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Ippolito Nievo's Pisana and Goliarda Sapienza's Modesta: Female Heroism as a Challenge to Gendered Configurations of the Nation

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Sommario

L'articolo sviluppa un confronto fra il personaggio della Pisana nelle *Confessioni d'un italiano* (1867) di Ippolito Nievo e Modesta, la protagonista dell'*Arte della gioia* (1998) di Goliarda Sapienza. Nella caratterizzazione di queste due figure d'eccezione l'eroismo femminile si presenta come una ribellione radicale al ruolo delle donne rispetto a come era articolato nei discorsi nazionalisti del tempo. Pisana e Modesta emergono come due eroine ribelli, estranee tanto alla dicotomia tradizionale della donna angelo/seduttrice quanto all'identità di vittime, mettendo in discussione la moralità e i ruoli sociali prestabiliti e problematizzando i valori che informano l'appartenenza delle donne alla nazione. L'articolo mette anche in luce una differenza significativa fra i due romanzi: laddove Nievo (e tanta critica insieme a lui) condanna il comportamento 'egoista' di Pisana e in ultima istanza la coinvolge nell'ideale dell'identità nazionale, Sapienza non contesta mai la ribellione di Modesta, la quale al contrario di Pisana è finalmente il soggetto narrante della propria storia.

Parole chiave: Ippolito Nievo; Goliarda Sapienza; Pisana; Modesta; eroismo femminile; nazione

Abstract

This article draws a parallel between Ippolito Nievo's Pisana in *Le confessioni d'un italiano* (1867) and Modesta, the protagonist of Goliarda Sapienza's *L'arte della gioia* (1998). It argues that, in the characterisation of these two exceptional figures, female heroism emerges as a radical rebellion against the role imposed on women by nationalist discourses of their time. Both Modesta and Pisana stand as rebellious heroines, fundamentally different from the traditional angelic/seductress dyad as well as from the position of victims. They unsettle sanctioned patterns of morality and social roles, calling into question the values that inform women's sense of national belonging. This article also points out a significant difference

between the two novels; while Nievo, like most critics, condemns Pisana's 'selfish' behaviour and ultimately involves her in the ideal of national identity, Sapienza never questions the rebelliousness of Modesta, who, unlike Pisana, is finally entrusted with the narration of her own story.

Keywords: Ippolito Nievo; Goliarda Sapienza; Pisana; Modesta; Female Heroism; Nation

Introduction

'Dalla vita che le si lasciò menare essendo bimba e zitella, sorsero delle eroine; non mai delle donne avvedute e temperanti, non delle buone madri, non delle spose caste, né delle amiche fide e pazienti'.¹ Thus writes Ippolito Nievo about Pisana in his historical novel *Le confessioni d'un italiano* (1867), highlighting the character's divergence from traditional, 'patriotic' models of women. This article draws a parallel between Nievo's Pisana and Modesta, the protagonist of Goliarda Sapienza's *L'arte della gioia* (1998), also a historical novel, set in the twentieth century, featuring a nonconformist female protagonist.² It investigates the gendered dimension of nationalist rhetoric and the eccentric position of the novels' heroines, Pisana and Modesta. It argues that, in the characterisation of these two highly original figures, female heroism emerges as an embodied statement of radical rebellion against the role imposed on women by the nationalist discourses of their time.

Ippolito Nievo (1831-1861) was a journalist, writer, and Mazzinian political activist who died at the age of thirty after taking part in Giuseppe Garibaldi's Expedition of the Thousand. *Le confessioni*, written before Italian Unification and published posthumously in 1867, is considered one of the masterpieces of the Italian national canon and the most important literary work on the events that led to the Risorgimento, while being virtually unknown outside of Italy.³ Set between the last decades of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, it is narrated in the first person by its eighty-year-old fictional protagonist, Carlo (Carlino) Altoviti. Nievo's sprawling historical novel recounts the series of revolutions and struggles for independence that lay the groundwork for Italian Unification, and the tormented and 'bizarre' love between Carlo and Pisana, starting from their childhood and lasting until Pisana's death. Pisana is the object of the protagonist's passionate desire, through the lens of which he portrays her as volatile yet capable of intense love, capricious yet generous, frivolous yet intelligent, 'umile e superba, buona e crudele, sventata bizzarra e bellissima'.⁴ In spite of the narrator's abundant use of stereotypes and moralistic judgement, Pisana stands out as a

richly developed and nonconformist female literary figure, which earned *Le confessioni* an attempt at censorship for immorality.⁵

Goliarda Sapienza's *L'arte della gioia* arguably needs a more detailed introduction, its popular success in terms of readership and criticism being very recent. Sapienza was born in Catania, Sicily, in 1924, to a socialist, antifascist, and atheist family.⁶ After working in theatre and cinema in Rome, she experienced serious depression, which resulted in two failed suicide attempts and a disruptive electroshock therapy. She recovered thanks to writing and managed to publish a few novels and short stories, although great success eluded her. *L'arte della gioia* is her most important novel, which was written between the late 1960s and the late 1970s but was rejected by all publishers for contradictory reasons – too experimental according to some, too traditional according to others – and only came out in a small edition by Stampa Alternativa after Sapienza's death.⁷ Since the 2008 Einaudi edition and the numerous translations, Sapienza's success has been rapidly growing, inside and outside of Italy, leading to the re-edition of previous works and the posthumous publication of new ones, including diaries, plays, and poems.⁸ *L'arte della gioia*, like *Le confessioni*, is a long fictional autobiography as well as a historical novel. It tells the story of Modesta, a poor and tough girl born in Sicily in 1900, who is orphaned after being raped by her (alleged) father and the death of her mother and sister in a fire. Through a sequence of episodes that subvert the *topoi* of nineteenth-century popular fiction, including various homicides committed by the protagonist and a marriage with a man who is mentally impaired, Modesta becomes princess of an aristocratic family and then an independent woman, anarchist and antifascist, lover of men and women, mother and then grandmother of a mixed community of children and step-children.⁹ Modesta clearly emerges as a radically nonconformist character, who breaks with the traditional female figure of the victim as well as with that of the muse and the angelic woman. Within such a marked originality, some features of Modesta can be traced back to other female literary figures, among which Nievo's Pisana is undoubtedly the most significant. Angelo Pellegrino suggests this literary lineage, writing that 'un certo nucleo di Modesta proviene da un bellissimo personaggio femminile italiano, questa volta dell'Ottocento: la Pisana di Nievo'.¹⁰

