

Pagliario, Annamaria, and Brian Zuccala, eds. Luigi Capuana:
Experimental Fiction and Cultural Mediation in
Post-Risorgimento Italy

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Pagliaro, Annamaria, and Brian Zuccala, eds. *Luigi Capuana: Experimental Fiction and Cultural Mediation in Post-Risorgimento Italy*. Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2019. Pp. 323. ISBN 9788864539164.

Though Capuana is mainly known as a major contributor to Italian *Verismo*, he did not adhere faithfully and entirely to only one literary movement. Annamaria Pagliaro and Brian Zuccala's *Luigi Capuana* presents a collection of essays that aim to analyze the corpus of the Sicilian author by surveying different aspects of his writings. As an experimentalist writer, his bibliography includes *verista* novels, short stories involving psychopathological cases, an anti-naturalist novel, idealist experiments, eclectic writings, and fairy tales for children (9). The volume not only provides new viewpoints for how one should study a complex writer like Capuana, but it also demonstrates, in its concluding essay, an example of how Digital Humanities can be an innovative way to research literature.

The first section, entitled *Cultural Mediation in Post-Unification Italy: Constructing Socio-Literary Identities*, deals with the role of Capuana as an important figure, both as a writer and critic, in the Italian *fin de siècle*. This era saw rapid changes in the literary movements of Post-Risorgimento Italy. Paul Barnaby opens with a re-examination of the parallelism that critics such as Croce saw between *Giacinta's* author and Doctor Fellini, the male protagonist of the novel. Many Capuanian scholars consider the *medico-filosofo* as the author's mouthpiece for his views on science. In his analysis, Barnaby observes the complexity of the narrative strategies employed by Capuana, as well as the author's reluctance in "reconciling positivist and idealist views of the psyche." (32) Salvina Monaco's contribution, at times through comparison with Giovanni Verga, pays particular attention to Capuana's portrayal of the Sicilian peasant society after the unification of Italy. She highlights the *questione meridionale* and how it was observed and dealt with by the political groups and by the *veristi* while emphasizing how Capuana's view of the matter differed from Verga. Annamaria Pagliaro's contribution to the volume recognizes the Sicilian writer as a militant critic of classical literary traditions. According to Capuana, the time had come for contemporary Italian literature to unbind itself from any "[...] subservience to patriotic and other political or nationalistic causes [...]" (66), thus allowing for the art to evolve freely, in order for it to better represent contemporary human thought. The essay also examines Capuana's role as a literary critic, who strived for modernization, stating that critics must be forces that encourage artistic creativity. Similar to Modena, Anita Virga's study focuses on the portrayal of Sicilian people in the post-colonial period. She

analyzes Capuana's position with regards to the colonization of Sicily. This is of particular interest given the author's inevitable and untenable position as one who was from the conservative, pro-unification class and, simultaneously, was involved in preserving Sicilian culture.

In the next section, *Gender and (Meta)Literature*, Ambra Carta discusses the fascination of Capuana with photography. In his attempt to the aestheticization of his characters, the author saw in photography a tool that preserved a moment of reality while being a duplicate of that moment. Thus, it can be used to manipulate people's imagination. Edwige Comoy Fusaro's essay is a psychoanalytic reading of the novel *Profumo*. Comoy Fusaro maintains that, while the title of the book alludes to a story with a female protagonist, the main character is Patrizio and not Eugenia. She, together with other female characters, is a metaphorical representation of the general dysfunctionality of the society. It is noteworthy how female characters are the central figures in Capuana's literary laboratory. To elaborate on this, Lara Michelacci explains how the author experimented with the creation of female characters in various ways. According to Michelacci, Capuana presents us with a narrative that goes beyond our usual perception of reality with his use of illusion and hallucination in *Profili delle donne*, as well as the hysteric conversion of the protagonist in *Profumo*. Symbolism, allegory, self-reflexivity and female-driven plot all reappear in Brian Zuccala's contribution, which surveys one of Capuana's least studied pieces: *La Sfinge*. Zuccala argues that the novel, inspired by Hegelian symbolism, represents three components for the author: "*riflessione, fantasia e immaginazione*" (171).

The last section, *Natural, Superhuman, Fantastic and Digital*, deals with further evolution in Capuana's writing. His extensive involvement in writing fairy tales for children is the focal point of Alberto Carli's investigation in the opening essay of this section. Christina Petraglia's contribution then shifts the reader's attention to the elements of science fiction present in the author's short stories. To do this, Petraglia first analyzes *Creazione*, the story of a narcissist scientist who creates his ideal woman out of atoms and particles in the air, and then *L'incredibile esperimento*, the tale of a scientist who uses electricity to inseminate his virgin daughter artificially. The scientific conception is regarded as incestuous rape since it denotes "an assault on a non-consenting female body" (220). In addition to futuristic scientific ideology, Capuana involved magical elements in his short stories, as well. As Gabriele Scalessa points out, to the author magic and science were inseparable, as magic was ultimately considered by him as a stimulant towards scientific discovery — thus, making possible what was previously impossible. These

characteristics of Capuana's ideology resonate in Mario Tropea's contribution. To conclude the collection, Simon Musgrave and Brian Zuccala provide results of their studies, using techniques made possible by Digital Humanities.

This collection of essays beautifully provides a wide range of topics in the study of the literary corpus of Luigi Capuana. Some of the essays are unique in their approach and lay the path for further research on the topic at hand. Musgrave and Zuccala's data analysis using Digital Humanities is definitely an inspirational methodology for the study of 19th-Century Italian literature.

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Valentina Sturli. *Estremi occidenti. Frontiere del contemporaneo in Walter Siti e Michel Houellebecq*. Milano: Mimesis, 2020. Pp. 250. ISBN 8857565483.

Il libro di Valentina Sturli ha un duplice merito: quello di analizzare nel dettaglio gli strumenti retorici e i contenuti ideologici di due dei più importanti scrittori del contemporaneo, Michel Houellebecq e Walter Siti; e soprattutto quello di prenderli in considerazione insieme, e di metterli in relazione. *Estremi occidenti* (impresiosito da una prefazione di Emanuele Zinato) offre uno studio rigoroso dell'opera di due dei più influenti *immoralisti* della narrativa contemporanea, evidenziandone per la prima volta i notevoli punti di contatto. Ad accomunare Siti e Houellebecq è, nel lavoro di Sturli, una tendenza retorica al paradosso e all'ambiguità (pure diversamente declinata), e la marcata dimensione saggistica del loro lavoro; e attraverso una serrata analisi stilistica e retorica (che poggia sulle solide basi della ricchissima bibliografia esistente su questi autori), Sturli smonta il pregiudizio che vorrebbe i due scrittori (e Houellebecq in particolare) genericamente reazionari, per offrirne una lettura complessa e ricca di sfumature.

Il libro è diviso in due parti, dedicate rispettivamente a Houellebecq e a Siti, corredate da un'introduzione e da una conclusione comparate. Il primo capitolo della parte dedicata a Houellebecq si concentra sulle strategie retoriche di reticenza e iperbole nell'autore — quell'oscillazione tra distacco e parossismo familiare a chiunque abbia avuto occasione di leggerlo. La tesi di Sturli (suffragata qui e altrove da una grande quantità di esempi testuali) è che l'estrema polarizzazione delle posizioni ideologiche di Houellebecq, in cui tanto la *pars destruens* quanto la *pars construens* appaiono irrimediabilmente partigiane, sbrigative e inutile e sono