THE AFTERLIFE OF MATILDA OF CANOSSA (1115-2015)

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As often happens to all great personalities in history, the life of Matilda did not end with her death, but was preserved in the collective memory, through a process of remembrance and imitation, as well as in the constant discursive revival carried on by posterity.

The year after her death, 1116, Emperor Henry V went to Italy with his wife, Matilda of England, to take possession of the estate and inheritance of the Countess and, at Canossa, he was welcomed by the monk Donizone.[1] If Matilda had wanted to leave her possessions to the Church, the document had disappeared, therefore the Emperor Henry V, a distant relative of hers, was able to claim her goods. The question of inheritance was proposed again upon the death of Henry V, and was claimed by Pope Innocent II in 1132 with a bull in which he granted it in usufruct to the Emperor Lothair III,[2] leaving things as they were, but changing their legal definition. On 7 October of that year, the Pope went to S. Benedetto Po to visit the tomb of the Countess Matilda. First interred outside the Church of St. Benedict, built by Matilda, at that time the Countess's body found a new home in the transept of the chapel of Santa Maria, where, in 1151, a mosaic was laid which symbolized the four lay cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance) and other figures that represent the struggle between good and evil.[3]

San Benedetto became her mausoleum, and as such was visited in the following centuries, probably even by Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), when he was in exile at the court of Cangrande della Scala at Verona.[4] In the period in which Dante lived, the name Matilda was linked to the myth of the more than a hundred churches that were associated with the Countess,[5] and he made her the symbol of the active life on top of the mountain of Purgatory, where he places the Terrestrial Paradise. Matelda, as Dante calls her, leads him to meet Beatrice, symbol of the contemplative life, who will guide the poet in Paradise. But Beatrice, besides being the woman sung by Dante, was also the mother of Matilda. Her daughter had buried her in an ancient Roman sarcophagus, which can still be admired in the Camposanto in Pisa. Dante had seen that tomb and he revives the daughter and mother couple, Matilda-Beatrice. Of Matilda, though, he may only have known the name and the myth of an " extremely generous woman (munificentissima), who flourished around the year 1060, who was a most virtuous ruler and built countless churches, endowing them with numerous properties. She was also very powerful in her time, leading a war against the Emperor, and when she was approaching death, brought all her patrimony to Rome, on St. Peter's altar, what today is called "the Patrimony of the Church", as Dante's son, Pietro wrote.[6]

In the Renaissance, the figure of Matilda was revived for her example by various women writers of the time;[7] she is remembered as a Christian heroine in the two outstanding epic poems by the major writers of the Italian Renaissance: in the Orlando furioso by Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533), and in the Gerusalemme liberata by Torquato Tasso (1544-1595) , and as a central character in the history of Florence and Italy by Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527).[8] In the same period she was chosen as a model by Lucrezia Pico (1458-1511), aunt of the famous philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Lucrezia made a large donation, and was buried next to Matilda in the Church of San Benedetto Po.[9]

The famous painter and architect Giulio Romano (1499-1546) was commissioned to paint the meeting at Canossa and an image of the Countess in the "Hall of the fire" in the Vatican, but then was forced to change the subject and to paint the Donation of Constantine, less offensive to the Emperor (the preparatory drawings of the meeting at Canossa have been preserved),[10] and in a fresco, which has now disappeared. In that same room, Pietro di Cristoforo Vannucci, called Il Perugino (1446-1523), painted Matilda's face in a wing of the ceiling.[11]

But Matilda and her donation to the church became a real touchstone at the time of the 16th-century reforms: Protestant and Catholic. During her lifetime, when the conflict for investitures between the Emperor and the Papacy was rife, Matilda had been the subject of praise from those who stood with the Pope, and of expletives from the supporters of the Emperor. Now those positions were becoming current again, so while for the Church of Rome Matilda was the champion of the Papacy, for the Protestants she was responsible for the humiliation of a King, Henry IV at Canossa, a despicable woman, mistress of Gregory VII.[12]

It is easy to recognize her while she is giving away her possessions to the Pope, as we see in the illustrations of the *Passional Christi und Antichristi* (1521) by Lucas Cranach the Elder[13] with lyrics by Martin Luther,[14] in contrast to Jesus who throws out the merchants from the temple, and, perhaps, even in one of the figures surrounding the Pope, while the Emperor is kissing his slipper (the *Fusskuss*), compared to Jesus washing the feet of his disciples (the *Fusswasch*).[15] The contrast is pointed out at the end of the 16th century in different interpretations of the meeting of Canossa by the Centuriators of Magdeburg and by the *Annales Ecclesiastici* of Cardinal Caesar Baronius.[16]

After the Council of Trent, Matilda is recognized by the Catholic Church as one of the greatest supporters of the Papacy, author of the donation to the Church of her estate, a donation that was added to the (false) one of Constantine, making the Papal States stretch out and reach from Lazio to Bologna and to Ferrara, passing through parts of Abruzzo, Umbria, Marche and Romagna.

