

Women's Writing and Women's Reading: Gender, Bibliography, Paths and Trends¹

Escritura y lectura femeninas: género, bibliografía, caminos y tendencias

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(Recibido 1-08-2013;
aceptado 7-01-2014)

Abstract. This work is based on some considerations about the possibility of understanding the semantic field of femininity as a specific genre of writing, with specific sub-genres related to themes and styles of expression. It takes as reference studies in Semiotics and Linguistics that allow us to understand the female as a “nebula of meaning”, which does not match codified and canonized expressive styles. Therefore, the female arises more like a particular interpretation of the texts, a point of view that emerges from the practice of reading.

On the basis of these considerations, this paper reviews the main theoretical approaches on women's reading, circumscribing three macro-areas: those of Gender studies, Historical research, and statistical analysis of Sociology related to the book market.

The final results seem to reinforce the hypothesis that femininity is characterized by a particular focus on the vision and on the possibility of translating the perceptible world in writing, with specific attention to the context of reading.

Key words: *Writing; Reading; Gender; Genre; Bibliography.*

Resumen. El trabajo se enfoca hacia algunas consideraciones acerca de la posibilidad de entender el género femenino como un género específico de la escritura, con referencia a los sub-géneros, y a los temas y a los estilos expresivos que corresponden a ello. El artículo toma como referencia los estudios de la Semiótica y la Lingüística textual que le permiten entender el entorno semántico de lo femenino como una “nebulosa de significado” que aún no ha llegado a la ratificación, y que no tiene formas textuales codificadas. El campo semántico de la mujer se plantea por lo tanto como una interpretación de los textos, un punto de vista que se desprende de la práctica de la lectura.

Sobre la base de estas consideraciones, el artículo analiza las principales líneas teóricas sobre la lectura de las mujeres, circunscribiendo tres macro-áreas: los Estudios de género, la investigación histórica y la investigación sociológica con los análisis estadísticos relacionados con la comercialización del libro.

El resultado final parece reforzar la hipótesis que el género femenino se caracteriza por un enfoque sobre la visión y la capacidad de traducir por escrito el mundo perceptible, con atención específica para el contexto de la lectura.

Palabras clave: *Escritura; lectura; género femenino; género literario; bibliografía.*

¹ Para citar este artículo: Marino, Toni (2014). Women's Writing and Women's Reading: Gender, Bibliography, Paths and Trends. *Alabe* 9. [www.revistaalabe.com]

I - The semantics of gender as a textual genre

The idea of femininity in texts is often accompanied by some critical observations on the processes of reading and writing. When not strictly linguistic, it is interpreted as a connotative level of significance adding a further sense to the text. That is to say that femininity is deduced by the reader starting from a set of features present in the text in terms of content and expression.

Femininity understood as textual genre has at least three characteristics: (i) a formal characteristic, (ii) a content related characteristic, (iii) and a methodological characteristic.

From the formal point of view the female gender is represented by a series of “isotopes” that orient the meaning. Rather than individual elements that produce the idea of femininity – such as the sex of the author – there is a more general sense created by a structural interaction of some elements in the text. The idea of femininity is communicated through the text while the text is read, adding a further meaning. It is a kind of result of the reading process which coincides with the linguistic performativity proposed by Austin (Austin, 1962), the effectiveness of which is given by the interlocutor’s willingness to accept the pragmatic value of the utterance. While Austin however, could somehow fix the standard conditions of acceptance (the conventional procedure; appropriateness of the circumstances and persons; correctness of the procedure; completeness of the procedure, compared intentionality of the act; respect of the consequences;), in our case the idea of femininity is not inferred in a direct way, because we consider some conditions as yet non-existent. The possibility to understand the female sense within a text is related to a condition of acceptance that Austin does not provide, and what we might call the “allusion”. Allusion here is understood as a characteristic of the text which does not denote a specific meaning, and also indicates the inability of the reader to define the idea of femininity referred to by the text. That is to say the reader can only deduce a connotative interpretation of the text. The idea of femininity as textual genre corresponds to a sort of “nebula of content” (Eco, 1975), whose features are in an accumulation phase.

From the point of view of content, however, the female as textual genre is closely linked with feminist studies and with the latest Gender Studies. Historically, attention to the female has always been closely related to a scrupulous attention to the biological identity of the woman, and to an examination of the political and social conditions that would permit the affirmation of women and their autonomy. Female textuality is not only the set of content associated with the universe of femininity, but is closely connected with the female identity of the author. Both women’s writing habits and women’s reading habits seem to create a real cultural context in which the operations of encoding and decoding suffer a preliminary predetermination based on cultural and biological diversity. Recently there is a new attention to the practices of women’s reading habits (preference of formats, choice of media, spending power, etc.), which endorses the hypothesis that women’s reading can indicate a particular point of view on textual production.

