

ZITELLE Y ZITELLACCE. PREJUICIO Y DESDÉN EN LA
PERCEPCIÓN DE VIUDAS Y MUJERES SOLTERAS EN LA
ITALIA DEL SIGLO XIX

Zitelle e zitellacce. Prejudices and scorn in the perception of widows and single women in Italy in the 19th century

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Abstract

Living alone in the pre-industrial world often created more complications for women than for men. The main source of this discrimination was a widespread prejudicial and hostile attitude towards unmarried women and widows in general. Past societies have generated both pejorative and celebratory words to describe women who have never been married or were widowed. Expressions such as “old maid”, “*vecchia zitella*” or the slightly more benevolent expression “poor widow” have become commonplace. The aim of this paper is firstly to highlight the negative prejudices suffered by single women and widows in past centuries. Secondly, it hopes to demonstrate the considerable change in society’s attitude towards

Résumé

Vivre seul dans le monde préindustriel a souvent créé plus de complications pour les femmes que pour les hommes. La principale source de cette discrimination était une attitude préjudiciable et hostile envers les femmes seules et les veuves en général. Les sociétés du passé ont généré de nombreux mots péjoratifs pour décrire les femmes qui n’ont jamais été mariées ou qui étaient veuves. Combien de fois avons-nous entendu des mots tels que «old maid», ou bien «vieille fille» ou encore l’expression apparemment bienveillante “pauvre veuve”. Le but de cet article est de mettre en évidence les préjugés négatifs qui ont été employés au cours des siècles passés afin de décrire les femmes célibataires et les veuves et de montrer comment l’attitude

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unmarried women that accompanied the rise of the bourgeois society and that transformed the semantic sense of the otherwise neutral word *zitella* to the pejorative one it has today. Despite focusing on the particular case of Italy, it will also seek to give a brief overview of the situation in the rest of Europe.

Key Words

Widows, single women, *zitella*, prejudices, stereotypes, Italy

de la société envers les femmes célibataires a considérablement changé avec la montée de la société bourgeoise qui a transformé le sens sémantique du mot « *zitella* » originellement neutre en un terme au sens aujourd'hui péjoratif français. L'article se concentrera sur les cas de l'Italie, mais il cherchera aussi à donner un bref aperçu de la situation dans le reste de l'Europe.

Mots-clés

Veuves, femmes célibataires, vieille fille, préjugés, stéréotypes, *zitella*

Historically, the role of a woman was almost uniquely related to giving birth and being a mother. From the moment she was born, her destiny was first subject to the father's *autoritas* and then with marriage, to her husband's. Deprived of their parental authority, mothers did not even have claim to their own children who were considered the full possession of their father. To women, marriage ensured both legitimacy and social protection. Living alone in the pre- industrial world often created more complications for women than for men. Being alone was in fact considered a deviation from what was 'normal'.¹

Single women, like widows, often had to contend not only with poverty and isolation, but also with lack of security and social marginalisation. One of the reasons for the marginalisation was a widespread hostility to unmarried women and widows. There is no dearth of derogatory terms that describe widows or women who have never been married or were widows. 'Old maid', 'spinster', *sorciere*, *vieille fille*, and *zitella* and *bisbetica* -with their pejorative variants of *zitellona* or *zitellaccia*- in Italian, constitutes a partial list of such references.

We can consider stereotypes about single women and widows to be intrinsically related to ideas and beliefs about women, to the religious ideas that conditioned social attitudes towards women, and not least to demographic policies. In short, many reasons have contributed to the diffusion of stereotypes against single women and widows.

1. See the interesting article by L. Reeder, "Unattached and Unhinged: The Spinster and the Psychiatrist in Liberal Italy, 1860- 1922", *Gender and History*, 24, 1, April 2012, 187-204.

The aim of this paper is to highlight both the negative and positive attitudes about single women and widows. Though the paper will focus on Italy it will also touch on those attitudes in other parts of Europe. The central questions to be answered are: What were the origins of these prejudices? When they most widespread in Italy? Was the attitude towards unmarried women always negative? Have these prejudices always existed? What produced them, and why? And when are they developed the negative connotation that we know today?

Historiography and sources

Historiography has devoted much attention to the study of widows and single women. However, little research has so far been paid to the study of the multitude of prejudices and stereotypes against these women.² Stereotypes about single women or widows, as seen in the numerous unflattering terms that are found in many languages, were not limited to Italy. Amy Froyde has studied the different expressions used to describe single women in England. She notes that there are no studies of the representations of never-married women between the medieval and modern eras. Froyde came to the conclusion that without any research on the origins and changing depictions of never-married women, we might assume that the negative caricature of lifelong single women is one of those cultural constants.³ So even if we can identify these prejudices, it is more difficult to explain their popularity in many European countries.⁴

Maura Palazzi has shown that in societies characterized by the strict application of the rules of patrilineage there is no space for unmarried women, as they were thought to threaten the honour of the family.⁵ Merry Wiesner shows that there was also a certain hostility to 'women without men' in Germany.

