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*Literature, Social Engagement and Civil  
Commitment in the Italian Press of the  
18th and 19th Centuries*

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Francesca Bianco, University of Padua  
Andrea Penso, Vrije Universiteit Brussel

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## Introduction

Francesca Bianco – University of Padua

Andrea Penso – Vrije Universiteit Brussel

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## Introduction

Francesca BIANCO  
University of Padua

Andrea PENSO  
Vrije Universiteit Brussel

Among the aspects that most characterized the dense cultural, social and political *milieu* of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, the experience of magazines and reviews stands out as one of the most significant. Normally considered as a second-level circle if compared to elite cenacles connected to the *salotti*, in which the most prominent local and international intellectuals participated, the reviews represent a cultural phenomenon that explodes in all its potential during this period, with a qualitative leap that occurs from the second half of the eighteenth century. The periodicals panorama returns an almost plethoric image of sheets, gazettes, women's magazines, militant newspapers, literary newspapers, local and cultural chronicles that do not yet build on an organic structure, and that are hinged within a framework open to a wider audience. The extreme variety of these innumerable experiences makes it difficult to outline single lines of development. Nevertheless, it is possible to pinpoint at least two constant features in the reviews of the time, which assume different relevance according to the historical moment: the consistent presence of debates surrounding literature and the progressive growth of political and civil engagement.

In a perspective that sets itself the goal of dissemination for educational purposes, cultural orientation and organization of consensus, the topics discussed in the periodical press acquire a decisive value: the debates sparked by literature, in all its forms, were often bent for purposes that went beyond the mere goal of artistic hedonism, and rather became an indicator of the crucial political changes that were occurring in the peninsula at the time.

The picture emerging from the Italian periodical press of the time is therefore complex and far from uniform. In the filigree, it is possible to read the representation of a society that was becoming more open to new cultural issues, and progressively permeated by a participatory spirit, sparked by the mutated socio-political objectives that culminated in the Risorgimento and the unification. The severe censorship interfered heavily with the editorial policies and the publications, but ultimately failed to stop the evolution of the political and social climate. Newspapers bear witness to the redefinition of the role of culture, which was becoming more and more engaged in

the political scene, and was heading in the direction of epochal changes in which literature, with its eclecticism, played a decisive role.

This thematic issue aims at describing some of the crucial moments and figures that played important roles in the development of the periodical press across two very dynamic centuries, from a cultural and political point of view. The starting point of the enquiry is the second half of the Eighteenth century. At this epoch newspapers undergo a process of radical transformation: a renewed relationship with the public, which has now become more attentive and critical thanks to an improved educational system, allowed greater political involvement and an opening to wider, more international subjects. Periodicals were also able to specialize on certain topics, such as theater, economics and medicine, which in most cases contributed to the education of the public and society at large, building on the ideals of the *encyclopédistes*.

Within this context, the long-lasting Venetian print industry, traditionally cosmopolitan from a philosophical and linguistic point of view, stands out for its independence and openness to new cultural demands on a multidisciplinary level, despite having already lost its editorial hegemony during the Counter-Reformation era. In the lagoon city numerous publishing experiences were flourishing, with the most prominent being the newspapers edited by Domenico Caminer and especially by his daughter Elisabetta in the second half of the Eighteenth century. The latter is considered the first female journalist in Italy and was able to find her own individuality within the theatrical sphere, using dramaturgical pieces as instruments to educate the public, embracing a tradition that has its constitutive roots up to classical antiquity. It is an era of great revolutions for Venetian (and Italian) theatre, which heralds much greater social changes. The Goldonian reform coexists with the reflections on the unhinging of Aristotelian units, especially for what concerns the disruption of the founding cornerstones of plot construction. The *bourgeoisie* starts occupying significant space in the tragic *larmoyante* genre, and the stages host numerous *mises en scène* resulting from as many translations of foreign works and new ways of organizing and rethinking theatrical performances.

With the advent of the French Revolution and the international conflicts that characterize the late Eighteenth century, the *res publica literarum* leaves room for a more markedly political-civil inspiration. The context favors the ‘maturation’ of the newspapers from a political perspective. Thanks to the larger size of the public, which was now also socially more variegated, the importance attributed to the periodical press grows and the professional category of the *journalist* emerges. This parenthesis of effervescent freedom, however, is soon destroyed by Napoleon’s government, which stifles all voices of dissent: even the official newspapers, that is, those that enjoy the ‘privilege’ of publishing news and articles, like the numerous city gazettes, must censor

everything related to the political debate, favoring instead a deeper engagement towards the so-called literary journalism. The formal objective is the re-discovery of good literary studies neglected during the Revolution, which underlies the precise desire to manipulate public opinion by distracting it from internal and international current affairs. A relentless praise of power is accompanied in the journals by news from abroad, which are disseminated prudently even when they are eminently literary, and especially when they come from England, as in the case of news concerning one of its symbolic novelists at that time, namely Walter Scott (see below). Magazines are therefore forced to appear as neutral places of pastime: in their pages the most varied topics are welcomed and for the most part they copy foreign models, especially French newspapers; these, in turn, also act as mediators of news from across the Channel, confirming the role played by France since the early Eighteenth century in the cultural interaction between England and Italy.

