

## BOOK REVIEWS / RECENSIONI

**DANIELE COMBERIATI & XAVIER LUFFIN (eds), *Italy and the Literatures from the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti. Beyond the Language and the Territory*. Canterano, RM: Aracne, 2018.**

The collection *Italy and the Literatures from the Horn of Africa*, edited by Daniele Comberiati and Xavier Luffin, aims to investigate literary and filmic contributions emerging from the Horn of Africa by employing a comparative approach. In doing so, it explores the relationship between texts and films beyond the monolithic idea of national literature and language. The first contribution of this collection thus lies in the multilingual, transnational and multicultural rationale, which avoids a monolingual and mono-national approach and suggests new directions for diasporic studies.

The underpinning idea of the seven interventions is, indeed, to consider the authors from the Horn of Africa and their artistic production as part of an “Interliterary Community” in which the links between the different literatures that compose it exceeds national, historical and ethnic bounds. The concept, theorised by Dionýz Ďurišin in replacement of “National Literature”, allows the authors of this collection to consider the Horn of Africa as a literary space in which writers can re-define national identities through their narratives (15). Due to their diasporic condition, their artistic production covers a wide geographical area, being at once national and transnational, global and local, multilingual and multicultural. Therefore, the interventions in this collection rely on the overlapping features of these narratives from the Horn of Africa, such as the hybridism of different languages and cultures, the link between colonialism and its legacy in present-day neocolonial practices and the re-interpretation of history by formerly voiceless subjects. The essays investigate the several intertwined layers that constitute the narratives of these authors, by exploring the relationship among them and the affiliation with their country of origin (or that of their relatives’) and their places of abode.

In the first intervention, for example, Sara Marzagora points out a disregarded aspect of the novel *Regina di fiori e di perle* (2007) by Gabriella Ghermandi. Indeed, while the latter has been investigated for its contribution towards the rethinking of Italian colonialism and the decolonization of Italian literature its relationship to the Ethiopian literary tradition in Amharic has been overlooked. Marzagora instead sheds light on the complex and problematic connection between *Regina di fiori e di perle* and other texts of the Amharic tradition, such as Maaza Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gate* (2010) and *Addis Alām* by Hiruy Wäldä Sillase (1924). This comparative approach highlights the opposition between tradition and modernity in Ghermandi's novel and places them in relation to the Ethiopian intellectual scene since the beginning of the twentieth century, when writers and thinkers scrutinised the Ethiopian cultural heritage and the idea of Western modernity. In her analysis, Marzagora shows that, while on the one hand, Ghermandi undermines the discourse about Ethiopia and Ethiopian women fashioned by Italian colonialism, on the other, her novel idealises, romanticises and homogenises the complexities underlying the concepts of Ethiopian histories, culture and literatures. Marzagora convincingly explains how the novel overlooks the social, political and ethnical fractures, as well as gender relations and geographical richness of her country. As in the case of the representation of the female characters, Ghermandi aims to counterbalance the Italian stereotype of African women as oppressed by portraying them in a very progressive way (48). However, in doing so, she denies the efforts made by Amharic writers and intellectuals to highlight and challenge the discrimination against women in their society.

The nostalgia and the memories connected to Ghermandi's experience in Ethiopia during her youth, along with the distance from her country, acted in the way of simplification, thus leading to a romantic and conservative representation of her country, "in stark contrast with the reformist tendency that has characterised Amharic literature since its inception" (30).

Lorenzo Mari, in his contribution "Somalia is a Caribbean Island", suggests an innovative reading of two texts from authors coming from a diverse context: *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (2010) by Somali author Nuruddin Farah and *The World is*

*Moving Around Me: A Memoir of the Haiti Earthquake* (2013) by Haitian Dany Laferrière. The bond that brings these two texts together is inscribed in the South-South relationship as described by François Lionnet and Shu-mei Shi's locution "minor transnationalism". This term emphasises the links "between two or more postcolonial cultures without making reference to the culture of their former metropolitan centres" (52). Mari's transnational analysis is further supported by the concept of "failed-state fiction" theorised by John Marx to encompass all fictional accounts that aim to challenge the neocolonial notion of "failed nation". Starting from the latter definition, relabelled "failed-state literature", and the idea of the writer as an "unaccredited analyst", Mari explores how the accounts of the civil war and diaspora, in Farah, and the Haitian earthquake, in Laferrière, deconstruct the dominant discourse coming from the West with regard to the concept of "state failure".

