CARMEN COVITO'S *LA BRUTTINA STAGIONATA*:
BRIDGING FEMINIST AND POST-FEMINIST LITERATURE

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Summary. Carmen Covito's 1992 novel *La bruttina stagionata* serves as a connective text between two significant moments in Italian women's writing: the feminist works of the 1970s and those published in the 1990s. Covito's text adopts the sensibilities of a feminist work in its description of the female protagonist's trajectory from a state of victimization to one of confident self-awareness. But, like many of the novels written decades after the apogee of the women's movement, *La bruttina stagionata* incorporates this poetics without the accompaniment of identifiable feminist practices, such as *affidamento* or *autocoscienza*, or the optimism and expectancy found in many works of the 1970s.

Women-authored Italian novels of the 1990s seemed to offer an unequivocal break from those of the 1970s: less politically engaged and less focused on feminist tenets or practices; more concerned with literary aesthetics than personal agenda. A cohort of young female writers producing novels in the 1990s created texts freed of the often didactic and one-dimensional works of the earlier generation of women writing during the height of the feminist movement. But any perceived rupture between these two recent literary moments is neither as sustained nor as profound as initial scrutiny would suggest. Rather, many of these later works are clearly indebted to those written earlier, framing familiar motifs and narrative practices in a new context. Indeed, the depiction of female relationships put forward in these recent texts significantly expands the contours of the women's movement, ushering it into the twenty-first century.¹

¹ Several critics in particular have been active in examining recent literary production by Italian women, addressing the artistic legacy of such authors while examining new models of women's writing. Stefania Lucamante, for example, has taken up this charge in her valuable work on women-authored novels of the 1990s and later. She uses as representative examples the works of Mariateresa Di Lascia, Elena Ferrante, and Simona Vinci to speak to a significant body of work that she believes represents a "hybrid" phase in the evolution in women's literature (2008). Adalgisa Giorgio has also investigated recent fiction by Italian women, pointing to the works of Silvia Ballestra, Rossana Campo, Isabella Santacroce, among others, as particularly innovative (2006).

One text in particular can be read as a bridge between these two literary moments. Carmen Covito's *La bruttina stagionata*, published in 1992, embraces stylistic and thematic elements common to feminist-era texts while also showcasing those found in later novels. Covito does this by creating a female protagonist who spurns social expectations, including marriage and motherhood, in her quest to "conquistarsi una propria autonomia" (Neiger 258). In order to acquire this "autonomia," her heroine must redefine or leave behind often toxic relationships with both the men and women in her life while recognizing her own worth. While this brief plot summary may read like the prototypical feminist text, Covito also explicitly rejects many of the principles of those earlier works, namely a psychosexual exploration of familial relationships and an unequivocal reiteration of such feminist practices as *autocoscienza* and *affidamento*.² Instead, the author portrays a heroine who comes to "claim, finally, her subjective self" not through sisterly alliances or the use of feminist practices, but through the validation of her artistic work (Wood 2003, 166). It is this work, and its expression in Covito's own literary production, that forms a continuum with an earlier feminist imperative to define women's subjectivity through their own creative production, although in *La bruttina stagionata* we can also read the author's disillusionment with the mixed results of the women's movement.

Covito belongs chronologically to the generation of second-wave feminists waging battle and producing texts in the 1970s and 1980s. Like Dacia Maraini, examined below, her perspective was informed by the struggles these women faced as they challenged political and social institutions, as well as literary traditions. But it is precisely Covito's position as a writer who has observed the evolving status of women in Italian culture that allows us to see in her a link between two different periods of women's writing. Although Covito came of age with the feminist writers, she can also be connected to a new generation of women authors, such as Rossana Campo and Silvia Ballestra, through their shared interest in presenting new models of femininity.

Tracing the connections among authors and movements is an important task in the study of Italian literature, as the practice solidifies female

² For an excellent recent overview of the Italian women's movement, see Amalia Signorelli's article in which she examines the theoretical underpinnings of the movement, its political and legal successes, and its practices, including *autocoscienza* and *affidamento*. Her article makes clear as well the profound and lasting transformation of Italian society because of the achievements of the feminist movement.

literary lineages. In the case of *La bruttina stagionata*, an examination of a text written after the especially cohesive and potent literary production of the 1970s, reveals continuity in the tradition of female writing and expression.³ And, despite decades of critical attention to women's literary creations, it seems imperative even now to insist on this continuity. Female authors and their contributions to Italian and world literature still suffer from neglect; while individual writers may be noted in critical anthologies or textbooks, it is rare to see a more methodical investigation of the connections among artists and across generations. My study, then, works to correct this neglect and offers, through the investigation of Covito's novel, a look at the connections between one set of women writers and another. Clearly, one text cannot stand for an entire crop of women-authored works. But this work in particular offers a convincing means of departure for such an analysis, one that in a different forum can be more thoroughly expanded.

