

In Breach of Civilisation

Dancing the United States' Slave Economy in Risorgimento Italy*

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On 10 November 1853, Milan's Teatro alla Scala presented in *prima assoluta* Giuseppe Rota's ballet *Bianchi e neri*. Although largely forgotten today, it became the most successful *ballo storico*, or Romantic ballet, of nineteenth-century Italy, presented in the theatres all over the Italian states and still celebrated as a choreographic milestone after the country was unified as a nation state in 1861.¹ Rota's work was a free adaptation of Harriet Beecher Stowe's American novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published a year earlier in 1852. The ballet openly played on, and responded to, the book's remarkable global impact as one of the most widely discussed novels of all times. Rather than analysing the work itself, for which the number of available sources is limited,² or reading it

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1 Giuseppe Rota (music by Paolo Giorza), *Bianchi e neri* (Milan, 1853). New York Public Library (NYPL), Walter Toscanini Collection (WTC), Libretti da Ballo (LdB), n. 809 and 939. The ballet was also performed under the titles *La Capanna di Tom* (Bologna) or *I bianchi e i negri* (Turin). For an analysis of the different versions of the plot and the ballet's surviving music see Matilda Ann Butkas Ertz, »Nineteenth-Century Italian Ballet Music before National Unification: Sources, Style, and Context« PhD thesis, University of Oregon, 2010, 418–70. The term *storico* in the denomination *ballo storico* refers to the fact that the plot is based on a real rather than an imagined event. For the distinction see Emilio Sala, »Dal ›Mosè‹ Napolitano al ›Moïse‹ parigino: contesti e modelli interpretative« in *Mosè in Egitto. Moïse et Pharaon*, ed. Emilio Sala (Pesaro, 2008), IX–LX, XVII.

2 The main sources for any history of the work are the different versions of the libretti surviving in various libraries, as well as two piano scores: Paolo Giorza, *Bianchi e negri; azione coreografica di G. Rota. Musica di Paolo Giorza ed altri autori* (Milano, [1853?]); Paolo Giorza, *Bianchi e negri: azione coreografica* (Milano, 1857). For a detailed comparison of the different ver-

within a history of dance, the following chapter examines *Bianchi e neri* as a »speech act«,³ looking at its role in Italian debates about societal and political change, and within a context of growing awareness of slavery and race in an increasingly globalised world.

Bianchi e neri was the creation of Giuseppe Rota. Born in Venice in 1823, Rota was one of the stars of nineteenth-century Italian ballet, described in 1858 by the influential literary magazine *Il Trovatore* as »il Verdi della coreografia«. ⁴ Originally working for Milan's Teatro della Cannobiana, it was the success of *Bianchi e neri* that established his reputation as choreographer at the Teatro alla Scala, before he started his international career, which included productions of his ballets *Gräfin Egmont* (1861), *Monte-Christo* and *Sylphide in Peking* (both 1862) at Vienna's Kärntnertheater. ⁵ Just thirty years old at the time of *Bianchi e neri*'s premiere, Rota is remembered for his earlier success as a dancer, but also for his subsequent accomplishments as a choreographer. He revived the genre of dramatic pantomime, or *coreodramma*, mostly associated with Salvatore Viganò, who had deeply marked the Austrian and Italian stages during the early decades of the nineteenth century, with the choreography for Beethoven's *Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus* op. 43 (1801) being among his most famous ballets. ⁶ Building on this aesthetic tradition, Rota knew how to enliven the action of his plots through the skillful addition of grand ensemble scenes and *pas de deux*, usually performed by outstanding and internationally acclaimed dancers. In the case of *Bianchi e neri*, these included Augusta Maywood (born in New York in 1825 and died in Lemberg/Lwów/Lviv in 1876), the first American dancer to win a place among the top-ranking ballerinas of Europe. ⁷

sions of the libretto see Ertz, »Nineteenth-Century Italian Ballet Music« 418–70. The work's choreography is likely to have varied from stage to stage and over time.

- 3 Here I refer to the Cambridge School of Political Thought. See in particular Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1, *Regarding Method* (Cambridge, 2002). Also John G. A. Pocock, »The history of political thought: a methodological inquiry« (1962), in *Political Thought and History. Essays on Theory and Method*, ed. John G. A. Pocock (Cambridge, 2009), 3–19; James Tully, »The pen is a mighty sword: Quentin Skinner's analysis of politics« in *Meaning and Context. Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, ed. James Tully (Cambridge, 1988), 7–25.
- 4 *Il Trovatore. Giornale Letterario, Artistico, Teatrale con illustrazioni* (1858), January 6.
- 5 Elisabeth Fleissner-Moebius, »Rota Giuseppe« in *Österreichisches Biographisches Lexikon 1815–1950*, (Vienna, 1986), ix, 273–74.
- 6 On the Italian *mimo-drama* (historical themes performed in several acts) see Edwin Binney, »Sixty Years of Italian Dance Prints« in *Dance Perspectives* 53 (1973), 17. On connections between opera and Viganò's style see Mary Ann Smart, *Waiting for Verdi. Italian Opera and Political Opinion, 1815–1848* (Oakland, CA, 2018), 23–59.
- 7 After an early debut on the American stages, in 1838 her father, an itinerant actor, took her to Paris to study under Jean Coralli and Joseph Mazilier, before she joined the Paris Opéra herself. Susan Au, »Augusta Maywood« in *International Encyclopaedia of Dance* (Oxford, 1998), iv, 338–39; »Maywood, Augusta« in *The Encyclopedia of Dance and Ballet*, ed. Mary Clarke and

