



## From Quill to Mouse: Digitizing the ‘Woman of Letters’ 1861-1922

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**Abstract:** This article describes a project in Italian Digital Women’s Studies, In-visiblewomen.org, which is currently being developed in collaboration with our two universities, and consists of an interpretive, thematic website on the material culture of Italian female intellectuals between 1861 and 1922. We envision In-visiblewomen.org as a tool that facilitates the investigation of women’s agency in promoting social change and the interconnections between women writers’ material culture, their private space, their access to the public sphere and the impact of the new media revolution on women’s social status. Unlike the majority of existing digital projects on women writers, ours is not only a digitized text-bank or a mere collection of bio-bibliographical data. Rather, it will be a multi-layered, interpretive platform stemming from the expert contribution of scholars in the field. Our time boundaries comprise the period between Italian unification (1861) and the beginning of the fascist era (1922). Compared to other historical periods (the Renaissance and the fascist and post-fascist decades, for example), this highly transformative era for women’s cultural production and consumption has inexplicably generated less scholarly attention. Using a commissioned oil painting representing a late nineteenth century woman writer’s virtual study as interface, this project will be the first of its kind in the field of Italian Women Studies. Each object in this ideal study (pen, ink bottle, letters, magazines etc.) will be clickable and will lead to an encyclopedia-type entry. Through the painting, users will be able to access two searchable databases organized hierarchically and interconnected through tagging: a themes database, and an authors database.

### History of the Project

As Italian Women’s Studies scholars committed to collaboration and exchange of ideas, and concerned with finding ways in which our (and other scholars’) research can have an impact beyond the academic community, we have often remarked how books, articles, and public presentations are not enough to accomplish this task. Digital tools have already done a lot to bring scholarly conversations about women out of the narrow boundaries of traditional methods of dissemination. The Modern Language Association, among others, has been promoting scholarly collaboration in the humanities through the ever-growing MLA Commons. Inspired by this endeavor, and by a range of existing websites about British and American women writers,

we realized that our research on turn-of-the-twentieth century Italian women could very well lend itself to an original digital interpretive database.

Our specific field of expertise – the works of little-known Italian female intellectuals active in Post-Unification Italy – is under-studied. These works are confined to (often) hard to reach libraries and small archives. We realize that this is one of the reasons why many scholars of Italian Women Studies ignored this portion of Italian literary production. Our project will bring this hidden world out of the margins and will be a repository of knowledge for everyone interested in the history of women's access to the public sphere (in Italy as well as transnationally) in the period under consideration. This is how we started thinking about an interpretive website that could address some of the above-mentioned problems and thus decided to create a collaborative, expandable network: In-visiblewomen.org.

### **Description of the Project**

In-visiblewomen.org consists of an interpretive, thematic website on the material culture of Italian female intellectuals in late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Our goal is to investigate women's agency in promoting social change and the interconnections between women writers' material culture, their private space, their access to the public sphere, and the impact of the new media revolution on women's social status. Far from being 'just' an archive, the website will function as both a database and an interpretive tool.

Unlike the majority of existing digital projects on women writers, ours will not be a digitized text-bank or a mere collection of bio-bibliographical data. Rather, it is going to be a multi-layered, interpretive platform with the expert contribution of scholars in the field. Moreover, we envision the website becoming a useful teaching tool that will foster mentored undergraduate research and the development of courses on Women's Studies and the material culture of Italian female intellectuals, which can interact with the website data, increase it, and further develop it.

At this initial stage, our time boundaries comprise the period between Italian unification (1861) and the beginning of the fascist era (1922).<sup>1</sup> These two milestones encompass a time of important social change for Italian women when their increased visibility in literary circles, thanks to the development of the printing press (with magazines, periodicals, and even publishers supportive of female intellectuals), which favored their entrance in mainstream culture. Additionally, new laws on education,<sup>2</sup> and more relaxed social customs allowed for new roles for women in the public sphere. Novelists and poets, but also sociologists, historians, art historians, journalists and activists had, for the first time, a visible place on the national cultural stage. Later, World War I contributed to women's emancipation and cemented their new role in society.

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<sup>1</sup> We are hoping to be able to expand our time boundaries at a later stage. For the time being, we are concentrating on our specific area of expertise.

<sup>2</sup> On matters of women's education in Italy, see Simonetta Soldani's evergreen *L'educazione delle donne*. This book includes, among others, chapters by Carmela Covato and Annarita Buttafuoco. More recent publications include Joyce Goodman's *Girls' Secondary Education in the Western World: From the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*.