The intervention by Alessandro Jedlowski compares the production of two contemporary Ethiopian directors, Tewodros Teshome and Dagmawi Yimer, in order to highlight the profound differences within the Ethiopian film production. The comparative analysis, in this case based on both the plots and the biographies of the directors, aims to underline the complexities of the film production and the tension in discussing that topic in Ethiopia. In this way, it fosters an artistic dialogue "between local and diasporic directors" (90). In this regard, Jedlowski starts from the different approaches employed by the directors to fictionalise the theme of migration.

The different outcomes of Teshome and Yimer are thus considered as "a direct consequence of their biographical experiences" (78). Where Teshome (director, producer and owner of a multiplex cinema in Addis Ababa) shies away from the representation of the political and economic causes behind migration, Yimer (a filmmaker who fled from Ethiopia to become an asylum seeker in Italy) focuses on political aspects and explicitly denounces the Ethiopian government. As a result, the former appears to be related to a local audience and aligned to the government's agenda or nationalistic sentiments; alternatively, the latter is personally involved in the topic of migration due to his direct experience, which allows him to be the subject who has his ideas about the causes that have led him to leave Ethiopia.

The fourth intervention also relies on a transnational approach, since scholar Monica Jansen investigates how two texts by Somali authors, Kaha Mohamed Aden and her father Mohamed Sheikh Aden, foster “a notion of national identity and culture rooted in transnationalism and dis-homogeneity” (94). However, Jansen also shows how these two texts belong to different categories, even though they both rely on personal experiences and aim to subvert the main narrative of colonialism as seen by Italians. The categories are drawn upon Giuliana Benvenuti’s idea, which divides Italian postcolonial literature into two kinds of texts: those based on direct experiences that aim to restore the broken line between experience and narration; second, those that “foster narrations with a performative value, which simulate the reader to assume an active part of it” (96). The cross-reading analysis of the two texts, therefore, shows how Kaha’s *Fra-intendimenti* (2010) can be ascribed to the latter category, while her father’s *La Somalia non è un’isola dei Caraibi: Memorie di un pastore somalo in Italia* (2010) should be included in the former. The article, furthermore, analyses *Fra-intendimenti* in the light of “the social conflicts inherent to global capitalism”, in order to show how Kaha’s short stories perform an act of citizenship “for it intervenes and tries actively to modify dominant discourses on nationality and belonging” (101).

The fifth article is similarly grounded in the Italian postcolonial scenario. Teresa Solis examines the still overlooked production of the Italian-Ethiopian writer Carla Macoggi (1965–2013) focusing on her two autobiographical novels, *Kkeywa. Storia di una bimba meticcica* (2011), followed by *La nemesi della rossa* (2013). Solis’s main aim is to analyse the direct psychological consequences produced by colonialism on the author. The concepts of *métissage* and *nemesis* are key terms to highlight how Macoggi’s writings depict a split in the self of the subjects who have undergone Italian colonisation, along the axis of Frantz Fanon’s *Les damnés de la terre* (1961). The article, underlining this aspect, suggests that Macoggi’s novels represent a way of healing from the systematic negation of the self, perpetrated by the Italian Fascists to the detriment of the colonised subjects.

Emma Bond, in her essay, explores the relationship between two apparently distant texts, *Amiable with Big Teeth* (1940) by Jamaican-born and Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay and the

contemporary novels *Children of the Revolution* (2008) and *All our names* (2014) by Ethiopian-American writer Dinaw Mengestu. Bond, by employing a cross-reading of these novels, shows how they are connected by a transnational network of resistance and solidarity (123). In doing so, the article explains how American literature reveals transnational and multidirectional trajectories, due to the notion of resistance and solidarity that overstep their temporal and national confines. In particular, the historical experiences of conflict and resistance in Ethiopia (against the Fascist and, later, the Derg provisional military government) intermingle in the novels with the American civil rights movement, the experiences of refugees arriving in the US and the insurrection, described in *Children of the Revolution*, in response to illegal evictions in Washington.

