

Disciplining the body.

The *Conservatori femminili* to protect the honour and prevent illegitimate motherhood

Disciplinare il corpo.

I conservatori femminili tra tutela dell'onore e argine alla maternità illegittima

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ABSTRACT

Women, historically subject to processes designed to regulate both her body and her social role, have long been imprisoned within the stereotype of the “icon of kindness” that is, of the exemplary wife and mother. This imprisonment has sometimes transcended the boundaries of metaphor to become a real confinement within the *Conservatori femminili*. Women interned there were particularly exposed to the risk of losing virtue and honour or they needed to regain it because it was lost due to illicit sexuality. As much on the virgin body as on the guilty one was poured a correctional and re-educational logic whose purpose was to protect it, redeem it, and, above all, prevent it from bearing the wounds of the greatest shame, namely illegitimate motherhood.

KEYWORDS

Maternity at risk, proletarian women, industry, birthrate, care work.
Maternità a rischio, donne proletarie, industria, natalità, lavoro di cura.

La donna, storicamente oggetto di processi atti a normare tanto il suo corpo quanto il suo ruolo sociale, è stata per molto tempo reclusa entro lo stereotipo dell’“idolo di bontà”, cioè della moglie e madre esemplare. Questa reclusione ha, talvolta, valicato i confini della metafora assumendo i tratti di un reale e drammatico internamento entro le mura dei Conservatori femminili. Le donne ivi reclusi erano tutte accomunate dal rischio di perdere l’onore o dalla necessità di riconquistarlo perché smarrito dietro amori illeciti. Tanto sul corpo vergine quanto su quello *reo di colpa* si riversava una logica correzionale e ri-educativa il cui fine era tutelarla, redimerlo e, soprattutto, evitare che portasse su di sé le ferite della vergogna più grande, cioè la maternità illegittima.

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1. The female archetype: “idols of kindness” and “women of honour”

The female universe, both in its social role and in its corporeity, has been confined by a long tradition within stereotypes that made its emancipation extremely arduous as well as the recipient of educational and re-educational practices, justified by the claim to govern it. The substratum of this authoritarian pedagogy is represented by atavistic judgements, expressed by an androcentric culture, which has condemned women to a position of subordination to men. The latter was supported by the idea that women were intellectually and biologically inferior (Lombroso, Ferrero, 1893, *passim*) and that they were Eve's daughters. Therefore, they were corruptible and prone to sin (Cagnolati, 2007, *passim*). These prejudices strongly affected both the symbolic and material condition of women, promoting the use of pedagogical means, formal and non-formal, to educate them to safeguard the future salvation of their souls and to maintain the good order of society. The disciplining of body and soul (Prodi, 1994, *passim*) was considered, for a long time, the privileged viaticum for the full adhesion of the female universe to the model prescribed by the male imaginary. That is to say, the model of the kind, meek, silent, obedient and chaste woman. The “idol of kindness” (Covato, 2014, *passim*) was an ideal towards which the female universe had to strive by disciplining words, gestures, and thoughts, educating the body and succumbing to the “law of the father” that decreed, without any opposition, that the only possible destiny was that of the exemplary wife and mother. Deviating voluntarily from this norm, following one's emancipatory desires, or involuntarily, due to the precariousness of existence, led to a counter-reaction by the patriarchal culture side, namely the recourse to measures of social control and containment of female behaviour believed deviant. The latter were often adopted to gain emancipation and autonomy as happened, for example, during the 18th century, a period in which the conjunction of particular social, political, and cultural conditions promoted a metamorphosis of female behaviour towards greater freedom (Briganti, 2007, *passim*). More frequent participation of women in the public space, their increasing schooling, and the delegation of motherhood using nannies (Briganti, 2017, *passim*), for example, were expressions of a path of self-determination that women began to embark on. This path produced, as a reaction by the male cultural tradition, the implementation, as Simonetta Ulivieri (1995) argues, of a “normalising pedagogical-political project”. It endeavoured to bring the female universe back within the enclosure of a normative gender role (Covato, 2014, *passim*), the aim of which was to preserve a hierarchical vision of the relations between men and women, which, therefore, became more prescriptive (Covato, 2014, *passim*). It was not only the role of women in society that became more rigidly regulated, but also their body. They had to be educated, or re-educated, in purity and chastity to contain the sexual immorality. Only through strict discipline women could be “purified” and fulfil the “gender destiny” in which the good social and moral order was rooted (Groppi, 1994, *passim*). Since the full adherence of the female universe to this destiny was the bulwark of a “good” society, the discipline of the body and the soul was primarily aimed at protecting honour, which was related to the observance of roles, norms and behaviour that had to be sexually and morally acceptable. Moreover, woman's honour was an issue that did not concern her alone but also the family she belonged. The loss of honour, due to illicit sexuality, became, in fact, a source of scandal and infamy for the family of origin as well. Honour, therefore, was a family and community attribute that represented the “hinge of a fundamental circularity between moral order and public order” (Bonacchi, Groppi, Pelaya, 2019, *passim*). For this reason, social control of women was the prerogative of the family, the community and religious and civil institutions in a “triple stranglehold” (Bonacchi, Groppi, Pelaya, 2019, p. 198) which was performed within specifically designated institutions: the *Conservatori femminili*. They arose on the Italian scene from the 16th century and spread widely between the 17th and 19th centuries. These institutions were designed to control and protect female honour and the rehabilitation of dishonoured women. The *Conservatori femminili* were originally established for a specific category of female profiles: lonely women, that is those who lived within a family context in which there wasn't a masculine figure that considered the one and only guardian and custodian of the woman's morality as well as the main means of her subsistence. Widows, unmarried women and orphans were the recipients of stricter discipline because they were “women” therefore “naturally” weak and corruptible and, for this reason, exposed to the risk of falling into prostitution and “without men” (Guidi, 1991, p. 11), therefore without protection. An existence full of precariousness and loneliness is thus which seriously exposed to the risk of losing honour by leading an immoral life. The unmarried women were more of a threat to the social order than the married woman, because “if female dishonour occurring within a family context was contaminating for the whole family, the dishonour of a woman without a family would discredit social classes, communities and institutions” (Guidi, 1991, p. 42). The possibility of such a discredit induced family, society, and institutions to impose a strict discipline of body and soul through internment in special institutions. In these, the “normalising pedagogical-political project” converged in a control of the female body exercised by bio-power (Foucault, 2005, *passim*) through prison methods as the strict regulations of the *Conservatori femminili* demonstrate. Internment

