

**DANTE VERSUS BEATRICE:
FEMINIST APPROACHES TO THE 1865-1890 CENTENARIES**

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In post-Unification Italy, Florence became the open-air stage of the 1865 *Festa di Dante* and the 1890 *Esposizione Beatrice*. Despite their historical and ideological closeness, the cultural legacy of the *festa beatriciana* has been systematically outweighed by that of the Dante Festival for its far-reaching impact on the Italian nation-building process and the poet's monumentalization as literary, linguistic, and political symbol of the newly unified country. In this article, I set out to redress the deep-seated outbalance to retrace and expose the hidden threads that binds a crucial moment of Italian women's history of education and emancipation to the broader dynamics of Dante's nineteenth-century reception. Through a comparative approach, I reassess the changing nature of women's participation to the celebrations: from phantom presences of the earliest commemorative events to marginalized observers of the *Festa di Dante*, to unwavering promoters, organizers, and award-winning contributors of the *Esposizione Beatrice*.

Keywords: Beatrice; gender history; women's writing; centenary celebrations

The nineteenth century was the age of national centenaries and women's emancipation movements; of the maximum expansion of the periodical press and the print industry; and of the rediscovery and canonization of Dante in Italian and foreign literary cultures.¹ In post-Unification Italy, these facets formed one, solid prism as

¹ *The Age of Anniversaries: The Cult of Commemoration, 1895-1925*, ed. T. G. Otte (London: Routledge, 2017); Ronald Quinault, "The Cult of the Centenary, c. 1784-1914," *Historical Research* 71.176 (1998): 303-23; *Commemorating Writers in Nineteenth Century Europe: Nation-Building and Centenary Fever*, eds. Joseph Leerssen and Ann Rigney (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Liviana Gazzetta, *Orizzonti Nuovi: Storia del Primo Femminismo in Italia (1865-1925)* (Rome: Viella, 2018); *Storia della stampa italiana*, eds. V. Castronovo and N. Tranfaglia (Rome: Laterza, 1976), 7 vols.; *Journalism and the Periodical Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Joanne Shattock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century: Nationality, Identity, and Appropriation*, eds. Aida Audeh and Nick Havely (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Federica Coluzzi, *Dante Beyond Influence: Rethinking Reception in Victorian Literary Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

Florence became the open-air stage of two large-scale public commemorations: the 1865 *Festa di Dante*, celebrating the six-hundredth anniversary of poet's birth, and the 1890 *Esposizione Beatrice*, commemorating his beloved's death in 1290. Despite their chronological and ideological proximity, the cultural and social memory of the *fešta beatriciana* faded almost immediately, only occasionally and fragmentarily (re-)evoked in recent scholarship.² That of the 1865 Dante Festival, by contrast, consolidated swiftly leading to the popular and scholarly monumentalization of the event as a pivotal moment in Italian national history.

In this article, I set out to redress the deep-seated outbalance by re-reading the history of the 1865 and 1890 centenaries from a comparative and explicitly feminist perspective. I examine the changing nature of women's participation in the celebrations from marginalized spectators of the *Festa* to unwavering promoters, organizers, and award-winning contributors of the *Esposizione*. The recovery of women's long-forgotten experiences will bring forth the hidden threads that bind a crucial moment in women's education and emancipation histories to the specific dynamics of Dante's nineteenth-century reception.

The (Italian) Female Public: Local and Foreign Experiences at the Festa di Dante

Mahnaz Yosefzadeh is, thus far, the only scholar to have questioned the nature and extent of women's inclusion in the 1865 centenary. While women of all ages, classes, and orders were an unquantifiable part of the 30,000 people flooding the streets of Florence, archival documents bear no trace of their practical involvement in the lengthy planning, organization, and delivery of the three-day celebrations. The only surviving evidence relates to their presence as spectators of the "religious ceremony, which inaugurated the statue of Dante"³ in Piazza Santa Croce. Yosefzadeh found that "six-

² Simonetta Soldani, "Una Beatrice molto controversa. Donne reali e ideali di donna nell'Italia fin de siècle," in *Tra archivi e storia. Scritti dedicati ad Alessandra Contini Bonacossi*, eds. Elisabetta Insabato, Rosalia Manno Tolu, Ernestina Pellegrini, and Anna Scattigno (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2018): 733-73; Rossella Bonfatti, "Dante e il Risorgimento educatore delle donne: percorsi anglo-italiani," in *I cantieri dell'italianistica. Ricerca, didattica e organizzazione agli inizi del XXI secolo. Atti del XVII congresso dell'ADI – Associazione degli Italianisti (Rome Sapienza, 18-21 settembre 2013)*, eds. Beatrice Alfonzetti, Giulia Baldassarri, and Franco Tomasi (Rome: Adi editore, 2014): 1-8.

