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Agata Maria Rosa Viglianisi

FEMALE PURITY AND TRANSGRESSION IN ITALIAN FICTION BY WOMEN AUTHORS 1906 – 1952

School of European Languages, Culture and Society
Centre for Multidisciplinary and Intercultural Inquiry
University College London

Supervisor: Dr: Maria-Novella Mercuri-Rosta

Abstract

The absence of women authors in the Italian literary Canon is still an unresolved and seemingly unsolvable problem. Italian women authors are extraneous to the labels of scholastic Italian literary history; hence, scholars and critics keep questioning their talent and relevance. The dismissal of their works as minor, in turn, hinders their rediscovery and study even in contemporary Italian literary studies, ill-equipped to understand their femininity.

This dissertation proposes a 'female poetics' of Italian women authors with the aid of a comparative approach and the application of relevant theories on female writing that have been long recognised in the anglophone literary panorama. This new framework is theorised and described through the analysis of four key works: two from the early 20th century, Sibilla Aleramo's *Una Donna* [A Woman] (1906) and Ada Negri's short stories collection *Le Solitarie* [Solitary Women] (1917), and two post-Second World War novels, Elsa Morante's *Menzogna e Sortilegio* [Lies and Sorcery] (1948) and Alba de Céspedes' *Quaderno Proibito* [Forbidden Notebook] (1952).

Outlining a female rhetoric within these works aids in the revaluation of Italian women's literary endeavours. Indeed, this research proves that 20th-century women authors contrast the male, polarised, and stereotypical representation of female characters – either angels or *femme fatales* – that worsened during the turn of the century and peaked during Fascism. Furthermore, these four female-authored texts testify to the presence and endurance in Italian literature of themes, modes and motifs which can also be found in women's writing outside their national tradition, especially in English and American late 19th-century genres, such as 'New Woman' and 'Gothic' fiction.