

Over her Dead Body: The Subversion of Feminine Beauty in La Scapigliatura

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Abstract

Within the canon of Italian literature, there is but a small pool of research on the archetypical avant-garde movement of La Scapigliatura, especially in how this circle of unique circle of artists especially their authors and poets, depicted female characters within their works. In fact, there is a dominating view that the portrayal of women presented by the Scapigliati in their works is incredibly misogynistic in nature and was inspired by the “fear of women” that was commonly felt by male artists in the mid 1800’s. However, this undergraduate thesis attempts to uncover the true nature of the women within the Scapigliatura. For many, their tragic ends and grotesque appearances in life came to represent the rebellious nature of the Scapigliati within Post-Risorgimento Italian society, thus reclaiming the abject as their ideal woman and standard of beauty in bold contrast to the literary model of the Risorgimento and Alessandro Manzoni before them. This leads to a conclusion that the Scapigliati, especially Iginio Ugo Tarchetti, used their fiction to break down the gender roles imposed harshly by the reality of society, in a subversion and gendered reconstruction of Rousseau’s state of nature. It is through the Scapigliatura that female characters can be more than a modest beauty of the Manzonian historical novel narrative. They are allowed to be real women who are ugly and decaying in both beauty and moral inclinations as a mirror of the reality around the Scapigliati during a time of cultural and political uncertainty.

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Introduction

Romanticism, History, and the Unification of the Italian Nation

Scholars in the humanities have attempted to both define and comprehend the all-encompassing intellectual movement of Romanticism that swept through Europe towards the end of the 18th century, and while the task has proven to be difficult by many, what is important to note about Romanticism, as Sir Isaiah Berlin expresses in his lectures, “The Roots of Romanticism,” is that “...it is the largest recent movement to transform the lives and the thought of the Western world” (Berlin 1). Writers of the Romantic era even began to view history in a new way, working within the genre of historical fiction as a means to “reach a higher truth than one based on a reading of the documentary evidence alone” (Martin 10). It is important to note the lineage that lead to the development of the Romantics’ new view on history, as historian John Jeffries Martin, begins to explain this phenomenon by looking at the role history served for the state and its people during Europe’s early modern period. During this period from the high Renaissance to the Enlightenment, history had been viewed as a means to study the past (especially the classical past) in order to teach and guide oneself in how they should behave in the present in regard to their public life and at a grander scale how the state should be ruled as well.¹ However, this view of history as one’s teacher for how to live in the present was demolished by the unbridled chaos spawned by both The French Revolution and The Napoleonic

¹ Martin continues by saying that history during this early modern period was known as *magistra vitae*, or a teacher of how to live. In that one did not read Livy or Tacitus to merely learn about the ancient world, but to also learn about and better understand one’s own time, in the present.

Wars, in that the present had been mutated into something so violent and unpredictable that no model of the past could provide relief and advice amidst these present conflicts (Martin 10).

Thus, history became solely a study of the past with no obligations to be studied as a guide for the present.

However, despite the destructive nature of the French Revolution and later the rise of Napoleon, intellectual progress had not been put to rest amongst times of great turbulence, in fact throughout Europe nationalistic sentiments were taking root and being discussed at large.² Such nationalistic sentiments were especially potent and well received by people of nations like Italy, that at the time were fragmented and ruled by foreign powers. Many Italians began to earnestly long for independence and a unified nation of their own. Italian nationalism was put into motion through the political movement of the Risorgimento (Also known as the Resurgence, in English) after the downfall of Napoleon and finally concluded with the unification of the Italian nation in 1861 (Wilkins 388). And while the Risorgimento was made possible by many important political and military figures such as: Giuseppe Garibaldi, Giuseppe Mazzini, and The Count of Cavour, another key protagonist in the effort to unify the nation was the highly regarded author, poet, and Italian Romantic Alessandro Manzoni accompanied by his great historical novel *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*).

² Martin mentions how in France “the Revolution had enshrined the ideal of la Nation – the Nation – as the source of political authority, with sovereignty no longer vested in dynastic monarchy but rather in propertied, male citizens who would choose their own rulers” and that by the time of the Napoleonic Wars, “as Napoleon toppled regimes from the Mediterranean to the steppes of Russia, new nationalist sentiments rose to the surface all across the continent and even abroad” (3).

Chapter 1

The Desolation of Manzoni's Risorgimento and the Birth of The Scapigliatura

The setting of *I promessi sposi* can, in parts, be seen as a revival of the early modern European tradition of viewing history and its narratives alongside the current events of the present. Manzoni chose to write about the region of Lombardy during its occupation by the Spanish in the 1600's, a historical situation that best paralleled the state of Northern Italy during the time that Manzoni wrote the novel, with the exception that the ruling foreign power was Austria instead of Spain. However, the novel Manzoni wrote was not one of pure history, as Martin notes Manzoni incorporated the sympathies of Romanticism to create a historical narrative which was structured by objective facts and enlivened by the inclusion of fictional elements like characters and their interactions within the story. The fiction was Manzoni's means to "capture the inner wellsprings of the actions of individuals in past times and to recreate a sense of their fears, their hopes, and their anxieties" (Martin 10). Thus, Manzoni's efforts merged to create an immersive piece of historical fiction that arguably aided Italians in envisioning the unification of their nation through historical parallels and relatable main characters.

Despite initial controversy, Manzoni centered the story of *I promessi sposi* around the betrothed, modest peasants, Renzo and Lucia, who come into conflict with nobles and the aristocracy throughout the novel.^{3 4} Manzoni's reasoning behind this, I suggest, is to appeal to an ordinary reader, in that the unification of a nation is not solely up to the cooperation of parties at

³ One early reader of the novel was quoted by journalist Niccolò Tommaseo in expressing that "this was a dangerous book, since the peasants come off better than the nobles," a sentiment shared by many readers at the time (Tommaseo, Vieusseux 115).

⁴ In fact, the driving conflict of the story is that Lucia and Renzo's marriage is broken up by the sinister local feudal lord, Don Rodrigo, who desires to have Lucia for himself.

a political level. What remains outside of the upper classes and those in privileged places of power within the government are the commoners and everyday people who make up the nation at its most basic level and ensure that society functions smoothly from the ground up. As political scientist Benedict Anderson states: “citizens must be able to imagine themselves as belonging to a national community,” a demand that Manzoni responds to by creating the narrative of *I promessi sposi* as a tool to unify the fledgling Italian nation at a cultural level. (Anderson 25). And so through its sympathetic and understandable setting and characters, *I promessi sposi* fostered a spark of Italian nationalism and gave Italians a sense of unity through a shared past history as depicted in the novel.

However, this spark began to fade not long after the nation had been finally unified, as the new kingdom in its infancy (1861-64) struggled to live up to the hopeful image of the Risorgimento that its supporters had championed. Instead, the Italian people found themselves living in a unified yet weakened state that offered them only a feeble reassurance of stability, as revolts broke out throughout the South, more and more Italians came to realize that their wars for unity had “cost more in money than in blood” further damaging the prosperity of the young nation and its future generations (Smith 65).⁵ ⁶ It was common during these times, as historian Denis Mack Smith explains, for danger on occasion to be so imminent that the king (Vittorio Emanuele II) was expected to renounce the throne at any moment (Smith 64). And thus, from the turmoil and widespread disaffection that battered a post-Risorgimento Italy, emerged the nation

⁵ The insubordination of some Southern provinces was grave enough to require an army occupation of 90,000 troops in these areas in order to stifle further outbursts (63).

⁶ Smith writes that the Risorgimento had provoked a naive expectation that “political change would suddenly release a great store of hidden wealth, but in fact it had only accustomed Italians to spending more than they could afford” (65).

of Italy's first avant-garde movement, known as The Scapigliatura. Italian scholar, Enrico Cesaretti, writes that during this time period many artists searched for a new identity within this rapidly changing society. However, regarding the Scapigliati, Cesaretti notes that: "[the Scapigliati found] an inability to accept the newly-founded identity of their country, one whose reality paled in comparison to the dreams and promises of the Risorgimento" (Cesaretti 140). The Scapigliati's dissatisfaction with the Italian nation was further exacerbated by the waning regional power and cultural individuality of Lombardy, caused by a centralization of political power within the new capital of Rome. Thus, the Scapigliati pursued an unorthodox lifestyle on the fringes of society within the city where most of their work was published, Milan.

The term *Scapigliatura* was chosen by writer Cletto Arrighi to characterize the literary and cultural ideals set forth by his fellow Scapigliati: Iginio Ugo Tarchetti, Camillo and Arrigo Boito, Carlo Dossi, Emilio Praga, and others. Arrighi himself discloses that he selected the term because he wished to express new ideas with aged and scarcely used words, a sentiment that defines a crucial feature of what the Scapigliati desired to accomplish in their work.⁷ This artistic objective was frequently intertwined with the Scapigliatura's general aim to differentiate the movement from the past literary school of nationalistic Romanticism, that was upheld by its key contributor, Manzoni. The work of Manzoni thus formed a basis for the Scapigliati's malaise as being the first generation of artists to come of age in the united nation of Italy. This was nation that could not even provide them with a concrete sense of identity, let alone a role in society to

⁷ Arrighi writes in *Introduzione, Prologo, e Presentazione: La Scapigliatura, Romanzo Sociale Contemporaneo*, a brief but pivotal reason for his selection of the term Scapigliatura which would go on to define the movement "cerca e ricerca, finalmente trovai una parola una parola acconcia al caso mio; perché, s'ha un bel dire, ma la nostra lingua, per chi la vuol frugare un po' a fondo, non manca proprio di nulla, e sa dar a un bisogno parole vecchie anche per idee nuove" (Del Principe, *Rebellion* 138).

occupy as artists. This was in marked contrast to Manzoni, whose work received praise and acceptance as a part of the Risorgimento.

