

DONNA: WOMEN IN ITALIAN CULTURE

Ada Testaferri, ed. Ottawa: Dovehouse Editions Inc., University of Toronto Italian Studies 7, 1989

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This volume is a selection of twenty-three essays that were originally presented at York University in February 1987 as part of an International Symposium on Women in Italian Studies. The collection deals with the works of women authors, the historical background to the movement of formal feminism in contemporary Italy, and women as characters in literary works written by men. In its totality, it offers to modern readers an overview of a hitherto neglected aspect of Italian letters.

The first major section is entitled *Women as Agents of Change* and emphasizes their impact in the postmodern world both in literature and political life; three of the articles, by Judith Adler Hellman, Linda Hutcheon and Hohn Picchione, relate specifically to the appearance of feminism in recent Italian cultural history.

The remaining essays in the first part highlight the aesthetic contributions of women writers – either through an overview of their productivity or an explication of particular works. Bice Mortara Garavelli examines Maria Corti's position of importance; Jen Weinstein distinguishes three types of male figures in Natalia Ginzburg's works.

Rocco Capozzi concentrates on Elsa Morante's fiction and connects her final novel, *Aracoeli*, to autobiographical truth. Laura Pietropaolo scrutinizes the genesis of Liliana Cavani's *Night Porter* and explores the role of sexuality in the film, and William Anselmi analyses the utopian discourse in Fiora Vincenti's two novels *Utopia per flauto solo* and *Le due signore*.

Deborah Heller's structural study of Anna Banti's *Artemesia* accentuates the dynamic interchange between protagonist and author-narrator and the subsequent thematic rejection of despair; Ada Testaferri's examination of *La Madre* supports her belief that love, which represents a dominant theme in the literary vision of Grazia Deledda overwhelms and isolates its victims. Anne Urbancic's es-

say on Annie Vivanti's "L'Invasore" explores the reasons for the continuing popularity of this play, while Fiora Basanese underscores the autobiographical fidelity of Sibilla Aleramo's *Una donna*. Lucienne Kroha advocates that the Marchesa Colombi's *Un matrimonio in provincia* prefigures the importance of gender considerations, not by attacking bourgeois institutions directly, but in a complex mediation between literary conventions and the writer's experience.

While Antonio Franceschetti investigates the lesser known writer Francesca Manzoni's eighteenth-century tragedy, *Esther*, both Paola Malpezzi Price and Sara Adler indicate the Petrarchan tradition in the sixteenth-century poets Chiara Matraini and Isabella Di Morra.

Marguerite Waller's essay on sexual difference in Dante's *Commedia* introduces the concluding section of this volume, *Images of Women in Italian Literature*, followed by Laurie Detenbeck's analysis of the female characters in Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena's *La Calandria*. Maristella de Panizza Lorch discusses the importance of humor in Macchiavelli's *Mandragola*; Domenico Pietropaolo describes Judith as the *femme fatale* of the baroque stage in Federico Della Valle's tragedy *Iudit*.

Anthony Verna's exploratory study of two significant Leopardi poems from the *Aspasia* cycle examines the poet's concept of love and its corollary view of women. S. Bernard Chandler emphasizes Manzoni's originality in deriving universal meaning from the humble character of Lucia Mondella in *I Promessi Sposi*, and Mauro Buccheri's conclusion accentuates the theme of maternal regeneration as a utopic force in Pirandello's *La nuova colonia*.

This volume of essays represents a welcome addition to the growing number of critical works dealing with the importance of women writers in Italy. In 1978, Anna Nozzoli's penetrating study *Tabù e coscienza: la condizione femminile nella letteratura italiana del Novecento* offered insight into the contributions of Italian women to literature in the twentieth century. Sandra Petrignani's recent *Firmato donna. Una donna un secolo* (1986) analyses the relationship between Italian women and key problems in the modern era, while Paola Blelloch's *Quel Mondo dei quanti e*

della stoffe (1987) defines the various themes in the works of modern women writers in Italy. The most recent issue of *Italica* (1988) is entitled *Women's Voices* and contains articles on feminist literature of the 1970s, and on Elsa Morante and Gina Lagorio. The present collection, *Donna: Women in Italian Culture*, continues the attempt to publicize the creativity of Italian women writers and stands as one of the first attempts to do so in North America.

THE MERIDIAN ANTHOLOGY OF EARLY WOMEN WRITERS: British Literary Women from Aphra Behn to Maria Edgeworth 1660-1800

Katharine M. Rogers & William McCarthy, eds. New York & Scarborough, Ont.: New American Library, 1987

THE SIGN OF ANGELICA: Women, Writing and Fiction, 1660-1800

Janet Todd. London: Virago Press, 1989

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The last five years have seen a tremendous flowering in our knowledge about women writers and women's writing in the eighteenth century. One important publication, for example, the *Biographical Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660-1800* (ed. Janet Todd, 1985), contains information about more than 300 British women writers and 200 American women writers from that period; of the British women writers, 100 date from before the mid-eighteenth century, and over 200 of them were actively writing and publishing after 1760. Their numbers, and the array of female expression and creativity they represent, are startling, even to readers of women's literature and other women's studies buffs. There is a treasure-trove of writing by women from eighteenth-century England waiting to be explored and interpreted.

