Women’s Writing in Western Europe
Women’s Writing in Western Europe
Gender, Generation and Legacy

Edited by

Adalgisa Giorgio and Julia Waters

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To our teachers and our students
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The present volume originated in a three-day international conference on “Contemporary European Women Writers: Gender and Generation,” held at the University of Bath in the spring of 2005, under the auspices of the Women’s Studies Centre and the Department of European Studies and Modern Languages. The many papers presented at the conference, nearly one hundred in all, confirmed our working hypothesis that, thirty years on from the blossoming of women’s writing in the western world and from the early pioneering critical projects of (re)constructing a female literary tradition, the categories of “gender,” “generation” and “legacy” continue to be relevant to both women’s writing and to literary criticism today. The conference brought together papers on the literatures of western, central and eastern Europe, and it was rewarding to discover that contemporary women’s writing in all three geographical areas is informed by a common base of feminist theories and cultural practices. This common base has served to illuminate both cross-cultural similarities and differences, and attests to the wide circulation of a truly international women’s culture across ever more fluid national borders. The contributions of the novelists who took part in the conference – Nadezhda Azhgikhina, Ananda Devi, Laura Freixas, Silvana La Spina, Natalia Malakhovskaia and Michèle Roberts – provided living proof that the writing practice of women writers is steeped in, and draws strength from, their gender and from their awareness of being part of a female literary and non-literary genealogy.

Given the highly productive cross-national and comparative nature of the conference, it is with some regret that we now present a volume solely on western Europe: a decision that has been dictated by mainly practical reasons. The sheer volume and variety of the material presented at the conference made it impossible for us to produce a book that would be inclusive, coherent and, at the same time, respectful of differences. Furthermore, as a result of the recent opening up to the west of the former Communist countries of central and eastern Europe, academics and writers from these areas have recently begun to discover feminist theoretical and literary texts that have long been “canonical” in western Europe. The notion of a female literary tradition is now beginning to be explored in their literatures too. As a result, whilst the term “feminism” has held rather different, predominantly socio-political meanings in these countries, it is to be expected that cross-fertilization between different traditions will soon increasingly take place, to mutual advantage. Though rich and fascinating, the
striking differences between cultures and national literatures occasioned by
decades of east-west separation would have been too great to explore
satisfactorily within the space constraints of one book. We decided, therefore, to
separate the material along geographic lines and according to our specialisms.
The material on central and eastern Europe will thus appear in due course in a
separate volume. We hope that what we have undoubtedly lost by narrowing our
perspective and field of enquiry we shall gain in terms of increased focus and
depth.

The individual chapters of this volume are considerably revised and
extended versions of papers presented at the conference, selected on the grounds of
their tight but multifarious focus on the volume’s central themes. Inevitably,
it was not possible to include all of the papers, but we wish to thank all the
participants who helped to make the original conference such an exciting and
cumstantial event. The three broad sections into which the chapters of this
volume are divided reflect the three key areas of common concern that have
emerged from the contributors’ heterogeneous engagements with the notions of
“gender,” “generation” and “legacy” in the works of women writers from across
western Europe. This division is, of course, only one possibility of many: as our
readers will discover, a complex web of interrelations, at the level of themes,
structures, genres, styles and methodologies, links the various chapters, so
demonstrating the numerous common underpinnings of the texts analyzed and
of the tools employed to analyze them. The volume attests to the thriving field
of contemporary women’s writing as well as to the critical strength of the
different “generations” of academics whose work is collected here: from
internationally renowned scholars, to senior and more junior academics, to
promising doctoral students. We invite our readers to unravel for themselves the
many threads that run through this volume and thus to contribute to the tapestry
we have started to weave.

We wish to acknowledge the following institutions which sponsored the
original conference and contributed to the development of the present volume:
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We are also grateful to Katy Jordan and Sophie Arnold from the University of Bath library for obtaining books and articles for us at short notice, and to Judi Upton-Ward, Bill Jackson and Paul Hamilton for their technical help.