Hostility toward never-married persons and a suspicion about women who were not under the control of men were not simply a matter of pastoral concern or religious ideology,

2. For Italian studies on singlewomen see Maura Palazzi, *Donne sole: l'altra faccia dell'Italia tra antico regime e società contemporanea*, Milano, 1997, 18. From the same author, "Solitudini femminili e patrilineaggio. Nubili e vedove fra Sette e Ottocento", in Marzio Barbagli e David I. Kertzer (Ed.) *Storia della famiglia italiana 1750-1950*, Bologna, 1992, 129-158. The monographic number of the journal *Memoria. Rivista di storia delle donne*, *Donne senza uomini*, and in particular the article of Maura Palazzi *Abitare da sole*, n. 18, (3), 1986, 7; of Marina d'Amelia, *Scatole cinesi: vedove e donne sole in una società d'ancien regime*, *idem*, 58; of Isabelle Chabot, "Sola, donna, non gir mai. Le solitudini femminili nel Trecento Quattrocento", *Memoria... op. cit.*, 7; Daniela Maldini, "Donne sole", *Risorgimento*, 33, 2, 1981; Sylvie Joye, "I conflitti familiari per la figlia nubile (V-IX secolo)", *Genesis*, IX, 1, 2010, 29-54; Raffaella Sarti e Margareth Lazinger, *Nubili e celibi tra scelta e costrizione (secoli XVI-XX)*, Udine, 2006.

3. A. Froyde, *Never married. Single women in Early Modern England*, Oxford, 2007, 154.

4. Amy M. Froyde, *Never married... op. cit.*, 154-181.

5. M. Palazzi, *Ragnatele di rapporti*, *op. cit.*, 19. See the article of P. D'Achille, 'Chi dice donna dice...'. *Le parole come strumento di infamia*, in *Storia delle donne*, 6/7, 2010/11, 13-30.

but led to explicit legal restriction on women's choice of work, place of residence, free-time activities, and even relations with their own family⁶.

Ida Blom has highlighted how being alone or elderly was more problematic for women than for men. Even if older men perhaps were proportionately more respected than loved, single women, especially in old age, caused fear and sometimes a real revulsion.⁷

Finding documents containing traces of prejudice against single women and widows is not always easy. Historical sources such as *status animarum* or notarial sources which are very important in the study of unattached women, do not readily reveal the existence of prejudice. To find evidence of prejudices against widows and single women we will have to turn to literature and treatises. In these sources prejudices often emerge from the writings as if they were a part of the authors' culture. For this reason I will analyze not only the historical sources but also novels, pamphlets and correspondence, sources that can shed light on this topic.

I have divided the article into four parts, corresponding to four different perceptions of single women and widows. In the first part I will analyse the misogynistic concepts of ancient medicine that very probably contributed to the spread of the early stereotypes about unmarried women and widows. In the second part I will continue by analysing the religious belief connected with the representations of the Virgin Marie and Eva, both of whom mystified the reputation of women who did not conform to the image of a 'virtuous' woman. In the third part I will discuss the demographic policy of various states that indirectly spread mistrust of unmarried women. Finally in the last part I will analyse some works of Italian literature to illustrate how single women and widows were perceived and how today's pejorative terms have been used over time.

Because of space constraints, I will devote more attention to single women. The purpose of this analysis is to highlight the evolution of the meaning of the word *zitella* to show how semantic transformations are the result of a cultural representation of religious beliefs and a political representation of women that generated the stereotypes of the lone woman and the widow in Italian culture and literature.

Stereotypes: the medical conception

That women generally did not have an easy existence and were historically subject to male misogyny is undeniable. The Aristotelian conception of woman was that of a mutilated man, with mutilated genitals hopelessly upside down.⁸ This image of woman heavily influenced the thinkers who came after Aristotle and survived virtually unchanged for centuries until

6. E. M. Wiesner, 'Having Her Own Smoke. Employment and Independence for Singlewomen in Germany 1400-1750', in *Single Women in the European Past*, op. cit., 192-216.

7. Ida Bloom, 'The History of Widowhood: A Bibliographic Overview', in *Journal of family history*, 16, 2, 1991, 201.

8. Aristotele, *Parti degli animali. Riproduzione degli animali*, 2° ed. Roma- Bari, 1990.

the scientific revolution. Enlightenment scientists established that women, far from being 'mutilated men', had their own sexual organs and reproductive systems.

The discovery of the bisexual nature of mankind and of two genders came at the end of a long tradition dominated by the idea of a 'monosexual' human body, rotating around the masculine specie.⁹ It was not unlike Galenic medicine which also attempted to prove scientifically the imperfection of the female body. However, according to Galen, and the medicine of his time, the imperfection of women had an obvious advantage: its reproductive system, which could benefit the human species.¹⁰ This view 'saved' married women and mothers from being persecuted, but condemned unmarried women for their uselessness. So this imperfect human being called woman, was beneficial only because of a reproductive system that enabled man to procreate. We can therefore imagine how women who could not perform this function were considered useless, if not harmful, according to Hippocratic-Galenic medicine.

