

Mussolini between Hero Worship and Demystification: Exemplary Anecdotes, *Petite Histoire*, and the Problem of Humanization

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This article considers the place of anecdotes in the construction of the public image of Mussolini during his rule and in the decades after his death.¹ The aim is to tackle the question of the dictator's exemplarity in the context of a well-known device of biography, a field that is particularly rich regarding the dictator who ruled Italy from 1922 to 1943.² Anecdotes, it may be said, are short accounts of true, minor incidents that serve to illuminate a personality or shed light on social practices by means of a self-contained story which may be amusing. They can cater to curiosity about the famous or contribute to history's moral role as educator and example. In relation to Mussolini, anecdotes can be divided into two broad categories. First, there are those related to the construction of the Duce cult which show the dictator in a flattering light as an exceptional individual, or which serve to illustrate prefigurings of his destiny as the leader of his people. Second, there are those that entered the public realm after his fall from power in July 1943 and which multiplied in the years that followed. These were mostly concerned to show him as vain, cruel, sex-mad, incompetent, and manipulative, though some focused more simply on his human foibles. This division reflects the larger watershed in perceptions of Mussolini as an exemplar so long as he was dictator and an embodiment of all things negative after. The former were propagandistic inventions or insights that

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¹ The present paper reworks and extends some of the much briefer reflections first advanced in S. Gundle, "Anecdotes and Historiography: From Traiano Boccalini's Strange Death to Benito Mussolini's Sexual Proclivities," *Incontri: rivista europea di studi italiani*, 24, 1 (2009): 101–8.

² Such was the phenomenon of Mussolini's biography during Fascism that Luisa Passerini dedicated an entire book to it. See *Mussolini immaginario: storia di una biografia 1915–1939* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1991).

served to bolster the cult of the Duce, while the latter were taken to show the true nature of a man whose regime ended ignominiously and few people, after 1945, believed to have been a good leader.

In fact, though, the history of anecdotes about Mussolini is more complicated than this sort of simple, mainly temporal division suggests. The construction of an exemplary biography as the basis for charismatic leadership was not purely a work of propaganda. Before the end of the 1920s, it was never wholly controlled from above and relied on a variety of different types of contribution. The most famous biography of all, by Mussolini's mentor and lover Margherita Sarfatti, was commissioned by a foreign publisher on commercial grounds. First published in English in 1925, it contained more gossip and personal insight than would later be allowed, as well as more than Mussolini himself desired (as he would make clear in his preface to the modified Italian edition). It was in some ways a celebrity-style work that corresponded with the image of Mussolini that had taken shape in the American media.³ As an avowed "women's book," it introduced an intimate element into the construction of the Mussolini legend that in some respects paved the way for the bursting forth after the war of stories and gossip that had circulated privately within the regime.

After his defeat and death at the end of an eighteen-month long civil war, Mussolini remained a marketable proposition. While the political impulse towards demystification was strong, there was also a drive toward memorialization among the dictator's former closest associates, some of whom still saw him as a great man whose every saying or deed, no matter how trivial, was worthy of preservation. In addition, there were revelations from former employees who had fallen on hard times (his driver, cook, attendant, office gatekeeper, and so on) and journalistic works devised to cash in on widespread curiosity about the personal life of the former dictator. There were also elements of nostalgia for Mussolini among some of those journalists who had been implicated in the regime and now recoiled from the utter repudiation to which he was subjected. Together these phenomena formed part of what may be called the post-cult of Mussolini. This cult could not be perpetuated by any new images,⁴ for the subject was dead, and it would instead be fueled by a stream of anecdotes and stories which reflected a certain residual attachment to the man, though by comparison with most earlier stories they were hardly exemplary. These would contribute to a process of posthumous resuscitation or "ghosting," to borrow an expression coined in a different context by theatre historian Marvin Carlson.⁵ By this means, Mussolini would continue to occupy a

³ G. Bertellini, *The Divo and the Duce: Promoting Film Stardom and Political Leadership in 1920s America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

⁴ Though, in fact, many images that were censored under the regime would enter the public realm many years later. See, for example, M. Franzinelli and E. V. Marino, *Il duce proibito: le fotografie di Mussolini che gli italiani non hanno mai visto* (Milan: Mondadori, 2005).

⁵ On ghosting, with special reference to the theatre, see M. Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

place in the diffuse imaginary of Italians long after the fall of Fascism. This persistence of a posthumous shadow presence would later feed into both media re-imaginings of the dictator and a certain surprising revival of his popularity in the Italy of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The discussion that follows first considers the place of the anecdote in biography from the seventeenth century. It then examines anecdotes of an exemplary nature or otherwise in the interwar biographies of Mussolini. The third section compares these with the supposed inversions of the postwar period and the development of a composite image in which revelations about Mussolini's personality jostled with official political judgements. I will then evaluate the place of anecdotes in academic and serious biographies of Mussolini. The fifth and final section examines the impact of these issues on representations of Mussolini in film and television, media that became important vehicles of public history and factors in the extraordinary persistence of the dictator's post-cult.

ANECDOTES AND BIOGRAPHY

In an illuminating essay on historiographical anecdotes, Harald Hendrix argues that they become “depositories and vehicles of cultural memory.”⁶ This occurs because they are “incorporated into a biographical discourse in which they have an instrumental function.” They “usually consist,” Hendrix asserts, “of small, more or less independent elements that can be easily identified as separate parts within the overall discourse. They are narrative intervals that have been inserted into a historiographical narrative and obviously contribute in one way or another to the general purpose of such discourse, which is indeed to create cultural memory.”⁷ His essay sets itself the task of establishing the contextual rhetorical function of anecdotes—why they are used and what meanings they impart—and investigating their effectiveness. He points out that one of their key characteristics is that they are invariably long-lasting. Another is that they are resistant to contradiction or demolition. Hendrix speculates that this may be because of what seventeenth-century French historian Antoine Varillas referred to as historiography's need for “inner or hidden truth” and not purely factual truth.⁸ Hidden truth can be accessed through fragmentary facts or tales of a personal, not to say idiosyncratic nature. An *exemplum*, in his view, has the power to convey efficiently and in a condensed form a logic that may be concealed by empirical facts.

Varillas defended his recourse to anecdote in his 1685 text, *Les Anecdotes de Florence ou l'Histoire secrète de la Maison de Médicis*, by arguing that it was time to move beyond the custom of viewing illustrious men only in their public

⁶ H. Hendrix, “Historiographical Anecdotes as Depositories and Vehicles of Cultural Memory,” in H. V. Gorp and U. Musarra-Schroede, eds., *Genres as Repositories of Cultural Memory*, *Studies in Comparative Literature*, 29 (2000), 17–26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

roles. His intention was to capture them outside of ceremony, during moments of conversation and leisure, with the aim of illuminating not so much their actions as their interior lives. Anecdotal history was unofficial history and for this reason, in his view, it offered a more faithful representation of the nature of men and therefore a better understanding of their decisions and actions. This represented a partial shift away from the classical model of the moral biography. Early biographies always had a moral purpose and lives were told in such a way as to highlight the qualities of the subject and condition the behavior of the reader, in keeping with the Western idea of morality as a universal code.⁹ This model was not so much displaced as supplemented by an approach that took in different purposes and paid greater attention to less obviously significant events.

As Malina Stefanovska notes, “In early modern written culture, anecdotes, often interchangeably referred to as ‘*historiettes*,’ ‘*bagatelles*,’ or ‘*curiosités*,’ were particularly widespread.”¹⁰ In historical narratives, including memoirs and the increasingly popular genre of the historical novella, they provided a detailed picture of social practices, revealing “the back stage of official historiography.”¹¹ This, she argues, was an aspect of courtly sociability that was a product of the age of conversation. Yet, there was a certain ambivalence towards them. Voltaire, for example, made recourse to them in his *Le siècle de Louis XIV* (1751) with the justification that they illuminated the spirit of men and of their time. However, he took care to distance himself from the details and gossip that fascinated “*faiseurs de conversations et d’anecdotes*.”¹² As Stefanovska shows, this was not a distinction that it was easy to maintain, both because anecdotes peppered Voltaire’s racy prose and because there was an evident public taste for them. Especially with regard to the affairs of court, the two purposes of amusement and moral purpose could combine. This was the case, for example, with Saint Simon’s *Mémoires* of the French court between 1691 and 1723, which served to testify to the moral decline of France and its nobility under Louis XIV.¹³ Anecdotes or “*historiettes*,” though often less than edifying in themselves, acquired a moral underpinning when they served to illuminate a larger picture.

Anecdotes appealed to writers and historians on account of their brevity, memorability, and efficacy. They provided a means to bring individuals to life, to capture something of their character or personality, and to amuse. In a context in which there was an expanding market for books of all sorts, including memoirs and biographies, these were significant, saleable qualities. There was a tension

⁹ On the specificity of the Western idea of morality, in contrast to the Mongolian approach, see C. Humphrey, “Exemplars and Rules: Aspects of the Discourse of Moralities in Mongolia,” in S. Howell, ed., *The Ethnography of Moralities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 33–34.

