Irene Zanini-Cordi. *Donne sciolte. Abbandono e identità femminile nella letteratura italiana*. Ravenna: Longo, 2008. Pp. 206. ISBN: 978-88-8063-600-7 (paperback). €18.

Irene Zanini-Cordi examines the frequent but largely overlooked motif of the abandoned woman in Italian literature, ranging from the Medieval and Early Modern female figures of Boccaccio, Ariosto and Tasso, to the contemporary ones of Erminia Dell'Oro and Elena Ferrante. This study consists of an Introduction ("Donna abbandonata: condannata o liberata?") and four chapters, followed by bibliography and index. Zanini-Cordi draws on Ovid's *Heroides* to identify four archetypal categories of abandoned women: Ariadne, Dido, Circe, and Medea. Each serves as the title figure for one chapter. In the Introduction Zanini-Cordi explains the methodological approach that sustains her study. Absent from critical discourse despite their wide presence in literature, abandoned women are "figure centrali nella mitopoietica occidentale" (7). The scope of the study is then quite vast and the author can only touch upon some aspects of a potentially much wider investigation. The book is particularly important in that, besides the traditional archetypes, it also presents a new archetype of abandoned woman, that emerges in contemporary female writing. Drawing on the feminist theory of Adriana Cavarero's *Nonostante Platone*, Zanini-Cordi finds in the work of Elena Ferrante new female figures who are "adeguate alla soggettività femminile in quanto pensate dalle donne" (8). For this approach the novelist needs to reject the binary opposition, typical of western thought, that classifies male as active and woman as passive.

In chapter 1 ("Arianna. La sedotta. Lamento e paralisi"), where abandoned women are defined by paralysis and lament, Zanini-Cordi examines Boccaccio's *Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta*, Ariosto's Olimpia in *Orlando furioso* and the protagonist of Erminia dell'Oro's *L'abbandono. Una storia Eritrea* (1991). Chapter 2 ("Didone. La vedova. Lacrime e scioglimento") deals with the liminal figure of the widow. In Goldoni's *La vedova scaltra* (1741) and *La donna sola* (1757) Zanini-Cordi finds remarkable subversive potential. Goldoni's widows display a form of agency that derives from relative economic freedom and control over their destiny. Chapter 2 then abruptly moves on to Marino Moretti's *La vedova Fioravanti* (1940) a figure that showcases the process of purification of the widow's uncontrolled sexuality. Chapter 3 ("Circe. La seduttrice. Incanto e metamorfosi") deals with the figure of the seductress, whose effects are enchantment and metamorphosis. Here Zanini-Cordi gives a fine interpretation of Ariosto's Alcina and Tasso's Armida and then examines Circetta, the protagonist of Moderata Fonte's *Tredici canti del Floridoro* (1581). The chapter then moves on to Fosca, the ugly heroine of Tarchetti's eponymous novel. Zanini-Cordi makes an interesting parallel between Fosca and Dante's *femmina balba*: in both women the seduction of speech is paired with physical ugliness and both embody man's deepest fears, the mystery of the maternal, the horror of death, the danger of unbridled feelings; the male protagonist must therefore reject Fosca in order to survive her mortiferous effects. The chapter ends with the modern Circe of Sandra Petrigani's *Navigazioni di Circe* (1997). Here the traditional roles of the myth are reversed: it is Circe who abandons Ulysses and begins to travel and

record her experiences in writing. Writing is the activity that allows this Circe to defer imprisonment and to discover her difference.

In Chapter 4 ("Le figlie di Medea. Sorriso e volo") Zanini-Cordi finds the final and positive outcome for abandoned women, smile and flight. By far the most convincing, chapter 4 is where Zanini-Cordi shines in her fine and in-depth analysis of Elena Ferrante's *I giorni dell'abbandono* (2002). Here is the decisive moment in the development of the condition of abandonment: with Ferrante's protagonist, Olga, we see the departure from the paralysis and passivity of the old feminine archetypes, and the birth of a new female subjectivity, made possible through the process of writing. This process in fact entails the re-writing of the story of two female literary figures: Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and Simone De Beauvoir's *La femme Rompu*. For Zanini-Cordi in *Navigazioni di Circe* and *I giorni dell'abbandono*: "la scrittura è l'elemento di sostegno della donna abbandonata quando vengono a mancare le certezze date dal sistema simbolico maschile" (172).

Throughout the book we find wide reference to theorists, ranging from Foucault, Barthes, Deleuze Derrida and Sausurre, just to name a few, to feminist thinkers of both European and American school. The best contribution to Zanini-Cordi's book comes from the use of the ideas of Italian feminist thinkers Adriana Cavarero and Luisa Muraro.

Referring to the protagonist of Ferrante's *I giorni dell'abbandono* Zanini-Cordi states that "raccolgiendo nella propria esperienza personale i *topoi* di tutte le donne abbandonate che l'hanno preceduta ed incorporandoli come parte integrante del suo essere . . . Olga reagisce alla paralisi dell'abbandono e si reinserisce nel sociale dopo un percorso di risignificazione dell'identità che la porta ad intuire il *sé*." (19) Zanini-Cordi then sees a path of evolution from the abandoned women of the previous chapters to Ferrante's Olga. This diachronic study of the motif of abandoned women in *Donne sciolte* is captivating and engaging, but the evolutionary trajectory inevitably contains some gaps, and at times the subject matter appears disconnected, dictated by the authors' personal preference, jumping in time or across genre and authorial gender, leaving one wondering what other authors, unmentioned here, have dealt with this central figure in Italian literature. I find chapter 2 on the widows intriguing and rich, but problematic and ill-fitting in the thematic frame of the *abbandono*: widowhood does not ensue from deliberate male abandonment of the woman, rather the widow is alone due to death, an involuntary disappearance of the male partner.

In conclusion this is a well-researched and engaging book that will be of interest to scholars of Italian literature and gender studies; it puts abandoned women in the spotlight and finds a redemptive space for those who move from the passive and painful role of the *sedotta e abbandonata* to the liberating position of the *donna sciolta* in contemporary female narrative. Given the wide scope of the study, this book also paves the way for more research on this important figure in western imaginary.