



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Gender, Writing, Spectatorships: Evenings at the Theatre, Opera, and Silent Screen in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy and Beyond* by Katharine Mitchell, New York and London, Routledge, 2022, 240 pp., £130 (hardback), ISBN 9780367265014; £38.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781032109510.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/215090/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Santovetti, O. (2024) *Gender, Writing, Spectatorships: Evenings at the Theatre, Opera, and Silent Screen in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy and Beyond* by Katharine Mitchell, New York and London, Routledge, 2022, 240 pp., £130 (hardback), ISBN 9780367265014; £38.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781032109510. *Modern Italy*, 29 (2). pp. 231-233. ISSN 1353-2944

<https://doi.org/10.1017/mit.2023.34>

© The Author(s), 2023. This article has been published in a revised form in <https://doi.org/10.1017/mit.2023.34>. This version is free to view and download for private research and study only. Not for re-distribution or re-use.

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Gender, Writing, Spectatorships Evenings at the Theatre, Opera, and Silent Screen in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy and Beyond, by Katherine Mitchell, New York and London, Routledge, 2022, 240 pp., £38.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780367265014

The aim of Katherine Mitchell's volume is to lay bare 'a plethora of rich textual writings to uncover a wave of gendered spectatorship based on admiration: these were the foundations of an active, self-conscious, and vibrant female culture industry at the turn of the twentieth century in Italy and beyond. Due to the onset of fascism, they were all too readily forgotten. Until now'. Until now because her study is impressive and noteworthy for the amount and the richness of archival material that it draws on: from realist fiction to autobiography, from fan letters and private diaries to reviews in women's and theatre journals. Through these documents, most previously unpublished, we hear the voices of women who were protagonists, producers, and – this is particularly innovative – consumers of literature, theatre, opera and film in this crucial period of Italian history between the 1880s and 1920s. Mitchell describes the phenomenon as a 'female spectatorship in-the-making', which emerge with the first wave of feminism and the arrival on the literary scene of professional women writers. Her approach is interdisciplinary combining cultural history (in particular the studies of Alberto Mario Banti and Silvana Patriarca) feminist studies, film theory and spectatorship studies.

The first two chapters are introductory: chapter 1 ('Towards Cross-Disciplinary Female Spectatorship') sets the methodological frame and contextualizes the research within the key directions in spectatorship studies. Chapter 2 ('Spectators, Traviate, and Women's Access to Culture') retraces the historical and cultural background focusing on women's access to education and employment in the nineteenth century as well as on the function played by cultural constructs such as that of the Fallen Woman and the *femme fatale*. On the subject of women opera spectators I found particularly effective the way in which Mitchell counters the claim made by feminist philosopher Catherine Clément in 1979 that opera is a misogynist genre using the argument by Carolyn Abbate,

who emphasises the ‘contribution of the performer over the ‘monological authority of the Composer’”, or by feminist Adriana Cavarero who believes that at the heart of opera lies the triumph of the female voice. What emerges is the ambivalent function played by the Fallen Woman figure, which on one side reflected the misogynistic ‘othering’ of male authors but on the other gave centrality to the women character and was instrumental in inducing reflection of women readers and spectators on the female condition. Chapter 3 (‘The Private Female Gaze’) is the heart of the book because it is here that Mitchell posits her idea that ‘as portents of modernity and intermediaries for women spectators, fans, and readers, female performers’ and women writers’ relationships were based on admiration and solidarity; and that these extended from them, to spectators, and back to performers, thereby constructing a continuous positive feedback loop’. This feedback loop or ‘affective alliance’ is very much a prototype, she underlines, of ‘the Italian feminist collective Diotima’s notion of *affidamento*’ of the 1980s. Her examples of ‘*affidamento* retrospectively applied’ are many and fascinating, all offering glimpses of this ‘female gaze in the making’ whether they involved exceptional women (including the writers Neera, Serao, Aleramo and the performers Pezzana, Bertini and Duse) or ordinary women (fans, spectators, readers, whose reflections appear in private diaries or letters collected at the Archivio Diaristico Nazionale of Pieve Santo Stefano). A more structured form of feedback loop is then analysed in Chapter 4 (‘The Public Female Gaze’) where Mitchell shows that, through their commentaries on theatre-going in columns in journals for women and theatre reviews in periodicals addressed to a female readership, women writers acted as intermediaries and critics who ‘were consciously educating and initiating women spectators – who were also readers – in how to be critically engaged with the new national language on their evenings out’. Among the many the case of Matilde Serao stands out. Mitchell draws attention to Serao’s 1916 article “Parla una spettatrice” where the writer presents herself as ‘a self- declared “spectatrix,” reflecting in retrospect on “the reasons for [her] tears, [her] smiles, [her boredom]”’. Chapter 5 (‘The imaginary Female Gaze’) turns to fiction to explore how women spectators and performers are

represented in the realist literature of the period. The intention is ‘to demonstrate the (albeit rigid binary) gendered fictional configurations of spectators and performers at this specific moment in Italy’s cultural history’. Indeed, many of the examples presented corroborate that ‘women and men authors of realist fiction differed in their depictions of female characters’. However, one is left to ponder whether fiction can be treated on a par with non-fiction and also whether the binary logic is the most suitable to capture what is happening in the creation (but also consumption) of literary characters. It is true that ‘women writers of realist fiction inject feeling into their writing, expressing *sympathy* for their protagonists’ thoughts and emotions’. But how can we explain male authors, as for example Federico De Roberto, who, by identifying so deeply with his female protagonist in *L’illusione*, not only did go against the misogynistic views expressed in his own non-fiction writing, but gave his fictional woman reader an awareness and an agency that contradicted the passivity of the bovaristic cliché? To be fair Mitchell is well aware that the binary logic is rigid, adding, to complicate the picture, the fact that there are also women writers who adopted a masculine perspective. The conclusion of the chapter is very persuasive: ‘Male- authored “othering” depictions in fiction of performing women were a backlash against the emergence of increasing numbers of “knowing” and engaged female consumers as readers and spectators of popular culture’. The final chapter (‘The Female Gaze Beyond Italy’) looks at how ‘Italian women writers and performers catalysed social and political change through the circulation and consumption of their “star text” at home and abroad’. This is a fascinating chapter where we see not only how cosmopolitan these Italian writers and ‘divas’ were (judging by their consistent success abroad) but also how much they were in charge of their own work and success: Adelina Patti, Eleonora Duse, Francesca Bertini were not only singers and actors, ‘divas’, but managers and directors of their own work. Significantly, the last sections are devoted to the legacy outside Italy of Matilde Serao who, herself a writer, a journalist, director of newspaper, screenwriter, cineaste, is exemplary of this ‘female gaze in the making’. Indeed ‘women writers and performers like Serao, Duse, Bertini, and Patti, challenged their women spectators (and readers) as

intermediaries, initiating them, as “Symbolic Mothers” into cultural fields [...]. In this way, women writers and performers were self-consciously inviting readers and spectators to participate in, and adopt, their stars’ critical and affective stances as spectators’. By showing us how this spectatorship came to be and by highlighting the crucial role played by the ‘positive feedback loop’ between women writers, performers and their audience, Mitchell’s book adds a very important piece to the study of the history of women’s cultural production and consumption in Italy and beyond. It is also a brilliant testimony of to female solidarity at work in the artistic field.

Olivia Santovetti (University of Leeds)