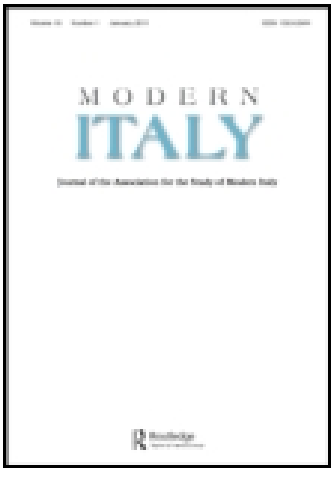

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'Questo cor che tuo si rese': the private and the public in Italian women's love letters in the long nineteenth century

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'Questo cor che tuo si rese': the private and the public in Italian women's love letters in the long nineteenth century

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Love letters are attracting increasing scholarly attention, especially from historians of scribal culture and historians of emotions. This article brings these two strands together to explore the unpublished love letters of four Italian women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Their letters, spanning a period from the 1840s up to the First World War, provide insights into the genre, and into women's lives and emotions in this period. Three of them were from the bourgeoisie or *piccola borghesia* and one, in slightly contrasting mode, was a peasant. Women of the middle class lived a secluded life, and writing was essential to express themselves, to construct an identity and to become visible. Their love letters were anything but private: they were continually supervised and scrutinised by their families, so that their letters inevitably had a public quality and were sometimes multi-authored. Single young women needed to subvert social rules in order to establish their independence and claim private space for their love correspondence.

Keywords: correspondence; love letters; First World War; emotions; private life

Introduction

In 1870, Eufrosina Serventi, a young woman from Parma, embroidered a silk handkerchief for her *fidanzato* Pietro Ugolotti, which carried a message of love including the phrase: 'Questo cor che tuo si rese' (This heart which has surrendered to you) (See Figure 1). She took these words from one of many cantatas by the eighteenth-century librettist Metastasio. Embroidery and writing absorbed an enormous proportion of the leisure time of young bourgeois women, and there was a close relationship between them, as Anna Iuso (2012) has brilliantly demonstrated. In both activities, young women left their personal mark on a blank background. Embroidery was encouraged by religious orders and their schools for girls to calm the fevered temperament and discipline the wayward soul. Writing fulfilled a similar function, but, since it potentially represented an independent life, it required closer supervision. Eufrosina's love-handkerchief perfectly illustrates Iuso's argument. Her needle and thread had inscribed a love letter to Pietro.

Love letters embody their own rituals, their own language and conventional expressions. My purpose is to explore four sets of sustained correspondence ranging from the 1840s to the First World War. All four were consulted in the Archivio Diaristico Nazionale (ADN) in Pieve Santo Stefano.[1] In focusing primarily on female authors of love letters, I will comment on their passionate language, their romantic content and on the contribution that love letters can make to

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Figure 1. Eufrosina's Handkerchief.
Notes: Transcript of text:

Pietro!
T'amo, nè sarà mai
Che a piu vezzosi rai
S'accenda questo cor
Che tuo si rese.
Eufrosina

(Pietro!
I love you, and only your most charming rays will ever light up this heart which has surrendered to yours.
Eufrosina)

Source: By kind permission of ADN

the history of intimate gender relations. Above all, this article will concentrate on the theme of secrecy and the way women correspondents negotiated the boundaries between their private emotional lives and the inescapable public scrutiny that constrained them.

As these love letters show, epistolary expressions of love and desire on the part of young women were far from private. Their letters reached out beyond a confined bourgeois world, but only by ruse or compromise or by forming discreet alliances could they emerge from the tight surveillance that regulated their behaviour and their public visibility. We conventionally regard the family as part of the private sphere, but here it acted as a gatekeeper, standing between the single woman and her public actions, which the family censored and supervised. The family circle imposed (or attempted to impose) what William Reddy (2001) called a strict 'emotional regime' governing the public expression of intimate emotions.

Love letters of this period are increasingly attracting scholarly attention. They offer the historian of scribal culture a special insight into the codes and conventions of private correspondence. Like all letters, love letters obey certain formulas, which unite the corresponding lovers in an epistolary pact governing the rhythm and the length of their letters, their forms of address and farewell and even the paper and ink acceptable to the recipient. Like all private correspondence, as Cécile Dauphin has reminded us, love letters are self-referential, constantly discussing the problems of writing and transmission; and, perhaps more intensely than other forms of correspondence, love letters deploy strategies for attracting sympathy for the writer, and for encouraging an affectionate reply (Dauphin, Lebrun-Pézerat and Poublan 1995, 131; Dauphin 1995). My own study (1999) of the perfectly sustained exchanges across the Tasman Sea between Frank Cato and Frances Bethune in the 1880s, for example, found that they offered a clear demonstration of the lovers' epistolary pact in action.