According to this understanding, women's nervous disorders were attributed to forced and unnatural inactivity of their uterus, conceived as a kind of animal (in ambush) lurking in the body of women: if not satisfied because it could not realize its natural vocation, it could cause often spectacular disorders.¹¹

As highlighted by Sara F. Matthews Grieco, historically, women were represented as temptresses, whose primary goal was to seduce confident men and hand them over to Satan. Medical science corroborated this voracious female sexuality, stating that the erotic fulfilment was, for women a necessity. Not only did their 'starving' uterus constantly demand to be satisfied, but atrocious diseases were waiting who had neglected the moral obligation of reproduction. Hysteria, a disease that originated in the inactivity of the womb, was blamed for the hallucinations caused by demonic possession and mental illnesses.¹²

Hence it was easy to imagine how these theories influenced social attitudes and their perception of women and young widows who -because of the lack of a man- could not satisfy their sexual appetites and had to remain at the mercy of their hysteria.

Religious views: the exaltation of chastity

Christianity did not improve the status of women and especially not the prejudices against single women and widows. As we are going to see, popular and religious beliefs and demographic policies had often opposing attitudes toward single women. The former exalted celibacy, but demographic policies penalised it.

9. Elena Brambilla, *Sociabilità e relazioni femminili nell'Europa moderna*, in Letizia Arcangeli e Stefano Levati (Ed.), Milano 2013, 114.

10. Galeno, *De usu partium corporis humani*, traduzione di Robert Archer, dalla edizione con versione latina di Karl Gottlieb Kühn, *Medicorum graecorum opera.... Claudii Galeni*, Lipsiae, 1822, 158-162

11. Elena Brambilla, *Sociabilità e relazioni... op. cit.*, 132.

12. Sara F. Matthews Grieco, 'Corpo, aspetto e sessualità', in Georges Duby e Michelle Perrot (Ed.) *Storia delle donne, Dal Rinascimento all'età moderna*, Ed, Roma- Bari, 1991, 74.

In theology, all women were for centuries be identified with Eve and Mary. Eve, who committed the original sin, was depicted as unstable, carnal, lascivious, lustful and vulgar. In contrast is the Virgin Mary, to whom we owe the redemption of the humanity from sin and who was the pure woman, virtuous, strong, far from fleshly pleasures and vices.

Italian literature gravitated to these two female images for centuries. The only redemption for women was marriage, which placed a wife under her husband's protection. The husband would watch over her honour and behaviour. The single woman or the widow was vulnerable to sin, hence her imprisonment in a convent to protect her from earthly misery. With Mary as a model, Christianity and Italian literature made virginity the only condition for woman's salvation. So Dante through the words of St. Bernard in the XXXIII canto of Paradise turned to Mary with the following words:

Vergine Madre, figlia del tuo Figlio,
umile e alta più che creatura,
termine fisso d'eterno consiglio,

tu se' colei che l'umana natura
nobilitasti sì, che 'l suo Fattore
non disdegnò di farsi sua fattura.
(vv.1-6)

The church as a paladin of the figure of the Virgin Mary became an assiduous supporter of female chastity. Literature glorified this kind of woman, pure, chaste and almost unnatural. Even the literary salons that arose in the most famous Renaissance cities, even having the merit of ending gender segregation for a short while, were open only to married women. Unmarried women were excluded because of their 'guilt' of not having a husband.¹³

After the Renaissance followed a period of reclusion, segregation and exaltation of virginity and purity of women (the great 'segregation' of 1560-1680). Women who lived chastely, renouncing marriage, were in this period hailed as the epitome of Christian virtue. Thus in the period of the Counter-Reformation the number of bachelors and spinsters grew enormously. Generally, segregation subtended also a series of economic calculations for the wealthiest families where women were being used as pawns on the chessboard of family alliances.

In this period of general delirium where women of marriageable age were segregated convents in order to be offered as virgins to their future husbands, the unmarried woman, virgin and pure was exalted. We can say that in the ancien régime to stay virgin, pure, especially in the upper classes of the society was a valuable quality for a woman. In contrast, the spinster from the lower classes was a source of derision; marriage was seen as her only possibility.

