

**Sebastiano Franci:
A Forgotten Philosopher, Enlightener and Feminist
Wolfgang Rother**

I.

When we are asked which philosophers had the most lasting influence on the thinking of the European Enlightenment, the first authors that come to mind are Voltaire and Rousseau, Montesquieu and Condillac, Diderot and d'Holbach, La Mettrie and Helvétius, Maupertuis and d'Alembert, Locke as an important precursor and Hume as a central figure, Thomas Reid and of course Adam Smith, then Christian Wolff and especially Kant or Lessing and Moses Mendelssohn, authors from the French, English and German-speaking cultural areas where the centres of the European Enlightenment were located. France undoubtedly played a leading role. The French word *philosophe* was also synonymous with enlightener in the eighteenth century.¹ But philosophy of the Italian Enlightenment? We are, of course, inclined to answer that there was such a thing, just as there was Enlightenment in Spain and Portugal. But on the map of the European Enlightenment, these countries were on the periphery. They were and are considered – not unlike the countries of Scandinavia, Central and Eastern Europe in this respect – to be resonant spaces rather than centres of the European Enlightenment. For this reason, research into the philosophy of the Italian Enlightenment is still largely doomed to a shadowy existence.²

If we are then asked which Italian philosophers of the eighteenth century are thinkers worth mentioning, Vico certainly comes to mind. Or, to stay in Naples, Antonio Genovesi and Gaetano Filangieri. And last but not least, Pietro Verri and Cesare Beccaria in Milan, which, along with Naples, was not only an important resonance space for the ideas of the Enlightenment but was also definitely involved in the development of such ideas itself. Beccaria is known above all as an opponent

¹ For the almost synonymous use of the expressions '*philosophe*' and 'Enlightenment philosopher' and on the concept of the *philosophe* as a 'circumscription of the Enlightenment ideal of life' in France, cf. Jochen Schlobach, 'Zum Bild des *philosophe* in der französischen Aufklärung', in *Die Teilung der Vernunft. Philosophie und empirisches Wissen im 18. und 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Manfred Hahn, Hans Jörg Sandkühler (Köln: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1982), pp. 62–77, cf. pp. 62, 70.

² More recent attempts to liberate Italian philosophy of the Enlightenment from its shadowy existence include the monograph by Wolfgang Rother, *La maggiore felicità possibile. Untersuchungen zur italienischen Philosophie der Aufklärung in Nord- und Mittelitalien* (Basel: Schwabe, 2005) or the *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie. Die Philosophie des 18. Jahrhunderts*, vol. 3: *Italien*, ed. Johannes Rohbeck, Wolfgang Rother (Basel: Schwabe, 2011).

of capital punishment and was read throughout Europe,³ Pietro Verri, after all, inspired Kant⁴ and was the central figure of a Milanese circle of Enlightenment thinkers, the Accademia dei Pugni and the founder of a short-lived but high-circulation journal, *Il Caffè* (1764–1766). The authors of this journal wanted to liberate philosophy from its academic context and establish it as a socially and politically relevant science for a broad middle-class audience, thus propagating the ideas of the Enlightenment and initiating practical reforms.⁵ Among the authors of *Il Caffè* was Sebastiano Franci, who contributed six articles – just fifty of the eight hundred pages that comprise the two volumes of the journal in the critical edition.⁶ By way of comparison, Pietro Verri published nineteen articles in *Il Caffè* during the same period; the first series of the *Edizione Nazionale delle Opere di Pietro Verri*, which brings together his published writings, comprises several thousand pages in six volumes; whereas there is only one book by Franci, comprising two hundred pages. In this respect, Franci, as a philosopher of the Italian Enlightenment, can be said to be on the periphery of the periphery. Whether rightly or not cannot and should not be decided in this essay. Just as, as we learn from Hegel in the preface to the *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, philosophy is ‘its own time comprehended in thought’, so too is the view of the *history of philosophy* shaped by its time. It is all the more surprising that Franci is still one of the forgotten and underestimated thinkers today, although he published an essay in *Il Caffè*, ‘Difesa delle donne’, for which he would have deserved a place in the ancestral gallery of modern feminism. The ‘Difesa delle donne’ is, in fact, the only text by Franci that – unlike his other writings – has at least been taken note of in historical research.⁷ After all, Franci’s *Caffè* article on women is ‘one of

³ For an overview of Beccaria’s reception, see W. Rother, *La maggiore felicità possibile*, op. cit., pp. 266–87.

⁴ Cf. Pietro Verri, *Immanuel Kant: Sul piacere e sul dolore. Immanuel Kant discute Pietro Verri*, ed. Piero Giordanetti (Milano: Unicopli, 1998).

⁵ Cf. Wolfgang Rother, ‘Publizistik im Dienste der Aufklärung. Zum philosophischen Selbstverständnis der Zeitschrift *Il Caffè*’, in *Kulturen des Wissens im 18. Jahrhundert*, ed. Ulrich Johannes Schneider (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 243–50.

⁶ *Il Caffè 1764–1766*, seconda edizione riveduta, ed. Gianni Francioni, Sergio Romagnoli, 2 vols (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998), CLXXVIII, 1252 pp.

