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(Article begins on next page)

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CHAPTER 14

Women and Novels: Educating the Female Public in the Age of Enlightenment

Patrizia Delpiano

Gender and Reading: Women and Fragile Readers

Analysing how the female public was educated and controlled in the Age of Enlightenment, and more specifically the connection between women and novels, entails addressing an important issue at the heart of this volume, namely the relationship between gender, the Enlightenment and Catholicism. This chapter engages the intersection of the history of reading and censorship by addressing the *roman antiphilosophique* (antiphilosophical novel), understood as one of the instruments used by conservative intellectuals—especially but not exclusively clerics—and other leading exponents of Catholic culture in their efforts to regulate women's reading. These novels comprised one of the genres that arose in response to the emergence of Enlightenment culture and the secularisation processes it brought with it. So far the history of antiphilosophical novels has been investigated in individual national contexts (Masseau

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2000; McMahon 2001; Caesar 2005; Delpiano 2018), yet it has a European scale (Delpiano 2021). A small part of this history is reconstructed here, first by investigating how aware censors and moralists were of the emergence of a specific public of female readers. The chapter then analyses a specific case study to draw attention to the moral and social construction of the woman reader, a construction deeply marked by Catholic culture's resistance to the proliferation of reading also (but not only) among the female public.

There are a few aspects worth clarifying in relation to the objectives of this chapter. Its focus is the Italian peninsula, but it also considers the other side of the Alps and particularly neighbouring France with which Italy engaged in intense intellectual exchanges during the eighteenth century.

A first aspect concerns the history of reading, a practice undergoing significant changes at that time: school reforms increased the reading public throughout Catholic Europe, paving the way, with greater or lesser difficulty, for social groups that had long been excluded from literacy (Roggero 1999). Of course, data on literacy should be treated with caution and must be understood in the specific Italian context. There was certainly an increase in the reading public in Italy[1] but, as various scholars have noted, only within the middle class (Infelise 1997; Roggero 2021). Moreover, it is difficult to interpret the significant representation of female reading scenes that emerged in Italian (and European) painting in that period. Are they to be interpreted as a sign of ongoing social changes? Or should they instead be viewed as the projection of a desire surfacing in this period, after women had been confined for centuries to the world of orality (Plebani 2001, 2016)?

A second aspect concerns the fears that elites, especially the clergy, nurtured towards emerging readers, including women. In terms of the social imaginary prevailing in the second half of the eighteenth century, these fears translated into a gradual shift from the idea of contagion to that of a flood. Indeed, the increasing circulation of books and supposed upsurge in male and female readership were presented at the time through a new metaphor. Beginning in the Counter-Reformation period, the

[1] In the last decades of the eighteenth century, in urban areas only 41% of men and 20.6% of women were literate, while in rural areas the percentages fell to 17% and 4.8%. For a comparison, the figures for France are 47% of men and 27% of women and for England 60% and 40% (Marchesini 1985).

image that had long dominated was that of a plague, an image associated with the idea of contagion and evocative of religious heresy; in the 1760s, however, the image that began to prevail was a biblical allusion to the flood. This metaphor circulated at a European level from the mid-eighteenth century onwards and dominated Italian ecclesiastical and secular literature in the last decades of the century, expressing a kind of breakdown in the ability of both ecclesiastical and secular censorial institutions to halt the circulation of books (Delpiano 2017, 2018; Artiaga 2007).

The third aspect has to do with the impact this increased circulation had on the forms of control that religious powers initiated (or continued to exercise) to maintain their intellectual hegemony. Italy had been shaped since the sixteenth century by the Congregation of the Index of Prohibited Books, an offshoot of the Catholic Church. There has been much debate on how effective its control really was. Some scholars have argued it was ineffective, highlighting that the Index itself provided free publicity for forbidden books (Infelise 1999). Others have instead emphasised its deterrent effects among certain classes and groups of readers in particular, including women (Delpiano 2018). The Index operated on two levels, institutional censorship and moral censorship. These two closely intertwined forces coexisted at length throughout the early modern period. However, in the later part of this period, the action shifted to the non-institutional level when repressive institutions underwent a crisis that ended up favouring techniques of persuasion instead of direct suppression (Delpiano 2018).

