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**“Saint Brother and Saint Sister”:
The Motif of Fraternal Incest
in Gladys Huntington’s *Madame Solario***

She was like me in lineaments—her eyes,
Her hair, her features, all, to the very tone
Even of her voice, they were like to mine;
But soften’d all, and temper’d into beauty;
She had the same lone thoughts and wanderings ...
And tenderness—but that I had for her.

–George Gordon, Lord Byron, *Manfred*

“On ne saura jamais qui a écrit *Madame Solario*!” (Minor 148), exclaims the female protagonist of a French novel whose title is almost identical with the subordinate clause of the exclamation: *Qui a écrit Madame Solario*? The enigma which puzzles the heroine, Arsène, as well as, one may suspect, the author of the novel, psychoanalyst and writer Nata Minor, surrounds one of the most intriguing literary works of the twentieth century. *Madame Solario* is an English-language novel, first published in 1956. Its fascinating plot and ambience alone would suffice to captivate and mystify generations of readers. However, the mystery which over the decades built up around the book was largely due to the fact that *Madame Solario* had been published anonymously. This, in turn, led to all sorts of speculations—sometimes wild ones—as to the identity, or at least the sex, of the author. The most extravagant of these is perhaps offered by Minor, who suggests the novel may have been written by none other than Winston Churchill. Despite such bold hypotheses, towards the end of her micronovel, published in 1992, Minor despairs of the possibility of ever identifying the writer who—for reasons best known to himself/herself—chose to remain nameless. Recently, however, Minor was proven wrong. Over half a century after the publication of the mysterious work, the question which constitutes the title of Minor’s novel, “Who wrote *Madame Solario*?” is no longer unanswerable.

Twenty years after Minor carried out her fervent investigation, we know for sure that—contrary to what some reviewers argued—*Madame Solario* was written

by a woman. Her name was Gladys Parrish Huntington. Like her sex, her origin defies expectations: though some believed the author of the novel to be British, Huntington was an American, the scion of a wealthy, respectable Quaker family from Philadelphia. Like her protagonist, the eponymous Natalia Solario, Huntington led a cosmopolitan existence. She spent much of her life in Europe, regularly holidaying in Italy as a young woman, and gardening in Sussex, where she had a house, later in life. A woman of the world—again like her protagonist—Huntington also maintained international social relations. Married to a successful editor, she harbored literary ambitions, which resulted in two stories and three novels, the most famous of which is, of course, *Madame Solario*. As the research done by Bernard Cohen for an interesting article published in *Libération* demonstrates, the puzzling decision to conceal the novel's authorship was motivated by Huntington's fear of failure as well as the strategy of her publisher, well aware of the fact that the aura of mystery boosts book sales. When *Madame Solario* received critical acclaim and became a literary sensation, Huntington became more inclined to reveal her identity, but eventually failed to do so. Interviewed by Cohen, the writer's descendants suggest that one of the causes of Huntington's suicide three years after the publication of her *magnum opus* may have been the fact that she was prevented from fully enjoying the literary fame she had won (Bernard Cohen, pars. 1–23).

Bernard Cohen, the author of the aforementioned article on Huntington, is merely one of the many French admirers of her novel. Given the fact that it was originally written in English and that for decades so little was known about the circumstances of its creation and publication, *Madame Solario* seems to be surprisingly popular—if only with the initiated few—in France, as both Minor's book and brief mentions occasionally recurring in the French press testify. Recently, this popularity was confirmed by the release of a film adaptation, directed by French filmmaker René Féret. The Belgian-born French-American writer and member of the Académie Française Marguerite Yourcenar is said to have kept at least two copies of *Madame Solario* by her bedside (Bernard Cohen, par. 2). In the postface to *Comme l'eau qui coule*, a collection of three stories published in English under the title *Two Lives and a Dream*, Yourcenar touches upon the theme of incest in literature. Having briefly commented on examples derived from Byron, Chateaubriand and Thomas Mann, she adds in a footnote:

Finally, one ought to analyze, as a story of the same type, the extraordinary anonymous novel which appeared in England in 1956, *Madame Solario*, which, although a best-seller, has never been closely studied. However, the extreme complexity of the psychological themes which are interwoven in this story make it difficult to isolate that of incest. (232)

In the present article, I have decided to undertake the task deemed so challenging by Yourcenar, and examine the incestuous ties which bind the protagonist of Huntington's novel to her brother. In doing so, I shall draw on psychological and anthropological studies of this phenomenon and the incest taboo, as well as on their cultural symbolism.

