



Dickinson

<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com>

**g/s/i** is an annual peer-reviewed journal which publishes research on gendered identities and the ways they intersect with and produce Italian politics, culture, and society by way of a variety of cultural productions, discourses, and practices spanning historical, social, and geopolitical boundaries.

**Title:** Book Review: *Writing for Freedom: Body, Identity and Power in Goliarda Sapienza's Narrative* by Alberica Bazzoni

**Journal Issue:** gender/sexuality/italy, 6 (2019)

**Author:** Stefania Porcelli

**Publication date:** August 2019

**Publication info:** gender/sexuality/italy, "Reviews"

**Permalink:** <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/?p=4352>

**Keywords:** Book Review

### Copyright information

**g/s/i** is published online and is an open-access journal. All content, including multimedia files, is freely available without charge to the user or his/her institution and is published according to the Creative Commons License, which does not allow commercial use of published work or its manipulation in derivative forms. Content can be downloaded and cited as specified by the author/s. **However, the Editorial Board recommends providing the link to the article (not sharing the PDF) so that the author/s can receive credit for each access to his/her work, which is only published online.**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

Bazzoni, Alberica. *Writing for Freedom: Body, Identity and Power in Goliarda Sapienza's Narrative*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018. Pp. 324. ISBN 9783034322423. \$72.95 (paperback).

Two studies published in 2018 share the ambition of providing a systematic approach to Goliarda Sapienza's entire literary production: Maria Rizzarelli's *Goliarda Sapienza. Gli spazi della libertà, il tempo della gioia* (Goliarda Sapienza: The Spaces of Freedom, Time, and Joy) and Alberica Bazzoni's *Writing for Freedom: Body, Identity and Power in Goliarda Sapienza's Narrative* (Oxford: Peter Lang). As Bazzoni states, "the choice to make this author the object of a monographic study already contains an implicit argument in favour of her relevance and significance" (5). The idea of freedom, as the two titles indicate, is central to both volumes, which present equally rich theoretical frameworks privileging psychoanalysis and queer theory. However, Bazzoni's book stands out because it reaches an audience that doesn't necessarily know Italian. To date, *Writing for Freedom* is the first monograph in English dedicated to Sapienza's work. Besides writing in English, Bazzoni's translation of every single quotation is another gesture towards the non-Italian audience – a gesture that helps position the volume more broadly in the field of women's and gender studies rather than limiting its readership to Italian Studies scholars.

The coincidence of these two publications gives credence to Sapienza's hitherto neglected status not only in Italy, but also, and perhaps more particularly, in the Anglo-Saxon world. Sapienza was prolific but did not see many of her writings published during her life. Among these are the autobiographical *Lettera aperta* (Open Letter, 1967), *Il filo di mezzogiorno* (Midday Thread, 1969), and two novels centered on her own experience of prison and its aftermath – respectively, *L'università di Rebibbia* (Rebibbia University, 1983) and *Le certezze del dubbio* (The Certainties of Doubt, 1987). Sapienza also worked on another novel, *L'arte della gioia* (*The Art of Joy*), for nearly a decade (most likely 1967-1976), but the manuscript was turned down by every publisher she contacted and was only partially issued by Stampa Alternativa in 1994 and again in 1998. *L'arte della gioia* remained unnoticed until it was translated into French and German. This international success sparked the interest of Italian readers (similarly to what happened to Elena Ferrante more recently). After what Angelo Pellegrino defined as "a long journey" in his introduction to the book, *L'arte della gioia* was published by Einaudi in 2008 and this publication finally triggered Sapienza's fortune. Even so, *L'arte della gioia* is now the only work by Sapienza translated into English.<sup>1</sup> In *Writing for Freedom*, Bazzoni accurately points to significant connections between this novel and the rest of Sapienza's production, which in this study receives the critical attention it deserves. Hopefully, Bazzoni's book will also help pave the way for the translation of the other texts.

Since most of Sapienza's books are autofictional – that is, a mixture of autobiography and imagination – critics have focused on her unconventional and eventful life, which was so central to her artistic output. Following Giovanna Providenti's brilliant volume *La porta è aperta: Vita di Goliarda Sapienza* (The Door is Open: Life of Goliarda Sapienza) at least three more biographies were published in just a few years' time.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Pellegrino (Sapienza's husband and current owner of her collection of manuscripts) decided to release other previously unpublished works, including some novels (*Io, Jean Gabin* [I, Jean Gabin], 2010; *Appuntamento a Positano* [Meeting in Positano], 2015), notebooks (*Il vizio di parlare a me stessa* [The Bad Habit of Talking to Myself], 2011; *La mia parte di gioia* [My part of Joy], 2013), and poems (*Siciliane* [Sicilian Poems], 2012; *Ancestrale* [Ancestral],

---

<sup>1</sup> Goliarda Sapienza, *The Art of Joy*, trans. Anne Milano Appel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> Giovanna Providenti, *Goliarda Sapienza. La porta della gioia* (Rome: Nuova Delphi, 2016). Alessandra Trevisan, *Goliarda Sapienza: una voce intertestuale (1996-2016)* (Milan: La vita felice, 2016); Gloria Scarfone, *Goliarda Sapienza. Un'autrice ai margini del sistema letterario* (Massa: Transeuropa, 2018).

