

# *I Misteri della polizia austriaca*

## Reprocessing of an Epoch of Foreign Domination?

Annette Kappeler

On December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1866, a few months into the independence from the Habsburg Empire, the provincial theatre of Feltre, in the Veneto Region in what is today Northern Italy, staged a piece entitled *I misteri della polizia austriaca* (*The Mysteries of the Austrian Police*).<sup>1</sup> The piece by Antonio Scalvini is a severe accusation of the Habsburg authorities, especially of its police force, and it had been on the censorship lists of the whole Empire since its first publication.<sup>2</sup> The staging of the piece was one of a series of Feltre performances accusing the Habsburg rule in Northern Italy of inhumane practices.<sup>3</sup> These examples from Feltre are not an exception – on the contrary, the 1850s and 1860s saw a multitude of theatre pieces reprocessing Risorgimento events and building a ‘patriotic’ canon.<sup>4</sup>

But why was a piece like this of special interest to the local population in a provincial Venetian town? This contribution tries to answer this question. The first part of the article contextualises the main themes of Scalvini’s piece: it sketches the socio-cultural situation in nineteenth-century Northern Italy, the functioning of the Habsburg police force and its networks of spies, and local attitudes towards the regime. Understanding the nature of the foreign government, its bureaucracy, its surveillance of the local population, and its attitudes towards local languages seems necessary in order to comprehend the accusations in Scalvini’s piece and why it was so popular with provincial audiences. The second part of the paper centres on the piece itself: it discusses its representation of Habsburg officials, of women suffering under their power abuse, and of its main characters involved in the Italian national movement. The article concludes with possible reasons for the popularity of the piece in the Veneto.

### *Socio-political situation in Lombardy-Venetia – despotic governance at its best?*<sup>5</sup>

Today’s Northern Italy was dominated by war and changes of governance during the nineteenth century. The Veneto was invaded by Napoleonic troupes in 1797 and was later ruled by the Habsburg regime, except for a few years before the

<sup>1</sup> Playbill of the performance: Polo Bibliotecario Feltrino “Panfilo Castaldi” (hereafter PBF), *Fondo Storico, I misteri della polizia austriaca ovvero i liberali e le spie*, 1866.

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. *Journal für Österreich’s Leihbibliotheken* 4, 1863, p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. PBF, *Fondo storico, Silvio Pellico e le sue prigionie ovvero i Carbonari del 1821, 1867*.

<sup>4</sup> See Francesco Doglio, *Il teatro patriottico nel Risorgimento*, in *Teatro e Risorgimento*, ed. by Doglio, Bologna 1962, pp. 5–52, here esp. pp. 38ff.

<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to my colleague Giulia Brunello, who advised me on all historical questions.

*Da darsi a mano*

E. D. B.

**TEATRO SOCIALE DI FELTRE***Per la sera di Lunedì 31 Dicembre 1866***DALLA COMPAGNIA PAYSSAN DIRETTA DA G. MORONI**Verrà rappresentato il nuovissimo Drama dei Signori  
SCHALVINI E GUALTIERI

che ha per titolo :

**I MISTERI DELLA POLIZIA AUSTRIACA**  
O V V E R O  
**I LIBERALI E LE SPIE****PERSONAGGI****ATTORI**

Conte Filippo Liberi . . . . .	Sig. Giuseppe Moroni
Consigliere barone Dickner . . . . .	» Carlo Mija
Olivarez della Cerva ( <i>Cesare Sbrana</i> ) . . . . .	» Federico Cavallucci
Fortunato Baldi . . . . .	» Francesco Zessi
Orazio Gemma ( <i>Scultore</i> ) . . . . .	» Napoleone Payssan
Il padre Ambrosiani ( <i>Cappellano</i> ) . . . . .	» Gaetano Payssan
Corradi ( <i>Accessista</i> ) . . . . .	» Alcibiade Payssan
Casalma ( <i>Carceriere</i> ) . . . . .	» Stanislao Cavallucci
Stopp ( <i>portiere di polizia</i> ) . . . . .	» Ernesto Traglio
Antonio ( <i>popolano</i> ) . . . . .	» Alessandro Zopis
Emilia ( <i>moglie di Liberi</i> ) . . . . .	Signora Caterina Payssan
Lucia ( <i>moglie di Baldi</i> ) . . . . .	» Toscana Payssan
Amanda ( <i>Traviata</i> ) . . . . .	» Elisa Mija

Un fanciullo — Tre Secondini — Soldati e Popolo

La Scena è in Milano, I. II. III. e V. Atto, il IV. è in Mantova.

