



# *Percy Bysshe Shelley's Italian Poems. Flotsam in the Canon, Fragments in a Corpus*

by Marco Canani

**ABSTRACT:** The concept of the literary canon has been extensively debated and questioned as the result of a process of critical negotiation including scholarly discourse as well as editorial and didactic practices. This complex network of cultural, social, and economic factors is also crucial to defining an author's own canon, that is, the body of works that best identifies a writer's authorial identity. With specific reference to English Romanticism, Percy Bysshe Shelley's works represent a relevant case in point, marked as they are by a long and established tradition of textual studies and critical editions. Interestingly, Shelley's notebooks dating to 1820-1821 include a number of poems and fragments written in Italian, either as original compositions or, more frequently, as attempts at self-translation. Until recently, Shelley's "Italian corpus" has received only marginal critical attention, viewed as best as a token of his infatuation with Emilia Viviani while he was living in Pisa. This article examines Shelley's Italian poetic corpus in order to discuss its relevance within his oeuvre, and it argues that these Italian fragments provide significant insights into the poet's readings and literary models between 1820 and 1821. Moreover, these texts testify to Shelley's constant exploration of, and engagement with, poetic conventions and poetic discourse. Viewed in this light, such "poetic flotsam" acquires new importance within Shelley's canon.

**KEY WORDS:** Percy Bysshe Shelley; British Romanticism; Anglo-Italian studies; self-translation; canon



The concept of the canon as a body of work identifying a specific literary tradition has been extensively debated and widely questioned. The multiple viewpoints concerning its boundaries, and the works that should constitute it, foreground the various elements that the very notion of canon embeds. As Gamer observes in his recent study of Romantic poetry, “self-canonization” and print culture, what every definition of the canon points to is a complex relationship between the past, embodied by the literary tradition, and the social, material, and economic factors that establish which texts become canonical in the present (Gamer 16-17).<sup>1</sup>

Surely, the idea of the canon rests on a process of critical negotiation that includes scholarly discourse as well as editorial and didactic practices. These factors are also crucial in order to define—and promote among readers—an author’s own canon, that is, the works that best identify a writer’s authorial identity. In this context, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s works represent an especially interesting case in point, marked as they are by a long and established tradition of textual studies and critical editions ever since Mary Shelley published her husband’s *Posthumous Poems* in 1824.<sup>2</sup> To borrow from the title of a volume edited by Weinberg and Webb, Romantic philology is currently bringing to light an “unfamiliar” Shelley, whose oeuvre includes poems and fragments that were neglected for a long time and have seldom appeared in annotated editions and anthologies.

As Weinberg convincingly illustrates, Shelley’s notebooks dating to the four years he lived in Italy, from March 1818 to July 1822, contain several draft fragments marked by a “discernible Italian character” (281). Weinberg’s primary concern is with poems and fragments that might be classified as “Italian” owing to their themes, characters, or places. These texts include Shelley’s 1818 “Tasso fragments,” the “Pisan sketches” that the poet composed in 1820, and his appropriation of the *topos* of the “donna ideale” in “Fiordispina” and “Ginevra” (1820-1821). These works, Weinberg concludes, have overall received scanty critical attention, mostly overshadowed by Shelley’s last Italian and incomplete poem, “The Triumph of Life” (1820). In addition to these “Italianesque” fragments, Shelley’s Pisan notebooks include a number of poems and poetic drafts that he wrote in Italian between December 1820 and the spring of 1821. These are either original compositions or, more frequently, attempts at self-translation. Moreover, in the same period he also wrote two prose texts in Italian, the review of a dramatic performance by the Italian stage improviser Tommaso Sgricci (1789-1836), and the allegorical tale “Una favola.”

Shelley’s first published Italian poem was “Buona Notte,” a self-adaptation or free translation of a poem that he had originally written for Sophia Stacey in 1819. Defining it “An Italian impromptu” (*Letters* 2: 660), Shelley sent it to Leigh Hunt in August 1821, possibly hoping that the poem would appear in *The Liberal*. However, “Buona Notte”

---

<sup>1</sup> In light of these complex dynamics, Even Zohar famously suggested replacing the notion of the literary canon with the concept of “literary polysystem,” which encompasses the political, social and cultural factors that determine which works are granted the status of canonicity (cf. Bibbò 248).

<sup>2</sup> After Shelley’s *Posthumous Poems* (1824), Mary Shelley also edited the four-volume *Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* in 1839, and the two-volumes *Essays, Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments* in 1840. On this point, see Behrendt.



was only published posthumously by Thomas Medwin. The poet's cousin included it, with his own English backtranslation, first in *The Angler in Wales, or, Days and Nights of Sportsmen* (1834, 1: 277) and then in his *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (1847, 2: 179). About thirty years later, "Una favola" appeared in Richard Garnett's anthology *Relics of Shelley* in 1862 (62-67; 67-73), accompanied by an English translation.