³ Mahnaz Yosefzadeh, *City and Nation in the Italian Unification. The National Festivals of Dante Alighieri* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 67, 96, 117.

hundred seventy-five” of the 16000 tickets were issued to women. The ‘Green tickets’ went to the “female relatives of various governmental deputies, council members, and high government officials,” with 80 being equally distributed between an unspecified group of “Florentine women” and “foreign women residing in Florence.”⁴

Despite being vociferously promoted in the press as the “participatory, inclusive, enthusiastic, and spontaneous union of the representatives of all sections and sectors of the Italian nation,”⁵ women’s formal attendance at the unveiling of the sculpture was regulated by revisionist criteria in line with the Codice Pisanelli. Introduced in 1865, the first civil code of the State failed to extend the political and legal rights already granted in Lombardy, Veneto, and the Grand duchy of Tuscany to the female population of the peninsula. Accordingly, the distribution of tickets and invitations to the female public was exclusively based on their marital status and social standing. Yosefzadeh recalls the case of the celebrated poet and patriot, Erminia Fuà Fusinato, who despite being denied an invitation because of her social background (she was not “a countess”) the Committee let a male presenter read her poetry at the ceremony. For Yosefzadeh, the Committee’s behavior further advances Ilaria Porciani’s argument that the women present were there because they played “specific roles: either as ‘decorative’ elegant ladies adding distinction to the festa; or as wives and mothers serving to represent the centrality of family as testimony to the equilibrium of the society and of the nation.”⁶ I would add that the confinement of their role to passive spectators of this national *festa* is particularly compelling for it erases the memory of women’s multifaceted mobilization in the Risorgimento wars.

The admission to the public ritual of the newly unified nation did not come in recognition of women’s selfless commitment to the cause of independence as armed fighters, fund-raisers for patriots and hosts of political salons.⁷ Their enforced passivity in the organization of the *Centenario* contrasts with their activism as

⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 96, 117. See also, Diana Moore, *Revolutionary Domesticity in the Italian Risorgimento: Transnational Victorian Feminism, 1850-1890* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

⁶ Yosefzadeh, *City and Nation*, 83.

⁷ Benedetta Gennaro, *Women in Arms: Gender in the Risorgimento, 1848-1861*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Brown University, 2010, Proquest ProQuest Dissertations Publishing; Laura Guidi, “Nobili o maledette? Passioni del Risorgimento fra tracce biografiche, narrazioni canoniche, riscritture,” *Meridiana* 69 (2010): 115-22.

promoters and animators of the other civic ritual that had marked the highest point of the Risorgimental process. The annexation plebiscites for which women of all classes had come together to organize “appelli, indirizzi, dimostrazioni, cortei, acclamazioni, allestimento di seggi separati e irruzione in quelli ufficiali, suffragi eccezionali di «cittadine» benemerite, offerte patriottiche.”⁸

While I have not been able to recover first-hand accounts written from Italian women’s own perspective, Frances Clemente recently examined the experience of the German *letterata* Anne Vivanti-Lindau’s as she travelled to Florence to attend the *Centenario*.⁹ Published as part of her *Journey to Crete, Constantinople, Naples, and Florence. Three Months Abroad* (1865), the account offers multiple portrayals of women’s manners and behaviors at the solemn ceremony and popular festivities. Upon reaching Piazza S. Croce for the unveiling of the sculpture, she immediately notices the ornamental pose of “ladies, in the most elegant spring toilets” that simply filling “seats and the windows round the piazza,” painted “the gayest imaginable” effect of the event.¹⁰ On the last day, she is similarly stunned by the “the extraordinary modesty and dignity of the Tuscan maidens, who had declined in a body to join the dance, considering the fête of too public a character.”¹¹ She observes that instead of entering the open-air danceroom created in the *cortile* of the Uffizi, “the young women, on the arm of their fathers, or in companies together, stood around as spectators and seemed to look on with pleasure.”¹²

The only exception to such stony demeanor is made by the “several ladies” Vivanti-Lindau sees marching as representatives of Italian artists,” wearing “as a head covering, instead of bonnets, the pretty and becoming black Italian veil.”¹³ Among one hundred of Italy’s most distinguished actors, she recognizes “Mdme Ristori, who walked along with the grace and dignity of a queen.”¹⁴ The internationally renowned tragedienne was one of the very few

⁸ Gianluca Fruci, “Cittadine senza cittadinanza: la mobilitazione femminile nei plebisciti del Risorgimento (1848-1870),” *Genesis: Rivista della Società Italiana delle Storiche* 5.2 (2016): 21-55 (22).

