Of Women, Folly, Reading and Revolts

The Repertoire of Feltre's Teatro Sociale in the Nineteenth Century

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I. Provincial theatres in the Veneto and Lombardy regions

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Veneto and Lombardy regions experienced a hitherto unknown boom of theatre building and renovating; many smaller and middle-sized towns like Feltre established new venues for (socio-)cultural events, and they competed with one another in an exposition of civic pride.[1]

The French and Habsburg governments supported theatres in the occupied territories. Theatre was seen as an instrument of control and influence: under the Napoleonic occupation at the beginning of the century, theatre was considered a means of contributing to the education of the masses and forming public opinion.[2] In an 1825 official document of the Habsburg government, the theatre is described as an important support for the internal security of a region because big parts of the population spend the late hours of the day in a place that can easily be controlled.[3] For the governments that promoted these theatrical activities, the theatre thus served three functions: 'civic education' for a still vastly non-literate society (lower classes of which were nevertheless mostly excluded from theatre performances), propaganda for their governance, and surveillance of social gatherings in an easily accessible public space.

While gatherings in the theatre were encouraged, assemblies were prohibited in most other contexts. Endorsing the theatre while preventing other forms of meetings[4] led to a situation where the theatre was often the only social centre of a town: "Those who did not live in Italy before 1848 cannot understand what the theatre was then. It was the only field open to manifestations of public life, and everyone took part in it", writes Michele Lessona in *Volere è potere* in 1870.[5] Many

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1 See Giulia Brunello's article in this volume, pp. 121–137; Carlotta Sorba, *Teatri. L'Italia del melodramma nell'età del Risorgimento*, Bologna 2001, p. 28.

2 Claudio Meldolesi/Ferdinando Taviani, *Teatro e spettacolo nel primo Ottocento*, Roma/Bari 1992, p. 7; Claudio Toscani, *"D'amore al dolce impero". Studi sul teatro musicale italiano del primo Ottocento*, Lucca 2012, p. 17; Antonio Paglicci Brozzi, *Sul teatro giacobino ed antigiacobino in Italia, 1796-1805*, Milano 1887, pp. 179–184.

3 Fabian A. Stallknecht, *Dramenmodell und ideologische Entwicklung der italienischen Oper im frühen Ottocento*, Stuttgart 2001, p. 139; Sorba, *Teatri*, pp. 36, 39.

4 Stallknecht, *Dramenmodell*, p. 125.

5 "Chi non ha vissuto in Italia prima del 1848, non può farsi capace di ciò che fosse allora il teatro. Era l'unico campo aperto alle manifestazioni della vita pubblica, e tutti ci prendevano parte." All translations by the author. Michele Lessona, *Volere è potere*, Firenze 1869, p. 298.

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theatres in towns like Feltre were thus the most important (and often the only big and legal) venue for assemblies: the upper and middle classes gathered there to exchange news, to keep informed, to socialise, to eat, to play games of chance, and to see many different kinds of theatrical performances. However, the theatre in the Habsburg territories was not a place where ideas and opinions could be expressed freely. They were under constant surveillance,[6] texts for performances were censored in advance, and performances were monitored by censors.[7]

Provincial theatres in the Veneto and Lombardy regions – with the few exceptions of the court theatres – were not public institutions. They were organised in self-governed societies that were financed by selling or renting out boxes.[8] Each theatre society had its own regulations that defined its modes of governance and organisation.[9] In general assemblies, a presidency was elected who was then responsible for financial matters, the contact with censors and the playing schedule.[10] Both the Napoleonic and the Habsburg governments supported this associative mode of organisation as a "potentially positive element, which allowed the exercise of daily control over the mood of public opinion."[11] At the same time, however, theatres were feared by the government as places where conspiracies could grow.[12]

The Feltre theatre, located in a Renaissance building in the middle of the town, was already used for theatre performances in the seventeenth century. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, it stayed closed for several years and was for example used for accommodating soldiers.[13] It reopened in 1813 as an autonomous theatrical association now called the Teatro Sociale. As in many other towns, a theatre society was established, which commissioned the renovation of the theatre.[14] The first recorded performances in the nineteenth century date back to February 1820, but there is a source dating from 1816 granting permission for the staging of an opera buffa.[15]

This statement has to be relativised: even provincial theatres were probably not accessible to everyone because of entrance prices, dress codes and their location in towns. Harry Hearder, *Italy in the Age of the Risorgimento. 1890–1870*, Harlow 1983, p. 249.

6 Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, AT-OeStA/AVA, Inneres, PHSt 839, *Organisierung der Zensur in Lombardo-Venetien,* 1815.

7 Sorba, *Teatri*, p. 36.

8 Ibid., p. 104.

9 For Feltre, for example, see in Polo Bibliotecario Feltrino "Panfilo Castaldi" (hereafter PBF), *Fondo Storico*, G VI 90 bis*, Regolamento sulla Polizia dei Teatri*, 19 February 1812.

10 Sorba, *Teatri*, p. 79.

11 "[…] elemento potenzialmente positivo, che consentiva l'esercizio di un controllo quotidiano sugli umori dell'opinione pubblica." Ibid., p. 81.

12 Ibid., p. 118.

13 Archivio Storico del Comune di Feltre (hereafter ASCF), Serie 30, *Regno d'Italia 1805-1813*, n. 650, 1809/1810, *Alla municipalità di Feltre*, 14 March 1809. The Feltre theatre was partly closed during these years, and there was a provisory smaller theatre vis-à-vis of the theatre building. Antonio Vecellio, *Storia di Feltre. Volume Quarto*, Feltre 1877, p. 458; Adriano Rota, *Feltre Napoleonica*, Treviso 1984, p. 103.

14 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, G VI 90 bis*, Regolamento sulla Polizia dei Teatri*, 19 February 1812.

15 ASCF, Serie 32, *Atti 1814-1868*, n. 659, 1816.

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The theatre society was closely linked to the local amateur theatre group and to the town's orchestra and brass band,[16] which, as in many other towns, performed regularly in the theatre.[17] In addition, travelling troupes visited the Feltre theatre, typically for a few weeks, bringing their own repertoire and sometimes their own scene designs.[18] The public consisted of box owners (or leasers) and spectators who paid an evening's fee. Prices for these latter tickets were relatively low and were affordable for a considerable part of the town's and the adjacent countryside's population;[19] however, lower social classes were probably excluded from theatre performances because of ticket prices, dress codes and working schedules.[20]

It is possible to reconstruct a network of troupes that performed similar repertoire in different provincial theatres. Periodicals mention the troupes' itinerary, revealing that they visited towns like Feltre, Belluno and Ceneda, where they performed the same repertoire.[21] Once in a while, provincial theatres hosted special events with famous troupes or solo musicians. Such was the case for a performance of Francesco Sandi and Giovanni Peruzzini's *La fidanzata d'Abido,* which was heard in Feltre in 1858.[22] The Milan Conservatory orchestra and singers travelled to Feltre for this occasion. Often these events were inspired by a special link between an artist and a town such as Feltre – in this case, the composer Sandi was a Feltre native.

Feltre had a very active amateur theatrical society (the members of which were often also part of the theatre society consisting of the box owners), for which several pieces were especially written, such as Luigi Jarosch's *Avaro* (1845).[23] Amateur orchestras often performed so-called *accademie* (concerts) and musical theatre. They consisted of local players[24] or players from nearby cities.[25] The

16 ASCF, Serie 30, *Regno d'Italia 1805-1813*, n. 650, 1809/1810, *La Presidenza del Consorzio del Teatro*, 1809; PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche [s.n.], *Società filarmonica in Feltre*, 1859.

