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Ross, Charlotte. *Eccentricity and Sameness. Discourses on Lesbianism and Desire between Women in Italy, 1860s-1930s*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2015. Pp 308. ISBN 9783034318204 (print); ISBN 9783035306989 (eBook). \$72.95, €56.00, £45.00.

Scholarship on female same-sex desire in Italy has been relatively limited, and discretely divided along disciplinary lines. Charlotte Ross' *Eccentricity and Sameness: Discourses on Lesbianism and Desire between Women in Italy, 1860s-1930s*, steps in to offer a comprehensive look at the space sexual desire between women has occupied in Italian culture by examining texts from a variety of spheres: literary, scientific, and political. Ross presents this extensive archive of material not as an example of an emerging lesbian consciousness, but as evidence that female same-sex desire was continuously discussed, investigated and represented. Ross's study adds to a small but growing body of work dedicated to uncovering the histories of LGBT people; in the Italian context the majority of that work has focused on men and Ross draws on that scholarship, particularly the work of Derek Duncan and Lorenzo Benadusi as she shines the light on representations of female homosexuality.

The book is divided in three sections, organized chronologically. "Part One: 1860-1901," begins with a discussion of scientific texts, specifically the work of Cesare Lombroso and Paolo Mantegazza, and the beginnings of scientific studies about sexuality. Ross provides a useful history of the origin and spread of a set of key terms used to describe sex and sexual desire between women ("sapphist," "tribade," "invert," and "virago"). This history is put in dialogue with the emerging scientific/medical discourse on sexuality from France and Germany, offering an interesting analysis of the ways in which Italian thinking was influenced by foreign trends. Ross explains how these early scientific texts condemn female same-sex desire as abnormal and pathologize the behavior, while, at the same time, offering some sympathy for the individual as a medically ill, suffering woman. In these hints of sympathy Ross identifies the beginnings of a discourse on flexible notions of gender and sexuality. In the following chapters Ross looks at literary texts by Alfredo Oriani, Enrico Butti and Ciro Alvi as well as a series titled *Cronaca bizantina*. Drawing on the work of theorists Luce Irigaray and Teresa de Lauretis, Ross demonstrates the way these texts work paradoxically to eroticize female homosexuality while condemning the behavior, and legitimizing the story-telling through heterosexual frame narratives. The section concludes with a discussion of the "fiamma," a quasi-medical idea of "an adolescent girl who desired other girls" (84). Ross explains that concern about the fiamma centered around female friendships and institutions in which women and young girls were living together (schools, prisons, etc.); this social concern gave rise to literature intended to identify and "correct" the behavior as well as literature that exploited this anxiety for erotic purposes. Ross offers a compelling close-reading of the figure of the fiamma in the early writings of two successful women authors: Matilde Serao and Eleonora Duse. Ross argues that the conditions which made the fiamma and close female friendships possible "allowed distinct forms of 'proto-lesbian' identity to become slightly more visible and 'thinkable'" (103). The measured nuance of this claim is key to Ross' project of studying the way representation interacts with the social construction of identity.

"Part Two 1901-1919," begins with the rise of a popular new genre of pseudo-scientific literature in which the scientific language of the previous generation is transformed to describe female homosexuality in satirical, quasi-pornographic terms, for the erotic pleasure of a presumably male readership. Ross makes the compelling case that these texts offer a potential shift in thinking about sexuality through the legitimization of "non-normative desire, and [...] its pervasive yet unthreatening character" (125). Through a study of a series of debates in the journal *La Voce*, Ross identifies a parallel shift in debates on sexuality that challenged established scientific thinking. This discussion was pushing for a less condemnatory attitude toward non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality and, at the same time, the spreading of a new narrative of the lesbian who

appears “normal” and cannot, therefore, be readily identified. This figure, Ross explains, “has the effect of both compounding anxieties about sexual perversions lurking beneath an ostensibly ‘normal’ exterior, and of eroding perceived gender and physiological differences between ‘tribades’ and ‘healthy’ women, further opening a continuum of sexuality” (119-20). It is particularly interesting to consider this attitude toward female sexuality in relation to then contemporary nationalist discourse in which non-normative sexuality was condemned as foreign and antithetical to Italian society. This section also includes a study of a small but remarkable set of authors working separately to craft narratives with encouraging messages about non-normative female sexual fulfillment: Donna Paola and Amalia Gugliemetti, two women writing about their own non-normative sexual experiences; and the futurist writers Corrado Govoni and Enif Robert.

The second section concludes with a thorough reading of Sibilla Aleramo’s *Il passaggio* and Mura’s *Perfidie*. Ross argues that, in both texts, love between women is ultimately rendered impossible and is always presented as an isolated experience, specific to the individuals and context described, and through a denial of any literary precedent, unique to the text at hand. This, Ross suggests, is a protective measure that works in tandem with the refusal to name these relationships between women as “lesbian”. Ross notes that while there was a proliferation of terms used to describe female homosexuality the term “lesbian” was rarely used in the Italian context.

In “Part Three: 1920-1930,” Ross explains that, with the rise of Fascism, Italy became an increasingly stifled and anxious site of debates about sexuality; perhaps because of these unique circumstances, the fascist *ventennio* has become a popular site for scholarship on questions of homosexuality. Ross’s study builds on the work of scholars like Elena Biagini, adding a literary component to the ethnographic analysis. The representations of female same-sex desire presented in this section fall into three distinct categories: the first includes the works of Pitigrilli and Guido da Verona, as examples of texts that eroticize, objectify and condemn women engaged in homosexual behavior. Amalia Guglielminetti’s *La rivincita del maschio* and Guido Stacchini’s *Lesbiche*, defy these narrative trends and, as Ross argues, “espouse their own particular brand of Sapphic feminism” (219) by refusing to tidy up the narrative with a heterosexual conclusion.

The final chapter is devoted to a reading of novels by three women authors: Fausta Cialente’s *Natalia*, Marise Ferro’s *Disordine*, and Alba de Céspedes’s *Nessuno torna indietro*. In Ross’s reading each text rehearses scenes of isolation in which the lesbian character is made to suffer feelings of painful loneliness because of her non-normative gender or sexuality. Unlike the texts discussed in the earlier chapters, these novels offer no “legitimacy of female same-sex desire” (263), marking a shift in shared cultural ideas about gender and sexuality that responds, no doubt, to the harsh Fascist rule. Just as in Aleramo’s and Mura’s texts, here too lesbianism is not named as such, “but is constructed as distinct from the norm” (265) and, in what might be a return to the push toward medicalization of the late 1880s, these novels seem to associate female same-sex desire with physical and mental illness.

The plurality of textual and historical material presented in this book allows Ross to argue convincingly that female same-sex desire not only existed, but was consistently discussed and represented in the early decades of Italian national history. The wide scope of this project, however, brings with it certain difficulties, particularly with regards to questions of gender theory. Ross is careful to explain early on that this project is meant as a history of representation and not of lesbian identity, and the repeated use of the phrase “female same-sex desire” helps reinforce that intention. The use of “queer,” on the other hand, is less rigorously addressed. In drawing on the work of queer theorists Heather Love and Eve Sedgwick, Ross places her project in dialogue with discussions of queer identity; she seems reluctant, however, to engage with the politics of a queer history project, opting instead to use the term queer as a marker of non-normative behavior rather than a political and theoretical lens.

The variety of material discussed, and the dramatic social changes covered by the breadth of the historical analysis makes *Eccentricity and Sameness* an engaging read, and a useful tool for thinking about and teaching the history of female sexuality in Italy.

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