Though published in 1956, *Madame Solario* is set five decades earlier. The action of the novel takes place in Italy: mostly in Cadenabbia, "a fashionable resort for the month of September" (Huntington 5), situated on the shores of Lake Como, and later in Florence and Milan. Among those spending the end of the summer in the spellbinding Como surroundings is Natalia Solario, a beautiful, twenty-eight-year-old woman, domiciled in Paris, but not French by origin. Born in England to a half-Swedish mother and an English father, who died when his daughter was still a child, Natalia grew up in the United States. Her widowed mother remarried and moved to Paris with her new South American husband, de Florez, and her two children from her first marriage. At first, the stepfamily led an idyllic existence in a luxurious Parisian townhouse, made possible by de Florez's fortune, but also by the fact that Natalia's mother truly loved her second husband, who seemed to have developed fatherly bonds with his stepchildren. However, after a few years, the dream turned into a nightmare: attracted by teenage Natalia's breathtaking beauty, de Florez seduced her and carried on a sexual relationship with her, of which both his wife and their servants were aware. When Natalia's brother, Eugene, accidentally found out the truth, he attempted to shoot his stepfather. Wounded, de Florez survived and took measures to hush up the scandal: he sent his eighteen-year-old stepson abroad and married Natalia to a South American friend of his. Despite his wife's pleas, de Florez refused to pardon Eugene and put an end to his exile. Devastated by the betrayal and humiliation she had had to endure as well as by her beloved son's fate, de Florez's wife died prematurely. Natalia's arranged marriage to the man who gave her the surname under which she is known did not stand the test of time. Twelve years after the tragedy which tore her family apart, she finds herself alone in the elegant Italian resort, separated from her husband and pursued by Count Kovanski, a former lover whose obsession with her has become threatening. Soon, however, she is joined there by her long-lost brother, embittered and resentful, expecting his sister to make it up to him for the suffering and miserable wandering of which she was the cause.

Huntington's novel is divided into three parts, and it is only at the very end of Part One that Eugene makes his first appearance, disembarking from a steamer which brings guests to the Hotel Bellevue, where most of the action is set. His arrival takes all the holidaymakers—including Natalia herself—by surprise. This *coup de théâtre* closes a section of the novel in which Madame Solario is

presented from the point of view of Bernard Middleton, a twenty-three-year-old Englishman fresh out of Oxford, for whom a platonic infatuation with the mysterious beauty will be an initiation into adulthood. When, overcoming her initial shock, Natalia announces by way of explanation: “This is my brother. Let me present my brother, Eugene Harden” (109), her words are just the prologue to the novel’s central section, in which Middleton recedes into the background and the pair of siblings take center stage. What follows is a series of confrontations between the brother and the sister, the psychological intensity and complexity of which merit a separate analysis. Though the reader is already familiar with the siblings’ family history, about which the hotel guests gossip early on in the novel, it is only in Part Two that its full impact can be felt, magnified by the contrast between how Natalia and Eugene are perceived by the elegant Cadenabbia holidaymakers and what they discuss in private. As Harden puts it, “Has your admirer—But you may have several. Have your admirers been thinking about you, do you suppose? However much they may have tried to imagine what you were doing, they won’t have arrived at this interview!” (133). The relationship between Madame Solario and her brother evolves: his hostility and her reserve gradually give way to a sense of complicity and bonding, which culminate in sexual intimacy. The third—and last—section of the novel, in which Bernard Middleton reappears to, so to speak, again lend the reader his consciousness, through which the events are filtered, shows the consequences of the scandal which breaks when the Cadenabbia society starts suspecting the true nature of the siblings’ relationship, as well as Natalia’s unsuccessful attempt to break away from her brother’s influence.

Throughout the novel, Huntington repeatedly evokes and emphasizes Natalia Solario’s ideal, almost unreal beauty. She does the same, though to a lesser degree, with Eugene, described as strikingly handsome. “At once he became a focus of feminine interest, for he was well dressed and very good-looking,” Huntington notes in the arrival scene (108). Not only do the siblings match each other in terms of physical attractiveness and elegance, they also resemble each other. Harden’s “golden-brown” moustache (108) seems to echo the golden beauty of his blonde-haired, violet-eyed sister. Although Eugene is two years Natalia’s senior, they are perceived as twins by the Cadenabbia society:

They came out into the road, and, calm and slightly abstracted, so that, though close together, they were not speaking to each other, they approached the hotel and the guests assembling in front before luncheon. The first to see them was the American Wilbur, and they were so much the fashion that he was delighted to connect himself with them by hailing their appearance.
‘Here are the Gemini!’ (211–212)

The brother and sister complete each other, and it is in aesthetic terms that the union between them is first presented:

Their public entrances together, side by side, were becoming more, rather than less, effective with every one of them; starting with her beauty, the affinity in their looks and their perfect proportionateness to each other had something of a work of art, and that is the more admired for being admired often. And when they came out of the hotel late—the others having forgathered—with the absence of conceitedness that, being hers, was also his, they were accepted for general admiration as a pair, and for more admiration than ever. (181)

Despite her unquestionable beauty and the innumerable tributes paid to it by her admirers, Madame Solario has no narcissistic tendencies. In a scene showing her at her vanity table, “her eyes, looking at herself in the glass, had the same calm thoughtfulness as when she looked at other people. The inquiry was not more interested or acute” (178). However, the only mirror in which she comes to contemplate herself intently is perhaps, as Nata Minor suggests, Natalia’s brother: their twinship, manifested in their physical resemblance and the effect of harmony it produces and culminating in the incest they commit, provides either of them with a mirror reflection taking the shape of the sibling’s face. The idea of mirror images is in fact put forward by Eugene in one of the novel’s most important scenes, which ends in the brother and sister spending their first night together. Considering the possible consequences of Natalia’s marriage to Count Kovanski, which could improve her social status as well as that of her brother, Harden imagines himself visiting his prospective brother-in-law’s Russian estate, spending time with his sister and even—in jest—joining the Orthodox Church:

‘We’ll make such a pair that day that we may figure afterwards on icons—for you are so beautiful you must be a saint, and I—Don’t ask me to say it. They’ll put our two faces side by side, in thick gold haloes. Two saints in the Orthodox Calendar! But under what names? Under our own?’
 ‘Why not just Saint Brother and Saint Sister?’ She said it with demure, not open humour, and he was transported. (263)

Among the recurrent motifs in *Madame Solario* a particularly prominent one is that of dance. There are two ball scenes in Huntington’s novel. One of them occurs early on, in the middle of Part One; for the other the reader has to wait until Part Three, as it is placed in the second of the eight chapters which make up the book’s final section. In both scenes, dance serves as a pretext for

displaying Natalia Solario's marvelous natural grace and her exquisite dancing skills. However, in keeping with the famous saying which has it that "Dancing is a vertical expression of a horizontal desire," both scenes also have a strong sexual subtext. In the first one, Madame Solario spends most of the evening dancing with Ercolani, an attractive Italian who courts her in Cadenabbia and happens to be an excellent dancer:

Ercolani was placing his arm about her; her arm in its long white glove was rested upon his, and they yielded together to the languorous strains of 'Valse Amoureuse.' After that he could not see her without seeing, too, Ercolani's straight back and flat shoulders, and his head turning a little to right and left over hers—the minimum amount for looking and guiding, which he did without a fault. Everything else faded before this spectacle, because this was the perfection of waltzing. One shouldn't waltz at all if one couldn't do it like that! (61–62)

The sexual symbolism of the first ball scene is confirmed later on in the novel, when, in a conversation with her brother, Natalia admits that she was attracted to Ercolani and regretted his departure. The connection between dance and sexuality is also reinforced by other elements of the scene. The tunes to which the guests dance include not just *Valse Amoureuse*, Rodolphe Berger's Belle Époque hit, but also *Elixir d'Amour*, presumably an aria from Gaetano Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore*. As if to emphasize the erotic overtones, among the favors distributed during the cotillion there are miniature copies of *Cupid and Psyche*, Antonio Canova's famous sculpture, whose replica by Canova's disciple, Adamo Tadolini, is exhibited in the nearby Villa Carlotta. Madame Solario is in great demand as a dancing partner and the men in the ballroom have to wait to dance with her and become "competitors" (Huntington 64). This state of affairs mirrors her personal situation: that of an irresistibly beautiful woman, whom men obsessively desire and wish to possess at all costs, even if the satisfaction of their desire should lead to transgression and tragedy. "Her vogue was such that it had become a matter of pride to dance with her" (65), the narrator notes, pointing out that there was an air of competition and jealousy at the ball: "As Madame Solario's success drew more partners to herself it left fewer for the others, and he [Bernard Middleton] seized the falsity of the other women's smiles when they were included in the same figure with her" (65). In fact, what Bernard witnesses at the ball is merely a case of history repeating itself: much later in the novel, Eugene recalls the furor his sister caused as a little girl when she attended a dance class, in which all the boys dreamed of being paired with her. Accordingly, the scene leaves Bernard Middleton, the silent observer in the passages quoted above, who knows that—if

only due to his youth and inexperience—he cannot aspire to become Madame Solario's lover, with a feeling of personal inadequacy. The two conversations in the course of which he cites his poor dancing skills as the reason why he fails to ask Natalia to dance that evening while she gently attempts to comfort him acquire a metaphorical dimension. Bernard's limited terpsichorean abilities may in fact stand for his lack of male self-confidence and ignorance of *ars amandi*. "I haven't been to many balls," Bernard puts it simply, to which Madame Solario replies, "But you will go some day, and enjoy them" (82).