Si principia a ore 7 e mezzo precise.

Marzura tip.

Fig. 1. Playbill of *I misteri della polizia austriaca* in Feltre, 1866, Polo Bibliotecario Feltrino "Panfilo Castaldi", Fondo Storico

Congress of Vienna when the Napoleonic government took over once again. At this point, the French government introduced a centralised administrative system, and the Habsburg authorities adopted parts of it.<sup>6</sup>

At the beginning of 1859, the Italian peninsula was divided into seven main parts. Six were sovereign states; the seventh, consisting of Lombardy and Venetia, was part of the Habsburg Empire. In 1859, Austria gave up most of Lombardy but not Venetia.<sup>7</sup> The Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed with neither Rome nor Venetia being part of it.<sup>8</sup> Italy gained Venetia in 1866 and Rome in 1870.<sup>9</sup>

The Habsburg rule in Lombardy and Venetia has been read as repressive by a Risorgimento tradition of research until quite recently.<sup>10</sup> More recent studies see their rule in Venetia “as good as imperial government ever could be”.<sup>11</sup> Substantial resources were invested in popular education. By 1860, the territories dominated by the Habsburg government had the highest literacy rates on the peninsula. Medical care was surprisingly advanced and transport infrastructure highly developed.<sup>12</sup> However ‘modern’ this might seem, the Habsburg regime, like other states on the Italian peninsula, did not have powerful representative institutions nor a free press.<sup>13</sup>

### *The Habsburg police in Venetia*

Venetia is known for its surprising political calm during the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the Habsburg regime is said to have been preoccupied by possible uprisings.<sup>14</sup> The idea that the government was terrified of Italian nationalism despite its lack of support in the local population seems to be unfounded, though.<sup>15</sup> The fear of uprisings had more to do with the role of Venetia in the defence of the Empire.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Harry Hearder, *Italy in the Age of the Risorgimento. 1890–1870*, Harlow 1983, pp. 17, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Derek Beales/Eugenio F. Biagini, *The Risorgimento and the Unification of Italy*, New York 2002, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>10</sup> David Laven/Laura Parker, Foreign rule? Transnational, national, and local perspectives on Venice and Venetia within the ‘multinational’ empire, in *Modern Italy* 19/1, 2014, pp. 5–19, here p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Beales/Biagini, *Risorgimento*, p. 38; cf. also Simona Mori, *Polizia e statualità nel primo Ottocento. L’esperienza lombardo-veneta e la cultura professionale italiana*, Rubbettino 2017, pp. 53f.; see also Laven/Parker, Foreign rule?, pp. 5f.

<sup>12</sup> Beales/Biagini, *Risorgimento*, p. 38.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Michele Gottardi, Gli Asburgo e Venezia, in *Venezia suddita 1798–1866*, ed. by Gottardi, Venezia 1999, pp. 15–38, here p. 33. David Laven, Law and Order in Habsburg Venetia 1814–1835, in *The Historical Journal* 39/2, 1996, pp. 383–403, here p. 398.

<sup>15</sup> David Laven, *Venice and Venetia under the Habsburgs, 1815–1835*, Oxford 2002, p. 79.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Nevertheless, the Habsburg government put a machinery of surveillance in action in order to track down revolutionaries.<sup>17</sup> The police were responsible for checking the spread of liberal, national, or other 'subversive' ideas and spying on individuals suspected of being part of secret organisations.<sup>18</sup> Secret societies, however, seem to have been almost irrelevant for the region of Venetia.<sup>19</sup> Even though they were feared and observed by the Habsburg empire, the few arrested members were rarely executed,<sup>20</sup> and trials were mostly held transparently.<sup>21</sup> The Habsburg criminal law was often seen as having advantages compared even to that of unified Italy.<sup>22</sup>

Besides the secret police tracking down possible conspirators, the Habsburg government employed a network of spies observing all social groups in public places.<sup>23</sup> The activity of spies intensified after 1848.<sup>24</sup> The government supplied ample funds for paying them,<sup>25</sup> and spies could come from very different social backgrounds.<sup>26</sup>

With this ample network of surveillance in place, it is important to remember that the Habsburg bureaucracy was known to be slow and inefficient. Information had to pass through numerous administrative steps before it finally reached someone with enough authority to take a decision or sufficient status to influence the emperor.<sup>27</sup> Thus, grievances in regions such as the Veneto had not much chance to be heard in Vienna. There seems to have been one notable exception to this rule, according to the historian David Laven: He claims that regional police reports about the state of public wellbeing and opinion, which had to be sent to the capital on a monthly basis, could transmit criticism about the living conditions in the regions and suggestions for improvement to the government in Vienna.<sup>28</sup> The police thus could play a double role of oppressive and disciplinary domination and of regional criticism and support of the population.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Laven, *Law and Order*, p. 394.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 383.

