

Johnny L. Bertolio

Controcanone. La letteratura delle donne dalle origini a oggi

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Review by Stefano Baldassarri

This is the kind of textbook that I wished my Italian literature professor had chosen for her class when I was in high school some forty years ago. Unfortunately, a manual like this did not exist back then. If so, I think I would have read it almost with as much interest and pleasure as I did in the last few weeks to write this review. The author is Johnny Bertolio, who holds a Master's Degree in classical studies from the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa and a Ph.D. in Italian literature from the University of Toronto. After finishing his studies in Canada, about five years ago, Bertolio started working for Loescher Editore, thus putting his knowledge in classical studies and comparative literature at the service of one among the oldest and most prestigious publishing houses in Italy. Luckily, his rich academic and international background shows in this book; I am glad to say that the effect is most positive for the readers. The latter, in this case, are mostly (but, indeed, not exclusively) Italian teenagers and their teachers, as this is a textbook conceived for Italian high schools. More specifically, *Controcanone* – which opens by reporting the seventeen goals making up the United Nations 2030 Agenda –¹ is designed for the so-called “licei”, where the humanities still take center stage in their interdisciplin-

1. This “global statement of purpose” is thus the first text in Bertolio's anthology or – if I may play with etymologies for a second – in his new ‘legenda’ (i.e., from Latin, something that must be read). I find it appropriate to list here, in a capsule form, the seventeen objectives that 193 UN member states intend to achieve in less than ten years from now: 1. Eliminate poverty 2. Erase hunger 3. Establish good health and well-being 4. Provide quality education 5. Enforce gender equality 6. Improve clean water and sanitation 7. Grow affordable and clean energy 8. Create decent work and economic growth 9. Increase industry, innovation, and infrastructure 10. Reduce inequality 11. Mobilize sustainable cities and communities 12. Influence responsible consumption and production 13. Organize climate action 14. Develop life below water 15. Advance life on earth 16. Guarantee peace, justice, and strong institutions 17. Build partnerships for these goals.

ary curriculum, which is established by the Italian Ministry of Education for the whole peninsula. This textbook is also designed to help students prepare for their “esame di maturità”, that is, the final (or comprehensive) exams that they all must take at the end of their fifth year in high school, when they are either 18 or 19. As such, an editorial project like this can have a remarkable impact on Italian high school students, should many of their teachers decide to adopt it. I hope this is going to happen, for the reasons I wish to explain in the next few pages.

First off, I would like to emphasize that in Bertolio’s case – as he makes clear in the preface to the book – “inclusivity” is inevitably paired with “skepticism”; that is, a critical attitude (which, far from a superficially polemical spirit, is synonymous with intelligence) to whatever choices editors make when they put together an anthology of texts. Bertolio is not trying to replace a traditional canon with another (supposedly original and, therefore, better) canon. Rather, he wants to stimulate his readers to consider what educational choices have been made in Italian schools for several decades in a row, understand the underlying criteria, and try to think of new ones. That is why (to quote from the one-page preface, entitled *Presentazione: canone e ‘controcanone’ letterario*) Bertolio sums up the contents of this anthology as follows: «[...] il volume presenta autrici e autori di solito esclusi dal canone, facilmente integrabili nella didattica tradizionale: un ‘controcanone’ al femminile dalle origini al Novecento [...] con opere incentrate sull’esperienza della deportazione, dell’esilio e della migrazione e sulle declinazioni dell’alterità e della diversità» («[...] this volume presents female and male authors who are usually excluded from the canon, although they may be easily added to the traditional teaching curriculum: a female ‘counter-canon’ from the origins to the twentieth century [...] with works focused on such experiences as deportation, exile, and migration and on all possible forms of otherness and diversity»).

