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ANTONIO BRESCIANI AND THE SECTS: CONSPIRACY MYTHS  
IN AN INTRANSIGENT CATHOLIC RESPONSE TO THE  
RISORGIMENTO

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**Abstract**

Antonio Bresciani's notorious trilogy of novels about the revolutions of 1848, starting with *L'Ebreo di Verona*, first appeared in the earliest issues of the Jesuit periodical *La Civiltà Cattolica* from 1850. They constitute an intransigentist attack on the Risorgimento, and portray the events of 1848-9 as the result of a satanically inspired conspiracy by secret societies. This article re-analyses those novels by placing Bresciani in the context of the 'culture war' between lay and religious world views across Europe from the middle of the nineteenth century. The article argues that Bresciani represents a significant case study in the intransigent Catholic response to the kind of patriotic motifs identified by the recent cultural historiography on the Risorgimento. The 'paranoid style' of Bresciani's conspiracy myth is analysed, as is Bresciani's portrayal of Garibaldi, female fighters, and Jews-- in particular the tale of Christian conversion presented in *L'Ebreo di Verona*. The article argues that, despite its polarising, reactionary intentions, Bresciani's fiction betrayed many influences from the Romantic culture of the Risorgimento that he claimed to despise.

**Keywords**

*Civiltà Cattolica*, conspiracy myths, Jesuits, anti-Semitism, secret societies, Freemasonry

## Introduction

Father Antonio Bresciani's trilogy, *L'Ebreo di Verona*, *Della Repubblica Romana*, and *Lionello*, written soon after the events of 1848-49 that are its subject, was conceived as a thoroughgoing, intransigent Catholic retort to the Risorgimento. Bresciani claimed to expose a conspiracy: from the Piedmontese moderates to Mazzini, all shades of patriotic opinion were surface manifestations of the machinations of secret sects, including the Freemasons, the Illuminati, Giovine Italia, and many others. The movement for Italian unification was a hallucinatory vision of Masonic scheming, moral corruption, political disorder, and devil-worship.

Bresciani's fiction was the most popular articulation of Rome's response to the revolutions of 1848-9, and of the Jesuit ascendancy within the Church thereafter (Logan 2012). The novels were written in instalments for Jesuit organ *La Civiltà Cattolica* (hereafter *CC*) from its inception in April 1850, and played an important role in establishing it as the most widely-read Italian periodical of its day (Dante 1990). Through *CC*, to which Bresciani contributed until his death (1862), a circle of Jesuit intellectuals gave Ultramontanism formidable theological roots in a revived Thomism, and the agility to respond to political events (Di Ricco 1981). Bresciani's influence was widespread and lasting: translated into several languages, his novels were republished until the 1880s (*CLIO* 1991-).

Bresciani has an appalling reputation: 'perhaps the most detested author in Italian literary history', as the first sentence of one study puts it (Orvieto 2011, 15). This pattern of infamy was set early, in Francesco De Sanctis's excoriating 1855 review of *L'Ebreo di Verona* (1869). In many respects, Bresciani was indeed a polarising figure. However, the contention of this article is that, partly because of the legacy of De Sanctis and the battle for ideas of the 1850s, both literary critics and historians have neglected how entangled Bresciani was in the Risorgimento culture he demonised.

The context in which I will situate Bresciani is the 'culture wars'. The term, taken from the German context and applied across Europe, has been used to describe the struggles between lay and Catholic cultures in the later nineteenth century (Clark and Kaiser 2003). The encounter transformed both lay and religious cultures. Catholicism became more centralised, while embracing new popular manifestations of devotion, organisational forms, revenue streams, media and styles of communication (Clark 2003).

In the Italian context, Lucy Riall has argued that the culture war lasted longer than the period c.1860-90 to which the phrase is habitually applied; the whole Risorgimento, she suggests, can be re-read in the light of a lay-religious confrontation. She also stresses that the battle lines were far from clear. Moreover, all shades of opinion in that confrontation built on the same developments in mass communications. *CC* and Bresciani's novels are prime examples of this communicative modernisation.

Riall also reiterates one of the key findings of the recent cultural turn in Risorgimento historiography when she points out that Risorgimento culture drew on Christian topoi such as sacrifice and martyrdom--which she usefully calls a shared 'symbolic matrix' (Riall 2010, 266). While much attention has been devoted

to the role of Catholic themes in Romantic versions of Risorgimento nationalism, there has been little attention paid to the response to patriotic Romantic culture from the other side in the culture war: intransigent Catholicism. Bresciani is an interesting case study because he shows that the 'shared symbolic matrix' could involve a two-way traffic.

Bresciani saw himself as borrowing the *feuilleton* from his enemies, in a strategy integral to *CC* from the outset. *CC*'s editors were aware of the intermingling of Christian and profane symbolism in Risorgimento discourse, and heartily disapproved. The first issue contained a lengthy denunciation of revolutionaries' use of Christian symbols, arguing that the magazine's aim was to recapture those symbols for the Church (*CC* 1850a, 66-7). Yet the editors wanted to reach a bigger audience than clerics and Catholic intellectuals. *CC*'s first issue also included a mission-statement blaming the press for the nefarious events in Europe since the French Revolution. *CC* intended to fight this enemy on its own territory by being a 'a temperate and Christian periodical press'. As well as conventional articles covering many fields, the journal would also publish serialised novels to combat the most common errors 'in vogue' (*CC* 1850b, 5, 10, 17).