<sup>19</sup> Laven, *Venice and Venetia*, p. 149. Nevertheless, there are two cases in which the activity of secret societies is known: The secret society *Esperia*, founded by Venetian naval officers, was active in Venetia but did not find much support within the region. Venetians also participated in the conspiracy of the *Martyrs of Belfiore* in 1852–1855. See Costantino Cipolla, *Belfiore*, Vol. 1: *I Comitati insurrezionali del Lombardo-Veneto ed il loro processo a Mantova del 1852–1853*, Milano 2006, p. 149.

<sup>20</sup> Laven, *Law and Order*, p. 394.

<sup>21</sup> Maria Rosa di Simone, *Il diritto Austriaco e la società veneta*, in *Venezia e l'Austria*, ed. by Gino Benzoni/Gaetano Cozzi, Venezia 1999, pp. 129–156, here p. 139.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>23</sup> Gottardi, *Gli Asburgo*, p. 34; Simona Mori, *Spiare il popolo nel primo Ottocento. Gli informatori di polizia Lombardo-veneti, interpreti dello spazio pubblico cittadino*, in *Acta Histriae* 17/3, 2009, pp. 527–550, here p. 528.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 529.

<sup>25</sup> Piero Brunello, *Colpi di scena. La rivoluzione del Quarantotto a Venezia*, Verona 2018, p. 230; Mori, *Spiare il popolo*, p. 530.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 531.

<sup>27</sup> Laven, *Law and Order*, p. 400.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Mori, *Polizia e statualità*, p. 265.

### *Local attitudes towards the Habsburg regime*

Some of the leaders of national movements, for example Giuseppe Mazzini and Silvio Pellico, remarked on the absence of political engagement and spirit of opposition amongst the Venetians and on the failure of political movements in this region.<sup>30</sup> For example, Pellico stated in 1820 that the Venetians lived in idleness and were not interested in politics.<sup>31</sup> However undeserved this commentary was, it seems to have been true that Venetia lacked a national movement and a widespread will to become part of an Italian nation.

During the nineteenth century, the Italian peninsula was characterised by what can be described as ‘cultural polycentrism’. The patriotism of many people was focused on their city or town rather than on a bigger region.<sup>32</sup> Italian nationalism would have meant little to men and women who felt anchored in traditions of municipal pride and local culture. Additionally, for many, the term “Italy” was associated with the domination by the Napoleonic government, run from the city of Milan and having few advantages for Venetians.<sup>33</sup> Recent research has thus questioned the idea that a national movement in all regions of the peninsula led to a unification of an Italian state.<sup>34</sup> We cannot assume a universal discontent with the Habsburg government or a will for an Italian unification in nineteenth-century Venetia.

Speaking or understanding Italian was not a matter of course for Venetians either. Italian was mostly a written and literary language. In 1861, only about 22 percent of the citizens of the new Kingdom of Italy were literate – a normal percentage for European countries at that time.<sup>35</sup> The majority of the population spoke (but did not necessarily read nor write) local dialects. A dialect was often seen as a feature of a region of which locals were proud.<sup>36</sup> Taking pride in a dialect was not in opposition to an idea of ‘Italianness’, though: “A taste for dialect did not equate to opposition to or, for that matter, support for the idea of nationhood.”<sup>37</sup> But belonging to an Italian state or nation with a national language would not necessarily have had more meaning to Venetians than belonging to a multilingual state which did not link citizenship to ideas of ethnicity, language or religious beliefs.<sup>38</sup> The Habsburg rule was polyglot,<sup>39</sup> and the Habsburg law, in theory, gave equal

<sup>30</sup> Laven, *Law and Order*, p. 394.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 402.

<sup>32</sup> Beales/Biagini, *Risorgimento*, pp. 16f.

<sup>33</sup> Laven, *Law and Order*, p. 403.

<sup>34</sup> Beales/Biagini, *Risorgimento*, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75, 78.

