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1

Introduction: Who Were the Cicisbei?

What does the term ‘cicisbeo’ mean today? Search the internet for the word and its corresponding noun – cicisbeism – and it rapidly becomes clear that both remain current. Numerous references reveal the cicisbeo as a figure with consistent, if wide-ranging, characteristics: he is a dandy, a flirt, a fribertigibbet fluttering around women; an obsequious habitué of snobbish circles, television chat shows and vestibules. Yet if the image of the cicisbeo is today rather vague, ranging from the effeminate to the gallant, albeit someone accepted in high society, this is not completely at odds with historical reality. Nevertheless, during the eighteenth century when the word was coined, the neologism had a more precise meaning, indicating a specific social role. Here is the definition from a major Italian dictionary: ‘Cicisbèo. A lady’s escort who, in accordance with a custom which developed in the eighteenth century, was expected, with the husband’s consent, to be in attendance on the lady, accompany her and assist her in all her activities.’

Therefore a cicisbeo – or a married woman’s escort (cavalier servente) – had the public and declared task of living side by side with another man’s wife, as part of an arranged and desirable triangle. It is this historical figure who is the topic of this book.

Let me clarify a fundamental point from the outset: cicisbeism is not synonymous with adultery. It was in fact a recognised and accepted custom, carried out openly and, so to speak, officially; that is why it appears so exotic today. When twentieth-century anthropologists encountered what were for them unusual marriage customs outside the Western world, they adapted the eighteenth-century Italian term in order to explain them: ‘cicisbeism – states a classic work of Anglo-Saxon anthropology – a legitimisation of equal access to married women.’

A specific example of this phenomenon is the documented custom of the Sisala of Northern Ghana. In the village of Bujan, the old healer Vene, who already had many wives but only daughters and wanted a son, married a girl and also admitted to his own home her lover, the young Chuong.
The male lover therefore became a *hiila*, who came and went as he pleased, saw the woman without let or hindrance and could freely have sexual intercourse with her: ‘That – comments an American researcher who lived among the Sisala – was my first experience with the *hiila* custom, what anthropologists call *cicisbeism*.\(^3\)

The generic adoption of the Italian term is clearly the result of a gross oversimplification. There are many differences between a *hiila* and a cicisbeo, as there are between the contexts in which they operate. We can deal with the most obvious differences before entering into a detailed treatment of our subject. In eighteenth-century Italy, a man could not have more than one wife; a man could not have casual sexual relations with another man’s wife; there was a marked distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children. Nevertheless, there is an important similarity: the customary acceptance of a man, a stranger, alongside a married woman. This significant and intriguing fact makes it understandable, up to a point, that the most immediate reference of comparison for customs like that of the *hiila* among the Sisala should have been found in refined, eighteenth-century Italian civilisation, in the Italy of Carlo Goldoni, Giuseppe Parini and Vittorio Alfieri, of Rococo art and the development of opera, of the Enlightenment, of Pietro Verri and Cesare Beccaria.

This strange phenomenon, in a world that generally appears familiar, affords us an excellent opportunity to understand the differences between modern and eighteenth-century Italian society. In consequence, there is much to consider if we are to understand a little more about the Italian cicisbeo, starting with some elementary questions: What did the cicisbeo actually do? What were his rights and duties? In what circumstances and in what ways was he by the husband’s side, and in what ways a surrogate? And in order not to dissemble over the most obvious area of curiosity: to what extent did he fulfil the sexual role that we can imagine being performed energetically by the young Chuong in Bujan? In this book I will try to answer these questions as well as less obvious ones arising from my research.

First, let me describe a typical day for a cicisbeo. In fact, the job has been done for us by a masterpiece of eighteenth-century literature, *Il giorno* (The Day), a long satirical poem by Parini set in the world of the Milanese nobility. This work, subdivided into parts that were variously written and revised over more than 30 years starting in the early 1760s, does not, in the final analysis, appear totally consistent and finished. Nevertheless, its content is very clear. Through the figure of the protagonist, the ‘young nobleman’ (*giovin signore*), the poet indicts a whole class, the nobility: idle, privileged, extravagant and parasitic. However, within this account Parini gives a central and dominant place to the practice of cicisbeism, as a phenomenon typical of the nobility. The unmarried young nobleman is the escort of a married lady: ‘the chaste wife, dear to you,
of another man’, as Parini pungently defines her, addressing his antihero in a line that recurs, virtually unchanged, throughout the poem.