⁷ Cf. Silke Segler-Meßner, *Zwischen Empfindsamkeit und Rationalität. Der Dialog der Geschlechter in der italienischen Aufklärung* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1998), cf. pp. 47–86; Perle Abbrugiati, ‘L’accusateur accusé, le défenseur défendu: la “Défense des femmes” dans *Il Caffè*’, in *Femmes italiennes*, 3 (1999), pp. 197–214, <https://doi.org/10.4000/italies.2581>; Rebecca Messbarger, ‘Reforming the Female Class: *Il Caffè*’s “Defense of Women”’, in *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 32, no. 3: *Constructions of Femininity* (1999), pp. 355–69; Silke Segler-Meßner, ‘Der Begriff *bene comune* in der Diskussion über die Studien der Frauen’, in *Beiträge zur Begriffsgeschichte der italienischen Aufklärung*, ed. Helmut C. Jacobs, Gisela Schlüter (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern etc.: Peter Lang, 2000), pp. 91–117; W. Rother, *La maggiore felicità possibile*, op. cit., pp. 101–107 (‘Der Geschlechterdiskurs’).

the first texts in Europe to address the problem of the status of women in a medium that by its very nature is intended to appeal to a wide audience'.⁸

However, there is only a two-and-a-half-column entry on Franci's life and work in the *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*⁹ and a one-and-a-half-page account in the *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie*.¹⁰ In addition, there are scattered references in the critical edition of *Il Caffè*¹¹ and in the first volume of Franco Venturi's *Settecento riformatore*¹² as well as isolated and hardly noteworthy mentions in the context of the debates on monetary policy that took place in Italy in the eighteenth century.¹³

II.

Anna Paola Montanari has gathered the little information we have on the life of Sebastiano Franci.¹⁴ Franci came from an old Palatine noble family based on Lake Maggiore and was born on 1st June 1715 in Pallanza, which is now a district of Verbania. His father ran a company dealing in wool and silk, which had already been founded in the seventeenth century, probably by Sebastiano's grandfather. After his marriage to Lavinia Prata (1747), who came from a Milanese noble family, he moved to the Lombard metropolis. Nothing is known about his education and studies. Montanari rules out the possibility that he studied law or medicine or trained as an engineer. That he studied theology or belonged to the clergy, as Messbarger and Abbrugiati assume, cannot be verified.¹⁵ In any case, there are no reflections on theological topics or ecclesiastical questions in his writings. Where he acquired his profound economic, philosophical, and historical knowledge cannot be ascertained.

He participated in the broad debate on monetary and currency policy that took place in Italy in the middle of the eighteenth century.¹⁶ To this end, in 1757

⁸ P. Abbrugiati, 'L'accusateur accusé', op. cit., par. 1.

⁹ Anna Paola Montanari, 'Franci, Sebastiano', in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 50 (1998), pp. 134–35.

¹⁰ Wolfgang Rother, 'Sebastiano Franci', in *Grundriss der Geschichte der Philosophie*, op. cit., pp. 270–71.

¹¹ *Il Caffè*, op. cit., cf. the 'Indice dei nomi', p. 1232 (34 entries).

¹² Franco Venturi, *Settecento riformatore*, vol. 1: *Da Muratori a Beccaria* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1969, 1998), cf. the 'Indice dei nomi', p. 761 (7 entries).

¹³ *La riforma monetaria in Lombardia nella seconda metà del '700*, ed. Carlo Antonio Vianello, *Annali di Economia*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1938); *Economisti minori del '700 lombardo*, ed. Carlo Antonio Vianello (Milano: A. Giuffrè, 1942).

¹⁴ A. P. Montanari, 'Franci, Sebastiano', op. cit.

¹⁵ P. Abbrugiati, 'L'accusateur accusé', op. cit., par. 1, n. 1 refers to him as 'abbé', R. Messbarger, 'Reforming the Female Class', op. cit., p. 367, n. 16 as 'a learned prelate from an aristocratic Milanese family'.

¹⁶ Cf. F. Venturi, *Settecento riformatore*, op. cit., pp. 443–552 ('Il dibattito sulle monete'); Massimo Amato, *Il bivio della moneta. Problemi monetari e pensiero del denaro nel Settecento italiano* (Milano: Egea, 1999).

he wrote ‘Pensieri politici, civili ed economici in forma di sistema per regolamento delle monete nello stato di Milano’;¹⁷ the text, however, was not published until twelve years later under the title *La moneta, oggetto storico, civile, e politico*.¹⁸ In this work, Franci argues that the disorder caused by the various currencies in circulation could be remedied by declaring the fineness of the coins, but not by legislating the monetary value; rather, this should be freely constituted through trade relations.¹⁹ Franci shows himself here not only as a practically oriented economic analyst, but also as a well-read and classically educated mind: he quotes not only authors such as Homer, Aristotle, Plutarch, Titus Livius, Bodin and Erasmus, but also thinkers such as Grotius, Pufendorf, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau and Hume.

Franci soon frequented the Accademia dei Pugni, founded by Pietro Verri in 1761, which formed the centre of the Milanese Enlightenment. Franci was by far the oldest there: Pietro Verri was thirteen, Beccaria twenty-three and Alessandro Verri twenty-six years younger than him. Between 1764 and 1766, the group around Pietro Verri published the journal *Il Caffè*. Franci, as mentioned, contributed six articles, which are the focus of the following study.

Franci was wealthy – thanks to his origins and thanks to the generous dowry that Lavinia Prata brought into the marriage – and does not seem to have been gainfully employed until the Habsburg government appointed him Inspector of the Mint of Milan and Mantua in 1771. He held this office only briefly, however, as he died three weeks after reaching the age of 57 on 20th June 1772.

III.

The first essay Franci published in *Il Caffè*, ‘Dell’agricoltura’, is devoted to Milanese economic policy.²⁰ Franci chooses the literary form of the dialogue. The names of the dialogue partners, Afranio and Cresippo, are probably allusions to figures of antiquity:²¹ ‘Afranio’ to the Roman politician and consul Lucius Afranius, who lived in the first century B.C., and ‘Cresippo’ perhaps to ‘Creso’, Croesus,²² who was king of Lydia in the sixth century B.C. and known for his immense wealth, whereas ‘-ippo’, *hippos*, horse, could refer to agriculture. So, while Afranio stands

¹⁷ MS Milano, Biblioteca Braidense, AH.IX.14.

