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978-0-521-57088-6 - A History of Women's Writing in Italy

Edited by Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood

Excerpt

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## Introduction

The title of this book, *A History of Women's Writing in Italy*, has been carefully chosen: first, 'women's *writing*' rather than 'women's *literature*' is meant to indicate that where women are concerned, one has to look beyond the conventional genres classed as literature. In Italy, in particular, which has only recently broken its ties with its classical Latin heritage, and where authors have been rebelling right up to the present against models of style and genre in vernacular prose and poetry imposed for centuries, writing *literature* has assumed both a classical education, and an education in a fixed canon of vernacular authors, beginning with Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. *Writing* on the other hand does not assume such a formal preparation, nor adhesion to fixed models. Women's writing does not fit easily into a literary tradition or a canon, and very talented women writers were of necessity self-taught.

Second, the phrase *in Italy* rather than 'Italian' indicates on the one hand that all the writers were and are geographically based in the Italian peninsula. We are not dealing with Italian writing outside Italy or by writers of Italian descent. On the other hand, it indicates that these women do not always write in what is now called 'standard Italian', but in Latin, French and a variety of dialects – a natural enough condition if one realises that Italy as a nation state did not exist before 1870.

The third point concerns 'a history of *women's writing*'. What criteria justify separating women's writing in Italy from a history of Italian literature? Is this not another way to 'ghettoise' women and what they do? We would not subscribe to the notion of *écriture féminine*, advanced by some feminist theorists, that the very act of writing is gender-determined, as if there were an essentialist distinction between the way women and men use language. On the other hand, we do accept that gender is, in fact, a

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social construction shaped by historical circumstances. In the Western world, and in Italy in particular, women have led very different lives, have taken on very different roles and have not enjoyed the same levels of literacy and access to cultural and intellectual circles that men have. Furthermore, women have not been granted full citizenship in the existing histories of literature. They have often been passed over, or dealt with haphazardly rather than systematically, simply because their writings fall outside what is thought to be the best style, the best genres or the best scholarship.

The constraints under which women writers in Italy have had to labour may need recalling to modern readers. Women's general lack of education has been mentioned. This alone has led to at least two problems: illiterate women – religious authors above all, even St Catherine of Siena, come into this category – need a scribe to write down what is being said. This mediation may alter the spoken words, make them more respectable or at least more 'correct', leave things out, or add glosses here and there. One confessor actually put his own name to the visions he recorded. On the other hand, women who have struggled to acquire learning in order to write and publish, find themselves stripped of authorship by men who cannot believe that women have written what they have written; even worse, men appropriate women's compositions – a practice that happened as late as the twentieth century.

Women's enforced domesticity, resulting above all from their status as wives and mothers, goes hand in hand with their low levels of literacy. The brute facts of so many women's lives – early marriage, frequent child-bearing and child-rearing, and lack of effective birth-control – left little or no time for reading and writing. The institution of marriage itself, with its emphasis on woman's subjection to her husband, and his dominion over her, hallowed whatever double-standards already existed in social practice. Intelligent, learned women threatened the sexual hierarchy asserted by Church and state, and enshrined in civil and canon law. Widows and nuns, provided they could afford books, or at least have access to them, sometimes fared better. An added obstacle to equality and to entrance into the public world of letters mentioned by women themselves was not just the lack of education that followed from their isolation, but being actively denied it by men. Women did not and could not take part in the social processes of learning and literacy: university lectures and debates, discussions in academies, participation in group efforts of research and writing, contacts with publishers and invitations

to travel abroad. That women accomplished all they did in such a harsh climate is truly astonishing. Up to World War II, women needed heroic determination first to learn, then to write and then to persist. This Cambridge *History of Women's Writing in Italy* illustrates their multi-faceted ingenuity in making themselves heard.

### **The Renaissance and early modern periods: 1350–1850**

What were the principal historical and cultural features of the periods this book addresses that impinged the most on what and how women wrote? In Italy, the legacy of Latin as the language of literature, learning and authoritative institutions like the Church and the law acted as a barrier to most men and all women, except a handful. The blossoming of the vernacular in the Middle Ages, with Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio – the ‘three crowns’ of Italian literature – and its growing use for all kinds of expression, on the other hand, gave women brought up in a dominantly oral culture the chance to participate. The first great collection of letters in the vernacular was dictated by Catherine of Siena to a scribe; she herself could not write. Letters are the dominant genre for women in the period: whether highly polished and erudite ones written in Latin, by women who long to belong to a ‘republic of letters’ where they would be on equal terms with men, or intimate family ones of a mother to her sons in exile.

