Fear of the Mother’s Tongue:
Secrecy and Gossip in
Manzoni’s I Promessi Sposi

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Victoria Goddard, in her study of women’s sexuality and group identity in Naples, rethinks the question of how codes of honor and shame are constructed and defended by examining the importance of women’s role as “bearers,” perhaps, as “the bearers of group identity.”1 Following in the wake of Mary Douglas’s work on the body and rituals of pollution,2 Goddard foregrounds the responsibility that women have in maintaining and perpetuating a group identity:

If women are seen as the boundary markers and the carriers of group identity, it follows that their ‘integrity’ should be safeguarded. The concept of the group can operate at different levels of inclusion: the family, the kinship group, the village, region, class, or caste. The integrity of the women of a group cannot be understood solely in terms of ensuring appropriate marriage arrangements, which would, however explain many aspects of behavior resulting in the isolation and ‘protection’ of women. The role of women as carriers of identity has further repercussions of a less obvious nature, which, I would argue, are related to women’s role and powers as reproducers. Women may also be seen as the guardians of the ‘secrets’ of the group. By the very process of their control by men and their relegation to and identification with the domestic sphere, women are in a unique position to provoke a crisis within the group. (180)

The potential of this crisis that women are in a “unique position” to provoke is powerfully illustrated in a text of fundamental significance for the construction of modern Italian culture and identity, namely Manzoni’s I Promessi Sposi [The Betrothed]. In the following pages, I focus on how Manzoni’s representation of the mother-daughter relationship in the novel implicitly recognizes and keeps at bay the critical potential of this bond and, by extension, the critical potential of a female alliance in the peasant community to which Lucia, her mother Agnese, and Lucia’s fiancé Renzo, belong. My analysis shows that Manzoni’s representation of Lucia’s secret fear of her mother’s gossip in a small community governed by face-to-face relations, is indicative of larger social and political questions which the novel fails to articulate but cannot quite suppress and/or efface.

I. The Secret

On the morning of her wedding day, while she is busy being dressed by a group of women from her peasant village, Lucia Mondella is called aside by a little girl who whispers something into her ear. Lucia leaves the group of women, goes downstairs to where Renzo is anxiously waiting for her. He tells her that their parish priest, Don Abbondio, has called off their marriage ceremony because his life has been threatened by the nobleman Don Rodrigo should he marry the two. Intimating that she knows something Renzo doesn’t, and with a feeling of terror in her heart, Lucia asks him to wait for her while she goes back upstairs to dismiss the women. In the meantime, roused by her daughter’s disappearance, Lucia’s mother, Agnese, comes downstairs and Renzo anxiously tells her the little he knows about what has happened while they await Lucia’s return. When she enters the room, Agnese rebukes her daughter for not having ever said anything and Lucia, wiping the tears from her eyes, promises to explain everything to her.

A chapter into the novel, this is a crucial scene. It sets in motion the plight of the two 17th-century Lombard peasant protagonists, Lucia Mondella and Renzo Tramaglino, whose marriage plans and hopes for a quiet and predictable future in their village are torn asunder by Don Rodrigo’s fancy for Lucia; a fancy that has led him to make a bet

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3 Hereafter referred to as PS. All citations to the PS are from: Alessandro Manzoni I Promessi Sposi eds. Ezio Raimondi and Luciano Bottoni (Milano: Principato, 1988). All translations into English are my own.
with his cousin Attilio that he, Don Rodrigo, will have seduced Lucia by the festive date of Saint Martin. Situated in the context of a Lombardy governed by the Spanish and about to be devastated by famine, war, and the plague of 1630, the PS tells the story of what happens to Lucia, Agnese, and Renzo: their forced departure from the village, their separation, and their final reunion and marriage two years later after many trials and adventures.

The scene described above is crucial to the story not just because it introduces the main characters and sets their plight in motion, but because it produces, by way of Lucia’s response to her mother, a secret point of entry and critique of the novel’s patriarchal subtext. The fact is that Lucia doesn’t tell her mother everything but what she does say appeases Agnese’s resentment at having been left out of her daughter’s confidence. The scene would raise few questions if this were all there was to Lucia’s response. But the narrator tells us that Lucia had another good reason for not bringing her mother into her confidence and that about this other reason, namely her fear of her mother’s gossip, Lucia remains silent. In short, readers are alerted to the fact that Lucia tells her mother only one of two good reasons and that the one becomes a secret precisely because the other satisfies Agnese’s desire for an explanation. Paradoxically, this secret only constitutes itself as such in the moment of its disappearance: in the moment that Lucia’s one good answer renders her other good reason undetectable and therefore secret. Agnese has no reason to suspect that her daughter’s answer conceals another “good” reason. Thus, it is in the act of responding that Lucia’s mistrust becomes absolutely secret—to her mother. We, however, know; and find ourselves, as readers, in the position of witnessing a secret which excludes the mother and her mode of being in the world. The question is why? What is at stake for the narrator in telling us that Lucia does not tell her mother everything? Why does Lucia fear her mother’s gossip and how does this secret, which successfully silences the mother’s potential for gossip, function both on a narrative and ideological level? As Marianne Hirsch asks: “How do plots and structures of realism rooted as they are in Oedipal forms and preoccupations rest on and benefit from the erasure, trivialization, or objectification of the mother?”


These questions challenge the presuppositions traditionally at work in readings of Lucia’s position in the novel. What brings them into focus is a preoccupation with narratives that silence the mother’s voice and gloss over the potential for a female entrustment. When read through the lens of entrustment, Lucia’s secret mistrust of her mother stands out as the marker of an all too familiar Oedipal scenario depicting the daughter’s embrace of the Father’s law. One does not have to be a feminist to note the production of Lucia’s secret, but a reader engaged in a critical analysis of representations of gender in social and cultural texts is more likely to investigate this detail and question its larger implications for a text that, like the PS, plays such a pivotal role in Italian culture and politics. Lucia Mondella is, without doubt, the most famous female character in modern Italian literature but in spite of the massive and on-going proliferation of more or less sympathetic “takes” on her character, she remains, in my view, also the least understood. Standing as a symbol of unquestionable virtue and faith, she has acquired the status of a cultural icon and the value of a commodity fetish.