However, despite the persistent harassment from the censorship, the periodical press has now become an unstoppable mass phenomenon: after the Bonaparte regime, the demand for information from the public opinion was still very strong and the periodicals, although limited within the framework of the reigning institutions and still pressured by state censorship, became instruments of political and civil combat. The commitment in this direction was deeply felt by the journalists all over the peninsula, and their language became a powerful instrument to engage with the public on two levels. On the one hand, it showed formally and politically orthodox attitudes to please the censors; on the other, it was possible to read unmistakable signs of a declared war against them between the lines. In fact, the texts started to convey vague and allusive hints in a continuous skirmish that challenged the severity of the censors and that could potentially lead those who collaborated with these journals to dangerous situations.

For these reasons, pseudonyms started to appear more and more regularly, together with particular communicative codes that writers adopted to transmit sensitive topics to the readers. Yet, despite the difficulties, the proliferation of publications became all the more widespread the more censorship was activated, especially in the Lombardy-Veneto area. For this reason, magazines almost always declared (*de facto* only formally) in their subtitles and *Programmi* that they would not treat political topics, aiming to focus exclusively on ‘scientific-literary’ themes. High-profile intellectual figures, open to moderate and liberal cultural solicitations, are often the main actors of these editorial experiences. It is the case of Padua, for example, where the prestigious university attracted the most prominent intellectuals of the time. In addition, the Venice-Padua axis was known and consolidated since the days of the famous *Giornale de’ letterati d’Italia*, both from an intellectual and a journalistic point of view. Padua became the symbol of the uprisings of 1848, for which the professors and students of the University would eventually pay a very heavy price. The

emerging dissident thought that was progressively growing in the area built on journalistic traditions such as the *Giornale Euganeo*, or the *Caffè Pedrocchi*.

After the Unification in 1861, with the relaxation of government controls, the periodicals began to be much more independent and freer. In this period the newly established government and Parliament settled in Florence until 1870, contributing immensely to the rise of local journalism. The Florentine experience is particularly meaningful, because some relevant women's magazines emerged in a world, that of periodical press, generally monopolized by the presence of publications targeting men. Building on the early experience of some female magazines published especially in Milan during the second half of the Eighteenth century (represented above all by the magazines of the Lampugnani, for instance), Florence started proposing periodicals dedicated to a female audience and sometimes even written by women. Alongside the classic themes of family, fashion, manual work and education is now the advocacy to grant women the possibility to have jobs (even at a younger age) and access to the University, especially for scientific and technical faculties. The political and social commitment of women is therefore aimed first of all at themselves, their space and their future within a new society. The autobiographical and almost didactic stories published in the pages of these periodicals gave voice to important experiences for the cultural construction of a new image of femininity that is confronted with the evolving, modern situation.

Modernity, here understood as gender equality, was still far away on a social level. However, it was slowly starting to flow alongside a renewed intellectual and artistic dynamism that was making Italy the object of particular attention from other countries, primarily France. French cultural mediation, of which the centuries-old *Mercur de France* is a symbol, acts now in reverse, allowing the Italian literary *coté* to filter massively into France. Italian magazines were abandoning their regional horizon and were ready to enter a cosmopolitan and innovative circuit. The restlessness of the avant-garde, for instance, crossing national boundaries and aiming at an international confrontation with other European currents, finds its testimony in the activity and career of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who, like other Italians, was a collaborator of the *Mercur de France*. The Italian and French newspapers no longer quoted each other (or at least not exclusively), as was happening before, but opened their editorial boundaries to new perspectives that reflected the new international cultural order.

Referring to the historical framework briefly outlined in these lines, from which a *fil rouge* that crosses the evolution of Italian journalism cannot be separated, this thematic issue analyzes some of the many crossings occurring between literature, politics and social themes that were animating the variegated Italian journalistic environment across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Through

targeted surveys on magazines, journals and editorial experiences, the articles aim at investigating the specific role played by the journals of the time as platforms where literature, politics and economy and their role in society were discussed on a (almost) daily basis, giving rise to conversations that were not limited to the literary domain.

The first two articles focus on Elisabetta Caminer Turra (1751-1796), one of the most prominent figures in the Venetian cultural milieu of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Caminer Turra is considered the first female journalist in Italy, and her roles as editor, translator and author had a vast impact on the evolution of early editorial experiences towards modern journalistic practices in Italy.

