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Italian Women Writers: Gender and Everyday Life in Fiction and Journalism, 1870-1910 (Toronto Italian Studies)

Katharine Mitchell

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Post-Unification Italy saw an unprecedented rise of the middle classes, an expansion in the production of print culture, and increased access to education and professions for women, particularly in urban areas. Although there was still widespread illiteracy, especially among women in both rural and urban areas, there emerged a generation of women writers whose domestic fiction and journalism addressed a growing female readership. This study looks at the work of three of the most significant women writers of the period: La Marchesa Colombi, Neera, and Matilde Serao. These writers, whose works had been largely forgotten for much of the last century, only to be rediscovered by the Italian feminist movement of the 1970s, were widely read and received considerable critical acclaim in their day. In their realist fiction and journalism, these professional women writers documented and brought to light the ways in which women participated in everyday life in the newly independent Italy, and how their experiences differed profoundly from those of men.

Katharine Mitchell shows how these three authors, while hardly radical emancipationists, offered late-nineteenth-century readers an implicit feminist intervention and a legitimate means of approaching and engaging with the burning social and political issues of the day regarding “the woman question” – women’s access to education and the professions, legal rights, and suffrage. Through close examinations of these authors and a selection of their works – and with reference to their broader artistic, socio-historical, and geo-political contexts – Mitchell not only draws attention to their authentic representations of contemporary social and historical realities, but also considers their important role as a cultural medium and catalyst for social change.

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