

football once, with reference to the World Cup victories of 1934 and 1938. The most important collective moments of national identification in the history of the Italian republic – the World Cup victories of 2006 and, above all, 1982 – are omitted from this account. The latter achieved a 95 per cent share of Italy's TV audience – a record that will surely never be broken. Surely such an event, remembered by most Italians as central to the postwar period, is worth at least a mention?

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doi:10.1017/mit.2019.5

Performing Bodies: Female Illness in Italian Literature and Cinema (1860–1920), by Catherine Ramsey-Portolano, Madison and Lanham, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2017, vii + 137 pp., \$80.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-68393-131-7

With this recently published book, Catherine Ramsey-Portolano, currently Program Director of Italian Studies at the American University of Rome, continues to guide her readers through the furthest reaches of Italian cinema and literature, employing an interdisciplinary perspective (similar to her method in *The Future of Italian Teaching: Media, New Technologies and Multi-Disciplinary Perspectives*, 2015) and a gender-based approach (as in *Rethinking Neera*, 2010). Starting from the analysis of several literary examples (two of which are also reviewed in their film adaptations), the author provides different portraits of female illness in Italian *fin de siècle* literature and diva films of the first decades of the twentieth century.

Considering neurosis as a lens for interpreting female reality, during radical changes in Italian social and cultural life of the late 1800s and early 1900s, Ramsey-Portolano points out that the progressive collapse of female submission and spirit of abnegation (originating with the revolutionary atmosphere of the Risorgimento movement, and continuing with the First World War and the rise of Fascism) led to a significant and irreversible disruption of the status quo. The efforts of an outdated patriarchal society to confine the desire for change within the ineffective 'motherland' rhetoric of the Risorgimento era, were followed by a series of unethical manipulations of positivist and evolutionist theories, which are examined by the author at the beginning of her volume.

By offering a clear overview of European scientific and philosophical theories of that period, such as those put forward by Comte, Darwin, Lombroso (whose philosophy was based on concrete evidence provided by craniology) and German neurologist Moebius, Ramsey-Portolano is able to deal skilfully with several theses positing female mental, physical and moral inferiority. Among the efforts to discourage women's pretensions towards 'una bugiarda emancipazione e una fatalissima concorrenza all'intelletto maschile' ('a deceptive emancipation and a fatal competition with the male intellect', p. 17), the author devotes particular attention to contagious hysteria and its destructive consequences, seen as metaphors drawn upon, according to Luciano Currieri, 'per esorcizzare la paura del femminile' ('to exorcise the fear of the feminine', p. 122).

The repercussions in the literary sphere that resulted from observation of pathologies, and particularly female pathologies, form the subject of the subsequent chapters, and epitomize the

central analysis of this volume. Proving once more her skill and good judgement, and moving expertly from synchrony to diachrony, Ramsey-Portolano reaches even further than Edgar Allan Poe's assertion, according to which Beauty is the sole legitimate province of poetry. Inspired by the work of the 'celebre anglista' Mario Praz, she chooses not poetry but hybrid and pre-modernist prose 'as a lens for interpreting female reality and for bringing to light social situations' (p. 121). Considering briefly the different steps by which the fascination for '*l'orribilmente bello*' was imperceptibly replaced by the attraction towards '*il bellamente orrido*', via the contemporary Italian *verista* experience, the author identifies two categories in the literary representation of neurotic women. In the first group, she places novels which posit sickness as the consequence for women who have transgressed traditional roles or have failed to fulfil societal expectations; in the second, novels where women adopt the empowering and liberating effects of illness as a form of agency and a source of liberation, 'to take control of their bodies and demonstrate self-mastery' (p. 122). As a result, a new model of femininity arises, against the backdrop of 'a restless and refined modern youth', who are victims of the *femme fatale*'s seductiveness – recalling Matilde Serao's famous reference to men's *devirilisation*.

Diva films in early Italian cinema provide testimony of how these women served as instances of non-traditional lifestyles. Examining, by way of example, two cinematic adaptations of female illness (in Giovanni Pastrone's 1916 film *Tigre Reale*, and Carmine Gallone's *Malombra* 1917), Ramsey-Portolano underlines how unique silent movies are for their emphasis on the plasticity of the female body, used as a means to indirectly promote an emancipated lifestyle and a proto-feminist behaviour. On the other hand, she points out that notions of deficiency and irresoluteness are associated with men 'marked by the inability to vitally adhere to existence' (p. 87): that is why the author compares them to the early inept male characters of modern Italian literature. *Performing Bodies* aims to provide the reader with a co-ordinated reference system, rationally organised, to navigate the vast reaches of Italian cinema and literature. This book represents an excellent example in the current non-fiction landscape of how it is still possible to analyse previously studied literature with an original and sensitive perspective that opens new interpretive possibilities.

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 doi:10.1017/mit.2019.6