Before we can situate *La bruttina stagionata* within the parameters of women's literature in contemporary Italy, I would like to review the salient characteristics of both feminist and post-feminist literary production. Much work has been done on the novels of Italian feminists, who vigorously explored those issues fundamental to the women's movement, including heterosexual and lesbian relationships, familial ties (with an emphasis on the mother-daughter bond), sexuality, motherhood, work, and artistic expression. Italy's cultural, social, and legal history, institutionalized to a large degree by a tradition of conservative politics and the often heavy-handed influence of the Catholic Church, was scrutinized by these authors—and then vehemently rejected. These authors offered a poetics of transformation, intent on challenging and changing centuries of this often oppressive tradition.⁴

Early assessments of these feminist-era texts focused primarily on their reiteration of this socio-political agenda, ignoring aesthetic considerations

³ I do not mean to claim that all women-authored novels of the 1970s were feminist in nature, nor that those that were inspired by a feminist agenda shared the same stylistic or thematic concerns. But a clearly-identified body of work did evolve from that moment, one that took up in a systematic and meaningful way the tenets of the women's movement. For an overview of feminist-era fiction, see Adalgisa Giorgio (2000) and Sharon Wood (2003).

⁴ A few of the more innovative and politicized early feminist texts include Dacia Maraini's *Donna in guerra* (1975), Oriana Fallaci's *Lettera a un bambino mai nato* (1975), Armanda Guiducci's *Due donne da buttare* (1976), and Francesca Sanvitale's *Madre e figlia* (1981).

and contributions. As Sharon Wood writes, “the struggle for form was largely subservient to the struggle for the political contextualization of all cultural activity” (1995, 202). Recent critical attention has looked more closely at literary matters; that is, the genres, narrative techniques, and poetic voices employed by these authors.⁵ Broadening the critical inquiry to examine both style and substance has led to a re-evaluation of this corpus, with many scholars now positing that because of the innovations of these women writers, the novel in Italy underwent genuine and profound changes. Adalgisa Giorgio, for example, writes that “Women have made an enormous contribution to the regeneration of the novel in Italy by making its form, content and language more pliable and thus able to represent and interpret the concerns of men and women in a fast changing world” (2000, 236).

But what effect did this “regeneration of the novel” have on a subsequent generation of female authors? And, equally important, if the feminist movement of the 1970s—having achieved many of its legal and political goals—is no longer the primary inspiration for literary endeavours, then what do these later works have to say about femininity and femaleness in contemporary Italy?

It may be precipitate to draw definitive conclusions about works published so recently, but it does seem clear that in the 1990s a cohort of Italian female writers created a unique body of work that initially seemed characterized by its break from earlier, more feminist-oriented novels. Two authors in particular, Silvia Ballestra and Rossana Campo, are the most visible and prolific writers of this generation. They are often linked to the *giovanani cannibali*, a loose-knit group of young (male and female) artists who in the late 1980s and early 1990s produced “pulp” fiction that “presented life in the rawest and most unpretentious fashion possible” (Capozzi 2003, 219).⁶ The focus of these loosely-connected authors on mass media, con-

⁵ Indeed, Carol Lazzaro-Weis has identified a number of different genres and generic configurations used by women of this generation, defying those claims of an absolute reliance on simplistic first-person narratives. Her work has revealed the literary sophistication of feminist-era texts, while also linking them to earlier generations, those decisively establishing a cohesive tradition of female writing.

⁶ While Covito is often positioned alongside Campo and Ballestra in discussions of contemporary writing, her work often differs quite dramatically from theirs. Born in 1948, her experiences more closely mirror those of the women authors of the 1970s than these younger writers (Campo was born in 1963, Ballestra in 1969). Covito’s work, too, is more traditional, at least in a narrative sense; *La*

sumerism, technology, and youth culture, and their re-imagination of narrative genres helped rejuvenate the novel in Italy and brought these writers international attention. All of these authors demonstrate a willingness to modernize traditional novelistic tenets; to create “a clear alternative in the construction of the canon...” (Lucamante 2001, 23).

Stefania Lucamante notes that these authors, and she singles out Ballestra, Simona Vinci, Isabella Santacroce, Campo, and Francesca Mazzucato, are “among the most controversial contemporary novelists, and offer an assorted display of unconventional uses of women’s narrative fiction in Italy at the end of the century” (2001, 99). In fact, many of these female authors seemed more indebted to the experimental texts of the *neo-avanguardia* of the early 1960s—mostly male writers—than to their more immediate literary foremothers.⁷ But several scholars posit that the women writers in particular who were attached to the *cannibale* movement absorbed—consciously or not—the literary legacy of the feminist generation. Claudia Bernardi, for example, believes that these authors “establish an intertextual dialogue with past women writers, even as they openly acknowledge their debt to the fathers of the canonical *neo-avanguardia*” (70). Giorgio, too, points out that while these later artists may locate their inspiration in the experimental male writers of the early 1960s, their literary production is clearly evocative of feminist-inspired work. “[T]here is a discrepancy between what these writers profess and what transpires from their work, which reveals that women’s social, cultural, and literary conquests in the 1970s and 1980s constitute now an unconscious collective legacy for the young generations,” she writes (2006, 109).⁸ Sharon Wood

bruttina stagionata reads more like a traditional *bildungsroman* than a postmodern tribute to and portrayal of popular culture. Covito also employs a more deliberately complex linguistic voice than the other two authors; indeed, Capozzi makes note of her “excellent control of a vivid language full of ironic allusions to today’s fast-changing society” (2003, 222).