After the poet's death, Mary Shelley transcribed the fragment "Così la Poesia, incarnata diva" in one of her copybooks, which suggests she might have considered publishing Shelley's Italian corpus (Varinelli, "Accents" 257). Nevertheless, these texts remained neglected for nearly a century. Published in the *Revue de littérature comparée* in 1922, André Henri Koszul's article on the "Inédits italiens de Shelley" included the transcription of two passages from the poet's self-translations of *Prometheus Unbound* and *Laon and Cythna*. Koszul was evidently keener on presenting fragments until then unpublished than on providing a detailed critical analysis. Nevertheless, he was the first to suggest that the possible rationale for Shelley's decision to translate entire passages of his own work was his *liaison* with Teresa "Emilia" Viviani (1801-1836), whom the Shelleys had met in late November 1820. The nineteen-year old daughter of the Governor of Pisa had impressed them with a fabricated self-narrative that made her appear as the heroine of a Gothic romance. A student at a respectable boarding school, she claimed having been confined to the adjoining Convent of St. Anna by her father and stepmother, who were arranging her marriage to a rich suitor. Owing to this story of patriarchal oppression and injustice, Viviani immediately won the sympathies of Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont,<sup>3</sup> and she soon became the object of Percy's infatuation. Mary was most likely aware of her husband's romantic interest. However, after Viviani got married Shelley wrote to Byron in September 1821 that

My convent friend, after a great deal of tumult, &c., is at length married [...]. This whole affair has taught me to believe that convents may be well enough for young children, but that they are the worst possible places for them as soon as they begin to be susceptible of certain impressions. They have made a great fuss at Pisa about my intimacy with this lady. Pray do not mention anything of what I told you; as the whole truth is not known and Mary might be very much annoyed at it. (P.B. Shelley, *Letters* 2: 347)

Whatever the nature of Shelley's feelings for Viviani, the dates of composition of his earliest Italian fragments coincide with the period in which he was spending time with the young lady. This evidence indicates, or at least supports, the assumption that Shelley's decision to write poetry in Italian or translate passages from *Prometheus Unbound* and *Laon and Cythna* might have been prompted by his acquaintance with Viviani. In this regard, it should be remembered that in early 1821 he was also eagerly at work on *Epipsychidion*, which appeared anonymously in the same year with a dedication to Viviani as a noble soul unlawfully destined to a life in the convent:

VERSES ADDRESSED TO THE NOBLE  
AND UNFORTUNATE LADY  
EMILIA V —  
NOW IMPRISONED IN THE CONVENT OF — (P.B. Shelley *Poems* 4: 126)

---

<sup>3</sup> See Mary's letter to Leigh Hunt, 3 December 1820 (M. Shelley *Letters* 2: 163).  
*Saggi/Ensayos/Essais/Essays*  
Sc[Arti] – 01/2020



Koszul's hypothesis that Shelley's self-translations were originally conceived for Viviani was later embraced by Rogers in his now seminal study *Shelley at Work* (1956). Rogers, however, only collected a few examples of Shelley's "Italian corpus," without providing much commentary, in a two-page appendix at the end of the volume (342-343). With the exception of a few articles focusing on Shelley's self-translations (cf. de Palacio; Capelli), his Italian poetry has until recently remained largely unexplored. The inclusion of Shelley's Italian poems and prose texts in the fourth volume of the Longman edition of *The Poems of Shelley* (2014), and the two-volume Italian edition of Shelley's *Opere poetiche* and *Teatro, prose e lettere* (2018), published for the Mondadori series "I Meridiani," give new dignity to these writings.<sup>4</sup>

Although they are mainly scattered fragments, mostly—but not exclusively—composed for private circumstances, my contention is that Shelley's Italian poems should not be dismissed as mere poetic flotsam within his oeuvre. In this sense, I borrow Weinberg's claim to suggest that Shelley's Italian poetic compositions and self-translations "do form a network of related ideas," and should be viewed as "significant draft fragments in their own right, all embedded in a texture of ongoing creative thought and composition, and of response to the Italian 'world'" (Weinberg 282). On the one hand, Shelley's Italian poetry contributes to enhancing our knowledge of his readings and literary models between 1820 and 1821. On the other hand, these fragments testify to Shelley's constant exploration of poetic discourse and conventions. Moreover, they foreground his long engagement—and well-known dissatisfaction—with translation. Viewed from this perspective, such poetic flotsam acquires specific relevance within the Shelleyan canon.

## DEFINING PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY'S "ITALIAN CORPUS"

Before examining Shelley's Italian poetry, a crucial point is the definition of what might be viewed as Shelley's "Italian corpus." His writings in Italian amount to a body of miscellaneous poetics fragments, two prose texts and, for the sake of completeness, six letters, one addressed to Marianna Candidi Dionigi in 1819, and five to Emilia Viviani. All of his poetic fragments were composed within the span of a few months, between December 1820 and the spring or summer of 1821.

Regardless of the order in which they were written, Shelley's Italian fragments fall into four distinct groups depending on either his possible inspiration and rationale for writing or his writing method. In addition to his self-translations, three texts are original poetic compositions, one may be classified as a self-adaptation and one as an adaptation from Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale",<sup>5</sup> that is, a text he specifically conceived for his addressee, Emilia Viviani.

---

<sup>4</sup> Shelley's Italian prose writings and a selection of his self-translations were already included in Rognoni's 1995 Italian edition of Shelley's works (P.B. Shelley *Opere*). At present, Valentina Varinelli is working on a doctoral project at Newcastle University (2017-2021) for a new critical edition of Shelley's Italian corpus.