<sup>36</sup> Laven/Parker, *Foreign rule?*, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Rolf Petri, *Cittadinanza, dimora, espulsione. Riflessioni sull’Austria ottocentesca*, in *Regionale Zivilgesellschaft in Bewegung. Cittadini innanzi tutto*, ed. by Hannes Obermair/Stephanie Risse/Carlo Romeo, Wien/Bolzano 2012, pp. 32–51, here p. 38.

<sup>39</sup> Hans Goebel, *La politica linguistica nella monarchia asburgica*, in *Venezia e l’Austria*, ed. by Gino Benzoni/Gaetano Cozzi, Venezia 1999, pp. 213–242, here p. 223.

rights to recognised linguistic communities.<sup>40</sup> German was thus not the official language in Lombardy-Venetia,<sup>41</sup> but the high ranks of the military and the police were often filled with German-speaking or bilingual officials.<sup>42</sup> The presence of German-speaking officials, though, was not as high as is often believed, and although their numbers diminished during the century, their symbolic presence could be seen as dominating and disturbing.<sup>43</sup>

Locals could thus be very limited in their professional advancement. In order to serve in the army or the bureaucracy in a high position, a basic knowledge of German was required. However, the usual language of instruction in Lombardy-Venetia was Latin or Italian; German was not an obligatory subject, and even when German classes were taken, their level was often lamentable.<sup>44</sup> In addition, there seems to have been a prejudice against Venetians, who were seen as unsuited to be state officials.<sup>45</sup> Another reason for a high number of ‘foreigners’ (in the sense of ‘non-locals’) in the Venetian administration was that many well-educated subjects from other regions of the Empire sought employment in the Veneto. Employees from regions other than Venetia were a target for resentment among Venetians.<sup>46</sup>

Nevertheless, for many Venetians, the Habsburgs seem to have been at least better masters than the French.<sup>47</sup> For example, many were relieved about the Habsburg attitude towards religion and towards social hierarchies corresponding better with traditional values.<sup>48</sup> But according to Laven, “Venetians to a great extent tolerated Austrian rule because there was no alternative.”<sup>49</sup>

### *Theatres as socio-cultural centres*

The question of why a piece like *I misteri della polizia austriaca* was performed in Feltre in 1866 is thus of interest – why did the theatre society in a Venetian town, who had never expressed great criticism towards the Habsburg regime, stage this piece as one of the first ones performed after independence?

Feltre was one of the hundreds of towns on the Italian peninsula that had a theatre for the surrounding population renovated or newly built in the beginning of the nineteenth century and active throughout the century. This period saw a boom of theatre construction and renovation on the peninsula.<sup>50</sup> A census carried out in 1871 in unified Italy registered 942 theatres in 650 municipalities, some of

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>41</sup> Laven, *Venice and Venetia*, p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> Marco Meriggi, *Il Regno Lombardo-Veneto*, Torino 1987, p. 31; Laven, *Venice and Venetia*, p. 85; Goebel, *La politica linguistica*, p. 223; Cipolla, *Belfiore*, p. 38.

<sup>43</sup> Laven, *Venice and Venetia*, p. 88.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>47</sup> Laven, *Law and Order*, p. 403.

<sup>48</sup> Di Simone, *Il diritto Austriaco*, p. 129.

<sup>49</sup> Laven, *Law and Order*, p. 403.

<sup>50</sup> Carlotta Sorba, *Teatri. L'Italia del melodramma nell'età del Risorgimento*, Bologna 2001, p. 28.

them having space for as few as fifty people and two thirds of them having been constructed or renovated after 1815.<sup>51</sup>

What might seem a remarkable choice in a period of war and hardship can be explained by the extraordinary role of the theatre in nineteenth-century Italy: while gatherings were forbidden in most public places, people could meet relatively freely in the theatre.<sup>52</sup> While the majority of the population was illiterate,<sup>53</sup> the theatre was a place in which culture and news were accessible to many. Theatres were often supported by the governing forces, who saw them as places of education and as spaces easily surveilled.<sup>54</sup> That led to a situation where theatres often were the only socio-cultural centre of a region where the population could gather to socialise, discuss topical events, gamble, and attend performances of all sorts: spoken drama, musical theatre, magician's shows, acrobatics, concerts and so forth. Feltre is thus a typical example of a nineteenth-century provincial theatre, forming the socio-cultural centre of a region.

