

## Saggi/Essays



# *The first perverse Review. Pasquale Penta and his pioneering studies on sexual psychopathy*

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*Abstract:* In 1896, in a very bigoted and puritan Italy, the psychiatrist and criminal anthropologist Pasquale Penta launched the “Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali”, the world’s first Review to directly address sexual deviance. Its purpose was to promote scientific understanding of sexuality, especially its pathological forms. Despite the unique nature of the journal and the more than satisfactory sales, it ceased publication after only one year. No official explanation was given. This article will retrace the path that led Penta to establish the Review and to identify possible reasons for the interruption of his pioneering venture.

*Keywords:* Pasquale Penta, “Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali”, Sexual Perversions.

## 1. *Towards a science of sexuality*

The historian Peter Gay has defined the nineteenth century as “restless”<sup>1</sup>, marked by ambivalent forces: on the one hand, Victorian puritanism and bourgeois respectability which made it one of the most sexually repressive periods in history, and on the other hand, non-conformist and libertarian approaches. As for the former, the biographer and writer Stefan Zweig already noted that, in the nineteenth century, many people chose to ignore the thorny issue of sexuality:

Art, science, morality, the family, the Church, the school, and the university were all given the same marching orders. There was to be no parleying with the enemy, who must never be met in open fight, but invariably circumvented. There was to be no discussion, no argumentation; the adversary must be fought by silence, by boycotting and ignoring him<sup>2</sup>.

But the nineteenth century is also the century that romanticizes science, a science now called upon to penetrate all the mysteries of human existence,

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Gay, *Schnitzler’s Century: The Making of Middle-Class Culture 1815–1914*, Norton, New York 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Stefan Zweig, *Mental Healers: Franz Anton Mesmer, Mary Baker Eddy, Sigmund Freud*, Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, New York 1962, p. 255.

including sexual taboos. As Michel Foucault pointed out, “the will to knowledge has not come to a halt in the face of a taboo that must not be lifted, but has persisted in constituting – despite many mistakes, of course – a science of sexuality”<sup>3</sup>. In the gradual transition from the *ars amandi* (the description of the ways of loving and the effects of love known in previous centuries) to the *scientia sexualis* (the analysis, classification, and regulation of sexual relationships) the focus shifts from the private to the public sphere. More precisely, to ensure the health and safety of the entire community, it becomes necessary to clearly demarcate the normal and the pathological, especially concerning sexual behaviours. Ultimately, as Georges Canguilhem emphasized, the “normal” itself began to be defined almost exclusively in relation to the “pathological”<sup>4</sup>.

To establish certain boundaries between the normal and the abnormal in sexuality – explains medical historian Giuseppe Armocida – society has also turned to the doctrine of physicians. [...] medicine did not decline the invitation, feeling itself capable, from the very beginning of the emergence of psychiatric doctrine, of studying and recognising certain conduct as pathological<sup>5</sup>.

This has led to a sort of medicalisation of morality. Diederik Janssen summarises the phenomenon as follows: “Gradually, the idea of the sinner ‘perverting’ divine natural purpose by committing the sin gave way to a conception of the sinner ‘suffering from a perversion’ of the developing sex instinct, and indeed from ‘specific perversions’ rather than indiscriminate libertine frenzy”<sup>6</sup>. And so, if until the middle of the nineteenth century it was mainly the magistrates and theologians who dealt with perverts, now the doctor somewhat takes the place of the priest and the confessor, replacing virtues and sins with a supposedly scientific list of healthy and pathological behaviours<sup>7</sup>. The categories of “perversity” and “perversion”<sup>8</sup> become central.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality I*, Pantheon Books, New York 1978, pp. 12-13.

<sup>4</sup> Georges Canguilhem, *Le normal et le pathologique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1966.

<sup>5</sup> Jutta M. Birkhoff, Giuseppe Armocida, Roberta Serra, *Perversioni, pervertimenti e perversità, ovvero parafilie*, “Rassegna italiana di criminologia”, IX, 1, 2015, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> Diederik F. Janssen, *From Libidines nefandæ to sexual perversions*, “History of Psychiatry”, 31, 2020, p. 422.

<sup>7</sup> Lorenzo Benadusi, *Lecito e illecito. Nascita della sessuologia e invenzione delle perversioni nell'Italia tra Otto e Novecento*, “Zapruder. Rivista di storia della conflittualità sociale”, 6, 2005, pp. 29-43, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> As Gert Hekma explains, at the end of the nineteenth century “Most physicians still distinguished between biologically based ‘perversions’ and ‘perversities’ resulting from sexual exhaustion”, Gert Hekma, *A history of sexology: social and historical aspects of sexuality*, in Jan Bremmer (ed.), *From Sappho to De Sade. Moments in the history of sexuality*, Routledge, London 1989, p. 180. In his *Psychopathia sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing had drawn a theoretical distinction between the notions of perversity and perversion. He explained that while the perverse individual, being inherently pathological, is not to be held responsible for his abnormality, the perverted individual, by deliberately choosing to pervert his impulses, is accountable for his abnormal behavior (Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia*

Following in the footsteps of pioneers such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, Auguste Forel, Ivan Bloch, Albert Möll, and Magnus Hirschfeld<sup>9</sup>, between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, Italian medicine also cautiously began to explain numerous sexual phenomena and certain anomalies<sup>10</sup>, mirroring the approach of these innovators. An exceptional contribution was made by a young physician from Irpinia (southern Italy), Pasquale Penta, whom Paul Adolf Näcké, director of the Saxon Mental Hospital in Colditz, would describe as “a great scholar and promoter of sexology”<sup>11</sup>.

