³² The improvisatrice, therefore, is utterly a product of the south. The initial lines of the poem confirm the importance of the Italian setting:

¹³⁰ Letitia Elizabeth Landon, *Selected Writings*, ed. by Jerome McGann and Daniel Reiss (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1997), p. 143.

¹³¹ Letitia Elizabeth Landon, *The Improvisatrice and Other Poems* (Poole: Woodstock Books, 1996), 'Advertisement'.

¹³² *The Improvisatrice*, 'Advertisement'.

I am a daughter of that land,
Where the poet's lip and the painter's hand
Are most divine,- where the earth and sky,
Are picture both and poetry-
I am of Florence.¹³³

The *Improvisatrice*, Landon explains, spent her childhood among famous and beautiful works of art, statues, paintings, music, which helped to shape her genius, while the Italian warm and sunny weather, and the fecundity of nature enhanced her imagination. By carefully reconstructing the Italian setting and the character of *Corinne*, Landon proposes an indirect confrontation with the reality and society known to her and her readers. Although Landon does not overtly discuss the difference between cultures, the confrontation between Italy and England is subtly hinted at. By the time 'The *Improvisatrice*' was published in 1824, in fact, readers were already familiar with the idea that Italy was a completely different country from England in the Romantic imaginary construction of Europe. Not only had the works of Byron and Stael clearly set the dichotomy between Italy as an artistically stimulating and morally free country and England as a domestic and morally strict society, but these same ideas had been popularised by conservative writers such as Foster and Harding. From Landon's description of the improvisatrice, the reader clearly understands how the heroine's character and genius are deeply linked and influenced by the natural, social and cultural Italian setting. This implicitly suggests the idea that such a woman poet, with these talents and characteristics, can only exist in Italy. The different English society, culture and nature could never nurture an improvisatrice, as Harding and Foster's novels had amply proved.

The allusion to Petrarch that follows confirms the Italianness of the improvisatrice. In invoking Petrarch- 'Divinest Petrarch! He whose lyre,/ Like morning light, half dew, half fire,/ to Laura and to love was vowed'- the

¹³³ *The Improvisatrice*, p. 1.

improvisatrice openly states her belonging to a southern lyric tradition.¹³⁴ Her songs, like Petrarch's, speak of unrequited love and sentimental sufferings. In a letter to S.C. Hall, Landon remarks how her reading of a *Life of Petrarch*, 'first threw round Italy that ideal charm it has always retained in my eyes, and gave me the most picturesque notion of the glory of poetry'. In particular, the author continues, 'the scene of his being crowned at the Capitol was always present to my mind, and gave me the most picturesque notion of the glory of poetry'.¹³⁵ Though the heroine of 'The Improvisatrice', unlike Corinne, does not receive the laurel crown, she symbolically identifies with Petrarch, thus asserting her subjectivity within the great Italian poetic tradition. Landon also reminds the readers that the improvisatrice is a performer. Like Corinne, she declaims her poetry in front of an audience and she receives praise and acclamations. The improvisatrice's public display of talents and the self-complacency at her success show her utterly a Corinne-like character: she is a woman of genius who seeks celebrity. *Corinne* had already suggested how this display of female talents was perfectly acceptable in Italy, and how a celebrated woman was not necessarily considered morally doubtful. Landon presents her improvisatrice in a very similar way and inserts her in an equally similar setting. Although the comparison between England and Italy is not explicit, Landon's contemporary readers would know that, ideally, the Italian society allowed women more freedom than the English one.

Felicia Hemans' 'Properzia Rossi' (1828) and 'Corinne at the Capitol' (1830) re-propose the Italian setting as a sensuous and artistically stimulating environment. Although not an improviser but a famous sculptor, Properzia is a woman of multiple genius. As Hemans informs us, she 'possessed also talents for poetry and music', thus entering with Corinne the category of highly gifted

¹³⁴ *The Improvisatrice*, p. 5.

¹³⁵ F. J. Sypher, *Letters of Letitia Elizabeth Landon 1802-1838* (Delman: New York Scholars' Facsimile, 2001), p. 199. Landon probably refers to Susanna Dobson's *Life of Petrarch* (1799), which became very popular in the 1820s. See also Landon's 'Petrarch's Dream', *Life and Literary Remains* (1841); <www.lion.chadwyck.co.uk>

women.¹³⁶ The Italy of 'Properzia Rossi' is, as in 'The Improvisatrice', one of 'bright heavens', 'drooping vine' and 'parch'd flowers'. Like Corinne, Properzia's inspirational powers are deeply linked to the Italian environment. Her farewells to Italy and artistic production mirrors Corinne's last improvisation:

Never oh! Never more; tho' still thy sky
Be blue as then, my glorious Italy!
And tho' the music, whose rich breathings fill
Thine air with soul, be wandering past me still,
And tho' the mantle of thy sunlight streams
Unchang'd on form instinct with poet-dreams;
Never, oh! Never more!¹³⁷

It seems that for Properzia the external environment and its liveliness are fundamental stimuli for artistic production. Once the artist's sensibility becomes blind to natural richness, then inspiration is lost. Although Hemans' poem focuses principally on the dependence of female genius on reciprocated love, Hemans still needs to assert the Italianness of Properzia and the importance of the natural and social environment. In this way Hemans seems to confirm that women's artistic expression is highly conditioned by the cultural context. By choosing an Italian artist as speaker, Hemans reasserts indirectly the fact that the Italian environment was thought to be particularly favourable for women's artistic enterprises.

Corinne soon became representative of a universal condition of women poets seeking fame and love. However, the Italian setting of the original story remains a fundamental element in the poetic reproductions of the novel. In her poem 'Corinne at the Capitol', for instance, Hemans describes Corinne's coronation and success in connection with Italian climate, nature and history:

¹³⁶ Hemans became fascinated with the character of Properzia Rossi when reading Vasari's *The Life of the Artists* (1550). The character was popular in the 1820s, thanks to the painting by Jean-Ducis, exhibited in Paris in 1822, which showed Rossi working at her sculpture. In 1828 the play *Properzia Rossi* by Paolo Costa was performed and published. For further information on the life and work of Properzia Rossi, see Frederika Jacob, 'The Construction of a Life: Madonna Properzia Rossi', *Word and Image: a Journal of Verbal Visual Enquiry* 9:2 (April-June, 1993), 122-123.

¹³⁷ Felicia Hemans, 'Properzia Rossi', in *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose and Letters*, p. 326, lines 87-92.

Daughter of th' Italian heaven!
Thou, to whom its fires are given,
Joyously thy car hath roll'd,
Where the conqueror's pass'd of old;
And the festal sun that shone, [...]
Makes thy day of glory bright,
With a shower of golden light.¹³⁸

The Italian setting accompanies Corinne's triumph throughout the poem; Hemans clearly connects the Italian social and cultural background with Corinne's genius, freedom and celebrity. Corinne is 'the radiant daughter of the sun!', the 'crown'd of Rome!'. The last few lines of the poem, however, contrast with the celebratory tone of the first part. More precisely, the exaltation of Corinne's fame, freedom and genius contradicts with the exaltation of domesticity:

Happier, happier far than thou,
With the laurel on thy brow,
She that makes the humblest hearth,
Lovely but to one on earth!¹³⁹

This moralistic ending is entirely Hemans' invention and absent from Stael's original plot. The need to validate the universality of English domestic values and feminine propriety over independence and fame is an effort to adapt the story of *Corinne* to a conservative English audience. Although Corinne is a famous and successful poet in a country that gives freedom to women and that celebrates their artistic talents, she is not happy in 'that glorious lot'. What Hemans does in the final lines is to take Corinne away from her Italian background and to interpret her experience from an English domestic point of view. Hemans easily leaves the imaginary world of a liberating Italy in order to re-establish the English values of home and domesticity, thus satisfying the tastes of a good

¹³⁸ Felicia Hemans, 'Corinne at the Capitol', *Songs of the Affections, with Other Poems* (1830); in *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose and Letters*, p. 355, lines 1-8.

¹³⁹ Felicia Hemans, 'Corinne at the Capitol', p. 357, lines 45-48.

number of readers and critics. After all, for both Hemans and Landon, Italy remained a distant and imaginary country they never visited.

The fact that in the works of Hemans and Landon there is an implicit intention of discussing national diversities is confirmed in Landon's 'History of the Lyre' (1828), where the author explicitly analyses the cultural clash between the Italian and English society. Eulalie is, like the anonymous improvisatrice, a famous extemporaneous poet who 'had the rich perfection of that gift,/ her Italy's own ready song, which seems/ the poetry caught from a thousand flowers'.¹⁴⁰ Her story is one of celebrity and loneliness, poetic genius and sentimental frustration. Interestingly, the narration is filtered through the point of view of an English Grand Tourist, who encounters Eulalie during his travelling. His opinion of Eulalie appears soon clear:

It was both sad and strange,
To see that fine mind waste itself away,
Too like some noble stream, which, unconfined,
Makes fertile its rich banks, and glads the face
Of nature round; but not so when its wave
Is lost in artificial waterfalls,
And sparkling eddies;¹⁴¹

The speaker seems to argue that Eulalie's unhappiness is not her lack of affection, but her lack of restraint. Eulalie wastes her talents in performing and in offering her genius to everyone unconditionally. Such a behaviour appears artificial and unsuitable for a woman who, in the Englishman's opinion, should devote her intellectual and emotional energy entirely to domesticity. This, at least, is what Emily, his bride-to-be, and the majority of Englishwomen would do. As soon as he returns to England, after a year of wandering, he soon notices how 'Emily had nursed [his] favourite flowers', and how his Italian journey has made him appreciate England even more. Eulalie is a complete stranger to this

¹⁴⁰ Letitia Landon, 'A History of the Lyre', *The Venetian Bracelet* (1828), *Selected Writings*, ed. by Jerome McGann and Daniel Reiss, p. 115, lines 11-13.

¹⁴¹ Letitia Landon, 'A History of the Lyre', p. 118, lines 126-132.

domestic reality. She had not even known an unhappy love in her life, since her poetic vocation made her an exceptional being since her early age:

I did not choose my gift: -too soon my heart,
Watch-like, had pointed to a later hour
Than time had reach'd: and as my years pass'd on,
Shadows and floating visions grew to thoughts,
And thoughts found words, the passionate words of song,
And all to me was poetry.¹⁴²

Eulalie had no alternative choice, as her poetic genius took possession of her and she could only follow and nurture it. Eulalie experiences a sense of loneliness and fragility which is very similar to the improvisatrice and Corinne's. In 'A History of the Lyre' and in 'The Improvisatrice', Italy appears as an imaginary land which gives women freedom of expression but does not guarantee their happiness.

As I argued earlier in this section, the fact that English women writers had to look abroad in order to find a model for a successful and celebrated woman poet suggests an implicit discontent with the place English society reserves for women poets. The fact that Landon and Hemans decided to project on an imaginary Italy their dreams of poetic success is mainly the result of Stael's *Corinne* and of Byron's popularisation of Italy as an ideal, stimulating and morally free country. However, the important question is why women poets' dreams of fame and freedom had to be imagined in Italy and not in England. More precisely, in order to justify women's imaginary construction of Italy we need to analyse what model of woman poet England proposes: what kind of woman poet would suit a society which welcomes and nurtures the timid, submissive and domestic Lucile? Felicia Hemans was probably the first and most famous British woman poet. Hemans was taken as representative of English culture and society. In her 1831 'Literary Sketches', Maria Jane Jewsbury notices how Hemans' character and poetry are representative of Englishness: 'Were

there to be a feminine literary house of commons, Felicia Hemans might very worthily be called to fill the chair as the speaker- a representative of the whole body'. At the origin of this idea, as the author later explains, is the fact that Hemans' poetry is commonly accepted as being representative of English values and traditions:

Her matronly delicacy of thought, her chastened style of expression, her hallowed ideas of happiness as connected with home, and home-enjoyments; - to condense all in an emphatic word, her *womanliness* is to her intellectual qualities as the morning mist to the landscape, or the evening dew to the flower- that which enhances loveliness without diminishing lustre.¹⁴³

It seems that the main aspects of Hemans' poetry are neither its political nor its cultural engagement, but its delicacy and its attachment to domestic values. More generally, its most important character is being feminine, or, to put it differently, is its being representative of the national ideal of femininity. Jewsbury thus concludes: 'Mrs. Hemans throws herself into her poetry, and the said self is an English gentlewoman'.¹⁴⁴ Thus, Hemans symbolises the English ideal woman poet, whose domestic, chaste, beautiful poetry keeps the contours of feminine propriety.¹⁴⁵

Letitia Landon has a similar idea of Hemans' poetry. In her essay 'On the character of Mrs. Hemans' published in *The New Monthly Magazine* in 1835, she comments how her poetry is emblematic of both genius and femininity: 'How exquisitely is the doom of a woman, in whose being pride, genius, and tenderness contend for mastery'. Landon goes on praising the moral character of Hemans' verses, and how in them 'the intuitive sense of right is elevated and

¹⁴² Letitia Landon, 'A History of the Lyre', p. 120, lines 202-207.

¹⁴³ In *Selected Poems, Prose and Letters*, ed. by Gary Kelly, pp. 465-66.

¹⁴⁴ *Selected Poems, Prose and Letters*, p. 467.

¹⁴⁵ I am aware that this is a highly limiting view of Hemans' production. Recent criticisms have amply demonstrated how Hemans' concerns go beyond domesticity and feminine propriety, and how her poetry treats of as many different subjects as politics, war, religion, slavery, social and economic issues. However, as contemporary reviews of her works suggest, the first reception tended to exalt the domestic and feminine side of her character and poetry. This is particularly important for my

strengthened into a principle'.¹⁴⁶ Landon's poem on Hemans, however, stresses the importance of Hemans' cosmopolitanism. In particular, Landon claims Hemans' ability to translate foreign culture and literature for the English audience: 'And thou far and foreign lands/ Didst bring back many a tone'. Her poetic skills permit her to write poetry inspired by foreign realities, but at the same time she is able to give a personal imprint to it: 'And giving such new music still,/ A music of thine own'.¹⁴⁷ Following this idea, Hemans is translating foreign customs for English readers. Similarly, we could say that Hemans is transforming the modern cosmopolitan idea of a woman poet of success into a more suitable and acceptable version of it for English society. In other words, she is converting the myth of Corinne into an English icon of female poet, a woman who can reconcile fame with domesticity. Hemans' poetic works become fully representative of the English idea of a woman poet in the same way that Corinne's improvisations are representative of the imaginary Italian idea of female genius. Letitia Landon was well aware of the strong cosmopolitan aspect of contemporary poetry, and she catches this idea and summarises it in her second poem on Felicia Hemans, composed in 1838:

And thou didst bring from foreign lands their treasures,
 As floats thy various melody along;
 We know the softness of Italian measures,
 And the grave cadence of Castilian song.
 A general bond of union is the poet,
 By its immortal verse is language known,
 And for the sake of song do others know it-
 One glorious poet makes the world his own.¹⁴⁸

In describing the work of Hemans, Landon re-elaborates Stael's need to integrate national differences. Although Hemans and Landon seem to perpetrate the idea of an artistically stimulating south for women poets, the conclusion of

argument, since it highlights how a successful woman poet was expected to be in nineteenth-century Britain.

¹⁴⁶ *Selected Poems, Prose and Letters*, pp. 472-73.

¹⁴⁷ Letitia Landon, 'Stanzas on the Death of Mrs. Hemans', in *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Prose and Letters*, p. 476, lines 33-36.

their poetic journey around Europe does not end in any specific country. As in Stael's *Corinne*, Hemans and Landon's final message seems one that celebrates cultural and national amalgamation. Although Italy- as an imaginary country- appears as a suitable place for women artists who seek freedom and celebrity, female genius does not seem to belong anywhere. After all, Landon and Hemans' Italian heroines, like Corinne, die in solitude and misery. If English society tends to domesticate genius in women, the Italian society idolises it. However, the result is similar, since in either conditions, women seem to be de-humanised. In Landon and Hemans' imaginary division of Europe, English society seems to reduce women to a homogeneous category of domestic beings, while Italy's celebration of their exclusivity and diversity transforms them into lonely and unprotected beings. In both cases the result is alienation from the surrounding social and cultural context. Landon's re-elaboration of Corinne's words in her 'Fragment of Corinne Song at Naples' (1832) clearly epitomises this idea: 'Thus, shrinking from the desert spread around,/ Doth Genius wander through the world, and finds/ No Likeness to himself'.¹⁴⁹ Genius, especially when it comes to women, has no place in the aridity of the world around, it does not matter which society hosts it. 'Exalted minds', Landon-Corinne continues, 'are the banished of another sphere'.¹⁵⁰ For Hemans and Landon nationality seems to influence the success of a woman poet, but it does not ultimately bring happiness and completeness. As I will discuss in the next section, Elizabeth Barrett Browning was the first woman poet to suggest the possibility of reconciling national and cultural differences, thus securing both fame and love.

¹⁴⁸ Letitia Landon 'Felicia Hemans', *Letitia Elizabeth Landon: Selected Writings*, p. 250, lines 17-24.

¹⁴⁹ Letitia Landon, 'Corinne at the Cape of Misena', *The Amulet* (1832), *Selected Writings*, p. 145, lines 61-64.

4.7 National interrelations in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*.

Corinne is an immortal book, and deserves to be read three score and ten times- that is once every year in the age of man.¹⁵¹

This is one of the most significant comments Elizabeth Barrett Browning made on Stael's novel. She read *Corinne* several times, and her whole production was deeply influenced by the novel. Browning clearly works in the tradition of *Corinne*, Hemans and Landon.¹⁵² However, she partially rejected the sentimental and decadent verses of her predecessors, and she considered herself as an independent and quite self-sufficient woman poet. In a letter to Mary Russell Mitford, thus she comments on Hemans and Landon:

But poor poor LEL- [...] She might indeed have achieved a greatness which her fondest admirers can scarcely consider achieved now. And do you know [...] if I had those two powers to choose from- Mrs. Hemans's and Miss. Landon's - I would choose Miss Landon's. I surmise it was more elastic, more various, of a stronger web. I fancy it would have worked out better- had it *been* worked out - with the right moral and intellectual influences in application.¹⁵³

As this passage demonstrates, Browning's meditation on the nature and possibility of Hemans and Landon's talents clearly reveals her concern for the intellectual and moral context.¹⁵⁴ In fact, Browning's life and work epitomise the woman poet's search for the right cultural and social context in which to develop artistic talents. In this way, Browning continues the discussion of the importance of the national and cultural environment for a woman artist that Stael had started. Her novel poem *Aurora Leigh* (1856) is the most *Corinne*-like of her

¹⁵⁰ Letitia Landon, 'Corinne at the Cape of Misena', p. 145, lines 68-71.

¹⁵¹ *Elizabeth Barrett to Mr. Boyd*, ed. B.P. McCarthy (London: John Murray, 1955), p. 176.

¹⁵² For a detailed analysis of the influence of Landon's life and work on Browning see: Linda H. Peterson, 'Re-writing a "History of the Lyre": Letitia Landon, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the (Re)construction of the Nineteenth-century Woman Poet', in *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian*, ed. by Isobel Armstrong (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999), pp. 115-132.

