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Ramsey-Portolano, Catherine. *Performing Bodies. Female Illness in Italian Literature (1860-1920)*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2017. Pp. 146. ISBN 9781683931317. \$80.00 (hardback). \$76.00 (ePub).

The possibility of women's biological inferiority harkens back to the philosophical writings of Aristotle. The nineteenth century's rise in scientific exploration, particularly with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, aimed to find empirical evidence to confirm the notion that women were physically and mentally inferior to men. In scientific circles, it was believed that women were especially susceptible to contracting nervous disorders such as hysteria, which were seen mostly as a feminine illnesses characterized by physiological and psychological symptoms. Catherine Ramsey-Portolano's *Performing Bodies. Female Illness in Italian Literature and Cinema (1860-1920)* expands upon these themes by providing an in-depth analysis of the social, scientific, and philosophical context of nineteenth-century theories on female bodies and illness.

In her first chapter, the author provides a broad historical context on women in fin-de-siècle Italy. At the same time that these theoretical ideas on female bodies were circulating, the social and legal conditions for women were vacillating. The author asserts that the movement towards Italian women's emancipation gave way to an increase in the number of women authors and journalists in society. Though this may be true, Ramsey-Portolano is quick to make absolute assumptions about the history of female literary productivity in the Italian peninsula that is not necessarily confirmed by modern scholarship: "The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed, in fact, the emergence in significant numbers, for the first time in Italy's history, of women writers [...]" (26). However, this was not the first time in "Italy's history" that women's scholarship surged. In the last ten years, research has shown that the early modern period saw a tremendous growth of literary production by Italian women such as in Victoria Cox's *Women's Writing in Italy: 1400-1650*. Ramsey-Portolano's assertion does not take into account the ample scholarship that reveals the history of female literary production in Italy long before the end of the 1800s, nor that women writers in Italy before that time also wrote about similar notions regarding the female body.

In chapter two, the author focuses on female illness in Italian literature during the nineteenth century. The cause of female malady in many works, she states, is primarily due to a character's transgression and protest of societal norms. Their familial and material decisions result in some form of "punishment" for women or their reduction, socially or psychologically, to victimhood. Ramsey-Portolano supports her argument with examples from texts by Verga, Capuana, Fogazzaro, Faldella, Neera, and Aleramo, yet she does not delve into depth in these examples. Instead it is a series of examples of texts that contains a transgressive female character that is castigated for her actions. Expanding on her examination of each chosen work with closer readings on language and thematic elements would improve the theoretical framework of this chapter.

In contrast with the perhaps overly general treatment of texts in the first two chapters, chapter three is compelling. This section of the book posits illness as a form of agency that allows for female empowerment in the text. Ramsey-Portolano provides examples from works written by Tarchetti, Serao, De Zerbi, and D'Annunzio. The author's analysis of Iginio Tarchetti's *Fosca*, for instance, is impressive and multidimensional. She shows the complexity of hysteria in the novel and how it is portrayed in the text as a vehicle for agency and emancipation for the central character, Fosca. Additionally, the author explores the threat hysteria imposes on the opposite gender, i.e., the risk of emasculation, seduction, and contamination as hysteria is more often linked to sexuality or sexual repression. Though this is the most developed chapter of the book, the critical attention is

predominantly directed to Fosca rather than giving a balanced analytical approach between among all the presented works.

Finally, the last chapter of *Performing Bodies* concentrates on the role of the diva in early Italian cinema. Here, Ramsey-Portolano contends that the diva affords female illness a performative space that cannot be accommodated in the textual realm. The author's analyses of *Tigre reale* (The Royal Tigress) and *Malombra* (Dark Shadow) to show how cinematic adaptations of Verga's and Fogazzaro's novels grant female illness a pivotal role where female agency triumphs over oppressive societal norms rather than their literary counterparts. She emphasizes how the visual medium grants the female characters a more prominent role that cannot be granted in the text. The role of the diva grants the female characters and thus their illnesses agency. Their illnesses now take center stage and drives the plot of the film forward as opposed their representations in the textual versions. Overall, her intention is to show that the gaze in the plot changes from a male gaze found in the text to a female gaze in the film. Yet, she places greater emphasis on context, i.e., what it means to be a diva and the acting style, rather than greater attention to the illness in the film themselves as the reader might expect. This final chapter could be seen an introduction for further exploration on the topic of female illness in cinema.

Overall, Ramsey-Portolano scholarship is concise and organized. She offers a convincing analysis of how female agency empowered a female character in the text. However, her assertions could have been made stronger with a more nuanced approach with additional close readings and a more profound theoretical analysis. Each of these chapters has a potential opportunity to be developed further on its own. This book makes significant contributions to the field of gender and sexuality in Italian literature and film not only for its general topic but also for its selection of texts in each chapter. Specifically, Ramsey-Portolano balances gender in her study by choosing both well-known male-authored canonical texts and lesser-known works by female authors.

The primary target audiences for *Performing Bodies* are scholars in Italian studies. Generally speaking, selections of this book could be used as material for understanding the social-political atmosphere of the time for Italian women, and its influence in the realm of literature and emerging media at the turn of the century in Europe. However, this book may very well appeal to broader audiences across disciplines such as, but not limited to, European history, literature, and gender studies. *Performing Bodies* could also be incorporated in courses on gender and sexuality in Italian studies, on interdisciplinary thematic approaches to European fin de siècle literature or literary adaptation in film for undergraduates or graduate students. It could also be a resource in medical humanities courses, that is, where the aim is identifying intersections between medical topics in humanistic fields. The Medical Humanities is indeed a burgeoning field, expected to grow thanks to rising interest by institutions of higher education and the recent establishments of departments, centers, and majors combining humanities disciplines and medicine.

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