The second principal feature of the period, which goes hand in hand with the respectability of the vernacular, is the emergence of the printing press. Printing arrived in Italy from Germany in the second half of the fifteenth century; by the end of the century, Italy and above all Venice had become the European centre for publishing. The desire of an ever-widening public to buy printed books, and of publishers to look for material, provided favourable conditions for women. They specialised, as it were, in two areas, poetry, and religious and devotional writing. Petrarch's collection of sonnets and other metrical forms in his *Canzoniere* fired a band of imitators, creating Petrarchism that lasted a good two centuries after his death in 1374. While preserving the vocabulary and imagery of Petrarch, women redirected his poetry of morally tormented love for an unattainable (married) object of desire into diverse channels, sometimes more spiritual, other times less so, to suit their own voice. Vittoria Colonna's *Rime spirituali* of 1538 used the verse forms to express a devoted wife's grief for a noble dead husband, and then for Christ. In the

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middle of the sixteenth century, an anthology composed entirely of women poets was printed.

Women found expression and publication in the most popular genre of writing, devotional prose and poetry. Here they gained respect for their moral and spiritual example and advice, whether they were composing mystery plays in poetry in the Medici circle, promoting religious renewal through devotional writings based on Scripture, or charismatics dictating their revelations and ecstasies with messages for the renewal of society.

It is hard to point to any one institution promoting women's literacy. Women's education remained haphazard, dependent within the family on obliging fathers, brothers and far-sighted mothers, who were themselves educated. The northern Italian courts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – Milan, Mantua, Ferrara and Urbino (the setting of Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, with its pioneering promotion of women's intellectual and moral equality with men) can be singled out. There women could enjoy the company of a political and cultural elite, and take on roles beyond the domestic. They were often patrons in their own right. Discussions in the vernacular by women about their own status took root at the courts, although they reach a climax at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries in Venice, among professional groups. At court, women also promoted fiction, put on spectacles, encouraged translations into the vernacular, and found in the short story or *novella* deriving from Boccaccio's *Decameron* a source of continual entertainment, yet they themselves remained aloof from writing it until much later in the sixteenth century. Their reputation as chaste and virtuous wives and mothers was paramount, and would all too easily be compromised by the very act of writing lascivious dialogue about erotic, usually adulterous, adventures. Religious orders, too, usually provided women with the basics of literacy and some Latin for participation in divine services; and judging from accounts of ecstasies and revelations, God seems to privilege communication with them.

Nevertheless, at the time of maximum cultural creativity in literature of all kinds and the arts, political and religious turmoil dominated the entire Italian peninsula. The French King Charles VIII invaded Italy in 1494, Louis XII in 1499, the German Charles V in 1527, all this culminating in the Sack of Rome by the same Holy Roman Emperor in 1527. The states of the Italian peninsula, with the exception of Venice, lost their political independence and became virtually colonies of the Spanish–Austrian Hapsburg monarchy; the thriving Italian mercantile economy also

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declined with growing competition from France, Spain, the Netherlands and England, while debilitating wars with the Turks drained Venice's economy, too.

Impinging more directly on women were the events of the Protestant Reformation in the north, beginning with Luther posting his challenge to Rome on the doors of Wittenburg cathedral in 1517, continuing with Calvin and the burgeoning of other sects in disagreement with Rome. The reaction in Italy was at first favourable – several reforming groups, like Vittoria Colonna's, also wished to renew the spiritual and moral life of the Church – but later became hostile, even persecutory. The Catholic Church responded with the Council of Trent, which opened in 1545, and continued fitfully until 1563, producing a massive programme of institutional, theological and moral reform, including an Index of Forbidden Books and legislation for enforcing censorship. For women, it meant stricter control over their sexuality, and greater emphasis on the 'rightness' of their subjection. The wave of enthusiasm for Neoplatonism, starting with new translations into Latin of Plato throughout the fifteenth century, and culminating with Marsilio Ficino's publication of Plato's works, with commentaries at the end, had offered new interpretations of Plato's inspired love, *furor*, that some poets adapted for women as well. The possibilities of sexual equality this offered were soon dampened with Trent and ensuing Counter-Reformation propaganda that put women firmly back in the home, with, ideally, only the literacy required to teach their children.