¹⁸ [Sebastiano Franci,] *La moneta, oggetto storico, civile, e politico. Parti due* (Milano: Giuseppe Galeazzi, 1769) (12), 198, (3) pp. The book was published anonymously. On the half title of the Austrian National Library’s copy is added by hand ‘Sebastiano Franzi’.

¹⁹ Cf. especially *ibid.*, Parte seconda, chap. 6, pp. 158–63: ‘Sistema monetario più semplice’.

²⁰ Sebastiano Franci, ‘Dell’agricoltura. Dialogo. Afranio e Cresippo’, in *Il Caffè*, op. cit., pp. 60–72. The dialogue appeared in vol. 1 (June 1764–May 1765), fol. 5–6. In the original version, all of Franci’s contributions are signed with the abbreviation ‘F.’.

²¹ Gianni Francioni and Sergio Romagnoli argue on the contrary that the names Afranio and Cresippo have ‘no evident references to persons of antiquity’ (*ibid.*, p. 1030).

²² It would also be possible, but from my point of view not very plausible, to connect ‘Cresippo’ with ‘Crisippo’, that is the Stoic Chryssippos of Soloi, but the dialogue figure does not represent Stoic positions.

for the politician, Cresippo is not only an expert on agriculture and agricultural issues, but someone who has recognised, or at least argues for, how important and fundamental agriculture is to the wealth of the state.

The question that the politician Afranio poses to the expert on agriculture is an economic-political one: Afranio asks Cresippo to explain to him ‘how we can use agriculture, handicrafts [*arti*] and industry to redress the imbalance [*sbilancio*] from which our trade [*commercio*] suffers’.²³ If the question Afranio raises is not a genuinely philosophical one, it reflects the central practical concern of the Italian Enlightenment: the reform and improvement of the political-economic conditions of life.²⁴ In an anticipation of Marx’s eleventh *Thesis on Feuerbach*, Enlightenment thinkers like Franci were not philosophers who interpreted the world, but those who wanted to change it.

In his answer to the question put to him, Cresippo deals only with agriculture – in this field he is an expert. Franci depicts him as a figure inspired by physiocratic thought, and in his dialogue he shines with agronomic and botanical expertise, both practical and theoretical. He cites the relevant recent and latest French, English and German works – Franci had already shown himself to be a profound specialist of political-economic literature in his book on money, which had not yet been published at the time.

What is Franci’s issue, what is Cresippo arguing for? Even if agriculture in Lombardy does not need to fear comparison with other European regions, it can still be improved in many respects. However, ‘progress in agriculture’ is not only achieved through the management of arable land based on scientific knowledge, but above all through economic policy measures such as land consolidation for the purpose of optimising cultivation and the promotion of long-term leases, as well as through projects to increase the area under cultivation, specifically through the clearing and cultivation of heaths and marshes. Cresippo’s main focus is on the application and utilisation of botanical and agro-economic knowledge, as well as the spread of agricultural science academies, as they already exist ‘in many provinces of France, in Switzerland, in Tuscany, in Modena’.²⁵

The initial question, namely how agriculture could contribute to ‘redressing the imbalance from which our trade suffers’, the dialogue partners largely lose sight of – Cresippo seems to be too caught up in his great detailed knowledge when he talks knowledgeably about the cultivation of rye, wheat, oats, spelt, wine, olives, peaches, plums, pears, figs, apples, flax, rape, turnips, nettles and tobacco. But at the very end of the dialogue, after Afranio has raised the question of whether Cresippo believes ‘that fruits, herbs and plants from across the sea can thrive in our country’, the problem of monocultures is discussed from an economic perspective. Cresippo argues that instead of using agricultural land for more cereals than the national population needs and thus being forced to sell superfluous raw material

²³ S. Franci, ‘Dell’agricoltura’, op. cit., p. 60.

²⁴ Cf. W. Rother, *La maggiore felicità possibile*, op. cit., pp. 345–46.

²⁵ S. Franci, ‘Dell’agricoltura’, op. cit., pp. 60–63.

abroad, it should be used to grow new crops that can provide raw materials for national manufacturers, thus increasing national wealth.²⁶

IV.

Shortly after this dialogue on agriculture, Franci published his essay ‘Alcuni pensieri politici’,²⁷ which was also designed as a dialogue between Afranio and Cresippo and was originally to be published under the title ‘La guerra senza sangue’. In his editorial work, Pietro Verri had reformulated the dialogue into a text that focused on general political and economic considerations and had therefore also deleted all references to the economic situation in Milan.²⁸ The original text had begun with Cresippo’s question as to what was new, to which Afranio replied that it was assumed that the election of a king in Poland would take place without bloodshed.²⁹ As is well known, after the death of Augustus the Strong (1763), the Russian Empress Catherine the Great, in agreement with Frederick the Great – the Prussian-Russian Alliance Treaty was concluded in 1764 – saw to it that her lover Stanisław Antoni Poniatowski was elevated to the Polish throne in 1764, in order to bring Poland under Russian rule. Possibly Pietro Verri considered this issue politically sensitive, since Austria, under whose rule Milan then stood, had not been included in this decision-making process.

The published text begins with a definition of the purpose of the state that Franci had originally placed in the mouth of Cresippo, who – also with regard to ‘Dell’agricoltura’ – is Franci’s *alter ego*: ‘*Alla conservazione ed accrescimento della pubblica felicità sono naturalmente indirizzate le sollecitudini d’ogni corpo politico costituito dalla società degli uomini*’, ‘The preservation and increase of public happiness is naturally the concern of every political body formed by the society of men’.³⁰ Franci intervenes here in a discussion of political philosophy that was not only central to the Italian Enlightenment, in which – along with freedom – public happiness was a leitmotif of political thought;³¹ the discussion was also conducted

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 69, 71.

²⁷ Sebastiano Franci, ‘Alcuni pensieri politici’ in *Il Caffè*, op. cit., pp. 143–50. The essay appeared in vol. 1 (June 1764–May 1765), fol. 13.

