# The Image of Francesca Da Rimini in Nineteenth-Century Opera. An Analysis of the Dantesque Character in the Libretto Written by Paolo Pola

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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines the figure of Francesca da Rimini as she appears in nineteenth-century Italian opera, focusing on the libretto written by Cavalier Paolo Pola in 1829 for the Teatro La Fenice in Venice. Rather than tracing the character back exclusively to Dante's *Inferno*, the analysis argues that the Francesca staged by Pola and his contemporaries is a fundamentally new creation - shaped by Jacobin ideology, Romantic sensibility, and Risorgimento politics. Through close reading of selected passages from the libretto, the essay explores two competing interpretations of the character: a moral absolution, which presents her as a victim of circumstance faithful to duty despite the pull of love, and a revolutionary condemnation, which reads her passivity as an allegory for an Italy unable to rise against foreign domination. The essay also traces the onomastic shift from *Francesca da Polenta* to *Francesca da Rimini*, arguing that this renaming reflects a broader cultural appropriation of the character by patriotic authors. The conclusion situates Francesca within the wider context of proto-feminist discourse and the Risorgimento canon, proposing that her enduring relevance lies in her capacity to be reinterpreted by every generation.

**Keywords:** Francesca da Rimini, Italian opera, Paolo Pola, nineteenth-century libretto, Dante.

## INTRODUCTION

Francesca da Rimini is undoubtedly one of the best-known characters in world literature and is, at the same time, also the most frequently cited reference when discussing Dante and his Commedia. Canto V, the one aptly named after Paolo and Francesca, is still today taken as a model for treating - if I may use the term - a subject as complex and universal as love.

Francesca da Polenta, daughter of Guido, lord of Ravenna, is the faithless woman who, seduced by her brother-in-law, carries on a relationship with him until, discovered by Gianciotto, lord of Rimini and her husband, they are both killed. This appears, on the surface, to be a normal occurrence for the era, and if we consider that the crime of honour was abolished in Italy only in 1981, perhaps it remains so even in recent times. History and jurisprudence are full of women murdered out of jealousy by their husbands; between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, in an age when courts were stages for vice and betrayal, such events were hardly shocking. Yet Francesca manages to imprint herself upon the collective imagination, crossing the centuries and reaching us in all her contemporary relevance.

This is, indeed, the distinctive trait of this noblewoman from Romagna: her capacity to speak of love in every age, with that phrase, «Amor ch'a nullo amato amar perdona» - which Dante bestows upon posterity through her very voice - rightly numbered among the most beautiful love verses of all time. One must ask, however, whether a few lines - however extraordinarily beautiful - suffice to elevate a character like Francesca, historical because she truly existed, yet anonymous in her own time since she was unknown to most, into an emblem of courtly love and, seen through the eyes of contemporaries, a champion of female freedom and revolution.

Furthermore, one must reflect on the true worth of this woman, on how her ideals may be summarized, and on which adjectives best describe her: unfaithful, oppressed, seductive, deceived, guilty, or victim.

We must not forget, indeed, that despite the compassionate attitude with which Dante conducts his conversation with her, she is nonetheless condemned to wander eternally through the underworld, swept together with her Paolo by that wind - allegory of the passion they failed to bridle in life. Just as Francesca's demeanour, in the account of her misfortunes, more closely resembles that of a storyteller than a woman repentant of her actions. Indeed, she seems to be the very turning point of Dante's poetics: the abandonment of the Stil Novo in favour of a lyric closer to beatitude, the correction, in short of the moral bewilderment that will lead the Supreme Poet to undertake his journey of expiation.

This is, obviously, a partial and highly subjective interpretation, one that does not explain Francesca's success more than seven centuries later.

To fully understand it, one must accept the idea of a Francesca not conceived exclusively by Dante, but written and rewritten by others, with additions, omissions, textual "betrayals" and modifications - a woman reinvented and even absolved, capable of being recalled from her damnation and placed on stage before an audience able to bring forth constantly new visions.