“A disenchanted observer of human phenomena”, Penta enjoyed considerable fame among his contemporaries, “putting himself forward in the Italian scientific community as one of the most prominent figures in the field [psychiatry and criminal anthropology], following the path recently laid out by Lombroso”<sup>12</sup>. Then, unjustly, he was almost completely forgotten<sup>13</sup>. Yet, it

*Sexualis, traduzione italiana sulla 16ª e 17ª edizione tedesca completamente rielaborata dal Dott. Albert Möll con note di adeguamento al Diritto italiano a cura del Prof. Piero Giolla*, Carlo Manfredi Editore, Milan 1966, p. 83). For further details on the distinction between perversity and perversion, see J.M. Birkhoff, G. Armocida, R. Serra, *Perversioni, pervertimenti e perversità*, cit.; Massimo Filippi, *L'invenzione della specie: sovvertire la norma, divenire mostri*, Ombre corte, Verona 2016; Matteo Loconsole, Paolo Mantegazza, *Alle origini dell'educazione sessuale*, Biblion edizioni, Milano 2021, p. 93.

<sup>9</sup> For an overview of the contributions of these authors to the emerging science of sexology, see, among many others, the volume by Vern L. Bullough, *Science in the Bedroom. A History of Sex Research*, Basic Books, New York 1994.

<sup>10</sup> Interesting studies on “sexual inversion” were conducted by Arrigo Tamassia (1849-1917); by Clodomiro Bonfigli (1838-1909), director of the Psychiatric Clinic of the University of Rome and of the Santa Maria della Pietà Asylum, who, within the context of criminal sexual behaviors, proposed the distinction between perversion (of a pathological nature) and perversity (an expression of vice and not of disease); by Silvio Venturi (1851-1900), director of the Girifalco Asylum, who believed that sexual disorders could be related to pathological processes and dwelt at length on what he called “sexual monstrosities”, a term he used to indicate many of what we might now define as “paraphilias”. On this subject, see J.M. Birkhoff, G. Armocida, R. Serra, *Perversioni, pervertimenti e perversità*, cit.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Näcké, *Penta als einer der besten Kenner und Förderer der Sexualwissenschaft*, “Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft”, 1, 1908, pp. 74-81, p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> Ilaria Gorini, Giuseppe Armocida, Jutta M. Birkhoff, *Pasquale Penta (1859-1904) un antropologo criminale non soltanto “lombrosiano”*, “Rassegna italiana di criminologia”, XIV, 1, 2020, pp. 12-17, pp. 14-15.

<sup>13</sup> Among the few attempts to rescue Pasquale Penta from oblivion are the commendable efforts of Lucia Monacis (*Genio, follia e criminalità nella Belle Époque*, Pensa MultiMedia, Lecce 2009; *Genio, follia e criminalità nella Belle Époque. Pasquale Penta*, in Paolo Contini, Giovanni Pietro Lombardo, Maria Sinatra (a cura di), *Follia e imputabilità nelle perizie giudiziarie. Casi clinici e ricerche dall'Ottocento ad oggi*, Franco Angeli, Milan 2023, pp. 199-217); Chiara Beccalossi (*The Construction of Scientific Knowledge Regarding Female ‘Sexual Inversion’: Italian and British Sexology Compared, c. 1870-1920*, PhD Dissertation, Queen Mary University of London, London 2008; *Female Sexual Inversion. Same-Sex Desire in Italian and British Sexology, c.1870-1920*, Palgrave MacMillan, London 2012; also mentioned in Arrigo Tamassia, *l'inversione sessuale e la sessuologia italiana di fine Ottocento*, “Rivista Sperimentale di Freniatria. La rivista della salute mentale”, CXXXVIII, 2, 2014,

was thanks to him that the “Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali” was launched in 1896. It was not only the first *European Review* of sexuality<sup>14</sup>, but also the first journal in the *world* to address “sexual deviance”<sup>15</sup>.

The Review aimed to promote the scientific understanding of sexuality, especially its pathological forms, with particular attention to the practical applications that the studies and findings presented could have in the field of forensic medicine. Despite its exceptional nature and the more than satisfactory sales, the “Archivio” ceased publication after only one year of existence. No advance notice or explanation was given. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to trace the path that led Penta to establish the Review and to identify the possible reasons for the abrupt termination of his pioneering venture.

## 2. *From Verzeni’s perversions to the “Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali”*

Penta took the first step towards the study of sexual psychopathy by analysing the case of Vincenzo Verzeni, the women strangler. This very young farmer from Bottanuco (near Bergamo), who was found guilty of the brutal murders of two women and the attempted murder of a third, was sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour and, on 3 March 1874, transferred to the S. Stefano penal colony in the Gulf of Naples<sup>16</sup>. Cesare Lombroso, who had testified as an expert witness at Verzeni’s trial, explained his criminal behaviour, at least in part, by a “kind of bloodthirsty fury that is associated with lechery”<sup>17</sup> and described him as “a savage with a lust for blood, a cannibal and therefore an atavistic criminal”<sup>18</sup>; a kind of a vampire<sup>19</sup> or violent savage;

pp. 27-41); Laura Schettini, who curated the entry “Pasquale Penta” in the *Dizionario Biografico degli italiani*, LXXXII, 2015; the articles by Marta Licata, Roberta Fusco, Silvia Iorio, Chiara Tesi, *Critical to the clinical value of anthropological anomalies of the skull in Forensic Psychiatry and Criminal Anthropology (from the lessons of Professor Pasquale Penta 1899-1900 academic year)*, “Medicina Historica”, III, 1, 2019, pp. 10-15; and by I. Gorini, G. Armocida, J.M. Birkhoff, *Pasquale Penta*, cit.

<sup>14</sup> L. Schettini, Entry “Pasquale Penta”, cit.

