Maidservant as muse:  
The dramatic reinvention of Antonio Canova

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In the mid-1870s, the successful Italian dramatist Lodovic Muratori (1834-1919) wrote a five act play based on the life of the famous sculptor, Antonio Canova (1757-1822). Dispensing with historical and chronological accuracy, the playwright transformed Canova’s industrious existence into pure melodrama. Romance was the play’s driving force, for Muratori wove his plot around the blossoming of an unconsummated passion between Canova and his housekeeper, Luigia Giuli. (Figs. 1-2) In the play, the two yearn for each other’s affection, but stumble along like awkward teenagers. Misunderstandings, hurt feelings and farcical asides prevent their relationship from developing fully, but in no way lessen the burning desire they feel for one another.

Canova did have a housekeeper named Luigia, of whom he was quite fond. Yet despite the well-documented, poignant nature of their feelings for one another, there is no evidence that a romantic relationship ever simmered between them. Instead, most biographers stress Canova’s modesty, diligence, perseverance and dedication to his art above all else. What then, should be made of the transformation of Canova’s life into melodrama? Of the insistence on romance and lust when there was none?

On the other hand, the cooption of Canova’s biography for dramatic ends was simply part of the nineteenth-century’s fascination with the lives of famous artists. Throughout the century, operas, novels, paintings, and plays featuring artists as their protagonists flourished. Indeed, Muratori’s play was published concurrently with several plays by other authors about legendary Italian artists, such as Michelangelo, Raphael and Tintoretto. As is often the case, however, there is a great deal of dissonance between the fictional characters and the ‘real’ individuals represented. Even as their artistic talent was emphasized, for instance, so too were many of these artists transformed into national folk heroes. Equally important—and often inseparable from their folk-hero status—was the fact that each artist was also the protagonist of a heady love affair.

On the other hand, however, the transformations that were wrought in the theatrical representations of artists’ biographies reflected the way both political and artistic values changed in Italy over the course of the century. Muratori’s play drive home the delta between the way neoclassicism was understood by Canova and the way it was ultimately perceived in the late nineteenth century. While Canova and his peers believed in the

1 Lodovic Muratori, *Antonio Canova: dramma in cinque atti ed un prologo*, Milano: C. Barbini, 1877. I have seen his name written as both ‘Ludovico’ and ‘Lodovico’ in nineteenth-century sources.

The only other article I have located on Muratori’s play is the short account by Cesare Levi. See Cesare Levi, ‘Dramatis persona: Antonio Canova’, *Il Marzocco*, 27:42, 15 October 1922, 2.

generative power of imitation and the antique, by the end of the century neoclassicism was viewed as the stultifying repetition of antiquity. Muratori’s insistence on the unconsummated passion between Canova and Luigia, therefore, is really a means by which the playwright establishes love as the creative inspiration behind artistic production. Luigia becomes not only Canova’s paramour, but also his muse. This transformation connects Canova to other great artist-lovers, certainly. More importantly, it contains an implicit critique of neoclassicism itself. Artistic inspiration is disengaged from imitation and the rote act of copying and located instead in the very personal and subjective emotions of the artist. In order to maintain the validity of an otherwise outmoded style, by the late nineteenth century neoclassicism and its suffocating image of repetition were necessarily recast to fit the political, sociological and artistic developments of the time.

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As Hugh Honour points out, the very term ‘neoclassicism’ is a critique in and of itself. Although neoclassical artists themselves had referred to their work as the ‘true style’, late nineteenth-century critics applied the term ‘neoclassicism’ to the art of the mid-to-late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century retroactively. See Hugh Honour, Neo-Classicism, Harmondsworth and New York: Penguin Books, 1977, 14.


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That Canova was the subject of a popular Italian drama is not surprising, given his stature as both a diplomat and the greatest sculptor in Europe during the early nineteenth century. In Italy in particular the memory of Canova’s work retained great allure. Not only were his sculptures incessantly reproduced by sculptors seeking to capitalize on his fame, but he was also the subject of innumerable posthumous biographies that contained ample material for

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Fig. 1 Luigia Giuli (ca. 1746-1811), Antonio Canova, 1793. Oil on canvas, 28 x 23 cm. Photo courtesy of Pandolfini Casa D’Aste, Florence, Italy.

Fig. 2 Antonio Canova (1757-1822), Luigia Giuli, 1799. Oil on canvas, 74 x 61 cm. Possagno, Italy: Museo Gipsoteca Antonio Canova
dramatic adaptations.\(^5\) Published in the years immediately following Canova’s death by trusted friends and colleagues, these biographies celebrated both the artist’s fame, as well as the authors’ first-hand knowledge of his life.

In addition, throughout the nineteenth century, slow transformations in the theatre and in the political construction of Italy as a nation-state promoted the interconnection between the stage and the life of the artist.\(^6\) Although many historical dramas at midcentury had been influenced by translations of French melodramas, particularly those of Victor Hugo and Alexander Dumas, by the 1850s, as the nascent unification movement gained power, Italian theatre began to seek out intrinsically Italian subject matter. By the late 1850s and 1860s, several Italian theatre companies pledged to perform works written in Italian—not local dialects—by Italian authors, with Italian themes as their subjects.\(^7\) In fact, the new Italian government encouraged such plays by actively promoting competitions and awarding monetary prizes to playwrights who best succeeded in creating ‘Italian’ dramas.\(^8\)

Not surprisingly, as the theatre historian Marvin Carlson points out, at times these plays depicted Italy’s greatest artists as their protagonists, in order to increase the plays’ “artistic” merit[s].\(^9\)

The editor Barbini’s publication of Muratori’s play on Canova in 1877 was therefore not an isolated development, for between 1873 and 1875 the publishing house also circulated plays about Michelangelo, Raphael, Tintoretto, and Pietro da Cortona, transforming these artists into popular romantic figures and contemporary folk heroes for the new nation.\(^10\)

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\(^9\) As noted in Carlson, *The Italian Stage*, 94.


Giacometti was an extremely popular playwright, whose plays blended entertainment with revolutionary sentiment. See Carlson, *The Italian Stage*, 106, as well as Giorgio Pullini, ‘Giacometti, Paolo’, In: *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, Roma: Casa Editrice Le Maschere, 1958, vol. 5, 1208-11. Interestingly, Cesare Levi suggests that Paolo Giacometti also wrote a play on Canova entitled ‘Antonio Canova e Raffaello Morghen’ in 1852, but like Levi, I have not been able to locate a printed version. See Levi, ‘Dramatis Personae’, 2. It appears that there is also a German play on Canova from the same period, at least one copy of which is held in the British Library, London, but I likewise have not yet been able to access it. See Johann N. Preyer, *Canova dramatische Geschichte in fünf' Acten*, Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1853.
Indeed, one unifying theme in these plays was the insistence on each artist’s political persona and his nationalistic fervour. Michelangelo, Tintoretto, Raphael, and Canova were all brought together as part of a push to greater national unity, notwithstanding the great differences between them and their artistic styles. Vaunting the excellence of their artistic productions was intended to incite national pride. Equally important was the way their behaviour in these plays established an ideal civic model: they were all depicted as fiercely loyal, patriotic, and willing to fight for La Patria. Michelangelo rushes into battle to defend Florence during the siege of the city by Charles V; Tintoretto loudly exclaims the glory of Venice; and Canova lays aside his pride to beg Napoleon to safeguard the cultural heritage of Rome, and then, after Napoleon’s fall at Waterloo, orchestrates the safe return of Italy’s looted masterpieces. The actions of these artists indicate a common national, Italian character—courage, valour, loyalty, ferocity—the traits embodied by the heroes of the Risorgimento themselves. The identification of Canova as a patriotic figure was particularly palpable. Not only were the Napoleonic invasions a relatively recent event, but, as Jean Henry and Christopher Johns have pointed out, Canova’s attempts to negotiate with Napoleon and his resistance to the French occupation made him a popular political figure for the Risorgimento.