At the same time, it is useful to focus on the words and fears of censors and moralists to see whether they identified the emergence of the female audience as a specific problem. I should clarify that the answer is not unequivocal. Women certainly did populate the imaginary of the censors called on to evaluate texts associated with French *philosophie*. While women were precisely identified by sex, however, they were also always lumped together with other social groups in the category of fragile readers, variously defined as "incautious", "weak" and "inexperienced". A few examples help to clarify this point while also demonstrating that this was the case for multiple kinds of texts. Take Francesco Algarotti's *Newtonianismo per le dame* (1737), for instance. This work was condemned in the Index (1738) partly out of concern that Newtonian principles might circulate in Italy among an audience of "inexperienced and insolent adolescents and idle women" (Delpiano 2018, 55). Giuseppe

Gorani's *Vero dispotismo* (1770), censured (1773) on the grounds that it defended jurisdictionalism, thus also appeared dangerous because it could end up in the hands "above all of common people and women" (Delpiano 2018, 71). The association between women and uncultured people—an association made throughout the early modern period—appears to be a constant feature of censors' opinions in the second half of the eighteenth century and also characterises their consideration of philosophical novels. The opinion on Voltaire's *Candide* is an illustrative example. This text was seen as capable of "enticing the unwary" and "luring the minds of women" (Delpiano 2013, 107). Women were thus included among risky readers, alongside the "simple-minded", the "naïve" or the "unwary faithful", to borrow the definitions used by contemporary observers outside of censorship institutions as well. These latter readers were explicitly cited by both Clement XIII in his encyclical *Christianae reipublicae: De novis noxiis libris* (1766) and Pius VI in his encyclical *Inscrutabile Divinae Sapientiae* (1775), expressing their concern about the circulation of dangerous books among, respectively, the "uneducated" and "the weakest – who make up the majority". These encyclicals do not actually mention the female audience; women are instead cited in other literary genres where they are sometimes associated with the young and "uncouth" (*Biblioteca per li parrochi* 1767, I, 111). At other times, they appear to be endowed with such a specific excess of imagination as to condition their self-control with respect to reading. Hence, in a move that likewise has a long history, women were included in the category of the "inept", i.e. people who, similarly to the elderly, infirm and young, were exempted from papal excommunication for reading heretical books as specified in the sixteenth-century bull *In coena Domini*. This was, for example, the thinking of Bishop Alfonso de' Liguori (de' Liguori 1761, vol. III, 26; Delpiano 2018, 130–31, 29).

In the eighteenth century, therefore, the emergence of a female audience surfaced as a specific problem in the minds of a number of men of letters. However, it did not seem to have significantly populated the mentality of the time: in reading, women seemed to run the same risks as other 'fragile' or vulnerable categories. It was precisely the condition of fragility that united women with those who, lacking a regular school education, were barely able to read in the sense of having little familiarity with the alphabet and therefore limited ability to understand texts.

While the persistence of this traditional association between women and *rudes* (uneducated people) appears to indicate continuity with the

past, there was also marked discontinuity on other levels. Suspicious texts had always seemed even more dangerous when they were accessible to a wide audience (Caravale 2022). During the eighteenth century, however, the reading public was perceived to be growing exponentially. Observers of the time viewed reading as the authentic feature of the century. It is no coincidence that a lively debate developed in that period, in Italy and Europe more generally, around the harms of reading. Many thinkers on the Italian peninsula shared the view expressed by Clement XIII: in the aforementioned encyclical *Christianae reipublicae*, the pope explicitly warned that books "remain forever, and are always with us, they travel with us, and penetrate rooms whose entrance would not be accessible to a wicked and deceiving author" (Delpiano 2018, 131). It did not matter that the literacy figures pointed to a different social reality, one in which the majority of the population was mired in illiteracy. Fears mattered, and the stakes were much higher than they had been in the past: the dangers associated with reading, and thus also with female reading, had changed. Whereas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the danger was the spread of Protestant heresy, in the Age of Enlightenment it was the loss of faith *tout court*. All the more so given that philosophical principles were disseminated through widely circulating literary genres such as the novel.

Although censorship verdicts remained largely the same, this should not conceal from our view important changes in the way the novel was understood over time. The novel was long interpreted as being concerned with love, hazardous in itself and placed in the category of impure books. It is thus not surprising that the censor placed the 1744 French version of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (London 1741–1742) in the category of obscene books because it dealt with *artes amatorias*, according to the seventh rule of the Index condemning works about lewd topics (Delpiano 2018, 77). As this genre in its version of *conte philosophique* became one of the instruments par excellence for disseminating Enlightenment principles, censors began to view it differently. From a means of fomenting concupiscence, they began to see it as an instrument aimed at subverting the religious and political foundations of Old Regime society. As Enlightenment culture became increasingly consolidated at the level of publishing, therefore, novels began to be viewed with new suspicion. The turning point can be traced back to the beginning of the 1760s. As is well known, Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, published anonymously in Amsterdam in 1721, was not censored until May 1762, forty years later. Since the novel had not been reported, it underwent *ex officio* censorship

