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Morris, Penelope and Perry Willson. *La mamma. Interrogating a National Stereotype*. New York: Palgrave, 2018. Pp. 258. ISBN 978-1-137-55986-9 and 978-1-137-54256-4. \$ 62.98 (eBook), \$ 66.29 (Hardcover).

Penelope Morris' and Perry Willson's edited volume *La Mamma: Interrogating a National Stereotype* stems from an interdisciplinary project with the goal of understanding the persistence of the stereotype of *mammismo* within the context of the various representations and lived experiences of Italian motherhood. The volume is the result of four international workshops and two public events that explored Italian motherhood in Italian society and in the Italian diaspora, particularly Anglo-Saxon countries. The book's aim is twofold: on the one hand, it analyzes how the cultural constructions of Italian motherhood have evolved and changed over time in literature, cinema, and society at large. On the other, it focuses specifically on a particular cultural representation of the Italian mother: the *mamma italiana* as a "primitively possessive, domineering and, at the same time, indulgent figure" (p. 2), at the core of the phenomenon of *mammismo*.

In the first chapter, Morris and Willson refer to historian Marina d'Amelia's book *La Mamma* (2005), which traces the origins of the *mammismo* stereotype in Italian society, from the Risorgimento to 1950s Italy. Here D'Amelia's definition of *mammismo* serves as a starting point for Morris and Willson to investigate various aspects of Italian motherhood and its representations in literature, cinema, and popular culture in Italy and its diaspora. The editors remark that the meaning of *mammismo* has not always been unambiguous, and could be interpreted as either a negative stereotype about overbearing mothers, or as a means to empower Italian women and their maternal skills. This complexity is deftly explored throughout the volume's contributions, which highlight the often contradictory ideas around the role of the mother in Italian society, simultaneously revered for her self-abnegation to her family and offspring and vilified for turning men into eternal children.

The essay by Silvana Patriarca's "Mammismo/Momism: On the History and Uses of a Stereotype," is an historical reconstruction of the word *mammismo* through literature, movies and pop culture. Patriarca also includes an apt comparison to the American word "momism." While *mammismo* is meant to define a sort of eternal condition of the Italian mother, "momism," instead, is generally considered a temporary condition related to the power American women obtained during the Second World War. Whereas most contributions in this volume point out the negative outcomes of the persistence of the *mammismo* trope, Molly Tambor's essay in chapter 3 takes a different approach, analyzing the positive outcomes of the visibility of working mothers in the public sphere, particularly through the case of Teresa Noce. Moving from textual analysis to a socio-historical framework, chapter three, thus, provides a sociological reading of Communist Party MP Teresa Noce's political campaign in 1948-50. Tambor convincingly claims that Noce's political activism in favor of working mothers was instrumental in passing a comprehensive law for maternity leave, and helped the public to accept the new role of women as workers and citizens in postwar Italy. The essay successfully demonstrates the complexity of motherhood representations in the Fifties, where the pathologizing of motherhood coexisted with working mothers' labor activism.

The Fifties appear to be the volume's main area of investigation, as evidenced by Penelope Morris' essay in chapter 4. Morris explores the way magazine advice columns in postwar Italy created discursive spaces, in which normative prescriptions about motherhood "come up against the anxieties and practicalities of everyday, private lives" (p. 78). Morris' analysis of four magazines of the time (*Grazia*, *Famiglia Cristiana*, *Noi Donne*, and *Epoca*) exposes the complex and often contrasting ways in which the role of the mother and the stereotype of *mammismo* were received and debated. The essay deftly argued that while *Grazia* and *Famiglia Cristiana* perpetuated a patriarchal vision of the family and the role of the mother, *Noi Donne* and *Epoca* aimed to counter negative stereotype about women and remove the stigma associated with unmarried and childless women.

In chapter 5, Ursula Fanning expands the temporal arch to examine several twentieth century women writers who specifically dealt with what she calls the “maternal voice” and the corporeality of the maternal experience. In particular, the author concentrates her analysis on Sibilla Aleramo’s novel *Una donna* (*A Woman*, 1906), while providing an overview of writers Vivanti, Deledda, Banti, Gizburg, Fallaci, Ravera, and Maraini. Fanning’s essay bears the result of the imbalance between the in-depth study of Sibilla Aleramo’s work and that of the other writers. However, the author convincingly problematizes the challenges women writers faced in the creation of maternal subjectivities, which dealt with both the corporeal aspects of maternity and the “constant returns to the intellectual dimension of mothering” (p. 123).

Literature is also at the center of Gribaudo’s essay in chapter 6. Drawing upon the fictional characters of the mother in the novel *Assunta Spina* and in Eduardo De Filippo’s plays, Gribaudo compares these literary representations of motherhood with the lived reality of Neapolitan women interviewed by the author and her students. Gribaudo’s interdisciplinary methodological approach, combining textual analysis of literary works with ethnographic research, effectively broadens our understanding of the connections between these fictional characters and the lived experience of several generations of Italian mothers.

As Morris and Willson state in their Introduction, “No discussion of the stereotype of *mammismo* would be complete without regard to the role that it has played beyond Italy itself” (p. 13). Thus, moving from Italy to the Italian diaspora, chapters 7 and 8 focus on the representations of Italian motherhood in the Anglophone world. In chapter 7, Tirabassi investigates the stereotype of *mammismo* within the Italian diaspora. Through a broad analysis of media texts, Tirabassi claims that the contemporary stereotype of the Italian *mamma* was born and disseminated within the Italian-American immigrant community as a way of recovering a lost identity, and then popularized by the American media industry. Tirabassi’s conclusions interestingly underline how the stereotype of the Italian *mamma* is inextricably linked to that of the damaged male offspring, often constructed as a weak dependent son or – on the opposite side of spectrum – a criminal or a gangster. While the mother-son bond has been broadly explored in Italian and Italian-American literature and cinema, the mother-daughter relationship has been often marginalized or neglected. Mary Jo Bona in chapter 8, thus, addresses this gap analyzing the works of three Italian-American queer female writers, Carole Maso, Mary Cappello and Alison Bechdel, and their relationship with the mother figure. Bona’s reading of the novels effectively underlines how their narrative both reinforce and challenge reductive media representations of the Italian mother.

Chiara Saraceno’s last chapter “Beyond the Stereotype: the Obstacle Course of Motherhood in Italy,” brings us back to Italy, but away from close readings of literary and media products. Saraceno instead chooses to focus on empirical data on the behavior of mothers in contemporary Italy, and on the examination of the difficult reconciliation of motherhood and paid employment. The decrease of fertility rates in Italy, as Saraceno effectively explains, is a product of the intertwining of the lack of social policies in support of motherhood and the resistance to changes in the gender-based division of labor within the household.

The book’s nine contributions provide an extensive and in-depth analysis of various representations of motherhood and the maternal in Italy, with most of the focus on the second half of the twentieth century. The choice of different methodological approaches to analyze a single thematic, from close readings to comparative analysis, is one of the merits of this collection, as is the transnational scope of some of the essays, which focus on the *mammismo* stereotype outside Italy. While the volume does not claim completeness, it would have been useful to include the analysis of *mammismo* in the contemporaneity, from current TV series to digital and social media discourse. Nonetheless, its explorations of the many facets of *mammismo* as a national and

transnational stereotype are a well-welcomed and necessary addition to the field of motherhood studies and will prove useful to both students and scholars.

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