²⁸ Gianni Francioni, ‘Storia editoriale del *Caffè*’, in *Il Caffè*, op. cit., pp. CXXXIII–CXXXIV.

²⁹ *Il Caffè*, op. cit., ‘Apparato critico’, p. 883.

³⁰ S. Franci, ‘Alcuni pensieri politici’, op. cit., p. 143.

³¹ See generally, for example, *Gli italiani e Bentham. Dalla ‘felicità pubblica’ all’economia del benessere*, ed. Riccardo Faucci (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1982); Ulrich Dierse, ‘Öffentliches Glück und anderes. Beobachtungen an einigen politisch-sozialen Begriffen der italienischen Aufklärung’, in *Beiträge zur Begriffsgeschichte der italienischen Aufklärung*, ed. Helmut C. Jacobs, Gisela Schlüter (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern etc.: Peter Lang, 2000), pp. 9–21; W. Rother, *La maggiore felicità possibile*, op. cit.; ‘Felicità e libertà – concetti principali della filosofia politica dell’illuminismo italiano’, in *Giornale di filosofia. Filosofia italiana*, no. 6 (maggio 2010), pp. 1–11; *Felicità pubblica e felicità privata nel Settecento*, ed. Anna Maria Rao (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2012).

in the Accademia dei Pugni: Pietro Verri had already published his *Meditazioni sulla felicità* in 1763, and the topic is present in quite a few articles of *Il Caffè*.

To secure the happiness of its citizens, the state protects its cities with walls, it has built fortresses and armed numerous citizens. International security, however, according to Franci, is only possible when there is a ‘balance of powers’ (*equilibrio del potere*) – Franci takes up a leading concept of the political discussion of the eighteenth century here –³² when European nations form defensive alliances ‘in order to weaken powers that are too big and by which they could possibly be oppressed’.³³ In contrast to the wars of antiquity, which in Franci’s view were less ‘political wars’ than wars in which nations wanted to prove their superiority in terms of their heroic virtues, they were less concerned with conquest than with their own honour and the humiliation of the enemy.³⁴

A change in this war policy and the motivation to wage wars had occurred in the thirteenth century, when Italian cities such as Florence, Pisa, the Amalfi, Venice, and Genoa, and later also the Flemish, Dutch and English metropolises, the Hanseatic cities and France had pursued a policy of expansion in the course of scientific and technical development and economic upswing, which permanently threatened the balance of power.³⁵

Franci counters this policy of expansion with a resolute policy of peace. War has achieved nothing other than ‘the shedding of human blood in torrents without achieving the desired intention’.³⁶ From an economic point of view, Franci says, wars are not profitable; wars incur immense costs and are a loss-making enterprise. From a human point of view, they are a disaster: Alexander and Caesar would have destroyed more than two million people and left only pain and horror to the conquered peoples as well as to their own. Franci concluded from these considerations that – in view of the purpose of the state defined at the beginning – peace was the prerequisite for the ‘lasting happiness of states’ (*felicità durevole dei Stati*).³⁷

Against this background, Franci develops a concept of peace that is succinctly expressed in the original title of the essay, ‘La guerra senza sangue’. The ‘war without blood’ is a metaphor with which Franci marks a change of perspective. If it is assumed that public happiness consists in wealth, then poverty is the greatest enemy of humanity.³⁸ The ‘most appropriate weapons’ in the fight against poverty

³² Hans Fenkse, ‘Gleichgewicht’, in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2004), vol. 2, pp. 959–96, here pp. 971–75.

³³ S. Franci, ‘Alcuni pensieri politici’, op. cit., p. 143.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 143–44.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 144–45.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

are ‘the sciences, craftsmanship, industry and commerce’ (*le scienze, le arti, l’industria ed il commercio*).³⁹

For Franci – here he returns to the theme of ‘Dell’agricoltura’ – agriculture is considered the ‘basis of commerce and wealth’, entirely in the sense of the Physiocrats and Richard Cantillon, on whose *Essai sur la nature du commerce en général* (1755) he draws. The raw materials that the earth provides and the creation of wealth through the ‘labour of men’ – these are the ‘weapons’ with which the nation defends itself against its enemies, against poverty.⁴⁰ War, Franci concludes, is moved from the bloody battlefield to the field of economics and trade: the old wars destroy wealth, the ‘war of industry’ (*guerra d’industria*) brings happiness and prosperity to the people and prevents the bloody wars.⁴¹

V.

The short essay on luxury products, for which gold and silver are processed,⁴² inserts itself into the discussion that took place in the eighteenth century regarding the moral and economic dimensions of luxury.⁴³ In this essay, Franci takes a position that fundamentally values luxury positively and critically examines the common moral and economic objections to luxury. In the first sentence of his essay, he refers to the consensus of ‘politicians’ according to which luxury and the luxury products produced in domestic factories, which neither corrupt morals nor harm health, must be promoted by ‘wise legislators’. But the luxury products of gold and silver spinning, and such products as are gilded or silver-plated would be judged negatively by most economists, since the precious metals, when they adorn the churches or the mansions of the rich, are withdrawn from commerce. In this respect they are useless – useless in the same way as gold and silver lying in the mines – and above all useless because that gold and silver can no longer be used as a general medium of exchange. For it seems plausible that the circulation of money contributes essentially to the ‘happiness of a nation’ (*felicità d’una nazione*): if a lot of money is in circulation, production is increased, ‘the merchant becomes more courageous, the worker more industrious, even the farmer goes to the plough with more joy’.⁴⁴

Franci, however, does not share this view and, in contrast, wants to show that the luxury from the gold and silver processing factories is by no means pernicious for a nation, but rather brings it considerable advantages. He based his argument

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁴² Sebastiano Franci, ‘Del lusso delle manifatture d’oro e d’argento’, in *Il Caffè*, op. cit., pp. 494–98. The essay appeared in vol. 2 (June 1765–May 1766), fol. 8–9.