It is not by chance that I say audience and not readers. The same applies to Francesca's assertiveness, which casts almost into the shadows the men of the story: from Gianciotto, her husband, to Paolo, already reduced by Dante to a silent supporting role in the encounter with the two lustful souls.

Audience and not readers, because this female character steps off the written page and becomes a theatrical protagonist - specifically an operatic one - from the eighteenth century onward. She lends her name to libretti penned by Antonio Ghislanzoni, Silvio Pellico, Paolo Pola, and eventually Gabriele D'Annunzio; she lends her name - and here we return to that earlier observation about Francesca as woman - not Francesca da Polenta but Francesca da Rimini, abandoning her paternal surname to reclaim her own identity, even though, in truth, the character in opera seems to tame the impulses and the rhetorical power so clearly present in the Florentine poet's text. Yet it is perhaps precisely this new quality - that of the devoted wife who restrains her passions to safeguard her marriage vow - that allows her to win the admiration and respect of the audience.

Hence the necessity of introducing new perspectives when one intends to analyse the presence and importance of Francesca da Rimini in Italian opera. Alongside the literary and dramaturgical approach, the historian's perspective must be added, capable of contextualizing this woman's conduct and tracing its similarities and idiosyncrasies with the dominant bourgeois values. Moreover, one must learn to understand that the events on stage unfold in an Italy in the full storm of the Risorgimento, eager to seize new heroes and symbols while at the same time negatively characterizing, through theatrical *topoi*, a political class not equal to the task entrusted to it. To this we add a feminism that was taking its first steps, particularly in the sociological sphere, and psychology, about to make its appearance at the dawn of the twentieth century.

A Francesca da Rimini, therefore, who is the daughter of every age and a symbol of a society in continuous evolution, to be viewed in all her complexity and in relation to the audience she addresses.

To this end, I have focused primarily on the eponymous libretto written by Cavalier Paolo Pola in 1829. My choice to concentrate on this work - treating the others, equally worthy of prestige and importance, only in passing - is motivated by the period in which it is situated and by the ideal and patriotic interweaving between the backdrop of the drama and its author.

Lastly, the question that aroused my interest most of all is how to understand this woman: victim or sinner?

Starting from an analysis of the libretto and comparing the paratextual notes with the Italian situation of the period, I have attempted to provide an answer to this question.

**The Author and the Historical Period**

As mentioned above, the libretto at the centre of this research is that of Paolo Pola. A count from Treviso, a fervent supporter of Napoleon and a collaborator of the French government established on the Italian peninsula,

Cavalier Pola composed his opera in 1829 for its premiere at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice, with music by Pietro Generali. These are only brief biographical notes - since the aim of this essay is not to treat the author at length - but they help us better understand the context in which his Francesca da Rimini is situated.

Other details, still more significant, come from the composer himself and are present in the paratext of the work: remarks that Pola himself describes as justificatory, a sort of preliminary excusatio for the alterations the audience will encounter in the performance:

«Informed by experience that on stage the verisimilar is most often preferred to the true, all the more so when it presents the characters in a more favourable light, it is for this reason that I ventured to introduce in my Francesca da Rimini some important historical alterations».

One must, however, be careful. The alterations the author speaks of are not from Dante's text - to which this Francesca da Rimini seems to refer only through a few allusions, moreover apparently forced - but from the previous libretto written by «the distinguished pen of Silvio Pellico». This is an important clarification, as it provides us with a dual perspective on this character.

In the first place, Francesca da Rimini is no longer an exclusive character of Dante's. On the contrary, the Florentine poet seems to have lost authorship of her, given that the rewritings of the noblewoman from Rimini do not take as their basis the canto of the Commedia, but more recent texts, or even one's contemporary with the authors who decide to stage her. Even the names of the protagonists of the historical episode are sometimes modified, or other characters introduced, to give the work the aura that best suits the librettist's intentions and the wishes of the audience, which, as noted above, prefers «the verisimilar to the true».