In 1632 Pope Urban VIII Barberini purchased from the monastery of San. Benedetto Po the body of Matilda, which he secretly transferred to Rome,[17] where he had the grandiose monument raised in St. Peter's, designed by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680) and his assistants, which was finished only in 1644.[18] In the 17th century, the biographies of the "Gran Contessa" multiply, since several Italian dynasties want to claim their relationship with her, as the Malaspina,[19] the Estensi[20] and the Canossa of Verona.[21] But, during the Enlightenment, when the historiographical debate was ignited, to those scholars who praised Matilda, such as Benedetto Bacchini[22] and Ludovico Antonio Muratori,[23] were opposed to those followers of the Enlightenment that scorned her as an exponent of a dark Medieval Age. Voltaire, treating of Pope Gregory VII, wrote that "ce petit homme très pétulant et quelquefois très vif abusa quelquefois de sa pénitente, qui était femme, faible, et capricieuse: rien n'est plus commun dans l'ordre des choses humaines."[24]

The name of Matilda returned during the Risorgimento.[25] When Italians sought to unify a territory which had been divided in so many little states, a movement, called "neo-Guelph", would have liked to see a united Italy under Pope Pius IX. For the neo-Guelphs Matilda was an example of the agreement between religious (Pope Gregory VII) and political power (Matilda). Certainly for this reason and also to exploit the current cultural fashion, Antonio Bresciani (1798-1862), a Jesuit, one of the founders of the "Civiltà Cattolica", wrote a historical novel: Matilde di Canossa and Yolande of Groningen (1857-58), which had a considerable editorial success, evidenced by the sales, the numerous Italian editions (1858, 1867, 1876, 1891) as well as the translations in Europe and the United States (French translations in 1859 and 1862, German in 1868, English in 1875,

New York[26] with several reprints.). France was also involved in the second war of independence of the Italian Risorgimento (1859), and Napoleon III intervened in Italy on the side of Piedmont to defeat the Austrians. It was on that occasion that a prominent French historian, Amédée Renée wrote a biography of Matilda, entitled *La grande italienne* Mathilde de Toscane, Paris 1859, that bore a portrait of Matilda, executed by Princess Mathilde Bonaparte, cousin of the Emperor, well-known for her cultural salon that welcomed artists, writers, and politicians in Paris.[27] Matilda of Canossa was re-invented as a heroine, an emblematic representative of the Italian and French struggle against the Germans.

By contrast, in Germany, the meeting of Canossa in 1077, and the advocate of that event, the Countess Matilda, were interpreted as a disgrace that weighed on the national consciousness at the very moment when German unification was established under the second Reich of Germany (1871). On May 14 1872, the German Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck, during a session of Parliament pronounced the famous phrase: "Nach Canossa gehen wir nicht" (we won't go to Canossa!). It was a time of friction between the Chancery of the Reich and the Holy See, which had to recognize the appointment of curia Cardinal Gustav Adolf von Hohenlohe-Schillingfürst as Ambassador to the Vatican. Bismarck's anti-papal position was clear, and aligned with the moment of cultural revival of German national identity: the Kulturkampf,[28] which referring to Medieval history strove to a humiliation and, at the same time, claimed also religious autonomy from Rome. Since then, the "going to Canossa" [*der Canossagang*] became a proverbial expression to indicate both repentance and retracing one's footsteps, as a backward movement.

This episode unleashed a veritable flood of reactions against Pope Pius IX, a controversial Pontiff in many ways, and a great deal of satire, written and drawn, which showed Matilda as a negative heroine, defined by the old, abusive insults of her opponents: cruel and perverted who some writers describe as the Pope's lover, and others even as the Emperor Henry IV's or his pages, and so she is represented especially in Germany. But even the famous art critic, John Ruskin (1819-1900), in the fourth of his writings in *Fiction Fair and Foul*, and also in a brief digression about Italian Medieval history, invited Protestants to read the lives of three Papist princesses: Theodora, Marozia, Matilda of Canossa, as well as that of Hildebrand,[29] bringing together the Countess with Theodora and Marozia, famous for having used the papacy for their whims in the middle of the tenth century, giving rise to what has been termed "papal pornocracy".