⁹ Frances Clemente, “‘And Now the Great Day Had Come, the 14th of May, 1865!’: Anna Vivanti-Lindau e il seicentenario dantesco,” *Italian Studies* 78:4 (2023): 399-420.

¹⁰ Anna Vivanti-Lindau, *A Journey to Crete, Constantinople, Naples and Florence. Three Months Abroad* (London, 1865), 163.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

women granted direct agency in the delivery of the centenary. In her *memoir*, Ristori recalls that she had been asked by the Committee to not only join the “grand procession,” but also to “contribute, with Tomaso Salvini and Ernesto Rossi, in composing an artistic programme worthy of the occasion.” Upon accepting the “flattering invitation,” Richard Cooper contends that Ristori “journeyed to Florence at her own expense,” to perform “unpaid”¹⁵ on two separate occasions at the presence of King Vittorio Emanuele. First, she recited the speeches of Francesca da Rimini (*Inferno* V), Pia de Tolomei’s (*Purgatorio* V) and Piccarda Donati (*Paradiso* III) at the Teatro Pagliano; she then impersonated Francesca da Rimini in Silvio Pellico’s tragedy by the same name at the Teatro del Cocomero.

If Vivanti-Lindau documented her ecstatic experience of the *Festa* in diaristic form, a “party of three ladies, all without a *Madame* among us”¹⁶ proclaimed themselves foreign correspondents for the *Monthly Packet of Evening Readings*. Founded and edited by the British novelist Charlotte Mary Yonge, the magazine was a didactic and entertaining “companion in times of recreation” for Anglican “young girls, maidens, or young ladies”¹⁷ between the age of fifteen and twenty-five. The twenty-four-page “tale of small private impressions and adventures rather than a real account of the Dante festival”¹⁸ appeared in the July issue.

The article immersed readers into their daily “adventures” in Florence starting with “the search for information, & c., which occupied our minds for some days before May 14, the day when the *Festa* began.”¹⁹ Significantly, the retelling tends to de-monumentalize the event by highlighting the practical difficulties visitors

¹⁵ Richard Cooper, “Dante on the nineteenth-century stage,” in *Dante on view: the Reception of Dante in the Visual and Performing Arts*, eds. Antonella Braida and Luisa Calè (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 23–38 (30).

¹⁶ “Dante Festival,” *The Monthly Packet of Evening News for Younger Members of the English Church* 2 (June–December 1865), 220–44. The reportage fits within the magazine’s broader interest in Dante demonstrated with a serialized study to the poet, his *Vita Nova* and *Commedia* since January 1863. Interrupted in December 1865 at *Inferno* xx (Coluzzi, *Dante Beyond Influence*), the reading was resumed in a slightly different format a decade later (1872–75), followed by a Dante Competition in the spring of 1895: a five-question examination paper designed by Arthur Butler that tested the readers’ critical interpretation and knowledge of Dante’s biography, of his historical and literary sources. The winner, Miss A. M. Mercer received a prize of three guineas.

¹⁷ Charlotte M. Yonge, “Introductory Letter,” *The Monthly Packet of Evening News for Younger Members of the English Church*, 1 (1851): i.

¹⁸ “Dante Festival,” 244.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 220

faced in gathering information about “the places where entertainments were to be held” or “how tickets were to be procured.”²⁰ It also reveals the consumeristic nature of the public ritual, as the three cousins come across vendors selling Dante brooches, “which they all bought and wore.”²¹ At the same time, it highlights women’s determination in being well-informed participants of the *Festa*, having “eagerly read up various pamphlets that suddenly blossomed out of all the libraries – short lives and notices of Dante and his period with application for the one ‘raccontata al popolo’ by G. Pieri, written in a particularly hearty wholesome manner.”²² Despite being admittedly “too strongly colored by personal ideas and feelings”²³, the three cousins’ coverage inscribes women’s perspective on the otherwise male-centric and male-exclusive historical narrative of the *centenario*.