Correspondence, then, is a material object and a social practice, but historians of gender and emotions have also re-valued the love letter as a text revealing important data on social expectations of women and their emotional lives. In the nineteenth-century love letter, the woman advanced an ideal image of herself, usually configured as noble-spirited, a passionate lover and a caring friend, and above all a faithful partner. Several recent works have brought the study of intimacy between couples into focus. Martha Hanna (2006) examined the wartime correspondence of Paul and Marie Pireaud to reveal a candid epistolary conversation about love and sexuality. Susan Foley and Charles Sowerwine (2012) analysed the voluminous correspondence between French republican politician Léon Gambetta and his long-term mistress, Léonie Léon. In their intense but unequal political romance, Léonie was an influential adviser, a Minerva in the shadows. She was condemned to a clandestine existence, refusing to commit to marriage. Although marriage was normally the implicit goal of women's love letters, Léonie Léon feared that marriage would publicise her past as a prostitute and a politician's mistress, and that she would face complete social ostracism.

In the Italian context, Mark Seymour (2010) has used a surprising cache of love letters as a 'peephole' for exploring the 'dynamic hinterland of bourgeois women's lives' – a phrase that highlights the scholar's role not just as a historian of emotions but also as a voyeur into the intimacies of past lives. Rosalba Dondeynaz (1992) analysed a more substantial corpus of 1371 letters between Selma (Anselma Ongari) and Guerrino Botteri, her *fidanzato* and husband, during the First World War, including transcriptions of 47 of them. Selma was born in the Trentino in 1892. She was the daughter of a postal official and she trained to become one in her turn. She fell in love with Guerrino, who was 10 years older, born in Trieste, the son of an itinerant seller of *salumi* (cold meats). After fighting in the imperial army, he became an elementary schoolteacher. Love was the only subject of their correspondence. 'Write to me

about you not about the world', wrote Guerrino in 1918. When Selma was obliged to write about more mundane matters, she wrote a sub-heading 'Lettera d'affari' (business letter) as if to apologise for doing so (Dondeynaz 1992, 24). Although the war generated this passionate correspondence, this was not a 'war correspondence' as such. Instead its primary purpose was to express love, desire and, implicitly, an individual personality. Dondeynaz's selection from this correspondence was published with her commentary and an introduction by Luisa Passerini. Her book can be considered as both a primary and a secondary source for the history of women's love letters in this period, and I draw on it wherever appropriate.

All these examples testify to a reappraisal of the subjective and the intimate currently being conducted by historians of different stripes. This study of nineteenth-century Italian love letters seeks to follow the paths mapped out in the works just mentioned.

The corpus

My corpus, selected from the ADN's limited nineteenth-century holdings, consists of four sets of correspondence. They were selected because they all include relatively sustained exchanges, and because they primarily treat love, intimacy and the life of the couple. All four provide insight into the emotional life of their author.

The correspondence of these four women spans the period between 1844 and 1919, although its centre of gravity lies in the late nineteenth century. All four came from the north and the centre, where female literacy was highest. In 1901, for instance, the official female literacy rate was 79% in Piedmont and 77% in Lombardy, whereas the rate for Calabria was only 13% (Vigo 1993, 50). In Piedmont, the Casati Law of 1859 established free and compulsory primary education, and this was extended to Italy as a whole after Unification. Legislation, however, represented hope for the future rather than a guarantee of immediate action, and it was many decades before female access to schooling became universal. Not surprisingly, then, Giuseppina Costantini, my first correspondent in chronological terms, born in 1822, was largely self-taught, while even the last one, Cecilia, born circa 1892, did not have a perfect grasp of the written language. In the period covered by this corpus, women's literacy advanced considerably at the national level but, perhaps more significantly, sending letters became a much more familiar activity. In 1862, 71.5 million items were posted in post-Unification Italy; by 1886, the number had more than doubled to 165.77 million (Tasca 2002, 147). Not only could more Italians read and write by the late nineteenth century, but they were also acquiring greater epistolary literacy.

Giuseppina Costantini (1822–1873), my first writer, never had any paid employment. She always referred to herself as a mother (*madre di famiglia*) or housewife (*casalinga*). We know nothing about her family background, except that she was born in Prato in 1822. Perhaps she came from the commercial bourgeoisie, but her education, according to her son Ridolfo, was patchy. Giuseppina, he tells us in an *Avvertenza* to her correspondence, learned to read and write from a schoolteacher, but the rest of her education was the result of her own efforts (*il resto della sua istruzione se l'era fatto da sé*).[2] Her future husband, Carlo Livi, on the other hand, was a well-educated scholar who was to become a distinguished psychiatrist. Their 22 surviving love letters were written between 1844 and 1846, at the beginning of their nine-year engagement. They married in 1853 and had six children.

Similarly, little biographical detail is available about the second author of this study, Eufrosina Serventi, who created the embroidered handkerchief cited in the title of this study. We know only that she lived in Parma and perhaps came from the lower middle class. Her *epistolario*, which is almost certainly incomplete, contains 24 passionate letters written to

her future husband Pietro Ugolotti in 1870–1871, while he was away on military service in Turin as a quarter-master (*furiere*). It also contained 10 letters from Pietro to Eufrosina.[3] Later in 1871, Eufrosina's father consented to their marriage. They eventually had six children and established a wax-making business (*cereria*).