Such frustration and a drive to dissent from all which signified the Risorgimento and the disappointment that was unified Italy is clearly expressed in Emilio Praga's poem *Preludio* (Prelude) as Praga penned what can be interpreted as the Scapigliatura's motto, as the poem begins with the establishing lines: "noi siamo i figli dei padri ammalati; aquile al tempo di mutar le piume" (Praga lines 1-2)⁸. Praga took a bold stance with the opening pronoun of the poem "noi", which unified the Scapigliati as the descendants of the past artistic and literary tradition of the Italian Romantics. The movement of the Scapigliatura called forth change, symbolized by the imagery of eagles shedding their feathers as the Scapigliati stray from the past and enter the murky future as ailing individuals. The poem then continues a few stanzas further on, with: *casto poeta che l'Italia adora...O nemico lettor, canto la Noia, l'eredità del dubbio e dell'ignoto*" which finally makes reference to Manzoni as the chaste poet whom Italy loves (Praga lines 13 & 17-18).⁹ By contrast, the Scapigliati do not write poems that praise *Il vero*¹⁰ as Manzoni argued that all literature should uphold. Instead, all the Scapigliati can write about and express is "la Noia" (the Boredom) through their heritage of doubt and the unknown spawned from the

⁸ Patrizia Bettella translates these lines in her article *The Debate On Beauty and Ugliness in Italian Scapigliatura and Baudelaire* as "We are the sick children of our fathers; / eagles at the time to shed our feathers" (79).

⁹ "chaste poet whom Italy adores...O reader, enemy, heritage of doubt and of the unknown" (Bettella 79).

¹⁰ Manzoni is famously quoted for saying that literature and poetry must "in genere, debba proporsi l'utile per iscopo, il vero per soggetto, e l'interessante per mezzo" (*Lettera* 505). There is still debate as to what Manzoni means when he refers to *Il vero*, however it is logical to conclude that anything found in literary works which is useless, false, and harmful such as that of great boredom "La noia" must not be *Il vero* and should be rejected by Manzoni's standards.

haphazard unification of the nation. *Preludio* acts as a direct response to Manzoni, in that the Scapigliati have chosen to subvert his ways of writing, with Manzoni's work serving as a basis for literary discourse rather than being simply influenced by it.

1. Manzoni's Lucia and Gertrude: The Origin of the Scapigliati's "Ravaged" Beauty

An important dialogue between Manzoni and the Scapigliatura can be found in how female characters within literary works are portrayed. This dialogue is best observed through the interaction between the primary female characters: Lucia and the nun of Monza, Gertrude, from Manzoni's previously mentioned historical novel *I promessi sposi*, which the Scapigliati all read and critiqued in various degrees throughout their literary careers.¹¹ Within the story, Lucia is described as a shy and reserved peasant girl who is devoted to doing the right thing in the face of adversity, as her character clearly represents a morally good and chaste woman befallen by a tragic event. In contrast, when Lucia first catches a glimpse of Gertrude upon arriving at the nun's convent in order to seek protection, Gertrude is physically separated from Lucia by "two big, thick, iron gratings" ("due grosse e fitte grate di ferro"). This separation, which literary scholar Verina R. Jones suggests, denotes Gertrude as a "glamorous, mysterious, tormented beauty, unlike Lucia's own 'modest beauty'" (Jones 213). Silvia Valisa also picks up on this contrast between the two women in her chapter on gender in *I promessi sposi* and concludes that Gertrude embodies the archetype of the classic "dark lady," who commands her feminine sexuality while being a figure of danger and violence for naive female characters like Lucia (Valisa 783).

¹¹ Cletto Arrighi wrote a parody of *I promessi sposi*, titled *Gli sposi non promessi*.

Interesting enough, the characteristics of Gertrude's beauty and persona as both Jones' "tormented beauty" and Valisa's "dark lady," play into the aesthetics of the Scapigliatura. For example, Gertrude is described as having "una ciocchettina di capelli neri" ("a lock of black hair") which her veil cannot contain, representing a divergence from the conservative and chaste and towards an alluring feminine sexuality (Manzoni, *PS* 157). The term Scapigliatura itself can refer to being disheveled, especially in regard to one's hair, thus the Scapigliati's own rebellious nature can be embodied through Gertrude's own divergence from the ideals of a good woman and nun. In another comparison, Manzoni describes Gertrude's beauty with the term "scomposta" ("ravaged" or "decomposed") which mirrors Praga's poem, *Preludio*, in how the Scapigliati are differentiated from past Romantics with an equally distinct and negative term, "ammalati" ("sick"). In addition, Jones reports that in the first draft of *I promessi sposi*, Manzoni initially described Gertrude as being a classic beauty with blonde hair and facial features that were "regolarissime" ("very regular") in appearance resembling those of a Greek statue. However, this was later changed for the final version of the novel (Jones 99). Valisa and Jones conclude that the reasoning behind Manzoni's decision to drastically edit the appearance of Gertrude was so that a reader could clearly distinguish her from a female character like Lucia who by contrast upholds moral goodness in combination with her virtuous image as a modest beauty.

I would like to look further into Manzoni's decision by referring to the historical context of the time, as it was a commonly held belief during the first half of the 19th century that the reading of novels could lead to the degradation of a reader's morals, especially for women¹²

¹² In the preface of his novel, *La Nouvelle Héloïse* philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau writes "never did a chaste maiden read novels" (Esterhammer, Piccitto, Vincent 60).

(Parisi 425). Therefore, Manzoni's decision to change Gertrude's appearance in order to highlight Lucia's morals could reflect a desire to spread what he viewed as good morals for women. And in doing so, Manzoni would unknowingly create the female character the Scapigliatura would later latch onto and make the quintessential representation of their ideal woman. The difference was that the Scapigliati would write entire narratives around women like Gertrude instead of having a female character like her confined to a small role in the overall story. Manzoni on the other hand, chose to have more story dedicated to the behaved Lucia and women that follow in her likeness. And so, the female archetype Manzoni has crafted through Lucia is one who does not stray from her own moral goodness despite the adversity she must face during this chaotic period in Italian history. Thus, this portrayal is an aspect of *I promessi sposi* that I interpret to be Manzoni's attempt to shape the standard of how a woman should behave within the Risorgimento's vision of the unified Italian nation. It is a standard which I argue the Scapigliatura aspire to subvert on the grounds that it confines women to a narrow existence of what they can and cannot do and how they must behave under expectations that are far from realistic. To the Scapigliati, what constitutes the ideal woman within their literary pursuits is one who embodies the ugliness of their reality within the new Italian nation. This reality deviates from the Risorgimento's dream, and so women should be portrayed as flawed and susceptible to vices just as expected of a real woman who is not confined to the pages of a historical novel.

2. A Renewed "Ravaged" Beauty: The Motif of the Female Body

A defining feature of Manzoni's female characters is their beauty, as previously noted Lucia and Gertrude are in fact separated from one another by the distinct type of beauty they

embody. However, the Scapigliatura as a representation of its innovative namesake did not simply adopt Manzoni's preexisting representation of a female character who is a "ravaged beauty" as their own without modifying her to fit the Scapigliati's purposefully dissenting aesthetic. This divergence from the initial starting point of Manzoni's work is established through the language used by the Scapigliati, in which their literary works are noticeably cryptic in their meaning especially in regards to how a reader is meant to interpret the female characters they present.¹³ However, one guiding light through the dense haze of the Scapigliatura's canon can be found in the recurring motif of the female body, especially one that is plagued by illness or one that has already succumbed to death itself. Thus, the ravaged beauty presented by Gertrude was taken a step further to be incorporated into not only a female character's outward appearance but also what lies beneath the skin in terms of both physical (regarding an unhealthy state of the body) and mental (internal strife and overpowering negative emotions). Therefore, the feminine muse for the Scapigliatura is separated from her peers due to her perceived beauty boarding on the line of abjection, which is a stark contrast from how Manzoni chose to categorize his female characters on the basis of their moral standings and correlating their appearances based upon them.

¹³ Mary-Lou Patricia Vetere writes in her introduction to operatic works of the Scapigliatura that a common maxim for the movement would be: "things are not always what they seem to be" an aphorism that "could very well represent the entire period between Verdi and Verismo, a period racked with controversy, secrecy, and loopholes" (2).