Muratori came of age precisely during this turbulent moment in Italian political and cultural history. Born in Rome in 1834 and heralded as a child prodigy, he had already developed a reputation as a powerful and successful playwright by midcentury. He wrote at least thirty plays, the majority of which were published by either the Tipografia Mugnoz in Rome or Carlo Barbini in Milan. By 1870, his critically acclaimed play, Il Matrimonio d’un vedovo, prompted the famous theatre critic known as Yorick to express the hope that

It is interesting to note two prominent artists not included in the list above: Gian Lorenzo Bernini and Filippo Lippi. Bernini’s romantic relationship with Costanza would undoubtedly provide excellent dramatic material. Perhaps the reason for this omission lies not only in the fact that their relationship was consummated, but also because it ended quite famously with a violent attack against both her and her lover, Bernini’s own brother, ordered by Bernini himself. As such, the tale is not redeeming on either a personal or national level. For Bernini’s relationship with Costanza, see Cesare d’Onofrio, Roma vista da Roma, Roma: Edizioni Liber, [1967], 131. For the way Bernini’s biography has been mythologized over time, see Maarten Delbeke, Evon Giacometti, -11. Additionally, Michelangelo Buonarroti, 143-180; Bazzero, Il Tintoretto, 44; and Muratori, Antonio Canova, 87-92 and 109-11.

Likewise, Filippo Lippi is a surprising omission. His romantic entanglement with a nun, Lucrezia, was a well-loved subject in the nineteenth century and was rendered in innumerable paintings, as well as a poem by Robert Browning. Perhaps this tale was also too scandalous to render in dramatic form. For more on Lippi’s affair with Lucrezia see Giorgio Vasari, ‘Vita di Fra Filippo Lippi’, In: Le Vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti, Milano: Rusconi, 2002, 319-26.


For a list of other plays by Muratori, see Angelo De Gubernatis, ‘Muratori’, Dizionario biografico degli scrittori contemporanei, Firenze: Coi tipi dei successori Le Monnier, 1879, 746.
Muratori’s writing would result in the resurgence of Goldonian theatre, with an emphasis on the life and manners of Italians themselves.  

Although the most successful of his plays were comedies, in *Antonio Canova* Muratori seized upon the most titillating anecdotes of Canova’s personal and artistic life, including Canova’s political adventures, in order to exploit their tragic and dramatic potential. Yet, despite the fact that Muratori featured Canova’s status as a political agent, it is Canova’s love for his housekeeper, Luigia, which structures the play’s narrative. In brief: the two meet in the prologue. By act one, a year later, Luigia has married Girolamo, an elderly man who rather unadvisedly convinces Canova to move into their home. Italy is invaded by the French in act two, and Canova and Luigia have a bitter argument immediately before he rushes off to Paris for diplomatic discussions with Napoleon (act three). By act four, Luigia’s husband has conveniently died, but before she and Canova can achieve conjugal bliss Napoleon’s defeat forces Canova to return to Paris yet again. Canova returns to Rome in act five, but it is too late; Luigia dies in his arms.

Although Muratori’s biographical source remains unknown, it is likely he availed himself of the memoirs written by Canova’s close friend, Antonio d’Este, and published posthumously by his son, Alessandro d’Este, in 1864. First and foremost, throughout Muratori’s play the character of Antonio d’Este makes several references to his biography and his own role in immortalizing the truth of Canova’s life. As the play develops and d’Este grows increasingly conscious of the role Luigia has had in securing his friend’s success, he goes so far as to state that everyone who reads his memoirs will know that Luigia is Canova’s love and inspiration, for, ‘as Dante had his Beatrice, as Petrarch had his Laura, so Canova had his Luigia’.

Luigia does play a prominent role in d’Este’s memoirs as Canova’s friend and assistant. In addition, the comedic tropes of the play—disguise, mistaken identity, jealousy, even possible espionage—recall the more piquant scenes of Canova’s life selected by d’Este. Even act three, the most politically charged act, which centers on Canova’s famous conversation with Napoleon at Fontainebleau, is a highlight of d’Este’s biography.

Yet, despite the way Canova was canonized both by biographies like these and by the new state instruments, the text radically departs from its ostensible political model. In the end, the real star of the drama is Luigia herself. In fact, a note in the publication suggests that act three, the most overtly political act of the play, in which Canova and Napoleon confer with one another and the only act in which Luigia is absent, could be and often was

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16 Pietro Coccoluto Ferrigni wrote for the Florentine Newspaper *La Nazione* under the pseudonym Yorick. For his comments on Muratori, see De Gubernatis, ‘Muratori’, 746.

17 One of the play’s reviews comments mockingly on this fact. ‘La pittrice ha un marito vecchio che dà a dozzina; Canova, già presso dalla sua metà…, fa l’intero con un’altra metà, quella dell’appartamento’. See Spleen, ‘Le Prime Rappresentazioni’, *Fanfulla*, anno v, 37, 8 Feb. 1874, 2.

18 d’Este, *Memorie di Antonio Canova*.

19 Muratori, *Antonio Canova*, 9 and 33.


Additional biographies were also published on Canova during 1860s and 70s, including Sebastiano Brigidi, *La vita di Antonio Canova*, Firenze: coi tipi di M. Cellini e C. alla Galileiana, 1866 and Just-Jean-Etienne Roy, *Le lion de beurre de Canova, ou le premier chef-d’oeuvre de ce grand artiste*, Tours: A. Mame et fils, 1866.
eliminated from individual performances.\textsuperscript{24} Presumably done to shorten the length of the production, it signals the fact that the act itself was not essential to either the overarching narrative or the development of Canova’s character. In the theatre, then, it is a rather different vision of Canova that is emphasized; his role as a political agent is minimized in order to emphasize his personal relationships, particularly his romantic entanglements.

Despite the nationalistic undertones of Muratori’s play, therefore, the overarching narrative recasts Canova’s artistic oeuvre in light of changes in the art world in midcentury. Although Canova was best known for works that expressed the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries’ obsession with antiquity, by the mid-to-late nineteenth century, changing trends inspired by romanticism and realism chipped away at Canova’s importance in broader European circles.\textsuperscript{25} This development coincided with a reappraisal of Canova’s oeuvre. Earlier works that made obvious use of classical models, such as \textit{Triumphant Perseus}, modelled largely on the \textit{Apollo Belvedere}, fell out of favour and were decried as mere copies of the antique.\textsuperscript{26} (Figs. 3-4) Even writers who defended Canova did so through backhanded compliments, as was the case with one journalist writing for the \textit{Magasin Pittoresque} in 1861. The sculptor did not yet deserve to be forgotten, the author claimed—‘despite his imperfections, his overly scrupulous imitations of the antique, his repugnance of attempting new paths and his desire to always give to his marble the soft subtility of skin and even the appearance of life itself’.\textsuperscript{27} In short, he criticized the very characteristics for which Canova’s work had been applauded in the early part of the century.

In contrast, Canova’s more lyrical and sensual works, such as \textit{Cupid and Psyche}, were more widely admired instead. Who, after all, can forget the confession of the French writer, Gustave Flaubert, who felt compelled to kiss the armpit of \textit{Psyche} when he finally saw the work?\textsuperscript{28} Likewise, Canova’s ethereal female forms, such as his \textit{Hebe} and \textit{Dancer with Finger on...
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*Chin,* were among the most commonly reproduced on a small scale, often transformed into decorative objects for the home. (Figs. 5-6) This was also the case with the *Penitent Magdalen,* a work whose very subject matter dissociated it from any antique references. The success of this particular work emerged from the way Canova fused sensuality and piety in the saint’s despondent form, yet the sculpture’s miniaturization in midcentury drained any religious sentiment from the work.29

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29 In *George Sand, Histoire de ma vie,* Sand records a conversation with the actress Marie Duval, who displayed a miniature replica of the *Magdalen* on her bookshelf and admitted she spent hours looking at the work. Duval, however, does not contemplate *Magdalen* as a model of religious piety, but rather asks ‘pourquoi elle pleure, si c’est du repentir d’avoir vécu ou du regret de ne plus vivre’. George Sand, *Histoire de ma vie,* 13 vols in 4, Paris and Liepzig: Chez Wolfgang Gerhard, 1855, vol. 11 in 4, 121.
In the paintings of the period Canova was transformed even more radically. During his lifetime, artists sometimes pictured Canova as a gentleman in repose, as is the case in the frequently reproduced painting of the sculptor from 1815 by Sir Thomas Lawrence. Conversely, he was often depicted as a craftsman. In those early imaginings of the artist at work, Canova is, more often than not, the only figure in the studio. Painters tended to hone in on his form, enclosing him tightly in the frame and revealing little about the studio’s larger space. 30 A portrait of the sculptor by Domenico Conti from around 1793, for instance,

