

The female figure in 19th century scientific correspondence

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Abstract

The scientific correspondence are in the archives of astronomic and meteorological observatories and in many scientific institutes is very useful to know the character of the people involved, to understand the development of their research, doubts and certainty during their careers. This correspondence sometimes contains intimate family details which enhance our knowledge of these people.

Key words *correspondence – female figure – Brera Observatory – US Naval Observatory – Observatory of Capodimonte*

Luisa Casale Buzzetti

In the archives of Brera Observatory we found a long letter, dated 8th March 1900, written by Luisa Casale Buzzetti, Curzio Buzzetti's daughter, addressed to Virginio Schiaparelli. This letter is in a folder on which Schiaparelli wrote:

«1887, August 15, death of Curzio Buzzetti former pupil of the Specola with biographic news sent by his daughter». (fig. 1).

Curzio Buzzetti (Milano 1815-Bologna 1877) worked at the Observatory devoting himself mainly editing the *Effemeridi*, and magnetic the observations. He left Milan when he was appointed professor of Physics and Meteorolo-

gy at the University of Ferrara. Even if he wasn't a very important personage his works were very interesting and much appreciated by his contemporaries.

Among his researches the work on the *Stato Meteorico della Lombardia*, published in 1844, is particularly interesting. This work gives a very good evaluation of climate in some cities of the Lombardy Region (Milano, Brescia, Pavia, Mantova, Lodi, Bergamo) and fig. 2 shows the first page of the publication on the meteoric status of Lombardy.

This letter is Buzzetti's daughter's answer to Schiaparelli, who asked her for some news about her father's life and career, in order to have topics for writing a short memoir.

The three handwritten pages are a very rich resource of information. We believe they are unique.

The astronomer's character is well described. He wished to explore the immensity of the sky, but three years before his death he went blind.

The daughter gave some biographic news and enclosed the list of publications, the degrees and honours awarded her father. She then introduced a short report about Italian politics.

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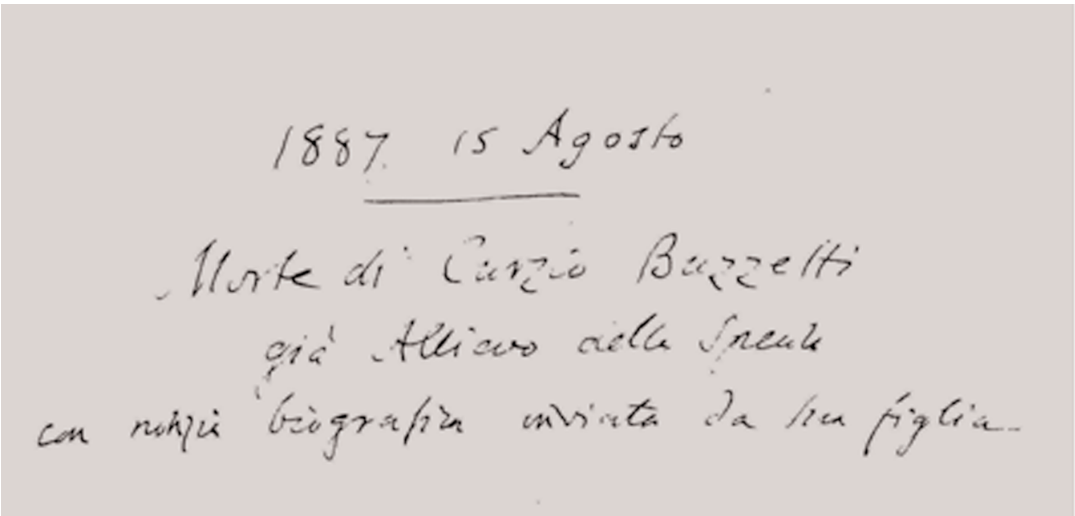


Fig. 1. Letter death Curzio Buzzetti.

