

Andrea Martini e Carlotta Sorba, eds., *L'università delle donne. Accademiche e studentesse dal Seicento a oggi*. Padova: Padova University Press; Rome: Donzelli Editore, 2021. VIII, 261 pp.: ill. ISBN: 9788855222778.

Among the initiatives celebrating the 800th anniversary of the University of Padua, founded in 1222, is the book series “Patavina Libertas. Una storia europea dell’Università di Padova” which includes “L’università delle donne. Accademiche e studentesse dal Seicento a oggi.” This volume brings together the results of original research, largely based on sources from the university archives, as well as essays providing a useful overview of the relationship between women and the university from a long-term, problem-oriented, large-scale perspective. The result is a comprehensive volume in which different interests and methodologies are intertwined, collecting 12 essays organized in three parts and preceded by a thorough introduction by the editors.

On the one hand, it portrays the women who have passed through the University of Padua over the past three centuries, looking at how this experience has changed their lives, the difficulties they have faced, and the achievements they have made. On the other hand, it explores how the university, conceived as a place of education, work and also knowledge production, has engaged with women. This book shows us the male pressures that prevented women from entering higher education, the events and transformations that made their inclusion possible, and the changes that took place, particularly in the field of knowledge, as the university became a space for women as well.

In the first part, “Il tempo delle pioniere (secoli XVII–XIX),” the authors provide a long genealogy, which is particularly valuable in challenging the idea that women who engaged in any form of activity in past centuries (including education, battle, travel, governance) were lonely heroines.

With this perspective Eleonora Carinci looks at the exemplary figure par excellence for the history of the ‘University of Women’: Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Episcopia. Carinci shows how Elena Cornaro’s degree in philosophy obtained in 1678, generally regarded as an isolated and unique event, was actually the result of a long tradition of women’s literacy and scholarship over the previous two centuries.

A similar approach to the collective dimension of women’s engagement is followed by Tiziana Plebani. Her essay looks at how women struggled for their own higher education in the eighteenth century, when academies, salons, and press were an important bridge between women and universities. In the second half of the nineteenth century, things would change irreversibly across Europe. Carlotta Sorba highlights two trends in particular that have favoured

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women's access to university education: firstly, the requirement to have a secondary education, which in turn has led to the presence of university-educated female professors in secondary schools; secondly, the possibility for women with degrees to have more job opportunities, that were not exclusively limited to teaching.

Michele Magri also analyses the experience of these young women by studying the archival documents relating to female students in Padua. This experience was characterised by living in rented rooms, mobility, harsh living conditions and a great deal of determination. A decisive factor in the expansion of women's university education was the culture of the middle classes, who were more accustomed to the idea of female labour and could afford the cost of a university education.

The second part of the volume, "Studentesse e laureate (secoli XX–XXI)," links the experience of female students in Padua to the political and social events that shaped Italian society. Alessandra Gissi uses essays, literary texts, memoirs, newspaper articles, songs, and films to measure the reception of female students in the collective imagination from the end of the nineteenth century to the early 2000s. The contrast between the way female university students are represented and the way women are supposed to occupy a place in society, particularly in the domestic domain, is becoming ever more evident.

Giulia Albanese focuses on the years of fascism and war, starting with the paradigmatic case of Giovanna Sullam, a Jewish student who graduated in Literature in Padua in 1940, with the racial laws already in force. The case exemplifies the ambivalence that pervaded the university in those years: the 'fascistisation' of teaching, the expulsion of Jewish students and professors, the pivotal year of 1943 and the impact of the German occupation, but also the actions of some anti-fascist professors, arrests, and relationships between women, as revealed in the female memoirs studied by the author.

The university, as the hub of social interactions is the subject of two essays by Andrea Martini. The 1960s and 1970s saw a transformation of the university into a mass university. This transformation led to the university becoming a place of sociality and experimentation with new gender models, new relationships between students and faculty, and new disciplinary approaches. However, it is clear that this is not the time for structural innovations affecting the status of female students. Women continue to be enrolled primarily in courses that then allow access to typically female professions—teaching and care work. The impact of feminism—the focus of Martini's second essay—led to significant political and cultural changes. Padua is home to one of the most vibrant feminist movements in the country. This was made possible by a group of female academics, who despite precarity and limited power, introduced the feminist

perspective in various disciplines. This is evidenced by the topics chosen for degree dissertations during that period.

Lorenza Perini and Naila Pratelli examine the reasons behind the tendency for women to enroll predominantly in humanities courses at the beginning of the new millennium. They analyse the overview of the student and academic body presented by the Gender Budgeting adopted by the University of Padua and other Italian universities in recent years. This allows them to identify the circumstances and stereotypes that still condition men's and women's academic careers differently.

The third part of the volume, "Donne e saperi nella contemporaneità," examines the presence of women at university. It analyses not only their careers but also their transformative potential.

Margherita Losacco provides insights into the experience of female anti-quists who trained and tried to work in Padua as academics, highlighting some key points. Firstly, she notes that the process of recognising women as researchers and teachers was slow, beginning only in the 20th century. Secondly, women were present, but hidden. They excelled as students. However, their academic careers were overshadowed by their male relatives or partners. Finally, academic careers were difficult to attain. Many women had to work two jobs, to teach in schools, or to accept less significant positions, such as in archives and libraries.

There are many elements in common with Elena Canadelli's essay on 20th century female scientists, who were even fewer and even more isolated than their male counterparts. Once again, these were challenging careers. They were overshadowed by family figures and cumbersome prejudices (such as the belief that women were not suitable to teach large classes) and often spent in less prestigious roles (as assistants or in laboratories) at less renowned universities.

Chiara Xausa completes this historical analysis of the relationship between women and academia by addressing new approaches that challenge the Anthropocene and environmental emergencies. Xausa highlights in particular the significant contribution of the environmental humanities, which are strongly inspired by feminist thought, in developing innovative strategies for change. This implies also reconsidering the nature/culture and nature/woman dualism towards the 'renaturalising humanity' suggested by Stacy Alaimo.

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