¹⁵³ *Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Miss Mitford: the Unpublished Letters of Elizabeth Barrett to Mary Russell Mitford*, ed. by Betty Miller (London: John Murray, 1954), pp. 77-78.

¹⁵⁴ On the influence of Landon and Hemans on Browning see: Margot Louis, 'Enlarging the Heart: L.E.L.'s *The Improvisatrice*, Hemans' *Properzia Rossi*, and Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 26 (1998), 1-17.

works. In it the protagonist follows the ambitious but also painful path of poetic vocation. The work, however, represents a clear evolution in the Corinne-like pattern, and the heroine's strong and determinate character mirrors the growth of women's poetic subjectivity in the Victorian Age. In particular, the reconciliation of national diversities and cultural differences is at the base of Browning's re-elaboration of the story of Corinne.

Browning's perspective on Italy is actually very different from Hemans's and Landon's. By the time she finished and published *Aurora Leigh* in 1856, she had already been living in Italy for ten years. Consequently, her view of Italy was not simply a projection of her imagination and of her dreams of success, but it was based on a real encounter with the country and on a deep interest in its culture, society and politics.¹⁵⁵ In the poem Browning reflects, follows and comments on the evolution of a woman's poetic genius. Her introspection into the formation of women's artistic subjectivity, however, bears the important issue of national and cultural differences. In this regard, it is interesting to analyse the role that Italy plays in the formation of Aurora's subjectivity as a woman and as a poet. Aurora, like Corinne, has Anglo-Italian origins and her Italian upbringing strongly shapes her character and influences her choices. The national and cultural clash is a central topic in *Aurora Leigh*. Although Italy is present only in three of the nine books in which the poem is divided, its influence expands to the whole poem, especially to the most important moments of Aurora's life. The first book concentrates on Aurora's unconventional Italian upbringing. Her mother is a Florentine, while her father is an Englishman who, after years of restraints and suffocation in his homeland, decides to change completely his life-style, settle in Italy and marry an Italian:

My father was an austere Englishman,
Who, after a dry life-time spent at home

¹⁵⁵ For a detailed analysis of Browning's relation to Italy, see: Deborah Phelps, 'At the Roadside of Humanity: Elizabeth Barrett Browning Abroad', *Creditable Warriors: 1830-1876*, ed. by Michael Cotsell (London: Ashfield, 1990), pp. 225-242.

In college-learning, law, and parish talk,
Was flooded with a passion unaware,
His whole provisioned and complacent past,
Drowned out from him that moment.¹⁵⁶

Browning re-proposes the issue of national diversity and cultural integration here, with the difference that this austere Englishman is eager to abandon England, its routine and its sense of immobility in order to throw himself into the lively, enthusiastic and novel Italian life. After Aurora's mother dies, father and child move into a remote mountainous region at the border of Tuscany. Aurora's adult memory of this period is permeated with silence, the prominence of a fecund nature, her father's attentions, and her mother's picture on the wall. Browning emphasises how Aurora's education was totally unconventional, even for Italian society. Aurora's up-bringing is characterised by an extreme freedom of manners and of learning. She wanders around the Italian countryside with no limitations; she reads randomly the books her father had brought from England: 'my father taught me what he had learnt the best/ And, seeing we had books among the hills,/ Strong words of counselling souls confederate/ With vocal pines and waters'.¹⁵⁷ Aurora's education seems to be strongly bicultural. Besides her reading English books and receiving the legacy of her father's strict English up-bringing, she is free to wander, know, appreciate the fecund and savage Italian nature, and learn empirically from it. As Maureen Thum comments, Aurora's up-bringing in the Italian countryside is extremely important for the shaping of her character.¹⁵⁸ The freedom that her father allowed her, the closeness to nature, the absence of moral and intellectual restraints make her an utterly un-English girl.

¹⁵⁶ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996); book I, p.7, lines 75-80.

¹⁵⁷ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, book I, p. 11, lines 185-189.

¹⁵⁸ Maureen Thum, 'Challenging Traditionalist Gender Roles: the Exotic Woman as Critical Observer in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*', in *The Foreign Woman in British Literature: Exotics, Aliens, and Outsiders*, ed. by Marilyn Demarest Button and Toni Reed (Westport: Greenwood, 1999), pp. 80-94.

Significantly, her Italianness is important to set her distance and her foreignness from English culture and society. When her father dies and entrusts her to the care of his sister in England, Italian culture and habits have already moulded Aurora's character, and their influence will be at the heart of her development and maturation as a woman of intellectual complexity and emotional depth. More importantly, Aurora's Italianess establishes the distance from English culture necessary to observe and critique its patriarchal norms and conventions. Most of all, the evident signs of her Italian origins make her a foreigner to English eyes. As soon as she reaches England and her aunt's house, Aurora is seen as an outsider, a savage and immoral being who needs to be tamed, educated, and encapsulated in the English codes of feminine propriety. Aurora's arrival in England and the reception of her aunt are utterly dramatic, and Browning seems to re-propose Stael's dichotomy between a liberating south and a suffocating north. Bearing with her strong memories of Italy and of her father's affection, everything appears strange and inscrutable to her:

Then, land!- then, England! Oh, the frosty cliffs
Looked cold upon me. Could I find a home
Among those mean red houses through the fog?
And when I heard my father's language first
From alien lips which had no kiss for mine
I wept aloud, then laughed, then wept, and wept.
Was this my father's England? The great isle?¹⁵⁹

Aurora's passionate and hysterical reaction at the sight of England is soon misinterpreted as sea-sickness, thus stressing the different language of emotions that the two cultures display. When Aurora meets her aunt, the cultural clash becomes striking. She soon appears the icon of restrained English femininity: distant, cold, judgemental, suspicious of any form of diversity, domestic, habit-bound, indifferent. Her physical traits have been shaped by a 'frigid use of life', her existence has been 'harmless', and 'virtuous', spent in quietness and

¹⁵⁹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, book I, p. 12, lines 251-259.

reserve, among churches, knitting, book-clubs and tea parties. Aurora's adult opinion of her aunt is not critical, though very clearly set: 'She had lived a sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage, accounting that to leap from perch to perch was act and joy enough for any bird'; on the contrary she was 'a wild bird scarcely fledged', who had been brought to her cage.¹⁶⁰ Aurora's aunt's first reaction at the sight of her niece is to scrutinize her physical appearance in order to find evidence not simply of her foreignness, but particularly of her mother's guilt. In the aunt's opinion, Aurora's mother was an immoral woman who had slyly corrupted her brother and forced him to abandon his homeland and his family. Aurora, as her daughter, is the evidence of this corruption and the result of the disloyalty. Maureen Thum acutely comments how through the aunt's perception of her niece, 'Browning explores the mechanism of cross-cultural stereotyping and dismantles the ethnocentric image of the exotic woman'.¹⁶¹ In the aunt's English point of view, her niece is a foreigner, and a violator of normative codes, which label her as an outsider. Although only an innocent child, Aurora is marked with the sign of treachery and dishonour, since her Italian mother led the child's English father to violate the terms of his inheritance. As a consequence of his act and of English patriarchal laws, the aunt must share her brother's guilt, and lose her part of inheritance, which will be entirely acquired by the young Romney, Aurora's cousin. The issue of cultural and national contamination becomes overt here. English laws cannot allow the transmission of property to the offspring of a union between an Englishman and a foreigner, since this would imply the bastardisation of national wealth and the corruption of English integrity.

During her stay in England, Aurora learns to tame her Italianess and to dominate her instinctive attitude, her wildness, her vivacity and her passionate curiosity. Under her aunt's influence she learns how to behave as an accomplished English gentlewoman, and she accustoms herself to the dull and pedantic daily routine: she 'broke the copious curls' upon her head, she 'left off

¹⁶⁰ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, book I, p. 14, lines 304-311.

saying sweet Tuscan words', she learned 'the collects and the catechism', she learned French and German and 'read a score of books on womanhood'.¹⁶² Still, Aurora never entirely integrates in English routine and she preserves her rebellious and unconventional attitude. She secretly disobeys her aunt and takes long walks in the morning, thus perpetrating the close relationship with nature that she had developed in her Italian years. Aurora's Italianess survives the strict intellectual and moral teaching of her English aunt. The process of intellectual and cultural colonization of Aurora's character is not entirely successful, since she always keeps a level of independence and transgression unknown to conventional English women. In these conditions Aurora's poetic vocation grows, and as soon as she reaches adult age, she leaves her aunt's home in search of literary success.

Cora Kaplan observes that Aurora is Corinne anglicised, since her genius develops and grows in England, and there she becomes a famous poet. However, in my opinion, Aurora's genius seems to be the legacy of her free Italian upbringing as well as of her English education. More precisely, Aurora's poetic talents seem to be the result of a careful and patient balancing of the two cultural identities. The freedom, spontaneity, vivacity of thought and emotional approach to life that characterise the Italian side of Aurora mingle with the self-discipline, determination and bookish education of her English upbringing. In this way Italian and English cultures intermingle in Aurora's character, and are both determinant in the construction of her subjectivity as a woman poet. Aurora has never rejected either her Italian origins or her English roots. When she refuses Romney's advantageous offer of marriage, which would resolve the problem of inheritance, because she prefers pursuing her literary career, the Italian and British sides are clearly discernible in her character. Her aunt still has to remind her to 'leave Italian manners', since, after all, she 'had an English father', and to answer Romney's proposal with a clear, 'quiet yes or no, like

¹⁶¹ Maureen Thum: 'Challenging Traditionalist Gender Roles', p. 86.

English girls, without convulsions', which clearly shows how Aurora's passionate character is far from being tamed. At the same time, she declares how, after some efforts and patient observation, she has 'learnt to love that England', which, in spite of the distancing demonstrative adjective -that instead of this-, reveals a growing attachment to her father's country. Similarly, the refusal of Romney's proposal, and the rejection of his conventional idea on English domestic women, is evidence of Aurora's resistance to a total integration with English customs. Kaplan also comments how Aurora is not an improvisatrice, but a woman poet who meditatively composes verses in the loneliness of her room.¹⁶³ Actually, the secrecy of her poetic act is the adaptation of Aurora's extrovert and communicative Italian genius to the English context where it develops and finds expression. English society conceives poetic composition as an utterly private and solitary act, while the experience of Corinne has clearly demonstrated how Italy sees the creative act as a communal enterprise, a public display of talents. In adapting the Italian component of her genius, Aurora converts the extemporaneous improvisation of verses into a reserved, taciturn and solitary act of composition.

When in the seventh book Aurora decides to go back to Italy and leave England permanently, the Italian cultural and natural context appears distant and different after years of absence. Aurora's perspective has actually changed, since now, as an adult professional woman poet with Anglo-Italian origins, she sees the Italian reality through the filter of her English experience, thus turning Italy from a homeland into a sort of tourist destination. Though she still acknowledges her bicultural origins, she seems to see herself more as an Englishwoman:

Well, well! My father was an Englishman:
My mother's blood in me is not so strong

¹⁶² Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, book 1, pp. 16-19, lines 384-454.

¹⁶³ Cora Kaplan, 'Introduction', in *Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. by Sandra Donaldson (New York: G.K. Hall & C., 1999), pp. 80-93, (p. 85).

That I should bear this stress of Tuscan noon
And keep my wits.¹⁶⁴

Aurora often perceives herself as a foreigner in her mother's land; she expresses a deep sense of alienation and of discomfort. The Italy she encounters after many years of absence is different from the one she remembered, and everything appears as unrecognisable and altered:

But now the creatures all seemed further off,
No longer mine, not like me, only *there*,
A gulph between us [...]
And I, I had come back to an empty nest,
Which every bird's too wise for.¹⁶⁵

Her feeling of alienation and her sense of being different from Italian people are most likely due to Aurora's impossibility of identifying fully with any national character, whether English or Italian. Her experience is so culturally hybrid and nationally undetermined that she cannot see herself in any national stereotype. Aurora's cosmopolitanism, however, unlike for Hemans and Landon's heroines, is an utterly positive experience. In this way Browning re-assesses the value of cosmopolitanism that Stael had first suggested and that seemed to be the source of uneasiness for Hemans and Landon.¹⁶⁶ While strolling in the Tuscan countryside, she remarks how the feeling of foreignness that she perceives gives her the possibility of re-visioning her own subjectivity and identity. She describes this feeling in terms of a new birth: 'To be, as if you had not been till then, /and were then, simply that you chose to be'.¹⁶⁷ Aurora's alienation and her sense of non-belonging, gives her freedom in the construction of her subjectivity as a woman poet. By rejecting any preconceived national identity, and by refusing to conform to any model, Aurora's personality is changeable, flexible, mutable and

¹⁶⁴ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, book VII, p. 240, lines 898-901.

¹⁶⁵ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, book VII, pp. 246-47, lines 1096-1110.

¹⁶⁶ In particular, Landon's suggestion that Genius does not belong anywhere and that 'exalted minds' are the 'banished of another sphere' make the issue of cosmopolitanism particularly problematic.

it adapts to different circumstances and different countries: '[...]- possess yourself. New sun, new moon, new flowers, new people- ah, and be possessed by none of them!'.¹⁶⁸ The disorientating feeling of 'not belonging' that Hemans and Landon's heroines experienced, has now turned into a constructive and liberating feeling of 'not being possessed'. The fluctuating identity of Aurora gives her ultimate freedom and a chameleonic faculty of adaptation. The final decision of Aurora to marry the much-changed and redeemed Romney is an important evolution in the Corinne-plot. Aurora is after all not a self-destructive character, and she actively decides to integrate her poetic success with domestic happiness. In Kaplan's words, Browning makes sure that her Aurora survives and can 'have it all', fame and love.¹⁶⁹ From a different point of view, Aurora's marriage with Romney symbolises the reconciliation of two national and cultural identities that seem to struggle within her. By marrying an Englishman and her cousin, Aurora can unify national diversities, and reconstruct the patrimonial and familial unity that her father had destroyed. The sense of wholeness that dominates the resolution of Aurora's story seems to redeem Corinne's experience.

This chapter has demonstrated how the ability to integrate national differences and cultural diversities was a major issue in the construction of the nineteenth-century woman poet's subjectivity. Italy with its cultural and social singularity represents in the imagination of women poets the foreignness that needs to be absorbed into the English system to make it more tolerant and respectful of women's artistic talents. This concept goes back to Stael's cosmopolitan political thought, and to one of her fundamental beliefs: 'there is no nationality which is not a limitation', such that 'you need several to be a

¹⁶⁷ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, book VII, p. 249, line 1195. The name 'Aurora' means 'dawn' in Italian; the heroine's name emphasises Browning's fascination for the idea of birth and re-birth in connection with the evolution of a woman's poetic subjectivity.

¹⁶⁸ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, book VII, p. 249, lines 1200-1203.

¹⁶⁹ Cora Kaplan, 'Introduction', pp. 84-84; see also Meg Tasker, 'Aurora Leigh: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Novel Approach to the Woman Poet', in *Tradition and the Poetics of Self in Nineteenth-Century Women's Poetry*, ed. by Barbara Garlick (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2002), pp. 23-43.

complete man'.¹⁷⁰ Stael recorded this idea during her Italian travels, thus confirming the fact that women's encounter with Italy, whether real or imaginary, enhances reflections on the necessity of national and cultural interrelations. Corinne, together with Hemans, Landon, and Browning's poetic heroines seem to validate the fact that national and cultural integration is essential to women's sense of completeness. At the same time, the obsessive need of English women poets to look abroad for an inspirational model clearly implies a discontent with the society in which they live. Stael was neither English nor Italian, and thus free to depict the two cultures and societies following her own experience and imagination. For Landon and Hemans the issue was more problematic, given the nationalistic pressure on them to affirm England as the land of liberty and female virtue. Browning's choice to exile herself from England in Italy not only re-proposes the geographical and cultural trajectory of *Corinne*, it also gives the author the possibility of exploiting national differences, and ultimately to reconcile apparently irreconcilable opposites. Although the national politics of improvisation seems to select Italy as an ideal- and mostly imaginary- country for successful women poets, it seems that only in surpassing national barriers and cultural differences can the woman poet be free to express herself. Browning's resolution of Corinne's dilemma opens a new chapter in the history of women writers, one that celebrates national, cultural and intellectual co-operation.

¹⁷⁰ *Les carnets de voyage de Madame de Stael: Contributions à la genèse de ses oeuvres*, éd. Simone Balayé (Genève : Librairie Droz, 1971), p. 162. Quoted and translated by Joanne Wilkes, *Lord Byron and Madame de Stael*, p. 14.

Women Writers and the prophecy of Italian freedom.

5.1 The 'poetry of politics': Romanticism and Risorgimento.

Italia, Italia! O tu cui feo la sorte
Dono infelice di bellezza, ond'hai
Funesta dote d'infiniti guai,
Che'n fronte scritte per gran doglia porte;
Deh, fossi tu men bella, o almen più forte.¹

Thus the Italian poet Filicaja addressed in the seventeenth century an already politically enslaved Italy. This sonnet became emblematic of the political condition of the Italian peninsula along the many centuries of occupation and conquest by foreign countries; it also became the object of attention of many intellectuals who supported the idea of an independent and united Italy. The idea of Italy as a feminised and victimised country was a politically charged trope long deployed in the imagination of British authors. In particular, the sonnet turned into a signpost of British interest in the fate of the Italian Risorgimento.² The most common political figuration of Italy, therefore, was that of a powerless woman, ravaged and enslaved by strong, imperialistic foreign forces, which contributed to deprive the country of its national and cultural identity. However, the image of a passive and victimised Italy was not a static one in the imagination of British authors; on the contrary, it evolved following the different phases of the Risorgimento. This chapter will analyse the writings of some of the most ardent supporters of Italian independence, and will highlight the important ideological support that British women writers gave to the Risorgimento. Their works show not only a deep understanding of the complex political situation of

¹Vincenzo de' Filicaja, *Rime* (Rome, 1716), p. 34. See Hemans' translation in 'Patriotic Effusions of the Italian Poets', *The Edinburgh Magazine, and Literary Miscellany, Being a New Series of the Scots Magazine* (June 1821), p. 514. The translation is reported in the Introduction.

nineteenth century Europe; they also reveal an intellectual involvement in the cause of Italian freedom. In particular, my analysis will demonstrate how women encouraged the evolution of the idea of Italy from a persecuted and suffering land to a free and united country.

Italy's recovery of political independence is a slow process that grows from a timid ideological re-evaluation of common origins and an ancient heritage to a threatening and violent revolution.³ As Gilles Pécout suggests, the Italian Risorgimento could be divided into two main moments: an ideological period, until 1848, and a revolutionary one, from 1848 to 1871, when the unification of Italy was completed.⁴ Symbolically, the first phase involved a slow and painful recovery of national dignity and, as a consequence, the growth of awareness of the injustice of foreign occupation. This gathering of intellectual and material energy would be the prelude to the more bellicose and active phase of the Risorgimento, characterised by several wars of independence, and culminating in the proclamation of the kingdom of Italy as a united and free country in 1861. For the purpose of this chapter, however, it is more convenient to divide the Risorgimento into three main phases, which would roughly coincide with the traditional historicizing of British Romanticism. Following McGann's periodization, in fact, British Romanticism is characterised by an early phase, when the French Revolution dominates the intellectual landscape, followed by a middle phase influenced by the age of French terror and Napoleonic Wars, and concludes with the phase of the Peninsular Campaign.⁵ Although the Risorgimento extends beyond the historical limits of Romanticism, a similar three-phased periodization

² See: *English Songs on Italian Freedom*, ed. by George Macaulay Trevelyan (London: Longmans, 1911).

