

BOOK REVIEWS

Gender, Writing, Spectatorships: Evenings at the Theatre, Opera, and Silent Screen in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy and Beyond

by Katharine Mitchell, New York and London, Routledge, 2022, 240 pp., £130 (hardback), ISBN 9780367265014; £38.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781032109510

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The aim of Katharine Mitchell's volume is to lay bare 'a plethora of rich textual writings to uncover a wave of gendered spectatorship based on admiration: these were the foundations of an active, self-conscious, and vibrant female culture industry at the turn of the twentieth century in Italy and beyond. Due to the onset of fascism, they were all too readily forgotten. Until now' (p. 17). Until now because her study draws on a wealth of previously unpublished archival material: from realist fiction to autobiography, from fan letters and private diaries to reviews in women's and theatre journals. Through these documents, we hear the voices of women who were protagonists, producers, and – most innovatively – consumers of literature, theatre, opera, and film in this crucial period of Italian history between the 1880s and 1920s. Mitchell describes the phenomenon as a 'female spectatorship in-the-making' (p. 16), which emerged with the first wave of feminism and the arrival on the literary scene of professional women writers. Her interdisciplinary approach combines cultural history (in particular the studies of Alberto Mario Banti and Silvana Patriarca), feminist studies, film theory, and spectatorship studies.

The first two chapters are introductory: Chapter 1 frames the methodology and contextualises the research within the key directions in spectatorship studies. Chapter 2 retraces the historical and cultural background focusing on women's access to education and employment in the nineteenth century as well as on the function played by cultural constructs such as that of the Fallen Woman and the *femme fatale*. On the subject of women opera spectators, Mitchell counters the claim made by feminist philosopher Catherine Clément that opera is a misogynist genre, employing Carolyn Abbate's emphasis on the 'contribution of the performer over the "monological authority of the Composer"' (p. 30) and Adriana Cavarero's contention that at the heart of opera lies the triumph of the female voice. What emerges is the ambivalent function played by the Fallen Woman figure, which on the one hand reflected the misogynistic 'othering' by male authors but on the other gave centrality to the woman character and was instrumental in inducing the reflection of women readers and spectators on the female condition.

Chapter 3 is the heart of the book because it is here that Mitchell posits her idea that, 'as portents of modernity and intermediaries for women spectators, fans, and readers,

female performers' and women writers' relationships were based on admiration and solidarity; and that these extended from them, to spectators, and back to performers, thereby constructing a continuous positive feedback loop' (p. 59). This feedback loop or 'affective alliance' is very much a prototype, she underlines, of 'the Italian feminist collective Diotima's notion of *affidamento*' (p. 61) of the 1980s. Her examples of '*affidamento* retrospectively applied' (p. 66) are many and fascinating, all offering glimpses of this 'female gaze in the making', whether they involved exceptional women (including the writers Neera, Serao, and Aleramo and the performers Pezzana, Bertini, and Duse) or ordinary women (fans, spectators, and readers whose reflections appear in private diaries or letters collected at the Archivio Diaristico Nazionale of Pieve Santo Stefano).

A more structured form of feedback loop is then analysed in Chapter 4, where Mitchell shows that, through their commentaries on theatre-going in columns in journals for women and through theatre reviews in periodicals addressed to a female readership, women writers acted as intermediaries and critics who 'were consciously educating and initiating women spectators – who were also readers – in how to be critically engaged with the new national language on their evenings out' (p. 91). The case of Matilde Serao stands out. Mitchell draws attention to Serao's 1916 article 'Parla una spettatrice', in which the writer presents herself as 'a self-declared "spectatrix", reflecting in retrospect on "the reasons for [her] tears, [her] smiles, [her boredom]"' (p. 100).