Presenting Rota's ballet for the first time in Milan promised a particularly strong impact among Italian audiences, which tended to follow the city's theatrical events all over the peninsula. One of the leading theatres in Europe, the Teatro alla Scala was, at the time, run as a joint venture with the Kärntnertortheater, then the Austrian capital's court theatre.⁸ Since the revolutions of 1848, Milan had become a hotspot of Risorgimento activism and of support for Italian unification under Piedmontese leadership. Although the Habsburgs had ruled the region since the early eighteenth century, the Congress of Vienna had created the Austrian Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia to compensate Austria for the loss of its Belgian provinces, but also as a buffer zone within Europe's new security system, directed against the potential resurgence of French power. Ever since 1848, the Habsburgs feared the loss of their possessions in Northern Italy.⁹ One way of responding to this situation was a generous cultural policy, which turned places such as the Teatro alla Scala and Venice's Teatro La Fenice into prestigious temples of culture. Seen in this context, Rota's production of *Bianchi e neri* responded to the Milanese appetite for major theatrical forms, while also offering Italians a critical reflection on life in the United States, a country whose reputation as the cradle of political freedom was severely undermined by what people saw on stage.

After its original production in Milan, in 1853, Rota's *Bianchi e neri* had thirty-five performances at Genoa's Carlo Felice in 1856, followed by another fifteen performances at the same theatre in 1857 and a further twenty-two in 1861, becoming one of Genoa's most successful ballets of the whole nineteenth century.¹⁰ As a port-city and home-town of Christopher Columbus, Genoa always had a particular (though not an uncritical) interest in American themes, explaining the positive response to Rota's ballet. In 1858, *Bianchi e neri* was produced in Rome, Turin and Bologna. At the height of the American Civil War, in 1862/1863, Naples' San Carlo gave a total of 37 performances, before the ballet returned to Milan in 1863, and to Turin's Teatro Regio in 1873 and 1875.¹¹ Within the first decade of its life, *Bianchi e neri* had been staged

David Vaughan (London, 1977), 231; Ivor Guest: »Balli presentati tra il 1845 e il 1854« in *La danza italiana* 8, no. 9 (1990), 23.

- 8 On the theatre's changing role during the nineteenth century see Jutta Toelle, *Bühne der Stadt. Mailand und das Teatro alla Scala zwischen Risorgimento und Fin de Siècle* (Vienna, 2009).
- 9 On the Risorgimento in the region see Brigitte Mazohl-Wallnig, *Österreichischer Verwaltungsstaat und administrative Eliten im Königreich Lombardo-Venetien, 1815–1859* (Mainz, 1993); Marco Meriggi, *Il Regno Lombardo-Veneto* (Turin, 1987).
- 10 G. B. Valebona, *Il Teatro Carlo Felice. Cronistoria di un secolo, 1828–1928* (Genoa, 1928), 348–57. The number of performances usually depended on the work's success. For the continuing appreciation of the audience in Genoa see *Il Trovatore* (1856), May 21.
- 11 Carlo Gatti, *Il Teatro alla Scala nella Storia e nell'arte, 1778–1963* (Milan, 1964), 195, 200; *Il Teatro di San Carlo*, ed. Carlo Marinelli Roscioni, (Naples, 1988), ii, 361. The fact that smaller theatres in medium-sized cities did not stage the piece had to do with the huge cast, requiring several hundred participants. This made the staging too expensive for smaller houses.

by all major Italian theatres. The extraordinary success of the ballet established Rota as one of the leading choreographers of his time. His productions dominated Italian stages for more than a generation and many of his original works were regularly restaged by other choreographers, even during the years after Italy's political unification, when for many theatres ballet became too expensive and developments in opera left little space (and money) for separate ballet productions.¹² Rota died in Turin in 1865, when his choreographies were still regarded as the finest examples of *ballo storico* the Italian stages had on offer.

The music to *Bianchi e neri* contributed to the work's success. The bulk of it was written by the Milanese composer Paolo Giorza, whose score was distributed by one of Europe's leading publishers, Francesco Lucca in Milan.¹³ Giorza was known for his theatre music, songs, waltzes and other dances, which were also popular on stages in London, Paris and the United States, before he decided to establish himself as a composer, conductor and music teacher in Australia. Especially, his patriotic and popular songs continued to be printed and performed in Italy well into the twentieth century. The music to the genre-specific standard elements of *Bianchi e neri* – including a multi-sectional Grand Waltz early on, and a Gallop at the end of the work – were in line with many ballets at the time. The music of other scenes is mostly mimetic.