Customarily "impassive" and "guarded" (Huntington 63), Madame Solario derives evident sensual pleasure from dancing: at some point in the first ball scene, Bernard notices "her deep enjoyment as though it were breathing from her, and the smile that didn't part her lips gave to the corners of her mouth a mysterious look of greed" (63). When he later asks her if she likes dancing, she replies, "One enjoys it when one has a good partner" (82). The harmony between her and Ercolani, the "perfect grace of those two dancing together" (65), is, however, superseded by the beauty of the couple Natalia and her brother make at the other ball, the one depicted in Part Three. The siblings dance the night away, and Eugene's facial expression is that of a happy man. It is again Bernard Middleton who, reduced to the position of a spectator, looks on the magnificent spectacle, in which, as he now knows, he will never become an actor:

Madame Solario was dancing with her brother. They came down the length of the room towards him, were close to him, passed, were lost among other couples, and reappeared to his sight far away, the whole room between him and them. From sheer humility he felt he would remain invisible to them, and that they would never see him, however long he watched them. She had produced that feeling in him before, at the cotillon; however unapproachable she could be at other times, it was never so much as when he saw her dancing. She and her partner became another order of beings from himself, not only as he was now but as he always would be—lacking in some quality, some element. Her chosen partners had it—Ercolani, and now her brother, so that it was a quality not dependent on other kinds of attraction, an element that belonged to an order of being. (280)

If Bernard is, once again, made to realize his own inadequacy, he is also, to a certain extent, comforted and reassured by the fact that Natalia and Eugene are linked by family ties rather than, as was the case with Ercolani, by sexual attraction. It is to their physical resemblance and to the close emotional bond between the brother and the sister that he attributes the supreme grace and larger-than-life aesthetic compatibility which elevate them to superhuman status:

And she and her brother made an even more harmonious couple than she and Ercolani. They were better suited in height, for Ercolani had been rather too tall, and from a likeness of proportions, and probably their relationship, there resulted an even more perfect attunement, a more freely flowing motion. His jealousy of Ercolani was allayed. He knew that it had been to some degree needless when he saw her dancing with her brother and it was proved that the harmony she and her partners could attain was godlike. There was that element in them that was not in him, but, even though invisible to her, he could feel a satisfaction, which was that she danced more divinely with her brother than with Ercolani. (280–281)

Later that evening, Natalia and her brother dance again. Significantly, they do so to *Valse Amoureuse*, to which Madame Solario previously waltzed with Ercolani. Seeing them, Bernard has a strong sense of *déjà vu*: Natalia seems to reenact what she did with her Italian admirer, this time in her brother's arms. However, since the fact that they are siblings appears to guarantee the innocence of their relationship, Middleton is not alarmed by what he witnesses, seeing it as a symbol of family reunion which puts an end to the tragedy that befell Natalia and Eugene in the past: "This must be the final reconciliation. They were in such perfect accord that it seemed an intrusion to watch" (283). He remains unaware of the true significance of this "perfect accord" even when Missy Lastacori, a young upper-class girl whom Eugene courts in the hope that he will marry into her rich and prominent Florentine family, storms out of the Villa d'Este, where the ball takes place, enigmatically exclaiming, "His sister! His sister!" (287), and when the members of the Italian high society, visibly shocked and outraged, start gossiping in their native language, which Bernard does not understand.

This brings us to one of the crucial aspects of Huntington's depiction of the incestuous relationship central to her novel: it is not explicitly referred to, let alone graphically described. The word *incest* never appears in the text. Nor can we be certain as to when exactly the two siblings become lovers. However, Nata Minor is probably right when she argues—through her protagonist Arsène—that the scene which closes Part Two ends prior to the moment the illicit passion linking the siblings is consummated. The scene in question ends with Eugene entering his sister's room, locking the door and uttering words which have acquired a sinister and perverse meaning in the novel: "*Comme votre papa est bon pour vous*" (268). The ominous words, which could be translated as "Your daddy is so good to you," are in fact those used by a French governess on seeing de Florez leaning over to look at Natalia's notebook. Unaware of the fact that she had actually surprised her employer in the act of seducing his young stepdaughter rather than helping her with her homework, she naively commented on his fatherly attachment to

the girl. Eugene is familiar with the particulars of the scene which marked the beginning of Natalia's affair with her stepfather because, shortly after his arrival at Cadenabbia, he compels his sister to reveal the lurid details of her relationship with de Florez. The fact that he repeats—or, to use the expression employed in the novel, “gasp[s] out” (268)—the governess's words as he locks himself in with his sister in the middle of the night seems to suggest that Minor has a point.