Bertolio further illustrates his method and main goals in the closing paragraph of this short preface, where his philological training surfaces in the first statement (on the surprising survival of some of these documents): «Sono parole dure le loro, salvate, talvolta fortunosamente, dal silenzio a

cui furono condannate, e non smettono di interrogarci nel presente, quando ancora si vedono operanti le stesse dinamiche di potere del passato. Il *controcanone*, beninteso, mira non tanto a sostituirsi al canone, quanto a incoraggiare lo studio della letteratura e della storia dalla prospettiva dell'inclusività, dell'accoglienza, della variegatezza.² Non una norma unificatrice, non una serie di capolavori geniali e intoccabili, bensì una sinfonia di parole tutte degne di essere ascoltate e, se necessario, ridiscusse» («Their words are harsh; they have been saved – sometimes fortuitously – from the silence to which they had been condemned and they don't stop asking us questions, in our present time, when we still see the same power dynamics at play as in the past. Clearly, the *counter-canon* does not aim at replacing the canon; rather, its goal is to promote the study of literature and history from the perspective of inclusivity, acceptance, and variedness. Not a levelling norm, therefore, or a series of unparalleled, untouchable masterpieces; rather, a symphony of words, every single one of them worthy of being listened to and, if necessary, reassessed»).

To pursue these objectives Bertolio resorts to a variety of means, thus proving to be proactively inclusive also for what concerns the students' cognitive approaches and the many learning tools offered by today's technology. The book (also available in digital format) is provided with QR codes in each chapter for multimedia activities to be done either in class, under the teacher's supervision, or individually by the students. Among the didactic materials accessible through QR codes are texts in their original language, which is not always Italian but sometimes – especially when dealing with medieval and Renaissance literature – Latin and regional dialects instead. Such is the case, for instance, with the first four texts: three are in Latin (St. Clare of Assisi's rules for her own religious order, Leonardo Bruni's suggestions on what books learned women should read, and Isotta Nogarola's letter to Pope Pius II supporting his call for a new crusade against the Turks) and one in Sardinian (an excerpt

2. To distinguish it from "diversity" or "diversification" and because of its etymology, I chose to translate this rare Italian noun as "variedness" in English.

from Eleonora of Arborea's legal code); all of these sources date from the mid-thirteenth to the mid-fifteenth century.

Ch. 2 (*Il Quattrocento*) tackles one of the time periods that a consummate philologist like Bertolio knows best, having published on such authors as the famous humanist Leonardo Bruni.³ The later Middle Ages and the early Renaissance saw the beginning of the so-called *querelle des femmes* (the "woman question"), with works like Giovanni Boccaccio's *De claris mulieribus* (*Famous Women*) and Christine de Pizan's *La cité des dames* (*The Book of the City of Ladies*) paving the way for it.⁴ This section of Bertolio's book plays a crucial role, as the debate he assesses here lasted several centuries and laid the foundations for an approach to the social status and the potential of women that would continue well into the modern era. Among other famous humanists, Bruni is mentioned (pp. 24-25) for his *De studiis et litteris* (*The Study of Literature*), the educational treatise that around 1424 he dedicated to Battista di Montefeltro, duke Galeazzo Malatesta's wife. As said above, an excerpt of this text is made available in Latin to the readers, who can access it by using the QR code next to its title on p. 26, while the corresponding Italian translation is provided in the book.⁵ As for female writers in this section, Bertolio rightly connects Isotta Nogarola's pioneering opus with the development of pro-feminist humanism in the XVI century thanks to the expansion of the book market in Italy. The latter phenomenon was primarily due to the invention of the printing press and the much wider use of the vernacular language in literature. In Bertolio's anthology this early modern trend stands out when he discusses the works of such authors as Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinelli (pp. 57-66). Significantly, in recent times these two Venetian

3. See, for instance, his excellent critical edition of Bruni's seminal treatise on translation theory and practice entitled *De interpretatione recta* (Rome: Istituto Storico Italiano per il Medio Evo, 2020).

4. Bertolio duly devotes a section to Christine de Pizan (1364-1429), despite her having written most of her works in French. As is well known, Christine was born into a distinguished Italian family; when only five years old, she moved to France, spending the rest of her life there.