The sets produced by various theatres for *Bianchi e neri* were of matching elaboration, contributing to the work's popularity with audiences in different Italian cities. The Archivio Storico Ricordi preserves sketches for the 1863 Milanese revival of the ballet by Carlo Ferrario (1833–1907), known for his dramatic and at the same time realist approach to staging.¹⁴ His sketch for *Bianchi e neri* shows a huge *magazzino* or workshop, with machinery, tools and rubble, helping audiences to imagine the rough life of American slaves. The theatre in Turin used the same sets as for Giacomo Meyerbeer's grand opéra *Le Prophète*, giving us an idea of the staging's grandeur, although the local authorities and some of the commentators in the press disapproved

Even at the San Carlo the role of ballet diminished during the second half of the century and, as a consequence, most productions were retakes from successful productions at La Scala, see José Sasportes, »La Danza, 1737–1900« in *Il Teatro di San Carlo*, ed. Raffaele Ajello and Carlo Marinelli Roscioni (Naples 1987), i, 395.

- 12 On these financial constraints see Axel Körner, *Politics of Culture in Liberal Italy* (New York, NY, 2009), 66–83. Rota and Giorza continued their collaboration, including the ballets *La Maschera o Le notti di Venezia* and *Cleopatra*, both presented at La Scala in 1865: NYPL, WTC, LdB, n. 849 and 850.
- 13 The score mentions additional pieces by other composers. See for instance Diema. Ballo di G. Rota. Archivio Storico Ricordi, catalogo No.27592. On the music for the ballet see Ertz, »Nineteenth-Century Italian Ballet Music« (as in fn. 1), chapter 7, 418–70.
- 14 See Fig. 1: https://www.digitalarchivioricordi.com/it/works/display/2220/Bianchi_ed_i_Negri_I (accessed February 25, 2022).

of the production's »natural« exhibition of the female slaves, leading the famous theatre critic Francesco d'Arcais to complain about a stage resembling the »whore of Babylon.« In its response, the local police felt obliged to suspend several ballerinas from the performance.¹⁵



Fig. 1: Carlo Ferrario, *Bozzetto per I Bianchi ed i Negri* (1863), Archivio Storico Ricordi ICONO12081

The extraordinary success of *Bianchi e neri* on the Italian stages is closely linked to the international interest in the libretto's literary source. Within weeks of its first publication, Beecher Stowe's novel had become a major sensation in transatlantic literary debates, as well as in political, cultural and social reflections on the United States' growing role in the world. The novel's first Italian translations had appeared almost simultaneously with the American original, and it was serialised by two Italian newspapers: Count Camillo Cavour's influential *Il Risorgimento* from Turin; and *Il Mediterraneo* from Genoa where, as we have seen, the ballet based on the novel proved to be particularly popular.¹⁶ Various cheap editions of the novel were available in all the peninsula's capital cities, with the noticeable exception of Rome, where the papal censors were concerned about the book's positive depiction of Quakers and

15 Alberto Basso, *Storia del Teatro Regio di Torino*, vol. 2, *Il teatro della città* (Turin, 1976), 295; Viale Ferrero, *Storia del Teatro Regio di Torino*, vol. 3, *La scenografia* (Turin, 1980), 418.

16 On its origin and impact see Sarah Robbins, *The Cambridge Introduction to Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Cambridge, 2007); *The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe*, ed. Cindy Weinstein (Cambridge, 2004). On the novel's European reception see *Transatlantic Stowe. Harriet Beecher Stowe and European Culture*, ed. Emily B. Todd (Iowa City, IA, 2006).

Methodists, as well as Beecher Stowe's own popularity as a Protestant hero.¹⁷ Another Italian translation of the novel was published in 1853 in Switzerland, while translations in other European languages also circulated in the Italian states.¹⁸

As a consequence of these many editions, the book was widely read among Italians, matching the novel's international success. Over the years, the book increased its appeal to Italian readers due to Beecher Stowe's own involvement in Risorgimento politics.¹⁹ Already before the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the Risorgimento's leading democratic revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini had met several members of Beecher Stowe's family, including her husband.²⁰ Lyman Beecher, her father, first contacted Mazzini through the Christian Alliance in 1842 and then met him in London in 1846, when Mazzini wrote a poem expressing his hopes that the American Republic will put an end to the evil of slavery. It was through Lyman Beecher that Mazzini got to know Margaret Fuller, who then became a protagonist of the Roman Republic of 1849. Mazzini regularly contributed to the American abolitionist periodical *The Liberator*, which considered Italy's political independence and the liberation of American slaves as connected issues.²¹ In 1860, he referred to abolition as his »santa causa«, his »holy cause«, reminding his readers how slavery