30 There are, of course, some notable exceptions. Francesco Chiarottini’s drawing of Canova’s studio from the 1780s, for instance, reveals the studio in its entirety. In this image, it is impossible to detect the figure of the sculptor, who may well be absent. Instead, assistants are busy using plumb lines to measure, transfer and enlarge the proportions of plaster models for the final marble works. This drawing, currently in the collection of the Museo Civico, Udine, has been reproduced numerous times, but a lovely illustration can be found in the exhibition catalogue, Sergei Androsov, Mario Guderzo, and Giuseppe Pavanello, eds, Canova, Milano: Skira, 2003, 335. For more on the techniques involved in enlarging plaster and clay models, complete with illustrations, see the 1802 instructional manual by Francesco Carradori, recently translated and published as Francesco Carradori, Elementary Instructions for Students of Sculpture, Matti Kalevi Auvinen, Hugh Honour and Paolo Bernardini eds, Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2002, esp. 64-71, plates 8-12.
shows Canova posing self-consciously with hammer and chisel in hand, marble dust scattered about, next to the Amorino completed for John David La Touche. Visible in the space are casts of a torso and head, Canova’s Psyche, and a smaller model of the Monument to Pope Clement XIII, perhaps meant to be resting in a niche but depicted oddly suspended in mid-air. (Fig. 7) In François-Xavier Fabre’s portrait from 1812 Canova cuts a more dashing figure in a black jacket and jaunty orange scarf. (Fig. 8) He holds a chisel in his hand, and the file, hammer, and marble chips and dust sprinkled across the foreground give the sense that the artist has merely paused in the process of sculpting the monumental foot of the figure next to him. The space of the studio is compressed, its shallowness revealed by the body of the artist, which is pressed between his work and a table or mantle that lies directly behind

Likewise, Letterio Subba’s painting from about 1819 also shows the larger studio space. In this image, however, Canova, is clearly visible, at work on the marble of Theseus and the Centaur, while visitors circulate and admire completed works and casts of finished sculptures that had already left the studio. As Antonello Cesareo has pointed out, this is an idealized view of the sculptor’s studio, for Canova would not have worked in such close proximity to finished pieces, out of concern that the marble dust would sully their surface. See Antonello Cesareo, ‘Su di un dipinto di Letterio Subba raffigurante Antonio Canova nel suo studio’, Arte veneta 65, 2009, 175-78.

Other paintings depicting Canova in his studio or posing with his works—often with his sculptor’s tools in hand—can be seen in the beautifully illustrated exhibition catalogues, La Mano e il volto di Antonio Canova: nobile semplicità, serena grandezza, Treviso: Canova, 2008, and Sergei Androsov, et al., Canova: l’ideale classico tra scultura e pittura, Cinisello Balsamo, Milano: Silvana, 2009, to name only two examples. For a recent exploration of the many functions of Canova’s studio, see Mario Guderzo,‘Antonio Canova “ebbe la sua officina”’, In: Gli Ateliers degli scultori: atti del secondo convegno internazionale sulle gipsoteca, Crocetta del Montello: Terra Ferma, 2010, 17-32.
him. The only ornaments in the space are pile of drawings, what appear to be engravings and a book, the latter two of which often were used by artists as source material. And, of course, directly to Canova’s left, with her cascading drapery nicely paralleling the arrangement of his scarf, rests a clay bozzetto of the Venus Italica, another work very openly based on a classical model, the Venus de’Medici.\textsuperscript{31}

By the end of the century, however, a different image of Canova emerged in the pictorial imagination. His artistic production was completely divorced from the classical works that had been so important in the early part of the century. In Pinckney Marcius-Simons’ painting, The Boy Sculptor, Antonio Canova, for instance, one of the popular anecdotes of the artist’s childhood is given visual form.\textsuperscript{32} (Fig. 9) It was said the young prodigy dazzled the Venetian senator Giovanni Falier by sculpting a lion out of butter for one of the latter’s dinner parties. This revelation of Canova’s innate genius inspired Falier to sponsor the young sculptor’s early training. Fictions such as this were a popular trope in the mythologies of artists’ childhoods, as Lindsey Schneider shows in her work on Pietro da Cortona in this journal. In addition, this particular tale would have appealed to admirers of Canova’s work because the two lions he later sculpted for the tomb of Clement XIII also became increasingly fashionable as the century progressed and were themselves frequently reproduced in miniature.\textsuperscript{33}

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\textsuperscript{32} This tale was popularized in a French book from 1866, Roy, Le Lion de beurre de Canova, which also contains an illustration of Canova sculpting a butter lion. Yet another image from 1856 depicting this scene can be found in the recent exhibition catalogue, La Mano e il volto, 176 and 235, plate 171.

\textsuperscript{33} A quick glance at auction catalogues from Christie’s and Sotheby’s attests to the popularity of these lions and the frequency with which they were reproduced in the nineteenth century.
More telling is the way Canova’s studio space and working practice were also reimagined by midcentury. In an undated work by the Belgian painter, Philippe Jacques van Brée, the sculptor is shown at work on the Naiad with Amorino while a naked model reclines on a lush lion skin, accompanied by two women. (Fig. 10) In this expanded studio space, therefore, Canova is no longer pictured as the lone genius at work. Yet, although van Brée worked in Rome for several years and undoubtedly saw the sculptor at work, the painting reflects an Orientalist fantasy more so than the gritty reality of a sculptor’s studio.\(^{34}\) Likewise, in Pompeo Calvi’s portrait of Canova at work on the clay model for the monument to Maria Christina of Austria, Calvi presents the artist in the larger space of the studio, his tools prominently displayed. (Fig. 11) Canova holds a clay modeling tool in his hand, and a triangular level and two compasses for pointing and enlargement hang from the studio wall. In the foreground of the image there is both a hammer and a mound of clay, out of which sprout several more wooden modeling tools. Even the half-burned candle stub alludes to Canova’s habit of assessing his work by a candle’s flickering glow.\(^{35}\) The artist is

\(^{34}\) For an introduction to van Brée’s work, see Denis Coeckelberghs and Pierre Loze, eds, 1770-1830: Autour du néo-classicisme en belgique, Bruxelles: Crédit communal, 1985, 225-230.

\(^{35}\) There are numerous references in travel diaries and journals to Canova’s habit of displaying his work by candlelight. In a letter dated Nov. 26, 1806, Canova himself even encouraged Quatremère de Quincy to use torchlight to judge the anatomical correctness and refinement of his carving. See Antonio Canova and Antoine-Chrysosthôme Quatremère de Quincy, Il carteggio Canova-Quatremère de Quincy, 1785-1822, Giuseppe Pavanello and Francesco Paolo Luiso, eds, Ponzano, Italy: Vianello, 2005, 91-92.
surrounded by his sculptures and the painting reads as a catalogue raisonné of his oeuvre. In a rear room, a lion from the Monument to Clement XIII and the heads of Creugas and Theseus and the Minotaur are just visible over a dividing curtain. Bas-reliefs line the studio wall. Along a shelf directly above Canova’s head rest small scale clay models of several works, including the colossal heroic male figures, Triumphant Perseus and Hercules and Lychas. Their magnitude, however, has been diminished and they are evenly balanced by two of Canova’s most delicate pieces, Hebe and the Venus Italica, presented on the same scale. Even the larger figures for the Maria Christina monument create a triangular frame, through which can be seen the tender kiss between Cupid and Psyche. As in Van Brée’s portrait, Canova is not alone in the studio. Instead, he is watched by a seated male figure who has paused in the process of reading a book—perhaps an allusion to one of his many friends or the many tourists who visited his studio, or, possibly, to his habit of hiring someone to read

36 The presence of a curtain in Canova’s studio, also visible in other paintings of the space, is confirmed by Canova’s account book of 1783, in which he purchased canvas or cloth to partition the rooms. Antonio Canova, ‘Libri di Conti (1783-1788)’, In: Scritti, Hugh Honour and Paolo Mariuz, eds, Edizione nazionale delle opere di Antonio Canova, Roma: Salerno, 2007, 210.
classical literature to him as he worked.\textsuperscript{37} Equally important, once again the studio reveals a female presence, for a model sits in a chair to the artist’s right, studying a drawing. Her dark curls are pulled into a loose bun and the two ribbons decorating her tresses are a frequently repeated motif in Canova’s female sculptures—as seen, for instance, in the ideal head and its reflection in the mirror, which are positioned directly behind the artist.

