

7

Italian Women in the Making: Re-reading the *Englishwoman's Review* (c.1871–1889)

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A soldier named Mariotti, of the 11th Battalion of the Italian Bersaglieri, though confined to the room by illness, refused to be carried to the hospital. Ultimately, on being forcibly removed thither, the soldier was discovered to be a woman. She joined the army during the war of 1866, to enable her brother to remain with his wife and six children. She had previously, being very strong, worked in the mines. At Custozza (*sic*) she won a medal of bravery. The king has now conferred on her a decoration and sent her home with a pension of 300 lire.¹

In reporting this piece of news from Rome, the 'feminist' quarterly, the *Englishwoman's Review*, emphatically displayed its editorial policy of subverting contemporary female stereotypes, challenging conventional images of the domestic role played by Italian women in building the nation.² Cross-dressing during the Risorgimento was one of the most immediately available strategies for women to blur gender boundaries and enter the public space, and Mariotti was not unique.³ Mariotti, however, even to the emancipated 'feminist' readers of the *Englishwoman's Review*, was clearly a most striking example of subversion.

The report was unusual not only in terms of its content but also in its choice of language. The way Mariotti was presented to the readers contrasted with the constructions of Italian Risorgimento rhetoric, which, as Laura Guidi has highlighted, drew attention to the 'virile', stoic *character* of the few women-in-arms rather than their 'masculine' *bodies*. The language employed to describe Mariotti was alien to the register used by Italian writers and early Risorgimento historians, whose concerns were

to salvage the Italian women-patriots from suspect 'masculine' attributes by cloaking their agency with the reassuring details of their 'feminine' nature, their domestic life or their subsequent role as mothers of the nation. 'Masculine' physical references, such as Mariotti's strength as a mine worker, were scrupulously avoided, as the Risorgimento rhetoric of the 'separate spheres' eschewed topics which might question the sexual identity of the nation's patriots and martyrs.⁴ Conversely, the description of Mariotti's 'very strong' build in the *Englishwoman's Review* defied conventional associations between 'the body', 'culture' and 'Italy'. As Loredana Polezzi and Charlotte Ross have argued, the Italian 'body' was laden with cultural references: in the context of the aestheticised classical figure, the Renaissance painting, religious iconography or in the 'exoticized, and eroticized' 'catholic whore' depicted by travellers.⁵ Mariotti, the working-class female miner, defied all these stereotypes.

Mariotti's decision to step into her brother's shoes was a further subversion of conventionally accepted family links. In Alberto Banti's cultural history of the Risorgimento, within the emotional familial ties (kinship) which linked the Italian genealogical community, 'motherhood', 'brotherhood' and 'sisterhood' were displayed according to a non-negotiable patriotic 'canon'.⁶ Yet, in the case of Mariotti, love for one's country and love of one's family and brother led her to make (or at least risk) the ultimate 'sacrifice' in person. As the brother remained home – in view, as implied, of his role and responsibilities as 'father' of a large family – conventional family relations between male and female members appeared to be reversed. This hinted at emotional bonds in the domestic sphere – 'masculinity' as 'fatherhood' – that possibly went beyond the public sphere within which the male breadwinner was ascribed.

The report in the *Englishwoman's Review* was also striking for the insight it gave into the official response to the *dénouement*. The article highlighted that not only had Mariotti as a fighting soldier gained the honour of a medal during the war later referred to as the Third War of Independence, but, when ultimately found to be a woman, she had also been granted by the king a token of the new nation's gratitude and a 300 lire pension. Indeed, as the account suggests, the honour had been granted despite the fact that cross-dressing might have dovetailed with Mariotti's own ambivalent sexuality. The new Italy had brought Mariotti a new identity, and rather than fall within the accepted code of woman-patriot turned 'mother', she had chosen cross-dressing as a way of life, preserving her male identity while serving in the Bersaglieri between 1866 and 1879.