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- 17 Joseph Rossi, »Uncle Tom's Cabin and Protestantism in Italy« in *American Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (1959), 418, 421–23; On the reaction of *Civiltà Cattolica* see Gennaro Lerda, »La schiavitù e la guerra civile nelle pagine della Civiltà Cattolica« in *Italia e America dal settecento all'età dell'imperialismo*, ed. Giorgio Spini et al. (Milan, 1976), 233–250, 238.
- 18 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *La capanna dello zio Tommaso ossia La vita dei negri in America* (Lugano, 1853). A further version appeared in 1898: *La Capanna dello zio Tom. Racconto di Enrichetta Beecher Stowe. Nuova Versione* (Milan, 1898).
- 19 The Catholic Church, which objected to Italy's political unification, identified the novel's societal agenda with American protestantism, reason enough to object to it. See Rossi, »Uncle Tom's Cabin« 416–24.
- 20 Harriet's brother Henry Ward Beecher, the most famous Congregationalist preacher of his time, supported numerous Italian republicans in exile. See Enrico dal Lago, *William Lloyd Garrison and Giuseppe Mazzini. Abolition, Democracy and Radical Reform* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2013), 107; Daniele Fiorentino, *Gli Stati Uniti e il Risorgimento d'Italia, 1841–1901* (Rome, 2013), 43–44; Daniele Fiorentino, »Il governo degli Stati Uniti e la Repubblica Romana del 1849« in *Gli Americani e la Repubblica Romana del 1849*, ed. Sara Antonelli, Daniele Fiorentino and Giuseppe Monsagrati (Rome, 2000), 95; Joseph Rossi, *The Image of America in Mazzini's Writings* (Madison, WI, 1954), 105. White Mario was introduced to the Beechers and Stowes by Mazzini. See Mazzini to Jessie White Mario, July 8, 1858 in *Edizione nazionale: Scritti editi ed inediti di Giuseppe Mazzini*, vol. 61, ed. Mario Menghini (Imola, 1932), 65–66.
- 21 See Mazzini's »Prière a Dieu pour les planteurs par un exilé« in Leopoldo Ramanzini, *Una lettera di Garibaldi ad Abramo Lincoln* (Vincenza, 1970), 10; dal Lago, *William Lloyd Garrison and Giuseppe Mazzini*, 131. In an 1838 review of Sismondi's work for the *Edinburgh Magazine* he had pointed to the fact that in America slavery co-exists with democratic institutions, Giuseppe Mazzini, »Sismondi's Studies of Free Constitutions« in *Edizione nazionale*, vol. 17, 221–92, 249.

contaminated American republican institutions.²² Harriet Beecher Stowe, though, also appealed to more moderate supporters of the Risorgimento. During her second visit to Italy, in 1859, she attended the meeting of the Tuscan Assembly at which the Grand Duchy's adherence to Piedmont was declared, a decisive step on the way to Italy's political unification.²³ Copies of her novel remained in high demand, especially among the political and cultural elites. For instance, Giuseppe Verdi's wife Giuseppina Strepponi passed her copy of the book to a family friend, Giovanni Minghelli Vaini, then a moderate member of the new Italian parliament, who later joined the ranks of the democratic left. Verdi, a keen reader of international literature, owned several copies of the novel. His collection included a French translation as well as an English edition that was furnished with notes in Italian to increase its appeal to readers from the peninsula, demonstrating the book's role in political debates.²⁴

Following developments elsewhere in the world, Italy's response to the novel included a variety of adaptations for the stage, produced for different social categories of audiences. For instance, in 1856 a popular theatre in Naples staged a play entitled *La famiglia dello zio Tom*, addressing an audience that was less likely to afford tickets at the San Carlo.²⁵ In the United States, newspapers referred to the numerous travelling shows presenting similar versions of the novel simply as »U.T.C. companies« (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* companies). Many of them presented white actors with blacked