⁴³ On the discussion in Italy, see Cosimo Perrotta, ‘Il “lusso” negli economisti italiani del Settecento’, in *Gli italiani e Bentham. Dalla “felicità pubblica” all’economia del benessere*, ed. Riccardo Faucci, vol. 1 (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1982) pp. 171–89.

⁴⁴ S. Franci, ‘Del lusso’, op. cit., pp. 494–95.

on the third of Hume's *Political Discourses* (1752) – 'Of Money', where the theory that increasing money circulation leads to a nation's prosperity is refuted. Rather, high money circulation would increase the prices of goods and food. The high price of commodities, though a necessary consequence of the abundance of money, does not follow directly from the abundance of money, but it is necessary that money circulate for a time to have this effect. The interval between the acquisition of the money and the price increase is favourable to the population and the industry.⁴⁵

On the basis of this relationship analysed by Hume, Franci argues that the processing of gold and silver extends this advantageous interval for the national economy and thus promotes industry. By limiting the use of these precious metals as money through the processing of gold and silver, demonetisation and thus inflation are efficiently counteracted. By processing precious metals into luxury goods, nothing is actually lost, because these goods secure a lucrative income for the goldsmith, the embroiderer or the weaver, because the trader remunerates them for their work in gold and silver coins. The merchant now sells the luxury goods at a profit to the rich man, who has more money than he needs to satisfy his basic needs. So, when the rich man indulges in his luxury, when he spends superfluous money on useless things, he harms no one.⁴⁶

Franci thus rehabilitates both the miser and the collector of luxury goods, types of people towards whom one hardly harbours sympathy, especially since miserliness is considered morally reprehensible, even a mortal sin. Franci judges the miser and the collector of treasures as positive because both serve the public good and promote public happiness without wanting to. This idea, however, comes from Alessandro Verri, who edited the article for publication;⁴⁷ in Franci's original text, the argument went in a different direction, distinguishing between the state and private accumulation of wealth: Franci had in fact written that accumulation of treasures (*tesoreggiare*) was necessary for a prudent and clear-sighted sovereign, but not for a private person 'to whom it serves either as an incentive to a thousand dissolutions or as a foundation for shabby avarice' (*cui serve o d'incentivo a mille dissolutezze o di fondamento ad una sordida avarizia*).⁴⁸ In the published formulation – '*Gli avari, i tesoreggiatori sono viziosi e obbrobriosi uomini, che servono però mirabilmente al ben pubblico*', 'The miserly, the treasure collectors, are vicious and odious people, who nevertheless serve the public good admirably' – the original moral condemnation of private treasure collecting is reinterpreted in terms of the argument of Bernard de Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1714): *Private Vices Publick Benefits*, as the book's subtitle puts it. The 'Public Benefits', after all, are owed to the 'vicious and vile people': they provide an income for the craftsmen who make the gold and silver jewellery, they offer an exclusive comfort to the rich, and they make the funds they temporarily remove from circulation

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 495–96.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 496–97.

⁴⁷ G. Francioni, 'Storia editoriale del *Caffè*', op. cit., pp. CXXXIX–CXL.

⁴⁸ *Il Caffè*, op. cit., 'Apparato critico', p. 927.

available for future needs. Luxury products for which gold and silver are processed, it is concluded, neither spoil morals nor harm health, but have exclusively beneficial economic effects.⁴⁹

VI.

Franci's reflections on the question of 'whether trade corrupts customs and morals' also belong in this thematic area.⁵⁰ His answer is even more resolute than in the case of the question of gold and silver processing – he points to the consensus of contemporary political authors that trade was 'the most important means of politics' because it brought wealth and 'happiness' (*felicità*), which is to say, wealth to the states.⁵¹ The judgement of the ancient authors – Tacitus and Caesar are mentioned – was quite different:⁵² they equated trade with corruption. Trade therefore enjoyed a bad reputation because it directed people's striving towards trivial and void things and thus distracted them from the sublime. Franci denies that trade corrupts morals. Rather, he argues that trade, as the 'image of the heavenly fire', animates culture and civilisation (*la copia di quel fuoco celeste fatto per animare le belle anime*) because it creates wealth. It is true, as Franci again argues in allusion to Plato's doctrine of ideas, that gold and silver 'are only an image of true wealth', but these images, as Franci concedes, can certainly cause people to chase after luxury and tend towards wastefulness, or that their hearts harden and they become miserly.⁵³ Since these views are also shared by modern authors – Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois* (1748) and Montaigne's *Essais* (1580) are mentioned –⁵⁴ Franci feels compelled to refute them.

Before proceeding to his refutation, he presents himself as an enlightened philosopher who does not rely on authorities but on his own reason, on the critical examination of other views: 'The reason of others must first be approved by our own inner feeling [*l'approvazione dell'interno nostro sentimento*], and then it becomes our own reason'. Franci deduces the necessity of action from the sociality of human beings and their different talents and preconditions. There are great differences among people in terms of strength, mind, and body, in the face of which the individual, left to his own devices, recognises his weakness and his neediness.

⁴⁹ S. Franci, 'Del lusso', op. cit., p. 498.

⁵⁰ Sebastiano Franci, 'Osservazioni sulla questione se il commercio corrompa i costumi e la morale', in *Il Caffè*, op. cit., pp. 655–61. The essay appeared in vol. 2 (June 1765–May 1766), fol. 24.

⁵¹ S. Franci, 'Osservazioni', op. cit., p. 655.

⁵² Tac., *Germ.*, 21; Caes., *Gall.*, 6,21. Franci apparently takes the references from Montesquieu, *De l'Esprit des lois* (1748), liv. 20 – thus the note in *Il Caffè*, op. cit., p. 1155, where the editors point out the inaccuracy of Franci's references.

