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Advocating Women's Rights in the Italian Periodical Press: Lidia Poët (1855–1949) and Teresa Labriola (1871–1941)

Eline Batsleer

Abstract: Lidia Poët (1855–1949) and Teresa Labriola (1871–1941) were two pioneers of the fight for women's rights in Italy. Despite being among the very first Italian women to graduate from the Faculty of Law at the University of Rome and the University of Torino, respectively, they were inescapably limited in the pursuit of professional careers. Inspired by their own personal experiences, both women started openly questioning the restricting values of patriarchal society and the lack of legal and political rights for women in their essays and conference presentations. Not only did they fight their individual battles by triggering public debate, but they also considered it their crucial task to create more awareness among the broader female population. Given the fact that the late nineteenth to early twentieth century was a particularly flourishing time for the periodical press, it is not surprising that both Poët and Labriola soon discovered the endless possibilities of magazines and newspapers. The aim of this essay is to illustrate how these two women turned to the periodical press and used it as a weapon in their quest for women's legal rights. In addition, it explores the development of a nationalist feminism that emerged from their wartime writings.

Introduction

This essay focuses on the case of Lidia Poët (1855–1949) and Teresa Labriola (1871–1941), two women lawyers and key figures in the fight for women's rights and female emancipation in Italy.[1] At first glance, the stories of these

[1] This research was carried out with the financial support of the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO) (grant no. 1132722n) and within the project National Angels, Homefront Warriors

forward-thinking and ambitious women might seem quite similar: both Poët and Labriola were among the first Italian women to complete a legal education, and both were determined to build professional careers in a world that was exclusively dominated by men. Yet, their personal choices and, more importantly, their ideological differences led them to very different fates. Indeed, Lidia Poët was erased from collective memory during the Fascist reign, whereas Teresa Labriola soon became one of the most influential female exponents of that same regime. Despite the ideological differences that characterized this later stage of their lives, it is remarkable how Poët and Labriola, with nearly thirty years between them, had to face the same challenges and prejudices, and how both turned to the periodical press in order to address social injustices and the often misogynistic attitude towards women in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italy. Their close interaction with the periodical press has not been the subject of much scholarly attention, nor have both cases been studied from a comparative perspective.

It is important to emphasize that this essay does not seek to offer an in-depth analysis of their professional and ideological paths, nor is it my goal to present a comprehensive biographical portrait of Poët and Labriola. For that, I refer to the work of Cristina Ricci, whose biography of Lidia Poët was recently published by Graphot, and Fiorenza Taricone, author of the personal and intellectual biography of Teresa Labriola. Instead, I start with some essential biographical information that will allow me to trace the similarities and differences between these two notable women before moving on to an analysis of their particularly successful relationships with the Italian periodical press.

Thus, after outlining the essential biographical and socio-political framework, the first part of this essay will focus on the role that the periodical press played in Poët's and Labriola's battle for professional recognition. Drawing on articles that were published by both women in various Italian periodicals, the core of this essay will analyze how their individual battles assumed a collective dimension in their search for women's professional, social, and political advancement. Finally, the last part of this essay will demonstrate how the debate on women's role and position within society gained new momentum during the First World War, and how the socio-cultural debate surrounding the conflict strengthened Poët's and Labriola's revolutionary discourse.

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and Wounded Doves of Peace: The Rhetorical Construction of Female Identity in Women's Literary Writings of the Great War in Italy (1914–1919).

Lidia Poët and Teresa Labriola: two pioneers of Italian women's rights

Both Lidia Poët and Teresa Labriola were born into distinguished families in the second half of the nineteenth century—Labriola as the only daughter of the Marxist philosopher Antonio Labriola (1843–1904),[2] and Poët as the daughter of Giovanni Piero Poët (1807–72), third generation mayor of Traverse di Perrero in Valle Germanasca, Piemonte. Both Poët and Labriola received a broad education, including philosophy, politics, and the study of multiple languages. Stimulated by the intellectual environment in which they were born, they were granted the opportunity to pursue their scholarly interests and both choose to study law, Poët at the University of Turin, and Labriola at the University of Rome. In the late nineteenth century, this choice was anything but obvious, since women had only recently been admitted to universities.[3] In addition, Italian society was still quite hostile towards women's higher education and expected women to marry and bear children rather than obtain university degrees.