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- 22 Giuseppe Mazzini »I repubblicani e l'Italia« in *Edizione nazionale*, vol. 66, 83–93, 86; Mazzini., *Dei doveri dell'uomo*, vol. 69, 3–145, 73. See also Giuseppe Mazzini, »In torno alla questione dei negri in America« (1865), in *Edizione nazionale*, vol. 83, 163–65; Mazzini to Francesco Dall'Ongaro, February 9, 1855, in *Edizione nazionale*, vol. 53, 341–42.
- 23 Nathalia Wright, *American Novelists in Italy. The Discoverers: Allston to James* (Philadelphia, PA, 1965), 87–89; William L. Vance, *America's Rome*, vol. 2, *Catholic and Contemporary Rome* (New Haven, CT, 1989), 22. Beecher Stowe admired the Catholic Church's symbolism and spirituality, but condemned its alleged political tyranny over the Italian people, the topic of one of her other, lesser-known novels, *Agnes of Sorrento*, written in the winter of 1859–1860 during her second visit to Italy. On this occasion she visited Florence, Rome and Naples, as well as Como, Milan, Verona and Venice.
- 24 Minghelli Vaini to Verdi, January 9, 1861, in *I Copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi*, ed. Gaetano Cesari and Alessandro Luzio (Milan, 1913), 587. According to Anselm Gerhard, the couple held the following editions in their library: Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Le père Tom, ou vie des nègres en Amérique*, trad. La Bédouillère (Geneva, 1853); Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, with Italian notes by John Millhouse (Milan: Millhouse, Florence: Molini, Naples: Marghieri, 1853). Minghelli Vaini had competed against Verdi for a seat in parliament, but remained on friendly terms with the family: Frank Walker, *The Man Verdi* (London, 1962), 232, 236.
- 25 For an Italian equivalent of the so-called Uncle Tom shows see for instance the monthly periodical *Il Teatro drammatico Napolitano di Luigi de Lise*, which issued popular plays. *Fascicolo XIII*, February 1856, included a piece entitled *La famiglia dello zio Tom*.

faces, not necessarily propagating anti-abolitionist positions.²⁶ In this respect, however, the novel's American response differed from the debate kicked off in 1850s-Italy, where the press openly criticized what the novel, and its adaptations for the stage, revealed about the American slave economy. Of these adaptations, Rota's ballet became the most successful, triggering a political debate in its own right, which responded closely to Italy's keen interest in the wider world during a pivotal moment of the country's political history.

The original production of *Bianchi e neri* coincided with the final period of Italy's Risorgimento, a moment of concerted reflection on the country's political future and its relationship with the wider world. While the New World, and the United States of America in particular, played a pivotal role in reflections on Italy's political and societal future,²⁷ contrary to what is often assumed, Italians did not necessarily use the United States as a societal and constitutional model for their own political future. Proud of their own tradition of political thought, and their country's humanist and Renaissance legacies, Italy's political and cultural elites often saw themselves as the descendants of a millennial Mediterranean civilisation, as reflected in Vincenzo Gioberti's famous treaty of 1843 *Del Primato Morale e Civile degli Italiani*.²⁸ In comparison, many commentators viewed the United States as a »barbarous country« that lacked any culture of its own and had to learn lessons from the Old World.²⁹ Some Italian commentators – including Joseph de Maistre – went so far as to see the whole experiment of the United States as doomed to fail.³⁰ Others, like Carlo Cattaneo, Antonio Rosmini and especially Giuseppe Mazzini, who abhorred the country's alleged materialism, simply thought that the social and economic conditions

26 Harry Birdoff, *The World's Greatest Hit. Uncle Tom's Cabin* (New York, NY, 1947), 6, 24–28. Robbins, *The Cambridge Introduction* (as in fn. 16), 78–79.

27 Körner, *America in Italy* (as in fn. 2). Also dal Lago, *William Lloyd Garrison and Giuseppe Mazzini* (as in fn. 20); Enrico dal Lago, *The Age of Lincoln and Cavour. Comparative Perspectives on Nineteenth-Century American and Italian Nation-Building* (New York, NY, 2015). For a diplomatic perspective see Lucia Ducci, Stefano Luconi and Matteo Pretelli, *Le relazioni tra Italia e Stati Uniti. Dal Risorgimento alle conseguenze dell'11 settembre* (Rome, 2012); Fiorentino, *Gli Stati Uniti* (as in fn. 20); *Gli Stati Uniti e l'unità d'Italia*, ed. Daniele Fiorentino and Matteo Sanfilippo (Rome, 2004).

28 Vincenzo Gioberti, *Del Primato Morale e Civile degli Italiani* (Brussels, 1843).

29 On the nineteenth-century idea of the United States as an »uncivilised country« see Axel Körner, *Barbarous America*, 125–59. For Italy also see Axel Körner, »Per una critica delle gerarchie intellettuali del pensiero politico risorgimentale. L'esempio degli Stati Uniti nell'esperienza italiana della modernità« in *Gli hegeliani di Napoli: il Risorgimento e la ricezione di Hegel in Italia. Scritti in onore di Gerardo Marotta*, ed. Fernanda Gallo (Naples, 2020), 29–59. For a related perspective see Jonathan Singerton, *The American Revolution and the Habsburg Monarchy* (Charlottesville, NC, 2021).

30 Philippe Roger, *The American enemy. A story of French Anti-Americanism* (Chicago, IL, 2005), 46.

of life in the New World could never be applied to the Old.³¹ These thinkers distinguished themselves from a vocal community of more casual commentators – many of them politicians involved in the process of the country's unification – who simply used references to the United States as a screen on which to project whatever utopia or dystopia might fit their current ideological concerns. Michel de Certeau has observed similar reactions, arguing that for many Europeans America served mainly as »une page blanche (sauvage) où écrire le vouloir occidental.«³² Ideas about the United States became discursive instruments in debates that often had more to do with the Old World than with life in the New World. Rota's *Bianchi e neri* contributed to this growing genre of transcultural exchanges.

