

Natacha Fabbri, *Profili di donne sulla Luna. Riflessi di scienza, filosofia e letteratura*.

Pisa: Edizioni della Normale; Firenze: Museo Galileo, Istituto e Museo di storia della scienza, 2022. 244 pp., illus. ISBN: 9788876427336.

*Profili di donne sulla Luna* (Profiles of Women on the Moon) by Natacha Fabbri is an intelligent and refined work from both a historiographical perspective and in its use of sources. Yet, it remains intentionally communicative and is an extraordinarily enjoyable read.

The volume sheds light on female scholars, writers, painters, and philosophers, often overlooked by the public and students. These women, active from the Renaissance to the early 20th century, offered alternative visions of the universe through the metaphor of the Moon. With a deft touch, Fabbri restores those women's skeptical views on the rhetoric of 'modern science' and its 'revolutions,' which still weigh down much of the history of science literature in Italian. But her book also revisits that tired old tale of supposed affinities between women, the Moon, and water: stereotypes that continue to affect us all, men and women alike, through a variety of media.

Indeed, the many cases that Fabbri discusses reflect the misogynistic culture that, by glorifying the 'celestial' woman, nudges her toward a romantic (and, naturally, domestic) dream: a dream that leads her, as if 'naturally' and without conflict, toward self-exclusion. Conveniently, this leaves men free to maneuver on Earth.

Fabbri reminds us that these watery, lunar images of women predate the Renaissance, rooted as they are in an Aristotelian thought that was as misogynistic as it was enduring, itself rooted in the even more ancient and entrenched culture of Pythagorean dualities. These commonplace views about lunar women, influenced by very concrete male interests, have nourished scientific, religious, philosophical, and artistic practices and languages over the centuries, not to mention politics.

In this history of useful clichés—useful for keeping women on the margins of educational and science institutions—Fabbri takes us on a journey through an impressive variety of sources, from both academic and popular cultures. She shows us how these sources—drawn from science, religion, philosophy, painting, and sculpture as well as from theater, early film and radio—interacted to reinforce one another. This interweaving of cultures and genres allows the author to meet the challenging task of writing a work that is both erudite and accessible.

Using a non-specialist language and narrative techniques supported by a solid historiographical framework, Natacha Fabbri leads us through printed texts, manuscripts, and visual representations that reveal how generations of

male scholars have reproduced an always-sexualized image of women, projecting it into their astronomical conceptions. These practices and conceptualizations bring us to the heart of the interactions between scientific culture and social values—specifically, in this case, those surrounding gender.

The book opens with a reflection by Italo Calvino (1923–1985) on the Moon and closes with a true rediscovery: a text by Ernesto Capocci (1798–1864) from 1857, thoughtfully included in the appendix.

Capocci's short epistolary work is set in 2057, when Urania writes to her friend Enrichetta, updating her on a trip to the Moon. Naturally, she's tagging along with her husband, Arturo, a scientist and astronaut. While he totes along the necessary scientific instruments, Urania brings the toiletries. When Arturo is heroically navigating the spacecraft out of the atmosphere, she is helpless and trembling. "He, all busy with his instruments, cared nothing for me, nor wanted me to speak, and brusquely repelled my embraces and caresses. In fact, now I recognize it! The poor man was not wrong [...] he only had the burden of flying for both of us, if not help from me, he at least did not want to be hindered. In the meantime, I was desolate, anguished ..." (p. 213). Brilliant.

Calvino's piece, opening the book (and inevitably so, given the unrelenting celebrations of his birth centenary in Italy), is controversial too. Here, misogyny is refined, as befits one of the most intelligent writers of the interactions between science and literature of the 20th century. In Calvino's account, the (obviously) silent, mysterious women play harps while men and dogs howl at the Moon. The supposed distances, both physical and emotional, are immeasurable.

Abundant and important historiographical and sociological literature from the past few decades has reconstructed how science, technology, and medicine have contributed to keeping certain social actors—namely, women—firmly outside the lab, the university, and the public sphere. Fabbri's stereotypical and improbable "lunar" women are an important addition to a historiography of science that has unearthed and amplified the voices of hundreds, if not thousands, of women philosophers, astronomers, doctors, scientists, and mathematicians, European and otherwise, who had long been erased from history. This body of literature has helped rewrite entire chapters of the history, anthropology, and sociology of science, technology, and medicine. Perhaps even more importantly, that literature has informed a genre of well-written, non-trivial biographies and popular books on women, gender, and science: a controversial genre in Italy, rich in literature that often heroises (or martyrises) female scientists.

However, in the past two years, a few non-specialist books, like Fabbri's, have made profiles of real, credible women in science accessible to wider audiences.

These works are always richly sourced and convincingly told. I'm thinking of Maria Sibylla Merian by Brunella Torresin, *Émilie du Châtelet* by Paola Cosmacini, and Eva Mameli Calvino (mother of Italo) by Silvia Bencivelli (offering us, by the way, a welcome dose of irony). But I would also like to mention the volume by Nastassja Cipriani and Edwige Pezzulli, which reminds the public that there is much more on women, gender, and science besides Marie Curie.

Natacha Fabbri's book belongs in this valuable genre. It reminds readers, for instance, that in the 'enlightened' 18th century France, when Europe boasted many educated women in every scientific and mathematical field, not one was invited to contribute as an author to the *Encyclopédie* (1751–1771). And it doesn't shy away from the continued obstruction women faced in the so-called Age of Progress when middle-class women began pressing for entry into universities. A master communicator like Camille Flammarion (1842–1925) was a skilled purveyor of misogynistic stereotypes in his popular works on astronomy. Fabbri shows us how Flammarion's volumes, which sold tens of thousands of copies in dozens of languages, reproduced "sexualized" images of the universe.

Against this background of misogyny, extending from Aristotle to Capocci, Fabbri brings forth the voices of remarkable women scholars. From astronomer and illustrator of the Moon Maria Clara Eimmart (1676–1707) to poet Mary Coleridge (1861–1907), Fabbri's subjects are always interesting, like the extraordinary Aphra Behn (1640–1689), though she doesn't neglect Lady Margaret Cavendish (1623–1673), whose sharp critiques of the Royal Society's domineering approach to nature deserve wider recognition among students and the general public, and maybe scholars too.

Fabbri draws on an extraordinary range of sources from Italian, French, German, English, and American literature, on objects too: not just telescopes, but cinematographs, radios, and cameras. She also discusses the architecture of the places where misogynistic astronomy was practiced: academies, universities, expert circles, and home parlors, as well as cinemas, squares, and Luna Parks.

The reader, having thoroughly enjoyed the book, is left hoping for a sequel: one on the 20th century women, from Hannah Arendt to Oriana Fallaci to Lynn Margulis, who wrote with international acclaim about humanity's adventures on the Moon without being cowed by the masculine arrogance of the many Arcturuses still roaming around, not only at NASA.

In conclusion, this richly illustrated and well-crafted book is a compelling read that will appeal to a wide audience, including historians of science. *Profili di donne sulla Luna* should be translated into French and English.

*Paola Govoni*

University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

*p.govoni@unibo.it*