

ISSN 1122 - 1917

L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

3

ANNO XXVII 2019

EDUCATT - UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

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PUBBLICAZIONE QUADRIMESTRALE

L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA
Facoltà di Scienze Linguistiche e Letterature straniere
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore
Anno XXVII - 3/2019
ISSN 1122-1917
ISBN 978-88-9335-566-7

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Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano | tel. 02.7234.2235 | fax 02.80.53.215
e-mail: editoriale.dsu@educatt.it (*produzione*); librario.dsu@educatt.it (*distribuzione*)
web: www.educatt.it/libri

Redazione della Rivista: redazione.all@unicatt.it | *web:* www.analisinguisticaeletteraria.eu

Questo volume è stato stampato nel mese di febbraio 2020
presso la Litografia Solari - Peschiera Borromeo (Milano)

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FOREWORD

FRANCESCO ROGNONI

UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

“Milan [...] was a very pleasant city large and populous yet quiet”. This is what Mary Shelley wrote to Leigh and Marianne Hunt from “noisy mercantile” Leghorn on 13 May 1818¹. Was Milan perhaps *too* quiet for us to celebrate the bicentenary of the Shelleys’ arrival in the city? Maybe, and yet I believe that there is much to discover about this neglected episode in their life and in the history of tourism in northern Italy.

We have all the clues that we need to picture Percy and Claire in a *gondola* crossing the Laguna in the pouring rain, or to imagine Mary drawing in the Borghese Gardens. But what do we see in our mind as we read in the Shelleys’ Milanese journal: “ride out on the Corso”?² Even after perusing Jacopo Ortis’s letters from Milan, and examining Stendhal’s topographic sketches in his *Vie de Henry Brulard*, I still have a vague understanding of what was then called the “Corso” in Milan. Will the articles in this issue help us form a clearer mental image of the Shelleys’ rides? Will the authors locate the Locanda Reale where Percy and Claire used to play chess in the evening, while Mary read *Pamela* and *Clarissa* in Italian?³

A few years ago, Michael Rossington and I spent hours inside the Duomo, trying to identify the “solitary spot [...] behind the altar” where Percy Shelley would read his Dante in the “dim & yellow” light “under the storied window”⁴. We are not quite sure that we have found it. What we did find is Marco d’Agrate’s statue of Saint Bartholomew with his skin wrapped around his shoulders like a mantle, which has stood in the right transept of the cathedral since the seventeenth century. Could Shelley have missed this hellish sculpture, which, as Addison informs us, “is esteem’d worth its weight in Gold”?⁵ The artwork is not mentioned in Shelley’s lengthy description of the Duomo in his letter to Thomas Love Peacock of 20 April 1818. Still, it seems possible to me that this decidedly disturbing Catholic icon was hovering in his mind over a year later, when taking notes on the sculptures in the Uffizi, he described the punishment of the satyr Marsyas, similarly flayed alive

¹ M. Shelley, *The Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, B.T. Bennett ed., 3 vols, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1980-1988, Vol. 1, p. 67.

² M. Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-1844*, P.R. Feldman – D. Scott-Kilvert ed., 2 vols, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1987, Vol. 1, p. 205.

³ C. Clairmont, *The Journals of Claire Clairmont*, M. Kingston Stocking ed., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1968, pp. 91-92; M. Shelley, *Journals*, Vol. 1, p. 205.

⁴ P.B. Shelley, *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, F.L. Jones ed., 2 vols, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1964, Vol. 2, p. 8.

⁵ J. Addison, *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy &c. in the Years 1701, 1702, 1703*, Tonson, London 1705, p. 28.

by Apollo, as “one of the few abominations of the Greek religion [...] as bad as the everlasting damnation” of the God of the Old Testament⁶.