From her first appearance in the novel, in the scene we are examining, Lucia is seen to be enveloped in an soft aura, illuminated by her candor and faith. When noted at all, her response to her mother’s question is construed as a sign of filial compassion for her mother’s indiscrete nature: by keeping silent about her mistrust, Lucia spares her mother’s feelings. Emma Grimaldi, who has argued most persuasively for a benign interpretation of Lucia’s secret, supports the compassionate reading with a comparative analysis of the differences between this scene as described in the PS and Manzoni’s prior draft version of the scene in Fermo e Lucia. In that text, which can be thought of as the working draft for PS, Lucia Zarella (in the FL she has a different surname from the PS) doesn’t give her mother an explanation because she can’t bring herself to reveal her fear that, had she done so, all the neighborhood would

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6 By entrustment I mean the relationship which Italian feminists have defined as affidamento: “one woman gives her trust or entrusts herself symbolically to another woman, who thus becomes her guide, mentor or point of reference—in short the figure of symbolic mediation between her and the world.” See: Sexual difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice. The Milan Woman’s Bookstore Collective trans Patricia Cicogna and Teresa De Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 9.


8 Emma Grimaldi, Dentro il romanzo: strutture narrative e registri simbolic{i tra il Fermo e Lucia e I Promessi Sposi (Messina: Sicania, 1992).
have known. By bursting into tears, she avoids giving any response and in Grimaldi’s view, this avoidance is a sign of immaturity. Grimaldi’s interpretation of the difference between Lucia’s responses raises two questions: the first has to do with the question of responsibility and, the second, with a question of how one reads the relation between two versions of essentially the same story. Grimaldi’s interpretation of Lucia’s Mondella’s silence as compassionate in the PS, leaves unread how it deceives Agnese. It preserves Agnese’s inability to understand, or change, or respond, or explain, and/or assume responsibility for what she is held incapable of doing; namely protecting Lucia’s honor by keeping silent. To be sure, there are cases when keeping silent is sometimes more caring and honest than saying what comes first to one’s mind, but Lucia Mondella’s secret treats Agnese as if she has a pathological condition which cannot be helped or cured and she, therefore, must be pitied. Lucia Zarella’s weeping in the FL, on the contrary, does not preclude Agnese from understanding and knowing that her daughter does not trust her. Lucia Zarella’s non-response does not downplay Agnese’s agency or her capacity to respond and therefore one could say that Lucia Zarella’s non-response is more honest and ultimately responsible than Lucia Mondella’s careful and “caring” answer.

Interpreting the secret as Lucia’s compassionate suppression of a painful truth is a powerful one because it immediately adds to Lucia’s portrait the virtue of maturity and compassion. It also has the advantage of glossing over the significance of the daughter’s mistrust of her mother. By reading her secrecy as compassionate, one forgets that what is kept from Agnese is not just any secret but one that makes trust impossible. It prevents the mother from knowing anything that really matters—from knowing that her daughter does not want to risk confiding in her. What Grimaldi’s intertextual rereading of the FL and the PS scene suggests, however, is its dependence on a traditional practice of privileging the PS as the final and aesthetically superior text over the FL as its first draft version.

9 The Fermo e Lucia (hereafter FL) is written between 1821–1823 but not published. In 1825 Manzoni rewrites it, changes its title to Sposi Promessi, and then publishes it in 1827 with the title I Promessi Sposi. For an edition of Fermo e Lucia see: Tutte le Opere ed. Mario Martelli. Vol 1. (Firenze: Sansoni editori, 1973).

10 It is not the only secret Lucia will keep from her mother. For example, she doesn’t immediately tell Agnese about her vow of chastity which she makes during her night of captivity in the palace of the Unnamed prince. Fearing her mother’s disapproval and/or attempt to get her out of it, Lucia doesn’t tell her until it becomes necessary to explain her assumed indifference towards Renzo.
Susan Stanford Friedman’s psychoanalytic approach to intertextuality has helped problematize the impetus towards unidirectional readings of differences between versions of a same story. Friedman proposes a method of “reading texts both ways,” that is without privileging the final version as the superior and teleological endpoint of all the others but rather reading each text as a version of a “complex composite text whose parts remain distinct yet interact according to a psycho/political dynamic to which we have some access with the help of Freud’s theory of repression and grammar for the dream-work” (166). Read from this perspective, the two scenes and the passage between them yield a much more problematical interpretation of Lucia’s response to her mother as well as a more complex understanding of Manzoni’s investment in producing it as a secret in the PS. One of the things that happens to these episodes, read both ways, is that the seemingly unimportant paradigm of the mother-daughter relation begins to appear as a crucial site for exploring both the construction of Lucia’s angelic figure and for examining Manzoni’s ambivalence about the power and political potential of trust between mother and daughter. The secret surfaces as the visible marker of Manzoni’s ambivalence towards the power of this relation and its potential for articulating in a political way the relation between private and public, individual and society. I can put it this way: the moment one takes note of Lucia’s fear of Agnese’s mediation, then the possibilities implicit in gossip’s “other” positive effects become available to the reader’s speculation. Had Lucia confided in her mother, for instance, Agnese might have used gossip to rally her community’s defense of her daughter.