1 In Italy, institutions designed for poor and single women are called conservatories. This term comes from the Italian verb *conservare* meaning “to guard”.

aimed to discipline and punish (Foucault, 2014, *passim*) women whose existential paths placed them in the risky condition of not being able to adhere to the prototype of femininity constructed by an androcentric culture. Here, the confinement within the stereotype of the “idol of kindness” and the “woman of honour”, that is the demure and chaste woman as well as exemplary wife and mother, transcends the boundaries of metaphor to become a real confinement within the *Conservatori femminili*. There, the social and moral support offered to women served to “social construction of a femininity marked by the manners and styles of a ‘gender’ education, which identifies women essentially as wives and mothers destined to work in a domestic environment” (Groppi, 1994, p. 6). These institutions, therefore, were a bastion of honour through the control and discipline of soul and body, both virgin and guilty, so rigid that it sometimes marked the lives of the women housed there. But it mattered little. Everything concurred so that the redeemed femininity could be immolated on the sacred altar of the exemplary wife and mother.

2. The Conservatorio della Maddalena in Foggia and other institutions to defend women’s honour

Rosa D’Avenio was housed in the Conservatorio della Maddalena² in Foggia in 1818. After twelve long years of reclusion, she implored the Intendente of Capitanata, Cav. Santangelo, to be allowed to leave the institution and to live with her brother, who wanted to host her. When Antonio Silvestri, the Asylum’s administrator, learned of Rosa’s request, he sent a letter³ to Santangelo dated 2 August 1826, in which he explained why Rosa’s request could not be accepted. In the letter he even stated that it was necessary to use stricter methods towards Rosa. She was fatherless and unmarried, having “una madre vecchia e di condizione plebea”⁴ and sisters who “avendo perso ogni freno e pudore han tirato una vita libertina vagando per ogni dove”⁵. The conditions of Rosa’s family were thus very vulnerable and precarious, and Rosa was afraid that the poverty would lead her to follow the fate of her sisters. This is the reason why she asked the Conservatorio della Maddalena of Foggia to receive her. In its letter of 2 August 1826, the institution not only denied Rosa the possibility of leaving the institution but also banned visits from relatives who distracted Rosa from her routine of prayers and work. Santangelo, indeed, wrote in his letter that Rosa’s sisters must not visit her “per non alienarla dal buon sentiero preso e per non farla uscire da questo luogo di salvezza spingendola nel vortice del disagio e dell’immoralità nei quali le stesse sorelle D’Avenio attualmente vivono”⁶. Rosa’s fate was no different from that of the many women interned in the “Conservatorio delle Pentite” of Foggia whose regulation ordered that contact with the outer world had to be controlled and sometimes, as in Rosa’s case, suspended in order to structure “an inner space of virtue separated from the outer corruption of the world” (Groppi, 1994, p. 111). The regulation of the institute, called “Stabilimenti di Regime per i Conservatorj della Comune di Foggia”⁷, provided for the use of parlours and gratings to discipline contacts with the outer world that could corrupt the soul of the “recluse”⁸. Confinement and segregation were common practices in all women’s Italian *Conservatori* (Da Molin, 2020, *passim*). Some of them involved enforced isolation for women who went back to the institution after a time spent in the outer world having worked as servants in well-off families. Indeed, the fear of these institutions was “for the relationships that they, having been in the world, could establish with inmates who had never left home”⁹ (Fubini Leuzzi, 1994, p. 874). In the Conservatorio dell’Annunziata¹⁰ in Naples, for example, there was an area called *ritornate* (Palombarini, 2011, *passim*). The strict control of women was also exercised through authoritarian figures whose function was to guard them. *Agenti di sorveglianza*¹¹, whom women had to “rispettare, venerare e ubbidire”¹², and *ufficiali* made sure that strict discipline was observed. It served both to grant peaceful communal life and to make efficient a moral training whose aim was to shape feminine profiles that were ideally constructed from the diktats of traditional patriarchal culture. Even words were censored. Indeed, authoritarian figures such as the *Ascoltatrici* or *Vigilatrici* monitored both the conversations between inmates, that