Given its literary source, the United States' slave economy represented the main focus of debates on Rota's ballet. As the Milanese literary journal *La Fama* opined in a review of *Bianchi e neri*'s original production, »slavery is a sin and a crime of remote countries, and has nothing to do with us, where everybody is the same before the law.«³³ The painful representation of human barbarity, the periodical argued, made it almost impossible to enjoy the performance. Likewise, *L'Italia Musicale*, commenting on the same production, speaks of »ferocious« scenes showing the »degradation of human nature«, which seem »more disgusting the closer they are to the truth.«³⁴ These comments reveal how the Italian debate on Rota's ballet contributed to an increasingly negative view of the United States that shed doubts over the idea that Risorgimento Italy should look for a societal model across the Atlantic. A large spectrum of public opinion in Italy considered slavery a crime against humanity, but in the case of the United States it also seemed to reflect a stark degradation of social and political structures. Taking up a similar line of argument, in an essay of 1858 the political philosopher Carlo Cattaneo recalled how in 1236 the papal city of Bologna had freed its serfs, announcing a death sentence for anybody still keeping slaves.³⁵ Referring to an episode dating six-hundred years before the end of slave-ownership in the British Empire and the United States, it was exactly this aspect – the idea that slavery represents a breach of civilisation – which reviews of *Bianchi e neri* underlined, resulting in an open rejection of what Italians came to detect as a defining aspect of American political institutions.

31 For a detailed discussion of these thinkers and their writings see Körner, *America in Italy*, 114–62.

32 Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire* (Paris, 1975), 9–10. His comments refer to Jan van der Straet's painting of Amerigo Vespucci.

33 *La Fama del 1853. Rassegna di Scienze, Lettere, Arti, Industria e Teatri*, November 14, 1853.

34 *L'Italia Musicale*, November 12, 1853.

35 Carlo Cattaneo, »La città considerata come principio ideale delle istorie italiane« in *Scritti storici e geografici*, vol. 2, ed. Gaetano Salvemini and Ernesto Sestan (Florence, 1957), 383–437, 425.

The Italian debate on slavery was exacerbated further during the years of the American Civil War, when international efforts to stop the transatlantic slave trade also reached new prominence. As early as November 1860, in a report on the United States' presidential elections, the Florentine liberal newspaper *La Nazione* simply referred to slavery as America's »vergognosa piaga«, a shameful plague.³⁶ In 1862, Cattaneo commented on the extent to which slavery had corrupted American institutions. In an astute analysis of recent research on »human typology«, published in the influential periodical *Il Politecnico*, he denounced the ways in which slavery stained the values of scientific research in the United States. Some of the most important works on human anthropology and modern phrenology, he argued, had originated from the United States, but racial prejudice profoundly compromised the work of scientists from the American South, who in order to justify the institution of slavery went so far as to assimilate the physiological appearance of people of African origin to that of monkeys.³⁷ These assessments were echoed in reviews of the ballet's revival, when *La Fama*, in 1863, reminded its readers how it had been widely assumed that the »trade in human flesh« would disappear as a consequence of these international efforts:

Unfortunately, one did not consider the indomitable tenacity of the Anglo-Saxon race in the Southern United States. They are united around an anti-social principle, based on the pure reason of force: that the white man owns the black, a principle sanctioned by laws, which treat these men as simple objects, to be exploited and commercialised like wild beasts.³⁸

La Fama's political contextualisation of the ballet's revival reflects the international consternation over the ongoing Civil War dividing the American nation. Although it was Lincoln who allegedly argued that the Civil War was indeed Mrs. Stowe's war,³⁹ from an Italian perspective one could hardly imagine a timelier programme for the

36 *La Nazione*, November 24, 1860. Under its entry »Abolizione della schiavitù dei negri«, the highly derivative *Nuova enciclopedia popolare* used the same expression »vergognosa piaga della schiavitù« to describe slavery especially in the United States, presenting British abolitionism as a model. Hippolyte Roux-Fernand, *Storia dei progressi dell'incivilimento in Europa* (Venice, 1843), used the same expression to refer to slavery in the ancient world. I am grateful to David Laven for pointing me to these references.

37 Carlo Cattaneo, »Tipi del genere umano« (1862), in *Scritti storici e geografici*, vol. 3, ed. Gaetano Salvemini and Ernesto Sestan, 214–47, 245–46. The article discusses several works of biological anthropology and was first published in *Il Politecnico*.

38 *La Fama*, September 29, 1863.

