

The education of young noblewomen in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany in the first half of the 19th century

FILIPPO SANI* 

University of Sassari, Italy

THEMATIC ARTICLE

Received: March 12, 2023 • Accepted: August 30, 2023

Published online: October 25, 2023

© 2023 The Author(s)



ABSTRACT

In light of the debates on the “feminisation of religion” that have animated historiography, during the Restoration one can distinguish two educational strategies towards the education of women. On the one hand, we can make out a symbolic system in which women, whether religious or married, fulfilled values that the male part of society seemed to deny or have forgotten. The same period, especially through the social action of the new religious congregations, saw an activity and a visibility that could not be attributed to a political dimension, but rather to a pre-political one. The relationship between women and the sacred conferred legitimacy on the reclusion of women, that is, the need for a confinement which constituted the physical and symbolic element of the continuity between the education given in monastic institutions and that of many nineteenth-century boarding schools for young women. Women’s action outside the classroom belonged more to the sphere of the symbolic than to that of the useful, and, in any case, were founded on an essentially individual type of relationship.

KEYWORDS

women’s education, nuns, religion, aristocracy

* Corresponding author. E-mail: sanifil@uniss.it

INTRODUCTION

In light of the debates on the “feminisation of the sacred” developed by historians since C. Langlois’s work, *Le catholicisme au féminin* (Caffiero, 1994; Langlois, 1985, 2016, in particular chapters XIX and XX), two strategies for the education of women can be identified during the Restoration period. On the one hand, we find a symbology according to which the woman, whether she had taken religious vows or was married, lived according to values that the male part of society seemed to have rejected or forgotten. At the same time, especially through the charitable activities of the new religious congregations, women gained a role and visibility that did not belong to a political dimension, but rather to a pre-political one. In both cases, the ancient *infirmitas* and *fragilitas sexus* justified the position of the woman who, when not subject to the command of her father or husband, had to submit to the religious discipline of a female community. In this sense, the relationship between the woman and the sacred legitimised the placing of women in enclosed environments, that is, the need for their confinement, which was physically and symbolically the common thread between the education imparted in monastic institutions and that delivered by many 19th-century boarding schools for young women.

In Tuscany, women’s education remained tied to the memory and legacy of the 1785 reform of the educational institutions called *conservatori* (see Fantappiè, 1995; Sani, 2001, 2012).¹ This reform launched by Grand Duke Peter Leopold, helped to fuel the “Leopold myth” among “moderate” Tuscan intellectuals in the first half of the 19th century.

Continuity with Leopoldo’s reformism was enshrined in the *Concordato intorno al ripristinamento degli Ordini religiosi in Toscana* (Concordat for the restoration of Religious Orders in Tuscany), ratified by the Church and the Grand Duchy of Tuscany on December 4, 1815. Article XVIII of this document provided that even cloistered monasteries could devote themselves to the education of girls and open public schools for the benefit of any social class. In 1819, a commission of representatives of the Tuscan and papal governments produced the *Relazione della commissione sul ripristinamento degli ordini religiosi al Granduca* (Report to the Grand Duke of the Commission on the Restoration of Religious Orders) by which the office of public schooling was approved for 23 women’s monasteries, while a list of thirteen restored conservatori had been established by the Rescript of June 21, 1816 (See Sani, 2019, 285–286).

Some of the Leopoldine *conservatori* had been shut down before 1790 or during the Napoleonic period, but some were reopened and entrusted in many cases to oblates, as prescribed by the grand-ducal provisions, without however excluding other regulatory arrangements. For example, in 1841, in Anghiari, the nuns of the Monastery of S. Maria Maddalena, an institute that was reopened after the Napoleonic era, provided teaching in the town’s public schools free of charge, under an agreement concluded on 16 September 1816 with the Grand Duchy’s competent office, the *Segreteria del Regio Diritto*.² In Florence, at the advent of the Restoration, the female teachers of the establishment of S. Pier Martire in S. Felice in Piazza became

¹According to the reform of 1785, the *conservatori* should have been, as Haraguchi writes, “lay institutions that would prepare greater numbers of young women to become obedient, productive wives and mothers who would support their husbands, manage efficient households, and raise their children to be upstanding and conscientious citizens” (Haraguchi, 2016b, p. 10).

²See Archivio di Stato di Firenze (henceforth ASFI), *Soprintendenza agli Studi*, 170, cc 265v–267r.



Dominican tertiary oblates. By order (*Rescritto*) of the Grand Duke of 18 December 1817, they were obliged to establish two separate schools, one free, the other charging a modest fee. The same order also provided for the boarding of female pupils seeking temporary lodging or sent by higher authorities. The government also allowed the boarding of more girls according to the capacity and means of the educational establishment (Sani, 2010, 589).