The young nobleman starts thinking about his beloved from the moment he wakes, late and leisurely after a night of merrymaking and gambling. His thoughts remain with her during his elaborate toilette, which includes the services of a renowned barber and ends with his being clothed in accordance with the latest French fashion. He then goes to the lady’s house, where he takes luncheon seated next to her, openly flirting with her in the presence of her indifferent husband who, after all, is perhaps in his turn the escort of another woman. The young nobleman, who also has the right to give orders to the servants in this other man’s house, makes sure that the lady is given her favourite dishes, and then personally serves her coffee, accompanied by brilliant if superficial conversation. He then sees to it that the carriage and horses are ready, while in the meantime entertaining the lady by playing her at tric trac, a form of backgammon. In the afternoon, having taken leave of the husband, the young nobleman accompanies her on a visit and then to the main street (corso) of Milan, where they both engage in gallant ‘conversation’ with other ladies and their escorts. At dusk, they take advantage of a few moments of intimacy in the privacy of the carriage. Finally, it is the young nobleman, and not the husband, who accompanies the lady to a sumptuous reception at a palace, in whose main hall there are tables to play cards and other society games. From there, he will take her back home in the middle of the night, bringing his day to an end.

My summary does not do justice to Parini’s art, and only hints at his scornful hostility towards cicisbeism. Favouring a sober and austere lifestyle, Parini is less concerned with understanding cicisbeism than with condemning it. This is a legitimate position for a satirical poet, but one that cannot exactly be used in historical analysis. Nevertheless, as an account of the daily conduct of a cicisbeo and his lady, Il giorno can be said to furnish reliable information, since it is corroborated by several other descriptions.

Leaving aside the poem’s imitators, with whom similarities can be taken for granted, in eighteenth-century Italian literature the most interesting comparison is with Goldoni’s plays. As we will see, Goldoni gives a presentation of cicisbeism that from a sociological perspective is less unequivocally negative and much more complex that Parini’s. This is due not only to a different mentality, but also to the difference between the two types of works: Parini’s moralising satire and Goldoni’s realistic plays. However, we can note initially that Goldoni’s cicisbei are busy doing the same things as Parini’s young nobleman, although Goldini’s are also occupied in other activities that are neglected or barely touched on in Il giorno. Thus, they wander around their ladies’ houses, sometimes being present at the ladies’ toilette, keeping them company,
courting them, taking them for walks, going to the theatre and escorting them to ‘conversations’ and soirées, which generally also include card games and sometimes the wearing of masks, and can take place in palaces or even in appropriate gambling houses (casini). Furthermore, Goldoni provides interesting additional information of a general nature: a lady might have more than one escort and, conversely, a cicisbeo might be escorting more than one lady, a subject that will reappear in the course of this book.

We can also see the cicisbei of Goldoni’s Venice in the set of illustrations to two editions of his plays published in the second half of the eighteenth century. I will focus only on those illustrations where the correlation between the text and the image permits secure identifications. The representation of La famiglia dell’antiquario (The Antiquarian’s Family; Plate 1) shows the interior of the house of a nobleman who clearly has an obsession for collecting antiques. In the drawing room there are also two ladies, his wife and his daughter-in-law, and four men: his son, his daughter’s father-in-law Pantaloon (a character who typifies an intermediate stage in the process of abandoning the mask) and the two ladies’ escorts. These escorts participate in a family reunion, which appears intimate and customary. La dama prudente (The Prudent Lady; Plate 2) depicts a typical scene of conversation with cicisbei, at the precise moment at which a manservant brings the guests some chocolate; and also portrays the characters playing cards. Despite the rudimentary simplicity common to all these illustrations, this suggests a lively scenario. In Plate 2b the lady, the protagonist of the comedy, is seated at the table on the left between two escorts who are vying with each other to serve her (the same ones who were on either side of her in Plate 2a), while at the table on the right her husband, who can barely repress his jealousy, is unable to stop himself from turning round to keep an eye on her.5