The last intervention, by scholar Linde Luijnenburg, focuses on the Somali production in the Dutch language through the writings of three authors who live in the Netherlands: Sayadin Hersi, Yasmine Allas and Zeinab Jumale. Luijnenburg explores their novels with a comparative approach based on language and shared themes, but it also relates them to the context of the Dutch publishing industry and, more broadly, to the social and political scenario of the Netherlands. Even though the three authors display different strategies in terms of narrative style, they share their dislike about the label 'migrant authors', and their difficulties during the editing process, since they were asked to adapt their language to the standard Dutch in order to be published.

In conclusion, the collection *Italy and the Literatures from the Horn of Africa* provides a refreshing perspective on the field of postcolonial and diaspora studies. The emphasis on the relationships between different texts by authors within the diaspora and their importance in decolonising the Western (and Italian) discourse, encourages a new understanding of the contemporary postcolonial production from the Horn of Africa. Comberinati and Luffin's collection has the merit of looking at that geographic region as a literary space where authors are connected through several cognate features, investigated in each article.

On a minor note, the collection reveals several typos and small mistakes overlooked in the editing process, as well as, on occasion, footnotes that are not always clear (a recurrent oversight is the use of

the abbreviation *Ibid.* to refer to a note on the previous page, instead of a note on the same page, thus often leading to a misplaced reference).

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**PAOLO PUPPA, *Altre scene. Copioni del terzo millennio.* Corazzano, PI: Titivillus, 2017.**

Claudio Magris, citando Anton Čechov, afferma che mentre la narrativa commenta e analizza la vita, il teatro la mostra e che la scrittura teatrale ha un carattere notturno, ovvero consente di incontrare i propri fantasmi, i sosia. Queste riflessioni possono inserirci all'interno della raccolta, architettonicamente compiuta, di Paolo Puppa, *Altre scene. Copioni del terzo millennio*. Sin dal titolo si comprende la natura estemporanea delle otto drammaturgie, che si snodano su quattro forme dialogiche e quattro monologhi; la configurazione quasi assente della scena dà forma e consistenza a personaggi che, come bassorilievi, emergono dal nulla e al nulla sembrano tornare, con le loro storie che si perdono nella refrattaria realtà. L'autore sembra prediligere infatti l'indagine psicologica dei personaggi sebbene la narrazione sia priva di giudizi o di facili considerazioni. Il loro sostare quasi sull'orlo del delirio diventa la trama stessa del racconto, così come il dolore, l'inettitudine, il non detto, l'identità franta acquistano la stessa forza del gesto teatrale.

Il primo testo, *Casa con angolo Shoah* – titolo che fa riferimento, come spiega l'autore stesso nelle *Notarelle introduttive*, al lessico immobiliare – presenta nove personaggi, i quali tuttavia non compaiono mai sulla scena tutti insieme, spezzando dunque la dimensione polifonica a cui si pone, in controcanto, la solitudine delle voci che dialogano. Tutto si svolge nel perimetro stretto di una casa, uno spazio quasi claustrofobico come lo è quello interiore dei personaggi limitati dalle proprie ossessioni, dalle proprie irrazionali paure, dai propri desideri inconfessabili. Nessun personaggio appare intero, ma sempre franto e senza nessuna via di scampo. Una piccola famiglia borghese nasconde nella propria soffitta i vicini, ebrei in

pericolo per la nuova ondata di razzismo: questo l'antefatto che pone da subito la narrazione entro una dimensione distopica. Le dodici sequenze raccontano le dinamiche esplosive dagli esiti grotteschi, una storia senza storia, che tuttavia porta alla luce le oscurità di un passato mai finito e sempre presente con i suoi tragici relitti. Il dolore è narrato anche attraverso lo *speculum* religioso e mitico, che costituisce la filigrana di altri due dialoghi: *Giacobbe 2014* e *Deposizione*. Se nel primo un uomo ferito, spezzato, immobilizzato dialoga con un vecchio, nel secondo abbiamo due personaggi quasi opposti: un anziano bloccato a letto e un giovane adulto che assiduamente si reca al suo capezzale. In *Giacobbe 2014* il personaggio omonimo racconta la sua estenuante lotta con l'angelo ai limiti del delirio:

Ricordo bene, poi, che quello mentre continuava a storcermi la gamba fino a spezzarmi l'anca, mi ha sussurrato qualcosa nell'orecchio, tipo "da oggi in poi ti chiamerai", perché ogni tanto traduceva, ma non si capiva bene quello che mi sibilava gorgogliando colla saliva, anche perché ansava. E, ma sì. ma sì, forse mi faceva i complimenti perché io stavo lottando con uno che nel suo è una specie di Dio. E la gamba rotta rappresentava il nostro strano contatto. Poi, sono sicuro, adesso, adesso me lo ricordo bene, è volato via, ma sì, sì, volato via. Sulla canottiera era come se spuntavano delle ali. (115)

Un Giacobbe sottratto alla Bibbia, inserito nel contesto gelido e spoglio di un ospedale, un Giacobbe reduce, senza gloria, senza ricompensa celeste, il cui racconto tagliente e ironico si infrange sulla sordità di chi gli sta intorno. Le dinamiche familiari, dolorose, precarie, che rasentano quasi i toni dell'assurdo, si rendono ancora più esplicite nella drammaturgia *Deposizione*. Qui il dialogo tra padre e figlio è quello tra Dio e Cristo dietro cui si aggira silenziosa la presenza di una donna, tutti insieme costituiscono «un triangolo, o meglio una ripresentazione della trinità antica, rivissuta nello squallore di una fase terminale. Agonia di un nucleo parentale, o quel che ne resta» (7). La scena è narrata attraverso 27 stazioni di una *via crucis* che conduce a un doloroso delirio del Padre, fino all'ultimo

incalzato dall'angosciante presenza del Figlio. Un rapporto morboso, asfissiante confermato dal susseguirsi vorticoso del dialogo a due voci, reso ancor più estraniante dal mutismo della figura femminile. I conflitti tra il Padre e il Figlio conducono alla dolorosa perdita del Sé:

Padre: Oggi è per caso martedì? O giovedì? Poi ci sarebbe venerdì o sviene il sabato? E quando arriva la domenica? Io però non voglio andare a messa. Nossignore. A fare cosa, poi, a messa? A messa perché, poi? Allora, in che anno siamo? Lei mi può aiutare? Sì, sì, dico a lei, signore. Siamo sempre a Venezia, vero? Questa è Venezia? Le avanzano stivali per l'acqua alta? Posso mica rischiare di bagnarmi. (104)

È allora che il Figlio sembra assumere, per paradossale rivelazione, il proprio tragico compito con una delirante smania:

Figlio: Faccio io! Faccio io. Faccio io tutto. Ho sognato questo momento, sai. Da una vita l'ho sognato. Ferma, signora mia! Resti in cucina. O meglio, porti catino, tanto acqua, spugna, borotalco, e biancheria fresca. Tutto quello che serve. È una vita che aspettavo questo momento. Sono bravo, sono bravo, io. Vedrai, vedrai. E quando arrivano, dall'ospedale, chiederanno 'ma chi dobbiamo ricoverare?', tanto sarai lucidato e messo a nuovo. Vedrai, vedrai. No, giuro che non alzo più la voce. Tu sei mio padre e io tuo figlio. Per sempre. (105)

