

Luisa Miglio, *Governare l'alfabeto. Donne, scrittura e libri nel Medioevo*. Preface by Armando Petrucci. (Scritture e libri del medioevo, 6) Rome: Viella, 2008, Paper, Pp. 375 plus 66 black-and-white plates. € 35.

by **H. Wayne Storey**

This impeccably produced collection features Luisa Miglio's essays on the intersection between the emergence of the written forms of the Italian vernaculars and writing and literacy as significant shapers in the social development and influence of "popular vernacular genres," especially the epistle. Drawn from disparate sources in specialized *acta* and journals, these essays span Miglio's published work from 1988 to 2001 on this powerful cultural intersection: "Donne e cultura nel medioevo," "Alfabetizzazione e organizzazione scolastica nella Toscana del XIV secolo," "Leggere e scrivere il volgare: Sull'alfabetismo delle donne nella Toscana tardomedievale," "Scrivere al femminile," "Lettere dal monastero: Scrittura e cultura scritta nei conventi femminili toscani del '400," "Perché ho charestia di chi scriva': Delegati di scrittura in ambiente mediceo," "La scrittura epistolare femminile tra archivio e tipografia: Continuità e censure," "A mulieribus conscriptos arbitror: Donne e scrittura," and "Donne e cultura scritta nel medioevo." Their collection in a single volume draws into clear focus the rigor and cultural importance of Miglio's projects on gender, writing, genre, and language, while also underscoring her place in the historical and specialist avant-garde of this field of studies in Italy, an area for many years relegated to a back seat in the Italian academe. As these essays demonstrate, Miglio brings an authoritative voice of a well-trained practitioner of paleography and cultural history to this complex field. Known for her early work on the genre of the "libro borghese" and Domenico Lenzi's *Specchio umano* (1979), Miglio's work consistently investigates the minutiae of writing practices in the emerging world of the actively literate (writers), down to common tendencies in the Gothic minuscule being produced in convents – which she cautiously calls a "minuscola delle suore" (p. 130) – to advance well-documented arguments about the circulation and influence of book culture in sometimes unexpected places. Miglio's work traces intellectual ground similar to that of David Bell's fascinating work *What Nuns Read* (1995) but with a clearer and more expert paleographical eye on the active production of women writing in late-medieval Italy. Her essays adroitly fill a void in the scholarly tradition of the study of "practical writing" in Italian vernaculars documented, for example, by Arrigo Castellani (*Nuovi testi fiorentini del Dugento*, 1952; and *Testi toscani di carattere pratico*, vol. 1 of *La prosa italiana delle origini*, 1982) and most recently with a new focus on individual companies by Roberta Cella (*Libri, conti e lettere della compagnia senese dei Gallerani: I testi*, 2005). Miglio's work has the added advantage of drawing methodologically upon the rise in the late 1980s and

early 1990s of Anglo-American studies of medieval women writing (for example, in the admirable work of Kate Lowe and Rosamond McKitterick), which led to the 1995 conference on female monasticism, edited by Gabriella Zarri (*Il monachesimo femminile in Italia dall'alto medioevo al secolo XVII*, 1997). Only with a careful reading of the progression of Miglio's research in *Governare l'alfabeto* can we begin to understand the endeavor and commitment of the paleographer's and historical linguist's tasks among these materials. There is little doubt that the essays contained in this collection were one of the driving forces of this field of Italian cultural studies (in the best and most erudite sense of the term).

