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## Gender: Italian Perspectives on a Useful Category for Comparative Literature

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# *Gender: Italian Perspectives on a Useful Category for Comparative Literature*

Gianna Fusco

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- 1 The title of this article openly plays on the title of the highly influential essay by Joan Scott, "Gender: a Useful Category for Women's History", that in 1986 consecrated the use of the category of gender in the international arena of feminist historical studies<sup>1</sup>. As it is well known, the fierce debate about the theoretical import and the critical potential of this category has soon spread beyond the limits of the historical discipline, informing every branch of feminist discourse and eventually producing a major and (especially with regard to the US academy) institutionally visible shift from Women's to Gender Studies. In this contribution, I will try to give an account of the latest trends in the study of gender in Italy, with specific references to the leading university centres in the field, while at the same time I will try to outline the intersection, the area of mutual (actual or potential) fruitful influence between comparative literature and gender studies, with particular attention to the ways in which this connection is perceived and explored by Italian scholars.
- 2 As the use of the word "gender" itself shows, this is an area deeply influenced by the Anglo-American theoretical production of the last decades. However, as witness the recurring linguistic concerns about its (im)possible translation into Italian, the adoption by Italian scholars of this critical and analytical instrument has never been unproblematic<sup>2</sup>. Italian feminists have always debated and nuanced in fact the Anglo-American feminist discourse, enriching and problematizing it with their experience of the European cultural and historical context, as well as of a university system so distant from the US model. Actually, one of the most influential voices in the Italian feminist discourse and thought, namely the group called "Diotima" and based at the University of Verona, has never accepted as theoretically valid and practically desirable the shift from an emphasis on women's sexual difference to the more generally inclusive category of "gender"<sup>3</sup>. Their position, although it does not represent the dominant trend in Italian feminist studies, plays nonetheless, as we will see, a significant role as a counterbalance

to the danger of a superficial use of a terminology developed in a different cultural and academic context.

## From poststructuralist feminism to masculinity studies: the passage from identity to difference and the crisis of the subjectivity

- 3 The feminist struggle to obtain recognition of women as political subjects had long been characterized by the affirmation of a commonality of experience among women that defined and identified them. "Woman" was theorized as a coherent and consistent category, an identity common to all women who, in spite of individual differences, were united by the experience of patriarchal oppression and could find in the solidarity of the utopian dream of sisterhood a strong identity to be affirmed through political action.
- 4 However, as women of colour and lesbians soon understood and began to denounce, the attempt to subordinate every other difference to gender produced in the political arena the legitimisation of a subject that actually embodied only the experience of white, middle-class, western, heterosexual women, thus reproducing among women an oppressive system of inclusion/visibility and exclusion/invisibility. It is this critique aiming at unmasking the essentialist bias of mainstream feminism of the 70s and 80s that eventually produced the shift from the label "Women's" to the label "Gender" in feminist studies. The structural relation between sex and gender is questioned as part of a wide rethinking of the opposition between nature and culture that finally led to a challenging of the very idea of subject as a philosophical category. However, what is rejected by post-structuralist feminism is not subjectivity itself, but the idea that a recovering of a natural, pre-cultural and pre-gendered feminine identity is possible through feminist discourse and practice. The political aim of this deconstruction of the systemic relation between sex and gender is made clear by Butler, one of the first and most influential voices of post-structuralist, queer feminism:

It would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive," prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts. This production of sex as the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by *gender*<sup>4</sup>.

- 5 Eventually, this pressure exercised over white feminism by its many "others" led to a change of emphasis in feminist theorizing, from the definition of a universal and essentialist feminine identity to the exaltation of difference between women, whose experiences, though always marked by gender, are intersected by their particular circumstances.
- 6 The post-structuralist rethinking of the nature/culture dyadic system is then the inaugural moment of a new phase in feminism in which a leading role is played by the Gay and Queer Studies critique of subjectivity and by the study of inter-sexuality and trans-sexuality as areas in which the relation between sex and gender is resistant to the

analysis of traditional feminism. Nevertheless, the so-called post-structuralist and post-modern critique of subjectivity has been opposed by those feminists still concerned with identity politics, that is with the postulation of a strong subject as prior condition for political action. Moreover, the theoretical separation of gender from biological sex was felt by someone as a threat to women's position inside feminism that could eventually result in what Modlesky has called a "feminism without women"<sup>5</sup>. The deconstruction of the category of subject and the consequential rejection of the concept of identity have been regarded by feminists like Modlesky as a dangerous step towards the unproblematic assumption that ours is a post-feminist age. Therefore, they claimed the necessity to keep men outside the feminist discourse, both as subjects and as objects of gender studies theorizing.