³ For a historical analysis of the Risorgimento see: Luigi Salvatorelli, *The Risorgimento: Thought and Action*, translated by Mario Domandi (New York: Harper and Row, 1970); Derek Beales, *The Risorgimento and the Unification of Italy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971); Harry Header, *Italy in the Age of the Risorgimento 1790-1870* (London: Longman, 1983); Frank J. Coppa (ed.), *Studies in Modern Italian History: from the Risorgimento to the Republic* (New York: Peter Land, 1986).

⁴ Gilles Pécout, *Il Lungo Risorgimento: la Nascita dell'Italia Contemporanea 1770-1922*; trad. di Marco di Sario (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 1999), p. 100.

⁵ Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (New York: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 107-118.

is possible. Modern historiography dates the birth of the ideological phase of the Risorgimento as early as the 1790s, when the influence of the French Revolution triggered a moment of reform in the numerous states that already mapped the political geography of Italy.⁶ Following this theorisation, therefore, I will consider a first moment, from 1790 to 1820, when the idea of a united and independent Italy was only an abstract ideological construction; then, from 1820 to 1848 when the first revolutionary turmoil, though unsuccessful, turned the idea of a united Italy into a more likely possibility, and the last phase between 1848 and 1871 when unity and independence were finally achieved.⁷

This periodization also agrees with Richard Cronin's recent division. Although Cronin maintains the three-phased historical division of British Romanticism, he claims that the idea of British national identity evolved from a negative to a positive formulation. More specifically, he argues that Linda Colley's story of nationalism produced by xenophobia, and particularly by anti-French politics, was progressively substituted by a more vital and assertive idea of British national identity in terms of Scott's patriotism and Byron's 'demand for unfettered freedom'.⁸ This shift from a defensive to an assertive idea of English identity is fundamental for the development of English interest in Italian freedom. Pécout observes how the interest in the political situation of Italy is to be considered as the elaboration and culmination of British Romantic interest in Italian culture, society and history.⁹ Paradoxically, a territory which 'seemed to have been intended by nature to constitute an entity from the racial, linguistic and cultural point of view, and was inhabited by one of the most homogeneous populations in Europe', was claimed by mankind as a whole.¹⁰ The official English

⁶ Gilles Pécout, *Il Lungo Risorgimento*, pp. 1-13.

⁷ The process of unification culminates in 1861 with the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy under the king Victor Emmanuel of Savoy; however, Italy achieves a complete unification only in 1871, when Rome, Lombardy and Venice are included in the kingdom.

⁸ Richard Cronin, *The Politics of Romantic Poetry: in Search of the Pure Commonwealth* (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 2000), pp. 16, 85-87.

⁹ Gilles Pécout, *Il Lungo Risorgimento*, p. 17.

¹⁰ J. L. Talmon, *Romanticism and Revolt: Europe 1815-1848* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1967), p. 115.

attitude towards Italy's aspirations for national unity was, 'limited to wishing her well', and to a general support for any struggle for constitutional governments.¹¹ English political attitude was generally one of non-intervention, though the government indirectly encouraged Italian uprisings, and often proposed itself as a mediator, though not always favourably, between the European imperialistic forces that controlled the Italian territory. Strategically, an independent and united Italy would help Britain to maintain the peace in Europe, thus permitting it to expand its trade and consolidate its empire.

Byron's works, under the influence of Stael's *Corinne*, mark the beginning of British support for the cause of Italian unity and independence that characterises all major writers till the 1870s.¹² Byron defined himself as one 'among the few English who understands Italy', and surely English interest in the Italian Risorgimento was invigorated by Byron's poetical and political contributions.¹³ Daryl S. Odgen defines the poet's attitude towards Italian independence as ambiguous, and explains his 'ambivalent ideological understanding' of the Risorgimento in terms of cultural imperialism.¹⁴ However, on the whole, Byron's support of the revolutionary movements was not simply limited to an ideological and poetic encouragement. After he started his relationship with Teresa Guccioli, whose family had been exiled from Romagna for being the main organiser of the 1821 insurrections, Byron became actively involved with the Carbonari. Thus he comments in his diary on February 18, 1821:

Today, I have had no communication with my Carbonari cronies; but in the meantime, my lower apartments are full of their bayonets, fusils,

¹¹ Harry Rudman, *Italian Nationalism and English Letters: Figures of the Risorgimento and Victorian Men of Letters* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1940), p. 13.

¹² Harry Rudman, *Italian Nationalism and English Letters*; see also *Britain and Italy from Romanticism to Modernism: a Festschrift for Peter Brand*, ed. by Martin McLaughun (Oxford: European Humanities Research Centre, University of Oxford, 2000).

¹³ *The Works of Lord Byron, Letters and Journals*, ed. by R. E. Prothero, 6 vols. (London, 1898-1904), vol. IV, p. 212.

¹⁴ Daryl S. Odgen, 'Byron, Italy, and the Poetics of Liberal Imperialism', *Keats Shelley Journal* 49 (2000), 114-137, (p. 116).

cartridges, and what not. I suppose that they consider me as a depot, to be sacrificed, in case of accidents. It is no great matter, supposing that Italy could be liberated, who or what is sacrificed. It is a grand object- the very *poetry* of politics. Only think- a free Italy!¹⁵

The Risorgimento was probably the revolution 'Byron had been waiting hourly to play a major role in', as a political activist and a revolutionary inspirer.¹⁶ He firmly believed that 'the revolution was inevitable', though 'the government may exult over the repression of petty tumults'; these are but 'the receding waves repulsed and broken for a moment on the shore, while the great tide is still rolling on and gaining ground with every breaker'.¹⁷ As with many other intellectuals involved in the Risorgimento, Byron did not only support the revolution, he also believed in the ultimate achievement of a united and republican Italy. The dream of the Risorgimento for those who promoted an idealistic view of democracy was, in fact, an Italian Republic: 'Give me a Republic,[...] rather than the mixed government of one, two or three' comments Byron, 'A republic!- look in the history of the Earth- Rome, Greece, Venice, France, Holland, America, our short (eheu!) Commonwealth, and compare with what they did under masters'.¹⁸

Canto IV of *Childe Harold* is Byron's first poetic elaboration of his ideas on Italian politics. Stanza XLII echoes Filicaja's sonnet and re-asserts the already established equation between Italy and a beautiful and enslaved woman:

Italia! Oh Italia! Thou who hast
The fatal gift of beauty, which became
A funeral dower of present woes and past,
On thy sweet brow is sorrow plough'd by shame,
And annals graved in characters of flame.
Oh God! That thou wert in thy nakedness
Less lovely or more powerful, and couldst claim
Thy right, and awe the robbers back, who press

¹⁵ *The Works of Lord Byron, Letters and Journals*, vol. IV, p. 230.

¹⁶ Giorgio Melchiori, 'Byron and Italy: Catalyst of the *Risorgimento*', in *Byron's Political and Cultural Influence in the Nineteenth-century Europe: a Symposium*, ed. by Trueblood Paul Graham (London: Macmillan, 1981), pp. 108-121, (p.112).

¹⁷ 'Appendix to *The Two Foscari*', *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Jerome McGann, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), vol. VI, pp. 223-224.

¹⁸ *The Works of Lord Byron, Letters and Journals*, vol. V, p. 123.

To shed thy blood, and drink the tears of thy distress;¹⁹

Italy's right to be a free and united nation is discussed throughout Canto IV in the form of the celebration of the country's ancient and prestigious past, and in the hope of a better and nobler future. Though politically enslaved and divided, Italy still appears in the imagination of an enthusiastic Byron as a land full of energy, ready to wake up after a long sleep:

Yet, Freedom! Yet thy banner, torn, but flying,
Streams like the thunder-storm *against* the wind;
Thy trumpet voice, though broken now and dying,
The loudest still the tempest leaves behind;
Thy tree hath lost its blossoms, and the rind,
Chopp'd by the axe, looks rough and little worth,
But the sap lasts, and still the seed we find
Sown deep, even in the bosom of the North;
So shall a better spring less bitter fruit bring forth.²⁰

The hope of Italy's re-birth acquires a prophetic connotation in *The Prophecy of Dante* (1819), where Byron re-asserts his firm belief in the temporality of the Italian enslavement, and in the possibility of a renaissance of its ancient glory and democracy. Dante's voice turns from political to patriotic when he deploys the love for his country and for his compatriots:

Oh! My beauteous land! So long laid low,
So long the grave of thy own children's hopes,
When there is but required a single blow
To break the chain, [...]
What is there wanting then to set thee free,
And show thy beauty in its fullest light?
To make the Alps impassable; and we,
Her sons, may do this with *one deed*- Unite!²¹

Byron partly blamed England and its policy of non-intervention for the failure of the 1821 revolutionary uprisings.²² He asked for English intervention on behalf of

¹⁹ Lord Byron, *Childe Harold*, stanza XLII; *The Complete Poetical Works*, vol. II.

²⁰ Lord Byron, *Childe Harold*, stanza XCVIII; *The Complete Poetical Works*, vol. II.

²¹ Lord Byron, *The Prophecy of Dante*; Canto II, lines 136-145; *The Complete Poetical Works*, vol. IV.

the Carbonari, and both *Childe Harold* and *The Prophecy of Dante* were written partly in order to stir English indignation and military and political action in defence of this wretched country. His disappointment at the unsuccessful outcome of the Carbonari's plotting echoes Dante's poetic interpretation: 'The plan has missed- [...] thus the world goes; and thus the Italians are always lost for lack of union among themselves'. He even proclaims himself to be ready to turn the prophecy of Italian freedom into accomplishment by any means 'whatever I can do by money, means, or person, I will venture freely for their freedom'.²³ *Their* freedom became *our* freedom in his letters of 1821, when the process of identification between the English poet supporting Italian independence and the Carbonaro was completed.²⁴

The prophecy of Italian freedom is a common thread in the writings of the authors discussed in this chapter. In particular, women's mapping of the Italian political situation became associated with their own fight for political and social emancipation. As Filicaja's sonnet demonstrates, the association between Italy and a beautiful enslaved female had been a long established one, which the works of Stael and Byron strengthened and popularised. It is not surprising then, that British women writers felt and showed a general deep sympathy towards the Italian political condition. Sandra Gilbert's discussion of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's use of the Risorgimento suggests an identification between the Italian liberation from foreign oppression and the woman poet's own personal development in a patriarchal society.²⁵ In fact, what Gilbert proposes as a

²² For further discussion of Byron's blame of English attitude towards Italian independence see, Daryl S. Odgen, 'Byron, Italy, and the poetics of liberal imperialism', p. 121.

²³ In Giorgio Melchiori, 'Byron and Italy,' p. 112.

²⁴ *The Works of Lord Byron, Letters and Journals*, vol. V, p. 178. Daryl S. Odgen suggests that Byron considered his own identity to be coincident with Italy's. In a similar way, Jerome McGann argues that Byron's representation of Italian history in *Childe Harold*- 'full of births and re-births'- in many ways parallel the poet's understanding of his own life at the time of the canto's composition, Daryl S. Odgen, 'Byron, Italy and the Poetics of Liberal Imperialism', pp. 121-122; Jerome McGann, 'The Book of Byron and the Book of the World', in *Poems in their Place: the Intertextuality and Order of Poetic Collections*, ed. by Neil Fraistat (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), pp. 254-72.

²⁵ Sandra M. Gilbert, 'From *Patria* to *Matria*: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento', *PMLA* 99 (1984), 194-209.

connection between the condition of British women writers and the political oppression of Italy is only the culmination of a process of identification that had developed over the decades of the first half of the nineteenth century. This brings about the implication that, while writing in favour of the Italian unification and liberation, women were consciously exploiting the gender correspondence for the purpose of asserting their own identity as women writers in a patriarchal society.²⁶ In this chapter I will demonstrate how the association of the Italian fight for independence and women's struggle for artistic emancipation is an important aspect in many writings by women.

If Byron had been free to express openly his sympathy for the Risorgimento, however, women had to be more cautious in the expression of their political ideas.²⁷ Nineteenth-century society generally excluded women from an active participation in politics, with the consequence that they were often morally criticised for expressing political opinions and for invading a public field beyond the competence that the patriarchal authority had attributed to them. However, while writing on and about Italian independence, women do not simply write about politics. Lady Morgan had got round the problem of political opinion in women's writings by claiming that 'politics can never be a woman's science; but patriotism must naturally be a woman's sentiment'.²⁸ Lady Morgan astutely turns the intellectual and political thought into a matter of the heart. More precisely, she transmutes the blue-stocking interest in 'the art and science of government' into the 'love for one's country', thus re-asserting women's rights to

²⁶ See also chapter I for a deeper analysis of women's approach to Italy.

²⁷ See for example, Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing and Revolution 1790-1827* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Elizabeth Eger (ed.), *Women, Writing, and the Public Sphere 1700-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Sonia Hofkosh, *Sexual Politics and the Romantic Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (New York: Hutchinson, 1988).

²⁸ Lady Morgan; quoted in William Fitzpatrick, *The Friends, Foes and Adventures of Lady Morgan* (Dublin: W.B. Kelly, 1959), p. 49; see also Jeanne Moskal, 'Gender, Nationality, and Textual Authority in Lady Morgan's Travel Books', in *Romantic Women Writers: Voices and Countervoices*, ed. by Paula R. Feldman and Theresa M. Kelly (London: University Press of New England, 1994), pp. 171-206.

express their opinion on a field, that of love and feelings, traditionally considered female-centred.²⁹ English women writers' interest in the fate of the Italian struggle for independence can hardly be called 'patriotic'. However, *Corinne* had clearly established Italy as an ideal motherland for women artists, and the popularisation of the novel among women writers confirmed their acceptance of the special status of Italy in their imaginary geography of Europe.

Stael wrote *Corinne* in a time when individual and national identities were more than ever connected in the popular mind. As Suzanne Nash argues, the interrelation between individual and national identity is the very basis for a 'new brand of collectivist patriotism' or, in Stael's words, 'une patrie de la pensée'.³⁰ Following Nash's opinion, the link between individual and national cultures is a specifically nineteenth-century phenomenon that fuses nationality with patriotism. Nationality, intended as the status of belonging 'to a cultural group speaking the same language and sharing the same customs' mingles with the idea of patriotism, that is the 'loyalty to a sovereign political state'.³¹ In a similar way, Stael's works transform the abstract and ideological status of nationality into a conscious and sentimental choice of one country over another. Stael's idea coincides with the 'popular revolutionary point of view that a nation was not based on ethnicity but on a shared commitment to individual freedom and to the common good as opposed to particular interest'.³² Following Montesquieu and Voltaire's ideas, Stael believes that 'every man is born with the natural right to choose his *patrie* for himself'.³³ Patriotism becomes then the right to choose and support a country rather than a passive loyalty to the country of birth. Lady Morgan's statement established how patriotism can be a woman's matter; Stael further develops this idea by giving women the right to decide the country to

²⁹ These definitions of politics and patriotism are in *The Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995)

³⁰ Suzanne Nash, 'Nationalism and Cultural Diversity in Mme de Stael's *Allemagne*', *Kaleidoscope: Essays on Nineteenth-Century French Literature in Honour of Thomas H. Goetz* (Toronto: Centre d'études Romantiques Joseph Sablé, 1996), 15-34, (p. 19).

³¹ Suzanne Nash, 'Nationalism and Cultural Diversity', pp. 19-20.

³² Suzanne Nash, 'Nationalism and Cultural Diversity', pp. 19-20.

which they want to be loyal. In *Corinne*, Stael explicitly makes this choice. She not only selects Italy as the heroine's mother country, but also proposes it as the ideal country for women artists, thus indirectly inciting women to be loyal to it, and to show a patriotic support in favour of its political unity and independence. As an 'adoptive motherland', therefore, Italy is often addressed in patriotic terms in the works of women writers, particularly those selected for this chapter. Felicia Hemans, Mary Shelley and Elizabeth Barrett Browning re-elaborate and develop Stael's enthusiastic support of Italy and of its independence. In their writings they promote the cosmopolitan view over artistic production and political engagement that the French author had first initiated.

5.2 'Servi noi siam, sì, ma servi ognor fermenti': *Corinne* as a political novel.³⁴

Germaine de Stael's works occupy a fundamental position in the general panorama of eighteenth and nineteenth-century European politics. As John Isbell has demonstrated, Stael's ideological involvement in the events of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic empire can no longer be overlooked.³⁵ With regards to the Italian political condition, Stael was a fervent supporter of Italian freedom as part of her ideological encouragement of national independence. Stael's attitude towards Napoleon, as Simone Balayé has made clear, was an ambiguous one.³⁶ In fact, Stael was one among many European intellectuals who, at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were first fascinated and then disillusioned by the raise of Napoleonic power. Simon Bainbridge has

³³ In Suzanne Nash, 'Nationalism and Cultural Diversity', p. 20.

³⁴ The quotation is originally from Vittorio Alfieri, translated in *Corinne*: 'We are slaves, but slaves who are still quivering'.

³⁵ John Clairborne Isbell, 'The Italian Romantics and Mme de Stael: Art, Society, and Nationhood', *Rivista di Letterature Moderne e Comparate* 50:4 (Oct-Dec 1997), 355-369; see also, Lilian Furst, *The Contours of European Romanticism* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979).

³⁶ Simone Balayé, 'Madame de Stael, Napoléon, et l'indépendance italienne', *Révue des Sciences Humaines* 133 (1969), 47-56; see also: Simone Balayé, *L'éclat et le silence, 'Corinne ou l'Italie' de Madame de Stael* (Paris : Honoré Champion Editeur, 1999).

articulated the ambivalent role that Napoleon played in the imagination of Romantic authors. Following the author's opinion, 'the Romantics saw Napoleon as an imaginary figure, a fabrication created to embody their political and personal hopes and fears'.³⁷ Stael was one of those intellectuals who saw in the raise of Napoleon out of the French Revolution a possibility of consolidating republican values. The first Italian campaign saw Napoleon at the head of the Italian army between April 1796 and May 1797 and the creation, with the Peace of Campoformio, of the Italian republics. Over the three years of their existence, the Jacobin republics adopted the French Constitution and the revolutionary values. Napoleon's first campaign in Italy was greeted by many as a liberation from the autocratic Austrian government. British radicals believed that this was a revolutionary campaign, fought 'to liberate the enslaved Italians from Austrian domination', rather than one of conquest fought on behalf of French imperialistic ambition.³⁸ Stael was indeed one of those intellectuals who saw Napoleon's intervention as an incentive towards Italian unity and independence. By the time she visited Italy in 1802, however, Napoleon's true intentions had already become clear after his self-proclamation as the king of Italy. His imperialistic purposes were completely consolidated by the time Stael composed and published *Corinne* in 1807. He had been greeted as the supreme embodiment of the democratic hero, but he soon turned out to be an imperialistic and intolerant tyrant. By 1810, with the exception of Sicily and Sardinia, which were under English protection, Italy was a French province, destitute of any national and cultural identity. Stael started with *Delphine* and continued with *Corinne* her personal battle for liberty from Napoleon, in the name of cultural and national progress.