The works of great eighteenth-century Venetian painters, such as Pietro Longhi and Giandomenico Tiepolo, attentive observers of contemporary society, show the same circles and scenes. Since their paintings are not linked to texts, the interpretation is less certain than in the case of Goldoni’s illustrations. Nonetheless, the traditions that associate their subjects with the practices of cicisbeism are resonant. Let us just consider a couple of examples. In Tiepolo’s two scenes of recreation in a villa (1791–93), now kept at Ca’ Rezzonico, the fashionably dressed couple dancing the Minuet (Il minuetto; Plate 3) have repeatedly been identified as a lady and her cicisbeo; and the trio of the The Promenade (La passeggiata; front cover), in which the two men have different attitudes, almost certainly constitutes a conjugal–cicisbeo triangle. In contrast to Longhi, Tiepolo often openly displays irony, which emerges to a certain extent in these two works and becomes dominant in a contemporary drawing (Plate 4) entitled Il cavalier servente (The Lady’s Escort), in which the return from a gondola ride offers the opportunity for piquant satire.6
Writers and painters concur in their representations of the moments and events, at home and in public, that characterise a cicisbeo’s daily routine. These events are listed in another source, by French astronomer Joseph-Jérôme de La Lande, whose description of his stay in Italy in 1765 and 1766 became a popular travellers’ guide. His list of a cicisbeo’s tasks is based on his observations in Rome:

In Rome, a lady does not appear in society without an escort, who offers her his arm; every lady has her own escort, and one almost always sees them arriving together at receptions; they promenade like this, as a couple, through the halls, until they feel like playing cards. The escort is obliged to go and entertain his lady from the morning: he waits in the drawing room until she appears; he serves her during her toilette; he takes her to mass, and entertains her or plays cards with her until lunchtime. He returns promptly in the afternoon, is present at her new toilette, he takes her to the forty hours’ devotion [in church], and then to ‘conversation’, and takes her home at dinner time.7

La Lande’s list of duties corresponds to those gleaned from the descriptions already discussed. Some aspects are missing, some could be added, particularly the stages of religious worldliness that, as we shall see, did not exist exclusively in Rome. Yet apart from these clear differences, information from various sources recurs, to such an extent that the accounts of other eighteenth-century travellers and literary figures, Italian or foreign, simply confirm what we already know.8 We now need to acquaint ourselves instead with a real-life cicisbeo, rather than figures from the world of literary or figurative invention, or to the generic and indistinct typologies conveyed by travelogues of Italy.

The real-life cicisbeo who has given us the best daily description of his duties was the great poet Vittorio Alfieri. His account is not in a literary work, but in his private diary. The importance and widespread nature of this eighteenth-century custom may be gauged by the fact that it was practised by this greatest of Italian dramatists, albeit in his youth. Alfieri was a man far removed from the cultural and psychological profile of Parini’s giovin signore. On his return to Turin in 1773 after his wanderings around Europe, the 24-year-old Count Vittorio became, and remained for almost two years, the escort of Gabriella Falletti, a lady 10 years his senior who was married to Giovanni Antonio Turinetti, the Marquis of Priero. Alfieri subsequently narrated the period of ‘being a lady’s escort’ (serventismo) in later life in his literary autobiography, Vita scritta da esso (Memoirs of My Life), although the young Alfieri did write a contemporaneous diary of his immediate recollections. After the first difficulties in his relationship with Gabriella Falletti, the entries express his dissatisfaction with a way of life that became the subject of severe condemnation in
his autobiography. This does not mean that those entries do not bear effective witness to a cicisbeo’s assiduousness in his relations with his lady, nevertheless. As we are considering a cicisbeo who is becoming slightly recalcitrant in his role, the list of his duties might even be less than the considered norm. In any case, we find him completely immersed in the daily tasks of a lady’s escort.