17 Meldolesi/Taviani, *Teatro e spettacolo,* p. 195.

18 Kenneth Richards/Laura Richards, Part Three: Italy, in *Romantic and Revolutionary Theatre, 1789–1860*, ed. by Donald Roy, Cambridge 2003, pp. 439–523, here p. 444; PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche n. 10, *Il ritorno di Pietro il Grande Czar di tutte le Russie in Mosca*, 13 September 1825.

19 Michael Walter, *"Die Oper ist ein Irrenhaus". Sozialgeschichte der Oper im 19. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart 1997, pp. 318, 323.

20 Stallknecht, *Dramenmodell*, pp. 136, 295. The term 'popolo' has led to some confusion in this context. In general, it does not include very low strata of society but describes a civic middle class. Roberto Leydi, The Dissemination and Popularization of Opera, in *Opera in Theory and Practice, Image and Myth. Part II: Systems*, ed. by Lorenzo Bianconi/Giorgio Pestelli, Chicago/London 1988, pp. 287–376, here p. 295.

21 E.g. [Anon.], Sommerstagione u. s. w. in Italien, in *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 43/46, 1841, coll. 956–958, here col. 957.

22 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche [s.n.], *La fidanzata d'Abido*, 1858.

23 Luigi Jarosch, *L'avaro. Opera in due atti. Scritta per i dilettanti feltresi*, Feltre 1844.

24 See Gisla Franceschetto, *Il teatro sociale di Cittadella*, Padova 1975, p. 28; Carlo Piastrella, Il teatro di Crema, in *Dall'Accademia dei Sospinti al Teatro San Domenico. Quattrocento anni di storia cremasco fra musica, scene e bel canto*, ed. by Carlo Piastrella, Crema 1999, pp. 13–43, here p. 33; Guido Bussi, I giovani dilettanti filodrammatici nell'800, in *La Scena e la memoria. Teatri a Este 1521-1978*, ed. by Sileno Salvagnini, Este 1985, pp. 125–140, here p. 125.

25 See Sileno Salvagnini, Architettura e immagini dello spettacolo a Este, in *La Scena e la memoria. Teatri a Este 1521-1978*, ed. by Sileno Salvagnini, Este 1985, pp. 11–36, here p. 17.

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provincial theatre's orchestras, at least in the first half of the century, were surprisingly small: there were about fifteen to thirty players.[26] Whereas we often imagine nineteenth-century Italian opera performed by big professional orchestras in major halls, the majority of theatres in what is today Northern Italy performed with relatively small musical forces. Most of the population heard the operas of Donizetti and Verdi played by about twenty amateur or semi-professional musicians and a handful of singers in medium-sized halls.

For the Feltre theatre, we can trace back performances for most parts of the nineteenth century, and we are thus able to reconstruct a good part of its repertoire. In this article, I will ask the following questions:

1. What kind of performances were held in the Teatro Sociale in Feltre during the nineteenth century?
2. What are the main topics with which these performances engaged?
3. Was Feltre's repertoire representative of Northern Italy's provincial theatres?

II. The repertoire of Feltre's Teatro Sociale

Throughout the nineteenth century, most theatres in smaller or medium-sized towns in Northern Italy seemed to host a variety of (musical) theatre and dance performances, concerts, lectures, festivities, pedagogical events, and spectacles like magician's shows and acrobatics. In the case of Medicina (near Bologna), there is evidence of rope dancers, acrobats and shows of exotic animals.[27] However, some of these theatres explicitly excluded such types of performance in their regulations (such as Castelfranco).[28]

Provincial theatres did not always have continuous performances during the nineteenth century, and they did not always maintain records of performances. Some theatres preserved documentation of their performance history in archives, and these are real treasure troves. In the case of Feltre, we are lucky to have found a vast number of playbills dating back to the nineteenth century in the communal historical archive and the local library. Feltre's theatre performances are also often mentioned in contemporary periodicals, in homages of artists and in repertoire lists of itinerant theatre troupes. While the Feltre theatre did not preserve its

[26] For example, in Lodi there were eighteen to twenty-four players, see Laura Pietrantoni, *Il palcoscenico ritrovato. Storia del teatro musicale a Lodi fal XVII al XX secolo*, Lodi 1993, p. 36; in Voghera, twenty-three to thirty-two players, see Alessandro Maragliano, *Teatro di Voghera*, Casteggio 1901, pp. 30, 67; in Medicina, twenty players, see Luigi Samoggia, *Il teatro di Medicina. Dal Seicento al Novecento. Vicende, personnaggi, attività*, Medicina 1983, p. 13; in Russi, only fourteen players, see Paolo Fabbri, *Teatri di Russi. Dal Vecchio al nuovo Comunale*, Ravenna 1979, p. 23; and in Sassuolo, twenty players, see Natale Cionini, *Teatro e arti in Sassuolo*, Modena 1902, p. 125.

[27] Samoggia, *Il teatro di Medicina*.

[28] Archivio Storico Comunale di Castelfranco (hereafter ASCC), *Fondo Teatro accademico*, Serie 3 Delibere, statuti e regolamenti 1778-1966, *Regolamento del Teatro accademico*, 1844.

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libretti or musical scores, most of the repertoire mentioned in the playbills is still accessible in historical printed editions; however, some works, sadly, seem forever lost.

For the first three decades of the nineteenth century, the extant repertoire list of Feltre's Teatro Sociale is almost certainly incomplete; playbills and other sources from this period conserved in local archives and libraries are relatively rare. What we do know is that itinerant troupes performed various genres such as pantomimes, including *Il ritorno di Pietro il Grande Czar di tutte le Russie in Mosca* by Alessandro Fabbri (1820; staged in Feltre in 1825), and musical theatre and spoken pieces such as *Andromeda e Perseo* by Giuseppe Avelloni (presented in Feltre in 1825; now apparently lost), and *Eduardo Stuard* by August von Kotzebue (1804; performed in Feltre in 1825), translated from German.[29] We also know that the local amateur theatre troupe and orchestra performed an opera by Luigi Velli and Giovanni Bellio (*Il barbiere di Gheldria,* 1829) in 1839.[30]

During the 1840s, the Feltre theatre began to host a larger number of opera performances presented by professional troupes. Operas that are still part of today's repertoire were performed in Feltre and many other medium-sized theatres during this period, including *L'elisir d'amore* (Gaetano Donizetti, Felice Romani, 1832; Feltre, 1840), *Marin Faliero* (Gaetano Donizetti, Giovanni Emanuele Bidera, 1835; Feltre, 1840), *Beatrice di Tenda* (Vincenzo Bellini, Felice Romani, 1833; Feltre, 1841), *La vestale* (Saverio Mercadante, Salvadore Cammarano, 1840; Feltre, 1841), and *Nabucco* (Giuseppe Verdi, Temistocle Solera, 1842; Feltre, 1845).[31]

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29 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche n. 10, *Il ritorno di Pietro il Grande Czar di tutte le Russie in Mosca*, 1825; Affiche [s.n.], *Andromeda e Perseo*, 1825; Affiche n. 8, *Eduardo Stuard*, [1825]. The German piece seems to be based on a French drama by Alexandre Duval: August von Kotzebue, *Eduard in Schottland, oder die Nacht eines Flüchtlings. Ein historisches Drama in drey Akten von Dueval, aus dem vom Verfasser mitgetheilten Manuscript frey übersetzt*, Augsburg 1804. Italian imprint: Augusto di Kotzebue/Teodore de Lellis, *Eduardo in Iscozia. Dramma storico*, Venezia 1805.

30 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, FII 50, *Il barbiere di Gheldria*, 1839. This piece was also performed in Oderzo, see Cesare Musatti, Il Teatro Sociale di Oderzo, in *Ateneo Veneto* 1/3, 1914, pp. 5–24, here p. 7; and in Russi, see Fabbri, *Teatri di Russi*, p. 25.