5. In this case, too, Bertolio proves to be a careful editor as he uses Paolo Viti's precise Italian translation in the latter's anthology of Bruni's writings entitled *Opere letterarie e politiche* (Turin: UTET, 1996, with facing Latin original) instead of other – less accurate – versions.

writers have attracted more attention from English-speaking than Italian scholars.⁶ In this case too Bertolio's anthology may help both students and professors (also at university level) to understand the value of authors whose writings are often much more insightful and stimulating than one may think at first.

Another prominent genre in the first chapters of Bertolio's anthology is religious literature. This is far from surprising, knowing what kind of education was reserved for women well into the XIX century. To the readers' relief, Bertolio manages to make this kind of literary production interesting by contextualizing it properly. For instance, when quoting and commenting on poems by such authors as Lucrezia Tornabuoni, Antonia Giannotti or Vittoria Colonna he connects those writings with the culture of their time. To this purpose, Bertolio stresses links between these writers' works on one hand and art, folklore, and social history on the other. His strategy shows also in the many images (miniatures, paintings, frescoes, and portraits) surrounding the texts as well as in the exercises that students are expected to do after each reading.

Bertolio applies the same careful contextualization to the homoerotic literature that accompanied the spread of Petrarchism throughout Europe in the XVI century and the reactions to it, which included pornographic poetry and prose by such authors as Pietro Aretino (1492-1556). When discussing female writers, though, Bertolio duly emphasizes another important feature: how those texts were collected, preserved, and – sometimes – published. A classical philologist by training, Bertolio knows that the first issue an editor should consider is why and how any given text has come down to us. So-called “paratexts” are a key factor to understanding this; Bertolio makes his readers aware of their importance on page 44 in a short yet most informative paragraph significantly entitled *Una circolazione variegata (A Varied Circulation)*, discussing – among other things – Renaissance prefaces addressed to female patrons.

6. See, for instance, the section (Chapter 3) on these two writers in Meredith K. Ray's monograph *Daughters of Alchemy. Women and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, MA – London: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 73-105 and the bibliography reported therein.

As one would expect, the Counter-Reformation, the ‘scientific revolution’, and the *commedia dell’arte* make up the backdrop to the chapter (pp. 76-91) on the Italian *Seicento* (the seventeenth century). All these topics perfectly fit the scholarly interests and the editorial projects of the north American academia that Bertolio frequented from 2012 to 2017. In those years he earned his Ph.D. from the University of Toronto, studying and collaborating with such scholars as Konrad Eisenbichler and Virginia Cox (both internationally acknowledged as leading authorities in early modern gender studies). As for that Canadian university’s press, suffice here to recall the following series, where one can find a good number of the writers and all the genres discussed in Bertolio’s *Controcanone*: Emilio Goggio Publication Series, Lorenzo Da Ponte Italian Library, Renaissance Society of America Reprint Text Series, and Toronto Italian Studies. Clearly, in making this textbook Bertolio has also relied on several editorial series (either digital or printed ones) and anthologies, which – from at least the 1980s onwards – have contributed to reshaping our perception of the “Western canon”. I am alluding, for instance, to *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, *The Victorian Web*, and «The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe». Launched in 1996 and originally under the aegis of The University of Chicago Press, this series has had a rather complex publishing history; from Chicago it “migrated” to the Center for Reformation and Renaissance Studies (University of Toronto), the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, and eventually Iter Press. Divided into no fewer than nine categories depending on the language in which the original text was written,⁷ the latest volumes in the Italian series provide editions (with a facing English translation) of works by the Venetian nun Arcangela Tarabotti (1604-1652). In his anthology, Bertolio devotes considerable attention to Tarabotti, discussing her and publishing an excerpt from her *Monastic Life as Inferno* on pp. 77-83.

