

## Preface

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Writing is a “processo dall’ indefinito al finito” (Oddo De Stefanis 1990, 89) that enables one to access the dark side of reality and to render it manifest and visible. Writing – and the same is true for any other expressive/creative process – also means to translate those *invisibilia* into concrete form: namely, through words and syntactic structures. It comes as no surprise that Luigi Capuana, who was as convinced of the existence of invisible realities as he was eager to give those realities a *voice*, constantly wrestled both with the problem of finding an adequate form and his (self)perceived failure to do so. The indescribability of reality and the overall inadequacy of language and of other expressive *media* – with the possible exception of music – to give form to the indefinable were not only a *leitmotif* of the writing and poetics of *Scapigliati*, coeval to young Capuana, but also a stable feature of Capuana’s own poetological reflections throughout his career. Capuana’s reflection revolves around the urge to find that voice, that form, that tool for communicability, and yet, at the same time, the awareness that those tools are inevitably going to prove inadequate, and those endeavours are doomed to failure. For Capuana, *to translate* means necessarily *to reduce*, to mutilate, to disfigure. Therefore the literary work, for Capuana, is the result of, in Gilardino’s words, “un paziente vaglio dei mezzi espressivi e di un’innata esigenza: quella di dar voce al ben più vasto universo spirituale” (Gilardino 1990, 136).

In this volume, which comes at the end of a decade-long scholarly journey, mainly under the insightful guidance of Annamaria Pagliaro, Brian Zuccala captures this fundamental need on Capuana’s part. He does so by shedding light on a dimension, that of metareferentiality and self-reflexivity, that has been neglected thus far. In the first

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three sections of his study, Zuccala both provides the reader with a detailed overview of the *stato dell'arte* in Capuana studies and illustrates the range of methodological tools to be deployed in his own analysis. Zuccala's methodology combines the tools of 'traditional' literary criticism, including a particularly sharp use of narratology, and more recent exegetic devices, developed and borrowed primarily from the Anglosphere. That is, indeed, one of the strengths of this study. It is worth remembering that, although a conference was held in Sicily on the centenary of Capuana's death (Catania, 11-12 dicembre 2015), the only international conference on Capuana was organised in what can be considered the Anglosphere - bilingual Montréal - in March 1989.

The singularity of Zuccala's perspective comes, to a substantial extent, from his international, mostly Anglophone education (it is also noteworthy that he reads French and therefore accesses and quotes from original French sources). This explains why, amongst the studies informing his critical approach and his reading of Capuana's *oeuvre*, one finds, alongside the usual and seminal works of Italian *capuanistica* - including very recent ones or even ones still in-print -, the works of, among others, Bachmann-Medick, Waugh, Moretti, Davies, Barnaby, Wolf and Nünning.

The two chapters "Gender and Self-Reflections Beyond the *caso psicopatologico*" and "Metareference in *l'altro* and *l'ultimo* Capuana" (4 and 5) constitute the core of Zuccala's argument. In these two sections, the Italian-Australian critic convincingly shows how, from the early *Profili di donne* (1877), all the way through to the early twentieth century, self-reflexivity represents a *fil rouge* through Capuana's theoretical as well as creative journeys. The whole of Capuana's massive corpus is taken into consideration, even though the focus is on his creative writing. Zuccala's exegetic postulation, in fact, entails a deliberately holistic and unselective approach, one that goes beyond genre-based distinctions and reductions. This proves to be a convincing, as well as a compelling approach, because Capuana's fundamental motivations do not change across genres: as much in essays as in short novellas, in academic lectures as much as in fairy tales, in narrative-non-fiction as much as in novels, Capuana constantly chases after the holy Grail of the perfect incarnation of concepts into what he calls *la forma artistica*. Within such a framework, 'close reading' allows one to identify and verify the macro-tendencies that 'distant reading' highlights, and vice versa.

A consistent feature of Capuana's writing is the nexus between theory and practice. His production is certainly not ascribable to that line - be it described as a vein, a tradition, an effect, a galaxy or a mode - of humouristic and intrinsically metareferential writing that characterises a vast portion of nineteenth-century Italian culture in the field of literature and journalism, especially in the *scapigliato milieu*. Capuana is primarily a narrator ("Alle teoriche bado poco, chie-

do lavori, lavori, lavori!", quotes Zuccala from *'Ismi' contemporanei* of 1898, 6), yet, when narrating virtually anything, he is actually reflecting on himself at the writing desk. When considering Capuana's entire corpus, an increasing amount of self-reflexivity over the years becomes obvious. In the context of his reflection on creative praxis, this creates a configuration that can be understood as a system of communicating vessels: periods of intense critical production and limited creative output alternate with periods when, on the contrary, creative production abounds and theoretical work is lacking.

The original and completely convincing argument that develops in chapter 4, which is erudite and articulate, reaches a veritably "counter-canonical reading of *il femminile*" (95). Although Capuana's female characterisation has been widely and deeply explored by other scholars, its functions as a "self-reflexive device" (74) and "catalyst for metareferential reflection" (99) have not hitherto been highlighted. Brian Zuccala fills this gap: "women are the privileged *medium* through which the metadiscourse on art [...] unfolds" (54) and "the narrative/creative act is configured quite explicitly as an act of (masculine) possession triggered by erotic desire" (54). Even though - as Zuccala rightly highlights - Capuana certainly appreciates some of the (few) charismatic women writers of his times and manifests such a high esteem in some of his critical works, the idea of the 'spermatic ink' seems to remain a fixture of Capuana's conception. Similar conclusions were drawn in a study of mine, dedicated to proto-*fantascientifica* Italian literature, in which I pointed out that Capuana's stories declaring the triumph of the 'cerebral man' anticipate Marinetti's *Mann-anschauung* (Comoy Fusaro 2013). The reflections carried out in chapter 5 are equally innovative. Among those, the analysis of "Dolore senza nome" stands out: in this short story, Zuccala argues, "possibly for the first time, there is a collective voice of the artist's *entourage* intervening to contradict what the artist thinks of himself and his work" (108). We are already at the level of Pirandello's problematisation of the relationship between an author and their characters.