- 7 A groundbreaking text that helped the definition and establishment of a feminist bias for masculinity studies has been Sedgwick's *Between Men* (1985), a study of homosociality in English literature that connected the analysis of male identity both to feminism and to gay and queer theory by affirming the necessity for the first to understand the cultural constructions of masculinity while highlighting the consequence of the latter in questioning the supposed universal hetero-normativity through the analysis of alternative masculinities<sup>6</sup>.
- 8 This inclusion of masculinity in feminist theories, as suggested above, has occasioned a fierce debate on the opportunity of shifting the focus of feminist thought from women to men. The same scholars that initiated the investigation of male identity agree in fact with "traditional" feminism about the risks inherent in the constitution of an area of gender studies potentially unconcerned with the commitment to struggle against sexism. Firstly, there is a threat of marginalisation of the feminine experience, which would result in a weakened political action when the strategies of empowerment through cultural visibility are abandoned<sup>7</sup>. Secondly, some feminists suspect that the opening of gender studies to the analysis of male identity and the consequential entering of male researchers in this area could return to men those positions in the academic establishment that feminism had obtained for women. Finally, on a more strictly theoretical ground, once it has been assumed that the cultural constructions of gender are as oppressive for men as for women, the risk is that of victimizing the male position while disregarding the fact that the adherence to a normative model of masculinity, though frustrating and oppressive at times, results for men in the acquisition of power and privileges. In other words, though both the male and the female gender identities are social constructions, they are in no way either symmetric or equally oppressive, but are actually the means through which the sexual oppression of women by men is perpetuated.
- 9 It is then clear that "what is ultimately at issue in masculinity studies is, or should be the effect of masculinity *on women*"<sup>8</sup>. Otherwise, the field of Masculinity Studies can easily become the academic face of an attempt by men to further maintain their privileged position through the understanding and the unmasking of the artificiality of those aspects of their gender identity which they now feel as oppressive. To avoid any compromise with such ambiguous approaches to the problem of masculinity, the scholars in this field not only underline the profeminist bias of their theorizing, but also emphasize how important the study of masculinity as gender is for feminism, since, in the words of an influential researcher, "to leave masculinity unstudied, to proceed as if it were not a form of gender, is to leave it naturalized, and thus to render it less permeable to change"<sup>9</sup>.

- 10 Masculinity studies are now clearly inscribed in the agenda of feminism and stress their distance from male (masculinist) movements. Their most urgent objective today is the questioning of hegemonic models of male behaviour and, as a consequence, the analysis of all the male identities that do not conform to this standard in order to make clear that masculinity is not a natural, hence undisputable category, but a historical and cultural construction that derives power and influence precisely from its being considered a universal norm. The ultimate aim of these analyses is the understanding not just of male identity, but also of the cultural processes through which the imbalance of power between the social category identified by hetero-normative masculinity and its numerous “others” has been established and is still exercised.