Needless to say, Mussolini's rise to power was followed by a number of setbacks for ordinary women. And yet some female intellectuals managed to navigate the complex fascist system and build a lasting career (for instance, Anna Franchi, Paola Masino, Sibilla Aleramo, Benedetta Cappa). In the past thirty years, the two fascist decades generated a substantial body of research in the field of Italian Women and Gender Studies both in Italy and in the English and French speaking world. Curiously, the previous sixty years have received significantly less scholarly attention. Our research and our Digital Humanities project aim to fill this gap.

Ever since Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* appeared in 1929, scholars have addressed women's domesticity and private space, producing a steady flow of studies on this topic. This was mostly in French and Anglo-American scholarship, with illuminating and fruitful results. Decades later, Michel Foucault's reflections on space and its relationship with power sparked a significant interest in spatial analysis,<sup>3</sup> although not necessarily with reference to women's private space. Italian Studies are still lagging behind: few critical readings exist, mostly in sociology, anthropology, architecture, or Foucauldian philosophy. The rare investigations of private literary space in Italy are often dedicated to non-Italian authors (among them, the Brönte sisters and Jane Austen).<sup>4</sup> When it comes to women's personal space, exceptions include Daniela Gagliani and Mariuccia Salvati's *Donne e spazio nel processo di modernizzazione* and Gisella Bassanini's work.<sup>5</sup> But there is still too little written on women writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and their space in Italy, brief asides like Martha King's book on Grazia Deledda notwithstanding. We hope that In-visiblewomen.org can become the missing piece of a transnational critical jigsaw puzzle that does not yet fully include Italy.

In-visiblewomen.org's design will shape its content to ensure a strong interpretive component. The website is going to be structured into three main sections:

1. a virtual study, a visual tool that provides access to the material culture of writing for a nineteenth century Italian female intellectual;
2. a searchable author database;
3. a searchable theme database.

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<sup>3</sup> In January 2012, a new Italian journal, «Materiali foucaultiani», devoted its first issue to this topic (<http://www.materialifoucaultiani.org>).

<sup>4</sup> We are referring to, among others, Velia Iannella's *Gli spazi oscuri della metropoli. Un viaggio misterioso nell'immaginario di Oscar Wilde; Marcel Proust. Proust e lo spazio*; Fiorentini and Ceserani's *Raccontare e descrivere: lo spazio nel romanzo dell'Ottocento*; Amalfitano and Innocenti's *Scene, itinerari, dimore. Lo spazio nella narrativa del '700* and Ginevra Bompiani's *Lo spazio narrante: Jane Austen, Emily Brönte, Sylvia Plath*.

<sup>5</sup> See Bassanini's *Tracce silenziose dell'abitare. La donna e la casa*.

## 1. The Virtual Study.



Using the detailed image of a virtual home office as interface, we intend to bring the hidden reality of nineteenth century women's writing to visibility. We commissioned art historian John Varriano<sup>6</sup> to produce an oil painting. This painting (see picture) reproduces an ideal late nineteenth century Italian study. The goal of this feature is twofold: on the one hand, it disseminates factual and interpretive knowledge about material aspects of women's writing; on the other, it functions as a visual pedagogical tool, which gradually and inductively introduces students and scholars to the multi-layered intellectual world of a late nineteenth century woman of letters.

Each object will be clickable and serve as a means of access into historical and artifactual knowledge. For instance, clicking on the ink bottle on the desk will lead to an encyclopedia-type entry on ink varieties, popular colors, and their meaning, history of ink production, and links to specialized websites. It will also provide scholarly information on types of ink preferred by the authors we examine: Jolanda, for example, favored violet ink, and so do her intellectual female characters. Hence, every time she develops a character with this feature, we know that she is projecting herself into her literary creation.

We see the writer's room as a locus of intimacy, but also, and foremost, as the place from which communication with the external world irradiates through reading and writing. In other words, this space is the fulcrum of a large network of interactions that involves women as well as men. Transcending gender boundaries, it reveals aspects of the intellectual panorama of the time that would otherwise be impossible to capture. Although private, objects in this virtual room constitute the *passé-partout* that opened the door to women's participation in the public sphere.<sup>7</sup> They are the precursors to today's digital tools, from email to social networks.

<sup>6</sup> Emeritus Professor of Art History, Mount Holyoke College.