31 *L'elisir d'amore, Marin Faliero* in Feltre, see *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 42/46, 1840, col. 955; *Beatrice di Tenda* in Feltre, see *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 43/46, 1841, col. 957, *La vestale* in Feltre, see *Il pirata. Giornale di letteratura, varietà e teatri* 7/26, 1841, p. 104. *Nabucco* in Feltre, see *Il pirata. Giornale di letteratura, varietà e teatri* 11/25, 1845, p. 106. *L'elisir d'amore* was also performed in this period in the provincial theatres of Asolo, see Luigi Comacchio, *Storia di Asolo*, Asolo 1984, p. 123; in Lodi, see Pietrantoni, *Il palcoscenico ritrovato,* p. 84; in Voghera, see Maragliano, *Teatro di Voghera,* p. 13; in Medicina, see Samoggia, *Il teatro di Medicina,* p. 13; in Oderzo, see Musatti, Il Teatro Sociale di Oderzo, p. 15; in Rovigo, see Sergio Garbato, *Il Teatro Sociale di Rovigo. 1819-2003*, Rovigo 2003, p. 244; and in Sassuolo, see Cionini, *Teatro e arti in Sassuolo,* p. 196. *Marin Faliero* was also presented in Chioggia, see Paolo Padoan, Il teatro Garibaldi, in *Chioggia. Rivista di studi e ricerche* 7/9, 1993, pp. 59–86, here pp. 75f.; in Lodi, see Pietrantoni, *Il palcoscenico ritrovato,* p. 87; in Lugo, see Michele Rossi, *Cento anni di storia del teatro di Lugo*, Lugo 1916, p. 34: in Voghera, see Maragliano, *Teatro di Voghera*, p. 105; and in Rovigo, see Garbato, *Il Teatro Sociale di Rovigo*, p. 243. *Beatrice di Tenda* could be seen in the theatres of Este, see Teresa De Bello, Note sugli spettacoli operistici al teatro sociale (1813-1913), in *La Scena e la memoria. Teatri a Este 1521-1978*, Este

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During the 1850s, this tendency towards more representations of Italian operas continued with performances of *Ernani* (Giuseppe Verdi, Francesco Maria Piave, 1844; Feltre, 1852), *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (Gioachino Rossini, Cesare Sterbini, 1816; Feltre, 1852), *I due Foscari* (Giuseppe Verdi, Francesco Maria Piave, 1844; Feltre, 1854) and *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* (Giuseppe Verdi, Temistocle Solera, 1843; Feltre, 1856).[32] In 1858, Feltre hosted a special performance: Sandi and Peruzzini's *La fidanzata d'Abido,* which had been first performed in Milan and was reproduced with the same cast in Feltre in the same year. That Sandi was Feltrinese was acknowledged through a lot of tributes, some of which survive today in printed form.[33] At the same time, there was a trend towards spoken theatre performed by itinerant troupes. Their repertoire was partly drawn from translations of French authors into Italian, such as Paul de Kock and Charles Varin's *I Misteri del Fumo* (Feltre, 1853) or Joseph Bouchardy's *Lazzaro il mandriano*, announced in Feltre as *La Taverna di S. Maria* (1847).[34]

The first half of the 1860s saw a decline of theatre performances in Feltre, most likely due to political circumstances during the Risorgimento. In the beginning

1985, pp. 117–125, here p. 117; in Lodi, see Pietrantoni, *Il palcoscenico ritrovato,* p. 87; in Lugo, see Rossi, *Cento anni di storia del teatro di Lugo*, p. 34; in Voghera, see Maragliano, *Teatro di Voghera,* pp. 40f.; in Medicina, see Samoggia, *Il teatro di Medicina*, p. 13; and in Rovigo, see Garbato, *Il Teatro Sociale di Rovigo*, p. 244. *La vestale* was also performed in Lugo, see Rossi, *Cento anni di storia del teatro di Lugo*, p. 45; in Voghera, see Maragliano, *Teatro di Voghera*, p. 105; and in Rovigo, see Garbato, *Il Teatro Sociale di Rovigo*, p. 244. *Nabucco* could be seen in Este, see Salvagnini, Architettura e immagini, p. 27; in Lodi, see Pietrantoni, *Il palcoscenico ritrovato*, p. 89; in Lugo, see Rossi, *Cento anni di storia del teatro di Lugo*, p. 42; in Voghera, see Maragliano, *Teatro di Voghera,* pp. 72, 126; and in Rovigo, see Garbato, *Il Teatro Sociale di Rovigo*, p. 248.

32 *Ernani* and *Il barbiere in Feltre*, see *Il pirata. Giornale di letteratura, varietà e teatri* 18/22, 1852, p. 88; *I due Foscari* in Feltre, see *La fama* 13/81, 1854, pp. 323f.; *I Lombardi* in Feltre, see *La fama* 15/79, 1856, p. 316. *Ernani* was also played in Chioggia, see Padoan, Il teatro Garibaldi, pp. 75f.; in Este, see Salvagnini, Architettura e immagini, p. 27; in Lodi, see Pietrantoni, *Il palcoscenico ritrovato*, p. 98; in Lugo, see Rossi, *Cento anni di storia del teatro, p.* 40; in Voghera, see Maragliano, *Teatro di Voghera*, p. 7; and in Sassuolo, see Cionini, *Teatro e arti in Sassuolo,* p. 199. *Il barbiere di Siviglia* was presented in Chioggia, see Padoan, *Il teatro Garibaldi*, pp. 75f.; in Este, see Salvagnini, Architettura e immagini, p. 155; in Lodi, see Pietrantoni, *Il palcoscenico ritrovato,* p. 77; in Lugo, see Rossi, *Cento anni di storia del teatro,* p. 26; in Voghera, see Maragliano, *Teatro di Voghera*, p. 24; in Oderzo, see Musatti, Il Teatro Sociale di Oderzo, p. 1; in Rovigo, see Garbato, *Il Teatro Sociale di Rovigo,* p. 241; and in Sassuolo, see Cionini, *Teatro e arti in Sassuolo,* p. 139. *I due Foscari* was also performed in Chioggia, see Padoan, *Il teatro Garibaldi*, pp. 75f.; in Cittadella, see Franceschetto, *Il teatro sociale di Cittadella,* p. 26; in Lodi, see Pietrantoni, *Il palcoscenico ritrovato,* p. 47; in Lugo, see Rossi, *Cento anni di storia del teatro di Lugo,* p. 38; in Voghera, see Maragliano, *Teatro di Voghera,* p. 7; and in Rovigo, see Garbato, *Il Teatro Sociale di Rovigo,* p. 245. *I Lombardi* was seen in Chioggia, see Padoan, *Il teatro Garibaldi*, pp. 75f.; in Este, see Salvagnini, Architettura e immagini, p. 27; in Lodi, see Pietrantoni, *Il palcoscenico ritrovato,* p. 90; in Lugo, see Rossi, *Cento anni di storia del teatro,* p. 38; in Voghera, see Maragliano, *Teatro di Voghera*, p. 63; in Rovigo, see Garbato, *Il Teatro Sociale di Rovigo*, p. 245; and in Russi, see Fabbri, *Teatri di Russi, p.* 27.

33 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche [s.n.], *Al maestro Franceso Sandi*, [1858].

34 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche n. 9, *La Taverna di S. Maria ovvero il muto lazzaro mandriano alla corte di Firenze*, 1847; Affiche n. 11, *I misteri del fumo*, 1853. The latter piece was also performed in Rovigo, see Garbato, *Il Teatro Sociale di Rovigo,* p. 208.