## The impact of feminism on comparative literature: US and Italy

- 11 In 1994 Margaret Higonnet edited a collection of essays entitled *Borderwork* which is considered the first scholarly book dealing specifically with the issue of feminism in comparative literature as an academic discipline<sup>10</sup>. In her introduction Higonnet underlines how the book aims to stress conflicts and discontinuities rather than homogeneity between the two fields. Although many scholars share the opinion that “feminist theories can renovate not only literary studies at large but comparative literature specifically”<sup>11</sup>, in fact, the connection between the two disciplines are not seen as “simple or without tensions”<sup>12</sup>, as witness also the multiplicity of theoretical and critical positions expressed in the essays contributing to the volume. Insisting particularly on the peculiar significance of establishing and crossing borders (between nations, self and other(s), languages, genders, genres, disciplines, ect.) for both comparative literature and feminism, *Borderwork* explores this tense, complex space between the two fields, tracing the motives for mutual diffidence while at the same time testing the theoretical productivity of their often invoked intersection.
- 12 This deeper engagement of comparative literature with feminism is urged first of all on the ground of a perceived delay of the former in taking advantage, especially in theoretical terms, of the irreversible changes brought by feminist thought in every area of research and knowledge: while feminism has already proved the remarkable potentiality of its radically innovative approach through its influence on other academic disciplines (history, anthropology, philosophy, literary criticism, law, economics, etc.), “some comparative institutions lag behind the innovative range of individual practices; dedicated journals often reinforce a narrow Eurocentric canon of writers and critics, as do many departmental reading lists”<sup>13</sup>.
- 13 In “Compared to What?”, her thought-provoking contribution to Higonnet’s volume, Susan Lanser further specifies: “although there has been feminist comparative practice for as long as there have been feminist critics, and although influential feminist theorists from Kate Millet to Gayatri Spivak were trained as comparatists, comparative literature as a self-conscious and self-articulating discipline has remained relatively untouched by feminist scholarship”<sup>14</sup>. In other words, not only is feminism an intellectual tool with an undeniable, formidable potential for a generalized renovation of scholarship; it is also a movement characterized from its origins and along its evolution by the adoption (either explicit or implicit) of a comparative approach. Probably one of the most popular and

frequently quoted passage witnessing the original, innate comparative impulse of feminism is the following excerpt from Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*, in which the author urges her readers to divest themselves of any local pride and gain a comparative perspective of the culture in which they are inscribed as women:

Compar[e] French historians with English; German with French; the testimony of the ruled – the Indians or the Irish, say – with the claims made by their rulers, [...] compare English painting with French painting; English music with German music; English literature with Greek literature, for translations abound<sup>15</sup>.

- 14 Beginning in the late 60s, second wave feminism has re-read past literature, paying particular attention to texts written by women, in the spirit of womanly solidarity and equality that can be perceived in Woolf's words. This long tradition of feminist comparative practice has continuously informed the movement's attention to transnational themes from the era of the utopia of universal sisterhood to the post-structuralist emphasis on difference, contributing to its increasingly self-conscious engagement with the complexity of contemporary multicultural issues.
- 15 Comparative approach, multiculturalism, transnationalism: these shared concerns in terms of methodology and of critical stance should have favoured, some scholars argue, a much earlier and thorough investigation of the theoretical interconnections between the two disciplines. However, even during the past decade, that is following the publication of *Borderwork* with its acknowledgement of the necessity of such theorization, there has not been a significant production of scholarly texts addressing directly and/or exclusively the issue of gender as a pertinent category in the ongoing debate about the re-definition of comparative literature, this being a further evidence of the discipline's resistance, already discussed by the contributors to that volume, when it comes to displacing its traditional, that is patriarchal and Eurocentric, defining structures and methods. Gender issue and feminist thought have nonetheless nuanced comparative literature with their continuing, although uneven, influence, both in the context of the US academy, where some of the most prominent scholars, such as Rey Chow and Gayatri Spivak, are just the expression of this controversial disciplinary convergence, and outside it, with scholars around the globe weaving multiculturalism, gender criticism, globalization, and sexuality in their writings. As a consequence, although a radical and formal re-definition of comparative literature along theoretical lines including the problematic dimension of gender is far from having been achieved, the intersections and exchanges between the two areas are increasingly acknowledged as both fruitful and inevitable.
- 16 In order to illustrate these complex disciplinary definitions with specific regard to the Italian context, I would like to discuss briefly two introductory essays clearly drawing upon Higonnet's and her co-authors' insights: "Studi femminili e di genere" (Women's and Gender Studies) by Elena Gajeri, published in 1999, and the more recent "Gli studi di genere e il comparatismo" (Gender Studies and Comparatism) by Vita Fortunati, published in 2005<sup>16</sup>. I would like to stress preliminarily the relevance of the different contexts in which the two texts were published and consequently the elected readers to whom they are addressed. Gajeri's article on gender and women's studies is included in a collection of introductory essays to comparative literature; in other words, it has been intended as part of a survey of current relevant disciplinary issues and methodologies, and thus supports the validity and necessity of a gender inflected comparative approach. Fortunati's essay, on the other hand, is a contribution to a scholarly volume on gender perspectives aiming at serving also as a handbook for beginners in the field of gender

studies. In this context, comparative literature is examined as not only an appropriate space for the application of feminist theories and methodologies, but also as a challenge and a testing ground for those same theories: comparative literature as a useful category for gender studies. The two essays virtually complement each other's approach, achieving almost literally Higonnet's goal: "to utilize feminist insights in order to nuance comparative practice and, conversely, to nuance and render more comparative the practice of feminist criticism"<sup>17</sup>.