13. Elena Brambilla, *op. cit.*, 22.

State law against the unmarried and celibate

If the religious authorities praised unmarried women and men as representing positive values some political regimes condemned those who remained single as contravening nature and the laws of the state. The Roman Republic had laws against bachelors and spinsters. In 403 BC, 'all those who had come bachelors to their old age' were compelled 'to pay to the treasury a sum as a punishment', since argued the censors, 'as nature has given you the possibility to be born, so it also has given you the possibility to generate'. Four centuries later, Cicero encouraged Caesar to prohibit celibacy. Caesar not only forbade celibacy, but offered compensation to large families. The Emperor Augustus, declared that marriage and procreation were the aims of his new marriage legislation. In 18 BC, Augustus approved the *Lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus*, that was integrated in 9 AD by the *Lex Papia Poppaea nuptialis* which imposed harsh penalties on the unmarried. The unmarried also lost the right to inherit or even take part in festivities and public spectacles.¹⁴

The concern that a poor demographic development could make it impossible to pursue a policy of power would, moreover, according to Susan Lanser, explain why, in England, 'old maids' became objects of social contempt to in a larger extent than in other countries.¹⁵ Lanser believes that between the late seventeenth and eighteenth century the acquisition of power was crucial in the development of the stereotype of the 'old maid' because England was at that time competing with more populous countries. Getting married and having children would then become, in England more and earlier than elsewhere, the patriotic duties of each woman. In contrast, remaining unmarried and without children would become an affront to the nation.

From ancient Rome to modern England we can imagine that states needed strong soldiers, and mothers had to bear them. Centuries later the same population policy was undertaken by fascism with the infamous tax on bachelors. (RD 19 December 1926) The main statement of the law was that celibacy after a certain age was an abnormal state, and except under special circumstances, reprehensible.¹⁶

The glorification of motherhood

Mothers and the glorification of motherhood become one of the symbols of the newly unified Italy, in the XIX century. From this point in time onwards, women started to play a new role in society- a role which history until then had prevented them from enjoying. Italians and the Italian mother as a symbol of the new *Risorgimento* were used in a strategy designed to create in the minds of the new Italian citizen a new unifying symbol. This

14. Carla Fayer, *La familia romana*, 'L'Erma' di Bretschneider, 1994, 79-80.

15. Susan Lanser, "Singular Politics: The Rise of The British National and the Production of the Old Maid", in J.M. Bennett, A. M. Froide (Ed.), *Singlewomen in the European past, 1250-1800*, Philadelphia, 1999, 308-309.

16. Pier polo Luzzato-Fegiz, "La politica demografica del fascismo", in *Annali di economia, Dieci anni di economia fascista: 1926-1935: la formazione dell' economia corporativa* (1937), Milano, 1956, 109-124.

new attitude was influenced by the enlightenment that brought new ideas to society. Rebecca Massbarger defined the eighteenth century as the century of women.¹⁷ Attitudes to women and especially to mothers changed. Mothers were assigned the power of shaping new social beings, plane of old prejudices and covered with a new rationality, with the right to be a citizen of a modern state. The woman is no longer the mother of children, but of citizens. In order to take care of the people, strengthening the demographic basis became a priority object of attention for the government, as pointed out by Voltaire.¹⁸ Mothers were assigned a duty to take care of these new men and be their first educators and, consequently, hold the secret of a permanent regeneration. Starting from 1760, the problem of education, for both female and male, engaged the enlightened mind. In 1762 Jean-Jacques Rousseau published *Emile*; Rousseau is the reference point for those who supported unconditionally the idea of education at home. Mothers became committed to their children's education, applying the principles expressed by Rousseau.¹⁹ The observation and the scientific debate in this field had the effect of enhancing the role of women and diminishing that of men in the formation of the newborn, placing an emphasis on the specific responsibility of the mother and limiting that of the father (Brambilla, 2013, 115).

Be liked by and useful to them, respect them, advise them, console them, make their life pleasant and sweet. Here are the duties of the women of all time, and what you have to teach them from an early age. Woman does not access knowledge for herself, but for the happiness of the groom and children. (Sonet, 1995, 128)

In these terms manuals and medical texts presented the new duties of a mother and were spread in various European countries. Procreation and childbirth acquired a particular social and political value, as a time when the social body of the state is renewed and developed.²⁰ To take care of the people, increasing the population became a government priority. Mothers were tasked with taking care of these new men, with being their first educators, and consequently with holding the secret of permanent regeneration²¹ Mothers become committed to their children's education, applying the principles expressed by the new enlightenment theories. With the emotional marriage, Rousseau favoured a new reclusion for women, lim-

17. R. Messbarger, *The Century of Women: Representations of Women in Eighteenth Century Italian Discourse*, Toronto, 2002.

18. M. Sonet, "L'educazione di una giovane", in *Storia delle donne in Occidente, a cura di George Duby, Michelle Perrot, Dal Rinascimento all'età moderna*, N. Zamon Davis, A. Farge eds, Roma- Bari, 1995, 126-128.

19. M. Sonet, "L'educazione..." op. Cit.

20. Nadia Maria Filippini, "Rappresentazioni e politiche di controllo del corpo materno tra età moderna e contemporanea", in *La Ricerca Folklorica*, n. 46, 2002, 19-25.