⁵³ S. Franci, 'Osservazioni', op. cit., pp. 655–56.

⁵⁴ Franci, *ibid.*, p. 656 refers in the footnotes to Montesquieu, *Esprit des lois*, liv. 20, chap. 2 ('De l'esprit du commerce') and to Montaigne, *Essais*, to. 2, pag. 372 (it is the chapter, 'Des loix somptuaires' in liv. 1, chap. 43, cf. *Il Caffè*, op. cit., p. 1156, n. 4).

The individual is dependent on the help of others and thus experiences that he can only develop his strength in exchange with others. Thus, people develop the ‘love of trade’ (*l’amore al commercio*), which regulates the exchange of goods. Trade is thus indispensable for human society.⁵⁵

Against this background, the view that trade corrupts morals seems absurd,⁵⁶ especially since, according to Plato, wealth is the highest good,⁵⁷ and wealth, according to Franci, is produced by trade. Franci also does not accept the differentiation between ‘necessary trade’ and trade in ‘superfluous things and luxury goods’. Evil does not lie in goods and ‘innocent trade’, but in ‘human passions’. For Franci, there is absolutely no connection between trade and evil, between the wealth gained through trade and the vices of avarice and extravagance.⁵⁸ On the contrary, the most hospitable and humane nations are those that trade. Trade makes man a ‘citizen of the world’ (*cittadino del mondo*). Through trade, poverty is fought.⁵⁹ It is not wealth that is to be feared, but poverty.⁶⁰ The elimination of poverty is the prerequisite for culture and civilisation: ‘*Tolti d’intorno gl’incomodi d’una vergognosa povertà, non ha lo spirito umano ostacoli ad avere nobili sentimenti della gloria*’, ‘Once the inconveniences of shameful poverty are eliminated, the human spirit no longer has any obstacle to the noble feelings of glory’.⁶¹ ‘First comes food, then comes morals’, as Macheath later put it in Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera*.

VII.

The call for a critical attitude towards authority, the recommendation to rely on intuition, the ‘inner feeling’ in examining the views of others, and to arrive at a sound judgement by thinking for oneself, by means of one’s ‘own reason’,⁶² is deepened in a short essay in which Franci urges caution with respect to ‘opinions’.⁶³ This is the only text that is not devoted to a question from the fields of practical or applied philosophy, in which moral, economic or political issues are not discussed, but in which the question of truth is central. The key words are found in the first sentence of the essay – ‘*Chi ama la verità ha da esser indifferente nel ricevere o rigettare una opinione che gli venga proposta, sino a che per mezzo di un accurato esame non venga a conoscere la solidità dei fondamenti sopra de’ quali essa si sostiene*’, ‘He who loves truth must be indifferent as to whether he accepts or rejects

⁵⁵ S. Franci, ‘Osservazioni’, op. cit., p. 656.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 657.

⁵⁷ Franci, *ibid.*, refers in the footnote to Plat., *Gorg.*; the relevant passage is 452 c-d.

⁵⁸ S. Franci, ‘Osservazioni’, op. cit., pp. 657, 660.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 658.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 660.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 658.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 656.

⁶³ S. Franci, ‘Della precauzione contro le opinioni’, in *Il Caffè*, op. cit., pp. 671-77. The essay appeared in vol. 2 (June 1765–May 1766), fol. 25-26.

an opinion presented to him, so long as he does not find out by careful examination how solid are the foundations on which it rests'.⁶⁴ What drives the enlightener and philosopher is truth, and he who loves truth must be indifferent to opinion, and must first abstain from judgement – Husserl will later call this *epoché*. The philosopher is not concerned with accepting or rejecting an opinion, but solely with its critical examination – not only of the opinion, but also of its foundations. But instead of 'thinking for themselves' (*a pensar da se stessi*), many people adopt the opinions of others unchecked and in 'puerile credulity' (*credulità puerile*). Credulity leads to 'blindly believing every opinion instead of clarifying it through examination'. In this context, Franci addresses the reluctance of many people to critically engage with the 'mainstream', 'the common opinion of the century, of the place where they live', under the title of Alcuin's dictum that the voice of the people is God's voice.⁶⁵

What Franci then argues against is book learning. He takes an ambivalent stance on this: books are a great support for our minds, they provide the 'raw material' (*materia prima*) of thought, but they also prevent people from thinking for themselves. Those who read must exercise the same caution as against prejudice, because books contain many errors and falsehoods. The view held in books must be empirical, 'verified by experience' (*essere verificati colla esperienza*). Book knowledge is secondary knowledge, the appeal to authorities is 'borrowed knowledge' (*scienza imprestata*).⁶⁶ In the remaining pages of the essay, Franci uses examples taken mainly from ancient literature to show what untruths and unbelievable stories can be found in many books, and how authors copied from each other – 'without verification, without criticism and without experience' (*senza esame senza critica e senza esperienza*).⁶⁷

VIII.

Whether Franci, when he wrote his 'Difesa delle donne',⁶⁸ knew the 'Defensa de la mujeres', which Benito Jerónimo Feijoo had published in 1726 in the first volume of his *Teatro crítico*,⁶⁹ is not known, but it is by no means impossible, since the 'Defensa' was then available in French⁷⁰ and the entire *Teatro crítico* was

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 671.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 671, 672.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 672.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 673.

⁶⁸ Sebastiano Franci, 'Difesa delle donne', in *Il Caffè*, op. cit., pp. 245–56. The essay appeared in vol. 1 (June 1764–May 1765), fol. 22.

⁶⁹ The 'Defensa de la mujeres' appeared as Discurso 16 in Benito Jerónimo Feijoo, *Theatro Crítico Universal, o discursos varios, en todo género de materias, para desengaño de errores comunes*, vol. 1 (Madrid: Lorenzo Francisco Mojados, 1726), pp. 313–80.

