

## **WOMEN'S VOICES AND GENEALOGIES IN LITERARY STUDIES IN ENGLISH**

Lilla Maria Crisafulli and Gilberta Golinelli, eds.

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**LUCA TOSADORI**

University of Bologna

luca.tosadori@unibo.it

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This publication addresses the ever-shifting realm of feminist literary studies in English, focusing on works that show how women have experimented with literary forms to investigate their gender identities and relationships with the patriarchal norm. The editors of this collection have opted for a wide variety of different influences and approaches, ranging from methodological surveys to more specific case studies. Contrarily to other works on the same topic published in recent years, original analyses of selected critics and authors have been preferred to a more comprehensive chronological discussion on the subject matter. In this respect, the volume under review is very different from *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* (2007), edited by Gill Plain and Susan Sellers, or the very comprehensive *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory* (2006), edited by Ellen Rooney. While the first work provides an extremely dense historical overview from profeminism to poststructuralism, the second takes a more theoretical stance, adopting a philosophical approach to gender and feminism which is not always applied to specific literary texts. In contrast, the literary text is at the core of *Women's Voices and Genealogies in Literary Studies in English*. 'Voices' and 'genealogies' highlight the plurality of women's experiences across time and space. The area of interest is referred to in the book title ("Literary Studies in English"), and the first chapters seek to give a methodological and theoretical overview of the collection that can also be applied to other texts not dealt with in this volume. The second section provides interesting insights into female writers of the past, ranging

from the early modern period to eighteenth-century novels and plays. The last part of the book looks at more recent instances of female writing and writing about the female self, drawing from genres like autobiography, science-fiction and others that offer additional coverage of class, race, and nationality.

In the first chapter, Vita Fortunati begins with a reassessment of key terms like ‘sisterhood’ and ‘solidarity’, claiming their relevance to the feminist debate even today. In her lengthy discussion of social responsibility, she relies on the theories of Martha Nussbaum, which espouse a pluralistic vision of international feminism and are used in her analysis of two case studies, Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and Elizabeth Strout’s *Amy & Isabelle*. Raffaella Baccolini’s contribution intends to reaffirm the notion of gender as pivotal in the intersection of other social abstracts. In her view, the crisis of the classical subject, at the core of post-structuralist thinking, is what led to the subsequent rejection of the concept of gender —seen as a universal superimposition against Foucault’s principle that the author is dead or, better, has no identity. As explained in other ways by feminist critics like Nancy K. Miller, who have encouraged the intersection of gender with other categories such as race, class, age, religion, culture, and sexual orientation, the author’s voice can be dismissed only after it has been heard, and in the case of women writers this has hardly ever happened. What Baccolini, quoting Miller, calls “anonymous textuality” (32) works against women, since it is still relevant today when someone is speaking as a member of a group that has been silenced throughout history, like women. Rita Monticelli closes this first methodological section with a discussion on theories by Irigaray, Cixous, Braidotti, Haraway and Butler, which are used to deconstruct the “western symbolic order where women have represented the ‘other’ of man” (41). After an overview of the ways in which these scholars have envisaged female re-figurations (the ‘queer’, the ‘drag’, the ‘abject’, the ‘posthuman nomadic subject’ and the ‘cyborg’), Monticelli claims that these scholars have “re-signified experiences for a political, material, and inspirational feminism” (55) with re-visions of the female body which become the pivotal subject of feminist investigation through different perspectives within literary studies, sociology, and psychoanalysis. The author skilfully compares the contrasting critical accounts of a variety of scholars, presenting them as the starting point for new feminist alliances in the posthuman, global world. The first section of the book lays the groundwork for the redefinition of concepts like ‘solidarity’, ‘sisterhood’, ‘gender’, and ‘otherness’, which are re-contextualized and brought back to the contemporary debate. The aim is to deliver up-to-date tools to students and scholars for the interpretation of literary texts, not only from the English context, but from global perspectives as well. Overall, this selection of theoretical frameworks is well thought out, with compelling explanations in accessible language.