<sup>5</sup> Varinelli observes that Shelley's papers include two further Italian fragments. However, the dates of the notebooks in which they appear suggest that these are probably notes from some *improvvisazione* or imitation that Shelley had heard or read, because he was still hardly proficient in Italian at the time (Varinelli, "Appendice" 1536-1537).



PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY'S ITALIAN WRITINGS		
POETRY	Self-translations	from <i>Prometheus Unbound</i> (II, v, 48-110; IV, 1-55; 57-82) from <i>Laon &amp; Cythna</i> (Canto II, 667-698) from "To Sidmouth and Castlereagh" ("Come da una avita quercia") from "Ode to Liberty" ("Ode alla Libertà," 1-195; 271-285) from <i>Epipsychidion</i> ("Anima dolce, chi sei la sorella"; "Sul altare del nostro amore, Sorella")
	Original compositions	"E da la [?buona] che forse [?sfrenata]" "Dal spiro della tua mente, [è] istinta" "Così la Poesia, incarnata diva"
	Self-adaptation	"Buona Notte"
	Adaptations from other poets	"Che Emilia, ch'era più bella [a vedere]"
PROSE	Original compositions	Review of Tommaso Sgricci's performance of <i>La morte d'Ettore</i> "Una favola"

Table 1. Percy Bysshe Shelley's Italian writings, classified by genre and typology.

The most substantial group consists of self-translations, mostly from *Prometheus Unbound*, *Laon & Cythna*, and "Ode to Liberty." From his lyrical drama, Shelley translated the song "Life of Life" addressed to Asia in Act II (v, ll. 48-71), and the first 82 lines of Act IV, with the curious exception of the stichomythic exchange between lone and Panthea on line 56. From *Laon and Cythna*, he translated the first three stanzas and part of the fourth in Canto II. The manuscript of his translation of "Ode to Liberty" is also incomplete, but the central stanzas of the poem are probably missing because Shelley might have circulated it for publication. Finally, he began to translate his political poem "To Sidmouth and Castlereagh" (ll. 1-4) as well as *Epipsychidion* (ca. ll. 1-4), but he abandoned both projects after only four lines.

In the textual commentary to the facsimile edition of *Shelley's Pisan Winter Notebook, 1820-1821* (1992), Adamson suggested that these self-translations were possibly the result of a literary collaboration between the poet and Viviani. As Adamson observed, "it is tempting to envisage Shelley seated next to Viviani with his printed volumes and this notebook in front of them, while she guided and assisted him translating" (P.B. Shelley, *Shelley's* 58). However fascinating, this possibility is disproved by Shelley's recurring spelling and sometimes grammar mistakes, which would have been significantly reduced had he been collaborating with a native speaker. In addition, Mary Shelley's remarks on Viviani's education and talent for writing further debunk this idea. On 3 December 1820, she wrote to Leigh Hunt that the girl was not only "bellissima," but also endowed with "un gran'genio – chi scrive Italiana con un eleganza e delicatezza chi eguala i migliore autori della ~~migli~~ migliore età d'Italia" (*Letters* 1: 163).<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, Shelley's attempts at self-translation should not be taken as a token of his mastery of Italian, which was based more on his aptitude for languages and, one

<sup>6</sup> For a different view on Viviani's education, and her knowledge of Italian literature, see Varinelli, "Accents" 258.



might add, his readings than on proper study.<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding the role of Viviani, it should be remembered that he frequently translated into English both ancient and modern classics. From Greek, Shelley translated Plato's *Symposium* (1818) and *Ion* (1819?-1821), and from Latin a passage from Book IV of Virgil's *Georgics* (1818-1819). In 1822, he translated three scenes from Calderón de la Barca's *El mágico prodigioso* and two from Goethe's *Faust*. Moreover, he translated from Dante the episode of Matilda gathering flowers in the *Purgatorio* (Canto XXVIII, ll. 1-51), the first canzone in the *Convivio*, and the sonnet "Guido, i' vorrei che tu e Lapo ed io." Therefore, if Viviani might have been *one* of the reasons why Shelley decided to translate some of his works into Italian, it is also possible, as Braida remarks, that he was applying "his usual method of choice for learning a language, translation, to his own poetry" (127).

Shelley, however, was rarely content with translation—or, as he defined it in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), "the burthen of the curse of Babel" (*Poetry and Prose* 484)—and this dissatisfaction might well account for the fragmentary and inconsistent nature of his self-translations. As Varinelli observes, the poet's manuscripts bear evidence of long and multiple revisions. This *labor limae* is hardly compatible with the hypothesis that Shelley conceived his self-translations only for private circulation. Consequently, Varinelli views them as a sort of poetic *canovaccio*, samples of working translations that he might have conceived for the subsequent perusal of an Italian "versificatore." Around the same time, the Italian poet Vincenzo Monti, whose famous translation of the *Iliad* had appeared in 1810, seems to have been interested in assisting Byron in a similar project (Varinelli, "Accents" 1539). Although it remains a possibility, Varinelli's claim is consistent with Shelley's assertion, in the letter he sent to Thomas Love Peacock on 12 July 1820, on readability as "a quality much to be desired in translations" (*Letters* 2: 213).