- 17 According to Gajeri, the interconnection between comparative literature and gender studies directly derives from their shared transnational and transdisciplinary vocation. Sexual difference in fact, cannot but be a relevant category of analysis for comparative literature, the latter being engaged in the understanding of our relations with our many others in terms of similarity and difference. On the other hand, "since gender is one of the categories that organize the production as well as the reception of literature, and since it crosses the boundaries of national literatures, gender studies cannot but be comparative"(Gajeri, 1999, p. 296)<sup>18</sup> Writing at the time of the almost generalized reception not only in the United States, but in Europe as well, of poststructuralist feminism that privileges gender's over women's issues and theorizes the crisis of the subject in the postmodern era, Gajeri asserts, beginning with her title, a rather critical stance with regard to this radical evolution of the women's movement and emphasizes the specific and still valuable contribution the European theory of sexual difference can bring to feminist thought. Confronted with the danger that the end of subjectivity turn into the end of feminism itself, she declares in fact the necessity for the movement to identify a "third way between the death of the subject-woman-author of post-structuralism [...] and essentialism"<sup>19</sup>. The third way she herself proposes is the "epistemological attitude of the feminist scholar who does not assume the poststructuralist unconcern toward sexual difference, but demonstrates and emphasizes instead the sexed subjectivity as embodied in writing"<sup>20</sup>.
- 18 The mutually related issues of subjectivity and identity play an important role also in Vita Fortunati's essay, whose main focus however is on the most relevant theoretical contributions by Third World women that have enormously enriched the discourse of both comparative literature and feminism during the past years, especially by maintaining the necessity for contemporary approaches to literature to be planetary in order to be authentically comparative, and by urging the feminist movement to deconstruct its own overlooked bias in order to become really open to the active participation of non-Western women. In Fortunati's words, "the great challenge women comparatists had to face has been the difficult interaction between a global perspective and an attention to the different local historical situations, while keeping in sight their own cultural specificities"<sup>21</sup>.
- 19 Both Gajeri and Fortunati, as we have just seen, insist on the fundamental role of women feminist comparatists, considering the import of gender studies in comparative literature especially with regard to the classic practices of women scholars comparing women's writings and/or men's texts in a feminist perspective. The fruitfulness and remarkable critical potential of this approach is witnessed in Italy by the impressive achievements over the past decade of the "Società delle Letterate" (Society of Literary Women), an association animated by many influential scholars from different universities and whose conferences' proceedings are published as a series explicitly devoted to women comparative literature<sup>22</sup>. It is not possible to give a detailed account here of the numerous

issues addressed and discourses developed by the scholars participating in the association (from autobiography to canons, from postcolonial theory to translation), yet a common thread can be identified in the continuing attention devoted to writing and to the written artistic representations of female subjectivity. It is an openly political conception of literature through which the feminist scholar questions the role of the woman writer and the possibility for literature to affect reality and produce actual changes in gender dynamics. In this sense, the Society's members are not far from Spivak's postulation of the necessary activism of the comparatist scholar in his/her daily encounter, especially within the classroom, with a multicultural complex reality that repeatedly questions and tests the validity of his/her theoretical assumptions<sup>23</sup>.