<sup>15</sup> Giovanni Dall’Orto, *Tutta un’altra storia. L’omosessualità dall’antichità al secondo dopoguerra*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 2015, p. 509.

<sup>16</sup> *Traduzione di detenuti*, “La Provincia Gazzetta di Bergamo”, III, 51, 3 March 1874, pp. unnum.

<sup>17</sup> Cesare Lombroso, *Verzeni e Agnolotti studiati dal prof. Cesare Lombroso*, “Rivista di discipline carcerarie in relazione con l’antropologia, col diritto penale, con la statistica ecc.”, 1873, III, 4-5, p. 201.

<sup>18</sup> Renzo Villa, *Faits divers et crimes célèbres*, in Laura Bossi (sous la direction de), *Crime et folie*, Gallimard, Paris 2011, p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> Nicole Rafter, Per Jørgen Ystehede, *Lombroso e la cultura di massa in Europa (1890-1930)*, in Silvano Montaldo, Paolo Tappero (a cura di), *Cesare Lombroso cento anni dopo*, UTET, Torino 2009, p. 189.

a degenerate with hereditary mental disorders<sup>20</sup> and even a necrophiliac<sup>21</sup>. Fourteen years later, it was Penta who studied Verzeni. Six years later, he published his reflections on the subject<sup>22</sup>. While openly embracing Lombrosian doctrines and adhering to his organic interpretation of disorders, Penta disagreed with certain of Lombroso's conclusions. According to Penta, who believed that every degeneration was an animal reversion, Verzeni was a degenerate<sup>23</sup> whose development was strongly influenced by both hereditary pathologies and the poor conditions of his psycho-physical environment<sup>24</sup>. The Bottanuco murders were "nothing more, nothing less than a bestial copulation<sup>25</sup>, a case of reversion"<sup>26</sup>; the acts of a pervert who basically was no longer human<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Patrizia Guarnieri, *Conflitti e convergenze tra psichiatria e legge (1876-1913)*, in Filippo Maria Ferro et al. (a cura di), *Passioni della mente e della storia: protagonisti, teorie e vicende della psichiatria italiana tra '800 e '900*, Vita & Pensiero, Milano 1989, p. 492.

<sup>21</sup> C. Lombroso, *Verzeni e Agnolotti*, cit., p. 204. For an in-depth analysis of the various Lombrosian interpretations of the Verzeni case, see Lorenzo Leporiere, *Anche il più piccolo particolare. Cesare Lombroso indaga sul caso Verzeni*, in Claudia Addabbo, Elena Canadelli, Luigi Ingaliso et al. (a cura di), *Ad limina. Frontiere e contaminazioni transdisciplinari nella storia delle scienze*, Editrice Bibliografica, Milan 2023, pp. 248-257; Id., *Le confessioni di un vampiro. Cesare Lombroso al processo di Vincenzo Verzeni* in Paolo Contini, Giovanni Pietro Lombardo, Maria Sinatra (a cura di), *Follia e imputabilità nelle perizie giudiziarie. Casi clinici e ricerche dall'Ottocento ad oggi*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2023, pp. 120-144.

<sup>22</sup> Pasquale Penta, *I perversimenti sessuali nell'uomo e Vincenzo Verzeni strangolatore di donne. Studio biologico*, Luigi Pierro Editore, Naples 1893. A much shorter version of this study had already been published in 1890: Id., *Vincenzo Verzeni e le parestesie sessuali*, "La Tribuna Giudiziaria", IV, 10, 25 March 1890, pp. 73-74. Penta would return to discussing Verzeni during the VIII session (held on 12 September 1891) of the Seventh Congress of the Società Freniatria Italiana held in Milan, where he delivered a presentation titled *La genesi e il significato dei perversimenti sessuali nell'uomo*, in *Atti del Settimo Congresso della Società Freniatria Italiana Tenuto in Milano dal 9 al 12 Settembre 1891*, E. Rechiedei e C.i editori, Milano 1891, p. 120.

<sup>23</sup> P. Penta, *I perversimenti sessuali*, cit. p. 123.

<sup>24</sup> *Ivi*, p. 148. Penta, much more than Lombroso, emphasises the importance of psycho-social factors in the Verzeni case. See C. Beccalossi, *Female Sexual Inversion*, cit. p. 151.

<sup>25</sup> As Luigi Roncoroni aptly summarises in his review of Penta's text for the Lombrosian "Archivio": "The main characteristics of these ferocious acts consisted of unconsciousness, to the point that he did not see, hear, or feel anything at that moment, he did not sense the danger; in the rudimentary nature of the sexual act as he would achieve erection without copulation, but merely by strangling the victim until suffocation occurred; and brutally, as in several instances, after suffocating the victim, he literally mutilated her in every way with a razor, extracting her organs, thrusting his hands inside, tearing off her limbs, sucking her blood, and biting her flesh". Luigi Roncoroni, *Pasquale Penta – I perversimenti sessuali nell'uomo e Vincenzo Verzeni strangolatore di donne*, Napoli, Pierro, 1892, "Archivio di psichiatria, scienze penali ed antropologia criminale per servire allo studio dell'uomo delinquente" XIV, 3, 1893, pp. 309-310.

<sup>26</sup> P. Penta, *I perversimenti sessuali*, cit., p. 93.