2013), along with the collection of short narratives *Destino coatto* ([Compulsory Destiny]. 2011). As Bazzoni rightly notices, more archival research will be necessary to assess the extent to which the published volumes reflect the author's plans. The work of Monica Zanardo on Elsa Morante's manuscripts comes to mind; in order to carry out a similar study of the "Archivio Sapienza Pellegrino" in Rome, it would be worthwhile to render the collection available to the public – a desire that shows Bazzoni's willingness to engage in further discussion, on a reassessment of the chronology of the manuscripts, for example, should the archive yield new data.

*Writing for Freedom* combines extensive research from the still private archive with vast theoretical knowledge and attentive close readings of six novels by Sapienza. The volume is organized into four chapters, each with an introduction, an analysis of one or two novels, and various theoretical interpretations that contribute to successfully show how the texts revolve around the formation of a subjectivity – the narrator's – that finds in imagination and writing an expression of her Epicurean and anarchist desire for freedom. Although the book is not very easy to navigate, due to the fact that the titles of the numerous subsections of each chapter do not appear in the table of contents, Bazzoni frames her discourse in an effective, structured way at the beginning of each part of the book. In line with her intention to provide "an organic picture," she prefaces her volume not only with the story of Sapienza's life and production, but also accounting for the existing scholarship and clarifying the "composite theoretical frame" of her own study (13). The introduction skillfully points to the value of the work, which goes beyond the analysis of the formation of the narrator's identity and the interplay between power, freedom, and body in the novels at the center of each chapter. In fact, the study as a whole situates Sapienza's production within the panorama of Italian literature and in dialogue with psychoanalysis, theories of identity formation, Marxism, feminism, and queer theory.

To foreground Sapienza's subversive and original vision, Bazzoni connects her writing with previous, contemporary or subsequent literature, comparing the author with a number of other writers, and emphasizing similarities and differences. For example, *Il filo di mezzogiorno* shares with Italo Svevo's *La coscienza di Zeno* (*Zeno's Conscience*) the centrality of psychoanalysis. By contrast, the second chapter, "Gioiosa forza nomade," posits *L'arte della gioia* as a rejection of the Sicilian literary tradition of Luigi Pirandello, Giovanni Verga, and Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, who all represent a thirst for richness as the primary instinct in human life. To Modesta – the novel's protagonist and narrator – power and wealth are, instead, only means to achieve freedom, specifically the freedom "to experience the pleasure of the body and the relationships of care" (122). Bazzoni successfully proves the relevance of this writer primarily by pointing to the anticipatory and original quality of Sapienza's texts. For example, in chapters one and two, the claim that Sapienza's first novels (*Lettera aperta*, *Il filo di mezzogiorno*, and *L'arte della gioia*) anticipate the literature about sexual abuse suffered by children is supported by references to Dacia Maraini, Fabrizia Ramondino, and Elena Ferrante, to name just a few. Later novels such as *L'università di Rebibbia* and *Le certezze del dubbio*, analyzed in chapter four, give space to marginalized subjects, that is, to the inmates of a female prison, and express the possibility of "empathetic communication" (234), thus delving into issues that are still at the forefront of public debates, as proven by the recent sources Bazzoni quotes. Therefore, the literary analysis constantly intertwines with the investigation of the political implication, adding layers of depth to the study.

Sapienza doesn't merely anticipate the themes of subsequent literature. Coupling every question raised by her writing – at times fragmented and contradictory – with specific theories about identity, gender and power, Bazzoni persuasively demonstrates that the author anticipates the deconstruction of the heteronormative ideology – typical of queer studies – and the criticism against Freudian theories. For example, *Lettera aperta* and *Il filo di mezzogiorno* recount the childhood of the protagonist Goliarda, and the psychoanalytic therapy the adult narrator underwent to recover the

memory of that childhood and especially the relation with her mother. In the account, therapy itself appears as yet another form of violence. Although some articles have explored this psychoanalytical experience, Bazzoni rightly points out that a comprehensive study of the influence of psychoanalysis on Sapienza's writing practice is still missing. This is just one of the valuable research directions Bazzoni provides for scholars that are engaging with Sapienza's multilayered and fascinating writing, while suggesting useful analytical tools (for instance, in the theories of Donald Winnicott and Alice Miller).

Even if Bazzoni at times seems to lump together notions as diverse as instincts, desires, and emotions, I believe that her insistence on the issues of emotional dependence and the absence of maternal love throughout Sapienza's production is particularly compelling and might lead to fruitful comparisons with other authors that explore similar topics (Ferrante would be a case in point). Furthermore, the superb analysis of the variable distance between narrator and protagonist in all of the works analyzed could be considered one of the most important achievements of Bazzoni's study, and an element of cohesion throughout the book that shows the development of Sapienza's narrative as a whole (whose turning point compellingly Bazzoni situates in *Io, Jean Gabin* in chapter three).

While engaging with all the existent scholarship, Bazzoni has by far made the greatest critical contribution to the debate on Sapienza in English. Besides publishing a number of essays (which made their way into *Writing for Freedom*), she has co-organized a monographic conference on Sapienza, held in London in 2013, and co-edited the proceedings of that conference.<sup>3</sup> Winner of the 2015 Peter Lang Young Scholars Competition in Women's Studies, *Writing for Freedom* could be of interest to students and scholars in the fields of sex and gender studies, comparative literature, and literary theory. It is certainly a book that those seriously engaged with Sapienza's literary production should read.

STEFANIA PORCELLI  
The Graduate Center, CUNY

---

<sup>3</sup> Alberica Bazzoni, Emma Bond, and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, eds., *Goliarda Sapienza in Context. Intertextual Relationships with Italian and European Culture* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016).