- 20 Within this compound and often conflictual cultural picture, not only does gender provide an effective analytical key through which women can rewrite both literary history and the history of our own gendered understanding of literary phenomena, but imposes itself as a multifaceted category, a space of theoretical production through which it is possible to investigate any literary and cultural document in a transnational perspective. This is actually the most significant function gender studies can currently exert within comparative literature, that is they can provide a methodology informed by the post-structuralist conflation of sexual difference with other socio-cultural categories (such as class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc.) that are fundamental in the definition and representation of identities and are thus essential for addressing the multicultural character of contemporary literary studies. In this perspective, gender is, quoting Spivak again, "a general critical instrument rather than something to be factored in in special cases"<sup>24</sup>. This move from comparative gynocriticism toward a more widely gender-inflected comparatism is made even more urgent as a consequence of the progressive and hotly debated inclusion of men, through masculinity studies, within feminism, both as objects and as subjects of feminist thought.
- 21 As it has already happened with the poststructuralist turn, Italian scholars and institutions respond to this new academic wave reaching us from the United States with a critical reception of its most useful insights, especially with regard to theory, and a coherent defense of their own productive experiences, such as the already mentioned Diotima and "Società delle Letterate", as well as the "Archivio delle Donne" (Women's Archives) based in Naples at the Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale"<sup>25</sup>. The archive is characterized by a marked multidisciplinary attitude – its areas of research ranging from anthropology to linguistics, from history to postcolonial theory, from economics to poetry – benefiting from the variety of approaches developed by each scholar in her specific field, as well as from the peculiarly multicultural insights offered by an institution with a long and established tradition in the teaching of foreign, European as well as African and Asian, languages and literatures. The comparatism practiced by these women thus answers, at least empirically, to the repeated current invocations of a planetary, gender-inflected, multilingual, and multidisciplinary comparative literature, whose realization is subjected to the possibilities of a direct, that is unmediated by translations, access to minorities' literary texts. The activity of the archive consists mainly in the organization of local and international conferences, the coordination of seminars, lectures, and workshops, the publication of volumes, and, most of all, the formation of and the support for a network of women scholars engaged in the rethinking of gender relations.

- 22 The marked, pervasive multi- and inter-disciplinary stance characterizing the practice of gender studies in Italy is a consequence both of their inherent comparatism, and of their usually non-institutionalized status at the level of university courses. Scholars, researchers, and students from different fields and often from different universities thus found or join centres, archives, societies, and groups as the only effective strategy in order to establish fruitful intellectual exchanges, but also in order to retain the complexity of human experience that would necessarily be partially lost in the process of academic fixing of disciplinary boundaries. This position is clearly expressed in the introduction to *Generi di traverso*<sup>26</sup>, a volume following a conference held at the Università del Piemonte Orientale, the latter being another significant academic centre for the interdisciplinary study of gender in Italy. Its most representative academic figure is in fact Marco Pustianaz, one of the leading personalities in Italian gay and queer studies, interweaving in his writings the most updated versions of Anglo-American post-structuralist theorizations of masculinity with acute analyses of Italian contemporary novels. Pustianaz thus perfectly represents the most recent trends in the study of sexuality and male identity, that is the validation of alternative masculinities as a contribution to the pro-feminist and gay undermining of the hegemonic model of male behaviour. He also participates actively in the initiatives of the “Centro Studi sui Linguaggi delle Identità” based at the Università di Bergamo, arguably the most influential and vital Italian academic institution engaged in queer theorization and masculinity studies. The centre aims “to investigate the ways in which literary writing, as well as media and film writing, express the crisis of the modern and postmodern subject”<sup>27</sup>, in a constant, dialectic and comparative engagement with different disciplines and with both the Anglo-American gender theory, from which the guide lines of research are derived, and the specifically European and Italian literary theories.
- 23 I would like to end this intervention with a few remarks on a yet another disciplinary intersection that is increasingly gaining the attention of theorists and critics in comparative literature: American studies. As we have seen, much of the Italian current discourse on gender is strongly influenced by categories elaborated inside the American academy. This is even more relevant in the light of the ongoing debate inside American studies that is currently revising the academic field as a response to the pressures exerted by the emergence of a plurality of ethnic traditions. These have invoked and sustained a shift in academic discourse from notions of national cultural homogeneity to a new emphasis on hybridization, mutual influences, and internal differentiations: American studies is redefining itself as a comparative field of studies. Gender is in this process a most important category of analysis since it constitutes one of the main sources of theoretical insights and political pressure on the field. The suddenly significant question of how these distinct conceptual areas are theorized as mutually connected is addressed by Donatella Izzo’s research work. Faculty member of the department of Comparative Studies at University “L’Orientale” in Naples and herself a contributor to the activities of the “Centro” in Bergamo, she takes advantage of her privileged position as a scholar in both American literature and comparative studies placed outside the US academic and cultural establishment in order to interrogate the theoretical and critical evolution of her field from a really comparative standpoint<sup>28</sup>.
- 24 In all these discourses, gender confirms its potential as a most relevant analytical category and a powerful theoretical instrument for the investigation of literary phenomena and their positioning inside a supranational context, a context in which it