Despite the obvious differences between *Le confessioni* and *L'arte della gioia*, texts which are separated by time, style, ideological approach, and historical setting, the two novels share significant, albeit inconspicuous, formal and thematic features.¹¹ The novels are constructed as fictional autobiographies, with an intradiegetic narrator who takes part in the events narrated and who involves the readers in the narrative discourse by addressing them directly. The use of the first person and the repeated direct appeals to the readers interspersing

the narrative are linked to a prominent ethical and pedagogical intentionality in both works. *Le confessioni* and *L'arte della gioia* display deep trust in the educational potential of literature, and their protagonists are engaged in a constant search for experiential wisdom. As Carla Gaiba observes, '[d]avvero non si può negare che con il suo romanzo Nievo volesse aderire a un'idea di letteratura propositiva, attivamente impegnata in un momento delicato della nazione in fieri. [...] Nievo conserva intatta la fiducia illuministica nelle possibilità educative della letteratura'.¹² While the kind of values that Modesta proposes may be very different from Nievo's, her story is equally centred on a quest for an ethical system, which she offers to the readers as an instructive tale.

From the title, *L'arte della gioia* presents itself as a pedagogical narrative, with Modesta as a model of female emancipation, an exemplary embodiment of anarchist and Epicurean ethics.¹³ The relationships between the individual and society, and between personal and collective values, are at the centre of the narrators' ethical and political reflections. In both novels, the protagonists develop revolutionary aspirations, challenge the status quo, and are sustained by a fundamental laicism. In their search for a code of ethics, Nievo's and Sapienza's novels are projected towards the future, questioning values and institutions of their times and looking for new social, political, and ethical configurations. Philippe Pogam remarks that *L'arte della gioia* 'evoca valori futuri';¹⁴ similarly, Stefania Segatori points out how *Le confessioni* relies on 'una "prospettiva idealistica" che andava applicata alla realtà e che doveva essere imposta come concreta. [...] Il romanzo del Risorgimento, scritto prima che esso sia avvenuto, è un'opera pedagogica e progettuale'.¹⁵

Despite their pedagogical intention, *Le confessioni* and *L'arte della gioia* are both 'imperfect' or 'excessive' novels, full of contradictions and unresolved tensions. They share a hybrid narrative structure, with the insertion of diaries and letters – Beatrice's diary in *L'arte della gioia*; Giulio's journal and several letters in *Le confessioni*. Diaristic and epistolary inserts add to the main narrative perspective, while secondary characters and episodes multiply on the page, creating a fractured and non-cohesive storyline. The literary genre to which these novels belong is similarly multifarious. Informed by a 'principio della molteplicità' and a 'struttura proteiforme', '*Le Confessioni* sono un romanzo storico ma anche di costume, narrazione ma anche indagine psicologica, avventura ma anche storia d'amore'.¹⁶ The same is true of *L'arte della gioia*, which combines historical, psychological, autobiographical, theatrical, and lyrical elements. The imbalances existing on the level of narrative structures and literary genres are paralleled by the contradictions that characterise both narrators. While Carlino and Modesta aspire to represent a model for the readers and to provide them with an understanding of their

socio-historical context, they are not stable and uniform characters. They are constantly at the mercy of their drives, ask questions that remain unanswered, experience the ambiguity and opaqueness of their own choices. They live and narrate in a fluid state, remain open to change and contradictions, and are resistant to the fixity and transparency that would be required of a pedagogical role model. In *Le confessioni*, the narrator's most significant ambiguity concerns his relationship with Pisana, which reflects Nievo's unresolved view of the role of women and the family within the republican revolutionary project.

Le confessioni and *L'arte della gioia* also share similar tensions in their articulation of a spatial and political dimension. In both novels the national dimension coexists and interacts on the one hand with a local, community level, and with a transnational level on the other. In *Le confessioni*, the community level is first represented by the Castle of Fratta, where Carlino and Pisana grow up, and then by the Venetian Republic. In the second part of the novel, the geographical notion of a local community is replaced by the mobile collective of the revolutionary army. In *L'arte della gioia* the community is represented by Villa Suvarita, the large house where Modesta raises her atypical family. The community living in Villa Suvarita is a group characterised by direct opposition to the values and political power of the nation, which corresponds first to the Fascist regime and then to the conformist and conservative rule of the Democrazia Cristiana. The transnational dimension also plays an important role in both novels. In *Le confessioni* the revolutionary struggle passes borders that are still under formation, moving across France, Italy, and Greece, and then crosses the Atlantic to involve a (controversial, to say the least) military expedition in South America.¹⁷ In Sapienza's novel, the transnational level concerns primarily a cultural and political discursive sphere, consisting in the circulation of the texts and ideas of the Enlightenment, first, and then socialist, anarchic, and feminist thoughts. In both *Le confessioni* and *L'arte della gioia*, the nation appears to constitute the most problematic dimension, in two rather different ways. In Nievo, the main references to Italy as a nation focus on its literary tradition, in particular on Dante, and on the Italian 'genus' or character, which is evoked as an abstract notion. However, the revolutionary struggles and the formation of republican institutions are more closely associated with ideals of freedom and progress than with a pre-existing national identity, to the point that the French invasion of northern Italy can be applauded as a 'liberation'. In fact, the national context exists mostly in the dialogue with the readers, as a project still to come to fruition. In *L'arte della gioia* too we find references to the Italian literary tradition (especially Dante and Petrarch), but the national dimension is identified more clearly with the power of the State and is seen in a negative light. *Le confessioni* gives voice to Nievo's hope for Italy to become a nation, moving

from the communitarian local level and the interaction with struggles in other places, such as Greece and France, to the constitution of the 'patria', Italy. In this floating and rapidly changing context, '*Patria* may at times refer to a homeland in Italy, or Venice, or even the castello di Fratta in the Friulian countryside.'¹⁸ In Sapienza, on the contrary, the national dimension comes to coincide with the authoritarian, hierarchical, and patriarchal organisation of the post-Unification State, while the level of the community and that of a transnational circulation of ideals and culture – feminism and anarchism in the first place – appear to inflect Sapienza's horizon of political aspirations.

