



# Women and Gender in Post-Unification Italy

Between Private and Public Spheres

**Katharine Mitchell and  
Helena Sanson (eds)**

**PETER LANG**

## VOL. 16 ITALIAN MODERNITIES

'[...] invaluable for scholars and students of Italian and European culture and for all interested in the history of women and gender.'

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'A very welcome first collective study in English on women, culture and gender in the Ottocento, offering innovative insights on the interconnected worlds of the private and public spheres.'

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In nineteenth-century Italy, a woman's place was considered to be in the domestic sphere, devoted to family life. But during the Risorgimento and the years following Unification, economic, political and social changes enabled women progressively to engage in pursuits that had previously been the exclusive domain of men. This book traces some of the steps of this shift in cultural perception. Covering the period from the Unification of Italy in 1861 to the First World War, the volume brings together new perspectives on women, culture and gender in ten original interdisciplinary chapters that explore a variety of subjects, including motherhood and spinsterhood, women's relationship with the Italian language, emigration and *brigantaggio*, patriotism and travel writing, acting and theatre management, film-making, and political ideas and female solidarity.

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VOL. 16

Edited by

Pierpaolo Antonello and Robert Gordon,  
University of Cambridge



PETER LANG

Oxford · Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · Frankfurt am Main · New York · Wien

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## Introduction

Amate, rispettate la donna. [...] Cancellate dalla vostra mente ogni idea di superiorità: non ne avete alcuna. Un lungo pregiudizio ha creato, con una educazione disuguale e una perenne oppressione di leggi, quell'*apparente* inferiorità intellettuale dalla quale oggi argomentano per mantenere l'oppressione. Ma la storia delle oppressioni, non v'insegna che chi opprime s'appoggia sempre sopra un fatto creato da lui? [...] Come due rami che movono distinti da uno stesso tronco, l'uomo e la donna movono, varietà, da una base comune, che è l'*umanità*. Non esiste disuguaglianza fra l'uno e l'altra; ma come spesso accade fra due uomini, diversità di tendenze, di vocazioni speciali. Son due note d'*un* accordo musicale disuguali o di natura diversa? La donna e l'uomo sono le due note senza le quali l'accordo *umano* non è possibile. [...] Abbiate dunque la Donna siccome compagna e partecipe, non solamente delle vostre gioie e dei vostri dolori, ma delle vostre aspirazioni, dei vostri pensieri, dei vostri studi, e dei vostri tentativi di miglioramento sociale. Abbiate la eguale nella vostra vita civile e politica.<sup>1</sup>

The nineteenth century in Italy, with its marked political and social changes, is a fascinating and fertile field of investigation for women and their histories. Yet no collective study of this topic has hitherto been published in the Anglophone academic world.<sup>2</sup> This volume intends to take a first

- 1 G. Mazzini, *Doveri dell'uomo* [1860] (Rome: Tipografia Grafica Editrice Romana, 1972), 73–4.
- 2 The volume *Women and Italy: Essays on Gender, Culture and History*, ed. Z. Barański and S.W. Vinall (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1991), contains studies on women in Italian culture from the middle ages to the present. Specifically on sexuality and gender, covering the period that extends from the Unification to the Second

important step towards filling this gap in scholarly production, by bringing together new perspectives on women, culture and gender in the Ottocento in ten varied but intersecting original chapters.<sup>3</sup> The period with which the chapters are primarily concerned begins with the proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861 and ends with Italy's entry into World War I, though several of the essays inevitably consider the years which precede and supersede this timeframe, with some figures and themes acting as *traits d'union* with earlier and later periods.

