

ADDRESSING THE LETTER:  
ITALIAN WOMEN WRITERS' EPISTOLARY FICTION

*This page intentionally left blank*

LAURA A. SALSINI

# Addressing the Letter

Italian Women Writers'  
Epistolary Fiction

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS  
Toronto Buffalo London

© University of Toronto Press Incorporated 2010

Toronto Buffalo London

www.utppublishing.com

Printed in Canada

ISBN 978-1-4426-4165-5



Printed on acid-free, 100% post-consumer recycled paper  
with vegetable-based inks.

Toronto Italian Studies

---

## Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Salsini, Laura A. (Laura Anne)

Addressing the letter : Italian women writers' epistolary fiction /  
Laura A. Salsini.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4426-4165-5

1. Epistolary fiction, Italian – History and criticism. 2. Italian fiction – Women authors – History and criticism. 3. Italian fiction – 19th century – History and criticism. 4. Italian fiction – 20th century – History and criticism. 5. Sex role in literature. 6. Women in literature. 7. Gender identity in literature. 8. Women and literature – Italy – History – 19th century. 9. Women and literature – Italy – History – 20th century. I. Title.

PQ4181.E65S35 2010 853.009'9287 C2010-901699-8

---

This book has been published with the aid of a grant from the University of Delaware.

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial assistance to its publishing program of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council.



Canada Council  
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts  
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL  
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

University of Toronto Press acknowledges the financial support for its publishing activities of the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP).

*To my parents, Paul and Barbara Salsini,  
and in memory of Nancy Tobias*

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Contents

---

*Acknowledgments* ix

Introduction 3

1 Love Letters 14

2 Literary Responses 45

3 Making Connections 71

4 Addressing Women 97

Postscript 142

*Notes* 147

*Works Cited* 175

*Index* 187

*This page intentionally left blank*



# Acknowledgments

---

This book was a joy to write, and not just because it allowed me to spend a few years reading other people's mail. I was fortunate to have both institutional and personal support throughout the researching and writing of this project.

A University of Delaware General Research Grant provided funds to begin my exploration of Italian women writers and their epistolary production. Dr Richard Zipser, Chair of the Foreign Languages and Literatures Department at UD, has been a staunch champion of this project from its inception.

Portions of this book have appeared in other publications, in modified forms. 'Rewriting the Risorgimento: Isabella Bossi Fedrigotti's *Amore mio uccidi Garibaldi*' appeared in *Forum Italicum* in 2008 (vol. 42) and 'Maraini Addresses Tarmaro: Revising the Epistolary Novel' was published in volume 78 of *Italica* in 2001. I am grateful to these periodicals for allowing me to reprint this material.

Ron Schoeffel at the University of Toronto Press has been a gracious and supportive editor. Other colleagues at UD, particularly Gretchen Bauer, Giuseppina Fazzone, Gabriella Finizio, Susan Goodman, Roberta Morrione, Vincenza Pastecchi, Riccarda Saggese, Monika Shafi, and Deborah Steinberger, have given me practical and personal assistance over the years. I thank Larry Baldassaro for his unwavering confidence in my work. Meredith Ray has been a wonderful sounding board for all matters epistolary.

Susan McKenna, Annette Giesecke, and Cindy Schmidt-Cruz are the best LWL ever; they never fail to inspire and energize me. Virginia Picchetti has read every word of this book at least twice and has offered

advice ranging from the literary to the sisterly – *tante tante grazie*. My parents, Paul and Barbara Salsini, also applied their journalistic skills to drafts of the manuscript; for that, and for their never-ending faith in me, I am so grateful. To Doug and John, who bring such joy to my life, I give you all my love.

ADDRESSING THE LETTER:  
ITALIAN WOMEN WRITERS' EPISTOLARY FICTION

*This page intentionally left blank*

# Introduction

---

Italian women writers have reinvigorated the modern epistolary novel, fashioning it as a site for examinations of female roles and experiences. The intersection between the epistolary structure and the discussion of the female figure generates trenchant social analysis of contemporary mores. This study analyses, for the first time, how these authors deployed the letter text to rigorously critique the assumptions – literary or social – governing female behaviours.