⁷ Silvia Contarini has traced the connection between Ballestra, Campo, and Covito in particular with the earlier group of female writers, paying particular attention to linguistic similarities (1995). She has also assessed works by Campo, Mariateresa Di Lascia, and Silvana Grasso and finds that these authors share many similar themes with the earlier generation of writers (1996). She credits this to the desire to “restare su un terreno conosciuto, rivolgersi al passato piuttosto che rompere col sistema culturale e provocare cambiamenti, affermare nuovi valori” (1996, 162).

⁸ Giorgio more thoroughly examines the connection between women-authored novels of the 1970s and the 1990s, concluding that much of women’s literary

goes even further, at least in the case of Covito, to claim that she “is a feminist writer but, unlike many writers from the previous generation, she seeks not a solipsistic isolation or separation, whether sexual or cultural, but a recognition that women must emerge from the ghetto. Hers is a cultural practice that aims toward a new century” (2003, 166). I would point out here that Covito’s perspective, while rooted in women’s writing of the 1970s and 1980s, serves as an excellent connective element with the novels of the subsequent generation of female authors.

Covito creates this new, forward-looking feminist archetype by constructing an atypical heroine. Marilina Labruna is neither wife nor mother, having rejected those roles in favour of an independent existence. Equally striking is Covito’s depiction of her heroine, for Marilina’s physical appearance further emphasizes her anomalous location in the ranks of literary heroines. She is middle-aged and unattractive, cursed with dan-druff and love handles. By deploying a female protagonist who is both homely and older than most nubile heroines, Covito explicitly confronts socio-cultural (and literary) issues of female beauty and age.

Marilina’s homeliness is underlined in the novel’s opening scene, where we find her in a beauty salon, getting her budding moustache waxed and bemoaning her “espressione stupida, da bovino infelice” (8). Marilina’s unsightly physical appearance both gives rise to and underscores her status as an outsider, a woman who, because she does not conform to the exacting standards of feminine pulchritude, lives on the margins of social and literary expectations. In this introductory scene, Marilina attempts to conform to social standards of female beauty by having her moustache removed. Throughout the text she will further endeavour to position herself as a conventional heroine, taking on the role of *femme fatale*, for example, a role defined in part by female attractiveness. But while Marilina initially attempts to engage in traditional standards of female beauty, over the course of the novel she learns to reject such unrealistic and one-dimensional expectations in her quest for self-validation.

In a world that insists on female beauty, Marilina’s unattractiveness has rendered her invisible, and the search for identity that informs the narrative arc of the novel means she must substantiate her own position in soci-

production between this time period has “engaged with or drawn attention to women’s position in language and society” (2006, 110). Although Giorgio does not discuss Covito in this article, the idea of positioning women in contemporary society is a central concern of *La bruttina stagionata*, for the novel is structured around how the female protagonist evades both literary and social expectations.

ety. Marilina's invisibility is made concrete by her choice of profession: "[V]ive in quieta solitudine scrivendo tesi di laurea a pagamento" (10). This is a solitary job, one done silently in library stacks and at the tiny desk in her living room. More significant is the omission of Marilina's name from the texts she ghost-writes, for the theses are instead adorned with the names of the lazy and deceitful students who rely on her research and writing skills to obtain their degrees. Marilina negates her own self by participating in a dubious occupation that erases all signs of her literary production along with her very identity and creativity.

But while earlier feminist novels employed social practices inherent to the women's movement to guide their heroines toward a self-awakening, Marilina does not acquire her sense of self through any such route. *La bruttina stagionata* instead appears to discredit the legacy of the women's movement, with Marilina's easy dismissal of it indicating how the tenets and practices of feminism no longer provide a galvanizing force in the lives of many women. She claims little allegiance to the women's movement, recalling with no sign of nostalgia her university days "quando andava di moda il femminismo" (95). Although Marilina and her best friend Olimpia initially got caught up in the fever of the movement, "Nessuna delle due si era però mai spinta a mettere in pratica la teoria, che giudicavano bella ma estremista" (95). Marilina rejects in particular the notion of separatism and difference, noting "l'idea che possa esistere una cultura propria delle donne fa venire la pelle di gallina: ma come, una dovrebbe rinchiudersi da sola in un ghetto specifico, dopo tutte 'ste lotte delle altre per uscire da quello generale?" (210).⁹

The originality of Covito's narrative trajectory is better understood by positioning it against two other texts published by women authors in the 1990s, one by an old-guard feminist and another representing the later generation of female writers. These two novels, *Dolce per sé* by Dacia Maraini and Rossana Campo's *Mai sentita così bene*, illustrate how writers from both generations employed explicitly feminist strategies to illustrate the interior growth of their characters.

Maraini, whose works often passionately expound an agenda rooted in the women's movement, created in her 1997 novel *Dolce per sé* a female protagonist remarkably similar to that of Covito's. Both heroines are sin-

⁹ Like many contemporary women, both fictional and real, Marilina seems unaware that she is the beneficiary of feminism's success in obtaining legal and social rights, as well as a reassessment of traditional roles for women. Marilina is happily and deliberately childless, for example, a situation (or at least an attitude) not sanctioned in pre-feminist Italy.

gle, middle-aged, childless writers. Both have struggled with failed heterosexual relationships. But the difference between these two texts is striking, and I would ascribe that difference to one of artistic intention. Maraini casts her epistolary narrative as a portrayal of an older, experienced woman gently tutoring a young girl in the social and sexual expectations she will face upon entering the adult world. By framing the narrative in this structure, Maraini pays tribute to the concept of *affidamento*, a mentoring practice central to the Italian feminist poetics of self-discovery and growth. Through this mentoring, the younger partner in this process benefits under the guiding tutelage of an older, more experienced woman.

