

# **To Be or Not to Be a Mother: Choice, Refusal, Reluctance and Conflict. Motherhood and Female Identity in Italian Literature and Culture**

## **Essere o non essere madre: Scelta, rifiuto, avversione e conflitto. Maternità e identità femminile nella letteratura e cultura italiane**

**Laura Lazzari**

**AAUW International Postdoctoral Fellow, Georgetown University  
Affiliated Research Faculty, Franklin University Switzerland**

**Joy Charnley**

**Independent Researcher, Glasgow**

### **ABSTRACT**

This volume of *intervalla* centres on the themes of choice and conflict, refusal and rejection, and analyses how mothers and non-mothers are perceived in Italian society. The nine essays cover a variety of genres (novel, auto-fiction, theatre) and predominantly address how these perceptions are translated into literary form, ranging from the 1940s to the early twenty-first century. They study topics such as the ambivalent feelings and difficult experiences associated with motherhood (doubt, post-natal depression, infanticide, IVF), the impact of motherhood and non-motherhood on female identity, attitudes towards childless/childfree women, the stereotype of the “good mother,” and the ways in which such stereotypes are rejected, challenged or subverted. Major Italian writers, such as Lalla Romano, Paola Masino, Oriana Fallaci, Laudomia Bonanni and Elena Ferrante, are included in these analyses, alongside contemporary “memoirs” and works by Valeria Parrella, Lisa Corva, Eleonora Mazzoni, Cristina Comencini and Grazia Verasani.

**KEY WORDS:** motherhood, Italian literature, Italian culture, female identity, women’s writing

**PAROLE CHIAVE:** maternità, letteratura italiana, cultura italiana, identità femminile, scrittura delle donne

## INTRODUCTION

The gradual empowerment of women within society and the emergence of major writers in the literary world have led critics to address in a variety of ways the issue of motherhood and its relationship with female identity. Feminist scholars across disciplines – such as psychology, social sciences and philosophy – have broadly investigated this relationship (Beauvoir 1949; Kristeva 1977; Rich 1977; Chodorow 1978; Muraro 1991; DiQuinzio 1999; Stone 2012), drawing varied and often controversial conclusions which have influenced literary texts and cultural production. Over the centuries, the topic has thus been recurrent in fictional and cultural creations, including in Italian literature (Benedetti 2009; Wood 1995), with many writers and critics referring back either explicitly or implicitly to Sibilla Aleramo's groundbreaking novel, *Una donna* (1906).

Interest in the topic of motherhood has increased to such a point that Motherhood or Mothering Studies are now considered a discipline in their own right, just like Women's Studies, LGBTQI Studies or Cultural Studies. Thus in recent years research funds have been made available to support projects, several international and interdisciplinary conferences have been organised, related panels are regularly planned at annual congresses and classes have begun to be taught in universities.<sup>1</sup>

Just as it is important to underline the growing awareness of this area of study in academia, so must we point out the peculiarity of the Italian situation, where women find themselves torn between strong traditions and contemporary expectations. Thus on the one hand, a stereotyped image of the Italian *mamma* has been reproduced, a self-sacrificing and caring figure based on that of the Virgin Mary (Prevedello). On the other though, in the course of the last century Italian women have often refused to become mothers (Amoia 2000), and currently, due to career pressures and the lack of childcare, many choose to postpone their decision to start a family and/or have fewer children (Piazza 2003). In spite of Italy's strong Catholic tradition, and the continued presence of contradictory social expectations, it is thus hardly surprising that Italy has one of the lowest birth rates in the world (Bettaglio, Lazzari).

Preliminary discussions that eventually led to this Special Issue started in 2014 at the University of Zurich in Switzerland during the annual conference of the American Association for Italian Studies, where Laura Lazzari had the opportunity to organise three panels on motherhood in Italian literature.<sup>2</sup> The success of the interdisciplinary papers presented in English and Italian by international scholars, and the considerations that followed, gave birth to the idea of finding a suitable forum in which to continue a dialogue in both languages and make those reflections available to a broader academic public.