<sup>7</sup> The bibliography on private and public sphere is extensive. Some relevant studies for the period under consideration include Gagliani and Salvati's *La sfera pubblica femminile: percorsi di storia delle donne in età contemporanea*; Joan B. Landes' *Feminism, the Private and the Public* and Jean B. Elshtain's *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in social and Political Thought*.

Many women writers were confined in provincial settings, and yet – or maybe because of this – they understood (much more than it is commonly assumed) the importance of connecting with the external world, of debate, of communication. They were looking for access, for a place in mainstream culture. As marginalized subjects, today they would have been major consumers of social networks (Facebook, twitter, e-books, e-journals, blogs) and mobile devices. During their lifetime, they were aided by the extraordinary proliferation of newspapers and magazines brought forward by the technological advancement of the printed media. These new technologies, paired with an efficient postal service, helped women to manage to open a breach in a world that was until then closed to them.

It is through the ownership of the tools of the trade that these women became writers. We carefully selected the objects included in this virtual office. More than just objects, they are meant to be clusters of meaning that embody these writers' persona.

Here follows a list:

- Furniture in the room: a desk with a chair; a bookshelf; a locked bookshelf; a small table; a chaise longue; a sewing basket; a window; a door.
- Objects: ink well; pen; paper knife; a magnifying glass; calling cards; hourglass; magazines; a notebook; writing paper; flowers; a teacup; a globe.
- On the walls: a map of Italy; a portrait of Sappho; lamps.

For instance, clicking on the stack of magazines will open a new window onto the world of (women's) periodicals. A female intellectual of the time would have read the most prominent literary magazines (*Il Marzocco*, *Nuova Antologia*, *Natura ed Arte*) together with magazines for women (*La donna*, *Regina*, *Margherita*, *Cordelia*, *La rivista per le signorine*). She would have been both a reader and a contributor with articles, rubrics, short stories, poetry. Last but not least, she would have been active in these magazines' 'Letters to the Editor', a section that often turned into a venue for debate, challenges, and fiery exchanges that look forward to today's 140-character tweets. Clicking on the locked bookshelf will open a page with information on 'forbidden' books, such as Gabriele D'Annunzio's works, French novels, and other books deemed not suitable for women.

One cannot address *fin de siècle* women writers without addressing the controversial issue of identity construction. It was through careful self-representation in their own writings that women controlled part of this process. Hence, our inclusion of an object belonging to an intellectual woman's domestic sphere (the sewing basket) in our virtual study. The basket has a double function: first of all, it is a reminder of a woman's 'other', less transgressive life, her daily reality as a daughter/wife/sister/mother. At the same time, it is also a gateway into the problematic dualism of domestic vs. public life, private vs. public sphere. Sewing, knitting, crochet, embroidery are frequent topics of women's writing. Clicking on the sewing basket will open a window to a page with quotes from fictional and non-fictional works, in which our authors discuss the merits of domestic life. This section will include, to quote a few examples, Emma Boghen Conigliani's profiles of women intellectuals in *La donna nella vita e nell'opera di Giacomo Leopardi* (*Women in Giacomo Leopardi's Life and Works*, 1898) and Sfinge's 1912 *Elogio dell'ago e della pentola* (*In Praise of Needles and Cooking Pots*).

## 2. The searchable author database.

On the wall is a portrait of Greek poet Sappho by J. F. Cazenave. We chose this particular portrait since Cazenave was a 19th-century printmaker whose works would have been available and affordable at the time. Clicking on Sappho's portrait, users will encounter a list of featured authors. While it may be surprising to some to find a portrait of a Greek writer in an Italian website, it should be stressed that, by the nineteenth century, Sappho had become an icon of liberated women writing.

Sappho's portrait will serve as an entry to a section of the website where authors can be fully explored. Our initial list of women writers comprises the following authors: Mara Antelling (Anna Piccoli Menegazzi, 1854-1904), Ida Baccini (1850-1911), Emma Boghen Conigliani (1868?-1956?), Willy Dias (Fortuna Morpurgo, 1872-1856), Anna Franchi (1867-1954), Evelyn Franceschi Marini (1864?-1920), Elda Gianelli (1856-1921), Jolanda (Maria Majocchi Plattis, 1864-1916), Cesarina Lupati (1877-1957), Mantea (Gina Sobrero, 1863-1912), Neera (Anna Radius Zuccari, 1846-1918), Guido da San Giuliano (Bianca Belinzaghi, 1861-1943), Sfinge (Eugenia Codronchi Argeli, 1865-1934), Flavia Steno (Amelia Osta Cottini, 1877-1946), Anna Vertua Gentile (1850-1926), Annie Vivanti (1866-1942).