Another text, Campo's novel *Mai sentita così bene* (1995), addresses the practice of *autocoscienza*, the Italian rendition of consciousness-raising sessions aimed at sharing and parsing female experiences. In Campo's novel, the female characters engage in boozy, frank conversation; indeed, the text reads like a joyful, rambunctious consciousness-raising session.¹⁰ The novel's lack of a traditional structure helps to emphasize the value placed on female friendships.¹¹

Covito's novel, however, rejects both *affidamento* and *autocoscienza* along with the very premise they are based on, for *La bruttina stagionata* does not privilege female friendships at all. Her heroine acquires her sense of self-worth without the guidance of a maternal or sisterly figure. She lives a solitary existence, close only to Olimpia, her college friend, and, to a lesser degree, to her widowed mother. Although Marilina's relationship with Olimpia initially seems sustaining and productive, it gradually reveals itself to be one-sided and exploitative. Olimpia, who marries (and is then left by) a young man whom Marilina once loved, later co-opts Berto, her friend's former lover, without any thought to the emotional distress she may cause her. And finally, despite their long history together, Olimpia impulsively breaks off their friendship over an imagined slight, though as Marilina realizes, "Non le sarebbe mancata più di tanto" (166). In this text, relationships between women friends have minimal value; rather than opening up opportunities for shared female experiences, they serve to

¹⁰ Bernardi offers a succinct discussion on how Campo subverts the traditional practice of *autocoscienza* in this novel while at the same time paying homage to the mothers of feminist thought.

¹¹ One literary device both Campo and Covito share is their use of humour and irony. Both authors often deploy this narrative strategy to undermine conservative institutions (marriage, for example). While Campo's boisterous humour is perhaps more amusing, Covito's sly irony allows for piquant comments on the more ridiculous behaviours of her characters.

remind the protagonist of her passivity and insignificance.

Marilina's relationship with her mother also belies the traditional dynamic seen in many earlier feminist novels. In these texts, the often-vexed bond between daughter and mother was explored as a model for relationships among women in general. This bond was usually the central relationship of these novels, more important than other familial or sentimental ties. But in *La bruttina stagionata*, Marilina's mother, Ersilia, plays a minor role in her daughter's life, and their relationship does not serve as a potential source of support, wisdom, or self-discovery for the daughter. Ersilia is painted as a pathetic, even silly woman, devoting her life to the phony mysticism spouted by a well-intentioned but equally ridiculous friend. Although at the end of the text Marilina and Ersilia do reaffirm their familial bond, they are too different to forge a relationship grounded in real and significant understanding.

Bereft of a meaningful female presence in her life, Marilina is equally lacking in male companionship. But she recognizes that sexual pleasure is important to her, and like many protagonists of feminist novels of the earlier era, is not hesitant to see that pleasure fulfilled. In one hilarious scene, Marilina decides to satisfy her sexual needs by buying a vibrator. But upon entering the shop purveying such items, she is overwhelmed by the variety of models. Finally, she realizes she prefers "un cazzo che non assomigliasse tanto a un cazzo....Quello che vuole lei è invece un corpo astratto che si possa vestire con una varietà di desideri: ecco, una Barbie nuda" (98). Interestingly, Marilina wants to impose her own desires on the device, rather than accepting one of the ready-made shapes and sizes that answer to pre-conceived expectations. She finally overcomes her timidity and ignorance to buy a device. But when Marilina finally tries out her new purchase, it makes more noise than "un martello pneumatico assordante sul movimento della percussione," rendering it useless (102). Here we see an excellent example of how Covito uses humour to deflate, at least temporarily, Marilina's hopes for independence. Nothing this heroine does, the author seems to say, will come easily; a comment on how difficult it is even in the 1990s for women to claim their own sexuality.

As with this example, Marilina's sexual exploits are described in detail throughout the text, a connection both to the explicit scenes of many earlier feminist novels, whose authors were determined to explore all aspects of female experiences and to the later "pulp" fiction of the 1990s. But not all critics have read beyond these explicit accounts to evaluate their significance. Silvia Contarini, for example, believes *La bruttina stagionata* "non veicola nessun messaggio. Il pregio del libro sta proprio nell'aver saputo

evitare la trappola dello schematicismo ideologico e della riproposizione in chiave femminista di comportamenti maschili" (1995, 94).¹² Ada Neiger calls Marilina "un eroe femmina" in part because of her sexual gusto (255). But by conflating her sexual appetite to that of a man, these critics miss the connection this character has with earlier feminist protagonists. Learning to love oneself, in all possible ways, was an important milestone in the trajectory of female empowerment and self-discovery.