The diary is in French, the main language of culture and worldliness in the eighteenth century, which Alfieri used as he was dissatisfied with his Italian too. I will give an outline summary of the three days in question. On Sunday 25 November 1774, having just got up and got dressed, Vittorio rushes to his lady, where he feels himself drawn by ‘a long habit, some traces of tenderness, and a kind of gratitude’, and spends the morning with her. He goes home alone to lunch with some literary figures he has invited. In the afternoon he goes, once again alone, by carriage to the main street in the city, where he admires and lusts after several beautiful women, some of whom reciprocate his feelings. On his way home, he stops to see an actress he had met abroad, but finding other people there he leaves almost immediately. He then goes to Gabriella in order to accompany her on a visit, but is not in the right mood to stay for a brilliant evening ‘in the most frequented house in the city’. The next day he wakes up thinking about his lady, and once again rushes to spend the morning with her. After having gone home to change quickly, he returns to lunch with her. In the afternoon he goes for a walk by himself, but then once again returns to his lady in order to escort her to her sister’s. Finally, he spends a couple of hours with her in the evening at her home. On the Tuesday, once again he spends virtually the whole morning with Gabriella. He then pays a barely affectionate visit to his own sister, and returns home late to have luncheon alone. He then goes back to take his lady for a walk; he manages to carve out two hours to do a little reading and writing, then returns yet again to Gabriella to witness ‘her boring toilette’, but at this point, rather than spending the evening with her, he decides to go home, where he ends the day with ‘quatre heures délicieuses occupé à écrire ma tragédie’, four final hours spent pleasurably writing Cleopatra, his first tragedy.9 The exhilaration of creative work at the end of these three days as a cicisbeo boded well for the young man’s future. He was taking control of his identity as a man and as a poet, a maturation that led him eventually to abandon his role as a lady’s escort. It is still noteworthy that even Vittorio Alfieri, with his powerful and overwhelming ego, paid tribute to this custom, carrying out all the activities associated with it.

Alfieri’s account neglects an important question, however. How did a cicisbeo’s duties fit in with the routine of a lady, or rather that of a married couple, in the medium and long term? Let us turn to the account of another real-life Italian nobleman, Costantino de’ Nobili of Lucca. De’ Nobili was not famous like Alfieri, and is unknown to high political or cultural history. Lucca was
then a small independent republic. Costantino, like Luisa Palma, the lady he escorted, and her husband, Lelio Mansi, was part of its aristocracy. Apart from these main characters, we should also mention two extras, the young brothers Lorenzo and Cesare Trenta, who sometimes kept Luisa company, albeit in a role much less significant than Nobili’s. We are indebted to the lady for her account of cicisbeism. Between 1791 and 1823 she wrote her ‘Mémoires ou Notices à l’usage de Louise Palma Mansi’, like Alfieri in French. It is a truly precious text: four manuscript tomes, a total of about 900 pages, offering a daily record of the appointments in the author’s social life; careful, punctilious and obsessively precise, it documents the meetings, recreation and parties of an urban Italian noblewoman during the end of the Ancien Régime in Italy, the French presence in Italy and the Restoration. The Mémoires are therefore also a diary, but one very different from Alfieri’s, in which one can already begin to perceive that conscious manifestation of the distinct personality that later characterised the Vita. Luisa Palma Mansi does not bare her soul. Instead, she gives us an account of her social life. Even if it is conveyed with all the human warmth of a legal contract, the Mémoires nonetheless constitute an invaluable source for explicit and implicit information on the cicisbeo relationship with Nobili, which lasted for almost all of the 1790s, and which was carefully documented on a daily basis, providing us with complete confirmation of the agenda proposed by Parini’s Giorno.

As reading a very detailed, and for the most part repetitive, description of someone else’s recreational activities throughout the course of a decade might be less than amusing, I will be very sparing in my references and quotations, limiting myself to cataloguing the different typologies of Nobili’s interventions. Visits made and received, conversations and dinners are everyday occurrences; parties are also very frequent, with an inevitable increase at the time of the Carnival, during which the nobility of Lucca also demonstrated their passion for masked balls: ‘Everyone had a great desire to enjoy themselves’ (I, 166), as the diarist wrote at the time of the 1796 Carnival. Her cicisbeo was always an integral part of the group; so much so that two years earlier, the lady records as noteworthy a disguise so perfect as to deceive even him: ‘I put on a fancy dress costume again for the second masked ball at the theatre, accompanied only by Caterina Marchetti and one of my manservants. We were not recognised by anyone, not even Costantino’ (I, 78). Luisa Palma, a true connoisseur of music who adores the theatre, also in this respect enjoys the usual devoted service: ‘I always go to Signor de Nobili’s box, number 20’ (I, 158). She has more difficulty in finding company for some (possibly less entertaining) private musical academies, like the one sponsored on 4 October 1794 by one of her relations, Marquise Carolina Mansi: ‘At her request I attended, but I went with Cavaliere Boccella, because neither Signor de Nobili nor Signor
[Lorenzo] Trenta was interested’ (I, 104). The frequent contact with Costantino is not limited to public occasions. In the autumn of 1796, while her husband is having a holiday in the country and her mother is also absent from Lucca, her cicisbeo keeps her company: ‘During the 11 days I spent in Lucca after my mother’s departure for S. Gennaro, I spent all the evenings at home, more often than not alone with Signor de Nobili, even though my sister-in-law Orsucci had invited me to her conversation with Signora Lucchesini’ (II, 35).