21. Martine Sonet, "L'educazione di una giovane", in *Duby- Perrot (Ed.), Storia delle donne, Dal Rinascimento all'età moderna*, Roma- Bari, 1991, 126

iting their role to that of wives and mothers, dedicated to nurse and educate their children, serve, obey and please her husband: a new, more modern version of inequality in marriage.²²

This new conception glorified the role of the bourgeois wife and mother, and denigrated that of unmarried women and widows. From this point of time onwards, to be alone or unmarried was a kind a stigma in the life of a woman.

Now we must turn our attention to the analysis of Italian literature to see concretely how the Enlightenment and the theories of the Renaissance, following the birth of the nuclear family and the bourgeois family model, have changed radically the attitude of society towards single women. While celibacy until the XIX century, was tolerated and even seen as a virtue, especially for the religious doctrines, it was later seen as a dishonour and shame in the life of a woman. In this paper I will devote more attention to the situation of single women and therefore just mention the attitude toward widows.

The chaste widow

Italian literature contains two antithetical conceptions of widows: the chaste widow and the sexually active widow. These two conceptions reflected religious and secular values from the 14th until the 20th century.

The embodiment of a chaste widow is Judith, a biblical figure who liberates her people by killing the tyrant Holofernes. The story of Judith was a source of literary and iconographic inspiration from artists like Caravaggio and Michelangelo to poets like Tasso and Metastasio. The Great Scriptures have many references to widows.

Why did these artists, poets and writers choose the representation of a widow? One reason is that poor widows needed God. This attention represents the victory of the weak over the strong; the triumph of the immaculate virtues.²³

The widow, who managed to avoid succumbing to the temptation of a second marriage, aroused considerable admiration. If she needed help she was often the privileged object of charity from other women. The Bible glorified the defenceless widow. In the texts of Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome and the other Church Fathers, we find the exaltation of these women who encountered hardships after the death of a husband. The Bible's idealization of 'the chaste widow' is not mirrored by equally positive images of widowers.²⁴

Dante's Purgatory (tenth canto) describes a widow described as 'vedovella' (little widow) or 'miserella' (little wretch). The symbol of the humble and submissive widow was widespread in the Middle Ages.

22. E. Brambilla, *Sociabilità e relazioni femminili nell'Europa moderna*, in L. Arcangeli e S. Levati eds. Milano, 2013, 127.

23. Paola Cosentino, "Vedova, puttana e santa. Giuditta figura del desiderio (XVI, XVII e XVIII secolo)", in *Between. Rivista dell'associazione di Teoria e storia comparata della letteratura*, vol. 3, n. 5, 2013.

24. Patricia Skinner, "The Widow's Options in Medieval Southern Italy", in *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, New York, 1999, 57.

Quiv'era storiata l'alta gloria del roman principato, il cui valore mosse Gregorio a la sua gran vittoria;	75
i' dico di Traiano imperadore; e una vedovella li era al freno, di lagrime atteggiata e di dolore.	78
Intorno a lui pareva calcato e pieno di cavalieri, e l'aguglie ne l'oro sovr'essi in vista al vento si movieno.	81
La miserella intra tutti costoro pareva dir: «Segnor, fammi vendetta di mio figliuol ch'è morto, ond'io m'accoro»;	84
ed elli a lei rispondere: «Or aspetta tanto ch'ì torni»; e quella: «Segnor mio», come persona in cui dolor s'affretta,	87
«se tu non torni?»; ed ei: «Chi fia dov'io, la ti farà»; ed ella: «L'altrui bene a te che fia, se 'l tuo metti in oblio?»;	90
ond'elli: «Or ti conforta; ch'ei convene ch'ì solva il mio dovere anzi ch'ì mova: giustizia vuole e pietà mi ritene».	93

Even in Petrarca's *Canzoniere* the widow was described as a disconsolate woman wearing black as a sign of mourning.

'Fuggi 'l sereno e 'l verde, non t'appressare ove sia riso o canto, canzon mia no, ma pianto: non fa per te di star fra gente allegra, vedova, sconsolata, in vesta negra.²⁵

We find the same depiction in *The Betrothed* (I promessi sposi) by Alessandro Manzoni where a widow meets Lucia at the Lazzaretto. Manzoni qualified her as a 'kind widow' (la brava vedova) who accompanies Lucia. We can suppose that Manzoni was aware of the virtues of the chaste widow.

25. Francesco Petrarca, *Canzoniere (Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta)*, Testo critico e introduzione di Gianfranco Contini, annotazioni di Daniele Ponchiroli, Torino, 1989, Canto 268 vv. 66 e seg.