involving, unsurprisingly, a two-fold condemnation. This affected both Montesquieu's work and the Italian translation of Voltaire's *Candide* also published in 1759, the year of the French original (Macé 2005, 57–59). Obviously, philosophical novels were censored because of the content they conveyed, the same ideas that were invoked in efforts to censor *philosophique* production: one of the main accusations levelled at Voltaire is that of fostering religious tolerance. His famous *contes philosophiques* were censored, from *La défense de mon oncle* (1767) to *L'homme aux quarante écus* (1768) and *Lettres d'Amabed traduites par Tramponet* (1770). Many censors interpreted tolerance as a gateway to unbelief. Novels were considered all the more dangerous, however, because they conveyed their content using a literary genre characterised by specific features. Not only did it succeed in reaching a wide and varied audience, it also had the power to transform the individual: by probing the thoughts and actions of the characters, novels prompted readers to identify with the protagonists and thereby potentially influenced their behaviour (Delpiano 2018, 76–78). The reasons for the prohibitions changed not only because of changes in the themes addressed by this hybrid literary genre (Crivelli 2002, 17) enjoying a revival at the time, but also and especially because the censors approached the genre of novel by projecting new fears and, therefore, with renewed prejudices. Unsurprisingly, this new genre was also used by writers critical of the spread of the Enlightenment. Indeed, no one doubted the novel's formative impact: its supporters, such as the literary scholar and traveller Giuseppe Maria Galanti (Galanti 1780), and its opponents, such as the Jesuit Giambattista Roberti (Roberti 1769), all agreed that the novel performed this function whether they viewed it positively or negatively (Caesar 2005, 30–31). The critics of this genre, however, overturned *conte philosophique* principles focused mainly on critiquing contemporary society (Séité 1997) to turn the novel into a genre defending the political, social and religious values of the Old Regime. The history of the *conte antiphilosophique* thus represents an important chapter in that pedagogy of books and reading that had its roots in the age of the Counter-Reformation and yet continued to shape Italian and European intellectual production in the second half of the eighteenth century. These moral warnings found expression in multiple literary genres, from papal encyclicals to sermons, from catechisms to behaviour manuals (Delpiano 2013). In the following section, I seek to outline the purposes, international scope and target audience of this current of pedagogy.

Of the Fate of Women Who Read *livres philosophiques*: The Case of Emirena

It is well known that women were the main characters in many of the novels published in the second half of the eighteenth century in Italy and the rest of Europe (Le Vot 1999; Ferrand 2002; Brouard-Arends 2003; Crivelli 2002, 192–229; Crivelli 2014). Their stories were either recounted in autobiographical form or through an external narrator; in any case, they were often cast in non-traditional roles. Even from the point of view of reading and the history of its representation (Nies 1995), authors often opted for choices that were transgressive or, at least, ran counter to prevailing social reality. Suffice it to say that in one of the novels by Pietro Chiari, a famous Venetian writer and author of the 1753 *La filosofessa italiana*, the protagonist states in the very first lines that "my predominant passion since [youth] has been reading and studying", declaring that she had devoured "an innumerable number of tales, poems, novels, and travels" (Chiari 1753, 7). This contradiction between representation and reality is clearly expressed in the observation that "women readers are paradoxically both the most visible in literature and the most invisible in the historical record" (Pearson 1999, 12). On one hand, female literacy struggled to take hold and the debate on women's capacity to read and study divided the minds of contemporaries. Even in Italy, many were wholly opposed to spreading literacy among women (Guerci 1987). On the other hand, female readers were the main characters in literature and particularly novels. In short, women had conquered the alphabet in literary fiction but not in reality (Ferrand 2002, 446). In real life, and especially in Italy, they had difficulty even obtaining books (Roggero 2001). This contradiction has been interpreted as evidence of a dual discrediting, as Nathalie Ferrand has pointed out, discounting both the novel (read only by women) and women (who read only novels) (Ferrand 2002, 449).

Women's presence on the fictional scene, however, may be viewed historiographically through a long-term lens, viewing novels as not only the representation of an image (of women, reading and the novel) but also as an instrument of education. Scholars have identified three distinct phases in the developing relationship between women and fiction from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries (1656–1856). In the first phase, from the 1650s to the 1720s, the emergence of a female audience was paralleled by satire of women readers, the so-called *précieuses*

ridicules. In the second phase, spanning up to the end of the eighteenth century, the fascination with reading triumphed while in the final phase, in the following century, the majority of young women were worried about reading and female readers became tragic figures (Aragon 2003a, 2003b, 456; Bernier 2003; Lanni 2003). However, it is useful to delve deeper into the connection between women, the novel and the Enlightenment specifically. Changes taking place in that period in the way novels represented the relationship between women and reading are worth examining. To better understand this issue, it must also be contextualised in relation to the increasing secularisation of eighteenth-century society. Before engaging with this question, however, I would like to point out that in the Italian peninsula, the *roman antiphilosophique*—like the novel in general (Marchesi 1991; Delpiano 2004; Asor Rosa 2002; Braida 2019; Roggero 2021)—was an imported genre that reached Italy through translation. Translations of French works were published in the country from the 1760s onwards, beginning with Father Michel-Ange Marin's *Il Baron Van-Esden ovvero la repubblica degl'increduli*, published in French (*Le baron Van-Hesden*) in 1762 and printed in Italian in Lucca in 1765 (Marin 1765). Developed by imitating European models, the Italian *roman antiphilosophique* became fully autonomous in the following decades yet always remained firmly intertwined with the European world.