The Gendered Rhetoric of the Nation

Within the articulation of a national discourse in *Le confessioni* and *L'arte della gioia*, gendered rhetoric and women's position play a pivotal role. As Michèle McHugh Griffin explains, the rhetoric surrounding the nation is emphatically gendered, and women occupy an ambivalent space in it:

Whereas the struggle for national liberation tends to emancipate women [...] the myths surrounding that struggle paradoxically reinforce women's subordination and gender stereotypes. [...] The romantic images of young men fighting for their mothers, their sweethearts and their motherland imbue the narrative. Imagining the body politic as feminine provides a theme central to both war and to nationalism. Indeed, a fundamental feature of national imagery is its gendered quality. [...] The nation-as-woman – images of the motherland and of women as the bearers of national values – abounds in history.¹⁹

Le confessioni provides an extensive sample of such gendered rhetoric. For example, Venice is compared by Carlino to a woman who is abused by Napoleon.

Bonaparte usò con Venezia come coll'amica che intende l'amore per servitù e bacia la mano di chi la percuote. La trascurò in principio, la oltraggiò poi, godette in seguito d'ingannarla di sbeffeggiarla, da ultimo se la pose sotto i piedi, la calpestò come una baldracca, e le disse schernendola: Vatti, cerca un altro padrone!²⁰

The gendered rhetoric of nationalist struggles reinforces the confinement of women to the position of objects or symbolic functions, while agency remains firmly a prerogative of men. However, women are also called to participate actively in the revolutionary process, leading to tensions and contradictions. In *Le confessioni*, we have a contrast between female heroism, which goes together with female eroticism, and the social role of women within the nation, which consists primarily of self-sacrifice, care, biological reproduction, and being the muse of men's actions. Within the patriotic discourse, women are exalted in their performance of a number of duties that are functional and subordinate to the welfare and well-being of the collectivity. They are mothers who raise soldiers, like Aquilina, who enthusiastically supports her sons' involvement in the war and is praised by Carlino for it: 'Tu sei la vera donna che ci abbisogna per rigenerarci! Quelle che non ti somigliano sono nate per strisciare nel fango.'²¹ Women inspire men's actions (or fail to do so, becoming responsible for inglorious times), 'perché gli uomini non fanno nulla senza ispirarsi da loro [...]. E questo valga a lode e a conforto delle donne, ed anche a loro smacco in tutti quei secoli nei quali succede nulla di buono. La colpa originale è di esse soltanto'.²² They are the object of men's love and desire, and the sensual and loving image of submissive Italian women is set against a satirical representation of the emancipated women who live in northern countries.

Le donne poi, oh le donne si somigliano tutte dall'Alpi al Lilibeo! Sono tagliate sul vero stampo della donna donna, non della donna automa, della donna aritmetica, e della donna uomo che si usano in Francia, in Inghilterra, in Germania. Checché ne dicano i signori stranieri, dove vengono i loro poeti a cercare, ad accattare un sorsellino d'amore?... Qui da noi: proprio da noi, perché solamente in Italia vivono donne che sanno ispirarlo e mantenerlo.²³

In general, the role of women is fundamentally functional to men: 'Le donne sono amanti, sono spose, madri, sorelle; ma anzi tutto sono infermiere'; 'se le donne non fossero al mondo per generarci, Dio le avrebbe dovute regalare agli uomini per infermiere'.²⁴

Alongside this trite repertoire of stereotypes and clichés, *Le confessioni* also makes space for women's active participation in the armed struggle, a role for which Nievo resorts to figures from Greek and Roman history and mythology. A telling example is Aglaura's letter from Greece, in which she gives voice to a radically different view of gender relations that is enabled by the armed struggle: 'fu soltanto al toccare il suolo della Laconia che mi sentii ruggir nel cuore lo spirito delle antiche Spartane. Qui le donne sono le compagne degli uomini, non le

ministre dei loro piaceri. [...] Così, o Carlo, le nazioni risorgono'.²⁵ The narrator of *Le confessioni* is ambivalent towards the figure of the heroine, for example when he affirms that his son's wife '[n]on sarebbe stata una donna greca, ma una buona moglie',²⁶ thus explicitly differentiating her from Aglaura. Carlino is fascinated by female heroism, but through a sequence of misogynistic *topoi* he keeps marking the distance between women and the socio-political sphere, giving rise to contradictory representations that highlight Nievo's ideological uncertainty on gender roles within the new republican project. The character of Aglaura is paradigmatic in this respect: she shows great courage by fleeing to Greece dressed as a man, and she writes intelligent and passionate letters about the Greek struggle for independence; however, when they arrive in Milan during a demonstration, Carlino suddenly shifts from admiration to patronising satire, mocking Aglaura's desire to become involved in political action as a ridiculous masculine performance and describing her as fanatical and silly:

Ella sembrava occuparsi più che di altro della festa, e le sue grida e il suo picchiare di mani colpirono tanto i più vicini che le fu fatto cerchio dattorno.

– Aglaura, Aglaura! – le bisbigliava io. – Ricordati che sei donna!

– Sia donna o uomo che importa? – rispose ella con altissima voce – Gli adoratori della libertà non hanno differenza di sesso. Sono tutti eroi.

