

CATHERINE RAMSEY-PORTOLANO. *Performing Bodies: Female Illness in Italian Literature and Cinema (1860-1920)*. Vancouver-Madison-Teaneck-Wroxtton: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2018.

Since the 1980s scholarly studies have extensively explored the literary and cultural perspectives on physical and psychological malady and disability. With particular reference to hysteria, Elaine Showalter, in her 1993 article “On Hysterical Narrative” (in *Narrative*, 1.1:24-35) – and earlier in her ground-breaking *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) – pointed out how “hysterical narrative” had been one of the most popular topics in literary criticism where:

psychoanalytic theory, narratology, feminist criticism, and the history of medicine intersect, drawing both on the vogue of Freud’s case studies, especially the canonical Dora, and the recent recognition that not just psychoanalysis, but all medical practice, depends on narrative, the “doctor’s story,” which both shapes the formal case study and determines practical treatment (1993:24).

Illness, in its varied manifestations, is profoundly gendered, and especially in the form of “hysteria” has been a favourite topic in fictional works in particular since the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1995, in her *Passions of the Voice: Hysteria, Narrative, and the Figure of the Speaking Woman, 1850-1915* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) Claire Kahane articulated, in fact, how numerous late 19th-century texts are symptomatic of the “problematics of sexual difference” and of a reaction to the rise of the New Woman, as a “speaking subject” that disturbed “not only the patriarchal structure of social relations but also the gendered conventions of nineteenth-century domestic fiction” (ix). In fin de siècle novels by both male and female authors, hysteria, took a variety of functions, as stressed by Ramsey-Portolano in *Performing Bodies*, “from representing the psychological consequence from

women who failed to adhere to prescribed roles and modes of conduct or symbolizing the expression of their repressed sexual desire” (3). Female suffering, illness, maladies of a nervous nature, madness and invalidity all confirmed conceptions of women as bearers of disorders and sin, in Western literary and cultural traditions. Above all, female malady was connected to women seeking any forms of fulfilment outside of the ones imposed onto them by traditional conceptions, and therefore failing to identify with the roles of wife and mother. The abundance of scientific theories and literary portrayals of female inferiority and illness in late 19th-century Europe coincided, as a matter of fact, with the emergence of the feminist movement whose aims threatened to disrupt the established social order.

In the last 30 years, studies on this topic have continued to flourish, with titles including, to mention just a few: Yang-Sook Shin, *The Female Malady: Discourse, Power, and Sexuality in the Eighteenth Century* (University of Missouri-Columbia, 1991); Diane Price Herndl, *Invalid Women. Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Helen Small, *Love's Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity, 1800-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Jessica Diane Droogsma, *Female Hysteria Across Cultures and Periods in American Literature* (University of Northern Iowa, 2009); Andrew Scull, *Hysteria: The Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Asti Hustvedt, *Medical Muses. Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011). More recently Abir Hamdar has analysed the female suffering body in Modern Arabic Literature in *The Female Suffering Body: Illness and Disability in Modern Arabic Literature* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014).

The clear and accessible book by Catherine Ramsey-Portolano joins this rich scholarly production by focusing on female illness in Italian literary and cinematic works from the end of the 19th century to 1920, and aims to demonstrate the central role that the female body and its biological functions and malfunctions played in the culture of the time. As Ramsey-Portolano reminds us, the widespread evolutionist and positivist discussions intensely influenced perceptions of femininity in fin-de-siècle Italy: from August Comte, Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, neurologist Paul Julius Moebius and philosopher Otto Weininger, to Italian anthropologists Cesare

Lombroso and Paolo Mantegazza, female inferiority and predisposition to nervous disorders were linked to women's reproductive organs and functions. The prescribed remedy, according to the American physician George Miller Beard, was often confinement within the domestic sphere, or the so called "rest cure" (15).

Performing Bodies is an engaging analysis of fictional works by an assortment of male and female authors. Ramsey-Portolano identifies two categories of novels. The first one includes literary works which present illness as the consequence and punishment for women who have transgressed traditional female roles. In these novels, women are described as essentially passive victims of social injustice and of a patriarchal, misogynistic society. A second group of novels represents, instead, malady as a form of female agency and empowerment through which women, by feigning illness, could actively regain control over their own body. Illness, in all these literary works, contributed to the creation of the cultural and the artistic ideal of femininity that then recurred in, and dominated, early Italian cinema and the figure of the diva at the beginning of the new century.

The author structures the book in four chapters. To begin, Chapter One presents an overview of the scientific attention that was paid to hysteria and its neurological causes especially in the 19th century. The studies of French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot and his three-volume *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (a photographic survey of hysterical symptoms in his patients), and Sigmund Freud's 1895 ground-breaking volumes *Studies on Hysteria* and 1905 *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (including the well-known case history of Dora) are examples of authoritative studies that asserted beliefs on female inferiority and physiological deficiency, and of "men writing stories of female illness, of men advancing their interpretation of femininity" (23). This first chapter also offers an overview of women's social and legal status in Italy at the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th centuries. The influx of female writers, in particular, was a cause of concern for many male writers and others unwilling to separate accepted and negative notions of femininity from women's ability for intellectual thought. At the same time naturalist and verist writers in Italy, such as Luigi Capuana and Matilde Serao, showed a pronounced interest in

contemporary scientific theories and female pathology as demonstrated in some of their female protagonists and their maladies.

