

CHANGING CORPUS, CHANGING TOOLS, CHANGING AFFECT: FEMINIST AND DECOLONIAL REVISIONS TO THE ITALIAN LITERARY CANON

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Over the past few years, I have been working on a large-scale project on the Italian literary canon, with the aim of mapping its current configuration, understanding the rhetorical mechanisms through which it constructs and reproduces its hierarchies, its value system, its exclusions, and identifying the sites of power that enforce or challenge it (Bazzoni 2021a; 2021b). My initial motivation was sparked by the simple realisation of the near absence of women writers from literary histories, university courses, and textbooks. This absence extends all the way into the 20th century, where women were writing in mass, and reaches into our contemporary time, where the social system too often operates under a false assumption of gender neutrality. In addition to issues of representation, I was struck by how our discourses change depending on which authors we take into consideration and which voices have a say in the conversation. The trajectory of the modern and postmodern (male, white) subject, at the centre of our literary history, assumes very different connotations when we read writings by subjects historically in a subaltern position, who bring other genres, themes, languages and imaginaries.

While critical discourses on literature (and art in general) often exalt the independence of aesthetic judgement from social structures of power, Marxist, feminist and decolonial thought has trained us to see how artistic canons are the expression of cultural hegemony. Canons embody and reproduce the values of the social groups who maintain the power to speak and assert their worldview. As Lidia Curti, one of the first scholars in Italy to bring feminist and postcolonial approaches into the study of literature, explains with great clarity:

L'articolazione della disciplina letteraria è forma di violenza alla pari della formazione nazionale cui è legata, e trova rispecchiamento nella pratica didattica che spesso è una pratica di esclusione. Tale discriminazione è volta in generale a scritture eccentriche e minoritarie, in connessione con differenze sessuali e etniche, geografiche e sociali. (Curti, 2015:18)

In order to document – and challenge – this form of symbolic violence, I developed a project entitled 'The Gender of Literature. Italian Women Writers and the Literary Canon', funded by the British Academy, which analysed the main sites of canon production, including school education, university teaching and research, literary festivals and prizes, authors' perspectives, readership and the contemporary book industry. For example, I conducted a systematic analysis of 24 high school textbooks, from 1992 to 2016, looking at women writers from the 19th century to today who are anthologised, present in paragraphs or boxes, or simply absent. Not surprisingly, the latter turned out to be the most common case; however, the extent of this lacuna is impressive – to give just some examples, Natalia Ginzburg was absent from 9 textbooks out of 24, Sibilla Aleramo was absent from 15, Anna Maria Ortese from 17, Matilde Serao from 20 – to mention only major names. I also took into consideration the positioning of women writers within the critical and historiographical discourse, where they are almost invariably confined in separate and minor sections or boxes. Even when they are present, moreover, they are often read through conservative lenses, which emphasise their minority status. We read for example of the "colorito e superficiale descrittivismo di Matilde Serao, venato di sentimentalismo da romanzo d'appendice e di ambizioni psicologistiche" (Baldi et al., 2011:75), of the "tono dimesso" of Patrizia Cavalli, who "si ritaglia uno spazio minore, aspetto diaristico della confessione poetica" (Baldi et al., 2016:213), or of the "tematiche tradizionali" and "storie intimistiche e private" of Elsa Morante's *La storia*, whose success is "pubblicitario" and "iperpopolare" (Magri, 2012:38).

The situation does not improve when we move to look at university education. An analysis of 189 syllabi of 19th-21st-century Italian literature in 25 Italian universities showed the massive over-

representation of male writers, who are the 91% of the authors taught. Seventy percent of courses do not include any women, and nine universities out of 25 do not include any women in any of their courses – meaning that it is perfectly possible for a student to graduate in Contemporary Italian Literature having studied exclusively male authors. With very few exceptions, migrant and second-generation writings in Italian are de facto absent from all these contexts. Overall, this research reveals a huge gap between the substantial work carried out within feminist and decolonial studies in Italy and internationally, and how much of this work is incorporated into didactic offering.

I would like to propose three main directions for the transformation of the literary canon, which I hope can serve as useful criteria when thinking of good practices in teaching, in developing courses, and in choosing or designing textbooks:

- (1) Transforming the *corpus*: this is the first step, in order to interrupt the monologism and universalism of the male subject and multiply voices and perspectives;
- (2) Transforming the *interpretative tools*: as the corpus changes, so does the way in which we read texts, reshuffle critical categories, and revise interpretations;
- (3) Transforming the *affect* that sustains our reading, moving from the canon as a normative institution to the canon as a fabric of conversation, an open space for voices to be heard and appreciated in their specificity, with a commitment to unsettling hierarchies and keeping that space open.

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