Adalgisa Giorgio and Julia Waters
Universities of Bath and Reading, August 2007
INTRODUCTION

GENDER, GENERATION, LEGACY

ADALGISA GIORGIO AND JULIA WATERS

Introduction

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed the blossoming of women’s writing and of a feminist literary, theoretical and political consciousness in many countries across Europe. “Gender,” “generation” and “legacy” were key concepts in early feminist literary criticism. Influenced by psychoanalytic models of familial and gender relations, feminist theorists posited the notion of a specifically female or “feminine” form of writing, rooted in the body and in the maternal. Such notions led to the establishment of “gender” as a fundamental category of literary analysis. To overcome centuries of critical neglect, feminist critics called for the creation of a specifically female canon, which would (re)construct a genealogy of literary foremothers for current and future generations. Thirty years on from the conception of such pioneering projects, from the publication of such seminal texts as Luce Irigaray’s Speculum, de l’autre femme (1974, Speculum of the Other Woman, 1985), Hélène Cixous’s “Le Rire de la Méduse” (1975, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 1976), Elaine Showalter’s A Literature of Their Own (1977) or Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), and from the flourishing of women’s writing that accompanied them, it is timely now to explore the legacy of earlier writers, texts and theories for the works of European women writers of the 1990s and early twenty-first century. Recent years have seen the burgeoning of a new generation of women’s writing across western Europe, with women-authored texts being prominent on mainstream publishing lists in many national literatures. The purpose of this volume is to draw comparisons and contrasts between different generations of writers and critics and between different countries, and to examine how women’s literary production has responded to the socio-political and demographic changes that have shaped an ever-evolving Europe.
The terms of enquiry that we have adopted in this book – “gender,” “generation” and “legacy” – are far from being transparent or unproblematic: the three terms convey multifarious concepts that have been increasingly contested over the last three decades. When we decided to embark upon this project, we were thus aware that we were treading on potentially dangerous theoretical and terminological ground. While an in-depth discussion of these concepts is obviously beyond the scope of this volume, some clarification of the use we make of them within the context of this book of literary criticism is nonetheless required. As our opening paragraph demonstrates, the three concepts were intertwined in the critical project women undertook in the 1970s. It appears that, despite the changes that have since occurred in our understanding of them and the critiques that they have undergone, the concepts of “gender,” “generation” and “legacy” are still closely knit and highly relevant today. Let us try to unravel them.

**Gender**

The current use of the word “gender” no longer sets it, as in early feminist theory, in opposition to “sex:” namely the physiological givens of being male or female (sex) versus the roles and behaviours that society attaches to male and female individuals (gender). The biological nature of sex and the constructed nature of gender have since been questioned and deconstructed, to argue that whilst biology does not necessarily entail fixity, social construction does not necessarily imply the possibility of change either.  

1. The boundaries between nature and culture have become blurred, as a consequence of such factors as new technologies or different sexual and self-identificatory practices. “Queer” theories and practices, in particular, deliberately undermine the traditional binaries of male versus female, celebrate the mismatch between gender and sexuality, and undermine the dominant discourse of heterosexuality.  

2. Gender is now widely understood to connote performative acts which are subject to regulation by, and are a means of destabilizing, dominant representations of masculinity and femininity.  

3. In the current volume, we use “gender” in the more general sense of “gender identity:” that is, the subjective perception people have of themselves as either masculine or feminine or other, and as just one facet of a complex subjectivity encompassing class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, age and other markers.