Foreign women’s contribution to the *Festa* also came in the form of gifted books. The Glasgow-born but Rome-based Claudia Hamilton Ramsay sent out a complimentary copy of her translation of the *Commedia* to be exhibited along with other foreign works, including those by Henry W. Longfellow and Thomas Parsons.²⁴ Published in 1862–63, Mrs. Ramsay’s *terza rima* rendition was the first Anglophone version authored by a woman, remaining unchallenged until Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds’ Penguin edition from the 1940s–60s.²⁵ On their part, a group of Italian women presented a sixteen-page booklet entitled *Ricordo delle associate del periodico “La Donna e la Famiglia” nel sesto secolare centenario della nascita di Dante Alighieri*. The volume consisted of a collection of poems, odes and sonnets penned by renowned authors and educators of the period, including Luisa Amalia Paladini, Marianna Giarré, Assunta Pieralli. Printed in Genova, the work had a

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 222.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 230.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 244.

²⁴ For a survey of the Anglophone translation history of the *Commedia* in the long Nineteenth century, see Federica Coluzzi and Nick Havely, “Nineteenth-Century English, Irish and American Translations: A Book-Historical Approach,” in *The Divine Comedy in Translation*, eds. Jacob Blakesley, Federica Pitch, and Theodore Catchey (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame Press), forthcoming.

²⁵ Federica Coluzzi, “Dorothy L. Sayers and Feminist Archival Historiography in Dante Studies: Female Authorship in Fin de Siècle Britain,” *CoSMo: Comparative Studies in Modernism* 20 (2022): 213–29. See also, Valentina Mele, “The Years of Transition. English translations of the *Commedia*, 1900–1950,” in *The Divine Comedy in Translation*, forthcoming.

limited circulation that hindered its successive canonization as part of the legacy of the *Centenario*.

Gaining centrality: Italian Women and the 1890 Esposizione Beatrice

In 1865, groups of Italian *letterate* and *salonnières* set up “Dante parties” in their homes as “sites where they could more actively partake in the national patriotic celebration.”¹⁵ They could not have anticipated the central role their successors would have played in the proposal, planning and realization of the Florentine commemorations for the death of Beatrice in May and June 1890. To this day, historians have examined the *Esposizione Beatrice* with an eye to the political and literary controversies it engendered and its historical and ideological connections to the Italian woman question and early feminism movements.²⁶ Whereas these approaches isolate the *Esposizione* from the Dante Festival of 1865, a contrastive reading can highlight major transformations in the status, influence, and impact of the female public.

To a greater extent than in the 1865 centenary, the fate of the *Festa beatriciana* depended on the press with one, major a difference. In the first occasion, male voices (of intellectuals, scholars, and politicians) dominated the public discourse unfolding through the pages of national newspapers as well as the *Giornale del Centenario* and *La Festa di Dante*,¹⁶ two official outlets created for the event. Twenty-five years later, women across Italy networked to promote plans for Beatrice’s centenary using as their main platform leading women’s periodicals of the period such as *La Donna* and *Cordelia*. The initial proposal for a commemoration of Beatrice’s death had come from Felicita Pozzoli, a “Milanese lady,” “an ardent disciple of Dante and a warmer supporter of the education of women” who promoted “a volume of essays on Dante and Beatrice”²⁷ based on a national competition open to Italian women only. A well-regarded journalist, editor of *Giornale delle fanciulle*, *L’Infanzia* and *L’Amico della prima età*, and teacher at the Scuola Normale Femminile di Milano, Pozzoli was the spokesperson of a

²⁶ Maurizio Taddei, “Beatrice cent’anni fa: l’esposizione fiorentina e una polemica carducciana,” in *Beatrice nell’opera di Dante e nella memoria europea 1290-1990* ed. Maria Picchio Simonelli (Florence-Naples: Edizioni Cadmo, 1994); Soldani, “Una Beatrice molto controversa,” 733-73; Bonfatti, “Dante e il Risorgimento educatore delle donne,” 1-8; Gazzetta, *Orizzonti Nuovi*, 94-100.

²⁷ Rachel H. Busk, “The Sixth Centenary of Dante’s Beatrice at Florence,” *The Academy* 947 (Jun 28, 1890): 443.

larger group of learned ladies. These included Emma Tattoni, poet, writer and close acquaintance of Giosuè Carducci and Giovanni Pascoli; Francesca Zambusi, patriot, poet, and historian; and Enrichetta Usuelli Ruzza, headmistress of the Scuola Normale di Rovigo, periodical contributor, and poet.

