

ISABELLA ALBRIZZI'S 'PORTRAITS' AS A BIOGRAPHICAL DOCUMENT AND AS LITERATURE

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(*Албрици, Изабела. Портрети. София: Алтера, 2009, ISBN: 9789549757354, 118 с., пр. Д. Карапеткова*)

Every book which has as its topic real historical figures has already enjoyed a certain advantage since the very outset. This advantage is due to the natural curiosity of the reading public about anything that an author's fictional intervention can add to what has already been known as a fact about the person described. At the same time the fiction gains verisimilitude, be it just for the simple reason that it is built around a real protagonist. And when it actually comes to a first-hand account rather than fiction, moreover an account interwoven with creative writing techniques, the documentary and the literary certainly go hand in hand. This is most likely the case with the Italian collection entitled 'Portraits' ('Ritratti'), but its worth is additionally due to a myriad of factors.

Author Isabella Teotochi Albrizzi (1760–1836) made her literary debut with a book which cannot be simply described as a biographical collection or a series of eulogies, even though either label would reflect the spirit of the time. The 'Portraits' are something of a different kind – an alchemical mix of verbal portraiture, psychological depth and a writer's coquetry, which created a furore as early as 1807. The author was then 47 years old and the reason not to call her a debutant has to do with her interesting life story.

She was born on the island of Corfu into a family whose social prominence was achieved by her father but which was run by her formidable and authoritarian mother, who forced her 16-year-old daughter to marry the Venetian Carlo Antonio Marin. After moving to Venice and the birth of her first child, Isabella quickly started moving in the local high circles. Her reputation as an exceptionally clever woman, who was attractive in every respect, drew to her salon intellectuals from various fields and of a wide range of backgrounds. Poet Ippolito Pindemonte, the protagonist of one of the portraits, suggested she should change her name from the original Elizabeth to Isabella because it sounded better. The confidence and respect that she had gained made it possible for this socialite to request that her marriage to Marin be annulled. This was made easier after her mother's death and due to her father's unconditional support. From that moment on, Isabella's biographies vary in tone: some biographers enthusiastically extol the moral virtues of an intellectual woman, whereas others make a point of highlighting what wasn't just intellectual affinity with her companions (Ugo Foscolo described her as 'a lover for five days, but a friend for life'). Isabella's second husband was Giuseppe Albrizzi, a wealthy Venetian with whom she had her favourite son, Giuseppino. As early as 1837, biographer Antonio Meneghelli wrote¹ about the mysterious circumstances in which Albrizzi married her because of his family's resentment at the way family possessions were distributed. This happened away from Venice and the news of the marriage was broken by no other than a suitor of Isabella's who had been rejected because she had already exchanged vows with her new husband.

One thing is certain: she had a boundless, unconditional love for Giuseppino, to whom she dedicated the 'Portraits', having shrewdly ensured he had got an excellent education and upbringing, despite her second husband's death. By that time she was already taking expert care of the family budget, which she managed to fit into her morning schedule alongside her intellectual pursuits, while her evenings were taken up with social gatherings in her salon. Her guests and admirers were vying for her favour and attention, as it was sure to confer social and professional prestige. Lord Byron described Isabella as the 'Venetian Madame de Staël', although Italian literary scholar Gino Tellini finds the similarities only superficial, since Albrizzi 'didn't share her intellectual exaltation, nor her extreme ideology, or the indomitable pride she took in her social mission or her political manoeuvres. The choice of literary genre and mode of expression is also rather different: polished outlines rather

¹ Meneghelli, A. *Notizie biografiche di Isabella Albrizzi nata Teotochi*, Minerva, Padova, 1837, p. 30.

than manifestos, addresses or novels.² And yet, the cosmopolitan nature of her social life is confirmed by the varied backgrounds of her interlocutors at her prestigious Venetian salon.

As it becomes evident from the models for her portraits, Isabella used to shine in a strictly male company; the reasons for that are wonderfully summed up by A. Meneghelli: ‘Literature and art didn’t really attract women brought up in the spirit of those times; and whoever knows them wouldn’t find it hard to believe that they were in a state of deep slumber.’³ Her companions included Chateaubriand, Sir Walter Scott, Vittorio Alfieri, Ugo Foscolo, as well as Antonio Canova, who supplied the material for her 1831 publication on ‘Works of sculpture and plastic art’ – an excellent verbal description and analysis of his masterpieces. Isabella died in Venice five years later; the press coverage of her loss was so extensive that it confirmed her importance as a cultural icon and celebrity of her time.