<sup>27</sup> Over time, Verzeni's "perversion" had taken on new meanings. Beccalossi summarises the issue as follows: "In prison, where sexual perversion was widespread, Verzeni had lost his sexual

The essay on Verzeni is of enormous interest for the purposes of this reconstruction as it represents the starting point for Penta's studies on sexual psychopathy<sup>28</sup>. That case, he states, "led me to delve into other sexual perversions"<sup>29</sup>. Indeed, the study of this case convinced him that the origin of almost all sexual perversions is more or less the same: they "are a manifestation of deviance which in turn is the effect of severe hereditary diseases, if not of difficult and bad environmental conditions"<sup>30</sup>. Drawing on Alfred Binet's theories on fetishism, Penta claims that the pleasure Verzeni took when strangling chickens as a child was closely related to that, he took as an adult in wrapping his hands around his victims' necks. On the basis of the analysis of the Bottanuco strangler, Penta concludes that perverts associate the achievement of pleasure with a certain image that was a source of erotic excitement in childhood. In perverts, sexual development is hindered by an erotic experience that occurred in early childhood. Sexual perversion is thus configured as a form of "rudimentary" and primitive love. A bestial love.

That same essay earns Penta considerable recognition in the scientific community. So much so that, a few years later, the small publishing house Fratelli Capaccini asked him – "already well-known in the field for his book *Pervertimenti sessuali*"<sup>31</sup> – to direct a journal entirely dedicated to the scientific study of sexual psychopathy: the "Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali". This journal is of fundamental importance as because it is the first of its kind. Magnus Hirschfeld's "Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen", referred to as the "direct precursor" of Penta's journal<sup>32</sup>, would in fact be founded only three years later, in 1899<sup>33</sup>. As for the periodical "Der Eigene", established by Adolf Brand in 1896, it actually began as a political anarchist journal. It only began to address sexual and homosexual issues as of 1898–1899, focusing exclusively on these topics from 1899 onwards<sup>34</sup>.

drive, but was known to other prisoners as a 'cinedo' [passive pederast]". C. Beccalossi, *Female Sexual Inversion*, cit., p. 151. Krafft-Ebing, who also dedicated some pages of his *Psychopathia Sexualis* to Verzeni's sadistic perversions, explicitly referred to Lombroso's work in describing his case.

<sup>28</sup> P. Näcke, *Penta*, cit., p. 76.

<sup>29</sup> P. Penta, *I pervertimenti sessuali*, cit., p. 153.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> *Programma*, in *Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali, rivista quindicinale di psicologia, psicopatologia umana e comparata di medicina legale e di psichiatria forense ad uso dei medici e dei giuristi, volume unico*, Fratelli Capaccini, Roma n.d. [1896], p. IV.

<sup>32</sup> P. Näcke, *Penta*, cit., p. 76.

<sup>33</sup> Kevin Dubout, *Durch Rezensionen zur Emanzipation? Die "Bibliographie der Homosexualität" (1900-1922) im Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, "LIBREAS. Library Ideas" 29, 2016, pp. 57-77; Bruno P.F. Wanrooij, *The History of Sexuality in Italy (1860-1945)*, in Perry Wilson (ed.), *Gender, Family and Sexuality: The Private Sphere in Italy, 1860-1945*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and London 2004, pp. 173-191, p. 177; V.L. Bullough, *Science in the Bedroom*, cit., p. 67.

<sup>34</sup> G. Dall'Orto, *Tutta un'altra storia*, cit., p. 476.

Penta's Review boasted a large number of contributors, including prominent figures in both medicine and law, such as Leonardo Bianchi, Penta's mentor; the physician, psychologist, and scholar of human sexuality Havelock Ellis; the German biologist, zoologist, and philosopher Ernst Haeckel; and the psychiatrist Paul Adolf Näcke, renowned for his studies on homosexuality and narcissism<sup>35</sup>. In 1896, Penta, who was 37 years old at the time, had not yet attained a prestigious academic position, but he managed to involve some of the most important scholars of "deviant" sexuality of the time in this unprecedented undertaking. His many contacts ensured the success of the project. These contacts were made in part through collaboration, that began in 1888, with the first Italian publication to promote the study of deviant sexuality, Lombroso's "Archivio di Psichiatria, Scienze Penali ed Antropologia"<sup>36</sup>; partly through participation in various congresses on psychiatry, medicine, and criminal anthropology<sup>37</sup>; and partly through direct and indirect links within the academic community. We agree with Beccalossi when claims that "Penta, despite his youth, was already a reputable member of the medical community that was gathering around the new discipline of criminal anthropology"<sup>38</sup>. The Capaccini brothers, editors of the new fortnightly review, have believed in the project from the outset, as they explain in the foreword to the review:

For some time now, the study of psychopathy and sexual feelings in general, has been rapidly developing both in Italy and abroad, gaining significant importance in Forensic Medicine, Psychiatry, Sociology, and Literature. A vicious prejudice, however, often prevents the publication and discussion of facts and observations that, if not concealed under the veil of excessive or misunderstood modesty, would greatly

<sup>35</sup> In addition to those mentioned, the Review's contributors include Dr. Andrea Cristiani from Naples; Augusto Di Luzenberger, a neuropathologist and lecturer in neuropathology in Naples; Dr. Alfredo D'Urso, also from Naples; Dr. Giulio Pelanda from Verona; the French journalist and essayist Marc-André Raffalovick (known for his studies on homosexuality); Prof. Giuseppe Ziino, lecturer in legal medicine in Messina, and many others.

<sup>36</sup> Since 1888, Penta had been collaborating and writing for the Lombrosian "Archivio". This collaboration continued even after the creation of his "Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali". Essays for the Lombrosian "Archivio" were also written by Andrea Cristiani and Giulio Pelanda. It is conceivable that their shared contributions to Lombroso's journal played a significant role in their decision to participate in Penta's 1896 endeavor.