Thus, the spectator is presented with an account that differs from versions that are themselves already distant from the original, as Pola himself writes:

«My Francesca, on the other hand, to comply with her father's wishes and the imperious interests of the homeland, comes to give her hand in marriage to Lancillotto at the very moment when Paolo returns from Palestine, for whom she had previously been seized by an ardent flame. The most rigid virtue is summoned to the aid of the wretched Francesca to avoid a meeting all too dangerous with the gaze of the never-forgotten beloved».

This justificatory note, placed in epigraph, besides explaining the authorial choices, implies above all that the Francesca da Rimini known to the public is the operatic one and not that of literature - or at least not solely. This makes clear the scale of operatic success in past centuries, with its pop quality capable of reaching everyone, unlike today, when the genre has been reduced to an elite culture accessible to a wealthy few. The horizon of expectations of the audience, therefore, is not the moral condemnation to which this woman - of lustful personality and devoted to infidelity - is subject. Quite the contrary: what the omniscient spectator wishes to find on stage is a figure still capable of appealing to «the most rigid virtue» to resist amorous temptation, just as he expects to see the drama set against a national backdrop, in deference to «the imperious interests of the homeland», which are not fictitious but concern everyone.

We thus have another perspective on the libretto, regarded no longer solely in its artistic dimension but as tending to assume a perspective of full Risorgimento character.

We shall see this subsequently, examining some extracts from the opera and identifying the points of contact with the Italian situation - or rather the European one - overturned by the French Revolution and the advance of Jacobin ideals. Suffice it here to highlight the name of Silvio Pellico, writer and patriot, emblematic figure of the Italian Risorgimento, who wrote his Francesca in 1815, some years before his long Austrian imprisonment.[10] It is not by chance that Pola chooses the Piedmontese writer's libretto as the basis for his work, given that it too belongs to the genre of Risorgimento lyric.

I call it the genre of Risorgimento lyric because Pellico and Pola are not isolated examples of the revival of classical female characters for political ends. Above all when speaking of Francesca da Rimini, the authors of

this 'canon' are more numerous than one might think. Between 1795 and 1850, more than twenty-six works on the noblewoman from Rimini were composed - including tragedies, poems, stories, and opera libretti - and no fewer than twenty-four of these were written by patriotic authors who were protagonists of revolts and uprisings.

It is hardly surprising, then, that this new version of Francesca should emerge, elevated to the status of national heroine or reduced to an allegory of the homeland and its bourgeois class - a class incapable of resolving to take up arms to free the country from foreign subjugation.

**From Francesca Da Polenta To Francesca Da Rimini**

A first clue to this renewed identity of Francesca - a presence, as we have said, increasingly central in Italian opera - is given by the name. If Dante does not even name her within the Inferno, leaving her identity to be inferred from geographical and biographical information, and if thereafter Giovanni Boccaccio and others designate her by her paternal name - da Polenta or da Ravenna - as if confining her within a space of men alone, in 1795 the author Francesco Gianni introduces the name Francesca da Rimini to title his poem. The Roman poet, Jacobin in his views, carries out his revolutionary and iconoclastic act against Dante's authority, extolling sentimental freedom in defiance of divine law.

From his work, then, a new Francesca is born; with Paolo Pola she will assume the personality of a woman tormented by love and, at the same time, faithful to the laws and to her duty toward her husband.

An example of this overturning of judgment regarding her behaviour is already apparent in the opening lines of the Trevisan cavalier's libretto:

Into new family and new friends' embrace

I come to seek my place. You welcome me, I see,

With feelings of pleasure: yours already am I,

To my fate's will I surrender myself.

That destiny which leads me to you

Is stirring in my breast

A confused, unknown feeling

That compels me to tremble.

(Poor heart,

You know why

You must sigh.

Of a first love

The pledged faith

One must forget).