Before examining Shelley's original compositions in Italian, some further considerations should be made. Focusing on the poet's self-translations, Capelli emphasizes their maieutic value and views them as a "silloge programmatica" (200), a body of writings that disclose the author's desire to provide Viviani with an idealized image of himself as a poet and a man. If true, the intimate implications embedded in Capelli's argument might be extended to his Italian corpus as a whole. Moving from these considerations, in the next sections I examine some instances of Shelley's Italian poetic corpus in order to discuss their relevance within his oeuvre. After focusing on his original compositions, I will discuss his attempt at translating Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" and, finally, his self-translation of "Ode to Liberty" (1821). Apart from Shelley's infatuation with Viviani, these works, as I intend to illustrate, demonstrate his interest in writers such as Dante and Petrarch, and reveal his commitment to contemporary Italian politics.

---

<sup>7</sup> In *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Medwin states that he had "often asked Shelley if he had never attempted to write [...] in Italian, and he showed me a sort of serenade ['Buona Notte'] which I give as a curiosity, — but proving that he had not made a profound study of the language, which, like Spanish, he had acquired without a grammar, trusting to his fine ear and memory, rather than to rules" (Medwin, *Life* 2: 178-179).



## SHELLEY'S ORIGINAL ITALIAN COMPOSITIONS

The earliest of the four original compositions that Shelley wrote in Italian, “E da la [?buona] che forse [?sfrenata],” is also the most problematic to discuss. It consists of only three lines, most likely composed between December 1820 and February 1821, two of which are hardly legible at present (*Poems* 4: 54). According to Adamson, this might be the fragment of a note that Shelley took with the intention of writing a letter to Viviani. However, the first word of each line is written in capital letters, which suggests that this piece might be the beginning of a poem that Shelley intended to compose in Italian (*Shelley's* 442).

This hypothesis is confirmed by Shelley's well-concocted use of syllables and accents in the only legible line, which confirms the poet's familiarity with the conventions of Italian metrics. “E da la [?buona] che forse [?sfrenata]” is an “endecasillabo a minore” with stresses on the fourth and the tenth syllables. Accordingly, the line consists of a *quinario* followed by a *settenario*, “E da la [?buona] || che forse [?sfrenàta].” Considering Shelley's careful construction of the verse, and the way he introduces a caesura according to the conventions of the Italian lyrical tradition, it is fairly reasonable to consider this fragment as the beginning of a poem subsequently discarded rather than a note.

The second fragment in this group, “Dal spiro della tua mente, [è] istinta,” is clearly an original composition. The draft presumably dates from the last few weeks of Shelley's life as it is included in “The Drowned Notebook” (*Poems* 4: 195), which was rescued months after the shipwreck of the poet's boat in 1822. Inasmuch as Shelley addresses at once the spiritual and the carnal aspects of his beloved's beauty, the first two stanzas recall the tropes of the *Stil novo* and its celebration of the ideal woman:

Dal spiro della tua mente, [è] istinta  
La chiara fronte, la labbra amorosa  
La guancia dal cadente sole tinta. —

Gli occhi, ove spento lampo posa  
Sono imagini dei tuoi; in tutto, [ ? ]  
Quella l'odor—tu la stessa rosa;  
La ombra al sostanza, —l'acqua al sete. — (P.B. Shelley, *Poems* 4: 197; ll. 1-7)

Shelley's praise of the “donna amata,” and his focus on the different parts of her visage, are arguably reminiscent of Petrarch's *Canzoniere*. According to Weinberg, Petrarch's “‘figural’ method of composition” in the sonnets to Laura left a significant trace in Shelley's depiction of Emilia in *Epipsychidion* (*Shelley's Italian Experience* 151). I suggest that the influence of *Canzoniere* can also be felt in “Dal spiro della tua mente” insofar as Shelley focuses on the single parts of Emilia's face in the first five lines of the poem. For example, in sonnet CCXX, “Onde tolse Amor l'oro, et di qual vena,” Petrarch shifts his focus from Laura's hair to her forehead and voice before eulogizing the woman's eyes and the light that enlivens them (Petrarca 222). Shelley follows a quite similar pattern as he moves from the forehead to the lips, cheeks, and eyes of the woman he celebrates in his lines. In addition to paying homage to the Italian lyrical tradition, his description is consistent with Medwin's remarks about Viviani in his *Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. After remarking the “rare faultlessness” (2: 63) of the girl's features



and statuesque elegance, Medwin emphasizes the sensuousness of her eyes and cheeks. To the poet's cousin, Viviani's visage significantly appears as a mirror of her soul and spirit, both of which, as in Shelley's poem, contribute to her pale demeanour:

[Viviani's] eyes had the sleepy voluptuousness, if not the colour of Beatrice Cenci [sic]. They had indeed no definite colour, changing with the changing feeling, to dark or light, as the soul animates them. Her cheek was pale, too, as marble, owing to her confinement and want of air, or perhaps, "to thought" (Medwin, *Life* 2: 64).