Tarabotti’s unfortunate destiny makes all Italian readers think of

7. That is, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Latin, Polish, Russian, Spanish and Portuguese. For the complete catalogue see <https://othervoiceineme.com/>

“la monaca di Monza” (the nun of Monza), that is, one of the best-known characters from Alessandro Manzoni’s masterpiece *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*). Fully aware of this, Bertolio highlights such similarities in a specific section within this chapter. The long-lasting practice of forcing young women to take monastic vows thus serves as a sad yet fitting topic to usher in the following century, that is, *Il Settecento*. Both this chapter and the one immediately after it (*L’Ottocento*) discuss, at length, Italian women’s increasing involvement in politics, that is, their contribution to the movement known as “Risorgimento,” which culminated in the unification of the peninsula under the royal house of Savoy in 1861. After quoting and commenting on a long passage by Eleonora de Fonseca Pimentel (1752-1799) in the section on the short-lived Neapolitan republic at the end of the XVIII century, Bertolio starts the following chapter by stressing the crucial role that women played in the Risorgimento. His first paragraph reads as follows (p. 114): «La presenza delle donne nelle vicende dell’Unità nazionale è troppo spesso trascurata, a fronte di un resoconto all’insegna degli eroi. La triade Cavour-Mazzini-Garibaldi, che si è imposta nonostante le profonde divergenze, ha finito per oscurare le tante anime del Risorgimento» («The presence of women in the events that led to Italy’s unification is too often neglected, to the advantage of a narrative focused on male heroes. Eventually, the Cavour-Mazzini-Garibaldi triumvirate – largely accepted despite the deep contrasts among them – has overshadowed the many other features that made the Risorgimento possible»). In the same page Bertolio discusses the creation – during the so-called “century of the bourgeoisie” – of a wider book market that catered to the needs of an increasing female readership. This was also linked to another growing phenomenon at the time, which Bertolio assesses in this same chapter on the Ottocento: literary salons. Often hosted by distinguished ladies, literary salons had started playing a relevant cultural role in the previous century, when the Enlightenment took center stage, that is, from the 1770s onwards. In Italy, one of the first “salotti letterari” was the one that Isabella Teotochi (1760-1836) started hosting in Venice in 1782. Local governments often (and with good reason) considered Italian literary salons hotbeds for political dissent. This

happened to be true especially during the Napoleonic Wars. In regard to literature, Bertolio properly emphasizes the most significant publications that stemmed from those gatherings of intellectuals, including newspapers, journals, and books such as Teotochi's *Ritratti*; a series of biographical sketches of renowned – and often politically engaged – figures who frequented Teotochi's literary salon, those “portraits” provided informative and semi-popular accounts of the life and works of (among others) Vittorio Alfieri, George Byron, Antonio Canova, and Ugo Foscolo, upholding them as role models to the readers. Even more directly involved in the Italian Risorgimento was Cristina Trivulzio, princess of Belgioioso (1808-1871), who authored writings in both Italian and French. A perfect example of those patriotic heroines usually overlooked by scholars that Bertolio alludes to in the opening paragraph of this chapter cited above, in 1830 Trivulzio fled to France to avoid being imprisoned by the Austrian authorities ruling over Lombardy and the Veneto. In Paris she made a living as a journalist, became an internationally renowned advocate of Italy's independence, and befriended a host of celebrities, including Balzac, Chopin, La Fayette, and Thiers. Once back in Italy, she participated in the major insurrection known as “Le cinque giornate di Milano” (“The Five Days of Milan”, March 18-22, 1848); a year later, Trivulzio organized medical support for the soldiers of the short-lived Roman republic who were being attacked by the pro-papal French army. The passage that Bertolio excerpts in this chapter (p. 120) is taken from Trivulzio's plea to her fellow-citizens (entitled *Ai suoi concittadini*) that she penned during the Milanese 1848 revolt, urging them to support a constitutional monarchy, though fully aware that a democracy would be – ideally speaking – the best form of government. If the whole nation – she writes – is not well-educated and imbued with certain virtuous ideals, a true republic cannot be realized; and, she must admit, mid-nineteenth century Italy is still far from attaining that goal.