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of 1866, the theatre hosted performances of acrobatics by an English troupe (Stephen Ethair)[35] and *accademie* – concerts with varied programmes: bits and pieces from operas and instrumental music as well as occasional poetry and short lectures. These *accademie* involved local professionals and amateur players and singers as well as pupils from the local music school.[36] Pieces drawn from the French repertoire such as Édouard Brisebarre's *Signora di Sant Tropez*[37] (Feltre, 1867) or Julien de Maillan and Auguste Boulé's *Macchia di sangue*[38] (1835; Feltre, 1867) stayed surprisingly popular for quite a while after the end of the Napoleonic regime, many of them considered today either as 'minor' genres and seen as going against the taste of the epoch.[39]

After Italy gained independence from the Habsburg empire, there was a shift towards spoken theatre with a heavily socio-political content, partly performed by local amateurs. Amateur and itinerant professional troupes staged a lot of plays that seem to have provided an opportunity to engage in political and social debates. The Feltre theatre entered into a phase of theatre 'obsession' with new performances every month – sometimes every week – covering topics such as cruel warfare, unjust imprisonment, and, very often, old and new gender roles. In 1866, only weeks after independence from the Habsburg empire was won, Antonio Scalvini's *I misteri della polizia austriaca* (1860) – which had been on the Habsburg censorship lists since its publication – was performed in Feltre.[40] The piece's central theme is the 1853 revolt in Milan, which was not politically successful but created a powerful echo in the middle-class press. The insurgents rebelled against the Habsburg government, failed and were imprisoned or executed.[41] *I misteri* shows an Italian count involved in revolutionary activities who, after the failed revolt, continues to lead a group of insurgents. The Habsburg commander of police is obsessed with surveillance and organises a dense network of spies, who infiltrate the local population and pressure them with sexual violence.[42] The noble count ends up in prison, where he awaits his execution. At the end of the

35 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche nn. 4 and 8, *Stephen Ethair*, 1866.
36 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche n. 23, *Accademia vocale ed istrumentale*, 1870.
37 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche n. 14, *La Signora di Saint-Tropez ossia la moglie del Corsaro*, [1867]. This piece could also be seen in Oderzo, see Musatti, Il Teatro Sociale di Oderzo, p. 21; and in Rovigo, see Garbato, *Il Teatro Sociale di Rovigo*, p. 206.
38 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche n. 52, *La macchia di sangue ovvero il figlio del giustiziato*, 1867. This piece was also performed in Russi, see Fabbri, *Teatri di Russi*, pp. 32f.
39 "Se si scorrono i repertorî degli anni '70, si nota il declinare ormai inarrestabile della tragedie (Alfieri, Monti, Pellico, Cossa, più qualche novità di Shakespeare), ed all'opposto una capillare divulgazione del gusto francese (*feuilleton*, dramma in costume, *grandguignol*, populismo, realismo sentimentale ed a forti tinte), tanto attraverso gli adattamenti di testi transalpini (dei varî Dumas, Scribe, Sardou) quanto mediante italiani infranciosati (Cicconi, Castelvecchio, Gherardi Del Testa)." Fabbri, *Teatri di Russi*, p. 27.
40 See the *Journal für Österreich's Leihbibliotheken* 4, 1863, p. 109. PBF, *Fondo Storico*, *I misteri della polizia austriaca ovvero i liberali e le spie*, 1866.
41 Catherine Brice, *Exile and the Circulation of Political Practices*, Cambridge 2020, p. 27.
42 Antonio Scalvini, *I misteri della polizia austriaca*, Milano 1860, p. 7.

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piece, he is freed, and the voices of the insurgent local population can be heard on stage.[43]

During the 1870s and 1880s, the local amateur group and itinerant professional troupes continued to perform many spoken theatre pieces, still partly drawn from the French repertoire, such as Eugène Scribe and Ernest Legouvé's *Una battaglia di donne* (1851; Feltre, 1875),[44] alternating with performances of instrumental and vocal music (*accademie*) and operas, many still well-known today, such as *La traviata* (Giuseppe Verdi, Francesco Maria Piave, 1853; Feltre, 1888).[45] What seems to have been new during this period is a special interest in pieces in local languages,[46] such as performances of Giacinto Gallina's *El moroso de la nona* (1875; Feltre, 1879) in Venetian.[47]

During the 1890s there is a record of many performances of spoken theatre pieces at the Feltre Teatro Sociale, now largely by Italian authors, with exceptions such as a piece by the German-speaking author Hermann Sudermann (*L'onore*, 1889; Feltre, 1891).[48] The local amateurs were mostly involved in performances of music, and the music-theatre repertoire tended to be less exclusively Italian with a larger number of pieces from other European regions, such as Federico Chueca and Joaquín Valverde's *La gran via* (1886; Feltre, 1894) or Ambroise Thomas, Jules Barbier and Michel Carré's *Mignon* (1866; Feltre, 1894).[49]

The repertoire of the Feltre theatre was not unique; rather, it reflected programming tendencies in the Veneto and Lombardy regions. In the first third of the nineteenth century, the playing schedule of most provincial theatres was varied (with dance, acrobatics, magician's shows, etc.) and not strongly canonised.[50] From the 1840s on, however, sources suggest a stronger canonisation of a national repertoire, especially with respect to lyrical theatre, with also many spoken pieces

43 Ibid., pp. 43, 52, 85.

44 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche n. 71, *Una battaglia di donne,* 1875; Affiche n. 22, *Un laccio d'amore*, 1870. *Una battaglia di donne* played in Voghera, see Maragliano, *Teatro di Voghera,* p. 95; in Oderzo, see Musatti, Il Teatro Sociale di Oderzo, p. 21; in Sassuolo, see Cionini, *Teatro e arti in Sassuolo,* p. 181; and in Russi, see Fabbri, *Teatri di Russi*, pp. 32f.

45 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche [s.n.], *Alla egregia Paolina Marilli*, 1888. *La traviata* was also presented in Chioggia, see Padoan, Il teatro Garibaldi, pp. 75f.; in Este, see Salvagnini, Architettura e immagini, p. 27; and in Rovigo, see Garbato*, Il Teatro Sociale di Rovigo*, p. 247.

46 In Italian, the term 'dialect' would most likely be used for these languages. It simply describes a linguistic system with a limited regional extension without reference to a particular social class or to a limited recognition. See keyword "dialetto" in Treccani, online under www.treccani.it/vocabolario/dialetto_res-545debd7-0018-11de-9d89-0016357eee51/ (05/09/2022).

47 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche n. 44, *El moroso de la nona*, 1879. This piece was also played in Cittadella, see Franceschetto, *Il teatro sociale di Cittadella*, p. 40

48 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche n. 37, *L'onore*, 1891.

49 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche n. 10, *La gran via*, 1894; *Mignon* in Feltre*, see Le Ménestrel. Musique et théâtre* 50/39, 1894, p. 309. *La gran via* was also seen in Chioggia, see Padoan, Il teatro Garibaldi, p. 76; and in Sassuolo, see Cionini, *Teatro e arti in Sassuolo,* p. 209. *Mignon* was performed in Lugo, see Rossi, *Cento anni di storia del teatro di Lugo*, p. 64; in Bassano, see Remo Schiavo, Il teatro a Bassano, in *Storia di Bassano*, Bassano 1980, pp. 617–635, here p. 630; and in Rovigo, see Garbato*, Il Teatro Sociale di Rovigo,* p. 253.