Questa Memoria venne stesa nell'anno 1844 ed inserita nel vol. I delle NOTIZIE CIVILI E NATURALI SU LA LOMBARDA, con tanto sennò raccolte dal dott. Carlo Cattaneo, nell'intento di presentare ai dotti qui venuti in occasione del sesto Congresso scientifico, compendiosamente tutto quanto può riguardare questa interessante parte d'Italia. Di quest'opera preziosa attendesi da tutti ansiosamente la continuazione, anche perchè possa nella sua integrità servir di modello ad altri consimili lavori suggeriti da consimili opportunità, sicchè si riesca in un ragionevole periodo di anni ad avere una più attendibile descrizione del nostro *bel paese*.

Fig. 2. Meteoric status of the Lombardy Region.

«Friend of Giuseppe Mazzini, Mauro Macchi, Carlo Cattaneo, Cesare Cantù, Brioshi and Cantoni, participated in the political movement in 1848».

Together his wife, Carlotta Peregnini, director of Ispettorato, he promoted the Italian cause

of liberty, and because of this neither of them received a salary.

Buzzetti went into exile in Switzerland (Lugano). His wife took refuge in Varese care of her family. She was recognized by the Austrian police as she was preparing cartridges with some fellow-villagers to be used in the Morazzone battle by Garibaldi.

The General promised that she was not involved and before retreating the troops escorted her disguised as a man so that she could meet her husband in Lugano.

We read:

«In 1860 Buzzetti was invited by his director Schiaparelli to accept the proposal of the famous astronomer Santini to be the new director of Padua's astronomical Observatory».

Even if this new position was for Buzzetti's moral and economic welfare he did not accept because it seemed to him an abject thing to stay in a country under Austrian domination.

Regarding the relationship between Carlo Cattaneo and Curzio Buzzetti, the daughter enclosed an original letter transcribed by Cattaneo, dated 7th July 1860, in which Buzzetti was invited to write an account of the coming

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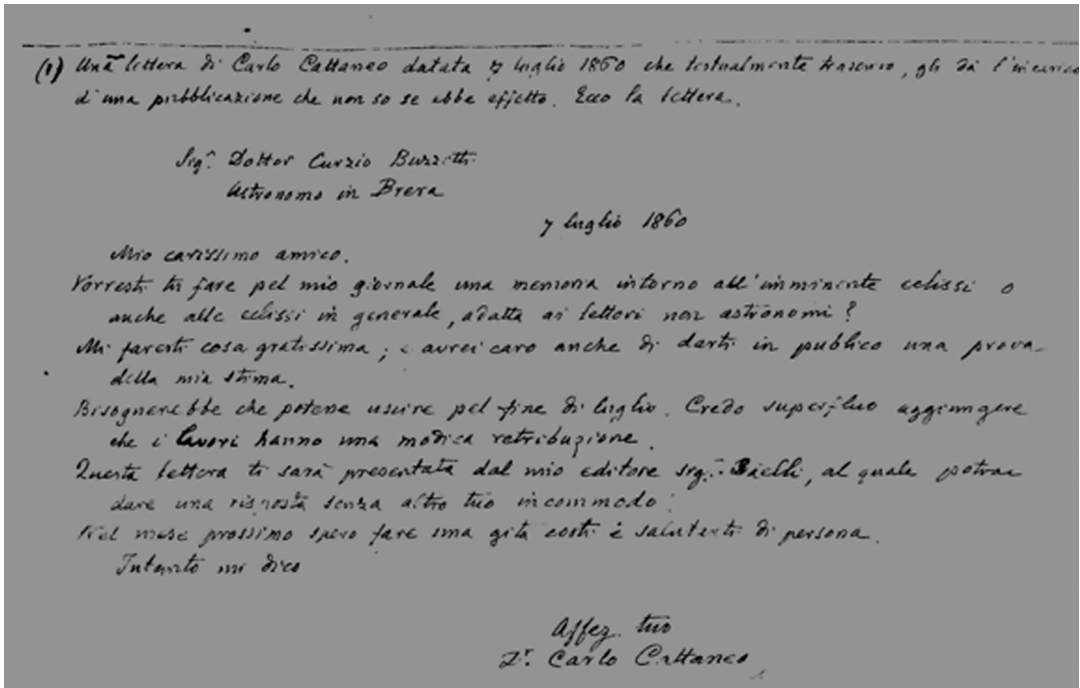


Fig. 3. Cattaneo's letter dated 7th July 1860.

eclipses to be published in his newspaper for non astronomical readers (fig. 3).