¹⁰ M. Stefanovska, “Exemplary or Singular? The Anecdote in Historical Narrative,” *SubStance* 38, 1 (2009): 16–30, 16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, 18.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 20–21.

though between amusement and veracity. For Voltaire, the anecdote had to be true and to be verifiably so to be of any value. Only if it was based on fact could it show some sort of relationship between events or explain the conduct of a prominent individual. Not all were so scrupulous. For writers concerned to please their readers with voyeuristic insights, plausibility was more important than truth. And even this quality could fade where the aim was simply to titillate or entertain by means of a good story. Through repetition and elaboration, the connection of a story to the truth could begin to weaken even if its origins were factual. Anecdotes, over time, could take on a life and acquire motivations of their own.

Conventionally, only selected great individuals from the remote or recent past merited biographical attention. The biography was a form of commemoration. The *historiette* served an exemplary purpose in terms of fixing an individual in historical memory and contributing to a moral conclusion. In the modern era, the potential subjects multiplied, just as the bourgeoisie asserted its presence in the once similarly restricted fields of portraiture and public monuments.¹⁴ It was no longer necessary for a subject to be royal or dead, or both, to receive the biographical treatment, though this was still the norm. Something of the moral purpose remained in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century biographies and indeed would be inherited by the cinematic genre of the “biopic,” but the purposes became more varied. Biography could be harnessed to ideology in addition to, or instead of, morality and acquire a political agenda of hero worship or reputational destruction.

All the charismatic leaders of the first half of the twentieth century harnessed biography to their causes, with publications playing a supportive and sometimes official role. They functioned as tools of power, typically establishing the leader as a figure so exceptional as to not be constrained by convention, while also positing him as a teacher demanding conformist behavior on the part of others. In this way dictators occupied a position that can be interpreted in relation to Caroline Humphrey’s discussion of Mongolian morality.¹⁵ While European rules and codes are based on the assumption that they are the same for all, Mongolians operate in a more subjective way. They choose exemplars to establish personal behavioral norms and make choices on the basis of stories and precepts that may be varied and even contradictory. Dictatorships of the right, like fascism, are often inconsistent in a similar way as they promote what may be thought of as parallel ethical systems, by embracing inherited rules while at the same time authorizing violations of them. They respect some codes and hierarchies while overturning others to create a space for new divisions based on gender, race, and political merit. This space in some degree resembles the Mongolian situation in that it exists in part beyond and outside of conventional

¹⁴ See the introduction to J. Woodall, ed., *Portraiture: Facing the Subject* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ Humphrey, “Exemplars and Rules,” 33–35.

codes, though it is not “free” or even properly subjective insofar as it is heavily governed by political and ideological precepts.

Still, leader biographies cannot be read purely in relation to politics. In modern market societies, biographies are often also commercial propositions. Thus, it was not uncommon to find exemplary and amusing stories side by side, or even on occasion fused, in the same volume. A mass market for books and a mass press increase the opportunities for writers and journalists to make a living from the public thirst for gossip and through-the-keyhole stories. The press obsession with *faits divers*—brief, usually lurid news stories—informed the development of an entire genre of *petite histoire* that had small events, trivial information, and personal quirks as its mainstay. Though of minor consequence if taken singly, small insights could be imaginatively powerful. A suggestive anecdote could fix an individual in the public mind in their most human dimension and make them understandable and accessible. In this way, a dictator’s life provided a “discursive space,” to use Humphrey’s term, through which people saw their own circumstances in a new way or in a way that included a new factor.¹⁶

MUSSOLINI EXEMPLAR

Biographies of great men enjoyed much favor in Italy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Risorgimento was viewed by the national elite as a heroic period of national affirmation. The men who made Italy were raised high in accounts of the struggles and sacrifices that led to the foundation of the modern Italian state in 1861. King Vittorio Emanuele II, who died in 1878, was the object of a cult that was fueled by a vast output of biographies, novels, poems, and historical works that sought to impress the monarch on the national imagination.¹⁷ It was complemented by the cult of Garibaldi, whose death in 1882 also gave rise to large number of biographies, evocations, and memoirs that stressed his selfless patriotism and loyalty to the king.¹⁸ The hero worship, turned as it was to the past, inevitably set up a contrast with the present, which was marked by economic problems, political division, and a failure to achieve the great power status that nationalists craved. In the 1890s, this crisis fed into the hopes that attached to Francesco Crispi, the Sicilian former Garibaldian who, as prime minister, championed an ill-fated drive for colonies.¹⁹ Crispi’s fall from power left nationalists exasperated and fueled hopes that a great genius might appear to invest the nation with new vigor. In the aftermath of World War One, the warrior

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁷ G. Papini, *Maschilità* (Florence: La Voce, 1915).

¹⁸ See L. Riall, *Garibaldi: The Invention of a Hero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

¹⁹ On Crispi, see the substantial biography by C. Duggan, *Francesco Crispi 1818–1901: From Nation to Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

poet Gabriele D'Annunzio briefly gained the attentions of nationalist authors and pamphleteers.²⁰ Soon, though, it was Mussolini who was seen as the man who could furnish the country with the strong moral leadership it was deemed to need.

Biographies of Mussolini began to appear soon after the March on Rome, with Antonio Beltramelli's *L'uomo nuovo* (The New Man) appearing in 1923, *The Life of Benito Mussolini* by Margherita Sarfatti in 1925, and Giorgio Pini's *Benito Mussolini* the following year.²¹ All three were products of a context in which Mussolini had emerged as the savior of the nation, a new man who offered the best chance of restoring order after a period of social and political turbulence. Beltramelli was a Futurist who, like Mussolini, had been born in the Romagna region. His account of Italy's new prime minister was entirely geared to establishing his vigor, tirelessness, impatience with established authority, distaste for the corruptions of modernity, and capacity to rouse the enthusiasm of the people. Mussolini is seen in his text as having been pre-destined to greatness from his earliest days, on account of his passion, firm convictions, deeply patriotic nature, and intimate connection to God. Austerity and self-sacrifice are his watchwords. A communicator who favored brevity, he knew no doubts and formed judgments quickly. Beltramelli himself, though his book is nearly six hundred pages long, writes with a similar declamatory style. He has little time for description or analysis; instead, he quotes, affirms, and marshals facts to support his basic thesis. Though he was not an intimate of Mussolini's and his work relied on secondary sources, he won his subject's approval. His book, which was published by Mondadori, a leading Milanese publisher, boasts an autographed note from Mussolini himself to the author which is signed off "*Romagnolamente vostro.*"

Beltramelli was concerned to build the legend of Mussolini and thus there is little in his text that positions him as a "*faiseur de conversations et d'anecdotes.*" Personal stories are relatively scarce, and only on one occasion does he admit to recounting a story that he labels an anecdote. This is where he reports a minor episode from the time of Mussolini's period as a worker in Switzerland, when he was reduced more or less to the status of vagabond.²² The episode is drawn from a profile of Mussolini written by a fellow exile, one Arturo Rossato. It tells of a night when the future Duce, wandering at night and intensely hungry, came across a building in the courtyard of which a family was about to eat. He walked

²⁰ On D'Annunzio's contribution to a modern charismatic template, see S. Gundle, "The Death (and Rebirth) of the Hero: Charisma and Manufactured Charisma in *Modern Italy*," *Modern Italy* 3, 2 (1998): 173–89.

²¹ A. Beltramelli, *L'uomo nuovo* (Milan: Mondadori, 1923); M. Sarfatti, *The Life of Benito Mussolini* (London: Thornton Butterworth, 1925); G. Pini, *Benito Mussolini: la sua vita fino d oggi, slla strada al potere* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1926). Luisa Passerini discusses Beltramelli and Sarfatti together as the joint founders of the genre of Mussolini biographies. See *Mussolini immaginario*, 42–61.

²² A. Beltramelli, *L'uomo nuovo* (Milan: Mondadori, 1923), 580–81.

up and demanded bread. After an initial silence, one of those present reluctantly handed him a bread roll. As he walked off into the night, he was tempted to throw the bread in a ditch, so meanly had it been proffered. Instead, he ate it in silence, seeking to banish the thought of what had just occurred, at the same time stiffening his resolve to make his mark on the world. For Beltramelli, “This is one of the most significant anecdotes about the early life of Benito Mussolini, this rebellious and noble life that was torn between disdain and sentiment.” What it showed, in his view, was a man who was at rock bottom, reduced to begging in order to eat, yet who remained proud and dignified. A story of this type helped build up the character of Mussolini as a man with a common touch and a personal understanding of hardship.