Madame Solario is set on Lake Como, arguably one of the most picturesque locations in the world. On numerous occasions, Huntington evokes the beauty of the Lombardian lake district, with the waters of the Como glittering in the sun, the hills and rocks, ornamented with elegant villas and gardens, descending towards the shores, and the azure Italian sky to complete it all. While the scenery helps to create an aura of magic and enchantment, it also serves to enhance the novel's symbolism and bring out the psychological relations between the characters. One of the local residences, Balbianello, a “love-haunted villa” surrounded by “secret gardens” (Huntington 23), plays a crucial role in the novel. The story goes that the villa belongs to an Italian aristocrat's beautiful widow, who moved to Paris following her husband's death. The villa was thus abandoned by its owner, but did not fall into a state of neglect thanks to the efforts of an elderly servant, who keeps waiting for his employer's return. The beauty of the villa, which is not open to the public, is jealously guarded. The aura of romance and nostalgia which has built up around Balbianello corresponds to the vagaries of love as depicted in Huntington's novel. Bernard Middleton first hears the villa's nostalgic story from Ilona Zapponyi, the young daughter of a Hungarian countess. Courted by Count Kovanski a few months before coming to Cadenabbia, Ilona is still hopelessly in love with him. However, in the meantime her Russian admirer transferred his affections to Natalia Solario, and his new passion, mad and overwhelming, dashes his former love interest's hopes. Bernard feels sorry for Ilona when she confesses that she expected Kovanski to accompany her to Balbianello, but he failed to do so. Having broken Ilona's heart, Kovanski himself is now lovelorn, as Madame Solario abandoned him, tired of his obsessive attentions and unpredictable behavior. As the novel unfolds, Bernard learns from Natalia that Kovanski wanted to buy the villa, and the irritation to which she momentarily gives vent when she suggests that the property's astronomical price makes the purchase sheer folly lets Bernard suspect that the Count “was trying to buy Balbianello to take Madame Solario to it” (81). The romantic associations the villa has prompts Bernard, who cannot help thinking Balbianello is a place meant for lovers, to ponder the fatality of amorous deception: “There it stood, waiting, it would seem. Ilona had been there alone—that is, without the one who should have gone with her—and he himself had never been, and Madame Solario would not go with Kovanski.

None of them would ever go” (81). Later on, when Madame Solario goes for a stroll in Bernard’s company, the young man is on the point of asking, “Would you let me take you to Balbianello?” (107), but refrains from doing so, hoping he will have a better opportunity soon. However, “the question that was charged with meaning for him” (107) is never to be asked.

In Huntington’s novel, the visit to Balbianello thus becomes the equivalent of a trip to Cythera, the mythical island of love. However, contrary to what the passage *loco citato* may imply, the villa does not only stand for unfulfilled love and frustrated desire. In the opening chapter of Part Three, Bernard notices Madame Solario as she returns from a boat trip. To Middleton’s relief, the man accompanying her is Eugene, rather than any of her admirers:

Her brother gave her his help, and she took it and rose to her feet. They both stood in the boat for a moment, together, looking up, and their two faces were singularly irradiated.

‘Where have you been?’ Colonel Ross called down.

‘To Balbianello,’ answered her brother.

Ah, what a waste! thought Bernard with a pang. (276–77)

Reassured by Eugene’s “asexual” status, Bernard fails—as he later does in the second ball scene—to realize that the brother and sister’s visit to the villa has the same symbolic significance as if Madame Solario went there with a lover. It is in fact his own innocence that the young man projects onto the pair of siblings, his inexperience blinding him to what is an unmistakable sign of erotic fulfillment and to the fact that the pair is actually a couple, albeit an illicit one. It is ironic that of all the emotional and erotic configurations in Huntington’s novel, the only one that is happy and fulfilled should be an incestuous one, that for the protagonists amorous fulfillment is inextricably linked with breaking a time-honored taboo and bringing disgrace on themselves. To further complicate the novel’s psychological dimension, the blissfulness of the sexual relationship between the siblings, doomed to be seen as perverse and abhorrent by the society, is in itself questionable. Towards the end of the novel, Madame Solario attempts to run away from her brother, though it is together that they eventually leave Italy, having driven Kovanski to suicide and deprived Bernard of his youthful illusions.