Chapter 5 turns to fiction to explore how women spectators and performers were represented in the realist literature of the period. The intention is 'to demonstrate the (albeit rigid binary) gendered fictional configurations of spectators and performers at this specific moment in Italy's cultural history' (p. 120). Mitchell's examples corroborate that 'women and men authors of realist fiction differed in their depictions of female characters' (p. 123). However, one is left to ponder whether fiction can be treated on a par with non-fiction and whether the binary logic is the most suitable to capture what is happening in the creation (and consumption) of literary characters. It is true that 'women writers of realist fiction inject feeling into their writing, expressing *sympathy* for their protagonists' thoughts and emotions' (p. 123, emphasis in the original). But how can we explain male authors such as Federico De Roberto, who, by identifying so deeply with his female protagonist in *L'illusione*, not only went against the misogynistic views expressed in his own non-fiction writing but gave his fictional woman reader an awareness and agency that contradicted the passivity of the bovaristic cliché? To be fair, Mitchell acknowledges the rigidity of the binary logic, noting that there were also women writers who adopted a masculine perspective. The conclusion of the chapter is persuasive: 'Male-authored "othering" depictions in fiction of performing women were a backlash against the emergence of increasing numbers of "knowing" and engaged female consumers as readers and spectators of popular culture' (p. 132).

The final chapter looks at how 'Italian women writers and performers catalysed social and political change through the circulation and consumption of their "star text" at home and abroad' (p. 136). This is a fascinating chapter that highlights how cosmopolitan these Italian writers and 'divas' were (judging by their consistent success abroad) as well as the control they wielded over their own work and success: Adelina Patti, Eleonora Duse, and Francesca Bertini were not only singers and actors, but managers and directors. Significantly, the last sections are devoted to the legacy outside Italy of Matilde Serao, who, herself a writer, journalist, newspaper director, screenwriter, and cineaste, is exemplary of this 'female gaze' in the making. Such writers and performers 'challenged their women spectators (and readers) as intermediaries, initiating them, as "Symbolic Mothers" into cultural fields ... self-consciously inviting readers and spectators to participate in, and

adopt, their stars' critical and affective stances as spectators' (p. 156). By showing us how this spectatorship came to be and by highlighting the crucial role played by the 'positive feedback loop' between women writers, performers, and their audiences, Mitchell's book adds a very important piece to the study of the history of women's cultural production and consumption in Italy and beyond. It is also a brilliant testimony of female solidarity at work in the artistic field.

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The Italian Literature of the Axis War: Memories of Self-Absolution and the Quest for Responsibility

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Does it make sense to study the Italian literature of the Axis War – the military campaigns fascist Italy fought between 1940 and 1943 – and its influence on Italy's self-absolving discourses almost 80 years after the end of the conflict and the fall of the regime? What may seem a rhetorical question in fact reflects a current debate in Italy following the new far-right government's attempt to set aside the Resistance component from the 2023 annual 25 April Liberation Day commemoration in the name of a 'restored national harmony', or the fact that the largest European conflict since the Second World War is currently being fought in Ukraine in the name of – according to the official Russian rhetoric – the 'denazification' of a country led by a 'Jewish president'. In view of this new wave of historical revisionism and attempts to rewrite (or abuse) history, Guido Bartolini's book is a timely and analytical attempt to explore and understand the role played by postwar Italian literature in the startling marginalisation of the memory of Italy's participation in the Axis War and its crimes.

The first two chapters introduce the research questions and lay the theoretical foundations and objectives of the book, 'the first in-depth study of the literature of the Axis War', which aims 'to examine the ways in which the Fascist wars of aggression entered the literary imagery of postwar Italy' (p. 4). It is immediately clear that this is a well-thought-out, well-researched, and well-structured interdisciplinary analysis at the intersection of memory studies, literary criticism, and historiography. Bartolini explains how the book focuses on a heterogeneous, strictly selected corpus of 34 texts of Italian Second World War literature comprising both novels and memoirs. The analysis takes into consideration a wide variety of books published between the end of the war and the 1970s that met with different degrees of success across the decades.

In the following three chapters, Bartolini shows his mastery of the tools of literary criticism by analysing a series of figures of repetition – topoi, themes, and master plots – that recur across his chosen corpus. Chapter 3 focuses on topoi of innocence and concentrates predominantly on the stereotype of the *italiani brava gente* and its manifestations