

*Female Cultural Production in Modern Italy* edited by Sharon Hecker and Catherine Ramsey-Portolano. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. 442 pp.

Review by Mariaconcetta Costantini

The condition of women in modern Italy is a highly controversial topic that still requires in-depth scholarly analysis. Despite some positive changes in their social and professional roles, Italian women continue to face manifold challenges due to the persistence of patriarchal structures and practices. A thorough critical examination of these challenges is therefore needed to increase sociopolitical awareness, to reduce gender inequalities, and, especially, to encourage a valorization of women's intellectual and creative labor.

Such an examination is offered by the groundbreaking volume *Female Cultural Production in Modern Italy*, edited by Sharon Hecker and Catherine Ramsey-Portolano, an interdisciplinary collection of 26 chapters that explores different aspects of the cultural and professional experiences of women in Italy from 1861 to the present. Divided into seven sections pivoting around specific themes (from female labor to performative production, from female authority to networking), the volume also explores international and intercultural collaborations between Italy and other countries. In the last section, moreover, the questioning of boundaries is widened to include the fluidification of gender categories pursued by women "whose intellectual contributions do not fit normative classifications" (13).

The volume's goals and scope are accurately illustrated by the editors in chapter 1. In addition to providing an introduction to the specific topics dealt with in each chapter, Hecker and Ramsey-Portolano give reasons for their decision to cross disciplinary boundaries and to offer international readers a heterogeneous set of stories of "women in Italy" who have contributed "to intellectual, artistic and cultural production in the modern and contemporary period" (3). Often "unknown outside of Italy" and sometimes "ignored or forgotten even inside the country," these stories are (re)discovered to highlight the precious work done by a variety of women cultural producers across three centuries—"artists, authors, poets, journalists, translators, critics, curators, filmmakers and photographers" (3). Attention is also drawn to the historical forces that have long marginalized female voices in Italy, including "fascist ideology," "the political and cultural dominance of the Christian Democratic Party

in the post-World War II period,” and “the power of the Catholic church” (6, 4), as well as to specific gendered cultural aspects, such as the long “obliteration” of women writers from a literary canon “established by male Italian literary critics in the nineteenth century” (8).

Readers of *Italian Americana* will be particularly interested in chapters 17, 20, and 22, which establish close links between Italian and American cultures. Chapter 17 by art historian Gloria Bell focuses on the Roman experiences of Edmonia Lewis, a 19th-century sculptor of African and Native American heritage who spent most of her career in Rome, “negotiating racism and sexism prevalent in the Roman art world of her time” (11–12). As Bell argues, Lewis’s works and negotiation with Italian culture “made room for artists to follow in her footsteps” (295) not only in the US but also within Italian culture. Equally thought-provoking are the Italian experiences of 20th-century American sculptor Beverly Pepper, discussed in chapter 20. As Barbara Tiberi notices, Pepper not only crossed gender confines by learning to weld from male workers in Italian factories, but she also managed to overcome her condition of outsider, pursuing abroad a “career and personal path” that make her “a leading example for women (artists) today” (349).

Another woman who established fruitful cultural exchanges between Italy and the US is Gabriella Drudi, “a rarely discussed literary agent, translator and art critic who built crucial connection between Rome and New York in the postwar period” (13). Her interesting figure is examined in chapter 22 by Maria De Vivo, who claims that “Drudi’s *modus operandi* remains exemplary in order to fully grasp forms of dissent in the current debate” (378). Like the other insightful contributions of *Female Cultural Production in Modern Italy*, the chapters pivoting on Italian and American relations disclose little-known aspects of women’s cultural production in Italy, encouraging readers of different age groups and backgrounds “to draw their own ideas from the chapters and continue the work by making the book’s themes meaningful and transformative” (15).