In 1888, the open call, signed under the pseudonym of La Spigolatrice, appeared in *La Donna - Periodico morale e istruttivo. Compilazione di donne italiane*: the first Italian periodical founded, directed, and edited by Italian women since 1868.²⁸ Pozzoli entrusted the material realization of the project to Carlotta Ferrari da Lodi, an acclaimed librettist, pianist, and poet. Ferrari, in turn, led a committee of female intellectuals, writers and teachers (Mander Cecchetti, Carolina Corone di Berti, Marianna Giarré Billi, Malvina Frank, and Caterina Pigorini Beri). The “Manifesto e Invito alle donne italiane” circulated in *Lettere e Arti* on May 11, 1889 (with a follow up call on June 1).²⁹ Despite meeting the favor of many journalists and intellectuals of the period, the plan was scolded and harshly contested in *Cordelia - Foglio settimanale per le giovinette italiane* by its editor-in-chief, Ida Baccini. Impersonating Dante’s wife, Gemma Donati, penning a letter to the *direttrice* from Paradise, Baccini expressed her ideological objection against a

rievocazione inutile di una gloria che a me pareva in qualche modo scroccata, per quella ricostruzione morale di una donna la cui personalità era stata soltanto avvivata dall’amore e dal genio Dantesco, per quella nulla e insignificante creatura diventata simbolo di bellezza e di bontà soltanto nell’animo di un poeta.³⁰

²⁸ La Spigolatrice, “Spigolando. Il VI Centenario di Beatrice Portinari,” *La Donna*, 30 December 1888. Throughout the months of May and June 1890, *La Donna* continued to publish articles, correspondence and even reports on the *Esposizione*. In a footnote, N. d. D pointed out that despite the diversity of opinions expressed on the cultural and political significance of the event, these positions all pursued one, common objective: that of ensuring “il progresso femminile, il miglioramento di tutte le classi sociali, per mezzo della redenzione della donna” quoted in Emilia Mariani, “L’Esposizione Beatrice: Mostra nazionale dei lavori femminile,” *La Donna*, 28 Agosto 1890, np. This was one of two lengthy reports that find Emilia Mariani produced after the conclusion of the *Esposizione* paired with, “Il lavoro delle donne all’Esposizione Beatrice,” *La Donna*, 15 November 1890, 160–63.

²⁹ Carlotta Ferrari, “Un po’ di storia,” in *A Beatrice Portinari: Il IX giugno MDCCCXC, VI centenario della sua morte le donne italiane*, ed. Carlotta Ferrari (Florence: Successori Le Monnier, 1290), 2–4.

³⁰ Ida Baccini, “*Dal Paradiso, Gemma Donati*,” *Cordelia* 48 (29 September 1889): 385–86.

Concluding with a counterproposal to dedicate the centenary celebrations to Dante's real, lawful and devoted wife, Baccini's stern rejection of the ideal "expressed," what Gabriella Romani calls "a simple and urgent message: it was no longer a time for muses to be celebrated but for women to be recognized as professional writers and active members of the cultural and public life of Italy."³¹ Soldani argues that the fiery letter was also one of the earliest sparks igniting the often-spiteful polemic, mostly fueled by male intellectuals, viciously spread across the press "provocando una impreveduta e infausta catena di rifiuti e disimpegni nell'organizzazione, nella pubblicizzazione e nella partecipazione agli eventi."³² The same *querelle* that severely comprised the outcome of the *Esposizione Beatrice* and its subsequent memorialization.

Baccini, however, reversed her position when Angelo De Gubernatis reshaped the initial publishing plans into a large-scale project: a month-long public exhibition held in Florence and highlighting women's "opere dell'ingegno e della mano." Baccini appreciated how De Gubernatis' proposal relied on the figure of Beatrice like "una leva potente, come di una scintilla sacra";³³ a spark encouraging and uniting Italian women to come together to exhibit and receive public awards for the excellence of their intellectual, artistic, and artisanal achievements. The main celebrative commemoration of Beatrice, partly inspired by the *Festa di Dante*, consisted of an inaugural lecture (given by Alinda Bonacci Brunamonti on May 1), *tableaux vivants* of scenes from the *Vita nuova* on May 2, and on May 15 the performance of the *Inno della pace in onore della Beatrice di Dante* composed by the Anglo-French Augusta Holmès and commissioned by De Gubernatis for the occasion.³⁴ The *Accademia letteraria e musicale* along with the award ceremony, took place on a symbolic day: June 9, the day of Beatrice's death in 1290 and of the official conclusion of the *Esposizione*. The rest of the period was entirely dedicated to the showcase of artefacts³⁵ and to public literary, musical, and dramaturgic competitions held in the Regio Politeama in Florence.