In her *The Life of Benito Mussolini*, Sarfatti, too, stressed Mussolini’s early life, his origins in the politically vibrant Romagna region, and his experiences of extreme poverty in Switzerland. She sought to show how he came to embrace a mission to redeem Italy and restore it to greatness by infusing its people with a new spirit. He is portrayed as emerging from the people and there are descriptions of his ability to mix with the ordinary people, but he does not cultivate friendship or seek to please. His fellow soldiers during the First World War are said to have been the first to see in him a man of exception. Their view feeds into a larger picture of the charismatic man of destiny. Mussolini is never seen as interested in personal gain; he is a man of action not motivated by personal ambition or any form of greed.²³

Sarfatti’s professional and personal relationship with Mussolini meant that she was uniquely placed to offer insights into the man of the provinces, the journalist, the political firebrand, and the patriot. *The Life of Benito Mussolini* was commissioned by an American publisher who was keen to tap into public interest in the man. In America, Mussolini was a celebrity-leader, the political head of a country who was ruling with an authoritarian flair and modern dynamism that many found appealing.²⁴ The expectation was that Sarfatti would provide an informal portrait and she stated that her work was explicitly a “woman’s book” that featured intimate or personal insights that would have special appeal to female readers.²⁵

²³ Obvious hero worship informs the picture of exceptionality that the author wishes to build: “Mussolini is one of those rare men who are born to compel admiration and devotion from all around them. He is even an exception to the rule that no one is a hero to his valet. Even the humblest members of his staff. Though they may not be able to gauge his actions and achievements, come under the sway of his magnetism and the force of his personality. It is wonderful to see how his slightest orders are obeyed. He does not speak loudly or indulge in emphatic language, yet somehow or other it is made clear to all concerned that his decisions are irrevocable—that there must be no discussion of them. Mussolini’s intuition and power are manifest in the smallest things no less than the greatest.” Sarfatti, *Life of Benito Mussolini*, 51.

²⁴ Bertellini, *Divo and the Duce*, ch. 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 346.

The text in fact contains many trivial observations. For example, she refers to her subject's abomination for beards: "He has consistently kept his own Roman profile free from one. He thinks of beards as masks for solemn humbugs and second-rate *arrivistes*. For the old-fashioned, long, full beard he cherishes a special detestation, seeing in it a symbol of all that is unsporting and unprogressive and unpractical."²⁶ It is also related that he is remote by nature, that no-one would "presume to buttonhole him or ... place a hand upon his shoulder."²⁷ Inconsequential observations of this sort, however, are balanced by remarks about his ability to withstand pain, his distaste for the mean and petty, and his unwavering focus on "big things."²⁸ Sarfatti painted Mussolini as a man of energy and purpose, who "passes from one matter to another without ever looking back" and who has complete control over himself. "He has the gift of sleep at will. Half an hour's sleep, or even ten minutes' sleep, will often suffice to refresh him and set him up," she asserts. "He seems to pass from sleeping to waking at one step, without wasting a moment."²⁹

One of the brief and telling anecdotes that feature here and there in the book is again set in Switzerland, though this time the Italian outcast has found some friends, a couple of female Russian students who affectionately dub him "Benitouchka."³⁰ They feed and entertain him and insist that he spends the night in a bed that one of them would normally sleep in, while they stay elsewhere. However, the wall is so thin that the landlady, who knows the girls are not at home but not that they have lent a bed to a visitor, can hear him and sends her husband off to the police station to seek help to see if there is an intruder. His mission proves fruitless and so the matter drops, though Mussolini, realizing he is at risk, spends a sleepless night, fearing that he will be discovered and expelled from the country. In the morning, the students return and are highly amused to find their guest in a state of alarm and distress. As an anecdote, it amounts to little, but it is worth noting that it is relayed purely as gossip, a *curiosité* or *historiette*, and, unlike Beltramelli's story of the bread roll, it has no moral or exemplary function other than to show a lighter moment in the life of a man who is otherwise presented as almost superhuman. It was precisely the sort of everyday tale that the publisher required to show readers the subject in a human light as well as a heroic one.³¹

The Life of Benito Mussolini was a commercial book, but it was also an exercise in personality cult construction. Boosting the aura of the subject was its political purpose. Sarfatti situated Mussolini in relation to historical precursors

²⁶ Ibid., 53.

²⁷ Sarfatti, *Life of Benito Mussolini*, 344.

²⁸ Ibid., 345.

²⁹ Ibid., 51–52.

³⁰ Ibid., 109–11.

³¹ This sort of balance was a common theme in the Mussolini cult; see G. Zunino, *L'ideologia del fascismo: miti, credenze, valori* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1985), 202–4.

or forerunners who included Napoleon, Garibaldi, and the great figures of Rome and the *condottieri* of the Renaissance. He is portrayed as a man whose commitment to honor and moral perfection is like that of “the Knights of old,” while, as a new man, an “aristocratic plebeian,” his horizon is that of the future.³² As Simona Storchi notes, the image of Mussolini as a born leader and as the personification of the best qualities of the Italian people served to underscore and complement the dominance of his political position.³³ It sealed his transition from “new man” to Duce.

The biography was a huge international success and was translated into eighteen languages. The Italian edition, re-titled *Dux* and corrected and modified in some respects (not least by replacement of the relaxed, smiling portrait that adorned the opening pages of the English edition—but not removal of the “Benitouchka” anecdote),³⁴ served domestic political purposes. As popular at home as abroad, *Dux* went through some seventeen editions between 1926 and 1938.³⁵ Mussolini, who had initially been enthusiastic about the enterprise, endorsed the book by supplying a preface to the Italian edition. In it, however, he marked a distance from its purported insights into the private dimension. In this way, he also pushed back Sarfatti’s attempts to position herself as the key authority on his story and his personality.³⁶ The dictator claimed that he considered himself to have been marked from birth as a “public man” (rather than a “domestic man”).³⁷ The book attracted some criticism from supporters who were uneasy about the author’s position and the nature of the treatment. Though it built up the aura of the leader, some claimed that episodes had been invented outright, though Sarfatti defended herself when the writer Curzio Malaparte accused her directly of purveying falsehoods.³⁸

While a colorful portrayal littered with trivia might have served a purpose in satisfying interest in the man who was establishing his dominance, it did not suit the regime’s need for a more conventional politically driven biography that could serve a pedagogical function. To meet this purpose, a volume was commissioned from Giorgio Pini, a journalist on the Fascist party newspaper *Il Popolo d’Italia*, titled *Benito Mussolini: la sua vita fino ad oggi dalla strada al potere* (Benito Mussolini: his life up to the present, from the street to a position of power). This volume was shorter and concentrated more on the political. It was distributed through official channels and updated on numerous occasions. It was

³² *Ibid.*, 333.

³³ S. Storchi, “Margherita Sarfatti and the Invention of the Duce,” in S. Gundle, C. Duggan, and G. Pieri, eds., *The Cult of the Duce: Mussolini and the Italians* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 50.

³⁴ The anecdote occurs on pages 74–75 of M. Sarfatti, *Dux* (Milan: Mondadori, 1926).

³⁵ Storchi, “Margherita Sarfatti,” 53.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁷ B. Mussolini, “Prefazione” to Sarfatti, *Dux*, 7.

³⁸ Storchi, “Margherita Sarfatti,” 41.

unambiguously an exemplary biography that contributed to the institutionalization and perpetuation of the cult of the Duce at a time when the regime was secure in its hold on power.

In the book, episodes from Mussolini's life are recounted with reverence and are functional to the overriding task of establishing his superiority. He is shown to be a unique individual, a genius, the embodiment not merely of the spirit of his region (which was stressed less than in earlier volumes) but of his race and the nation, a born leader who never hesitates, a good family man, a lover of art, a courageous soldier, a man of destiny, one who is always calm and resolute.³⁹ "The perfection of Mussolini's life," it is stated, "derives from his ability to understand the whole of modern life and to take part even in its mechanical aspects, without ever losing the sense of the oldest traditions of Italian life, the supremacy of the instincts and the intelligence of art."⁴⁰ The man "who has within him the Roman chief and the nobleman of the Renaissance" is shown as simple and honest, frugal and sober, one who has no interest in intrigues, personal comforts, or any form of personal gain. Like the other volumes, it presented an ideal picture of Mussolini that wove together fact and myth. All aspects of human interest that appear in it have the function of accentuating the unique qualities of the subject, which, according to official orthodoxy, were manifested in his early life and shaped by the experiences he went through prior to founding the *Fasci di combattimento* in 1919. These qualities are related to Mussolini's physical appearance, which is described in all three books as strong, handsome, and virile. Citing a living source, and thereby demonstrating a concern to establish truthfulness, Pini attributes this judgement to no less a personage than the dowager Queen Margherita, who is alleged to have sung the praises of his vivid, dark eyes, his high forehead, square jaw, and agility.⁴¹

There are many testimonies in Pini's volume, though only occasional small insights, which show traces of the anecdotal imprint on Mussolini's story. One of these, perhaps the only one that deserves the label anecdote, in effect serves as the mirror image of Beltramelli's *exemplum* of the bread roll. It has Mussolini traveling by car in the company of an aristocratic acquaintance. When they reach the latter's family seat, a palace, Mussolini observes a thin, pale man who is leaning against a pillar and staring at him but who does not say a word. The dictator immediately extracts a banknote from his pocket and gives it to the man, much to the astonishment of the aristocrat, who inquires why he should offer a handout to one who had not asked for anything. "You're wrong," Mussolini is reported to have replied; "only someone who has suffered from hunger could

³⁹ Passerini, *Mussolini immaginario*, 181.

⁴⁰ Pini, *Benito Mussolini*, 121.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

understand the gaze of supplication of another who is hungry."⁴² Once again, the hardships of Mussolini's early adulthood are shown to inform his understanding of people and guide his conduct as a political leader.