But it is precisely in the romantic nineteenth century that her myth is renewed, while the remains of her castle at Canossa were being discovered, and the places where she lived were becoming the favored destinations of travelers, fascinated by history and by the landscape of ruins of towns and castles, sites that seen a more glorious time. At the beginning of the nineteenth century at Canossa had passed August von Platen (1796-1835), finding accommodation at the home of a hospitable priest; then came the poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), who dedicated an ode to Canossa, *Auf den Schloss von Canossa* (1839), and many others. But even Bismarck's reaction came to be seen as a humiliation greater than the one suffered by Henry IV, at least in a sonnet, dated 1881, composed by Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837-1909), *Bismarck at Canossa*, because the German Chancellor, who hated freedom, was forced to lower his head in front of the Pope. And, in 1885 a historical romance about the Countess was published in London: *Matilda of Canossa: an historical drama in five acts* by Benjamin Gott.

"She was a woman of strong will and strong mind, she held her own, and rent from others, till she had united nearly all Lombardy under her rule»: so reads the reception of the figure of

Matilda of Canossa by the American traveler and novelist William Dean Howells (1837-1920). In his "bestselling" account of Italy resonates the myth of the Risorgimento linked to the Italian heroine Matilda, who fought against the "German" Henry IV, who favored culture in its many manifestations, and especially favored the Church.[30]

Slowly, but progressively, the myth of the Countess Matilda spread across the ocean. She is a woman in whom the strong female figures who were colonizing the new world could identify. Matilda in the Belle Époque and at the beginning of the 20th century became: "the most famous handmaid, completely dedicated to the Holy Church", and, for English-speaking travelers and writers, a role model, an exaltation of the variety and possibilities of the feminine life. Many sang her praises, as the English writers Vernon Lee (Violet Paget, 1856-1935), who visited the tomb of her mother, Beatrice, in the Camposanto of Pisa (1884); Mary E. Huddy wrote *Matilda, Countess of Tuscany*, 1905; Nora Duff, *Matilda of Tuscany. La Gran Donna d'Italia,* 1909; or the American Evangeline E. Whipple, who in her book, *A Famous Corner of Tuscany*, 1928, about Bagni di Lucca, dedicated a long chapter to Matilda. The scholar and historical novelist, Helen C. White, (1896-1967) wrote a well-documented novel all about Matilda: *Not Built with Hands*, published in New York by The Macmillan Company in 1935 and reprinted several times; in remembrance of the Countess, the poet Julia Cooley Altrocchi (1893-1972) drew sketches and composed poems; and, deriving inspiration from her character, Kathleen McGowan has invented the fantasy novel, The *Book of Love*, 2009, based on the gripping biography of Matilda: *Tuscan Countess: The Life And Extraordinary Times Of Matilda Of Canossa*, by Michèle K. Spike, published in New York in 2004.

In the last nine centuries, Matilda of Canossa has continued to be a figure of reference for both men and women, who have recognized in her way of being, whether positive or negative, a part of themselves, and this form of recognition continues in the memory of those who live in her territory and in those, who from afar, admire her strength, her principles, her legacy.

English Translation by Rita Severi.

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7 B. Collina, Donna illustre e guerriera di Dio. Matilde nella letteratura fra Tre e Cinquecento in Matilde di Canossa nelle culture europee del secondo Millennio. Dalla storia al mito. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Reggio Emilia, Canossa, Quattro Castella, 25-27 September 1997 ed. by P. Golinelli, Bologna, Pàtron, 1999, pp. 109-25; M. P.
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8 P. Golinelli, Matilde di Canossa nella letteratura italiana , cit., p. 53.

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10 You can see the reproductions in I mille volti di Matilde. Immagini di un mito nei secoli, ed. by P. Golinelli, F. Motta editore, Milano 2003, pp. 78-80.

11 Ibid., p. 78.

12 John Foxe (1517-1587), Actes and Monuments , London, John Day, 1563: "The tragicall Historye of Gregorius VII" (pp. 20-29), insists on alleged amorous relations with Matilda with the Pontiff, "ye popes paramour", and illustrates with a woodcut the meeting at Canossa where the Emperor begs forgiveness accompanied by his wife and son, with the caption: "A wonderous submissyon of a valiant Emperour to a vyle pope"; see. R. Severi, Matilde in Inghilterra: trattatisti, polemisti e viaggiatori nel Cinque e Seicento, in Matilde di Canossa nelle culture europee del secondo Millenio, cit., pp. 127-139, p. 132.

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