The merry widow

Preserving her chastity was often hard for a widow. The counterparts of the chaste widow was the merry widow who defied social convention by remarrying. As pointed out by Barbara Todd e Sandra Cavallo, one common response to the resulting patriarchal dilemma was the ubiquitous negative image of the widow in pre-modern England. Pathetically eager to remarry, the sexually active widow was assumed to be even more insatiable than young wives and unmarried women. As a woman wise to the ways of men, she was seen as a bad influence on young married women, teaching them how to undermine their husbands' control.²⁶

Widows were therefore viewed to be a threat to morality, and could easily transform become sinners, as did the merry widow in Greek and Roman satirical literature. Petronius in his *Satyricon* described the matron of Ephesus as a grieving widow who fell in love with the soldier guarding her husband's grave.²⁷

We also find the merry widow in Boccaccio's *Decameron*.²⁸ Contrary to Dante's humble widow, his widow 'mai più rimaritar non si volle, essendosi ella d'un giovinetto bello e leggiadro a sua scelta innamorata (...) spesse volte con lui con meraviglioso diletto si dava buon tempo'. In other words Boccaccio's widow is the typical merry widow, sexually insatiable and enjoying the company of younger men. This portrayal of a widow was reproduced by authors such as Angelo Beolco Ruzante and Goldoni. In the comedy 'La vedova scaltra' (the cunning widow) by Carlo Goldoni, the widow Rosaura, chose her new husband not for love, but for other reasons. In this comedy another stereotype appears: that of the greedy widow. This satire also applied to elderly widowers who wanted to marry young women.²⁹

The 'zitella'

The *zitella* (old maid or spinster) differed from the widow (especially the merry one). As regards we can ascertain an evolution of the word *zitella*, that took different semantic meaning in different length of time, arriving to denote the negative connotation that have the word today. This means that the word *zitella* has not always had a negative connotation. Until the 19th century, the word was rather neutral and was often used to denote a young girl, *fanciulla*. We find the word *zitella* in Boccaccio's *Decameron* written around 1350³⁰ The word *zitella* in this context means 'young girl'.

26. Barbara Todd, "The virtuous widow in Protestant England" in S. Cavallo, L. Warner, op. cit., 69

27. Petronio, *Satyricon*, xxii; trad. it. di Piero Chiara, Mondadori 1969, 111-112. See also Alfonso D'Agostino, *La Matrona d'Efeso e la vedova consolata. Il personaggio della vedova nella letteratura medievale*, libreriauniversitaria.it ed.

28. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, in Vittore Branca (Ed.), Milano 1985, (Novella settima dell'Ottava giornata), Novella number seven, eighth day.

29. On unmarried men see S. Cavallo, "Matrimonio e mascolinità. Uomini non sposati nel mondo artigiano del Sei e Settecento", in *Celibi e nubili tra scelta e costrizione*, in Raffaella Sarti e Margareth Lazinger (Ed.), Udine, 2007, 98.

30. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, op. cit, Giornata nona, novella decima.

Comar Gemmata, non ti tribolar di me, ché io sto bene, per ciò che quando mi piace io fo questa cavalla diventare una bella zitella e stommi con essa, e poi, quando voglio, la fo diventar cavalla; e per ciò non mi partirei da lei.

In *Orlando Furioso* by Ludovico Ariosto (1532) we encounter the word 'zitella' or 'Cittella', in Florentine dialect. Again the word is taken to mean 'young girl'. Again the term did not have a negative connotation.

XIII Ne la nostra cittade era un uom saggio,
di tutte l'arti oltre ogni creder dotto,
che quando chiuse gli occhi al febeo raggio,
contava gli anni suoi cento e ventotto.
Visse tutta sua età solo e selvaggio,
se non l'estrema; che d'Amor condotto,
con premio ottenne una matrona bella,
e n'ebbe di nascosto una cittella.³¹

Torquato Tasso's 'Rime amorose' referred to the *zitella* several times. He used the term synonymously with 'young', 'virgin' girl.

56 Le più belle zitelle del contado
Noi siam, ch'i rozzi amori
Fuggiamo de' bifolchi, e de' pastori.
Saggi, vezzosi amanti o qual di voi
Sarà, che le natie pure bellezze
Nostre fugga, o disprezze?³²

In the comedy of Valerio Comi entitled «La zitella cortigiana» published in 1653, the «zitella» is a young girl «di non ordinaria bellezza»- which means that she is not only beautiful but extraordinarily beautiful- and has «a non so quale raggio di nobiltà e subito ne rimasi invaghito». For this reason the main character falls immediately in love with her.³³

In the drama-comedy of the poet and librettist Giambattista Casti entitled 'The King Theodore in Venice', one of the protagonists, Taddeo, when seeing Lisette said: Oh what a beautiful daughter! Oh what a *zitella*!