FEMALE EDUCATIONAL ESTABLISHMENTS

In the 1820s, Tuscany had a fair number of female educational establishments, which differed as to fees and type of teaching according to the social class at which they were aimed. In 1819, the provision of public schooling was entrusted to 23 nuns' convents (Sani, 2019, 286), while in 1836, Luigi Serristori's *Statistica del Granducato di Toscana (Statistics of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany)* counted 43 girls' institutes, including two convents and the Educandato della SS. Annunziata, founded in 1824 and based on the Napoleonic model of the *Maison d'éducation de Saint-Denis* (Franchini, 1998, 171 in reference to Serristori, 1837, 43-45).³ In addition to these institutions, there were public primary schools and hundreds of private schools, all very different from each other, which the 1841 report described in detail.

In addition to the Institute of SS. Annunziata, in 1841, the Florentine educational institutions that housed the girls from wealthy families - Tuscan and not - were the *conservatorio* of the Montalve,⁴ and that of Angiolini (see Calafati & Teodori, 2006), which were followed, decreasing in symbolic capital, by the conservatories of the Conventino (founded by the Verrazzano family in 1700), Mantellate di Chiarito, S. Agata and Giovacchine. These institutes were very different from each other as to the time and circumstances of their establishment as well as their financial resources and fee-charging system (Franchini, 1998, 178). But one element they all shared was their emphasis on the religious dimension, which involved the requirement for the girls to attend and participate in numerous religious services. This practice, followed even by avowedly "lay" institutions such as SS. Annunziata (Sani, 2019, 291), in some cases were carried quite far, as in the conservatory of S. Stefano di Chiusi, which was reprimanded by the government for the "flaw" of "spending perhaps too much time in pious practices and exercises. The consequence of this is that quite often teaching gives way to religious matters".⁵

In many conservatories there was a strong tendency to push the oblates, where present, towards a monastic interpretation of their role.⁶ This orientation was particularly felt where the nuns and oblates lived in the same building. One example was the institute of S. Chiara in Castiglion Fiorentino where, in 1817, the Poor Clares lived together with the oblates and the latter, far from being teachers not tied to religious discipline, observed the Rule of the Third Order of Saint Francis (Gallorini, 1991, 29).

³On the SS Annunziata girls' boarding school, see Franchini (1993), Porta (2002).

⁴On the origins and developments of the *Conservatorio* of the Montalve see, among others, De Benedictis (1997), Sani (2007), Paoli (2016), Haraguchi (2016), Scattigno (2018).

⁵ASFI, *Soprintendenza agli Studi*, 170, cc 217v-218r.

⁶These processes of "conventualisation" of non-monastic female institutes had characterised the entire Medici era (See Sani, 2007). For the 19th century, this trend is discussed in Franchini (1998, 177).



In other areas of the Grand Duchy, among the institutes catering for wealthy families, sometimes foreign, we should mention the *conservatorio* of S. Raimondo, founded in the early 17th century as a refuge for abandoned girls, exposed by definition to serious dangers. In 1674, the abandoned girls not belonging to the noble class were separated from the nobles and placed in the former monastery of St. Jerome. During Leopold's era, S. Raimondo became a *conservatorio* for the education of noble girls and remained so during the Napoleonic era (throughout which the oblates remained in the building) and after the Restoration (Moscadelli, 1988; Rosa, 2003).

Since 1786, the *conservatorio* of S. Niccolò di Prato had been destined to the "Education of Ladies" on the model of the Montalve.⁷ In 1841, this institute, run by a community of oblates who, however, wore "the habit of the Dominican nuns", held considerable assets, "the income from which exceeded the costs of the religious community and of three free places reserved for girls from Prato and abroad by appointment of the Prince, and any additional costs that may be necessary for the maintenance of the girls, who pay a fee of 5 *scudi*, often reduced in the past by a few liras, in order to help the families, especially those living in Prato, take advantage of the convenience of this educational institute".⁸

The transition from the Enlightenment-inspired reformism of Peter Leopold to the Restoration saw continuity in the practice of confining the girls, in the name of preserving their honour, which remained closely linked to the religious dimension (Franchini, 1998, 166–167; Sani, 2019, 289–290). Secondly, the education of higher-class girls continued to be essentially restricted to the skills intended for the narrow bounds of family life, with a focus on the *arts d'agrément* (drawing, vocal and instrumental music, dancing) (Sani, 2019, 293–294) and needlework. The expensive theatrical performances which, in keeping with the tradition of the *Maison Royale* of Saint Cyr, were staged at the Institute of SS. Annunziata, referred to the symbolic spectacle of the Grand Duke's munificence; however, those shows were often denounced as immoral (Franchini, 1993, 273).