What is unusual about Bresciani's project is less that he was trying to write a Catholic *feuilleton* than that, by doing so, he was working in a genre that he himself had condemned as one of his enemies' most insidiously immoral weapons. He had had no ambitions to write a work of the imagination before 1850; indeed, he was a vocal critic of Romanticism, and particularly the *feuilleton*. In a series of essays published in 1839 as *Del Romanticismo italiano*, Bresciani argued that Romanticism was characterised by shambolic literary forms like the *feuilleton* which contravened the immutable aesthetic criteria exemplified by Dante, Petrarch etc. (Bresciani 1839). Romantic novels were populated by ambitious and cruel bishops, ignorant and malign priests, and lustful nuns, on the one hand, and by heroic and virtuous Moslems, saintly dervishes, and chaste concubines on the other (34-5). Romanticism's attitude to religion spawned a rebellious politics that, in the name of freedom, undermined all authority (41, 57, 70). Bresciani's polemic reached its apex in a condemnation of the scenes of crime and immorality that filled the works of Balzac, Dumas, Hugo and Sand (71-2).

*Del Romanticismo* makes it clear that Bresciani regarded the *feuilleton* as an intrinsically anti-Christian genre. This was no inert 'form' that could be appropriated and filled with Catholic 'content'. His extreme and categorical position makes no concession to the obvious fact that there were Catholic Romantics. In the same year that *Del Romanticismo* was published, he wrote to the Jesuit Father General about his plans to write a polemic against 'the damage caused by the imagination', decrying the threat the imagination *per se* posed to morality and public order (cit. in Del Corno 2000, 53).

Thus eleven years later, when the editors of *CC* asked Bresciani to become the Church's answer to Dumas, he found himself in a compromising position. He regarded the job of journalist as an 'abhorrent trade'; writing *L'Ebreo* caused 'acute pains that tormented my intestines without interruption'--so much that he feared for his life (Bresciani 1866, 10, 13).

It is striking how many of the items in *Del Romanticismo's* catalogue of horrors appear in the trilogy eleven years later: Bresciani's conspirators murder children, rape women, and perform Satanic rituals in Church--scenes often described in vivid detail. The contradiction is only accentuated by the fact that his novels contain frequent warnings about the dangers of Romantic literature (Orvieto 2011, esp. 49-59). According to Oliver Logan, the trilogy was 'written in the belief that the devil should not be left with all the most gripping yarns' (2012, 385). The problem was, as I hope to show, that what was gripping about the *feuilleton* proved hard to separate from what was corrupting.

Despite Bresciani's reputation as a mere amplifier of dogma, and despite his extreme views on Romanticism, his engagement with the Romantic culture of the Risorgimento in the trilogy was both profound and fraught. Here four aspects of Bresciani's place in the shared symbolic matrix of the culture wars will be explored. The first is his conspiracy theorising. The others are his representations of Garibaldi, the female warrior, and Jews. Bresciani emerges from this analysis as a more contradictory and ambiguous writer, and one much more closely tied to some of the cultural strands of the Risorgimento, than has previously been assumed.

## **Pandemonium**

*L'Ebreo di Verona*, *Della Repubblica Romana*, and *Lionello* relate the international tumult of 1846-49 in a variety of narrative modes. The sprawling *L'Ebreo* centres on Aser, the Veronese Jew of the title, who is a roving agent for the secret societies plotting Europe-wide revolution. Aser falls in love with Alisa, a pious Roman maiden. He becomes disillusioned with the sects, and eventually seeks refuge in the Swiss Alps. While hunting he is badly injured in a fall. Moved by the piety of a Swiss family who nurse him, Aser becomes a Christian, despite knowing that his former comrades will hunt him down. On the way to a rendez-vous with Alisa by Lake Geneva, he is murdered by two patriotic conspirators (Bresciani 1861: hereafter *L'Ebreo*).

*Della Repubblica Romana* is less a novel than an extended discussion. We begin where we left off, in Switzerland, where Alisa and other members of her family are still reeling following Aser's murder. Their conversations are propelled by the arrival of news from Rome where, with the Pope sheltering in Gaeta after November 1848, a constitution and then a Republic are proclaimed. Don Baldassare, an exiled priest they have befriended, arrives to add his voice to the chorus of disapproval. Pages and pages are dedicated to the misdeeds carried out in the Republic's name as the Pope loses his temporal authority, the *garibaldini* arrive, and the worst popular instincts are unleashed (Bresciani 1855: hereafter *La Repubblica*).

*Lionello* is based on the conceit of an autobiographical memoir. At the start, following Lionello's suicide, Alisa and her family find his memoir and start to read. Lionello is born with great advantages: wealth, noble blood, looks. As a student, he is drawn into the orbit of the secret societies. He rises quickly within the sect, and

learns its darkest secrets. Moving between Europe's capitals, Lionello dissipates his wealth and brings his family to despair. His wanderings become more eccentric as he seeks to escape the voice of his conscience: he hunts whales and fights polar bears in the Arctic before becoming a pirate off the Pacific Coast of the Americas; he commits several murders. In Montevideo he meets Garibaldi, with whom he returns to Europe to fight in defence of the Roman Republic. Travelling to Switzerland on sect business, he finds suicide is the only way to end his torment (Bresciani 1877: hereafter *Lionello*).

A conspiracy myth is central to Bresciani's view of the Risorgimento. It is therefore surprising that it has not yet been subjected to sustained analysis. A full-scale study would need to embrace the role of anti-Masonic conspiracies in *CC* more generally. In its early years, the magazine was in the grip of an obsession with Freemasonry more prevalent even than its hatred of Judaism: one approximate indicator is the 1850-1904 index which lists around twenty articles on Jewish themes, and more than seventy under *Massoneria* (Del Chiaro 1904).

My interest in Bresciani's conspiracy thinking is limited to illustrating two points. First: Bresciani was not the only conspiracy theorist in circulation. All sides in the culture wars tended to imagine their enemies in conspiratorial terms. Second: Bresciani posited a close, specular relationship between the conspiracy behind the Risorgimento and the opposing forces of Christianity.

Bresciani's view of the secret societies is consistent across the trilogy, and is identical in all important respects to the views articulated elsewhere in *CC*. Freemasonry was born in the Middle Ages when the spread of cathedral-building led to the emergence of religiously inspired stonemasons' guilds. Enraged by this picture of social beatitude, Hell sent heresies (Cathars, Valdensians, etc.) to create havoc. Having been militarily defeated or subdued, the heretics infiltrated the guilds and twisted them to their own ends (*Lionello*, ch. XVIII).