Finally, from the methodological point of view, the female as a textual genre includes the methods of detecting the idea of femininity within the text (Violi, 1997). Gender studies have proposed an approach based on the assumption that a characterization of the idea of femininity is closely related to texts produced by women. This concept states that the level of expression within the text depends on the gender of the author rather than the content of the text itself. There are, in fact, many anthologies that aim to build a canon of female works from individual female voices. In this way the idea of femininity appears more plausible when starting from feminist authors.

2 - Genres of feminine writing

The reference to gender research also confirms the existence of a very intricate and complex semantic framework or, if you prefer, problematic especially with regard to possible formalizations. The theoretical options of research related to gender thicken around the gender of the author, and it is hard to discriminate genealogical aspects (the language of women) from aspects of interpretation which are more related to the construction of female poetics. In other words, gender studies seem to be faced with a dichotomy: on the one hand, a specific aspect of women inevitably transmitted in any communicative act; on the other hand, a specific aspect of the women in the interpretation of reality. This leaves open the opposition between “feminine voice” and “female point of view”. In this theoretical dichotomy a double methodological procedure is involved, that, in the first case, privileges female production as a field of research, or in the other case, a sense of femininity is potentially deductible in any communicative production even by a masculine author.

The publishing scene shows the presence of a semantic characterization of the female as a genre that, without a doubt, crosses over into other genres. Female publishing is limited to sub-genres of the feminine – like serial books for women, certain kinds of magazines and manuals and more. The three most easily spotted are: chick lit, romance for women, crime. But we must emphasize that these three sub-genres have a particularly high rate of hybridization, not only to each other (i.e. the Spanish or Italian “rosa-crime” that blends the characteristics of serial books for women and the characteristics of *noir*), but also with other kinds of narrative.

In the example of chick lit we are facing not only a review of the classical serial literature for women, but the establishment of a real sub-genre alternative to this, marked by a particular characterization similar to the bourgeois comedy of manners, as well as a series of characterizations of female subjects. Unlike serial literature for women, the texts of this sub-genre are not produced in serial form, but are more often associated with the themes of womanhood as historically understood (i.e. love stories). Whereas serial literature for women relies on stereotypes (beautiful women/strong men; noble

women/handsome men, etc.), and also presents a strict formula of characteristics as far as the author is concerned (female, successful writer, married, mother, living with family and children), chick lit produces variants which are more nuanced conforming to the modern social roles of women (successful woman, engaged in work, etc.). Moreover, serial literature for women in the 80s began to change in the 90s, and was even then under the effect of hybridization of female content with others of different types (such as crime or the classical novel) thus multiplying the themes from the adventure to the erotic, from the sensual to the historical narrative, and so on.

As for crime, however, history has been shaped in a different way, not only because a tradition of female crime already exists, but also because there is a strict relationship between this sub-genre and the world of women itself, with explicit references to the characterization of “feminine curiosity”. This is often demonstrated by the use of circular shapes on the front covers, which fuses the idea of femininity and the idea of curiosity (Sander and Volkelt, 1962), or by the representation of silhouettes of the backs of women as if they are being hidden from the scene (Schapiro, 1996).

As far as romance is concerned, however, we are faced with a feminine interpretation of a macro-genre of fiction, which can only be grasped through detail and nuance, such as the (feminine) gender of the author. The most relevant detail is the choice of female figures as protagonists of the plot who represent a point of view: cognitive and ethical, closely related to the female world.

3 - Women's reading: a bibliographic approach

Studies on women's reading, collected for many years under the label of *Gender Studies*, have reached a level of specialization which requires a specification of the academic point of view (literary, philosophical, sociological, anthropological, and so on). Every orientation is preceded by a distinction between “reading for women” and “women's reading”, in which to marks the difference between a cultural canon imposed and derived from the male (prescriptive), and one reconstituted from the critical action of women.

The evolution of what in the past could have been considered the paradigm of feminism, understood as a political movement for the emancipation of women, which also included a form of cultural emancipation, seems now to have already reached a sort of fourth paradigm: having first moved from biological difference feminism to feminism as cultural difference, to the third phase which is the endowment of a theoretical apparatus that determined the great tradition of Gender studies, to finally arrive in recent years to a redevelopment of cultural identity through a greater attention to topic of corporeality (Butler, 1997), which includes all those theoretical fragmentations of Gender Studies related to the topic of passion and physical perception like *Gay and Lesbian Studies* or *Queer Theory* (Izzo, 1996).