A study of the centuries-old epistolary narrative may seem an anomaly in our technology-driven world. Certainly the ever-greater use of electronic mail, text messages, and cell phones has changed the way we speak and write to each other. Indeed, John L. Brown writes that in the midst of these innovations the epistolary novel ‘perishes, unwept, unhonored, unsung, and largely unnoticed by the world at large’ (220). But it is precisely in the midst of this communication revolution that other, older forms of interaction begin to seem especially intriguing. Despite periodic predictions that the epistolary novel is obsolete, no longer suitable in a society where written interactions are both instantaneous and incessant, it continues to thrive.<sup>1</sup> Cultural and literary critics are studying this phenomenon by looking at both fictional and real epistolary exchanges, seeking in them a means to better understand contemporary concerns through the letters of those often left out of traditional historical accounts.

Several recent projects in Italy attempt to incorporate these lost voices into the national consciousness. Since 1984 the Archivio Nazionale di Pieve Santo Stefano in Arezzo has published diaries, memoirs, and unedited correspondences in order to create ‘una specie di banca della memoria’ (*Emilia: Le parole nascoste*, 10) [‘a type of memory bank’].<sup>2</sup> It

recently published the letters of a certain Emilia, an unhappily married Milanese woman, to Federico, a young soldier, written from September 1872 to October 1881. The letters describe their affair, their separation, and finally his suicide. In addition, the epistles examine, albeit briefly, the post-unification, pre-emigration struggles of Italy. Saverio Tutino, the editor of *Emilia: Le parole nascoste* (*Emilia: The Hidden Words*), suggests that these older epistolary works – fictional or real – can make connections with our contemporary lives: '[A]nche le cose di un secolo addietro si legano direttamente alla nostra vita' (10) ['Even the things from a century ago tie directly to our lives']. The epistolary builds bridges, as it were, to different political and historical moments.

Another epistolary project, taken from the same archive, focuses more specifically on female correspondents and their world. *La finestra, l'attesa, la scrittura: ragnatele del sé in epistolari femminili dell'800* (*The Window, the Waiting, the Writing: Webs of the Self in Female Epistolaries of the 1800s*), edited by Clotilde Barbarulli and others, is a collection of letters four women wrote to their betrothed or husbands between 1844 and 1903. These letters revolve around the traditional feminine concerns of that era: husband, children, and home. In these letters, female roles, culturally prescribed and confined to 'sorella-figlia-moglie-madre' (sister-daughter-wife-mother) were defined strictly in relation to others (80). But while these letters often espoused traditional roles, they also served as a means of creating an identity for the female correspondents: '[L]e donne comuni possono trovare, nella lettera amorosa, sia pure in mezzo a dubbi ed incertezze, l'unica possibilità di lasciare sulla carta e non solo nella trama dei ricami la dichiarazione: io esiste' (10) ['Women can find in the love letter, even in the midst of doubt and uncertainty, the only possibility of leaving behind on paper, and not just in their embroidery stitches, the declaration: I exist']. These letters were not intended for publication, but the very act of writing them served as a vehicle for self-expression, allowing their authors to articulate their own concerns and desires. By employing the presumably innocuous genre of the love letter, these women fashioned their own voices in a culture and an era that did not value female expression. In rescuing these texts from the dusty trunks of family attics, the editors of *La finestra* liberate these otherwise unknown women from anonymity. In the process, the socio-cultural fabric of late nineteenth-century Italy must be reconstructed to embrace the heretofore silenced voices recording female experiences.<sup>3</sup>

My examination of nineteenth- and twentieth-century epistolary

fiction by Italian women writers is triggered by this same desire to bear witness to these lost voices, and to see in these texts a connection between the literary codes and social injunctions that inform – and enforce – female roles and behaviours. The works I discuss demonstrate how these authors used the letter novel as a vehicle to illustrate, and often challenge, literary and social perceptions of women. The narrative structure becomes an integral part of this process, for through epistolary tenets – or a revision of them – these authors were able to communicate the poetics of their works to their readers through the connections inherent to the genre. Although some of the authors and texts studied here have received critical attention, my study is the first to systematically analyse the crossroads of genre and content in the works of these writers. Why did these women authors make use of this narrative structure, and how did they refashion it for their own female (if not always feminist) poetics?