There were many other books about Mussolini published under the regime, though no biographies as important as the three just discussed. In her study of the fantasy Mussolini, *Mussolini immaginario*, Luisa Passerini counted around seven hundred volumes published up to 1939 that in one way or another sought to capture, interpret, or praise Mussolini and his leadership.⁴³ However, the vast majority of the works published in the 1930s were low-profile offerings that merely repeated or re-elaborated what was already known.

Instead of anecdotes which, unless they referred to the leader's passions for fast cars and airplanes (that provided a continuous source for uncontroversial, flattering stories and *curiosités*),⁴⁴ or re-proposed tales from his youth and young adulthood, Italians were provided with a flood of images of Mussolini visiting this or that location, addressing crowds or meeting people. These depictions functioned as visual anecdotes or image bites and created an impression of ubiquity which ensured that Mussolini impressed himself on the collective mind like no one else before him.⁴⁵ Over time, he became a constant second-order presence in the life of many, a figure through whom the Italians were expected to see the best of themselves and experience the forward march of their country. Even as the regime's popularity declined,⁴⁶ Mussolini himself was rarely criticized; instead, it was the Fascist Party and local officials who were blamed. Thanks to the aura that had been constructed around him, the idea of him as good leader who had his people's interests at heart remained widespread.⁴⁷ Even though Mussolini became more remote, the thirst for information about him did not diminish and nor would it do so after his removal from power in July 1943, though after this event it would be satisfied in a very different way.

MUSSOLINI DEMYSTIFIED

After the fall of the regime in July 1943, there appeared anti-Fascist portrayals of the leader, which previously had only circulated abroad. Mussolini's image changed as revelations about his private life began to appear in the press and

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Passerini, *Mussolini immaginario*. Foreign authors contributed to the phenomenon with books that offered portraits of the new Italy and its dictator. See E. Gentile, *In Italia ai tempi di Mussolini* (Milan: Mondadori, 2014).

⁴⁴ Passerini, *Mussolini immaginario*, 170–71.

⁴⁵ F. Ciarlantini, *Mussolini immaginario* (Milan: Sonzogno, 1933).

⁴⁶ See P. Corner, *The Fascist Party and Public Opinion in Mussolini's Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴⁷ See C. Duggan, *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini's Italy* (London: The Bodley Head 2012), 333.

in pamphlet publications.⁴⁸ They multiplied after the liberation of Rome in June 1944 and did so further after the final liberation of the country in April 1945. Insofar as the intimate realm was mentioned at all in earlier years, it was indirectly or in general terms, as for example in Carlo Delcroix's volume *Un uomo un popolo* (A man, a people) in which Mussolini's exemplary and extraordinary qualities, even down to his physical strength and sexual potency,⁴⁹ were highlighted to underline his uniqueness. Like Humphreys' Mongolian exemplars, the dictator was situated in many accounts in part within and in part beyond conventional moral codes; he was part of the cultural fabric of the nation but also licensed to make his own rules.⁵⁰ What Ruth Ben-Ghiat calls the "rogue nature" of the political strongman drew people to him by promising order and delivering transgression.⁵¹ After his fall, the public was treated to more detailed information, notably concerning his relationship with Claretta Petacci, a young admirer who became his lover in 1936, when she was twenty-four and he was fifty-three. The affair had been much discussed in social and political circles in Rome since the later 1930s and was sufficiently known in the capital for Claretta to receive begging letters. But it never reached the public realm and therefore remained unknown to the majority, who had only ever been privy to general allusions to the dictator's sex drive.

Piquant details of the affair appeared in a pseudonymous publication of 1944 entitled *Vita segreta di Mussolini* (Mussolini's secret life) in which the still-living Duce was variously mocked as "the erotomaniac tyrant" and "the Da Verona-style dictator" (a reference to the popular light erotic writer Guido Da Verona) and accused of having behaved towards his young mistress like "a money-laden old client."⁵² The aim of a text like this was, even more radically than Voltaire with Louis XIV, to illustrate the decadence and immorality of the dictator and his regime. The aim was to turn the leader figure into a "negative exemplar."⁵³ *Vita segreta di Mussolini* referred to Asvero Gravelli and a handful of other senior Fascists as "pimps and hangers-on of the tyrant," implying that, among other things, they procured women for the Duce. This denigration re-cast the virile image of earlier years. The anti-Fascist artist Tono Zancanaro, who had begun drawing caricatures of Mussolini as a lascivious semi-human monster in

⁴⁸ For an overview of Mussolini in postwar culture, see S. Gundle, "The Aftermath of the Mussolini Cult: History, Nostalgia and Popular Culture," in S. Gundle, C. Duggan, and G. Pieri, eds., *The Cult of the Duce: Mussolini and the Italians* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 241–56.

⁴⁹ C. Delcroix, *Un uomo un popolo* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1928), 83. On the attention paid to Mussolini's virility under the regime, see Passerini, *Mussolini immaginario*, 99–109.

⁵⁰ On this aspect of Mussolini's charisma, see Zunino, *L'ideologia del fascismo*, 202–10.

⁵¹ R. Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen: How They Rise, Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (London: Profile Books, 2020), 251.

⁵² Calipso, *Vita segreta di Mussolini* (Rome: n.p., 1944), 27.

⁵³ Humphrey, "Exemplars and Rules," 39.

1942, confirmed that satire was a weapon in the armory of Fascism's opponents and that this passed through sexual ridicule.⁵⁴

This continued after the war's end and Mussolini's death. Magazine and book publishers struggled to satisfy the thirst for evocations of and revelations about the fallen regime. Anecdotes about Mussolini's habits, conduct, and vices were of great interest. These were still rooted in the everyday but, in contrast to the prewar period, they took elements of the Mussolini image and gave them a grotesque spin. One of the first and most influential sources was a book by Quinto Navarra published in 1946 under the title *Memorie del cameriere di Mussolini* (Memoirs of Mussolini's attendant).⁵⁵ Navarra had been employed at Palazzo Venezia up to 1943, where his job was to oversee the comings and goings of those with appointments to see the Duce. The volume provided a close-up human picture of the leader's foibles. It was filled with curious insights into the dictator's habits and personal quirks, covering everything from his dress sense and his passion for self-staging to his moods and artistic tastes.

One anecdote that quickly became the best-known, to the point of acquiring the status of an *exemplum*, concerned his sexual appetite. According to Navarra, for a period of twenty years—even, that is, during his relationship with Claretta—Mussolini “received almost regularly a different woman every day.”⁵⁶ Allegedly, “his adventures were interspersed between one official ‘audience’ and another, according to a regular rhythm and at pre-established times.” These were not protracted or leisurely encounters. According to Navarra, “Mussolini never dedicated to love two or three minutes more than was necessary; he dedicated to the women no more time than he was accustomed to dedicate to the workers of the iron and steel industries or to the peasants.”⁵⁷ The women were chosen for him from among the many who sent him admiring letters. They were received in his normal working environments including the Sala del Mappamondo in Palazzo Venezia. Navarra claimed that he only realized that the Duce was having sexual relations with his visitors when he noticed that the carpets and cushions were stained. The dictator always took care that the women exited the rooms “in perfect order and above all suspicion.”⁵⁸

The anecdote unquestionably played into a diffuse fantasy of Mussolini as a sexually rampant, hyper-virile leader.⁵⁹ The image of the family man and Catholic statesman that had been so important in the 1920s was somewhat played

⁵⁴ See S. Gundle, “Satire and the Destruction of the Cult of the Duce,” in S. Gundle and others, *Against Mussolini: Art and the Fall of a Dictator* (London: Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art, 2010), 15–35.

⁵⁵ Q. Navarra, *Memorie del cameriere di Mussolini* (Milan: Longanesi, 1946).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 200–1.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁵⁹ The best-known example of this fantasy is by the author Carlo Emilio Gadda. His *Eros e Priapo* (Milan: Adelphi, 2016[1967]) was written in 1945 and 1946.

down in the 1930s as he sought to convey the impression that he was no less vital than he had been as a younger man. In this context, allusions to his sexual vigor appeared more regularly. Though Navarra's anecdote appeared to align with the satirical reduction and sexual derision to which the fallen dictator was subjected, in fact it did not emerge from any anti-Fascist current nor was it indicative of any hostile sentiment. Navarra retained affection for his former master and his memoirs were published by a company founded by Leo Longanesi, an ambiguous figure and one-time Fascist who had coined the phrase "Mussolini is always right." Longanesi, like his friend, *Corriere della sera* journalist Indro Montanelli, had once been a keen supporter of Mussolini, though he had become disenchanted well before the fall of the regime. In the climate of general condemnation of Fascism—and of opportunistic detachment from it by individuals—the two men once more changed their attitude toward Mussolini. They did not hide the fact that they regarded the postwar attitude toward a leader most Italians had been happy to support as a disgrace.⁶⁰ In the face of a widespread demonization of the man, they responded by humanizing and domesticating him. They set themselves up as architects of the re-absorption of Mussolini as a faulty human being into the collective consciousness of middle Italy. It was only revealed many years later that the Navarra volume was in fact written by Longanesi and Montanelli, who had got to know the down-at-heel former attendant and composed the volume "following the verbal account and on the basis of notes by Navarra himself."⁶¹

The two journalists were central to the strange cultural battle being fought in postwar Italy over the memory of the dictator, which took advantage of the popular appetite for the *petite histoire* of the regime. They spoke in their writings to the millions of Italians who felt no need to express guilt or repentance for the support that they had given Fascism. Other journalists, including such as Paolo Monelli, whose *Mussolini piccolo borghese* enjoyed success at home and abroad,⁶² contributed to this current, which encouraged a view that the regime had been a dictatorship for sure, but of the comic opera variety. Its leader was not so much an evil genius as a poor devil called to perform a role that was too big for him. This sort of depiction rested on the assumption of a persisting imaginary connection between the Italians and their one-time dictator who was merely a projection of the nation's vices and flaws.