Marilina's developing sense of her own sexuality reveals a character, not only able to identify her needs, but also to find the means to satisfy them. She is keenly aware, however, that her less-than-desirable physical attributes have denied many opportunities for amorous affairs. But even the least attractive of women is afforded some adventures, she points out:

In una, o meglio, quasi due occasioni si era messa a convincersi che, con la quantità di perversioni del gusto e della psiche praticate dai maschi, doveva certamente rientrare nella logica delle combinazioni che qualcuno potesse innamorarsi di lei. Era stato un disastro (14).

Her earlier experiences with love (and sex) resulted in nothing but heartache and self-doubt, and Marilina harbours little hope that she will ever find a permanent, loving partner. But she remains open to trying new avenues for romantic encounters, and as the book begins, she is just embarking on an affair with Berto, a youth half her age whom she meets through the personal ads in a weekly newspaper. Neither one has any intention of falling in love; rather, as Berto declares primly in their first conversation, the purpose of their meetings is merely to "fare l'amore" (14). But the relationship quickly evolves into something more serious, with Marilina bestowing on the under-employed young man stereo equipment and motorcycle gear in an effort to keep his attention.¹³ Although she

¹² I would disagree with this statement, as I find in Covito's novel a strong message warning against such ideological traps. Nor do I feel her protagonist is taking up "comportamenti maschili;" rather, Marilina is discovering her own, decidedly female code of sexuality. We could read here another link between Covito and the later generation of women writers, who often created narratives in which "desire and pleasure are not imposed upon the [female] characters but are, in turn, activated by them" (Lucamante, 2001, 105). Certainly in *La bruttina stagionata*, Marilina is zealous in her search for sexual fulfillment.

¹³ In one of her final scenes with Berto, he is flabbergasted to learn that she has kept an account of every last *lira*—"sei milioni e ottocento"—she spent on him over the course of their relationship (144). Whether her bookkeeping was an effort to eventually seek restitution for these funds or an awareness of the unro-

learns after their affair that he was indeed in love with her, Berto treats her badly, sexually assaulting her when she refuses to let him move in with her and hitting her in another scene. His abuse of Marilina points to the inequity of their relationship: Despite her seniority and relative financial security, she is still victimized by virtue of being female.

This brutal behaviour finally galvanizes Marilina, who realizes that she has never refused a man anything: “Ne avesse voglia o non ne avesse affatto, lei si sentiva in obbligo di non lasciar fuggire quell’istante di grazia che l’uomo del momento le accordava: e se non fosse più tornato? pensava consciamente” (145). From that moment she becomes more assertive in her romantic/sexual relationships, even indulging in an explicit all-night encounter with a sympathetic Algerian youth she meets at a discotheque.¹⁴

Marilina is finally able to acknowledge her own self-worth and recognize that she does not need a partner to feel fulfilled, but this awareness comes only by learning from the disappointments of a third relationship. Significantly, this new relationship conflates Marilina’s professional work with her romantic aspirations, two aspects of her life that act as obstacles to any maturation. Often, these two aspects are presented as irreconcilable, as we see at the beginning of the text, when one lazy afternoon Marilina contemplates the possibility of masturbating. Her decision reveals much about her work ethic and what ultimately serves as a source of satisfaction.

No, sa che il pomeriggio poi le scivolerebbe via in un sudore ignavo, è molto meglio che si decida a prendere di petto questa tesi: suderà, sì, ma per organizzare una rete di senso permanente, non per sfibrarsi in una vertigine slabbrata che non perdurerà nella memoria quanto il piacere, brevissimo, che Marilina prova quando il suo lavoro è finito...: è un attimo che può esaltare a lungo.... È qualche cosa in cui dimenticarsi. (37)

Marilina is able to reconcile her creative endeavours with her roman-

antic nature of their liaison is unclear. But the alarming results of her tabulations do give Marilina the moral upper hand in a relationship that became increasingly exploitative.

¹⁴ Equally important in Covito’s emphasis on female sexuality is how she frames the issue within the larger issue of body image. Marilina may be a heroine whose physical appearance runs counter to traditional female protagonists, but that does not stop her from actively searching out sexual experiences. Perhaps her non-conventional appearance allows her to cast off the passive demeanour often expected of female protagonists, as Marilina turns the disadvantages of homeliness into an opportunity to ignore those expectations and conduct herself in a more assertive manner.

tic-sexual inclinations, when Giandomenico Accardi enters her life. Initially, Giandomenico appears to represent any traditional heroine's dream, for he is handsome, charming, and rich. He has hired Marilina to write his thesis, one that reads as both ludicrous and plausible to anyone familiar with academia: *Algida Musa. Rinfreschi e sorbetti nella poesia italiana dalle origini a Giacomo Leopardi*.¹⁵ But rather than the anonymous and inconsequential relationship Marilina has with most of her clients, she quickly becomes enamoured of him, although it seems clear to a more discerning observer that he is spoiled, lazy, and pretentious, with a penchant for street drugs. When his indulgent father offers to publish the thesis as a mass-marketed book, Giandomenico calls on Marilina to revise the text. Although she hopes this means a closer collaboration, one leading to a more romantic involvement, he leaves the work to her, his only contribution to the revised text a gift of a used computer to take the place of Marilina's out-dated typewriter.