The Freemasons added fuel to the Reformation. Subsequently Enlightenment philosophies allowed the sect to spread. Indeed the creation of the Illuminati by Adam Weishaupt in Bavaria in the late 1700s marked a grave escalation of the Masonic menace, giving rise to the French Revolution (*Lionello*, II, 123). The chaos visited upon Europe since then has been entirely the work of the secret societies: 'Therefore the soul of all the unexpected and rapid changes in European states is the pandemonium of the secret societies' (*L'Ebreo*, I, 74). The differences between these groups are minimal, and their occult purposes are identical: anarchy and murder; Christianity's destruction; Satan's triumph (*Lionello*, II, 17-18).

There could scarcely be a better illustration than Bresciani of Richard Hofstadter's account of the 'paranoid style' in politics. The Catholic Church of the 1850s was just the kind of system feeling under threat which Hofstadter identifies as a fertile terrain for conspiracy myths. Bresciani's vision of a life-or-death struggle between the sects and Christendom is also neatly encapsulated in Hofstadter's analysis: 'The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of conspiracy in apocalyptic terms-- he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values' (Hofstadter 1964, 82). In Bresciani, what Hofstadter terms the 'renegade from the enemy cause' also has special status: both *L'Ebreo* and

*Lionello* are variants of the well-established genre of the Masonic confession, in which penitent Freemasons expose the brotherhood's secrets (85).

Conspiracy myths were a central feature of nineteenth-century European political culture. The turmoil that followed the French Revolution, together with the growth of industrial capitalism, bureaucracy and mass communications, fostered an 'uncomfortable sense of subjection to remote and mysterious human forces' (Cubitt 1993, 3; Cazzaniga 2006). So by the time Bresciani wrote his trilogy, the cultural imaginary of conspiracy was crowded. Bresciani saw himself as participating in a long-term struggle against Freemasonry; a series of Papal bulls, constitutions, and encyclicals beginning with *In eminenti apostolatus specula* of 1738 had anathematized the Craft (Gilbert 2006; Ferrer Benimeli 2006). In parallel, Bresciani's own order, the Society of Jesus, had been targeted by conspiracy theories since the Enlightenment. With an international reach, and answerable only to the Holy See, the Jesuits were seen as a threat in states that sought legitimation in the principle of *cuius regio eius religio*. They were banned in Portuguese territory in 1759 following accusations that they had plotted regicide. Other states banned them in the 1760s. In 1773, Clement XIV bowed to these pressures and dissolved the Society entirely. Its reconstitution by Pius VII in 1814 was a significant feature of the Restoration project to reunite Throne and Altar (Lucci 2014). Accordingly, the Society came under fire at various stages of the Risorgimento, suffering expulsions, confiscations, and closures frequently legitimated by conspiracy scenarios.

The 1840s saw a peak in anti-Jesuit propaganda. Vincenzo Gioberti's *Prolegomeni* (1845) accused Jesuits of being an alien threat and a 'pestiferous influence', of infiltrating all levels of society, and of 'feminizing' Italians (Gioberti 1846, pp. 142-3, 171, 186, 201). This book, a response to the way Ultramontane Jesuits criticized Gioberti's neo-Guelph programme, was followed by a 3,000 page invective against *Il Gesuita moderno* (Gioberti 1846a; Borutta 2012; Menozzi 2007). These attacks on Jesuits were prominent in the thinking of *CC*'s editorial team. Gioberti received blistering responses from the young Jesuit intellectual Carlo Maria Curci who would become *CC*'s first editor (Curci 1846). When 1848 arrived, there were anti-Jesuit riots--recounted in horrified terms by Bresciani. The Jesuits were expelled from most of Italy, including Rome (Martina 2003, 81ff); Bresciani went into hiding (Coviello Leuzzi 1972, 182).

Jesuits featured as scapegoats with Jews and Masons in nineteenth-century popular literature. The plot of Eugène Sue's enormously successful *Le Juif errant* (1844-5) revolves around scheming Jesuits who stop at nothing to deny a family its inheritance. Sue's blend of conspiracy theory and pulp fiction popularised anti-Jesuitism in France (Cubitt 1993, passim). *Le Juif errant* was translated into Italian in 1847, and *L'Ebreo di Verona*'s title deliberately echoes it.

Bresciani's portrayal of Risorgimento secret societies mirrors anti-Jesuit conspiracy theories. The notion of a homology between Jesuits and Freemasons, and of a specular relationship between anti-Jesuit and anti-Masonic polemics, was widespread at the time and subsequently became a critical commonplace (Croce 1914, 41). Several critics have argued that Bresciani sneakily admired the sects: for their border-crossing communications, discipline, and influence over the young

(e.g. Orvieto 2011, 65). The suggestion is that he admired the conspirators in spite of himself because they were out-Jesuiting the Jesuits.

What has not been observed before is that Bresciani himself thought in terms of a homology between Jesuits and Masons. Underlying his whole project is what we could call a demonology of mimicry. Citing the early Christian thinker Tertullian, among other authorities, Bresciani declares that 'the devil is the counterfeiter or ape of God, and imitates his sacraments'. The proof of the fact that the Risorgimento sects are inspired by Hell is the precision with which they mimic the Church:

In his perfidious church, the devil has created a hierarchy, a priesthood, sacraments, a cult, relics, a calendar, festivals, ferial practices, devotees (...), his own temples, his own missionaries, religious vows, unholy orders, congregations, a bible, dogmas, precepts, councils, liturgy, ritual, and liturgical language. Everything; but all of it with a meaning and aims that are diametrically opposed to those of God's Church. (*L'Ebreo*, I, 84)

In Bresciani, the language of religious devotion and organization circulates freely between the Church and its Other, the sects.