Lidia Poët was among the first women to attend the University of Turin and the very first woman to obtain a law degree. After graduating and undergoing two further years of intensive training, she would finally be able to start practising law. On 15–16 May 1883, she took the exam that would allow her to join the Ordine degli Avvocati di Torino, which she passed without any difficulties. Ready to embark on her professional journey, she registered to the barristers' association on 28 July 1883 and was officially admitted on 9 August of that same year. However, her case had divided the commission in charge of the decision, and her admission was openly called into question by some of its members and more generally by critical voices in society. What followed was a vigorous legal debate between the two parties.[4] On 24 August 1883, less than a month after her admission to the Ordine degli Avvocati di Torino, Lidia Poët's registration was officially revoked by

[2] For a detailed portrait of Antonio Labriola and his philosophical work, see, among others, Badaloni and Muscetta; Bondì; Femia; Miccolis, "Antonio Labriola" and *Antonio Labriola*.

[3] On 22 October 1875, the *Gazzetta Ufficiale del Regno d'Italia* (*Official Journal of the Kingdom of Italy*) published Royal Decree no. 2728 concerning university education. With the implementation of this decree, women were officially permitted to attend university, provided that they could present all the necessary documents, including a high school diploma and a certificate of good conduct.

[4] For a more detailed reconstruction of this legal battle, see Iannuzzi and Tammaro; Ricci; Tacchi.

the attorney general. Even though his objections were of a socio-cultural rather than of a legal nature, it became impossible for Poët to legally exercise her profession (Tacchi 3).

The case of Lydia Poët is probably best known to contemporary audiences, since she was recently portrayed in *La legge di Lidia Poët* (*The Law according to Lidia Poët*), the 2023 Netflix series created by Guido Iuculano and Davide Orsini, and starring Matilda De Angelis in the title role. Yet, it must not be forgotten that she was not the only Italian woman whose registration to the order of lawyers was annulled by the Corte d'Appello and the Corte di Cassazione di Torino. Almost thirty years later, Teresa Labriola suffered a similar fate. In 1912, when after more than a decade her academic career had started to decline, Labriola contemplated a career change and wished to join the Ordine degli Avvocati di Roma. According to Marina Tesoro, the reason for her failing academic career was threefold. First, over the years Labriola published various works on highly sensitive and even controversial subjects, such as women's suffrage, adultery, and the right to divorce.[5] Second, Teresa Labriola's social and also academic prestige was determined to a large extent by the success of her father. Consequently, after his death on 12 February 1904, it became increasingly difficult for Teresa to maintain her position within the academic world. But third and most importantly, it was nearly impossible to overcome the many prejudices against women that dominated the patriarchal society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

At the time, when Poët and Labriola commenced their university studies, Italian women were actively discouraged from studying law and thus from developing legal careers. According to Taricone, the reluctance of men towards women lawyers had a clear motive: historically, politicians were often law school graduates, since a law degree provided an excellent background for pursuing a political career. As a result, the admission of women to the profession of lawyer could have serious repercussions for the male monopoly of political power, especially because this meant that women could potentially claim the right to vote and be elected into official positions (Taricone 16). This fear was not entirely unfounded, since both Poët and Labriola not only had a profound knowledge of the law but were

[5] Her most important publications from that period include *Del divorzio: Discussion etica* (1901), *La donna nella società moderna* (1902), *La persona: Discussione etico-sociologica* (1902), *Contributo a gli studi su la società familiare* (1904), *Studio sul problema del voto alla donna* (1904), and *Chiesa e Stato (da S. Agostino a E. Kant)* (1910).

also determined to use this knowledge in the battle for women's social and political advancement that was progressively gaining momentum.

In 1881, Lidia Poët graduated from the University of Turin with a thesis on women's suffrage, titled *Sulla condizione della donna rispetto al diritto costituzionale e al diritto amministrativo nelle elezioni* (*On the Status of Women in Constitutional and Administrative Law in Elections*).[6] In this work she discusses, among other things, the requirements that a female citizen should meet in order to obtain the right to vote and states that there can only be one plausible conclusion: "Non vedo adunque teoricamente ragioni sufficienti per escludere le donne dall'elettorato politico" ("I don't see sufficient theoretical reasons to exclude women from the political vote; *Sulla condizione* 22). In 1903, both she and Teresa Labriola got actively involved in the newly established Consiglio Nazionale delle Donne Italiane (CNDI), the Italian branch of the International Council of Women (ICW), founded in Washington in 1888.[7] Furthermore, Labriola regularly published articles in the association's official organ, *Attività Femminile Sociale: Rivista mensile del Consiglio Nazionale delle Donne Italiane* (*Women's Social Work: Monthly Magazine of the National Council of Italian Women*), which ran from 1913 to 1931.

The power of the periodical press

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a limited but determined group of Italian women activists, including, among others, Anna Maria Mozzoni (1837–1920), Gualberta Alaide Beccari (1842–1906), Paola Baronchelli Grosson (1866–1954), and Anna Kuliscioff (c. 1855–1925), committed themselves to denouncing women's inferior position within the family and society, their restricted access to (higher) education, as well as their exclusion from public life in general (Gori 239–40). In this context, the periodical press proved to be a crucial and highly effective medium for women to raise public attention for their cause. Poët understood the dynamics of the periodical press perfectly and knew how to make the most of its potential. When her registration to the Ordine degli Avvocati di Torino was revoked, it soon became the subject of an intense public debate that caught the attention of people from all over the country. It is striking that almost every single Italian woman's magazine of the early twentieth

[6] All translations are my own.