Moreover, *L'éducation progressive* (3 volumes, 1828–1838) by Albertine-Adrienne Necker de Saussure and the posthumous *De l'éducation* (1824) by Mme Campan, two works well known in Tuscany in the first half of the 19th century,⁹ fully upheld this view.¹⁰

"Such then is the destination of women in this world. According to us, they are called to improve private life within the limits imposed by the laws of God. This is applicable to all situations, poor or rich, married or single. Women have influence on private life; the happiness of families depends much on them. We say private life, as distinguished from political life, for we do not mean to convey the idea that the action of women should be restricted to the interior of their homes; we believe it, on the contrary, designed to produce results extensively beneficial – but their influence is always of the same nature. It is to souls, considered separately, that they are to address their efforts – their influence concerns the individual, and the relations he sustains to those around him. Free from any direct relation with the public, they are so from any engagement with the mass. It is their lot to be

⁷See ASFI, *Segreteria di Gabinetto*, n. 50, ins. 19.

⁸ASFI, *Soprintendenza agli Studi*, 169, cc 165v–166r.

⁹The treatise *De l'éducation* was translated almost immediately into Italian. See Campan (1827). On the author, see Haroche-Bouzinac (2017). On the work of A.-A. Necker de Saussure, Gino Capponi expressed this opinion: "an admirable book by the Genevan Necker de Saussure (*L'éducation progressive*): a book that every man would be proud to have written, but that only a woman could write" (Capponi, 1877, 301). See Benetton (2009).

¹⁰On this subject, see the comments on both authors by Rogers (2005).



always subject to a single chief – the father or the husband is their ruler – so society and their affections have decreed” (Necker de Saussure, 1838, 49; Necker de Saussure, 1844, 34).

DOMESTIC SOLITUDE AND NEEDLEWORK

Women’s action in the world belonged more to the realm of the symbolic than to that of the useful, and, in any case, was based on a largely individual relationship. In both Necker de Saussure and M.me Campan, the function of women was expressed through a particular link with the sacred (Rogers, 2005, 27–30). In the case of Madame Campan, the role of women was exalted exclusively within the confines of the home: “A sentiment truly national will lead them to regard their own homes as the only theatre of their glory, and public morals will then soon shew the immense steps made by social order towards a better state of things” (Campan, 1824, 4; Campan, 1825, 287). This prospect of domestic solitude (and confinement) enhanced the role of artistic skills both to meet the demands of the matrimonial market and to aid the development of the personality of the wife/mother (Sani, 2019, 292–293; Campan, 1824, 178–181).

With regard to needlework, the exquisitely post-Tridentine role it played in female education in the modern age has been amply highlighted by historians (Pellegrin, 1999; Plebani, 2015). As it is well known, while in some cases this activity was linked to economic circuits,¹¹ in others it had only an explicit symbolic value. Needlework encompassed a wide range of skills, expertise, and especially materials, depending on the social context in which it was practiced. At the lowest levels, in nineteenth-century conservatories, these activities were limited to knitting, sewing and embroidery, while in the educational institutions for well-to-do girls the situation was quite different. According to the 1841 inquiry, at the Institute of S. Giulia, known as Paradisino, in Livorno, the girls were divided into 39 “First-class pupils,” 12 “Artists or Second class pupils,” and 262 “*Miserabili*”. In this institution, the six courses on gold embroidery, silk embroidery, tulle embroidery, lacework, sewing and knitting were entrusted to as many teachers,¹² while at the Conservatorio S. Niccolò of Prato the skills of “gold embroidery, silk embroidery, wool embroidery, lacework, blonde embroidery, and white sewing” were taught by three teachers.¹³

The other courses were organised in line with the general education for semi-cultured individuals (Italian language and literature, history, geography, French, arithmetic) which, in the modern age, was the parallel of the courses in the humanities given in the male colleges. Although Necker de Saussure had recommended that Latin be included in the school syllabi for girls (Necker de Saussure, 1838, 160–161), as late as the mid-19th century, studying this subject continued to be a privilege reserved for boys. As shown by the 1841 inquiry, Latin was taught only in the boarding school of the Conservatorio di S. Chiara in Castiglion Fiorentino¹⁴ and at the Conservatorio di S. Raimondo in Siena.¹⁵

¹¹For example, at the Institute of Santa Maria Maddalena in Livorno, destitute girls were employed in a textile factory in order to learn a trade. See ASFI, *Soprintendenza agli Studi*, 170, cc 84v–85r.