– Bravo! brava! Ben detto! È un uomo! È una donna! Viva la Repubblica! Viva Bonaparte!... Viva la donna forte! –

Dovetti trascinarla via, perché non me la portassero in trionfo; ella si sarebbe accomodata, credo, molto volentieri di questa cerimonia, e le vedeva errare negli occhi un certo fuoco che ricordava il furore d'una Pizia. A gran fatica potei condurla in un altro canto, dove si raccoglieva una gran turba femminile, la più molesta e ciarliera che avesse mai empito un mercato. Era una vera repubblica, anzi un'anarchia di cervelli leggieri e svampati; per me non conosco essere che dica tante bestialità quanto una donna politica.²⁷

The contrast between 'heroine' and 'good wife' is made explicit in the description of Pisana, who arguably belongs to the first category. Heroines of her kind, Nievo writes, are not wise and mild-mannered, they are not good mothers nor chaste wives, but rather extravagant, unpredictable, and unreliable characters. The roles traditionally assigned to women are those of mothers, wives, muses, and nurses, but the narrator is constantly drawn towards a different kind of female initiative, which he alternatively praises and scorns. In the figures of Aglaura

and Pisana, he gives space to more active and independent roles, but then he obliterates the same roles through the use of misogynistic stereotypes that do not hold within the representation of those characters. Throughout the whole novel, Pisana is the unstable object of Carlino's double gaze; on the one hand, he is in love with her independence, her strength, and her agency; on the other, he is unable to respect her for the very same reasons for which he loves her. He is in love with the heroine, yet despises her at the same time, as he would want her to be a good wife instead: 'Sì, la disprezzo come merita; la disprezzerò sempre! – gridava dentro di me. Povero fanciullo! Io cominciava infin d'allora a disprezzare e ad amare'.²⁸ Incapable of accepting Pisana's freedom, yet fervently in love with her, the narrator of *Le confessioni* ultimately forces her into a traditional pattern of self-sacrifice, turning her into a post-mortem inspirer of great enterprises, in the style of Petrarch's Laura and Dante's Beatrice. While Carlino insists that her self-sacrifice elevates and absolves her, until the very end Pisana claims that all her actions were guided by the pursuit of pleasure, subtracting herself from the normalising and moralising operation that he is superimposing on her death. 'Ma non capisci che tutti quelli che tu chiami dolori patimenti sacrifici, erano per me piaceri ineffabili, colmi d'una voluttà tanto più dolce quanto più nobile e sublime? [...], volli il piacer mio prima di tutto, ad ogni costo!'.²⁹ Ignoring her protestation, after her death Carlino subsumes her into his patriotic rhetoric, depicting her as an ideal and abstract muse that inspires and sustains his struggle. Pisana's heroic stature can only be reconciled with Nievo's nationalist pedagogical project through her death; in Carla Gaiba's words, 'la trasformazione della donna in eroina passa dalla sua uccisione e dal blocco di lei in un'immagine convenzionale'.³⁰ Pisana, and not Carlino's modest wife Aquilina, becomes the true patriotic heroine, but such a sanctification necessitates that the woman's unsettling agency is neutralised by making her die. The contradiction between heroine and good wife is not solved in *Le confessioni*, but an important point is established – a woman cannot be both. Nievo preaches a traditional role for women but provides an extraordinary portrait of the figure of the heroine, whose subversive strength Pisana's death does not suffice to defuse.

In *L'arte della gioia*, Sapienza depicts a variety of normative and restrictive paths available to women that Modesta observes around her and that other characters attempt to impose on her, but that she firmly rejects. Among these, the first negative model is the protagonist's mother, who is silent, poor, and powerless to prevent Modesta's alleged father from raping her. A second element to the role of women that Modesta quickly learns as a child is that intelligence and self-confidence in expressing opinions do not suit women, as her friend Tuzzu remarks in an attempt to silence her: '– Ma che vuoi capire! Locca sei e pure se non

fussi locca, le femmine, come dice mio padre, da quando mondo è mondo non capiscono niente. – E invece capisco’.³¹ When Modesta is lodged in a convent as a child and then a teenager, the nuns – described as hypocritical, frustrated, and repressive – explain to her the only professions and social roles to which a woman should aspire, none of which required culture and intelligence:

– Diventerò anch’io una dotta! – Pazzarella che sei! E a che ti servirebbe se sei donna? La donna non può arrivare mai alla sapienza dell’uomo [...] Sarta, ricamatrice, cuoca, sceglierai tu fra queste attività umili che sono le uniche che si confanno a una donna. Studiare è un lusso che corrompe.³²

As the story progresses, the role of women is configured as servitude, in the form of care, work and sexual availability. The hierarchical and patriarchal social order, founded on the family and organised in the national state, rests on this fundamental division of male and female roles, which is above all a division of labour and authority. Nation and family are tightly linked to each other: ‘quella fortezza di prima linea che, fascismo o no, è sempre la famiglia, palestra di futuri soldati, madri-soldato, nonne-regine’.³³ Modesta firmly contests such a hierarchy, acquiring knowledge and gaining a position of power by becoming involved in politics, first as a member of the Socialist Party, then as an anti-fascist comrade, and finally, briefly, as an activist and journalist close to the Communist Party. However, throughout her engagement with politics, Modesta repeatedly finds that even the Socialist and, later, the Communist Party, despite their promises of social renewal and equality, are pervaded by an entanglement of nationalism and patriarchal power, which firmly rest on the traditional family. The narrator mentions the nationalist turn of the socialist ‘traditori’³⁴ and their support for Italy’s participation in World War I; furthermore, in the character of Carlo Civardi, the young socialist doctor, she provides a dramatic portrait of a revolutionary militant who is dragged into deeply conservative views of gender roles. After the end of World War II, the PCI is represented as ambivalent, when not overtly hostile, towards gender equality, and subservient to the Catholic electorate. In a bitter argument with Joyce, who has become a party executive, Modesta accuses the PCI of being just another face of the same old structure of power: ‘siete una massa di traditori, Joyce. [...] era sempre quel potere a tutto tondo nella sua divisa elegante di altero guerriero’.³⁵ To the ideology, values, and political structures of left-wing national parties, Modesta prefers instead the transnational inspiration of anarchism and feminism. While in the gendered rhetoric of *Le confessioni* the nation is a woman to conquer, love, or subdue, and

women are called to play an ancillary role, for Sapienza the nation is the primary site of male power and patriarchal ideology, founded on the family and central to the establishment and reproduction of hierarchies – between women and men in the first place, but also between owners and workers, heterosexual and homosexual people, and so on.