In my third example, Cecilia's love letters form part of the family correspondence of her husband Giovanni, together with letters by Giovanni's father and brother and other relatives. The family lived in Bagni San Giuliano (now Terme San Giuliano) between Lucca and Pisa, and sometimes visited Torre del Lago on the coast for a break. The correspondence is overwhelmingly in one direction – written by Cecilia and Giovanni's family to Giovanni, while he was absent at the front during the First World War. The *epistolario* includes letters sent from Giovanni to Cecilia in 1911 and later between 1918 and 1919, and from Cecilia to Giovanni from 1915 until Giovanni's demobilisation in 1919, with gaps during the rare moments when Giovanni was on leave.[4] There is no clue about the educational status of any of the correspondents, except that Giovanni was an infantryman, and a letter of May 1919 suggests that he was a telegraphist. His father occasionally sold a calf, so we may guess that they were well-off peasants. This seems confirmed by one letter mentioning haystacks and another in which Cecilia goes olive picking for them.[5] Cecilia's writing is clear, but shows traces of popular Italian forms (*italiano popolare*), for instance in her random word separation, the use of *lostesso* as one word, *o* for *ho*, *pazzienza* for *pazienza*, and so on. The correspondence was transcribed and donated to the Archive in 2005 by a stranger who discovered it in an antique sale. Following his wishes, I have preserved the anonymity of the two lovers. Cecilia and Giovanni were not their real names.

Catterina Janutolo's letters to her husband Bernardo stand out in this company because they were clearly peasants, and because soon after their marriage Bernardo emigrated to the United States.[6] Catterina Janutolo Gros (1869–1956) was born in 1869 in Piedicavallo (Biella province) in the Piedmontese mountains. She fell in love with Bernardo Janutolo Giangrand in 1888 and they were married in 1890. He made several journeys to America before returning definitively in 1903. Except for three letters from Catterina in 1888, the letters all post-date the marriage and they coincide with Bernardo's absences overseas. Bernardo's letters have not survived, but he kept about 80 written to him by Catterina. Almost all Catterina's letters were written from her home village of Piedicavallo, and they continue in fits and starts from 1890 up to 1903. As is common in peasant writing, Catterina's letters include some words of dialect and some grammatical errors, to the extent that the donor of the correspondence saw fit to provide a glossary. Her letters are the usual four pages in length, with a fifth page added if necessary. After 1901, she used standard lined notepaper of a modest variety. Catterina's letters to her husband form a peasant *epistolario* that raises important questions. Compared with Giuseppina, Eufrosina and Cecilia, Catterina's social origins were extremely humble: did this make her language of love and her epistolary codes different from those of the other women? In addition, the agenda must include the question of how far Bernardo's long absences conferred greater individual freedom on his wife. I will consider below how far Catterina's circumstances made her more independent as a woman than the other female authors examined in this study.

The preservation of the love letters was often haphazard, but as Cécile Dauphin rightly insists (Dauphin, Lebrun-Pézerat and Poublan 1995, 65–66), the formation of the corpus and the ways it has been constituted and transmitted are vital for our understanding of it. In the case of Selma and Guerrino, the preservation of the letters was the result of deliberate decisions by the correspondents, but in other cases documentary survival owed more to sheer accident. As I have noted, Cecilia and Giovanni's letters were discovered in an antique sale, while Catterina's letters were found in an old travelling trunk in an old house in the mountains, and donated to the ADN in 1989.

The saga of Giuseppina Costantini's letters is even more dramatic. Giuseppina burned her letters in 1846 to avoid discovery and, much later in 1873, the couple agreed to destroy the entire correspondence.[7] The correspondence survives because, unknown to Giuseppina, her letters to Carlo had been copied by his friend, Cesare Guasti. Forty years after the event, Guasti gave these copies to the Livi family. The family made another transcription from Guasti's copies and donated it to the ADN in 1990. Family editions of letters unfortunately do not always respect the quality of the originals. Ridolfo Livi's transcriptions were beautifully clear and well organised, but were the originals equally immaculate? We cannot know. He selected 22 letters in all but, as is often the case, his criteria for selection are mysterious.

In spite of these reservations and regrets about the mediation process through which family papers are filtered, love letters can provide an invaluable insight into the interior life and the situation of women in the past. Although single women's writing was under public scrutiny, their letters expressed their individuality, projected a self-image to their lover, and helped them to manage overwhelming emotions. Writing helped everyone in this cast of four female writers to establish their identity and control their future. Writing letters to their lovers enabled them to project their personalities beyond the confines of their own bourgeois domestic world. Writing was vital if they were to free themselves from the watchful gaze of their protectors and communicate with those who lived outside their enclosed world.