Although their position was notably more respectful, and avowedly nostalgic also in a political way, a variety of one-time Fascists and former

⁶⁰ He told Denis Mack Smith that he and Longanesi encountered Navarra in 1945, when he had fallen on hard times. In return for some dinners and drinks, he regaled the two journalists with stories of his time attending to Mussolini. Testimony of Denis Mack Smith to the author, June 2002. In these circumstances it can be assumed that the contents of the memoirs were doubly embroidered.

⁶¹ I. Montanelli and M. Staglieno, *Leo Longanesi* (Milan: Longanesi, 1984), 310 n2.

⁶² Monelli, *Mussolini piccolo borghese* (Milan: Garzanti, 1950). The volume appeared in English as *Mussolini: An Intimate Life* (Norwich: Jarrold, 1953).

collaborators of the Duce contributed to the flow of stories. For example, Gravelli—branded a pimp in *Vita segreta di Mussolini* and alleged by some to be the Duce's illegitimate son—had under the regime authored several adulatory texts, including *Uno e molti: interpretazioni spirituali di Mussolini* (The one and the many: spiritual interpretations of Mussolini, 1938). In 1952 he published *Mussolini aneddótico* (Anecdotal Mussolini), a volume that promised to reveal “the hidden life of an illustrious man” but which in fact consisted of banal observations taken from works mostly by Fascists, including Sarfatti and Pini's volumes, many of which were published during the *ventennio* itself.⁶³ Gravelli included passages from his own works, minor stories from the press, and testimonies from the dictator's children. Cesare Rossi, a one-time director of Mussolini's press and propaganda office who fell from grace over his involvement in the murder of Giacomo Matteotti in 1924 and was eventually imprisoned, also wrote series of texts exposing the manias and foibles of his one-time master, including *Mussolini com'era* (Mussolini as he was) in 1947 and *Trentatre vicende mussoliniane* (Thirty-three Mussolinian episodes) in 1958.⁶⁴

Over many years, the anecdotes would continue to flow as Mussolini's former domestic employees and attendants periodically gave interviews to the press.⁶⁵ It may be argued that these accounts of the private life of a public man ultimately continued and extended precisely those aspects that Sarfatti had incorporated into her biography and which had caused her to consider it a “woman's book.”⁶⁶ It was the illustrated weeklies, whose main target was women and families, which mainly gave space to this material. The “human” Mussolini, rendered trivial in the flow of nostalgic anecdotes, was a dictator that had been made acceptable, who could be remembered even with fondness by those who had backed him at the height of his power. Sergio Luzzatto, the author of a study of the history of Mussolini's body, has commented on the effect of this type of white-washing: “the retrospective through-the-keyhole point of view,” he has argued, “allowed Fascism to be represented not as a totalitarian regime so much as a vanity fair, and Mussolini not as a fearful dictator but simply as the most fatuous Italian of them all.”⁶⁷

⁶³ A. Gravelli, *Mussolini aneddótico* (Rome: Latinita 1952). The quotation is taken from the preface by Pierre Pascal, v.

⁶⁴ C. Rossi, *Mussolini com'era* (Rome: Ruffolo, 1947); *Trentatre vicende mussoliniane* (Milan: Ceschina, 1958). On Rossi, see M. Canali, *Cesare Rossi: da sindacalista rivoluzionario a eminenza grigia del fascismo* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1991).

⁶⁵ On the role of the press in cultivating an affectionate or “indulgent” memory of Mussolini, see C. Baldassini, *L'ombra di Mussolini: l'Italia moderata e la memoria del fascismo (1945–1960)* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2008).

⁶⁶ Sarfatti reflected on her role in building up Mussolini in a text authored in the United States that would only be published in 2015: *My Fault: Mussolini as I Knew Him*, B. Sullivan, ed. (New York: Enigma Books, 2015).

⁶⁷ S. Luzzatto, *Il corpo del duce* (Turin: Einaudi, 1998), 122.

ANECDOTES AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

The heyday of the indulgent, anecdotal perception of Mussolini was before Fascism and its leader were treated as objects of study by historians. From the 1960s, the situation changed as historians both academic and popular produced biographies in a stream of work that catered to an interest that remained constant. The monumental eight-volume biography by Renzo De Felice was key in constituting the regime and its leader as objects of historical research. Between the publication of the first volume, *Mussolini il rivoluzionario 1883–1920* (Mussolini the Revolutionary, 1883–1920) in 1965, and the final one published in 1997, a year after the author's death, this on-going work was a reference point for historical debate and a regular source of interpretative controversy. The first volume's definition of Mussolini as a "revolutionary" stirred up a debate. De Felice's insistence on the radical difference between Fascism and Nazism sparked another one, while his conviction that, for much of the 1930s, the regime commanded widespread consent, challenged the anti-Fascist assumption that most Italians had been victims of an oppressive dictatorship. For more than twenty years, De Felice, who proclaimed his commitment to objective, document-based research, set the tone for discussion in Italy.⁶⁸

The foreigners who published biographies while De Felice was in the process of working on his volumes almost always worked from an assumption that the overall judgement on Mussolini and Fascism could only ever be negative. In English alone, these included Denis Mack Smith, Jasper Ridley, Richard Collier, Ivone Kirkpatrick, and several others. In the early 2000s, two important biographies by Pierre Milza and Richard Bosworth appeared, as well as several popular works. Despite differences in standpoint, all biographers shared the assumption, articulated by De Felice, that "the personality of Mussolini" was "decisive for the understanding of Fascism."⁶⁹ Inevitably, therefore, all of them had to engage on some level with the accumulated baggage of *historiettes* and *curiosités*. Anecdotes were at one and the same time stories whose truth or otherwise needed to be investigated and a ready means of enlivening an account.

Popular authors might be thought generally to be more susceptible to the temptation to deploy a juicy anecdote than academics. In fact, the picture is quite complex. While Sarfatti was set to one side as a source, Navarra represented a challenge. For male political historians of a traditional cast of mind the intimate realm was not an easy one to handle, or one which they were accustomed to analyzing. It was perhaps especially difficult for foreign historians. But in

⁶⁸ See B. W. Painter, "Renzo De Felice and the Historiography of Italian Fascism," *American Historical Review* 95, 2 (1990): 391–405. For a sympathetic assessment, see E. Gentile, *Renzo De Felice: lo storico e il personaggio* (Rome: Laterza, 2003).

⁶⁹ R. De Felice, *Intervista sul fascismo*, M. Ledeen, ed. (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1975), 28.

Mussolini's case this topic was difficult to avoid. As Milza notes, "Mussolini's Don Juan tendencies formed part of the panoply of signs that in the eyes of the average Italian contributed to the image of the superman,"⁷⁰ while Bosworth asserts that sexual prowess was "linked to his image and charisma."⁷¹ The Navarra anecdote therefore was difficult to ignore; it offered something useful in highlighting an acknowledged but largely hidden aspect of his magnetism and his relations with women. The question remained as to whether it was true. De Felice referred to it as "hearsay" but, unlike the popular British historian Hibbert, he used Navarra as a source and surrounded the anecdote with supplementary considerations about Mussolini's utilitarian attitude towards women that lent it credibility.⁷² Denis Mack Smith, for many years the greatest critic of De Felice's supposedly objective approach,⁷³ mentioned Navarra once in his biography but, despite the narrative verve of his prose and his fondness for the telling anecdote, he paid no attention to his comments on the Duce's sex life.⁷⁴ Bosworth briefly reflects on the Duce's sex appeal,⁷⁵ but consigned Navarra's "claims" to an endnote.⁷⁶ Perhaps surprisingly, the biographer Hibbert, whose many books, it was said, "were rich in anecdote and filled with choice quotations,"⁷⁷ was also skeptical. His biography of Mussolini, which appeared in 1962, referred to the dictator as a "compulsive *donnaiolo* (womanizer)" but, with striking scruple, he labelled Navarra's information on this topic as "necessarily suspect."⁷⁸

Of all serious biographers, the Frenchman Milza paid most attention to Navarra as a source. At first sight, he says, Navarra's notes on the Duce's sex life "would seem to belong to the realm of merely anecdotal history," suggesting that they were trivial even if true.⁷⁹ However, he does not renounce reporting the details of Navarra's memoirs, which he finds to be plausible on this question. Perhaps bearing in mind Voltaire's strictures, he took steps to confirm the story, consulting the archives of the Duce's private secretariat to find that there was often a gap in the dictator's afternoon schedules. On this basis, he accepts Navarra's account, with the sole correction, first advanced in the postwar years by Paolo Monelli, that perhaps not *all* his female afternoon visitors were subjected to the dictatorial lunge.⁸⁰

⁷⁰ Milza, *Mussolini* (Rome: Carocci, 2000 [first published in Paris in 1999]), 511.

