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Book Review: Women and Gender in Post-Unification Italy: Between Private and Public Spheres by Katharine Mitchell and Helena Sanson

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Mitchell, Katharine, and Helena Sanson, eds. *Women and Gender in Post-Unification Italy. Between Private and Public Spheres*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013. Pp. 272. ISBN: 9783034309967 (paperback); ISBN 9783035304923 (eBook). \$57.95, € 44.00, £ 35.00.

Situated in a clearly defined historical context (framed by the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy and Italy's entry into World War I) *Women and Gender in Post-Unification Italy* interrogates the shifting contours of the private and public spheres and women's roles within them. The thematically organized book includes essays by scholars from a range of disciplines. It offers new perspectives on women's lives and on their representations during a vibrant period of Italian history that has often sidelined issues of women and gender.

In the first part of the book, "Motherhood in the New Italy," Ursula Fanning frames her readings of literary works by Matilde Serao, Carolina Invernizio, Neera and Sibilla Aleramo in the maternal 'prescriptions' of the period. Heeding the distinction between the institution of motherhood, its public expectations, and the experience or private dimension of motherhood, Fanning examines how Serao and Invernizio's featured protagonists experience pregnancy as a problematic transformative bodily experience that can be both positive and deadly. In an analysis that extends beyond the notion of biological motherhood, Fanning considers how selected works by Serao, Invernizio and Neera re-envisage the mother-daughter bond, anticipating the notion of '*affidamento*' theorized by feminists in the twentieth century and rejecting a conventional reading that all women are inherently nurturing mothers. Moving from the textual to the social, Helena Sanson's chapter deals with a different kind of mothering as women in post-Unification Italy found themselves at the center of a political patriotic discourse that called on them to educate their children in the use of the 'national' language in a linguistically divided country. As writings by educationalists of the time show, the promotion of the figure of the '*madre educatrice*' led to access to education previously unavailable to women and to public language (national as opposed to dialect) and the public sphere, which had been largely out of reach.

In the second part of the book, "Living and Writing on the Margins", the emphasis moves to women situated on the social or geographic margins. Lucy Hosker explores the figure of the spinster or '*zitella*' in the works of Neera and Matilde Serao. Hosker contends that the spinster's marginalization in society is mirrored by her virtual absence in late nineteenth century male-authored literature. She goes on to argue that the '*zitella*' in the works of Neera and Serao is characterized by a representational tension. While Neera reinserts her as a mother, suggesting a discontinuity between spinsterhood and motherhood, Serao focuses on the spinster as a symbolic mother whose assumption of maternal duties does not necessarily imply the abandonment of her otherness. Geographical rather than social marginalization lies at the core of Anna Laura Lepreschy's analysis of Maria Massina and Carolina Invernizio's perspectives on the immigration wave at the turn of the century. Exploring different motivations for immigration (sentimental versus financial) the authors also offer differing perspectives on the experience: the characters' geographical mobility and establishment of new community in the case of Invernizio and the more static perspective of those left behind coupled with the psychological drama of return in the case of Massina. Finally, Marjan Schegman's essay combines social and geographical marginalization in its account of Mara Oliviero, a '*banditessa*.' Oliviero epitomizes female outlaws. Schegman's account, based on testimony and oral history, highlights Oliviero's and other female outlaws' position on the margins of society, typically perceived as 'female monsters' occupying the boundary between heroism and horror, between feminist excess and rebellion of the role of the oppressed southern woman.

The third part of the book, "Writing and Performing in the Spotlight," focuses on women operating in the public sphere. Sharon Wood explores the case of the intellectual and public figure, Cristina di Belgiojoso, whose political and travel writings elicited accusations of

elitism, orientalism and retrograde gender politics. Wood's essay centers around a hybrid text whose representations and reflections on life in an Eastern harem can be seen to anticipate Belgioioso's later, much discussed 'reluctant' essay on Western women's contemporary condition where she highlights the tension between women's personal happiness and political activism. Julie Dashwood's chapter examines the early life and career of the actress-manager Adelaide Ristori. Dashwood focuses specifically on the personal and professional circumstances that culminated in her success not only as an international star, but also as a significant artistic director—an extraordinary achievement for Italian women of the time. The essay relies on Ristori's memoirs as well as on other sources to provide insight into the state of nineteenth century Italian theater and the challenges, including travel barriers, faced by theatre companies. With Monica dell'Asta's contribution, we move from the world of theater to that of cinema, from the singular case study to a more panoramic one. Dell'Asta's essay highlights the important contributions women made to cinema in female roles often invisible in traditional film historiography: screenwriting, marketing and distribution.

In the final part of the book, "New Approaches to the Study of Women and Gender in Post-Unification Italy," Katharine Mitchell suggests that '*sorellanza*' or female solidarity, contributed significantly to the emancipationists' cause and to the changes in legislation in favor of women in the new Italy. Mitchell stresses how women in the public sphere demonstrated '*sorellanza*' in their roles as educators, writers, artists and political activists. Her reading of letters, essays, conduct manuals and literature provides evidence of a strong sense of female solidarity, which transcended political, social, and geographical boundaries in Italy. In the volume's final essay, Ann Hallamore Caesar warns against the ghettoizing of work written by women, about women, and for women. Ultimately, Caesar calls for a reconsideration of writing by both women and men claiming that only then are we able to assess the presence and contribution of the anti-novel to the development of nineteenth century fiction in Italy. Her chapter takes a step in this direction by considering the work of La Marchesa Colombi, whom she proposes as the most consistently experimental writer of her generation. While there is value to Caesar's warning against ghettoization, it ironically comes at the end of a volume written by women scholars, about women, and arising out of a symposium on Women in *Ottocento* Italy. As many of the essays in the volume suggest, recovery work is ongoing and unfortunately many critical histories across disciplines continue to marginalize or exclude women, denying them a public space.

This volume makes an invaluable contribution to the history of women and gender as well as laying the groundwork for future research. It is to be praised both for its scope and for its coherence, an element often lacking in collections of essays. The writers' sensitivity to the book's project is clearly echoed in the individual chapters which maintain a focus on a distinct historical period and through cross-referencing and re-visitation of themes that consistently address the expanding and shifting boundaries of the private and public spheres and women's roles within them. Finally, given that this volume emerged from a symposium, it is a testament to how gatherings of scholars can stimulate conversation, debate, and productive outcomes.

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