The language of love

The language of love, for all these women writers, began affectionately and became progressively more ardent. As single women, they knew that to receive a letter from a man and to reply to it were acts that signified in themselves an intention to marry. In all four cases, their terms of address and farewell were accordingly effusive right from the start of the exchange. As Bernardo's *fidanzata*, Catterina Janutolo addressed him as 'Amata mia speranza' (My beloved hope) or 'Idolo del cuor mio' (My heart's idol). Eufrosina Serventi often sent a thousand kisses to her *fidanzato* Pietro, and was soon addressing him by the nickname Pierotto.[8] For Cecilia, Giovanni was 'Mio caro Tesoro' (My dear treasure) or 'Mi Unico Pensiero' (My only thought) or her 'Angelo Adorato' (adored angel). She repeatedly told Giovanni that it seemed like a thousand years since they were together, that her heart was open only for him, that she was sincere and would be faithful until the grave. The prolonged absences of soldiers at the front generated anxiety on both sides and opened up a wide space for sexual jealousy. In this context, affirmations of constancy and fidelity were not fortuitous. Sexual desire was hinted at obliquely. Cecilia wrote to Giovanni: 'This evening and always I sleep alone and cold, come back soon. Do you understand? [*Ahi capito?*]'.[9] Such questions may be interpreted as cryptic invitations to sex. Usually, male correspondents reciprocated in floods of passion. Giovanni told Cecilia, 'I love you to the point of madness', and wrote of the 'feverish anxiety of my poor heart, so passionate'. 'Two such good hearts', he wrote, 'so full of love and joy, to find ourselves separated in this way, believe me it's something from another world'.[10] The only exception was perhaps Pietro Ugolotti, who occasionally signed off brusquely with just 'Ugolotti'.

Catterina Janutolo's correspondence followed a different trajectory. Not only does Catterina stand out in this group as a peasant woman but, unlike the other women considered, she also married in the course of the exchange of letters and soon became a mother. The tone of her correspondence passed through three distinct stages of love, anger and resignation. At first, as Bernardo's *fidanzata* and young wife, she was very ardent and hopeful that Bernardo would return from the USA. He did indeed return briefly in 1893 and made her pregnant with their first

child Ovidio. In the next few years, however, passion subsided, as in 1895 Bernardo failed to make good his promises to return again. We know that he did return twice, because by 1902 Catterina had three sons to look after. By this time her letters to Bernardo sound tired and disillusioned, as she waited for him to come home. The ideal of romantic love that apparently inspired her earlier letters had now cooled. She wrote in defeated tones in 1898:

> I don't believe it, we've had to spend this winter too without you, I always had a faint hope in my heart, but now I see that even this is pointless, patience I don't ask any more of you, I leave you to your judgement, to your pleasure . . . .[11]

For Cecilia, on the other hand, the absence of her husband Giovanni encouraged expressions of desire. Not a night went by, she often told him, without her dreaming of him, while the sight of their empty bed and his clothes in the chest of drawers also saddened her.[12] 'I think I would give a cupful of my blood to see you just for a few hours', she wrote in 1916[13], and she anticipated Giovanni's return in these terms:

> I am waiting for you with open arms and I am going to hold you tightly against my breast [*stringerti forte forte al mio seno*] and cover you with hot kisses which come from the depth of my heart full of love, affection and sincerity.[14]

Whereas Cecilia and Giovanni used the familiar form of the second person (*tu*), Catterina Janutolo always addressed her husband Bernardo with the formal *vi* and *vuoi*. Perhaps this formal form of address between spouses was part of peasant usage, or perhaps it showed the respect due to husbands. Since Bernardo's letters to Catterina have not survived, it is impossible to tell whether he addressed Catterina as *tu* or *vuoi*.

The moment when a woman began to address her lover as *tu*, and vice versa, was a delicate one and an important transition in the relationship, indicating a closer bond and a more affectionate commitment. Giuseppina Costantini discussed this critical moment in her relationship with Carlo Livi quite explicitly. The first use of the familiar form of address between them occurred fully two and a half years after the beginning of the correspondence, and it happened at Carlo's suggestion. Carlo had sent Giuseppina a ring and asked her to call him *tu*. The turning point came with Giuseppina's reply on 18 July 1846:

> My dearest. You ask me something that my heart was just longing for so very ardently. And you know my dear that if I hadn't felt ashamed and afraid of profaning the dignity of your love, I would have already dropped that *voi* before the first letter I wrote to you from Caserane, because it seemed so very coarse and abrupt coming from my pen.[15]

This superb reply from Giuseppina indicates that it was appropriate for the man to initiate the step to a new level of relationship.

Literary models served to convey love and passion, especially in the case of the well-read Selma and Guerrino. Their correspondence referred to 22 different book titles (Dondeynaz 1992, 37). They talked of Tolstoy and of Hugo's *Les Misérables*. Guerrino promised Selma he would love her with the strength and tenacity of Jean Valjean, and the fire and enthusiasm of Mario (i.e. Marius) (Dondeynaz 1992, 207). Selma's reading was, in contrast, mainly religious and she drew inspiration from her bedside book, which was an *Imitatio Christi*. She also drew on the romantic vocabulary of novels and *feuilletons*. Dante's Beatrice provided another model for women, guiding men and bringing them closer to God, according to the stereotypical nineteenth-century role of the guardian angel (Dondeynaz 1992, 79). Not everyone had the literary culture of Selma and Guerrino but, as Seymour has suggested (2010, 157), the opera could provide another erotic register in female love letters. Eufrosina's embroidered love-handkerchief is a clear illustration of this frame of reference.