From the perspective of entrustment, to gloss over this filial mistrust and its implications for the mother-daughter plot in the novel is like glossing over a crossed-out word, leaving unread an illegible mark, a stain. To understand the politics of this secret Manzoni so casually offers on a platter, only to whisk it away as if it did not matter, requires a re-focusing of the reading lens on the mother-daughter relation and on the question of Lucia’s preference for the private (male) world of confession over the mother’s world of gossip with its constant blurring of the boundaries between private and public, its constantly making secret affairs public. It means investigating

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how Lucia’s secret mistrust of her mother functions within the economy of a historical novel about three illiterate peasants for whom not only Agnese’s gossip, but gossip in general, would be a crucial means for communicating and sharing experiences and knowledge. It means asking why only the negative aspects of gossip are foregrounded when gossip, historically, has invariably offered communities, and female communities in particular, a powerful tool for shaping, modifying, and regulating behaviors and customs.\(^{12}\) Stressing the positive aspects of gossip means, as Patricia Meyer Spacks writes, remembering that “its [gossip’s] talk may be devoid of malicious intent; it often involves close and emotionally fruitful human association; reflecting intense interest in the personal, it may include subtle judgment and discrimination.”\(^ {13}\) Politically, Lucia’s rejection of Agnese’s networking abilities and her mediation also entails closing off the possibility of a peasant rebellion against the oppressor Don Rodrigo.

II. Reading Both Ways

In the FL, Lucia tells her mother and Renzo that one evening Don Rodrigo, accompanied by some of his friends, had seen her leaving the silk-mill and had tried to draw her aside and take liberties with her. She had escaped his grasp but heard him say in anger, exacerbated by his friends’ laughter, “ci vedremo” [we’ll be seeing each other]. “Allora” [so], Lucia explains to Agnese and Renzo: “io pensai di non andar più alla filanda, feci un pò di baruffa colla Marcellina, per avere un pretesto, e vi ricorderete mamma ch’io vi dissi che non ci andrei” [I thought of not going back to the silk mill any more and I provoked a quarrel with Marcellina in order to find a pretext, and you will remember, mother, that I told you I would not be going] (260). Lucia, however, does return to work as the season’s work is almost over and she thinks that for the few remaining days she can protect herself from Don Rodrigo by remaining in the midst of her companions. His persecution continues:


\(^{13}\) Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopp, 1985) 34.
mi aspettava quand’io andava al mercato, e vi ricorderete mamma ch’io vi dissi che aveva paura d’andar sola e non ci andai più: mi aspettava quand’io andava a lavare, ad ogni passo: io non dissi nulla, forse ho fatto male. Ma pregai tanto Fermo che affrettasse le nozze: pensava che quando sarei tua moglie colui non ardirebbe più tormentarmi; ed ora. . . . (261)

[He waited for me when I went to the market, and you will remember, mother, that I told you that I was afraid of going alone and didn’t go anymore: he waited for me when I went to the washing place, at every step: I said nothing, perhaps I did wrong. But I begged Fermo to hurry the wedding plans: thinking that when I would have been his wife he wouldn’t have dared torment me anymore; and now . . .]

Lucia at this point bursts into tears and, as we saw before, her sobbing keeps her from having to respond to her mother’s question. Agnese, however, insists. She tries a less directly scolding question: “Non ne hai tu fatto parola con nessuno?” [did you not speak of this to anyone?], and when Lucia confesses that she had indeed told Father Galdino in confession, Agnese reluctantly approves her daughter’s choice of confessor but reiterates “hai fatto bene; ma dovevi dirlo anche a tua madre” [you did well; but you should have also told your mother] (my emphasis, 261).

The syncopated rhythm of Lucia’s narrative, with its repeated reminders to her mother of the times which she had expressed her fears or acted strangely, conveys a sense of Lucia’s anguish as Don Rodrigo’s assiduous and relentless pursuit continues over time and she finds him invading the spaces of her everyday life: the market square, the washing place, the road between the silk mill and home. But the focus in Lucia’s story-telling is not on Don Rodrigo’s pursuit alone. Lucia’s litany of “e vi ricorderete mamma che . . .” [and you will remember mama that . . .] draws one’s attention to the drama of a failure in communication between mother and daughter. It strongly underlines that while Lucia did not tell her mother openly, she also did not hide her anguish from her mother. Indeed, she desired her mother’s attention as much as she feared telling her about Don Rodrigo. Lucia’s reminders carry a strong tone of reprimand for her mother’s having failed to understand. If Agnese remains in the dark, as we deduce from Lucia’s representation of the events, it is because she does not hear her daughter’s repeated appeals for help nor does she question the changes in Lucia’s behavior.14 When Lucia tells

14 It is important to note that Agnese’s failure to notice her daughter’s strange behavior is in direct contrast with the cruel and subtle surveillance to which Gertrude,
Agnese that she is not going back to the silk mill, presumably because of a misunderstanding with Marcellina. Agnese doesn’t object or intervene. When Lucia tells her of her fear of going back to the market alone and doesn’t go, Agnese has no reaction. Lucia’s increasing anguish about Don Rodrigo’s relentless invasion of the spaces of her everyday life is heightened by her increasing sense of isolation from a mother who doesn’t understand. The sense of anguish and drama that exudes from Lucia’s story-telling stems from this combination over a long period of time of her mother’s failure to understand and of her inability to escape Don Rodrigo’s lustful gaze. Within this framework, Lucia’s bursting into tears when her mother rebukes her for her silence can be read as the pained response of a daughter reliving the experience of her mother’s failure to get the point.

