Overall, Crohn Schmitt makes it clear that these scenarios are a treasure trove of social commentary on daily life in early modern Italy. *Befriending the Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala* combines an outstanding understanding of performance and all of its intricacies with solid scholarship, and is presented in a clear, concise, and precise manner. Crohn Schmitt enables her readers to immerse themselves in the world of Flaminio Scala, and understand how different it was from our present reality. Additionally, Crohn Schmitt demonstrates the extent to which the actors were reliant on a written text replete with socio-cultural, political, and moral references, and the extent to which the success of the scenario was dependent upon the audience's familiarity with said references. The results are a very well-written book grounded in history and close textual analysis, which enable readers to understand the author's redefinition of the Scala scenarios as "carefully crafted works of art that are rich in cultural history" (xii). This book offers a fresh perspective on not only the four specific scenarios of focus, but on the opus of Flaminio Scala, and, by extension, on the commedia dell'Arte. It highlights the wealth of cultural, historical, and political information embedded within these scenarios, and is, therefore, an asset to any scholar of Italian studies, Renaissance studies, theatre, performance, the commedia dell'arte, and many other areas of research and interest.

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Silvia Valisa. *Gender, Narrative and Dissonance in the Modern Italian Novel*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2014. Pp. 239. ISBN: 9781442649224. \$65.

When Manzoni compares the meanderings of his characters to a group of little guinea pigs that a "caro fanciullo" attempts to herd together in vain (Chap XI *I promessi sposi*), he offers us an analogy with the narrator who must gather his characters into a cohesive story. His words, however, leave a tacit understanding that sometimes the characters resist and rebel. Their "selfhood" is not under the complete control of the narrator. The reader, on the other hand, can discern the gaps and find in this conundrum an enhanced perspective on the characters.

In her book, Silvia Valisa has undertaken just such an investigation. She chooses Manzoni, in fact, to begin this study of what she considers problematic characters, a series of seven headed by Manzoni's nun, Gertrude. Then she proceeds chronologically through Italian literary history, with focus on characters found in the work of Neera, Marchesa Colombi, Paola Masino and Elsa Morante: six female personages and one male. For each study Valisa analyzes how the characters represent behaviour dissonant with ideological expectations of their time, through an epistemological realization that encompasses first and foremost their gender. Valisa employs an impressive number of theorists to support her views, from Althusser to Žižek. She demonstrates a remarkable talent for reading into and beyond a character to probe at what constitutes the epistemological "aha moment," the point of epiphany when the character acquires a disconcerting sense of self as dissonant with society.

The complex layering of the Monaca di Monza, first as biographical character, later as Gertrude in *Fermo e Lucia*, and still later as Gertrude in *I promessi sposi*, allows Valisa to explicate her critical perspective in a convincing manner. Gertrude struggles as a character in constant ambivalence between the masculine and feminine, between how she exercises her awareness of how she must act to succeed socially and how she often acts against her gender expectations. Valisa, following Barbara Spackman, posits "the sexualization of knowledge," pointing out that in this problematic ambivalence between feminine and masculine, in her knowledge that she is maneuvering between the two, Gertrude recognizes in detached irony how she is subject rather than merely object in her story (42–43). She is doing the narrating rather than solely being narrated.

Neera allows the protagonists of *Teresa* (1886), *Lydia* (1887) and *L'Indomani* (1888) the same epistemological realizations that they are subjects, bound by systems of discourse defined often by gender and consequently inscribed within power relations. (59) In these novels, it is the struggle between lack of knowledge (seen as feminine) and acquired knowledge (seen as masculine) that affects the female characters. It mobilizes them once they have entered into the realm of knowing, allowing them the seemingly contradictory status of woman and knower which gives them the power over socially sanctioned behavior. In this way, they rid themselves of "the veil of mystifications, of romantic and social narratives that curtail their ability to willfully inhabit their stories" (77). This is particularly evident in Marchesa Colombi's *In risaia*, where, as Valisa points out, the protagonist, Nanna Lavatelli, an outcast in so many senses, acts upon the narrative, and upon its

Christian and Christmas framing, to effect a happy ending without undermining her “frustrated desire” (104). If there is compromise in Nanna Lavatelli’s narrated life, it is with her awareness and permission, and not because of her resigned acceptance of her social role.