In exploring this point, it is interesting to look at a specific case study: the novel *Emirena*, published anonymously in 1778 by the Piedmont count Benvenuto Robbio di San Raffaele (1735–1794). It has been chosen here as an example for several reasons (Cerrano 1990–1991; Delpiano 2015, 170–77; Delpiano 2018, 182, 193). Firstly, because it narrates a story that was recurring in European fiction of the time. Secondly, because this work underwent a long publishing process and was reprinted, re-edited and adapted between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And lastly, because it was written by an author who, while holding public positions, sided with the conservative sectors of Catholic culture and participated in a cultural-political project to promote the dissemination of good books. Launched in Jesuit and former Jesuit circles, this project involved both ecclesiastics and laity. It laid the foundations for the alliance between throne and altar that went on to mark the political and cultural spirit of the Restoration and was long held up by individuals and groups as a moral referent (Delpiano 2018, 223–36).

Let us begin with a few words about Robbio di san Raffaele, author of important texts reacting to the culture of the Enlightenment aimed

mostly at young people in school, but also at families and fundamental mediating figures such as educators. Born near Turin, Piedmont, in 1735 (he died in Turin in 1794), Robbio attended the Jesuit College in Lyon and then frequented the Barnabite Giacinto Sigismondo Gerdil's teachings in Moral Philosophy at the University of Turin. Gerdil was one of the Italian refuters of the *culture philosophique* and wrote famous texts such as the *Réflexions sur la théorie, et la pratique de l'éducation* (1763) against Rousseau, a position that helped elevate him to the post of cardinal and prefect of the Congregation of the Index in 1777. Robbio di san Raffaele followed in Gerdil's footsteps, writing eloquently titled texts from *Della falsa filosofia* (1777) to *Della condotta de' letterati* (1780), a guide for budding scholars, to *Apparecchio degli educatori* (Robbio di san Raffaele 1777, 1780, 1787) in which he cast a critical eye on the "domestic" education of the nobility and argued that they were exposed to uncontrollable passions. The author was thus part of the political-cultural circle that, in the years following the suppression of the Society of Jesus, played an important role in Piedmont and Italy more generally in resisting the circulation of Enlightenment ideas and coordinating the spread of the Catholic "good press" (Prandi 1966, 1975; Rosa 2008; Delpiano 2017, 2018; Guasti 2006, 2017). After having held important positions in the field of State Education beginning in 1778, in 1780 Robbio was appointed Royal Reviser of Books (Merlotti 2016). His texts are also important because they allow us to grasp, in the midst of an age of jurisdictional reform, the alliance between former Jesuits who took a stand in defence of the censorious powers of the Church (think for instance of Francesco Antonio Zaccaria and his *Storia polemica*; Zaccaria 1777) and officials such as Robbio who supported the authority of the state. This alliance is an important aspect that allows us to identify a broader model for controlling reading that originated in reactions to Enlightenment culture and went on to operate throughout the nineteenth century.

Emirena is based on a recurring pattern of this *antiphilosophique* narrative: a young woman, wife and mother, falls victim to a man who suggests bad readings to her; due to these texts, she quickly loses the virtues associated with her dual wife-and-mother role and her connection with the domestic sphere, leaves her husband and children, and begins to lead an immoral life. Through the providential intervention of a curate, she then finally repents, destroys her books and returns to religion and family. The first edition of *Emirena* appeared in 1778 as part of the anonymously published collection *Operette relative alla religione e sopra gli*

errori correnti without any further publishing information (Robbio di san Raffaele 1778). One clue, however, allows us to reconstruct the text's background: the publishing place and date are reported in the *Avviso* (warning) as Freiburg, 26 August 1778. So is the name of Jos[eph] Reebman, professor of theology O.P., who signed the preventive assessment of the work on behalf of the local bishop. The warning suggests that the *Operette* is to be considered as belonging to the sphere of Amicizia Cristiana, an organisation founded in 1776 by a group of ecclesiastics and former Jesuits including, in addition to Robbio di San Raffaele, Gian Domenico Giulio, Luigi Virginio and Pio Brunone Lanteri, and above all the former Jesuit Nikolaus Joseph Albert von Diessbach (1732–1798). A Calvinist born in Berne, Von Diessbach later converted to Catholicism and was active in Turin beginning in 1769 (Stella 1991). The aim of this association was to promote the circulation of "good books" in reaction to the spread of Enlightenment ideas through the publishing centre *Pia associazione per la stampa* (Pious press association) operating in Turin and Freiburg. This publishing house collaborated with numerous printers in Italy and Switzerland and involved ecclesiastics and lay people, including women, with an international scope of dissemination. It sought to circulate religious books (of theology and apologetics), but also literature and history, in the original or translated versions. Their key focus was texts aimed at cultivating religion (Bona 1962; De Mattei 1981, 2005; Delpiano 2018, 190). The pamphlets included in this collection of *Operette* are indeed highly varied but all apologetic in nature. The *Avviso* at the beginning of the volume lends coherence to the collection, not least because it identifies a precise enemy, albeit without mentioning his name (Voltaire, as can be inferred from the mention of the *philosophe*'s death in May 1778). In short, Robbio's objective was to point out Voltaire's errors by refuting his books (*Avviso*, no pp.).