³¹ Gabriella Romani, "Muses, Heroines, and Virtuous Wives in Nineteenth-Century Italy: Erminia Fuà Fusinato's and Matilde Serao's Literary Portrayals of the New Italian Woman," *The Italianist* 39, no. 3: 297-314 (303).

³² Soldani, "Una Beatrice molto controversa," 737.

³³ Ida Baccini, *La mia vita: ricordi biografici* (Rome-Milan: Albrighi, Segati e C., 1904): 245. The whole chapter XXX is dedicated to the *Esposizione Beatrice*.

³⁴ On this point, see Karen Henson, "In the House of Disillusion: Augusta Holmès and 'La Montagne Noire,'" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 9, no. 3 (1997): 233-62.

³⁵ The *Esposizione* opened every day from 9-6. The cost of individual tickets was one lira, while the personal membership was priced at twenty lire, was valid for the entire

The first official communication for the *Esposizione* appeared on 2nd March in *Cornelia*, the periodical De Gubernatis had founded in 1881 with the intent of supplementing the educational provision for girls. The request for submissions for the eight categories³⁶ was prefaced by Baccini's enthusiastic address:

Mandate dunque, o signore italiane, il fiore del vostro ingegno o della vostra pazienza all'Esposizione. [...] Io intanto per darvi il buon esempio preparo, fin d'ora, per l'esposizione [...] una conferenza... semiseria, di cui ignoro il soggetto.³⁷

The female public that Pozzoli, Ferrari and Baccini at once impersonated and solicited had changed radically from the subordinated and silence(d) attendees of the 1865 *Festa*. The rise of literacy levels, the educational reforms and early emancipation movements characterizing the intervening decades engendered a *new* public of professional, often politicized, women eager to find new forms of agency and participation in the country's cultural life. Many entered the field of literary journalism authoring several Dante-related articles published in the *Giornale Dantesco*, the *Rassegna della Letteratura Italiana* and *Nuovo Convivio* throughout the second half of the century.

The call for submissions was circulated across Europe thanks to De Gubernatis' networks of correspondents and acquaintances. The Florence-based folklorist and writer, Rachel H. Busk acted as his British representative, entrusted "to bring his idea to the knowledge of English people who love Italy – and who among us does not?"³⁸ Weeks later, Busk rejoiced at her achievement of persuading many "eminent writers [...] to write in [Beatrice's] honor on the occasion," and having "the Queen" herself "testify her sympathy by contributing to the collection a copy of her works with her autograph on the first page."³⁹ Busk received one of the nine Grandi Diplomi di Benemerenzia in recognition of her role in collecting "autografi, libri e disegni di scrittori e artisti inglesi" for the *Tribuna Beatrice*, the competition opened to Italian and foreign

duration of the event and could be purchased from the [sedi] of the central and the local committees.

³⁶ These were: 1. Pittura, miniature; disegni ed arazzi. 2. Scultura ed incisione. 3. Letteratura. 4. Lavori d'ago e di ricamo. 5. Ornamenti da donna. 6. Didattica. 7. Igiene domestica. 8. Industrie diverse.

³⁷ Ida Baccini, "L'Esposizione Beatrice," *Cordelia*, 1890.

³⁸ Busk, "The Sixth Centenary of Dante's Beatrice at Florence," 445.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

contestants of both sexes.⁴⁰ Notably, the news of the *Esposizione* reached the British middle-class female public through the more affordable *The Woman Herald*. Previously known as *Women's Penny Paper*, it ran from 1888 to 1893 as “a women's suffrage advocacy publication” discussing “industrial, social, and educational questions, addressing a range of topical social and political issues, and assiduously reporting the legal, educational, and professional gains made by women across the globe.”⁴¹

Women also governed the vast, capillary network of local committees across the country tasked with the office of soliciting, gathering, and reporting submissions to the central committee of the *Esposizione*. The committees featured (and benefited from the acquaintances of) representatives of the old nobility, but the majority of the “presidentesse,” “vice-presidentesse,” “segretarie,” “patronesse,” “delegate,” and “espositrici” were “signore” and “signorine” from the middle and even the working classes. Through their spontaneous aggregation and co-operation in the name of Beatrice, urban and provincial women alike exercised new forms of participation to civic rituality from which they were excluded in 1865. Still engrained in pre-unification forms of sociability, the *Festa* had confined women from upper and middle classes to the *salon*, a physical and sociable space “at the intersection between the public sphere of the intellectual debate and the private realm of the domestic.”⁴² The *Esposizione*, instead, reflected the progressive expansion of the public arena and “democratization of the process of cultural production and consumption”⁴³ begun in the 1870s.