50 Samoggia, *Il teatro di Medicina*.

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translated from French and a strong interest in pieces in local languages, though these latter two trends faded at the end of the century.[51] Not even the performances of acrobatic troupes in the second half of the nineteenth century is particular to the Feltre stage.[52] Provincial theatres from the Veneto and Lombardy regions often staged a largely Italian lyrical repertoire during a good part of the nineteenth century, written by composers like Donizetti, Verdi, Bellini and Rossini, still part of the canonical opera repertoire today.[53] Not until the end of the century did provincial theatres in these regions include a bigger number of operas by composers like Giacomo Meyerbeer, Charles Gounod or Richard Wagner.[54]

What seems to be special about the Feltre repertoire is what was *not* staged: many other provincial theatres in Veneto and Lombardy had a strong interest in dance performances (as had theatres in major cities) during the nineteenth century. Apart from the aforementioned pantomime in the 1820s, we cannot find any trace of dancers in the Feltre theatre. Many other provincial theatres also featured marionette theatre throughout the nineteenth century – for Feltre, we cannot find any examples of this genre either.[55]

III. Topics of the Feltre repertoire

What were the main topics of the pieces performed in nineteenth-century Feltre? I will present a few dominant themes; my choice of subjects is not in any way exhaustive but should be understood as a selection of topics that stand out and have important socio-political implications for the period under investigation. Most pieces that were played in Feltre from the 1840s on can also be traced to other theatres in the Lombardy and Veneto regions; thus, we may treat Feltre as a representative example of programming for these provincial theatres as well.

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51 Venetian pieces were performed in many provincial theatres. Carlo Goldoni's *Quatro rusteghi* (1760; Feltre, 1867), was also performed in Oderzo, see Musatti, Il Teatro Sociale di Oderzo, p. 9; and in Sassuolo, see Cionini, *Teatro e arti in Sassuolo,* p. 187.

52 The "ginnasti bassanesi" could be seen in Asolo, see Comacchio, *Storia di Asolo*, p. 124. There were gymnastic spectacles performed in Cittadella, see Franceschetto, *Il teatro sociale di Cittadella*, p. 28; and in Este, see Bussi, I giovani dilettanti filodrammatici, p. 132. In Russi, there was a performance of a "compagnia acrobatica e mimica", see Fabbri, *Teatri di Russi,* p. 31; and in Sassuolo, a performance of a "compagnia ginnastica-mimica-plastica", see Cionini, *Teatro e arti in Sassuolo*, pp. 208, 184.

53 See note 32.

54 Exceptions include *Il crociato in Egitto* (Giacomo Meyerbeer, Gaetano Rossi, 1826), performed in Lugo in 1826, see Giovanni Manzoni, *Spettacoli teatrali e altre manifestazioni culturali e folkloristiche in Lugo di Romagna dal 1711 al 1920*, Lugo 1984, p. 34.

55 Dance performances were common in Sassuolo, see Cionini, *Teatro e arti in Sassuolo*, p. 129; marionette theatre was popular in Lodi, see Pietrantoni*, Il palcoscenico ritrovato*, pp. 36, 94; and in Voghera, see Maragliano, *Teatro di Voghera*, p. 25.

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Gender roles

Unsurprisingly, pieces performed in Feltre (and in other provincial theatres in Northern Italy) were very much engaged with deliberations of nineteenth-century gender roles. While the emphasis was on marriages of convenience, illicit love, and women's honour in the first half of the century, pieces performed from the 1840s on are very much concerned with the importance of maternal love.

The first source of a piece performed in Feltre during the nineteenth century is an article in the *Gazzetta privilegiata di Venezia* on 18 February 1820 that describes a performance of Ferdinando Paër and Luigi Buonavoglia's very popular opera *Agnese* (1809) by local youth and musicians from Venice and Feltre. The newspaper correspondent writes:

> Faithful to my commitment, I write to you from Feltre, where my first stop was. Appropriately and against my expectations, I found in this city a very elegant little theatre of beautiful forms and excellent taste [...]. *L'Agnese* was performed to a large audience, and some well-educated young people from the leading families of this city, as well as some brave young Venetians, who were entrusted with the first parts, showed no ordinary skills.[56]

The piece tells the story of a young woman who elopes with her lover, gets pregnant and is abandoned by the father of her child. The young woman's father rejects her, is driven mad by his daughter's shortcomings and is institutionalised in a 'mad house', where a few scenes of the opera take place. The young heroine is able to make herself recognised by her father, is pardoned, and reconciles with her now-recovered father. Even her child's father regrets his doings and returns to the young woman.[57] While the events of the piece are driven by illicit love and the repudiation of a 'shameless' daughter, her actions do not seem to be unpardonable; she is characterised as 'innocent', and the story ends well.[58]

In Federico Ricci and Gaetano Rossi's *La prigione di Edimburgo* (1838), performed in Feltre in 1840, another young woman (Giovanna) is abandoned by the father (Giorgio) of her illegitimate, dead child. Giorgio quickly finds another wife (Ida), marries her secretly and fathers another child. Giovanna is driven mad by the loss of her baby and abducts Ida's child, believing it is hers. When Ida's baby cannot be found, Ida is imprisoned for its presumed murder and condemned to death while Giovanna is taken in for theft. During a fire in prison, Ida is freed and reunited with her husband and child; Giovanna dies in the fire. While in

56 "Fedele al mio impegno vi scrivo da Feltre, dovè la mia prima Stazione. Opportunamente e contro la mia aspettazione ho trovato in questa Città un assai elegante Teatrino di belle forme e di ottimo gusto [...]. Si rappresentò l'*Agnese* col concorso di numerosi spettatori, e dimostrarono non ordinaria maestria tanto alcuni ben educati giovani delle primarie famiglie di questa Città, quanto alcuni valorosi giovani Veneziani, ai quali furono affidate le prime parti." [Anon.], Squarcio di lettera di N.N di Roveredo ad N.N. in Venezia, in *Gazzetta privilegiata di Venezia*, 18 February 1820, s. p.

57 [Ferdinando Paër/Luigi Buonavoglia], *L'Agnese. Dramma semiserio in musica* [libretto], Bologna 1813, pp. 9, 16, 22.

58 Ibid., p. 44.

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Agnese, illicit sex and motherhood out of wedlock could be pardoned, and the child's father was characterised as guilty of abandonment, in *La prigione di Edimburgo* the guilty mother and her illegitimate child die while the guilt of the child's father is never mentioned.[59]

Pieces that put maternal love at the centre of the storyline were plentiful in the repertoire of the Feltre Teatro Sociale: Joseph Bouchardy and Pietro Manzoni's *Lazzaro il mandriano* (Feltre, 1847),[60] *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* (1843; Feltre, 1856),[61] and Augusto Lancetti's *Gloria del 1808* (Feltre, 1866)[62] are but a few examples.[63] A very explicit demonstration of the values of motherhood and procreation within marriage can be found in Felice Cavallotti's *Lea* (1882; Feltre, 1891). In this piece, the teenage male protagonist has married a young girl who is then repudiated by her family. When her mother is taken ill, she wants to see her and is subsequently sent to a convent by her family while her husband is made to believe she is dead.[64] He gets over the loss of his young wife, marries again and fathers a child. When his first wife turns up at his doorstep, he is torn between the two women, but the case is quickly resolved as there can be no real marriage without procreation: "He is my right, it is the mother who sanctifies the marriage, it is the mother!... You, no mother, are the barren dream, the nothingness: I am the family, the whole!",[65] comments the second wife. The first wife (who is not a mother) thus has no choice: she commits suicide to legitimise her husband's second marriage.[66]

A big portion of the pieces performed in Feltre during the nineteenth century engage with questions about women's roles and relationships within families. The theme of illicit love is a dominant one, but its treatment changes over time, from forgiving positions towards women's illicit relationships to a more negative view of 'dishonoured' or 'guilty' women. In the second half of the century, women's characters tend to be no longer focused on their roles as lovers and wives but instead on their unique role as a mother. This implicates putting last other desires of women, to the point that wives without children can be sacrificed without further ado. This corresponds with Katharine Mitchell's conclusions in her 2021 study on

59 F. R., Un po' di tutto, in *Il pirata. Giornale di letteratura, varietà e teatri* 6/25, 1840, p. 102. [Federico Ricci, Gaetano Rossi], *La prigione di Edimburgo*, Novara [1845], p. 40.