Born in the 60s of the last century, the so-called *Second Wave Feminism*, emphasizes the difference between males and females as a socio-cultural construction starting from a biological difference. The biological difference between the sexes, that is, has been used as scientific evidence of a difference in cultural and consequently on the political and social life. Feminism, however, denounces the biological difference as a false evidence, and shows how the social differences between men and women are the result of a cultural building made by males. At this stage feminism has primarily a political objective which consists in claiming new social and political roles for women. What the movement claims in the first instance is a condemnation of the textual practices that force women into a limited cultural boundary, where roles and functions are prescribed by the male universe (Fedi, 2010). It proposes a “re-reading” of the canon of reading, intended to expose the female canon as imposed by men. From early research (Fetterley, 1997) the movement moves towards an equalizing of women’s rights of interpretation of women, through the critical exercise of reading followed by the re-interpretation of what you read. Starting from this assumption feminism will follow two paths and two aims, parallel but often in conflict: firstly, the equalizing of feminist and male critique, or secondly and in contrast, the rediscovery of the female voices (Gilbert and Gubar, 1985) and the construction of a new feminine canon of writing. On the one hand, feminine critique will be directed towards the Theories of reading, often related to the literary critics inspired by deconstructionist method of analysis, and on the other hand, it will tend towards a fragmentation of ever more marginalized typologies of reading: from *Black Studies* to *Postcolonialist Studies*.

An example of the distance in points of view is the controversy between Nancy Miller and Peggy Kamuf (Kamuf y Miller, 1990) about the importance of the gender of the author, which started from the anonymous text *Lettres Portugaises*, 1669, apparently written by a nun to her lover. The determination of the gender of the author is necessary, according to Miller, in order to prove that the text is not real but only fiction – actually the letters were written by a man – while, according to Kamuf, women’s reading should concentrate only on the text itself, without any consideration of the gender of the author. The political tone of Miller’s position is clear, as well as the derivation from the Deconstructionism of Kamuf, who wants to underline the paradigm of dissemination of the text and the paradigm of reading as creation of the text.

In the late 70s and early 80s the “feminine” critique, and no longer “feminist”, will build in fact, through the support of French feminism, a theoretical apparatus to reading as a critical exercise near to Deconstruction and poststructuralist theories (Foucault, Lacan, Althusser and Derrida). The works of Julia Kristeva (1969) and Gayatri Spivak (1981) mark the transition from the need to dodge the definition of feminist or feminism, antithetical to the theoretical support of Deconstruction, and the translation of “feminism”, a term compromised with the male canon, as “feminine”, a word which will no longer be an incentive for historical research, but for a new approach nearer to the study of the effects of speeches.

The result of this new approach is the interpretation of the female as a sociolinguistic variant. For Lakoff (1975), utterances pronounced by women would keep a doubtful inflection even when assertive – what Key (1975) calls “the language of apology” – by which women would try to get approval and acceptance; Fisher (1964) speaks of hyper-correction in feminine speech, due to insecurity. These studies immediately show an inherent weakness, due to the need to contextualize social and historical sexual differences, and the need to shift the focus from text to context, in which the constitution of roles takes place. The feminine marks, in fact, are detectable or investigable only in the reading of the text. Moreover, the insistence on a lack of neutrality in language irreversibly proceeds toward a pre-semiotics starting point, that is not researchable, where the gender difference should act.

A new line of growth in the study of women’s reading is related to the development of the Semiotic of passions. This is the case of critics like Patrizia Violi, who openly discusses the relation between difference in gender and difference in speech in the work *Infinio singolare* (1988). Further considerations on the sex difference in language are in Cristina Demaria’s *Theories of Gender* (2003), which tracks the points of contact between Semiotics and Gender Studies. Both draw up a category which seeks to give an account of the admixture between the vital space of reality and the semiotic space of reading. Nearer towards Feminism, Teresa De Lauretis (1994) tries in the notion of “habit” the confluence of the outside social world, and the inside space of the psyche, while Judith Butler will open a discussion about the body, where the female coincides with the empathic interpretation of the world. The study on women’s reading consistently seems to reproduce an inescapable attention to biological life, to the real contexts of social life, to make it an existential postulate regarding the identity of woman (Tompkins, 1997).

It should be noted that Gender studies do not saturate the entire amount of studies and research that revolves around the theme of women’s reading: furthermore they could be related to the general framework of Cultural Studies. The bibliographical panorama on women’s reading, in fact, shows multiple perspectives with the application of different analytical methods, as well as an interest in many kinds of textual objects, from literature to painting, from visual arts to history, to cognitive science, and much more. In addition to the genealogic meaning it is possible to identify at least two other meanings of women’s reading: (i) the first, philological, where attention to gender is used to reconstruct the historical role of woman, (ii) the second, sociological, which reconstructs the network of cultural relations and real contexts of women’s reading, acting and existing as a gender difference. It would be incorrect to ascribe the sense of women’s reading only to the contributions of Gender Studies, because very often, results derived from the other two points of view not only provide knowledge and support for the theory of gender as textual genre, but also methods useful for research.

Regarding the first – philological – an important contribution to the definition of feminine as a peculiarity of the text structure appears from the historical perspective, and starts from the need to broaden history to the geographical and sociological con-

texts (*École des Annales*). The interest in books of important aristocratic figures such as Christina of Sweden and Catherine of Russia having been specified, or the importance of female intellectuals like Madame de Staël or Lou Salome, history feels the need to acquire a documentation closer to women's reading understood as a process of historical change. Specific data on the use of textual women and therefore on the kinds of text specifically aimed at women are derived from historical research, which locates in the nineteenth century the time of quantitative equalization between female and male readers, and also the time of textual genres specifically designed for women's reading: from the enormous spread of women's magazines to books of practical utility – such as cooking and serial stories – often directly written by women. Women, who were involved in the family business or in family care – the kitchen, the care of home and children – read manuals as a source of knowledge and information. The success of *La cuisinière bourgeoise*, which sold 100,000 copies between 1815 and 1840, is an example. Even before the growth of reading for pleasure, women's reading looked to the book as a source of information. On the other hand, then, in the reading of serial novels a woman is able to identify herself in a narrative representation, both as aristocratic *Dame* or as popular *Femme*, and the different formats of books communicate the social level of readers: twelfth for the popular woman and eighth for aristocratic women. What is interesting in these historical descriptions of women's reading is the indication of new sources of information often neglected by the classical critical perspective², and of new methodologies such as the interview, typical of the anthropological and cognitive approaches (Zaganelli, 2011). Such is the case in a study by Martin Lyons and Lucy Taksa, named “Australian readers remember: an oral history of reading 1890-1930” (1992), in which women are interviewed about their past reading habits, or in another study – “If Mother Caught us Reading! Impression of the Australian Women Reading 1890-1933” (1992) – where Lyon and Taska discover the female necessity to hide reading because it was considered by men a subversive action, dangerous for the keeping of social roles even in the case of reading for pleasure, for example the *Collection des meilleurs romans français de diés aux dames*, which could subtract time from female commitments.

In this way, new knowledge emerges such as the existence of a uniquely female line in the transmission of the sacred scriptures (Ales Bello, 2004; Perroni, 1993 y 2003) – the Bible or the lives of saints – where women have a role in the education of the family and in particular with regard to reading. Moreover, women's reading is far away from public life, closed in the private context of the family: a model of private and quiet reading. Another result of these studies is the possibility (Plebani, 2001 y 2007) to backdate the birth of women's reading to the Late Middle Ages during the transition from Latin to the vernacular, when women could rely what we can define as “maternal language”, which retains within it the memory of oral communication. It is therefore from the thirteenth cen-

² For example, notarial archives are the most important source of information even if the possessor of books is always the householder, that is a man and never a woman.

ture that women's reading grew, through genres strictly related to women, such as manuals that support women in their skills, from embroidery to housework and childcare, as well as the emergence of new types of books (courtly books, hotchpotch books, handheld booklets). Above all the relevance of religious and liturgical books as specifically targeted to women emerges, which links the oral activities of storytelling with the woman's role as the educator of the family unit. Moreover, the use of visual codes – i.e. the iconographic representation of Bible stories – conforms the hypothesis that at the root of women's reading, especially that used for the catechesis, there is a code, both verbal and visual, which privileges women and of which the *Libro d'ore* would be the best known example. It is a useful discovery not only in the historical sense but also in the sociological paradigm which studies the publishing market, where both the production and buying of children's books, typically realized by verbal-visual codes, can be attributed almost exclusively to women.