2 The Magdalene Asylum of Foggia was founded in 1708 by Monsignore D. Emilio Giacomo Cavalieri for the prostitutes of Foggia. Cfr. Rossi (1741, p. 185).

3 The letter can be found in the ASFG Opere Pie Serie I, b. 1102.

4 ASFG Opere Pie Serie I, b. 1102 (text translated: “an old mother of plebeian condition”).

5 SFG Opere Pie Serie I, b. 1102 (text translated: “having lost all restraint and modesty have led a libertine life wandering everywhere”).

6 ASFG Opere Pie Serie I, b. 1102 (text translated: “so as not to alienate her from the good path she had taken and not to make her leave this place of salvation by pushing her into the vortex of disease and immorality in which the D’Avenio sisters themselves are currently living”).

7 ASFG Opere Pie Serie I, b. 1048. In Foggia there were four *Conservatori femminili* who followed the regulation: Conservatorio della Maddalena, Conservatorio del Buon Consiglio, Conservatorio dell’Addolorata and Conservatorio di Santa Teresa.

8 The term can be traduced with “inmates” that refers to inhabitants of *Conservatori femminili*.

9 Original text “[Il timore era] per i rapporti che esse, state nel mondo, potrebbero stabilire con le donne interne, mai uscite di casa”.

10 Cfr. Da Molin (2002, pp. 81-101) and Da Molin (2001).

11 In the documents of the Historical Archive of Foggia, this term refers to men who constantly controlled inmates.

12 ASFG Opere Pie Serie I, b. 1048 (text translated: “respect, venerate and obey”).

should not be “inutili e oziose”¹³ and the conversations between inmates and their relatives. These women had to learn to follow the moral code of obedience, purity and chastity through a confinement during which “educate le fanciulle nella pietà, ed ammaestrate nelle rispettive loro scuole, vivendo lontane dai pericoli del guasto mondo, utili si rendono alla società colla produzione dei loro manuali lavori, e giunte poi, ad una discreta età si trovano in grado di abbracciare con loro vantaggio quello stato cui sono chiamate”¹⁴ (Gropi, 1994, p. 138). It was a forced confinement which end was the monasticism, the marriage or the attainment of a state of ideal perfection. In both the Conservatorio della Maddalena in Foggia and the other Italian *Conservatori*, the honour code was used to classify women (Carbone, 2020, *passim*). The two feminine categories accepted were *pericolanti* and *pericolate* ones. The first category included virgins, unmarried, orphans and widows. Women whose precarious moral and economic conditions, as well as the absence of a man to protect them, exposed them to the risk of losing their honour. On the other hand, the *pericolate*, also named “fallen women”, were women who had lost their honour due to illicit sexuality. The *Conservatori femminili* were originally designed for this category of women and their purpose was “to protect and reconstruct not only the individual identity of the woman but especially that of the family or community whose symbolic heritage of respectability was threatened” (Guidi, 1991, p. 42). The loss or even the risk of the loss of a woman’s honour undermined the guarantee of the honour of the family and of the entire society whose moral order could have faltered. For this reason, the confinement of deviant women was decided not only by the family but also by community and institutions, through a mixture of private and public, both interested in safeguarding their own honour by exercising control over women.