The daughter cannot say if this article was written or not. The newspaper *Il Politecnico* was an important political cultural magazine founded in 1839.

Ann Herndon Maury

The second figure was involved in the civil war which upset the American states in 1860.

The letter that we found is by Ann Herndon Maury, who married Matthew Fontaine Maury in summer 1834. The Commander of the American Navy Matthew Fontaine Maury is a very important figure in the international scientific world (fig. 4).

Born in Virginia, Maury was always faithful to the spirit of the southern states. In 1861 the Civil War began and Maury left the direction of the National Observatories in Washington, one of



Fig. 4. Matthew Fontaine Maury.

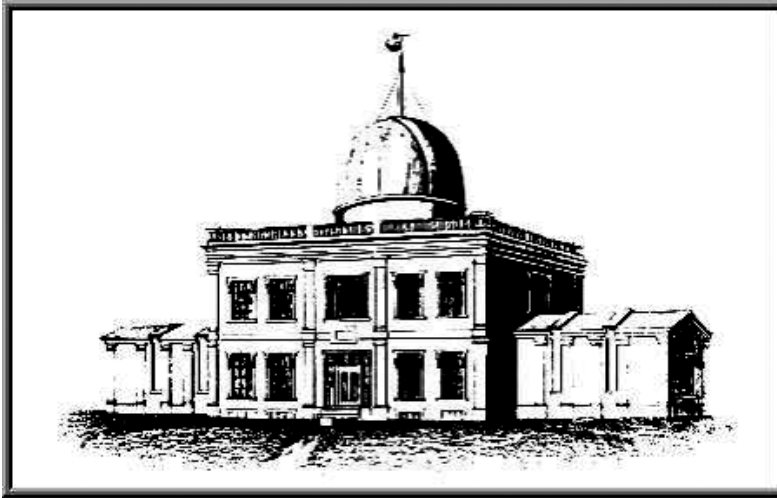


Fig. 5. US Naval Observatory.

the most prestigious Observatory in the World. He went to Richmond (Virginia) to return to his native people to attempt to create a new nation.

In June 1861 Maury was nominated Commander in the Confederate Navy. US Naval Observatory (fig. 5) was built in 1830 as a warehouse for navigation equipment. Maury worked there from 1842 to 1844, when he became the director.

The letter, dated 12th July 1873, sent by padre Secchi to Schiaparelli, is a transcription of a letter of Maury's widow sent to thank the Italian scientific community for the commemoration celebrated in Italy on her husband's death.

The letter of the widow was sent to Secchi (fig. 6).

«This distinguished lady replied to me as I was the first signatory of the list, so it is my duty to transmit to S.V.I. the Italian copy of the letter received».

Military Institute of Virginia – Lexington 12th May 1873.

To father Secchi, director of Collegio Romano Observatory

«I would like to be able to write in your language to thank you for the tribute of respect in memory of my beloved husband, addressed to me by many distinguished Italian people.

I am sure that you will convey to everybody my warm thanks and I confirm to you that knew and appreciated my husband for his scientific knowledge, that, in every domestic living relationship, as husband, father and friend, he was at the same time good and generous, his faith in Christ, as his unique Saviour, was his support in the point of dying.

Enclosed are some copies of a short memoir of my dead husband. I hope that you distribute them and will keep a copy for yourself.

With all my respect.

Anna H. Maury».

Secchi's letter, after transcribing Mrs Maury's letter, continues with tone of mourning and admiration for the scientist that helped him during his exile and his forced stay in Georgetown University Observatory, founded by father James Curley of the Department of physics of the Georgetown's University, city near Washington.

«For me was a duty more that for all the other Italian astronomer to demonstrate my esteem to Maury, because, I had the great pleasure to know him personally in Washington, when he was carrying on studies of the meteorology of sea.

He explained to me all the mechanisms of the new and complex science. During my stay in America he was very kind to me. He let me use many times, for my and my pupils' education the instruments of Observatory, that he founded [...]