When in the course of his investigations into Gladys Huntington’s life, Bernard Cohen inquired about the possible biographical reasons for the writer’s interest in the subject of incest, one of his interviewees replied that the Parrishes were a Quaker family, suggesting it was not a matter for speculation. Cohen infers from this that Huntington may have been affected not so much by some actual

incestuous experience as by the somewhat claustrophobic and at times stifling experience of living in a closely-knit family (par. 13). While we may ask ourselves what motivated the author of *Madame Solario* to place incest at the heart of her novel, it is equally—if not more—interesting to raise the question as to why her characters engage in an incestuous union. If it seems farfetched to treat what is, after all, a fictional story as a clinical case, it may nevertheless be worthwhile to speculate about what drives Eugene Harden to have sexual relations with his sister. Importantly, such speculation also enables the novel's exegete to note that Huntington's characterization bears witness to her considerable psychological insight. In the three paragraphs which follow, I shall attempt to briefly present psychological and anthropological views of incest, its causes and meaning, which correspond to what I see as the central theme of Huntington's novel, namely the way disastrous and traumatic personal experiences, family tragedy and familial breakup lead to antisocial and isolationist tendencies, which, paradoxically, cause the protagonists, especially Eugene Harden, to insulate himself from the outside world and look for shelter within the family or, to be precise, what is left of it.

In *Madame Solario*, Huntington examines what is expertly referred to as adult sibling incest, a phenomenon which—unlike other types of incestuous relationships—still remains unexplored by researchers (Feldman 218). Although “many of the foundation myths of ancient civilizations have involved sibling incest,” which “has held a strong place in cultural myths about the beginning of the world and is a potent part of our imaginative heritage” (Coles 60), “sex between siblings is a phenomenon that remains poorly understood and infrequently researched” (Ascherman and Safer qtd. in Coles 62–63). Since such incest is generally believed to be voluntary, as opposed to incest cases involving children, which tend to be unequivocally regarded as “based on a power imbalance or the use or threat of emotional or physical force” (Feldman 218), opinion is divided as to whether it should be prosecuted (Feldman 218; David Cohen, par. 10), and in some countries, such as France, it is not penalized (David Cohen, par. 11). Additionally, the popular view that sibling incest is inevitably harmful and traumatic is contested by leading authorities on the subject (Coles 60–61, 63). This, of course, does not prevent society from considering sibling incest between consenting adults to be morally unacceptable nor from wondering what it stems from. In keeping with the etymology of the term, derived from the Latin *incestum*, which denotes not just *incest*, but also *moral sin*, and *incestus*, which means *unchaste* (“Incest”), this type of brother-sister relationship is seen as impure, taboo and transgressive.

Why sibling incest occurs is open to question. When the mental health of one of the siblings involved is debatable, psychiatrists may be inclined to think that “unable to choose a more appropriate sexual partner,” the individual “may have

regressed to a childlike way of thinking about sex and sexual partners” (Feldman 221). Experts claim that unsatisfied “emotional needs” coupled with “fear of rejection and intimacy” lead one to turn to “safe relationships, which may include incest” or to “social isolation” (Gromska, Masłowski, and Smoktunowicz 268, trans. A. P.). They also add that certain factors, such as “an unstable family situation” leading to the formation of “antisocial or narcissistic tendencies,” “an immature personality or even personality disorders,” are inextricably intertwined with incest “irrespective of the culture” in which it occurs (271, trans. A. P.). According to Ascherman and Safier, sibling incest may be a response to “unmet needs” such as “ a desire for affiliation and affection; a combating of loneliness, depression, and a sense of isolation; and a discharging of anxiety and tension due to stress” (qtd. in Coles 61). Though the above quote refers to incest between siblings who have not reached adolescence yet, Coles extends it to adolescents and adults, claiming “that the need for a sexual relationship with a sibling, at any age, grows on the backdrop of parental neglect and abandonment” (64). Using the example of Lord Byron’s relationship with his half-sister, Augusta Leigh, which flourished when they were in their mid- and late twenties respectively and is believed to have inspired the poetic fragment which serves as the epigraph to the present article, Coles argues that incest is particularly likely to occur between siblings who “had appallingly fractured childhoods and very little parental support as they grew up” (64). Coles backs her views with a reference to Bank and Kahn’s book *The Sibling Bond*, whose

underlying thesis is that brother and sister incest has played a potent part in myth and literature because it describes, psychologically, a failure of parental care and attention. The children’s need for affection and attachment have not been met, and as a result, they have had to turn to each other. Sibling incest involves the search for a more primitive merged state [...] (63)

The notion of the “primitive merged state” brings to mind the Jungian view of incest as expressive of a longing for completeness and harmony (Pajor 19–20), and ultimately symbolic of unity with oneself (22). Unlike Freud, who believes that “*an incestuous love choice* is in fact the first and regular one” (qtd. in Wolfe 5), sees incest as inextricably linked with the Oedipus complex and insists on the existence of a primary incestuous instinct (Pajor 12, 17) manifested in a child’s sexual fantasies, Jung focuses on the non-literal, symbolic dimension of such fantasies and their place in the collective unconscious. If sexuality is tantamount to leaving the family in order to become independent (16), incest symbolism should, conversely, be read as a representation of the need to return to security (18).