<sup>37</sup> For instance, in 1891 Penta, Pelanda, and de Luzenberger participated in the Seventh Congress of the Società Freniatrica dedicated to this topic. See *Atti del Settimo Congresso della Società Freniatrica Italiana Tenuto in Milano dal 9 al 12 Settembre 1891*, E. Rechiedei e C. i editori, Milano 1891, pp. 4-5. The Eleventh Congresso Medico Internazionale, held in Rome in 1894, marked a very significant event. Many doctors attended, and Penta had the opportunity to meet, among others, Bianchi, Lombroso, D'Urso, as well as Paul Näcke and Havelock Ellis. See *Atti dell'XI Congresso medico internazionale, Roma, 29 March – 5 April 1894*, IV, Tipografia della Camera dei Deputati, Roma 1895.

<sup>38</sup> C. Beccalossi, *Female Sexual Inversion*, cit., p. 155.

enhance our knowledge, contributing to shed light on some still obscure phenomena in the psycho-physical life of humans and animals. Encouraged by many doctors, naturalists, lawyers, and judges, we have decided to publish a scientific journal – *Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali* – to collect everything that is being printed in our country and abroad on this important subject<sup>39</sup>.

Indeed, the Review contained original articles, a column on clinical cases, and reviews of the most important publications (both Italian and foreign) on the subject<sup>40</sup>. In many cases, Penta himself authored both the scientific reviews and the original contributions, a third of which bore his signature. The journal was, therefore, almost entirely on his young, strong back; a back that would soon be stabbed.

### 3. *Chronicle of a Closure Foretold*

Leafing through the pages of Penta's Review, one comes across numerous "obscene" stories that risk promoting those very same human deviances under investigation<sup>41</sup>. Hence, the "vicious prejudice" that often prevents publications on these topics is lurking just around the corner. The editors, however, well-aware of possible attacks, emphasise that the purpose is strictly scientific. They explain that through the presentation of shocking cases, "Far [...] from us the dishonest aim of tickling certain human weaknesses"<sup>42</sup>, the noble goal is to shed light on the darkest depths of human nature. Right from the very first pages, where they define the guidelines of the journal, their commitment is apparent:

We will do our best to ensure that the publication is clear, elegant, and well-made; that the periodical is comprehensive and multi-faceted, written with seriousness and proper words, so that it does not feed morbid fantasies, that is, not tickle certain human weaknesses, but only serve the noblest purposes of science<sup>43</sup>.

<sup>39</sup> Fratelli Capaccini, *Programma*, in *Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali*, cit., p. III.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Pasquale Penta, *Dei varii studi pubblicati sui pervertimenti sessuali dai primi sino ai più recenti dei giorni nostri*, in *Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali* [1896], pp. 8-14, 111-117. The third part of the contribution is missing because the Review ceased publication before it could be released.

<sup>41</sup> This accusation had already been made about ten years earlier by the scientific community itself, against Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Indeed, as soon as the book was published, it was criticised for justifying sexual deviance by recognising the right of perverts to exist. Moreover, it was even more seriously criticised for contributing, through the mere recounting of case studies, to the spread of sexual perversions among those who were not involved in the field yet had access to that work.

<sup>42</sup> *Programma*, in *Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali*, cit., p. IV.

<sup>43</sup> *Ivi*.

With these “scientific” reassurances, the “Archivio delle psicopatie” is thus launched. However, a few months later, following the release of the second issue in November 1896 – more precisely, the twenty-second issue – the publishing house ceases publication, unexpectedly. The question is: why? The reasons for such a drastic decision seem shrouded in mystery, and the answer is anything but simple. Clearly, it was not due to a lack of editorial success as the issues sold well<sup>44</sup>. Moreover, almost all the original contributions that appeared in the journal, along with other interesting essays on the same subjects, were republished in a series called the “Biblioteca dei perversimenti sessuali”<sup>45</sup>. Furthermore, in this same period, the very important and well-known Bocca publishing also explored the theme of sexual perversions in its series called “Biblioteca antropologica-giuridica”<sup>46</sup>. This evidence demonstrates not only a significant interest in sexology within Italy but also the profitability of books on sexual perversions<sup>47</sup>. The cessation of the “Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali” did not occur due to a lack of interest from the medical community. What, then, were the underlying reasons? Let us attempt to analyze this question in detail.

During that year, there were already some warning signs. In the summer of 1896, the editors referred to “serious reasons, beyond our control” that delayed the publication of the new issue, despite “everything being ready and arranged as usual”. Publication then resumed, but the sudden disappearance of almost all the advertisements indicated an evident disruption, likely causing significant economic repercussions for the publishers. Nevertheless, the journal continued to be printed up to Issue 22, dated November 15, 1896, though the Decem-

<sup>44</sup> The Capaccini themselves pointed out that the “Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali” was “highly sought after” in an additional page titled *Annesso all'Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali*, bearing the date 28 April 1897.

<sup>45</sup> The importance of this series also lies in having made the Italian translations of some important essays available. These include Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Sadismo, masochismo e feticismo*, Capaccini, Roma 1896; Id., *Inversione sessuale nell'uomo e nella donna*, Capaccini, Roma 1897; A. Moll, *Uranismo e prostituzione mascolina nei tempi antichi e moderni, dal lato sociale e sessuale*, Capaccini, Roma 1897; Paul Moreau de Tours, *Le aberrazioni del senso genesiaco*, Capaccini, Roma 1897; Jean-Martin Charcot, *La fede che guarisce*, Capaccini, Roma 1897, and many others.