The next part puts to use the methodologies established above, giving the reader an understanding of the impact of a gendered approach to both canonical and lesser known texts, with literary genres ranging from the novel to historical plays and poetry. Gilberta Golinelli offers a close reading of Aphra Behn's masterpiece *Oroonoko* and its implications in questions of class, race, gender and nationality, which helped its author gain agency as a writer and independent individual demonstrating how fiction can work towards both the consolidation and the subversion of ideology. Serena Baiesi examines important female voices that were able to innovate Romantic fiction. Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Inchbald, Ann Radcliffe and Jane Austen, among others, are taken as case studies for the analysis of the emergence of new narrative forms and contents. Baiesi insists on the heterogeneity of their production and the different literary genres they explored, which makes them important innovators of the modern novel. In her essay, Lilla Maria Crisafulli looks at issues of agency in British Romantic women's drama, with a focus on how women playwrights re-appropriated history to reflect on their condition through the centuries. In a delightful lament, Crisafulli questions the depth of theorization of Romantic drama, in comparison to the new feminist approaches toward early modern drama. This is a much-needed appraisal in that early modern drama is predominantly populated by male authors, whereas the Romantic period sees the emergence of important women playwrights like Elizabeth Inchbald, Hannah More, and Joanna Baillie, and could thus be re-interpreted from a gender perspective. Valentina Pramaggiore investigates Mary Darby Robinson's poetic works and demonstrates how they reflect her political and social engagement in defence of women's unprivileged condition. Pramaggiore points out Robinson's experimentation with gender roles in her literary production and stresses how "she embodied an ideal of gender as fluid and performative" (111), thus anticipating Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity.

The final section is a fitting conclusion, further enlarging the spectrum of literary genres to include slave narratives, autobiography and science fiction. It opens with Josmary Santoro's study on early modern English drama with her analysis of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. The author unfolds questions of linguistic construction of the female gender on the stage through the figure of the misogynist. Thanks to a combination of feminist and semiotic approaches, Santoro reveals the dramatic irony that makes early modern playwrights insightful commentators on contemporary views of gender. Valeria Morabito contributes to the debate with an analysis of female slave literary works in conversation with English feminist history. After a thorough introduction of the concept of 'genealogy', Morabito proceeds to an analysis of the *History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave*, explaining how gender and racial discriminations are intimately intertwined. Wilmarie Rosado Pérez considers the experiences of the

French émigrés who arrived in England during the late eighteenth century. The poetry of Charlotte Turner Smith and Mary Darby Robinson represents the efforts of women of their time to enter the public debate around gender related issues and find a voice in questions of subjectivity. Cristina Gamberi's contribution focuses on new interpretations of Doris Lessing's autobiographical texts in order to reassess the theme of motherhood in her output. Gamberi stresses the relevance of this literary genre to the popular feminist assumption that the personal is political. Speaking overtly in her autobiographies, Lessing "is able to inscribe the maternal narrative within the colonial metaphor and to question dominant discourses on motherhood and colonial racism" (165). Eleanor Drage closes this collection with her study on works of science fiction and the way in which they can address the issue of the "spatial construction and policing of gender and 'racial' identities" (180), with case studies like the television series *Lost*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Octavia Butler's *Dawn*. Finally, the book is enriched with an appendix by Janet Todd, one of the most outstanding pioneers of feminist literary criticism, who gives a compelling account of Mary Wollstonecraft's life and work.

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Overall, after reading the table of contents of this collection one could argue that its miscellaneous nature may confuse the reader looking for a *fil rouge* and a thematic subdivision of the chapters. With the exception of the first section, which functions as a methodological introduction, the other two could easily be joined into one single section, since all the essays in the second and third parts deal with specific case studies and do not follow a particular thematic path. Nevertheless, with methodical and analytical perspectives, the topics that play a pivotal role in feminist debates are reassessed and reaffirmed for a new generation of feminist scholars to apply in their own research. Hence, this collection of well-researched essays will prove to be an invaluable resource for scholars and students in the fields of Gender and English Studies. The authors certainly pay homage to the legacy of feminist pioneers like Wollstonecraft, Woolf, and second-wave scholars, but also initiate a dialogue with more recent theories and assumptions on gender.

## Works Cited

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