De Gubernatis made women's labor visible within the history of the celebration by sharing the committee's plans in the press, and printing the names of members and *espositrici* in the *Catalogo*. These testimonies offer unparalleled opportunities for biographical and bibliographical research, leading to notable discoveries. They reveal, for instance, the limited presence of women in the evaluating panels of the *Esposizione*. Out of the ten committees, women were recognised as competent, authoritative judges of submissions in the field of music, pedagogy, and embroidery. The record how

⁴⁰ Christina Rossetti sent out a copy of D. G. Rossetti's *The Early Italian Poets* (1861) and of her sister's best-selling companion, *A Shadow of Dante* (1871).

⁴¹ Elizabeth Gray, “Poetry and Politics in ‘The Women's Penny Paper / Woman's Herald’, 1888-1893: ‘One Swift, Bright Fore-Gleam of Celestial Day,’” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 45, no. 2 (2012): 134-57 (136).

⁴² Gabriella Romani, “A Room with a View: Interpreting the Ottocento through the Literary Salon,” *Italica*, 84, no. 2/3 (Summer-Autumn, 2007): 233.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

the unexpected absence of Queen Margherita – “che non si presentò né mandò messaggi” despite having initially recognised that “l’ispiratrice del divino poeta meritasse di venir onorata con una particolare commemorazione”⁴⁴ – was counterbalanced by individuals and institutions embodying the new Italian woman. Among the 2,000 *espositrici* and organizers listed in the catalogue, Manuela Soldi identified many “attiviste del movimento femminile di fine secolo” including “una giovane Dora Melegari nel comitato romano; Emilia Mariani, voce decisamente più radicale del femminismo italiano [...]; a Milano Sofia Bisi Albini.”⁴⁵ Their presence demonstrated the greater political significance of the *Esposizione* as a rare opportunity for pushing forward the issues at the heart of the woman question.

The catalogue of 40,000 submitted artefacts showed the diversity of women’s contributions both as cultural producers and interpreters of Dante’s work. The issue was also at the heart of the cycle of women-led conferences held in May, that Ferrari later collected in the volume titled *La donna italiana descritta da scrittrici italiane*. While some lecturers provided historical surveys (Savi Lopez’s *La Donna italiana del Trecento*; Anzoletti’s *La donna Italiana nel XVIII secolo*), others discussed women’s philanthropic work and civic engagement (Vittori’s *Le eroine e le patriote*; Zampini Salazar’s *La Donna Italiana nella beneficenza*); changes in the maternal role and domestic life (De Gubernatis, *La donna italiana in famiglia*; Lupo Maggiorelli, *La donna amante*). Most interventions centered on women’s new role in the emerging industrial and sectors (Invernizio’s *Le operaie italiane*; Tettoni’s *Le scienziate*); in the performing arts and literature (Ferruccia’s *Le novellatrici e le romanziere*; Irma’s *Le attrici italiane*); and in education (Baccini’s *Le maestre, le educatrici* winner of the golden medal).

Neither Bobba’s paper on *Gli studi della donna* nor La Maire’s *L’avvenire della donna* considered the way Dante was becoming increasingly central in the higher education, artistic labor, and professional life of nineteenth-century Italian women. The volume, instead, contained two Dante-related lectures: Filippina Rossi Gasti’s *Le donne nella Divina Commedia*, winner of the Grand Jury’s gold medal, and Bonacci Brunamonti’s inaugural speech on *Beatrice Portinari e l’idealità della donna nei canti d’amore in Italia*.

The creative and critical engagement with the poet

⁴⁴ Soldani, “Una Beatrice molto controversa,” 758.

⁴⁵ Manuela Soldi, “Esporre il femminile. L’Esposizione Beatrice (Firenze, 1890),” *Ricerche di S/Confine* VI:1 (2015): 33–34.

materialized most conspicuously in the *Tribuna Beatrice*, which received a large and diverse body of Dantean submissions, inspired by passages and figures from the *Vita nuova*, *Canzoniere* and *Commedia*. The *Catalogue* details that poetry too was amply represented along traditionally feminine, domestic arts such as embroidery, pottery decorations, and watercolor painting. Penelope Mengozzi Petrini was recognised for her *Collana di dieci sonetti sulla Vita Nuova e il Canzoniere di Dante*, while Angioletta Citterio presented her *Omaggio a Bratrice: serie di componimenti*. The judges of the *Esposizione* publicly rewarded women's critical and scholarly endeavors on par with the work of renowned male academics. Giuseppina Bellotti received a *diploma of benemerenza* for contributing a series of 'Scritti su Dante'; Emilia Oliper for a manuscript titled *Idee sulla divina commedia*; Giuseppina Caristo for her 'Studio dantesco'; and Regina Valenti-Castelli for her *Adiettivario Dantesco* issued by the renown Florentine publisher, Barbera.