Pisana and Modesta

Within gendered discourses on the nation developed in and informing *Le confessioni* and *L'arte della gioia*, Pisana and Modesta stand out as exceptional female characters who do not conform to the role that is expected of them in their social contexts. What image do they provide of female heroism? How does the figure of the heroine that these characters embody trouble and unsettle national ideologies and rhetoric? Let us begin to answer these questions by looking at some characteristics shared by Pisana and Modesta and the way in which they depart from patriarchal expectations and traditional patriotic roles. Gaiba notes that, differently from what happens with male heroes, 'il tradizionale *roman d'apprentissage* femminile non consiste in una ricerca, in una presa di coscienza di sé, bensì in un progressivo adeguamento ad un modello culturale esterno'.³⁶ Contrary to this established pattern, Pisana and Modesta systematically undermine and subvert normative models. They are complex and self-contradictory characters with psychological depth, who evolve through time and emerge as exceptional within their social contexts. They are represented as strong-willed, independent, brave, and authoritative. If we consider the plots of *Le confessioni* and *L'arte della gioia*, it is significant that for both Pisana and Modesta their freedom of movement and action is granted thanks to unusual marriages. In the case of Pisana, she marries Il Navagero, an old and sick man who leaves her entirely free to do as she pleases and does not consummate the marriage. Modesta marries Ippolito, heir of the Brancifortis, becoming princess of the aristocratic family and acquiring riches and influence. As Ippolito is mentally disabled, he does not exercise any form of control over Modesta, who is thus free to move, run the family estate, and choose her own lovers.

An additional element that connects Modesta and Pisana is the lack of maternal love and care. From an early age, Pisana is neglected by her mother, who entrusts her to the care of maids and other servants in the Castle of Fratta, resulting in the little girl's unusual freedom of movement and experimentation, but also in her lack of guidance and encouragement: 'D'altronde nessuno avrebbe osato castigare la Contessina all'infuori di sua madre; e costei per solito non se ne dava pensiero più che d'una figliuola altrui'.³⁷ Similarly, Modesta feels that her mother does not care about her as much as about her sister Tina, and is orphaned when still

a child; although Madre Leonora takes care of her in the convent, she soon learns that she can rely only on herself, which contributes to her growth as a strong-willed and self-determined character. The absence of the maternal figure appears to trigger for both characters their existential search and strengthening process.

In terms of the construction of the characters, the most prominent feature that Modesta inherits from Pisana is their uncompromising pursuit of pleasure, with its correlated desire for freedom, growth, and change. As a child, Pisana enjoys playing the role of lover with Carlino as well as with many children from the county, and as a teenager she shows all the violent symptoms of erotic desire in front of Lucilio: ‘Vidi la Pisana fissa sempre cogli occhi a guardare Lucilio, come volesse mangiarlo. [...] Non parlava, non fiatava, non vedeva altro; non si moveva e non sorrideva che per lui. Tutti i segni dell’amore più intenso e violento erano espressi dal suo contegno’.³⁸ When she grows up, she loves different men with passion, and always expresses her desire with erotic ardour: ‘una tal fiamma di desiderii, di voluttà e d’amore traluceva da tutta lei, che le si respirava dintorno quasi un’aria infuocata’.³⁹ A powerful and early developed sexual desire also characterises Modesta, who discovers pleasure when still a child:

Buttata in terra, avvertii [...] come una dolcezza in tutto il corpo. Dolcezza che in seguito si tramutò in brividi di piacere [...]. E fu così che seguendo le mie mani spinte dagli urli scoprii, toccandomi là dove esce la pipì, che si provava un godimento più grande che a mangiare il pane fresco, la frutta.⁴⁰

Sexual desire and the pleasure principle constitute the fundamental drives that sustain Modesta throughout her whole life, giving her the resilience to keep changing and fighting against all forms of oppression. While a powerful sexuality and vitality are features of both characters, Pisana is subject to Carlino’s moralising and self-centred gaze, which too often criticism has repeated unquestioningly.⁴¹ Carlino constantly judges Pisana’s behaviour, interpreting it through the stereotype of female volubility (‘Le bastava di cambiare’; ‘Volubile come una farfalla’),⁴² and condemning her sexual drives as immoral (while of course benefitting from them).

Not only are Pisana and Modesta both sensual and powerful women who assert their right to pleasure; they also experience love with both men and women, something that in *L’arte della gioia* is represented overtly, while in *Le confessioni* is only hinted at implicitly. Modesta has male and female lovers, and claims the right to sexual fluidity and freedom, rejecting labels

and any pathologising frame of bisexuality: ‘Ma l’amore non è assoluto e nemmeno eterno, e non c’è solo amore fra uomo e donna, possibilmente consacrato. Si poteva amare un uomo, una donna, un albero e forse anche un asino, come dice Shakespeare’.⁴³ Although any statement of this kind is unthinkable for Nievo’s times, he alludes to a lesbian relationship involving Pisana – an episode of *Le confessioni* that criticism has so far entirely neglected. Pisana, Carlino writes, develops an extremely intimate relationship with Aquilina, which worries him and which he struggles to describe and interpret.