Paola Masino’s novel *Nascita e morte della massaia* (1945) offers a postwar reversal of conventions of the Bildungsroman involving both a character of dissonance and the narrator who cannot limit or contain such an attitude, despite enclosing the protagonist in a space of comfort, emblematically a coffin. The protagonist wills herself out, eventually. She wants to know her gendered self, her body, beyond the skimpy education her immediate gender-model (her mother), has given her. While she performs her gendered self following prescribed rules, she remains completely aware that she is, in fact, performing. The dissonance and perhaps even disapproval of the narrator is obvious in the trope of continuing the story beyond the protagonist’s death, a defiant act that forbids the protagonist from continuing her own performance but that forces her into a spectral manifestation of gendered compliance. Night after night, she emblematically cleans and polishes the spaces she now inhabits in the family mausoleum. Valisa’s closing commentary to this chapter is particularly noteworthy, as she compares the novel with Masino’s own difficulties in having her story published during the years of Fascist censorship, which restricted how women should be represented.

Finally, in the closing chapter, the focus of Valisa’s study is a male character, the protagonist of Elsa Morante’s *Aracoeli* (1982) which Valisa considers “a parodic text denying the epistemological possibilities of literature” (146). Her study here is particularly detailed and complex, not only because the gendered dissonances come from the perspective of a reversed male gendered role, highly problematic and difficult in a literary tradition where the default (and therefore, more acceptable narrated gender) is male. The protagonist, Manuele, is an outsider by language, by sexual orientation and in the fact that his epistemological quest takes place outside of Italy. Distanced from the status quo in so many ways, Manuele represents, for Valisa, the impossibility of fitting into a master narrative (149). His epiphany comes with his recognition that there is no “other” masculinity; while there may be inter-gender negotiations, this does not hold true for intra-genderedness.

This book is not an easy read; it requires intelligent attention and asks us to negotiate our readerly expertise through highly nuanced observations. Nevertheless, enriched with excellent and interesting notes, Valisa’s pages offer

thought provoking material for discussion and debate on how characters perform selfhood within the confines of fiction, confines that first and foremost restrict them in terms of gender.

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Natasha V. Chang. *The Crisis-Woman. Body Politics and the Modern Woman in Fascist Italy*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2015. Pp. 166. ISBN: 9781442649675. \$50.

This study sets up for itself a formidable challenge that the author meets through a multi-faceted approach: historical, literary, semiotic, feminist. The figure of the *crisis-woman* in various media of the early years of fascist Italy, is without doubt a narrow one, as Chang openly admits; however, the complementarity of the various perspectives she chooses, allows Chang to argue convincingly for the importance of this topic as an independent area of study, meriting more than a cursory consideration.

The volume is composed of four main chapters supported by a comprehensive introduction and a brief conclusion. Who was this *donna crisi*, and why did she give rise to so much political, cultural and social angst in Mussolini's Italy? As Chang elucidates, the term *donna crisi* was used extensively, at least into the mid-1930s, to describe a subset of the modern Italian woman of the bourgeoisie; the *donna crisi* served the fascist ideology as a representative of what an Italian woman should not be: overly thin and consequently sexually unattractive, unhealthy, non-maternal. The *donna crisi* became objectified as a source of derision and satire. The term stood in contrast to the *donna nuova* or *nuova italiana* who was modern, elegant, confident and who accepted (at least in magazines and advertisements) the new cultural policies that the Italian fascist sociopolitics championed. (13) Both *donna nuova* and *donna crisi* existed contemporaneously, arising out of but also separated from the more widely understood crisis of the time, the economic one, that affected Italy in the wake of the Great Depression.

Chang's research is noteworthy. She begins by describing the role of mainstream Italian women's magazines in illustrating and shaping the female look of the 1920s in Italy, with particular emphasis on the refined and cosmopolitan woman,