

BOOK REVIEW

Lettrici italiane tra arte e letteratura. Dall'Ottocento al Modernismo

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This volume is a formidable example of how scholarly perspectives that stemmed from Cultural Studies have – at last! – inaugurated a dialogue with scholarly literary criticism in Italy. Thanks to an insightful multidisciplinary approach that connects literary and visual studies, the project's main goal is to show how, between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, both Italian women's increasing familiarity with books and their featured presence in literature and the visual arts changed the status of their reading practice. Most significantly, in this book it becomes clear how, in a newly formed Italian nation, rather than a merely recreational activity for women, reading began to be perceived as a creative pastime that would enhance their agency in the public sphere.

The collection is divided into two subsections ('Lettrici' and 'Letture'), plus an afterword by Anna Villari, who examines in detail the painting *La lettura* by Mosé Bianchi, and contains contributions by Italian as well as (fewer) English-speaking scholars. The contributions offer a wide-ranging series of analyses of the 'object-book' in its many contexts of use, such as painted and sculpted representations of women caught while reading, or private libraries and shelves inside domestic *salotti* where young girls received their education. There are also several close readings of novels and paintings thematising reading, along with two essays respectively dedicated to female readers in the context of Italian *melodramma* (Marco Sirtori), and to female readers/spectators of Italian *cinema giallo* from the 1930s (Raffaele De Berti). Furthermore, many of the contributions directly engage with the role of books in paintings – which are illustrated in a dedicated section – thus providing noteworthy transmedial analyses.

Not only do the textual and visual aspects of the book highlight how books have played a crucial role in the cultural, social and political lives of women in modern Italy; they also offer original information about how Italy acquired greater gender equality thanks to the circulation and transmission of ideas that, even on the eve of Fascism, could not be entirely obliterated.

As the editors observe in their introduction, the female reader reflects specific historical, social and cultural phenomena (p. 8), and she is indeed the representative of historical and cultural tensions, partly because the transformation of the relationship between women and books took place during the end of the nineteenth century, when the genre of the novel began to embody the authors' metanarrative anxieties, at a time when the pedagogical function of literature was beginning to fade (p. 9). This collection of essays therefore particularly focuses on the 'grande Ottocento', yet it also explores a variety of themes

that are still highly relevant in the current debate about books and the practice of reading, including the influence of the mass market on certain forms of readership, or the idea of 'reading for pleasure', as Ann Hallamore Caesar points out in her contribution (pp. 40–42). As current research has shown – I am thinking here, for instance, of Diana Holmes' research on French middlebrow literature – the habit of 'devouring' books reflects the rapture and the enchantment of reading, which become more and more of a totalising experience. One cannot but recall the *topos* of the female reader à la Emma Bovary, who loses herself in her dangerous tendency to blend her own reality with the world of her literary heroines. And yet, it is thanks to the character of the voracious female reader, as Santovetti skilfully argues as she refers to Marco Praga's novel *Adelina*, that women progressively gain a representational agency of their own. (p. 54).

The deliberate choice of adopting books as symbolic vehicles of change is evident when literature is authored by women, as Ombretta Frau describes in her essay, where she investigates the strategies used by Jolanda and Sfinge, popular female novel writers of the nineteenth century, by comparing them with the ways in which books were used as clever props in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century paintings by male artists such as Giovanni Boldini, or Silvestro Lega. Both literary and visual practices are identified by Frau as bearing a constant representational and symbolic tension, as they differently serve the purpose of revealing social hypocrisies, such as the taboo of adultery, or various kinds of desires, perversions, and transgressions (pp. 85–91). Other relevant case studies of female readers featured in literature and paintings include investigations on authors less studied today, such as Federigo Tozzi and Camillo Boito (Laura Lucia Rossi and Edwige Comoy Fusaro); an in-depth reading of a painting by Pellizza Da Volpedo (Davide Lacagnina); as well as Ursula Fanning's essay about Matilde Serao's novel *Fantasia*, where the cautionary messages addressed to young women are paralleled by the powerful presence of female characters who remind one a little of Austen's Elizabeth Bennett – also a rabid reader – as they subtly subvert social conventions in search of an independent voice.

Female authorship is another pivotal aspect analysed by the volume, as Annick Paternoster shows in her contribution examining how the popularity of pedagogical books addressed to upper middle-class young women highlighted a specific form of female authorial autonomy. Similarly, the commercialisation of Catholic novels written in Italian, as Stefano Cracolici argues (pp. 111–119), would, paradoxically, start eroding the moral authority of the Church over women by featuring Christian heroines who lived exemplary lives of martyrdom and pious resistance to sin. Finally, with their rich investigation widely based on *ekphrasis*, Jessica Calipari and Maria Saveria Ruga provide original transmedial perspectives on the male painter's gaze on women as readers and/or observers of reality. Calipari specifically discusses the role of reading and books in nineteenth-century paintings by focusing on the recurring figure of the female visitor in the artist's atelier, which she interestingly parallels with the literary character of the female reader. On the other hand, Ruga deals with the paintings of Vittorio Corcos, whose featured readers become the embodiment of a newly found female autonomy, both in terms of social posture, as well as representations of freely expressed sensuality. As women return to the act of reading while visiting a man's atelier, they stop merely playing the role of passive muses who may be manipulated by the male artist. The *mise en abîme* is made possible by a game of reversed gazes, in which the book serves as a functional gimmick to stress female difference.

The multifaceted scope of each analysis is further expanded by the soliciting of the reader/viewer's gaze with illustrations of each of the described paintings, provided in a dedicated section of the book. The overall result, for us readers and observers, is a deeply involving and immersive experience that, similar to a time machine, allows us to project ourselves into a recent past, as well as to reflect upon our own relationship with books, at a time when these objects seem to be becoming more and more ephemeral.