[S]e la prendeva fra le braccia, e la copriva di carezze e di baci. Erano più che due sorelle. La Pisana la amava tanto, che io ne ingelosiva; se l’Aquilina la chiamava, certo ch’ella si stoglieva da me e correva da lei, capace anco di farmi il muso s’io osava trattenerla. Che cosa fosse questa nuova stranezza io non lo capiva allora; ma forse ci vidi entro in seguito, per quanto si può veder chiaro in un temperamento così misterioso e confuso come quello della Pisana. [...] Trovai a Cordovado cresciuta più che mai l’amicizia, l’intrinsichezza, e direi più se vi fosse una parola più espressiva, fra la Pisana e l’Aquilina. Omai l’amore della prima non giungeva a me che pel canale di questa. [...] L’Aquilina mi stava dinanzi, e l’anima della Pisana non vedeva che lei. Fino in certi momenti, nei quali per solito il pensiero non ispazia molto lontano, io sorprendevo la mente della Pisana occupata dell’Aquilina. Se fossimo stati ai tempi di Saffo avrei creduto a qualche mostruoso stregamento. Che so io?⁴⁴

Carlino is confused by Pisana’s intense feelings for Aquilina and by the closeness between the two women, and he refers to Sappho in the attempt to understand and frame it. The triangular relationship between Pisana, Aquilina, and Carlino undergoes an unexpected twist when Pisana convinces Carlino to marry Aquilina. He does not fully comprehend what happens to the three of them, describing his marriage as the most confused episode in his life. However, on her deathbed Pisana explains her decision: ‘Perdonami di averti amato alla mia maniera, di aver sacrificato te ad un mio ghiribizzo strano e inconcepibile, di non aver cercato nella tua vita altro che un’occasione di appagare le mie strane fantasie!’.⁴⁵ Those ‘ghiribizzo strano’ and ‘strane fantasie’ are not described explicitly, but what is stated clearly is that Pisana used Carlino as a proxy to satisfy her own desires for Aquilina, at a time and in a context when their legitimacy was not conceivable.

Similarly to Modesta, Pisana is propelled by powerful and fluid sexual drives, and like Modesta she uses any possible means available to her to pursue her own happiness. Her space

for action, however, is considerably more limited, and in a number of episodes this emerges clearly in all its oppressive effect on her, to the point that her exercise of strong will and her restlessness can also be interpreted as a response to the impediments to self-expression encountered throughout her life. A first and telling example is her bid to rescue her sister Clara, who had been locked out of the besieged Castle of Fratta, when Pisana is only a child. She bravely offers to venture outside the Castle, but nobody pays attention to her, since ‘non sono affari da signorine questi’;⁴⁶ instead, her courageous initiative is taken up by Carlino, also a child, who is thus given the opportunity of a heroic enterprise, while she is sent to bed among bites and cries. Another episode that shows Pisana’s frustrated potential is what the narrator interprets as her love for Lucilio. While Carlino narrates young Pisana’s erotic desire for Lucilio, several years later she gives a different account of that time, which combines love with a desire for self-expression:

Ci fu anche un tempo ch’egli mi piaceva; e massimamente a Portogruaro, in casa della zia restava incantata a udirlo parlare. Caspita! come stavano mogi e attenti ad ascoltarlo tutti quegli altri signori! Io avrei dato non so che cosa per essere in lui a fare quella gran figura. — Gli volevi proprio bene; — osservai io con un segreto tremore.⁴⁷

Carlino, blinded by jealousy and scorn, can only register Pisana’s attraction for Lucilio, while her own words voice a rather different desire – that of being in Lucilio’s place, to occupy his position and speak authoritatively in front of an audience, which she is never given the opportunity to do. She does achieve a form of authority, but only by resorting to her seductive power: ‘Bisognava ubbidirle ad ogni costo, ed amarla come imponeva lei’.⁴⁸ Modesta, on the contrary, is able to access a traditionally masculine speaking position, succeeding in being perceived as ‘una donna forte e volitiva’ and becoming an intellectual point of reference for other characters, male and female.⁴⁹

If Modesta and Pisana appear to be closely related female characters, who stand out as remarkable exceptions within the landscape of Italian literature, their destinies diverge significantly. On the level of the plot, a notable element is that of motherhood: Pisana does not have children, while Modesta does – both a child to whom she gives birth, Eriprando, and other children of whom she takes care – Jacopo, Bambù, Mela, and ’Ntoni. Pisana’s status as an independent, strong, and sensual woman does not leave space for childbearing. In fact, it is Carlino who refuses to have children with her, disregarding her desire for it, but then is able to start a family with Aquilina, who, unlike Pisana, fits the traditional role of wife and mother.

Modesta, on the contrary, can reconcile sexual freedom and maternity, the woman and the mother. Second, and no less importantly, Pisana dies, while Modesta lives. *L'arte della gioia* ends with Modesta's lover Marco encouraging her to continue to narrate her story as she keeps on living it, in a sort of replication of Scheherazade's tale. On the other hand, Pisana is too troublesome with respect to Nievo's patriotic discourse, both in the sense that Carlino needs to focus on the nationalist struggle while Pisana is a distraction, and because her character resists the identity and the role that is traditionally assigned to women within the nationalist rhetoric. In order to access the status of an unproblematic heroine, Pisana must stop unsettling the patriotic ideological frame, founded as it is on the patriarchal family, with her changing and manifold desires. Such a perspective is also endorsed by several critics, for example by Alfred F. Alberico, according to whom Pisana's final self-sacrifice 'purifies her and transforms her at the moment of her death into the Pisana whom the readers of the *Confessioni* cannot help but admire'.⁵⁰ After her death, she can become a neutralised metaphor of the nation, the unproblematic object of Carlino's love, and the guide of his virtuous actions. Conversely, being free from the role of muse and from any metaphorical superimposition, Modesta can escape the destiny of sacrificial victim and joyfully continue to live, change, desire, and narrate.

Pisana's death and Modesta's life are linked to a fundamental difference between *Le confessioni* and *L'arte della gioia* regarding the status of their respective heroines. Pisana is the object of Carlino's discourse, a function of his story: 'perché la sua indole fu così straordinaria che merita una storia apposta'.⁵¹ Throughout *Le confessioni*, the control of representation rests with Carlino, who interprets Pisana's behaviour through his own lens – and it is a lens deformed by desire and spite, love and hatred, admiration and restrictive stereotypes. In this way, he frames her character through a sequence of sexist and misogynistic *topoi* – women's volubility, superficiality, silliness, perverse sexuality, and so on. *L'arte della gioia* does the opposite. From the opening sentence of the novel, Modesta is the subject narrating her own story: 'Ed eccovi me [...] Voglio raccontarvi quello che è stato senza alterare niente'.⁵² This allows her to put forward her own perspective, appropriating her own story and talking back to normative stereotypes. She can clarify the reasons behind her choices and give voice to her own desires. If other characters tell her that she is mad, which happens repeatedly, she can respond and argue that her alleged 'madness' is nothing but her willingness to enjoy life and keep changing. In *Le confessioni*, we can read between the lines a similar form of desire in Pisana, but her point of view is not accessible and her behaviour remains trapped in Carlino's jealous and rancorous judgements.