Taddeo:
Oh che figlia! Oh che zitella!
Teodoro da se' prendendo il caffè
Com'è savia
Gafforio:

31. Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, Canto 43, Torino, 1966

32. Torquato Tasso, *Le Rime*, a cura di B. Basile, 2 voll., Roma, 1994.

33. Valerio Comi, *La zitella cortigiana*, pubblicata per Agostino Faostini, Todi, 1653.

Com'è bella!
 Teodoro, Taddeo, Gafforio a tre:
 E' un portento d'onestà

Lisette is not only beautiful, but also wise and honest. The play is set in Lazio in the late eighteenth century and it contains almost exclusively positive connotations of the word spinster: virgin, young and even beautiful and honest. This is the meaning of the word until the end of the nineteenth century.

Or dunque, un frate di cotal natura
 O donne mie, vi conterò siccome
 A una zitella fece la fattura,
 che Doralice si chiamava a nome³⁴

Another example that can confirm the original meaning of the word is found in another of Goldoni's comedies, 'The Campiello' from 1756.³⁵ At the request of one of the characters, whether Gasparina was or not a *zitella*, the girl not understanding the meaning of the word asked for an explanation. The main character answered: '*zitella* means 'fanciulla'.

Gasp. Zerva umilissima.
 Cav. Lasciam perdere le cerimonie, favorite;
 Siete zitella?
 Gasp. No lo so dazzeno.
 Cav. Nol sapete; tal cosa io non comprendo.
 Gasp. Sto nome de zitella io non l'intendo.
 Cav. Fanciulla voglio dir.

But let us move to the first half of the eighteenth century, the period of the Risorgimento. The patriotic writer as Ippolito Nievo wrote about 'smancierie di zitellina', 'the mawkishness of a young girl'. La *zitella* in question 'che fa la ritrosa a nominarle il marito' is therefore married. The fact that the girl is married means that also Nievo uses the word *zitella* as synonymous of with young girl. We can conclude that the word *zitella* until the first half of the nineteenth century had a meaning quite different from the pejorative connotation that it has in Italy today. Literally it was taken to simply mean a «young girl».

When the word 'spinster' changed its semantic sense to take on a pejorative meaning, we are conferring to the word today?

A near-contemporary of Nievo is Alessandro Manzoni. In the first chapter of *The Betrothed* he describes the servant Perpetua. She works for the priest *Don Abbondio* and has reached 'the synodal age of 40'. Perpetua was therefore a *zitella*. But instead of using this term Manzoni refers to her as 'nubile', 'unmarried'. He justifies her status with the following

34. Giambattista Marino, *Tempietto di Venere. Scelta di prose e poesie erotiche*, 182

35. Carlo Goldoni, *Il Campiello*, Torino, ristampa 1988.

words: 'For having rejected all the parties that were offered, as she put it, or for not having founded a dog that wanted her, as said by her friends'. Perpetua is the prototypical spinster - according to the modern meaning of the word -- the housekeeper of a priest, a gossip and no longer young. Yet Manzoni defines the maid with the more neutral word of 'nubile'. The fact that Manzoni did not use the term spinster, *zitella* leads us to assume that the term had just undergone a semantic transformation. The spread also in Italy of the model of middle-class family, the ideas of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, the influence of nationalism, changed the attitude against unmarried women. The new Romantic ideas that spread across Europe with a different idea of the family in which mothers had a very important role presented many problems for unmarried women who did not fit this social construction. Within these cultural coordinates, we can identify a new way of thinking in Italy and much of Europe that not only changed the way people perceived the relationship between a mother and a child, but contributed to attribute a privileged status to the mother, to the detriment of the single woman. From this moment onwards the meaning of the semantic word «zitella» was gradually transformed from one with a neutral to one with a very negative connotation, in the sense of being associated with a single, not very young, ugly, eager for sex and often with evident physical defect.

Almost contemporary to Manzoni was the poet Giuseppe Gioachino Belli. His sonnets were published in 1832. One of them bore the title of 'Er zitellismo'; which was followed by another sonnet with the unequivocal title: 'La zitella ammuffita', (the mouldy spinster). Belli's spinsters are 'vogliose anzi vogliossissime' 'full of lust and eager for sex'. They are also ready to do anything in order to get married. At the same time the spinster is described as revolting.

Tanta smania te viè de fatte sposa? Ma cchi vvòì che tte pijji? Basciaculo? Chi volete che se la pigli, così brutta, magra e curva?

So with the sonnets of Belli the spinster becomes the anti-woman par excellence, a source of ridicule, and useless because she does not live up to the new bourgeois standard.

Sposarla io? Neanche morto, conferma il presunto pretendente della 'zitella strufinata' (parte II): non solo ha un pessimo umore ('tutto quer morzarzo') ed è mutevole peggio del sol di marzo, non è bella, ed è pure zoppa ('co cquella scianca che tte bbutta in farzo'), ma per fortuna io sono vedovo, e non me la sento 'de la padella de cascà a la bbrascia', cioè di cadere dalla padella nella brace. (da zitella ammuffita).

To marry her? Even dead, confirms the supposed suitor of the 'spinster *strufinata*' (Part II): not only she has a bad temper but she is changing mood as often as the sun in March. She is not beautiful, and she is even lame.