The high point of this relationship occurs when Giandomenico invites Marilina and a male friend to his family's palazzo to celebrate the publishing of "their" book. She is disturbed to see that although she wrote and revised it, his name graces the cover. Even worse, Giandomenico's attempt to acknowledge all of her labor backfires, for on page four of the book, next to the copyright, is written "Per la ricerca iconografica i ringraziamenti dell'Autore vanno alla dott. Marilina La Bruna" (217). Marilina is mortified and hurt, not just because Giandomenico will receive all the credit for the book, but also by the misspelling of her name (it should be Labruna), an indication of how oblivious he is to her feelings and her hard work. But she hides her anger, and the evening, fuelled by expensive Champagne and other intoxicants, ends with Marilina, Giandomenico, and his friend in bed, engaging in a variety of sexual configurations.

By participating in this encounter, especially as it comes on the heels of a professional disappointment, Marilina appears to have sacrificed her sense of self to her romantic yearnings, just as she had with Berto, allowing herself to be used (and even abused). But the resolution of her relationship with Giandomenico reveals how much she has evolved over the course of the novel. After their evening of sexual congress, Giandomenico actively pursues Marilina, claiming to be desperately in love. But she recognizes the superficiality of their bond, and refuses to encourage his advances. Rather than remain in a loveless, if sexually satisfying, relation-

¹⁵ Covito's sly humour gently punctures the artistic inclinations of the overly-pretentious Giandomenico.

ship (again, as she had with Berto), Marilina turns her attention to her work. She tells Giandomenico pointedly that not only does she have a deadline to meet, but also “Lavorare *mi piace*,” indicating with this emphasis the satisfaction she receives from her writing (229). She is also reclaiming her creative agency, lost when she agreed to omit her name under the conventions of ghost writing. When the spurned lover offers to pay her himself, so that she doesn’t have to work for the thesis-writing agency, Marilina has had enough, realizing the proposal not only demeans her, it would take away one of the few aspects of her life that sustains and rewards her. Marilina’s final scene with Giandomenico underscores her new-found independence. Frustrated and enraged—and armed with a gun—Giandomenico threatens to shoot her if she continues to rebuff his propositions. When Marilina firmly rejects him, he does fire several shots, but fortunately he misses her completely and flees in humiliation. Giandomenico’s handling of the gun underscores his impotence, for by misfiring he misses as well any chance of salvaging his threatened masculinity.

This incident takes place outside the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, the magnificent Milanese archive where Marilina has gone to research her current thesis topic, Lucrezia Borgia, a woman who knew a thing or two about self-empowerment. Covito situates the end of her text at a shrine to the cerebral, a site that celebrates the heroine’s decision to place her vocation above her love life. Or, in a twist on those feminist novels that firmly rejected conventional literary resolutions rewarding well-behaved heroines with well-suited husbands, Covito allows Marilina to satisfy both her romantic inclinations and her professional aspirations. The author sets up this resolution by bringing back a minor character from early in the text: Silvio, an ex-lover of Olimpia, who works part-time at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana.¹⁶ Although Marilina, who asks him for directions to the “ricciolo di Lucrezia Borgia” on display, has never met Silvio, she recognizes him from Olimpia’s description. (242). They quickly find common ground in their professional interests. Silvio describes a new project he has embarked on: an editorial co-op, which would employ the services of various writers, researchers, and annotators. Marilina is immediately intrigued by the idea, seeing in it an escape from the precarious and anonymous work she does writing the-

¹⁶ To further emphasize the insignificance of female friendship in the this text, Marilina is allowed to take revenge on her ex-friend by taking up with her former lover. Although Marilina does not revel in this coincidence, surely Covito means to draw attention to how this tenet of feminist texts has been excluded from the novel.

ses for rich undergraduates.¹⁷ By putting an end to her ghost writing, Marilina claims her own identity, and will no longer remain “self-effacing and unseen” (Wood 2003, 165). As she and Silvio share ideas about the project, Marilina is overwhelmed by powerful new feelings stemming from both their mutual attraction and the exciting new professional prospects. But rather than immediately assuming that theirs will be an amorous association, Marilina resolves to remain open to whatever ensues, be it “[u]n’amicizia, il riconoscimento di un lavoro ben fatto a viso aperto, una passione che la travolgerà” (244). Even more important, for the first time she recognizes that she is deserving of a relationship with a man. The attraction between them “[n]on è un regalo della lotteria del caso: è stata lei, cambiando, a meritarselo” (244-245). Marilina has matured over the course of the novel, rejecting the “ruolo di madre sostituta” that she played with Berto (245), as well as that of the supplicating and misunderstood lover she acted out with Giandomenico. Instead, she will go her own way, establishing relationships on her own terms.

It seems appropriate, then, that although this scene hints at a budding passion between Marilina and Silvio, the final words of the text underline her independence. As Marilina waits outside the library for Silvio to finish his shift, Giandomenico arrives with his gun, demands that they reconcile, shoots at her when she refuses, and then drives off in his Range Rover. Marilina finds herself flat on the ground, stunned by the gunfire but completely uninjured. Silvio rushes to her aid, but she refuses to play the role of literary heroine in need of rescuing. Marilina has learned to avoid becoming entrapped in a narrative that restrains or dictates female behaviour. Indeed, she laughs off her awkward position on the pavement, telling Silvio that she isn’t “abituata a tacchi bassi,” a declaration that reclaims her dignity and her femininity (249).

