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## Guglielma e Maifreda: Storia di un'eresia femminista by Luisa Muraro

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often caricatured as Don Giovanni, bumbling bankers and aloof aristocrats, come to be assimilated into society, assuming their designated roles usually at the cost of their sexuality.

In the study's second half, Landy turns her attention to the historical film and the comedies. These films, which include some of the more well-known pieces of the era such as *Scipione Africano* and *Quattro passi fra le nuvole*, are appropriately interpreted as an attempt at a creation of popular culture, "clothed in the language of myth, fantasy and dream." Her assertion that many of these films are self-reflexive in that they turn the camera on themselves and are aware of their status as entertainment, is a new angle which could serve as a point of departure for future studies.

The final chapter examines the family melodramas of the early forties. It provides historical closure as well as delineates and reinforces some of the main themes that run throughout the films discussed. These films, somewhat akin to the "film noir" in the United States and elsewhere, are more critical and psychological, dealing with obsessive and deviant behavior and not striving toward resolution of conflict or conversion of the principal characters. Landy's analysis of Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* is perceptive and persuasive. Most critics tend to identify it as the turning point between Fascist cinema and Neorealism, and it is generally given the privileged position of being grouped with the latter movement. However, while it is definitely a precursor of Neorealism, as Landy states, "it is better understood, then, without denigrating its achievements, as part of a continuum, an undercurrent of opposition that finally realized itself in the post-war era" (328).

*Fascism in Film* is a solid introduction to a traditionally understudied

area of Italian cinema. Its bibliography is extremely rich and an excellent place for any novice to begin his or her study of the cinematic history of the period. Consistently maintaining a global perspective, Landy relates the films discussed to other foreign cinemas and cites their influence on Italian film production and marketing. The plot summaries, which to some scholars might appear excessively lengthy, serve a precise function: they introduce the reader to unknown films, since many are not readily available in this country. With *Fascism in Film*, Marcia Landy has made a welcome contribution to the sorely needed reappraisal of the forgotten cinema during the Fascist years in Italy.

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***Guglielma e Maifreda: Storia di un'eresia femminista***

*By Luisa Muraro.*

*Milano: La Tartariga, 1985*

Luisa Muraro is without question one of the leading feminists in Italy today. She has produced philosophical discourses on the nature of sexual difference and virtually introduced Luce Irigaray into Italy, translating the principal texts of this foremost French feminist. So Muraro's historical work on the Guglielmite heresy of the thirteenth century warrants study not only from Medieval scholars, feminist historians, and literary critics, but also historians of the body, sexuality, and gender.

More traditional scholarship has focused either on delineating its similarities and dissimilarities with other

heretical movements of the period or has centered on the legends of its more "depraved" aspects. Luisa Muraro's contribution, *Guglielma e Maifreda*, corrects these more traditional analyses of the heresy which elide what she believes are its particularly feminist components. Muraro's aim is to "know and make known the facts and ideas which had Guglielma as their center" (9) by concentrating on the Guglielmite's feminist notion that "the renewal of Christian society [would come] from the female sex" (8).

Muraro clearly belongs to the Italian tradition of New Social Historians which would include also Carlo Ginzburg, Giulia Calvi, and Piero Camporesi. Their counterparts in the field of literary studies in the United States would be the New Historicists. These scholars are chiefly concerned with the ways in which literary and historical discourses are imbricated in social fields and systems of signification. In addition, these scholars often use non-traditional primary source materials—such as criminal or inquisitorial documents—to enrich our understanding of these periods by suggesting new ways in which to regard historical subjects.

Muraro's innovation is that she employs New Historicism with a feminist perspective. She constructs the social and historical world of the Guglielmites by using the inquisitorial records of the trial against them in 1300 (in actuality the third and final trial). Muraro begins with a detailed account of Guglielma's life and, after her death in 1281, the gradual development of the Guglielmite congregation. She then moves to the trial proceedings, allowing the Guglielmites to speak for themselves, and yet stressing the suggestive strategies of the inquisitors and the probable use of torture. Finally, she analyzes the Guglielmite doctrine, emphasizing both its

orthodox and heretical elements.