⁷¹ R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), 212.

⁷² R. De Felice, *Mussolini il duce, Il Lo Stato totalitario* (Turin: Einaudi, 1981), 275–76, and 276.

⁷³ See D. Mack Smith, "Mussolini: Reservations about Renzo De Felice's Biography," *Modern Italy* 5, 2 (2000): 193–210.

⁷⁴ D. Mack Smith, *Mussolini* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994[1981]), 107.

⁷⁵ Bosworth, *Mussolini*, 212.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 466 n145.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ C. Hibbert, *Benito Mussolini: A Biography* (London: Longman, 1962). The first quotation is on page 59 and the second on 338.

⁷⁹ Milza, *Mussolini*, 511.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 513. For Monelli, see *Mussolini piccolo borghese* (Milan: Garzanti, 1950), 174–80.

By evaluating the plausibility and seeking to establish the truth of the story, Milza followed the procedure outlined by Hendrix, who asserts that the first duty of the scholar should be to make every effort to discover the empirical truth or falsity of an anecdote. However, while the historian might derive professional pleasure in finding evidence to disprove or support a long-standing anecdote, Hendrix also suggested that interest in an anecdote does not start and stop with the matter of truth. The life of an anecdote can be perpetuated by cultural memory for reasons that have nothing to do with its veracity. They perform a rhetorical function and serve to perpetuate widely held perceptions. In the case of Mussolini, imaginary representations had a life of their own and did not always respond to factual developments or evidence-based discoveries. As Passerini has noted, they tended to move slowly and often resisted efforts at change.⁸¹

Not all foreign historians appreciated what was at stake in postwar Italy over the legacy of Mussolini. Many saw Mussolini as a historical figure, not as a figure whose ghostly presence was still a live factor with implications for present-day politics. While Mussolini's sex life might, in the eyes of foreigners, have underlined his abnormality, for male Italians, especially those of a certain generation, this was far less the case. Womanizing was an aspect of the anecdotal Mussolini that situated him within the realm of a diffuse normative masculinity.⁸² It was not incompatible with the persistent image of the benevolent, if flawed, leader. The view of the political realm as a masculine one persisted into the postwar period, despite the extension of the franchise to women and the election of the first female deputies in 1948. So strongly was male domination entrenched in society and so strong was resistance to change that Patrizia Gabrielli has argued that anti-feminism "was a widely held sentiment in Italy, almost a national characteristic, [which] traversed the political class that was engaged in establishing the foundations of the new state."⁸³ It would remain a factor, shaping political culture for many decades.

As interpreters of the humors of the conservative middle class, Longanesi and Montanelli would have a key long-term impact on the way many viewed Fascism and Mussolini. Longanesi died in 1957, but his associate remained for decades a central figure in the "ghosting" of Mussolini. Right up until his death in 2001 at the age of ninety-two, Montanelli occupied a position at the apex of the journalistic profession and for most of that time he had a column in the *Corriere della sera*. He frequently returned to the subject of Mussolini. With what has been referred to as his "taste for the anecdotal and psychology,"⁸⁴ he often

⁸¹ Passerini, *Mussolini immaginario*, 8.

⁸² See Bellasai, *L'invenzione della virilità*, 98–116. The author refers to the replacement of "virilism" as a hegemonic force in Italian society in the 1960s by an "informal virilism" that safeguards the same values.

⁸³ Gabrielli, *Il 1946, le donne, la repubblica* (Rome: Donzelli, 2009), 104.

⁸⁴ M. Franzinelli, "Introduzione" to Indro Montanelli, *Io e il Duce* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2018), vi.

commented on the dictator's foibles and those of the Italians. Mussolini the man, the character, was his subject and he often conflated the whole regime with its leader and figurehead. Distrustful of documents, he believed that it was precisely through personal experience and anecdotes that the truth of Fascism could be best grasped.⁸⁵ As he entered advanced old age, Montanelli came to occupy a unique position. On the one hand he was a witness, someone who had lived through the interwar period as an adult and whose perspective therefore was not that of those who were too young to properly remember the regime. On the other, as the author of many volumes of popular history, he explained Mussolini to later generations and sought to place him in the national culture. Neither an overt defender of Fascism nor a party to blanket condemnations of the regime,⁸⁶ he repeatedly sought to advance justifications for the infatuation that he and many of his generation had felt for a man who once seemed exceptional but who had ultimately failed to live up to expectations.⁸⁷ If the dictator had been the object of hero worship, the fallen leader merited comprehension and this would continue to be articulated through observations of, and insights into, his foibles.

REVIVING THE DICTATOR ON SCREEN

In the 1930s, newsreels greatly contributed to making the dictator visible and recognizable. In *Mussolini immaginario*, Passerini noted that, in her view, the fantasy Mussolini of the regime was shaped as much by the culture of stardom as by popular religion.⁸⁸ Image bites and photo opportunities bolstered the authority of the dictator through visual means. Newsreel images were repackaged and recycled in the postwar period as television documentaries, though the approach was cautious, especially at first as Italy's governing Christian Democrats were wary of disturbing the sensibilities of the middle classes and sectors of public opinion that had never fully embraced anti-Fascism. The state television broadcaster RAI was so exceptionally timid towards the topic of Fascism that even some commentators identified with the political center deplored the absence of any meaningful criticism.⁸⁹ The entry of the Socialists into the government in 1963 heralded modifications and led eventually a steady series of more

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁸⁶ See, for example, a 1982 article entitled "Per il centenario del Duce, l'Italia ridiventa nostalgica," in Montanelli, *Io e il Duce*, 208–10.

⁸⁷ See, for example, the 1982 article "Per il centenario del Duce, l'Italia ridiventa nostalgica," in Montanelli, *Io e il Duce*, 208–10.

⁸⁸ See Passerini, *Mussolini immaginario*, 126–27; and S. Gundle, "Mass Culture and the Cult of Personality," in S. Gundle, C. Duggan, and G. Pieri, eds., *The Cult of the Duce: Mussolini and the Italians* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 72–90.

⁸⁹ G. Crainz, "The Representation of Fascism and the Resistance in the Documentaries of Italian State Television," in R.J.B. Bosworth and P. Dogliani, eds., *Italian Fascism: History, Memory and Representation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999), 126–27.

informative documentaries.⁹⁰ The Resistance, which had been denied full legitimation for many years, for the first time received proper attention from television.⁹¹

With the advent of color television in the 1970s and the international rise of long-form drama the following decade, dramatic reconstructions of the past became the order of the day. RAI opted to include Mussolini among the gallery of historical figures deemed ripe for dramatic resuscitation principally on account of his proven market appeal. Thus, after Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, Giuseppe Verdi, Giuseppe Garibaldi, and others, the Fascist dictator was brought to the screen in the mid-1980s and the years that followed in a way that rendered his story appealing to mainstream audiences. The main aim was to appeal to a wider audience than those who watched historical documentaries. This entailed a gender shift—since women and fans of historical drama were key targets—but also a generational one, since the young were also targeted. They thus accorded ample space to the private and domestic dimensions in keeping with the conventions of television fiction, though the producers of the dramas went to some lengths to establish authenticity.⁹²

It was a convention in film “biopics” that even great historical figures should be shown in a family and personal dimension. In Hollywood in the 1930s, the producer Daryl Zanuck, who is credited with inventing the genre, believed that biographical pictures should function like moral biographies. They should offer exemplars, provide models for emulation. It was taken for granted that spectators had to be given a stake, or “rooting interest” in the life of the famous person.⁹³ This was achieved in part by involving them in the personal aspects of the person’s story. It was only with the amplification of the range of subjects after the war, and the adoption of the theme of “botched greatness” or “debased genius,” that this imperative declined,⁹⁴ though without ever entirely abandoning the rooting interest. The focus on the domestic in television biographies originated in this tradition, though it was reinforced by the fact that the family as an institution “reigns supreme” in a consumer-based medium.⁹⁵

Dramas did not avoid larger events, but they found their element in more intimate settings which explored personal relationships, the psychology of the

⁹⁰ V. Roghi, “Mussolini and Postwar Italian Television,” in S. Gundle, C. Duggan, and G. Pieri, eds., *The Cult of the Duce: Mussolini and the Italians* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 259–63.

⁹¹ On the place of the Resistance in postwar Italy, see Cooke, *The Legacy of the Italian Resistance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

⁹² For example, credibility was sought by enlisting De Felice and other historians as advisors.

⁹³ D. Bingham, *Whose Lives Are They Anyway? The Biopic as Contemporary Film Genre* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 37.

⁹⁴ E. Mazierska, *European Cinema and Intertextuality: History, Memory and Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 61.

⁹⁵ G. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 155.