I rimandi alla sfera biblica e mitica sono evidenti e si ritrovano anche nei quattro monologhi che si mostrano ancor più incisivi rispetto alla forma dialogica. Non solo il mito, come ne *Il Centauro* e in *Ratto d'Europa*, ma anche suggestioni letterarie e storiche che intessono le trame di *La vera storia dell'Innominato* e *La fidanzata di Don Milani*. Il racconto monocorde del personaggio acquista una maggior intensità che acuisce il senso tragico della storia. Tutto si svolge in una scena sempre più spoglia in cui risuona ancora più dolorosa la eco della solitudine. Anche qui, come nei dialoghi, la sovrapposizione dei tempi crea un'inquietante estraneità così come la presenza di personaggi già

conosciuti come Don Milani, qui raccontato attraverso lo sguardo innamorato di una ex fidanzata che lo ricorda ancora nella sua giovinezza, il suo «povero fidanzatino del liceo, scomparso per sempre dalla vita, coi suoi segreti intatti, colla sua lotta disumana contro i sensi, e colle maschere, i simulacri, le battaglie combattute in solitudine per esprimere in qualche modo se stesso» (166). La creatura manzoniana che esordisce sulla scena, prendendo forse per la prima volta la parola:

Nemmeno un nome mi ha dato. Perché ha avuto sempre paura di me, non appena gli son caduto dalla penna. O meglio dai suoi nervi e dalle sue notti interminabili. Sì, il mio autore è sempre stato davvero strano e complicato. Oltre che infelice. Già, e la mia storia lo ha molto, diciamo pure, intrigato, fin da quando è andato a spulciare su ridicoli archivi dove noiosissimi eruditi in latino, nel secolo di Borromeo, hanno parlato di me demonizzandomi. (146)

Questo breve *excursus* dentro e attraverso i personaggi messi in scena da Paolo Puppa segna una *descensus ad inferos*, una catabasi nell'oscurità della psiche. Non esistono vie di fuga, ogni strategia di difesa sembra infrangersi nella desertificazione del mondo circostante che quasi mai appare un luogo rassicurante. Altre scene, dunque. Altri scenari, altrove immaginati, pensati, vissuti al di fuori della trama temporale della storia, al di là di ogni percezione sensoriale, di ogni credo. La conclusione della raccolta, che rappresenta, si direbbe, un teatro del disagio, è affidata al monologo di un seduttore, un imperdonabile Zeus che racconta una delle sue numerose conquiste, quella di Europa. Anche l'eros è vissuto con imperdonabile violenza e aridità. Tutto si muove, per dirla con Claudio Magris, tra utopia e disincanto, tra ricerca di una totalità e la consapevolezza di un terribile nichilismo che sta in agguato nelle piaghe della nostra società.

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**CATHERINE RAMSEY-PORTOLANO. *Performing Bodies: Female Illness in Italian Literature and Cinema (1860-1920)*. Vancouver-Madison-Teaneck-Wroxtton: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2018.**

Since the 1980s scholarly studies have extensively explored the literary and cultural perspectives on physical and psychological malady and disability. With particular reference to hysteria, Elaine Showalter, in her 1993 article “On Hysterical Narrative” (in *Narrative*, 1.1:24-35) – and earlier in her ground-breaking *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) – pointed out how “hysterical narrative” had been one of the most popular topics in literary criticism where:

psychoanalytic theory, narratology, feminist criticism, and the history of medicine intersect, drawing both on the vogue of Freud’s case studies, especially the canonical Dora, and the recent recognition that not just psychoanalysis, but all medical practice, depends on narrative, the “doctor’s story,” which both shapes the formal case study and determines practical treatment (1993:24).

Illness, in its varied manifestations, is profoundly gendered, and especially in the form of “hysteria” has been a favourite topic in fictional works in particular since the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1995, in her *Passions of the Voice: Hysteria, Narrative, and the Figure of the Speaking Woman, 1850-1915* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) Claire Kahane articulated, in fact, how numerous late 19<sup>th</sup>-century texts are symptomatic of the “problematics of sexual difference” and of a reaction to the rise of the New Woman, as a “speaking subject” that disturbed “not only the patriarchal structure of social relations but also the gendered conventions of nineteenth-century domestic fiction” (ix). In fin de siècle novels by both male and female authors, hysteria, took a variety of functions, as stressed by Ramsey-Portolano in *Performing Bodies*, “from representing the psychological consequence from

women who failed to adhere to prescribed roles and modes of conduct or symbolizing the expression of their repressed sexual desire” (3). Female suffering, illness, maladies of a nervous nature, madness and invalidity all confirmed conceptions of women as bearers of disorders and sin, in Western literary and cultural traditions. Above all, female malady was connected to women seeking any forms of fulfilment outside of the ones imposed onto them by traditional conceptions, and therefore failing to identify with the roles of wife and mother. The abundance of scientific theories and literary portrayals of female inferiority and illness in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe coincided, as a matter of fact, with the emergence of the feminist movement whose aims threatened to disrupt the established social order.