Whatever the discourse of love – religious, spiritual, literary or operatic – it was a projection of the author's identity. In their love letters, women represented themselves as passionate and devoted lovers. Much more so than their male lovers, they insisted on their loyalty and fidelity. In the writer's self-image, she was sincere and her love was for life. They doubted, perhaps, that someone could want them enough to offer marriage, but this prospect brought forth an effusive, passionate and discreetly erotic correspondence.

Family surveillance

Love letters combine the affectionate, the erotic, the loyal and the dutiful in the expression of intimate and highly personal emotions. For the four women studied here, however, writing to a lover was far from a private matter. They had to follow rules of etiquette for single women, and they were further constrained by a net of family supervision. Sending a love letter to a man was thus a very public affair. Although women struggled for secrecy and independence, they were continually forced to negotiate, and indeed transgress, the frontier between the private and the public.

If writing and receiving letters from a man implied an intention to marry, this made it family business. It was no coincidence that the first letter that Catterina received from Bernardo was delivered to her by her father. Both her parents and Bernardo's parents were involved in their correspondence, which became a collective enterprise. Through Catterina's letters to Bernardo, parents sent their greetings to him, as did Bernardo's brother. Her letters were occasions on which everybody in the close family participated. Sometimes Bernardo's father put his own letter in the same envelope as Catterina's, as did Clementina, Bernardo's sister-in-law.[16] In one letter from these early years of their relationship, Catterina added a significant postscript to Bernardo: 'No one knows that I have written to you, but we are all well.' Several months later she wrote:

> None of our folk know that I am writing to you, I'm alone, and I long for them not to know, because they say there's no need to write all the time, but my heart cannot be still, it finds relief only in writing to you and reading your letters.[17]

These remarks indicate the difficulties involved in maintaining a private connection with her lover, and Catterina's need to carve out some secret place and time where it was possible to write to Bernardo alone. They also foreshadow her future conflicts with Bernardo's family.

Cecilia had identical problems when she wrote to Giovanni at the front in 1915. The family, including Cecilia, sent collective and multi-authored letters to lover and future son-in-law. Using a standard page folded to make four sides, Cecilia's father wrote on the two exterior pages, while her mother usually wrote on the two interior pages. Any other correspondents, like Cecilia and Giovanni's brother, had to add a few lines where they could, or insert an additional sheet amongst the other messages.

Similarly, Giovanni's letters were received first by his family and only then passed on to Cecilia. Cecilia, however, wanted to receive her own letters from Giovanni, and she wrote to him in 1916:

> I suggest that you don't write half a letter to me with your father, and I don't want to have to ask for your letters. You know very well that I have no other consolation except getting your letters, and I read them and read them and I would never get enough of reading them [*non mi sazierei mai di leggerle*].[18]

Giovanni's father wanted to keep his son's letters, and became angry if Cecilia took one of them away from the house. Increasingly they quarrelled, for Cecilia wrote to Giovanni:

> I am no longer in control of our letters [*io son più padrona delle nostre lettere*] … I can't tell you how livid this has made me [*no so dirti la bilia che ci o preso*].[19]

Cecilia, however, gradually won the war. She wrote longer letters to Giovanni, to which her own father added a short note, which seemed to invert the previous power relationship between them. Cecilia had gained some independence and her father was no longer in complete control of her love letters. By the end of the war she was able to write completely alone to Giovanni.

Luisa Tasca's study of epistolary manuals (2002, 149) noted a furtive aspect to instructions on writing love letters given by specialist etiquette books, suggesting a culture of policing women which is strongly echoed in my corpus. Single young women of the bourgeoisie lived enclosed lives and love letters provided an emotional escape. Writing to a lover enabled them to become visible in the world and to express their own identities. But physical communication with a lover was extremely difficult. Just setting eyes on him, let alone arranging a meeting, was fraught with problems and needed careful choreography. Giuseppina Costantini's correspondence with Carlo Livi expressed fervent hope that the couple might actually see each other, however fleetingly, in the street, at the theatre, during the customary *passeggiata* that followed Sunday Mass or at religious processions in Prato. On 23 July 1846 Giuseppina told Carlo that she would wait to see him at the *fiesta* in Sant'Anna, adding 'I go out as much as I can to see you', meaning she was hoping to catch sight of him.[20] Giuseppina, of course, would not venture out alone; she was usually in the company of at least her sisters. The following week she was hoping to cross paths with Carlo during the Sunday *passeggiata*, but rain and stormy weather unfortunately prevented this.[21] At one point early in the correspondence the over-sensitive Carlo found Giuseppina's protective ring of female relatives intolerable. He felt that her sisters and cousins had been gossiping about him, and asked Giuseppina to return all his letters, but she refused.[22] No wonder lovers dreamed of their own home, free of such social controls, 'a nest for my family', as Guerrino Botteri put it to Selma, 'but above all for my Selma … far away from indiscreet or profane eyes' (Dondeynaz 1992, 138).