In their voluptuousness, Viviani's eyes remind Medwin of the melancholic visage of the sibyl depicted in the painting that Shelley and his contemporaries believed to be Guido Reni's portrait of Beatrice Cenci.<sup>8</sup> I would suggest that both Medwin's comment and Shelley's "Dal spiro della tua mente" are worth reading against the poet's description of the alleged portrait by Reni in the preface to *The Cenci* (1819). Shelley had especially remarked the "fixed and pale composure" of Beatrice's features, her "exquisitely delicate" face, and her "large and clear" forehead, which finds its equivalent in the "chiara fronte" mentioned in the Italian text. Moreover, Beatrice's visage appeared to him to be notable for the inward expressiveness of her eyes, which, though "swollen with weeping and lustreless," did not affect the girl's "beautifully tender and serene" countenance (P.B. Shelley, *Poems* 2: 735).

After this idealized description, the remaining part of "Dal spiro della tua mente" is marked by a well-defined change of focus. In the third, fourth, and fifth stanzas Shelley describes his amorous experience in terms of a desirable escape, listing a series of earthly experiences and feelings that he is willing to sacrifice to delight in the pleasures of love:

Dal cupo speco della passata  
Dal vano pentimento, e nero affanno  
Dal'alta speme mai non compiuta

Dai fantasmi che dal memoria vanno  
Inasprendo i sogni del'ora presente,  
O dalle ombre che il futuro anno

Getta davanti; dalla tema veniente,  
Dalla morte stessa, moriendo, fuggo;  
Amore mio, morte a morte consente. — (*Poems* 4: 197-198; ll. 8-16)

Among the various images that Shelley (or the voice speaking in the poem) is ready to escape from, the ghosts of memory haunting at once the present and the future are especially significant. As Rossington remarks (P.B. Shelley, *Poems* 4: 198), this image echoes a central passage in *A Defence of Poetry*. In discussing the epistemic function of poetry, and thus the role of the artist, Shelley claimed at the end of his poetical manifesto that

---

<sup>8</sup> On the alleged portrait of Beatrice Cenci that Shelley saw in Rome, and the Italian Baroque painter Ginevra Cantofoli as its possible author see Canani.





Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present, the words which express what they understand not, the trumpets which sing to battle and feel not what they inspire: the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World. (*Poetry and Prose* 508)

The ghosts and shadows that Shelley addresses in “Dal spiro della tua mente” coincide, in other words, with the elements that shape the identity of the poet, from memory to the ability of interrogating the essence of things. It is quite significant that in describing what he is willing to sacrifice for his erotic experience with Viviani to (ideally, at least) occur, Shelley mentions the same images that he resorts to in the *Defence* in order to foreground the constituting elements—and the social function—of poetry. The connection between these two works is all the more interesting in that he claims to be ready to renounce “the supreme hope that is never fulfilled” (“alta speme mai non compiuta”). If “speme” is meant as the attainment of poetic fame, this idealization of Viviani is only partly consistent with his definition of poetry as the expression of what is universal. On the one hand, Shelley’s insistence on Viviani’s features relates “particular facts” that might seem hardly compatible with poetry as “the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature.” On the other hand, this contradiction is resolved in Shelley’s claim that poetry should illustrate “whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature” (*Poetry and Prose* 485), which arguably include his platonic passion for Viviani.

Shelley further explores the connection between poetry and earthly passion in another poem he wrote in the same notebook, “Così la Poesia, incarnata diva.” Whether this fragment represents “an earlier portion” or a sequel to “Dal spiro della tua mente” (P.B. Shelley, *Poems* 4: 198), Shelley no longer seems to be willing to renounce poetry for the sake of his coveted erotic experience. All the same, he celebrates Viviani as a source of inspiration as she is saluted by the goddess Poesy:

Così la Poesia, incarnata diva  
Nelle spoglie antiche di pennello mortale  
Come snella barca [ ] ad altra riva  
Da Raffaele a te pervenne tale  
Che fu grande  
Ed in tuo sorriso [ ] le ale

E la tua mano la feci possente  
Di alzarsi al terzo sfera (P.B. Shelley, *Poems* 4: 199-200)

Although Viviani is not explicitly mentioned in these two texts, several allusions, as we have seen, suggest viewing her as their subject or addressee. At the same time, these fragments offer interesting elements in order to investigate Shelley’s poetical development, his literary models and readings during the last years of his life. It is precisely from this perspective that these texts acquire specific relevance within the Shelleyan canon.

In 1821, Shelley’s dedicated to Viviani *Epipsychidion*, a long meditation on the nature of ideal love that is highly indebted to Dante, whose work he had been reading eagerly since he arrived in Italy in 1818. During the four weeks he spent in Milan, he would frequently sit in a corner inside the Duomo to read the *Commedia* (*Letters* 2: 8),



and in Pisa he read the *Vita Nuova* and the *Convivio*. For Shelley, Dante's poetry was second only to Homer's in an ideal lineage connecting, as he explains in *A Defence of Poetry*, the ancient world to modernity. In the *Vita Nuova* he read "an inexhaustible fountain of purity of sentiment and language," and in the *Paradiso* he found "the most glorious imagination of modern poetry" (P.B. Shelley, *Poetry and Prose* 497).<sup>9</sup> Shelley's reading of Dante also surfaces in "Così la Poesia, incarnata diva." Particularly the comparison between the goddess Poesy and the movement of a "snella barca" (a "thin" boat) suggests a possible echo to the second canto of the *Purgatorio* (P.B. Shelley, *Poems* 4: 199-200). At the mouth of the Tiber, Dante and Virgil are waiting for the "angelo nocchiero," the angel escorting Christian souls to Purgatory on his "thin" and "light" boat:

Poi, come più e più verso noi venne  
l'uccel divino, più chiaro appariva:  
per che l'occhio da presso nol sostenne,

ma chinail giuso; e quei sen venne a riva  
con un *vasello snelletto e leggero*,  
tanto che l'acqua nulla ne 'nghiottiva. (Dante 3: 2, ll. 37-42; my emphasis)

The letter that Shelley wrote to Leigh Hunt on 20 August 1819 confirms that the simile through which he compares poetry to a "snella barca" is most probably a Dantesque allusion. After refuting the definition of Michelangelo as "the Dante of painting" because of his deficiency "in beauty and majesty both in conception & the execution," Shelley mentions Dante's description of the Angel Boatmen as one of the most poetical passages in the *Commedia*:

but if we find some of the gross & strong outlines which are employed in the most distasteful passages of the *Inferno*, where shall we find *your* Francesca, where the Spirit coming over the sea in a boat like Mars rising from the vapours of the horizon, where Matilda gathering flowers, and all the exquisite tenderness & sensibility & ideal beauty, in which Dante excelled all poets except Shakespeare? (P.B. Shelley, *Letters* 2: 112).

Over twenty years after the poet's death, the letter that Mary Shelley wrote to Hunt on 15 November 1844 further testifies to his appreciation of the second canto of the *Purgatorio*:

Can any thing be so wondrously poetical as the approach of the boat with souls from earth to Purgatory—Shelley's most favourite passage—The Angels guarding Purgatory from Infernal spirits—the whole tone of hope—& the calm enjoyment of Matilda is something quite unearthly in its sweetness [...]. (M. Shelley, *Letters* 3: 160)

As a last point concerning Dante's influence on Shelley's Italian fragments, it should be noted that "Così la Poesia, incarnata diva" closes with the lines "E la tua mano la feci possente / Di alzarsi al terzo sfera." The reference to the "third sphere" suggests an allusion to Dante's cosmological views as he outlined them in the *Paradiso*. According to Dante, Paradise was divided into nine concentric celestial spheres—which he associated with the four cardinal virtues (Prudence, Justice,

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of Dante's influence on Shelley see Braidà 95-127.



Temperance, and Fortitude) and the three theological virtues (Faith, Hope, and Charity)—and the Empyrean, the abode of God. In the *Paradiso*, the third sphere is described as the heaven of Venus, the goddess of love, and as such it is home to the souls who distinguished themselves in life for their love of God and humankind. The paratext of *Epipsychidion*, as already discussed, reveals both Shelley's knowledge of Dante's cosmological views and his desire to express in an idealized form his passion for Viviani. In addition to dedicating the poem to Emilia, in the "Advertisement" to the reader he acknowledges his debt to Dante's *Vita Nuova* and one of his *Rime*, the canzone "Voi che 'ntendendo il terzo ciel movete" (*Poems* 4: 129). Although briefly and somehow abruptly included at the end of "Così la Poesia, incarnata diva," the reference to the third heaven should reasonably be viewed as a proof of Shelley's passion for Viviani, as well as an indication of his Dantesque readings at the time.

### SHELLEY'S ADAPTATION OF CHAUCER

Written between December 1820 and February 1821, the fragment "Che Emilia, ch'era più bella [a vedere]" further testifies to Shelley's passion for Viviani and his multiple literary interests while he was living in Pisa. The surviving text consists of only three lines:

Che Emilia, ch'era più bella [a vedere]  
Che il giglio bianco sul suo verde stelo  
E più fresca che la Maia quando (*Poems* 4: 53)

From a linguistic perspective, this fragment is a quite faithful translation of three lines from Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" (ll. 1035-1037):

Than Emelye, that fairer was to sene  
Than is the lylie upon his stalk greene,  
And fressher that the Mey with floures newe —

According to Rossington, this fragment might be the beginning of a poem written in *terza rima* (*Poems* 4: 53), which suggests considering these lines as an adaptation, rather than an actual translation, from *The Canterbury Tales*. Albeit fascinating, this hypothesis is difficult to ascertain as the last line is seemingly incomplete. For certain, the first two confirm Shelley's knowledge of Italian prosody. As in the case of "E da la [buona] che forse [sfrenata]," he composes two hendecasyllables "a minore" in which the last unstressed syllable of the *quinario* is the first of the following *settanario*. Moreover, Shelley introduces a synaloepha at the beginning of both lines. According to the conventions of spoken Italian, the first line consists of thirteen syllables, which are reduced to eleven owing to the two synaloephas coalescing the vowels in the first and the eighth syllables, "Che E | mi | lia | ch'é | ra || più | bel | la a | ve / dé | re." The beginning of the following line replicates the same sound effect, "Che ll | gi | glio | bian | co || sul | suo | ver | de | sté | lo." Left incomplete, the last surviving line reads instead as a ten-syllable verse.