39 Daniel R. Vollaro, »Lincoln, Stowe, and the ›Little Woman/Great War‹ Story: The Making, and Breaking, of a Great American Anecdote« in *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 30, no. 1 (2009), 18–34.

peninsula's theatres. Naples too had recently revived the work, with the *Gazzetta Musicale di Napoli* arguing that Rota's work was in fact more than a ballet: »you could easily call it a *drama without words*«. ⁴⁰

Although Italian commentators were adamant in arguing that the institution of slavery demonstrated how different the United States were from Italy, their passionate interest in the constitutional conflict across the Atlantic can partly be explained by developments at home. Given the ongoing civil war in Italy's recently annexed South, Italians had their own reasons to be concerned about the escalating conflict in the United States. When the Italian Prime Minister Ricasoli voiced his support for the authorities of the North, he did this also in awareness of secessionist ambitions in his own country's former papal and Bourbon territories. ⁴¹ Picking up on these parallels, the ballet's reviewer for the *Gazzetta Musicale di Napoli* was keen to describe slavery as the cause of the Civil War dividing the United States; and that it was the country's constitutional system that had caused »the most horrible massacre in the history of humankind.« ⁴² It was the federal character of the American constitution, the reviewer argued, that gave American slaveholders the ability to oppose abolition, which ultimately caused the war. It seems remarkable how the review of a ballet, staged at home, leads the critic to debate the pros and cons of the American constitution. Arguments such as these reflect a growing distance to the United States' federal constitution, a critique associated most prominently with Giuseppe Mazzini, who saw federalism as a force dividing the nation. This negative stance towards federal solutions to Italy's national question marked a noticeable difference to earlier positions in Risorgimento politics, represented by the political thinkers including Carlo Cattaneo, Vincenzo Gioberti or Alberto Mario. ⁴³ Debates on federalism also disturbed the Italian revolutionaries' relations with the Democratic Party in the United States. Initially hesitant in declaring themselves in favour of Abraham Lincoln, their allegiance clearly changed with the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1863.

Beyond contemporary political observations, Italian reactions to Rota's ballet, and to the American Civil War, also reflect longer trends in Italian political thought, and in the role of the United States in imagining Italy's own political future. Since the end of the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), Italians had always taken a keen interest in political developments across the Atlantic, in the American Revolution, and subsequently in the new nation's constitutional development. Most influential among the many contributions to this debate was Carlo Botta's *History of the War of Independence*

40 *Gazzetta Musicale di Napoli*, December 7, 1862.

41 Fiorentino, *Gli Stati Uniti* (as in fn. 20), 189.

42 *Gazzetta Musicale di Napoli*, December 7, 1862.

43 On Italian debates about American federalism see Körner, *America in Italy* (as in fn. 2), 97–100.

of the United States of America, which first came out in the midst of the Napoleonic Wars, in 1809, and was then republished many times throughout the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ Botta's book described a conflict that had divided entire communities, villages and families, fighting either for or against independence from Britain.⁴⁵ Botta's reading of the American War of Independence as a civil war in its own right, however, made the American Revolution a rather unattractive blueprint for Italian unification. The book's detailed description of massacres and of the war's destructive impact on American natural and economic resources, deeply shocked Italians, telling them of a barbarous country, seemingly marked by an absence of civilisation that Italians saw as the foundation of their own political project. The impact of Rota's ballet went into a similar direction. By turning the slave economy into a libretto for a ballet, Rota crossed another line in Italian debates about the United States, making it almost impossible to still propagate life in America as a model for Europeans.

Slavery remained a topos on the Italian stages even after *Bianchi e neri*. In addition to his *Uncle Tom* ballet, Giuseppe Rota treated slavery in *Elda e Dielma*, presented at the Roman Apollo Theatre during the carnival of 1861.⁴⁶ In 1867, Paolo Taglioni produced his ballet *Thea o la Fata dei Fiori* at Milan's Teatro alla Scala, including representations of »oriental« and African slaves. Similarly, in Pasquale Borri's *Nephte o il figliol prodigo*, also scheduled at La Scala and the Teatro Regio in Turin, audiences were confronted with the representation of large numbers of black slaves on the ballet stage.⁴⁷ *Bianchi e neri* should be seen in the context of these productions, but there were other stage productions relating to Rota's ballet too. From 1859 onwards, its staging was frequently combined with Giuseppe Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera*, another gruesome

44 For a history of the book and its author see *Il Giacobino Pentito. Carlo Botta fra Napoleone e Washington*, ed. Luciano Canfora and Ugo Cardinale (Rome etc., 2010). Also Körner, *America in Italy*, 42–77.

45 Carlo Botta, *Storia della guerra dell'indipendenza degli Stati Uniti d'America scritta da Carlo Botta*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1809). For the original English translation see Carlo Botta, *History of the War of Independence of the United States of America by Charles Botta* [1809], trans. George Alexander Otis (New Haven, CT, 1840). Numerous Italian authors writing about the American War of Independence simply summarized Botta. See for instance Tullio Dandolo, *Il Settentrione dell'Europa e Dell'America nel secolo passato sin 1789. L'Inghilterra e l'America* (Milan, 1853).