When Byron was in Milan in the autumn of 1816, the faithful Hobhouse chronicled all his friend’s movements in his journal. Ludovico di Breme invited his Lordship to dinner and kept Madame de Staël posted with almost daily letters. Vincenzo Monti – who could not read English – volunteered to translate some of his poetry as he had done with Homer, skilfully versifying a literal rendering of the original⁷. Henri Beyle, who met Byron at La Scala on 16 October, and saw him a few more times in the following weeks, captivated him (and Hobhouse) with made-up anecdotes on Napoleon’s campaigns⁸. Although Stendhal’s numerous accounts of his meeting with Byron are full of inaccuracies and fabrications, there had been a real acquaintance and a genuine understanding between them. But Stendhal’s claim that he had had “l’honneur d’accompagner” Shelley – “ce grand poète, cet homme si extraordinaire, si bon et si calomnié” – is pure fantasy⁹. In fact, by an ironic coincidence, the self-styled Milanese left Milan for Grenoble on 2 April 1818 and returned on 11 May¹⁰, missing the whole period of the Shelleys’ residence in the city.

Apparently, no one took notice of the Shelleys in Milan, where their enthusiasm at being in Italy – the country of Dante and Tasso, of azure skies, and the opera – must have been tempered by their much more concrete worries about the choice that Claire was going to make in relation to her daughter Allegra. Actually, we should not say *Allegra* (the Venetian name that Byron so ominously chose for his unfortunate child), but *Alba*, as this is what the Shelleys and Claire almost invariably called her.

In one of the holograph manuscript notebooks that Shelley scholars today quote as frequently (and sometimes as inaptly) as his critics of the 1980s cited Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, I find what looks like the outline of a poem dedicated to Alba that Shelley never wrote:

To Alba. eyes. depth. amiableness, like
Albè. better with me than him. Infants
don’t know their father from a stranger
The Mother a mist — a torrent cinctured spot
mountain tops — scattered by the storm¹¹.

⁶ P.B. Shelley, *Notes on Sculptures in Rome and Florence together with a Lucianic Fragment and a Criticism of Peacock’s Poem “Rhododaphne”*, H. Buxton Forman ed., Printed for Private Distribution, London 1879, p. 34.

⁷ L. Di Breme, *Lettere*, P. Camporesi ed., Einaudi, Torino 1966, pp. 386-388.

⁸ M. Crouzet, *Stendhal ou Monsieur Moi-même*, Flammarion, Paris 1990, p. 219; J.C. Hobhouse, *Hobhouse’s Diary*, P. Cochran ed., p. 243, <https://petercochran.wordpress.com/hobhouses-diary/> (last accessed September 1, 2019).

⁹ Stendhal, *Voyages en Italie*, V. Del Litto ed., Gallimard, Paris 1973 (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), p. 394.

¹⁰ Stendhal, *Œuvres intimes*, V. Del Litto ed., 2 vols, Gallimard, Paris 1982 (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), Vol. 2, p. ix.

¹¹ Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodleian MS. Shelley e. 4, fol. 6^v.

These few words effectively convey Shelley's feelings for the little girl, and hint at the difficulties of being a father, which are all the greater when the mother is "a mist" (as certainly was the case with Claire). Shelley could have jotted down these notes at any time during his use of the notebook (probably from winter 1817 to summer 1819), but it is very tempting to suggest that they were written in Milan, perhaps on the very day (28 April) in which Allegra left with her nanny, Elise¹², to meet a father who was still a stranger – who perhaps would remain a stranger to her...

Delivering Alba to her father was the main reason why the Shelleys had stopped in Milan and had looked for a house on Lake Como. Similarly, Claire's need for distraction after her daughter's departure was the principle motive "which led [them] to forego the divine solitudes of Como", as Percy put it in his letter to Peacock of 30 April. (In the same letter, a five-line paragraph about "little Alba" is so heavily scratched through as to result illegible¹³.) On 1 May, the Shelleys "set out from Milan"¹⁴ on a tour of Italy that would inspire some of their major works. The following articles will establish in what measure the Milanese experience contributed to them.

¹² M. Shelley, *Journals*, Vol. 1, p. 207.

¹³ P.B. Shelley, *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 16.

¹⁴ M. Shelley, *Journals*, Vol. 1, p. 207.

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e-mail: editoriale.dsu@educatt.it (produzione)
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redazione.all@unicatt.it (Redazione della Rivista)
web: www.educatt.it/libri/all

ISSN 1122 - 1917