When Stael published *Corinne*, she knew that Napoleon's censors would scrutinize it in fear of subversive elements. As a result, Stael chose to set the

³⁷ Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 1.

³⁸ Simon Bainbridge, *Napoleon and English Romanticism*, p. 33.

novel in the pre-Napoleonic period, specifically in 1794-5, immediately before Napoleon 1796-7 campaigns. Recent criticisms have rarely approached *Corinne* as a political novel.³⁹ However, as Pacini's analysis of the novel's intertextuality demonstrates, Stael did not entirely sacrifice her interests in politics. With its oblique allusions, Pacini suggests, *Corinne* articulates a strong, yet subtle, critique of contemporary French policy.⁴⁰ Although I agree with Pacini's opinion, it seems to me that *Corinne* is not 'obliquely' a political novel, but rather an overt proclamation of Italian unity and right to independence. The tendency to read the novel as an anti-Napoleonic text seems to have misled the attention on what Stael does not say, or only subtly says, instead of focusing on what she explicitly claims. In my opinion, the novel should be read not as a work against Napoleon's imperialism, but rather as a proclamation of Italian unity and independence against foreign oppression.

Corinne is a celebration of Italian national unity at different levels. Stael willingly constructs the novel in a way that, at the end of Book XV, when Lord Nelvil abandons Corinne and returns to England, the reader has a clear picture of Italy as a distinctive and united nation. The depiction of Italy as a united country starts with Corinne's improvisation at the Capitol and proceeds through the description of the idiosyncratic characteristics of Italy. First Rome, symbolically the centre of Italian history and culture is thoroughly described. Then, the ancient prestige of the Roman republic and empire is evoked to demonstrate that Italy was in the past a cohesive national unity, whose power extended over many European countries. Stael then dedicates a chapter to the description of Italian customs and characters, thus transmitting to the reader the idea of

³⁹ Giulia Pacini, 'Hidden Politics in Germaine de Stael's *Corinne*', *French Forum*. 24:2 (May 1999), 163-177. Doris Y. Kadish and Susan Tenenbaum also analyse *Corinne*'s political significance, however not in reference to the Italian condition. Susan Tenenbaum, '*Corinne*: Political Polemics and the Theory of the Novel', in *The Novel's Seduction: Corinne in Critical Inquiry*, ed. by Karyna Szmurlo (London: Associated University Press, 1999), pp.154-164; Doris Y. Kadish, 'Narrating the French Revolution: the Example of *Corinne*', in *Germaine de Stael: Crossing the Borders*, ed. by Madelyn Gutwirth, Avriel Goldberger, and Karyna Szmurlo, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1991), pp. 113-121.

⁴⁰ Giulia Pacini, 'Hidden Politics', p. 163.

homogeneous people with distinctive habits and folkloristic traditions. In Book VII, Corinne's attention shifts to Italian literature and language, which emerge as important signs of Italian cultural and linguistic unity. Italian art, festivals and music contribute to Stael's mapping of Italy as a well-defined and well-established country, while her depiction of Catholicism as the dominant religion gives Italy another important national characterisation. David Aram Kaiser discusses the Romantic idea of the homogeneity of nations; he explains how the 'unity of cultural nation is based on concept of common culture', that is, 'shared historical and social cultural practices centred around a common language, literature, ethnic practices, religion, and even race insofar as it is tied to the former'.⁴¹ Obviously, in *Corinne*, Italy appears as having all these distinctive elements and as being characterised by a precise unity of culture, religion, language, art and common Roman origins, along with a natural geographical delimitation. The national unity that Stael celebrates in the novel, however, appears in deep antithesis to the political division of Italy. In this way, Stael's effort to present Italy as a national and cultural unity has important political implications. Significantly, it does not simply claim Italy's right to unity and freedom; it also implies the wrongness of any political dominion, whether it is Napoleon, the Austrians, the Bourbons or the Pope.

Corinne's improvisation at the Capitol in Rome re-asserts the assumption that Italy is a united nation, with a distinctive culture and a prestigious historical and artistic past. Furthermore, Corinne structures her improvisation in a similar way to Stael's organisation of the book, that is in a way that presents Italy as a united and homogeneous country. As Giulia Pacini observes, Corinne's voice represents the independence and freedom of expression that Italy has lost.⁴² 'The glory and happiness of Italy' begins by positioning the country in the moment of its utmost political power: 'Italy, empire of the Sun; Italy, mistress of

⁴¹ David Aram Kaiser, *Romanticism, Aesthetics, and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 19.

⁴² Giulia Pacini, 'Hidden Politics', p. 165.

the world; cradle of literature; I salute you. How many times has the human race been under your sway, sustained by your arms, your arts, and your skies!'.⁴³ The tone that Corinne sets in her improvisation is clearly inspired by Filicaja's sonnet, but also very different from it. Instead of celebrating Italian beauty as the cause of the country's political misfortunes, Corinne declaims it to be the source of its artistic and historical prestige. By commemorating the glory of Rome and its illustrious past, and by praising Italian artistic and poetic achievements, Corinne presents Italy as a country worthy of admiration and consideration, especially by foreign nations, symbolised by Lord Nelvil and Count d'Eurfeuil in the audience. In Corinne's improvisation Italy emerges as a distinctive country, as prestigious and potentially powerful as other politically united and free countries. By constructing this indirect analogy, Corinne asserts Italy's right to be considered as a nation, and encourages Italy to regain its unity and freedom. To think of Italy as an independent nation was, in fact, a brave political act at the beginning of the nineteenth century. As Martin McLaughun notices, before the 1830s few people thought the unification of Italy was possible or even desirable.⁴⁴ Stael was undoubtedly one of them, since she not only thought that the foreign occupation of Italy was unjust, but she envisioned the possibility of regaining freedom and unity.

The relationship between Corinne and Lord Nelvil has also important political implications. One of Corinne's priorities, in fact, is to help Lord Nelvil to understand Italy and to decipher its cultural and social specificities. In other words, while acting as a tourist guide to Nelvil, Corinne is trying to convince the sceptical foreigner that Italy is a cohesive national entity, able to govern itself without the intrusion of alien and imperialistic governments. However, in order to convince Lord Nelvil that Italy is 'worthy of another fate', Corinne needs to stimulate Nelvil's imagination. Indeed, the political situation needs to be

⁴³ Madame de Stael, *Corinne or Italy* ; translated and with an introduction by Avriel H. Goldberger (London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), p.26.

⁴⁴ Martin McLaughun (ed.), *Britain and Italy from Romanticism to Modernism*, p. 14.

interpreted with the help of imagination. The situation at the time of the story envisions Italy as a politically divided country, which has lost any national and cultural individuality under the globalisation of the Austrian, and later the French empires. At the beginning of the novel, Stael reminds us how Nelvil came to the country 'prejudiced against Italy and the Italians', and how in order to 'get to the heart of the mystery' of the country, he had to exert his imagination. While showing Nelvil the beauty of the Pantheon, Corinne declaims the prestige of the Roman republic and the artistic genius of the people honoured in the place; finally she asks him if he did not think that 'a people which, in this way, honours the talents it has would deserve a nobler fate'. Nelvil's answer is quite severe: 'I always think [nations] deserve their lot, whatever it may be'.⁴⁵ Lord Nelvil's perspective is clearly influenced by his being British, that is by living in a democratic, and politically free country.

Nelvil's judgment of Italy does not evolve in a considerable way in the course of the novel. After Corinne has shown him the beauty of Italian architecture, he still thinks that 'in a country where there are no military careers nor free institutions', men cannot acquire dignity and strength.⁴⁶ After two years, when he leaves Italy and Corinne to go back to his native Scotland, his judgment is still unfavourable and the comparison between the two countries is unquestionably pro-Britain: 'it seemed to him that in his native land human reason had left its noble imprint everywhere, while in Italy, in many respects, the institutions and social conditions only reflected confusion, weakness, and ignorance'. The dominant feeling in Oswald's mind is that of pity: '[he] thought of Italy with pity'.⁴⁷ The pity Nelvil feels is enhanced by a typically imperialistic attitude. The fact that he comes from a country dominated not only by 'order and prosperity', 'wealth and industry', but also by political independence makes him think of the disorganised and lazy Italy as a country unable to govern itself

⁴⁵ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 54.

⁴⁶ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 120.

⁴⁷ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 315.

and, consequently, unworthy of gaining freedom. Corinne also feels pity for Italy, but in a different way. Corinne's feeling originates in her deep sympathy with the politically enslaved situation of the country and in her strong persuasion of the unfairness of it: 'the failings of the Italians only arouse in me a feeling of pity for their fate. In every age, foreigners have conquered and torn apart this beautiful country, the goal of their permanent ambition; and yet foreigners bitterly reproach this nation with the failings of nations that have been conquered and torn apart!'.⁴⁸ Corinne directs her anger to foreigners who, like Lord Nelvil, judge Italy in a superficial way.

Corinne's interpretation of the present situation of Italy actually enters a global historical perspective. In particular, Corinne is able to see the present political enslavement of Italy as temporary, not as a permanent doom. While Nelvil, and foreigners in general, tend to consider Italy's lack of freedom as an unsurpassable difficulty, Corinne is convinced that, since Italy was powerful and free in the past, it will be again an independent state: 'how comes it then', she apostrophises Nelvil, 'that this nation was the most military of all under the Romans, the most jealous of its liberty in the medieval republics, and in the sixteenth century the most famous for literature, science and the arts?' She continues saying that if Italy is now 'no longer distinguished, why would you not blame its political situation, since in other circumstances it has shown itself to be so different from what it is now?'.⁴⁹ Glory and freedom, for Corinne, are only a matter of time. The present situation of Italy appears, therefore, as a transitory political sleep from which Italy will sooner or later awake, thus recovering the strength of its former times. For Corinne, as for Filicaja, Italy is 'a beautiful land which nature seems to have adorned like a victim', but one which is recovering its strength and which will ultimately regain its independence. As early as Book I, Stael expresses her confidence that the present degradation of the Italians should be considered only as a temporary condition: 'the Italians are much more

⁴⁸ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 101.

outstanding for what they have been and by what they might be than by what they are now'.⁵⁰ This suspended condition of the Italians extends to the political situation of their country. Italy now seems to exist in an a-temporal dimension, where the echoes of a great past project glimpses over a great future. In this way, Stael gives her own version of the prophecy of Italian freedom: since Italy had been a free nation it will soon be independent again. The fact that Italy's greatness exists in suspension between past and future makes the role of imagination even more important. Only thanks to the imagination, in fact, can Italians bear present slavery and think of a better future. The work of imagination also keeps alive the hope and the energy necessary for turning dreams into reality. Corinne elaborates this thought in one of her efforts to justify the apparent indolence of the Italians with regard to politics: 'Other peoples have endured the yoke like us, but they lack the imagination which makes us dream of another fate: "Servi siam sì, ma servi ognor fermenti", *We are slaves, but slaves who are still quivering*'.⁵¹ In 1807, Stael was already able to perceive that the superficial immobility of Italian patriotism hid a deeper level of political ambition, and that only by encouraging and supporting this ambition, could Italy liberate its territory from foreign oppression. Significantly, in Stael's *Corinne*, imagination turns into political activism.

The identification between the character of Corinne and Italy has also important political implications. At the beginning of the novel, Corinne is presented at the peak of her celebrity as an improvvisatrice. She is not only a famous and acclaimed artist, but also an independent and autonomous woman. At the same time she proposes herself as representative of Italy, the country she has chosen as motherland.⁵² Addressing Oswald, prince Castel Forte, one of

⁴⁹ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, pp. 100-101.

⁵⁰ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 17.

⁵¹ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 59.

⁵² Doris Y. Kadish claims that Corinne's appearance at the Capitol is an allegory of the Republic. As the author suggests, women in history had tended to be treated historically as generalisations and abstractions, and she connects the character of Corinne with Marianne, the figuration of the French Republic. However, in the context of *Corinne*, and on the basis of the topic of her improvisation, it

Corinne's closest friends, clarifies the political implications of Corinne's identification with Italy: 'Look at her, she is the image of our beautiful Italy; she is what we would be but for the ignorance, the envy, the discord, and the indolence to which our fate has condemned us'.⁵³ Corinne is there to remind the Italians of what Italy should be: a free, successful and prestigious nation. Corinne represents 'the offshoot of the past' and 'the harbinger of the future', since she bridges a glorious past with an equally glorious future. More precisely, Corinne is the image of a successful and independent Italy, and she keeps the minds of Italians aware of their country's potentialities.

The first part of the novel, therefore, presents an important split between the condition of Corinne and that of the Italy she represents; in point of fact, Corinne's freedom and vitality contrast with the passivity and political enslavement of Italy. However, by the end of the novel, the condition of Corinne becomes similar to that of Italy. The story of Corinne, parallels the story of Italy in a way that, at the end of the novel, Stael transforms the independent and successful Corinne into an indolent and dependent woman. If at the beginning of the novel Corinne symbolises the great Italy of the past and of the future, at the end of the story Corinne represents the Italy of the present. By the end of the novel, the identification between Corinne and Italy is complete, and Corinne becomes that beautiful and victimised woman Filicaja mourns in his sonnet to Italy. She has lost her role as connector between past and future, and she is no more in a position to promote Italian freedom. At this point it seems fundamental to understand how and why Corinne/Italy has lost her independence or, in other words, what the reasons of Corinne's involution are. The story makes it clear: Lord Nelvil is the origin of Corinne's loss of freedom and success, and ultimately of her death. As a matter of fact, Corinne's decline starts when she seeks the companionship of Oswald, ultimately becoming

seems to me that Corinne represents the Roman republic, thus personifying Italy in the utmost of its political power. 'Narrating the French Revolution: the example of *Corinne*', p. 115.

⁵³ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 27.

dependent on his love and presence. However, the evolution of the relationship between Nelvil and Corinne mirrors the political trajectory of Italy. Interestingly, Lord Nelvil is a foreigner and his invasion of Corinne's intellectual and emotional territory is not very different from the Austrian and Napoleonic conquest of Italy. Lord Nelvil is, in fact, a little Napoleon. Not only does he conquer and exploit Corinne's beauty and fame; he also tries to rob her of her distinctiveness, particularly of her Italianess. Lord Nelvil falls in love with Corinne's beauty and exoticism, he uses her during his stay in Italy, then abandons her when the relationship is no longer convenient for him. However, Nelvil's presence has affected and changed Corinne's character deeply and, under his foreign influence, she has lost all her creative power, her energy and independence. More specifically, what Nelvil tries to do in the story is to transform Corinne into an Englishwoman and to destroy the peculiarity and distinctiveness of her character. Joanne Wilkes reminds us how one of Stael's greatest fears was national homogeneity, which she identified with Napoleon.⁵⁴ Napoleon's imperialistic conquest of Italy had actually followed Nelvil's path. Soon after the proclamation of the kingdom of Italy, Pécout explains, Napoleon extended French laws to the newly-acquired Italian territory, he introduced French as the official language for governmental and educational purposes, he deprived Italy of some of its most prestigious works of art, and tried to reduce the country to a province of the French empire.⁵⁵ In the novel, Corinne follows a similar involution: she becomes the victim of Nelvil's cultural imperialism and loses both her identity as a woman artist and her Italianness. Stael was aware that Italy ran the risk of losing its national distinctiveness, and she wrote *Corinne* also with the purpose of reminding European readers that Italy had its own national identity, strong cultural traditions and a prestigious historical heritage.

⁵⁴ Joanne Wilkes, *Lord Byron and Madame de Stael: 'Born for Opposition'* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 97.

⁵⁵ Gilles Pécout, *Il Lungo Risorgimento*, p. 59.

To some extent, Corinne seems to collaborate with Nelvil's attempt to 'colonise' her, and she does not resist his influence or try to recover her lost independence. When Nelvil and Corinne are about to leave Rome for Venice, Corinne explicitly allows Nelvil to dispose of her as he wishes: 'Do what you like with me. Chain me like a slave to your fate'.⁵⁶ At this point in the novel Corinne has already become completely dependent on the presence of the foreign Nelvil: she is no more self-sufficient, she has lost her friends, her talents, her beauty and her freedom. Corinne had welcomed Nelvil as her lover, the man who would make her life complete and help her to express fully her talents and, in the end, she has become utterly dependent on him. This is also the parable of Italian politics under Napoleonic influence. The arrival of Napoleon in Italy had been welcomed as the end of Austrian imperialism and the beginning of a free and republican future. Napoleon was seen as the liberator, the one who would help Italy to turn from an enslaved and divided country into a united, republican and democratic land. Like Corinne, Italy was deceived, and Napoleon turned out to be an ambitious and undemocratic tyrant. Instead of unity and independence he had brought more division and enslavement. The parable of Corinne's life ultimately coincides with the history of Italy.

At the end of the novel, the already destitute and lonely Corinne reflects on her fate and says: 'sometimes I examine myself as a foreigner might, and I have pity on myself'. As Lord Nelvil had pitied Italy for its fate, so Corinne pities herself as a victim who has been unjustly treated: 'I was witty, sincere, kind, generous, and sensitive. Why has all that gone so badly wrong?'.⁵⁷ Like Italy, Corinne, the woman of genius, would deserve a better fate. In the case of Italy, as Prince Castel Forte observed, it had been the ignorance, the envy and the discord of foreign countries that had reduced it to a powerless and enslaved political reality; in the case of Corinne, Stael seems to suggest that the narrow-mindedness of the patriarchal society has suffocated the woman of genius. The

⁵⁶ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 67.

equivalence between the woman of genius and Italy dominates the end of the novel. If Corinne's initial success mirrored the future glory of Italy, the present degradation of Italy mirrors the condition of the woman of genius under patriarchal values at the end of the novel. Finally, Corinne and Italy share the same unhappy destiny, and they become victims of masculine imperialistic forces.

Joanne Wilkes suggests that Corinne's decline is not paralleled by any overt expressions of pessimism about Italy's political future.⁵⁸ Certainly the novel does not end happily either for Corinne, or, consequently, for the Italy she represents. Stael had clear ideas about the political situation of Europe. She was against any form of political oppression. With regards to Italy, she hoped the country could find again its unity and independence by a common national effort, and not with the help of foreign states which, as in the case of Austria and France, have their own imperialistic purposes. 'Italia farà da sé', she exclaims while praising Sismondi's description of the independence and perseverance of the Italian republics of the middle ages in his *Histoire des Républiques Italiennes*.⁵⁹ With the story of Corinne, Stael suggests that Italy should fight for its independence with its own strength, without the intervention of any foreign states which, in most cases, have their own interests in mind, and might dangerously undermine the distinctiveness of Italian culture and traditions.