On a first reading of the extract, we may immediately note how the textual form gives us the image of a Francesca with a conflicted inner life, unlike the linearity of the fourteenth-century one, where the anaphora of the word «love» in Dante's tercets demonstrates an intention - however sinful - that is coherent and resolute. In this strophe, instead, we find a tripartite arrangement of lines that taper to just a few words in the final ones. This

structure tells us clearly that the woman's emotions are anything but transparent. In the opening lines - evident also in their staging - what emerges is a fundamental rationality, with Francesca ready to comply with her conjugal duties with a certain serenity. Yet immediately an unsettling thought intervenes: the lines narrow, the rhythm begins to press, with the labio-dental rhyme «breast/feeling» evoking, in its sound, the beating of the heart, underscored also by «trembling» at the close of this second section and by «poor heart» that opens the final internal strophe, as we might call it. It is love, then, that intervenes to disturb Francesca's poorly concealed serenity, in that contrast of reason against feeling which will ultimately lead her to the tragic conclusion. The final lines are, in my view, those most charged with symbolic meaning. Francesca seems entirely entwined by her emotions; she hides them inwardly - as the parentheses graphically indicate - but cannot feign their absence. The lexicon is that of love, as it could not be otherwise, and the regularity of the repeated rhyme recapitulates the heartbeat introduced earlier, here mistress over the woman's rationality. Furthermore, it is not only the number of words that diminishes, but the words themselves, with truncated vocabulary and apocope rendering relentless a feeling that struggles to be subdued.

This constant and incessant personal doubt - of a woman who does not wish to dishonour her husband and the duty to which she has been called yet is on the other hand enveloped in that cloud of love difficult to dispel - is the leitmotiv of the entire opera.

Evidence of this is the recitative in which Francesca forces herself to send Paolo away, despite his resistance:

Francesca: Wretched me!

*(Guido, surprised)*

Paolo: At your feet

*(in the act of throwing himself at her feet)*

Francesca: Flee from me!

Paolo: Such harshness! Ah, barbarous one!

Francesca: Flee from me for pity's sake.

*(See, cruel one, the trembling*

*that I feel in my breast for you.)*

Paolo: A single glance, a single word,

Does not make you guilty.

Francesca: Know that a glance, a word.

In this strophe the dispute between duty and freedom is not merely personal for Francesca, but must contend with the temptation represented by Paolo, who seems to be the only reprehensible character between the two. This is evident in the very concept each has of guilt: Paolo states clearly that an exchange of glances and words does not constitute any offence against Guido's honour - who, meanwhile, hidden, confirms his suspicions. Francesca, on the other hand, expresses a different view with that «makes me guilty» which acknowledges a different understanding of values and, above all, of culpability. The personal pronoun, indeed, is the clearest example of this shift in paradigm: Francesca is guilty, she alone, because it is her duty to respect her husband and hers is the choice whether or not to yield to this feeling, also in this case conveyed through the parenthetical aside and the words «trembling» and «breast», encountered also in the opening strophe. I allow myself here to declare a proto-feminist vision of this woman: that «me», assumes, in my view, the entire claim to freedom and decision-making power of Francesca who, even in possible error, asserts herself.

Certainly, she married Gianciotto under compulsion, not freely — though perhaps even in this bond we may glimpse a decision, or rather a spontaneous sacrifice in favour of the homeland.

She is obviously not free from doubt, is ultimately unable to choose, and tragically suffers the consequences, yet neither is she the woman with the distracted gaze who is surprised by Paolo's kiss, as depicted by the iconography that has built up around her over the centuries. On the contrary, it is perhaps precisely this unresolved inner question that allows the audience to absolve her for one reason while at the same time condemning her for others.

**The Moral Absolution**

Francesca is absolved because the will to submit to duty - fleeing love - is strong in her intentions. Above all, the morality of the nineteenth century is not that of Dante: the Jacobin affirmation has set aside obedience to Catholic dogma in favour of a personal and collective freedom whose pillars are the fundamental rights of man. Francesca, therefore, is not an adulteress incapable of controlling her passion, but a victim of events endured with dignity, despite the call of love which represents, alongside freedom, a reason for existence.

And this absolution is claimed by Francesca herself in the final aria:

Fatal and dear walls,

Farewell for ever, farewell.