<sup>46</sup> See, among other studies, Mark André Raffalovich, *L'uranismo, inversione sessuale congenita: osservazioni e consigli*, Bocca, Torino 1896; Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, *La terapia suggestiva delle psicopatie sessuali*, Bocca, Torino 1897; Alfredo Niceforo, *Il gergo nei normali, nei degenerati e nei criminali*, Bocca, Torino 1897; Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Trattato di psicopatologia forense in rapporto alle disposizioni legislative vigenti in Austria, in Germania ed in Francia*, Bocca, Torino 1897; Annunziato La Cara, *La base organica dei perversimenti sessuali e la loro profilassi sociale*, Bocca, Torino 1902; Auguste Forel, *La questione sessuale esposta alle persone colte*, Bocca, Torino 1907.

<sup>47</sup> Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the journal “L'anomalo”, which often featured articles discussing sexual inversion and hermaphroditism, was also established. Obviously, the publications by the Capaccini brothers released in that the same period were much bolder and must have been considered even more “controversial”. See L. Benadusi, *Lecito e illecito*, cit., p. 34.

ber issues were never published. Thus, the first scientific journal dedicated to sexual issues came to an unceremonious end. The journal fell silent, Penta fell silent, and the publishers fell silent. The collaboration between the Capaccini publishing house and Penta terminated. A few months later, in a supplementary loose sheet titled “Annesso all’Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali” dated April 28, 1897, the publishers addressed the readers of the “Archivio” to retain their interest and redirect their attention to a new journal (the “Rivista quindicinale di psicologia, psichiatria, neuropatologia” edited by Ezio Sciamanna and Giuseppe Sergi), which would commence publication in May and continue until 1899<sup>48</sup>. This journal was certainly less controversial than the one directed by Penta.

The abrupt discontinuation of the “Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali” appears to have stemmed from the fact that, as stated in the handwritten pages of the *Commemorazione dell’illustre concittadino, Professor Pasquale Penta*, the journal, in its brief existence, “caused much talk in the scientific community and [for this very reason] was suspended in 1897”<sup>49</sup>. As Bianchi noted, the material published in that journal “seemed indecent to some”<sup>50</sup>, and Gorini remarked that it attracted “criticism from moralists”<sup>51</sup>.

Bruno Wanrooij is even more explicit, stating that Penta was “accused of immorality for his studies on sexuality”<sup>52</sup>. It is likely that some protested against the journal, prompting the Capaccini brothers to cease its publication by the end of that same year, despite its editorial success<sup>53</sup>. This likely created tensions with Penta. In a 1903 review, Penta expressed hope that Hirschfeld’s journal would achieve greater success than his own “Archivio,” stating that he had attempted to “overcome the prejudices and false modesty of society” with his journal, but that “due to the fault of the publisher, the journal was closed down”<sup>54</sup>. His words encapsulate the dual reasons for this abrupt cessation: the

<sup>48</sup> See the supplement *Annesso all’Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali* bearing the date 28 April 1897.

<sup>49</sup> *Commemorazione dell’illustre concittadino, Professor Pasquale Penta, morto in Napoli il 29 decorso Novembre*, Dal registro dei processi verbali delle deliberazioni Consiglieri in Fontanarosa, manoscritto unum. In reality, as we have seen, the Review ceased publication as early as November 1896.

<sup>50</sup> Leonardo Bianchi, *Prefazione* in Pasquale Penta, *La simulazione della pazzia*, Perrella, Naples 1905 (3rd edition), pp. unum.

<sup>51</sup> I. Gorini, G. Armocida, J.M. Birkhoff, *Pasquale Penta*, cit., pp. 14-15.

<sup>52</sup> Bruno P.F. Wanrooij, *Storia del pudore. La questione sessuale in Italia 1860-1940*, Marsilio Editori, Venezia 1990, pp. 40-41.

<sup>53</sup> Alessandro Mercè explicitly states that those were the years when the studies by the founder of the “Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali” “were at the centre of fierce controversies”. The same was the case for Paolo Mantegazza’s studies on erotic physiology and a considerable body of literature regarded as overly licentious. Alessandro Mercè, *Alla ricerca dell’inverecundia: una polemica letteraria intorno all’Intermezzo di rime dannunziano*, “Griseldaonline”, 13, 2013, pp. 1-23.

<sup>54</sup> Pasquale Penta, (review) “*Jahrbuch für sexuelle Zwischenstufen mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Homosexualität*” 1899, “Rivista mensile di psichiatria forense, antropologia criminale e scienze affini”, 2, 1903, p. 524.

excessive prudery of Italian society and the role of the Capaccini brothers, who perhaps lacked the fortitude to withstand it, given their small publishing house. This, however, remains a hypothetical reconstruction yet to be proven (or disproven). Nonetheless, Näcke, a collaborator of the journal, seems to confirm this: “Whether his journal did not find the right support among his compatriots, or mainly because of inconveniences with the publisher, the fact remains that Penta’s journal was unfortunately discontinued after only one year”<sup>55</sup>.

In any case, far from being discouraged by the failure of his first publication, in 1898, Penta would establish a new journal, the “*Rivista mensile di psichiatria forense, antropologia criminale e scienze affini*”, which would provide a broader framework for his studies on sexuality and reach a larger number of readers<sup>56</sup>. Leaving behind the Capaccini brothers, the new publishing house became the Cavalier A. Tocco, based in Naples. The new Review showcased the best works on forensic psychopathy, focusing particularly on crime in Southern Italy. It had three guiding principles: the social and legal examination of the “natural history” of criminals and the mentally ill; emphasis on methods from natural sciences applied to sociological and legal studies; and the analysis of sex-related pathologies and crimes. As can easily be guessed, the latter aspect represented a continuation of the objective of the previous Review: it challenged the still prevailing excessive *pruderie*, but since the investigation of sexual psychopathy was just one theme among others, it would ultimately cause much less clamour and discontent. Penta’s interest in sexuality extended beyond his publications. In his university lectures, he devoted special attention to this topic. He also explored Freudian theories of sexuality<sup>57</sup>, contributing to their dissemination<sup>58</sup> at a time when, in Italy, they were still unknown and which, a few years later, would be looked at with suspicion, if not outright hostility, largely due to Freud’s emphasis on sexuality<sup>59</sup>.