Large groups of people were not left unsurveilled, of course. Rehearsals and performances were attended by police officers; theatre texts were censored or forbidden altogether.<sup>55</sup> While theatres were mostly supported by governments, they were also feared as places of rebellion,<sup>56</sup> and rightly so – in many theatres the local population exchanged their views of politics, social change, and joined forces for political movements expressing national ideas.<sup>57</sup> The theatre seems to have been one of the most effective media for political propaganda in nineteenth-century Europe – propaganda by the governing forces but also by a political opposition.<sup>58</sup>

### *Antonio Scalvini and his literary career*

The author of the piece *I misteri della polizia austriaca*, Antonio Scalvini, was born in Milan in 1831. He wrote historical dramas, historical novels, and opera libretti, some of them long forgotten, some of them still performed today, such as

<sup>51</sup> John Rosselli, Italy. The Centrality of Opera, in *The Early Romantic Era. Between Revolutions. 1789 and 1848*, ed. by Alexander Ringer, Basingstoke/London 1990, pp. 160–200, here p. 162; Carlotta Sorba, Musica e teatro, in *L'unificazione italiana*, ed. by Giovanni Sabbatucci/Vittorio Vidotto, Roma 2011, pp. 533–549, here p. 534.

<sup>52</sup> Fabian A. Stallknecht, *Dramenmodell und ideologische Entwicklung der italienischen Oper im frühen Ottocento*, Stuttgart 2001, p. 125.

<sup>53</sup> Beales/Biagini, *Risorgimento*, p. 78.

<sup>54</sup> Stallknecht, *Dramenmodell*, p. 139.

<sup>55</sup> Sorba, *Teatri*, p. 36.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>57</sup> Giorgio Pullini, Il teatro fra scena e società, in *Storia della cultura veneta*, Vol. 6: *Dall'età napoleonica alla Prima Guerra Mondiale*, ed. by Girolamo Arnaldi/Manlio Pastore Stocchi, Vicenza 1986, pp. 237–282, here p. 240.

<sup>58</sup> Beales/Biagini, *Risorgimento*, p. 74. See also Giulia Brunello/Annette Kappeler/Raphaël Bortolotti, Introduction. Feltre's Teatro Sociale and the Role of Provincial Theatres in Italy and the Habsburg Empire during the Nineteenth Century, in *Feltre's Teatro Sociale and the Role of Provincial Theatres in Italy and the Habsburg Empire during the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Giulia Brunello/Raphaël Bortolotti/Annette Kappeler, Baden-Baden 2023, pp. 19–43.

*Il Guarany*, about the colonisation of Brazil. Scalvini's writings were influenced by French genres such as the *vaudeville* and the *féerie*. One of the author's major successes was *La principessa invisibile* (*The Invisible Princess*), a kind of operetta characterised by political satire that was concerned with political governance in post-unitarian Italy, including with inefficient bureaucracy and corruption.<sup>59</sup> Scalvini was also a translator, including of works by the French author George Sand, and he was the head of a well-known theatre troupe. His written works and theatre career had great influence on Italian society, especially on the development of a spectacle 'for the masses'.<sup>60</sup>

*I misteri della polizia austriaca*, performed in Feltre in 1866, had been on the censorship lists of the Habsburg empire since at least 1864. In fact, the only sources about the piece easily accessible today are the so-called *Amtsblätter*, official gazettes of regions of the empire that distributed news and new laws. One can find mentions of Scalvini's piece in the local gazettes of Lemberg,<sup>61</sup> Tyrol,<sup>62</sup> Laibach,<sup>63</sup> and the Bukowina.<sup>64</sup> For a few years, the piece was quite popular in towns now belonging to the Kingdom of Italy; for example, it was played in Siena<sup>65</sup> and in Padova in 1866.<sup>66</sup>

## I misteri della polizia austriaca

In December 1866, the piece was performed in the provincial town of Feltre in a theatre that had been active the whole century with no known events of political agitation. The piece is concerned with the aftermath of one of the anti-Habsburg revolts in the middle of the century – the Milan revolt of 1853. The uprising did not have any political success but was much thematised in the European press.<sup>67</sup>

In Scalvini's piece, an Italian count continues to lead a group of insurgents after the revolt and is in possession of compromising documents. The Austrian police commander has the population monitored by spies who disguise and infiltrate the population. The patriotic count ends up in prison but is freed at the end of the play, and the voices of the rebellious people can be heard taking over the scene – and the city of Milan.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Elena Oliva, *La fiaba in musica di Antonio Scalvini nell'Italia post-unitaria. Fuga e ritorno alla realtà*, online, 21 January 2023, <https://drammaturgia.fupress.net/saggi/saggio.php?id=8530> (last consulted 8 August 2025).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> *Lemberger Zeitung/Gazety Lwowskiej* 94, 25 April 1864, p. 323.