60 Joseph Bouchardy/Pietro Manzoni, *Lazzaro il mandriano ovvero Cosimo I. soprannominato il padre della patria. Dramma in quattro parti*, Milano 1843 (Biblioteca ebdomadaria teatrale, Vol. 410), p. 57

61 Giuseppe Verdi/Temistocle Solera, *I Lombardi alla prima crociata. Dramma lirico in 4 atti* [libretto], Firenze 1843, pp. 13, 19.

62 Augusto Lancetti, *L'abbandono o una gloria del 1808. Dramma in tre atti*, Milano 1855 (Florilegio drammatico ovvero scelto repertorio moderno di componimenti teatrali italiani e stranieri, Vol. 6/1), p. 18.

63 All mentioned Feltre productions in this text rely on sources in PBF, *Fondo Storico*.

64 Felice Cavallotti, *Lea. Dramma in tre atti in prosa con un prologo in versi*, Milano 1917, pp. 53, 60, 68.

65 "È lui il mio diritto, è la madre che santifica le nozze, è la madre!... Voi, non madre, siete il sogno sterile, il nulla: io sono la famiglia, ossia il tutto!" Ibid., p. 97.

66 Ibid., p. 104.

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gender on the Italian stage in the nineteenth century. According to her, "new technologies and inventions were fuelling misogynistic and patriarchal attitudes towards real and represented women" in the second half of the century.[67] At the "crucial juncture in Italy's nation-making process"[68], "[m]oral regeneration was […] as much an aim of the Risorgimento as political unification",[69] which included a focus on women's honour. While literacy levels were still very low in the 1860s, there was a trend of opening girls' schools during the 1880s.[70] Some women now called for equal rights (such as Adele Cortesi in 1848), but even personalities like Giuseppe Mazzini, who supported the feminist movement, held a very conservative view of women's 'natural' designation as a wife and mother.[71]

In the world of the theatre, and especially the opera, the 'Magdalene' archetype seems to dominate in the late nineteenth century:

> Fallen Women were […] blamed for their so-called transgressions and punished with their deaths at the end of the narrative's denouement, in which themes of forbidden or unrequited love, adultery, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, abandonment, shame, prostitution, and financial ruin dominated.[72]

But, as Mitchell argues, these 'fallen women' cannot be reduced to a product of a misogynistic imagination. They are also the object of admiration, desire and pleasure for both male and female spectators.[73] Attending such theatre performances with female protagonists who did not bow to social norms "opened up for women […] spectators new ways of feeling and thinking about their sexual, social, and economic selves."[74] It is thus an oversimplification to limit one's observations to ideologies promulgated by the piece's plot: even if the lives of female characters often end in death, their portrayal opened up new possibilities for dealing with patriarchal society in an emancipated way.

Mental health

The emphasis on women's roles as wives and mothers is often linked to an interest in the mental health of female protagonists and their relatives. Their psychological state is frequently very precarious, often due to excessive feelings, such as after the loss of a child.

In the aforementioned piece *Agnese* (1809), the female protagonist's father ends up in chains in a mental asylum because of his excessive feelings due to his

67 Katharine Mitchell, *Gender, Writing, Spectatorships. Evenings at the Theatre, Opera, and Silent Screen in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy and Beyond*, New York 2021, p. 1.
68 Ibid.
69 Alexandra Wilson, *The Puccini Problem. Opera, Nationalism, and Modernity*, Cambridge 2007, p. 15. See also Mitchell, *Gender, Writing, Spectatorships*, p. 9.
70 Ibid., pp. 8, 2.
71 Ibid., pp. 11f.
72 Ibid., p. 4.
73 Ibid., p. 3.
74 Ibid., p. 2.

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daughter's illicit sexual behaviour. The father's illness is depicted in his delusion about her supposed death while she is still very much alive. His physicians do not think he can be healed, but his daughter makes him recover and pardon her.[75] In *La prigione di Edimburgo* (1838), it is the female protagonist (Giovanna) herself who becomes irrational due to the abandonment by her lover and the loss of her child. Her state is described as follows: "Giovanna appears distracted, slowly, and smiling – She stops, advances, and in all her actions and in her physiognomy one can see her mental alienation".[76] She imagines her child still being alive, performs gestures relating to it, and abducts her rival's baby believing it is hers. In the end, Giovanna dies while her former lover, his new wife and their baby are reunited in a happy ending.[77]

The case of the opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Gaetano Donizetti, Salvadore Cammarano, 1835; Feltre, 1888)[78] is a more famous one: Lucia's lover Edgardo is banished from the castle (where she lives) because of a family feud. She is tricked into another marriage, but Edgardo reappears and curses her. Lucia loses her mind over these events and kills her husband. Her illness is shown as a delusion where she is happily married to her beloved one and described as mental alienation in the stage directions, as is Giovanna's in *La prigione di Edimburgo*: "The paleness of her face, her bewildered look, everything announces the suffering she endured and the first symptoms of mental alienation".[79] Lucia does not perceive what is happening around her;[80] she is deathly pale, resembles a ghost and is on the edge of dying:

> Her hair is dishevelled, and her face, covered with a deathly pallor, makes her resemble a spectre rather than a living creature. Her petrified gaze, convulsive movements, and even an unfortunate smile manifest not only a frightening dementia, but also the signs of a life already drawing to a close.[81]

At the end of the piece, Lucia dies, and Edgardo takes his own life.

The thematisation of mental health in nineteenth-century theatre is often seen as an "expression of an increasing interest in emotional aspects in [...] society as

75 Paër/Buonavoglia, *Agnese*, pp. 9, 25, 28, 31.

76 "Giov. comparisce astratta, lentamente, e sorridendo – Si ferma, avanza, ed in tutta la sua azione e nella di lei fisonomia si scorge l'alienazione mentale". Ricci/Rossi, *La prigione di Edimburgo*, p. 8.

77 Ibid., pp. 22, 30, 37, 40.

78 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche [s.n.], *Alla egregia Paolina Marilli*, 1888.

79 "[L]a pallidezza del suo volto, il guardo smarrito, e tutto in lei annunzia i patimenti ch'ella sofferse, ed i primi sintomi d'un'alienazione mentale". [Gaetano Donizetti/Salvadore Cammarano], *Lucia di Lammermoor. Dramma tragico in due parti*, Napoli 1835, p. 16.

80 Ibid., p. 16.

81 "[H]a le chiome scarmigliate, ed il suo volto, coperto da uno squallore di morte, la rende simile ad uno spettro, anzicché [*sic!*] ad una creatura vivente. Il di lei sguardo impietrito, i moti convulsi, e fino un sorriso malaugurato manifestano non solo una spaventevole demenza, ma ben anco i segni di una vita, che già volge al suo termine." Ibid., p. 32.

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well as in clinical psychiatry".[82] Already at the beginning of the century, it became very popular to include so-called 'mad' scenes in theatre pieces, especially opera.[83] The concept of 'mental alienation' was popularised by, amongst others, the French psychiatrist Jacques-Joseph Moreau de Tours (1804–1884), who introduced the idea of a continuity between normality and mental illness.[84] The protagonists of operas can thus change from a state of good mental health to one of 'alienation' and – as in the case of *Agnese* – back to 'normality'.