My reading of Lucia’s narrative and emphasis on her ambivalent desire for her mother’s ear, foregrounds several problems that Manzoni resolves in the course of retelling the story in the PS. In the passage between the FL and the PS, Manzoni suppresses any sense of Lucia’s desire for her mother’s ear. While in neither version of the story does Lucia actually turn to her mother for help, in the PS there is no trace of her ambivalent desire to do so. The narrator tells the following story:

pochi giorni prima, mentre tornava dalla filanda, ed era rimasta indietro dalle sue compagne, le era passato innanzi don Rodrigo, in compagnia d’un altro signore; che il primo aveva cercato di trattenerla con chiacchere, com’ella diceva, non punto belle; ma essa, senza dargli retta, aveva affrettato il passo, e raggiunte le compagne; e intanto aveva sentito quell’altro signore rider forte, e don Rodrigo dire: scommettiamo. Il giorno dopo, coloro s’eran trovati ancora sulla strada; ma Lucia era nel mezzo delle compagne, con gli occhi bassi; e l’altro signore sghignazzava, e don Rodrigo diceva: vedremo, vedremo. “Per grazia del cielo,” continuò Lucia, “quel giorno era l’ultimo della filanda. Io raccontai subito . . .” (53)

[A few days before, as she was returning from the silk mill, and had remained behind her companions, Don Rodrigo had passed by her

the other main female character in the novel, is subjected by her father. When Gertrude, who is trying to resist her father’s pressure to enter the monastery of Monza, becomes much calmer and quieter as a result of her infatuation with a young page who is serving her, her father has her surveilled by a servant. Thus, unlike Agnese, Gertrude’s father immediately perceives that his daughter’s behavior is different and thus significant.
accompanied by another gentleman; the former had tried to entertain her with chatter, as she put it, not at all proper; but she, without paying attention to him, had quickened her pace and caught up with her companions; meanwhile she heard the other gentleman laugh very loudly, and Don Rodrigo say: let's bet. The following day, the two were again at the same site; but Lucia this time was in the middle of her group, keeping her eyes lowered; the other gentleman sniggered and Don Rodrigo said 'we'll see, we'll see.' ‘Thank God’ Lucia added ‘that day was the last [of work] at the silk mill. I immediately told . . .’.

Lucia explains that she talked to Fra Cristoforo in confession the last time she and her mother had gone to the convent’s church and she reminds her mother of that morning: “se vi ricordate, quella mattina, io andava mettendo mano ora a una cosa, ora a un’altra, per indugiare, tanto che passasse altra gente del paese avviata a quella volta, e far la strada in compagnia con loro; perché, dopo quell’incontro, le strade mi facevan tanta paura . . .” [if you remember that morning, I was busy going from one thing to another, lingering, so that others from the village would be going in that direction; because after that encounter, the roads terrified me] (53). This reminder is a visible carry-over from the FL, but it is no longer charged with a sense of Lucia’s reprimand to her mother for failing to take note of her fears. In the FL, the failure in communication between mother and daughter raised implicitly the question of whether Lucia’s turn to Fra Galdino (Fra Cristoforo, in the PS) came as a consequence of this breakdown, whether Agnese’s failure to understand Lucia brought her ultimately, after much hesitation, to opt for the safer and quieter ways of a man-who would-understand.15 In the PS, any sense of hesitation or ambivalence about whether or not to trust Agnese is gone, and gone is any hesitation about whether or not it is proper for her to override Agnese’s maternal authority by going directly to Fra Cristoforo. In other words, Lucia’s turn to Fra Cristoforo in the PS is immediate and unproblematical. In the PS, her lingering in order to wait for other people to walk with them to the convent is an “empty” lingering: it does not threaten, slow down, or cause her to rethink her decision to confess Don Rodrigo’s pursuit to Fra Cristoforo instead of her mother. Whereas Lucia, in the FL, admits “forse ho fatto male” [maybe I did wrong] to have turned to Fra Cristoforo without having first (or also) consulted Agnese, she shows no such hesitation or

regret in the PS. In the PS, Lucia takes no emotional or practical risks. Her dawdling has nothing to do with wanting to get her mother’s attention. Thus, while the result of the story in the FL scene is no different from that of the PS there is a crucial difference between the two representations of Lucia.

Lucia, in the PS, is a radically different subject. Manzoni de-dramatizes her emotional and affective world. Lucia’s inner world, her interiority, bears no signs of time, of a history, of lived experience. Structurally, Manzoni achieves this reduction of drama by concentrating Lucia’s encounter with Don Rodrigo into a forty-eight hour period and limiting it to a single site. For readers of the theater, his representation of Lucia’s drama is recognizably patterned on the spatial and temporal grid of the classical theatrical unities of time and space. What Manzoni achieves by adopting the theatrical grid which his poetics had rejected is a reduction of drama and an increase of theatricality. By translating into a narrative context the unities of time and place, Manzoni effaces the intensity of Lucia’s inner drama and sense of the complexity of her emotional world. Her story is staged as if her only passion were fear. What “happens” to her, what she experiences, can be taken in at a glance: her fear—cut clean of any ambivalence and desire—is projected on to the page without a history. While in his theoretical essay on theatrical representation, the Lettre à M. C***,16 Manzoni had argued for the need to show how an individual’s passions developed gradually and over time, in his revision of Lucia’s story he successfully suppresses the complexity of her fear and desire for her mother’s trust and does so precisely by reducing her experiences into a temporal and spatial grid which eliminates any tension or possibility of misunderstandings between mother and daughter. The story of this suppression remains unread when the PS is privileged as the aesthetically superior text, the one that successfully elevates Lucia above the vulgar squalidness of her peasant everyday life.

