

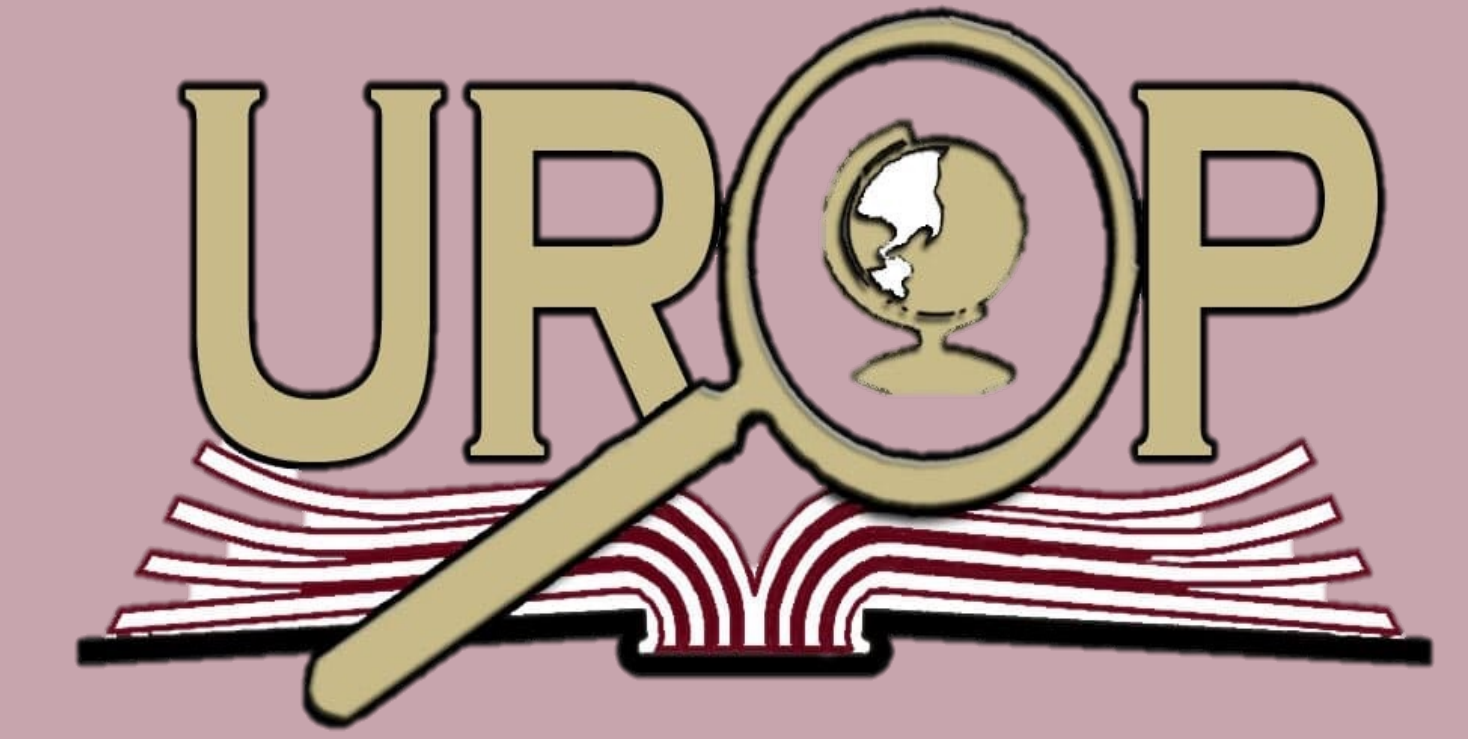
# Culture, Conversations, and Social Networks in 18th- & 19<sup>th</sup>- Century Italy