We chose these authors because they are under-represented and (with few exceptions) almost unknown in the universe of Italian women's writing, unlike Sibilla Aleramo, Matilde Serao, Grazia Deledda, Marchesa Colombi, whose works and profiles can be easily traced online and in libraries and archives. In spite of their being ignored for almost a century, we believe that our authors' intellectual profile is highly representative of the female cultural panorama of the period under consideration in more than one field: sociology, books of conduct, journalism, literary criticism, children's literature, science, religious studies and, of course, fiction and poetry. We also believe that these writers prepared the ground for future women writers. Although forgotten, their influence on future women writers cannot be underestimated.

However, we must stress, once again, that ours is not simply a rescue operation. Our goal is not just to save the above-mentioned names from oblivion. We want to bring the work of these women to the surface because it is impossible to fully understand women's contribution to the national intellectual debate if we concentrate on those few names that are included in anthologies and literary histories, whose works have been re-published (Sibilla Aleramo, again, is a typical example).

## 3. The searchable themes database.

Clicking on the large bookshelf, users will be able to access the theme database. Through an original thematic approach, In-visiblewomen.org allows for effective interdisciplinary and intertextual mapping. As Jacqueline Wernimont and Julia Flanders point out, making invisible women writers visible by grouping their biographies and works in a website is not enough to make women's writing matter ("Feminism in the Age of Digital Archives: The Women Writers Project", 426). We believe that digital tools paired with effective methodology can significantly help resolve this issue: a reader (or a scholar) unaware of the existence of a particular author or work could cross paths with that name or title simply by using our website. This is how our

thematic approach comes into play: we selected an expandable series of feature subjects that allows for an increased visibility of these authors. This enables us to investigate specific questions from a literary, legal, sociological, political, and historical point of view, in order to map these women's involvement and influence in the intellectual and social debates of their time.

To begin with (once again, we are planning to expand this initial list in the future), our list of themes includes: pseudonyms; public sphere; adultery; religion; family; divorce; rape; fashion and cross-dressing; motherhood; work and profession; sexual orientation; humor; war; representations of female intellectuals in mainstream (visual and literary) culture; science, travel and cultural otherness.

How does this work? Suppose a scholar is conducting research on how divorce legislation affected women. S/he can use our search tool and, typing 'divorce' obtain the following results:

- a clickable list of authors (with individual biographical entries and iconography, if available) who wrote about divorce in Italy during the period under consideration, in fictional and non-fictional works: for example, Anna Franchi, Grazia Deledda and Jolanda.
- a clickable list of works about divorce: for example, Deledda's novel *Dopo il divorzio* (1902) Anna Franchi's *Avanti il divorzio* (1902) and Jolanda's book of manners *Eva regina* (1907). Links to full digital text, when available.
- secondary sources: scholarly papers, books, specialized websites. Links to full digital text, again, when available.
- legal and social history: a file with the legal and social history of divorce in Italy with relevant bibliography and links to legal documents and legislation, when available.
- a list (and digital text, when available) of contemporary works on divorce from countries other than Italy. For example, Carmen de Burgos' *El divorcio en España* (1904).

One of the aims of our project is to contribute to close the gap between digital and traditional scholarship. For instance, the kind of search we described allows for a cross-referenced view of the topic of divorce in Italian literature, history, legal history, and cultural studies.

Interdisciplinary and transnational connections become instantly visible, and new ways of data interpretation are possible without laborious library and archival investigations.

Women at the end of the nineteenth century acted as agents of change, a fact that was ignored, obscured, and even ridiculed. Quantitative and qualitative data analysis collected through a project like ours will provide an effective mapping of this phenomenon and explain (and visualize) the link between women and society at the turn of the twentieth century. Specifically, it is a common assumption that late nineteenth century Italian women writers expressed conservative positions on family issues. When searching 'divorce', In-visiblewomen.org users will see how many of them actually were pro- or against divorce and why. Such a search might lead to unexpected results, thus stimulating new approaches and views on women. Case in point, Jolanda, a staunch Catholic, was pro-divorce, while Neera was not.