The success of the ‘Portraits’ is confirmed by the fact that it went through several editions, reaching its final form only in the fourth one. There were only 16 portraits in the original version of 1807⁴. In the following year, the author included Esteban de Arteaga; in 1816, she added ‘Torto mi fece il velo’, Cavalier Morelli, Antonio Canova, Francesco Aglietti, Marchese della Maison-fort, followed in 1826 by Cav. Mustoxidi and Lord Byron. The copper engravings accompanying the text were most likely made by Vivant Denon, who is himself featured in one of the portraits and who in turn asked the virtuoso portrait artist Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun to paint Isabella for him before he embarked on a journey. It is remarkable that over the years the portraits tend to grow in length, testifying to conscious efforts to shape their structure. Gino Tellini draws attention to the choppy rhythms and the plethora of epithets in the early stages, as well as the transition, followed by the ‘lens gradually coming into focus’, including complex convoluted phrases, obviously in an attempt to formally enrich the so called *esprit de conversation*. By carefully steering clear of the quotidian, sticking to the personal and the cult of the Classical, Albrizzi tried to carve out her own niche in a territory contested by Neoclassicism and Romanticism; she was no traveller, but the world flocked to her home. In certain places, she strikes a balance by skilfully hovering on the cusp of irony, masterfully disguising her personal attitude with textbook objectivity. To quote Gino Tellini again, ‘she doesn’t play her game by imposing her own personality, but by challenging others to reveal theirs... Isabella is a master of this art: she possesses the cautiousness and patience needed to coax her interlocutors into making a confession, as well as having the brains to decipher the meanings of those confessions.’⁵

As Bulgarian readers can also find out for themselves⁶, Isabella Teotochi Albrizzi’s ‘Portraits’ haven’t suffered serious damage at the hands of time. Her turn of phrase is sophisticated and masterful, but the contemporary, and at times even matter-of-fact, tone often dominates over the convoluted syntax and her erudite exuberance. At first glance, considering her age and nationality, the femininity of the author’s voice makes her work seem untypical, especially in the light of the information available in Bulgaria about Italian literature from that period. Upon closer inspection, however, it turns out that, despite the aforementioned accusations of intellectual apathy on the part of the majority of women, there were quite a few women authors who took active part in the life of the literary community. The relevant statistics would be more accurate and meaningful, if the collected volumes to which they contributed didn’t just mention the names of their editors. Researcher Maria Pia Casalena alerts us to such technical obstacles⁷, citing Giustina Renier (also considered as a rival of Isabella’s), Caterina Franceschi Ferrucci (the first woman to become a corresponding member of the Accademia della Crusca), Adelaide Pulli Filotico, Bianca Milesi, alongside a host of other landmark names, leaving an impression of the intellectual equality of women authors, as well as the encouraging attitude to their original work.

² Tellini, G. prefazione a: Isabella Teotochi Albrizzi, *Ritratti*, Sellerio editore, Palermo, 1992, p. 23.

³ Meneghelli, A. *idem*, p. 19.

⁴ Based on: Albrizzi, I. *Ritratti*, Sellerio editore, Palermo, 1992.

⁵ Tellini, G., *idem*, p. 27.

⁶ Albrizzi, I. *Ritratti*. Sofia: Altera, 2009, translated into Bulgarian by D. Karapetkova.

⁷ Casalena, M.P. *Alla ricerca delle scritture femminili. Un’esperienza di catalogazione tra strumenti tradizionali e nuove tecnologie.* - In: *Scritture femminili e storia*, a cura di Laura Guidi, ClíoPress, Napoli, 2004, p. 70.

The prestigious selection of names featured in Isabella Albrizzi's 'Portraits' goes beyond the social dimensions of her original intentions, since the time distance lends them some documentary value too. Quite apart from the subjective personal evaluations, those are testimonies which most certainly give a more rounded image of their real historical protagonists. As for her indisputably emancipated authorial presence, it is a sign of the vibrancy of the female literary activity in the early 19th century, forming part of the process of affecting European intellectual circles on a supranational scale, doubtless contributing to its further development.