⁵⁷ Madame de Stael, *Corinne*, p. 357.

⁵⁸ Joanne Wilkes, *Lord Byron and Madame de Stael*, p. 130.

⁵⁹ Madame de Stael, 'Histoire des républiques italiennes', *Publiciste* 22 (Juin 1807), 214-217.

5.3 From Restoration to Risorgimento: Felicia Hemans and Italian independence.

Nanora Sweet and Susan Wolfson have established Felicia Hemans' ideological involvement in the major political events of the early nineteenth-century.⁶⁰ In particular, Sweet has demonstrated how Hemans, like Stael and Byron, was a fervent supporter of liberty and the preservation of national identities. From the beginning of her writing career, Hemans showed herself an energetic commentator on the international scene. As Sweet observes, Hemans, like the later Romantic generation, preferred the 'international to the insular', and the 'republican to the imperial'.⁶¹ Sweet's work, moreover, illustrates Hemans special interest in the politics of the Mediterranean countries, especially in the precarious situation of Greece, Spain and Italy.⁶² In general, Hemans' attitude towards the Peninsular War and the post-Napoleonic period was that of promoting the independence and the unity of the Mediterranean states.

In the introduction to *Patriotic Effusions of the Italian Poets* (1821), Hemans claims that 'the moment a patriotic chord is struck, our feelings are awakened, and we find it easy to sympathize with the emotions of a modern Roman'.⁶³ Patriotism, Hemans seems to argue, is a matter of the heart. Thus, by turning the political into patriotic, as Lady Morgan had suggested, the author is free to sympathise with a politically oppressed population, and at the same time to express her opinion on the issue. In *The Restoration of the Works of Art to*

⁶⁰ Nanora Sweet, 'The Bowl of Liberty', unpublished dissertation, (University of Michigan, 1994); Susan Wolfson, 'Hemans and the Romance of Byron', in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Nanora Sweet and Julie Melnyk (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

⁶¹ Nanora Sweet, 'History, Imperialism, and the Aesthetics of the Beautiful: Hemans and the Post-Napoleonic Moment', in *At the Limits of Romanticism: Essays in Cultural, Feminist, and Materialist Criticism*, ed. by Mary A. Favret and Nicola J. Watson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp.170-184, (p. 171).

⁶² One of Hemans' first publications was a translation of Ugo Foscolo's *Ultime Lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (1802), a strongly patriotic and anti-Napoleonic work.

Italy (1816) Hemans elaborates her understanding of the political significance of Stael's novel.⁶⁴ The poem celebrates the restoration to their original countries of the artworks Napoleon had plundered for removal to Paris to enhance the prestige of his empire. The tone of the composition is deeply anti-Napoleonic and pro-Italian independence. As my analysis will demonstrate, the poem is structured in a very similar way to *Corinne*, and echoes some important moments of *Corinne's* improvisation. In particular, by describing the Italian artworks, Hemans celebrates the artistic glory and historical prestige of Italy, thus promoting a view of the country as a united nation, unjustly exploited and ravished. In addition, Hemans commemorates the returning of famous works of art as an important occasion to promote a sense of national identity and to inspire unity and freedom.

The initial epigraphs to the poem set the general tone of the composition. Hemans' choice of quoting the first lines of Filicaja's sonnet clearly establishes the connection with *Corinne*, and re-proposes Italy as a victimised, beautiful female. The second epigraph from Eustace's *Classical Tour Through Italy* not only serves to strengthen this already established image; it symbolically gives to Napoleon's appropriation a sort of physical connotation. Eustace comments how the French have 'rivalled or rather surpassed the rapacity of the Goths and Vandals' in their Italian campaigns, and how they have 'laid their sacrilegious hands' on the rare and delicate Italian collections of artworks: they 'tore' them from their pedestals, and 'dragging them from their temple of marble', transferred them to Paris and consigned them to 'the dull sullen halls, or rather stables' of the Louvre.⁶⁵ The barbaric French behaviour transpires as depredation of the beauty of Italy. In this way, Italy does not simply appear as a passive

⁶³ 'Patriotic Effusions of the Italian Poets', *Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany* 8 (June 1821), 514-20. The authors included in this work are: Filicaja, Carlo Maria Maggi, Alessandro Marchetti, Alessandro Pergolesi and Francesco Maria de' Conti.

⁶⁴ On the supposed influence of *Restoration* on Byron's 'Canto IV' see: Susan Wolfson, 'Hemans and the Romance of Byron', in *Felicia Hemans: Reimagining Poetry in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 157-161.

female but also one whose beauty has been ruined, and whose integrity has been violated. The first few stanzas of the poem confirm the image of Italy as a 'fallen' feminine country, which has lost its dignity, fame and power under the 'chain' of foreign political oppression and physical abuse.⁶⁶ At the beginning of the poem, Hemans presents Italy as a once powerful and prestigious country, but presently degraded to a condition of slavery and decadence:

Land of departed fame! whose classic plains,
Have proudly echoed to immortal strains;
Whose hallow'd soil hath given the great and brave,
Day-stars of life, a birth-place and a grave;
Home of the Arts! Where glory's faded smile,
Sheds ling'ring light o'er many a mould'ring pile;
Proud wreck of vanish'd power, of splendor fled,
Majestic temple of the mighty dead!
Whose grandeur, yet contending with decay,
Gleams thro' the twilight of thy glorious day;
Tho' dimm'd thy brightness, rivetted thy chain,
Yet, fallen Italy! Rejoice again!
Lost, lovely Realm! Once more 'tis thine to gaze
On the rich relics of sublimer days.⁶⁷

The idea of Italy that emerges from the poem is not a static one; on the contrary it follows an evolution which, in the course of the poem, transforms Italy from a passive and vulnerable country into a potentially energetic and strong nation. The term 'restoration' itself had an ambiguous significance in the post-Waterloo period, since it was a reactionary and liberal term at the same time.⁶⁸ From a political point of view, for Italy, the term restoration meant the re-establishment of the pre-Napoleonic division of the country, after the Congress of Vienna (1815) had replaced Napoleon with the old conquerors. Differently, the 'restoration' of classical culture in Italy and Greece signified a liberal and republican revolution, and in Hemans' work surely implies a restoration of the Italian national dignity. Hemans seems to be aware of the double significance of

⁶⁵ *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy: A Poem*, in *Felicia Hemans: Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials*, ed. by Susan Wolfson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 18-19.

⁶⁶ Felicia Hemans, *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy*, lines 1-55.

⁶⁷ *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy*, lines 1-14.

⁶⁸ Nanora Sweet, 'History, Imperialism, and the Aesthetics of the Beautiful', p. 175.

the term 'restoration' and she uses it in order to strengthen the transition from a passive idea of Italy to a more active depiction of the country. Thanks to the restitution of its artworks, Italy can at least regain its cultural prestige, if not its political independence.

Following the example of *Corinne*, Hemans celebrates the artistic fame of Italy as a source of national unity. By describing famous works of art by Raphael and Michelangelo (197-213), and by evoking Virgil and Tasso (15-28), the poet reminds the readers of Italy's illustrious past and of its distinctiveness as a national entity. The same idea is confirmed a few stanzas later, when Hemans argues that the same works of art would not show the same splendour in a different context:

Oh! ne'er, in other climes, tho' many an eye,
Dwelt on your charms in beaming ecstasy;
Ne'er was it yours to bid the soul expand
With thoughts so mighty, dreams so boldly grand,
As in that realm, where each faint breeze's moan,
Seems a low dirge for glorious ages gone[.]⁶⁹

The works of art, Hemans seems to claim, have not the same significance in other countries, since they do not evoke the glorious past which is specific to Italy, and thus nationally distinctive. In this way the celebration of artistic works becomes instrumental for the celebration of national unity, and the restoration of these works to their original country is a public recognition of the Italian cultural prestige. As David Rothstein observes, Hemans' use of artistic works as a means of enforcing national identity is a complex one. More specifically, Hemans' use of history, fiction, memory, and I would add art, correlates to Pierre Nora's concept of 'lieux de memoire'. Nora argues that 'individuals feel a need to consecrate sites of memory that provide a sense of connection to a collective heritage of the past', thus strengthening their sense of belonging to a national unity.⁷⁰ In *Restoration*, the works of art function in a very similar way, since they inspire in

⁶⁹ *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy*, lines 105-110.

⁷⁰ David Rothstein, 'Forming the Chivalric Subject: Felicia Hemans and the Cultural Use of History, Memory and Nostalgia', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27:1 (1998), 49-68 (pp. 58-59).

the Italians an awareness of being part of a collective community with a common and prestigious historical and artistic past, thus contributing to strengthening their national identity.

The poem acquires an explicit nationalistic tone when Hemans turns to celebrate British victory over Napoleon and the defeat of his imperialistic plans. Hemans addresses Britain as 'isle of the free', and commemorates the heroic people who have lost their lives in the cause of 'Freedom'. In comparison to the military strength and liberal politics of Britain, Italy appears even more as a defeated, passive and vulnerable land. Hemans comments that the fall of Italy was 'very deep'. She addresses it as a 'Fallen woman' and as a 'triumphant wreck', and later she refers to Rome as a 'Fallen Empress'. The integrity of British military actions against tyranny are strikingly in opposition to the fragmentation and instability that characterise the idea of Italy in the poem. The works of art that Hemans describes are, in fact, only fragments of a glorious past which evidently contrasts with the precariousness of Italy's present situation. Italy appears as an oxymoronic construction whose oppositions centre on the contrast between a great past and the present decadence. In this way, Italy becomes a land of 'departed fame', a 'proud wreck', a 'triumphant wreck' of 'vanish'd power', where 'mighty dead' commemorate a 'grandeur' which contends with 'decay'. The works of art are only 'relics of sublimer days', fragments of an 'ancient race' whose 'power and freedom scarce have left a trace'. Rome, the 'fallen Empress', welcomes 'in chains the trophies of the Free' as 'the proud memorials of [its] noblest day'.⁷¹ The aesthetics of instability and fragmentation that emerges in *Restoration* is an important component of Hemans' approach to the Mediterranean countries.⁷² As Nanora Sweet observes, Hemans 'adopts in particular a Mediterranean aesthetics of the beautiful'

⁷¹ *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy*, lines 281, 272, 284.

⁷² As Sweet demonstrates, this aesthetic of fragmentation is typical of Hemans' works about Mediterranean countries. *England and Spain* and *Modern Greece* show a very similar approach, though less overtly gendered. Although both Spain and Greece are depicted as 'feminised' countries,

characterised by instability and vagueness. Following this interpretation, the restoration itself is not complete, since the presence of the works cannot redeem Italy from its slavery.⁷³ As Hemans explains, the works are suspended in a 'veil of radiance' suffused with disillusioning beauty:

Those precious trophies o'er thy realms that throw
A veil of radiance, hiding half thy woe,
And bid the stranger for a while forget
How deep thy fall, and deem thee glorious yet.⁷⁴

A careful reading of the poem suggests that, although the 'restoration' of the glorious Italian past can be only partially accomplished through the restitution of its artistic masterpieces, these same works will constitute a fundamental part of Italy's Risorgimento. In other words, the works of art awaken the collective memory of the Italians and inspire their will to recuperate the ancient glory.

In *Restoration*, Italy appears as in a suspended political limbo where the memory of the past is still alive, yet the future is a distant and dim reality. According to David Rothstein's opinion, Hemans depicts national unity at key moments of its division and dissolution.⁷⁵ Hemans' nations are continually portrayed either in the process of emergence or under threat of erasure. Thanks to a practice of historicisation, however, national unity can recuperate substantiality. *Restoration* clearly enters this dynamic of memorialization: though Italy is still divided and politically enslaved, the restoration promotes its sense of national unity and national distinctiveness. Hemans depicts Italy in search of a more stable identity, which is located either in the past or in the future. In particular, Hemans envisions the possibility of an Italian Risorgimento. The poem is scattered with words of incitement to freedom and unity. After the works of art are restored to Florence, for example, Hemans encourages the town to regain its

the connection with a passive and vulnerable female is less explicit. Italy's strong feminised and passive condition is probably due to the influence of Filicaja's sonnet and of Stael's *Corinne*.

⁷³ Nanora Sweet, 'History, Imperialism, and the Aesthetics of the Beautiful', pp. 171-172.

⁷⁴ *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy*, lines 89-92.

⁷⁵ David Rothstein, 'Forming the Chivalric Subject', p. 55.

freedom: 'Florence! Th' Oppressor's noon of pride is o'er,/ Rise in thy pomp again, and weep no more!' (143-144). She also stirs Italy to awaken from its political slumber, to gather new forces, and react:

Ye [Italy], at whose voice fair Art, with eagle glance,
Burst in full splendor from her deathlike trance;
Whose rallying call bade slumb'ring nations wake,
And daring Intellect his bondage break.⁷⁶

Later in the poem, while addressing Rome, Hemans renews her faith in the possibility of an Italian 'risorgimento':

Oh! with your images could fate restore,
Your own high spirit to your sons once more;
Patriots and Heroes! could those flames return,
That bade your hearts with freedom's ardours burn;
Then from the sacred ashes of the first,
Might a new Rome in phoenix-grandeur burst!⁷⁷

Although the poem mirrors the precariousness of the Italian political condition and reinforces the symbolisation of Italy as a fallen woman, it also promotes the possibility of future recovery. The poem's oscillation between death and resurgence, between past, present and future reflects the transitory moment of the Italian political condition. The restoration of the works of art represents the starting point of a process of formation and transformation of the Italian political situation. *Restoration* depicts Italy in the process of recovering its national dignity and of re-establishing its distinctive national identity. The restoration is the historical moment and the political fact that enhances the Italian risorgimento.

The final stanza of the poem reasserts the universal value of freedom. While commenting Raphael's 'Transfiguration', Hemans turns the elegiac tone of the poem into a celebration of freedom:

Gaze on that scene, and own the might of Art,
By truth inspired, to elevate the heart!
To bid the soul exultingly possess,
Of all her powers, a heightened consciousness,
And strong in hope, anticipate the day,
The last of life, the first of freedom's ray;
To realize, in some unclouded sphere,
Those pictured glories feebly imaged here! ⁷⁸

Though the tone of this stanza is predominantly religious, the context of the Italian restoration extends its religious significance into political activism. Raphael's transfiguration is there not only to inspire a devotional attitude, but also to encourage Italy to recover its independence. Thanks to the restoration of its stolen masterpieces to their original place, Italy can foresee a better fate, 'elevate the heart' from the enslavement of foreign dominion, and 'anticipate the day' when it will see 'the first of freedom's ray'. These are glories only 'feebly imagined' in the present, but surely the recovery of national dignity is the first step in the process of uniting and liberating Italy. The restoration of the artworks has then become the dawn of the Italian Risorgimento. After all, Hemans seems to suggest, Italy is a 'fallen woman' in the process of redemption. With *Restoration*, Felicia Hemans aligns her writings with those patriotic verses she translates in *Patriotic Effusions*. Her poem, like theirs, is 'the warning voice of [Italy's] bards' that 'has been heard to prophesy the impending storm, and to call up such deep and spirit-stirring recollections from the glorious past', and aims to 'keep alive the flame' of Italian cultural prestige in the hope of a future recovery of political unity and freedom.⁷⁹ *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy* clearly shows Hemans' intention to appreciate Italy's cultural and national unity and to validate independence and liberty.

⁷⁶ *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy*, lines 165-168.

⁷⁷ *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy*, lines 297-302.

⁷⁸ *The Restoration of the Works of Art to Italy*, lines 509-516.

5.4 Mary Shelley's republican dream in *Valperga*.

Mary Shelley's ideological involvement in the event of the Risorgimento is connected with her long residence in the country and with her knowledge of Italian literature and history. Her intellectual approach to the political situation of Italy bears the influence of Stael, and, to some extent, of Italian authors.⁸⁰ Like Hemans, Shelley read Ugo Foscolo's anti-Napoleonic novel *The Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis* (1802) and she translated a passage from it in her 'Life' of this author written for *The Cabinet Encyclopedia* and published in 1835. The passage exemplifies the condition of an hopeless Italian exile and it reconfirms the image of Italy that Filicaja had first suggested: 'what can we expect except indigence and indignity [...] and where shall I seek an asylum?—in Italy? Unhappy land! And can I behold those who have robbed, scorned, and sold us, and not weep with rage?'.⁸¹ Furthermore, during her residence in Italy from 1816 to 1822, Shelley had personally witnessed the effect of the post-Waterloo restoration in Italy, especially the tyrannical and illiberal government of the Austrians in the North and the Bourbons in the South. In 1821 and 1822 she followed and ideologically supported the first revolutionary movements in Naples and Milan.⁸² In 1844, Shelley clearly expresses her political opinions on the Risorgimento in *Rambles through Germany and Italy*, where she not only meticulously reports and comments on the state of Italian politics, the Austrian government and the Carbonari revolutionary plans, but also translates an essay by Gatteschi, an

⁷⁹ 'Patriotic Effusions of the Italian Poet', p. 514.

⁸⁰ Mary Shelley had an extensive knowledge of Italian literature. In her Italian Journals she often annotates Percy's and her reading of famous Italian authors, such as Dante, Tasso, Petrarca, Macchiavelli. For a list of Mary and Percy Shelley's readings, see: 'The Shelleys' Reading List', in *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-1844*, ed. by Paula Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), vol. I, p. 678.

⁸¹ *The Cabinet Encyclopedia, Volume 87: Lives of the Most Eminent Literary and Scientific Men of Italy, Spain and Portugal*, (London, 1835), p. 358.

Italian revolutionary, on the Carbonari, and includes it in the text, thus converting her travel work into political propaganda.⁸³

Long before the publication of *Rambles*, however, Mary Shelley had reflected on the political situation of Italy and on the possibility of a future redemption in her novel *Valperga, or the life and adventures of Castruccio Castrucani* (1821). As Shelley explains, the novel was conceived at Marlow as early as 1817 but it was researched and written in Italy between 1818 and 1821:

It has indeed been a child of mighty slow growth, since I first thought of it in our library at Marlow. I then wanted the body in which I might embody my spirit- the materials for this I found at Naples- but I wanted other books- nor did I begin until a year afterwards in Pisa [...]. It has indeed been a work of some labour since I have read & consulted a great many books.⁸⁴

The books that Mary Shelley consulted were political and historical texts belonging to a wide European literary tradition, and include Sismondi's *Histoire des Républiques Italiennes du Moyen Age* (1818), Macchiavelli's sixteenth-century biography of the Tuscan tyrant Castruccio Castrucani, Villani's *Florentine Chronicles* and, last but not least, Stael's *Corinne* which, following her journals, she was reading in 1820.⁸⁵ Moreover, during the time of composition, Shelley was witnessing the first revolutionary movements in support of democratic constitution in Sicily, Naples and Piedmont, while she was also strengthening her contact with the Italian revolutionary intellectuals. The result of Shelley's widespread reading and ideological involvement was a novel whose main story is set in fifteenth-century Italy but whose political implications extend to the contemporary events of the Risorgimento. In terms of temporality, *Valperga* is a two dimensional novel which expands from the Middle Ages political panorama to

⁸² See: Muriel Spark, *Mary Shelley: a Biography* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987); Emily Sustain, *Mary Shelley: Romance and Reality* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1989).