If a young woman could coordinate her movements with those of her lover, they might glimpse each other from a balcony or from her window. Giuseppina eventually did see Carlo from her window and was delighted: 'At that moment I was called in great haste to the window, I saw you, and my heart jumped for joy.'[23] The window of the *fidanzata* took on enormous significance. It not only symbolised her narrow gaze on the outside world, but also gave her real opportunities for personal non-written contact with her lover, however ephemeral. Through her window, she could for a moment subvert the supervision to which she was subjected.

Eufrosina was adept at exploiting her window to make contact with Pietro Ugolotti. When she expected her Pierotto to come home to Parma on leave at Christmas 1870, she gave him precise written instructions to meet at her window. She detailed the street, the house and the exact individual window where he would find her. She told him to stand there and sing the national anthem as a code to announce himself. This was important because Eufrosina had recently changed bedrooms:

> I don't sleep in the room over the stream any more, but instead my window now looks out opposite the little archway, the first one you come to in borgo San Giacomo before you reach the Church of St Teresa, watch out on the second floor, if you want to call me with our usual signal the Italian anthem you can be sure that I will hear you straight away.[24]

Eufrosina prepared this clandestine meeting at the end of November, and a few days before Christmas, her excitement was mounting. She wrote to Pietro: 'Four days more, and then get

ready for a torrent of kisses! [*un diluvio di baci ti è preparato*].'[25] The window ritual was clearly successful, because the lovers repeatedly made their rendezvous there.[26] 'I am saying adieu to our dear window', she later wrote, 'witness to our sweetest meetings'.[27] Pietro played the game to perfection. In February 1871, he wrote to Eufrosina about his next visit to Parma: 'At a half past twelve I will wait for you at the famous window ... so I can quickly give you a beautiful kiss.'[28] The young woman's window was of crucial importance to her emotional life. The window was the scene for a secret rendezvous, an unsupervised conversation and a surreptitious kiss.

Ruse and ingenuity were needed for young women to keep their relationship and their correspondence with a lover as secret as possible. Eufrosina asked Pietro to be discreet with her letters:

> For charity's sake please don't show my letters to anyone. You shouldn't show that little messy piece of work [*pasticcio di lavoro*, i.e. the embroidered handkerchief] either, that I had the insolence [*sfacciataggine*] to send you.[29]

Giuseppina Costantini went to even greater efforts to hide her love letters to and from Carlo Livi. Giuseppina lived in constant fear of discovery by Carlo's sister, and contemplated sending letters to Carlo via registered post to maintain secrecy. If you want to talk to my relatives about our engagement, she warned Carlo, please say nothing about our secret correspondence.[30] She needed to know exactly when Carlo's letters would arrive so that she could quickly hide them from prying eyes in her own family, writing that if she knew letters were arriving, 'I can stand guard so that they don't fall into hands other than mine or M's [i.e. *Mamma*]'. Tuesday, she suggested, was a good day because her father usually went out late that day.[31]

Disclosure would not just expose the lovers themselves, but it would further compromise all the assistants and go-betweens who were necessary to keep the letters flowing between the couple undetected. It is clear from the above citation that Giuseppina's mother was in the know. Giuseppina had also enlisted the support and assistance of her sisters, her cousin Ebe and a friend named Gabriella. Eventually Carlo's sister, whom Giuseppina had originally feared, was introduced to the secret correspondence and agreed to act as an intermediary.[32] Several go-betweens were thus employed, including one called Calendi whose relationship to Giuseppina is unclear. Perhaps he was a cousin, but it is impossible to identify all the messengers from the letters themselves. Carlo's friend Cesare must also have been aware of the correspondence since he copied some of the letters. The existence of this 'clandestine' love correspondence was therefore well known to at least eight other individuals apart from the two lovers themselves.

Giuseppina's well-broadcast secret, however, did have a point. Two important individuals were excluded from the network. One was Gianni, presumably Giuseppina's elder brother, and the other was *il Babbo*, her father. What Giuseppina feared most of all was their masculine authority and power of interference, hence her attempts to maintain patriarchal ignorance for as long as possible. The network of helpers and go-betweens was almost exclusively female. It formed a support group for Giuseppina and a kind of 'emotional community', as the historian of emotions Barbara Rosenwein (2002, 842) might call it. Rosenwein defined emotional communities as groups that shared common 'systems of feeling' and had a common sense of the ground rules about what was acceptable and what was not. She saw emotional communities perhaps in similar terms to those in which historians of reading refer to interpretive communities of readers, with similar reading preferences and similar understandings of the hierarchy of literary genres (Fish 1980). Giuseppina Costantini's loyal band of messengers and protectors of her intimate secret did not share her own profound love for Carlo; but they contributed as a group to make it flourish, and to allow her to communicate it in writing.