¹²See ASFI, *Soprintendenza agli Studi*, 170, cc 22v–23r.

¹³See ASFI, *Soprintendenza agli Studi*, 169, cc 165v–166r.

¹⁴See ASFI, *Soprintendenza agli Studi*, 170, cc 223v–224r.

¹⁵See ASFI, *Soprintendenza agli Studi*, 170, cc 179v–180r.



This was a consolidation of the curtain wall erected around Latin, the knowledge that, by definition, traditionally pervaded the monolithic structure of men's studies, as opposed to the plurality and variety of women's studies. A variety that remained an equally stubborn sign of an alleged lack of perseverance and depth of the female intellect, forcefully reaffirmed in a great many 19th-century authors (See Cohen, 2006, 329–331).

SUMMARY

Between 1820 and 1840, in Tuscany, female educational establishments were very different from each other in terms of their financial assets and the organisation of their fees, but what they had in common was the tendency to bind the girls to the sacred by having them celebrate and attend numerous religious functions.

The transition from the “enlightened” reformism of the age of Peter Leopold to the Restoration took place under the banner of the continuity of female reclusion, in the name of the control of honour, which remained intrinsically linked to holiness.

Secondly, the education of women of elevated status remained characterised by the expectation of a substantially sedentary life in the circumscribed space of the family to which both the *arts d'agrément* and needlework were linked.

REFERENCES¹⁶

- Bandini, G. (2015). From tutor to teacher: The birth of popular schooling in early 19th century Italy. In M. Caruso (Ed.), *Classroom struggle. Organizing elementary school teaching in the 19th century* (pp. 205–228). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Benetton, M. (2009). *La vita umana come educazione: la pedagogia del corso di vita di A. Necker de Saussure fra storia ed attualità*. Padua: Cleup.
- Caffiero, M. (1994). Dall'esplosione mistica tardo-barocca all'apostolato sociale (1650–1850). In L. Scaraffia, & G. Zarri (Eds.), *Donne e fede: santità e vita religiosa in Italia* (pp. 327–373). Rome-Bari: Laterza.
- Calafati, M., & Teodori, B. (Eds.) (2006). *S. Maria degli Angiolini a Firenze. Dieci anni di restauri*. Firenze: Edifir.
- Calogero, T. (2010). *Scuole e comunità nella Toscana di Pietro Leopoldo*. Florence: Regione Toscana, Consiglio regionale: Edizioni dell'Assemblea.
- Campan, J.-L.H. (1824). *De l'éducation, ... Tome premier*. Paris: Baudouin Frères.
- Campan, J.-L.H. (1825). *The Private Journal of Madame Campan, comprising original anecdotes of the French court*. London: Colburn.
- Campan, J.-L.H. (1827). *Dell'educazione trattato di madama Campan aggiuntivi de' consigli alle fanciulle ed alcuni saggi di morale...*, 2 vols. Milano: published by Giuseppe Rezzi.
- Capponi, G. (1877). *Scritti editi e inediti, I*. Florence: Barbera.

¹⁶The reference list contains uncited items to provide general bibliographical references on the history of education in Tuscany in the 19th century.



