Contessa Lara. *Lettere ad Angelo De Gubernatis*. A cura di Carlo Caporossi. Milano: Otto/Novecento, 2010. Pp. 123. ISBN 976-88-87734-33-1. €12.

This review begins with a disclosure. Two years ago, as I sat in the formal quiet of the manuscript room of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze intent on my own research, I noted across from me a continuous exchange of folders, letters, and whispered discussions. Clearly the research there had aroused a degree of excitement not only for the researcher but among the librarians and archivists as well. I finally asked about the project. My curiosity satisfied, and my own interest sparked, I wished the researcher much success with his future book.

Contessa Lara's *Lettere ad Angelo De Gubernatis* is the work that had generated so much enthusiasm at the BNCF. Those familiar with the precise manner in which the researcher, Carlo Caporossi, uses a critique génétique approach will agree that this latest publication certainly merits many accolades and that the attention of BNCF librarians and archivists was well justified..

The letters of Contessa Lara have previously been published; Caporossi's intent in presenting them again was to correct the typographical and informational errors in the earlier publication. More importantly, he provides an appropriate contextual framework for the letters both in his introduction and in the four interpretive essays that follow, situating the friendship of the two protagonists within their socio-political environment. Consequently, he has also examined much unpublished but relevant material, including the letters of the publisher Vallardi, those of the Contessa's common-law spouse Giovanni Alfredo Cesareo, and the diaries of De Gubernatis.

Evelina Cattermole (1849-96), better recognized as the writer who signed herself (most often) Contessa Lara, has had her life writ large by other scholars. The description of the biographical events of her life titillate, repulse, attract, and inevitably invite judgment as they did in her lifetime when her stories were published in numerous Italian periodicals. The philologist Angelo De Gubernatis (1840-1913), a specialist in Oriental history (in particular Sanskrit), established himself also as the compiler of two compendia, in the style that *Who's Who* would do years later: brief biographical entries of notable writers in Italian letters, and also in Romance languages (this latter work is written in French). At the time of his initial correspondence with Contessa Lara, De Gubernatis directed the journal *Natura e arte*. Their acquaintance, and later their friendship, was occasioned by Contessa Lara's desire to have her work included in De Gubernatis' journal.

In bringing the "rare case of sincere friendship with no ulterior motive" (7) to life, Caporossi makes it clear that there is no torrid love affair between the fallen woman and the "*tombreur des femmes*", as he refers to De Gubernatis. Following the chronology suggested by the letters, he avoids, however, a biography in the strict sense of the word. Caporossi exemplifies those enviable expert readers who pay close attention to philological nuances, to lacunae in texts, to minute textual changes in the manuscripts they examine, and who, in doing so, present chronological events seen through the highly personal vicissitudes of his protagonists. For example, in reproducing an early letter (27 October 1891) sent to De Gubernatis

by Contessa Lara, Caporossi alerts us to the subtexts that will increase in importance as their friendship develops, and then sadly unravels. He writes:

Già questo primo breve scritto dice molto del carattere e delle abitudini di Evelina, che non potendo più sposarsi, deliberatamente sceglie di dichiarare di vivere more uxorio perché, da “anima franca”, le piacciono le “posizioni nette”, e la quiete vita di casa. (20)

The astute reader will acknowledge Caporossi's subtle hint at how the relationship between the two will unfold and will not be surprised, then, that ultimately Contessa Lara will choose her domestic arrangements with a much younger lover, Giuseppe Pierantoni, a violent man and decidedly not her equal, over a sincere friend. And again, in citing her farewell letter (which Caporossi dates in the late spring or early summer of 1895), he steers us once again through the silences that inform Contessa Lara's words, silences that De Gubernatis must have understood himself. Caporossi comments:

È, questa, una lettera realmente esplicita della realtà di Evelina in quel momento. Se i primi due periodi sembrano addirittura dettati dal Pierantoni... la seconda parte afferma, negandola, una realtà che Lina è costretta a subire suo malgrado. Infatti, De Gubernatis legge benissimo nel suo cuore e legge ciò che ella non vorrebbe mai che venisse alla luce. (91)

As he guides us through the collaboration of the Contessa with *Natura e arte* and later in De Gubernatis' *Vita italiana* from their first epistolary encounter to the Contessa's untimely and cruel death at the hands of Pierantoni, Caporossi remains faithful to his goal of presenting a microhistory in the context of the late nineteenth-century Italian literary environment. While he affectionately refers to the author as Evelina or Lina, he never surrenders his critical distance; his purpose is not to judge but to recount, and while recounting, to provide as much supporting material as possible. His footnotes are satisfyingly informative and ably enhance the text. He invites us to engage further with Contessa Lara and De Gubernatis by including the full corpus of her letters to him in an appendix. The academic reader will lament the lack of an Index of names, but will appreciate the breadth and depth of the research and the fascinating and highly readable story of two friends.

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