⁷⁰ *Défense ou éloge des femmes*, trans. Nicolas-Gabriel Vaquette d'Hermilly (Paris: Pierre Clément, 1743); 'Apologie des femmes', trans. Abbé Prévost, in *Journal Étranger* (Paris, Juillet 1755), pp. 208–37.

accessible in French and Italian translations.⁷¹ The fact that Franci's 'Difesa' appeared in *Il Caffè* is probably due not least to the journal's avowed orientation in support of women, since Beccaria, who is regarded as one of the most important figures of the Italian Enlightenment, will explicitly ascribe philosophical competence to women in his essay 'De' fogli periodici', which precedes the second volume of the journal, and attribute to women a special ability as teachers of virtue – in contrast to men, who often oppose truth. For Beccaria, women are the true philosophers thanks to their better natural disposition towards the essential objects of philosophy, namely truth and virtue, compared to men. And as such, they are the preferred audience of a philosophical periodical dedicated to the Enlightenment: '*Felice quel filosofo che dalle amabili donne sarà letto*', 'Happy is the philosopher who is read by amiable women'.⁷²

The first, long section of the article in which Franci presents and analyses the current situation of women in Europe may at first glance reproduce the common gender stereotypes.⁷³ He seems to join in the 'endless complaints about women' who lead otiose, inert lives and are in no way useful to society. This is not only true of the noble women, who are characterised either by 'extreme laziness' (*pigrizia estrema*) or by vain pleasure-seeking: they get up late and spend all their time combing their hair, after dinner they go for a walk and in the evening they are bored at the theatre. Or they hang around in town, gossiping and chatting, attending balls, and wanting to be seen in society. Similarly negative is the picture Franci paints of the 'plebeian women', that is, the common women of the lower classes: They shirk housework, they flirt and coquet, and they dwell extensively on their beauty.⁷⁴

But in the next section, the accusation of women tips over into an accusation against men, that is, against the patriarchal system shaped by men. '*Con noi stessi bisogna lagnarsene, perché noi stessi loro additiamo questa tenebrosa strada e le costringiamo a battere questo fangoso sentiere*', 'We ourselves must complain about this because we ourselves put them on this dark road and force them to take this muddy path'.⁷⁵ He analyses the causes of women's alleged gendered behaviour

⁷¹ *Théâtre critique ou Discours différens sur toutes sortes de matières pour détruire les erreurs communes*, trans. Nicolas-Gabriel Vaquette d'Hermilly (Paris: Pierre Clément, 1742-1743); *Teatro critico universale per disingano del pubblico su i comuni errori*, trans. Marcantonio Franconi (Roma: Pagliarini, 1744).

⁷² Cesare Beccaria, 'De' fogli periodici', in *Il Caffè*, op. cit., pp. 412-13.

⁷³ This is the interpretation of S. Segler-Meßner: *Zwischen Empfindsamkeit und Rationalität*, op. cit., pp. 73-76; 'Der Begriff des *bene comune*', op. cit., pp. 106-108; on this, see W. Rother, *La maggiore felicità possibile*, op. cit., p. 104, n. 138. P. Abbrugiati, 'L'accusateur accusé', op. cit., par. 3, aptly speaks of a 'surprise effect' and a 'cruel caricature' that 'seems to refute the title', with which Franci succeeds in 'seducing the most misogynistic readers' in order to ultimately show that it is men – that is to say patriarchal social structures – who are responsible for what women are accused of.

⁷⁴ S. Franci, 'Difesa delle donne', op. cit., pp. 245-46.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

and laments the neglect of their upbringing and education. They are denied the study of science and fine arts. *‘Diamo loro i lacci per impedire i voli del loro spirito, imprigioniamo loro il cuore, affinché non sentano l’attrazione della virtù’*, ‘We – and this is the men, the patriarchy – put shackles on them to prevent the flight of their mind, we lock up their heart so that they do not feel the attraction of virtue’.⁷⁶ Finally, Franci reminds us that the education of children is the responsibility of both parents. The argument concludes with a sentence that succinctly deconstructs gender stereotypes, gender stereotypes based on ‘false opinions’, men’s prejudices about the nature of women, which hinder their possibilities for development: *‘I vizi sono degli individui e non del sesso’*, ‘Vices are a matter of the individual and not of sex’.⁷⁷ What Poullain de la Barre asserted as a rationalist about the sexlessness of reason – *‘L’Esprit n’a point de sexe’*⁷⁸ – Franci reformulates for the realm of morality.

Franci’s change of perspective, which is now directed at men and mutates the ‘defence of women’ into a critique of ‘male’ behaviour, leads to a critique of what we would now call the sexist view of women, which reduces them to their appearance, their beauty. Franci calls beauty the ‘most graceful spectacle’ that nature has to offer, but beauty is only perfected through virtue and education.⁷⁹ For this, he invokes Montaigne, who attributed to women a quick and sharp mind, and to a profound philosopher – Malebranche is meant – who attributed to them imagination and good taste.⁸⁰ As evidence of the intellectual qualities of the ‘graceful and educated woman’, he outlines the achievements of three Milanese contemporaries, although he does not mention them by name.⁸¹ They are probably the poet Francesca Biccetti (1712–1788), most certainly the mathematician Maria Gaetana Agnesi (1718–1799), author of the *Istituzioni analitiche ad uso della gioventù italiana* (Milano, 1748), and probably the writer and translator Francesca Mazoni Giusto (1710–1743).⁸²

Franci does not reduce good taste to aesthetic competence, but understands it as intellectual and moral competence based on the agility and adaptability of mind (*aggiustatezza di mente*) and empathy (*sentimento delicatissimo del cuore*) – qualities that have enabled many queens to rule great empires.⁸³ This idea is taken up again at the end of the essay, in which Franci pays homage to Maria Theresa,

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 247.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ François Poullain de la Barre, *De l’égalité des deux sexes. Discours physique et moral, Où l’on voit l’importance de se défaire des Préjugés* (Paris: Jean Du Puis, 1673), p. 109.