The opening text of the collection is a short section entitled *Dello Zelo*, outlining the harm that this kind of books may cause, when aimed at a wide audience ("whatever is your sex, age, condition or ability, zeal is your definite duty", *Dello Zelo*, 3–4). Unbelief and apostasy: these are the evils that must be fought through the study of religion. The second section delves into *De' libri empj* and provides some "cautions" to be adopted with respect to these books, consisting of eight specific rules, to which I will return shortly (16–23). The collection continues with the *Avvisi a chi scrive in favor della religione cristiana* aimed at suggesting ways to best attack "the blasphemous philosophers" (24–55).

It is the following text, however, that is crucial for grasping the genesis of *Emirena*: the *Osservazioni sopra il libro intitolato Confidenza filosofica* (56–68). This is a fictional dialogue by the Geneva-based pastor Jacob Vernes, published in 1771, that Robbio ponders in search of models for his novel (Vernes 1771). Although Vernes' work is one of the sources of his inspiration, Robbio does not fail to point out its flaws. Vernes does seek to strike a blow against deism, Robbio notes, but he fails to contain its spread by not properly refuting the thoughts of the ungodly protagonist. Moreover, he does not represent the death of the "unrepentant and desperate" seduced woman, Madame Herbert, in a dire enough way to serve as a warning for readers. Robbio also focuses on two other works by European authors. The first is what Robbio refers to as the "Valmont novel", namely Philippe-Louis Gérard's *Le Comte de Valmont* (1774) in which the death of the ungodly Lausanne is portrayed as appropriately terrible (Gérard 1774). The second work, referred to as "Young's letters", consists of *Letters from Altamont in the capital, to his friends in the country*, published in London in 1767 by the Anglican Charles Jenner. This book is praised by Robbio for the exemplary death of the evil protagonist (Altamont) and, as I will show, he later took it as a source of inspiration. Robbio's antiphilosophical novel is thus not the result of literary creativity alone. It is a text carefully designed with precise educational intentions, the outcome of elements thoughtfully chosen from among the various possible options present at the European level and aimed at providing exemplary moral models for how readers should relate to books. At this point, the reader finds *Emirena* (69–187). In this collection, the story does not appear to be an autonomous text; it should instead be read as a section, albeit the longest in the collection, of a broader body of thought about books, followed by other texts such as the pamphlet *I Cinque Dubbi* touching on various themes from the relationship between ancients and moderns to freedom of thought.

The story of *Emirena* rests on a thin plot; however, it is worth examining it to understand Robbio's narrative choices. The novel—a hundred or so pages, divided into thirteen short chapters—is preceded by a warning from the publishers cautioning against "modern anti-Christian philosophy, the destroyer of every holy duty of religion, nature and society". The author presents *Emirena* as a "sufficient refutation": he aims to show his audience "only the simple but true portrait" of this philosophy, while dealing with "specious sophisms" elsewhere. In the "operetta", as it is called in the warning, Emirena quickly enters the scene: at the age

of fourteen, her considerable dowry makes her the object of marriage proposals from various "gentlemen". She ends up choosing the Marquis Dorfiso, a poor gentleman with whom Emirena soon has a child. The action unfolds very quickly. Emirena begins to surround herself with "acquaintances" who push her to change her values, importance to physical beauty and pursue it through artificial means ("under the hairpins and comb" of a young man). Educated in a monastery, she moves away from religious teachings and begins to read novels "passionately". As a result, she takes "giant steps forward in the glorious pursuit of arousing her own and others' passions, kindly succeeding in cursing, being lascivious with grace, impious by genius, in becoming wholly glacial towards her husband and son, and giving all fire to other acquaintances" (78). The account continues with a description of her three closest male friends: Antagora, "stunned and garrulous", Ecchidno, "frowning and pensive" and, above all, Atiasto, "fed on the best milk of the new-ancient admirable philosophy". Atiasto has read the worst enemies of religion without "wasting time" reading its defenders. His reading is thus characterised by superficiality and rapidity. In particular, he read Locke and was convinced by him "that matter is capable of thought". He studied Helvétius and Spinoza, learning from the former that human beings are equivalent to beasts and from the latter "that everything is God". He read Collins and Mandeville, learning that "vices are the basis of civilised happiness", and Barbeyrac, who taught him the alleged "absurdities" of the Church Fathers in matters of morality. In these texts, Atiasto learned to question the Pentateuch and Books of the Prophets and to make bold remarks about the Old Testament and ponder the evils of religion. During her conversations with these friends, Emirena begins to have doubts about religion. However, the turning point for her is when she starts to read novels and later encounters the "new books" brought by Atiasto. A specific chapter is devoted precisely to these books, with Robbio ridiculing their content in order to deprive them of power. The idea that "men are no more than beasts" thus offers Robbio the chance to harken back to times gone by, when "people did not believe that man, being intelligent and free, should have as masters the irrational chicken that runs through his yard, and the servant ox that ploughs his farm" (87). The author is aware that the censorious apparatuses of the Church and states are unable to put a stop to the circulation of such books. On the contrary, censorship has the opposite effect in that it causes people "seek them out more avidly", and Emirena prefers just those books against which "Rome,