Economic and political decline went hand in hand with the loss of relative freedom of expression in Italy, and led to stagnation in Italian culture up to the middle and late 1700s. (It should be mentioned, however, that the very first university degree was granted to Elena Cornaro Piscopia in theology and philosophy from the University of Padua in 1678, and her works were published in Parma, 1688.)

From about this time to 1850, the period we have called 'Enlightenment and Restoration' ('Restoration' referring to attempts to restore the monarchy after the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars and subsequent revolts in Italy), French culture dominated Italy. It is significant that our chapters on early women's writing leave a gap from 1650 to roughly the French Revolution at the end of the next century. The kind of writing then employed shows a distinct break from the Renaissance. There is an almost total oblivion of earlier Italian writers, accompanied by a slow

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beginning to recover them, as if they were ancient monuments of a forgotten civilisation.

As in the early seventeenth century, Venice is at the centre of this revival of women's writing. Scholars like Luisa Bergalli pioneer the recovery of a genealogy of women poets and intellectuals. There is the occasional woman academic: Laura Bassi taught science at the University of Bologna from 1732 to 1778; and Maria Agnesi taught mathematics at Bologna from 1750 to 1799. Of fundamental importance is the establishment of the literary salon, also imported from France, and also centred in Venice, of which women were the chief protagonists. The salon enabled women – admittedly an elite, but an influential elite – to expand their literary and cultural horizons, to find the stimulus and support needed for writing and publishing, and to participate in and shape political and social events. Women like Giustina Renier, with her massive social history of the origins and significance of Venetian festivals, engaged in serious scholarship. Other new directions open up. For the first time, women become journalists and pamphleteers, more often than not in favour of revolution, or at least social reform. Other women write for journals that provide practical advice unobtainable elsewhere. Women travellers, another new and daring phenomenon, write their diaries and publish accounts of trips as far abroad as the Orient; and they now begin to take up the historical and philosophical novel.

#### **Unification and after: 1850–2000**

With the achievement of a united Italy in 1860, the declared task of successive governments, in D'Azeglio's notorious phrase, was to 'make Italians', and the role and function of women within the new nation state were seen to be fundamental to the new order. While many women, particularly those from the north and the north-east, forfeited social and economic power under the new centralised Civil Code, they were nonetheless required by nationalist rhetoric to serve as mothers to the new nation, the repository of virtues prized alike by right-wing and Catholic groups and barely dissented to on the fledgling left.

In reality, women's lives differed almost as much as the regions which had hastily come together to form the new nation. If domestic life was not necessarily cast in the rigid mould of Verga's Sicilian novels, nonetheless throughout the peninsula the family retained its central importance as bearer of tradition and as a means of economic survival. Other options

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were limited. Most professional life was still barred to women and there were very few alternative ways of making a living outside the family home, while their rights within marriage remained minimal.

Despite these obstacles, there were some remarkable shifts in the relation of women to reading and writing. A large-scale literacy programme – largely carried out by poorly paid women teachers – led to a substantial growth in a reading public no longer exclusively identifiable with a cultural and social elite. The most popular genre was no longer poetry but the novel, frequently serialised, which was much more adaptable to the requirements of the new reading public. Women wrote poetry and drama too, however, much of it in dialect, and still to be fully explored. Many women writers, given the limited access they still had to formal patterns of education, were self-taught and relatively unskilled in the traditional canon of literature; their models were contemporary French rather than classical. It can be argued that the lack of formal education of these women led them, on the one hand, to be particularly responsive to the desires and requirements of their market and to adapt accordingly, and, on the other, freed them to experiment in form and style, in that they were not bound by the constraints of canonical expectations.

Involvement in the Risorgimento, together with the impetus of a fledgling feminist movement, led to a heightened awareness amongst women of social issues, and broadened considerably the scope of their writing; essayists and political activists dealt with such contentious issues as the vote, the role of the Church and divorce, as well as more philanthropic matters such as hygiene and child welfare. Middle-class women, rather than just the aristocracy, began to make a living from contributing to the burgeoning number of periodicals, many of them dedicated to women. Journalism, essays and novels with a social, political and polemical intent began to appear, along with the first feminist novels.