In the last 30 years, studies on this topic have continued to flourish, with titles including, to mention just a few: Yang-Sook Shin, *The Female Malady: Discourse, Power, and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century* (University of Missouri-Columbia, 1991); Diane Price Herndl, *Invalid Women. Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Helen Small, *Love's Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity, 1800-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Jessica Diane Droogsma, *Female Hysteria Across Cultures and Periods in American Literature* (University of Northern Iowa, 2009); Andrew Scull, *Hysteria: The Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Asti Hustvedt, *Medical Muses. Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011). More recently Abir Hamdar has analysed the female suffering body in Modern Arabic Literature in *The Female Suffering Body: Illness and Disability in Modern Arabic Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014).

The clear and accessible book by Catherine Ramsey-Portolano joins this rich scholarly production by focusing on female illness in Italian literary and cinematic works from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to 1920, and aims to demonstrate the central role that the female body and its biological functions and malfunctions played in the culture of the time. As Ramsey-Portolano reminds us, the widespread evolutionist and positivist discussions intensely influenced perceptions of femininity in fin-de-siècle Italy: from August Comte, Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, neurologist Paul Julius Moebius and philosopher Otto Weininger, to Italian anthropologists Cesare

Lombroso and Paolo Mantegazza, female inferiority and predisposition to nervous disorders were linked to women's reproductive organs and functions. The prescribed remedy, according to the American physician George Miller Beard, was often confinement within the domestic sphere, or the so called "rest cure" (15).

*Performing Bodies* is an engaging analysis of fictional works by an assortment of male and female authors. Ramsey-Portolano identifies two categories of novels. The first one includes literary works which present illness as the consequence and punishment for women who have transgressed traditional female roles. In these novels, women are described as essentially passive victims of social injustice and of a patriarchal, misogynistic society. A second group of novels represents, instead, malady as a form of female agency and empowerment through which women, by feigning illness, could actively regain control over their own body. Illness, in all these literary works, contributed to the creation of the cultural and the artistic ideal of femininity that then recurred in, and dominated, early Italian cinema and the figure of the diva at the beginning of the new century.

The author structures the book in four chapters. To begin, Chapter One presents an overview of the scientific attention that was paid to hysteria and its neurological causes especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The studies of French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot and his three-volume *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (a photographic survey of hysterical symptoms in his patients), and Sigmund Freud's 1895 ground-breaking volumes *Studies on Hysteria* and 1905 *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (including the well-known case history of Dora) are examples of authoritative studies that asserted beliefs on female inferiority and physiological deficiency, and of "men writing stories of female illness, of men advancing their interpretation of femininity" (23). This first chapter also offers an overview of women's social and legal status in Italy at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The influx of female writers, in particular, was a cause of concern for many male writers and others unwilling to separate accepted and negative notions of femininity from women's ability for intellectual thought. At the same time naturalist and verist writers in Italy, such as Luigi Capuana and Matilde Serao, showed a pronounced interest in

contemporary scientific theories and female pathology as demonstrated in some of their female protagonists and their maladies.