the Sorbonne, and the bishops had cast the most thunderbolts". What follows is a detailed examination of the forbidden readings and studies of Emirena. The protagonist reads not only novels but also and especially the classical texts of *philosophie*. Emirena's learning method is also important: she does not learn slowly or by examining what she reads in depth, but quickly, without order or rules. Indeed,

> She jumped from one topic to another: she delved into every matter with the same [degree of] interest: she flew without wings. Peruvian letters touched her heart; Persian letters illuminated her mind; sometimes even the coarse antics of Monsieur d'Argens gave her dear amusement. If Diderot's howling comedies made her fall asleep, a novelette by the same author […], caused her eyes to reopen […]. She learned from Helvetius that the spirit is not spirit; from Berkley, that the body is not body; from Colins, that freedom is not freedom; from la Metrie, that man is not man; from the alleged Mirabaud [i.e. d'Holbach], that the world is not created by the power of God, but God is created by the weakness of men (92–93).

In other cases, Emirena's readings are not direct but rather mediated through orality. Atiasto reads aloud to her pages from Bayle and the *Encyclopédie*, and speaks to her concisely about Voltaire's works. Robbio di San Raffaele's ironic gaze targets both Atiasto and the *philosophes* and aims to represent Emirena—called "the Marchioness" by her tutor—and her "gullibility" as crude and unsophisticated. In short, the woman is characterised by the superficiality with which she "greedily" devours the "philosophical bats". Emirena's life continues under the banner of degeneration, beginning with dinners with her merry company uttering words of slander against the Church and the Gospel. Tired of this "philosophical feasting", her husband Dorfiso invites her to accompany him and their son to a mansion outside the city. Emirena thus has to choose between two alternative models proposed to her by Atiasto: to continue nurturing "enlightened reason" and oppose the "blind impetus of maternal affections", or to re-establish family life. Reason and family feelings appear to undermine one another: someone cultivating *philosophie* can be neither a good mother nor a good wife, the story suggests. The fact is that Emirena quickly comes to terms with being separated from her son and continues reading some thirty dictionaries of science and the arts. She does so sporadically and superficially, in those "brief moments" when she is not occupied with conversation, play and dance.

She then becomes a patroness, the target of private scams and public satire. After three years, Emirena falls ill with rheumatic fever and the doctor suggests she take the sacraments. She weeps and cries in despair until her elderly nanny turns to a curate who takes her case to heart. By conversing with him, Emirena comes to her senses in that the man urges her to ponder her mistakes and even manages to free her from evil through a sort of exorcism. Convinced at last that "there is no peace for the wicked", Emirena bursts into a liberatory fit of weeping and repents. Atiasto, however, dies of colic in an infernal scene: "With unrestrained fury he tore his hair, bit his flesh, threw his head against the wall; and if he saw someone coming towards him, he rushed at him with teeth and nails to tear him to pieces", while his mouth spewed out curses and imprecations. Atiasto's death is the death of the ungodly that Robbio had pondered, and it triggers a complete and sincere change in Emirena. Assisted by the curate, she proceeds to destroy the books in her possession in a purifying fire. At this point, she is reunited with her dear family. In the conclusion, which contains the moral of the novel, her room becomes "the room of prayer" and Emirena is once again ready to obey the requests of her husband, the curate and the doctor. She is once again what she was at the beginning of the narrative: "humble, quiet, composed, [and] full of sincere self-loathing" (173). The protagonist is now presented as the antidote to Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse*: "Far from the marchioness the bawdy illusions, whence the maddened Heloise is filled with them! Emirena was aware of her need for guidance and Enlightenment: she did not pretend to know what she did not know: she did not blush when questioning the Ecclesiastic" (175). Her repentance does not heal her, however, and Emirena ends up dying after being reconciled with God, "disenchanted and converted", without ever "detaching her eyes and mouth from her crucified Lord".