### **Project implementation, dissemination, and (technical and financial) challenges**

Our project is an expandable collaborative platform for scholars of Italian and Gender Studies, for scholars of material culture, historians and art historians, for anthropologists and sociologists and, last but not least, for students. With regards to students, we have started collaborating with student assistants who are conducting research on the various themes and aspects of material culture and compiling entries, thus developing their own research skills and agenda.

In sum, we want to be facilitators of a virtual laboratory of ideas, a community of thinkers and researchers, but also a venue for everyone interested in the material culture of Italian women writers and their participation in the public sphere. This environment is ideal to ensure such collaboration, exchange of ideas, access, data collection, organization, visualization and interpretation.

We were encouraged by existing projects and by early, successful efforts to create digital archives, such as the Dartmouth Dante Project (1982) and the Princeton Dante Project (1999) recently cited by Robert Hollander in the virtual pages of this journal, and by the Decameron Web (1994-1995). These projects brought Italian literature online, and they are not just databases, but also interpretive, collaborative platforms that have changed the course of humanistic studies and have brought the reader's attention back to the text. But when we turn to Women's Studies the situation is different. While, in the Anglo-American world, digital Women's Studies are a consolidated reality,<sup>8</sup> in the world of Italian letters things are different: at this point, there have been several attempts at cataloguing and collecting data on women and women's literature. Among them, in Italy, we should acknowledge the *Enciclopedia delle donne*,<sup>9</sup> a big endeavor that aims at including bio-bibliographical entries on all women, of all eras, professions and cultures; Patrizia Zambon's *Le autrici della letteratura italiana-Bibliografia dell'Otto/Novecento*;<sup>10</sup> *Letteratura dimenticata*,<sup>11</sup> developed by Maria Enrica Carbognin, Anna Levi and Lia Madorsky. In the United States, a pioneer project is the University of Chicago's Italian Women Writers Project<sup>12</sup> directed by Catherine Mardikes, Elissa Weaver and Courtney Quaintance.

In-visiblewomen.org aims at a more focused, analytical, interdisciplinary and content oriented structure. With respect to the above-mentioned websites, our project aims not only to collect data, but also to analyze and interpret information and provide tools that allow such analysis. The quantitative questions that prompted our project have to do with the need for statistics for women's magazines and books and with issues related to the location and accessibility of correspondence and archives. Our theoretical questions stem from one main concern: how can data retrieval, organization, and visualization help challenge assumptions and generalizations for female intellectuals of the time? Can received knowledge of these authors' conservative behavior be questioned through digital scholarship? If so, how? Through which channels did women

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<sup>8</sup> One example are the projects included in the University of Virginia's Project Nines, <http://www.nines.org>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.enciclopediadelledonne.it>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.maldura.unipd.it/italianistica/ALI/principale.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.letteraturadimenticata.it>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/TWW>



participate in the intellectual debate? How did they ‘materially’ access those channels? How did they contribute to shape the new (modern) woman’s identity? We discussed how we could analyze and answer these questions through a website that could guarantee access, interpretation, and collaboration on an interdisciplinary level. This is how our project was born.

Although the project, at this stage, involves a limited number of people (the authors, students, IT experts), our aim, once it has launched, is to create a working group that includes colleagues at institutions in the US and abroad. In particular, we are going to form an editorial board to select and peer review material submitted to Invisiblewomen.org, and a circle of contributors. As Invisiblewomen.org grows, we anticipate to expand the initial circle and involve other scholars in data collection, organization, website maintenance, and planning.

So far, the biggest challenge has been our (very) limited institutional support. Although most American universities are encouraging their faculty members to turn to digital humanities for both teaching and research projects, a lot of them do not yet have the infrastructure and the staff needed to implement such projects. Our two institutions, both in the northeastern United States, belong to this category. While there has been quite a lot of moral support and enthusiasm for our project, we have spent long months trying to navigate the system with scarce results. Since digital humanities are indeed the future, as demonstrated by wonderfully innovative projects at various campuses such as those at The University of Oregon, The University of Virginia, Brown, Harvard, The University of Southern California, Stanford, to mention a few, most schools are coming to terms with the challenges and financial commitment needed to turn a traditional campus into a 2.0 reality.

We are finally seeing some success and we are now actively developing our project on an Omeka platform. We believe that Omeka offers the necessary flexibility for a complex project such as ours. So far, our project has been met with great enthusiasm among colleagues at institutions in the US and Europe. We are at work on several grant applications in the hope to secure adequate financial support to sustain our project.

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