The word *zitella*, with its pejorative adjectives of *zitellona* e *zitellaccia*, would henceforth assume a thoroughly negative meaning among almost all the authors of the Italian literature. As already mentioned, the term is often associated with the description of a physical defect of

the unmarried woman that in some way or the other prevented her to get married. In the *Secret of Luca* by Ignazio Silone published in 1956, we find a 'zitella, shrunken and yellowish.'³⁶

Alberto Moravia (1907-1990) is the Italian writer who perhaps describes best the life of the new bourgeois, middle class families that came into being in Italy after the war. In his books the author presents an acute analyzes of the crisis with no way out of bourgeois society which failure is personified by the «zitella» itself. A woman that is not married and therefore outside the typical bourgeoisie model is represented as different, if not abnormal, and thus ridiculed.

The illustration of the *zitella* takes a central place in his romances, always described as ugly and in her middle age. In his novel «Teatro», the zitella is described 'with emptied breasts, a swollen belly, thin thighs, a butt with cellulite.'³⁷

Mi scrivi che sei stufo di me, delle mie poltrone, dei miei divani e delle mie tappezzerie. Che io sto diventando sempre più una vecchia zitella, non soltanto nei sentimenti e nelle idee ma anche nel fisico e qui il tuo rancore contro di me si sfoga in maniera realistica: il mio corpo sarebbe sfiorito, avrei un seno che si svuota ogni giorno di più, un ventre viceversa gonfio, cosce troppo magre, sedere con la cellulite.³⁸

Very often «zitella» is also taken to mean an unmarried woman lustful for sex. As is described in another of Moravia's books «più che il bacio di una donna pratica e sensuale, pareva quello di una zitella, invecchiata nella continenza e nei sogni, molle e smaniosa». To be a «zitella» was evidently a hard lot in the life of a women. In the *Racconti Romani* a character is asking a young female servant why she does not want to get married instead of working as a waitress. The answer she gives is that she wants to be a «zitella». In saying these words she is not smiling.

Le domandai un giorno, per esempio, se era contenta della famiglia dove si trovava. Rispose: «Sono buona gente, religiosi e perbene, e pi non c'è tanto da fare: la signorina mi aiuta a fare le pulizie e perfino a cucinare.» Insistei: «Ma non preferirebbe sposarsi e avere un marito e stare a casa sua?» Lei abbasso gli occhi e disse, contegnosa: «Macche marito.... Voglio restare zitella. Mi parve pero che, pur dicendo queste parole, sorrisesse, ma appena agli angoli della bocca.»³⁹

Thus was born the caricature of the spinster who was too ugly to marry. Sometimes even full of hair like a monkey (bertuccia) as in the novel *Boh* of Moravia.

Vuol dire passare le serate davanti alla televisione, con quella vecchia scimmia pelosa di tua madre e con quella bertuccia non meno pelosa di tua sorella zitella.

36. Ignazio Silone, *Il segreto di Luca*, Milano, 1956.

37. Alberto Moravia, *Teatro*, Milano, 1998.

38. Alberto Moravia, *Teatro*, Milano, 1998.

39. Alberto Moravia, *Racconti Romani*, Milano, 1959/2009.

People were terrified by her appearance; Above all, she was old. *Vecchia zitella* is a typical description of the unmarried woman. The spinster, every woman's fear, became a character in many novels. The spinster was the woman that no man wanted. The two *zitelle* (le due zitelle) is a novel by Tommaso Landolfi written in 1943. The protagonists Lilla and Nena are described as 'old, ugly and moustached (mustacchiose)'. The two older sisters have always lived in their bourgeois prison-house; have never known a man in the 'biblical sense of the word' and are described as 'the two useless human being without meaning and a reason to live, present and future'.

Conclusions

Today we use the word *zitella* in a derogatory sense, but as I tried to show in this article the word «zitella» was not always used in such a pejorative sense, in fact quite the opposite. From the examples found in the Italian literature I have tried to substantiate how the word *zitella* during the XVI to the XVIII century was used to describe a «young» and sometimes even beautiful girl. The enlightenment that brought new ideas to the society contributed to change the attitudes towards women and especially towards mothers. Mothers were assigned the power of shaping new social beings, plane of old prejudices and covered with a new rationality, with the right to be a citizen of a modern state. At a time when the social body of the state is renewed and developed, this new conception contributed to glorify the role of the bourgeois wife and mother, and at the same time to denigrate that of the unmarried women. Therefore, with the rise of the bourgeois society the attitude of society towards unmarried women changed considerably. In particular it transformed the semantic sense of the otherwise neutral word *zitella* to the pejorative one that it has today. The examples taken from the Italian literature indicate that as from this point onwards the unmarried woman was associated with the description of an ugliness and a sort of physical deformation that contributed to make the figure of the «zitella» even more frightening. This negative connotation has survived until today.