<sup>55</sup> P. Näcke, *Penta*, cit., p. 78.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*. Penta published the “*Rivista mensile di psichiatria forense*” until his death in 1904. Some evidently confused the two journals and wrote that the “*Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali*” “appeared for eight years from 1896 to 1904”, see Erwin J. Haeberle, *Sexology: From Italy to Europe and the World*, in Chiara Simonelli, Filippo Petrucci, Veronica Vizzari (a cura di), *Sessualità e terzo millennio, studi e ricerche in sessuologia clinica*, I, Franco Angeli, Milano 1997, p. 20.

<sup>57</sup> References to Freud and his theory of the influence of sexual functions on certain neuroses can already be found in Pasquale Penta, *Influenza degli organi e delle funzioni sessuali sul modo di agire del sistema nervoso* (General Review), in *Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali*, cit., pp. 246-258, pp. 253-254. Later, in his essay *In tema di perversimenti sessuali* (which appeared in the “*Rivista mensile di psichiatria forense, antropologia criminale e scienze affini*”, 3-4, pp. 69-95), he would openly adhere to Freud’s “psychiatric” views on homosexuality, seen as a variation of sexuality developed over time.

<sup>58</sup> Penta believed that Freud’s theories on sexuality were not very original per se. Quite the contrary. However, he did acknowledge that the centrality Freud attributed to sexuality (for explaining neuroses and, more generally, accounting for various aspects of human life) was the theories’ real strength.

<sup>59</sup> See Enrico Morselli, *La psicoanalisi. Studi e appunti critici*, 2 voll., Bocca, Milano 1912. More

#### 4. Conclusion

While the 19th century exhibited a profound trust in scientific knowledge, the pervasive moralism of the era compelled scientists interested in exploring a field as indecent yet as compelling as sexuality to proceed with caution and sensitivity<sup>60</sup>. A declared scientific intent was often insufficient; some works on sexuality were accused of immorality, and even of being pornographic, designed solely to provoke public opinion<sup>61</sup>. Thomas Laqueur coined the term “medical pornography”<sup>62</sup> to describe this literary genre, explaining: “By pornography, I mean not only those dangerous books – the books to be read with one hand, in Rousseau’s famous phrase – whose explicit purpose was to spark sexual fantasy and sustain masturbation, but a considerable swath of modern imaginative fiction”<sup>63</sup>. This included medical texts that, while analyzing various aspects of sexuality, recounted its most emblematic stories. Those who attempted to address the subject felt compelled to defend themselves against (or preempt) potential accusations by emphasizing that “the morality that wants to hide and punish what it cannot hide should be replaced with one that observes, meditates, studies, and heals”<sup>64</sup>.

Moreover, if the scientific debate on sexuality in general raised numerous questions, the discourse on deviance and perversion provoked even more. In this context, the challenge was not only to overcome certain prejudices related to sexuality but also to determine whether it was appropriate to discuss perversion outside the exclusive realm of specialists. The aim was to warn people against the dangers and prevent the risks of sexual aberrations. Essentially, the question was whether the general public should remain uninformed about the depths of the human psyche, which should therefore be the sole concern of specialists, or whether they should be educated to recognize and avoid such dangers. However, opinions on this matter were far from unanimous. This extreme caution often resulted in the use of metaphors, synonyms, or Latin terms, particularly when the articles had a more popularizing

generally, to understand the reception the Freudian thought was given in Italy, we recommend the now classic book by Michel David, *La psicoanalisi nella cultura italiana*, Boringhieri, Torino 1966. It is noteworthy, however, that in the 642 pages of the text, Michel David never once mentions Penta.

<sup>60</sup> L. Benadusi, *Lecito e illecito*, cit., pp. 29-30.

<sup>61</sup> Paolo Mantegazza’s volume, *Gli amori degli uomini*, had also been described as “an obscene book to make a lot of money”. Paolo Mantegazza, *Prefazione all’undecima edizione* (1892) in *Gli amori degli uomini. Saggio di una etnologia dell’amore*, I, Paolo Mantegazza Editore, Milano 1892, p. IX.

<sup>62</sup> For example, Thomas W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex. A Cultural History of Masturbation*, Zone Books, New York 2003, pp. 15, 85, 173.

<sup>63</sup> *Ivi*, p. 334.

<sup>64</sup> Vito Massarotti, *Nel regno di Ulrichs. Appunti e considerazioni sull’omosessualità maschile*, Bernardo Lux editore, Roma 1913, pp. VI-VII.

intent. Yet, these literary devices, or rather precautions, were not limited to popular works. It was not uncommon to encounter such measures even in works intended for a specialist audience. In the preface to the first edition (1886) of his *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing explained:

The following pages are addressed to those who have devoted themselves to rigorous studies in natural science and jurisprudence. To prevent the non-specialist from reading this work, the Author was forced to choose a title intelligible only to the scholar and to use technical terms whenever possible. Furthermore, he considered it convenient to quote some particularly indecent expressions in Latin instead of German<sup>65</sup>.