⁸³ See: Clarissa Campbell Orr, 'Mary Shelley's *Rambles in Germany and Italy*, the Celebrity Author, and the Undiscovered Country of the Human Heart', *Romanticism on the Net* 11 (August 1998), p. 1.

⁸⁴ *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. by Betty Bennett, 3 vols. (Baltimore, 1980-8), vol. I, p. 203.

⁸⁵ *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-1844*, vol I, pp. 68-69.

the nineteenth-century struggle for independence, thus constructing an important continuity between the past and present history of Italy.

The fact that the story of Castruccio Castrucani is connected with the rise of Napoleonic power was evident to contemporary readers and critics. In a letter dated 25 September 1821, Percy Shelley describes the novel to his publisher and praises its medieval setting; at the same time he uncovers its potential connections with contemporary history. After introducing the character of Castruccio, Shelley comments how 'he was a little Napoleon, and, with a dukedom instead of an empire for his theatre, brought upon the same all the passions and the errors of his antitype'.⁸⁶ From Shelley's presentation, *Valperga* seems to exemplify in the story of Castruccio the historical dynamics of the formation, empowerment and fall of a tyrant, thus amplifying its historical perspective, and including the vicissitudes of the most recent tyrant, Napoleon. In other words, the novel is soon presented as anti-Napoleonic and, more generally, against any violent and undemocratic conquest. Shelley was not the only reader who discerned in the character of Castruccio the figure of 'a little Napoleon'. John Gibson Lockhart, writing in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in March 1823, comments how the prototype of Mary Shelley's hero was all too obvious:

Another thing we are very sick of, is this perpetual drumming at poor Buonaparte. That singular character is already the hero of fifty romances. Wherever one turns, he is sure to be met by the same sort of lame, impotent, and abortive attempts to shadow out Napoleon under the guise and semblance of some greater or smaller usurper of ancient days [...] Here we find Mrs. Shelley flinging over the grey surtout and cocked hat of the great captain of France, the blazoned mantle of a fierce *Condottiere* of Lucca.⁸⁷

Castruccio is not the only character in the novel who acquires a wide historical significance. Percy Shelley thought that 'the chief interest of the romance sets

⁸⁶ *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964); vol. II, pp. 662-663.

⁸⁷ *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (March 1823), p. 265.

upon Euthanasia', Castruccio's betrothed bride, 'whose love for him is only equalled by her enthusiasm for the liberty of the republic of Florence, which is in some sort her country, and for that of Italy, to which Castruccio is a devoted enemy, being an ally of the party of the Emperor'.⁸⁸ The novel's oppositional construction becomes therefore soon clear: on one side the tyranny of Castruccio, whose only concern is to acquire power at the expense of Italian unity and stability; on the other hand, the liberal, democratic and republican position of Euthanasia, whose disinterested political engagement aims at the construction of a unified and strong Italy. Clearly, the story mirrors contemporary issues: on one side the tyranny of foreign nations and of their imperialistic ambitions over Italy, and on the other the Italians' ideological and military resistance, sustained by the hope of a unified and democratic Italy.

Daniel White has established the significance of *Valperga* in the context of both Romantic aesthetics and Italian politics. White observes how in the novel Shelley offers a stark reading of the period from the French Revolution to 1821 as a 'mutually destructive polemic between a dominant political, social, and aesthetic masculine ideology and its feminine other', a polemic that significantly found its 'fittest expression and conclusion on Italian soil'.⁸⁹ In White's opinion, *Valperga* is a critique of what Mary Shelley understood to be the implicit correlation between the 'aesthetics of desire central to her perception of masculine Romanticism', and 'the political and social implications of gendered identity'.⁹⁰ The connection between Shelley's critique of masculine imperialism and the Italian political situation is fundamental in the novel. White argues that Shelley found in Italian history the terrain on which to represent the consequences of Romantic aesthetics and political conflicts, and how 'Italy and

⁸⁸ *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, p. 663.

⁸⁹ Daniel E. White, " 'The God Undeified': Mary Shelley's *Valperga*, Italy, and the Aesthetic of Desire", *Romanticism on the Net* 6 (May 1997), p. 1.

⁹⁰ Daniel E. White, " 'The God Undeified': Mary Shelley's *Valperga*, Italy, and the Aesthetic of Desire", p. 1. See also, Daniel E. White, 'Mary Shelley's *Valperga*: Italy and the Revision of Romantic Aesthetics', in *Mary Shelley's Fictions: from Frankenstein to Falkner*, ed. by Michael Eberle Sinatra and Nora Crook (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 2000), pp. 75-94.

the feminine are at once the terrain and subject of the novel'.⁹¹ Similarly, Kari Lokke sees the Italian potential for political independence as a means to construct a powerful critique of the Romantic hero.⁹² The identification between Italy and the feminine clearly enters the established tradition of associating the political condition of the country with that of a powerless and victimised female. Mary Shelley exploits at most the political potentialities of this gender correlation. What Shelley expresses in *Valperga* is the fragmentation of the feminine into a body or nation of contradictions, thus associating the evolution of feminine identity with the construction of an independent nation. As I will demonstrate in this section, the parable of Euthanasia's –and to some extent of Beatrice's– life parallels the difficult construction of an Italian national identity.

The connection between the story of Euthanasia and the emergence of Italy as a national entity is established soon at the beginning of the novel. Shelley's opening of the novel is an overt celebration of the Italian cultural and artistic prestige over the other European nations: 'the other nations of Europe were yet immersed in barbarism, when Italy, where the light of civilization had never been wholly eclipsed, began to emerge from the darkness of the ruin of the Western Empire'.⁹³ In this passage Shelley clearly celebrates Italy for its cultural superiority and describes the country in the moment of its emergence from the darkness of the Middle Ages. Italy was then elaborating its national identity and consolidating its cultural and artistic prestige through authors such as Dante and Petrarch. The Italian political situation, however, already emerges as fragmentary and precarious: 'Lombardy and Tuscany, the most civilized districts of Italy, exhibited astonishing specimens of human genius; but at the same time they were torn to pieces by domestic factions, and almost destroyed

⁹¹ Daniel E. White, 'The God Undeified', p. 3.

⁹² Kari Lokke, 'Sibylline Leaves: Mary Shelley's *Valperga* and the Legacy of *Corinne*', in *Cultural Interactions in the Romantic Age: Critical Essays in Comparative Literature*, ed. by Gregory Maertz (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 157-176 (p. 158). See also by the same author, "'Children of Liberty': Idealist Historiography in Stael, Shelley, and Sand', *PMLA* 118:3 (May, 2003), 502-520.

by the fury of civil wars'.⁹⁴ The political landscape of fifteenth-century Italy clearly mirrors the nineteenth-century division and the revolutionary insurrections. The political struggle between the Ghibellines, friends of the emperor, and the Guelphs, 'partizans of liberty', soon becomes a symbolic struggle between 'the elements of good and evil that have since assumed a more permanent form'.⁹⁵ Shelley identifies the elements of evil with imperialistic intent, whether exemplified by the Germans in the novel or the Austrian empire in nineteenth-century Italy, while the 'partizans of liberty' are all those who support freedom and national unity. The oppositional construction of the novel, therefore, acquires a general significance, easily extendable to the contemporary situation of Italy.

In this political context, Euthanasia, the Countess of the little democratic and independent state of Valperga, represents a republican and liberal tradition against Castruccio's individualistic ambition and thirst for power. Educated by her blind father, Euthanasia shapes her political thoughts by reading ancient literature and philosophy, especially the authors of the Roman republic. Thus Euthanasia grows in liberal and republican principles, which she not only 'hears and understands', but also imitates.⁹⁶ Euthanasia's young mind is able to elaborate her own thoughts and to transcend the specificity of her father's teachings, so as to shape her political ideas on the universality of human history. This implies that Euthanasia's understanding of politics is not limited to the present political situation, since she interprets the moment as the result of preceding historical facts and, in turns, the basis for future change. This cyclic approach to history and politics is a fundamental aspect of the novel, and it gives

⁹³ Mary Shelley, *Valperga or, the Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*, ed. with and introduction by Michael Rossington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 5.

⁹⁴ Mary Shelley, *Valperga*, p. 5.

⁹⁵ Mary Shelley, *Valperga*, p. 5.

⁹⁶ Mary Shelley, *Valperga*, p. 18.

a specific significance to its catastrophic ending.⁹⁷ Euthanasia's political actions and decisions, in fact, are not to be interpreted in the narrow context of the novel but, as Shelley suggests, their historical significance extends to the future: 'Her young thoughts darted into futurity, to the hope of freedom for Italy, of revived learning and the reign of peace for all the world'.⁹⁸ Though these are 'wild dreams' of a young enthusiastic supporter of liberty, their significance 'still awake the minds of men to high song and glorious action'.⁹⁹ Mary Shelley's intention appears clear here. Though limited to a fourteenth-century context, *Valperga*, like the thoughts and action of the main heroine, Euthanasia, extends its implications much further in the line of western history, to include the contemporary situation of Italy. Euthanasia's example, therefore, Shelley argues, can still inspire great actions and dreams of liberty and unity.

Euthanasia's political position appears as beyond any particularistic interest. She refuses explicitly to ally herself with any faction, since she only supports liberty and peace. Her impartiality represents an ideal of universal love that is strikingly in opposition to Castruccio's 'petty intrigue' and thirst for power. Euthanasia transmutes the history and ideals of the Roman republic into a political attitude which promotes neutrality, freedom and respect of any political entity, most of all of Italy's national unity. Her political concerns, in fact, go beyond the state of Valperga, even beyond Florence and Tuscany, since she 'is more attached to concord and the alliance of parties, than to any of the factions which distract our poor Italy'.¹⁰⁰ Italy is seen as a scattered and fragmented nation and Euthanasia, like Stael and Hemans, seeks its unity and freedom. The state of Valperga clearly mirrors Euthanasia's political ideas and appears as an oasis of liberty and democracy among the turbulent political situation of the other Florentine towns: 'the villages under [Euthanasia's] jurisdiction became

⁹⁷ Shelley was influenced by the Italian philosopher Vico who theorised a cyclic idea of history. Following his theory, human history is the result of a cyclic movement of ascendancy and fall of empires and political states (*The Journals of Mary Shelley*, pp. 334, 380).

⁹⁸ Mary Shelley, *Valperga*, p. 18.

⁹⁹ Mary Shelley, *Valperga*, p. 18.

prosperous', since her most 'glorious and delightful occupation' was that of rendering her numerous dependents happy; she was adored by her peasants who 'knew her power only by the benefits she conferred to them'. Though her inclination 'to love the very shadow of freedom with unbounded enthusiasm' had initially deceived her on the intention of Castruccio, she soon understands that her thoughts of peace and concord, are 'schemes of war and conquest' for him.¹⁰¹

Interestingly, as White observes, Euthanasia becomes the ideal 'Romantic' woman conceived from the bourgeois feminist perspective of the 1790s: a self-sufficient woman who can both feel and think, and whose feelings and thoughts lead to an ideology of social renovation through universal love, and of gradual political reform through organic change.¹⁰² Euthanasia's love of independence on a personal basis, however, has important political implications. In the course of the novel it becomes clear that Euthanasia identifies herself with Valperga, and that this small democratic and peaceful state mirrors the evolution of Euthanasia's individuality. At the beginning of the novel, Valperga is presented as a well-defined political entity which distinguishes itself for its peaceful, democratic and liberal government. Valperga's 'feminine' political identity is clearly in opposition to Castruccio's imperialistic de-personification and acquisition of other states. In this way, Shelley constructs an interesting parallelism between the formation of individual identity and state identity. The analogy can easily be extended to national identity. Euthanasia's utopian project would be to extend Valperga's form of government to Italy, so as to create a united nation under the guidance of republican, liberal and democratic ideals. Thus, Italy would no longer be a scattered and fragmented nation but a well-defined national entity. In other words, Valperga represents what Italy could and should be: an independent, free and republican nation. The association between

¹⁰⁰ Mary Shelley, *Valperga*, p. 83.

¹⁰¹ Mary Shelley, *Valperga*, pp. 80, 112.

¹⁰² Daniel E. White, 'The God Undeified', p. 7.

Euthanasia's feminine identity and Valperga's political identity becomes even clearer as the novel proceeds towards its conclusion. The fall of Valperga mirrors Euthanasia's loss of independence, and her abandonment of her feminine ideals of progressive and peaceful change in favour of the masculine laws of intrigue. The evolution of Euthanasia and Valperga are actually strictly interconnected. While Euthanasia's principles keep her rooted in liberality and democracy, Valperga prospers; as soon as Euthanasia renounces her values in order to join the conspiracy against Castruccio, Valperga is taken by the imperial army and transformed from an independent and liberal state into a mere province. After Valperga falls, Euthanasia is captured and dies in a shipwreck on her way to exile. Like the lost Valperga, no trace is left of Euthanasia besides the living memory of those who have known her. In a broader political context, Euthanasia's Valperga represents an utopian democratic and republican state, the Italy of the future, when the time will be ready to transform the dream of unity and freedom into reality.

Beatrice, the other major female character in the novel, is clearly a derivative of Stael's *Corinne*. Kari Lokke has observed how the characters of Beatrice and *Corinne* are connected, and how *Corinne* influences *Valperga*.¹⁰³ However, in my opinion, the interaction between the two novels operates also on a political level. Beatrice is, like *Corinne*, an inspired woman, a Cassandra-like figure who enchants people with her words. Like *Corinne*, she is famous for her performances, and she is a source of attraction to many people. However, Beatrice is neither an improvvisatrice, nor a woman of genius, but a prophetess, a woman who receives the words of God and transmits them to the people. Interestingly, although of a religious origin, Beatrice's prophecies have a political meaning. The first time Castruccio meets her, Beatrice is summoned to predict whether his plan of conquest will be successful or not, and to suggest the most suitable time for military enterprise. In particular, the young prophetess is asked

to 'light' Castruccio's political party so as 'success may attend [their] steps'. Instead of spreading the worlds of God, Beatrice's prophecies are tactically directed to the success of a political party over the other.

Beatrice's prophecies are clearly shaped after Corinne's improvisations, with the only difference being that her words are arbitrarily in support of imperialistic purposes and do not encourage Italian unity and freedom in any way. After she feels 'the spirit coming fast upon' her, she asks her countrymen to gather in the church of St. Anna where she will tell people 'in veiled words their moment of deliverance'. The atmosphere and public response of her first prophecy clearly reshape Corinne's spectacular improvisation at the Capitol:

She spoke; her words flowed with rich and persuasive eloquence, and her energetic but graceful action added force to her expressions. She reproached the people for lukewarm faith, careless selfishness, and a want of fervour in the just cause, that stamped them as the slaves of foreigners and tyrants. [...] Every eye was fixed on her,- every countenance changed as hers changed; they wept, they smiled, and at last became transported by her promise of the good that was suddenly to arise, and the joy that would then await the constant of heart.¹⁰⁴

Beatrice's words apparently support freedom and liberty; however, her position, unlike Euthanasia's, is not in favour of universal peace and freedom but is linked to the particularistic interest of her lover, Castruccio. Predictably, the partiality of Beatrice's talents is the main origin of her fall. Once she has become the lover of the tyrannical Castruccio, her fate follows the same parable of Euthanasia and Corinne: she loses her moral and intellectual integrity, along with her talents and prophetic skills. By the end of the novel Beatrice is reduced to a schizophrenic human being, whose identity is fragmented and altered by external circumstances. She dies in the final effort to conquer Castruccio's love. If Euthanasia's dream of a united republican and democratic Italy represents the future, Beatrice's fragmented and confused identity mirrors the fragility and

¹⁰³ Kari Lokke, 'Sibylline Leaves: Mary Shelley's *Valperga* and the Legacy of *Corinne*', ' "Children of Liberty": Idealist Historiography in Stael, Shelley, and Sand'.

¹⁰⁴ Mary Shelley, *Valperga*, p. 154.

vulnerability of contemporary Italy, a country prey to foreign imperialistic forces. This analogy reinforces the a-temporal condition of Italy which Stael and Hemans had suggested. The Italian national identity belongs either to the past or to the future; as a present political entity Italy can only be represented by the frail, deceived and victimised Beatrice.

What is surprising, is the fact that all these different personifications of Italy- Corinne, Euthanasia and Beatrice- are destined to fall and ultimately to die. My interpretation of *Corinne* has suggested that Corinne's fall has important political implications which transcend the pessimistic ending of the novel. Similarly, Euthanasia's sad destiny in *Valperga* needs to be put into context. Critics have interpreted the ending of the novel in different ways. Mellor thinks that *Valperga* emphasizes the inability of women, 'whether as adoring worshippers or active leaders, to influence political events or to translate an ethic of care into historical reality'.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Daniel White records how the ending leaves the novel 'empty of the feminine', destroyed by the public world of dominance and subordination.¹⁰⁶ More optimistically, Kari Lokke suggests that Euthanasia's death with moral and spiritual integrity is 'the most a woman can hope for in a world run by men like Tripalda and Castruccio'.¹⁰⁷ However, the political significance of the ending needs to be interpreted following Euthanasia's historical awareness. Euthanasia's classical education makes her aware of the temporality of any historical moment. Like the Roman republic, every political state follows a parable of power and decadence, including *Valperga* and Italy. The present situation, Euthanasia's approach to history suggests, is only an insignificant moment in the cyclic movement of history, and the precariousness of the Italian political condition would soon develop into a more stable and powerful reality. While she meditates on the ruins of ancient Rome, Euthanasia

¹⁰⁵ Mellor, Anne K., *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (New York: Methuen, 1988), p. 210; see also William D. Brewer, 'Mary Shelley's *Valperga*: the Triumph of Euthanasia's Mind', *European Romantic Review* 5:2 (Winter 1995), 133-148, (p. 144).

¹⁰⁶ Daniel E. White, 'The God Undeified', p. 14.

¹⁰⁷ Kari Lokke, 'Sibylline Leaves', p. 169.

clearly elaborates her thought: 'in my wild enthusiasm I called on the shadows of the departed to converse with me, and to prophesy the fortunes of awakening Italy'.¹⁰⁸ Like the Roman republicans, Euthanasia will converse with the following generations of Italians, and the memory of her experience will inspire other people to endure suffering and to sacrifice their lives in the name of liberty and unity. Following the example of *Corinne*, Euthanasia celebrates the glorious past of Italy, and offers it as a source of national identity and a model to follow:

If time had not shaken the light of poetry and of genius from his wings, all the past would be dark and trackless: now we have a track- the glorious foot marks of the children of liberty; let us imitate them, and like them we may serve as marks in the desert, to attract future passengers to the fountains of life.¹⁰⁹

Nothing is lost in Euthanasia's cyclic historical consciousness and everything has a precise significance, whether in the present or in the future. The countess' s patriotic effort and idealistic philosophy will inspire love for freedom and justice in future generations. As a consequence, Valperga's political parable and Euthanasia's personal story acquire an a-temporal significance and can influence the nineteenth-century political situation. From this perspective, and in Mary Shelley's intention, *Valperga* is not simply a tale of medieval times, but a narrative which has a trans-historical dimension, and which can inspire the present generation of Italians to believe and support the same republican and democratic creed. The story of the small republic of Valperga is only an insignificant point in the line of historical events; the fall of Euthanasia's idealistic politics is therefore only an apparent surrendering to imperialistic and masculine forces, since its significance transcends the narrow temporary delimitations of the story. Aligning herself with Stael and Hemans, Mary Shelley gives her own version of the prophecy of Italian freedom through the experience of Beatrice and Euthanasia. However, she also seems to understand that the time for a

¹⁰⁸ Mary Shelley, *Valperga*, p. 96.