At the time of Unification, the doctrine of separate spheres between the genders continued to dominate Italian society:<sup>4</sup> women's place was considered to be in the private, domestic sphere, that is, in the home, devoting themselves to family life. Men's place was outside the home, in the public sphere, where they were involved in the economic world, in politics, in

World War, see P. Willson (ed.), *Gender, Family and Sexuality: The Private Sphere in Italy, 1860–1945* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). Recent years have seen the emergence of edited volumes on women in sixteenth- and eighteenth-century Italy, among them L. Panizza (ed.), *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society* (Oxford: Legenda, 2000) and P. Findlen, W. Wassying Roworth and C.M. Sama (eds), *Italy's Eighteenth Century: Gender and Culture in the Age of the Grand Tour* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), both of which offer contributions on a variety of topics relevant to women and gender. For a recent collective volume on late nineteenth-century Italy, focusing specifically on print culture, see A. Hallamore Caesar, G. Romani and J. Burns (eds), *The Printed Media in Fin-de-Siècle Italy: Publishers, Writers, and Readers* (London: MHRA and Maney, 2011).

3 The idea for the volume grew out of the March 2009 symposium *Women in Ottocento Italy: New Perspectives* (Clare College, Cambridge, organized by the editors).

4 On the notion and the metaphor of the 'separate spheres' in women's history, see, for instance, L.K. Kerber, 'Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History', *The Journal of American History* 75 (1) (1988), 9–39; A. Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History', *The Historical Journal* 36 (2) (1993), 383–414; J. Rendall, 'Women and the Public Sphere', *Gender & History* 11 (3) (1999), 475–88. On Jürgen Habermas's notion of the 'public sphere' and feminist criticisms of his social theory as gender-blind and, in many respects, androcentric, see J. Meehan (ed.), *Feminists Read Habermas: Gendering the Subject of Discourse* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), in particular those by N. Fraser (21–56), J.L. Cohen (57–90) and J.B. Landes (91–116).

public cultural and social activities. In practice, of course, the division between these two ‘realms’ of life and action is not so clear cut: as Joan Kelly writes, not only what constitutes ‘domestic’ and ‘public’ varies from culture to culture, but the lines of demarcation between the two realms can be differently drawn. The greater the differentiation between the private and the public, the more restricted and limited women’s activities are, but where familial activities and public, social and cultural ones fairly merge, the status of women can be seen as comparable (or even superior) to that of men.<sup>5</sup> In Ottocento Italy, economic and political changes saw the demarcation between the spheres shift markedly, and women engaged in many pursuits that had previously been the exclusive domain of men. The Risorgimento process played an important role in thrusting women into the public sphere as never before. Some women were exposed to new ideas in their own politicized families, some fought on the barricades or went to prison, and others had to flee into exile.<sup>6</sup> In the years after Unification, the most progressive thinkers were able to see how this received distinction between a private ‘female’ sphere and a public ‘male’ sphere needed re-assessment. Aristide Gabelli wrote, for instance, in his 1870 essay on ‘L’Italia e l’istruzione femminile’ that despite women and men seemingly

- 5 J. Kelly, *Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 10–11.
- 6 There has been a burgeoning literature on women’s participation in the Risorgimento, in particular on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Italy’s Unification in 2011. See, for instance, B. Bertolo, *Donne del Risorgimento: le eroine invisibili dell’Unità d’Italia* (Turin: Ananke, 2011); M. Cepeda Fuentes, *Sorelle d’Italia. Le donne che hanno fatto il Risorgimento* (Turin: BluEdizioni, 2011); M. D’Amelia (ed.), *Oh, dolce patria: l’Unità d’Italia scritta dalle donne* (Rome: Biblink, 2011); E. Doni et al., *Donne del Risorgimento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011); I. Fabbri and P. Zani, *Anita e le altre: amore e politica ai tempi del Risorgimento* (Bologna: La Linea, 2011); G. Fazzini, *Cortigiane ed eroine: storia di un altro Risorgimento* (Rome: Edup, 2011); G.B. Guerri, *Il bosco nel cuore: lotte e amori delle brigantesse che difesero il Sud* (Milan: Mondadori, 2011); M.T. Mori, *Figlie d’Italia: poetesse patriote nel Risorgimento (1821–1861)* (Rome: Carocci, 2011); *Protagoniste dimenticate: le donne nel Risorgimento piemontese* (Turin: D. Piazza, 2011).

inhabiting two separate ‘mondi’, these were in fact strictly interconnected and mutually influential:

Certamente, per chi si ferma alle apparenze, tutto a questo mondo è fatto dagli uomini. La diplomazia e le leggi, come le armi, le statue, i quadri, i libri, i giornali, le invenzioni scientifiche, le imprese industriali, i viaggi, i commerci, tutto questo rimescolio vorticoso che chiamasi vita civile, esce dai maschi, mentre le donne hanno l'aria di starsene tranquille e indifferenti in disparte. Al vedere si direbbe che donne e uomini formino in certa maniera due società separate, due interi mondi che vanno per vie diverse, intento ciascuno a seguire la sua. Ma per chi guarda più addentro, la donna ha nella vita civile un potere profondo, celato e tanto più forte, quanto appunto si rivela meno. Le due società sono congiunte fra loro da legami così intimi e così forti, che l'una influisce continuamente sull'altra [...]. Fatta la debita parte ai diversi uffici assegnati ai due sessi dalla natura, il valore dell'uno corrisponde a quello dell'altro, poichè inevitabilmente a vicenda si modificano e tendono a pareggiarsi.<sup>7</sup>

In the second half of the century, women's contributions to the nation's cultural, economic and social progress – as critical producers and consumers of culture – was taking place concomitantly alongside the simultaneous rise of the nascent movement for female emancipation. From a cultural, artistic and didactic standpoint, their creative participation in the literary and visual culture of the time helped in no small measure to facilitate ordinary women to take steps to move beyond their highly circumscribed experiences of everyday life.

This volume aims to trace some of these steps. The chapters are organized thematically into four parts. Taking into account recent research on motherhood and maternity, the first part re-examines women's prescribed roles as mothers and educators in light of the more public and civic role they were expected to carry out in the new Italy. Ursula Fanning addresses how women writers reacted to prescriptions and proscriptions around motherhood and maternity in Italy compared with their English and French counterparts. In the Italian case, the importance of motherhood as a topic, and of giving a voice to the mother, is revealed thereby prefiguring Sara

7 A. Gabelli, 'L'Italia e l'istruzione femminile', *Nuova Antologia* 15 (1870), 145–67 (145–6).

Ruddick's late twentieth-century theorization of a kind of 'maternal thinking' in their narratives. Helena Sanson brings together motherhood and language, in the light of the increasing importance of mothers as educators of their children in the new political context of Italy. In the linguistically fragmented peninsula, Unification brought a sense of urgency to the need for a common spoken medium, as only a small minority of the population was able to use Italian competently. If a patriotically imbued rhetoric invested mothers with the responsibility to teach their offspring the 'national' language, in practice the majority of women were dialect speakers and could not fulfil this task. Yet, as Sanson shows by supporting her views with a rich selection of writings by male and female contemporary educationalists, the rising importance of the figure of the 'madre educatrice' had far-reaching implications. The role mothers had been assigned as educators meant they could make a fundamental leap in terms of their sphere of influence: not only were the outcomes of their care for and dedication to children felt to extend beyond the sphere of family life to reach society as a whole and the State, but women were now also finally granted a privileged relationship with that very language which for so long had been largely out of their reach.

Part 2 of the volume brings the focus on women who, out of either necessity or choice, experienced life at the margins, away from the models of domesticity and maternity. What happened, for instance, when motherhood was denied, when marriage was not an option? Lucy Hosker explores the figure of the 'zitella' in the works of Neera and Matilde Serao, two writers who, despite considering themselves as anti-feminist, collected with sensitivity in their fictional works an endless gallery of women from all walks of life, including the figure of the unmarried woman. By means of a close reading of a selection of short stories that feature 'zitelle' among their characters, Hosker examines how these women, in theory enjoying a greater capacity to act more independently than other women (not being bound, for instance, by the shackles of the 'autorizzazione maritale'), but in practice being socially isolated by their inability to fulfil their mission of motherhood, are saved from oblivion and exclusion by Neera and Serao through a broader interpretation of motherhood itself. As part of her ongoing study into the representation by Italian male and female authors

on the question of emigration between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, Anna Laura Lepschy's chapter offers us the perspective of two female writers on the subject, Carolina Invernizio and Maria Messina. This is a view *from* the margins *on* the margins. Invernizio, with her prolific production, might have been extremely popular among her (mostly female) readers, but was dismissed by contemporary male critics as a second-rank author. The Sicilian Maria Messina, a fine and sensitive writer in the *verismo* vein, has been attracting renewed critical attention and readership interest after suffering unjust neglect. Invernizio and Messina dealt with a phenomenon in their narrative that saw, between 1876 and 1915, 14,027,000 people from across the peninsula leave their home in search of work and new possibilities, and among these 7,625,000 crossed the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>8</sup> In this, marginality also comes from the fact that '[l]'emigrazione è stata a lungo descritta come un'esperienza maschile; nelle ricostruzioni storiche le donne restano ancora in gran parte sullo sfondo, presenze silenziose e passive.'<sup>9</sup> Although with different and even contrasting outlooks on the subject, Invernizio and Messina are interested in the perspectives (in particular the female perspective) of both those who lived in person the hardships of life abroad and of those who stayed behind and saw their beloved ones leave. Quite far removed from the ideal contemporary model of mother and wife are the *brigantesse*, the female outlaws, who are the subject of Marjan Schwegman's chapter in the context of the much debated 'questione meridionale' and 'brigantaggio'. Living 'alla macchia', either out of their own will or because they had been kidnapped or forced to follow their husbands or male relatives, in their association with death, revolt and violence, women bandits become *ante litteram* examples of feminist claims for autonomy. Francamaria Trapani, in one of the first studies to focus in detail on the *brigantesse*, interpreted their experience as 'una prima ribellione femminista allo stato di soggezione

8 M. Sanfilippo, 'Tipologia dell'emigrazione di massa', in *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*, vol. I. *Partenze*, ed. P. Bevilacqua, A. De Clementi and E. Franzina (Rome: Donzelli, 2001), 77–94 (79).

9 B. Bianchi, 'Lavoro ed emigrazione femminile (1890–1915)', in *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*, 257–74 (257).

atavico e tradizionale della donna nelle province meridionali d'Italia, una sorta di suffragismo del subconscio'.<sup>10</sup>

Part 3, 'Writing and Performing in the Spotlight,' looks at the exceptional *personae* and audience reception of women who were credited for their contribution as political activists and writers and for their talents as well-known filmmakers and performers. Sharon Wood writes on the Milanese Princess Cristina di Belgiojoso, who, in 1832 at the age of twenty-four, held in Paris one of the most popular political and cultural salons where many Italian patriots in exile would gather. An activist, writer and traveller, and 'una delle figure femminili più importanti dell'Ottocento italiano per intelligenza, cultura, patriottismo e anche bellezza,' Belgiojoso 'lottò e si sacrificò per rendere l'Italia un paese migliore dove la dignità delle donne fosse una realtà'.<sup>11</sup> Belgiojoso provides a link between the Risorgimento and Italian feminism in the second half of the century. Wood focuses in particular on the five years Belgiojoso spent in Turkey as the first Western woman to live in the Middle East without a man beside her, observing and writing on her experience as a sociologist and anthropologist and denouncing the condition of Turkish women. Julie Dashwood examines the early life and career up to the Paris tour of the actress-manager Adelaide Ristori and looks at some of the major social, economic, personal and professional circumstances that enabled her to form her own theatre company, the Reale Sarda, and become an international star. Drawing on Ristori's own memoirs, on recent research, and on increasing interest in her career and achievements, Dashwood shows how Ristori was able to flourish in the male preserve of theatre business to become, not only one of the first fully international actresses of the Ottocento, but also a highly successful image-maker and entrepreneur. Monica Dall'Asta asks what possibilities early cinema offered to women who wished to extend their experience beyond the domestic sphere. Though traditional film historiography has paid attention almost exclusively to those women who gained

10 F.M. Trapani, *Le brigantesse* (Rome: Canesi, 1968), 4.

11 M. Cepeda Fuentes, *Sorelle d'Italia: le donne che hanno fatto il Risorgimento* (Turin: BluEdizioni, 2011), 9.

wide recognition as actresses, recent research has revealed that a significant number of women, such as Matilde Serao and Elvira Notari, took an active role in film direction, production, screenwriting and distribution.

The final section, 'New Approaches to the Study of Women and Gender', questions the usefulness of critical enquiries of women as a separate category at a time when fertile ground is being uncovered in studies on masculinities and sexualities. It argues for a gender-inclusive approach to re-assessing women's cultural, political, social and economic contributions to nation-building. Following the important recent work of Alberto Banti, Lucy Riall and Silvana Patriarca,<sup>12</sup> the chapters in this section underscore the need for a cultural studies approach to thinking on Italy's nineteenth century. Katharine Mitchell reassesses women's condition in late nineteenth-century Italy, extending and updating Victoria De Grazia's account on the legacy of Liberalism from over twenty years ago.<sup>13</sup> Drawing on her own revised account, and through a reading of letters, conduct manuals, fiction and essays written by women, Mitchell argues that the relatively small number of women entering the public sphere were bound by a sense of female solidarity which cut across class boundaries, political views, regional differences and ideas on the 'questione femminile'. Ann Hallamore Caesar warns against the perils of treating women writers in isolation, arguing that the time has come to integrate their writings into the literary landscape: it is only by bringing together female and male-authored texts – argues Hallamore Caesar – that we can really assess the presence and contribution of the anti-novel to the development of nineteenth-century fiction in Italy, and at the same time put to rest the persistent assumption that the history of fictional narrative in Italy is largely a male preserve.

The interdisciplinary approach of these chapters, with their attention to the cultural and social context of the time, aims to offer new and

12 See A.M. Banti and P. Ginsborg, 'Per una nuova storia del Risorgimento', in *Storia d'Italia, Annali 22. Il Risorgimento* (Turin: Einaudi, 2007), xxiii–xli; L. Riall and S. Patriarca (eds), *The Risorgimento Revisited: Nationalism and Culture in Nineteenth-Century Italy* (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

13 V. De Grazia, 'The Legacy of Liberalism', in ead., *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 18–40.

engaging perspectives on women's lives in a period of Italian history that has attracted much scholarly attention, but still offers a wealth of lesser-known or unexplored territories that await further investigation from the specific point of view of women and gender issues. This volume is of course by no means exhaustive, nor does it aim to cover all aspects and topics that concerned the lives of women at the time: female painters, singers, artists and dancers would undoubtedly deserve further study, as do women in science, women in education, or, among others, the topics of women and fashion, women and sport, women and food. All those women who led less than extraordinary lives should also, and perhaps even more so, be at the centre of scholarly attention: wet-nurses and governesses, servants, factory workers, peasants, as well as prostitutes and, at the opposite end of the social and ideological spectrum, women in the convents. It is hoped that the contributions herein will help stimulate new perspectives and further research and collaborations, also at graduate level, on the topic of women's roles and lives in Italy's nineteenth century more in general, and in the fertile and lively period following Unification more specifically.



PART I

Motherhood in the New Italy



URSULA FANNING

## Maternal Prescriptions and Descriptions in Post-Unification Italy

### Prescriptions and Proscriptions

The 'prescriptions' alluded to in the title of this chapter refer, for the most part, to the public sphere – to public aspirations around motherhood, and to public expectations of mothers and of the maternal. The 'descriptions', in turn, have as one point of reference women writers' reflections of those public debates and thus of motherhood in the public sphere, but also the writers' imaginative representations of motherhood in its private dimension. The prescriptions, then, often map on to what Adrienne Rich has famously defined as the 'institution' of motherhood, necessarily public, while the descriptions certainly treat of that, but also engage with what Rich suggests can be the very different 'experience' of motherhood (often private).<sup>1</sup> Rich explores what she defines as 'two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential* relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control'.<sup>2</sup> The tension between these two meanings of motherhood, already glimpsed by many Italian women writers in the post-Unification period in Italy, informs and complicates their representations of motherhood, as we shall see.

- 1 A. Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1991 [1977]).
- 2 Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 13.

This chapter begins by outlining some of the prescriptions around the maternal and motherhood in this period. It then considers some of the most significant maternal descriptions of the period, analysing Matilde Serao's most striking representations of both pregnancy and motherhood in her pre-twentieth-century output, alongside some of Carolina Invernizio's late nineteenth-century fiction, certain of Neera's late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writings on mothering, and Sibilla Aleramo's ground-breaking representation of the topic in the early twentieth century. Aleramo's writing, it transpires, differs in some significant respects from earlier representations of motherhood, and sets the tone, in some ways, for later twentieth-century women's writings on the topic.

The nineteenth century is not short of prescriptions around mothering, and indeed, its discourses frequently define woman's primary role as that of mother, or mother-substitute. Certainly, from the Risorgimento onwards, a subtle, and sometimes not-so-subtle, connection was made in official rhetoric between the terms 'donna' and 'patria'. Women were intended to 'fare gli italiani' in more ways than one; obviously, it was unthinkable at this point that women would not literally be giving birth to new Italians in considerable numbers and thus 'making Italians' in that most obvious way. Indeed, Massimo Livi Bacci notes that while some degree of birth control was practised towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, this happened only in the privileged classes, while 'il peso delle famiglie numerose passò sulle spalle dei piú poveri con le conseguenze che è facile immaginare'.<sup>3</sup> Not only, however, was there no perceived need for a demographic campaign; there was, rather, a constant extending-out of the maternal role prescribed for women. The task of creating a new, morally upright nation rested squarely on their shoulders; and middle-class women, in particular, were exhorted to devote their energies, in the first instance, to the task of bringing up their children in a 'proper' and moral manner. Fiorenza Taricone's study of the exemplary texts (the 'cataloghi') of the early 1880s concludes that women's primary mission lay

3 M. Livi Bacci, *Donna, fecondità e figli: due secoli di storia demografica italiana* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1980 [1977]), 281.

in the family: 'altrimenti chiamata santuario, fuoco sacro, focolare e così via; a misura che la famiglia umana si estende, la missione della donna si va anch'essa trasformando e ampliando, rimanendo illeso il principio fondamentale: la felicità dell'uomo, l'educazione dei figli, il perfezionamento del proprio ascendente basato sulle qualità morali'.<sup>4</sup> More generally, those women who did not themselves give birth to children were encouraged to dedicate themselves to the children of others. This was, indeed, one of the paradoxical ways in which the notion of employment outside the home became quasi-acceptable for middle-class women. Between 1881 and 1901 the proportion of women teachers in Italy increased from 55 per cent of the teaching workforce to 68 per cent – teaching was, relatively speaking, a socially acceptable occupation.<sup>5</sup> Conventional wisdom had it that if educated middle-class women were unmarried, teaching was, as Giampaolo Perugi puts it 'la carriera più consona al temperamento e più compatibile con le esigenze delle donne',<sup>6</sup> precisely because it was effectively viewed as a natural extension of women's duty as carers. Indeed, the very education of women itself depended on the notion that women were better placed to fulfil their duties as cultural and moral 'makers of Italians' if they had some degree of education. As Taricone aptly has it: 'la donna andava alfabetizzata soprattutto per irrobustire e cementare una nazione in embrione'.<sup>7</sup>

Further prescriptions around maternity and motherhood are, of course, to be found in the more scientific texts of the period. Perhaps the most significant of these in the Italian context are the works of Cesare Lombroso and Paolo Mantegazza, both of whom published their discourses on women in 1893.<sup>8</sup> For these writers, woman's role as mother is ordained by her very physiology and the role of mother is so all-encompassing that it takes up

4 F. Taricone, 'I cataloghi femminili dell'Ottocento', in *Operaie, borghesi, contadine nel XIX secolo*, ed. F. Taricone and B. Pisa (Rome: Carucci, 1978), 11–24 (13–14).

5 B. Conti, 'Introduzione', in S. Aleramo, *La donna e il femminismo*, ed. B. Conti (Rome: Edizioni Riuniti, 1978), 7–39 (18).