In comparing the two scenes, critics have focused extensively on Manzoni’s shift from direct to indirect speech and his reduction of the historical and social details within which he had located Lucia Zarella’s encounter with Don Rodrigo. His rewriting of the FL scene is seen as protecting Lucia’s innocence from being contaminated by Don Rodrigo’s sordid desire. By not having her speak directly,

Manzoni reinforces the sense of her as a maiden pure, innocent, and absolutely untouched by evil nature (Grimaldi, 152). In not speaking directly, Lucia is seen to rise above the petulant morality which brought her in the FL to explain that she was not the only one harassed by Don Rodrigo and that “purtroppo v’era chi lasciava fare!” [unfortunately there were those who let themselves be touched by him] (261). In the PS, as Guido Baldi argues, an aura of perfection envelops Lucia’s story from the beginning and makes it unimaginable to think of Lucia making excuses, fighting with her co-workers, creating scenes, and makes it sacrilegious to think of Don Rodrigo actually taking liberties with her.17 According to Grimaldi, the more energetic and combative Lucia of the FL is sacrificed to a figure of candor and purity (161). From her point of view, the most important change between the two representations of Lucia’s encounter with Don Rodrigo takes place less on Lucia’s side than on the side of the male pursuer. Manzoni’s retelling of the story in the PS foregrounds the pronouncement of Don Rodrigo’s bet and therefore focuses on the value of male virility and honor (152). By privileging this focus on the bet and its pronouncement, what gets ignored or left unseen is the significance of the narrator’s pronouncement of Lucia’s secret and what it hides. Manzoni’s suppression of Lucia’s desire for her mother’s understanding turns Lucia’s encounter with Don Rodrigo not just into the drama of his objectifying gaze but into a tragedy of her isolation, isolation from her mother, from a community of other women who could and might understand her terrible predicament. The success of Manzoni’s production of Lucia’s secret consists precisely in offering the daughter’s silence towards the mother as if it were of no import or consequence to the story. The secret mistrust which divides daughter from mother remains ignored by all but those readers for whom the separation between mother and daughter is never innocent, never simple, and always to the advantage of patriarchal practices and perspective.

III. Fear of the (M)other’s Tongue

Taking at face value the apparent tranquillity of Lucia’s relationship to her mother is to grossly misunderstand the function of Agnese’s position at the margins of the story and leave unread the constraints

17 Guido Baldi, I Promessi Sposi: progetto di società e mito (Milano: Mursia, 1985) 308.
which keep her from being able to speak for her daughter. Agnese is a character of extraordinary interest not in spite of her marginalized position but because of it, because of what her position at the margins makes visible.18 It, first of all, shows that the strange absence of biological fathers in the text (neither Lucia’s nor Renzo’s biological father are ever mentioned) does not point to a privileging of the maternal, as for example, Franco Lanza argues.19 Indeed, not only are neither Lucia’s nor Renzo’s father ever mentioned, but their deaths do not haunt the protagonists in any way. The striking absence of biological fathers in both the FL and the PS suggests an interesting, even important, twist in a tradition of nineteenth-century literary plots which tend instead to depict mothers as either dead, absent, overbearing, or wicked, when they are not otherwise just plain uninteresting and trivial. This twist, however, is not enough to sustain the argument that Manzoni privileges the maternal world over the paternal. On the contrary, as Lucia’s secret makes visible, it is not Agnese but Fra Cristoforo who occupies the space of authority left empty by the absence of Agnese’s husband. Lucia’s fear not only marginalizes her mother’s voice but reveals the mother’s irrelevance in a world where father figures constitute the sole point of reference and voice of authority. It is only when we take note of this marginalization that Agnese’s rebuke about her daughter’s silence acquires a new significance. Both in the FL and in the PS Agnese is not just hurt, she is scandalized. Her words to Lucia underline her position as mother: “dovevi dirlo anche a tua madre” [you should have also told your mother] (FL 261; PS 53). Agnese, unlike Lucia in the same passage does not refer to herself with the more private and endearing term mamma but with the official and public: madre. Appealing to her position as mother, Agnese desires, demands an explanation from her daughter. What is at stake is her sense of propriety, her right—as mother—to know about such important


matters regarding her daughter. What upsets Agnese, the FL narrator says, is that she who knows so much about everyone else doesn’t know about what touches her most intimately (260). The daughter’s silence does not just leave a gossipy, curious, mother out of the loop, it makes public the mother’s limited value as an authority figure for her daughter. Agnese’s right and control, as a single parent of a female only daughter, are diminished by Lucia’s act. If Lucia had a father, her immediate turn to Fra Cristoforo instead of to him would have been construed as a gross insult, injury, and betrayal of her father’s trust. But because Lucia has no father (or male relatives), her bypassing of Agnese’s position is interpreted as a mature and sensible act and not a breach in a hierarchy of authority figures. The word “betrayal” does not come into the picture. Agnese’s scandalized reaction to her daughter’s silence is read as a sign of her pettiness rather than as a reaction to a public humiliation. Thus, when a reader as attentive as Grimaldi states that Agnese’s reaction deserves at least some mention (146–47), but then interprets Lucia’s secret as compassionate towards her mother’s indiscrete ways, what is invariably diminished is Agnese’s role: her reaction as mother to finding out, in front of another person—Renzo—that she doesn’t know the most important things about her daughter’s life. Grimaldi deduces from the confessional scene that Agnese’s pettiness serves Manzoni’s task of underlining Lucia’s superiority over her mother.20 However, when read from the perspective of entrustment, the scene shows that Lucia’s docile ways and downcast eyes depend not only on her being progressively silenced and removed from a local and peasant milieu but also upon a leveling out, and marginalization, of the power of another woman—her mother—to offer her a point of reference, authority, and mediation in the world.