Over the timescale of a decade, the Mémoires also illustrate with a great wealth of detail the customary worldly events of the lifestyle of the nobility, which are not apparent in the very brief period of time depicted in Parini’s Giorno, nor in the slightly longer one recorded in Alfieri’s diary. Luisa Palma moves around a great deal between Lucca and at least four other country retreats belonging to her family or her husband. In one or other of these villas, there are often holidays or picnics, informal parties, receptions and soirées: all occasions when the cicisbeo’s company and his means of transport are much appreciated, namely – as Luisa writes – the ‘company of Signor de Nobili with his horses and light carriage’ (I, 37). Another reason for travelling is the lady’s already mentioned passion for the theatre. Thus, she often attends performances in the cities near Lucca, such as Pisa or Livorno (Leghorn). These outings, generally comprising, servants apart, a quartet – including Nobili, her sister-in-law Orsucci and Alessandro Guinigi, presumably the latter’s cicisbeo – lasted a few days and meant staying in a luxury hotel or accepting the hospitality of aristocratic friends and often attending a reception. Such trips could be very expensive, as in the case of the three days spent in Livorno at the beginning of October 1797; nevertheless, Luisa did not have any problems: ‘my husband was kind enough to pay for me’ (II, 107).

A husband’s willingness to finance his wife’s outings with her escort brings us back to the heart of the matter: the openly triangular (subordinately polygonal) nature of cicisbeism, on which the Mémoires shed much light. About 10 years of daily diary entries bring out very well two complementary aspects of the situation. On the one hand, there is the frequency and ‘naturalness’ of the cicisbeo, rather than her husband, being at the lady’s side at so many times in her life. Let me simply quote what Luisa Palma wrote on 10 May 1797, during one of Lelio Mansi’s trips to the country: ‘On 10th of the same [month] I had dinner at Scilivano in order to see my husband, accompanied by Signor de Nobili and Signor Cesare Trenta’ (II, 75). This passage perfectly and concisely defines a type of relationship that to us appears an astounding reversal of roles. On the other hand, it is precisely the natural familiarity between the lady and her escort that makes it perfectly possible to organise events when the husband is not replaced but flanked by his wife’s cicisbeo: events, in fact, experienced as a trio, in which Lelio Mansi is not only a passive element, as in the meeting
at Scilivano. Between May and July 1792, husband, wife and cicisbeo travelled by coach from Lucca to Venice and back. This journey was recorded in Luisa’s other diary, which unfortunately has been lost (I, 24). Significantly, they sometimes participated in public holidays at Lucca as a threesome, for example in the 1797 Carnival at the club for the aristocracy: ‘Every evening of the ladies’ parties at the Club, I went with my husband and Signor de Nobili for the dinner given by Signor Raffaele Mansi for 24 guests’ (II, 60). Furthermore, apart from being visible and not hidden, the triangle was also not fortuitous but formalised. In the Mémoires, on 28 November 1796 Luisa writes: ‘On the same day, I received three invitations, for the dinner of St. Ansano, for myself, my husband and Signor de Nobili’ (II, 38). Returning momentarily to the images depicting cicisbeism, it is my view that it is in the light of such statements that we can interpret a painting such as Tiepolo’s above-mentioned *Promenade*, chosen for the cover of this book because of its evocativeness.