6 G. Perugi, *Educazione e politica in Italia, 1860–1900* (Turin: Loescher, 1978), 104.

7 Taricone, 'I cataloghi femminili dell'Ottocento', 36.

8 C. Lombroso, *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale* (Turin: Loescher, 1893) and P. Mantegazza, *Fisiologia della donna* (Milan: Treves, 1893), 2 vols.

her whole being. It is essentially incompatible with intellectual pursuits, such as writing. So far, so prescriptive, and so restrictive.

What happens, then, in terms of women writers' reactions to and reflections of these public prescriptions and proscriptions around mothering, the maternal, and maternity itself? We might, from our twenty-first-century perspective, easily understand a rejection of motherhood by women writing in a context where motherhood is presented as both intrinsic to womanhood and as inimical to writing as a woman, one way or another. Such rejection might take the form of a silencing or absence of the mother-figure in women's narratives. Marianne Hirsch has traced this pattern in many English, American and French women writers' work of the period. She finds 'not surprisingly', she says, 'that mothers tend to be absent, silent or devalued' in women's nineteenth-century novels, and goes on to assert that 'the conventions of realism, resting on structures of consent and containment, shut out various forms of indeterminacy, instability and social fragmentation, including [...] maternal perspectives and experiences.'<sup>9</sup> Or a rejection of the maternal in Italian women's writing might, instead, shape itself in a refusal to represent the specific experience of motherhood itself. Margaret Homans, indeed, speculates that a mother-daughter discourse is 'lost to most women writers before the twentieth century',<sup>10</sup> and, again, that the relation between mothers and daughters is, more generally, 'almost always hidden from the representational purview of a literary work.'<sup>11</sup> Homans's and Hirsch's views on the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel have become a critical given. And yet, the Italian situation is markedly different from those considered by these critics. Italian women writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries return, fairly obsessively, to maternity, to motherhood, to mothering, to the figure of the mother and to the mother-daughter relationship, in particular; and this mother-daughter relationship is, fascinatingly, viewed as often from

9 M. Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 14.

10 M. Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 226.

11 Homans, *Bearing the Word*, 251.

the perspective of the mother as it is from that of the daughter – something that marks it as radically different from many of its representations in late twentieth-century women's fiction, where daughterly discourses (and, often, angry daughterly discourses) prevail.<sup>12</sup>

Are women writers in Italy just going with the flow in this area, then, in the immediate post-Unification period (despite their well-documented rejection, demonstrated in several of the chapters in this volume, of many of the cultural norms of femininity in their fiction)? Are they just reflecting these aspirational norms, writing what is acceptable (insofar as it is acceptable for them to write at all), or what does not fly in the face of the public cultural and scientific discourses around the maternal? Is maternity especially resistant to reconceptualization in this period in Italy? Or are these writers genuinely grappling with the issue of maternity and, in the case of many (Neera, Serao, Ada Negri and Aleramo, for instance) the experience of motherhood, and attempting to represent it on their own terms? The centrality of maternity as experience, and of the figure of the mother, in nineteenth-century Italian women's writing (while not at all straightforward, nor in any way unproblematic) anticipates some of the most lively debates both in and outside of feminism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, both in Italy and outside it, around 'maternal impressions' as Cristina Mazzoni would term them,<sup>13</sup> around the hugely significant debate on identity and the usually accepted dichotomy of self and other, around what Sara Ruddick defines as 'maternal thinking',<sup>14</sup> and

12 See A. Giorgio (ed.), *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narrative by Women* (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2002) and U. Fanning, 'Some Segments of Daughterly Discourse: Dacia Maraini's Return to the Mother in *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*, *Bagheria* and *La nave per Kobe*', in *Narrativa italiana recente/Recent Italian Fiction*, ed. R. Bertoni (Turin: Trauben Edizioni and Department of Italian, Trinity College Dublin, 2005), 121–33.

13 C. Mazzoni, *Maternal Impressions: Pregnancy and Childbirth in Literature and Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

14 S. Ruddick, 'Maternal Thinking' [1980], in *Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory*, ed. J. Trebilcott (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1983), 213–30; S. Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1989).