The study by Elena Zilotti, entitled *Journalism and theatre in the Age of Enlightenment: Elisabetta Caminer's Reviews for «L'Europa Letteraria»* investigates the role played by Caminer in spreading and promoting the modern French-style drama in Italy through the journal *L'Europa Letteraria*, which she edited from 1768 to 1773 with her father Domenico. During the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Elisabetta Caminer's journalism played a fundamental part in the cultural exchanges between France and Italy and in the intersections between literature and theatre. With her reviews, Caminer chose to spread a very specific type of dramaturgical works: the bourgeois drama and the *comédie larmoyante*, both of French origins. This kind of dramaturgy attempted to fit into a theatrical context that saw on the one hand the 'practical' theatre where comedies dominated, on the other hand a literary theatre mostly based on tragedies. Elisabetta Caminer introduced to the public some original Italian plays inspired by French theatrical literature. For instance, some authors, such as Francesco Albergati Capacelli and Alessandro Carli, composed and staged "serious" plays, modelled on French *pièces* and on the performing arts system in France. This interconnection between literature and theatre and between Italy and France is examined through the analysis of some of the journalist's reviews. The approach highlights her favourable opinion towards a theatre that becomes more sensitive to civil and moral aspects, and which could nevertheless be effectively staged and performed.

The article *The Enlightened Journalism of Elisabetta Caminer Turra* by Maria Di Maro aims at analysing the structure of the *Giornale Enciclopedico* and the figure of its founder, Elisabetta Caminer. Between the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries, the periodical press was rising in almost all European countries. In the Italian peninsula, numerous periodicals were printed in the Veneto area: their goal was to historicize culture and ideas and become the main voices of political and cultural debate. Among these, the *Giornale enciclopedico* (1774-1782) had peculiar characteristics. Directed by Elisabetta Caminer, *Giornale* spread the literary and scientific innovations of Enlightened Europe in pre-unified Italy. This was an unusual periodical for the contemporary publishing scene both for its female direction and its

editorial configuration: it was created to be a free and independent space for fighting against the principle of authority, the prejudices of the century and freely expressing the ideas of the Enlightenment. From literature to economy, from theology to law, from politics to philosophy, Elisabetta and her collaborators aimed at discussing all fields of knowledge and their mutual influences and overlaps. The journal was a real arena of debates: in this sense, particular attention is paid in the study to the reviews of French and English books, as a very useful source for analyzing the circulation of Enlightenment ideas in Italy and reconstructing the network of contacts created by Caminer and her collaborators. The analysis of the reviews' structure allows to investigate more closely the intersection between journalistic and literary practices. The other focus of the paper is linked to the study of the reflections made by Elisabetta Caminer on the profession of the journalist, from which the key points of her idea of journalism can be derived: rationality of thought and clarity of expression, responsibility for one's own ideas and honesty towards the readers, freedom of thought with consideration of the opinion of others in the intellectual debate.

With the third article by Andrea Penso, entitled *Between Literature and Journalism: The Circulation of Foreign Literary News on the Italian Gazettes of the Early 19<sup>th</sup> century*, the focus switches to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, on the first three decades in particular. In fact, his study analyses the crossings and intersections occurring between literature and journalism in the Italian press of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, by focusing on a particular case study, namely the reception of Walter Scott and his work in the *gazzette* published in Milan, Turin, Parma, Florence and Naples. The choice of Walter Scott as a case study is not arbitrary: a preliminary reading of the corpus of gazettes shows that no other foreign author is mentioned as many times as the Scottish novelist, who received immediate and consistent attention from the press since the very first appearance of his novels in translation (initially in French, and then in Italian). The gazettes are probably the widest source of information about the daily life of the time. Not only did they cover a wide array of topics (from politics to economy, arts and culture), with news coming from many different countries, but they were also made available in cafes and public gathering places, where they were read out loud for the attending people who wanted to be updated with the latest news. Since the beginning of their capillary diffusion in the Italian peninsula, which started in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, gazettes contained also a multitude of articles about the life and works of prominent writers of the time, and were one of the most effective tools for the spreading of knowledge and information. The aim of this article is primarily to analyse the extent of the overlaps and the crossings that tied together the foreign and the Italian press of the time, deepening in particular the understanding of how the Italian gazettes interacted with the British and French press. Secondly, the study demonstrates how this cross-

cultural and polycentric approach favoured the wide spread of information about the English literary *milieu* across Italy.