¹⁰⁹ Mary Shelley, *Valperga*, p. 93.

republican, united and independent Italy has not come yet. In *Valperga* Shelley is, in her heroine's point of view, disseminating the seeds of liberty for the Risorgimento.

5.5 Mazzini and the Republican Interlude.

The second part of the Risorgimento was marked by revolutionary activity. The first insurrections started in the 1820s, but it was only in 1848 that the ideology of the Risorgimento came into action with a precise political plan. The first revolutionary movements started in Sicily, then spread to Venice, Milan and other northern towns, and culminated with the creation of a liberal government in Rome, known as the Roman Republic (1848). The revolution was enhanced by the ambiguous behaviour of Pope Pius IX who, first had supported liberalism and reforms, and then refused to help Piedmont in the war against Austria. Though the Roman Republic lasted only a few months and was soon destroyed by the intervention of Louis Napoleon, it symbolised the possibility for Italy to change its present political enslavement and to create a united and republican country.

Mary Shelley's vision of a republican state in Italy was not so far away from reality. As for the small state of Valperga, the life of the Roman Republic was short and precarious; however, it constituted an important example of what the collaboration between ideology and action could achieve. It is interesting to observe how the story of *Valperga* somehow anticipates the events of Italian history. More precisely, Euthanasia's philosophical and political principles are connected with the thoughts and ideology of Giuseppe Mazzini, one of the most well-known supporters of the idea of a united republican Italy.¹¹⁰ Like Shelley's character, Mazzini was an idealist and a republican. Together with Garibaldi, the

man of action, Mazzini represented the ideal of the Risorgimento and the embodiment of patriotic thoughts and actions to the eyes of British intellectuals. In turn, he was deeply influenced by English literature and politics. One of Mazzini's early essays, written in 1830 for *The Monthly Chronicle*, for instance, analyses the relationship between Byron and Italy:

We don't know whether Goethe will enjoy a greater share of our admiration as an artist than Byron, but we know, and we have no hesitation in stating, that Byron will enjoy a greater share of our love as a man and as a poet. It could be said that Byron wished to take upon himself the aspirations, the sufferings, the struggles, the whole load, in order to raise us up- to raise us, his brothers. He never deserted our cause, he never lacked human sympathy. Surrounded by slaves and by oppressors, wandering through countries in which even memory was suppressed, witnessing the progress of the Restorations and the triumph of the principles of the Holy Alliance, he never swerved from his courageous opposition, but maintained, in the face of the world, his faith in the rights of the people, in the ultimate triumph of freedom, and in his duty to promote this by every means in his power, and whenever the opportunity offered.¹¹¹

This passage highlights the connection between British literature and the Italian Risorgimento.¹¹² Mazzini was admired by British intellectuals for his liberal and democratic thought. His international background and his life as an exile in France, Switzerland and Britain gave to his political activity a cosmopolitan imprint. Mazzini's patriotic words: 'the motherland of an Italian is not Rome, nor Florence or Milan; it is Italy as a whole', echoes Stael's nationalist incitement in *Corinne*, and Shelley's republican ideal in *Valperga*.¹¹³ Italian unity is at the centre of Mazzini's thought: 'Italy is called to be a nation and it can create its unity only with its own forces'.¹¹⁴ Like Stael, Hemans and Shelley, he idealised the ancient Roman Republic as an example to imitate; in his opinion, only a 'third Rome' could restore political and moral unity to Italy, after the first great

¹¹⁰ Mary Shelley knew and admired Mazzini's thoughts. She mentions his works and political activity in *Rambles Through Germany and Italy*, pp. 67, 332-33.

¹¹¹ In Giorgio Melchiori, 'Byron and Italy', p. 116.

¹¹² For an extensive analysis of the connection between Italian revolutionaries and British intellectuals see: Harry Rudman, *Italian Nationalism and English Letters*.

¹¹³ In Harry Rudman, *Italian Nationalism and English Letters*, p. 36.

¹¹⁴ Harry Rudman, *Italian Nationalism and English Letters*, p. 84.

Rome of the ancients and the second of the Popes. Following the example of Stael, he tries to reconcile the apparently irreconcilable notions of nationalism and cosmopolitanism in the effort to create positive universal values.¹¹⁵ In Mazzini's thought, the transition between the love of one's country, the elaboration of a national consciousness and the re-vindication of its individuality follows the path from particular to universal. Hence the condemnation of all nationalisms which promote imperialistic conquests at the expense of other countries. At the same time Mazzini's ideology refuses an idea of cosmopolitanism which ignores the individuality of each state.

Mazzini was the most active propagandist of the Risorgimento in Great Britain. After the Italians had mistaken Palmerston and Lord Minto's support of Italian liberty for an encouragement to revolution, the help and support of British intellectuals was ever more desirable. Britain welcomed him as the person who 'went nearest to the heart and true significance of democracy'.¹¹⁶ He wrote articles for *The Westminster Review* and *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* on the events of the Risorgimento and on his ideological thought. Many British intellectuals supported Mazzini's ideas, among whom Jane and Thomas Carlyle, who gave him ideological and material help, along with friendship and hospitality.¹¹⁷ Harriet Martineau met him and was favourably impressed. Elizabeth Browning deeply admired and esteemed Mazzini's ideology. Some women intellectuals, such as Emily Winkworth, do not hesitate to confess their physical attraction to him:

Well, altogether he is simply the most wonderful-looking man I ever saw in my life. He may be any height he likes, he is so thoroughly manly-looking, you do not think of it. Forehead high and cliff-like, with caverns underneath for his eyes; great round temples, with a little scanty black hair straying over them; looks like the sort of man that everybody round

¹¹⁵ See his essay on 'Nationality and Cosmopolitanism' in *The People's Journal* (8 May, 1847), Harry Rudman, *Italian Nationalism and English Letters*, p. 77.

¹¹⁶ Harry Rudman, *Italian Nationalism and English Letters*, p. 106.

¹¹⁷ Harry Rudman, *Italian Nationalism and English Letters*, p. 115. The author illustrates in details the successful reception of Mazzinian thought by British writers and intellectual, especially by women writers.

him can't help obeying; strange colour over his face, sort of grey ashy halo, not like the white or yellow paleness one sees always.¹¹⁸

What seems to be particularly attractive to women is Mazzini's exotic look and manliness. Significantly, the spokesman of Italian liberty has acquired masculine traits in defence of the victimised and feminised Italy. A similar process of gender transition applies to Italy in the works of British writers. More precisely, the image of the country evolves from that of an enslaved and feminised land to a more powerful and active entity. The possibility of an independent and free Italy became step by step a reality which suggested how a passive, fragmented feminised national entity could turn into an active and independent country. Symbolically, the evolution from a passive and dependent land to an energetic and rebellious one, implies important changes in the figuration of Italy. In particular, those women writers who, under the influence of *Corinne*, had chosen Italy as an ideal country for their artistic enterprises find in the Italian political awakening a source of inspiration for their own emancipation from the oppression of patriarchal society. The analogy between the creation of an Italian national identity and the strengthening of women writers' identity becomes particularly significant in Browning's writings on the Risorgimento.

5.6 Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento: the birth of a new nation.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning had already been living in Italy for three years at the time of the composition of the first part of *Casa Guidi Windows*, her most overtly political poem on the Risorgimento.¹¹⁹ Browning was a strong supporter of the 1848 revolution, and her ideological involvement in the cause of Italian

¹¹⁸ In Harry Rudman, *Italian Nationalism and English Letters*, p. 91.

¹¹⁹ For a detailed biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning see: Angela Leighton, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (Brighton: Harvester, 1986); see also, Deborah Phelps, " 'At the roadside of humanity': Elizabeth Barrett Browning Abroad", in *Creditable Warriors: 1830-1876*, ed. by Michael Cotsell (London: Ashfield Press, 1990), pp. 225-242.

independence was constant throughout her literary production.¹²⁰ In her writings she communicated her enthusiasm for the idea of a free and united Italy, and the failure of 1848 was the cause of disappointment for her. Numerous critics have noted how Browning's enthusiasm for the cause of freedom and national unity had personal implications. Dorothy Mermin, for example, notices that Browning found in Italy most of all freedom from the patriarchal oppressive environment in which she lived in London; the author observes how the Italian struggle for independence was 'her own Risorgimento', the beginning of a new life as a writer, wife and mother.¹²¹ Sandra Gilbert was the first to suggest the analogy between Browning's consolidation of her own identity as a woman writer and the creation of a united Italian political identity. In particular, Gilbert argues that the poet 'revises and revitalises the dead metaphor of gender' through the use of Italy as an ideal mother country and through the transformation of it 'from a political state to a female state of mind'.¹²² More recently, Jean Hoffman Lewis and Flavia Alaya have suggested a similar interpretation. They argue that Browning 'had changed her motherland into Italy', and that Italy's struggle for liberty corresponded to 'her own struggle as a woman and as a poet'.¹²³ With regard to *Casa Guidi Windows*, Steve Dillon and Katherine Frank describes it as 'history in the making', while Helen Groth and Isobel Armstrong prefer to focus on the complex aesthetic construction of the poem.¹²⁴ On the other hand, Esther Schor and Richard Cronin tend to approach the poem mainly as a political text,

¹²⁰ See in particular: *Poems Before Congress* (1860) and *Last Poems* (1862).

¹²¹ Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 164.

¹²² Sandra Gilbert, 'From *Patria* to *Matria*: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento', *PMLA* 99 (1984), 194-209 (p.196).

¹²³ Jean Hoffman Lewis, 'Casa Guidi Windows: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's aesthetic struggle', *Victorian Institute Journal* 25 (1997), 159-176 (p. 161); Flavia Alaya, 'The Ring, the Rescue, and the Risorgimento: Reunifying the Browning's Italy', in *Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. by Sandra Donaldson (New York: G.K Hall, 1999), pp. 43-69, (p. 47).

¹²⁴ Steve Dillon and Katherine Frank, 'Defenestration of the Eye: Flow, Fire, and Sacrifice in *Casa Guidi Windows*', *Victorian Poetry* 35:4 (Winter 1997), 471-492; Helen Groth, 'A different look-visual technologies and the making of history in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Casa Guidi Windows*', *Textual Practice* 14:1 (Spring 2000), 31-52; Isobel Armstrong, 'Casa Guidi Windows: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Italy, and the Poetry of Citizenship', in *Unfolding the South: Nineteenth-Century*

in which the author enhances a 're-definition of citizenship not as a state but as a process', and more precisely as an 'unending process of negotiation by means of which the individual defines and re-defines its place within the body politics'.¹²⁵ Cronin argues that *Casa Guidi Windows* is more a civic poem than a personal construction of identity, and observes how 'it suggests that civil society comes into being, like the poem itself', by negotiating the claim of the individuals and the claims of the state.¹²⁶ As a matter of fact, Browning clearly explains the nature of the poem in her 'Advertisement to the First Edition':

It is a simple story of personal impressions, whose only value is in the intensity with which they were received, as proving her warm affection for a beautiful and unfortunate country, and the sincerity with which they are related, as indicating her own good faith and freedom from partisanship.¹²⁷

Personal and political intermingle in the construction of the poem in a way that, as the poet explains, the political becomes personal and vice versa. The poem is an emotional rendering of the process of history, it relates the feelings and impressions connected with the making of a free and united nation, which Browning follows with a precise knowledge of historical facts and with patriotic support. At the same time, the poem mirrors her personal choices and evolution as a poet.

As the previous chapter has demonstrated, Browning was a fervent reader of Stael's *Corinne*. She had internalised the novel to such an extent that she had chosen, like the novel's heroine, Italy as her adoptive land and Italians as people with whom to share her life and her poetic talents. In a sense, in *Casa Guidi Windows*, Browning re-writes her own version of *Corinne's* improvisation at

British Women Writers and Artists in Italy, ed. by Alison Chapman and Jane Stabler (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 51-69.

¹²⁵ Esther Schor, 'The Poetics of Politics: Barrett Browning's *Casa Guidi Windows*', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 17 (1998), 305-324; Richard Cronin, 'Casa Guidi Windows: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Italy and the poetry of citizenship', in *Unfolding the South*, pp. 35-50; Richard Cronin, *Romantic Victorians: English Literature, 1824-1840* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 184.

¹²⁶ Richard Cronin, *Romantic Victorians*, pp. 184-185.

¹²⁷ *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Smith, Elder, & co, 1897), p. 322.

the Capitol, in the voice of a woman poet who has chosen Italy as an ideal land for poetic expression, and who wants to see it as a united and free nation. It is interesting to observe how, after only few years of residence in Italy, she refers to herself as Italian in her letters and diary: 'Oh, we Italians grow out of English bark; it won't hold us after a time'.¹²⁸ In spite of Robert Browning's disagreement, she wanted to bring up her only child as an Italian, following Italian education, culture, language and customs; she records in her letters how 'there's an inclination in me to turn round with my Penini and say "I am an Italian"'.¹²⁹ Browning's process of identification with Italian people reaches its apex with her ardent support of the Risorgimento. Henry James commented how Browning's 'feverish obsession' for the Risorgimento, was utterly out of any sense of proportion and how, at the end, it became a 'possession' that 'rode her to death'.¹³⁰ Without taking James' extreme position, we need, however, to acknowledge that Browning's *Casa Guidi Windows* is the ultimate expression of women writers' ideological support for the Italian fight for independence and that, this support, had an important symbolic significance for the development and consolidation of women writers' identity.

One of the most important aspects that differentiates *Casa Guidi Windows* from the other works that this chapter considers, is the evolution of Italy from a metaphorical construction to a political reality, with precise geographical boundaries and cultural unity. The complex and apparently disorganised structure of the poem reflects the chaotic emergence of Italy as a country with a distinctive political identity and, at the same time, the evolution of Browning as a poet, a woman and a mother. Browning consciously uses the interconnection between personal and political to create an amalgamation of individual identity and political entity which connects the poem to Stael's novel, particularly to

¹²⁸ *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, ed. Frederick G. Kenyon, 2 vols. (London: 1897); vol II, p. 197, my emphasis.

¹²⁹ *The Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, vol. II, pp. 180-181.

¹³⁰ In Frederick Wegener, 'Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Italian Independence, and the 'Critical Reaction' of Henry James', *SEL* 37:4 (Autumn 1997), 741-761.

Corinne's identification with Italy. As the anonymous reviewer of *The Athenaeum* comments in June 1851, the apparent disorder of the poem mirrors the poet's emotional involvement in the Risorgimento:

Though fraught with the spirit of English strength and insight, [the verses] are Italian in their style. Fervid, unrestrained, and imaginative, they might have been delivered by an improvisatore in a Florentine thoroughfare to an audience of his countrymen. Nor are they, it must be said, free from those defects which belong to such impromptu inspirations.¹³¹

Interestingly, Browning's poetic outpouring of thoughts and emotions is associated with improvisation. This association reinforces Browning's link with *Corinne*. In particular, the anonymous reviewer seems to suggest, Browning has taken on the legacy of the Italian improvvisatrice and her work emulates Corinne's poetic skills and political engagement. The same reviewer reproaches Browning for not being able to discern the distance 'between object perceived by the senses and objects as interpreted by the mind'; in other words, she lacks 'that one-sided tranquillity which is built on the sacrifice of the weak'.¹³² The fact that Browning did not align with the tradition that viewed Italy as a weak and passive country is clear in the poem.

The first part of *Casa Guidi Window* is a detailed political analysis of the Italian, and especially Florentine, insurrections, while the second part is a meditation on the cause that has made these efforts unsuccessful. Browning is not a partisan of peace, but an enthusiastic supporter of freedom, since 'the apathy of a nation prostrate beneath tyranny [is] a worse evil than the horrors of popular insurrection'.¹³³ Browning directs her 'passionate, vigorous and true' protest not only against the tyrannical oppressors of Italy, but also against those who continue to identify Italy with Filicaja's image of an 'enchained' country, a

¹³¹ *The Athenaeum*, (7 June, 1851), p. 597.

¹³² *The Athenaeum*, p. 597.

¹³³ *The Athenaeum*, p. 597.

'widow of empires', whose beauty is the primary cause of its slavery.¹³⁴ The transition from slavery to political activism brings about an important change in the poetic figuration of Italy. The image of Italy that Browning suggests, in fact, is very different from the victimised, passive and vulnerable feminised land. In the poem Italy appears as an energetic and powerful national entity. The new Italy is no longer the one that Filicaja had sung, the 'less fair, less wretched' country, but a newly re-vitalised Italy. The poet's initial association between herself and the Italian child singing 'O bella libert ' symbolically implies the beginning of a new era, which celebrates a new image of Italy. Browning clearly prefers to connect her poetry with 'the hopeful child' who 'sings open-eyed for liberty's sweet sake'; she prefers 'to sing with these who are awake, with birds, with babes, with men who will not fear', than 'join those old thin voices with my new'.¹³⁵ In Browning's opinion, the new Italy is not only able to defend itself against new oppressors; it is also able to react against the present situation and to reject the imperialistic control of foreign nations. The poet witnesses with joy, 'the first torch of Italian freedom, lit to toss in the next tiger's face who should approach too near them in a greedy fit'; this is 'the first pulse of an even flow of blood to prove the level of Italian veins towards rights perceived and granted'.¹³⁶ Against this tiger-like violence of the foreign tyrant, Italy is now able to react with the strength of a lion:

Will, therefore, to be strong, thou Italy!
 Will to be noble! Austrian Matternich
 Can fix no yoke unless the neck agree;
 And thine is like the lion's when the thick
 Dews shudder from it, and no man would be
 The stroker of his mane, much less would prick
 His nostrils with a reed. When nations roar
 Like lions, who shall tame them and defraud
 Of the due pasture by the river-shore?
 Roar therefore! Shake your dewlaps dry abroad[...]¹³⁷

¹³⁴ *Casa Guidi Windows*, Part I, lines 21, 24; *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 323.

¹³⁵ *Casa Guidi Windows*, Part I, lines 152-162.

¹³⁶ *Casa Guidi Windows*, Part I, lines 465-469.

¹³⁷ *Casa Guidi Windows*, Part I, lines 661-673.

The image of Italy as a powerful lion who can defend itself from the oppressor, attack the enemy with force, and even regain national unity and independence, is clearly different from the traditional idea of a victimised country.