Epistolary fiction has had a long and fruitful history across national literatures, illustrating the narrative structure's capacity to adapt throughout centuries of literary, socio-cultural, and political transformations. Perhaps the most famous early practitioner was Samuel Richardson, whose portrayals of persecuted heroines in *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747–8) set the tone for future letter novels.<sup>4</sup> In France, *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* (1669) with its mysterious origins was followed by Choderlos de Laclos's *Dangerous Liaisons* in 1782. Examples of early epistolary fiction by women include Aphra Behn's three-volume *Love Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684–7), Françoise de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* (1747), and Jane Austen's *Lady Susan* (published posthumously in 1871). Contemporary texts focus less on the traditional romantic plot and more on an exploration of female identity. Works such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986), and Jane Gardam's *The Queen of the Tambourine* (1991) recast the traditional format into a vehicle for a subjective female voice.

In Italy, the modern epistolary text has not received the same critical and systemic evaluation as in England, France, Germany, and the United States.<sup>5</sup> Rather, much work has been done on the rise of epistolary expression during the late medieval and Renaissance periods. During this time, such noted figures as St Catherine of Siena, Alessandra Macinighi Strozzi, and Arcangela Tarabotti used letters to discuss political, religious, and socio-cultural affairs. Other authors, including Vittoria

Colonna, Veronica Franca, and Isabella Andreini, examine in their letters familial, sentimental, and literary matters. Epistolary production for these women served as a valuable means of entering into a literary discourse with their male cohorts.

The focus of this study, however, is the epistolary *novel*, a tradition begun later in Italy than in other European countries. Thomas Beebee, in his study of the letter text in Europe from 1500 to 1850, has identified Ferrante Pallavicino's 1644 novel *Il Corriere svaligiato* (*The Ransacked Courier*) as the first fictional epistolary text written by an Italian.<sup>6</sup> There were a few other such Italian novels in the years that followed, but we must make a rather large leap to 1802 before the next successful epistolary novel is published: Ugo Foscolo's *Le ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (*The Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis*), modelled in part on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Letters of Young Werther* (1774) and *Julie, or The New Heloise* (1761), by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. But while other national literatures heavily featured epistolary production in the first half of the 1800s, Italian authors favoured instead historical novels, and only turned to other narrative structures in the later part of the century.<sup>7</sup>

As with other European countries, both male and female authors in Italy produced epistolary fiction. Giovanni Verga's 1871 novel *Storia di una capinera* (*Sparrow*) features a virtuous heroine who narrates, through her letters, a tale of forbidden love and forced enclosure within a convent. In Guido Piovene's modern response to Verga's novel, *Lettera di una novizia* (*Confessions of a Novice*) (1941), his protagonist is also forced to take religious vows, although she is decidedly an anti-heroine. More recently, Antonio Tabucchi's *Si sta facendo sempre più tardi: Romanzo in forma di lettera* (*It's Getting Later All the Time*) (2001) uses the epistolary format to unhinge 'le categorie del genere letterario e [altera] la divisione tra mondo reale e mondo fittizio' (Brizio-Skov, 668) ['the categories of literary genres and alter the division between the real world and the fictitious world']. Certainly a thorough examination of these and other texts would reveal how male authors interpret the letter novel and offer a rich contribution to our understanding of literary styles and canon formation.