⁷⁹ S. Franci, ‘Difesa delle donne’, op. cit., p. 248.

⁸⁰ Michel de Montaigne, *Essais* (1580), liv. 3, chap. 5: ‘Sur des vers de Virgile’, Nicolas Malebranche, *De la Recherche de la vérité* (1674–1675), liv. 3, part. 2, chap. 5: ‘De l’imagination des femmes’, cf. *Il Caffè*, op. cit., p. 1079, n. 3 & 5.

⁸¹ S. Franci, ‘Difesa delle donne’, op. cit., p. 248.

⁸² Cf. *ibid.*, n. 4; P. Abbrugiati, ‘L’accusateur accusé’, op. cit., par. 23.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 248–49.

under whose rule Milan then stood and ‘whom we obey out of love and duty’. She is praised as the epitome of feminine virtue. She combines religion, magnanimity, strength, tireless care, prescient counsel, incorruptible faith and justice, mildness and gentleness coupled with majesty, heroism, and steadfastness amidst extreme danger. The text culminates in the exclamation: ‘Happy the peoples who are subject to such rulers’.⁸⁴

The fact that women lead, rule and command is nothing unusual for Franci, since men learned early on to obey women, namely their mothers, without delay.⁸⁵ And if women have skills of political leadership, there is nothing to be said against the idea that they are equally suited to leadership positions in business and the military. Because of the aforementioned agility and adaptability of mind (*aggiustatezza di mente*), female citizens are quite capable of occupying leading positions in the economy, that is, of managing a bank or a factory, and women of the common class could exercise many trades.⁸⁶ Franci explains that women also possess military and martial qualities, that there are women who have undaunted heroism and bravery and can even surpass men in this (*capacissime di superare gli uomini*) by saying that ‘military bravery requires neither weapons of steel nor hands of iron’, but that ‘the heart is the most important part of bravery’.⁸⁷ In particular, the arguments for leadership and competence in the military field, which even today is in many places a purely male domain, leave no doubt that Franci’s ‘Difesa delle donne’ aims unreservedly and resolutely at full equality for women.⁸⁸

IX.

Although Franci, who published very little, was not a central figure in eighteenth century Italian philosophy, in many respects he fits the type of Enlightenment philosopher.⁸⁹ Like many other Italian enlighteners, he came from an aristocratic background: he belonged to the nobility and was wealthy. Nothing is known about his education, but judging from his writings, he had the typical classical education that was imparted at Italian religious colleges and universities. However, he showed

⁸⁴ In the published article, the eulogy of Maria Theresa was shortened, presumably for reasons of space, cf. *ibid.*, p. 1080, n. 17, the deleted text: *ibid.*, pp. 905–906. The view of R. Messbarger, ‘Reforming the Female Class’, *op. cit.* p. 358, that Franci’s ‘article, more explicitly than any other in the journal, aimed to curry favor with Maria Theresa’, seems to me to be a narrow perspective and not to do justice to the claim and intention of Franci’s essay.

⁸⁵ S. Franci, ‘Difesa delle donne’, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 252–53.

⁸⁸ Different, but from my point of view not entirely convincing, is the conclusion of the essay by R. Messbarger, ‘Reforming the Female Class’, *op. cit.*, p. 366: ‘Ultimately, the “Defence” renovates the traditional feminine paradigm according to the new terms and tenets of the Enlightenment’.

⁸⁹ On the typology of the Italian Enlightenment philosopher, cf. Wolfgang Rother, ‘Il “filosofo” nella cultura italiana del Settecento’, in *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, 7th series, vol. 10, no. 3 (2014), pp. 610–19.

himself to be a critic of that traditional education which he had presumably received himself and which, as he asserted in one of his articles, was only book learning and secondary knowledge and could therefore never replace one's own critical thinking.

Like many other Italian Enlightenment thinkers, he did not pursue an academic career, but embodied, at least at the end of his life, the philosopher as public servant.⁹⁰ Unlike the French *philosophes*, who usually kept a critical or even oppositional distance from the *Ancien Régime*, and like many other Italian Enlighteners, Franci seems to have had an unbroken relationship with the state and the monarchy. He did not want to reform the state and the political system, but the economy, education, and society, especially the position of women in society. And he was not, like many *philosophes*, a critic of religion, but like most of his Italian contemporaries, he was silent on religious issues.

Even though Franci is today one of the forgotten philosophers of the Italian Enlightenment, the articles he published in *Il Caffè* must have had a broad impact at the time – the periodical's sheets were published in a circulation of 500 copies, which was not inconsiderable by the standards of the time.⁹¹ And in terms of his ideas and positions, Franci had a sound grasp of contemporary developments. He was influenced by the Physiocrats and put forward proposals for agricultural reform. As an alternative to the bloody war of expansion fought with weapons, he pleaded for a 'war of industry' to defeat humanity's worst enemy, poverty, and to promote common prosperity, 'public happiness'. In general, the happiness of the citizens is for him the central purpose of the state. Against this background, neither luxury nor trade appear morally reprehensible since they precisely serve this purpose. Trade connects people, has a peacemaking function, and makes people citizens of the world. On all these points, Franci is not a pioneer, but he is undoubtedly a typical enlightener whose ideas are inspired by the European Enlightenment. But as the author of the 'Difesa delle donne' he is – and this is his lasting merit – one of the early feminist thinkers.

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⁹⁰ Cf. Carlo Capra, 'Il funzionario', in *L'uomo dell'illuminismo*, ed. Michel Vovelle (Roma, Bari: Laterza, 1992), pp. 353–98.

⁹¹ G. Francioni, 'Storia editoriale del *Caffè*', op. cit., p. LXXXIII.