The Italian Risorgimento is no more a distant and uncertain event; it is now a present reality that the poet can witness and support from the safe outpost of Casa Guidi. In contrast to the a-temporal condition of Italy that had emerged in Stael and Hemans' texts, in *Casa Guidi Windows*, Italy is no longer a temporally imprecise political entity, suspended between past and future; rather, the present is its new temporal dimension. Italy can finally be proud of its present condition and of the Italians' concrete and systematic efforts to regain glory and independence. From this perspective, the poem is a celebration of present Italy and a rejection of the immobility of the past: 'O Dead, ye shall no longer cling to us/ With rigid hands of desiccating praise,/ And drag us backward by the garment thus,/ To stand and laud you in long-drawn virelays!¹³⁸ The new generation of Italians, 'will not henceforth be oblivious' of the present, simply because of the past glory; on the contrary, though they acknowledge the greatness of their ancestors, they look forward to their own glory which they are now preparing: 'We thank you that ye first unlatched the door, but will not make it inaccessible/ By thankings on the threshold any more'.¹³⁹ The 'great Hereafter in this Now' is the new temporal dimension of Italy, a country that is in the process of creating a new and powerful political identity.

The image of Italy that Browning proposes in Part I of *Casa Guidi Windows* involves a process of masculinisation of the country. If until 1848 the common idea of Italy was that of a feminised, passive and vulnerable country, the first concrete efforts to redeem Italy from its political enslavement, brings about a more masculine, active and powerful image of it. This transition has important implications for British women writers. More specifically, the

association between Italy and women artists that Stael had first suggested evolves considerably in Browning's poem. At the end of Stael's novel, in fact, Corinne is reduced to the same hopeless and death-like condition of the country she represents. Similarly, the story of Euthanasia and Beatrice follows the same parable: from power to fragmentation and finally to death. Browning, on the contrary, suggests a very different development. The first part of the poem records an evolution which transforms Italy from a passive, fragmented country to a powerful, united entity. Symbolically, Italy's momentary emancipation brings about the resuscitation of Corinne. The liberation of Italy from foreign oppression and the restoration of its original unity, imply the emancipation of the woman of genius from the patriarchal society that had destroyed her. Like Italy, Corinne can resuscitate and change her fate from one of suffering and death to one of everlasting success, strength and power. In other words, in *Casa Guidi Windows*, Browning represents a successful woman poet who can utterly identify with a lively and powerful Italy, thus resolving the clash between poetic success and political decadence so evident in *Corinne*. Italy and the woman of genius can finally follow the same successful trajectory, and gain emancipation respectively from the foreign oppressor and the suffocating patriarchal society.

In the second part of the poem, Browning gives her own interpretations of the failure of Italian revolutionary efforts. Browning's blame is mainly directed at the deceitful attitude of Louis Napoleon and Pope Pius IX, who first seemed to support the revolution, and then turned out to be enemies of unity and independence. The poet also meditates on the lack of organization, and especially on the absence of a great leader who could direct Italy and its random forces. Browning's hope and encouragement have dissolved into a 'dream', and her poem was only an unsuccessful effort to fulfil an 'exultant prophecy'. The failure re-asserts the traditional gender construction which sees Italy and the woman poet as feeble feminised presences in relation to masculine, oppressive

¹³⁸ *Casa Guidi Windows*, Part I, lines 230-233.

powers. Browning asks 'absolution' for her 'woman's fault that ever [she] believed the man was true!'.¹⁴⁰ Browning shares her 'feminine' disappointment with all those Italians who had hoped in the help of the 'masculine' powers of Louis Napoleon and the Pope. The redemption of Italy has been brief and precarious, destroyed by the deceptive attitude of foreign imperialistic powers. Italy is again reduced to a victimised and enslaved country and the image of an effeminate land deceived by masculine power accompanies Italy's republican defeat.

Interestingly, Browning's reaction to the re-emasculinisation of Italy is the liberation of her femininity in the form of maternal imagery. As Dorothy Mermin reminds us, the most important event in the poet's life between the writing of the first part and the composition of the second had been the birth of her only son, Pen.¹⁴¹ The second part of *Casa Guidi Windows* reflects Browning's maternal experience. In spite of the dominant tone of disappointment, in fact, the poem is dominated by images of maternity and birth. If in the first part, the Italian nation was symbolically represented by the lively child singing 'O bella libertà', the status of Italy has now regressed to a sleeping child, symbolised by Browning's own infant child, who needs not to be awakened by unnecessary noises of war and revolution. The involution from a young active nation to a post-natal, undetermined and self-less infant re-establishes Italy as a victimised and dependent country. Italy is also symbolically associated with Anita, the wife of the famous officer Garibaldi, who died while following her husband in war. Her life,

Outfaced the whistling shot and hissing waves,
Until she felt her little babe unborn
Recoil, within her, from the violent staves
And bloodhounds of the world, -at which, her life
Dropt inwards from her eyes and followed it
Beyond the hunters. Garibaldi's wife

¹³⁹ *Casa Guidi Windows*, Part I, lines 237-239.

¹⁴⁰ *Casa Guidi Windows*, Part II, lines 64-65.

¹⁴¹ Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: the Origins of a New Poetry*, p. 171.

And child died so. And now, the seaweeds fit
Her body, like a proper shroud and coif,
And murmuringly the ebbing waters grit
The little pebbles while she lies interred
In the sea-sand.¹⁴²

Like Anita's unborn child, the Italian revolution has been an abortive effort, and has been destroyed under the insensitive imperialism of foreign powers. However, as the conclusion of the poem seems to suggest, after this unsuccessful attempt, new revolutionary lives are already moving: 'new springs of life are gushing everywhere/ To cleanse the watercourses, and prevent all concrete obstructions which infest the air!/ That earth's alive, and gentle or ungentle/ Motions within her, signify but growth!'.¹⁴³ In this metaphor, Italy is the maternal womb that nurtures new revolutionary forces. Despite the failure of the first revolutionary efforts, the Italian nation is a nurturing and alive entity, though only in a foetal stage. The final message of *Casa Guidi Windows* is, after all, one of hope and faith. Like Browning's smiling infant, Italy will grow into an adult nation, politically free, united and culturally distinctive.

In *Casa Guidi Windows*, Browning suggests a new idea of Italy and its feminised national identity, one which replaces passivity and vulnerability with vitality and energy. At the same time, she presents herself as a post-Romantic woman poet, whose poetic voice is dynamic and politically engaged. For the two terms of this long lasting analogy, Italy and women poets, the result is a mitigation of gender distinction. In light of this, the traditional strict boundary of femininity becomes more malleable and can embrace fields such as politics, war and nationalism traditionally associated with the masculine. Like Italy, women poets can conquer a cohesive and united artistic identity; their emancipation from the oppression of patriarchal society mirrors Italy's emancipation from foreign dominion. As Browning's successful life as a woman poet seems to

¹⁴² *Casa Guidi Windows*, Part II, lines 679-688.

¹⁴³ *Casa Guidi Windows*, Part II, lines 762-766.

suggest, Italy's recovery of its lost unity and freedom ultimately coincides with Corinne's resurrection as a famous and independent woman poet.

Conclusion

"Now give us lands where the olives grow",
Cried the North to the South,
"Where the sun with a golden mouth can blow
Blue bubbles of grapes down a vineyard-row"
Cried the North to the South.¹

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's last poem 'The North and the South', written in Rome in May 1861, only a few months before her death, represents an exemplary conclusion to this thesis. In the poem Browning represents the north and the south as two antithetical but also complementary geographical and cultural realities. The north and the south appear both as independent and distinctive entities; however, the poem celebrates the need of a mutual collaboration and the necessity of integration. In particular, the dialogical construction of the poem epitomises the importance of surpassing the oppositional construction of north and south.

Barrett Browning's poem explains how only thanks to an integration of northern and southern elements can art and culture achieve perfection. Otherness is not the source of division, but rather of fascination. In 'The North and the South', Browning beautifully summarises the main concern of her production. It is a poem in process, oscillating the voices of north and south and creating poetry in the space in between. This is poetry of representation, performing its call for rapprochement. The North needs the South to overcome its limits. It needs a sunny climate and a sensuous nature to compensate its cold and rainy weather, and to stimulate the imagination of its people. At the same time, the South needs the North:

"Now give us men from the sunless plain",
Cried the South to the North,
"By need of work in the snow and the rain,

¹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'The North and the South', *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1897), p. 551.

Made strong, and brave by familiar pain!"
Cried the South to the North.²

The North and the South are different, almost oppositional in their characterisations. However, the poem symbolises the need of mutual understanding and respect. Only through a reciprocal collaboration, Browning seems to suggest, can artificial boundaries be overcome. Browning's message of integration extends to other social and cultural fields. In the following stanza, the physical and natural cooperation is turned into a religious and artistic need of compensation:

"Give lucider hills and intenser seas",
Said the North to the South,
"Since ever by symbols and bright degrees
Art, childlike, climbs to the dear Lord's knees"
Said the North to the South.
"Give strenuous souls for belief and prayer"
Said the South to the North,
"That stand in the dark on the lowest stair,
While affirming of God, 'He is certainly there,'"
Said the South to the North.³

If the South can give the North its bright skies and its artistic flourishing, the North can contribute with a steady morality and a simple religious belief. Browning suggests that the Catholic magnificent celebration of God through the works of art, needs to be integrated with humble and pure Protestant worship and vice versa.

Browning's urge for collaboration culminates in the celebration of literary interaction. After stressing the importance of geographical, religious and cultural interaction, the poet meditates on the role of artistic, and particularly poetical, collaboration. The North sighs for the South's 'flowers that blaze and trees that aspire', for its 'insects made of a song or a fire!'; but the South asks the North for 'a poet's tongue of baptismal flame, To call the tree or the flower by its name!'. Significantly, in Browning's poem, the South needs northern poets to celebrate its natural and artistic beauty. More precisely, the South needs and wants to be interpreted by Northern imagination. Browning's long stay in Italy and her poetic

² Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'The North and the South', p. 551.

productions are clear answers to the plea of the South. She lived in the country for several years until her death in 1861. The Italian landscape, society, culture and politics are the main subjects of her works. Italy remained for her an inspirational country, the reality that awakened and kept alive her poetic imagination.

The interpretation of the south by northern imagination has also been the main subject of this thesis. More specifically, the reading of southern geography, culture and society by northern authors is at the origin of a considerable part of the literary production of the Romantic Age. The majority of Romantic authors became engaged in the debate on the differences and similarities between north and south, which dominated British culture at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Some of these authors have been examined in this thesis in order to show the importance of this cultural and literary collaboration; however the authors analysed represent only a small portion of a wide phenomenon.

The development of the thesis follows a similar trajectory to Browning's 'The North and the South'. As a matter of fact, the initial frame had set the relationship between north and south as oppositional. However, in the course of the analysis, it has clearly emerged how this relationship is mostly based on the need to communicate and interact. The curiosity and the urge to discover an alien and apparently 'other' reality dominate British literary production about Italy. The writings selected have also demonstrated how the north/south dichotomy is simply a geographical and cultural construction. In point of fact, the major concern of Romantic writers is not to reinforce or perpetrate this opposition; on the contrary, one of their primary aims is to overcome those national and cultural boundaries that are artificially constructed. In this way, it is not division that predominates in the fictional rendering of Italy by British Romantics, but rather the need of interaction and cooperation.

As it has clearly emerged in the course of the thesis, the confrontation between south and north, and specifically between Italy and Great Britain, brings

³ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'The North and the South'; p. 551.

about important implications for the construction of national and cultural identity. The encounter between otherness and familiarity is at the origin of a process of re-discussion and re-definition of the concept of national identity. Byron's letter to John Murray quoted as epigraph to the introduction clearly exemplifies the 'otherness' of Italy, in terms of social, religious and cultural customs. In his writings, Byron presents himself as a sort of bridge between north and south, Britain and Italy. His role as interpreter of otherness is the consequence of his ability to step outside any pre-conceived construction of national identity. The rejection of national and cultural stereotypes is at the origin of Byron's ability to re-invent himself in terms of otherness, that is to re-define his national identity in accordance with another clime, culture and society. Similarly, Browning's need to escape the British construction of national identity is an important element at the origin of her choice to re-invent herself as Italian, in terms of political, literary and cultural characterisations. In this way Italy and Italianess are not simply the sources of difference and confrontation; more importantly they represent the need of British authors to 'differentiate' themselves from the average aristocratic and bourgeois definition of Britishness. For Browning, the re-location to Italy represented an escape from the pre-defined idea of British femininity and a possibility to create a new feminine identity. Significantly, the two authors frame the historical margins of the Romantic interest in Italian culture, society and politics.

In the rendering of Italy in British literature, as the Introduction anticipated, the mingling of real and imaginary constitutes a fundamental aspect. As an exotic locale, in fact, Italy is often represented in terms of an imaginary country the reality of which is filtered through the imagination. These two levels of characterisation, the real and imaginary, have emerged as fundamental for the figuration of Italy in the different literary genres analysed in this thesis. In the representation of the Italian landscape, as chapter one has demonstrated, the real and imaginary coexist. In particular, in the works of the authors considered, the

actual and the symbolic merge in landscape representation. The experience of the Alps has clearly highlighted how imaginary expectations mingle in the mind of the traveller with the real image of Italy. The symbolic as another level of significance, beyond the actual reality is an important part of the travellers' interpretation of the Italian landscape. In this way, the symbolic becomes the doorstep to the real and vice versa. Italy as a real country is complementary to the imaginary rendering of it in the mind of British authors.

Imagination is also the key element for the representation of Italy in Gothic literature, as chapter two has amply discussed. Filtered through the imagination of those authors who never travelled to the country, Italy appears as an alien, artificial and hostile reality. However, the stereotypical otherness of Italy in Gothic literature suggests not only an implicit fascination for this alien society but, most interestingly, reveals an hidden willingness to find elements of similarity. The importance of the re-discovery of a common European and Christian origin demonstrates the need to construct a dialogical relation between apparently opposite realities.

In a similar way, the imaginary and the real collaborate to the creation of a utopian country, a symbolic literary territory where women can finally be free to express themselves and to obtain artistic merits. More precisely, as chapter three discussed, the imaginary world of love and poetry that the Petrarchan tradition popularised, becomes for Romantic women poets the instrument through which they can assert their poetic identity and be recognised as important contributors to the literary production of the time. As a matter of fact, the Petrarchan abstract world of love and feelings is adapted and modified by women poets in order to give voice to their 'real' sense of displacement in the British poetic tradition.

In chapter four, the reality of Italy is again absorbed by British imagination in order to denounce women's position in society and culture. As a consequence, Improvisation as a real and widespread phenomenon in eighteenth-and nineteenth-century Italian society, becomes in British literature the symbol of women's artistic

ambitions. In the works of women writers, Italy becomes the geographical and cultural space on which to project their artistic ambitions.

From a political perspective, as chapter five has discussed, the dream of Italy as a free and united country is in opposition with the reality of its oppression and enslavement. However, when the dream of liberty progressively becomes a reality through the persistence of revolutionary movements, women writers envision their own emancipation from social and political oppression. As a free and independent state Italy comes to represent women's possibility to overcome the political, cultural and social limits imposed on them, and to finally create a nation which can guarantee democracy and freedom for all its members.

The co-existence of real and imaginary in the representations of Italy in British Romantic literature helps to depict the country as the symbol of an alternative reality to the British one. Italy appears as a country that women can create, mould and adjust to their own needs for emancipation. From this point of view, the gender characterisation of Italy plays a crucial role in the fictional representations of the country. The thesis has clearly demonstrated how the emasculation of Italy stands in opposition to the figuration of Great Britain as an increasingly strong, powerful and masculine country. The opposition between north and south is thus strengthened by the gender dichotomy. As a consequence, the figuration of Italy as a feminised political, social and cultural entity gives women writers the possibility of exploiting it for advancing their own cause of freedom.

However, as it has progressively emerged from the analysis, the effort to establish a connection between north and south, is common also to their gender characterisations. The result is the creation of gender hybrids which suggest a re-consideration of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century gender stereotypes. In particular, as the second and fourth chapters have discussed, the movement from north to south involves a re-definition of male and female roles in culture and society. Women's journey from north to south enhances an important revision of their position in British patriarchal society. In most cases, British heroines

transposed into Italian soil become independent, self-sufficient and artistically creative women. In the imaginary figuration of the south, Italy becomes for women the geographical and cultural space for their emancipation.

The gender characterisation of Italy also explains women's engagement in Italian politics. As the last chapter has discussed, the fight for political freedom is symbolically associated with women's struggle for political and social rights. British women writers saw in the Italian effort to free itself from foreign dominion their own campaign for equality. The ideological involvement in the events of the Risorgimento, however, has also important political implications. As chapter four and five discussed, British interest in Italian politics is part of an important debate on the limits of national belonging that had been predominant in British culture since the second half of the eighteenth century. The debate on the importance of re-discussing one's national belonging and of embracing the modern concept of cosmopolitanism is at the origin of women's active engagement in the Risorgimento. The destruction of national barriers in favour of international exchange and communication becomes the new rule in terms of political activism. The choice to support the Italian fight for independence, therefore, is the result of the growing of political consciousness in nineteenth-century intellectual women. The final outcome is the flourishing of patriotic works in support of the liberation of an oppressed country which had long been associated with the female condition. Gender is connected with politics in a way that stresses the link between private and public, between individual emancipation and state freedom.

Another important aspect that has emerged in the course of the thesis is the configuration of British Romanticism as a cultural hybrid movement. The focus on the contrastive structure of Romantic texts, which discuss the tension between familiarity and otherness, has highlighted the multicultural matrix of British Romanticism. The absorption of foreign elements and their adaptation to British literature is a fundamental component of British Romanticism, one that has rarely been taken into consideration by modern criticism. The result of this assimilation of

foreign elements is a re-discussion of Britishness in a way that sometimes strengthens and sometimes weakens the attachment to the British nation. In the case of women writers, in particular, the outcome of this debate on otherness and familiarity is a more or less direct critique of the role that British society allows to women. As the introduction anticipated, Bhabha's link between a literature of emancipation and multiculturalism has proved to be especially true in the case of Romantic women writers. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works by women bear the evidence of women's marginalisation and their effort to gain social, cultural and political respectability. From this perspective, women's assimilation of Italian elements in their writings implies a re-evaluation of British culture and society and reveals an impending need of change. Italy, therefore, becomes an imaginary space for national confrontation and for social and political improvement. As this thesis has demonstrated, however, the use of Italy in the main Romantic literary genres is not only functional to women's emancipation; it also uncovers a deep fascination with the literature, culture and traditions of southern Europe.

Finally, this work wants to reveal the importance and the significance of the use of foreign elements in Romantic texts; it also intends to demonstrate the potential of a comparative analysis of British Romanticism. In modern criticism the use of foreign cultures and customs is often assimilated with the Romantic tendency to exoticise 'otherness'. However, this is not always true. On the contrary, the investigation of the role of Italy in British Romanticism has revealed how the fascination with the south is often the result of an interest in its culture and society and a deep knowledge of its history and literature. Thus, for future critical research, we may want to consider that the majority of Romantic authors had a large knowledge of European literature and that the absorption of foreign elements in their works was a conscious and strategic choice that carried political and social implications.

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