<sup>62</sup> *Tiroler Bothe* 136, 17 June 1864, p. 303.

<sup>63</sup> *Laibacher Zeitung* 100, 3 May 1864, p. 279.

<sup>64</sup> *Bukowina* 96, 28 April 1864, sp.

<sup>65</sup> Erminio Jacona, *Siena tra Melpomene e Talia. Storie di teatri e teatranti*, Siena 1998, p. 151.

<sup>66</sup> Bruno Brunelli, *I teatri di Padova dalle origini alla fine del secolo XIX*, Padova 1921, p. 438.

<sup>67</sup> Catherine Brice, *Exile and the Circulation of Political Practices*, Cambridge 2020, p. 27.

<sup>68</sup> Antonio Scalvini, *I misteri della polizia austriaca. Dramma in 5 atti*, Milano 1860.

The piece is dominated by secret activities: those of the Habsburg police and its spies surveilling the local population and those of the rebels organising a national movement and uprising. The Habsburg government has a surveillance system using disguise and espionage, which one could imagine being used by the historical government's police officers and spies. In the process, police officers set in motion a web of intrigues, not least to gain personal advantage.

The Habsburg officials are portrayed as ugly, ridiculous, cruel, mercenary and corrupt, while the Italian patriots are brave, noble, honest and beautiful. But there are shades of grey, too: Italians can turn into spies for the foreign government, and police officers (only those with Italian names) can have mercy on prisoners.<sup>69</sup> The women in the play are first and foremost wives and mothers, but they can be noble and brave, too, when it comes to the liberation of their homeland. Their main role, though, is to submit to loveless marriages, be loyal to their husbands, and care for their children.<sup>70</sup>

### *A dark portrait of the Austrian police*

One of the main characters of the piece, Consigliere Dikner, director of the local police,<sup>71</sup> is described as “German figure. Blond moustache and favourites. Grey hair and a little bald. Gold glasses. Dressed in black with a ribbon in his button-hole. Calm. Speaks without ever fixing the other's eyes.”<sup>72</sup> He gets pleasure out of using his power to sexually exploit pretty women and to make people suffer and hang.<sup>73</sup> When he has to leave Milan after 1859, he is said to comment: “What a pity! and there were still so many beautiful people to be hanged!”<sup>74</sup> He is obsessed with finding the heads of the Milan revolt<sup>75</sup> by exposing secret societies and conspiracies, has a fear of international secret organisations<sup>76</sup> and sees suspicious activities everywhere.<sup>77</sup> Dikner and his system of espionage have created an atmosphere in which people barely dare to speak.<sup>78</sup>

The police department in the piece employs spies, some of them local: Corradi is an assistant police officer, portrayed as naive and ambitious.<sup>79</sup> He spies on the local population in disguise and writes police reports.<sup>80</sup> Olivarez is a secret

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> “Figura tedesca. Baffi e favoriti biondi. Capelli grigi e un po' calvo. Occhiali d'oro. Vestito di nero con nastro all'occhiello. Calmo. Parla senza mai fissare gli occhi in volto.” Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., pp. 7, 77.

<sup>74</sup> “[C]he peccato! e c'era ancora tanta bella gente da far appiccare!” Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

agent of the Austrian police, formerly part of a secret society himself.<sup>81</sup> The priest Ambrosiani is using his function as a confessor to get information out of the local population.<sup>82</sup>

Austrian bureaucracy is described as inefficient and nontransparent, just as it probably was in historical reality. In the play, the local population can be imprisoned for months or years without being questioned or informed about the reasons for their imprisonment.<sup>83</sup> They can be submitted to torture, too.<sup>84</sup> Dikner tries to make people sign compromising documents in German when they cannot understand a word of them.<sup>85</sup> This practice is criticised by the Italian count, who emphasises that the Habsburg government has not been able to impose the German language on them in forty years of governance.<sup>86</sup>

### *Despotism and abuse of power*

The two main characters persecuted by the police are a poor woman, Amanda, and an Italian patriot, the count Liberi. Amanda has been exploited sexually by Dikner after her husband has been imprisoned. After six months of his imprisonment, she shows up at the police station and explains:

One night, it must have been six months, my husband, from whose work my children and I lived, was arrested. Why? I have always ignored the reason. I waited a day, then two, then a week ... a month! ... and no news about him. You showed up at my house under the pretext of a search, you saw me, and when leaving, you said – You are beautiful, you can still hope – I understood all the horror of my position. It was a matter of buying the husband's freedom with the wife's dishonour: you returned after a few days and I drove you away. But after another month, exhausted by hunger, by nights without sleep, anguished by the cries of my children asking for bread, I came knocking at your door, livid, haggard, with despair in my face and death in my heart. You opened [the door] to me ... from that day on you know what I have become ... and what you have done to me!!<sup>87</sup>

Amanda is an example of the arbitrariness of despotism and sexual power abuse by the police force.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., pp. 26, 56, 65.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> “Una notte, saranno sei mesi, mio marito, col lavoro del quale vivevamo io e miei figli, venne arrestato. Perché? lo ignorerai sempre. Aspettai un giorno, poi due, poi una settimana ... un mese! ... e nessuna nuova sul suo conto. Voi vi presentaste in casa mia sotto pretesto di una perquisizione, mi vedeste, e partendo avete detto – Siete bella, sperate – compresi tutto l'orrore della mia posizione. Si trattava di comperare la libertà del marito col disonore della moglie: tornaste dopo alcuni giorni e vi scacciai. Ma trascorso un altro mese, sfinita dalla fame, dalle veglie, angosciata dalle grida de' miei bambini che domandavano pane, io venni a battere a quella porta, livida, sparuta, colla disperazione sul volto e la morte nel cuore. Voi mi apriste ... da quel giorno in poi voi sapete cosa sono divenuta ... e che cosa avete fatto di me!!” Ibid., p. 7.

The hero of the piece, Count Liberi, is involved in the national movement. He is spied on, interviewed, put in prison and tortured but later freed. He is not intimidated and expresses his patriotic feelings freely in front of the Habsburg officials:

As for the people who frequent my house: [...] as for the speeches that are made there, they are not the speeches of a family, but those of a nation [...]. They are not the thoughts of a few individuals, but the ideas of a whole people; if you want to condemn me, it is necessary that you bombard the whole of Italy.<sup>88</sup>

Even when imprisoned, he does not try to get his sentence alleviated but tells the jury that he considers the Austrian dominion illegitimate:

I have conspired against the House of Habsburg because I have always considered its rule in Italy illegitimate and tyrannical; it may kill me and my companions, but [...] it will always have to fear conspiracies and uprisings; because you kill a man but you do not kill an idea, and the idea of independence would not die in Italy, even if you had to make of all this land a heap of corpses and ruins!<sup>89</sup>

Count Liberi is convinced that the inhabitants of the peninsula – Venetians included – want to be Italians,<sup>90</sup> and his mission is to create an Italian state and chase away foreigners.<sup>91</sup>

### *A piece of propaganda?*

In Scalvini's piece, what is sacred to the Italian national movement according to historians – the Italian language, women's honour, the Catholic church, its confessional secret,<sup>92</sup> etc. – is used by the Habsburg police to get information out of the population, to persecute and exploit locals, and to get pleasure out of it. The author draws a dark picture of the police force, although it does not owe much to a historical reality in some respects. While the structure of the police force, its network of spies, and the inefficient bureaucracy of Habsburg government seem to be portrayed in a historically accurate manner, the treatment of the local population and attitudes towards local languages do not seem to be realistic. For example, people suspected of rebellion were not imprisoned for years without a trial nor were secret organisations a real threat to the regime. Is this drama a black-and-

<sup>88</sup> “Quanto alle persone che frequentano la mia casa: [...] quanto ai discorsi che vi si fanno, essi non sono i discorsi di una famiglia, ma quelli di una Nazione [...]. Essi non sono i pensieri di pochi individui, mai i voti di un popolo intiero; se volete quindi condannar me con giustizia, è d'uopo che bombardiate tutta l'Italia.” *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>89</sup> “Ho cospirato contro la casa d'Absburgo perchè ho sempre stimato il suo dominio in Italia illegittimo e tirannico; essa uccida me e i miei compagni, ma [...] dovrà sempre temere e cospirazioni e sommosse; perchè si uccide un uomo ma non si atterra un'idea, e l'idea d'indipendenza non morrebbe in Italia, doveste pur fare di tuttata questa terra un mucchio di cadaveri e di rovine!” *Ibid.*, pp. 66f.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Alberto Mario Banti, *The Nation of the Risorgimento. Kinship, Sanctity, and Honour in the Origins of Unified Italy*, trans. by Stuart Oglethorpe, London/New York 2020.

white picture of a historical conflict that can be dismissed as a boring piece of propaganda? This view might be too limited, considering how popular the piece was and how quickly and readily provincial theatres took it to their stages.