This led to the decision to edit a special volume that welcomed contributions in English and Italian and whose central purpose is to investigate how motherhood and non-motherhood relate to female identity. The result, Special Issue Volume 1 – *To Be or Not to Be a Mother: Choice, Refusal, Reluctance and Conflict. Motherhood and Female Identity in Italian Literature and Culture / Essere o*

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<sup>1</sup> Projects and conferences organised in recent years include: a series of four workshops in Scotland on *La mamma italiana: Interrogating a National Stereotype* (2012-2014), funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council; the rich programme of events, conferences, initiatives and publications produced by the *Motherhood in Post-1968 Literature Network*, funded by the AHRC and hosted by the Institute of Modern Languages Research at the School of Advanced Studies at the University of London; the international and interdisciplinary conference on *Motherhood and Culture* that took place at the University of Maynooth, Ireland, 15-17 June 2015 and *Nel nome della madre. Ripensare le figure della maternità* at the University for Foreigners of Siena, Italy, 11-12 November 2015. In addition to this, panels have regularly been organised in Europe and the United States at the annual conferences of the American Association for Italian Studies and North-East Association of Modern Languages, to name but a few.

<sup>2</sup> At the 2014 annual conference of the American Association for Italian Studies at the University of Zurich in Switzerland (23-25 May), panels on *La maternità nella letteratura italiana delle donne dal Ventesimo secolo ai giorni nostri (I/II/III)* took place, with the participation of twelve scholars, who presented papers on aspects of motherhood in Italian literature.

*non essere madre: scelta, rifiuto, avversione e conflitto. Maternità e identità femminile nella letteratura e cultura italiane* – takes a cross-disciplinary approach to the subject, featuring nine papers written by scholars in Australia, Canada, France, the United Kingdom and the United States who explore the subject through a range of texts, including novels and plays, fiction and semi-autobiographical works, from the twentieth to the twenty-first centuries, employing various methodologies and models.

Organised around the key themes of choice and conflict, refusal and rejection, these essays set out to challenge conventional ideas of motherhood as a natural destiny for all women and the greatest accomplishment in their lives. All the contributions link motherhood to ambivalent feelings – some of which do not sit comfortably with many people – such as doubt, abortion, post-natal depression, suicide and infanticide, and analyse how mothers are perceived in Italian society, what the impact of non-motherhood on female identity is and how others perceive childless or childfree women, how some mothers struggle with their new role, which stereotypes are still associated with the image of the “good mother” and how women refuse, challenge or subvert stereotypes.

### CHOICE / CONFLICT

The essays dealing with choice and conflict study texts published over a sixty-year period, from the 1960s onwards, from the early years of the modern women’s movement to the era of “post-feminism,” and ranging over topics such as the conflict between career and motherhood, abortion, miscarriage, the work/life balance and IVF.

Elisa Rocca studies a corpus of books by Lalla Romano published between 1964 and 1973, just before and in the early stages of the women’s movement of the 1970s, focusing on the difficulty of reconciling the status of women – as writers and intellectuals – with that of mother, as traditionally depicted in Italian society. Across the three texts, Rocca highlights how the notion of motherhood is questioned in different ways and from different perspectives by Romano, analysing the relationship between motherhood, creativity, writing, subjectivity and female identity in the light of the relationships between the author and her mother, son and grandson, and examining maternal representations from the point of view of the daughter, mother and grandmother respectively.

Michela Prevedello and Aureliana Di Rollo’s essays focus on a slightly later period and provide complementary studies of Oriana Fallaci’s 1975 text *Lettera a un bambino mai nato*. Prevedello looks at the work in the context of the 1970s women’s movement, showing how the search for a new way of being a mother (made difficult by social conditions) and the struggle to reconcile motherhood with autonomy and creativity are very much foregrounded by Fallaci. She emphasises that Fallaci’s pessimistic ending (miscarriage and death) perhaps indicates the impossibility of the protagonist’s ambitious aim. Di Rollo takes this reflection further in her comparative study, contrasting Fallaci’s work with Valeria Parrella’s *Lo spazio bianco* (2008). Thirty years on, Parrella questions once again to what extent a woman is able to reconcile her desire for a career and for independence with the demands of motherhood, and Di Rollo looks at how much has changed (or not) in Italian society to make that possible. In contrast to Fallaci, the outcome is considerably more optimistic, perhaps suggesting that in some respects at least “progress” of a kind has occurred in Italian society during the intervening years.