Duce and of his waning political and physical powers as the war reached its final stages. It was not the leader of the great rallies, the public works programs, and the proclamation of the empire that figured so much as the man who had already been “humanized” by setbacks and betrayal, that is to say the frail man to whom the female auxiliary soldiers who backed him to the end and were later interviewed by the historian Maria Fraddosio were so attached.⁹⁶ The revelations, insights, and demystifying works of the postwar years extended this and contributed to a forgiving perception of a man who was judged no worse than the people who believed in him. The crimes of Fascism were overshadowed by a concentration on the personal and the domestic.

Imagination played a part here, since there was no official footage of Mussolini at home, in contrast to Hitler, whose home life was an aspect of the *Führer* cult in Germany,⁹⁷ and there was little of him with his family and none at all of him with Claretta.⁹⁸ As Milly Buonanno has noted, television drama “took on the role of narrator of history ... and took up the baton of the documentaries,” albeit in a way that was “more or less shaped by imagination.”⁹⁹ It is noteworthy that the family helped out here, as the sources for such stagings were the memoirs of Mussolini family members as well as anecdotal tales supplied by former staff. The very titles of some of the dramas, such as *Io e Mussolini* (1985) (in which the “io” was the Duce’s son-in-law), *Mussolini: The Untold Story* (1985) (in which his son Vittorio’s recollections supposedly offered a new perspective), or *Edda* (2005; based on the testimony of his daughter), suggested a privileged look behind the scenes.

The anecdotal infiltrated the productions in various ways by providing sources for minor situations. There was a “though-the-keyhole” feel to them, with kitchens, bedrooms, and living rooms featuring regularly. In explicit acknowledgment of this, Quinto Navarra (played by Franco Fabrizi) featured as a character in the international co-production *Io e Mussolini*. Some events are seen from his point of view, including the dramatic meeting of the Fascist Grand Council at Palazzo Venezia on 25 July 1943, which voted no-confidence in Mussolini, at which he is shown peering round the door. There is no evidence that Navarra was there, and in fact the only attendant who is named in any historical account of the meeting is another, one Pietro Apriliti.¹⁰⁰ Navarra’s tales of Mussolini’s sexual compulsion were alluded to in the dramas that covered the early 1930s as well as the war years. The American production *Mussolini: The*

⁹⁶ M. Fraddosio, “The Fallen Hero: The Myth of Mussolini and the Fascist Women in the Italian Social Republic (1943–5),” *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, 1 (1996): 99–124, 101.

⁹⁷ See D. Stratigakos, *Hitler at Home* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

⁹⁸ On the place of the private Mussolini in television documentaries, see Roghi, “Mussolini and Postwar Italian Television,” 263–65.

⁹⁹ M. Buonanno, *Italian TV Drama and Beyond: Stories from the Soil/Stories from the Sea* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 210.

¹⁰⁰ D. Susmel, *Dieci mesi terribili: da El Alamein al 25 luglio '43* (Rome: Ciarrapico, 1970), 315.

Untold Story (1985), in which George C. Scott took the central part, even includes a scene in which a foreign female journalist exits Mussolini's office in a disheveled and disturbed state after having apparently been subjected to a sexual assault. The appearance of this scene attested both to the shift towards a focus on "botched genius" or flawed characters in the world of biopics and growing interest in the sex lives of the famous.

The "tabloid point of view" had already gained influence in France,¹⁰¹ where television reconstructions of Napoleon's domestic life gave rise to critical comments on "the housewife's emperor" as an entirely inauthentic imaginary creation.¹⁰² In Italy, too, critics were alert to the implications of reducing Mussolini to the dimension of *petite histoire* and creating a climate of sympathy around him, something which had concerned the former high-ranking Fascist Giuseppe Bottai in the late 1940s.¹⁰³ Guido Crainz asserted that the films exemplified a "new sort of revisionism" that "television in part recorded and in part helped to manufacture and spread."¹⁰⁴ "The recent insistence on the image of the defeated dictator coincides with the reappearance of the aura of family around him," observed Luisa Passerini.¹⁰⁵ This, she argued, needed to be combatted: "Every effort that can be made in the fields of historiography, journalism, art, and mass communications to escape the family memory—in which even the violence is related to forms of clan or clannish bonds—will be contributions to the civilizing of our culture." Passerini was well aware that the focus on family, as a reflex of the most conservative elements within Italian culture, could only "feminize" Mussolini in a conformist way, by situating him in a reassuring affective context.¹⁰⁶ In the postwar years, the sense of the nation as a brotherhood that had been elaborated from the Risorgimento through both Fascism and the Resistance waned in favor of a stronger emphasis on the family, reflecting the ascendancy of the Church and its political allies.¹⁰⁷

The actors who played Mussolini on television often felt a need to understand the Duce in human terms. This was in marked contrast to the approach

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁰² I. Veyrat-Masson, "Staging Historical Leaders on French Television: The Example of Napoleon Bonaparte," in E. Bell and A. Gray, eds., *Televising History: Mediating the Past in Postwar Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 103.

¹⁰³ See G. Bottai, *Diario 1944–1948*, G. B. Guerri, ed. (Milan: Rizzoli, 1999[1988]). In a 1947 diary entry, the one-time high-ranking Fascist minister warned that a discussion of Mussolini's human flaws might turn into "a posthumous justification for compassion" (p. 498).

¹⁰⁴ Crainz, "The Representation of Fascism and the Resistance," 133–34.

¹⁰⁵ L. Passerini, "Mussolini," in M. Isnenghi, ed., *I luoghi della memoria: personaggi e date dell'Italia unita* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1997), 185.

¹⁰⁶ In *Mussolini immaginario*, Passerini examines how the family narrative was deployed under the regime (see pp. 87–99).

¹⁰⁷ According to Alberto Mario Banti, the idea of the nation as a "community of descendants" conferred a decisive bio-political substance to the national community. Family was always important in this, but never more than in the postwar years. See his *Sublime madre nostra: la nazione italiana dal Risorgimento al fascismo* (Rome: Laterza, 2011), 60–61.

adopted by Carlo Lizzani in his 1974 film *Mussolini ultimo atto* (The last days of Mussolini), which was the first to bring the Duce to the screen in anything other than a cameo role. A Communist and a former member of the Resistance, Lizzani had made every effort to avoid indulging sympathy for the doomed dictator. In the lead role, he cast Rod Steiger, an introspective actor who had previously played a late Napoleon and, in *The Pawnbroker* (Joseph Losey, 1964), a troubled Holocaust survivor.¹⁰⁸ By contrast, Bob Hoskins, the central player in *Io e Mussolini*, made no bones about the fact that he tried to gain a perspective through anecdotes. “He was a world leader but he was still a bloke. I’m trying to learn the little things about him,” he said.¹⁰⁹ By this he meant that Mussolini had something about him of the common man who could be understood in terms of his foibles and daily life. In fact, Hoskins’ portrayal had something in common with the warm-hearted bullies and gangsters that he was accustomed to playing.

It is of interest to see how Claretta Petacci was played in these dramatic reconstructions. Not all the screen depictions of her avoided the demeaning; sometimes—as in the American drama in which she was played by Virginia Madsen—she came over as a simpering fan oozing what one critic termed a “kind of Marilyn Monroe breathiness.”¹¹⁰ Other portrayals were more dignified and featured the stern loyalty of Lisa Gastoni in *Mussolini ultimo atto*, or the heroic self-sacrifice of Claudia Cardinale in *Claretta* (Pasquale Squitieri, 1984). Her increasing prominence coincided with the development of a gender politics perspective on fascism in the 1970s that was exemplified by several key works of Italian art cinema. The sexual paranoia that is often to be found in fascisms has been most exhaustively analyzed in relation to the German case through the work of Klaus Theweleit.¹¹¹ The picture he gives dovetails with the image of fascism and Nazism as regimes of sexual excess and perversion. In more recent years, Barbara Spackman has explored the cultural dynamics of “fascist virilities” with special reference to the genesis and early years of the movement.¹¹² In this context, the place of Petacci in the treatment of Mussolini as a psychically flawed masculine figure grew. Once seen as little more than a hanger-on or groupie, she gradually moved from being a figure of anecdote to a figure of history.

The importance of Petacci for understanding Mussolini was bolstered by the publication of her diaries from the 1930s, which had been held in the Italian State Archives without the possibility of being consulted until seventy years had

¹⁰⁸ See S. Gundle, “Playing the Dictator: Re-enactments of Mussolini in Film and Television,” *Modern Italy* 18, 1 (2013): 177–95.

¹⁰⁹ Cited in K. Moline, *Bob Hoskins: An Unlikely Hero* (London: Sphere, 1988), 196.

¹¹⁰ J. J. O’Connor, “George C. Scott as Mussolini on NBC,” *New York Times*, 22 Nov. 1985: 35.

¹¹¹ K. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).

¹¹² B. Spackman, *Fascist Virilities: Rhetoric, Ideology and Social Fantasy in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

passed.¹¹³ For years, the fate of Mussolini's own diaries was the subject of speculation. Purported, but false, versions of them were published in the late 1950s and again in the early twenty-first century (though it was not at first realized that the same texts were involved).¹¹⁴ The release and publication of Petacci's diaries were a different matter.¹¹⁵ They provide a detailed account of the intimate Mussolini. They record her regular encounters with her lover and summaries of their many daily telephone conversations. Though it was not clear how the transcripts of these conversations had been made, there was no doubt about the authenticity of the diaries.¹¹⁶ They took the private dimension out of the field of the purely anecdotal or the speculative and filled it with evidence. Where Navarra or his ghost writers could only peep through the keyhole, these diaries recorded something, if by no means all, of what went on behind the door.