Understandably, the interdisciplinary character of Bertolio's anthology becomes even more overt in this and the following chapters (7-9), which are entitled *Il Novecento* (*The Twentieth Century*, pp. 138-189), *Percorsi tematici: storie di deportazioni e di migrazioni* (*Reading by Topic: Stories of*

Deportation and Migration, pp. 190-219), and *Percorsi tematici: variegatazza e inclusività* (*Reading by Topic: Variedness and Inclusivity*, pp. 220-250, with a closing section on suggested movies and songs), respectively. Photographs of the authors being cited punctuate the pages, alongside pictures of their book covers, some of which became either best-sellers or long-sellers, even inspiring – in the case of novels – movies based on their plots. The section entitled *Storie di deportazioni e di migrazioni* discusses texts by concentration camp survivors, Italians who were born of immigrant parents (e.g., Igiaba Scego, b. Rome 1974) or authors who migrated to Italy (e.g., Amara Lakhous, b. Algiers 1970). The one following it (*Variegatazza e inclusività*) focuses on queer studies (citing, among other texts, two poems by Giovanna Cristina Vivinetto) and social forms of marginalization in recent Italian history; the latter include mental asylums, which provide the setting of writings – either in prose or verse – by authors like Italo Calvino, Alda Merini, Amelia Rosselli, Mario Tobino, and Sebastiano Vassalli.

The authors cited in the paragraph above show how up to date Bertolio's anthology is, featuring writers (like Vivinetto) who were born in the 1990s. More importantly, Bertolio's innovative approach relies on the seminal work of such Italian scholars and writers as Franco Buffoni. It is hard to find a "label" to classify Buffoni; born in Gallarate (near Varese) in 1948, Buffoni is a poet, an essayist, a translator, a literary critic, a former university professor (after serving for many years as dean of the Comparative Literature Department at the Università di Cassino), and the founder of a journal («Testo a Fronte») that since the late 1970s has stood out as a "beacon" – so to speak – of translation theory and practice in Italy. Probably, he is one of the few people on the Italian peninsula today who deserves to be called "intellectual" (also in the original, militant sense of this word). Among his most recent publications is a volume on famous Italian authors (that is, famous enough to make up the nation's literary canon) whose biographies have been traditionally told in such a way as to hide or neglect their homosexuality.⁸ We should all be grateful to coura-

8. See F. Buffoni, *Silvia è un anagramma. Per giustizia biografica* (Milan: Marcos y Marcos, 2020).

geous, intelligent, and knowledgeable authors like Buffoni for paving the way to what Bertolio and other Italian colleagues are doing today. Thanks to them it is now possible to look at this country's history, literature and – more generally – its culture from a different perspective, thus promoting a more inclusive and respectful society. Yet, I wish to stress one more time, in this closing paragraph, both the originality and the value of Bertolio's *Controcanone*. His book is accurate, convincing, and sensitive (that is, aware of all the nuances making up the texts he cites and comments on) because it is the product of a long, sincere, and zealous commitment. His previous anthology (that would also be a perfect text to review for this issue of *Beyond* on diversity, equity, and inclusion)⁹ made another significant step in this direction, that is, the goal that – in my opinion – all educators today should pursue, wherever they work, either at home or abroad, from kindergarten to university. This would finally make it normal for everyone – students and teachers alike – to welcome and appreciate, as a (gay) poet once wrote, «all things counter, original, spare, strange».¹⁰

9. See J.L. Bertolio, *Le vie dorate: un'altra letteratura italiana da san Francesco a Igiaba Scego* (Turin: Loescher Editore, 2021). Toward the publication of this textbook Bertolio was awarded the 2021 Renaissance Society of America Grant in Support of Innovative Teaching of Renaissance Studies to High School Students.

10. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Pied Beauty*.