Especially important in Miglio's essays is the role of self-taught writing skills, often devoid of otherwise common elements, such as "punctuation, abbreviation, majuscles . . . , an orthographical chaos in which . . . one intuits less a denied education than a different, or separate, or 'other' education" (p. 100). These are scripts that are often less open to traditional terminology and classification but that – as Miglio often demonstrates – evince a more primary need to communicate and to express oneself (p. 101). It seems important to point out that Miglio's observations are not conjectures founded on overviews but are based on her own careful examination of the documentation (see esp. pp. 173-206), one of the principal features that make her work so compelling. Certainly tied fundamentally to this autodidacticism, this "alternative" practice of writing, was the role of reading itself. Miglio reminds us that for women reading was recommended (notably by – among others – Paolo da Certaldo, *Libro di buoni costumi*) as an exclusive vehicle to prayer (p. 226). However, inherent in this issue of gendered reading is also, as Tiziana Plebani outlined in 2001 (*Il "genere" dei libri*), the question of the ownership and familial inheritance of books themselves. Not only in the case of books of hours but also in ever more varied readings, use and ownership of books by women played a role in the history of books from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, that is, in the development of a distinct format: the "libricciuolo," or the "libricino da donna" (pp. 228-38).

There is among these pages a wealth of documentation that has been, one could argue, already consumed and digested by specialists. At the beginning of the volume, the reader is advised that the "essays are published with neither substantial modification nor bibliographical updates; only minor material corrections have been undertaken" (p. 19). The republication of the essays has its own legitimacy in the historical perspective supplied by gathering these contributions between two covers. One always won-

ders, of course, if republication does not offer at least the opportunity to supply even minimal, but useful, bibliographical entries of the material that has accumulated in the intervening years in a field that today commands so much more interest than before. To have Miglio's pioneering view on recent achievements in the field would have been valuable. And her brief introduction of eight pages does not satisfy in that sense. But if there is any doubt about the worth of this collection and its very valuable perspectives and lessons, one feature alone guarantees the volume as a superb tool: the addition of the appendix, "Né altro per ora': Lettere di donne dal medioevo" (pp. 252-317), which contains complete transcriptions – and without senseless modernization in spelling and forms – and photographs of sixty-six letters written by women and found in the Archivio di Stato in Florence, in the Mediceo Avanti il Principato collection (MAP). These are letters to which Miglio makes reference throughout the essays in the volume (thoroughly noted in Raffaella Crociani's "Indice dei manoscritti" [pp. 366-71]). But supplying these important witnesses also gives other scholars, from codicologists to linguistic and cultural historians, plenty of new evidence with which to work (especially in conjunction with Crociani's "Indice dei nomi di persona e di famiglia" [pp. 353-65]). The range of practical topics that compelled women such as the prioress Lisa Baldovinetti or Filippa Doria to write to Piero and Cosimo dei Medici brings us closer to understanding the power that the written document – even in the vernacular – held for these writers, who were often responsible for the well-being of numerous others in their charge. Equally compelling are the letters to Lucrezia Tornabuoni: the *badessa* Costanza from

San Baldassarre writes in 1480 to ask for help with a land dispute ("voi ci vogliate aiutare di farcci riavere terre che tiene Horlando Gherardi"), excusing her previous reticence due to her insufficient (writing) ability: "ho avuto grandissimo desiderio di sscrivervi ma, essendo tirata indietro propria insuficienza e ppi-chola virtù, non 6 mai messo in effecto quello io ho avuto nell'animo" (p. 269). The letter is perhaps most remarkable in its *narratio*, in this case a relatively long explanation of the damages that the sisters of the convent have endured.

Each letter in the appendix, even the seemingly most mundane, offers the historian and the curious reader a view into the practicalities of daily life at various levels, in some just to give reports of health and crops or supplies ("abiamo volte le cipolle e son belle ed èvi istato di molte çucche" [letter 8, "Checca a Ciaio di Pagolo della Iscarperia," 6 August 1431, p. 266]). And one cannot help but note that in her long missive of 13 December 1477 to ask Lorenzo dei Medici for funds to expand the "munasterio," the *badessa* Tita Sapiti notes Lorenzo's certain admiration "dello scriver mio" as well as his great affection for her brother, Ulivieri Sapiti (p. 315). The *badessa*'s coupling of writing and family ties to the Medici family confirms the overarching lesson of all these letters and of the span of Miglio's work in this volume on gender and writing in the late Italian Middle Ages: the power of the written word in the vernacular was soon put to use by women who often needed not just for themselves but for their communities the very tangible aid it could acquire for them.

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