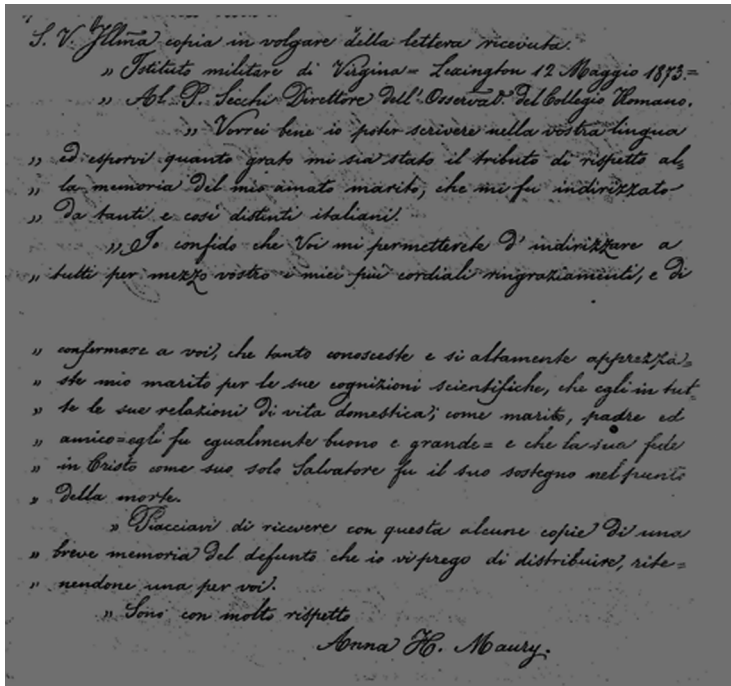


Fig. 6. Maury's widow's letter to Secchi.

Everybody read, I think, with a lot of interest Maury's widow's letter. I am aware of the moral and religious quality of Maury. Although he was separated from the Catholic Church, he talked with pleasure with the Fathers of the Jesus' Congregation of the College of Georgetown. He often participated in the sermons in the Catholic Church.

The biography and story of his death demonstrate how deep and living was the religious spirit that breathes through this scientist».

Secchi's words are in accord with the notices written in many biographies of Maury. Among these we must mention the biography written by William Maury Morris II, his great-grandson.

Matthew Fontaine Maury named Pathfinder of the Sea was inspired by the Holy Bible: he was sure that Bible and Science were in perfect harmony.

His fame in America grew enormously especially in the South of the country where he dedicated himself not only to scientific re-

search, but also to politics during the Civil War.

In Lexington, where he worked in the Virginia Military Institute, and where he died, and in Richmond there are monuments and slabs dedicated to him. A remarkable monument is in Goshen Pass, fourteen miles from Lexington. Figure 7 shows the unveiling of the Matthew Fontaine Maury Monument (11th November 1929) while fig. 8 is the inscription on bronze plaque in Goshen Pass.

Giuseppina Guacci Nobile

The third figure is Giuseppina Guacci (1807-1848) (fig. 9), born in 1807 in Naples according to the records of the church of S. Anna di Palazzo.

She met the astronomer Antonio Nobile (1794-1863), who participated in the cultural meetings in the sitting-room of Carlo Troya (1784-1858), premier of the Neapolitan Gov-



Fig. 7. Unveiling of the Matthew Fontaine Maury Monument (11th November 1929).

ernment in 1848, and married him in 1835. They had two children: Arminio (1838-1897) and Emilia. Arminio was astronomer of the Observatory of Capodimonte as later was his son Vittorio.

Guacci, poetess and active patriot wrote many poetic, teaching and political publications and a treatise for the study of the cholera and some Neapolitan customs in 1837. This work, never published, describes the disease in Naples and how people live together with the cholera.

Her correspondence is spread among many families in Naples and Florence, but the majority is in the «Carte di Casa Nobile», published by Anna Balzerano in «Giuseppina Guacci Nobile nella vita, nell'arte, nella storia del risorgimento».

Antonio Nobile kept every sort of writings of his wife and then passed them on to his son Arminio, who in turn passed them down to his daughter Emilia, who kept her grandmother's writings till her death in 1963.

Guacci, was an eminent figure of the Italian Risorgimento and she had friendly relationships with many representative figures of the politic (Settembrini, Poerio brothers), literary (De Sanctis, Ranieri, Leopardi) and musical worlds (Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti).

After the insurrection in Calabria, Guacci intensified her activity against the Borbonic

**MATTHEW FONTAINE MAURY
PATHFINDER OF THE SEAS
THE GENIUS WHO FIRST SNATCHED
FROM THE OCEAN AND ATMOSPHERE
THE SECRET OF THEIR LAWS.**

**Born January 14th, 1806
Died at Lexington, Va., February 1st, 1873
Carried through Goshen Pass to his Final
Resting Place in Richmond, Virginia.**

EVERY MARINER

**FOR COUNTLESS AGES
AS HE TAKES HIS CHART TO SHAPE
HIS COURSE ACROSS THE SEAS,
WILL THINK OF THEE.**

**HIS INSPIRATION HOLY WRIT
Psalms 8 and 107, Verses 8, 23 and 24
Ecclesiastes Chap. 1, Verse 8
A TRIBUTE BY HIS NATIVE STATE
VIRGINIA.
1923**

Fig. 8. Inscription on a bronze plaque in Goshen Pass.

government and her hom, located in the Observatory of Capodimonte in which she lived after her marriage, became a meeting point for liberal meetings, so that the Borbonic administration became very suspicious of her activity.

Perhaps her activity was the her husband Antonio Nobile lost his assignment at the University where he had been teaching since 1819.

The economic situation of the family worsened a lot and the poetess wrote the following poem:

*Or, quando la pietosa Luna
A innamorar di sue bellezze il cielo,
Maladico le stesse ad una ad una,
E il dì che venni a provar caldo e gelo
Maladico ogni fior che a l'aria bruna
Dolcemente riposa in su lo stelo*

*Maladico ogni cosa ovunque io mova,
Che dorme in pace, ed io pace non trovo.*

However her relationship with her husband was always happy and Guacci even used poetry to explain some celestial phenomena and physical features that must have been suggested by her husband, that she called Astronomia. Stars and all the elements of the sky, on the contrary, were called dangerous competitors.

She was very interested in the Newtonian theory of the decomposition of solar light and wrote:

*I sette ardenti colori
nel sincero tuo raggio discoperse
or simile a viola or a narciso
i nitidi cristalli
architettati in mille forme nuove
la sua chiara virtù fer manifesta.*

In her letters there are many references to her son Arminio. In a letter to her mother, for example, we find: «[...] today I couldn't send Arminio, but soon I will let you see him». Here is a letter written to her son who stayed at his grandmother's house during her illness.

«My dear son Arminio,

I am very grateful to you for the care demonstrated for my mother. I will do everything so that you will not be angry: anyway I ask you to study hard so that all my worries can be compensated by your application in study.

I shall not say anything more, but be a good and studious boy and be sure that your mother loves you a lot».

Arminio grew up a spoilt child and even the tenderness of his mother did not change his uneasy nature.

In the correspondence between Arminio Nobile and Giovanni Virginio Schiaparelli during the years 1868-1894 some letters reveal Nobile's character who was probably shocked by several and continuous misfortunes.

In May 1848 the struggle between the liberals and the borbonic police intensified. Guacci thought that she had pushed her husband into a group of rebel citizens inspected by police.

On 14th hostilities began: Antonio and Arminio had left the Observatory to go into the



Fig. 9. Giuseppina Guacci.

city. Guacci waited for their arrival all day. This waiting together with the news of the struggle taking place in the city exhausted her and she died suddenly.

In her last letter addressed to a friend she wrote:

«What sort is this country where we are living? Africa perhaps? In which Africa would they carried in triumph the gunthat had ruined such a beautiful town? In which Africa they would murder women the sick and elderly, and children and destroy houses?

It is truth that it was a silly thing to initiate the struggle even if only a few persons initiated it, anyway the devastation of the country was a very unworthy thing!»