Reading the "new" books, i.e. the *livres philosophiques*, therefore only leads to a loss of faith and behaviour that disrupts the family order. Given its evident and even crude moralistic aims, this novel is an important source not only for studying the way the dangers of books and reading were represented in the Age of Enlightenment, but also for understanding the strategies used to provide women with models to follow when reading. Novels, for Emirena, are the gateway to *philosophie*, of which she falls victim. In some respects, she is a ridiculous character and the reader smiles at her misadventures, yet her story is also tragic in that her stupidity leads to her death. In this sense her story, chosen here to

illustrate the genre of antiphilosophical novels in the Age of Enlightenment, seems to constitute a sort of *trait d'union* between the events of the *précieuses ridicules* and the tragedies of the following century.

It is no coincidence that *Emirena*, created in response to eighteenth-century *philosophie* culture, was also re-edited and adapted in the following century. A second edition, bearing the author's name on the title page and a mention of "new additions", was published in Milan, at Cesare Orena, Stamperia Malatesta, in 1784 (Robbio di san Raffaele 1784). This edition is grouped with texts by other authors, but each one is presented as autonomous. The author relinquishes his anonymity in this edition and includes the previous text of *Emirena* with the addition of an appendix entitled *Avvisi dell'autore sui libri empj* (89–94), an appendix on unholy books that echoes the short section *De' libri empj* presented as a standalone text in the 1778 collection (16–23). The slight change of title reflects the author's desire to appropriate the warnings so that the suggested "cautions" appear to come directly from Robbio. These "cautions" consist of eight rules intended to regulate the reader's relationship with books and reading, with few variations and addressed—I would like to emphasise—to the entire reading audience with no particular focus on women. While the 1778 version invites readers to avoid reading these books "without proper reasons or opportune cautions", the 1784 version reads "*without due permission* (italics added), proper reasons or opportune cautions", underlining the ecclesiastical requirement that readers obtain special reading licences. It is nevertheless worth reading these suggestions as an illustration of the fears of the time. The first suggestion is to avoid reading unholy books "without being equipped with previous studies" that provide the reader with the antidotes to unravel "those sophisms that appear on every page to lure you in". The second consideration invites readers to pay more attention to the meaning than the style, as the latter may entice them "with amenity and elegance". The third suggestion is to always read with scepticism, and the fourth is to avoid prolonged contact with books: to hold them "as seldom as possible" and put them down "as soon as possible". The fifth reminds readers that there exists a convincing response to every theme dealt with in these books, and that they must seek out these responses. The sixth calls for the reading of ungodly books to be accompanied by good books, especially those that provide a response to modern unbelievers and therefore act as an antidote. The seventh points out that ungodly books, even read by wise people, are dangerous because they cast doubt on faith. The eighth advises readers

not to be swayed by famous names, given that celebrity is often associated with lies. These considerations are thus meant to encourage readers to self-regulate their reading and internalise the prohibitions.

A new edition, which is actually a reprint, was later published in Venice in 1791 by Francesco Andreola, once again bearing the author's name (Robbio di san Raffaele 1791). In addition to a statement of approval from the Riformatori dello Studio di Padova (Reformers of the University of Padua) which obviously appears only in this version, this edition also contains a couple of added warnings. One of these (chap. IV, 12) points out that Atiasto's character references St. Bernard and in particular the "sad features" he attributed to a "hard heart". Regarding Atiasto's death, it specifies that the event is not "an invention of fiction" but a real fact because the death of the impious man "matches an event that happened a few years ago" (47).

Emirena's publishing history continued into the nineteenth century, however, and the text gradually lost its already not-so-strong link with its author. An anonymous author drew on the work, reuniting Robbio di San Raffale's text with *Disinganni, o sia il solitario cristiano cattolico* by the aforementioned priest Diessbach, published without editorial indications in 1778. This too was the tale of another life undermined by bad books and regenerated through good reading (Diessbach 1778). The resulting book is *Riflessioni tratte dal libro intitolato Il solitario cristiano cattolico e dall'altro intitolato Emirena del conte di S. Raffaele*, published in Imola by Galeati typography in 1827. The text was part of the printing activity of the *Società de' Calobibliofili*, an association with links to the papacy (Montecchi 2001, 89–91; Piazza 2009) that paid for the book to be published. Heir to the aforementioned organisation *Amicizia cristiana*, *Società de' Calobibliofili* became *Associazione Cattolica* in 1833. In both of its incarnations, it sought to promote the circulation of good books. In this case, *Emirena* lost its identity as a novel to merge with the other work and become a *vademecum* for readers to defend themselves against philosophical books, providing "remedies to oppose the progress of irreligion" with a repetition of the eight "cautions" (Reflections 1827). In 1857, *Emirena* was again published under a different title—*Emirena ossia la giovane sposa sedotta dai liberi pensatori*—by Simone Birindelli's printing house in Florence (Robbio San Raffaele 1857). Once again anonymous, the work was presented in this case as a "historical tale", although the text remained identical in content and in its structure of thirteen chapters (only the titles of the individual chapters were eliminated). This edition

does not include the *Avviso degli editori* warning and the names of the main characters are changed in an attempt to modernise them and make them more realistic: Dorfiso becomes Girolamo, Antagora becomes Carlo and Echidno is renamed Pietro while Atiasto is changed to Dario. Finally, in 1865, *Emirena* was turned into an opera (Emirena 1865).