Agnese’s potential gossip is consistently suggestive of its power of blurring boundaries. As Spacks writes, gossip as a phenomenon raises questions about boundaries, authority, distance, the nature of knowledge (Gossip, 12). If Agnese’s chatter threatens the boundaries between public and private she also threatens to blur the sexual division of roles which exclude her, as mother, from publicly defending her daughter. Agnese’s frustrated relation to the public sphere is

20 “Agnese risponde allo stereotipo piu’ frequente, è affettuosa e protettiva, quantunque il narratore la mostri non molto scrupolosa sotto il profilo morale, affinche’ acquisti maggior risalto la coscienza particolarmente delicata della figlia.” Elena Sala di Felice, Manzoni/Grossi: congresso nazionale di Studi Manzoniani (Milano: Centro Nazionale di Studi Manzoniani, 1991) 255.
visible through her competitive relationship to Renzo. When, in the aftermath of Lucia’s explanation, the threesome attempts to find a way to get around Don Rodrigo and Don Abbondio’s cowardly acquiescence to his threat, Agnese is the first to come up with a solution. She suggests that Renzo go to Lecco to consult with the not-so-reputable lawyer Azzocea-Garbugli known around town for his ability to get folk out of trouble. Agnese, in other words, doesn’t offer to talk with the lawyer. While she competes with Renzo for finding a solution to their problem she lets him take the responsibility and visibility of assuming a public role, thereby reinforcing an implicit gender division of tasks and roles. Indeed, when Renzo fails to convince the lawyer to help him use the law against Don Rodrigo, Agnese implicitly rebukes him for his weakness and, conversely, when Renzo succeeds in his plans to find witnesses for their second plan, a subterfuge marriage, he concludes his report to Agnese and Lucia with the exclamation “ahn” which, as the narrator explains, “significa: sono o non sono un uomo io? si poteva trovar di meglio? vi sarebbe venuta in mente? e cento cose simili” [am I or am I not a man? could one have done better? would it have ever come to your mind to do that? and a hundred other such things] (130). It is in reference to a division of sexual roles that we can understand why Agnese later on in the novel murmurs to herself that Renzo was “un giovine quieto, fin troppo” [a quiet fellow, all too quiet] (130). Agnese’s comment which has puzzled critics because it seems so unwarranted by the facts, makes sense when it is placed within the perspective of Agnese’s frustrated competitive relation with Renzo.21 If she takes it for granted that Renzo—as a man—is the one who has to negotiate matters with other men, she nevertheless desires to be the negotiator—behind the scenes.

As mother and gossip, Agnese threatens to blur any clear-cut division between public and private. She is both an insider and outsider. Her house, located at the margins of the peasant village (between Don Rodrigo’s palace and the village) symbolically reinforces her difference from others in the village.22 While gender, class,

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21 Giorgio de Rienzo asks whether this is not a lapsus on Manzoni’s part and whether Agnese has some precise notion of facts we don’t have any knowledge of: “forse e’ concesso a lei—attraverso questo lapsus manzoniano—di avere qualche nozione precisa dei fatti, che per il lettore sono solo sospetti?” Per amore di Lucia (Milano: Rusconi, 1987) 52.

22 There are various changes in the location of Agnese’s and Renzo’s respective houses between FL and PS. In the PS40, Renzo’s house is in the middle of the village
and gossip reinforce her ties to the village, Agnese’s status as a widow—and as a widow without close male relatives to speak for her—keeps her somewhat at a distance. As the mother of a female only child, and in the absence of a network of close parentage—either her own or her husband’s—Agnese is unusually isolated in her world. Manzoni, in telling Agnese’s story, departs from the traditional structures of peasant families which used to be, up until the late 18th-century, comprised of very large multiple families which sometimes extended to five or six married couples with their accompanying in-laws, children etc.23 In the absence of brothers, uncles, sons, or male relatives and in-laws to stand and defend the honor of her family, Agnese finds herself in a position of extraordinary responsibility as head of her household and yet, as we have seen, her lack of authority is made obvious both by the narrator’s reference to Lucia’s secret fear and Lucia’s turn to Fra Cristoforo.24 If Agnese’s gossip offers a tool for overcoming her distance from the community, Lucia’s secret mistrust of her gossip marginalizes Agnese’s voice to the periphery of the narrative where she is not only prevented/prohibited from sharing with others of her community her justifiable maternal anger against Don Rodrigo’s violation of her daughter’s space but where the potential of her chatter for instigating a shared response, a common village rebellion against the oppressor, is kept carefully at bay. It is this threat of Agnese’s potentially destabilizing chatter and indeed of the political potential that her gossip might have for rallying support for her daughter’s protection that remains unread when Lucia’s response to her mother is interpreted as a compassionate gesture of sparing her mother’s feelings.25 Rather, Lucia’s silence is based on a

and “Lucia’s house at the other side of the village in fact slightly outside it” ("passato davanti a casa sua [di Renzo], ch’era nel mezzo del villaggio, e , attraversatolo, s’avvio’ a quella di Lucia ch’era in fondo, anzi un po’ fuori.” The bold face here indicates what Manzoni adds to the PS40 from the PS27 version. 45). See I Promessi Sposi di Alessandro Manzoni raffrontati due edizioni del 1825 e 1840 ed Policarpo Petrocchi (Firenze: Casa Editrice le Lettere, 1992).


24 For an interesting account of the conditions for women head of households in the 18th-century, see Maura Palazzi “Abitare da sole: donne capofamiglie alla fine del Settecento.” 37–57 Memoria 18:3 (1986).

25 Ironically, the only time Agnese is required to mediate for Lucia and correspond with Renzo who is now living in Bergamo, she must find another person—a man—to write her letters and to read for her Renzo’s (also mediated) replies. Agnese never mediates directly for her daughter.
fear, turned secret, that her story might enter the village’s circuit of knowledge and thereby presumably damage her reputation and taint the honor of her name. To protect her name, she rejects her mother’s trust and authority, instead of risking (as she does in the FL) her mother’s mediation.26

