

Paola Orsatti: an appreciation

I first met Paola Orsatti years ago in the home of the late Gianroberto Scarcia. It was 1980 and she had just been repatriated to Italy from Iran following the outbreak of the war between Iraq and Iran, sometime after the advent of the Iranian revolution.

In 1983 she won a competition as a researcher in Persian language and literature at the University of Rome La Sapienza and that same year I became an associate professor of Arabic language and literature. We taught in the same Department of Oriental Studies, in adjacent classrooms, and we often met and sometimes had brief exchanges on issues in which Arabic and Persian meet and sometimes mingle and blend with each other. In those circumstances, more than once I noticed and admired her precision and solid foundation in linguistic knowledge. Over time, I discovered other scholarly qualities and above all a diversification of interests that were not limited to Persian language and literature.

Here I mention her work on Arabic palaeography and Islamic codicology, the result of a specific interest that had inspired her—after graduation—to specialize at the then Specialization School for Archivists and Librarians of La Sapienza, graduating in Codicology with a dissertation on the Arabic manuscripts of Spanish origin at the Vatican Library. Her studies have ranged across various fields, such as the history of Persian studies in Italy and Europe and the history of manuscript collections. In 1996 she published a monograph on the history of the Borgia Collection at the Vatican Library, a collection of manuscripts of considerable importance in the history of Oriental studies in Rome. Paola had begun to take an interest in the history of this collection as she prepared to take the History of Libraries exam and had devoted many years to this research. She would spend her entire day in the Vatican Library and, to this aim, had moved all her classes at the university to the evening hours. I remember that, more than once, she found herself locked inside the university in the evening and was freed only by the intervention of the night watchman (at the time there were no security exits yet).

But her research interests have also covered other fields. When, in the early 2000s, she inaugurated the teaching of History of the Persian language (on which she still lectures to this day), Paola told me about the need for a manual of this discipline. That manual was published in 2007 in the series ‘La Sapienza orientale’ which, in the meantime, I myself had conceived and edited and whose title puns on our university’s name and ‘Oriental wisdom’. Paola was so kind as to dedicate that manual to me. Those were the years in which we had created the Faculty of Oriental Studies (2001–2011), which I will talk about presently.

In those same years, Paola devoted time and energy to the realization of educational aids for students of Persian: the reprint, in our series ‘La Sapienza orientale’, of Alessandro Bausani’s *La letteratura neopersiana* (2011), first appeared in 1960 as the main contribution in his and Antonino Pagliaro’s *Storia della letteratura persiana*; Alessandro Coletti’s 1986 *Grammatica della lingua persiana* (2007); the *Dizionario persiano-italiano* (2006) by Alessandro Coletti and Hanne Coletti-Grünbaum originally published in 1978, which Paola is currently working on a new updated edition of. She also worked on the creation of educational tools dedicated to students of the new Faculty of Oriental Studies in general. I would like to recall here her work entitled *Tesi e tesine: ricerca e redazione*, published in 2004, in

which Paola (with contributions by the colleagues Franco D'Intino and Bruno Lo Turco) put to use her skills in library science and methodology of research.

More recently I can testify to the passion with which Paola applied herself to what she calls 'the work of my life', her full-bodied contribution on romantic poems for the long-awaited and as-yet-unpublished third volume of *A history of Persian literature*, to which she dedicated herself from 2010 to 2016. I remember her joy at Professor Ehsan Yarshater's invitation to contribute to the volume and her enthusiasm for the collaboration between her and the volume editor, Mohsen Ashtiany. Paola has repeatedly told me that working for the volume has been a wonderful experience for her both from a scholarly and a human point of view. As a result, she has written four extremely comprehensive chapters, of the six contained in the volume, and her contribution is really a substantial book in itself.

I must also mention, last but not least, the friendship and the scholarly and educational collaboration between Paola and Mauro Maggi, which has lasted since the mid-1990s at least, when Mauro came to Rome, initially on contract, to reopen the teaching of Iranian Philology that had been Antonino Pagliaro's responsibility before World War II. This is a friendship and collaboration that has extended to all aspects of academic life, from research on Persian, especially on Persian texts in Syriac script, to educational issues and to efforts to promote Iranian studies in our university. I remember an undertaking to which they both devoted themselves with fervour: the organization of a conference on the elections in Iran in 2009. This, achieved as it was by two philologists used to dealing with totally different research topics, was a feat in itself: for the largest, 120-seat lecture hall in our faculty was full to overflowing with people, even standing, including, besides students and scholars, famous journalists, politicians, and representatives from the business world and the trade relations between Italy and Iran. This notable success, unfortunately, did not have the desired consequence in reviving the fortunes of studies on Iran at the university level. Nor have their attempts to bring notable scholars from abroad to Rome, in order to expand the educational scope of the Iranian studies curriculum, had the desired effect.

I am not the person most qualified to extol the merits of Paola Orsatti's scholarly production. I prefer, therefore, to emphasize and reiterate what her bibliography cannot mention: her commitment to Persian teaching and the management of undergraduate and graduate programs.

As soon as she became a researcher, Paola began her teaching activity, first in the field of language and soon after also in Persian literature. Her teaching efforts expanded year after year to the point that the teaching of Persian language and literature for the whole curriculum of Iranian studies rested for long periods, or better still for entire decades, entirely on her shoulders. And this was despite the fact that Paola was officially just a researcher until 2005 when, after qualifying in a competition in 2001, she finally had the call to become an associate professor.

In 1999, a university reform law came into force that transformed the traditional four-year degree into a three-year degree, followed by a possible master's degree (first and second cycle or graduate and undergraduate programs). This reorganization of studies was delegated to the faculty members themselves and involved very complex work. It was thus that a handful of us gathered in a committee, with Paola always present, had to tackle the thorny subject of laws and regulations. In the end, however, we managed to create our three-year program in Eastern Languages and Civilizations, which was rewarded by a high number of enrolments.