Conclusions: Conservative and Subversive Notions of Female Heroism

In their pursuit of pleasure and of a self-affirming attitude, the characters of Pisana and Modesta are deeply destabilising with respect to the traditional role of women as defined by the rhetoric of patriotism and nationalism. From what emerges from *Le confessioni*, female heroism can be understood generically as the exercise of courage and resistance in the fulfilment of a sanctioned social role, such as that of the loyal wife and the mother of soldiers. In this patriotic formulation, a heroic dimension can be appropriated by women without challenging patriarchal norms. As Gaiba points out, '[i]n un momento storico di transizione, segnato da simili incertezze, la donna diventava allora la depositaria dei valori della casa, della famiglia, della continuità.'⁵³ The highest form of female heroism is, in this context, that of self-sacrifice. However, any form of female heroism, including self-sacrifice, entails a high degree of agency on women's part, and as such it poses a constant threat to the patriarchal social order. The tension between a 'patriotic' form of female heroism and a much more troubling one is captured by Nievo in his characterisation of 'le eroine. [...] donne che oggi sacrificerebbero la vita ad una causa per cui domani non darebbero un nastro. È presso a poco la scuola dove si temprano le momentanee e grandissime virtù, e i grandi e duraturi vizii delle ballerine, delle cantanti, delle attrici e delle avventuriere'.⁵⁴ Heroines such as Pisana are defined by great but fleeting virtues, which are not sustained by any moral and ideological awareness. The *topos* of women's volatility is applied by Nievo to this alternative view of female heroism, which comes to coincide with the temporary dimension of excessive and passionate drives, a form of immoderate action without thought. In contrast with male heroism, which is configured as a conscious choice to strive to transform socio-political conditions, female heroism is framed by Nievo as an extemporaneous act of wilful rebellion that does not stem from a reflection on social reality and does not pursue any constructive direction. In this way, the figure of the heroine clashes with her civic function, which should conversely be oriented towards the stable and stabilising roles of mother and wife. Nievo's judgement on 'le eroine' is at the same time paternalistic and concerned, as it displays an unresolved tension on the role of women within the patriotic project. Gaiba highlights how '[p]roprio l'universo femminile è uno dei luoghi in cui con maggior profondità si svelano le contraddizioni che accompagnano tutti i propositi normativi e pedagogici dell'Altoviti'.⁵⁵ Female heroism becomes female active participation and self-determination, which poses a threat to the patriarchal order. In fact, when the emphasis falls on women's agency, heroism entails the rejection of a destiny of submission and the acquisition of freedom and subjectivity. For both Pisana and Modesta, as we have seen, the

movement towards agency occurs in the first place in the sphere of sexuality, which sustains their desire for self-affirmation. Such a rejection of a normative model opens up the possibility of a new identity and role for women, which unsettles the bond of 'patria' and patriarchal order. While Pisana is ultimately imprisoned by Nievo in the conservative heroism of self-sacrifice, Modesta embodies a fully subversive heroism, that of women's self-actualisation.

While in *Le confessioni* the notion of 'patria' is articulated through a gendered rhetoric that portrays men as active subjects and women as objects, for example of love, or of conquest, Sapienza unsettles this rhetoric, creating a female heroine that defies the patriarchal dichotomy of male subject and female object and claims agency for herself. It is the appropriation of her own story that distinguishes Modesta from Pisana, and that enables the critique of nationalist rhetoric. The complicity between nationalist and patriarchal discourses is unmasked as Modesta removes herself from that ideology, accessing a speaking position, entering the public sphere and forging a new destiny for herself.

¹ Ippolito Nievo, *Le confessioni d'un italiano* (Milan: Mondadori, 1981), p. 105.

² Goliarda Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia* (Turin: Einaudi, 2008).

³ The first full English translation of the novel was published only recently, *Confessions of an Italian*, trans. by Frederika Randall (London: Penguin, 2014). Before, only an abridged English edition was available, *The Castle of Fratta*, trans. by Lovett F. Edwards (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 1957).

⁴ Nievo, p. 218.

⁵ 'La Società Italiana contro le cattive letture [...] schedava le *Confessioni* fra i libri "sconsigliati alle famiglie e alle biblioteche popolari"'. See Marcella Gorra, 'Introduzione', in Nievo, pp. vii-li (p. x). Maurizio Vito notes that Pisana's innovative persona was the chief culprit for eliciting that negative response. See Maurizio Vito, 'Ippolito Nievo's Pisana: How Bildungsroman and Historical Novel Created a Monster', *The Italianist*, 35.1 (2015), 61-77, p. 62, n. 4.

⁶ For a full account of Sapienza's life, see Giovanna Providenti, *La porta è aperta: Vita di Goliarda Sapienza* (Catania: Villaggio Maori Edizioni, 2010).

⁷ See Goliarda Sapienza, *Cronistoria di alcuni rifiuti editoriali dell'Arte della gioia*, ed. by Angelo Pellegrino (Rome: Edizioni Croce, 2016), and Maria Belén Hernández, 'La fortuna letteraria de *L'arte della gioia* in Europa', in *Quel sogno d'essere di Goliarda Sapienza*, ed. by Giovanna Providenti (Rome: Aracne, 2012), pp. 99-113.

⁸ For a full bibliography of Sapienza's works, see Alberica Bazzoni, *Writing for Freedom: Body, Identity and Power in Goliarda Sapienza's Narrative* (Oxford, Bern: Peter Lang, 2018), pp. 295-314.