- Cohen, M. (2006). "A little learning"? The curriculum and the construction of gender difference in the long eighteenth century. *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 29, 321–335.
- De Benedictis, C. (Ed.) (1997). *Villa La Quiete: il patrimonio artistico del Conservatorio delle Montalve*. Firenze: Le Lettere.
- Fantappiè, C. (1995). I conservatori toscani nell'età di Pietro Leopoldo: genesi e significato dell'istituto. *Annali di storia e dell'educazione e delle istituzioni scolastiche*, 2, 39–57.
- Franchini, S. (1993). *Élites ed educazione femminile nell'Italia dell'Ottocento. L'Istituto della SS. Annunziata di Firenze*. Florence: Olschki.
- Franchini, S. (1998). Scuola, conservatorio, educando e tradizioni familiari: l'istruzione femminile a Firenze verso la metà dell'Ottocento. *Annali di storia dell'educazione e delle istituzioni scolastiche*, 5.
- Gallorini, P. (1991). *Il conservatorio di S. Chiara in Castiglion Fiorentino*. Città di Castello: GESP.
- Gaudio, A. (2001). *Educazione e scuola nella Toscana dell'Ottocento: dalla Restaurazione alla caduta della destra*. La Scuola: Brescia.
- Gaudio, A. (2018). Le Toscane educative dei Lorena: una ricognizione storiografica e alcune prospettive di ricerca. In C. Sindoni (Ed.), *Itaca. In viaggio tra Storia, Scuola ed educazione. Studi in onore di Salvatore Agresta* (pp. 171–177). Lecce-Rovato: Pensa multimedia.
- Haraguchi, J. (2016a). Convent alternatives for rich and poor girls in seventeenth-century Florence: The lay conservatories of Eleonora Ramirez di Montalvo (1602–1659). In A. Weber (Ed.), *Devout Laywomen in the early modern world*. London: Routledge.
- Haraguchi, J. (2016b). *Istruzione alle maestre (Instruction for teachers): A model text for women's lay conservatories in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Tuscany*. *Early Modern Women*, 10, 3–21.
- Haroche-Bouzinac, G. (2017). *La vie mouvementée d'Henriette Campan*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Langlois, C. (1985). *Le catholicisme au féminin. Les congrégations françaises à supérieure générale au XIXe siècle*. Paris: Cerf.
- Langlois, C. (2016). *Le continent théologique. Explorations historiques*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes.
- Macchietti, S. S., & Bellatalla, L. (1998). *Questioni e esperienze di educazione femminile in Toscana dalla Controriforma all'ultimo Ottocento*. Roma: Bulzoni.
- Moscadelli, S. (1988). I Conservatori riuniti femminili di Siena e il loro archivio. *Bullettino senese di storia patria*, 95, 9–129.
- Necker de Saussure, A.-A. (1838). *L'éducation progressive, Tome troisième*. Bruxelles: Meline, Cans, et Compagnie.
- Necker de Saussure, A.-A. (1844). *The study of the life of woman*. Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard.
- Paoli, M. P. (2016). Ramirez Montalvo, Eleonora. *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, 86.
- Pellegrin, N. (1999). Les vertus de l'ouvrage. Recherches sur la féminisation des travaux de l'aiguille (XVIIe-XVIIIe siècle). *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 46, 745–769.
- Plebani, T. (2015). I segreti e gli inganni dei libri di ricamo: uomini con l'ago e donne virtuose. *Quaderni storici*, 50, 201–230.
- Porta, U. (Ed.) (2002). *Parole sul Poggio. Testimonianze e ricordi della vita quotidiana nell'Istituto della SS. Annunziata di Firenze 1830–2001*. Florence: Pegaso.
- Rogers, R. (2005). *From the salon to the schoolroom: Educating Bourgeois girls in nineteenth-century France*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Rosa, G. (2003). *Dame, oblate, converse e serventi in educazione: i conservatori riuniti femminili di Siena, 1500–1900*. Rome: Bulzoni.
- Sani, F. (2001). *Collegi, seminari e conservatori nella Toscana di Pietro Leopoldo*. Brescia: La Scuola.



- Sani, F. (2007). I conservatori toscani in età medicea. *Annali di storia dell'educazione e delle istituzioni scolastiche*, 14, 151–176.
- Sani, F. (2010). Aspetti dell'educazione femminile in Toscana alla fine dell'età napoleonica. *Rassegna volterrana*, 87, 577–590.
- Sani, F. (2012). Monasteri e conservatori in Toscana (1785–1790). In A. Bianchi (Ed.), *L'istruzione in Italia tra Sette e Ottocento. Da Milano a Napoli: casi regionali e tendenze nazionali* (pp. 809–838). Brescia: La Scuola.
- Sani, F. (2019). L'educazione femminile in Toscana agli inizi della Restaurazione. In A. Bianchi (Ed.), *L'istruzione in Italia tra Sette e Ottocento. 3. Dal Regno di Sardegna alla Sicilia borbonica. Istituzioni scolastiche e prospettive educative. I – Studi* (pp. 285–300). Brescia: Scholé-Morcelliana.
- Sanson, H. (2015). “Ma e in latino nulla? Qualcosa sì, ma tanto poco, che paja un nulla”: Donne e latino in Italia fra Sette e Ottocento. *Romanische Forschungen*, 127, 449–481.
- Scattigno, A. (2018). Eleonora Ramirez Montalvo. Un impegno per l'educazione femminile nella Firenze del XVII secolo. In C. Bianca, & A. Scattigno (Eds.), *Scritture Carismi Istituzioni. Percorsi di vita religiosa in età moderna* (pp. 513–536). Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura.
- Serristori, L. (1837). *Statistica del Granducato di Toscana*. Florence: Stamperia Granducale.
- Soldani, S. (2010). Chequered Routes to secondary education: Italy. In J. C. Albisetti, J. Goodman, & R. Rogers (Eds.), *Girls' secondary education in the Western world. From the 18th to the 20th century* (pp. 59–76). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Open Access statement. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial purposes, provided the original author and source are credited, a link to the CC License is provided, and changes – if any – are indicated.