Although the “momoirs” studied by Marina Bettaglio once again question just how much “progress” has been made, referring to major issues such as work/life balance, the role of fathers and how mothers can continue to have a career, they do so in a humorous way and, concludes Bettaglio, fail to challenge in any serious way the social structures underpinning and influencing women’s place in Italian society. Certain conservative attitudes, assumptions and images – the working mother as supermum/superwoman, the unquestioned influence of “celebrity pregnancies” and media images on women’s expectations and their desire to “have it all and do it

all” – are left intact and even very serious topics (such as post-natal depression) are glossed over.

If tradition expected women to retire to the domestic sphere when they became mothers, an attitude strongly challenged by feminists, Bettaglio underlines that the dilemma is still not resolved and continues into the twenty-first century. In the same way, just as much energy has gone into gaining for women the right to contraception and abortion (that is, the right to choose when and if to be pregnant), so the right to give birth is now seen by many to be important, and women who encounter difficulty conceiving are having recourse to the relatively new option of IVF. This subject is tackled by Laura Lazzari, who considers two contemporary Italian novels published after legislation on assisted reproduction (one of the most restrictive in the world) came into force in 2004. *Confessioni di una aspirante madre* by Lisa Corva (2005) and Eleonora Mazzoni's *Le difettose* (2012) tell of the desperate and sometimes obsessive search for motherhood through IVF. The events narrated in the literary texts – the desire for pregnancy and the experience of repeated failure – are explored through interdisciplinary methodology, drawing on studies in the social sciences, in an attempt to investigate the longing for children expressed by the protagonists of the novels. Some theoretical issues related to the consequences of childlessness following fertility treatment, the path for the renegotiation of “normality” and the redefinition of women's female identity are also explored.

## REFUSAL / REJECTION

Under the heading of refusal and rejection, four papers look at texts published between 1945 and 2006 which consider reactions to motherhood ranging from doubt to disgust to infanticide. Fiammetta Di Lorenzo challenges essentialist literary interpretations of Paola Masino's *Nascita e morte della massaia* (1945), which see it as a response to the fascist regime's denaturalisation and mechanisation of the maternal body. In contrast, Di Lorenzo provides an alternative analysis of the novel, showing how it is closer to a materialist view of motherhood and of “women's issues.” Texts contemporary to Masino's, by Anna Banti (1942) and Laudomia Bonanni (unpublished manuscript), motivated by similar demystifying intentions, are also studied.

Laudomia Bonanni's later text, *Il bambino di pietra* (1979), provides the focus for Sara Teardo, who analyses how fear and disgust at the physical aspects of pregnancy develop, to the point where the foetus is perceived as an alien presence within the woman, a “stone baby” which the woman can neither accept nor expel. Through her self-analysis, the protagonist faces her extreme feelings with regards to motherhood in general and her own mother in particular, creating a new, symbolic type of motherhood with the next generation, a process which Teardo analyses with reference to Muraro's *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (1991).

Fear and disgust are once again key reactions to motherhood in the two texts written in different genres which Marianna Orsi studies: Elena Ferrante's novel *La figlia oscura* (2006) and Cristina Comencini's play *Due partite* (2006). Both works offer non-idealised representations of motherhood, free from any sentimentalism, focusing instead on the darker, disturbing aspects of maternity, with references to disgust at gestation and lactation, the animal component of the maternal function, the suffocating bond with children, the annihilation of women and the possible terrible consequences, ranging from depression to suicide. Orsi identifies in the two texts a similar symbolism around pregnancy and childbirth, a common vision of motherhood and a comparable approach to the resolution of the mother-woman conflict, not forgetting the influences of psychoanalysis and the idea of sexual difference.

Giusy Di Filippo meanwhile, takes refusal and rejection of motherhood to their ultimate end in analysing one of their most extreme expressions: infanticide. She proposes a reading of the play *From Medea – Maternity Blues* by Grazia Verasani (2004) that depicts motherhood that kills, but also suggests a possible route to salvation through renegotiation of the different meanings of motherhood and solidarity between women. With reference to Suzette Henke's definition of traumatic memories (2000), Di Filippo demonstrates how the protagonists'

behaviour results not only from conflicts between the model proposed by patriarchal society and the protagonists' refusal of its version of maternity, but also from the memory of the trauma caused by murder. Furthermore, with reference to Cavarero's theories on motherhood (2007), the author identifies for her women readers-spectators possible ways towards salvation, proposing a model which could liberate motherhood from the burden of the patriarchal symbolic order.