## Reframing Identity:

# Isabella Teotochi Albrizzi's Cultural Networks

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## Abstract

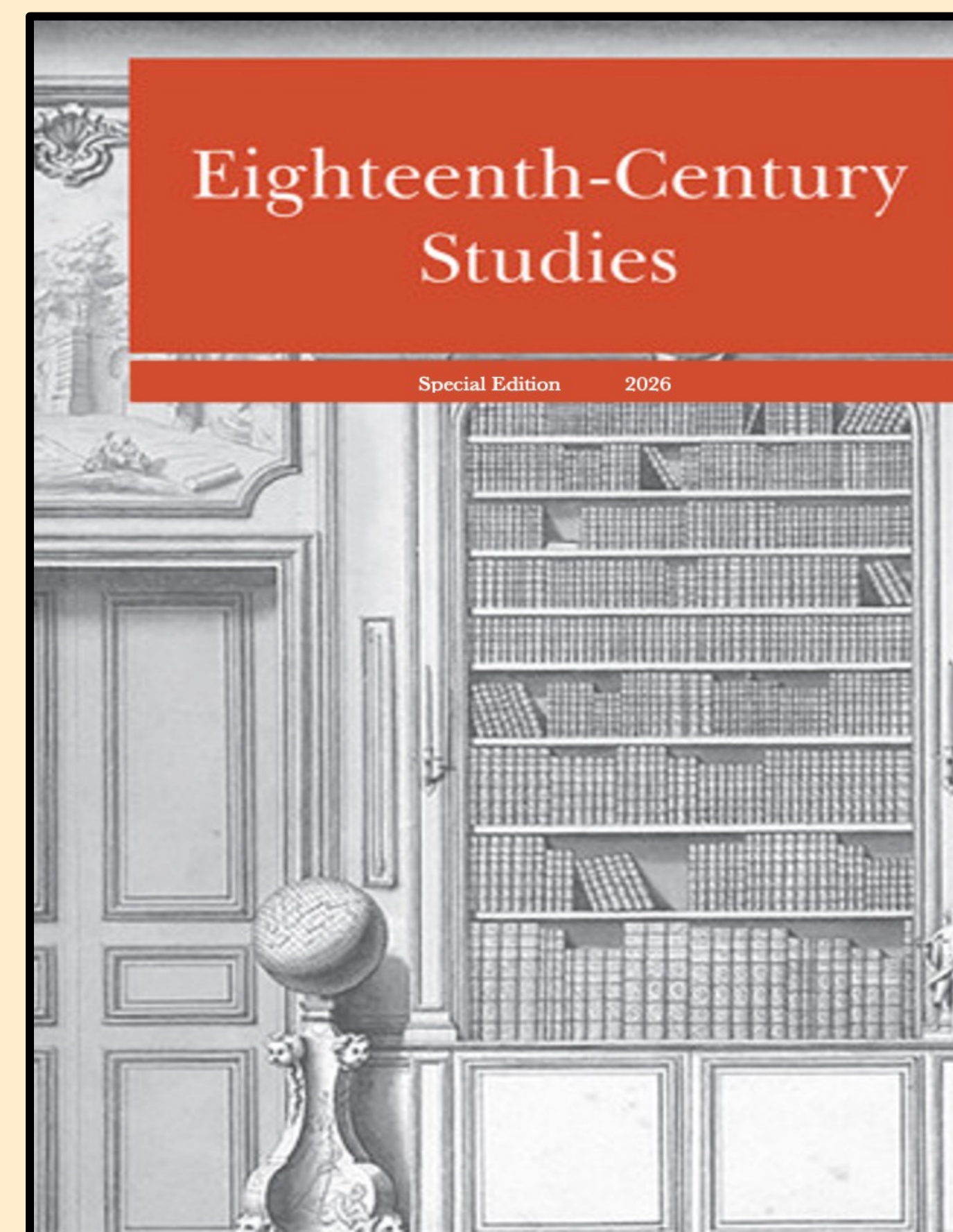
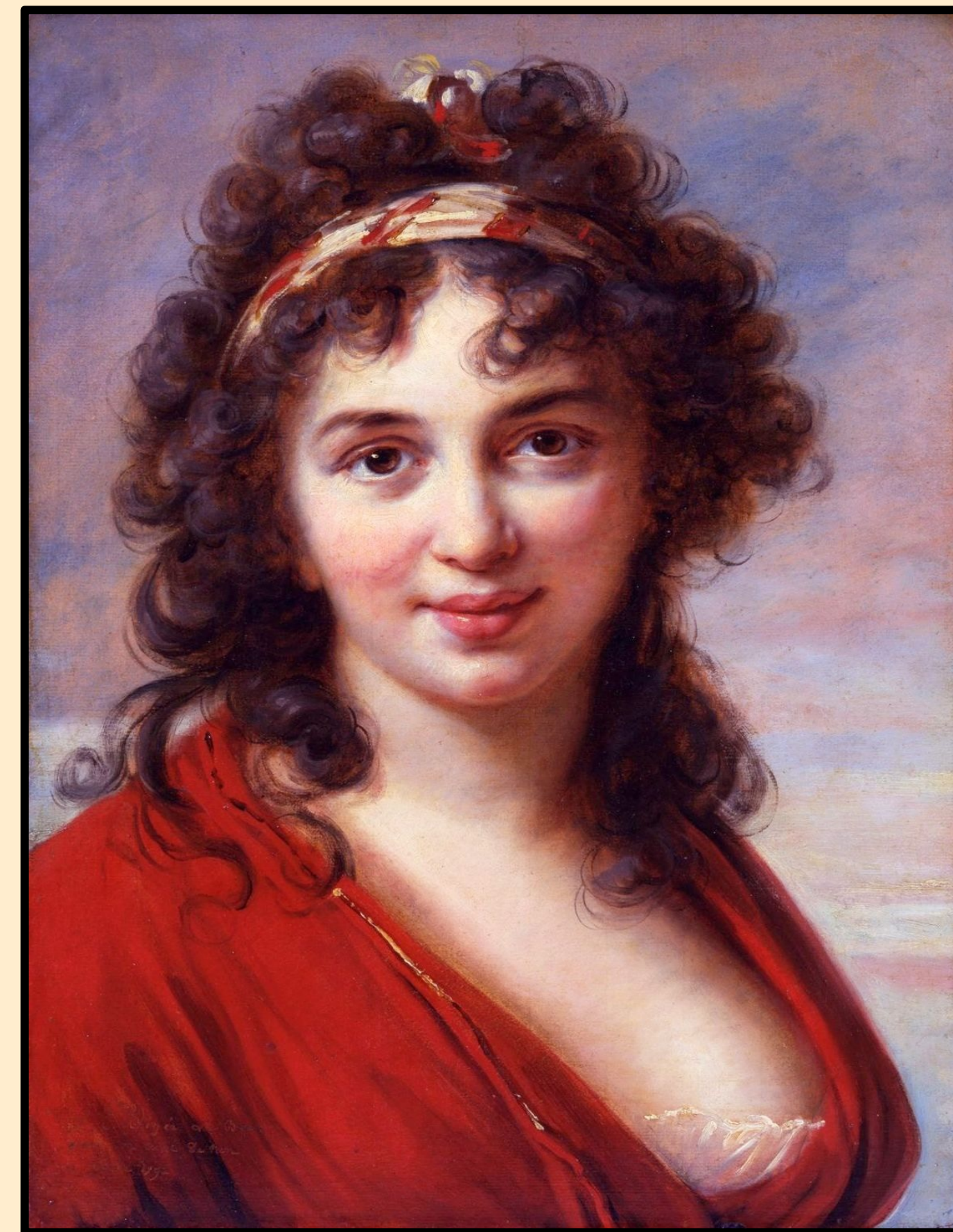
In the 18th century, Enlightenment salonnières, women who mediated conversation in salons, popularized the pseudo-literary genre of narrative portraits as guessing games in their salons. Narrative portraits were descriptions of a known person's outward appearance and character. While people thought women lacked the breadth of knowledge and talent required for proper biographical writing, these "literary" endeavors, rooted in the developing notions of psychology, were acceptable because it was believed that women excelled at knowing true character. The celebrated Venetian salonnière, Isabella Teotochi Albrizzi (1770-1836) published four editions of her *Ritratti* (1807-1826)- a book of narrative portraits describing the famous men in her salon, which she dedicated to her son as an educational tool to better understand people. As the editions of her book grew in complexity through the inclusion of a literary critique on Alfieri's *La Mirra* (1786) and the biography of a renowned Italian poetess, *La Vita di Vittoria Colonna* (1816), Teotochi Albrizzi challenged social and literary gender norms. By the last edition, she had reframed her identity into that of a respected literary critic and published author. Analyzing the additions and changes in Teotochi Albizzi's work, I show how they become a narrative tool to construct the self.