⁹ For an account of Sapienza's subversion of nineteenth-century popular fiction tropes, such as the depiction of young women as innocent victims and the representation of marriage as women's ultimate accomplishment, see Claude Imberty, 'Gender e generi letterari: il caso di Goliarda Sapienza', *Narrativa*, 30 (2008), 51-61.

¹⁰ Angelo Pellegrino, 'Un personaggio singolare, un romanzo nuovo, una donna da amare per sempre', in *Appassionata Sapienza*, ed. by Monica Farnetti (Milan: La Tartaruga, 2012), pp. 69-88 (p. 71). Gloria Scarfone also identifies Pisana as one of the female literary models of Modesta, together with M.me de Merteuil in Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' *Dangerous Liaisons* (1782), and Moll Flanders in Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722). See Gloria Scarfone, *Goliarda Sapienza: un'autrice ai margini del sistema letterario* (Pisa: Transeuropa, 2018), pp. 95-112.

¹¹ Scarfone identifies in *Le confessioni* the most significant model of *L'arte della gioia* and analyses specific environments and episodes that link together the two novels. See Scarfone, pp. 116-30. Particularly noticeable is the episode in which Carlino sees the sea for the first time as a child, which finds a punctual and beautiful correspondence in Modesta's encounter with the sea upon her arrival in Catania. In fact, as the narrator and protagonist of her own story, Modesta is not only a direct heir of Pisana, but also of Carlino, making the connection between the two novels even deeper, and Sapienza's character even more nuanced.

¹² Carla Gaiba, *Il tempo delle passioni: Saggio su Le Confessioni d'un Italiano di Ippolito Nievo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2001), pp. 9-10.

¹³ On the ethical and pedagogical aspect of *L'arte della gioia*, see Andrée Bella, 'A Backbone Held Together by Joy', in *Goliarda Sapienza in Context: Intertextual Relationships with Italian and European Culture*, ed. by Alberica Bazzoni, Emma Bond and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi (NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016), pp. 47-61; and Bazzoni, *Writing for Freedom*, pp. 151-52.

¹⁴ Philippe Pogam, trans. by Michele Zaffarano, in *Cythère-Critique*

<<http://www.cythère-critique.com/PRESSE/pressesept05.html>> [accessed 9 October 2018].

¹⁵ Stefania Segatori, "'Io nacqui Veneziano... e morirò per la grazia di Dio Italiano": Centri e periferie nella narrativa di Ippolito Nievo', *Incontri: Rivista europea di studi italiani*, 27.1 (2012), 30-37 (p. 36).

¹⁶ Gaiba, p. 4.

¹⁷ This is recounted in the 'Giornale di Giulio', written by Carlino's son, and establishes a highly problematic and ideologically untenable continuity between European revolutionary struggles and colonisation.

¹⁸ Stephanie Hom Cary, 'Patria-otic Incarnations and Italian Character: Discourses on Nationalism in Ippolito Nievo's Confessioni d'un Italiano', *Italica*, 84.2-3 (2007), 214-32 (p. 217). On heroism and nationalism in *Le confessioni*, see also Stefano Jossa, 'Un eroe zoppo vale assai meno d'un mascalzone ben piantato', in *Un paese senza eroi: l'Italia da Jacopo Ortis a Montalbano* (Rome: Laterza, 2013), pp. 104-30.

¹⁹ Michèle McHugh Griffin, 'As a Woman I Have No Country', *Peace Review*, 10.2 (2007), 255-59 (pp. 256-57). On the gendered rhetoric of the nation in Italy and Europe, see for example Alberto M. Banti, *L'onore della nazione: identità sessuali e violenza nel nazionalismo europeo dal XVIII secolo alla grande guerra* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005); and 'Patrie e appartenenze', first issue of *Genesis: Rivista della Società italiana delle storiche*, ed. by Maura Palazzi, Raffaella Sarti and Simonetta Soldani, 1 (2002). On women's participation in the Italian Risorgimento, see Christiane Veauvy and Laura Pisano, *Paroles oubliées: Les femmes et la construction de l'État-nation en France et en Italie (1789-1860)* (Paris: A. Colin, 1997); and Simonetta Soldani, 'Donne e nazione nella rivoluzione italiana del 1848', *Passato e presente*, 17 (1999), pp. 75-102. For a broader feminist reflection on the gendered rhetoric of the nation, see Suruchi Thapar-Björkert, 'Gender, Nations, and Nationalisms', in *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*, ed. by Georgina Waylen and others (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); 'Gender, Nationalisms, and National Identities', issue of *Feminist Review*, 44 (1993).

²⁰ Nievo, pp. 909-10. It is interesting to find the same stereotyped imagery in a recent documentary, *Girlfriend in a Coma* by Annalisa Piras and Bill Emmott (2012), where the leading metaphor, which also gives the film its title, is that of Italy as a battered woman.

²¹ Nievo, p. 1301.

²² Nievo, pp. 628-29.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 1058.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1176; p. 1378.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1297.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1373.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 937.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 423-24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1327.

³⁰ Gaiba, p. 189.

³¹ *Sapienza*, p. 8.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 481.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 424.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 472-73.

³⁶ Gaiba, p. 213.

³⁷ Nievo, p. 108.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 507.

⁴⁰ *Sapienza*, p. 5.

⁴¹ See for example Alfred F. Alberico, 'Nievo's Disquieting Pisana', *Italica*, 37.1 (1960), 13-21; and Luigi Ciceri, *Pisana* (Udine: Il Tesaur, 1949). Vito's article 'Ippolito Nievo's Pisana' and Gaiba's book *Il tempo delle passioni* are rare and significant exceptions to this trend.

⁴² Nievo, p. 99; p. 183.

⁴³ *Sapienza*, p. 134.

⁴⁴ Nievo, pp. 1215-6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1327.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 434.

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- ⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 99.
⁴⁹ Sapienza, p. 61.
⁵⁰ Alberico, p. 18.
⁵¹ Nievo, p. 1129.
⁵² Sapienza, p. 8.
⁵³ Gaiba, p. 196.
⁵⁴ Nievo, p. 105.
⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 231-32.