3. The concealment and the training of motherhood. The role of Italian *Conservatori femminili* in maternity education

A woman’s honour was closely linked, as it has been said, to the observance of the sexual role entrusted to her, which is why the loss of honour was essentially attributable to the adoption of sexual behaviours not conforming to the prescribed norms, among which were included the failure to observe chastity and disorderly and promiscuous sexuality. Among women’s sexual transgressions, the one considered most dishonourable for both the woman and the entire community was illegitimate motherhood, as it was considered to be the “access to a role outside the socially necessary rules to access it” (Bonacchi, Gropi, Pelaja, 2019, p. 195). The maternal role, in fact, was only considered within marriage and this meant that the illegitimate mother was considered an “mother against nature” (De Serio, 2008, p. 54) and, moreover, incapable of loving because she was dishonest, having lost her virtue due to sinful passions. This social and moral discourse on unmarried mothers led them to safeguard their honour by carrying out desperate acts such as abandoning the “children of sin”¹⁵ or killing them (Palombarini, 2011, *passim*). Women who conceived children outside marriage were often orphans, single women, widows and even poor women forced by poverty to leave their families to work as servants or farm labourers. The latter were work situations that, as emerges from archive sources relating to criminal trials for infanticide, were often the cause of illegitimate pregnancies (Palombarini, 2011, *passim*). Listed profiles of women who got pregnant out of wedlock make us realise that it was often the unmarried woman condition that most exposed to the risk of illegitimate motherhood. It could be caused by rape, but also by illicit sexuality that was often a consequence of women’s greater sexual freedom and more uninhibited attitude, as attested by the conspicuous increase in illegitimate births in Europe from the late 18th century onwards (Palombarini, 2011, *passim*). The ecclesiastical authorities, worried about moral corruption and the spread of “inondante scostumatezza”¹⁶ (Corsini, 1997, *passim*) constantly warned against the consequences of *Amor Profano*, as can be deduced by reading the eponymous edict of 1734, which precluded the salvation of the soul. Moreover, illegitimate pregnancies were often the result of premarital sexual intercourse, which, although strictly regulated by the Council of Trent which legitimised sexual intercourse only within the marriage bond, continued to be consummated during the engagement throughout the 19th century (Cavallo, Cerutti, 1980, *passim*). It can be deduced, therefore, that since the control of female honour was closely related to the control of sexuality (Cavallo, Cerutti, 1980, *passim*) and since the latter was related to illegitimate motherhood, the protection of a woman’s honour involved the use of pedagogical means that were also indirectly aimed at motherhood. That is to say, as much as honour, motherhood was subject to control aimed at preventing or concealing its illegitimacy and educating its legitimacy. For instance, in Italian *Conservatori femminili*, the assistance given to *zitelle povere*¹⁷ and *pericolanti*, who were particularly exposed to the risk of losing virtue and

13 Regolamento per lo governo interno de’ conservatorj, orfanotrofj e ritiri, 1824, p. 245 (text translated: “useless and idle”).

14 Inmates were educated in purity and passivity, and they were prepared for their destiny: to be an exemplary wife and mother or to be a devote nun. The disciplinary regime was very strict, and it was based on work and prayers.

15 Children conceived outside the marital bond.

16 The term “scostumatezza” refers to immorality.

17 This term refers to poor women.

honour through illicit sexuality, was also aimed at preventing illegitimate motherhood, the most dishonourable of transgressions. Indeed, confinement by preventing the single woman from consummating sexual relations with men, was a deterrent to illegitimate pregnancy. Another practice used to prevent illegitimate pregnancies was to exclude, as the Confraternity of San Girolamo of Ancona did in 1764, from the dowry system women who “facendo l’amore ardiscono di contravvenire alle santissime proibizioni fatte in tal proposito dal Sinodo” (Palombarini, 2011, p. 25). As for as the practice of concealing illegitimate pregnancy, this was widely used at the *Conservatorio di Orbetello* which was set up to help elderly widows and from 1704 onwards also offered hospitality to *gravide occulte*¹⁸ until childbirth (Passerini, 1853, *passim*). The aim pursued by the institution was not to protect pregnancy, but to hide it not to scandalise the community and to safeguard the honour of the woman and her family. If the “illegitimacy of motherhood” was concealed, its “legitimacy” was severely disciplined. Since motherhood was the only symbolic behavioural code to which women were disciplined (Briganti, 2007, *passim*), the *Conservatori femminili* can be configured as places in which inmates were also educated for their future role as mothers. It was a real “training in the maternal function” (Groppi, 1994, p. 19) through a “generic training of good, diligent, thrifty and humble mothers, destined to bring up their children in religion” (Groppi, 1994, p. 139). Such an educational proposal, as well as the constant and rigid surveillance, the countless prohibitions that enforced observance of the norm, served to bring women closer to the prototype of kind and honourable femininity. Women whose existential paths deviated from this prototype had to be rendered, tamed, disciplined because there was no other way, no other destiny, outside the “idol of kindness” and the “woman of honour”.

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18 This definition refers to women whose pregnancy had to be hidden.