But Covito does not leave it at that. The last sentence of the novel, “E, fingendo per amore di appoggiarsi alla mano di lui, Marilina è subito di nuovo in piedi da sola,” references the protagonist’s maturation and new-found sense of self (249). That “da sola” clinches it: Marilina will forever be her own person, not cowed by a demanding lover, nor intimidated by an inequitable professional situation.

¹⁷ Marilina also reveals a new-found business sense, still smarting, perhaps, from Giandomenico’s exploitation of her writing skills. “Una cooperativa vuol dire che si divide tutto in parti uguali? Ricavi e investimenti?” domanda Marilina, cauta” (243). Clearly she has learned to place more value on her own professional worth and thereby hopes to participate in a more equitable professional situation.

Like many earlier feminist novels, the narrative arc transcribes the gradual acquisition of the heroine's sense of identity. In the case of *La bruttina stagionata*, the protagonist arrives at this maturation through a deliberate investigation of different female archetypes. By the end of this process, Marilina learns that she must reject these ultimately one-dimensional and outdated models in order to achieve a more authentic sense of self. This exercise in rehearsing different socio-literary female roles takes on various forms, and allows Marilina to finally come to terms with her unfortunate physical appearance. When Giandomenico passes on to Marilina his computer, for example, a practice session with the word-processing functions turns into a vehicle for questioning her own identity and the proper narrative in which to explore it. She opens a blank page, types her name, and then stops, "incerta su che cosa potrà scrivere mai dentro questa seconda Marilina. Un curriculum? Un diario? Un romanzo? No, una fiaba" (139).

Marilina begins her fairy tale with the traditional protagonists: a beautiful princess in love with a handsome prince who is cursed with "un cuore di ghiaccio" (139). Frustrated that he does not return her love, the princess promises herself to her faithful bodyguard if he kills the prince and brings her his heart. The story clearly mirrors the situation Marilina finds herself in: in love with the oblivious Giandomenico while carrying on a loveless affair with the steadfast but uninspiring Berto. But after writing and then deleting a few more sentences in her tale, Marilina erases the entire narrative in disgust. As a woman unable to find her own prince, and in a precarious economic situation, Marilina cannot picture herself as a "principessa bellissima, alta, bruna, formosa," with a legion of courtiers and the power to control lives (139). Even more importantly, she refuses to confine herself within a narrative structure that traditionally relegates female characters to passive roles. Although Marilina attempts in her narrative to endow the heroine with some degree of autonomy, she cannot write her way out of a genre that rarely allows such originality and self-determination, especially on the part of the female protagonist.

After rejecting the part of princess, Marilina takes on that of *femme fatale*, although here, too, she finds herself utterly incapable or unwilling to inhabit this persona. This episode occurs at a gay discotheque, which she visits one evening, determined to add some spice to her sedate social life. Surrounded by throbbing music and lights and inspired by the writhing bodies of the dancers, she finds herself completely liberated. She has found herself in a space with no heterosexual expectations; roles are not traditional male or female. Marilina is suddenly filled with "un'approssimazio-

ne di felicità: in quella terra di chiunque, lei non era tenuta a piacere a nessuno” (167). Dancing wildly by herself, she can act out “impunemente i suoi fantasmi di primadonna interiore” (169). Indeed, when Karim, a young Algerian impressed by her uninhibited display on the dance floor introduces himself, she tells him her name is “Merilin,” an ironic allusion to Marilyn Monroe. By conflating her identity with that of the screen goddess, Marilina toys with expectations of female beauty. But even though this symbolic re-naming has given her the courage to join Karim in an evening of enthusiastic sex, on her way home from his apartment the following morning Marilina feels “insignificante come sempre” (192). Adopting the persona of a sexually liberated woman brought only fleeting physical satisfaction, rather than any lasting self-awareness and subjective formation. Covito implicitly critiques both socio-cultural and literary models of female appearance by creating a heroine who sees through those models and learns to favour a more authentic and realistic self-identity.

The final archetype that Marilina rejects comes at the end of the text, when she spurns Giandomenico’s offer of a more permanent relationship. The scene re-writes the final episodes of the opera *Carmen*, a move foreshadowed during the evening at his house, when they celebrated the publication of his thesis. Before tumbling into bed together, they watched the film version of *Carmen*. Like the heroine of the opera, Marilina refuses to engage in proper female behaviour; both women fiercely defend their right to love freely and openly. Although Marilina is fully cognizant that Carmen is killed at the end of the opera as punishment for her sexual transgressions, she cannot help flirting with that very resolution herself, a move that would fulfill both social and literary expectations. When Giandomenico, armed and theoretically dangerous, demands that she return to him, she is tempted to engage in “un gran finale da sogno di tutta una vita” (247). But, while Marilina is swept up by the passion of the moment, she recognizes the ending assumed by the long-established narrative.

[S]e invece lei ardisse recitare fino in fondo questo copione mitico che le viene così semplicemente offerto, se si lasciasse fiorire sulla tempia o sul seno un garofano di sangue, ecco, che all’improvviso sulle spalle il cappotto le si merletterebbe nella spuma impalpabile di una mantiglia, e la sua gonna si allungherebbe in una fiammeggiante cascata di volants: e sarebbe lei Carmen (248).