Freud himself, in his letters to Wilhelm Fliess, used Latin to describe certain sexual acts<sup>66</sup>. Penta adopted a similar approach when illustrating the incompleteness of Verzeni's crimes, describing them in terms of "lack of *immissio penis in vaginam*"<sup>67</sup>. In Italy, many other authors who wrote essays and articles on similar subjects took similar precautions. Given these premises, one might argue that despite Italy's puritanical culture in the late 19th century, there were many readers interested in these topics. However, as emphasized by Patrizia Moro<sup>68</sup>, the number of (non-pornographic) books discussing sexuality during those years was very modest<sup>69</sup>. Anthony Giddens also points out that: "Medical journals and other semi-official publications were accessible only to very few; and until the latter part of the nineteenth century, most of the population was not even literate [...] this literature was not available to the majority, even of the educated population"<sup>70</sup>. In the first

<sup>65</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Le psicopatie sessuali. Con speciale considerazione alla inversione sessuale. Studio clinico-legale*, Bocca, Torino 1889, p. IX. Similar measures had already been taken in the past. The Swiss physician Samuel-Auguste Tissot, for example, whose writings had repeatedly been accused of "promoting vice by describing its dangers", had originally published his medical treatise on the alleged negative effects of masturbation (*L'Onanisme. Dissertation sur les maladies produites par la masturbation*) in Latin to counter such accusations. On this subject, see T.W. Laqueur, *Solitary Sex*, cit., p. 337.

<sup>66</sup> See Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience. From Victoria to Freud*, I, *Education of the Senses*, Oxford University Press, New York, Toronto, London 1984, pp. 10-11; Norman O. Brown, *Life against Death. The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History*, Sphere Book, London 1970, pp. 69-73; Michel Onfray, *Crepuscolo di un idolo. Smantellare le favole freudiane*, Ponte alle Grazie, Milano 2011, p. 107.

<sup>67</sup> P. Penta, *I perversimenti sessuali*, cit., p. 131.

<sup>68</sup> Patrizia Moro, 1870-1920: *La letteratura scientifica e divulgativa* in Giorgio Rifelli, Corrado Ziglio (a cura di), *Per una storia dell'educazione sessuale*, La Nuova Italia, Scandicci 1991, pp. 205-217.

<sup>69</sup> While the so-considered more "established" and, therefore, "safe" books were republished multiple times by various publishers within the span of a few years, many others, despite being essential, remained untranslated, unpublished, or unavailable in Italy for a long time. These include some fundamental works by Bloch, Ellis, and Moll, as well as those by Freud, which began to be published in Italy only many years later. See M. David, *La psicoanalisi nella cultura italiana*, cit.

<sup>70</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy. Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1992, p. 24.

forty years after the Unification of Italy, literacy in the peninsula was very limited: in 1861, 74.7% of the population was illiterate; in 1871, 68.8%; and still in 1901, one out of every two citizens could neither read nor write<sup>71</sup>. This means that such texts dedicated to the “scientific” aspects of sex, whether intended for general circulation or not, could be read by a very small number of Italians: a few educated, middle and upper-middle-class adults, and almost exclusively males. Although fewer in number than one might expect, some series extensively covering topics related to sexuality began to emerge. This was the case with certain manuals published by Hoepli and the “Biblioteca di Scienze Moderne” by the Bocca brothers. Despite the dominant bourgeois morality being unreceptive to new studies on sexual behavior, books dedicated to these topics still enjoyed considerable success<sup>72</sup>. So much so that some publishing houses, such as that of the Capaccini brothers, invested in the “sexual question” and, more specifically, in the “question of sexual psychopathy.” However, despite the success of the “Archivio delle psicopatie sessuali”, the Review ceased publication just after a few months. This paper attempts to shed light on the possible reasons for the sudden and unexpected change of direction by the Capaccini brothers. It has been suggested that the reasons lie in the rumors that arose from that publication, likely originating within the medical community to which the journal was predominantly addressed, although it was certainly also read by curious non-experts.

Aside from the unfortunate conclusion of this venture and the reasons underlying it, what deserves our attention is the modernity of Pasquale Penta’s intuition. It is disconcerting how easily both his role as a physician and an academic, as well as his contribution to the recognition of sexuality as a science, have been forgotten. His death at the age of only 45 may have contributed to this; it is reasonable to assume that had he not died so prematurely, he would have made other significant contributions to the field of sexology. Paul Näcke is convinced that if Penta had lived longer and had known the works on sexology written after his death, especially those of Hirschfeld, he would have certainly changed some of his views. This is because Penta never jumped to hasty conclusions nor stubbornly clung to his positions, but always paid tribute to progress<sup>73</sup>.

He had challenged the *pruderie* and sexual morality of certain doctors and numerous intellectuals, and, although he seemed at least partly defeated, with the creation of his “Rivista mensile di psichiatria forense”, subsequent publications, and his stimulating lectures, he had risen again and achieved a

<sup>71</sup> The data are reported in P. Moro, 1870-1920: *La letteratura scientifica e divulgativa*, cit., p. 209.

<sup>72</sup> Margherita Pelaja, Lucetta Scaraffia, *Due in una carne, Chiesa e sessualità nella storia*, GLF Editori Laterza, Roma-Bari 2014, p. 241.

<sup>73</sup> P. Näcke, *Penta*, cit., p. 80.

significant victory over the bigoted Italian society of those years. Of course, as revolutionary as he was at the time, many of his contributions appear outdated today. Since Penta, sexology has evolved considerably, becoming an independent field separate from psychiatry or criminal anthropology. As Vern L. Bullough wrote, “Research continues today on a variety of topics, from sexually transmitted diseases to gender dysphoria, although much of the cutting-edge material is in journals, the quality of which has risen considerably in the past decade”<sup>74</sup>. However, it is undeniable that without pioneers like Pasquale Penta, research in this field today would still be mired in old stereotypes and likely less free from moral conditioning, and therefore less scientific and rigorous.

<sup>74</sup> Vern L. Bullough, Entry “Sexuality” in Arne Hessenbruch (ed.), *Reader's Guide to the History of Science*, Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, London-Chicago 2000, p. 686.