## Background

- Saverio Bettinelli (1718-1808) encapsulated a popular view of women at the time when he wrote, "... [women] see clearer than us and understand that kind of science which is not rooted in the methods, in the precepts, and in rules, but in the depths of the heart which only they study and understand beautifully." Women were believed to be conversant with the inner workings of the human heart; they were the unquestioned authority on its translation into one's outward behavior.
- The narrative portrait genre, usually written by women for women, was criticized and ridiculed because of the portrait's "feminine" qualities like excessive flattery, lack of structure, monotony, and its establishment in the private sphere (Ekstein). Hence, it lacked the qualities of real literature.
- Since women were typically excluded from serious academic work, to make her work palatable for public consumption Teotochi Albrizzi framed her *Ritratti* as a moral guide on people for her son, her literary criticism on Alfieri's *La Mirra* as an instructional for tool herself, and *La Vita di Vittoria Colonna* as a guide of virtue for women.

## Methods

I analyze the original Italian texts and translated versions of Isabella Teotochi Albrizzi's *Ritratti*, literary criticism on Alfieri's *La Mirra*, and *Vita di Vittoria Colonna* to examine how elements in each built up her reputation. Then, I cross reference each addition with secondary texts to investigate how her social networks functioned in the production of the texts.



## Analysis

- Teotochi Albrizzi published her *Ritratti* (1807) first as a present to her friends which consequently demonstrated her expertise in psychological profiling and publicly established her social and cultural networks. Then, through her literary critiques Alfieri's *La Mirra* (1786), she demonstrated the ability to make critical arguments and dissect emotion. Finally, in *La Vita di Vittoria Colonna*, she showcased her solid biographical writing skills while subtly immortalizing herself in the text.
- She maneuvered the gendered boundaries of acceptability in these works through distinctive phrasing and use of pronouns and adjectives related to feelings. Simultaneously she showcased her knowledge of physiognomy in the *Ritratti*, historical literature and philosophy in her critiques of *La Mirra*, and textual analysis of Vittoria Colonna's poems in *La Vita di Vittoria Colonna*.
- Teotochi Albrizzi relied on the credibility of the famous people in her social networks for collaborating, editing, and disseminating her work. Their assistance with preparing her works for publication helped her gain prestige and respect in the world of letters, from which women were typically excluded.
- Within the course of the four publications of her work, Teotochi Albrizzi reframed her identity using a combination of her own merit, her educational relationships with those in her social network, and her position as a salonnière to boost her reputation and respectability. In this way, her social networking proved to be a solid method of self-construction.
- Further Research could expand the textual field of analysis to other works, like *Opere di Scultura e di Plastica di Antonio Canova* (1809) to assess how they also contributed to the shaping of her identity.
- The lack of translated materials, my still imperfect knowledge of Italian, and the limited ability of translator apps potentially restrict this study.
- More detailed results and information for this project can be found in the podcast below and in a scholarly article on pedagogics that has been accepted for a special issue of *Eighteenth-Century Studies* focusing on women. "Conversations that Shape Identity: What 18th-century Italian Salonnières can Teach Modern Students," which will be written in collaboration with Dr. Zanini-Cordi and my UROP teammates.

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Sip & Connect: Social Networking Italian Style: