these plays communicate to each other their personal histories, which include all kind of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of men, and become friends on the strength of this shared experience. These friendships might seem to indicate the possibility of a lesbian relationship, but Ginzburg does not accept this as a real possibility and shows us women who cannot form lasting relationships between them. In both plays the main character is a woman, who prefers the company of women, yet does not give up her dependency from men. Ginzburg’s support of women’s cause on the issues of divorce and abortion finds a voice in her plays, but she takes a position of neutrality between the “straight” and the “queer” camp, thereby leaving free play to the imagination of the viewer.

In conclusion, Anderlini-D’Onofrio has not only developed a valid theory of feminist drama, but has also written a very rich and complex study of twentieth century female playwrights, many of whom, like Ginzburg, have not received the attention they deserve.


A collection of essays on subjects as diverse as black madonnas, Giorgio Armani, lady detectives and Italian feminist philosophers, this volume’s overarching theme is the valorisation of a non-essentialist notion of femininity which, while fully recognizing the primacy of the body, is grounded in practices and not in biology. If patriarchy has always constructed models of femininity functional to its own survival, Italian women have always resisted these calls to submission and continue to do so, in creative, highly effective and culturally-specific ways which recast femininity as a richly-textured and subtly-nuanced way of being, no longer at the opposite pole of institutionalized feminism, but intertwined with it in a mutually-enriching symbiotic relationship.

The first essay, Lucia Chivola Birnbaum’s “White and Black Madonnas” discusses black madonnas, (pagan woman deities) as possible pre-Christian sources of feminist protest. As the embodiment of “women’s perennial resistance to the subordinate role of woman in the catholic church and other patriarchal institutions” (8), they become the “shadow” of and alternative to the passive, white madonnas of Catholicism. While I found the historical, documentary part of this essay very interesting, the part connecting present-day practices to this heritage seemed contrived and hence less convincing: “For Livia Turco, major leader of the PDS, communism in
a postmodern age means transformation, with recognition of the value of each of the seasons of life” (11).

In “Unseduced Mothers” Robin Pickering-Iazzi challenges the notion that official Fascist images of womanhood accurately represent the way women experienced themselves during this period. She argues persuasively that the roles women were called upon to fill did not in fact prevent them from elaborating strategies and sites of resistance, such as the Terza pagina, where they explored their own subjectivity between the lines of the official rhetoric, challenging official truths and expressing officially-banned desires. Pickering also suggests that official Fascist images of womanhood were expressions of male anxiety about the gradual blurring of gender roles brought to a head by WW1, rather than an accurate depiction of the condition of women under Fascism.

Grazia Parati’s “The Transparent Woman” is a fascinating essay which examines the ways in which Futurist women resisted male Futurist constructions of femininity by attempting to establish a dialogue with them within the context of Futurist writing. The “transparent woman” is the woman of Futurist male fantasy, completely known and completely mastered, while women Futurists deliberately problematize and try to restore some “opacity” to the figure of woman. Though they occasionally do fall prey to masculine discourses, they also succeed in subverting them.

Maria Marotti, in “Filial Discourses” studies woman’s autobiographical texts (Aleramo, Manzini, Ginzburg, Cialente, Ramondino) as liminal genres, less strictly bound by the autobiographical pact than their male counterparts and hence closer to fiction. She reads these texts from the point of view of their relation to matrilineage and patrilineage, and finds a complex interweaving of shifting identifications which reveal that both positions have liberatory and oppressive potential for women. Moreover, whether or not they are overtly feminist, what these texts share is a resistance to patriarchal values and definitions of femininity.

Giovanna Miceli-Jeffries, in “Caring and Nurturing in Italian Women’s Theory and Fiction,” reads the fictional works of Clara Sereni (Casalinghitudine and Manicomio primaveri) as an example of the positive re-appropriation of the caring and nurturing function in women’s lives. As if aware of the limitations of political activism and of an outwardly-turned gaze, Sereni, in Jeffries’ reading, has decided that only within her own sphere of domesticity can woman find a measure of dignity and serenity that cannot be taken away from her. It is as if by cultivating her own garden - cooking, taking care of children, homemaking, and nurturing herself as well as others - but in a culturally self-conscious rather than “natural” manner, she can gain a sense of control and self-esteem in a world which continues, often, to deny it to her. I had a lot of trouble with this essay, partly because of its perpetuation of the stereotype of the caring and nurturing woman when there are many women who in fact do not fit this image, and partly because of its valorizing of a “feminine” activity as a surrogate for political action. Perhaps it is true, as Sereni says, that “everything has already been said, everything has already been written,” but has everything been done?
Another essay I had trouble with, but for totally different reasons, is Carol Lazzaro-Weis’ “Cherchez la femme,” a study of the feminist appropriation of the detective story (the giallo) by Italian women writers. The essay engages with numerous theorists and critics - Hendler Vendler, Umberto Eco, Maria Rosa Cutrufelli are just three - but fails to make a single unifying point or discernible argument out of the many interesting issues it raises about the genre’s appeal to women writers and the possibilities it forecloses or creates in feminist terms.