[7] For more information about the ICW, see Rupp; Gubin et al.

century—from *La Donna: Periodico d'educazione compilato da donne italiane* (*The Woman: Educational Periodical Compiled by Italian Women*) to *La Donna: Rivista quindicinale illustrata* (*The Woman: Fortnightly Illustrated Magazine*) and *La nostra rivista femminile* (*Our Women's Magazine*)—discussed the case or at least referred to it, even years after the registration had been declared null and void (see Iannuzzi and Tammaro; Ricci). Even the *Corriere della Sera*—which remains to this day one of the most important newspapers in Italy—got involved in the debate. On 4 December 1883, the newspaper published an interview with Poët, preceded by the following note from the editors: "Noi non crediamo che, allo stato dei nostri costumi, l'avvocatura sia professione adatta alle donne" ("We do not believe that, in line with our present morals, advocacy is a suitable profession for women"; "La Signorina" 1). However, they also observed that, to their knowledge, the law did not explicitly forbid women from exercising the profession of lawyer, and that the court sentence that sealed Poët's fate was in fact "debolissima" ("very weak") and did no credit to the respectable reputation of the Court (1).

Internationally, the debate caught the attention of two American women's magazines—*Demorest's Monthly Magazine* and *The Union Signal*—and in the UK Poët's legal battle was addressed on the pages of the feminist magazine *Englishwoman's Review* (Iannuzzi and Tammaro 49). It is fair to say that Poët divided public opinion and had become both a national and international symbol of women's growing resistance and rebellion against patriarchal society and its restricting laws and values. Therefore, it is not surprising that *La Donna: Rivista quindicinale illustrata* became one of Lidia Poët's allies and offered her a platform not only to fight openly her own personal case but also to question and debate Italian women's political and juridical status. Indeed, Poët continued to strive for her own professional recognition for decades while also raising attention for the broader issue of women's rights. In order to fully comprehend the importance of this fruitful collaboration, it is necessary to open a brief parenthesis that allows us to examine the magazine's editorial history more closely.

Founded in 1904, *La Donna: Rivista quindicinale illustrata* was one of the most read and influential Italian women's magazines of the early twentieth century.[8] As an illustrated supplement of the newspapers *La Stampa* and *La Tribuna*, published in Turin (at the time one of Europe's fashion capitals) and Rome, respectively, *La Donna* appealed to a broad readership. Indeed, in 1915, in the midst of the First World War, *La Donna* reached an average circulation of

[8] For a more detailed analysis of *La Donna: Rivista quindicinale illustrata*, see Alesi; Meazzi.

300,000 copies (Venturini 270). The success of the magazine can be attributed to its combination of articles exploring the latest interior design and fashion trends, its discussion of topical issues related to women's socio-cultural and political condition, and its readers' letters section that invited the public to actively engage with the magazine's columnists. In other words, given its wide audience and clear interest in women's questions, the magazine represented a new, powerful weapon in Poët's battle against the Italian judicial authorities. In August 1917, more than thirty-three years after her registration to the Ordine degli Avvocati di Torino was revoked, she addressed once again the injustice of the exclusion of Italian women from the legal profession on the pages of *La Donna*:

> Non spenderò parole a farvi rilevare quanto sia ingiusto che una donna la quale abbia tutti i requisiti di studi e diplomi reputati necessari dalla legge per l'esercizio di una professione, debba vederselo vietato soltanto per ragione di sesso, e se si ritiene, come oramai non si osa più affermare, che il sesso sia causa di inferiorità e incapacità, perché allora la donna medico, la donna farmacista può avere in mano la vita del suo cliente e alla donna avvocato non si potrà affidare i suoi interessi patrimoniali e morali?—perché la donna intelligente, capace, che esercita il commercio non potrebbe essere nominata arbitra quando ne sono esclusi soltanto i minori, gli interdetti e i condannati non riabilitati? Incapaci, pazzi, delinquenti! Ecco la lusinghiera compagnia nell[a] quale il legislatore relega la donna troppo soventi […]! ("Una Conferenza" 25)

> I will spend no words about how unjust it is that a woman who has all the qualifications and diplomas deemed necessary by law for the exercise of a profession should be forbidden to do so solely on account of her sex, and if it is believed, as it is now no longer dared to be asserted, that sex is a cause of inferiority and incapacity, why then can a female doctor, a female pharmacist be allowed to hold her client's life in her hands and can a woman lawyer not be entrusted with her pecuniary and moral interests?—why couldn't the intelligent, capable business woman be appointed as arbitrator when only minors, interdicts, and unrehabilitated convicts are excluded? The incapable, insane, delinquents! Here is the flattering company in which the legislature too often relegates a woman […]!