The focus of this study is the modern epistolary text by Italian women writers. Despite the popular and critical success of letter novels by well-known male authors in Italy and other countries, the genre has historically been considered a 'female' genre, practised by and most suitable for women authors.<sup>8</sup> The letter novel did stem in part from the



tradition of letter writing, a practice that began, after all, as an intimate and often anti-literary expression of self – in other words, a practice that needed no particular or specialized education, as Ruth Perry points out. Because female letter writing historically revolved around matters of the heart, the male literary establishment posited that woman's very nature was inherently drawn to this practice. Women, then, were encouraged to participate in letter writing (as opposed to more challenging literary forms) since 'letter-writing had always been thought of as an accomplishment rather than an art' (Perry, 17). But when letter writing evolved into letter fiction, an interesting shift in critical assessment took place. Although early female-authored epistolary novels were often a popular success, they were speedily dispatched to a literary graveyard, for when the male critical establishment coupled women's writing with the epistolary mode it soon became devalued as a genre. Katharine Jensen, in her study of letter novels by French women writers, offers a succinct description of how perceptions of gender play into canon formation: the epistolary tradition 'fatally equates women's writing with letters; women's letters with unselfconsciousness, disorderly emotion; women's disorderly emotion with amorous suffering; and women's letters of suffering with nonliterary writing' (85).<sup>9</sup> Beebe also comments on this dichotomy: 'The letter is at once the most prominent and often-used literary genre considered suitable for women's voices and experience, and a sub-literary form to which they are condemned by the hierarchy of the genre' (105). What many of the critics condemning the epistolary format – and by extension, its practitioners – failed to recognize was how these women innovated the novel through their revision of the genre.

This book explores what these women writers did *within* the epistolary genre to challenge literary and social conventions, to find a voice or sense of identity, and to create an alternative to the male-constructed national canon. I take as my touchstone the work of Joanne Frye, who, while not studying specifically the epistolary text, does examine modern female-authored works written in the first person, a technique certainly analogous to the letter novel. She posits that an analysis of the parameters of the novel can lead to a radical reworking of both narrative and cultural conventions. Indeed, she writes, authors concerned with genre revisions do more than just challenge literary conventions, for 'to alter literary form is to participate in the process of altering women's lives' (33). The epistolary novels studied in the following chapters, with their open discussions of female experiences,

encourage such a process as they question hegemonic institutions and traditions in Italy.

Feminist literary criticism provides the theoretical foundation upon which I constructed my analyses of the modern epistolary texts, although not all the works in this study are feminist in approach or tone. In the larger sense, feminism is predicated on some of the same tenets of epistolarity: a commitment to dialogue and collaboration (among women) and an emphasis on self-expression. This common ground was highlighted in the 1999 text *Letters of Intent: Women Cross the Generations to Talk about Family, Work, Sex, Love and the Future of Feminism*. Here, the chapters are set up as conversations between two women, one an established figure within the women's movement and a second, younger one. In the introduction, the two editors also write letters to one another, reinforcing the notion that 'positive relationships across generations are possible and fruitful' (Bondoc and Daly, 1). One, Meg Daly, describes how the project benefited her personally: 'Our friendship has deepened considerably through our collaboration, which is a testament to the importance of female friendship, correspondence, and collaboration' (2). The other editor, Anna Bondoc, points to the inherently complex, impassioned, and often ambiguous nature of the epistolary text when she notes its correlation with feminism: 'After reading our manuscript for the umpteenth time, I am struck by a kind of beauty about the unruly, unwieldy, nonhomogeneous nature of the book' (7).<sup>10</sup>

Feminist criticism also allows us to shift the focus of the traditional narrative presentation of woman from object to subject, both intra- and extra-textually. As Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld points out in her essay on Dacia Maraini, 'Engaged in various representational strategies, from a subject position, women writers are rewriting the classic patriarchal masterplots, are transforming the rules of genre. Their chosen narratives, bound up with social identities and ideologies, are acts of resistance and of creativity' (9). While Diaconescu-Blumenfeld speaks specifically of the literary works produced during the Italian feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s, Anna Santoro believes the evolution of a distinct female point of view began in the nineteenth century. Those writers, she points out, introduced 'nella narrativa italiana una grossa novità, e cioè che la voce narrante è quella di una donna. Semplicemente. Portano esse le loro scritture come portano il volto, il corpo, che è corpo e volto di donna' (11) ['into Italian narrative an important innovation, and, put simply, that was the narrating voice of

a woman. They wear their writing as they wear their face, their body, which is the body and face of a woman'].