I liked Maurizio Viano’s “Feminism in High Culture, Femininity in Popular Culture,” because of its irreverent tone and yet serious appraisal of the apparent involution of feminist consciousness in Italy in the Nineties. The essay attempts to evaluate, from different points of view, the “return to femininity” in popular culture’s images of women. Viano emphasizes the subversive potential of a provocative, stylized femininity adopted in a self-conscious rather than reactive “popular” way, particularly in view of the reactionary neutrality which pervades the pensiero debole school of thought, whose major exponents, while appearing to recognize the plurality of voices which makes it impossible to construct “strong truths,” continue to speak as if without a body: “For all its vulgarity, popular culture does not forget the body, does not give in to the temptation of the neuter. Whereas Eco and Vattimo roam in the celestial spheres like sexless angels in search of God’s grave, the feminine fix in popular culture presupposes an awareness of the body and sexual difference as a major divide” (143-44).

Beverly Allen’s “The Novel. The Body, and Giorgio Armani,” is a meditation on what happens to “national identity” in a post-modern world (subtitle). How to read the emergence in 1975 of Armani’s woman in padded shoulders, who camouflages her femininity by embracing the 1930’s male silhouette? If read in a transnational context it, seems to point to the “tantalizing androgyyny of that era in Hollywood” (168). When restored to its national context, however, it takes on a totally different valence. Against the backdrop of the political unrest of the Seventies in Italy, marked by various acts of extremist right and left-wing terrorism culminating in the kidnapping and assassination of Aldo Moro, the Armani woman becomes a gesture toward the sort of order and “strong government” symbolized in segments of the popular imagination by the ventennio nero. Allen’s theoretical discussion of the fate of national identity in the postmodern world is far more thought-provoking than what she has to say about Armani, which seems almost an add-on (perhaps to make the piece fit into this volume) and in relation to which the theoretical part seems almost a case of “overkill.”

“Fashion as a Text,” the subject of Eugenia Paulicelli’s essay, reads fashion as an example of a constantly mobile text, which, in a “society of spectacle and information” reflects the rapidly shifting identities of the contemporary cultural landscape: “In such a reality it is almost impossible to associate a particular look with a definite political orientation, as one could do in the 1960’s and 1970’s” (178).

Aine O’Healey’s “Filming Feminine Autobiography” analyzes Marco Ferreri’s
Storia di Piera (1982) as a text which bears the traces of its collaborative genesis: directed by the controversial Ferreri, written by him as well as by Dacia Maraini and the actress Piera Degli Esposti, it bears the earmarks of a male re-telling of the story but also, in its gaps and interstices, of the contradictions that had to be suppressed to make that particular re-telling possible.

The relations between Italian and North American feminism are examined in the collection’s last two essays. Serena Anderlini-D’Onofrio’s “I Don’t Know What You Mean by ‘Italian Feminist Thought.’ Is Anything Like That Possible?” discusses some of the difficulties inherent in attempting to translate Italian feminist thought for presentation to an American audience. These difficulties derive from the vastly different socio-political conditions which spawned Italian and American feminism, as well as from American stereotypes of Italian culture which invariably superimpose themselves on any “understanding” of Italian phenomena.

Renate Holub’s “Between the United States and Italy” also addresses Italian feminism, in particular the Diotima group’s practice of affidavitamento as a form of Social-symbolic practice intended to make it possible to circumvent the impasse created in the process of woman’s acculturation to the feminine, which by definition simultaneously blocks her access to the Symbolic order. This essay, too, grounds this philosophy in the time and place which produced it, thus explaining how Diotima came to confront an issue which American feminism all too often elides, that of power relations among women.

In all, this is a very stimulating and informative collection of essays, useful both for the Italianists and for the non-Italianists wishing to acquaint themselves with the cultural specifics of Italian feminism and feminist scholarship. Its theme, that of the “third way” As Italian feminism’s specific contribution to a feminist practice which defines itself from within and manages to overcome the dichotomy between femininity and feminism, is more clearly articulated in some essays than others, but generally works surprisingly well and does not seem at all contrived or superimposed. Each essay is accompanied by a bibliography which provides useful and copious markers for those wishing to venture further into this very rich and variegated terrain.

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By suggesting that a critical re-appraisal of Italian American writing be carried out from a postmodern perspective, Anthony Julian Tamburri’s A Semiotic of Ethnicity