The following article by Francesca Bianco sheds light on another particular case study, regarding again the Veneto region. The essay *Stampa periodica e nuova coscienza civile nel Veneto del "decennio di preparazione"* analyses the *Rivista Euganea*, a weekly review published in Padua. In particular, the study deepens a topic that is still neglected in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian studies, namely the crossings between literature and journalism during the so-called 'preparation decade' (1850-1860). The intersection between literature and journalism becomes one of the most common topics for the regional culture of the period, in particular when the purpose of this crossing is the growth and education of society. The study analyses how the development of this purpose does not limit itself to the divulgation of a 'notional' knowledge but deeply engages itself with the civil, social and municipal reality of the time. The language of the journals' articles is didactic and informative, in order to effectively reach the readers, by creating a communication code that keeps together journalistic and literary features. In fact, the study demonstrates how the simple and immediate style of the periodical press crosses the higher literary language, orienting it towards the didactic dimension. If on the one hand traditional literature is present inside the reviews through bibliographical critiques and announcements, on the other the literary language, a sort of refined *koiné*, is visible in the filigree of all the articles, mixing/gelling the language of the *élites* with that of the periodical press. This crossing between literature and journalism becomes the principal means of communication with the public and gains a widespread circulation that reaches even the little countryside villages. The principal aim of the essay is to prove how the crossing between literature and journalism allows to transmit social and political considerations. Such overflowing messages, however, had to be conveyed with prudent circumspection and within an encrypted communication code, aimed at avoiding the innumerable obstacles of the severe Austrian censorship. The communication therefore travelled on two levels: a literal and formal one, that had an anti-censorship function, and a metaphorical one, that was ciphered and comprehensible only to those who had the right keys to interpret it.

The fifth article represents a preliminary enquiry on a crucial topic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian journalism, namely how the conditions of women in regard to work and employment in a male-dominated society were represented by the press. Carmela Panarello explores a specific case study, as her article *From Cornelia to Cordelia: Il lavoro delle donne nella stampa femminile toscana* analyses how the intersections between the topic of work and the *questione femminile* are treated by some Tuscan magazines aimed at an audience of young women or mothers. The approach the Tuscan press had towards a matter that was potentially destabilizing for the political and social



system of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is investigated in an excursus that goes from the reception of John Stuart Mill's emancipationist theories in the journal *Cornelia* to the predominance of a pedagogical imprint in the magazine *Cordelia*. The investigation focuses on the examination of the different strategies each of the two periodicals applied in order to convey a disruptive message: the young girls of the *élites*, educated to become good mothers of families, could only be freed from a condition of subjection to the male authority if they could have access to the liberal professions.

The last article of this thematic issue reverses the perspective of the previous essays: instead of focusing on the role of the Italian newspapers as platforms for the discussion of different and intertwined topics, it investigates the reception of Italian journals abroad. In fact, Marguerite Bordry's *Un « jeu de miroirs » déformant ? Les revues italiennes sous l'œil du Mercure de France (1890-1918)* focuses on how one of the most important French news outlets discussed, understood and introduced to its readers some contents published in Italian reviews of the *fin de siècle*. Since the very foundation in 1880, *Mercure de France* devoted considerable attention to Italy. Numerous articles dealt with Italian events of the time (regarding museums, archeology, history, political life). Nevertheless, the *Mercure* was particularly receptive towards literature, for what concerns both the latest publications in Italian and the French translations. Multiple articles over three decades offered French readers a detailed overview of the Italian literary panorama. An important portion of these articles were dedicated to the vast constellation of Italian literary magazines (such as *Gazzetta letteraria*, *Cronaca Bizantina*, *La Voce*, *Lacerba*) both in targeted reviews and in regular columns ("Journaux et revues", "Les journaux", "Les revues") as well as within the section entitled "Lettres italiennes". These articles were aimed at an Italophile public, and were written both by French authors (such as Remy de Gourmont, journalist, critic and writer, a fine connoisseur of Italian culture, but also by the writers Robert de Souza and Charles-Henry Hirsch), and by Italians, such as Luciano Zuccoli, Ricciotto Canudo and most of all Giovanni Papini. During that period the *Mercure* became a true bridge between Italian and French culture, in a crucial era for what concerns the political and economic relations between the two countries. Bordry's study on the French reception of the Italian magazines allows to comprehend the cultural and literary networks built across the Alps, within the European context.

This last article is a perfect example of how the issue's perspective goes beyond territorial boundaries, as it engages also with the intercultural crossings that animated the European scene of the time. The periodical press was one of the main protagonists in the dissemination of knowledge and in the intercontinental dialogue of the time. The press became the forum for perspectives on themes such as educational dissemination, cultural orientation, consensus organization, social and political issues. The topics of discussion, often based on the intersections occurring between

literature and actuality, acquired a decisive value in the formation of a cultural and political identity in the Italian peninsula: literature was often bent for purposes that went beyond the goal of artistic hedonism, uncovering a path on which the traces of the political changes remained impressed. The debates that animated the journals, gravitating around the intersections between literature, international politics, gender issues, and civic identity, return to us the image of a society that was becoming increasingly sensitive to new cultural issues and permeated by a participatory spirit that the dominant censorship could not stop.