In all the aforementioned cases, characters go 'mad' in relation to unwanted female sexual behaviour. The representation of 'mad' women in nineteenth-century theatre has often been understood as the subjection of these characters under a patriarchal regime, but also as a liberating gesture which allows them an escape to behaviours outside societal norms within the frame of mental illness. 'Mad' behaviour, in this sense, is relative to a society's construction of 'normality' and 'sanity' and can be understood as a mode of resistance to a dominant order. Women, in this sense, 'escape' from a tight patriarchal regime to a world of less regulated behavioural norms – not as a wholly conscient choice, but as a reaction under extreme duress. This view of mad scenes is closely linked to their correlation with the feminine and the threatening nature of female sexuality in nineteenth-century theatre.[85]

Lucia's behaviour is clearly a danger for the order of her society, as are those of Agnese, Giovanna and Lea. These women threaten family bonds and power relations, and all of them can express themselves within the verbal, gestural and musical languages of mad scenes in the theatre, but all of them (except Agnese) end up dead. As Smart suggests, the signification of mental health in nineteenth century theatre is never a simple one: "[C]onflicting interpretations are the norm, and any 'rational' explanation of operatic meaning is riddled with contradiction and ambiguity."[86] The pieces presented in Feltre thus reflect an interest in psychiatry and especially in the 'female' nature of madness. They give space to women's expression of 'otherness' but restrict it to a brief moment in a plot that condemns their protagonists to an early death.

82 Andreas Erfurth/Paul Hoff, Mad Scenes in Early 19th-Century Opera, in *Acta Psychiatra Scandinavica* 102/4, 2000, pp. 310–313, here p. 310.

83 Ibid., p. 311. The verbal description of 'mad' protagonists is often accompanied by their musical characterisation which can imply a deconstruction of musical formal elements. Ibid., p. 312; Mary Ann Smart, The Silencing of Lucia, in *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4/2, 1992, pp. 119–141, here p. 133.

84 Erfurth/Hoff, Mad Scenes, p. 310.

85 Smart, The Silencing of Lucia, p. 119–121.

86 Ibid., p. 140.

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Reading and writing

Another topic closely linked to gender roles is that of reading and writing. In a society where literacy levels were very low until the 1860s,[87] and many regions were taking the first steps towards increasing literacy among a larger part of the population, the ability to read and write is a constant theme in nineteenth-century Italian theatre. In the repertoire of Feltre, one can notice a particular insistence on the importance of reading and writing throughout the century. Written documents are often used in intrigues, misleading protagonists and/or deciding their fate; often whole scenes are dominated by writing materials, and they play a major role in defining gender roles and social classes.

One of the very first pieces performed in Feltre in the nineteenth century, *Eduardo in Iscozia* (August von Kotzebue, 1804; Feltre, 1825), opens with a secret letter that threatens to reveal the identity of the male protagonist;[88] the opera *Nabucco* is dominated by secret documents;[89] the piece *Lazzaro il mandriano ovvero Cosimo I soprannominato il padre della patria* (Joseph Bouchardy, Pietro Manzoni, 1843; Feltre, 1847) revolves around a multitude of secret letters;[90] and in *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835; Feltre, 1853) counterfeit letters seem to prove the infidelity of Lucia's lover, which entices her to sign a marriage contract with another man, pitting her oral vow with her lover against the written marriage contract.[91] Letters and written documents thus dominate the plots of a number of pieces performed in Feltre, and writing materials and furniture associated with writing were also very present on stage throughout the century.[92]

It is often the female protagonists who read and write on stage and who are confronted with written documents that decide their fates. Even the poorer female characters can often read and write and are sometimes able to copy music, such as in *Il biricchino di Parigi* (François Alfred Bayard, Émile Vanderburch, 1836; Feltre, 1866)[93] and in *1812 e 1814 ossia la croce d'oro* (Mélesville, Girolamo Giacinto Beccari 1840; Feltre, 1867).[94] The idea that women should not read much

87 Mitchell, *Gender, Writing, Spectatorships*, p. 8.
88 Kotzebue/Lellis, *Eduardo in Iscozia*, p. 3.
89 Temistocle Solera, *Nabucodonsor. Dramma lirico in quattro parti* [libretto], Milano 1842, p. 15.
90 Bouchardy/Manzoni, *Lazzarro il mandriano,* pp. 16, 75.
91 Donizetti/Cammarano, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, pp. 14, 19, 21.
92 See, for example, [Mélesville (Anne-Honoré-Joseph Duveyrier)/Pierre-Frédéric-Adolphe Carmouche], *Le nozze di Cornelio*, Firenze 1853, p. 3. Premiered in 1848, presented in Feltre in 1877: PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche [s.n.], *Le nozze di Cornelio*, 1877.
93 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche [s.n.], *Il birichino di Parigi*, 1866. [François Alfred Bayard/Émile Vanderburch], *Il biricchino di Parigi. Melodramma* [libretto], Milano 1841, p. 27.
94 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche [s.n.], *La croce d'oro*, 1867. Mélesville [Anne-Honoré-Joseph Duveyrier]/Girolamo Giacinto Beccari, *1812 e 1814 ossia la croce d'oro. Commedia in quattro atti*, Milano 1842, p. 12.

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(common in the eighteenth century) is not represented in the theatrical repertoire in nineteenth-century Feltre.[95]

Reading and writing are very often linked to an idea of national identity. In *Silvio Pellico e le sue prigioni ovvero i carbonari del 1821* (Luigi Gualtieri; Feltre 1867), the majority of the population cannot read because the Habsburg regime has kept them in ignorance.[96] In Paolo Ferrari's *Marianna ovvero le due rivali* (1862; Feltre 1872), the importance of studying written documents in order to understand political circumstances and liberate one's country plays an important role.[97] Reading and writing are thus essential for the construction of a national identity. In *I misteri della polizia austriaca*, all documents are issued in German, which the local population does not understand, and this fact contributes to a great reluctance towards the foreign regime.[98]

Scenes of reading and writing, written documents and writing materials[99] were omnipresent in the repertoire of the Feltre theatre and other nineteenth-century Northern Italian provincial theatres. The ability to read and write was understood as both a disciplinary act that imposes a certain way of thinking and of deportment and as a liberating practice,[100] which is very often adopted by young women.[101] More generally, nineteenth-century theatre highlights the power of the written language – its capacity for manipulation and forcing people into submission – but also the power it can give to the subjected to stand up for their rights.

Revolts, Nationalism and the Masses

Nineteenth-century Italian theatre was very much engaged with the idea of political revolt and national 'liberation' in general. While pieces performed in Feltre in

95 Günther Stocker, Lost in a Book. Ein kurzer Streifzug durch die Literaturgeschichte des immersiven Lesens, in *Leseszenen. Poetologie – Geschichte – Medialität*, ed. by Irina Hron/Jadwiga Kita-Huber/Sanna Schulte, Heidelberg 2020, pp. 367–386, here p. 373.

96 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche [s.n.], *Silvio Pellico e le sue prigioni ovvero I carbonari del 1821*, 1867. Luigi Gualtieri, *Silvio Pellico e le sue prigioni ovvero i carbonari del 1821. Dramma in tre atti*, Milano 1861, p. 4.

97 PBF, *Fondo Storico*, Affiche [s.n.], *Marianna ovvero le due rivali*, 1872. Paolo Ferrari, *Marianna. Dramma in tre atti*, Milano 1876, p. 24.

98 Scalvini, *I misteri*, p. 25.

99 Konrad Feilchenfeldt, "Ich schreib's euch auf, diktiert ihr mir!" Theatralik des Schreibens in Richard Wagners *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, in *Schreibszenen. Kulturpraxis – Poetologie – Theatralität*, ed. by Christine Lubkoll/Claudia Öhlschläger, Freiburg i.Br./Berlin/Wien 2015, pp. 369–388, here p. 374.

100 Christine Lubkoll/Claudia Öhlschläger, Einleitung, in *Schreibszenen. Kulturpraxis – Poetologie – Theatralität*, ed. by Christine Lubkoll/Claudia Öhlschläger, Freiburg i.Br./Berlin/Wien 2015, pp. 9–24, here p. 11. Jadwiga Kita-Huber, Leseszenen in den Erzählungen Jean Pauls. Zur Inszenierung und Reflexion einer Kulturtechnik, in *Leseszenen. Poetologie – Geschichte – Medialität,* ed. by Irina Hron/Jadwiga Kita-Huber/Sanna Schulte, Heidelberg 2020, pp. 155–180, here pp. 157f.