Due to the widespread nature of this custom among eighteenth-century Italian nobles, we can take it for granted here that a more or less casual triangle, both in terms of life as a threesome and of the husband frequently being replaced by the cicisbeo, was the normal – or at least a normal – model of marriage. It is important to stress this near-institutionalised normality, because it distinguishes the custom sharply within the much broader and more general subject of more or less free relations between the sexes in the eighteenth century, the century of the gallant *par excellence*. I repeat that the most interesting aspect of cicisbeism is not sexual freedom or infidelity, but the official nature of the legitimisation of other men’s access to married women. These two factors are clearly linked, but not identical. In the following chapters I shall attempt to analyse the problem in greater detail, by considering the theme of Italians’ private morality through the actual daily events of life. Before concluding this introduction, however, I should explain the reason for the second element of the book’s subtitle: national identity.

Underlying the adoption of the Italian term ‘cicisbeism’ by non-Italian anthropologists to explain forms of polyandry in Africa, there is a long history of intercultural relations that had its decisive phase precisely in the eighteenth century. This was the golden age of the Grand Tour, the educational journey made by European nobles throughout Italy, regarded as the country of classical reminiscences and Renaissance art. Apart from admiring paintings and ruins, these foreigners used to meet ladies, their escorts and their husbands in the drawing rooms and theatre boxes of the cities they visited. Invariably they reacted with great interest and, in many instances, feigned astonishment when confronted by cicisbeism. The politeness of the astronomer La Lande in respect to cicisbeism was not the norm. Thus, in the vast mass of relevant recollections and judgements in the travel accounts, one finds just about everything: useful
information, plausible hypotheses, mischievous suggestions, patent nonsense and shameful calumnies. Still, the common element in these works of very variable quality is the idea that the custom was a totally Italian invention and habit, and therefore a distinctive feature of Italian family morality and social life. This idea – as we shall see – was, in its clearest formulation, fundamentally mistaken. Yet an image, though distorted – in fact, it is perhaps more valuable to the historian if it is distorted – can also be an important historical subject. As this applies to the identification between Italians and cisisbei, it will be useful to study both the reality of cisisbeism in Italy and its image in Europe.

This was not, I hasten to add, a positive image, and that was not only due to the prejudices of some gossiping and ignorant travellers. In fact, the opinions that developed over the course of the eighteenth century culminated, at the beginning of the nineteenth, in one of the major writings of the European culture of Romanticism: a work in which matrimonial customs are at the heart of a study of Italian history, by a sober, cultured and sympathetic author. I am referring to the *Histoire des Républiques italiennes du moyen âge* (1807–18) by Simonde de Sismondi, a historian and economist educated in the Calvinist environment of Geneva, part of Madame de Staël’s liberal circle and well acquainted with Italy. Most of the *Histoire* reconstructs, with warm admiration, the history of the free Italian Communes in the closing centuries of the Middle Ages. However, in the last volume, which is a kind of appendix summarising the events of the early modern age, the tone changes. Any trace of glory or greatness disappears from Italian history in the sixteenth century, according to Sismondi, replaced by subservience and corruption, heightened by political subjection to Spain and religious subjection to the Counter-Reformation Church.

What concerns us here is the discovery of those who were, in this account, the protagonists of the dramatic crisis of modern Italian morality, since surprising as it may seem to us, the absolutely central and dominant protagonists of this crisis were the cisis bei. Sismondi accorded such importance to the custom that he did not wait to write about it in the part of his book dealing with the eighteenth century, but began to do so at the beginning of the chapter on the seventeenth century, thus showing the urgency with which he wished to tackle a decisive issue in regard to the end of political independence and the establishment of the Counter-Reformation. He did not conceal his amazement at what he saw, mistakenly, as a lack of interest by other writers in this subject:

No one has included among Italy’s public calamities perhaps the most general cause of the private problems of all Italian families; the affront, I mean, to the sacred bond of marriage by means of another bond regarded as honourable, and that the foreigners always see in Italy with the same amazement, without being able to understand why it is so; and it is that of the cisisbei or cavalieri serventi.
The section that follows is too long to be included in its entirety, but I will quote at least a few more sentences to give an idea of the tone and content. In order to 'placate the restless spirits recently reduced to servitude' and 'pass the hours of leisure like a courtier',

the rights and bizarre duties of cicisbei and ladies’ escorts were invented; these rights and duties were based entirely on two laws created by high society, and were: that no woman could decently appear in public alone: and that likewise no husband could, without appearing ridiculous, accompany his wife.