Chapter 2

The Boito Brothers and the Conquest of Female Beauty

1. An Introduction to Positivism and the Work of Cesare Lombroso

There is scholarly debate over whether the Scapigliati found their motif of the dying and diseased woman aesthetically pleasing for its own sake, or if their foray into the realm of the grotesque had a more profound reasoning than the pursuit of beauty. Such a debate I believe can best be resolved through a close analysis of Camillo Boito's short story "Un corpo" and his brother, Arrigo's poem "Lezione d'anatomia" which together established a dialogue between science and art during the early years of unified Italy. In order to examine how diseased and dying women were portrayed in these works, it is important to specify that what constituted science and how it was practiced within the new Italian kingdom differed greatly from the modern understanding of science accepted today. To the extent that the rising school of Positivism had overtaken many areas of scientific research including the fledgling discipline of criminology.¹⁴ The notable founder of the Italian school of positivist criminology, Cesare Lombroso, struggled to overcome the shortcomings of the Risorgimento within his research, as statesman Massimo d'Azeglio is famously attributed to saying that the Risorgimento had "made Italy", but it had not "made Italians."¹⁵ Thus Lombroso, through his research on Italian criminals, strove to discover how to identify those harmful to society and those who would positively

¹⁴ In broad and accessible terms, sociologists John J. Macionis and Linda M. Gerber explain the school of Positivism as "stating that certain (positive) knowledge is based on natural phenomena and their properties and relations. Thus, information derived from sensory experience, interpreted through reason and logic, forms the exclusive source of all certain knowledge" (32).

¹⁵ Italian scholar, Claudio Gigante, clarifies that this famous saying attributed to d'Azeglio was never actually spoken or written by him but ascribed after his death by an outside party. However, the saying still maintained a lasting impact on how Italians viewed the Risorgimento and its end result of the unified nation (15).

contribute in order to strengthen the Italian nation through its citizens. In light of the emergence of threatening brigandages in Southern Italy after the Risorgimento, many Italians throughout the infused nation questioned if North and South Italy were really a part of the same country and could remain as without more destabilizing conflict. As a result, Lombroso created a greater division between the North and the South by profiling, specifically Sicilians, as what a typical criminal looks like in physical appearance and behavior (Young 71).¹⁶

Lombroso became especially preoccupied with understanding the nature of women, with the most notable of his research being published in 1893, entitled *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale*. However, for Lombroso what differentiated criminal women, prostitutes, and “normal” women from one another was not based on his own literary creativity through fictional characters and their descriptions. Instead Lombroso, as a positivist criminologist, worked to reduce the deviant behaviors of bad women to a physical source within their bodies. Of course, this proved to be a difficult mode of research, as Lombroso painstakingly examined the anatomical measurements of the brains, skulls, and other internal organs of the women who ended up on his dissection table, typically prostitutes. One of the conclusions Lombroso drew from his research was that the female body as a whole is inherently deceptive, especially the bodies of deviant women like the prostitute, whose survival relies upon her ability to seduce men.¹⁷ Thus Lombroso, through his dissection of the female body ventured forth to

¹⁶ Modern day criminologist, Jock Young explains that Sicilians, especially those with dark skin, had been made into representing the largest source of criminality in Italy in both the discussion of criminal justice and in popular culture.

¹⁷ In *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale*, Lombroso quotes German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer as saying: “la dissimulazione è innata nella donna, nella più sciocca come nella più intelligente” (134). Lombroso later concludes that “le prostitute, come i criminali, mostrano una tendenza invincibile a mentire, anche senza ragione” (565).

uncover the truth behind the allure of women. In fact, historian Ludmilla Jordanova argues that during the 19th century, the dissection of women by male scientists represented an allegorical acquisition of knowledge amidst the adversity of female deception (58, 93). This was the intellectual environment that the Boito brothers, as contemporaries of Lombroso, were arguably influenced by. Although seemingly separate from the world of science, both of the Boitos penned literary works that referenced Lombroso's positivist approach to uncovering the allure of the female body through dissection.

2. The Artist and the Anatomist of “Un corpo”

In contrast to Lombroso's original research, the work of the Boito brothers presents the reader with a female body that is evaluated not only by the perspective of scientific Positivism but also through art in that art is made to be the foil of science. To begin, looking back at Camillo Boito's “Un corpo”, the structure of this story's narrative can be simplified to exploring the conflict which arises when science and art each attempt to uncover the enigma of beauty that is found in the female body. Thus, outside of the debate between science and art, the narrative focal point of “Un corpo” is none other than what the title ominously refers to, a body, one that specially belonged to a young woman named Carlotta who is praised both in life and in death for her immense beauty. It is through her beauty that Carlotta finds herself living with a notable artist as his greatest muse, in which he gives her the name of Arethusa, a name which both foreshadows Carlotta's tragic demise as well as describes the beauty that she possesses, equating her with that of a “ninfa o folletto” (“nymph or a sprite”) (C. Boito 236). From this description, while it may appear that Carlotta is the protagonist of the story, her voice as a character is rarely heard as her story is told through the aforementioned artist, who also serves as the story's

unnamed narrator. It is also important to note the detail the artist puts forth describing the beauty of Carlotta through his narration as he speaks more about her than to her. In fact, when Carlotta is first introduced to the reader as Italian scholar, Daniela La Penna notes, she “is presented as the very embodiment of an earthy sexual force...as a mobile and fluid embodiment of female power” (6). For example, when the narrator mentions Carlotta’s body he is fixated on how it resembles a Greek vase: “il corpo flessuoso, che s’incurvava come l’ansa di un vaso greco” as well as how when they would stroll through nature, she would often run off from him with the grace of a gazelle: “di quando in quando si svincolava dal mio braccio per fuggire sull’erba verde di que’ bei prati...Talvolta le correvo dietro, ed ella mi scansava..e sbalzando da ogni parte con salti da gazzella” (C. Boito 236).¹⁸ These passages put into perspective the liveliness and health of Carlotta’s body which the artist has come to idolize, in that he describes her beauty through classical references and images of nature, making her appear as a timeless goddess that no ordinary man, even one of the arts, can hold onto. Therefore, the narrator spends most of the story outside of his relationship with Carlotta, because as an artist his greatest preoccupation is transferring the beauty of the living Carlotta to the woman he has painted on his canvas, Arethusa.

Outside of the realm of art, Carlotta’s beauty also entices an anatomist by the name of Dr. Carlo Gulz who is highly regarded for his work on the aesthetics of anatomy. However Gulz, being a clear representation of a positivist scientist like Lombroso, views Carlotta’s immense

¹⁸ Daniela La Penna translates these passages into English in her article *Aesthetic Discourse and The Paradox of Representation in Camillo Boito’s* “Un corpo” as “supple body, curved like the handle of a Greek vase” and “every so often she would let go of my arm and run across those lovely green grass lawns [...] sometimes I chased after her, and she would dodge away, [...] bounding off in all directions like a gazelle” (6).

beauty as something which he can understand via dissection, as if it could be reducible to a physical part of her anatomy. This is made especially clear to the reader when Carlotta herself overhears Gulz outright declare his desire to dissect her, fervently stating to his colleagues that: “giuro, amici miei...in nome della scienza, che la bella Carlotta riposerà sul marmo della mia tavola, per rivelare al mio coltello il segreto della sua bellezza” (C. Boito 252).¹⁹ Before this brief encounter, Carlotta had never met Gulz in person and she was only told in passing that he was a celebrated scientist who “vive notte e di coi cadaveri” (“lives night and day with cadavers”), a description that immediately makes her tremble in fear (C. Boito 252). Carlotta’s fear of Gulz only continues to grow when in his declaration he refers to her by name when they have never met one another. This aspect of characterization between Carlotta and Gulz may seem trivial, however this is the first of many instances throughout the story where Gulz disregards Carlotta as a living person to marvel at her body. Carlotta does not fare well after this encounter. As the narrator notes, she develops a strong aversion to anything that reminds her of death despite her body being the very embodiment of good health. In contrast to Carlotta’s lively appearance, the first description of Gulz that is given to the reader details him as “un signore smilzo e lungo, vestito di nero” (“a tall and slender man, dressed in black”) whose very presence near Carlotta after his initial declaration, makes her fear for her life (C. Boito 236). Thus, Gulz becomes a haunting figure of death for Carlotta, who stands to represent the very essence of health and beauty in life. However, the juxtaposition between these two characters is more than a symbolic reference to the binary of life and death, because what Carlotta fears most about death is what will become of her body afterwards. When commenting on Carlotta’s newfound fear, the

¹⁹ I have translated Gulz’s declaration in English as “I swear, my friends...in the name of science, that the beautiful Carlotta will rest on the marble of my table and reveal to my knife the secret of her beauty.”

narrator explains that while, funerals make her uneasy and doctors are only tolerable, what evokes true terror in her is even the slightest mention of surgeons and autopsies in addition to a recently developed aversion to wax figures (C. Boito 237-239).

3. *Venerina*: An Intimate Relationship Between Wax, Science, and The Female Body

On a cursory analysis, Carlotta's dislike of wax figures may at first appear unrelated to her general phobia of dissection at the hands of an anatomist like Gulz, however during this era, wax figures had a very intimate relationship with the field of anatomy. By the late 18th century, despite an increased interest in the field of anatomy, there was a shortage of cadavers to dissect for study. And so between 1780 and 1782, Clemente Susini, a master of ceroplastic (wax modeling) and the director of his workshop, Felice Fontana, were commissioned by the then-Grand Duke of Tuscany, Leopold II, to create what would be known as *Venerina*, the Anatomical Venus for La Specola, Florence's museum of zoology and natural history.²⁰ *Venerina*, and the Anatomical Venuses made after her, were life-sized wax models of the female body that were constructed to show various anatomically correct layers of skin, muscle, and organs that a student was meant to pull apart and eventually uncover within the womb of many models that a developing fetus was inside. However, before the Anatomical Venus's skin was peeled back from her outermost layer, she appeared as a beautiful woman who was completely nude, seemingly submissive and at rest with the added detail of long, flowing, and real human hair and for *Venerina*, there was even a string of pearls around her neck (*Figure 1*). Outside of her aesthetic

²⁰ From *The Study of Anatomy in England from 1700 to the Early 20th Century*, bodies were not frequently donated for dissection so around Europe the bodies of criminals were primarily used for this practice, which resulted in a reduced amount of cadavers that could be used (91-99). As medical historian Lisa Rosner notes in her novel *The Anatomy Murders*, it became commonplace for cadavers to be illegally obtained through acts of body-snatching and even anatomy murder (43).



Figure 1: *Venerina*, Courtesy of Museo di Palazzo Poggi - Università di Bologna. Photo © Joanna Ebenstein.

appeal, the Anatomical Venus was meant to educate the general public as well as render the messy and ethically questionable practice of dissection obsolete. Fontana was later quoted saying that the benefits of the Anatomical Venus were that her body was “in a permanent, odor-free, and incorruptible state,” and thus, these benefits would contribute to the success of the Anatomical Venus as Fontana and Susini’s workshop produced over 2,500 wax models between 1771 and 1893 (Ebenstein, “The Brief”).

The Boito brothers were certainly acquainted with the body of the Anatomical Venus, to the extent that they were inspired to make reference to her likeness in their literary works, beginning with Camillo’s “Un corpo” which was published in 1870 and followed up several years later with the publication of Arrigo’s poem “Lezione d’anatomia” in 1874. Together these works allow for one to look into the midst of this period of mass exposure for the Anatomical Venus, in which they provided what I suggest is their own *Scapigliatura* influenced commentary on this equally scientific and cultural phenomenon. Thus far, I have only focused on Carlotta’s

beautiful body while she was alive, however it is important to note that the artist and the anatomist are only able to debate their differing perspectives once Carlotta has already met a tragic demise.

4. The Transformation of Arethusa and the Death of Carlotta

For the artist, in what can be seen as a darkly ironic turn of events for the story, Carlotta's death hauntingly mirrors how in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Carlotta's nymph persona, Arethusa, must relinquish her alluring female body in order to escape the pursuit of an unwanted lover, the river god Alpheus. Similar to the attractive power of Carlotta's beauty, the river god's infatuation with Arethusa is unable to be halted despite Arethusa's wishes to remain a pure and chaste attendant of the virgin goddess Artemis until Artemis complies with Arethusa's pleas and transforms her into a stream. Carlotta on the other hand, falls into the rapid waters of the Danube river frightened by the passing of a funeral convoy that was coming her way. Once Carlotta's body is recovered from the river, her previous identities as both Carlotta and Arethusa are wiped away to only leave behind the unidentifiable body of a woman who is "giovane e bellissima" ("young and very beautiful") and without any "indizi del suo nome o della sua abitazione" ("indications of her name or of her residency") (C. Boito 255). However, in contrast to the myth of Arethusa, Carlotta's loss of identity and death which is likened to Arethusa's transformation into an inhuman force of nature, does not result in the completion of the story, as both of her pursuers had never really loved Carlotta for who she was while alive.

5. From Lombroso to Gulz: The Unveiling of Female Beauty Through Science

This is especially clear for the anatomist, as Gulz cannot even begin to fully appreciate Carlotta's beauty unless she is a corpse on his marble dissection table. Thus any reference to

Carlotta as the beautiful woman she was in life has no use for the anatomist who only views her body as a tool for his field of study. Although Gulz does not directly mention the Anatomical Venus, which was indeed a popular tool used in his field at the time, he has instead taken the body of Carlotta and made it into a unique Anatomical Venus of his own. In death, the messy details and annoyances that real women possess are removed, as Carlotta can no longer avoid Gulz and protest his fervent desire to cut her open. The imagery of the Anatomical Venus is especially present when Gulz explains to the artist that in order to better preserve the beauty of Carlotta he had injected colored liquid into her flesh to mimic “la bella tinta di rosa” (“the beautiful rosy tint”) of her complexion as if she were still alive. Gulz in fact likens his technique to having actual blood pumping through her veins as the artist examines the anatomist’s laboratory to find more embalmed yet lifelike cadavers displayed around the room in glass cases (C. Boito 236). Thus, the anatomist is successful in removing Carlotta from the natural course of life to become an object of his scientific inquiries. He now has complete control over Carlotta’s body and can do what he wants with it. In a re-creation of how the Anatomical Venus would never rot or become unsafe for a scientist to dissect her, the same is true for what has become of Carlotta.

The essence of the woman she was has been broken down and sterilized, leaving behind only what the anatomist finds desirable, her body. Gulz makes his preference clear by stating in regard to what has befallen Carlotta that: “mi rincresce per lei; ma ne godo per la scienza” (“I regret it for your [the artist] sake; but I enjoy it for science”), in this case, the verb “godere” expresses an underlying connotation of one experiencing sexual pleasure. Therefore, Gulz enjoys the scientific acquisition of Carlotta’s body, as the word for science in Italian “la scienza” also

carries with it connotations of femininity from its grammatical gendering. Even nature “la natura” is femininely gendered and is commonly used as a metonym for female genitalia in the Italian language (Mazzoni 180). Thus, the strong presence of nature that Carlotta was frequently compared to through her immense beauty in life is replaced by Gulz’s true love of science, erasing what individual and feminine power Carlotta may have had over the anatomist in favor of his acquisition of knowledge, just like Lombroso’s research on women.

6. The Muse as the Living Copy of Art

Now the question remains to if the artist loved Carlotta outside of his own interests and what she had to offer him for his art. This question is ultimately answered when the artist is presented the chance to claim Carlotta’s body and give her a proper funeral. He decides to leave her with Gulz as a nameless corpse with no family to protest against the desecration of her body. As previously mentioned, the reason that Lombroso was able to collect so many corpses of prostitutes to dissect and conduct his research on, was that once these women had died, due to the stigma of their profession, no one including relatives would claim their bodies. French historian Alain Corbin notes that during the 19th century, “the prostitute maintains complex relations with the corpse in the symbolic imagination of these times” an association which would not go unnoticed by Boito’s original readers (Corbin 211). Although, Carlotta is not explicitly identified as a prostitute, the fact that the artist is easily able to leave her body behind and no one else identifies her, paints a clear image that Carlotta at least strays outside of the traditional 19th century family unit. She is no one’s mother or sister and her male guardian, the artist, has detached himself from their loose cohabitation.

However, the same cannot be said for Carlotta's persona through the artist's work, Arethusa. In fact, when Gulz gives the artist the choice of taking the body of Carlotta or a painting of Arethusa that the anatomist had bought in secret from the artist during one of his exhibits, the artist eventually takes the painting and leaves Carlotta to her ghastly fate with little reluctance. Thus, the artist has willingly discarded the soiled woman that Carlotta was in life for the idealized version of her that he created himself. Italian scholar, David Del Principe notes that in this story "it is no longer the object of love but the love of the object that matters" (Del Principe, *Rebellion* 128). This indicates that Carlotta is objectified by the artist to such an extent that to him she has become Arethusa, the work of art which feeds his immense vanity. The artist confirms this himself as he explains to the reader that he has, even before the death of Carlotta, begun to see his muse as the "living copy" of Arethusa, a copy that he loves more deeply than the actual woman before him, confessing: "Carlotta m'innamorava anche più nel mio quadro che in sé stessa: la mia vanità m'aveva tanto ubbriacato che in qualche istante quella donna mi sembrava la copia viva della opera delle mie mani" (C. Boito 246).²¹

7. The Femininity of Nature and The Corrosive Forces of Masculine Art and Science

Since both the artistic and scientific perspectives on understanding feminine beauty have been discussed at length within this paper, many scholars, after doing the same, have attempted to uncover which perspective the Scapigliati were in agreement with. However, I suggest that this is a misguided undertaking, as both sides of the argument reduce to an equivalent outcome, in that within the story the artist and the scientist are equally successful in stripping beauty away

²¹ Del Principe has translated this section in English as "I was more in love with Carlotta's portrait than with her. In that instance, my own vanity was so intoxicating that the woman seemed to be the living copy of the work of my own hands" (*Rebellion* 119).

from its original source for their own gain. Specifically, while the unnamed narrator and Gulz may evaluate the beauty of Carlotta differently, by the end of the story they have both successfully objectified her into something which they have full control over: as the Carlotta that the anatomist loves is a corpse which represents the period's Anatomical Venus, and the artist comes to solely love his painting of her. Gulz takes this similarity between himself and the narrator even further by declaring that both their disciplines strive to perfect appearances in depicting life as accurately as possible, and that they must rely on one another to do so with the expression "*l'arte abbraccia la scienza*" ("art embraces science") (C. Boito 264). This sentiment is also clear for the artist even before Gulz had put it into words. As upon the completion of his cherished portrait of Arethusa, the artist steps away from his canvas for a moment and becomes immediately awestricken by the translucent nature of Carlotta's skin as his eyes wander over her body, ogling the bones that are visible underneath its thin layer. The artist continues his absorbed musings and asserts the elimination of the boundary between art and science, as he compares his paintbrush with an anatomist's scalpel, both working together on the same project: unveiling and ultimately possessing Carlotta's beauty (C. Boito 246).

However by the end of the story, even though both men end up with the version of Carlotta that they desired, it is nebulous as to what they discover, if anything at all, about this beauty they were both drawn to whom. Instead Carlotta, as a representation of nature and its beauty, is grotesquely abused by two men who are blinded by their own love for false idols that are merely facsimiles of her physical appearance. In fact, Gulz states that if the artist had loved Carlotta as more than a body, then his love would have survived her death "*s'ella avesse amato uno spirito, l'amerebbe tuttavia, non foss'altro nella memoria*" ("had you loved a spirit, you

would love her still, if only in memory”) (C. Boito 265). The artist never verbally admits to the reader or discusses with Gulz what this message meant for him, however, in the final moment of the story it appears that the artist, through his actions, is in agreement with Gulz about not loving Carlotta beyond that which her body gave him. Later, the artist stops by the Danube river with the painting of Arethusa by his side, in order to drop a white jasmine flower into the same dark waters in which Carlotta had met her demise not long ago. The artist stays to watch the speck of beauty that was the flower immediately disappear and be washed away by the murky current of the river. This image symbolizes how the artist’s memory of Carlotta’s beauty is fleeting and insignificant in comparison to the beauty of Arethusa. For the beauty of the woman on his canvas will not fade away like something natural as Carlotta and the jasmine flower had done.

In the end, both men never come to truly understand Carlotta’s beauty, and the story of “Un corpo” in itself acts as a critique of both of their perspectives: from the classical approach to how beauty is depicted in art to scientific Positivism’s evaluation on the matter through the dissection of the body. As Del Principe explains, when it comes to understanding the classical conception of beauty, the artist’s perspective is comically delusional in favoring art’s representation of life over that of life itself, as according to Platonic and Aristotelian sources it is instead art that is merely a copy of nature (Del Principe, *Rebellion* 119). Thus, the ultimate folly of the artist is that he absurdly falls in love with the painting of his muse and not the woman she was while alive. The anatomist also follows the artist down this misguided path, as he can only love Carlotta and appreciate her beauty when she is a corpse on his dissection table requiring him to cut into her body and dismember her. This takes her original form further and further away from its intended natural beauty outside of the corrupting influences of men.

8. “Lezione d’anatomia” and Science’s Misguided Venture into the Abject

This corruption of nature that is represented by the female body is further explored in Arrigo Boito’s “Lezione d’anatomia” (“Anatomy lesson”), which intriguingly begins where Camillo’s work left off. The opening stanzas of the poem graphically describe the active dissection of the body of a young and beautiful woman, who in death has unfortunately found herself on an anatomist’s table in a similar vein to what had befallen Carlotta. Perhaps to best compliment his choice of writing a poem, Arrigo takes the premise of a nameless narrator who is associated with the arts from his brother’s work and transforms the artist of “Un corpo” into a poet for his own separate, yet seemingly related narrative. For that reason, in the same fashion as “Un corpo”, the poet of “Lezione d’anatomia” provides the sole voice and perspective of what happens to the principal female character of the work just as was the case for the artist and Carlotta throughout Camillo’s story. However for Arrigo’s poem, this style of narration is perverted in a rather grotesque way in that the female character that the reader is presented with has already been stripped of any living human qualities in regards to her character. All that is left is her corpse which the narrator must speak for in full with no prior memories of the life of this woman remaining, leaving everything about her for the poet to interpret. Despite this unfamiliarity, the poet is resolved in proclaiming that this woman deserves a proper funeral and that this anatomy lesson has “tolta alla requie dei cimiteri” (“taken her away from the peace of the cemeteries”) to be defiled on an anatomist’s “freddo letto” (“cold bed”) of a dissection table (A. Boito line 5 and lines 10-12). The poet only becomes more enraged as the body of the woman continues to be further dismantled, and what seems to especially evoke these strong

emotions in the poet is that the desecration of her body also harms her outward beauty. The poet expresses this by declaring:

Delitto! e sanguina
 per piaga immonda
 il petto a quella!...
 Ed era giovane!
 ed era bionda!
 ed era bella! (A. Boito lines 19-24).²²

These stanzas, as they are aligned, serve to define a contrast between the natural state of this woman's body that her great beauty belongs to, and the penetrating mutilation of her flesh by the surgical tools of the anatomist that, to the poet's great disgust, have the power to defile her on both physical and metaphorical terms. Such a defilement of both the physical and metaphorical aspects of the body amalgamate by the end of the poem when it is revealed that the woman was pregnant at the time of her death, as her uncovered uterus bares the tissue of a 30 day old fetus in a presentation that replicates the Anatomical Venus. Thus, through the tampering of the anatomist, the female cadaver has transformed from a poetic body of natural beauty to an anatomical body that evokes, what notable literary critic Julia Kristeva would classify as "abject." In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva has defined the abject as being something which is both human and non-human, disturbing identity and order due to the very conflict of its existence (Kristeva 4-5). While the poem at its beginning may focus on the external beauty of the female body through the eyes of the poet, the anatomist is more intrigued by the lower regions of the

²² I have translated these stanzas as: "What an atrocity! and it bleeds / from an unclean wound / to the chest! / and she was young! / and she was blonde! / and she was beautiful!"

female cadaver nearing the erogenous zone of her “natura” to pry open the sacred spot of her womb.

As Mazzoni notes, “Lezione d’anatomia” and “Un corpo” both share a preoccupation with the truth of nature, *Il vero* as this truth is perceived to be hidden within the bodies of beautiful women and thus, it is the duty of male artists and scientists to both uncover and discover this veiled truth (Mazzoni 180). However, the poet narrator in Arrigo’s work is indeed connected to the arts. Unlike the artist of “Un corpo”, he does not become disillusioned and condone the destruction of the natural beauty of the female body due to a shallow infatuation with his own artistic creation. In fact, the truth that is revealed to the poet only evokes horror and disgust in him, echoing back to the reaction one experiences when they encounter Kristeva’s abject. The fetus found within the female cadaver puts into question what is and is not human, an anxiety that renders the necessary and natural occurrence of a young mother carrying her child as something which has its origins in abjection.

Thus, the horrified reaction of the poet is meant to be aligned with the Scapigliati’s own views towards how science was conducted in Italy after unification, in light of positivist figures such as Lombroso and the growing field of anatomy and criminology. The works of the Scapigliatura presented by its prominent members, the Boito brothers, serve to denounce science’s encroachment on nature and its distinctive beauty that is beyond the reach of humanity even for those male scientists who claim to understand more about life than those who are trained in the arts. So according to the Scapigliati, the preoccupation of unveiling the truth of nature’s beauty is proven to be a foolish task, and by doing so, all one will discover is the abject truth about humanity’s existence as a whole.

Chapter 3 Tarchetti and Rebellion Through the Abject

1. Tarchetti and the Femininity of Rousseau's State of Nature

It is important to note that when analyzing the work of the Scapigliati, that prominent symbols such as the female cadaver are not secluded to only one isolated work or member of the movement. In fact, many scholars today are preoccupied with analyzing the meaning behind why the notable author of the Scapigliatura, Iginio Ugo Tarchetti, had such a distinctive focus on dying women and their bodies throughout his literary career. I suggest that Tarchetti's work is analogous to the conversation about the symbol of the female cadaver and the Italian society which she, alongside the ailing Scapigliati, are maltreated by. For this reason, while many scholars argue that Tarchetti intended to sexualize the female cadaver presented in his works, I argue that Tarchetti also commented on the Boito brothers' conflict between what is natural and beautiful and what society has made into abject and horrific. Along with a disdain for society and the status quo, Tarchetti also seems particularly tormented by his own overpowering emotions which he reflects on through the male protagonists within his poems and novels. Tarchetti's fragile emotional state appears to be worsened by pondering the hidden abject that underlies what appears to be natural and beautiful on the surface. For example, in his poem "Memento!" (1867) the male protagonist is plagued by thoughts of what lies beneath the skin of his beautiful female lover:

Quando bacio il tuo labbro profumato,
cara fanciulla, non posso obbliare

che un bianco teschio vi è sotto celato (lines 1-3).²³

These stanzas reflect that the male protagonist cannot escape from the “truth” of the abject that is found within life itself, not even in a woman who the protagonist loves dearly. In a sense, this poem is taking another artistically involved male narrator, as the reader can assume these are the thoughts and feelings of Tarchetti’s poetic voice, and placing him in an anxious state awaiting his lover to meet a similar fate to the Boitos’ Carlotta and the unnamed pregnant woman on the anatomist’s table. Not even positive emotions like love can overcome the lingering fear of abjection and death for Tarchetti’s narrator. And so, I argue that Tarchetti’s most notable work, his novel *Fosca*, serves as a bridge which bypasses one’s initial feelings of disgust towards the abject within the previously analyzed works from the Scapigliatura, to then be subverted by Tarchetti and reconstructed as a symbol of rebellion for the Scapigliati.