That circulation is also evident from the close parallels in Bresciani's writing between the revolutionary sects and the Jesuits, who are the sects' 'eternal enemies', the main target of their scheming; the Society of Jesus is the only organisation that the sects will never try to infiltrate (*Lionello*, II, 33-5).

That specular relationship extends right into the way Bresciani conceives of his project of imitating the *feuilleton* form for Christian ends. In *Lionello*, Romantic authors play a vital role in perpetrating the sects' inversion of Christian virtues:

they bestow the names of the most celestial virtues on the most nefarious crimes. Pride is called *chastity*. The foulest love is called *charity*. The enervation of the soul immersed in every kind of moral filth is called *humility*. The weakening of the body dissolving in its contaminations is called *mortification*. Lust is called *divine wisdom*. You only need to pay attention to the writings of Balzac, Dumas, Victor Hugo, George Sand, Fourier, Victor Considerant, and even more extensively the most recent German communists. (*Lionello*, II, 86)

'Sect', an important term in Bresciani, knots together his view of Romanticism, his account of the secret societies, his demonology of mimicry, and longstanding facets of Catholic theology. The word was traditionally applied to all forms of heresy and schism (Catholic Encyclopedia). Freemasonry had been repeatedly denounced as a sect since the eighteenth century. In all of these cases, the term 'sect' shows that Church viewed its enemies as baleful versions of itself. In *Del Romanticismo*, Bresciani states that Romantics all belong to sects: for example, when it comes to representing Christianity, the Romantics do so 'with the false judgements typical of the sects that they belong to'. Bresciani also refers to Romanticism itself as a 'sect' (Bresciani 1839, 34, 57). In this he was following Jan

Roothaan, the Jesuit Superior General, who in 1832 condemned Romanticism as 'an irreligious and anti-monarchical sect' (Martina 2003, 29).

Evidently the Jesuit novelist was weaving a tangled web when he took on the task of imitating a Romantic popular fiction which he considered to have been inspired by the sects' own drive to follow Satan's evil mimicry of the Church. We can sense the consequences of this for Bresciani's writing through Hofstadter's reference to a confusion of self and other integral to the 'paranoid style': 'this enemy is on many counts a projection of the self; both the ideal and the unacceptable aspects of the self are attributed to him' (Hofstadter 1964, 85). The description provides a key to some of the central dynamics of Bresciani's texts, where metaphors proliferate. The sects are like the mysterious, multiform, omnipresent demiurge of ancient Oriental religions; they are as insidious, poisonous, and hypnotic as a snake. They are a cult, a plague, an evil flower, a scourge, a poison, a blinding fury. Their members are wolves, foxes, hyenas, tigers, dragons, scum, slaves, chained dogs. Such metaphorical hyperactivity is related to the way that, for Bresciani, the conspiracy against the Church was not just an ideological map of contemporary politics, but also an imaginative terrain invested with fear and loathing, desire and pleasure, a space in which to enact fantasies of devilry and divinity. Crucially, because of the the specular dynamics in the way Bresciani construed his relationship to the sects and Romanticism, that terrain is one where good and evil can become confused. In the following sections, I will examine aspects of the trilogy where Bresciani seems seduced by the Romantic Risorgimento culture he was both fighting and attempting to appropriate.

## **The Garibaldis**

Bresciani has two basic writing modes. His most arresting passages are emotive set-pieces of piety or evil, of martyrdom and comeuppance which he associated with Romanticism. Examples include: Orsola's last-minute conversion (she dies after confessing to murdering a priest and eating his heart); or the horrible deaths of Babette d'Interlaken and Lionello.

The second mode is didacticism. Bresciani is obsessed with making himself clear, often issuing propagandistic messages without even the flimsiest literary packaging. The narrator addresses the reader in long passages of historical narrative and commentary, responses to critics, apostrophes... So concerned to hammer home his message is Bresciani, that he resorts to capitals: 'THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS LIBERTY WITHOUT RELIGION' (*L'Ebreo*, I, 201).

The tension between these melodramatic and dogmatic writing modes attests to Bresciani's need to exert control over the story--a need rooted in what we have seen is his very uncomfortable relationship with the *feuilleton*. In these circumstances, it is always significant when Bresciani leaves the reader in doubt about how to interpret anything he writes.

The most significant of those moments of doubt relate to important cultural motifs of the Risorgimento. There are several examples that would reward close analysis: the way Aser sublimates his love for Alisa into his patriotic mission, in the style of Mazzinian love stories (Bonsanti 2007); Bresciani's concept of *popolo* is caught in a dialogue with patriotic concepts (Rosa 2007; Levis Sullam 2007). Here I concentrate on two cases where Bresciani's handling of Risorgimento motifs concedes a surprising amount to his enemies' mythology: Garibaldi and female warriors.

Risorgimento portrayals of Garibaldi and the *garibaldini* are repeatedly referenced in Bresciani's fiction. Lionello's 'Garibaldi-style' long hair is plastered over the walls when he blows his own head off (*Lionello*, I, 6). Aser too resembles the Risorgimento hero:

Several times, as she happened to lift her gaze, Alisa saw among the plants a young man with long hair in ringlets, a moustache whose tapering ends turned upwards, and a tuft of beard that hung down below his chin. (*L'Ebreo*, I, 26)

Aser's appearance is described in terms borrowed from contemporary patriotic dress codes and representations of Garibaldi (*viz* the good looks, the high forehead, the feather in the hat): 'he is handsome, with a high forehead, and fire in his eyes; he dresses *all'italiana*, and wears a hat with a black feather swept back near his right ear' (*L'Ebreo*, I, 61; Riall 2007, 86; Sorba 2007, 493-5).

