



SIMON ON MONDAY

La Ragazza di Marsiglia

On Thursday, 8 November, the President of the Republic, HE Marie Louise Coleiro-Preca, will preside over the launch of an important book that has just been published by the well-known Sicilian publisher, Sellerio.

The book, *La Ragazza di Marsiglia* is a historical novel, written in Italian, about the wife of the famous or better still infamous Italian prime minister, Francesco Crispi. The author is Maria Attanasio, a leading Sicilian feminist who does not hide her Leftist principles and ideals. Perhaps, she was led by these ideals, when by chance, while searching on the internet, she came across the name of Rosalia Montmasson, who was to become the main character of her novel.

Malta will be joining leading Italian towns and cities in the presentation of this book. In Italy, this book has already been presented, first of all in Attanasio's home town, Caltagirone. But it was also presented in other Sicilian towns, among others, Pozzallo, Ragusa, Giardini Naxos and the University of Messina. She has presented the book at Ispica, Lipari, Naples at the prestigious Villa Pignatelli, Rome, Bibbiena and in a number of Northern Italian towns such as Rapallo (near Genoa), Como, Venezia, Milano and Pisa.

She is also being invited by schools in Italy to talk about it. Maria Attanasio is most at home when meeting with teachers and students; after all, she is the retired head of one of the most important state schools in Caltagirone.

The book has been positively received by Italian critics and has already been reviewed in leading newspapers, such as *La Sicilia*, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, the newspaper of Casentino, *L'Espresso*, *La Nazione*, *Il Resto del Carlino*, *Il Corriere*, *il Corriere del Ticino* and *Il Giorno*. She was interviewed on Rai 3 (radio) and Rai 5 (cultura).

The book has already won Maria Attanasio four Italian awards for literary achievements, including the prestigious Manzoni book award and the Premio Rapallo. This novel is lauded both for the image and memory of Rosalia Montmasson. Italian historiography had sought to obliterate the memory of this woman from the history of Italy.

For the past seven years, Maria Attanasio has carried out extensive research on Rosalia Montmasson, Francesco Crispi's second wife. Her research brought her to Malta, where Rosalia together with Francesco Crispi found political refuge between the years 1853 and 1854. In fact, Rosalia Montmasson married Francesco Crispi here in Malta, at the church of St. Publius in Floriana in 1854. The reason for their stay in Malta was linked to their political beliefs and actions. In this period, Francesco Crispi was a staunch Mazzinian. Both Rosalia and Francesco believed in the



Maria Attanasio

La ragazza di Marsiglia



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cause of the unity of Italy according to the Mazzinian thought. Rosalia did not change her political beliefs but her husband, for political expediency, had no problem to renegade his Mazzinian sympathy in favour of the Savoy Monarchy.

Incidentally, Rosalia Montmasson hailed from Savoy and in her youth worked as a laundry-woman in Marseilles. It is from this humble origin that this book got its title. She would fall in love with Francesco Crispi, a young Sicilian lawyer always on the move because of his political ideals. Despite not being yet married, she joined Francesco Crispi in his travels and endured all the financial hardships that ensued and always supported him. She ended up exiled in Malta with him. It was this connection that brought me in contact with Maria Attanasio.

On the bicentenary of Mazzini's birth, I wrote a paper about Francesco Crispi and Malta and also discussed his marriage to Rosalia at Floriana. I also published an important document, the *Status Libero* of the couple which attests that this was a lawfully contracted marriage. This is an extremely important document because when Francesco Crispi wanted to annul his marriage to Rosalia and take a younger wife, he claimed that the marriage in Malta was not legally valid. In this claim Crispi was being backed by corrupt judges. My research has proven that this marriage was valid. Maria Attanasio continued researching this period and found other important revelations, including

the exact house where Francesco and Rosalia lived at Tarxien. It is not the one that is currently being indicated as having been their residence, but the one next door to it. She has also brought to light the peculiar and revolutionary character of the Capuchin friar who helped Francesco Crispi and Rosalia Montmasson get married in Malta. In those days, in the eyes of the Maltese, this Capuchin friar seemed to be a Muslim Marabout. The truth is that the Capuchins sported a very long beard and those undertaking missionary work in North Africa wore a white cassock. He was a leading figure of the Capuchin mission in North Africa. He died in the aura of sainthood and is buried at the Church of Saint Paul in Valletta.

Italian historiography remained in awe of Francesco Crispi, who beside other positions, served twice as Italy's Prime Minister. His downfall came about with Italy's failed attempt to take Abyssinia in 1896. For us, in Malta, he remains famous for the *Legge Crispi*, a law in Italy, which is still valid even if now defunct since Malta joined the EU, whereby Maltese and others who were considered 'regnicoli', could become Italian citizens. By the word 'regnicoli', the Italians meant those Italians who were not yet part of the realm of United Italy.

Unfortunately, to achieve political standing, Crispi was willing to abandon his republican and Mazzinian principles. He became famous for his phrase 'the monarchy unites us, the Republic divides us'. Rosalia Montmasson

remained faithful to her republican ideals. This fact and the added reality that this woman, despite her unconditional love for Francesco who had betrayed her, was destroyed by the politicians of 'l'Italia Liberale', led Maria Attanasio to re-evaluate her historical figure. I can recall Oliver Friggieri lecturing that the processes of political change start with the literary narrative which is then embraced by politicians and historians. Maria Attanasio does not mince words. Crispi used servile judges, pseudo-moralists and politicians to destroy Rosalia Montmasson. They sought to smother the voice of the people who, like Rosalia Montmasson, were calling for justice. Even her participation in the famous Expedition of the Thousand was obliterated, and with her, the memory of other individuals who participated in this event. She was the only woman to have participated in the Expedition of the Thousand.

Therefore, even if this is a fictional work, what is said in this book is not all fiction. It would be wrong to consider Attanasio's judgement on Crispi as one based only on emotion. It is also a learned conclusion which is based on her extensive historical research. What Maria Attanasio wants is the rehabilitation of the historical memory of Rosalia Montmasson and as a historian, I would add, she has succeeded.

Anyone interested in attending the launch can contact me on my email: simon.mercieca@um.edu.mt for a reservation, as entrance is strictly by invitation.