Katharine Rogers is one of the early pioneers in publicizing women's writing during this period. She has published the

Selected Poems of Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea (1979) and also the anthology *Six Women Writers of the Eighteenth Century* (1979). She has written *Feminism in Eighteenth-Century England* (1982), in which she discusses the forms that what she called "feminist feeling" took among women writers who were radical and outspoken as well as among those who were constrained by beliefs and conventions, but who used their writing to show concern for the status of women.

In the *Anthology of Early Women Writers* Rogers and her co-editor William McCarthy have compiled selections from 19 British women writers, adding headnotes and a general introduction. Their anthology highlights British literary women, some of whom are read fairly widely in our day, others known mainly to specialists. The most widely known are Aphra Behn, Lady Mary Wortly Montagu, Hester Thrale Piozzi, and Fanny Burney, writers whose visibility traces to their links to fathers and male literary lions, or to their colourful and scandalous lives.

Rogers and McCarthy place these luminaries in the company of a much larger cadre of women writers of the period. Among the less familiar writers are Delarivier Manley, essayist, journalist, and fiction writer; Anna Laetitia Barbauld, poet, essayist, and editor; and Maria Edgeworth, novelist and pedagogical writer. Notably omitted is Mary Wollstonecraft, excluded perhaps because she is already so widely represented in paperback editions; her friend and feminist comrade Mary Hays appears, though.

Rogers and McCarthy suggest in the introduction that the eighteenth century be called the "Age of the Emerging Woman Writer"; their anthology supplies textual evidence for this, along with some guidelines to the territory. But while the editors integrate feminist touchstones of the period such as critiques of marriage and women's education, they appear hesitant to have their anthology seem too exclusively feminist in its selections or in their suggestions for interpretation. Their focus is more on women writers and the fact of women's writing than on feminist approaches to reading eighteenth-century materials. Theirs is a middle-of-the-road introductory anthology, meant to be read by various audiences, and equally useful

for courses in women's studies, eighteenth-century culture, and the history of English literature.

For a more sophisticated and more explicitly feminist mapping of women's writing during the period, we turn to the work of Janet Todd. Her publications include *Women's Friendship in Literature* (1980), several anthologies of writing by Mary Wollstonecraft, a short study of Sensibility, an eighteenth-century movement significant for women writers, and *Feminist Literary History* (1988). *The Sign of Angellica* is a skillful melding of biographical, historical, and feminist interpretive approaches to eighteenth-century women writers.

Todd discusses the "social construction" of the woman author and the contexts within which women wrote. By the 1790s, she reports, the female professional writer was an established reality in England, and 300 to 400 women published during the decade of the 1790s alone! But this profusion of women writers did not come about in a progressive unfolding of the female voice. Instead of charting the smooth "rise" of the woman novelist, Todd sketches a literary history in which earlier outspoken female self-expression was curtailed by an ideology of femininity and domesticity that prescribed silence, chastity, and modesty for all women.

Todd discerns three phases in her feminist literary history. During the first phase, the Restoration and early eighteenth century, the climate for women's writing and for writing in general was frank and open, although "the status of female fiction remained dubious." During the second phase, across the mid-eighteenth century, the literary and cultural style of sentimentalism gave the woman writer "a new respectable image," but restricted her subject matter. The third phase, spanning the 1780s and 1790s, saw women writers and their writing taking two different directions: some women fought the restrictions on what they should write about and what tone of voice they should use; others accepted restrictions and accommodated themselves to a genteel female novelistic voice.

Todd organizes her book effectively according to these three phases. She begins each section with a historical chapter about the literary and cultural contexts to

women's writing, not as "background" to the novels and novelists, but as the fabric into which women and their writing are woven. She then presents a chapter of general argument about women writers of each phase. Thereafter, Todd supports her views through case studies of individual writers and their work.

Janet Todd takes the title of her book from Aphra Behn's play *The Rover*, in which the prostitute Angellica hangs out an actual portrait of herself as a sign. Her sign represents self-assurance and success, yet during the play she suffers the perils of being a public and assertive woman. For Todd, Angellica's self-representation and the consequences of it illuminate complexities in the history of the female author in England during the eighteenth century.

In tracing the history of female authors and of women's relationship to writing and culture, Todd highlights individual stories and circumstances. Her emphasis is not on a timeless or universal "woman," but rather on "the signature of women" during the changes and tensions of a particular time and place. She does not believe that "the feminine" can be understood outside a cultural and historical framework.

The voices of women writers in England during the years 1660-1800 speak to us across the centuries, telling us about their day and about how, as women, they lived and worked and wrote within it. Our source materials are much more diverse than we have known. The more widely we cast our net over what eighteenth-century women wrote, the more we can enlarge our comprehension of women's writing, and revise prevailing accounts of eighteenth-century history and literary history. Neither the Rogers/McCarthy anthology nor the Todd study helps us to fully sample and examine this diversity, but it is too soon to expect any collection or any analytic work to embrace the totality and suggest a synthesis. Students of eighteenth-century women's studies still have large fields to map. *Early Women Writers* helps the beginning student and the general reader sample women's literary work, and Todd's book gives us a very important overview of female authors, what they wrote, and how they fit (and did not fit) into eighteenth-century England.