As Lucy Riall has observed, the pages of *Lionello* that describe the protagonist's adventures with Garibaldi draw heavily on Giovanni Battista Cuneo's 1850 hagiography--a text that founded an entire genre of life-stories (Cuneo 1850; Riall 2007, *passim*). Riall calls these references a 'satire' and a 'parody' of Cuneo. Yet, while it is clear that Bresciani intends on one level to portray Garibaldi as the bandit of reactionary propaganda, the result is more ambiguous than satire.

Throughout the trilogy, Bresciani uses good characters--chiefly Alisa and a succession of churchmen--as mouthpieces. Their role becomes particularly important in *Lionello*, where the eponymous conspirator is the story's main narrator. In *Lionello*'s description of his time with Garibaldi, which closely follows Cuneo, the good characters frame the narrative by, for example, describing acts of vandalism Garibaldi committed in Rome in 1849. The narrator weighs in, describing Garibaldi's 'love of the *patria*' as 'a love of massacres, robberies, acts of sacrilege, murders of priests'... (*Lionello*, III, 100). However, inside that metadiscursive frame, Cuneo's laudatory Garibaldi narrative survives largely intact; indeed it is even embellished. Bresciani is particularly keen on the displays of *Italian* courage staged by Garibaldi and his men in South America. From Cuneo Bresciani borrows an episode where Garibaldi hears of disparaging marks about Italian cowardice made by a Frenchman (Cuneo 1850, 16-7; *Lionello*, III, 93). Garibaldi's Italian Legion answers this insult with deeds of such courage that 'the French themselves were so amazed that they could not stop exalting them' (*Lionello*, *ibid.*). Imagined insults to Italian valour of this kind were a key trope of Risorgimento propaganda, setting the scene for performances of patriotic masculinity (Riall 2012; 2007a). It is therefore significant

that Bresciani not only reproduces the Cuneo anecdote, but even elaborates it, writing a rousing speech for Garibaldi that is not there in Cuneo.

A few pages later, Bresciani again embellishes Cuneo's story with a colourful description of some of the *garibaldini*. Many are former hunters of wild bulls from the Pampas, of tigers in the Javan forests, and so on. Each of these collective portraits is accompanied by cameos of derring-do set in exotic locations. As is well known, the picturesque image of Garibaldi's volunteers was highlighted by both his supporters and his detractors: for the former they were dashing, exotic, masculine; for the latter, ill-disciplined or criminal (Riall 2007a). Bresciani's text demonstrates that even an intransigent Jesuit could be fascinated by the positive Romantic version.

Another Risorgimento motif that Bresciani finds alluring is the female fighter (Guidi 2000; Riall 2012; Banti 2005, 306-40). *L'Ebreo* includes several such women, who leap off the page compared to the many anaemic embodiments of ideal Catholic femininity.<sup>1</sup> These amazons have two opposing moral trajectories. Some are evil, like Babette d'Interlaken, a conspirator, communist, forger, assassin, master of disguise, and devil-worshipper. Divine justice catches up with her in a prison hospital run by nuns whose attempts to convert her only provoke such a fury of self-loathing and demonic possession that she haemorrhages and drowns in her own blood. Three more evil amazons are allowed to repent of their crimes once they have suffered the fatal wounds that are the due punishment for their transgressions.

Alisa, her father Bartolo, and the other members of the family discuss such female warriors explicitly. Bartolo finds them unnatural and even sickening; he asserts that,

In a woman, patriotism should absolutely not go beyond encouraging warriors to defend her, nursing the wounded, and--if she is a really good Christian--praying God to defend the men and lead them to victory. (*L'Ebreo*, II, 191)

Two things should be said about this condemnation, beyond the obvious fact that it is rooted in traditional gender norms. The first is that its relationship to the narrator metadiscourse is uncertain. Bartolo is portrayed as a bumbling character, one who needs priestly guidance because of his neo-Guelph sympathies. Unusually his remarks on female fighters are not followed by a direct or indirect intervention to clarify what we are supposed to think about them. The second striking thing about Bartolo's comments is that they crop up in the story at a point when a wholly positive female fighter has already appeared; the woman in question returns prominently later in the story: Olga Ukassowich is a Croatian mountain girl who becomes a hussar on the Austrian side. Bresciani never tries to square the contradiction between Bartolo's disgust at female warriors, and the heroic portrayal of Olga.

The trilogy also contains a short but significant portrait of the best-known Risorgimento amazon: Anita Garibaldi. Again, Cuneo is the source and Bresciani makes his account racier than the original (Cuneo 1850, 11-12). Whereas Cuneo does not even mention Anita's name, Bresciani not only tells us her name and dwells

at greater length on tales of her courage and devotion to her husband, he also adds a portrait of her as a quasi-masculine beauty:

She is brown-skinned like all the Creoles in the tropics; she has a sound figure which is slender and vivacious; her features are well carved with a melancholy air, but she has fire in her eyes and her chest is manly. (*Lionello*, III, 89)

In the same episode, the priest don Baldassare (yet another of the author's alter egos) comments acidly about the reasons why Garibaldi picked the name of Menotti for the son he had with Anita. Yet he is tellingly silent about the figure of Anita herself. The only other very brief reference to Anita in *Lionello* is many pages later, in Bresciani's concluding *Avviso ai lettori*, where she is rather perfunctorily dealt the death she deserves: 'buried under the sand of Ravenna's pine forest, then dug up and gnawed by the dogs' (Bresciani 1866a, 296). But some editions omit even this coda.

In all of these instances, significant motifs of Risorgimento iconography are powerfully evoked, and then left un-policed in the text. Bresciani may have been asked by *CC* to turn the Risorgimento's Romantic weapons against it, but the result on the page is sometimes ambivalent; his reactionary intentions get lost in the fog of the culture war.

### **From conspiracy to conversion**

Bresciani's representation of Jews was not touched on by any commentator until 1978, and did not receive close scrutiny until 1992 (Canepa 1978; Gunzberg 1992, 57-89).<sup>2</sup> Since then, he has become a minor paradigm of Catholic anti-Jewish prejudice. Umberto Eco's *Il cimitero di Praga* has a character based on Bresciani who is an avowed anti-Semite (2010; Picchiorri 2011).