Chapter 1 begins with the first female practitioners of the modern letter novel in Italy, examining the traditional epistolary narrative, centred on the love plot. The Marchesa Colombi, Matilde Serao, and Sibilla Aleramo all wrote sentimental letter novels that simultaneously incorporated conventional epistolary tropes and challenged both narrative and genre expectations. I include as well a discussion of the first modern Italian epistolary novel published by a woman: Orintia Romagnuoli Sacratì's 1818 *Lettere di Giulia Willet* (*The Letters of Giulia Willet*).

Chapter 2 examines how Aleramo, Benedetta Cappa Marinetti, and Gianna Manzini used the letter novel to explore important literary debates in twentieth-century Italy. In the process, the issue of canon formation is challenged, as these authors deployed the epistolary as a means for significant literary experimentation.

Chapter 3 focuses on how Natalia Ginzburg and Alba de Céspedes address the ethos of post-war Italy. Here, the correspondences contained in the epistolary novel lead to discussions on personal and socio-political commitment and communication. Both Ginzburg and de Céspedes deploy the letter text as a means to counter what they saw as a culture of widespread and debilitating personal and social alienation.

The final chapter looks at overtly feminist texts published during the height of the women's movement in Italy. Here Oriana Fallaci and Dacia Maraini energize the epistolary text by using it as a forum to discuss the cultural and political goals of the feminist movement. In contrast, Susanna Tamaro returns to a more conservative position, both in her novel's structure and in its poetics. Finally, Isabella Bossi Fedrigotti's epistolary historical novel reimagines a female voice within the male-centred chronicle of the Risorgimento.

Narrative structure was a fundamental component in the literary production of all of these authors. If we look at their works, we see an astonishing variety of genres: novels (feminist, Gothic, sentimental, *verista*, autobiographical, historical), short stories, poetry, critical essays, journalism pieces, travel writings, children's literature, diaries, memoirs, dramas, screenplays, and even visual art. They deliberately chose the narrative format that would best illustrate a particular thematic concern, whether it is the choral structure of de Céspedes's *Nessuno torna indietro* (*There's No Turning Back*) to reveal both female solidarity and the individual stories of young schoolgirls or Maraini's monologue-play *Dialogo di una prostituta con un suo cliente* (*Dialogue between a*

*Prostitute and Her Client*), which allows a marginalized figure her own space and voice. As this study demonstrates, the epistolary framework itself allowed these artists to focus on gender and genre.

Although these authors were (and in some cases continue to be) successful, productive writers, because of their sex, their works were often relegated to a secondary status among their contemporaries. The earlier, nineteenth-century writers such as the Marchesa Colombi and Serao were typically compared to each other, or to other 'lady authors' of their time, despite their active involvement in the literary and journalistic milieu and their vast literary production. Aleramo, who flouted both literary and social conventions, faced criticism that focused more on her amorous liaisons than on her works. The writers of the 1960s and 1970s, on the other hand, were generally grouped together under the label 'feminist,' despite often significant differences in style and content. Manzini generally escaped being pigeonholed as a 'woman' writer, perhaps because there were few women writing the *prose d'arte* for which she became known. Ginzburg, too, perhaps because of her firm disavowal of being categorized as a woman writer, was typically judged on her merits alone.

In this work, I, too, weigh these authors and their works against each other. But my approach is not to further banish them to a literary ghetto, reducing their achievements to a chapter – at best – in surveys of Italian literature.<sup>11</sup> Instead, by reading them *through* each other and in a rough chronological order, we can recognize more clearly their role in the creation of a literary genealogy. By examining how these women authors revised and revitalized the epistolary novel, we can finally acknowledge and pay tribute to their unique contribution to the world of letters.

Before delving into the works themselves, a discussion of the nature of letter novels is in order. Pinning down the specific characteristics of an epistolary text is an elusive process, especially in modern works. Ana Castillo, for example, in her *The Mixquiahuala Letters* (1986), completely destabilizes narrative structure in the epistolary by inviting readers to craft their own texts by selecting from three different tables of contents. Castillo's work points to the predicament of discussing an epistolary text: how to define it. Structurally, it is a work revolving around letters, but that basic framework includes much variation. An epistolary text can be composed of a one-, two-, or multi-sided correspondence.