The female model takes on even more prominence in two additional paintings envisioning the artist at work. In an undated painting by Lorenzo Valles, for instance, Canova is shown contemplating the full-scale clay model of his work, \textit{Paolina Borghese as Venus Victrix}. (Fig. 12) Here, however, it is the ‘real’ Paolina’s half-naked form that takes center stage, for although she is being dressed by an attentive maid as the modeling session comes to a close, one of her breasts is still fully uncovered. The intimation is clear: Canova modeled his famous work directly from the body of Paolina herself. Valles was referring to the scandal the sculpture caused shortly after it was completed, for rumors did circulate that Paolina—Napoleon’s sister and Prince Camillo Borghese’s wife—had posed nude for Canova, a charge she infamously refused to deny.\textsuperscript{38} Yet it is not just Paolina’s physical body

\textsuperscript{37} Both the number of tourists who visited Canova’s studio and his habit of having someone read aloud to him are noted in Hugh Honour, ‘Canova’s Studio Practice I: The Early Years’, \textit{The Burlington Magazine}, 114: 828, March 1972, 147 and 148, respectively.

\textsuperscript{38} This rumor was widely circulated in travel journals and diaries published throughout the century and even made its way into more historical accounts of the epoch. See, for instance, Frank B. Goodrich, \textit{The Court of Napoleon}, or, \textit{Society Under the First Empire}, New York: Derby and Jackson, 1857, 195.
that makes her presence in the studio so palpable. Indeed, signs of the prominent role that ‘woman’ takes on in the creative process abound. As in Calvi’s work, the larger space of the studio is shown, but here Canova’s tools are no longer visible. They are replaced, instead, by a profusion of flowers arrayed in a vase on the floor, a smaller arrangement in a bud vase on a neoclassical side table, and what appears to be a mass of violets directly behind the artist. These decorative signs of femininity are multiplied in the rich silk fabrics which flourish in the foreground. Sculptures still line the space of the studio, visible in bits and pieces beyond the drapery which encloses the sculptor at work, but only ideal heads and portrait busts are apparent. The one exception is the head of the *Venus Italica*, which peeps out in profile over the curtain rod and whose profile is mimicked in the profile of the clay model of *Paolina*. Even the representation of Canova himself is transformed. Not only is he shown in a contemplative moment, gazing at his sculpture—or, perhaps, at the half-dressed form of *Paolina*—but, he has unconsciously mimicked the very attitude of his *modello*. His elbow rests on the table beside him and he props his chin in his hand, shifting his weight into his hip and creating an s-curve similar to the sinuous form of his sculpture. His forward gaze parallels that of the model, Paolina, and the similarity in their profiles is further punctuated by the similarity between the profiles of *Paolina* and the *Venus Italica*.

Finally, Achille Beltrame’s painting from 1894, *Canova modeling the Magdalene*, was awarded a prize at the *Esposizioni riuniti* in Milan that same year.39 (Fig. 13)

Once again, Canova is shown in a moment of repose, contemplating both a nude model seated on her haunches and a clay model of the *Penitent Magdalene*. His more classical works, *Theseus and the Minotaur* and *Venus and Adonis*, have been relegated to the background,

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symbolically cut off by framing edge. Canova has been inspired by the female model in front of him, and, as in Lorenzo Valle’s painting, his form mimics the slumped posture of both the half-naked figure and the clay *modello*. It is also telling that in these last three paintings of Canova in his studio, it is the clay model that is shown and not the final marble. Not only does the clay model most clearly bear the trace of the sculptor’s hand, but, as one of the first sketches for the work, it also best reveals his inventive genius. In addition, these paintings reaffirm the mistaken belief that Canova did not sculpt his own marbles, misinformation that was widely published in travel diaries and journals of the period. 40

In all of these images, then, female models are made a prominent part of the artist’s studio and the creative process. Rather than depicting the tools that were more likely to have been found in Canova’s studio, yet which would too strongly register his interest in classical antiquity—engravings, books, and casts of the antique, for instance—the sculptor is shown working from life. Canova undoubtedly did sketch from the female nude; thousands of lively drawings of animated and nubile female figures attest to the fact. 41 Yet it is highly unlikely any models posed naked at length while he worked on a large scale clay model, much yet the marble block. In these nineteenth-century imaginings of the artist at work, therefore, the studio becomes a gendered space where at least part of the creative process is indebted to the lure of the female nude. This femininity not only affects Canova’s work, but the very figure of the artist as he takes on the attitudes of his own models in an unconscious sympathetic gesture.

The rewriting of Canova’s life that occurs in the art and art criticism of the time is paralleled in the complimentary effort of Muratori’s drama. Canova is transformed in the play into an artist whose very creativity is dependent on a female presence. Indeed, almost all of the plays from this period that feature artists as their protagonists likewise insist on the artist’s passionate impulses. Not only are Tintoretto, Michelangelo, and Raphael depicted as being madly in love, but in all of these plays the woman they love acts as the guiding impulse to their art. 42 Ambrogio Bàzzerò’s 1875 play on Tintoretto, for instance, portrays the great painter as enamoured of Titian’s daughter, Lavinia. Although her marriage to another man and subsequent early death thwarts his desire for her, her features appear regularly in his work. 43 Paolo Giacometti’s play on Michelangelo likewise heavily emphasizes Michelangelo’s friendship with Vittoria Colonna. 44 With a tortured sigh, Michelangelo makes the bombastic proclamation that he dare not even consider that ‘the most sublime

40 By midcentury the idea that Canova did not work on the marble itself mistakenly had taken hold in the popular imagination. See Honour, ‘Canova’s Studio Practice I: The Early Years’, 146-7.
42 Carolina C. Luzzatto’s play, *Piero da Cortona*, is the only play in this list that does not include a female figure as muse. I account for this partly because the play deals primarily with Cortona’s adolescence and follows the general structure of most tales about Cortona from the period. For more on the many children’s stories written about Cortona in the nineteenth century, see the article by Lindsey Schneider in this journal. Lindsey Schneider, ‘Pietro Berrettini and the Sorcerer’s Stone: Pietro da Cortona in Nineteenth-Century Children’s Literature’, *Journal of Art Historiography*, Issue 3 December 2010.
43 Bàzzerò, *Il Tintoretto*, 33 and 70. After Lavinia’s death, Tintoretto marries another woman who gives birth to a daughter, Marietta—herself a painter. Even this coda continues the theme of woman as muse, for Tintoretto’s paternal affection for Marietta inspires many of his paintings until her own tragic, early death.
woman in Italy’ would deign to be his lover, yet as soon as she is widowed, he proposes to her—and when she refuses him, he becomes rabidly jealous of her dead spouse.\(^{45}\) Throughout all of this emotional turmoil, one thing remains constant; Vittoria is, as Michelangelo himself proclaims, ‘a muse, a sibyl’.\(^{46}\) In fact, within the play it is her encouragement that inspires him to complete what are arguably his greatest masterpieces, the *Sistine Ceiling* and the *Last Judgment*.\(^{47}\) Finally, Leopoldo Marenco’s *Raffaello Sanzio* centers, not surprisingly, on Raphael’s relationship with La Fornarina, continuing a long-standing fascination with Raphael’s love affair with the ‘baker’s daughter’.\(^{48}\) Marenco’s play, however, breaks the mould of the others. It is true that La Fornarina explicitly acts as Raphael’s muse within the play, but it is also the consummation of their passion that leads to Raphael’s early death, made clear in the play’s dedicatory inscription in which beauty and love spark both art and the fire that devours life.\(^{49}\) The interconnection between these artists, for whom love and inspiration go hand in hand, likewise is made explicit repeatedly in the dialogue of the plays themselves, for at times the artists refer not only to one another, but also to Dante and Petrarch, whose passion for Beatrice and Laura, respectively, stand in as a model for their own.\(^{50}\)