The First World War (1915–18 for Italy), followed by two decades of Fascism (1922–43), left women confronted with an ideologically hostile barrage from Church and state alike. Fascism and Catholicism both allowed little space for women outside their traditional domestic and reproductive functions. Mussolini was supported by both the traditional elite and the Vatican, which formally ratified their acceptance of Fascism through the Lateran Pacts of 1929: this move effectively made Catholicism the religion of the state, with a powerful say in family and social matters.

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Fascist propaganda required women to be mothers to soldiers, and promoted the archetype of the rural earth-mother in preference to the subversive cosmopolitan chic imported from abroad.

Women were required to conform to a traditional and regressive ideology of gender, to be wives and mothers, to produce soldiers for the nation. Women writers, in accordance with increasingly threadbare models, were regarded as sexually dissolute, unfeminine, emasculating and sterile. Literary histories have been rather too eager to concur with the view that women achieved little of merit during the years of Fascist dictatorship. Yet writing by women during this period, generally dismissed as mediocre and low-brow, limited to the popular or romantic novel, reveals itself to be rich in avant-garde and formal experimentation, with women exploring new genres and very modern modes of writing, experimenting with symbolism and expressionism, as well as realism. Women writers were engaged in a range of literary activity, from the hugely successful popular novel nonetheless despised by a critical elite, to works of high modernism. During these middle decades of the twentieth century, writing by women became increasingly attentive to alternative cultural forms within an international context, and this remained largely true after the Second World War.

Italy changed swiftly and dramatically in the post-war period. Women had been active in the Italian Resistance, a movement celebrated in the immediate post-war period in literature and cinema alike, earning themselves the vote and, for many of them, a first taste of political and militant activity. Population shifts – whether out of Italy or from the south to the north – loosened the ties of the traditional family, while surging industries led to rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. Increasingly secular, with a level of prosperity undreamt of a generation before, Italy was experiencing seismic and sometimes violent change. None were more affected by the social and cultural change than women, who in the two decades between the end of the war and the beginning of the new feminist movement had the vote, access to wider areas of employment, much better levels of education and increased freedom from domestic drudgery. Their aspirations, and their expectations, were bound to change. The issue of divorce was one of the first rallying points for the new feminism. A divorce law was finally approved in 1974, a clear sign that Italians were no longer subservient to traditional authority. Abortion was the second issue which drew women in their hundreds of thousands in a campaign of information and civil disobedience, and was finally legalised in 1978, thus



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largely ending a hidden but widely felt scandal. The 1970s saw a considerable amount of legislation which put women's legal and civil status on a firmer footing.

Women, urban and literate, demanded a great deal more from Italian society than their mothers had done. Writing from the 1960s and 1970s challenges the dominance of a traditional elite, male culture, seen as an arm of repressive social and ideological thinking, and women wrote of their own experience with a new raw directness which eschewed attempts to conform to standard literary models. With the end of the period of social and feminist militance, too, women began to explore new ways of writing. Their work displays increasing confidence and sophistication at a formal level, while they also increase the scope of their work to address previously neglected or hidden areas of female experience, such as the relationship between mothers and daughters or the expression of female sexuality. While they have made the greatest gains within the fields of poetry and the novel, at the same time, women have also moved into more areas of cultural and literary production than ever before, becoming active as critics and academics as well as dramatists and film-makers. They have also addressed traditional discourses of philosophy, producing theory, as well as fiction, which explores and challenges the construction of female identity within dominant and age-old traditions.

'Giving a voice' provides a cogent motivation for writing this history, and distinguishes it from conventional histories of national literatures mentioned above. We believe this book to be the first of its kind to be published either in Italy or in the English-speaking world. While there are other, more specific, histories of women's writing, especially for the modern period, this is comprehensive in its attempt to map out the main features of women as writers, and the genres of writing they engaged in from the Middle Ages to the present. Just as important, it brings to maturation a process that has been going on in earnest since World War II: that of women discovering their own past. Writing of whatever kind and genre by women in previous generations has begun to be recovered and rediscovered, and the question of women's relationship to the written word over the centuries to be reassessed. By this process, we are bringing back to life, as it were, and giving voice to whole groups of women writers in Italy who even when they were published, often sank into early oblivion. They were often hardly aware that they had an ancestry, and could never have hoped for descendants who cared as much as we do about what they achieved.

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