As perviously mentioned, the Scapigliatura was indeed an anti-conformist movement against the society that had been formed after unification, however many scholars have pointed out that the Scapigliati did not have a concrete manifesto that formally explained in detail how an ideal society, in their eyes, should be structured. Instead, within the works of Tarchetti, readers can learn of what the Scapigliati were greatly opposed to within society without much of a thought on how such a fault can be fixed. In regards to Tarchetti, it appears that what he loathed most about the society he was acquainted with was that it existed in the first place. Such a bold belief should first be examined in Tarchetti’s short story “Bouvard” which temporarily removes itself from the narrative’s established plot and characters to enter a liminal space of bare dialogue

²³ I have translated these stanzas as: “When I kiss your perfumed lips, / dear maiden, I cannot bear / that a white skull is beneath it.”

that presents ideas about the formation and nature of society similar to those that were notably put forth by the 18th century Genevan philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Equally important, is that it is clear that Tarchetti knew of Rousseau's literary works as the two principal characters in *Fosca* read and discuss at length one of his novels, *Giulia o la nuova Eloisa* (*Julie, or the New Heloise*). Thus, proposing the idea that Tarchetti was also knowledgeable of Rousseau's philosophical works is not a far-fetched assumption to make, and I argue that from Tarchetti's musings in "Bouvard", he subscribed to how Rousseau viewed human nature and civilized society. In *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau writes that "nothing is so gentle as man in his primitive state, when placed by nature at an equal distance from the stupidity of brutes and the fatal enlightenment of civil man" (Rousseau 2). A statement that seems to be mirrored in this passage from "Bouvard":

Vi fu un tempo in cui gli uomini si amavano, prima che la famiglia, fanciulla vergine e pura, toltasi dalle foreste e dalle capanne per venirne a nozze colla società, non s'incontrasse per via coll'oro, garzone petulante e avventuriere che le fece violenza; e da quello sconcio nacque l'egoismo, mostro scellerato e insaziabile, che divora gli affetti nati da lui stesso, come Saturno divorava un tempo i suoi figliuoli (*Amore nell'arte* 92).²⁴

According to Rousseau, before the construction of societies man was solitary and lived scattered throughout the land like animals with no sense of familial ties or lasting personal

²⁴ Lawrence Venuti has translated this passage from "Bouvard" into English as: "There was a time when men loved one another, before the family, that pure, virginal girl, was taken away from the forests and cabins to attend her wedding with society and met gold in her path, the petulant, adventurous boy who did violence to her. From that disgrace egoism is born, the wicked and insatiable monster that devour the emotions to which he himself gives birth, as Saturn once devoured his children" (Venuti 58).

relationships. As Tarchetti summarizes, this pure state of nature was one before families and wicked moral failings such as egoism. However, what is most intriguing about Tarchetti's interpretation of Rousseau's work is that he specifically made the original idea of natural man living in the primitive state of nature as a pure, young, and virginal woman. Thus, what corrupts this pure virgin is her removal from the state of nature that Tarchetti appears to connect to living a simple, peasant, life in the wilderness with his references to "foreste e capanne" ("forests and cabins"), only to be violated by civilized society that is characterized as an aggressive male force. Although a bit abstract, this imagery harkens back to the Boitos' presentation of the female body being dissected by male anatomists in a repulsive fashion that corrupts the very nature of female beauty. Advanced sciences such as the study of anatomy can only be created and flourish within an established society beyond the capabilities of natural man and their pure state of nature. Thus, like the anatomist, society too destroys this figurative woman.

2. The Duality of Giorgio's Love

The question remains if there is a female character within the works of the Scapigliatura who is able to overcome this dismantlement and not be reduced to a silent corpse that must be spoken for by a dominating male presence? Such a question, I propose, is best answered by looking into Tarchetti's final novel, *Fosca*, in which the most memorable aspect of this piece that differentiates it from the other works of the Scapigliatura, is that Tarchetti finally presents the reader with a prominent female character who has a voice of her own, the eponymous Fosca. From the start, *Fosca* presents itself as a novel within the Scapigliatura that strays away from the standard narrative that I have analyzed so far. To begin, while the central male narrator is kept intact, the life of Tarchetti's brooding Giorgio is bisected by his two most defining romantic

relationships. As he declares to the reader: “ho avuto due grandi amori, due amori diversamente sentiti, ma ugualmente fatali e formidabili” (Tarchetti 5).²⁵ It is important to note how Giorgio defines the experience of his two great loves, labeling one of them as occurring during a time in his life full of such anguish, that he questions how he even survived such torment, and the other receives a more pleasant outlook which Giorgio appears to still cherish after its conclusion.

However, the tumultuous romance is left ambiguous as Giorgio never explicitly tells the reader if the first of his great loves: a beautiful married woman named Clara, or his second and final love, the hideous and hysteria ridden Fosca, is the woman from the relationship that caused him so much turmoil. It would appear obvious from these simple descriptions that it is Fosca, a name synonymous with murkiness and gloom, who would be the cause of Giorgio’s anguish in contrast to Clara, a feminine name which brings forth images of clarity and light. However, I argue that such a shallow interpretation of the novel overlooks one of the clearest testaments as to what the Scapigliati supported and wished to see flourish in society, which culminated in the very presence and actions of Fosca herself. To be more precise, *Fosca* as a novel is centered more around Giorgio falling in love with Fosca and accepting their relationship despite it contradicting with the love and the women, especially Clara, that Giorgio had interacted with up to that point in his life.

What is intriguing about the brief time that Giorgio spent with Clara during their two month affair, is that the intensity of their relationship and the infatuation Giorgio felt for his lover and her beauty harkens back to the representation of women in the Boitos’ work. As Lawrence

²⁵ Lawrence Venuti has translated this passage into English as “I have had two great loves, two affairs differently experienced, but equally fated and formidable” (Venuti 7).

Venuti remarks in his introduction to *Fosca*, together Giorgio and Clara had become inattentive to everything but their love (Venuti iv). It is a love that eventually leads Giorgio into a delusional fantasy where he transforms Clara into his object of desire who will never leave him and love him forever. This is similar vein to the previously mentioned male narrators of the anatomist and artist. However, Tarchetti's *Fosca* subverts the typical male narrative that was present in the work of the Boitos, as Clara does not meet a tragic demise which would then allow for Giorgio to continue his self-serving idealizations of who Clara was to him. Instead, Clara shatters Giorgio's delusion herself by ending their affair in order to be faithful to her husband. While this point in the story may appear to be Tarchetti's attempt to create dramatic tension in a novel about tempestuous romance, Clara's decision to leave Giorgio has a more significant meaning to both Giorgio and Tarchetti, Giorgio praises Clara for her illicit love, affirming that: "ciò che noi consideriamo come la più gran colpa possibile nella donna — l'adulterio — non è spesso che una rivendicazione dei diritti più sacri che le ha dato la natura, e che la società le ha conculcato" (Tarchetti 20-21).²⁶ As previously mentioned, Giorgio's response is a clear example of how Tarchetti took great influence from Rousseau and thus, strove to incorporate elements of Rousseauian philosophy into his fictional narratives. In turn, Giorgio as a character is able to criticize society's views of adultery and the construct of marriage by placing blame not on women for their infidelity but on society itself. In that its existence only stands in the way of the natural attraction that a woman may feel for a man. However, in the case of Giorgio and Clara's relationship, regardless of whether they leave behind civilization for the countrysides of Milan,

²⁶ "what we consider the greatest possible fault in women — adultery — is often only a vindication of the most sacred rights that nature gave them, and for which society has oppressed them" (Venuti 25).

as is recounted in one of their notable romantic outings, Clara in the end chooses to return to society and her marriage. Thus, the couple's love is only a fleeting moment of escapism that cannot survive outside of Clara and Giorgio's brief infatuation with one another. The reality of the situation is that they can never be together. In addition, Clara herself cannot stand as a representation of the Scapigliati's ideal woman as she chooses to relinquish her rebellious spirit, along with her love for Giorgio, to reclaim her established roles in society as a wife and a mother. Such an action discredits the very anti-conformist nature that the Scapigliatura embodied.