If ever my story

Resounds among you,

Posterity will repeat

To the latest age:

Francesca was a wretched soul,

Most worthy of compassion.

Francesca's words serve as a prelude to the final scene, which will see Paolo killed at his brother's hand and the woman's suicide (as if she wished once more to assume full decision over her own death). The walls are fatal yet also dear, and it is to them that she entrusts her memory. She closes with an invocation to posterity, a request to rehabilitate her image — not that of a sinner, but of a wretched woman deserving of compassion.

A plea that posterity, embodied by the chorus, will receive and affirm:

(Ah yes, you are indeed wretched, And worthy of compassion)

**The Revolutionary Condemnation**

The absolution - or rather the moral rehabilitation - obtained by Francesca acts, however, as a counterpart to a condemnation of a political and revolutionary kind. It is impossible, indeed, to consider the presence of this woman within Italian opera by adopting a single point of view.

One must therefore immerse oneself in the context of nineteenth-century Italy, scrutinize the models proposed at the time and the ideals that confronted or opposed one another at the dawn of Unification.

We have seen that Francesca has lost over time her label as sinner to assume the aspect of a woman who is a victim of events, endeavouring in every way to banish her temptations and fully aware of the respect owed to her husband. In this opera, indeed, the physical betrayal is never consummated; love is experienced almost platonically or, more precisely, follows the dictates of courtly love — anachronistic by that era. Love, however,

in whatever form it presents itself, retains a pivotal relevance in Romanticism, and its pursuit is worthy of praise rather than censure. There is, therefore, a Francesca in love — symbol of Romantic fervour and therefore absolved of her faults — and a Francesca who desperately attempts to master her feelings, guilty even for «a glance» or «a word», and thereby rehabilitated by bourgeois standards, imbued with a Catholicism less rigid than Dante's and, above all, set within that Enlightenment current which demands that reason prevail over all else, just as the woman herself strives to impose.

However, the opera also contains another Francesca - perhaps the one to whom the librettists refer most, if one considers their biographies and their revolutionary commitment.

She is a woman whose task is to represent not only herself, as a symbol of female emancipation, but must also convey the Risorgimento - and consequently revolutionary - message that seeks to move the population and the social classes to reunite Italy at last.

Francesca da Rimini is an opera also and above all for the Homeland. This is demonstrated by the clear references that follow one after another in the libretto, which we reproduce here to better illustrate this authorial intent:

Lancillotto: The homeland salutes you; she knows how much

An Italian heart can be capable

Of virtue and of honour in war, be capable.

Here it is Lancillotto - or Gianciotto, given the frequent variations that occur across the versions of Francesca - who invokes Italy. We find once more the recurring «heart», seen earlier, now qualified by the adjective «Italian»[31] to suggest that the only love to which all must be sacrificed is that for the Homeland. It is hardly by chance that Gianciotto should be the spokesman for this sentiment, given that precisely love and interest toward the State will allow him to unite in marriage with Francesca, the counterpart obtained in exchange for peace between the cities of Ravenna and Rimini.

This concept is reinforced by the dialogue between Guido, Francesca's father, and his daughter:

Francesca: Father, I told you,

Your will made me Lancillotto's wife,

Your will shall cost me my death.

Guido: Of a valiant knight, gentle ray,

A bride I wished you, to end such

Fatal war which drank Italian blood.

Noteworthy in this exchange of lines is the rhyme sung by Francesca, «wife/death», suggesting what this marriage represents for her and foreshadowing what will occur. Guido, on the other hand, like Gianciotto before him, underscores the purpose of this union with the phrase «Italian blood» which echoes «Italian heart» to declare to whom or to what the actions performed must be directed: to Italy. This applies not only to Francesca but is a message to the audience, and thus to Italians: above all else comes Italy.

Here, finally, after the main characters, the full chorus breaks forth in this prayer of hope:

Chorus: A sudden thunderbolt crashes,

Dark roars the tempest,

The wave now flees, now halts,

Death stands in the middle of the sea.