While one must be careful to separate actual, clinical cases of incest from its symbolic or metaphorical dimension (21), the parallels between the Jungian view and the possible causes of incest cited earlier in this paragraph are inescapable.

When looking for the sources of the incest taboo, it is impossible to ignore exogamy, which “according to anthropologists, is the oldest human law” and favors outbreeding, counteracting the “intimacy laws” and “strongest biological ties” inherent in the family (Gromska, Masłowski, and Smoktunowicz 270, trans. M. P.). “The incest taboo, as regards siblings, appears to have two sources,” therapist Paul Brown observes. “The first is genetic and relates to the degeneration of the species that results from inbreeding. The second relates to the psychological health of the individual, and concerns people separating from their families in order to become independent adults” (qtd. in David Cohen, par. 3). In a study of incest and inbreeding, Arthur P. Wolfe retraces the twentieth-century scholarly debate on the roots of the incest taboo (2–6). In the process, he cites the arguments of both sides: those who believed man to be equipped with an inborn defense mechanism to prevent the degeneration incest is likely to entail, and those who did not, turning to, among others, Freud (8). Among the views quoted are those of Leslie White and Claude Lévi-Strauss, who see incest as the enemy of socialization and intermarriage as a way “to build, out of the artificial bonds of affinity, a true human society, despite, and even in contradiction with, the isolating influence of consanguinity” (Lévi-Strauss qtd. in Wolf 7), arguing that inbreeding precludes “cooperation *between* families” and that the incest taboo serves “to unite families with one another, and social evolution as a *human* affair was launched upon its career” (White qtd. in Wolf 7).

In one of *Madame Solario*'s last scenes, Count Kovanski, determined to marry the eponymous heroine, the scandal notwithstanding, refers to—without naming it—the incest committed by Natalia and Eugene. However, neither of the siblings admits to it, and Harden actually tries to feebly deny it, claiming the rumor to be merely a figment of Missy Lastacori's wild imagination. Though Eugene's own behavior when he shouts at Kovanski, “She's mine, only mine. *You* won't have her—she's mine!” (375), evidently shows that he cannot control himself even in public and that there is more than a grain of truth in the allegations, he is stable enough to realize that the relationship between him and Natalia is transgressive by the standards of the society in which they live. However, throughout the novel, Huntington makes it clear that the brother and sister seem to lead a parallel existence in a world of their own, to which the codes and conventions of ordinary society do not apply. In Harden's words, “One is shamed, if ever, only because of what one is in the eyes of other people. And what one does is judged by what one is—in *their* eyes, in the world” (210). Siblings, however,

must not judge each other by the standards of the outside world: “You can’t look at me with the eyes of other people” (210), the brother tells his sister. Of the two, Eugene is incontestably the architect of this separate world, into which he gradually drags his sister. “We both lost our supports in the same catastrophe, Nelly. And we are *together* out here in the open—different from everyone else” (147), he declares shortly after his arrival at Cadenabbia. Symbolically, this separateness is represented by the interactions which take place between Madame Solario and Harden in his or her hotel room: “On his shutting the door they had entered into the atmosphere that was theirs, that of their place of privacy where they were as no one in the world knew them, and for him that meant entering, comparably to entering the room, into the drama of the past” (150–151).

It is impossible to consider the motif of incest in *Madame Solario* without taking account of “the drama of the past.” Whatever one thinks of Eugene Harden, his psychological condition and his motives, the fact remains that his attempt to shoot his stepfather ruined his prospects and that the potentially brilliant future he probably had ahead of him ended before it began. Left to himself at a very young age, helpless, isolated, unable to fall back on his family’s support, Harden spent twelve years leading a miserable existence which he compares to that of a “shadowless” man: a man with no qualifications, no credentials, no connections and no fortune. Relating his past to Natalia, Eugene draws an analogy between himself and the eponymous hero of *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte*, a culturally influential children’s story written in German by Adelbert von Chamisso, a French aristocrat expatriated in Germany after the French Revolution (*Britannica*, pars. 1–2). Published in English under the title *The Wonderful History of Peter Schlemihl*, it tells the story of a man who sells his shadow to the Devil. The deal liberates him from financial worries, at the same time dooming him to ostracism, lovelessness and a nomadic existence. Having read the tale as a child, Eugene still remembers it seventeen years later. When—following the initial hostility and resentment—his relations with his sister become warmer and more friendly, the Peter Schlemihl scenario takes an unusual turn. As the siblings sit on a bench in a secluded piazza, holding hands and discussing plans for the future, the sun emerges from behind the clouds, making it possible for their two silhouettes to cast their shadows. “Look! You have given me my shadow!” Harden bursts out (225). Elaborating on the idea, he seems to anticipate the incest committed later in the novel when he imagines that their two shadows assume a life of their own: “We would see them walking away together, and they would stand against the wall . . . and we would sit here and see them *over there*, and see them kiss each other” (225).