Canova, likewise, is ensnared in a web of tumultuous emotions inspired by Luigia. His presumed dedication to his art and reputation for asceticism are thwarted by his first encounter with her, for she reminds him of a youthful crush and instantly ignites his desire.\(^{51}\) He compares this meeting to the first moment in which Petrarch saw Laura, and refers to Luigia as his ‘poetic vision’.\(^{52}\) Yet his continuous sighs and nostalgic reminisces are

\(^{45}\) ‘Mic. [...] Olà, Buonarrotti! che dici? che sperì? che pretendi? che la più sublime delle donne d’Italia, la moglie del marchese di Pescara sia la tua amante?...menzogna! io nol cerco, non lo spero, non voglio... Vittoria Colonna sente la religione dell’arte, ama l’artista...Ebbene, che importa l’uomo?’ Giacometti, *Michelangelo Buonarrotti*, 60 and 102-6.

\(^{46}\) ‘Mic. Vittoria Colonna è una musa, una sibilla’. Giacometti, *Michelangelo Buonarrotti*, 62. The romantic undercurrents to Michelangelo’s relationship with Vittoria are also laid bare by other characters, who point out that she is much more than a mere muse. See, for instance, Giacometti, *Michelangelo Buonarrotti*, 19 and 27.


\(^{51}\) Giacometti, *Michelangelo Buonarrotti*, 66-8; Bàzzero, *Il Tintoretto*, 39, 41, and 61; and Muratori, *Antonio Canova*, 22. The references to Dante and Petrarch, the fathers of modern Italian language and literature, also have nationalistic resonances.

\(^{52}\) ‘Can. Si, lo stesso giorno in cui Petrarch vide la sua Laura la prima volta, ed era pure in un tempio...Egli non dimenticò più quell’incontro [...] Chiunque tu sia, poetica visione, non ti scorderò mai!’ Muratori, *Antonio Canova*, 22.
the source of endless amusement to his assistant, Tonino, who jokes, ‘and they say he
doesn’t like skirts’ — that is, women — ‘that must be why his statues never wear any!’

In those first scenes, Luigia and Canova reveal their love for one another in
breathless asides and through the intermediary of art itself. She kisses his portrait bust when
no one is watching, and paints numerous copies of his portrait, including one that is meant
only for her. At the same time, Canova’s passion for Luigia penetrates his works, unbidden
and unconsciously. In a reversal of the Pygmalion myth, it is not a sculpture that is
transformed into a woman, but rather the woman who becomes stone. That is, in one
instance, although intending to represent the male youth Palamedes, Canova involuntarily
gave the statue the features of a beautiful woman, those of Luigia herself. He subsequently
converted the statue into a female muse, making Luigia’s role as a muse in his life quite
literal. Even his famous Venus Italica, undoubtedly one of his more politically charged
sculptures intended, as it was, as a replacement for the looted Venus de’Medici stolen by
Napoleon, purportedly was endowed with Luigia’s features.

Nonetheless, their passion is never consummated, in part because Luigia is married
to another man, but also due to a promise wrested from her by Antonio d’Este, who is also
the supervisor of Canova’s studio. D’Este fears that should Canova discover Luigia’s love
for him, it would destroy his artistic potential. Although she professes to desire nothing
more than to be Canova’s ‘sister, advisor, housekeeper — everything but his lover’, d’Este
does not believe her. Her ‘provocative smile, fiery eyes and shiny braids’ and her knowledge
about art and literature will make her irresistible to a ‘man who seeks out the most beautiful
things in nature’. D’Este therefore beseeches her: ‘Talk to him about the laundry and the
chicken coop, with a basket of eggs on one arm and socks to mend on the other; and then I
will find you sublime, and I will kiss your hand, both your hands’.

D’Este’s great fear is that if Luigia and Canova find fulfilment in their love for one
another, Canova will die young like Raphael. Yet, if it is an unhappy union, he will die
insane, like Tasso or Petrarch. It is Luigia’s response, however, that encapsulates the idea

53 ‘Ton. (E dice che non ama le gonnelle!...[con malizia] Sarà per questo che le sue statue ne fan sempre di meno.)’ Muratori, Antonio Canova, 12.
54 Muratori, Antonio Canova, 56.
55 In the play, Luigia is at work on her third portrait of Canova, having already completed two for Count Oddio and Girolamo Zulian. This third portrait is intended for her own pleasure. In this scene, it is clear that even
Luigia’s own artistic renderings are inspired by passion. When d’Este questions how she can make such a perfect likeness of Canova, she reminds him that painting itself had its origin in love, when a young woman traced her
lover’s profile with candlelight and created the art — ‘e così l’amore diede origine alla pittura’. Muratori, Antonio Canova, 32-3.
56 Muratori, Antonio Canova, 49-50. Canova then subsequently destroys this statue after an argument with Luigia. She
feels that people will recognize her face and assume that she posed nude for the artist as well, miring her in a
57 Muratori, Antonio Canova, 61.
58 ‘Io voglio essere per Canova una sorella, una consigliera, la custode della sua casa…tutto, fuorché la sua
amante.’ Muratori, Antonio Canova, 36.
59 ‘D’Este. (in fretta e con calore) Sentite: se voi vi presentate con quelli occhi di fuoco, con quel sorriso provocante, con quelle treccie rilucenti sfoggiando tutti i doni che vi prodigò natura dinanzi ad un uomo che va cercando ciò
che la natura fece di più bello; se gli venite incontro coi pennelli in mano, colle terzine di Dante sulle labbra, parlando di Ariosto, di Shakespeare, dei giardini Estensi, dell’acque di Valchiusa e della figlia di Dibutade che
raccolgile il carbone; io non crederò mai che voi vogliate esser tenuta per sorella o per governante. Parlategli del
bucato e del pollaio, con un cesto d’uova sopra un braccio, con delle calze da racconciare sull’altro; ed allora io vi
troverò sublime, e vi bacierò la mano, tutte e due le mani’. Muratori, Antonio Canova, 37
60 Muratori, Antonio Canova, 33-5.
that love—and, of course, woman—is the ultimate creative force. One artist dies mad, but, she says, ‘the other dies canonical’. Reprimanding d’Este for his narrow thinking, she argues, although ‘you think love extinguishes genius, I think love and genius are a single flame’. Canova himself seems to agree with her tenet, for he declares ‘he cannot be an artist, nor a poet, who does not love beautiful women!’

Despite the sentiment she feels towards the sculptor, however, Luigia respects d’Este’s wishes. She transforms herself physically, hiding her lustrous hair and dressing more severely. More importantly, she lays aside her brushes and her poetry to focus on running Canova’s household. Although her motivation is unclear, perhaps she was influenced by a prophecy that a gypsy woman had conveyed to her when she was young: she would be the muse of the greatest artist of the era, as long as she repressed her womanhood. The moment the artist reached the apex of his glory, the poor muse would expire, having completed her mission.

The transformation of Luigia’s character and the suppression of her beauty surprises Canova, and she defends her new role by trumpeting her own housekeeping skills, which, she argues, are more worthwhile abilities for a woman to have than either artistic or literary talents. Yet, even as Luigia makes her presence invaluable from a practical point of view, as Canova’s housekeeper, she continues to encourage him and his creativity. Luigia’s role as muse is, moreover, not limited simply to the depiction of her physical beauty. When the sculptor lacks the financial resources to buy marble, she sells her own jewellery and presents the money to him as though it were his own savings. In addition to providing quite literally the materials necessary for the production of his art, her intellectual insights continue to impact his progress. Throughout her life she leaves Canova anonymous, perfumed notes critiquing his work, offering suggestions for improvement, and imploring him to continue working towards perfection. She encourages him during the most difficult moments of his career: when he quavers at the thought of placing his work in the Vatican; when he resists traveling to Paris to sculpt Napoleon’s bust; when criticism makes him doubt himself; and even when he lacks the courage to exhibit his work in Paris.

