

# Florida State University Libraries

---

2016

## Katharine Mitchell, Italian Women Writers. Gender and Everyday Life in Fiction and Journalism 1870-1910

Silvia Valisa



Katharine Mitchell, *Italian Women Writers. Gender and Everyday Life in Fiction and Journalism 1870-1910*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014.  
Silvia Valisa, Florida State University

*Italian Women Writers. Gender and Everyday Life in Fiction and Journalism 1870-1910* is a much needed book-length contribution on 19th-century Italian women writers. In it, Katharine Mitchell discusses the fiction and journalistic writings of three important *scrittrici*: Neera (Anna Radius Zuccari's *nom de plume*), Marchesa Colombi (Maria Antonietta Torriani's *nom de plume*), and Matilde Serao, and argues that "the depiction of girlhood and womanhood in Italian domestic fiction and journalism as written by women functioned as a type of conduct manual that taught women how to deal with the predicaments and limitations in everyday life" (150). Mitchell is less focused on demonstrating whether these writings had an actual impact on legal and social changes, than she is in understanding and reviewing what female readers found, and identified with, in them. The result is an accessible, informed, and insightful overview of Neera, Marchesa Colombi, and Matilde Serao's works.

These writers' contribution to Italian literature and culture has long been obliterated or minimized by the Italian literary establishment, whose canonization practices favored male over female writers both as pedagogic and creative models. In recent years, Antonia Arslan and other Italianists such as Ann H. Caesar and Lucienne Kroha (to name just a few) have contributed to a new visibility of these authors, with the positive result that the relevance of women writers in pre-WWI Italian culture is not restricted anymore to the supposed *unicum* of Sibilla Aleramo's controversial *Una donna* (1906). And yet so much remains to be done.

Mitchell's volume contributes substantially to our knowledge and critical assessment of these authors because it approaches them from several different standpoints. She provides a detailed historical and sociological overview of the place of women in post-Unification Italy, thus allowing the reader to contextualize the writers' interests and specific contributions. Her research is devoted to both fiction and non-fiction writing: Mitchell examines their domestic fiction (realist novels in which the female protagonists deal with their social and sexual position in society), journal articles, essays, and conduct books in order to reflect on and discuss the different stances assumed by the authors vis-à-vis themselves, their work as public figures, and the main concerns of their middle class audiences. Finally, she also contributes overviews of specific themes and motifs within these works, such as the gendering of private and public spheres, the politics of emotions, and the different types of bonds between female subjects, and argues that in tackling such specific themes, these texts offered a much needed instrument of reflection and self-assessment for female readers. In most cases, the texts proposed subtle critiques of the status quo, or at least helped female readers cope with the limitations of their gender roles by acknowledging their predicament as the result of social structures, and not individual limitations.

The narrow scope of the book (three writers, and their works devoted to middle class women) is less a limit than it is a strength; while in most cases what holds true for the texts examined would not be true for other classes of women, for

**Commented [SV1]:** If we give the nom de plume for Marchesa Colombi we need to give it for Neera as well -

**Commented [PG2]:** Colombi (Maria Antonietta Torriani's *nom de plume*),

example factory and farm workers, these explicit research boundaries allow Mitchell to focus specifically on middle class women, that is on the category of female subjects that were being most directly interpellated by the ideology of domesticity and by discourses on femininity in liberal Italy, and that were publicly held as models and representatives of their gender. As she explains, thanks to writers such as Neera, Marchesa Colombi and Serao, “for the first time in Italy, middle-class women readers were reading about women like themselves who were depicted with sympathy and pity” (20).

One of the most important points brought forward by this book, in continuity with Antonia Arslan’s insights in her 1998 *Dame, galline e regine*, is that, far from operating in isolation and/or in competition with their fellow female novelists, the three writers established professional collaborations and a network of solidarity among them, just as they provided models for solidarity, female friendships, and mutual understanding among women within their fictional texts. Indeed, the discourse of solidarity becomes in this volume both a critical and an ethical gesture, one that dismounts the cliché of the female artist uninterested in the work of her female colleagues, and that reasserts our duty to practice the same solidarity across generations. As Mitchell reminds us in the introduction, after all, it was not by coincidence that Marchesa Colombi’s masterful novel *Matrimonio in provincia* (1885) was brought back from oblivion by the Einaudi publishing firm in 1973. The mother of the one female editor at the firm, writer Natalia Ginzburg, “encourage[d] her daughter to recommend [Marchesa Colombi’s] work to the publisher” (3) arguing that it represented one of the most significant readings in her formation as a young woman.

This example of the transmission of female-authored literature from one generation to the next, a transmission, in this case, that had a direct impact on the text’s availability to new readers, is illuminating in both its specificity and in its rarity. Only when we give importance to the experiences of subjects other than white males, and to genres other than the canonical ones, can we begin to fully appreciate the wealth and depth of material that Italian culture carries within in, and that should be made more known and available to the readers. Mitchell’s thematic and ideological analyses transcend genres and narrative formats, drafting an original literary and emotional landscape that will hopefully continue to be expanded and explored by scholars. Clearly and cogently written, *Italian Women Writers. Gender and Everyday Life in Fiction and Journalism 1870-1910* provides great critical insights on the works of Neera, Marchesa Colombi, and Matilde Serao, and helps us reconnect with literary representations that for the first time both described and criticized for female readers the world they lived in.