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This volume therefore concerns the literary output of individuals whose sense of gender identity is female and whose writing focuses in some way on gendered identities, as well as on other components of subjectivity, notably “generation.” Exclusionary as our choice of confining ourselves to women’s writing might be seen to be, it has proven still to be a valuable operation to study women’s writing as a category unto itself and so to investigate the extent to which contemporary women’s writing can be seen as part of a female literary genealogy. In so doing, we have sought to examine whether women writers still seek legitimation in literary precursors, as earlier generations of feminist critics argued, and if so, in what ways. The numerous studies that have been published in recent years on women’s writing in different western European literatures attest to the continued contemporary interest in the subject of gender and writing. Yet, to date, very few studies exist of women’s writing from across western Europe and ours is the first with the ambition of being both intergenerational and international. The current volume thus contributes to an important existing field of study, whilst also expanding its area of enquiry across national, cultural, linguistic and generational boundaries. As such, it offers more than just a “snapshot” of contemporary writing by women, valid though such a project would be: it presents a forum for taking stock of developments within individual literatures and for looking forward and beyond the confines of our national specialisms, to see if and how certain gendered concerns, practices and theories have crossed national boundaries. Unlike many earlier studies, our aim is not to enumerate a list of cross-cultural similarities in female-authored literary practices, but rather tentatively to sketch the shifting, ever-evolving contours of something approaching what Kristeva termed a trans-European “feminine sensibility” with its own “storehouse of memory.” Such considerations take us on to the second term of our title, “generation.”


5 A notable exception is Giorgio, ed. Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women (2002).

"Generation" is commonly understood as a group of individuals sharing a worldview as a consequence of having been exposed to the same historical events, to similar social and material practices and to similar life experiences. A generation occupies a specific position along a progressive line of descent and is normally seen in opposition to preceding and successive generations. Age is a fundamental element of generation, since a generation is normally characterized as being born in a certain year or within a given time interval.

As such, “generation” continues to be a recognized and useful concept in sociology, ethnography, anthropology, economics, political science and certain branches of history and is an analytical tool that has been applied, in conjunction with gender, to fields as diverse as health studies, finance, the marketplace or the workplace across different geographical areas. As the mid-1980s, and in line with class, race and gender, increasing attention has been paid to “age” as a social category which defines identities, shapes experiences and determines access to opportunities, resources and rights. The adoption of age as an additional identity marker, acting as a source of difference between women, originated in the need for historical contextualization at a time when, ironically, the life course has been becoming increasingly destandardized as a consequence of changes in social norms, family structures, patterns of employment and reproduction, and medical technologies. These transformations have been crucial in revealing the socially constructed nature of certain life experiences, and in reiterating the importance of age and generation as categories to locate individuals in society and history. Research also attests to the fact that women “interpret, define and give meaning to social reality in varied and contrasting
ways” as a consequence of different personal histories resulting from age and generation.11 This “social generational consciousness,” a perception of oneself in time and space, shows that women experience their lives as immersed in gendered generations, even though these must always be understood in relation to the continued impact on life patterns of ongoing socio-economic and cultural transformations.

The long-standing debate on the usefulness of the concept of generation for historians seems to have yielded in recent years a more cautious view of its potential, namely as a means of understanding limited phenomena of socio-historical change rather than as a key to the universal laws of historical development.12 Moreover, generation is a complex and elusive concept that “can play on the ambiguity between ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ ties,” as it combines simultaneity (the location in time of coevals) and succession (of different generations) and is a potential source of cohesion and change, solidarity and conflict.13 Thus, as the traditional view of history as a chronological continuum and linear progression was replaced by a poststructuralist view of history as a superimposition of spaces of representation, generation has continued to have a high currency in different discourses, including feminism. For example, already in 1977, when discussing the relations between different feminist movements in and across Europe, Kristeva proposed that “the word ‘generation’ suggests less a chronology than a signifying space;”14 that is, that different feminist movements do not interrelate in solely linear ways with earlier, older generations influencing later, younger ones, but that they all contribute, back and forth, to an ever-expanding, collective bank of memory and meanings.

The use of generational metaphors to group together women of different ages, experiences, classes, ethnicities or occupations has also been put under close scrutiny in later studies of feminist critical history, because it “ignores intragenerational differences and intergenerational commonalities, and thrives on a paradigm of oppositional change.”15 As we moved towards the 1990s, new generations of feminists, and not only “backlash” feminists, felt the need to examine their relationship with the “historical” figures of 1970s feminism and their inheritance. What was being questioned was the lineal and unidirectional, cause-and-effect relationship between past and present implicit in the adoption of a hierarchical parent-child model to describe non-familial relationships which