46 Paolo Taglioni, *Thea o la Fata dei Fiori*, NYPL, WTC, LdB, n. 868; Pasquale Borri, *Nephte o il figliol prodigo*, NYPL, WTC, LdB, n. 883 (Turin, 1869), n. 923 (Milan, 1873); Giuseppe Rota, *Elda e Dielma*, »azione mimica-danzante« NYPL, WTC, LdB, n. 787. The ballet featured slaves in India. Thematically related, in 1862 Rota presented a Chinese ballet at the Pergola in Florence, *Lo spirito maligno*, NYPL, WTC, LdB, n. 799. See also Antonio Pallerini, *L'Anello infernale ossia Folgore. Ballo fantastico in sei parti*, set in Cadice during the 16th century and performed at La Scala during the autumn of 1862, NYPL, WTC, LdB, n. 795.

47 To a lesser extent, audiences were also accustomed to the representation of race and slavery in opera. For a pioneering investigation into this topic see *Blacknes in Opera*, ed. Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan and Eric Saylor (Champaign, IL, 2012).

image of life in the New World, where Verdi and his librettist Antonio Somma describe Ulrica as »dell'immondo sangue dei negri« (of the foul blood of the Negroes) (Act 1, 1, 18).⁴⁸ The combination of the two works started with *Un ballo*'s premiere on 17 February 1859 at the Teatro Apollo in Rome.⁴⁹ Florence in 1861 and Naples in 1862 likewise combined the two works, turning the production into an American themed night. While much has been written on Verdi's original intention to write an opera about the assassination of the Swedish king Gustav III,⁵⁰ the plot's move across the Atlantic, and into the period of the British colonies, became a major factor of the opera's success and probably the reason why Verdi, after unification and at the time of the American Civil War, never considered returning to the plot's original Scandinavian setting.

Like Rota's ballet, *Un ballo in maschera* presented Italians with a devastating account of life in the New World, characterised by broken social relations, superstition, a lack of trust in political structures, and terror, culminating in a political assassination. In no way would Italians want to read the societal setting presented on Verdi's stage as a blueprint for their own political future. To contemporaries the work's political message seemed so obvious that, in 1861, when the opera was first presented in New York, the country's new president-elect Abraham Lincoln was escorted away from his box before the scene of the governor's assassination. The management feared that the heated political atmosphere during those days might inspire a fanatical federalist to kill Lincoln during the performance.⁵¹ It is not known if anybody remembered this moment when, four years on, the actor John Wilkes Booth shot Lincoln at Ford's Theatre in Washington during a production of Tom Taylor's *Our American Cousin*.

As mentioned earlier, many Italian patriots saw the abolition of slavery across the Atlantic and the fight for their nation's political unification as »one single cause«, as a struggle for the good of humankind as a whole.⁵² Not all Italians who came

48 For a detailed analysis of Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* in the context of Italian debates about the United States see Körner, *America in Italy*, 163–99.

49 *L'Armonia*, February 26, 1859.

50 For an recent overview see Arnold Jacobshagen, »Un ballo in maschera« in *Verdi Handbuch*, ed. Anselm Gerhard and Uwe Schweikert (Stuttgart, 2013), 486–493.

51 *New York Times*, February 21, 1861. On Lincoln's reception at the theatre see also Harold Holzer, *Lincoln President-Elect. Abraham Lincoln and the Great Secession Winter 1860–1861* (New York, NY, 2008), 365–66.

52 Enrico dal Lago, »Radicalism and Nationalism: Northern »Liberators« and Southern Labourers in the USA and Italy, 1830–60« in *The American South and the Italian Mezzogiorno. Essays in Comparative History*, ed. Enrico dal Lago and Rick Halpern (Basingstoke, 2002), 197. See also Roland Sarti, »La democrazia radicale: uno sguardo reciproco tra Stati Uniti e Italia« in *La democrazia radicale nell'ottocento europeo*, ed. Maurizio Ridolfi (Milan, 2005), 145–48; Ramanzini, *Una lettera di Garibaldi ad Abramo Lincoln* (as in fn. 21); David Richards, *Italian American. The Racializing of an Ethnic Identity* (New York, NY, 1999), 118.

across Beecher Stowe's novel, Rota's ballet or Verdi's opera would have shared such transatlantic idealism. Many had no clear idea of what the North American Republic stood for, how its constitution worked, or what role the United States played in Risorgimento political thought. Their relative ignorance of American affairs, however, made the impact of these works on their own political ideas still more compelling. As a result of their encounter with these literary works, and their staged productions, Italians increasingly saw themselves as part of an interconnected world where political and societal developments across the Atlantic became part of their own lives. Meanwhile, they also learned how different these worlds were. To many commentators America seemed the future; but Italians learned that this future was not necessarily their future. In this sense, transatlantic crossings also served Europeans to realise what their own Old World stood for.