This is the only Italian fragment where Shelley explicitly addresses "Emilia," to whom he dedicated an unfinished poem written in English, titled "To E\*\*\* V\*\*\*," in



March of the same year. Apart from the poet's infatuation, the name Emilia does not only suggest his reading of Chaucer, but also his knowledge of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Teseida delle Nozze di Emilia* (1339-1341). Discussing the influence of Boccaccio in *Epipsychidion*, Viviani della Robbia argued that Shelley was possibly drawn to *Teseida* in that it provided him with a poetical representation of Teresa Viviani. Like the young Pisan lady, the heroine of the poem, whose name is Emilia, was contended by two noble suitors, Palemone and Arcita. The similarities between *Teseida* and Viviani's fabricated story of patriarchal oppression and imprisonment might explain why Percy and Mary fondly renamed her "Emilia" (Viviani della Robbia 185).

Notwithstanding Shelley's possible intention of translating a longer section of Chaucer's tale, or adapting the original text so as to experiment with the Italian metrical conventions and rhyme schemes, what he bequeathed to us seems to be a *billet doux* for Viviani. Albeit an impressionistic possibility, this type of adaptation is compatible with at least one of his attempted self-translations of *Epipsychidion*. Conflating the first four lines of the poem,<sup>10</sup> Shelley seems to be paying homage to Viviani as he platonically salutes her as his sister: "Sul altare del nostro amore, Sorella / Ti [offerisco] questi pallidi fiori" (*Poems* 4: 187).

#### SHELLEY'S SELF-TRANSLATIONS, BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC CIRCULATION

Not all the poetic fragments that Shelley wrote in Italian were composed for Viviani. Unlike his self-translations from *Prometheus Unbound*, *Laon and Cythna*, and *Epipsychidion*, he most likely conceived "Ode alla Libertà" for public circulation in that it shares the political tone and the strong radical intent of the English original. Whereas Rogers (342) still read in the Italian version of "Ode to Liberty" Shelley's desire to educate Viviani on freedom and democracy in the context of the contemporary uprisings in Spain and Naples, the surviving sections of the ode reveal, as Varinelli observes, a careful command of the language, and thus the possible revision of a native speaker. If Shelley had intended it for publication, this would explain why the stanzas in which he prompts Italy to action are now missing. It is plausible to infer that he might have circulated those portions of the poem among potential editors (Varinelli, "Appendice" 1540). According to Rossington, Shelley possibly conceived "Ode alla Libertà" for publication in a Florentine newspaper—either the *Gazzetta di Firenze* or G. P. Viesseux's recently launched *Antologia*, which often featured translations of poems by European writers. Moreover, Shelley might have been inspired by the examples of contemporary libertarian odes such as Vittorio Alfieri's *Odi per l'America libera* (1781–1783) and Ugo Foscolo's "A Bonaparte liberatore" and "Ai novelli repubblicani" (1797; cf. Rossington 241).

Whatever Shelley's intentions, his apology of libertarian revolutions would have found significant resistance against publication in post-Napoleonic Italy. As in the

---

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Epipsychidion*, ll. 1-4: "Sweet Spirit! Sister of that orphan one, / Whose empire is the name thou weepst on, / In my heart's temple I suspend to thee / These votive wreaths of withered memory" (P.B. Shelley, *Poems* 4: 131-132).



English original, the poet traces the progress of liberty beginning with the celebration of the Spanish uprisings in 1820:

Un popolo glorioso vibrava di nuovo  
Il fulmine delle nazioni. Libertà  
Da core a core, da torre a torre, a traverso la Spagna  
Spargendo per l'aere contagiosa luce,  
Balenò.—Mia anima spezzava i ceppi del suo timore,  
E si vestì esultante e fiera  
Colle piume rapide di armonia  
Battendo l'ale in canto sopra l'usata preda,  
Come una aquila se ruota fra le mattutine nuvole. (P.B. Shelley, *Poems* 4: 99; ll. 1-9)

Only two sections of "Ode alla Libertà" have survived, the first thirteen stanzas, amounting to 195 lines, and the conclusion, from line 271 to line 285. Unfortunately, the passages that are missing from the manuscript include Shelley's plea for action against foreign domination over Italy, whose people should take pride in the glorious past of the country:

And thou, lost Paradise of this divine  
And glorious world! thou flowery wilderness!  
Thou island of eternity! thou shrine  
Where desolation, clothed with loveliness,  
Worships the thing thou wert! O Italy,  
Gather thy blood into thy heart; repress  
The beasts who make their dens thy sacred palaces. (*Poetry and Prose* 234; ll. 204-210)

What this brief examination suggests is that Shelley's Italian poems and poetic fragments should not be seen as marginal texts or exercises conceived at best for private circulation. They shed light on biographical facts, such as Shelley's infatuation with Emilia Viviani, but they also testify to his development as a poet and as a reader between 1820 and 1821. They point to the role of Dante and, to a lesser extent, Petrarch in Shelley's poetic maturity. Moreover, they confirm his political engagement and indicate his possible plan to collaborate with Italian newspapers and periodicals other than Leigh Hunt's *The Liberal*. From this perspective, Shelley's Italian corpus should not be viewed as "flotsam" in the poet's canon. To borrow Rognoni's words, his Italian writings rather represent a personal, if not exactly intimate, anthology (P.B. Shelley *Opere* 1806). A poetic introduction, in other words, to the last two years in the poet's life.

## WORKS CITED

Alighieri, Dante. *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*. Edited by Giorgio Petrocchi, Le Lettere, 1994.