Poët rightly observes that in the current legal system, female lawyers are being treated in the same way as convicted criminals or psychiatric patients. The female sex is associated not only with biological but also with intellectual inferiority, and therefore with the inability to perform almost any job properly (see Berardi; Loconsole; Babini et al.). Health care is just one of the few exceptions to this rule, since this was traditionally considered to be an appropriate job for women (see Nieva and Gutek). Indeed, nursing, just like teaching, was believed to be a natural extension of a woman's maternal duties and skills. As a result, teaching and nursing were considered to be respectable and socially acceptable jobs for women, since they were sufficiently related to their domestic responsibilities.

At first, it might seem odd to find these kind of politically charged statements on the pages of *La Donna*, because they stand in stark contrast with the more moderate—if not neutral—stance that the magazine generally adopted. In the mission statement of *La Donna*, its founder and editor-in-chief, Nino Giuseppe Caimi,[9] formally and openly stated that the magazine had no feminist aspirations[10] but rather aimed at "l'affermazione della personalità femminile attraverso gli echi svariatissimi delle estrinsecazioni dell'attività muliebre" ("the affirmation of the female identity through the varied echoes of female activity"; 3). Nonetheless, it is undeniable that the magazine approved of the activism of Lidia Poët, Teresa Labriola, and other female activists of the time. For example, in their preface to Poët's 1917 article, the editors wrote:

> Nell'accogliere nelle sue pagine integralmente la bella e profonda conferenza della Poët, *Donna* intende anche rendere omaggio di consenso e di ammirazione alla serena ed eloquente opera di

[9] Nino Giuseppe Caimi was born in Milan in 1876. A great sports enthusiast, in January 1902 he founded the supplement *La Stampa Sportiva* together with Cesare Goria Gatti (1860–1939). In 1923, after a journalistic career that lasted more than twenty years, Caimi decided to undertake a new professional challenge and became a successful advertising agent. During this time, Caimi was responsible for the introduction and promotion of numerous products and brands both in Italy and abroad, including Ford, Camel, Texaco, and Barilla. He died in 1952.

[10] In the mission statement of *La Donna* that was republished in the bicentenary issue of the magazine in April 1913, Caimi states that "*La Donna* vuole essere la Rivista preferita e indispensabile di ogni dama e fanciulla italiana. Avrà quindi forma corretta e castigata […] non sarà una rivista femminista" ("*La Donna* wants to be the preferred and indispensable magazine of every Italian lady or young woman. Therefore, it will have a correct and chastened form […] it will not be a feminist magazine"; 3).

> apostolato per ogni giusta rivendicazione femminile di questa sua illustra personalità che ci è caro rammentare collaboratrice preziosa e amica fedele di questa nostra Rivista. (Poët, "Una Conferenza" 22)
>
> In welcoming Poët's beautiful and profound lecture in its entirety to these pages, *Donna* also intends to pay tribute of approval and admiration to the serene and eloquent work of apostolate for every just feminine vindication of this illustrious personality, whom we are fond of as a precious collaborator and faithful friend of this magazine of ours.

Furthermore, in a comment on an interview with Teresa Labriola, in which she discussed the need for women's right to vote, the editors of *La Donna* clearly and openly stated that "a questa vasta e importante opera, *Donna* si propone di dedicare la sua attività, invocando l'aiuto di tutte le energie fattive del campo femminile italiano" ("to this vast and important work, *Donna* aims to devote her activity, invoking the help of all active energies within the Italian women's field; Testa 31).

These are just two examples—and there are many more—that demonstrate that the editorial board took an explicitly political stance, notwithstanding their initial declaration of neutrality. Indeed, it is striking how in the case of Lidia Poët, the statement of the magazine's editors went beyond a mere message of support. In this comment, Poët is depicted as an example for the magazine's readership and the Italian female population at large, but more importantly, as a long-standing ally of *La Donna*. If the magazine really desired to maintain a neutral position, one would expect the editors to distance themselves from Poët and her battle for professional and legal recognition. Instead, in the midst of this heated debate, *La Donna* decided to underline the importance of its partnership with someone who embodied the fight for women's rights in Italy. The same applies to Teresa Labriola, because she too had become a symbol of the continuous battle for women's social and political advancement.