Bresciani's status as an emblem of the worst forms of Catholic anti-Semitism is understandable, given that he served a Holy See committed to ghettoizing Jews, discriminating against them in law, and forcibly baptizing their children. But I am not convinced that he entirely deserves this reputation. Any attempt to describe the specificities of Bresciani's anti-Semitism (and I would certainly not hesitate to label it as such) must start by acknowledging that, for such a dogmatic writer, he is very prone to moments of ambivalence and silence. Nowhere in the trilogy, for example, does he even mention the debates about emancipation during the late 1840s, or the policies that flowed from them. We are left uncertain just what to think about this omission, as we are about the expressions of anti-Semitic loathing that occasionally find their way into the text--almost always voiced by bad characters.

Giovanni Miccoli strikes the right note by seeing Bresciani as representative of the 'significant but limited space' attributed to Jews in the Church's world-view before Unification (Miccoli 1997, 1411). The decisive terrain for analysing the

'significant but limited' role of Jews in Bresciani is *L'Ebreo's* eponymous protagonist Aser. His narrative arc is a story of religious conversion that is ensnared in both Romantic character types and attitudes to Judaism that characterised many strands of *both Catholic and non-Catholic* thought during the Risorgimento.<sup>3</sup>

The portrayal of Aser turns on a central contradiction: he is profoundly involved in the sects' conspiracies, but he is also a Romantic hero. Lynn M. Gunzberg, the critic to whom we owe the most sustained analysis of Bresciani's representations of Jews, pinpoints this contradiction:

Despite his Judaism and his politics there is something likeable about this man. He has strong convictions and a rich emotional life. [...] by opting for a Jewish protagonist who was exotic by definition, by endowing him with so many positive qualities, chief among these being bravery and the willingness to convert, Bresciani gave in to the reigning literary convention and created a Romantic hero (Gunzberg 1992, 87).

My reading of Aser will emerge through a critical engagement with Gunzberg. For while her central premise seems entirely right, the characterisation of Aser is by no means as clear-cut as she implies elsewhere, when she fights against the text to make Aser a much nastier character than he is on the page. For example, it is reductive to argue that 'Aser's Judaism precludes any positive assessment of his actions' (76). It is also an over-statement to say that 'When [Aser] abandons Judaism and politics he turns one hundred and eighty degrees from a state of aggression to passivity and from bad to good' (86). Nor, as I hope to show, is the portrayal of Aser based on some concealed, evil essence: 'a hideous and dangerous underside' (74).

Gunzburg is intent on reading Aser as a conventionally derogatory anti-Semitic type, when what is actually most striking about him is just how much Bresciani wants us to admire him. We first encounter Aser as a mysterious horseman who falls in love with Alisa. He looks like a typical Romantic hero, and even resembles Garibaldi. Ariella Lang has advanced the reasonable hypothesis that, in this scene, Aser also echoes Mazzini's image of a hero-poet-patriot (Lang 2008, 119).<sup>4</sup> But it is notable that such descriptions lack any condemnatory framework in the text. In the scene that introduces Aser he wins a prize for his painting of Alisa stroking a lamb set in the landscape around the Lake of Albano. The Christian symbolism of the lamb is evident; and the fact that the Lake of Albano is overlooked by the Papal retreat at Castelgandolfo is not coincidental: the scene is one of many spiritually inspiring landscapes in Bresciani's fiction, and it is clearly meant to foreshadow Aser's eventual conversion to Christianity.

It is only after some sixty pages that we learn Aser is a revolutionary conspirator. Yet given how deeply immersed Aser is in the sects, it is striking how Bresciani manages to protect him from the most damning associations with them. We first learn of Aser's conspiratorial activities through Doctor Sterbini (based on the real Mazzinian Pietro Sterbini):

He hires dissolute youths, womanisers, fraudsters, the idle, and those contaminated by wicked crimes. He pays layabouts, spendthrifts, wife-beaters, men who renounce their children, exhaust their possessions, overburden themselves with debt and pawn-shop credit, whose only remaining resort is to sell the honour of their wives and daughters. (*L'Ebreo*, I, 61-2)

But this sinister portrait is one that the text fails to back up. Indeed Sterbini is immediately contradicted by another demonstration of Aser's noble courage. Having been drawn into a duel over Alisa's honour, he allows his opponent to shoot (and narrowly miss), before discharging his pistol harmlessly in the air and shouting 'Viva l'Italia' (*L'Ebreo*, I, 74). Aser embodies patriotic masculine honour, and that facet of his persona is exalted rather than criticised by Bresciani.

Aser then leaves Rome to join his fellow conspirators in Turin. But he does not share their uncouth speech and slovenly body language. He writes a long letter to Sterbini recommending action against the Jesuits. Plainly this letter is meant as an example of his wickedness. Yet it is noteworthy that he explicitly advises against violence. More significantly still, the passage highlighting Aser's bad intentions is again followed by one that stresses his noble soul. In Genoa, Aser is moved by the humility and courage shown by some Jesuits who have taken refuge in the hold of his ship after being attacked by a mob. This first unambiguous marker of the moral distance between Aser and the depravity of conspiracy comes only 140 pages into a novel of nearly 800 pages. In short, Aser no sooner appears than he is on the path to conversion: he makes a very unconvincing conspiratorial bad guy.

Yet still at this stage, and indeed for the rest of the novel, no one in the conspiratorial network is aware that Aser is Jewish. Moreover, it is only some two hundred and seventy pages into the novel that the reader is let into the secret that Aser is actually the Jew of Verona. The news comes through a conversation between two former school companions of his. They explain that he is the son of a Jewish banker, and that he left Italy to work with a wealthy uncle in Hamburg. But Aser's conversion to the conspiracy is presented as a personal decision rather than as part of a Jewish plot (*L'Ebreo*, I, 274). His motivation is much closer to the misguided idealism of Catholic characters like Mimo and Lando (Alisa's cousins who volunteer to fight in the 'First War of Independence', but become disillusioned) than it is to the resentful anti-Christian motives imputed by Sterbini (*L'Ebreo*, I, 59).