The Guglielmite doctrine was predicated on three theses which appear to be closest to Guglielma's original teachings: the salvation of non-Christians, the physical consubstantiality of Christ and Guglielma in the Holy Spirit, and the necessity of the female sex for the salvation of humanity (28). Two members of the congregation, Andrea Saramita and Sister Maifreda da Pirovano, developed and elaborated this complex of beliefs. Andrea Saramita believed Sister Maifreda would be Pope of a new Church following the resurrection and ascension of Guglielma. In public Sister Maifreda promoted the cult of the Holy Spirit and preached the Christian doctrine and Guglielma's sanctity, while in private she taught that Guglielma was God and the Holy Spirit who came to bring salvation to those outside the Church, and that through Guglielma the female sex has an active role in the apostolic mission. Moreover, she blessed hosts, administered communion, and received kisses on her hands and feet, the latter an effect of the belief that she was Guglielma's vicar on earth.

It is in the analysis of the feminist component of the heresy that we note the New Historicist tendency to employ semiotic techniques in their analyses. Muraro cogently argues that the Guglielmites performed a feminist re-reading of this passage in *Genesis*: "God created human beings in his image; God created them male and female" (*Genesis* 1: 27). In short, they interpreted these words to mean: first, that God, being male and female, had to be incarnate in a man (Christ) and a woman (Guglielma); and second, that the redemptive passion of God would only be completed through Guglielma's passion and death. Muraro skillfully reconstructs their radical reinterpretation of this biblical narra-



tive in much the same spirit as Carlo Ginzburg, whose Menocchio of *The Cheese and The Worms*, much to the inquisitors' astonishment, read "orthodox" texts in "unorthodox" ways. And yet Muraro's Guglielmites do not simply read this text in a subversive manner; crucially, they read it in a feminist one.

Muraro's primary interest is the feminist nature of the Guglielmite doctrine, which was central for all its members, and its ultimate meaning for Christian theology and philosophy. She believes the inquisitors avoided the theological question of sexual difference in relation to the incarnation of God and instead concentrated on the tenet of Guglielma's divinity and on the "unorthodox" sacerdotal functions performed by Maifreda in order to reveal and condemn the heresy as quickly as possible (138).

This "elision" by the inquisitors also appears to have informed the majority of scholarly work on the Guglielmite heresy. The recent analysis by Stephen E. Wessley has stressed the Guglielmites' alleged desire "to establish a new church ruled by a female pope and female cardinals." Undoubtedly, Maifreda was perceived as a threat to male ecclesiastical authority, power, and knowledge, for she was, in effect, a female priest. And yet Muraro believes this assertion is attributable only to Andrea Saramita. More importantly, she stresses the non-hierarchical nature of the doctrine: the Guglielmites believed that Guglielma symbolized the non-hierarchical "true" Church (134), where the subordination of one sex to the other—be it female to male or male to female—would no longer be operative. Muraro also emphasizes that even in Saramita's vision of the earthly Church, men were not necessarily excluded from its ranks. Moreover, Wessley's prioritization of the "fe-

male" element of the heresy can obscure its truly "feminist" ones.

No doubt the book will be open to the charge of "anachronism." And yet Muraro correctly maintains that there are different historical forms of feminism with varying notions of equality depending on the particular socio-cultural context. She believes that there are different historical expressions of the feminist tenet that refuses the subordination of the female sex to the male sex. And she persuasively argues that for the Guglielmite the refusal of subordination was expressed "as the need for a direct relationship between God and the female sex, one unmediated by the male sex" (9). Furthermore, I would add that the absence of the concept "feminism" in the Middle Ages in no way prevents both consciousness of socially-constructed differences between the sexes, which Muraro convincingly manifests, as well as conceptions of notions of empowerment.

*Guglielma e Maifreda* is a rich and perceptive analysis where Muraro is able to maintain a careful blend of feminist, historical, and semiotic perspectives. She is sensitive to the complexity of the Guglielmite belief-system and its often conflictive and contradictory nature. Muraro's suggestive analyses should stimulate us to probe deeper into the multiplicity of meanings she has revealed. In particular, her provocative insights on the female body and magic deserve further attention. It is a pleasure, and indeed an honor, to introduce Luisa Muraro, one of Italy's foremost feminist scholars, to the English-speaking world.

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