Towards the abolition of marital authorization

As time passed, Lidia Poët's individual battle for professional recognition became part of a broader political agenda. Indeed, her activism assumed a more collective dimension as she turned her attention to broader issues regarding women's legal

and political position. In particular, both she and Teresa Labriola strove for the abolition of the *autorizzazione maritale* ("marital authorization"), a set of laws that considerably limited a woman's independence and prevented her from making any major or even minor decisions without her husband's consent.[11] To give an example, a woman could not exercise a profession or control her inheritance—she could not even subscribe to a magazine without male approval.[12] From a juridical point of view, the legal status of the Italian woman was comparable to that of a minor (Iannuzzi and Tammaro 28). The *autorizzazione maritale* was part of the *Codice civile del Regno d'Italia* (also known as the "Codice Pisanelli") that was enacted in 1865. The four articles (nos. 134–37) concerning marital authorization legitimated women's subordinate position in society and subjected them to male authority. Moreover, article no. 1743 stated that "la moglie non può accettare mandato senza l'autorizzazione del marito" ("a wife can't accept a mandate without the husband's consent"; *Codice civile del Regno d'Italia* 411). In other words, even if she had all the required qualifications and/or diplomas, a married woman could still be prevented by her husband from accepting a professional position and thus from pursuing a career outside the home. Poët and Labriola, alongside other public voices,[13] openly questioned the validity of such a discriminating and outdated system. However, despite the growing opposition to marital authorization among the female population, their protests did not immediately yield the reform they hoped for.

Paradoxically, it was the collective traumatic experience of the First World War that triggered a long-awaited legal revolution. During the conflict, a significant number of women joined the labour market, which allowed them, often

[11] For a detailed historical and juridical analysis of the *autorizzazione maritale*, see Bartoloni, *Cittadinanze*; Fioravanzo; Galeotti.

[12] For example, Tiziana Pironi observes that it was not uncommon to see copies of the feminist magazine *L'Alleanza* (*The Alliance*) returned to the editorial office when a woman's desire to subscribe to the magazine incurred her husband's disapproval.

[13] One of the most famous examples in this regard is the essay of Anna Maria Mozzoni (1837–1920), one of the first women's rights activists in Italy. In 1865, shortly after the *Codice civile del Regno d'Italia* was established, Mozzoni published *La donna in faccia al progetto del nuovo Codice civile italiano* (*The Woman Facing the Project of the New Italian Civil Code*), in which she heavily criticizes the Code's misogynist character and the "miserrime condizioni nelle quali è costretta la donna sotto l'impero del Codice vigente" ("the miserable conditions in which women are forced under the empire of the current Code"; 3).

for the first time, to assume responsibilities outside the domestic sphere.[14] Until then, women's entrance into the public sphere had been strongly opposed by men, which is why the Great War represented an opportunity of inestimable value for female emancipation. For the first time in the history of the young nation, Italian women were able to collectively show what they were capable of—an opportunity that in other circumstances would not immediately have presented itself. In her analysis of women's contributions to the war effort, Donna Paola, pseudonym of the well-known journalist and activist Paola Baronchelli Grosson (1866–1954), writes: "Chi avrebbe mai sognato sino a poco tempo addietro che la guerra, cioè quel complesso di fatti o attività che sembravano i più estranei alla capacità femminile sarebbe stato di tutti gli eventi della vita nazionale quello che più avrebbe messo in valore il contributo della donna?" ("Who would have dreamed until recently that war, that complex of facts or activities that seemed most alien to women's capabilities, would be of all the events in national life the one that would have highlighted most the contribution of women?"; Baronchelli Grosson 8).[15]

In turn, Lidia Poët and Teresa Labriola did not deny the cruelty of the conflict or the immense suffering that it caused to the innumerable soldiers who voluntarily joined the army and their families who lived in uncertainty and fear. Yet, they were fully aware of the fact that the war could set in motion the sociocultural (r)evolution they had been longing for. Once again they used the power of the periodical press to convey this belief to their female audience, each in her own way, but with the same objective: to liberate the Italian woman by removing all barriers that hinder her personal and professional development in the modern

[14] For more information about women's role and their contribution to the war effort, both in Italy and abroad, see, among others, Bartoloni, *Donne*; Boneschi et al.; Bravo; Braybon and Summerfield; Grayzel; Guidi; Lamarra; Molinari, *Donne*; *Una patria*; Belzer; Schiavon.