What lies behind Manzoni’s production of Lucia’s secret fear is a problematic of negotiating between the possibilities of community versus institutional control over individual subjects. The secret, which marks the breakdown of trust between mother and daughter, suggests that Manzoni privileges an institutional (religious, in this case, but no less institutionalized) form of control, over gossip as the form of control that a community, Lucia’s community, might take. Gossip is a powerful means for a community to control, inform, shape and regulate the behavior of members of the group. Women have historically been known to use gossip as a weapon against aggressive male behavior. As Cavallo and Cerruti point out in their discussion of female honor in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, by confiding in her female neighbors, a wife was able to make her husband’s misbehavior part of the public domain and thereby exert pressure on him. Husbands feared female gossip, because when reported within other family circles it eventually had an impact on their relations with other men. In moments of conflict, worry about bad-mouthing drove the male to warn his wife to avoid contact with female neighbors (88). Gossip provided women with a language circuit of their own, and the strongest links in this invisible chain of solidarity were those between mother and daughter. But the chains of a female solidarity, and the power of a community, Cavallo and Cerutti argue, depend foremost on the strength of the social ties:

disseminating the news, judging it, and intervening in behavior were possible only if the social network was characterized by high density or internal cohesiveness, understood as the strength of relationships among its members. The strength of the network did not depend so much on its size as on its cohesion; that is, on the presence of strong bonds that linked its components. (92)

26 With regards to trusting her community Lucia Mondella takes to heart Bettina’s lesson in the FL. Bettina was one of Lucia’s girl-friends who let herself be flattered by Don Rodrigo and blatantly paraded his presents in front of her community. When he later shuns her because he has caught sight of Lucia, Bettina understands her delusion and runs from her village.
Lucia’s confession to Fra Cristoforo draws attention to Manzoni’s representation of Lucia’s community. Lucia’s fear of having her secret spread to the neighborhood—her neighborhood—underlines her distance from her mother and, via her mother, from the village. Fear is the governing emotion among the peasants and, rather than a community, Lucia’s village seems an aggregation of individuals who have difficulty thinking publicly, or expressing a public opinion. When describing the social dynamics in Lucia’s village, Manzoni privileges a view of gossip’s negative and divisive powers. The male peasants, for example, are afraid of gossiping even amongst themselves about Don Rodrigo. Renzo knows he cannot convince his friends to defend him were he to challenge Don Rodrigo. The women of the village are never shown to use gossip as a means for gathering information and/or aiding each other but rather, as in the case of an exchange between Agnese and Don Abbondio’s servant Perpetua, gossip becomes a tool for distracting the other’s attention. Both men and women fear speaking their minds even to their closest relatives, and their silence, as Manzoni puts it, eventually makes them come to feel less. Manzoni doesn’t say explicitly what this lessening or numbing of feeling amounts to, but one deduces that what becomes less felt, in this numbing process, is a sense of a shared community identity. It is only in a moment of extreme crisis—the discovery that Agnese’s house has been violently ransacked and Lucia and Agnese are nowhere to be found that the peasants rally to defend the honor of their women who, they believe, have been abducted from the village (176).27 The desire for a community rally against the feared oppressor Don Rodrigo immediately dissipates as a (false) rumor spreads among the men that Lucia and Agnese are instead visiting one of their homes. Gossip, again, plays a divisive and dissipating role rather than affirming the bonds of a cohesive peasant community.

It is only among the nobility that gossip is articulated as a cohesive force. Gossip is very much feared by Don Rodrigo’s cousin Attilio who speculates on the possibility of a popular uprising against Don Rodrigo. It is precisely the threat of a community rebellion that

27 Lucetta Scaraffia points out in her studies on the construction of gender identities in Italy in the nineteenth century that the honor of a woman coincided with that of the original or acquired family, and that her body was the symbol of the unity and prestige of this family and in particular, of the men who “possessed” her, the father, the husband, the brother (“Essere uomo, essere donna,” 212). It is only when Lucia is thought to be abducted that the men of an extended family-community feel that the honor of their village has been threatened.
Attilio uses to convince his powerful uncle, a member of the Milanese Secret Council, that something must be done to protect Don Rodrigo. The solution consists, as he intimates, in asking the head of the religious order to which the friar belongs, the Provincial Father, to send Fra Cristoforo far away to another convent. Attilio’s understanding of the potential gossip has for gathering and rallying public opinion also reveals that he does not consider Lucia’s village capable of doing so without the aid and instigation of someone (a man) who comes from the outside and is from an educated, albeit not noble, class. From Attilio’s viewpoint, “aizzatori” [the instigators] and the “curiosi maligni” [malicious curious] who would be most susceptible to Fra Cristoforo’s prodding are male. The “ciarlare” [chatter] he fears is that of men—not women. Men, in his view, have the power to threaten Don Rodrigo or at least seriously to weaken the reputation of his power and control over the territory. Gender as well as class shape Attilio’s vision of gossip and its political danger. It is not Agnese’s anger—as mother—and the power of her gossip to instigate a community rebellion that are feared or even recognized as an issue of concern, but rather Fra Cristoforo’s capacity to speak for and to Agnese’s village. While the noble class understands the potential gossip has for gathering and rallying public opinion, the lower peasant class seems oblivious to its power and political potential.

If it were not for Lucia’s secret there would be no sign of the power of Agnese’s voice to threaten the status quo in the peasant community. Her secret opens a space of ambiguity and ambivalence that critical readings have constantly and unconsciously closed. For example, Ezio Raimondi and Luciano Bottoni in their critical edition of the PS clarify with a footnote Lucia’s announcement to her mother about her confession to Fra Cristoforo:

Al padre Cristoforo, in confessione: il vincolo della confessione esclude, senza offenderlo, lo spirito di interferenza della madre. Al Manzoni si è rimproverato che, stando alle leggi canoniche, i cappuccini non avrebbero potuto confessare persone estranee all’Ordine, ma uno studioso autorevole come M. Barbi replicava che di fatto essi non furono mai privati della facoltà di confessare i laici. Certo, Lucia, per ragioni di logica artistica, non poteva confidarsi con don Abbondio. (53)

[To father Cristoforo in confession: the bond of confession excludes, but without offending, Agnese’s interventionist spirit. Manzoni has often been reproached that according to the canonical laws, the Capuchins would not have been allowed to confess individuals outside of their Order but in reality, as a scholar as authoritative as M. Barbi replies, in practice friars
were not denied the possibility of confessing lay individuals. Certainly, for the sake of artistic reasons, Lucia could hardly have gone to Don Abbondio for confession]