At the same time, it is also at Luigia’s urging that Canova returns to Paris a second time in order to negotiate the return of the famous Napoleonic booty, including masterpieces such as Raphael’s Transfiguration, the Apollo Belvedere and the Laocoön. Not only does her love have enormous personal and professional consequences, therefore, in that it shapes Canova’s entire artistic output, but it also has national consequences as well. Even Canova’s political greatness is ultimately indebted to Luigia’s insight and persuasion.

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62 ‘Eh, che non può esser né artista né poeta chi non ama le belle donne!’ Muratori, Antonio Canova, 39.

63 Muratori, Antonio Canova, 41.

64 Muratori, Antonio Canova, 36.

65 Muratori, Antonio Canova, 43.

66 Muratori, Antonio Canova, 100-101.

67 Muratori, Antonio Canova, 38 and 107. The role of the female critic was growing steadily during the nineteenth century. For a broad overview of several women who had a great impact on the arts in nineteenth century, see Claire Richter Sherman and Adele M. Holcomb, eds, Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820-1979, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981.

68 Muratori, Antonio Canova, 107.

69 Muratori, Antonio Canova, 106-8.
Yet, her insistence that Canova return to Paris trumpets her ultimate self-sacrifice, for it is at the end of act three that her husband dies. The path finally has been cleared for her and Canova to consummate their love. Despite the fact that Canova rushes to be with her, Luigia urges him to leave her, to go to Paris to retrieve the looted works of art. Although she insists they finally will be united when he comes back, she is acutely aware that she is quite ill, and she might not live to see his return.70

As with many of these stories about artists and their loves, fulfilled desire and artistic contentment cannot coexist. Despite the clear attraction between the two characters, the play ends tragically. After cheering crowds in Rome have presented Canova with the laurel crown celebrating his artistic achievement and his triumphant diplomatic mission in Paris, Luigia has the honour of placing it on his head. In that moment, when he achieves the height of his glory, the gypsy woman’s prophecy is fulfilled, and Luigia dies in his arms. Yet, even with her last breath she continues to fulfil her role as muse by salvaging Canova’s artistic legacy. His despondency at the thought of living without her is so great that he threatens to throw away his chisels and destroy all his sculptures. With Luigia’s death, he cries, so is his own genius extinguished. But, once again, Luigia intervenes, extracting a promise that he will not render her life’s sacrifice useless. Regardless of his heartbreak he must continue to produce great works of art, if not for his own glory, or the memory of Luigia, then for the love of Italy itself.71

As already mentioned, this play radically departs from the historical record. It is true that Canova did have a housekeeper named Luigia Giulii. Born in Ravenna, in either 1746 or 1749, with the maiden name of Bocciolini o Boccolini, Luigia married a Roman named Girolamo Giulii.72 From 1786 onward, the couple lived with Canova. She was a friend, a fellow artist, and did paint several portraits of Canova. D’Este refers to her often in his biography and attests to the deep friendship between the two, including Canova’s deep sadness at her death—which, incidentally, preceded that of her husband and occurred well before the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo.73 There is, likewise, no evidence that Canova had a romantic relationship with her, or with any other woman (or man).74

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71 ‘Can. E che importa a me di corone e di evviva? Ma non vedi dunque? ... ella muore! Gittate i miei scarpe, spezzate le mie statue, Canova non è più artista: il mio genio è spento, a me non resta che una tomba per piangere. (piange) Lui. (con un grido) No! (sì alza a stento e con sforzo parla) Vuoi tu dunque rendere inutile il sacrificio di tutta la mia vita? Vuoi tu che io muoia sconsolata? Prostrati, e dinanzi a Dio giurami che dedicherai tutti i tuoi giorni, come per lo passato, all’arte tua; se non per la tua gloria, se non per la mia memoria, per amore di questa terra, madre amorosa che ti predilesse ispirando il genio animatore che rende l’uomo immortale, e che andrà altera e gloriosa del figlio suo. Me lo giuri? L’arte tua... Can. Si, e la tua memoria!’ Muratori, *Antonio Canova*, 117.
72 There is very little written on Luigia herself. For basic biographical details, see the auction catalogue *Arredi, mobili e dipinti di Maria Anna dei Principi Ruffo di Calabria*, 27 Ottobre 2008, Firenze: Pandolfini Casa d’Aste, 2008, lot 138, 72-3, in which one of Luigia’s paintings of Canova was sold.
74 The most widely documented romantic entanglement of Canova’s life was his engagement to Domenica, daughter of the engraver Giovanni Volpato. The engagement was broken off by Canova when he discovered she was in love with another man. See d’Este, *Memorie di Antonio Canova*, 33-7.

Canova also had many female friends, with whom the precise nature of his relationship is unclear, but there is no concrete evidence he had a romantic affair with any of them. See Antonio Muñoz, ‘Gli Amori di Antonio Canova’, L’urbe: rivista romana diritta da Antonio Muñoz, 3, 1957, 8-19; Ennio Francia, ‘Antonio Canova fra due donne’, *Nuova antologia*, 1962, June 1964, 228-40; and Jane Clifford, ‘Miss Berry and Canova: A Singular Relationship’, *Apollo*, 152: 463, 2000, 3-12.
friendship is confirmed by the 1809 copy of Canova’s will, in which he left the Giulis couple all his ‘furniture and precious effects’, as well as one of his paintings. But his tenderness was primarily filial and platonic, and when Luigia died in 1811, the same year as his mother, Canova lamented, ‘I had two mothers, one gave birth to me, the other governed me and assisted me with her grand and noble ideas’.76

Muratori’s decision to structure the play around Canova’s relationship with Luigia was one way the artist’s life was being rewritten to a new template, one that demanded an erotic union as inspiration for his art—regardless of whether this corresponded with historical fact. Indeed, this entanglement between life, love, and art is the most compelling aspect of Muratori’s play, for it reveals the supposedly symbiotic relationship between art and biography. Canova’s work is used to illustrate key biographical moments, even as his biography provides the key to understanding the works themselves.77 And biography, in this case, is rooted in and synonymous with one’s love life—a popular romanticization of artistic creation that even seeped into sociology and sexology books of the period. Such was the case with Paolo Mantegazza’s 1873 Physiology of Love, an Italian best-seller that was reprinted twelve times and published in fourteen editions over fifty years.78 In his book, Mantegazza argues not only that every artist leaves sentimental traces of his affections in his art work, but also that artists can assist psychologists in the analysis of love, and the two should collaborate on a study of the different ‘amorous types of art’.79 Indeed, Mantegazza’s writing sheds light on how diverse love can be. He insists that ‘[n]ot only has every poetic or artistic genius […] left in his works the imprint of his loves, but he has felt and interpreted love, in a way entirely his own, and which in some cases became the style of a school or of an epoch. The woman loved by Byron is quite different from the sweetheart of Burns, Laura is not Beatrice, and the woman seen by Leopardi is not Vittoria Colonna’.80 Mantegazza’s writing is a reminder of the variety and richness of love, and recalls to us that even within the stereotype of ‘artist as lover’, there are complications and complexities. Michelangelo,

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Satish Padiyar’s engagement with the eroticism of the surface of Canova’s sculptures, particularly his Endymion, might entice us to question Canova’s heterosexuality. Of this potential aspect of Canova’s romantic life there is likewise no evidence in the archives. See Satish Padiyar, Chains: David, Canova, and the Fall of the Public Hero in Postrevolutionary France, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007, esp. 119-141.


76 ‘Due madri ho avuto, l’una mi ha messo al mondo, l’altra mi ha governato e mi ha assistito con le sue grandi e nobili idee’. Antonio Canova, as cited in Muñoz, ‘Gli Amori di Antonio Canova’, 14.

Canova was so moved when Luigia died on February 20, 1811, the same year of his mother’s death, that he began a funerary cenotaph honouring both women, although it was never completed. See Mario Praz and Giuseppe Pavanello, L’opera completa del Canova, Milano: Rizzoli, 1976, 123.