[15] Paola Baronchelli Grosson was born in Bergamo in 1866. She developed a fruitful career as a journalist collaborating with numerous periodicals such as *Vita Femminile Italiana*, *Almanacco della donna italiana*, *Gazzetta del Popolo*, and *Corriere dei Piccoli*. Convinced supporter of female emancipation, she often held conferences in which she critically analyzed and commented on the female condition. At the outbreak of the Great War, Baronchelli Grosson was on the side of the interventionists, since she strongly believed that women's mobilization would eventually result in more social and political rights. During this time, she published two crucial volumes highlighting women's crucial role in the war effort: *La funzione della donna in tempo di Guerra* (1915) and *La donna della nuova Italia: Documenti del contributo femminile alla Guerra* (1917). Under the Fascist regime her journalistic activities diminished. She died in Quarto dei Mille in 1954 (D'Alessio).

world. During one of her conferences, Poët looked back at an article that she wrote shortly before Italy's entry into the war on 24 May 1915, in which she stated the following: "Se dovrà anche l'Italia intervenire nell'immane conflitto, gli uomini al Governo come il popolo italiano vedranno le virtù delle donne nostre e ciò che domandiamo, insieme con altre riforme da tanto tempo chieste, ci sarà concesso senza che più occorra insistere" ("If Italy must also intervene in the immense conflict, the men in our government as well as the Italian people will see the virtues of our women; and what we demand, together with other reforms that we have been asking for so long, will be granted to us without having to insist any longer"; "Una Conferenza di Lidia Poët" 22).

After two years of war, Poët still stood by that statement. She was convinced that thanks to the perseverance, determination, and hard work of all Italian women, they had now accumulated enough proof to confirm that Italy's involvement in the war had allowed them to demonstrate their "alto valore" ("high value"), and that "la donna italiana è lontana da quel complesso di debolezza mentale e leggerezza morale che sembrava fosse stato sempre presente ai compilatori del codice Napoleonico dal quale I nostri legislatori copiarono […] le disposizioni riguardanti le donne" ("the Italian woman is far from that mental weakness and moral lightness that seemed to have always been present to the compilers of the Napoleonic code from which our legislators copied the provisions concerning women"; "Una conferenza" 22).

Lidia Poët's juridical argument

However, the aim of Lidia Poët's argumentation was not limited to the revendication of civil and political rights; she was also determined to demonstrate that all restrictive laws to which Italian women were bound did not have any cultural grounds and thus were impossible to justify. Indeed, men used to claim that the differences between the male and the female sex were historically determined by the evolution of the Roman law system, which still stood as the ultimate example for modern legislation. During the conference that she held in Turin in 1917, Poët explained why these claims have no ground truth, since parts of the Italian civil code relative to women's rights were actually imported from France[16] and, before that, from the north of Europe:

[16] The *Codice civile del Regno d'Italia* was strongly influenced by the *Code civil des Français* (or Napoleonic Code) that was established in France on 21 March 1804.

> L'Istituto dell'Autorizzazione maritale non è di origine latina. […] la matrona romana godeva di molta considerazione non solo, ma di diritti, ad esempio nell'esercizio di professioni, maggiori di quelli della donna attuale. Non nel *corpus iuris* romano quindi, ma nel *mundio* germanico, è da ricercarsi l'origine di questa istituzione, e perciò anche dovrebbe ora più che mai essere ripudiata! ("Una Conferenza" 23)
>
> The Institution of marital authorization is not of Latin origin. […] the Roman matron was not only held in high esteem but also enjoyed greater rights, for example in the exercise of professions, than women today. Not in the Roman *corpus iuris* but in the Germanic *mundio* can be found the origin of this institution, and therefore it should, now more than ever, be repudiated!

In other words, Poët argued that the marital authorization that so many Italian women resented did not originate in the Roman legal system, contrary to what men claimed. In a world where leading intellectuals propagated the superiority of Latin culture over its Germanic counterpart, the northern origin of the marital authorization had a very negative connotation and took on an even more negative meaning within the context of the First World War.[17] This allowed Poët to take her argumentation to the next level and state that because the marital authorization was of Germanic origin, its abolition had become inevitable.

From a rhetorical point of view, but also and especially from an ideological point of view, this was a decisive move, since she turned to nationalist culture and politics in order to support her feminist discourse. In other words, here we see the exceptional and even unexpected association between nationalism and feminism, which can be found in various women's magazines of the period.

Teresa Labriola's project of national regeneration and independence

In her numerous articles, Teresa Labriola also affirmed the necessity of liberating the Italian population from the Germanic oppression that weighed so heavily on the nation. Indeed, a significant number of Italian-speaking people still lived under Austro-Hungarian rule, especially in Trento and Trieste, and Labriola felt an urgent need to liberate them from Germanic cultural and political domination.

[17] On this topic, see, among others, D'Auria; Patriarca.