Petacci's diaries were followed by a number of books which sought to integrate the dictator's sex life and wider relations with women into the historiographical mainstream.¹¹⁷ Roberto Olla's *Il Duce and His Women*, and Mimmo Franzinelli's *Mussolini e le donne* (Mussolini and women) explored the way women exercised significant influence over the dictator and his decision-making.¹¹⁸ In this way, they removed the dictator from the homosocial world of fascism and placed him in a hitherto only partly known affective one. Most significant of all was Richard Bosworth's biography of Petacci, which was an attempt by a leading biographer of Mussolini to correct the general neglect of his private and emotional life by academic historians.¹¹⁹ Bosworth had long been critical of the "totalitarian" view of the regime advanced most forcefully by Emilio Gentile in his many works.¹²⁰ He had argued that it was more "Italian"

¹¹³ Later diaries have been consulted by researchers, including Richard Bosworth, but have not been published.

¹¹⁴ Though reputable historians were prepared at various points to authenticate these texts, they were ultimately shown to be false, the concoctions of a provincial mother and daughter who worked mainly off the press to forge a saleable text. See P. Chessa, *Il romanzo di Benito: la vera storia dei falsi Mussolini* (Turin: UTET, 2018); and M. Franzinelli, *Autopsia di un falso: i Diari di Mussolini e la manipolazione della storia* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2011).

¹¹⁵ Later diaries have been consulted by researchers, including Richard Bosworth, but have not been published.

¹¹⁶ Mussolini's chronic vulnerability to the claims, as well as the charms, of women was confirmed by publication in 2014 of a memoir by his long-serving chauffeur, Ercole Boratto. The text had been written at the behest of the American authorities in 1945 and had lain un-read for decades in the National Archives in Washington, D.C.: E. Boratto, *A spasso col Duce: le memorie dell'autista di Benito Mussolini*, G. Casarrubea and M. J. Cereghino, eds. (Rome: Castelvecchi, 2014).

¹¹⁷ C. Petacci, *Mussolini segreto: i diari di Claretta Petacci, 1932–1938* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2010); and C. Petacci, *Verso il disastro: Mussolini in Guerra—diari 1939–1940* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2011). Philip Cannistraro and Brian Sullivan had taken an important step with their biography of Sarfatti, but for many years their work stood alone. See their *Il Duce's other Woman* (New York: Morrow, 1993).

¹¹⁸ R. Olla, *Il Duce and His Women* (London: Alma Books, 2011); M. Franzinelli, *Il Duce e le donne: avventure e passioni extraconiugali di Mussolini* (Milan: Mondadori, 2013).

¹¹⁹ R.J.B. Bosworth, *Claretta: Mussolini's Last Lover* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

¹²⁰ See, especially, R.J.B. Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy: Life under the Dictatorship, 1915–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).

than totalitarian and that Mussolini was, relatively speaking, a “weak dictator.”¹²¹ Claretta’s writings on her “more pathetic than tragic” relationship with Mussolini were deemed an “indispensable source” for the understanding of Mussolini’s regime, not to say of the man himself.¹²² But they also offered something else. The role of Claretta and her family was indicative of the porous nature of Fascism in power: “their story illuminates much about what life was like in the first avowedly “totalitarian,” yet decidedly Italian, dictatorship.”¹²³ This judgement completed the circle. What began in the postwar years as an effort to bring a once-godlike dictator down to earth had now been elaborated and enriched to the point of offering crucial insights into the understanding of the Fascist regime.

CONCLUSION

What the historian Pasquale Chessa has called “the story of Benito,” that is to say the narration of the private Mussolini, remained a continuous thread in postwar Italy, a key facet of the “ghosting” that ensured that the dictator never faded into the past.¹²⁴ There were political reasons for the interest in, and sympathy for, the human figure of Mussolini, but this also offered a way in which many Italians detached themselves from a dictatorship that had attracted wide support. The “human” Mussolini had been incorporated into the cult of personality in the 1920s and had never entirely gone away even as the dictator became more aloof and impenetrable. In the postwar years, the anecdotal depiction of the dictator served a variety of by no means always compatible purposes. Demystification was an overriding aim, but if he was made to appear in these depictions as vain and foolish, little more than an average Italian writ large, then this also served to satisfy the need of many ordinary former supporters of the regime and its leader to somehow minimize the horrors of Fascism. Longanesi and Montanelli were concerned not so much to shatter the Mussolini legend as to rescue the fallen Duce from ignominy and opportunistic vituperation and restore him to a place in the affections of Italians.

This article has drawn attention to efforts, from Sarfatti on, to domesticate and feminize him, a trend that became especially marked in the era of television. But the idea of Mussolini has always been bound up with some idea of male power and the way in which he occupied a narrative space in the postwar period had something to do with the limited changes that occurred to the pattern of

¹²¹ R.J.B. Bosworth, “Dictators Strong or Weak? The Model of Benito Mussolini,” in R.J.B. Bosworth, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27–72.

¹²² The first quotation is taken from *ibid.*, 246, and the second from p. 17.

¹²³ Bosworth, *Claretta*, 246.

¹²⁴ Chessa, *Il romanzo di Benito*.

gender relations.¹²⁵ This helps explain why anecdotes about his sexual adventures became part of an effort to normalize the one-time Duce rather than damn him. Few people in postwar Italy continued to regard Mussolini as an exemplary leader, for even among those who had followed him in the final phase of his political life there was a certain disenchantment, yet there remained an attachment, a sympathy, and even a kind of nostalgia.

One reason for this is that, as a masculine exemplar or, to put it more prosaically, as an ideal type of the Italian *gallo*, Mussolini retained an allure. While his regime ended in disaster and he personally met an end that was exemplary in an entirely different way, his *style* of leadership, with its masculine swagger and implications of sexual vigor, proved to be a longer-lasting influence. If initially confined to the margins of democratic republican politics, it would once more come to the surface and form a template of sorts in the 1990s as the political system of the “first republic” crumbled and then fell.¹²⁶ Whether Mussolini today functions as a political exemplar for ordinary Italians is to be doubted. It is also unlikely that he functions on any sort of scale as a personal exemplar, or “discursive space” for the elaboration of ideas of the self, in the manner of Genghis Khan for Caroline Humphrey’s Mongolians.¹²⁷ But it cannot be entirely discounted, for exemplars of this type are necessarily contradictory and offer a variety of positive and negative points of reference. Comments written in the visitors’ book to the dictator’s tomb in Predappio suggest that, for some, he continues to stand as a model of racial and sexual identity and an example of authoritarian leadership.¹²⁸ He offers a model of a certain type of Italian male leader that still resonates. If it is true that dictatorships never really end, that they shape political culture and collective memory over the long period, then it is no less the case that dictators, no matter how dramatic their demise and regardless of what many might wish, never entirely go away, but remain as ghostly presences in the imagination of their people.¹²⁹ Through popular imagery and anecdotes, they are intertwined with the common culture of their nations.

¹²⁵ Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen*, 250: “The strongman brand of charisma ... attracts followers by celebrating male authority.”

¹²⁶ See S. Gundle, “From Mussolini to Berlusconi: Masculinity and Political Leadership in Postwar Italy,” in C. Fletcher et al., eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Masculinity and Political Culture in Europe* (London: Palgrave, 2018), 435–55.

¹²⁷ Humphrey, “Exemplars and Rules,” 42.

¹²⁸ See C. Duggan, *Fascist Voices: An Intimate History of Mussolini’s Italy* (London: Vintage, 2013), 430–35. One visitor in May 2005 wrote: “Homage to a man who has been such a part of the history of my family and the construction of my being a man” (431).

¹²⁹ Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen*, 247.

Abstract: Mussolini is considered in this article as a figure around whom narratives have been developed for a century or more. Several biographies were published shortly after he came to power and many others have appeared in the decades since his death in 1945. This article explores the place of anecdotes in the construction of a legendary Mussolini in the 1920s and in the demystification that marked the period after World War Two. It is shown that early biographies were marked not only by hero worship but also by a commercially driven need to humanize and to amuse. After the war, humanization persisted as former Fascists and associates of Mussolini spread stories and anecdotes that made the dictator appear not as an evil tyrant but as a flawed and fallible human being. The agenda here was to make support for Fascism and its leader forgivable. A comparison of the anecdotes shows that both adulatory and demystificatory ones reserved a place for minor stories or *petite histoire*. The resulting image, which placed some emphasis on his sex life, proved influential. It presented a challenge to historians and found its way into the biographical films that were made for cinema and television between the 1970 and the 2000s. It is suggested that, via anecdotes, Mussolini occupied an ambiguous and continuous place in the moral universe of Italians, functioning variously as a political and a gender exemplar.

Key Words: Italian Fascism, Mussolini, postwar Italy, biography, anecdotes