provides the critic, and particularly the comparatist, with new models and interpretive tool for the investigation of the current geopolitical circumstances, as well as for the vivification of the fruitful tension and the auspicated dialogue between the local and global dimensions. The outstanding quality of the work of Italian researchers and scholars in this field is witnessed by the increasing interest expressed by the international academic community toward research projects and international conferences coordinated and organized by Italian institutions. Recently (December 2003), the international conference “Donne e Multiculturalismo. Corpi prigionieri anime in movimento” organized at “L’Orientale” in Naples had among its participants Rey Chow, Deborah Cameron, Catherine Hall, that is three most influential scholars in their respective fields (literature, linguistics, history). University “L’Orientale” has also hosted in November 2004 an important conference on “Transnational American Studies and New Comparative Literary Studies” featuring leading figures in both fields (Donald E. Pease, Remo Ceserani, Djelal Kadir, Paul Giles). Events like these are foregrounding Italian comparatists and gender specialists as protagonists in the international arena of comparative and gender studies, concretely connecting them to universities and centres of research that have been regarded for decades as undiscussed leaders in theoretical and critical production.

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## NOTES

1. Scott, Joan Wallach, “Gender: a Useful Category for Women’s History.” *American Historical Review*, 91.5 (1986): 1053-1075. The essay was later included in Scott’s collection *Gender and the Politics of History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 28-50.
2. For an excellent reconstruction of the theoretical debate around the category “gender” and the problems relating to its translations and uses in foreign contexts see Di Cori, Paola, “Genere e/o gender? Controversie storiche e teorie femministe.” *Generi di traverso. Culture, storie e narrazioni attraverso i confini delle discipline*, Eds. Bellagamba, Di Cori, Pustianaz, Vercelli : Edizioni Mercurio, 2000, 17-70.
3. Cfr., Villa, Luisa, “Femminismo e filosofia. Appunti in forma di narrazione attorno ai fatti di Diotima.” *Ibid.*, 169-189.
4. Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, London: Routledge, 1990, 7.
5. See Modlesky, Tania, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a “Post-feminist” Age*, New York, London: Routledge, 1991.
6. Sedgwick, E. K., *Between Men. English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
7. As Newton has pointed out, “[m]asculinity studies ...run the risk of deradicalization, of failing to work toward structural alterations in men’s privilege and power.” (Newton, Judith, “Masculinity Studies: The Longed for Profeminist Movement for Academic Men?” *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory. New Directions*. Ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, 188.)
8. Thomas, Calvin, “Reenfleshing the Bright Boys; or, How Male Bodies Matter to Feminist Theory?”, *Ibid.*, 62.