Independence and privacy

Women writing to men thus maintained a respectful attitude, but this did not mean they lacked a will of their own. In fact the love letters contain traces of conflicts, in which women writers fought for their own privacy and independence. This final section will briefly examine their growing sense of autonomy, and the limits they encountered.

The absence of the *fidanzato*, for instance in the army, could create friction but it could also give women some freedom. Cecilia came into conflict with Giovanni's family over his letters home and, as has already been indicated, she eventually prevailed over Giovanni's father who effectively surrendered control over the correspondence.

Catterina Janutolo was again a different case, because her husband's absence was so prolonged, and this thrust new responsibilities upon her. Catterina, however, was dependent on Bernardo's family, and their apparent stinginess with money was a source of tension. Bernardo sent small remittances home to Catterina and at the same time to his own parents. Catterina used the money for medical expenses, or to buy a stock of winter meat and wine, and she was careful to deposit some of Bernardo's hard-earned money in the bank to await his return.[33] Catterina assumed financial management of the money Bernardo sent home, although she scrupulously accounted to him for everything she did with it. Receiving remittances changed her life and opened her horizons: she used a local bank and she now had to take notice of world currency exchange rates. In this way, Bernardo's money gave her a degree of independence and introduced her to the modern world.

Catterina quarrelled, however, with Bernardo's parents over the allocation of the remittances. Bernardo's father was unhappy with the amount Bernardo was sending for him and, when Catterina conveyed this to Bernardo, her husband angrily blamed her for causing trouble. Catterina was a spirited woman and she did not easily tolerate the disapproval of her husband combined with the meanness of her father-in-law. In January 1894, frustrated by the family's reluctance to pay for medical treatment when she and the baby were ill, she took the initiative and moved out of Bernardo's family house. Instead they went to live with her own parents. Catterina acted alone in this even though she knew this would provoke the anger of her father-in-law and the displeasure of her husband.[34]

All the same, Catterina's attitude remained ambiguous. In spite of taking independent action, she continually deferred to her husband's authority. 'You are the boss [*siete padrone*]', she unequivocally told him, 'to do as you see fit and as you please, and your every wish will be something sacred to me'.[35] Catterina's frequent expressions of obedience never stopped her from speaking her mind and admonishing Bernardo. 'As a beloved wife', she wrote, 'I was hoping to read a better letter, but instead you tell me that I should blindly obey, as if I was not part of the family'.[36] It appears that Bernardo's reaction to the conflict back home was to punish Catterina by not writing to her. Catterina, whose desire for independence was undiminished, replied stoically and proudly in the face of his epistolary silence:

> But I have a heart in my breast, and it tells me that I am a wife and mother, and it asks me to love you equally because I carry your name, and a son from our love; You have never really got to know me, you do not realise how strong my pride can be [*quanto io sia grande all'amor proprio*]. If you were next to my heart you would feel it beating violently … these are angry heartbeats; because I am offended, I don't know if one has the right to make someone suffer when you were first brought together by the word love; it appears that you have clearly forgotten it ….[37]

This fine statement of self-identity must be read alongside Catterina's protestations of wifely obedience. Perhaps her declarations of obedience were tactical, a kind of deliberate smoke-

screen; or perhaps, as she became more defiant, she felt a corresponding need to conform, to say exactly what was expected of a wife. I have described Giuseppina Costantini as a bourgeois woman, Eufrosina Serventi as petit-bourgeois, and Cecilia as probably petit-bourgeois married to well-off peasants. Their love letters do not bear even the remotest echo of Catterina's defiance. Perhaps the peasant woman was the most self-sufficient of all of them.

Conclusion

These four rich epistolary collections suggest the potential value of love letters for the history of women and of gender relations, for the history of marriage and the family, for the history of emotions and not least for the history of scribal culture. Love letters, like all correspondence, leave traces which, in Cécile Dauphin's words are:

> … like pebbles which ricochet and spark off distant echoes from letter to letter, [and] these traces eventually outline for us a history, a culture, a society. (Dauphin, Lebrun-Pézerat and Poublan 1995, 22)

Each of the women considered here expressed her own distinct personalities in her correspondence. Eufrosina Serventi was lively, resourceful and very affectionate. Catterina Janutolo had a peasant's patience and resignation, but she could also become stubbornly defiant. Giuseppina Costantini was happy but timid and apprehensive; Cecilia, whose writing was close to oral speech, faithfully offered Giovanni consolation and encouragement as she hoped that he would survive the war. Meanwhile she got fatter for him – something many Italian soldiers found very attractive in their partners (Lyons 2013, 161, 164).

They were all different and yet they suffered in common, as they waited passively for news of their lovers, absent in the army or overseas. They were condemned to wait, sometimes for days, perhaps for weeks and in Catterina's case, for years, before they could see their correspondent face to face.

