

Women in Italy, 1945-1960: An Interdisciplinary Study, Penelope Morris (editor), New York and Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 246 pp., ISBN 1-4039-7099-8 hbk £40.

This book is an excellent addition to the literature in English on Italian gender history, which has only recently overcome its marginal status and shifted focus from the medieval and early modern periods to the more recent past. (Willson 2006). The period 1945-1960 saw the aftermath of World War II, reconstruction, female suffrage, the Cold War, American consumerist influences, and the beginning of the boom. The book's success in fusing social, historical and cultural concerns in writing women's history is shown in, for example, Nadia Zonis's chapter on the 1960 Rome Olympics, Mary P. Wood's analysis of women and prosperity in postwar cinema and Daniela Cavallero's discussion of women's educational theatre. Cavallero recognises the Catholic church as enabling women through education just as many of the other chapters emphasise its role in quashing women's desire for equality. Motherhood is an important theme, of course: Ursula Fanning's examines Anna Banti's writing, Donatella Fischer's explores Eduardo de Filippo's plays and Lesley Caldwell analyses three films of the period. The book moves from Madonna to whore in Molly Tambor's discussion of the Legge Merlin debates and Danielle Hopkins's account of Visconti's *Rocco e i suoi fratelli*. Domesticity is central in critiques of the domestic imperative for postwar women, in discussions of domestic advice, and in Ellen Nerenberg's discussion of 'Public Housing in Postwar Rome.'

Notwithstanding its achievements, the book raises two difficulties, each perhaps attributable to its interdisciplinarity. Firstly, while the title promises a study of women, the chapters deliver analyses of *representations*. The implication is that by reading culture, we read the history of women. It is not that simple and the book's title should reflect a distinction between practice and representation. While the editor makes only generalised references to 'women, whether real or imagined,' (p. 12) most of the authors reflect lucidly on relationships between representations and practice. Stephen Gundel's chapter concludes: 'television was never a mirror of Italian society, but it was responsive to the evolution of social mores and, within limits, it contributed to the expansion of female roles in the country.' (p. 75) Réka Buckley's chapter examines 'the "real" lives' of Italian film stars of the 1950s (p. 36) showing how they, too, 'contributed to a slow and difficult redefinition of women's roles in Italy.' (p. 47) Fanning, Penelope Morris on agony columns and Sharon Wood's survey of women's writing each focus on women's cultural production, but much of the work discussed is man-made, making recognition of the interplay of representations and practices all the more important. Rebecca West, the book's series advisor, argues in her chapter that films and novels provide 'a much more psychologically and socially realistic view of female experience in the postwar era than do the prescriptive descriptions of domestic life and femaleness to be found in domestic guides...' (p. 28) West's comparative approach is stymied by her misunderstanding of advice as representation, rather than *prescription*. She describes novels and films as 'creative cultural forms,' (p. 24) without recognising that the same is true of advice manuals. West's insistence on the 'realness and uniqueness' of filmic and novelistic representations (p. 24) doesn't stop her from also asserting their representative nature. (p. 33) Morris's chapter is more adept in

analysing advice, in the form of letters to an agony column, which challenged 'preconceived ideas about Italian women, particularly those based on cinematic images.' (p. 121) See Morris 2004, Bernini 2004 and Lees-Maffei 2007.

Secondly, given that all but five of fifteen chapters examine visual and material culture, the lack of illustrations is damaging. West, Wood, Hipkins and Caldwell discuss films, Gundel analyses television, Fischer and Cavallero examine theatre and Nerenburg analyses architecture. Buckley devotes half a page (of 12) to describing a series of press photographs of Gina Lollobrigida. (p. 44). While the authors are charged with the unnecessary labour of describing visual and material phenomena, readers are asked to accept the author's accounts, rather than judging the visual evidence for themselves. Specialists in visual culture would not countenance publication of their analyses without visual evidence. I can only guess that it is the interdisciplinary nature of this volume that has allowed a lack of images to prevail. However, the book's interdisciplinarity is also valuable; just as film, literature, domestic advice, housing and law reform jostled in Italy's postwar public sphere, so they are discussed together here. Numerous cross-references make for a rich, coherent, useful volume.

731 words.

References

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