77 As Gabriele Guercio points out, monographic projects in the nineteenth century promoted the belief that transformations in the artist’s life were reflected in the work itself. See Gabriele Guercio, Art as Existence: The Artist’s Monograph and its Project, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.


80 Mantegazza, ‘The Physiology of Love’, 211.
Tintoretto, Raphael and Canova may all be amorous souls, but their loves are born, fulfilled or refuted in very different ways.\footnote{Marc Gotlieb, for instance, explores the rich complexities of desire and artistic production in nineteenth-century artists’ and writers’ representations of Poussin. See Marc Gotlieb, ‘Poussin’s Lesson: Representing Representation in the Romantic Age’, \textit{Word and Image}, 16:1, Jan.-March 2000, esp. 129-132.}

In the case of Muratori’s play, however, the love between Canova and Luigia teaches us less about Canova and his own epoch than it does about Muratori’s and the Risorgimento. The sociological mores of Muratori’s era seep into his play in myriad ways. Not only does Muratori help rewrite Canova’s working process, but he also puts forward a new aesthetic model befitting the recently united Italian peninsula—the Italian housewife. At the time of Italian unification, woman’s role in the home became increasingly important as love of the family and love of the country seemed to go hand in hand.\footnote{Lucia Re, ‘Passion and Sexual Difference: The Risorgimento and the Gendering of Writing in Nineteenth-Century Italian Culture’, In: \textit{Making and Remaking Italy: The Cultivation of National Identity around the Risorgimento}, Krystyna Clara Von Henneberg and Albert Russell Ascoli, eds, Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001), 163.} Woman became the ‘angel of the hearth’;\footnote{As cited in Lucia Re, ‘Passion and Sexual Difference’, 163.} by running a productive household she was meant to inspire both her husband’s sense of duty as well as suppress any potential tension over social or class conflict.\footnote{Lucia Re, ‘Passion and Sexual Difference’, 163.} Luigia’s pledge to d’Este that she will not inflame Canova’s desire in any way therefore transforms her into the ideal female role model. She throws her energy into running Canova’s household, encouraging his artistic production as well as his nationalistic fervour. She does her job admirably well: d’Este himself is impressed not only by the way she keeps her promise to him, but by the efficacy with which she manages Canova’s affairs and the way Canova prospers under her guidance.\footnote{Marc Gotlieb, \textit{Passion and Sexual Difference}, 163.}

Nonetheless, expending her energy on housework stifles Luigia’s own desires, not to mention her artistic talents. In fact, the suppression of female passion was yet another concern of post-Risorgimento society. As the historian Lucia Re makes clear, in this period women were encouraged to channel their emotions towards their spouse, children and home out of fear that if they were left unchecked and untamed by a cooler, more rational masculine mind, they would become wild, uncontrollable and potentially dangerous.\footnote{Lucia Re, ‘Passion and Sexual Difference’, 163.} Yet, while d’Este is pleased with the Luigia’s diligence and industry, Canova, on the other hand, finds her role bittersweet. Although he too praises her skill as a housekeeper, he bemoans the transformation that her new role has wrought upon her. Before she was ‘gay’ and ‘erudite’, but now Canova laments hearing the woman who is ‘the genius of inspiration, destined to walk on clouds […] talking only of expenses and packages’.\footnote{‘Can. Vedere una donna che sembra il genio dell’ispirazione destinato a camminar sulle nubi, non aver vezzi che per un vecchio, e non parlare che di spese e d’incassi; mentre prima si mostrava gaia, erudita…lo vedo un cambiamento tale nel suo carattere…Son contento, contentissimo di lei, ti ripeto; ma ho un bel porre il suo volto sul busto di una musa…(va ad indicargli la statua) D’Este. Eh! Can. Vedi? D’Este. Vedo! Can. Ella non è che massaia, massaia fino alla punta delle unghie!’. Muratori, \textit{Antonio Canova}, 55.} He even struggles to render her features, for they seem to have lost their ethereal qualities. Suddenly even one of his busts of an ideal muse seems like nothing more than a housewife through and through!
Since, by this point in the play, Canova still has not identified Luigia as the writer of the notes critiquing his sculptures, it appears to him that not just her beauty, but even her critical and intellectual faculties have been dimmed by her new role. Indeed, they undoubtedly would have been, for the importance of women’s role in the home went hand in hand with the condemnation of her education. Despite, however, Canova’s discomfort at seeing Luigia consumed by such prosaic and commonplace chores, it is telling that she continues to inspire him nonetheless. Her advice, financial support, steadfast strength, unwavering loyalty and silent self-sacrifice make her the pillar on which Canova’s success rests. The ideal artistic model, Muratori’s play therefore suggests, could be found directly in one’s home: a woman who could run the household and also provide artistic, intellectual, and sensual inspiration. Her status was defined by her connection to the hearth and her support of the men in her life. Indeed, the relationship between love, family and woman’s place in the home is reiterated by Mantegazza’s writing, in which he states, ‘the woman we love is always an angel, mother, sister, daughter, wife. The woman we do not love is only a female, even were she as beautiful as the Fornarina, as plastic as the Venus de Milo’. Not only, therefore, was this a modern vision of artistic production, disengaged from dependence on an antiquated past, but Muratori’s play also reinforced Italians’ pursuit of a new, common history. Artistic inspiration for Italy’s great artists was contemporary and local, stemming from the potent collision of an artist’s passionate emotions and the beautiful woman who supported him. One might even go so far as to suggest that Muratori’s play inadvertently touched on—or, indeed, helped create—the very stereotypes that continue to dominate contemporary images of Italians: the passionate Italian male and the competent, yet beautiful, housekeeper.

Somewhat ironically, Muratori’s vision of the Italian artist as lover does not retain any distinctly ‘Italian’ characteristics; rather it has simply become part and parcel of the larger myth that sexual desire and artistic inspiration go hand in hand. Embedded in Canova’s relationship with Luigia, and in this belief that art is fuelled by love and passion, is a theory of artistic production in which the artist is inspired by his female muse. All great art is given a common origin that stems from the potent combination of ardour, passion and nature. Although this is a common enough trope, the consequences of this romanticization of the creative process are immense, particularly for an artist like Canova. That is, implicit in this theory of artistic production is also a critique of the very type of art that Canova had produced. His neoclassical sculptures, modelled as they were on the idea and ideal of

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89 Mantegazza, ‘The Physiology of Love’, 305.
91 For a broad insight into the construction of stereotypes, national and otherwise, see the seminal text by Roland Barthes, Mythologies, New York: Hill and Wang, 1972, and any number of popular cartoons, images, and writings about Italians—from the highbrow (E.M. Forester’s characterization of Italians as both violent and passionate in A Room with a View) to the lowbrow (Madonna wearing an ‘Italians do it better’ t-shirt in her the 1986 ‘Papa Don’t Preach’ video, and even the slang-term for Italian men and their sexual expertise, ‘Italian stallion’).
92 One need think only of Auguste Rodin and Pablo Picasso to see how the connection between sexual desire and artistic creativity continues into the twentieth century. See, for instance, the essays contained in Rainer Crone and Siegfried Salzmann, eds, Rodin: Eros and Creativity, Munich and New York: Prestel, 1992 and Diana Widmaier Picasso, Picasso: Art Can Only Be Erotic, Munich and London: Prestel, 2005, to name only two examples.
classical antiquity, were, by the 1870s, already outdated. Antiquity was no longer the preferred aesthetic model. This reflects, in part, the impact that both romanticism and realism had on the fine arts and the historiography of neoclassicism itself. The works most obviously based on classical models were derided, and as a result Canova’s reputation continued to suffer over the course of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century as well. At its best, Canova’s work was thought to exhibit a frozen sensuality, a condemnation from which his reputation has emerged only in the last fifty years.\footnote{The reevaluation of Canova’s career began in the 1950s, with the work of Elena Bassi and Hugh Honour. See Elena Bassi, \textit{La Gipsoteca di Possagno; sculture e dipinti di Antonio Canova}, Venezia: N. Pozza, 1957; Hugh Honour, ‘Canova’s Studio Practice I’ and Honour, ‘Canova’s Studio Practice II’, for examples of some of the earliest serious reexaminations of Canova’s career.}

In the end, therefore, the manipulation of Canova’s biography went hand in hand with the decline of his and neoclassicism’s critical fortunes. Not only does Muratori’s play reveal that Canova’s biography could be shaped to fit changing social and political developments in Italy, but, at the same time, it reflects how readily Canova’s graceful and gracious sculptures—namely, his female nudes—could be co-opted by a new narrative of creation. The disengagement from stiff ancient models served to draw viewers’ attention once again to the very \textit{presentness} that underlay successful contemporary artistic production, and Canova’s biography as well as his entire artistic output could be remade in light of more popular cultural and artistic trends.