Like his credentials as a conspirator, Aser's Jewishness is strangely thin. The two old school companions recall that Aser was the only Jew who did to attract mockery from the other pupils because 'he didn't stink of the ghetto at all' (*L'Ebreo*, I, 273). This is a back-handed compliment to be sure: it saves Aser by damning all other Jews with a very ancient pejorative stereotype. Like all Bresciani's crassest moments of anti-Semitism, this quip occurs in a voice that is not the narrator's and in a passage that is marginal to the narrative. The question therefore arises as to just what it is that makes the Jew of Verona Jewish. There is very little that he says, does, eats or wears that unambiguously identifies him as such.<sup>5</sup>

The prime candidate for a stereotypical marker of Aser's ethnic identity is the rootless, multi-lingual existence that his wealth enables, and the resulting

illegibility of his cultural identity. Other characters repeatedly find his ethnicity hard to pin down. On this basis, Gunzberg argues that Aser is 'an almost classic portrayal of the legendary Wandering Jew' (75). But as Gunzberg herself partly acknowledges, Aser also has important traits that differentiate him from most versions of this stereotype: he is not a ragged old man with a long beard; and his rootlessness is motivated by misplaced idealism rather than by Christ's curse. We could also add the whole range of features that make Aser a Romantic hero. It is a matter of opinion whether differences like these go to create a variant of the pejorative image of the Wandering Jew, or whether they instead locate Aser closer to the positive portrayals of the Wandering Jew in Romantic literature (Anderson, 1965). Indeed, it could be argued that such characteristics distinguish Bresciani's creation from the Wandering Jew image altogether, and that a much closer parallel is with Risorgimento exiles like Mazzini.<sup>6</sup> (Gunzberg herself describes this parallel very well.) Whatever view one takes, it is a forced reading to see Aser as a classic Wandering Jew.

Aser, it seems to me, is not a stereotypical Jew. To recognise this is certainly not to absolve Bresciani of anti-Semitism. Indeed it is the *absence* of Jewish traits that is *L'Ebreo's* most anti-Semitic component. That absence plays a crucial preparatory role in a Christian fantasy of conversion--followed immediately by Aser's willing adoption of the role of Christian martyr. His Jewishness is of an entirely aseptic variety that signals little other than his readiness for conversion. Aser represents nineteenth-century Catholicism's idea of a 'good' Jew; as such, he is scarcely a Jew at all (Orvieto 2011, 69). It is precisely because Aser is a heroic, positive figure whose cultural specificity has been erased that he takes his place in the history of the Church's dehumanisation of Jews.

Bresciani's particular brand of anti-Semitism, and the conversion myth that drives the characterisation of Aser, show once again that Bresciani was embroiled in Risorgimento culture, as a glance at the debates over Jewish emancipation reactivated by Pius IX's reforms of 1847 will demonstrate (Luzzatto Voghera 1998, esp. 89-112; Bernardini and Lucci 2012; Della Peruta 1997).

The most intransigent clergy manifested an entrenched hostility to emancipation: the best way to get Jews to mend their obstinate ways was to compel them. Some democratic writers, like Guerrazzi, also expressed anti-Semitic loathing (Forniciari 1984). Between these extremes, there existed a variety of intermediate positions. Some Catholic thinkers like Giuseppe Gatti viewed a tolerant, emancipationist approach to Jews as most likely to favour the ultimate goal of absorbing them into the Church. Vincenzo Gioberti articulated positive views of Jews within a vision for a reformed Church leading a national re-awakening. Yet he too viewed emancipation as ultimately 'the most effective way to lead the lost Israel back to the sheepfold' (Della Peruta 1997, 1159). Massimo d'Azeglio considered emancipation an emblem of national unification's status as an enlightened project. Nonetheless, he too saw the final destination of the Jewish community as assimilation. Thus the vision of converting Jews, or otherwise assimilating them into a national and / or Christian culture, represented the common ground for many of the views expressed in the late 1840s. That 'regeneration' narrative had a powerful sentimental appeal, and a legitimizing political force: on one side, it proclaimed the

power of the Church's redemptive message; on the other, it gave the Risorgimento an inspiring millenarian dimension.

Gunzberg ably summarizes the pre-Unification emancipation debate, but then mistakenly associates Bresciani with the most oppressively anti-Semitic positions within it (60). What my reading suggests instead is that Bresciani was very close to the sentimental centre ground of the emancipation debate as it was articulated in the neo-Guelph moment. What is genuinely odd is that Bresciani was telling that story, not in 1847, but in the intransigent climate of 1850, precisely when Pius IX was reinstating the anti-Semitic regime that had been watered down in the early months of his Papacy, and then abolished by the Roman Republic. That fact only makes sense if we add conversion narratives and representations of Jews more generally to the symbolic matrix that was shared and fought over by many strains of Catholicism and liberalism during the culture wars.

## Conclusions

Bresciani is an important source for the reception of Risorgimento culture. His work was subject to constant scrutiny by *CC*'s editorial group; Pius IX's own corrections have been spotted on a draft of *L'Ebreo* (Picchiorri 2008, 49-52). If novels written in those circumstances could still bear traces of Risorgimento culture's influence, it surely tells us something about how seductive that culture was.

But what did Bresciani's readers make of his trilogy? My analysis of the internal contradictions of Bresciani's literary project inevitably invites questions about reception, an issue that has often arisen in discussions of the cultural turn in Risorgimento studies (Banti 2000, 151-98; Körner 2009; Laven 2009; Riall 2009; Isabella 2012, 262). The trilogy's reception is beyond my scope here. Nevertheless some methodological comments are called for by way of conclusion, since a messy and ambiguous text like Bresciani's trilogy poses tricky problems.