All creative and non-creative responses were deposited in the archives of the Regia Biblioteca Centrale di Firenze. Several were later selected by Carlotta Ferrari for a second commemorative volume published by Le Monnier: *A Beatrice Portinari nel VI Centenario della sua morte le donne italiane*. Ferrari contributed a lengthy essay that recapitulated the 'polemica' on the historical and allegorical meaning of Beatrice and, by extension, on the significance of a centenary celebration like the *Esposizione*. The piece demonstrated that her expertise reached past the poetical inspiration evident in her own lyrics to encompass complex philological and ecdotal issues. A conscious critical engagement mostly expressed in her correspondence with renowned scholars of the period (and disseminated by the press: it appeared in *La Nazione*, *Lettere ed Arti*, *Gazzetta dell'Emilia*), reproduced at the end of Ferrari's chapter.

Unlike the 1865 *Ricordo delle associate*, Ferrari's volume presented forty-three contributions, with the regular alternation of poetry and prose writings of various length and subject. Defying expectations, the latter group consisted only marginally of narrative reimaginings of Beatrice's life and love for Dante. The prose interventions illustrated women's analytical and interpretive abilities applied to various aspects of the *materia dantesca*. Cross-cantica readings on the function of love in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*; evidence of Beatrice's love for Dante through the textual analysis of lyrics from the *Vita nova* and *Canzoniere*; comparative studies on the figure of Beatrice against Boccaccio's Fiammetta and Petrarch's

Laura; a critical study of Dante's representation of Piccarda; historical essays on the Maggio Fiorentino and the Portinari's family. Furthermore, the instances of creative appropriation in literature and the arts demonstrated women as readers able to dissect Dante's poetic works and be inspired by it to craft their original rewritings.

Women's ability as competent interpreters and authoritative mediators emerges from the breadth of their non-creative interventions in thematic and textual criticism, philology, and history; the degree of self-confidence with which they advanced their line of argument against current scholarly trends; the deep-seated knowledge of both primary and secondary sources developed not just through self-guided reading, but curricular study and even applied pedagogical practice. The inclusion in Ferrari's volume granted a secure, well-regarded publishing outlet that ensured authors public recognition as legitimate agents of collective civic ritual, and to their works as part of the cultural and scholarly legacy of the *Festa Beatriciana*.

My bibliographical research, which will soon populate the *Modern Beatrices Archive* – an open-source digital archive documenting the Dantean production of Italian, British and Irish women across the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries –, is still ongoing. The evidence gathered thus far, however, shows that although the *Esposizione Beatrice* gave unprecedented exposure to Dante's female public, the emergence of women dantiste occurred during the preceding generations continuing their growth, diversification, and professionalization throughout the entire century. For Carlotta Ferrari, Emma Boghen, Alida Bonacci-Brunamonti and Luisa Anzoletti, among others, the essays represented a fraction of their broader contribution to the studies and reception of Dante, which included school manuals and handbooks, critical editions (of major and minor works) and periodical essays, public lectures, commemorative speeches, and poems. Hinged on the (re-)discovery and rehabilitation of Dante as Italy's national poet and a central figure of the European literary canon during the Risorgimento era, the formation of Dante's female public was tightly connected to post-unification socio-cultural, political, and technological transformations. These not only increased women's access to the reading and the study of the poet's work, but sparked the production of vast and varied body of literary, critical, scholarly, and pedagogical publications.

More than uncritical celebrators of Beatrice as the epitome of moral rectitude, ideal femininity and "divina ispiratrice," these

women actualized the intellectual growth that Elena Lombardi traced for Beatrice herself from the *Vita nuova* to *Commedia*. Like the character in Dante's poem, they imposed themselves as authoritative "commentator and glossator" of the poet's works; each of them stands out as "vehement, well-formed, and eloquent like an orator"; mimicking her own relationship with Dante-pilgrim, they accept the responsibility of "guiding, directing and administering"⁴⁶ the reading of the poet's oeuvre for emerging, mixed-gender readerships.

⁴⁶ Elena Lombardi, *Imagining the Woman Reader in the Age of Dante* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 140, 128.