At a second glance, some of the very real concerns of the local population in Venetia and Lombardy seem to be thematised in Scalvini's piece:

First, the inefficient nature of the Habsburg bureaucracy is alluded to in several places: its multiplication of police reports about public opinion, its concern with secret activities and societies, its ever-present surveillance of insignificant details, its lack of engagement in actual day-to-day police work, and the problems when dealing with the language of leading officers that the local population did not understand.

Even though German was not the official language in historical Lombardy-Venetia, many of its high-ranking officials might have spoken German better than Italian, and they might not have had any knowledge of local dialects. Thus, the local population and the government officials might not have communicated easily. Even if the Habsburg government was not terrified of Italian nationalism in general, there were surely officials who took their duty of surveillance seriously and put a network of spies into action who prevented the local population from speaking their minds. And no doubt there were sadistic high-ranking officers, as there always are when people have too much power. Police reports might have transmitted criticism to the government in Vienna, but what counted for the local population was probably the fact that they were spied on and that suspicious activities were reported.

Second, when one looks more closely at the depiction of the Italian patriots in Scalvini's piece, they are noblemen speaking in a metaphorical language that might not have been understood by the majority of the local population, who spoke local dialects and were not used to the written form of Italian. The characters from a lower social stratum, such as the prison guard, are not much concerned with political affairs or national ideas and collaborate with the government willingly. A division amongst the Venetian population is made visible in the piece – on the one hand, the richer and 'educated' ones, who understood Italian and were at least a little versed in national ideology; and on the other hand, the rest of the population, who were perhaps more engaged in local patriotism, had to earn their living, behave in a humane way and get on with their lives.

Even though in historical Lombardy-Venetia, the majority of government officials came from the Italian peninsula, the symbolic presence of 'foreigners' holding high positions was quite important. Locals would probably have been limited in their career, and people from lower strata of the population surely did not have much chance to advance their careers. This fact is rendered tangible in Scalvini's piece.

Third, women's grievances are made visible in the piece. Scalvini's drama is concerned with women in loveless marriages who give up their life's hopes, are loyal to their husbands and behave as decent mothers; and with women who are

dependent on their husbands' income, exposed to (sexual) violence, and who starve to death if their husband is no longer able to provide for them.

Even though Habsburg officials were probably no more prone to sexual violence than any other person, there is no doubt locals would experience sexual abuse from people in power, as they still do today in patriarchal societies.

### *Staging I misteri*

Could these subjects have escaped the attention of a public in a provincial town, coming from a mixed social background? Coming back to my initial question – what could have prompted a theatre like the one in Feltre to stage this piece? –, I will sketch some possible answers.

Scalvini's piece might not be an accurate description of a socio-historical situation, but it describes general sensitivities of a historical population in Lombardy-Venetia. The piece alludes to several subjects important and topical to many groups of the local population, such as women's financial situation in marriage, their vulnerability to power abuse, or the elitist nature of parts of the Italian national movement. Scalvini's masterstroke was involving different parts of the population and invoking their day-to-day grievances. These multifaceted aspects of the piece would have made it particularly predisposed to be played in provincial theatres where the public was a mixed one.

Furthermore, Venetia was known for its political calm and its acceptance of political regimes during the nineteenth century, which must have implicated a certain degree of compliance with governments. The local theatre of Feltre might have pronounced their compliance with the new (Italian) regime by performing pieces such as Scalvini's *I misteri*. The Feltre theatre was led by a local elite that formed the theatre society and chose its repertoire. This provincial elite perhaps needed to express their loyalty to the new regime and publicly pronounce that they were now engaged in the cause of an Italian state and an Italian nation, even though they had had only a minor part in fighting for it. The fact that the performance of Scalvini's piece was not the only one performed in Feltre criticising Habsburg rule immediately after the declaration of independence supports this idea.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> See e.g. PBF, *Fondo storico, Silvio Pellico e le sue prigionie ovvero i Carbonari del 1821, 1867*.