Reception is sometimes invoked as if it were the court of last appeal on issues of interpretation, and as if a historical text only meant what we can empirically demonstrate that readers took it to mean (Körner 2009). The problem is that the evidence we rely on for any account of reception is more texts--with their own interpretative problems. For example, how legitimate is it to generalise about a book's impact from localised evidence? We know about De Sanctis's polemical review of Bresciani. But we don't know what contemporary readers thought about it. What was the reception of the reception?

It is a problematic, positivistic methodological move to isolate one text or body of work from the cultural field in order to assess its impact. As I have tried to show, Bresciani's trilogy is inhabited by the other texts with which it was in dialogue, notably Romantic novels. So it is profoundly misleading to reduce his writing to a monologic expression of his initial intentions. This intertextuality makes it more likely that readers used his books in varying ways. Indeed one of the things that worried Bresciani was precisely that he was being read only for the kind of colourful scenes that he regarded as morally and politically dangerous.

Bresciani is also an important source for understanding his *own* reception. The novels were not planned in detail in advance, and it is highly likely that one of the factors influencing him as he wrote, issue by issue, was reader response. In *L'Ebreo*, Bresciani's relationship with his readers continued after the novel was finished, in new footnotes, and in a 'Discorso intorno all'Ebreo di Verona' published as an appendix to later editions (*L'Ebreo*, II, 401-23). This consists of a series of (imagined or partly real?) discussions about the book among readers, and between readers and the author. Here Bresciani refers to himself in the third person, and to the novel as 'his poor *Jew*'. It is not clear what to make of this oblique and rambling text. The least we can say is that it shows an author lacking confidence in the way his public was reading him.

There is evidence aplenty of similar indecision throughout the trilogy itself. Even the most coherent of the novels, *Lionello*, betrays an aesthetic vacillation that arguably reflects Bresciani's fears about how he was being interpreted. While some two thirds of the text is taken up with the protagonist's memoir, in chapter XIX (of XXVII) there is a brusque change in narrative strategy: the characters from *L'Ebreo* (Alisa *et al*) who, until this point, had merely formed a framing device, begin to provide a substantial commentary on the story--to the point where Lionello's voice is frequently drowned out by moralising, biblical quotation, and the like. There is evidence that this shift was caused by Bresciani's having a change of heart about the balancing act involved in using Lionello as both the narrator of his morality tale, and its bad example. In chapter XIX, there is a discussion between the framing characters about how they are reading Lionello's memoir that seems to dramatise the novelist's own desire to correct his readers (III, 12).

Finally, as should hardly need saying, finding the right quantity and quality of other sources to draw meaningful conclusions about Bresciani's reception would be no easy task. Reception, in short, is important. But it is a rather more elusive object of analysis than has sometimes been assumed.

The revolutionary moment of 1848 that so horrified Bresciani and his Jesuit brethren, revealing as it did the existence of a new popular patriotic culture, was one where the sacred, the profane, and the sacrilegious seemed alarmingly jumbled. Bresciani's trilogy aimed to restore a lost univocality to Catholic discourse. The problem was that, at the same time, he sought to reach a broader readership and so could not restrict himself to mere pedagogy. At an explicit level, his Italian patriotism amounted to little more than a neotuscanism in language (Picchiorri 2008, 53-62), and a landscape cult (Logan 2012). But such inert conceptualisations of *italianità* were no longer enough. Bresciani needed to respond to and borrow such things as: the giant spectre of a conspiratorial enemy; the dash of the Romantic hero; the outlandish glamour of the *garibaldini*; the enticing paradox of the woman warrior; the maudlin scenario of the redeemed Jew; the terrible satisfaction of crimes that meet with a bloodthirsty retribution. In drawing on such motifs, and in speaking to a readership liable to appropriate his texts in uncontrollable ways, he found himself on a terrain where the moral and political clarity he hankered after could only remain elusive.

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## **Notes on Contributor**

John Dickie's most recent publications include: *Mafia Republic*, a history of Italy's three major criminal organisations since the Second World War (Hodder, 2013); *Adolfo Rossi. Nel regno di Mussolini*, (edited and with an introduction in collaboration with Fabio Truzzolillo), (Rubbettino, 2016); 'Mafia and prostitution in Calabria, c.1880 - c.1940', *Past and Present*, vol. 232 (1) August 2016.

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<sup>1</sup> Bresciani's female warriors have some echoes of earlier examples of the type, such as from Italian Renaissance epic poetry or the cult of Joan of Arc. What justifies my concentration on the Risorgimento female warrior is that Bresciani very clearly organises his women warriors into two contrasting categories, reciprocally defined by their relationship to the Risorgimento.

<sup>2</sup> More recently see Bonavita 2003 and Lang 2008, 105-35.

<sup>3</sup> Aser's conversion has been remarked upon by critics before, without sufficient analysis or contextualisation. For example, despite the title of the relevant chapter, Lang (2008) says remarkably little about conversion.

<sup>4</sup> Less plausibly, Lang argues that, because Bresciani puts a Jew into this Mazzinian role, he is making a polemical gesture against Mazzini. But this takes as read the negative nature of Aser's character and fails to explain why he is not clearly marked as Jewish from the outset.

<sup>5</sup> Aser's name has an Old Testament provenance (Lang 2008, 117-8). But the obscure reference is not explicitly highlighted in a text aimed at lay readers. More significantly, the plot-driving mystery of Aser's identity is dependent on his not being immediately identifiable as Jewish.

<sup>6</sup> Another ingredient of Aser's Jewishness suggested by Gunzberg is a parallel with the Rothschilds. But his wealth is not on remotely the same scale as the Rothschilds, and he does not bankroll the conspirators (or least it is only Sterbini who says that he does to some extent); rather he is primarily a messenger.