3. The Enigma of Fosca: The Voice of the Hysteric

This leaves the question, Giorgio is ever able achieve a genuine love with a woman who does not simply view their relationship as a passing frenzy and brief holiday from normalcy? It is a love that, I argue, can only be acquired by Giorgio once his position in the military requires him to leave Milan and relocate to a new city where the name and location have been purposefully censored from the reader. Giorgio's reasoning for his censorship relies heavily on the emotions which the location provokes in him, lamenting that: "La piccola città di * * * — ne taccio il nome perché potrei smarrire queste pagine, e ho caro che niuno conosca il luogo dove ho sofferto, e dove vi è una tomba su cui posso recarmi qualche volta a piangere" (Tarchetti 21).²⁷ This passage, especially with its concluding mention of "una tomba" ("a grave") provides more information as to why Giorgio may view the second of his great loves, as one that caused him more suffering than happiness. However, I would not immediately assume that this suffering

²⁷ "The small city of * * * — I suppress its name because it could confuse these pages, and I want no one to recognize the site of my suffering, or of the grave where I sometimes go to weep" (Venuti 26).

was caused by the relationship itself nor the woman that the reader will soon learn is Fosca.

Instead it alludes to the tragic end of this time in Giorgio's life, referenced by the image of the grave and a lover visiting the site to weep over it.

The significance of Giorgio's relationship with Fosca and why it brings him such immense grief remains an enigma. The reasoning for this, I suggest, is that Fosca allowed Giorgio to finally experience freedom from the societal constraints that had destroyed the happiness and love he had shared with Clara. The city that Fosca resides in, through its censorship, becomes a place of fantasy outside of a known location in Italy like Milan. Thus, Giorgio and Fosca, are able to rebel against their assumed gender roles within society to truly come to love one another for who they are, without the outside pressure and regard to who they should be and how they should behave with one another. As Giorgio admits to Fosca in their final moments together, he no longer actively loves Clara. Now all of his affection is dedicated to Fosca (Tarchetti 123).

To begin, one of the most prominent qualities in how Fosca differs from the standards set for women during post-unification Italy is that she has a loud and outspoken voice with no interruptions or interpretations from a dominant male prospective. This was never the case for all of the female characters within the works of the Boitos. In addition, Fosca is not described solely by the appearance of her body, as was the case for Carlotta and her unnamed counterpart in Camillo Boito's poem. The reader does not rely on Fosca's outward beauty as one of her only defining traits, nor does the male narrator have the chance to comment on and become infatuated with said feminine beauty to oversaturate the narrative with his obsession. The reason why the narrative of *Fosca* differs so greatly from the works of the Boitos in their portrayal of female

characters is that Tarchetti seems to purposefully create a looming presence of Fosca not through her physical body and those who look upon her, but from the strength of her own voice.

In fact, Giorgio is first introduced to Fosca through her absence, as he notes when he is first dining with the colonel he has been newly appointed to. Although Fosca is given a seat at the table, he is told that she rarely leaves her room to join them due to her illness (Tarchetti 23-24). It is during one of these dinners that the mysterious shroud of Fosca's absence is finally uncovered for Giorgio, as he is startled after overhearing the screams of Fosca for the first time while she is having one of her numerous debilitating hysterical attacks. As Del Principe points out, this defining moment in the narrative is peculiar. In that during the 19th century it was commonplace that women were seen but not heard, in contrast to Fosca who is not seen but heard by all (Del Principe, *Rebellion* 19). Significantly, after Fosca's hysterics have ceased, Giorgio becomes especially perplexed to find that none of the other men appear distraught after overhearing the immense suffering that the ailing woman must go through. They have become accustomed to this anomaly which is something Giorgio can not comprehend. This unnamed city that Fosca resides in is reminiscent of a fantasy that is far removed from society and reality. The city has become Fosca's domain where she can behave and present herself as she pleases, despite her hysteria restricting her from appearing like a proper woman who is both silent and alluring to men. However, without seeing her in person, Giorgio begins to create an image of what Fosca must look like and it appears rather indulgent of his own fantasy of being with a beautiful woman after the departure of Clara. One of Giorgio's prominent concerns about the mysterious Fosca is whether she is beautiful or not. In fact, Giorgio looks for an answer to his question by first confiding in the barrack's doctor who also oversees Fosca's perplexing medical condition.

However, Giorgio is not given an answer that he can decipher before his romantic relationship with Fosca has begun. The doctor clarifies that Fosca, along with her poor health, “È una specie di fenomeno, una collezione ambulante di tutti i mali possibili. La nostra scienza vien meno nel definirli” (Tarchetti 26).²⁸ In a sense Fosca herself is an enigma to men, as the doctor accentuates that “nostra scienza” (“our science”) (being the male dominated field that it was in post-unification Italy), has failed to understand her. This is exemplified by the accounts of fictional doctors and scientists within the Boitos’ and Tarchetti’s works, who desire to uncover the mysteries of the female body as well as the real life account of Lombroso and his categorization of women within society.

Thus, when the doctor is forced to categorize Fosca for Giorgio as being either a beautiful woman or an ugly one, he is placed in a position as equally uncertain as if he were to be questioned on finding a cure for Fosca’s befuddling ailments. In what can be seen as foreshadowing, the doctor appears to speak of how there is no logical way to understand Fosca as either a woman or a living being, and if a man is to venture into this enigma to uncover her beauty, it will only lead him down a path of disarray. The doctor further states, although in a joking manner that Giorgio reads as a ghastly omen: “giudicherete voi stesso della sua bellezza. Bisognerà che vi mettiaste sulle difese...Badate al vostro cuore: tenetevi in guardia!” (Tarchetti 27).²⁹

²⁸ “She is a sort of curiosity, a walking collection of every possible disease. Our science has failed to define it” (Venuti 31).

²⁹ “you yourself shall judge of her beauty. You shall need to stand at your guard...Mind your heart; keep on your guard” (Venuti 32).

4. The Ugliness of Fosca as a Reflection of Society

There is an interesting interplay of both humor and seriousness in the doctor's warning to Giorgio, as it seems rather foolish for him to be fearful and act cautiously around not only a woman, but especially one that is weakened by illness. However, during the period that Tarchetti wrote the novel, there was a growing fear amongst men in Italy towards women who, after the country had been unified, took it upon themselves to fight for equal rights and establish an empowered position for women within what had become the new and modernized Italian society.³⁰ Thus, a woman who acts out of place and does not behave as she should, for many of Tarchetti's contemporary readers, appeared as an ominous female figure who will most likely cause harm to Giorgio and the other men around her. Therefore, Fosca could be viewed as a symbol of how, women of the unified Italian nation had begun to challenge the previously established patriarchal order. This sentiment was clearly felt all throughout Europe as many men who were a part of intellectual circles and artistic movements like Tarchetti began depicting the female characters in their work less like the morally pure and virtuous maiden Lucia of Manzoni's creation, and instead these women were mutated into something equally frightening and darkly perverse, from Baudelaire's writings on prostitutes to the vampire woman of Strindberg (Luperini 74). Many literary critics who have studied this phenomenon have since come to the conclusion that these male writers were using their craft to exorcize their fears

³⁰ There were many prominent female figures that supported the ideals of the Risorgimento along with the modernization of the Italian nation that were to come forth from unification. Two of the most notable of these women being the woman of letters, Clara Maffei, and the noblewoman as well as writer, Cristina di Belgiojoso (Luperini 74).

towards women and the changing nature of society, that not long ago had been stable under the traditional upholding of the patriarchy.

I argue however, that such an explanation is insufficient to fully uncover why Tarchetti goes to such an extent in *Fosca* to have his everyman male narrator, Giorgio, become so smitten with a woman who should evoke in him nothing but fear and abhorrence. It is as if Tarchetti had taken this monstrous woman and reclaimed her as a character which the Scapigliatura can support in full. As Giorgio when he does finally meet Fosca is indeed horrified by the unique ugliness which possesses her body, yet he is equally transfixed by how she differs from any other woman he has ever encountered. Specifically, Giorgio puts an immense amount of emphasis on two specific qualities of Fosca's outward appearance: the bones which protrude from her thin face, and her long dark hair:

Un lieve sforzo d'immaginazione poteva lasciarne travedere lo scheletro, gli zigomi e le ossa delle tempie avevano una sporgenza spaventosa, l'esiguità del suo collo formava un contrasto vivissimo colla grossezza della sua testa, di cui un ricco volume di capelli neri, folti, lunghissimi, quali non vidi mai in altra donna, aumentava ancora la sproporzione.
(Tarchetti 28)³¹

This passage stands to further elaborate upon the specifics of Fosca's immense ugliness, however as the details relating to her bones and hair reveal, Tarchetti did not intend to make her into a generically hideous monster-like woman for the reader to be disgusted by. Both of these

³¹ "A slight effort of imagination would permit a glimpse of her skeleton. Her cheekbones and temples protruded fearfully, and her slender neck formed the most striking contrast with the bulk of her head, whose rich mass of hair, black, thick, longer than I had ever seen on a woman, further augmented the disproportion" (Venuti 34).

