



The Century of Women: Representations of Women in Eighteenth-Century Italian Public Discourse (Toronto Italian Studies)

Rebecca Messbarger

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Eighteenth-century Italian playwright Pietro Chiari designated the age he lived in 'The Century of Women' - an age when women gained considerable power through education and admission to various academic positions and professions. Structured as an extended disputation, this book tells the tale of five paradigmatic and ideologically divergent eighteenth-century Italian texts by male and female authors whose leitmotif is woman. These include an academic debate, a scientific tract, an oration, an Enlightenment journal, and a fashion magazine. Analysis focuses on the specific ways in which the exigencies of the 'new science' and the burgeoning Enlightenment project founded on rational civil law, secular moral philosophy, and utilitarian social ethics forced a transformation in the formal controversy about women.

By uncovering the characteristics of the expansive dominant discourse about women among Italian Enlightenment thinkers and of the counter-discourse women authors produced to assert their own distinct authority over constructions of femininity and the public sphere, this study reconceives eighteenth-century Italian culture and rectifies misconceptions about Italy's position and influence within the literary republic of the European Enlightenment. Groundbreaking and original, this study is the first to examine the contribution of women to the Republic of Letters of the Settecento, and will revise prevailing notions of eighteenth-century Italian culture and academia.

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