9. *Ibid.*, 61.
10. Higonnet, Margaret R., (ed.), *Borderwork. Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994.
11. *Ibid.*, 4.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 5.
14. Lanser, Susan Sniader, "Compared to What? Global Feminism, Comparatism, and the Master's Tools", *Ibid.*, 282. An artist and a prominent feminist thinker, Millet is the author of *Sexual Politics*, one of the works that most contributed to the rise of second wave feminism, a hotly debated critical debut directly derived from her doctoral dissertation in English and comparative literature. (Millet, Kate, *Sexual Politics*, University of Illinois Press, 2000, first published by Doubleday and Co. in 1970.) More recently, in her challenging *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak, best known for her provocative theoretical contributions to literary criticism interweaving several approaches (from gender to postcolonial issues, from Third World to deconstruction), has called for a renewed activism in comparative (planetary) literary studies. (Spivak, Gayatri, *Death of a Discipline*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.)
15. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p. 108, quoted in Lanser, *ibid.*, p. 299.
16. Gajeri, Elena, "Studi femminili e di genere." Ed. Armando Gnisci. *Introduzione alla letteratura comparata*. Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 1999, 296-340; Fortunati, Vita, "Gli studi di genere e il comparatismo: un confronto critico tra discipline." Ed. Raffaella Baccolini. *Le prospettive di genere. Discipline, soglie, confini*, Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2005, 339-352.
17. Higonnet (ed.), *op. cit.*, 14.
18. "[S]e il genere sessuale è una delle categorie che organizzano la produzione e la ricezione letteraria, al pari delle valutazioni per classe o razza, e supera i limiti delle letterature nazionali, i gender studies non possono non essere comparatistici". (My translation). (Gajeri, *op. cit.*, 296). The Italian word *genere* (gender), as used by Gajeri and other Italian authors, mainly refers to "sexual difference". As the author herself notices in the essay, in post-structuralist feminism the same word comprises a wider range of sexual identifications than those represented by the male/female difference.
19. "[U]na terza via tra la morte del soggetto-donna-autrice del poststrutturalismo [...] e l'essenzialismo". (My translation). (*Ibid.*, 320).
20. "[A]tteggiamento epistemologico della studiosa che non adotta l'indifferenza dei poststrutturalisti nei confronti del genere, ma al contrario dimostra e porta in evidenza la soggettività sessuata incarnata nella scrittura." (My translation). (*Ibid.*)
21. "La grande sfida che le donne comparatiste hanno dovuto affrontare è la difficile interazione tra una prospettiva globale ed un'attenzione alle diverse realtà storiche locali, senza perdere di vista le proprie specificità culturali d'appartenenza". (My translation). (Fortunati, *op. cit.*, 342)
22. The series include: Borghi, Liana, Svandrlik, Rita (eds.), *S/Oggetti immaginari. Letterature comparate al femminile*. Urbino: Edizioni Quattroventi, 1996; Borghi, Liana (ed.), *Passaggi. Letterature comparate al femminile*. Urbino: Edizioni Quattroventi, 1998; the four edited volumes composing *Grafie del sé. Letterature comparate al femminile*, Bari: Adriatica Editrice, 2002; *Leggere e scrivere per cambiare il mondo. Donne, letteratura e politica*. (Edited by the Società Italiana delle Letterate and by the Centro Documentazione Donna di Ferrara), Ferrara: Luciana Tufani Editrice, 2004.
23. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *Death of a Discipline*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.
24. *Ibid.*, 74.
25. Founded at the end of the '70 as an interdepartmental association gathering women scholars and young researchers, the Archive is now animated by the experiences of about fifty members from nearly any discipline or department in the university, from comparative literary studies (Maria Teresa Giaveri) to linguistics (Jocelyn Vincent, Cristina Vallini), from postcolonial and

cultural studies (Lidia Curti) to history (Angiolina Arru). It also promotes the activities of the doctorate in “Storia delle Donne e dell’Identità di Genere in Età Moderna e Contemporanea”, one of the very few doctoral programmes in gender history currently offered by Italian universities.

26. Bellagamba, Di Cori, Pustianaz, “Introduzione.” Eds. Bellagamba, Di Cori, Pustiannaz, *op. cit.*, 9-16.

27. “[I]ndagare i modi in cui la scrittura letteraria, ma anche cinematografica e mediatica, esprime la crisi del soggetto moderno e postmoderno.” (My translation). (Mario Corona, ed., *Incroci di Genere. De(i)istituzioni, transittività e passaggi testuali*, Bergamo, Bergamo University Press, 1999, 187.

28. Cfr. Donatella Izzo, “Americanistica/comparatistica: dall’eccezionalismo alla globalizzazione.” Eds. Izzo, Mariani, *America at large. Americanistica e nuova comparatistica*, Milano: Shake, 2004, 77-113.

## ABSTRACTS

This essay traces the connections, both on a theoretical and on a critical level, between the field of comparative literature and the category of gender studies. These connections will be analyzed in the context of the Italian academy, with specific regard to the multi- and interdisciplinary character of many contributions to the debate.

Cet article trace des liens, sur les plans théorique et critique, entre le domaine de la littérature comparée et la catégorie des *gender studies*. Ces liens sont examinés en tenant compte de leurs développements actuels au sein de l’université italienne, avec un regard spécifique sur le caractère multi- et interdisciplinaire de nombreuses contributions qui s’inscrivent dans le cadre de ce débat.

Tanto en el plano teórico como en el crítico, el presente artículo establece vínculos entre el campo de la literatura comparada y el área de los cultural studies. Tales vínculos son examinados según el desenvolvimiento de cada disciplina en la universidad italiana de hoy, poniendo un especial interés en el carácter multi- e interdisciplinario de numerosas contribuciones que se inscriben dentro de los límites del debate.

## AUTHOR

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Gianna Fusco has completed a PhD programme in Comparative Literature at the University “L’Orientale” of Naples in 2005, defending a dissertation on the figures of masculinity in late nineteenth century novels (comprising works by Zola, Hardy, Clarín, Fontane, Chopin, and James). She is currently serving as teaching assistant in Anglo-American Literature at the department of Comparative Studies at University “L’Orientale”