The note illustrates, on the one hand, the impetus to explain the artistic and practical reasons motivating Manzoni’s reference to a confessional practice not officially sanctioned by the Church while, on the other hand, the lack of interest in explaining Lucia’s secret mistrust for her mother’s voice and mediation. In other words, the footnote pre-empts any such question about the function of Lucia’s secret from being raised by stating that Lucia’s confessional bond to Fra Cristoforo “excludes, but does not offend” Agnese’s desire for intervention. The interpretation thereby leads us back to a reading of Lucia’s secret as a compassionate act of filial silence: reading which glosses over any of the tensions, ambivalences, and political implications of choosing to speak—or not—in and through the mother’s tongue. Manzoni’s suppression of Lucia’s ambivalent desires to confide in her mother, leads to a refocusing of the lens on how Lucia’s secret mistrust, occasionally underlined by her silencing glares, keeps Agnese’s maternal tongue from speaking for her. This potential voice, kept at bay, draws attention to the need for rethinking the relations between margins/center, private/public, insider/outside, community control/institutional control in the novel. Agnese’s position makes visible the possibilities of the desire, possibilities, and limits, to challenging a division of gender roles and spheres.28 As Lorraine Code writes, “gossip, in its workings, shatters the monolithic definition of ‘knowledge’ that governs standard epistemologies both honorifically and regulatively. It appeals, convincingly, to hitherto disreputable locations as sites where knowledge that is implicated in life-altering power can be made.”29 The suppression of Lucia’s ambivalent desire for a maternal /community mediation (suppression which we have seen is constitutive to the difference between the Lucias in the FL and the PS) invites readers to rethink

28 “Woman’s position has always been dual, both outside of dominant values and inside the society that lives by them. Often enough women have been complicit with dominant values, and women’s culture exists as a ‘muted’ subculture at the margins of the dominant culture. The analysis of woman’s position as (‘ambiguously’) non-hegemonic, is more subtle than that of woman as simply Other or Outsider.” Judith Kegan Gardiner, “Gender, Values, and Lessing’s Cats.” Feminist Issues in Literary Scholarship ed. Shari Benstock. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987) 112–13.

radically the narrative as well as the ideological implications of a novel considered so neutral in its representation of women and men as to make moot the question of a Manzonian feminism or anti-feminism.\footnote{30} Under the scrutiny of my feminist lens, Lucia’s secret stands out like an illegible mark, an undecipherable scribble, a detail-under-erasure in a scene which makes trust between mother and daughter impossible.\footnote{31} The secret, in other words, exudes a secret appeal. In her reading of fetishism, Emily Apter writes that the detail has the “tendency to prick consciousness, to encroach on the terrain of inner feelings, to expand to the point of obsession.”\footnote{32} What emerges from my insistent remarking of Lucia’s secret is the knowledge of how fundamentally interwoven it is with a text itself so interwoven with the construction of modern Italian identity and culture that its stains and blemishes, while noted, remain unread. Lucia’s secret reproduces, at a textual and experiential level, the same visual effect and fetishistic experience which Manzoni describes as being constitutive to his writing of the novel. The PS begins, as Manzoni explains in his prefatory remarks to the PS, with the story of his discovery of a seventeenth century anonymous manuscript which he decides diligently to transcribe and is in the process of so doing when he comes across a blot in the text which he cannot decipher. In front of this illegible mark he pauses and begins to reflect on the purpose of his transcription of the baroque seventeenth century prose:

Ma, quando io avrò durata l’eroica fatica di trascriver questa storia da questo dilavato e graffiatto autografo, e l’avrò data, come si suol dire, alla luce, si troverà poi chi duri la fatica di leggerla? Questa riflessione dubitativa, nata nel travaglio del decifrare uno scarabocchio che veniva dopo accidenti, mi fece sospendere la copia, e pensar più seriamente a quello che convenisse di fare (3)

But when I will have labored through the task of transcribing this story from this faded and messy manuscript, and I will have brought it, so to speak, to light, who will have the energy to read through it? This doubt, born in the process of trying to decipher a large scribble which came after

the word *accidents*, made me suspend the transcribing, and think more seriously about what ought to be done.

As a result of this reflection, Manzoni decides to translate (instead of transcribe) the story. The blot has, in other words, disrupted the flow of his writing and reading: its jolting unintelligibility produces a moment of critical reflection, a moment of distance and, ultimately, the opportunity to translate and rewrite a story that otherwise would be unreadable to a modern audience. For a different audience, Lucia’s secret reproduces the same need to stop and rethink the premises of a story that begins with the daughter’s exclusion of her mother from a position of knowledge and power. The secret invites us to rethink those spaces and discourses of knowledge kept from the center, kept from the telling of Lucia’s story, kept from “threatening” the stability of Lucia’s iconic position. It would be simplistic, at this point, to assume under the aegis of a feminist gesture this disruptive textual moment, this fascinating secret which immediately appeals to a feminist’s eye. Manzoni was not a feminist or, for that matter, an anti-feminist. The more complicated and demanding task is capitalizing on the leverage of this secret, magnifying its ambivalent position in the novel, its disruptive power, its constant potential for opening “a view from elsewhere” within the novel’s Oedipal scripting of Lucia’s silent betrayal.33 Manzoni, in the first drafted preface to the FL suggests that women are, generally speaking, better readers than men because they read for the plot and if it bores them, they don’t hesitate to throw the book aside. Unlike men, he argues, women do not thrive on the pleasure of teasing out the author’s mistakes, errors, and failures (241). In other words, men read fetishistically and are involved in a competitive relation with the author, while women remain libidinally uninvested in the novels they enjoy. Seen through his gendering of the reading process, Manzoni’s blatant parading of Lucia’s secret takes on an added, last provocative dimension.

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