These writers waited passively, but they wrote with passion, as did their partners. They did not spare the hyperbole and the superlative when pouring out their love. In this respect they seem far removed from the Australian love letters analysed by Hsu-Ming Teo, who found in her corpus that expressions of romantic love were 'circumscribed by middle-class respectability' (Teo 2005, 350). In contrast, they tend to confirm Marie-Claire Grassi's (1994, 199–205) contention that there was a trend towards greater intimacy in correspondence from the romantic period of the early nineteenth century onwards. In spite of the frequency of arranged marriages, all the women considered here idealised romantic love. Romantic love, here as elsewhere, was assumed to lead to marriage, and for young women it seemed a goal to be pursued with the utmost warmth and tenderness.

Love letters follow certain protocols and their language is highly coded. Eufrosina made liberal use of exclamation marks and suggestive dots, and all the women discussed had mastered the art, the conventions and the grammar of the genre. They were well versed in 'epistolary literacy'; in other words, they were in control of the technology of writing, they knew how to organise the layout of the page and seal and address their letters (Whyman 2009, 9–11). They were familiar with the postal services and in fact transmitting their love letters without detection was a major concern and a source of intrigue.

The letters suggest that middle-class Italian women of the late nineteenth century lived a sheltered life, in which they were supervised and chaperoned in everything they did. Their chastity was closely policed. Their means of communication were often limited to a wave from a balcony or a furtive kiss at the window. In this rarefied atmosphere, writing was vital to allow them to express a personal identity. But even writing and transmitting a love letter were not private acts; they required

the enlistment of a network of female accomplices. Private correspondence carries an aura of 'authenticity', allegedly providing a privileged insight into the inner persona. The love letters examined here, however, were never completely private objects, but were, rather, the fruit of collective projects. In their patriarchal environment, young women deployed infinite secret strategies to escape the paternal eye. They balanced their own privacy against the need for public scrutiny. Strengthened by the solidarity of female relatives, the women writers considered here were bold enough to choose their own spouses, and to take risks with their correspondence. They were subject to a culture of surveillance, but they participated in their own 'culture of disobedience'. William Reddy (2001, 129) has usefully referred to 'emotional regimes' that impose normative codes of behaviour, and to 'emotional refuges' that provide relief from rules and restrictions. For nineteenth-century women like Giuseppina Costantini and Eufrosina Serventi, the only refuge from the regime of family surveillance was marriage itself. In the meantime, crippling social conventions prevailed. They could never be suspended, but they could on occasion be subverted.

Notes

1. In Arezzo province. See http://www.archiviodiari.org/
2. Archivio Diaristico Nazionale (ADN) E/91, Costantini.
3. ADN E/89, Serventi. Some of Eufrosina's letters have been anthologised in Barbarulli et al. (1997).
4. ADN E/Adn2, AA.VV. 'Mi compatirà'.
5. Ibid., letters of June 12, 1917 and February 1, 1918.
6. ADN E/89. Janutolo. Some of Catterina's letters have been anthologised in Barbarulli et al. (1997).
7. ADN E/91, Costantini, *Avvertenza* and letter of May 23, 1846.
8. ADN E/89, Serventi, letters of July 16, 1870 and July 22, 1870.
9. ADN E/Adn2, AA.VV. 'Mi compatirà', letter of May 1, 1919.
10. Ibid., letters of October 2, 1911 and October 20, 1911.
11. ADN E/89, Janutolo, letter of November 27, 1898.
12. ADN E/Adn2, AA.VV. 'Mi compatirà', letter of July 21, 1917.
13. Ibid., letter of June 26, 1916.
14. Ibid., letter of July 10, 1917.
15. ADN E/91, Costantini, letter of July 18, 1846.
16. ADN E/89, Janutolo, letter of February 14, 1891.
17. Ibid., letters of August 23, 1891 and July 31, 1892.
18. ADN AA.VV., 'Mi compatirà', letter of August 17, 1916.
19. Ibid., letter of August 17, 1916.
20. ADN E/91, Costantini, letter of July 23, 1846.
21. Ibid., letters of August 1, 1846 and August 8, 1846.
22. Ibid., letter of April 21, 1846.
23. Ibid., letter of August 8, 1846.
24. ADN E/89, Serventi, letter of November 28, 1870.
25. Ibid., letter of December 19, 1870.
26. Ibid., letter of January 30, 1871.
27. Ibid., letter of August 3, 1870.
28. Ibid., letter from Pietro in Turin, February 1, 1871.
29. Ibid., letter of July 24, 1870.
30. ADN E/91, Costantini, September 26, 1846.
31. Ibid., letter of May 5, 1846.
32. Ibid., letter from Caserane, June 6, 1846.
33. ADN E/89, Janutolo, letters e.g. of February 1, 1893 and April 19, 1903.
34. Ibid., letters of January 10, 1894 and February 7, 1894.
35. Ibid., letter of December 6, 1891.
36. Ibid., letter of December 6, 1891.
37. Ibid., letter of February 9, 1896.

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