The second approach (sociological) provides data useful in order to construct a context for the manifestation of women's reading. In fact, understanding the role played by women in society, and especially in the contexts of production and use of texts, helps us to construct a relationship between the theory of reading and the real manifestation of reading. Starting from the reflections commonly collected under the label of Theories of Reception or Theories of Reading, in which authors such as Jauss (1967; 1987) reflect on the text-public relationship, regulators of the relationship between female subjectivity and textual manifestation of feminine meaning should be identified, both in terms of the aesthetic dimension of the text and the context of reading, taking into account the existence of new textual genres or sub-genres, new roles of women, and above all new mass communication processes. As pointed out by Alberto Abruzzese, the transition from an "economy of the public" (regulated) to an "economy of the crowd" (unregulated), changes the scenario of social communication (Abruzzese, 1988). In the case of literature, for example, and of narrative production in certain way, the old bond which establishes a logical association between the gender of the author and the gender of the reader (Farese, 2006), corresponding to a link between style and meaning, is changing. For example a genre like penny dreadfuls, historically intended for the pleasure and control of readers, landed in what has been called the "nebulosa rosa" (Rak, 1999). It is also however a place of projection for the female reader, which fills a horizon of expectations, dreams and frustrations, giving power to women's reading, able to act with the levers of the motivational options in market research and purchasing power.

4 - Reading at the windows: the representation of women's reading

From studies on women's reading a common finding emerges: the enormous importance of reality as a set of social processes, life practices, functions to be performed and responsibilities of different roles. Whether it be the birth of an audience of women, with their own kinds of reading, both involving the action of critical re-reading of the canon, or only as an orientation of the target derived from market research, women's reading looks at reality as a condition of its existence. And this reality is to be understood as a space in which women act, using the tools that the same reading can provide.

Viewed in historical perspective, the study of women's reading returns the framework of a public, socially stratified, where the growth of small and middle-class women relies on two main roles: a co-worker in the family of craft activities, and home educator.

In fact, the birth and growth of manuals for women was already in progress before the Renaissance, with a progressive and more rapid consolidation throughout the course of the nineteenth century (Plebani, 2001). These manuals speak about typical female tasks (kitchen, workshop, embroidery, etc.), and also some tasks for men, whose wives, mothers and sisters provide technical and administrative support (Bellavitis, 2002). Homologous to reading and to the search for information is reading about religious themes, of which women are not the only custodians in the family, but actual transmission components (Lyon, 1995), as they have the responsibility of a communication which works as social regulator, controlling the role of the mother as sender, selecting the messages with which to educate the younger generation, and translating for the people through the use of a verbal-visual code. In essence, religious themes, particularly those related to catechesis (lives of the saints, the Gospel narratives), feed a mixture between reading and life, that is successively textualized in a verbal-visual structure. The model of the window-frame, that has a centuries-old tradition from Leon Battista Alberti, would be a particular example of a gluing of the mimetic function of the image and narrative dynamics.

But the model of the window not only shows the need for a balance between the private horizon of the family, to which the woman is relegated, and the desire to escape from their duties, but rather becomes the redemption of real experience. It is life coming through the window, with its noise, its distractions and its commitments, with the urgency of roles and functions to be performed, which requires a presence status in the process of reading (Thompkins, 1987).

It is no coincidence that in the transition from reading to criticism, Feminism always claims a focus on marginalized groups in life: women of color, women who live in postcolonial places, social and cultural minorities living in a state of impediment, with no access to reading tools. Even theoretical Feminism, which winks at Deconstruction, and is often accused of creating complicated theories from a privileged position, looks to women's reading as a specific perspective of reading where "experience" of reality is central. Women's reading requires a reconsideration of the reader and of the sexual, psychic and social context of reading.

This idea of reading is related to women's using of medial contamination, and to cross-cutting actions engaged by women against an oppressive canon of reading. Female readers are pressing for a specific request: a pressure that acts on the textual contents and, metonymically, from these, expands itself and manages to get a hearing in production systems.

Having become a target for marketing, the window-frame of women's reading includes the possibility of a direct presence of the reader in the text – for example in the case of the readers shown by Sophie Calle (2007) at the Venice Biennale – and of the conquest of space in the market or bookstore – for example in the case of appropriate spaces where women can leave their children while shopping (Peresson, 1995).

Therefore when a dissatisfaction with reading occurs in the polls, combined with a low inclination to purchase, the causes do not much differ from those that the readers surveyed by Lyons stated more than a century before: lack of time, commitments to childcare or care of the home. But if in the past this was because women were patronized by men – the lack of reading as a synonym for good behavior – today we can assume that this dissatisfaction is instead an accusation against reading understood in a classical way, and an invitation to look at readers – ever more conquered by the many windows that media put available – in a new way.

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