The formulation of the further two-year program in Eastern Languages and Civilizations was an even more complex task, but Paola volunteered and everyone, relieved, was grateful to her. And when, only a few years later, yet another reform imposed substantial changes to

the second cycle programs, it was yet again Paola who took care of the reformulation and completed it on time.

More than once in all those years Paola confided to me how the management commitments, which she had accepted out of a sense of duty, combined with a heavy teaching load, posed a problem for her, impinging on the time needed for her own research activity. The teaching burden on Paola's shoulders became even heavier following the retirement of Professor Angelo M. Piemontese in 2011. Several times I presented her with a chance to alleviate her of some of her teaching: to close the Persian curriculum while keeping the teaching of only the first two years of Persian language, which students on the Arabic curriculum could choose as their second language of study. Paola, however, always adamantly refused to consider such a possibility, as if this were a betrayal of the discipline to which she had devoted so many years of work.

The implementation of the university reform was intertwined with another key event: the coming into being of the Faculty of Oriental Studies in 2001. In fact, the Academic Senate of La Sapienza had decided that faculties with too many members and students should split up. The then Faculty of Letters and Philosophy, where we taught, had to be split into smaller faculties. This unleashed virulent debates and was to be an almost traumatic event for many. Some faculty members proposed to take advantage of this opportunity to give new impetus to disciplines that had had a marginal weight until then. This idea prevailed in our Department of Oriental Studies and was motivated by the lack of human resources, in particular for the teaching of 'Oriental' languages, some of which had recorded a very sharp increase in the number of students in recent years (specifically in the Arabic, Chinese and Japanese curricula). It was thus that a group of us proposed the creation of a new Faculty of Oriental Studies in the hope of providing momentum for the disciplines related to that area of the world conventionally known as 'eastern' and of giving these languages a greater weight than in the past. The proposal, vigorously opposed by some of the department's 'older' members, exposed an almost generational rift. The fracture quickly proved to be irremediable. We, 'the youngsters', and among them Paola, had a concrete, seemingly ambitious plan; the others merely opposed it, sometimes resorting to nowadays meaningless clichés such as 'the safeguarding of the unity of the Orientalists': none of us felt 'an Orientalist', that is, an 'Homme qui a beaucoup voyagé' according to the definition in Gustave Flaubert's famous dictionary.

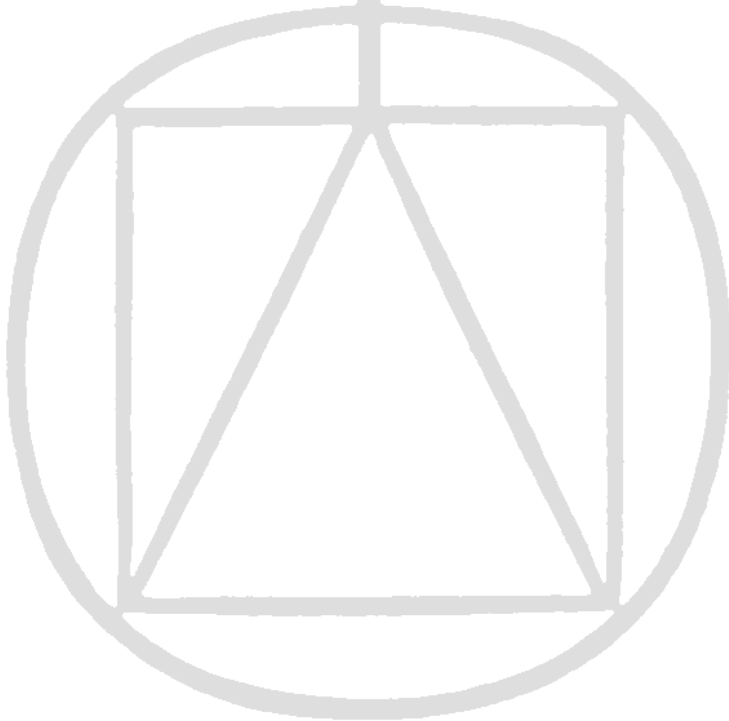
In order to plan the faculty-to-be, we began to meet outside the university, in our own homes. The meetings seemed, and perhaps were, parties: since we met in the evening, our meetings coincided with dinner time and highlighted the culinary skills of many of us. One among the many problems to be faced was to have a minimum number of members so that the project of a new faculty could be approved. Paola managed to convince two fine scholars—Claudia A. Ciancaglini of the Department of Classics and Paola Carusi of the Department of Chemistry—to join us, and with us they remained. Eventually we reached the required number and the Faculty of Oriental Studies was born on the 7th of March 2001. Like all things that have a beginning, it came regrettably to an end in 2011 when, after ten years, it was deactivated by decision of the Ministry of Education along with other university institutions. The events of the Faculty of Oriental Studies and the cultural initiatives that saw it as protagonist and organizer deserve a story apart. Here, I will just limit myself to saying that, for those ten years, its members—some more, like Paola, and some less, but all certainly in some way—worked to make it progress. The atmosphere amongst us, the founders of the Faculty and those who arrived later also on Paola's initiative, was one of engaging, sometimes even frenetic enthusiasm.

Our beautiful adventure is now over, but several things have survived: among them my friendship with Paola—still woven together with mutual questions about things Arabic and Persian—and Paola’s passion for and commitment to study and research.

To Paola I wish, on this particular occasion: *Tavallodat mobārak!*

Angelo Arioli

Roma, 3 April 2020



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Compiled by Mauro Maggi

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