## CONCLUSION

Covering a period of about seventy years, analysing work in various genres (novels and plays but also blogs which subsequently became novels), referring back to key early texts such as Aleramo's and to the 1970s women's movement, but also tackling resolutely contemporary issues such as IVF and looking forwards to new possibilities such as a symbolic reworking of motherhood, these nine essays cover a lot of ground.

They reflect on a changing Italian society – the diminishing influence of a once-dominant Catholic Church and record low fertility rates – but also show quite clearly just how much has moved sideways rather than fundamentally changed – social norms and expectations of women continuing to be imposed, but now via the all-powerful media, and the negativity of “childlessness,” rather than the positivity of “childfreeness,” continuing to dominate the public discourse. In comparison to previous periods when women could not choose when or if to become pregnant and once pregnant could not choose a termination, they undoubtedly have greater autonomy and can now exert control over their own fertility, choose motherhood or non-motherhood, choose to have recourse to IVF or fashion their own symbolic version of maternity. Women's options have increased and broadened, and they can now envisage combining a successful career with motherhood, but social structures have not kept pace and in spite of all the feminist gains on contraception, abortion and divorce, “childcare” remains above all a “female” concern. Conflict between their identity as women and mothers and how to reconcile the two roles also continues to exist, as do serious questions around the work/life balance and the interaction between the domestic world and the world of work which are particularly acute for women (and especially Italian women).

As some of the articles here suggest, refusal and rejection of motherhood, either completely or at least in its traditional form, are now more easily realisable options, although as several authors indicate, and as we pointed out above, the pressure to “conform” has not gone away, it is simply more subtle and differently exerted. This shift from an explicit expectation of motherhood (Di Lorenzo, Prevedello, Rocca) to choice tempered with the expectation that the norm will nonetheless be adhered to (Bettaglio, Lazzari) is charted in this collection of articles. The authors also enable us to follow the sinuous path of “progress,” from the pre-women's movement days, through to new twenty-first-century reworkings of motherhood and what it might mean for women. Along that path we encounter depression and death (Orsi) but also, more optimistically, the emergence of new relations of trust and legacy between generations of women (Di Filippo, Di Rollo, Teardo) and all the opportunities they may open up.

We wish you a stimulating read and would like to close this introduction by thanking all the authors of these articles for their hard work and collaboration and all our referees who so generously gave of their time and expertise to help make this Special Issue possible.

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## EDITORS' BIOGRAPHIES

**Dr. Laura Lazzari** holds an MA and a PhD from the University of Lausanne and a Master of Studies in Women's Studies from Oxford University. She is currently on research leave at the Department of Italian at Georgetown University, where she is the recipient of an AAUW International Postdoctoral Fellowship, working on a project on Motherhood in contemporary Italian literature and culture.

She has taught at the Universities of Lausanne, Fribourg and Franklin in Switzerland, and at George Washington in the United States. Her book on Lucrezia Marinella's *Enrico; or Byzantium Conquered* appeared in 2010 and her co-edited volume on Swiss-Italian literature in 2015. In addition to this, she has published several articles on a wide range of subjects, and has presented papers at international conferences in Europe, Canada and the United States.

Her research focuses on autobiographies in the Renaissance period, women's writing in the Italian-speaking world, migrant literature, mothering studies and language acquisition.

**Dr. Joy Charnley** was formerly Lecturer in French at the University of Strathclyde (Glasgow) and has published books, edited volumes and articles on several Swiss women writers, including Anne-Lise Grobéty, Yvette Z'Graggen, Alice Rivaz and Janine Massard. She has also co-organised many conferences on women writers and on Switzerland, and is currently collaborating on a series in Glasgow entitled "Switzerland in Dialogue." Her recent publications include the co-edited volumes *As Time Goes By: Portraits of Age* (2013) and *Displaced Women: Multilingual Narratives of Migration in Europe* (2014).