As well as a fascinating example of textual instability, *Emirena*'s content and publishing history make it an exemplary case in the historical education and control of the female audience. The character Emirena has several companions. One of the first is Donna Urania, whose name provides the title for another *conte antiphilosophique* by Robbio di San Raffaele dealing with women's scientific studies (Robbio di San Raffaele 1793). In terms of publication, it should be noted that this genre developed at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Les Helviennes, ou lettres provinciales philosophiques* (1781–1784) by the former Jesuit Augustin Barruel, for instance, narrates the misadventures of a woman (a baroness) who falls victim to philosophical readings. Part of this novel translated into Italian was published in Naples (Barruel 1786), then its entirety was released in Venice (Barruel 1801). This genre was produced not only by authors from Jesuit or former Jesuit circles, but also by other members of the clergy and lay people. An example is Abbot Gérard, who wrote the aforementioned *Comte de Valmont ou les égarements de la raison*. Narrating the story of a conversion from *philosophie* to Catholicism, this book was published in Paris in 1774 and re-released in no less than thirteen French editions from 1771 to 1823 (Masseau 2000, 308–09 and 334–36). It also enjoyed great success in Italy: the first translation was published in Modena by Società tipografica in 1805, and the work was reprinted in Milan by Giuseppe Maspero in 1816 and then in Imola, again by Galeati typography, in 1851 and 1852 (Gérard 1774, 1793, 1805, 1816–1818, 1851–1852).

These works were also translated into other languages. To cite only southern Europe, a Spanish translation of *Les Helviennes* appeared in 1787 (Barruel 1787) and of *Le Comte de Valmont* in 1793 (Gérard 1793), while links with other European countries and the American continent have yet to be explored. In short, antiphilosophical novels had international reach and a publishing and political-cultural history that began in the Age of Enlightenment—albeit in opposition to the Enlightenment movement—and continued into the nineteenth century. This is an important part of a larger story concerning the relationship between gender and reading that had specific national characteristics but also a

European scope. Regarding specifically the ideal audience targeted by *Emirena* and the other novels mentioned here, indeed, the question is whether they were aimed exclusively at female readers in all the countries where they were disseminated. Certainly it would have been easy for female readers to identify with the main character, but it is doubtful that this fiction was intended exclusively for women and addressed to them directly. The teachings provided through antiphilosophical novels regarding books and reading served to educate not only women but also the figures (mostly men) responsible for women's education, namely parents and educators (private tutors and teachers in public schooling). If the ideal audience already appears broad in the original version of *Helviennes*, for example, in the preface of the Italian translation of this book, the anonymous translator explicitly specified that it was meant for "everyone"[2]: a warning, therefore, for the whole of society.

Conclusion

Drawing attention to Italian antiphilosophical novels is not, of course, tantamount to trying to grant literary dignity to a body of work that is scarcely as significant as literature. However, the extensive editorial circulation it enjoyed and the social repercussions it had on women's education in reading cannot be ignored. This essay only begins to explore these aspects in the case of Italian-French relations, while the genre's multiple international entanglements remain to be investigated. Catholic fiction that is also attentive to the female audience, a body of work generally dating to the nineteenth century, has its roots in the broader reaction to Enlightenment culture that arose in the second half of the eighteenth century, led by clergymen and laymen. It therefore constitutes an important chapter of history that may also help to better illuminate the relationship between religion (Catholic, in this case) and "feminism", if indeed this word can be used in speaking of the early modern age without falling into anachronism. Together with questioning the modernity of secularisation (Mack 2005; Lehner 2016), scholars are currently seeking to reassess the role religion has played in the process of carving out spaces of freedom for women. For a complete view, such reassessment would do well to take into account the rather extensive strand

[2] Barruel, *Le chavalier philosophe au lecteur* (Barruel 1784, I, V–XI) and *Prefazione del traduttore* (Barruel 1786, I, III–XIV).

of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors who, identifying with the values of the Catholic Church and certainly those of Catholic culture, assiduously wrote and published texts designed to instil in women a suspicious attitude towards books and reading. Given that their target audience also included families, preceptors and society as a whole, the female public was not the only intended object of this suspicious stance (Delpiano 2019). Feminism, in any case, is a whole different story.

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