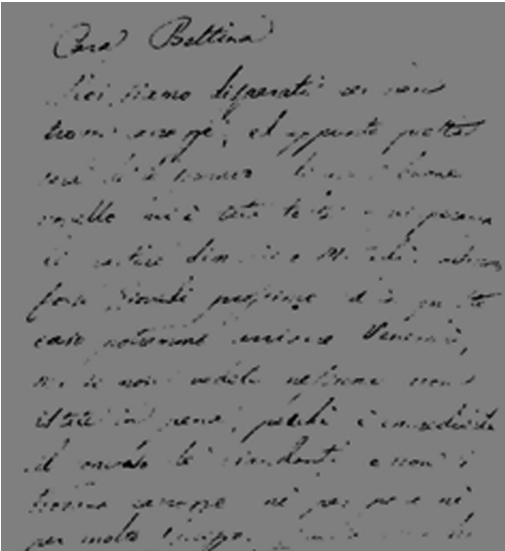


Fig. 10. Guacci's letter to her sister Bettina.

Guacci in a letter to her sister Bettina (fig. 10) expressed her disappointment to be unable to join her very soon, as she had planned: she couldn't find any carriages even paying a lot of money.

We have found a large correspondence between Arminio Nobile and Schiaparelli.

The subject is an award sponsored by the Accademia dei Lincei.

Nobile participated in this competition and was very confident of winning.

In some letters exchanged between Schiaparelli and De Gasparis (Director of Capodimonte Observatory) we learn that Nobile had sent his work in advance for the approval of Schiaparelli. As he was a member of the commission and as he did not agree with his ideas, he asked De Gasparis to convince Nobile not to participate. Nobile gave it up, but he never forgot it.

Some problems occurred some years late. There were three candidates: Nobile, Angelitti, Rajna. The members of the Commission proposed to split the prize into three parts, but the Accademia did not agree with this proposal and preferred to cancel the prize.

Nobile was furious against Schiaparelli as we can easily learn reading the following letters

«Eminent Mr Senator,

As you have nothing in the scientific field to envy anybody I want you know that my idea of the negative judgement given by senator Brioschi expressed on the report of the Lincei commission.

It is true that in 1884 you insulted me writing that you could not trust me without any demonstration, it is true that I did not digest that insult, it is true that you will not read or will not reply to this letter, but I imagine that whatever you will do, you will think that I am right.

I am sure that one day (perhaps when I am dead, I will have justice and they will say that thanks to my works, with an instrument that I made by myself (with Herteuax), Italy was the first to verify a variation of the latitude in a short distance, and they will say that the author of this work was judged inadequate. Now it is true that I am destroyed, not for the money even though it is necessary for my family, but for the enormous consequences that this fact will cause in the future (if some future will follow).

After a life spent studying several parts of astronomy I am attacked in public and judged inadequate.

I notice that the award was given for a translation from German and for an eclipse, in the meantime the person dealing with a new subject is covered with mud.

I wrote to you to let you know my ideas: I ask nothing. Late justice will come and will find me old and covered with dust.

With respect».

Of Schiaparelli's reply was immediate:

«In 1884 I wrote that I couldn't trust you without any proof: I ask you, Archimede, Laplace and one hundred other people for the same thing.

This is not an affront. Many people don't trust me for what I wrote and I said, but I don't take offence.

The true scientist accepts criticisms and suggestions and tries to confirm his ideas with evident demonstrations.

If these demonstrations aren't enough the scientist must wait for the fair judgement of posterity and continue his studies.

You couldn't claim that your works are perfect and that you aren't blamed. This I don't claim by my works, that I publish and I take profit from the criticism they receive. I get profit if right, if are I forget them.

I am quite sure that in a short time you will consider everything in a different way and you will believe that I am not persecuting you. I have never persecuted anybody and I don't want begin now!

Be composed and accept my inalterable estimation.

Schiaparelli»

This letter is followed by the last one full of ill feeling from Nobile to Schiaparelli, that closes with the following words:

«If you think this dialogue useless, that I would come to do even in the Alps, don't reply to my letter».

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