

## THE DEFIANT MUSE: ITALIAN FEMINIST POEMS FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE PRESENT: A BILINGUAL ANTHOLOGY

Edited by Beverly Allen, Muriel Kittel and Keala Jane Jewell. New York: The Feminist Press, 1986.

### Marie-France Silver

This anthology of Italian poems is the third in an ambitious four-volume series devoted to feminist poetry in the French, Spanish, Italian and German languages.

In each volume the poems appear both in their original language and in English translation. Each book also includes biographical data as well as relevant social and historical information. Thus, all those interested in either feminism or poetry will have access to material that might otherwise have remained inaccessible.

The present volume contains works by 51 Italian poets as well as some anonymous verses. Although the anthology represents the period from the middle ages to the present, most of the material comes from the 19th and 20th centuries. Three authors only represent the whole of the 17th and 18th centuries. Beverly Allen, in her otherwise thoughtful introduction, explains this paucity by saying that few texts from those centuries are available to us, "either because few women wrote during those periods or because much of what women wrote was not preserved." But the reader cannot help wondering why this should be so, particularly since, according to Allen herself, Italian women of the time were active promoters of literary and artistic activity.

The editors' selection, however, is a convincing demonstration of the richness of a poetry which, Allen asserts, was for centuries the preferred mode of literary expression of Italian women. The craftsmanship of La Compiuta Donzella in the 13th century, the perfection of the poems of Vittoria Colonna (1490-1547), are reminders of Italian women's long literary tradition. Although the main purpose of the anthology is to present texts which are feminist in content, the selection also reveals the extent of Italian women's involvement with main-stream literary currents. It acquaints the non-specialist reader with the most influential women poets in more than just their feminist aspects.

Up to the twentieth century, these women belonged to the privileged and educated classes of society. However, as

Allen points out, they were still vulnerable to forms of oppression and violence. The complaint of Modesta dal Pozzo (1555-1592) about the repressive character of girls' education; the grieving poem of Petronilla Paolini Massimi (1663-1726) about her forced marriage at the age of ten to an old man; these are but two of many poems denouncing attitudes and practices which oppressed women, and complaining of inequalities inherent in a patriarchal society. Some of the most moving testimonies to the plight of Italian women come from the oral tradition — from late 19th and early 20th century anonymous songs from working class women. A "Song of the Venetian Silk-Spinners," for instance, complains of the economic exploitation of women workers:

*Poor silk-spinners,  
we are so wretched,  
the pay that we get  
they eat it back off us.*

Perhaps the most original element of the book is its selection of 19th and 20th-century poems. The emergence of a recognizably modern feminist discourse, a consciousness not only of injustice and oppression but also of history, an increasing insistence on the positive cognitive value of feminine and feminist emotion allied to that sense of history, a firm belief in the power of the poetic word,<sup>1</sup> the thematic wealth of contemporary poems — all these indicate the presence of a new type of feminist mind in modern Italy. The result is to make this anthology of Italian poetry a fascinating study of feminist thought.

<sup>1</sup> *I want so strongly our freedom  
in the red round dance of defiance  
I want to sing so strongly  
that the song could break my heart  
and go on living  
without me.*

- Franca Maria Catri (1931- )

**Mary di Michele**  
...from *Bread and Chocolate*  
(Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1980).

## Waiting for Babbo

The year was a chasm gaping.  
I lost some heart in that darkness.  
I lost my father for the first time  
to the sea, to america.

The year is a desert canyon  
stretching beyond the arid horizon  
where the dust dreams of breathing  
through gills in water.  
I dream of seeing my father in the wide  
black and white screens of america.

I am four, a year to you, *babbo*,  
is twenty to me, twenty years  
and I am five, I have grown old  
without you. I have dressed as a gypsy  
for *Carnevale*. The sacrifice in the  
bonfire  
was my rocking-horse for the end of  
winter.

In a few days, *babbo*, we pack  
the smiles that are destined for you.

But a year is twenty,  
twenty years lost in snow is an ice age.  
Can it be redeemed by an olive branch  
or a palm?  
And that dark skeleton waiting  
is not my father.

## Documentary

In its flattest prose style  
the light planted in the clay  
masks of the faces  
of a mother and her two children,  
making one print for the passport  
and one print for an air  
mail letter to Canada.

Nothing could be blander  
than the features of that woman,  
lips drawn in a thin smile,  
the barest nod to a man  
who hold the camera.  
Only her eyes are pregnant  
with a distant husband.

Nothing could be more stolid  
than the boy's chops  
sitting in rolls of chin,  
a fat sausage curl slithering  
across the centre of his head,  
his cock's comb.

Nothing could be more frightening  
to a waif girl  
than the threat of a bird  
to make her smile.  
She is waiting to be born again  
to her father.