She urged her female readers to oppose this spiritual domination and to integrate resistance into their daily lives in such a way that even buying groceries could become an act of nationalism. In line with the institutional propaganda of the Italian government, women's magazines actively discouraged their female readers from buying goods of German origin. In the words of Labriola, purchasing German products was tantamount to "fornir piombo al nemico" ("supplying munition to the enemy"; "La guerra economica" 1). She also observed that "l'emancipazione tecnica ed economica […] è il momento di trapasso dall'asservimento […] alla reale indipendenza nazionale" ("the technical and economical emancipation […] is the moment of transition from subservience […] to real national independence"; 1). According to Labriola, it was absolutely crucial to cut all ties with Germany and to oppose spiritual resistance to the enemy in order to know real independence. Indeed, in one of her other articles, "Guerra germanica e libertà italica" ("German War and Italian Liberty"), that was published on the pages of *La Madre Italiana* (*The Italian Mother*) in September 1917, Labriola explained that it was not just a question of economic or material independence but also of intellectual and spiritual independence that would allow them to reach the "sfera superiore di libertà" ("superior sphere of liberty"; 22). Only then would Italy be truly free. It goes without saying that in this context, it would simply be unacceptable to retain laws that were established by the culture they all collectively resented.

Teresa Labriola took the discourse on women's liberation and its connection with the Great War even further by adding yet another ideological dimension to it. In an article that she published only six months after Italy's entry into the war, she observed that "nell'eroica follia, le donne han ritrovato sé stesse" ("in the midst of heroic madness, women have rediscovered themselves"; "Le nostre sorelle" 838). In this article, published on the pages of *La nostra rivista femminile* in November 1915, she explained that through this immense conflict, Italian women had finally found a real purpose in life and (re)discovered their true selves. It is interesting to observe how Labriola elaborated on the concept of the "guerra farmaco" ("pharmaceutical war") or "guerra riscatto" ("redemption war")—that is, the idea of the conflict as a transformative experience with a purifying effect that would put an end to a state of crisis and deterioration and pave the way for a new era with renewed national glory and prosperity.[18]

It is a recurrent theme in the numerous texts and articles that she published during the war—namely, the idea that the conflict would lead to liberation and

[18] On this topic, see Isnenghi; Gentile.

freedom: not only liberation from foreign rule but also and especially from their former, passive, and even immoral lives that had no real meaning or purpose. In that same article, Teresa Labriola stated: "liberarci dal passato […] rifarsi nel dolore, così volle questa società nostra, stanca della sua vacuità, tormentata dal dubbio" ("to liberate ourselves from the past […] to recover through the pain, that is what our society wanted, tired of its emptiness, tormented by doubt"; "Le nostre sorelle" 838). In other words, the Great War had become the symbol of a radical break with the past, a necessary evil that would finally put an end to the vanity of their lives from before the war (842). As a consequence, it is not surprising that she often refered to the post-war period as a new Renaissance, or "the hour of resurrection":

> Nuovo è lo spirito della grande guerra che ora insanguina la terra ed ha posto dinanzi a gli occhi una folla di problemi nuovi. […] Il valore della vita vien celebrato mediante uno scoppio enorme di violenza. Questo è il momento storico che può dirsi un'era di violenza ed insieme di espansione. Il comodo ottimismo e l'insignificante utilitarismo sono spazzati, e voi, gentilissime, contribuite a quest'opera, perché da voi vi siete fatte sorelle dei soldati d'Italia, nell'ora dell'aspettazione che pure è ora di risurrezione. ("La missione" 12–13)

> New is the spirit of the Great War, which is now covering the earth with blood and confronts us with a multitude of new problems. […] The value of life is celebrated through an enormous outburst of violence. This is the historic moment that can be called an era of violence and expansion at the same time. Convenient optimism and insignificant utilitarianism are swept away, and you, dear women, contribute to this work, for you have made yourselves sisters of the Italian soldiers, in the hour of expectation that is also the hour of resurrection.

According to Labriola, the liberation and subsequent resurrection of the Italian people could only become reality through collective suffering and the achievement of heroic deeds, which at first might seem problematic for Italy's female population. In her article "Le nostre sorelle della carità" ("Our Sisters of Charity") she noted that women have always been excluded from history since they never

had a real opportunity to participate in public life. She added that men also tried to exclude them from this conflict, since women still could not enlist in the army.

Triggered by this prohibition, and by growing frustrations due to the lack of an active role in the public sphere in general, women soon found their way to the Red Cross. First and foremost, they desired to disprove the stereotype of the emotional, impressionable, and less capable woman. In other words, they wanted to debunk the persistent image of the sensitive and fragile woman. Furthermore, by enlisting as nurses, they too could put themselves to the service of the nation, make sacrifices for the homeland, and witness the violence of war and its consequences with their own eyes. By doing so, they lived the same purifying experience as the soldiers on the front lines while creating a closer bond with those who sacrifice their lives for the future of the country. For the first time in Italian military history, men and women could be considered equals.