Consequently,

no husband any longer could look upon his spouse as a life-long faithful companion; no longer could he find in her a counsellor in his doubt, a support in adversity, a saviour in danger, a consoler in his desperation; no father could dare to assume that the children of his marriage were really his.

In conclusion, Sismondi even goes so far as to say:

Not because some women had lovers, but rather because a woman could no longer appear in public without a lover, the Italians ceased to be men.11

It should be borne in mind that the Histoire, precisely because of its thesis about Italy's moral crisis in the early modern era, made an enormous and lasting impact on Italian Risorgimento intellectuals and politicians, and that a considerable part of their writings should be seen as an explicit or implicit dialogue with Sismondi. Suffice it to mention that as early as 1819 Alessandro Manzoni, on the threshold of his most artistically creative period, devoted himself to drawing up the Osservazioni sulla morale cattolica (Observations on Catholic Morality), a long treatise confuting Sismondi's views about religion and the Church; and that following Italian unification Francesco de Sanctis, the great literary critic, patriot and Minister of Education, could instead write that the Histoire ‘should be our code, our gospel, until we rebuild our character’.12 Evidently, the issue goes beyond the compass of cicisbeism; nevertheless, if one were to take Sismondi’s views seriously, as nineteenth-century Italians certainly did, there is no doubt that the custom, as a corrupter of social and moral pillars such as marriage and the family, had a decisive responsibility in marring the Italian ‘character’, a character that it was therefore necessary to re-establish together with the new unitary State. The Histoire stated forcibly and with efficacy the
implications of the civic and political importance of the gallant custom in the nation’s life and identity.

This certainly is not something that can be ignored. I shall of course attempt to consider the history of the Italian cicisbei in a more tolerant spirit than Sismondi, and one that is, if anything, closer to the moral climate of Goldoni’s comedies or Pietro Longhi’s paintings; similarly, I shall address the problem of virility in the Italian national character in less dramatic terms than we have just encountered. However, neither do I want to avoid taking into account the vigorous nationalisation of the theme set out by Sismondi and accepted by his Italian readers. Alongside the study of the reality of this custom that is at the heart of this book, I therefore give further attention to the study of the image (or myth) of the custom in the final chapter. This is an important aspect in itself, which had a significant influence on the events themselves. Furthermore, the image of Italy, for foreigners and Italians themselves, is an element that should be borne in mind in order to understand properly the opinions expressed about cicisbeism by men of letters and travellers throughout the eighteenth century.

This book is organised as follows. Chapter 2 correlates the origin and spread of the custom of cicisbeism with changes in the ideas and behaviour of the nobility, induced by the Enlightenment. Chapter 3 identifies other reasons for the success of the phenomenon, in terms of wealth and demographic considerations for noble families, and in their strategies of alliances and class solidarity. Chapter 4 illustrates the diverse forms of cicisbeism in relation to variety in the Italian aristocracy and compares the custom with the more common relationship of comparatico. The first four chapters thus demonstrate that cicisbeism concerned many important things that were not necessarily related to the erotic sphere, to such an extent that it assumed a significance that can be defined, at least broadly speaking, as political. Chapter 5 shows how the ‘service’ given by these escorts to ladies could specifically be related to love and sex, and the consequences of this. The final chapter discusses reasons for the disappearance of the cicisbei and the demise of the custom through the revolution that brought the Ancien Régime to an end, and the emergence of a national consciousness with the Risorgimento.

It is my hope that the book will also be of interest in regard to the primary sources I have consulted, especially the letters and diaries of the women and men who practised this custom. It is through this research on the lived experience that more familiar sources such as literary works and travel accounts, used by others who have previously written about the cicisbei, are examined here. The documentary basis of the book depends (my greater or lesser ability and fortune as a researcher notwithstanding) on the availability of sources, which is
not the same in different parts of Italy. To a certain extent, the availability and location of sources correspond to the degree to which the custom was practised and its importance, as well as the variety of nuances in the custom from city to city. Throughout the book the reader will notice this geopolitical variability of cicisbeism, which I discuss in Chapter 4.
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