Chapter Two is dedicated to female illness and to the representation of women's submission to patriarchal expectations in fin-de-siècle Italian society. The novels examined in this chapter are Giovanni Verga's *Storia di una capinera* (1871) and *Tigre reale* (1875), Luigi Capuana's *Giacinta* (1879) and *Profumo* (1892), Antonio Fogazzaro's *Malombra* (1881), the little-known *Madonna di fuoco e madonna di neve* (1888) by Giovanni Faldella, as well as Neera's *Il Castigo* (1881), *Teresa* (1886) and *L'Indomani* (1889), and Sibilla Aleramo's famous *Una donna* (1906). The emergence of mental illness is connected to the suffocation of female independence and sexuality, the impossibility for women to break out of the traditional roles of wife and mother, and as a consequence of female deviation from acceptable modes of behaviour. Spiritualism and mental illness – as in *Malombra*'s gothic-style setting and plot – confirm notions of women's susceptibility to malaise of a hysterical nature. Hysterical attacks are, therefore, forms of rebellion against sexual dissatisfaction and expressions of frustration and oppressed desire for passion. The consequence is, however, only the alienation or death of the heroine.

The novels discussed in Chapter Three, on the other hand, offer examples of illness as forms of liberation and empowerment. Ramsey-Portolano examines how “performing illness” transforms female protagonists into irresistible “superior female types”. Iginio Ugo Tarchetti's *Fosca* (1869), Matilde Serao's *Cuore inferno* (1881) and *Fantasia* (1883), Rocco De Zerbi's *L'avvelenatrice*, as well as Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Trionfo della morte* (1894) and *Il fuoco* (1900) provide cases of hysterical women whose theatricality and artificiality of their disease make them dominators, rather than victims of society's pressures and limitations. Female protagonists in these novels subvert the established order through a tendency to prohibited desires. Interestingly, in these works, men – such as Giorgio in Tarchetti's *Fosca* and Giorgio in D'Annunzio's *Trionfo* – are not immune from disease and are often weak, vacillating subjects with a “feminine” nature, infected and governed by vampire-like women, and associated with notions of deficiency and malaise. As oppressed men they become emblematic of the negative condition of a modern

subject unable to vitally adhere to existence (87). Yet both female and male protagonists become metaphors for diversity and vehicles through which the writers could express a criticism of the bourgeois perception of normalcy and the traditional restrictions on female behaviour of the time.

The final chapter of *Performing Bodies* is devoted to the cinematic adaptations *Tigre reale* (1916) and *Malombra* (1917). These films accentuated the appeal of their female performers – Pina Menichelli and Lyda Borelli respectively – through the exaltation of the seductive power of the emancipated woman. Belonging to the genre of diva films, Pastrone's *Tigre reale* and Gallone's *Malombra* present female characters who are both passive and active, "spectacle and narrative" (94). These films "enforce the role of the female character as representative of power by avoiding the association of the diva with notions of wrongdoing, accomplished through the sublimation of her responsibility and guilt into illness and suffering" (94). Ramsey-Portolano argues that it is, in fact, the medium of cinema itself that allowed a shift in the function of illness in these two films as compared to Verga's and Fogazzaro's original novels: "In these films illness is not a punishment for transgression, it is that which allows the diva to take center stage and act out *her story*" (95). This chapter offers an overview of the development of the role of the diva as *femme fatale* and modern model of femininity in Italy. Following Laura Mulvey's influential discussion in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), Ramsey-Portolano argues that diva films provide an early example of the female gaze in the history of Italian cinema. Illness influenced cultural and artistic standards of beauty and attraction for the actresses of this period giving divas the power to dominate the screen and minds of spectators. The diva's portrayal of illness – through dramatic poses, decadent eroticism, exaggerated gestures, pictorial style or statuary expressions – granted centrality to both the female character and the diva. In this way cinema and the acting profession offered women emancipation, independence as well as control over the production of the film itself. This is an interesting chapter that, however, leaves the reader wanting to know more about illness and hysteria in the Italian cinematic production of the time. It would be also interesting to see how divas managed the balance

between their private existence and their performative maladies on screen.

Overall *Performing Bodies* is an interesting book and a welcome contribution to the exploration of fin-de-siècle women's conditions and representations. Ramsey-Portolano offers an enjoyable reading of a wide array of figures and texts important to understanding the cultural devaluation of women and historical dispositions to treat feminine will and desire as invalid. The book also provides a valuable introduction for readers interested in further exploring the issue of female diversity and sexuality in post-unification Italian literary and visual culture.

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