Chapter Two is dedicated to female illness and to the representation of women's submission to patriarchal expectations in fin-de-siècle Italian society. The novels examined in this chapter are Giovanni Verga's *Storia di una capinera* (1871) and *Tigre reale* (1875), Luigi Capuana's *Giacinta* (1879) and *Profumo* (1892), Antonio Fogazzaro's *Malombra* (1881), the little-known *Madonna di fuoco e madonna di neve* (1888) by Giovanni Faldella, as well as Neera's *Il Castigo* (1881), *Teresa* (1886) and *L'Indomani* (1889), and Sibilla Aleramo's famous *Una donna* (1906). The emergence of mental illness is connected to the suffocation of female independence and sexuality, the impossibility for women to break out of the traditional roles of wife and mother, and as a consequence of female deviation from acceptable modes of behaviour. Spiritualism and mental illness – as in *Malombra*'s gothic-style setting and plot – confirm notions of women's susceptibility to malaise of a hysterical nature. Hysterical attacks are, therefore, forms of rebellion against sexual dissatisfaction and expressions of frustration and oppressed desire for passion. The consequence is, however, only the alienation or death of the heroine.

The novels discussed in Chapter Three, on the other hand, offer examples of illness as forms of liberation and empowerment. Ramsey-Portolano examines how “performing illness” transforms female protagonists into irresistible “superior female types”. Iginio Ugo Tarchetti's *Fosca* (1869), Matilde Serao's *Cuore inferno* (1881) and *Fantasia* (1883), Rocco De Zerbi's *L'avvelenatrice*, as well as Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Trionfo della morte* (1894) and *Il fuoco* (1900) provide cases of hysterical women whose theatricality and artificiality of their disease make them dominators, rather than victims of society's pressures and limitations. Female protagonists in these novels subvert the established order through a tendency to prohibited desires. Interestingly, in these works, men – such as Giorgio in Tarchetti's *Fosca* and Giorgio in D'Annunzio's *Trionfo* – are not immune from disease and are often weak, vacillating subjects with a “feminine” nature, infected and governed by vampire-like women, and associated with notions of deficiency and malaise. As oppressed men they become emblematic of the negative condition of a modern

subject unable to vitally adhere to existence (87). Yet both female and male protagonists become metaphors for diversity and vehicles through which the writers could express a criticism of the bourgeois perception of normalcy and the traditional restrictions on female behaviour of the time.

The final chapter of *Performing Bodies* is devoted to the cinematic adaptations *Tigre reale* (1916) and *Malombra* (1917). These films accentuated the appeal of their female performers – Pina Menichelli and Lyda Borelli respectively – through the exaltation of the seductive power of the emancipated woman. Belonging to the genre of diva films, Pastrone's *Tigre reale* and Gallone's *Malombra* present female characters who are both passive and active, "spectacle and narrative" (94). These films "enforce the role of the female character as representative of power by avoiding the association of the diva with notions of wrongdoing, accomplished through the sublimation of her responsibility and guilt into illness and suffering" (94). Ramsey-Portolano argues that it is, in fact, the medium of cinema itself that allowed a shift in the function of illness in these two films as compared to Verga's and Fogazzaro's original novels: "In these films illness is not a punishment for transgression, it is that which allows the diva to take center stage and act out *her story*" (95). This chapter offers an overview of the development of the role of the diva as *femme fatale* and modern model of femininity in Italy. Following Laura Mulvey's influential discussion in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), Ramsey-Portolano argues that diva films provide an early example of the female gaze in the history of Italian cinema. Illness influenced cultural and artistic standards of beauty and attraction for the actresses of this period giving divas the power to dominate the screen and minds of spectators. The diva's portrayal of illness – through dramatic poses, decadent eroticism, exaggerated gestures, pictorial style or statuary expressions – granted centrality to both the female character and the diva. In this way cinema and the acting profession offered women emancipation, independence as well as control over the production of the film itself. This is an interesting chapter that, however, leaves the reader wanting to know more about illness and hysteria in the Italian cinematic production of the time. It would be also interesting to see how divas managed the balance

between their private existence and their performative maladies on screen.

Overall *Performing Bodies* is an interesting book and a welcome contribution to the exploration of fin-de-siècle women's conditions and representations. Ramsey-Portolano offers an enjoyable reading of a wide array of figures and texts important to understanding the cultural devaluation of women and historical dispositions to treat feminine will and desire as invalid. The book also provides a valuable introduction for readers interested in further exploring the issue of female diversity and sexuality in post-unification Italian literary and visual culture.

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