No more joy, no more laughter

Gladdens the Homeland's breast,

If a fair serenity returns not

To restore the soul's hope.

One cannot escape, therefore, the patriotic subtext of the opera, nor confine Francesca da Rimini within a purely sentimental dimension or, to be more precise, within a personal sentimental dimension that overlooks the collective love for Italy.

One question remains: who is Francesca da Rimini and what does she represent for the Italian revolutionaries?

The answer might seem uncertain if we imagine this Francesca to be solely the product of Dante's intellect. As we have said and demonstrated, however, this Francesca is above all a creature of the librettists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and their conception of society.

That is why, without hesitation, we may affirm that Francesca represents Italy - oppressed and enslaved by injustice, torn by fratricidal strife. A woman who, nonetheless, despite being the victim of all this, also subtly embodies its cause. Her doubts, her passive acceptance, and her self-inflicted death are typical of the popular mentality, incapable of rebelling and taking a stand against foreign domination and the imposition of others, preferring to turn arms against itself rather than direct them at the enemy and fight for its own freedom.

## CONCLUSIONS

What this analysis of Francesca da Rimini within Italian opera has sought to demonstrate is how her portrayal differs from the one Dante offers us.

The woman from Rimini treated in these pages possesses her own distinct character, a personality less sharply defined than that conferred upon her by the Florentine poet - who makes of her a woman of vice and lust on a par with the most celebrated Semiramis, Cleopatra, Helen, Dido, and many others. Here the attitude we have witnessed is not that of a sinner, but of a victim divided between duty and love - and note that we are speaking of love, not passion.

We have seen that this aspect is given by the context in which the libretti are written - in this case that of Paolo Pola - a social and ideal dimension entirely different from that of the fourteenth century. The audience attending the performances, indeed, consists of spectators who subscribe to bourgeois and Jacobin values, who do not base moral judgments on religion but on philosophy and law, pursuing collective well-being and the identity of peoples and, above all, appealing to the fundamental rights of man.

That is why - to answer one of the first questions that drove this research, namely whether Francesca is considered the usual sinner or should be understood as a martyr compelled to endure imposed events - we cannot but absolve Francesca from the charge of sin and rehabilitate her, at least from this perspective. Francesca, viewed through this lens, appears to us as a symbol of feminism, a woman who is a victim of male power and far from deserving eternal condemnation.

However, as we have also noted, Pola and the others who chose Francesca as the protagonist of their texts are not merely aristocrats or bourgeois, but also patriots and revolutionaries, intent on advancing the unification movement through the implicit messages of their works. Many of them, moreover, do not confine their ideal fervour to ink but even take up arms to repel foreign invaders and reunify the country. An example of this may

be seen in the Roman Republic - short-lived, yet no less important on that account within the Risorgimento events - where many librettists mount a vigorous, if ultimately futile, defence against the French.

That is why the morally absolved Francesca becomes guilty when it comes to considering her passivism. Francesca does not act, does not rebel except through death, repels the love that is owed to her as a personal right rather than a parental prerogative, bowing her head before the injustice to which she has been subjected. In this case, her behaviour cannot be evaluated positively - not by an omniscient audience that knows history thoroughly and waits to observe the characters' reactions to it.

Francesca thus represents Italy, torn apart by foreign domination, unable to determine its own destiny and unite under a single banner. Francesca is also the image of those social classes incapable of rising for their rights, standing and watching brutal repressions rather than throwing themselves upon the barricades.

Francesca is a victim - we have said so - but it is a time, that of the Risorgimento, when victims must rebel and act, not lament their misfortunes and accept their abuses.

In short, there is a multiple vision that concerns Francesca da Rimini: a reading that is the daughter of its time, a Francesca who cannot be reduced to Dante's judgment alone but must be continually revisited to offer new insights.

Today, this woman would likely receive a different kind of affection - the product of a feminist culture that would cry out loudly, and rightly, against any moral judgment passed on a woman. And this, in my view, is the meaning of the classical: to transcend its age and be capable of speaking to every generation.

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