Behrendt, Stephen C. "The History of Shelley Editions in English." *The Reception of P.B. Shelley in Europe*, edited by Susanne Schmid and Michael Rossington, Continuum, 2008, pp. 9-25.



Bibbò, Antonio. "Canone e canoni." *Letterature comparate*, edited by Francesco De Cristofaro, Carocci, 2014, pp. 227-256.

Braida, Antonella. *Dante and the Romantics*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Canani, Marco. "The Cenci, or the Complex Reception of Percy Bysshe Shelley in Italy, between Translation and Gender." *Worlds of Words: Complexity, Creativity, and Conventionality in English Language, Literature and Culture*, vol. 2, edited by Roberta Ferrari, et al., Pisa University Press, 2019, pp. 175-188.

Capelli, Roberta. "Le autotraduzioni di Shelley per amore di Teresa: frammenti di un'autobiografia poetica ideale." *Scrittori stranieri in lingua italiana dal Cinquecento ad oggi. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Padova 20-21 marzo 2009*, edited by Fulvio Brugnolo, Unipress, 2009, pp. 199-214.

de Palacio, Jean. "Shelley traducteur de soi-même." *Revue des Sciences humaines*, vol. 40, no. 158, 1975, pp. 223-244.

Gamer, David. *Romanticism, Self-canonization, and the Business of Poetry*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Garnett, Richard, editor. *Relics of Shelley*. Edward Moxon, 1862.

Koszul, André. "Inédits italiens de Shelley." *Revue de littérature comparée*, vol. II, 1922, pp. 471-477.

Medwin, Thomas. *The Angler in Wales, or, Days and Nights of Sportsmen*. Richard Bentley, 1834. 2 vols.

---. *The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Thomas Cautley Newby, 1847. 2 vols.

Petrarca, Francesco. *Canzoniere*. Edited by Ugo Dotti, 6th ed., Feltrinelli, 2003.

Rogers, Neville. *Shelley at Work. A Critical Inquiry*. 2nd ed., Clarendon Press, 1967.

Rossington, Michael. "'The destinies of the world': Shelley's reception and transmission of European news in 1820-21." *Romanticism*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2007, pp. 233-243.

Shelley, Mary. *Letters*. Edited by Betty T. Bennett, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980-1988, 3 vols.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *Letters*. Edited by Frederick L. Jones, Clarendon Press, 1964, 2 vols.

---. *Opere*. Edited by Francesco Rognoni, Einaudi-Gallimard ("Biblioteca della Pléiade"), 1995.

---. *Opere poetiche*. Edited by Francesco Rognoni, in collaboration with Valentina Varinelli, Mondadori ("I Meridiani"), 2018.

---. *Shelley's Pisan Winter Notebook, 1820-1821. A Facsimile of Bodleian MS Shelley adds. e. 8*. Edited by Carlene A. Adamson, Routledge, 1992.

---. *Poetry and Prose*. Edited by Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, W. W., Norton & Company ("Norton Critical Editions"), 1977.

---. *Teatro, prose e lettere*. Edited by Francesco Rognoni, in collaboration with Valentina Varinelli, Mondadori ("I Meridiani"), 2018.

---. *The Poems of Shelley. Volume 2, 1817-1819*. Edited by Kelvin Everest and Geoffrey Matthews. Routledge ("Longman Annotated English Poets"), 2014.

---. *The Poems of Shelley. Volume 4, 1820-1821*. Edited by Michael Rossington, et al. Routledge ("Longman Annotated English Poets"), 2014.

Varinelli, Valentina. "'Accents of an Unknown Land': Percy Bysshe Shelley's Writings in Italian." *European Romantic Review*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2019, pp. 255-263.



---. "Appendice: Versi Italiani." Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Opere poetiche*, pp. 1536-1549.

Viviani della Robbia, Enrica. "Shelley e il Boccaccio." *Italica*, vol. 36, no. 3, 1959, pp. 181-197.

Weinberg, Alan M. *Shelley's Italian Experience*. Palgrave Macmillan, 1991.

---. "Shelley's Italian Verse Fragments: Exploring the Notebook Drafts." *The Neglected Shelley*, edited by Alan M. Weinberg and Timothy Webb, Ashgate, 2015, pp. 281-306.

Weinberg, Alan M., and Timothy Webb, editors. *The Unfamiliar Shelley*. Ashgate, 2009.

---

**Marco Canani** teaches English Language and Literature at Università degli Studi di Milano and Université de la Vallée d'Aoste. He received his PhD in 2015 with the dissertation *Vernon Lee and the Italian Renaissance: Plasticity, Gender, Genre*, a study based on archival research conducted at Colby College (USA) and the University of Oxford. He is a member of the Interuniversity Centre for the Study of Romanticism at the University of Bologna, and of the Research Centre "Romanticismo and Romanticismi" at the University of Milan. Canani's research interests include Romantic poetry, Anglo-Italian studies, and gender studies. In addition to various articles on John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Vernon Lee, Judith Kerr, and A. J. Cronin, he has published the volumes *Ellenismi britannici. L'ellenismo nella poesia, nelle arti e nella cultura britannica dagli augustei al Romanticismo* (2014) and *Introduzione allo studio della letteratura inglese* (2017, with F. Chiappini and S. Sullam).

[marco.canani@unimi.it](mailto:marco.canani@unimi.it)