Yet, in Labriola's discourse, the role of nurse at the front took on an even greater significance. Indeed, she added that one of her most valuable tasks was to closely analyze "la peculiarità del temperamento italiano" ("the peculiarity of the Italian character"; "La missione" 14). This analysis was of crucial importance, since it allowed her to identify "alcuni lati manchevoli che van corretti, se l'Italia vuole aspirare sul serio alla condizione di potenza mondial" ("some shortcomings that must be corrected if Italy really aspires to the status of world power"; 14). In other words, it is a nurse's task to detect the wounded men's flaws so that these weaknesses can be eliminated and not affect future generations. This remark needs to be understood within a broader discourse on Italy's national identity, since the First World War was the first large-scale military conflict in which the Kingdom of Italy was involved that could potentially bring glory and international prestige to the young nation. Therefore, as is well known, the Great War was considered to be "la prova del fuoco degli italiani" ("the fire test of the Italians"; Mondini 7). These observations were an integral part of Teresa Labriola's strategy to legitimate the role of the Italian woman within modern society, since she is not only responsible for the household and the education of her children, but it is also her responsibility to prepare a new, stronger generation of Italians and thus to build a powerful and resilient nation that is ready to face the future, because in the end, to quote Lidia Poët, "[lo] Stato […] non è che la riunione di tutte le famiglie" ("[the] Nation […] is not more than the reunion of all the families"; "Il Consiglio" 12).

Concluding remarks

As this essay has shown, Lidia Poët and Teresa Labriola were two influential and prominent figures who played a pioneering role in the quest for women's rights in Italy. Thanks to the open-mindedness of their immediate environment, they had the opportunity to break through the traditional and strict boundaries set by society and its expectations around women's reproductive and care-giving role. Within the limits of the acceptable, they enjoyed much greater freedom than their female contemporaries, who were entirely dependent on the goodwill of their husbands. Even though some of their life choices were unconventional and heavily criticized in conservative circles, Poët and Labriola were groundbreaking women who should be remembered as two determined individuals who used their voices to challenge societal norms and foster lasting change. Being among the first Italian women to obtain law degrees, they showed that women were intellectually equal to men and could aspire to professional careers in a field that was traditionally considered a man's domain. With any significant change inevitably comes opposition, and it is fair to say that the commotion that Poët's and Labriola's registration to the Ordine degli Avvocati caused was symptomatic for a society in full evolution. The late nineteenth to early twentieth century was a time that saw the rise of the feminist and emancipation movements, both in Italy and abroad. Although these movements initially involved only a limited group of women, it was undeniable that the new century would bring new opportunities for change, and that more and more women desired public recognition for their potential and role in and outside the domestic sphere.

As previously shown, Lidia Poët and Teresa Labriola were very aware of societal dynamics and used their privileged positions to challenge conservative notions regarding women and their subordinate position, which they considered outdated and incompatible with the modern world. In other words, their focus extended beyond individual empowerment, as they emphasized the collective dimension of their battle. Indeed, Poët and Labriola did not only strive for their own professional recognition; they also fought for the acknowledgement of women's rights in general. Consequently, part of their mission was to instil a sense of value and consciousness in all women, and to let them feel actively involved in public life. By leveraging the power of the periodical press, Poët and Labriola played an instrumental role in promoting gender equality and women's social and political advancement. Therefore, it is not surprising that both women propagated the

abolition of the *autorizzazione maritale*, or "marital authorization," since this obsolete set of laws severely hindered women's social and political empowerment. In this context, notwithstanding its cruelty and destructiveness, the First World War proved to be a unique opportunity to advance their cause, since it allowed women to demonstrate their worthiness and great value for the nation. Drawing on war rhetoric and nationalist propaganda, Poët and Labriola succeeded in uniting both the feminist and nationalist discourses. Lidia Poët stated, for instance, that the outdated laws that regulated women's civil rights were not of Latin origin but rather stemmed from Germanic traditions, which evoked strongly negative connotations among the Italian population. In turn, Teresa Labriola instilled nationalist sentiments in her female readers by asking them to oppose spiritual resistance to Germanic influences and to reject anything that was not of Latin origin. In other words, within the context of the First World War, the unsurmountable contrast between Latin and Germanic cultures formed the basis of Poët's and Labriola's nationalist feminist discourse and thus of women's advancement.

Furthermore, the idea of the Great War as a purifying experience that would lead to the regeneration of the nation was one of the key concepts in their wartime publications, since it was easily transferable to the debate on women's rights. Highly relevant in this regard is again the collective dimension that emerges from this reasoning: united in pain, all Italian women prepare together as one the new era—a new, modern Italy that has been purified and is ready to become the society of tomorrow. In sum, Lidia Poët and Teresa Labriola were among those women who paved the way for one of the most significant societal revolutions in the history of Italy—a revolution that would eventually result in more civil and political rights for women, including the right to vote.

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