Although Marilina, “spinge uno sguardo tragico oltre la soglia del Walhalla delle donne fatali,” she adamantly rejects Giandomenico and, by extension, the role of doomed lover, punished for flouting social prescriptions (248).

In all three of these episodes, Marilina takes up a traditional female literary role only to discard it. She must ascertain how to live her own life without the social and literary pressures attached to conventional female archetypes.¹⁸ Only then can she pen her own narrative. That she can take on this task so consciously and creatively is due in part to her profession as writer. Marilina follows in an extended tradition of female-authored texts featuring writer-heroines. The protagonists serve as fictional extensions of their creators, but also represent the active and engaged process necessary for the carving out of one's own identity. In *La bruttina stagionata*, Marilina adopts and then rejects female roles found primarily in literary works. By doing so, she challenges long-standing assumptions about these roles and their integration into the culture at large.

The narrative arc describing Marilina's self-realization, along with a repositioning of the heroine as a more active agent in her life, emulate a key tenet of feminist-inspired texts. But this novel, along with others published in the 1990s that follow a similar trajectory, does not embrace fundamental practices of the women's movement. Perhaps this later generation of female authors, while evoking the struggles of self-identity that are evident in earlier texts, do not feel bound by their gender to promulgate a political and literary agenda that they see as now deeply engrained in Italian culture. Many of these more recent texts do not reject male-female relationships, for example, in order to empower their heroines, nor do they privilege the bonds women share with each other, be it with sisters, mothers, or daughters. Many of these authors embrace traditional endings for their heroines, resolutions that enclose the female protagonist within the centuries-old "happy-ever-after." *La bruttina stagionata*, then, incorporates the sensibilities of a feminist work without the accompaniment of an obvious apparatus of feminist practices. Marilina prefers to go forward with her life without the support of female friends or the guidance of her mother, formalized in such practices as *autocoscienza* and *affidamento*. Equally remarkable is the resolution penned for the novel's heroine. Although Marilina chooses at the end of the text to explore new and more challenging professional endeavours, she is not denied the promise of a relationship with Silvio.

Perhaps Covito's greatest innovation in *La bruttina stagionata* is paint-

¹⁸ Marilina is reminded of the perils of relying too closely on male companionship by an elderly woman to whom she impulsively confesses her need for a partner. "Le donne oneste vengono messe in mezzo da quelle che non sono oneste," the woman warns her. "Brutta storia, la vita. Ma bisogna lottare. Lotti, lei, lotti per sé, che dagli altri non dobbiamo aspettarci niente, mai" (194). It is a difficult lesson for the needy Marilina to accept, but she takes it to heart.

ing the portrait of an atypical heroine—a frumpy, middle-aged woman—and then allowing her to overcome limited means and opportunities to achieve her dreams. Marilina defies the literary tenet that rewards attractive heroines, and she does so without the help of friends, lovers, or family; indeed, she lacks as well the general social benevolence toward the young and the pretty. But Marilina’s mature age and homely appearance may ultimately liberate her, allowing her more freedom to ignore literary prescriptions that impose restrictive behaviours on traditional, and beautiful heroines.

But despite Marilina’s accomplishments at the end of the text, she is keenly aware of her condition and status as woman and its attendant expectations, an awareness that would not have been as readily attainable without a decades-long national debate about these issues. This perspective permeates the text, like the narrative arc describing the heroine’s self-realization, and makes up part of the link between the novels of the earlier generation and those published later. Covito is vigilant in her efforts to reveal the connection between gender and social status. Early in *La bruttina stagionata*, for example, after a brutal sexual encounter with Berto, Marilina muses: “Forse essere donna vuol dire questo senso di non essere nessuno” (84). And despite Marilina’s own growing self-confidence in matters both professional and romantic, she recognizes that her life will never be easy, precisely because of her gender. Significantly she makes this observation while ghost writing the thesis on Lucrezia Borgia, a woman whose motivations and actions have often been interpreted through the lens of misogynistic History. Marilina compares her own situation to the wealthy and powerful Renaissance woman, noting humorously but poignantly, “Se fosse nata lei nel 1480, [Marilina] è sicura che sarebbe stata esattamente come è oggi: intenta a sopravvivere da sola, senza potere, senza un nome e senza un soldo. E in più sarebbe stata anche senza computer” (232). Marilina understands the second-class status granted women historically, a status that will continue to shape her own life, despite her new-found confidence and the promise of more rewarding professional opportunities.

La bruttina stagionata can very well act as a bridge uniting these two currents of women’s writing in Italy, but it also warns its readers not to forget the heated struggle of the 1970s or assume that all of its goals have been met. Despite the impressive and far-reaching achievements of the feminist movement, evident in both literature and in the wider social *zeitgeist*, women—or at least female protagonists—are still discovering it difficult to find their own identity when confronted with out-dated expectations of female behaviour. Covito’s *La bruttina stagionata* offers a tempered consid-

eration of the women's movement. We see none of the optimism apparent in Maraini's works, for example, as Covito grapples with the mixed legacy of the feminist struggle to transform Italian society. While the atypical heroine of *La bruttina stagionata* succeeds in realizing her dreams of satisfying and productive work and the promise of an equally rewarding heterosexual relationship, the author paints a moving depiction of the obstacles still confronting women in post-feminist Italy.

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