Muratori’s claims that Canova’s muse must have been a beautiful woman, and that it is her features that reappear throughout his oeuvre, therefore, both distance Canova from the academic practice of copying and imitating the antique, and also locate artistic inspiration in newly unified contemporary Italy and its Italians. The dynamic fusion between theatre, nationalism and the life of the great artist celebrates the newly formed Italian state, and brings to the fore the very public job that the theatre had in reinterpreting the art historical past. Emphasizing lyrical and sensual works over others, mythologizing the origins of Canova’s inspiration, and even romanticizing the political aspects of Canova’s career, Muratori’s play reflects the malleability of Canova’s afterlife, even as it contributes to the fiction that art and sexual prowess are inextricably linked.

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Unfortunately for Muratori, however, the dramatic adaption of Canova’s life did not make for great theatre. When the play premiered in Rome at the Teatro Valle, on the 7th, 8th, and 9th of February in 1874, even the romantic intrigue did not save Muratori from a spate of negative reviews.\footnote{Rome was not the only city in which the play was performed. Muratori’s play was also performed in Florence in the fall of 1873, and in Udine on 17 February 1875 by the Drammatica Compagnia n.1 Bellotti-Bon at the Teatro Sociale di Udine. Although it is likely that the company also performed in several other cities, exploration of those performances is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.} The piece was performed by one of the most well known theatre companies in Italy at the time, that of Luigi Bellotti-Bon (1820-83), a director who had dedicated himself in the 1860s and early 1870s to producing only works written by Italian playwrights.\footnote{Vito Pandolfi, \textit{Antologia del grande attore}, Bari: Laterza, 1954, 20-1 and 104-11, and Carlson, \textit{The Italian Stage}, 163.} The leading actress was also a renowned star, Adelaide Tessero (1842-92).\footnote{Bellotti-Bon’s success was so great that in 1873 he transformed his single company into three travelling companies—at which point his ability to perform only ‘Italian’ plays ended, due to the need for more repertory. Unfortunately, however, Bellotti-Bon’s success was short-lived. Having overstretched himself financially, he ran into debt and ultimately committed suicide in 1883 to avoid his creditors.}
Despite these power-house performers, the play received very mixed reviews. The most positive of these in La Capitale described it as a ‘work of conscience’, with ‘historical fidelity’,97 while a more cynical reviewer, writing under the pseudonym ‘Spleen’ in Fanfulla, pointed out how Muratori had ‘whitewashed the wall of history’.98 A writer in Il Diritto argued that even the more moderate critics found that Muratori’s play ‘is not a good work, but it is a work written by a man of genius and spirit—they found that the action and plot are poor and a bit disconnected, but that the behaviour is painted artistically, and that the dialogue is lively, spontaneous and attractive—they found that the character of Canova, if not very precise, is tinged with truth, but others lacked personality and newness, including that of Napoleon I who gives the appearance of a marionette—they found most of the scenes lacking interest and curiosity, but two or three ideal and executed with great passion and with shrewdness and artistic confidence’.99

The most amusing criticisms were levelled at act three, in which Napoleon and Canova converse at Fontainebleau. Although the mere appearance of Napoleon on the stage proved sufficient to offend critics’ nationalist feelings, it was Muratori’s failed attempt at realism that proved his undoing. Seated close to the stage, one poor critic watched in horror as Napoleon ate his breakfast, which, as he noted, consisted of steak with truffles.100 This, another critic maintained, constituted an unforgivable breach of decorum, for here the playwright had transformed Fontainebleau into the Café Cavour.101

96 Tessero was the niece of the famous Italian actress Adelaide Ristori, and she performed with Bellotti-Bon for years before forming her own company in 1881. For more on Tessero, see Pandolfi, Antologia del grande attore, 481-3 and Bruno Brunelli and Giuseppe Pastina, ‘Tessero’, In: Enciclopedia dello Spettacolo, Roma: Casa Editrice Le Maschere, 1962, vol. 9, 860-1.


99 ‘[...] ieri sera il pubblico la più irrequieto era diviso in due partiti egualmente ingiusti ed egualmente ridicoli. In mezzo ai due elementi per fortuna ce ne stava un terzo moderatore e ragionevole. Era composto di quegli spettatori tranquilli, attenti, pronti ad approvare o disapprovare a seconda dalle impressioni che ricevono, e senza alcun sentimento preconcetto. Questa parte del pubblico – e noi vi apparteniamo sempre e in ogni occasione – trovò che la comedia del Muratori non è un buon lavoro, ma è il lavoro di un uomo d’ingegno e di spirito – trovò che l’azione e l’intreccio sono poveri, e un tantino sconnessi, ma che la condotta è pennellaggliata con arte, che il dialogo è vivo, spigliato, pieno di attrattive – trovò che il carattere di Canova, se non è scolpito è accennato con verità, mentre gli altri mancano di fisonomia e di novità, compreso quello di Napoleon I che è una comparsa da Marionette – trovò la maggior parte delle scene prive di interesse e di curiosità, ma due o tre ideale e svolte con grande affetto e con finezza e disinvoltura d’artista.’ Il Diritto: giornale della democrazia Italiana, Rome, anno xxi, 39, 8 Feb. 1874, 3.

100 ‘P.S. All’alzarsi della 4ª tela, dopo aver visto Napoleone I cresciuto per lo meno di 50 centimetri, l’ho sentito discorrere per 50 minuti di statue col suo calzolaio e dopo aver assistito alla sua colazione durante la quale faceva dello spirito, mangiando una bistecca con tartufi, mi son rivolto…alla porta…per la 34ª volta’. Il Direttore del Don Pirloncino, Don Pirloncino, anno iv, 17, 8 Febbraio 1874, 3.

101 ‘Dopo di che Canova va a Parigi per la prima volta. È lì che troviamo nel gabinetto di Napoleone I, insieme a Maria Luigia, al signor Pasquale, al signor Nicola, a chiunque vuol andarci, perché le Tuileries sembrano una
The most pointed review, however, critiqued the play’s endless references to artistic practice. When one theatre-goer suggested that the play was not a great drama, but spoke very well of paintings and sculptures, the critic retorted—‘then why not send it to a museum?’ For this critic, at least, Canova’s sculptures, his artistic production, and his unfulfilled love were not riveting subject matter. Despite Muratori’s attempts to transform the artist into a modern hero and infuse his biography with passion, nothing could save the plot from being disjointed, antiquated, and dull. Canova’s artistic production might be the proper subject for a museum, but it was far removed from the vitality that should have been represented in the theatre instead.

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*stanza del caffè Cavour, senza camerieri, visto che Napoleone per il primo si serve a colezione con le sue proprie imperiali mani. [...] ‘L’arte e le sua memoria! – dice Canova quando vien giù la tela. ‘L’arte che perde la memoria – vorrei correggere io: — l’autore del Pericolo che dimentica il buon nome suo e il decoro per tanti anni apportato al nascente teatro italiano!’ Spleen, ‘Le prime rappresentazioni’, 2.

Jokes regarding Napoleon’s breakfast continued in the subsequent issue of Fanfulla. During the next performance, Napoleon no longer served himself breakfast, as a waiter appeared on the stage as well. ‘Al Valle fu replicato il Canova. Qualcheneduno di meno in platea e uno di più sul palcoscenico. L’uno di più era un cameriere, che serviva Buonaparte a colezione. Ne prendo nota volentieri!’ Il Signor Tutti, Fanfulla, anno v, 38, 9 Feb. 1874, 3.