Among significant outcomes of the study is the reevaluation of the entire corpus, with, on the one hand, the rediscovery of previously neglected or completely ignored works - including the aforementioned short story "Dolore senza nome", the short essay "L'eterno femminile", the novel *La Sfinge*, as well as the "pagine memorialistiche" (6) of *Ricordi di infanzia e di giovinezza* (2005), recently republished by Aldo Fichera.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the importance of other better-known works comes under scrutiny in Zuccala's analysis. By putting emphasis on works such as *Profili di donne* and *Rassegnazione*, Zuccala coun-

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**1** Fichera is also the editor of other neglected works, such as *Gli americani di Ràbbato*, as well as an enthusiastic promoter of the Casa Museo Luigi Capuana's materials.

ters a *vulgata* that has historically celebrated the centrality of, for example, *Il Marchese di Roccaverdina* (to which little attention is paid).

This study has the additional, significant merit of paving the way for new research. In this piece, I have appropriated the word *capuanistica*. However, it ought to be specified that, if Zuccala speaks of Capuana studies and of *capuanistica* (as do I, following his lead), this is due to the new impulse given in recent years to the studies of the Italian nineteenth century and of Capuana in particular, in Italy and abroad, by young and talented scholars, including the Author of this book.

These young researchers are both talented and daring: it would probably sound hyperbolic to say Zuccala has read all there is to read on and by Capuana, but certainly “the new landscape of *capuanistica* as it presents itself to scholars today” (27), and as he overviews and illustrates it at the beginning of his exegetic journey, is exhaustive. His engagement with both existing *capuananista* and non-Capuana-centred scholarship is unremitting. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that Capuana was a very prolific writer. This study by Zuccala exhibits the qualities of a genuine researcher: creativity and academic rigour, modesty and intellectual ambition, as well as, *cela va sans dire*, interpretative insightfulness, that enable him to overcome the apparent contradiction between self-reflexivity and *verista*-like mimesis, by building – and rightly so – on the hybrid and speculative quality intrinsic to any artistic representation: “self-reflexive and ‘mimetic’ creative writing are not at all mutually exclusive and [...] represent in fact specular, interrelated instances of a vision of the real that is not simply reproductive but always – to some extent – a ‘re-creation’” (19).

Among the new research pathways opened by this study is one that seems particularly promising to me: the extension of the exploration of self-reflexivity, through combined close and distant reading, so as to reach and incorporate some of its most metaphorical instances. An example of the further scholarly possibilities attached to self-reflexivity could be that of focusing on the early short story, “Il dottor Cymbalus”. This text, albeit much less explicitly than in “Il piccolo archivio” and the ‘rejected’ “Un caso di sonnambulismo”, already appears to display traces of the *sperimentale-speculativo-metaletterario* model that will later become dominant and fully-fledged in Capuana’s *oeuvre*. Likewise, applying Digital Humanities’ tools to the whole of Capuana’s production, including too often neglected paratextual materials, appears auspicious. There is, in other words, work to do, and I hope Brian Zuccala will continue to pursue this kind of scholarly exploration, so as to continue enriching the field of *capuanistica*.

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## Author's Preface and Acknowledgments

This book is a comprehensive study – the first in English since 1979 – that revolves around Luigi Capuana. It is also a book on pre-twentieth-century self-reflexive narratives as well as, more collaterally, a single case study-centred approach to gender and narrative, focusing on strategies of female characterisation in Liberal Italy (1861-1915). It is the result of over a decade of reflection, which began at graduate level and then has continued at post-graduate and post-doctoral levels across four continents, on two core themes, variously intertwined: the increasingly debated theme of Capuana's relationship with Naturalism, *Verismo* and realism in general, on the one hand, and the rather more neglected theme of his rendition of female characters and gender dynamics on the other. A third line of inquiry has become progressively more involved with those two themes: the way in which theory is negotiated in Capuana's creative writing and vice versa.

In a few other circumstances, over the past years, I have attempted to reflect on these defining research questions individually, and in a way that tended to be rather compartmentalised. Here, I attempt to bring all these thoughts together, whilst at the same time taking the ideas further. I will endeavour to compensate for obvious partialities – e.g. not considering works such as *Rassegnazione* (1907), *Le appassionate* (1893), *Ricordi di infanzia e di giovinezza* (1893) or the numerous fairy tales. I will also try to correct what I by now regard as previous shortcomings, and to strengthen the link between Capuana's conceptualisation of the genre of the novel and his narrative construction of gender.

For what I consider to be a positive and interdisciplinary progression in the way I have come to think about Capuana and Capuana's work within the context of post-unification Italian literature and culture, I must thank, among others, Anita Virga, Annamaria Pagliaro, Edwige Comoy Fusaro, Victor Houlston, Paul Barnaby, Chris Fotheringham, Samuele Grassi, Franco Savarino Roggero, Kamalini Govender, Linda Parkes, and I am certainly forgetting someone, to whom, nonetheless, goes my deepest gratitude.

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