aspects of Fosca's appearance relate back to common motifs used by the Scapigliati to characterize both themselves as artists as well as their female characters, which supports a more profound critique on society. According to the order of Giorgio's observation, the bones which protrude through Fosca's thin face perfectly mirror how in Tarchetti's poem "Memento!" the male narrator is equally perturbed by the mere thought of the bones which lay beneath his precious lover's skin. However in the case of Fosca, this lingering anxiety is brought to the forefront, that she is the very embodiment of a dying woman and all that Tarchetti's narrators fear most. Giorgio blames the ugliness that has primarily ravaged Fosca's face on the mysterious illness which she suffers from, explaining his reasoning to the reader as "ma era evidente che la sua bruttezza era per la massima parte effetto della malattia, e che, giovinetta, aveva potuto forse esser piaciuta" (Tarchetti 28).³²

The fact that Giorgio hypothesizes that Fosca was most likely pleasant and free from her current ugliness as a young girl is reminiscent of the figurative metaphor which Tarchetti employs in his short story "Bouvard" in regards to how society, in the figure of a man, pillages and corrupts the sacred image of a young and beautiful girl through matrimony. And so, I suggest that Tarchetti's disdain for marriage and the society which forces it upon men and women is equally present when Giorgio and the reader discover that Fosca had not always been a brooding, if not feared, woman separated by others due to her illness. Instead, she had once been a young girl who was full of anticipation to be married to an awaiting male suitor as per the tradition of the time. Fosca however, appears to be at odds with this traditional path that women are expected

³² "It was evident that her ugliness was for the most part the effect of her illness, and that, when a girl, she was perhaps pleasant" (Venuti 34).

to follow as she realizes that, if women are meant to be loved by men through marriage by attracting a worthy suitor with their own physical beauty, then the existence of the ugly women who remain unmarried, "...diventa la piú terribile, la piú angosciata di tutte le torture" according to Fosca (Tarchetti 65).³³

Despite Fosca's apparent view that what women desire most in life is to be loved and find happiness in their marriage, this idealistic progression for a woman's life did not occur for Fosca. For when Fosca was eventually married off to a man, the basis of their union was not built upon the love which Fosca anticipated, but instead on deception driven by her husband's own greed. Fosca's husband shares the same characteristics as Tarchetti's "garzone petulante e avventuriere" ("petulant and adventurous boy") that violates the pure maiden of nature, for Fosca's husband is also referred to as an "avventuriere" along with being described as a "sempre felicemente ingannatore" ("always successful conman") (Tarchetti 69). Thus from these descriptions alone, it is no surprise to the reader, when Fosca details how her husband had only married her in order to steal her family's wealth, which left Fosca and her family not only impoverished with no way to support themselves, but also greatly devastated Fosca's already fragile wellbeing. As all Fosca desired in her life was to be loved, yet society's construct of marriage allowed for her to be deceived, taken advantage of, and then abandoned once the wealth that supported her marriage was bled out. And so, as Giorgio meets Fosca in her deteriorating state plagued by a violent and mysterious illness with no remedy, she stands to represent the ghastly results of what marriage does to women. Therefore, Fosca's ugliness and illness are not intended to be a warning for Giorgio in a sense that he should stay away from her, rather they speak to him as someone who

³³ "...becomes the most horrible, the most anguished of all torments" (Venuti 78).

has been equally tormented by what society deems is the only correct way for a man and a woman to share their lives with one another. As was the case for Fosca, whose marriage was not initiated by love but by greed, Giorgio's love for Clara could not last because she wished to uphold her morals and commitment to a husband she did not love in exchange for society's acceptance.

5. Disheveled Hair and the Figure of Medusa: Fosca as the Voice of the Scapigliati

Fosca's weakened appearance that places her closer to death than life may seem like an ill fit representation of a character who is meant to be a spark of rebellion for not only Giorgio but the Scapigliati as a whole. And so, with this criticism in mind, it is important to look back on how the Scapigliati commonly used elements of classical mythology to give their narratives and their female characters more potency. As Carlotta was compared to and eventually replaced by her nymph persona Arethusa, Fosca however, deviates from the beautiful yet tragic woman of the Boitos' work. Del Principe classifies Tarchetti's Fosca as resembling the monstrous-feminine figure of Medusa. Although I agree with this comparison, it is important to note that Fosca is not referenced outright as a representation of Medusa in the text, as Carlotta was in "Un Corpo" whose very death paid a gruesome homage to Arethusa's transformation into water in order to evade an aggressive male force.

By contrast, Fosca's resemblance to Medusa comes forth in the symbolic meaning of her distinctive long hair and Giorgio's reaction to it. He appears to be notably transfixed by the vast disproportion between the thick and dark hair on top of Fosca's head, the "ricco volume di capelli neri" ("rich mass of black hair") and the slender nature of her sickly body. The way in which Giorgio describes Fosca's hair as unlike any other woman's, brings to mind the equally

disproportionate mass of slithering serpents that identified Medusa as a terrifying female monster in classical mythology. This overlaying of Fosca and Medusa is what gives her the power to speak her mind freely. She is not compared to and thus limited to a beautiful nymph that the male narrator can sexually fantasize about. For Fosca and Medusa alike, evoke fear in men due to their distinct ugliness which separates them from other women. In combination with the imagery of Medusa, Del Principe also notes that women during Tarchetti's time generally "wore their hair in a 'crocchia,' a chignon hidden by a hat" and that if a woman was to loosen her hair from such a confine, as Fosca wears hers, it "implied, not surprisingly, moral looseness and rebellion" (Del Principe, *Hearsay* 51). Such a connotation between loose hair and improper styling harkens back to the very meaning of Scapigliatura, as the Scapigliati desired to be disheveled in appearance in order to rebel against society at large. Thus, Fosca stands to be an unshakable force of the Scapigliatura's distinct type of rebellion, as she embodies it in her physical appearance, her metaphorical comparison with Medusa, as well as having her own outspoken voice uncontrolled by the men around her.

So this leaves the question if Fosca will ever use her voice beyond ear splitting screams? The reader will come to realize, that despite Fosca's initial appalling appearance, Giorgio becomes just as transfixed by her powerful literary intellect, an area of art that was of great importance to the Scapigliati. What is so profound about Fosca's views towards literature is that she opposes the very construct of what Manzoni saw as the two paramount purposes of literature: being that of *utile* ("usefulness") and *Il vero* ("truthfulness, or the truth") in order to best educate a reader as to how they should act in accordance with the moral goodness within a society. Fosca declares in opposition that: "abborro i libri di morale e di metafisica — leggo per dimenticare..."

È tutto ciò che io posso fruire dell'esistenza; fuggire dalla realtà, dimenticare molto, sognare molto" (Tarchetti 30).³⁴ In contrast to the Manzoni, Fosca does not view literature as a tool to strengthen society in terms of the morals of its citizens, but instead as a medium which can allow one to escape from the confines of society that plague an outsider like Fosca.

³⁴ "I abhor works of morality and metaphysics - I read to forget...That is the only joy I take in my existence: flight from reality, oblivion, dream" (Venuti 36).

Conclusion

Thus, it can be viewed that the aforementioned works of the Boitos only provide an expression of the disgust that the Scapigliati felt towards the Italian society of their time, without any definite answer as to how one is able to cope with or escape from the problems the Scapigliati saw within society. And so, the female characters written by the Boitos are depicted less as women with personalities and a voice to share with the reader and more as martyrs who must bare the evils placed on them by society or, in the case of the Boitos, the science which society supports over nature. However, in the case of Tarchetti, evidenced by Fosca's opinions on the matter, literary works of fiction are what liberate one from the seemingly unbreakable bonds of society. Readers of fiction can dream of a better existence for themselves, free from the obligation to follow societal norms and expectations, such as matrimony between a man and a woman who do not love one another. In addition, the novel *Fosca* on a meta-narrative level serves to represent this concept of fiction having the power to allow a reader to gaze beyond the boundaries of society.

Tarchetti shows that a woman like Fosca can find love, and have her love accepted by a seemingly everyman like Giorgio. In that sense, what makes Fosca the ideal woman for the Scapigliatura is that she is in every way an opposite to how women during this time in Italian history were required to look and behave, and so Fosca's ugliness is what makes her beautiful to the Scapigliati. It is through Fosca's imperfections that she becomes the truest essence of a realistic woman in fiction. She does not serve the narrative as a sole model for how a proper woman should be, instead she offers an alternative to the rigidly modest perfection that was crafted by Manzoni in his literary works. By the end of the novel, Fosca's hysteria transcends its

limits of being a disease only contracted by women, by spreading to Giorgio. Giorgio's contraction of hysteria arguably denotes that he has come to realize the horrors of the reality that society has created in contrast to the joys he experienced with Fosca in their fantasy world where their relationship could flourish. Thus, the Scapigliati, and especially Tarchetti, have accepted that they would rather live in madness than be blindly content with the horrors of society and that through their works of fiction there is a spark of hope that women and men can be free from further oppression. To conclude, the Scapigliati and their work are not misogynistic in nature nor do they revel in the grotesque tragedy that befalls their female characters. In fact, I propose that the Scapigliatura while being an archetype for Italy's avant-garde, also provides later scholars with a glimpse into what was to become Italian feminism. For the Scapigliati from the Boito brothers to Tarchetti are not simply aimless anti-conformists as their art explicitly questions the treatment of women and how society itself has failed them and left them to be abused and silenced.

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