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could otherwise be acted out on a level of parity. The volume *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue*, edited by Devoney Looser and E. Ann Kaplan, brings to the fore the reality of the differences and conflicts in feminism and the complex relations – of power and authority but also of mentorship and respect – between generations of feminists at various levels, including the institutional. The following questions around the notion of “generations,” posed by Roof and echoing Kristeva, perhaps best encapsulate the issues that are relevant to our project of assessing legacies between women writers:

Is it possible for me to be neither a daughter nor one who spontaneously generates? What paradigms exist outside of the familial and the reproductive? Can we conceive of cause and effect going both ways? Can we let go of the myth of intellectual property or at least be wary of all claim of ownership of ideas generated in the community? Can we at least begin to question these kinds of assumptions?

Looser and Kaplan’s book shows that generational metaphors are so all-pervasive in feminist enquiry and practices, that Roof’s appeal – to think of relationships between feminists and feminist theories as multidirectional rather than linear and unidirectional, and to think of action and thought as “gifts” that “expect no return and create no debt” – sounds almost utopian. Nonetheless, as the title attests, the volume does not discard the word or the concept of “generation.” Roof herself wants to preserve the knowledge and achievements of her precursors, provided that new ways of relating past and present feminists can be found. Similarly, the younger of the volume’s editors proposes a solution which does not do away with generations and which she finds in the words of one of her precursors: namely that, “to historicize the positions and perspectives of each generation could foster the multiplicity of generational voices rather than the silencing of one by another.” More recently also, Astrid Henry’s analysis of “matrophor,” the use of the maternal metaphor in feminist writing, shows how third-wave feminists continue to see feminism in generational and oppositional terms (first, second and third waves), even if this runs the potential risk of homogenizing both their predecessors and themselves. In this volume, Nancy K. Miller (Chapter 1) and Maggie Humm (Chapter 10) both explicitly discuss the tensions inherent in portraying influences between women (as feminists, academics, writers or readers) in terms of linear generations. As a

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16 Ibid., 71.
17 Ibid., 86.
18 Ibid., 87.
19 These are Stanford Friedman’s words, quoted in Looser, “Gen X Feminists? Youthism, Careerism, and the Third Wave,” 35.
20 Henry, *Not My Mother’s Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism.*
solution to these intergenerational tensions, Miller proposes a model of parallel, shared, intertextual dialogue, with books themselves, rather than their authors, acting as links between women. Humm proposes instead the pragmatic use of specific examples of intertextuality, within a historicized frame, as a means of avoiding the essentialism and familial tensions implicit in theories of gendered generations.

As we shall now consider, metaphors of generation also inform both earlier and contemporary women’s practices of creative writing and of literary criticism, in their efforts to understand the sources and origin of female creativity and the mechanisms of female literary production. This brings us to the central concern of the current volume: the “generation” (in the sense of production) of literature and generations of women writers and critics.

**Literary generation(s) and legacies**

The history of feminist literary criticism and of women’s writing is riddled with generational anxieties. The “literary foremother” was a fundamental metaphor in the early “gynocritical” projects of Showalter or Gilbert and Gubar, both of which emphasized the idea of a missing female literary tradition that needed to be (re)constructed. Gilbert and Gubar posited a female variant of Harold Bloom’s anxiety of influence, the “anxiety of authorship,” to describe the isolation of the nineteenth-century woman writer, her desire to avoid reproducing the image of herself that she found in male texts, and her struggle to create instead her own “authority.”21 As Gilbert and Gubar’s study shows, the idea of a missing female literary genealogy is not simply a critical invention, but was a conscious need which women writers openly articulated in their work. Just like the writers they studied, Showalter and Gilbert and Gubar wrote in a generational void: like women’s writing, women’s literary criticism also had to invent its own tools. As a result, both early women writers and the first feminist critics, in Roof’s words, generated spontaneously.22

The fact that this first “socio-historical” phase of feminist literary criticism was followed by theoretically-based and (self-declaredly) more “sophisticated” approaches to women’s writing should not blind us to its importance and to the fundamental role it played in recuperating women writers from the past and making them available to new generations of writers, critics, university students and the general reading public. Their pioneering work on British women’s writing broke out of the confines of the USA where it had originated and reached the broader western world, stimulating similar projects in other

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22 Roof, “Generational Differences,” 86.
European national literatures. The search for a female tradition took place alongside an intense production of creative women’s writing, and the two searches often coincided, with criticism and the creative enterprise feeding each other.