The shadow metaphors present in the novel show that Eugene gradually comes to perceive his sister as the one who completes him and is able to provide him with what he has hitherto lacked. This conviction as well as the incest to which it eventually leads inscribe themselves into the notion of family, which in itself plays an important role in *Madame Solario*. Significantly, family is one of the cornerstones of the inimical world in which, as Eugene feels, there is no place for him. He envies the wealthy and prominent holidaymakers he mingles with at Cadenabbia not only because they enjoy the social and economic status he lacks though still hopes to achieve, but also because they have never had to struggle for their social position, having been born into the “right” families. Although he regretfully knows it to be the only option available to him, the idea of being a self-made man does not appear particularly appealing to Harden, for it only seems to widen the gap between a parvenu like himself and men such as Count Kovanski or Bernard Middleton. It is this deficiency that Eugene attempts to make up for by scheming to use his and his sister’s sexual attractiveness so that they can ally themselves with influential people. “I wish I could have made you the mistress of a pope, Nelly, but one does what one can” (208), he tells Natalia while planning the conquest of Roman high society, to which the Marchese San Rufino, attracted to Madame Solario, and his wife, infatuated with Harden, could be a passport. Preposterous as the comment may seem, it reveals Eugene’s penchant for Machiavellian plots, his flamboyance as well as, arguably, his instability. More importantly, however, it also serves to enhance the theme of incest in the novel. Giving free rein to his imagination, which borders on madness, Harden casts his sister in the role of a papal mistress. This, in turn, brings to mind the story of the Borgias, one of the richest and most powerful families in history. Like Madame Solario, Lucrezia Borgia was a ravishingly beautiful blonde with artistic inclinations rumored to have sexual relationships with both her father, Rodrigo, who took the name Alexander VI on becoming pope, and her brother, Cesare, on whom the ruler in Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The Prince* was modeled. Unscrupulous and power-hungry, Rodrigo and Cesare Borgia rushed Lucrezia into politically advantageous marriages (Jensen 328–330) at the expense of not just her happiness, but human lives as well. Both the famed Renaissance beauty and the eponymous heroine of Huntington’s novel are caught in a web of manipulation, intrigue and sexual scandal, in which the strings are pulled by the closest male relatives. In Madame Solario’s story, the incest and the plotting seem to go hand in hand: the brother and sister plan Natalia’s marriage to Kovanski on the same night on which they consummate their relationship, becoming “collaborators, partners in an enterprise” (Huntington 260) as well as lovers.

It is also within the family that the tragedy which marked the siblings' lives originated. At this point, it is perhaps worth mentioning that, as Nata Minor observes in *Qui a écrit Madame Solario?*, the incest in Huntington's novel is in fact double. De Florez's seduction of Natalia may be considered incestuous if not in biological then certainly in moral and psychological terms, since he was like a father to the siblings. According to Minor, Natalia committed a kind of "mock-incest" with her stepfather prior to experiencing "the real thing," that is incest proper, with her brother. However, while de Florez betrayed the trust put in him by his new family, the close emotional bond between the siblings is supposed to give them a sense of security. Eugene asserts his firm belief that he can feel safe with his sister. He sees her as the only person capable of truly understanding him because of the past they share despite having been physically separated for so many years. "Whatever happens we will never be shamed to each other; we cannot be, because we are brother and sister," Harden declares, adding that he and Natalia "have everything in common," that is "Every ancestor, every relation," "all the places and conditions of our childhood" (209). This sense of a shared heritage results in knowledge of each other and in the kind of transparency which seems impossible to obtain with other people, doomed to remain strangers. "There are no secrets, no ambiguities" (209) between the two siblings, who do not have to pretend when they are together, whereas they are obliged to do so in front of other people: "If I were sitting here with another woman, at some point I would be bound to dissimulate," Eugene confesses. "But here we are, not able to dissimulate, even if we told lies to each other" (210). Harden obviously thinks of his relationship with his sister as a buffer between the two of them and the hostile world. The "perfect attunement", the total identification which is possible between them and which makes him say, "I am with myself when I am with you" (210), translates itself into a sexual union. Their intimate relationship is the physical expression of a unity which, Harden argues, is immanent in the fact that they are siblings: "We know everything because we know what we are, what is behind us both; because we derive from the same source and by that *we are the same*" (210).

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