101 Irina Hron, Quasi una Fantasia. Die Lust am Leser, in *Leseszenen. Poetologie – Geschichte – Medialität*, ed. by Irina Hron/Jadwiga Kita-Huber/Sanna Schulte, Heidelberg 2020, pp. 31–44, here p. 32.

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the beginning of the century often played a 'domesticating' role by showing illegitimate revolts that must be put down, as early as the 1840s, works were staged that depicted successful revolts against political authorities. In the second half of the century, theatre pieces sometimes even portrayed conspiracies against the Habsburg empire, promoted sacrificing for the 'fatherland' and displayed black-and-white nationalism. The portrayal of 'popular' revolts remained relatively rare in theatre pieces – the 'masses' were often shown as too uneducated for an uprising, and revolts or conspiracies were typically allotted to characters representing the intellectual elite. Very closely linked to the thematisation of revolts is the representation of social groups: while pieces performed in the first half of the century mostly show lower social classes as contented with subordination to their masters, pieces in the second half of the century sometimes criticise working conditions, power abuse and social inequalities.[102]

In Alessandro Fabbri's *Il ritorno di Pietro il Grande in Mosca* (1820; Feltre, 1825), a revolt is portrayed as illegitimate and has to be put down by a faithful German military unit.[103] Just a decade later, in *Marin Faliero* (Gaetano Donizetti, Giovanni Emanuele Bidera, 1835; Feltre, 1840) the people rise up against an unjust state,[104] and in *Nabucco* (1842; Feltre, 1845), the Israelites, condemned to hard labour, develop a sense of national unity.[105] In this era, revolts in theatrical pieces are often carried out by the more powerful members of society, such as in *Ernani* (Giuseppe Verdi, Francesco Maria Piave, 1844; Feltre, 1852).[106] Only weeks after the independence, Scalvini's *I misteri della polizia austriaca* was shown in Feltre, a work which depicts a conspiracy against the Austrian occupation and underlines the importance of a national identity and language.[107] Similarly, *Silvio Pellico e le sue prigioni ovvero i carbonari del 1821* (Luigi Gualtieri, 1862; Feltre, 1867) shows the planning of a revolt against the Habsburg empire.[108]

In this context, the opera chorus plays an essential role. While choruses are mostly shown as affirmative unities in pieces represented in Feltre until 1840,[109] choruses in works from the 1840s on are often separated in different groups.[110] They now have their own agency on stage and make tumultuous movements

102 See, for example, Sandi's *Fidanzata d'Abido*, [Francesco Sandi/Giovanni Peruzzini], *La fidanzata d'Abido. Tragedia lirica in tre atti* [libretto], Milano 1858, p. 19.

103 Alessandro Fabbri, *Il ritorno di Pietro il Grande in Mosca. Ballo eroico-pantomimico diviso in cinque atti*, Roma 1820, p. 3.

104 Gaetano Donizetti/Giovanni Emanuele Bidera, *Marin Faliero. Tragedia lirica* [libretto], Bergamo 1841, p. 37.

105 Verdi/Solera, *Nabucodonsor*, p. 23.

106 Giuseppe Verdi/Francesco Maria Piave, *Ernani. Dramma Lirico in quattro parti* [libretto], Milano 1844, p. 31.

107 Scalvini, *I misteri*, pp. 9, 24, 25.

108 Gualtieri, *Silvio Pellico*, p. 4.

109 See, for example, Luigi Velli/Giovanni Bellio, *Il barbiere di Gheldria. Opera buffa* [libretto], Venezia 1829, p. 5; Gaetano Donizetti/Felice Romani, *L'elisir d'amore. Melodramma giocoso* [libretto], Trieste 1834, pp. 5f. Premiered in 1832, Feltre 1840.

110 See, for example, Ricci/Rossi, *La prigione di Edimburgo*, p. 6.

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on stage relatively late in the century, such as in *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Feltre, 1888).[111]

Many researchers have argued that nineteenth-century opera played an important role in a nation-building process, where the chorus as "a mass of people singing together" is fundamental for the inspiration of theatre-goers.[112] After the French Revolution, the theme of political struggle, according to Parakilas, creates "a growing need for choruses"[113] throughout European theatres. This 'singing mass' constitutes a powerful link between the stage and the audience as well as between life and drama, not least in a very literal sense because the choirs in provincial towns were mostly constituted of local amateurs.

Where earlier forms of choruses often represented fixed power relationships, the 'tumultuous' chorus with its own actions on stage now frequently stood for a crisis in the state.[114] It could represent different groups of people or different camps in a crisis, but from the 1840s on, it was very often used as a representation of 'the people' in general:

> The chorus was a group of actors who could represent 'the people' as a mass – exactly what the drama of liberalism required – their voices organized, as only music could organize them, into sustained, unified, and commanding utterance that expressed their identity, independence, unity, and importance.[115]

The most explicitly political operas showed a mobilised people as a whole, as a nation struggling against oppression.[116] With the tumultuous chorus, nineteenth-century opera creates a very powerful image of political assembly and thereby of political struggle: according to Parakilas, "nineteenth-century opera presented as an eternal formula of political life […] what was at the time a new model of public assemblies still being tested in politics."[117] While Parakilas observes that spoken theatre in the Italian peninsula turned away from the political and toward domestic dramas in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the Feltre repertoire, there remains an engagement with political themes of uprisings against oppression in dramas throughout the century.[118]

111 Donizetti/Cammarano, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, p. 27.
112 Krisztina Lajosi, Shaping the Voice of the People in Nineteenth-Century Operas, in *Folklore and Nationalism in Europe During the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Timothy Baycroft/David Hopkin, Leiden 2012, pp. 27–48, here p. 36.
113 James Parakilas, Political Representation and the Chorus in Nineteenth-Century Opera, in *19th-Century Music* 16/2, 1992, pp. 181–202, here p. 185.
114 Ibid., pp. 183f.
115 Ibid., p. 184.
116 Ibid., p. 189.
117 Ibid., p. 199.
118 Ibid., p. 185.

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Conclusion

The Feltre repertoire reveals tendencies that were representative of provincial Northern Italian theatres of the nineteenth century and that distinguished them from major theatres. As the social centre of a geographical area, provincial theatres had to create an interest in theatre among all those strata of society rich enough to pay an entrance fee. These theatres provided a variety of 'spectacles' until the middle of the century, but even late in the century many theatres were hosting some events like acrobatic performances.

The repertoires from provincial theatres witnessed the canonisation of an opera repertoire from the 1840s on (many works of which remain part of the modern opera canon). But even later on in the century, theatres did not represent exclusively opera, they used their theatre stages for balls and socio-political discourses, and they specialised in spoken theatre (partly in the Venetian language) and what we would call concerts today, staying a platform for local amateur troupes and providing a space of engagement in socio-political debates. Accordingly, part of the Feltre repertoire is still performed in today's opera houses, but part of it has long been forgotten. While opera was frequent on the Feltre stage, dance performances and marionette theatre seem not to have been offered there, or at least, we cannot find any trace of these genres, which seems surprising considering their importance in other major and minor theatres of the region.

Feltre's choice of repertoire suggests a very pronounced interest in gender roles, mental health, the importance of reading and writing and the nation-building process as an intellectual project, themes that were probably common among most theatres during the second half of the nineteenth century. The sources from Feltre suggest a surprisingly French (and partly German) repertoire up to the 1880s whereas the programming of other theatres show an earlier 'Italianisation'. One reason for this is likely the late separation of the Veneto region from the Habsburg empire and its close transalpine connections. While other theatres were constructing a unified national repertoire, the Feltre theatre was still engaging in the idea of translating and adapting a larger European canon of literature and theatre traditions.

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