

# Theorizing Narrative Genres and Gender

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*Defying Genres to Find a Voice.*  
*Giustiniana Wynne and the Birth of the Italian Novel.*

The history of the origins of the Italian novel is still underdeveloped but scholars generally agree that the modern novel originated in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, its seeds in the difficult to classify works of a few now obscure male authors. Very few Italian women were part of the Republic of Letters, and their privileged, if scanty, modes of expressions were mostly letters, encomiastic poetry, and translations. The date *ad quem* for the Italian novel is 1827, with the publication of Manzoni's historical novel *I promessi sposi*: only in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, novels written by women blossomed.

In this paper I am concerned with the exclusionary mechanisms at play in establishing a national literary canon, in particular with regard to a work that I argue could be considered a forerunner of Italian women's novels. I will depart from Giustiniana Wynne's nowadays almost unknown work *Les Morlaques* (1788) to argue that by challenging traditional notions of well defined genres (romance, novel, travel reportage, anthropological essay) it asserted the rights for the writing of women "of genius" (as a contemporary reviewer put it) to exist outside of the boundaries of male-defined genres. At the same time, the neglect it suffered by posterity will allow me to explore the exclusionary mechanisms at play in the Romantic definition of a literary canon.

Written in French to address an international readership, *Les Morlaques* draws heavily on the anthropological observations of naturalist Alberto Fortis' *Viaggio in Dalmazia*; it relies on contemporary historical sources and events; it is imbued with Enlightenment ideas on human society; it avoids the lure of exoticism and strikes a balance between realism, idealism, and invention. Above all, the book bears the seal of the author's own experience on love, life and relationships. Her prose, her choice of topics and of words, and her progressive view of women, cast a highly gendered tone on what could arguably be considered the first modern novel penned by an Italian woman writer.

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