The two-way interrelation of feminist literary theory and women’s literary practice is discussed in several of the contributions to the current volume. In Chapter 5, Waters discusses the productive, though often ambivalent, interrelation between the development of 1970s French feminist theory and the work of Marguerite Duras, whom Cixous hailed as an exemplary exponent of *écriture féminine*. Maestri (Chapter 13) shows how feminist theory and women’s writing can feed into one another in rich and unexpected, cross-cultural ways, as is demonstrated by the theoretically-informed Italian translations of works by A. S. Byatt. Lazzaro-Weis (Chapter 19) discusses the ways in which theoretical debates about the nature of women’s history have informed and been informed by women writers’ use of the historical novel genre. Edwards (Chapter 24) shows how Cixous’s feminist theories of the 1970s intersect with her autobiographical work of the 1990s which, in turn, questions and modifies contemporary feminist theories of autobiography.

As these chapters demonstrate, the early socio-historical, literary-critical feminist projects of Showalter and others were complemented and contested by other approaches, based in object-relations theory, in poststructuralist theory, in psychoanalytic feminist revisions of Lacan and in various combinations of these: approaches which are often grouped together under the title of “French” feminism or “feminisms of difference.” With these new approaches, the notion of “generation” was shifted from the author to the text, focusing on what the texts themselves might tell us about the repressed maternal pre-Oedipal, about a feminine subjectivity rooted in the (M)other, or about the mother-daughter relationship. A central theoretical concern, posited initially by Hélène Cixous, was the articulation of a specifically feminine language (*écriture féminine*), which proceeds from the (maternal) body and which subverts traditional phallogocentrism. These thematic and theoretical concerns came to dominate much of women’s writing from across western Europe, but most notably from France and Italy, throughout the 1970s and 1980s and, to an extent, into the early 1990s. French feminism was concerned with the possibility of a universal, non-contingent form of biologically-determined feminine expression. A body of women’s literature, overtly or implicitly committed to gender, thus gradually accumulated over these decades without critics attempting to fit it into generations. Women writers were still exploring and creating their own writing tools in opposition to the male tradition, while criticism was concerned with identifying links between them in relation to genre, themes and styles, rather than according to birth dates. As a result, one of the most prolific periods of
female literary production in twentieth-century western Europe was not seen, and did not see itself, as a “generation,” formed and confined by a common socio-cultural and historical context.

The idea of literary generations burst to the fore, instead, in the 1990s when, in a number of European literatures, the phenomenon of “youth writing” made its appearance alongside the rise of an interest, in many fields of research, in youth and in a specific “girl culture.” Iconoclastic, postmodern young writers emerged who were so different from what had been seen before that they were immediately packaged as a group or generation: the postfeminist “New Barbarians” in France (see Jordan, Chapter 8, and Robson, Chapter 27); the “Pulp Generation” in Italy (see Bernardi, Chapter 4); or the “literary Fräulein miracle” in Germany (see Gremler, Chapter 7), for instance. Their common interest in controversial and ambiguous representations of femininity – on the one hand appearing to affirm female friendship, agency and physical power, whilst on the other focusing on violence, sexuality, self-interest and consumerism – together with their characteristic questioning or outright rejection of the labels of “feminist” or “woman writer” invoke questions about the nature of legacies, influences, intergenerational and intragenerational relationships. Whose heirs are these young writers and how do they relate to those who came before them? Many of these young women authors also reject “gender” as a relevant interpretative category for their work and for themselves as writers: their relationship with their female predecessors is contestatory, self-assertive and uneasy. Gilbert and Gubar’s notion of women writers’ “anxiety of authorship” seems, for many contemporary writers, to have become an anxiety of gender and autonomy, with new authors repeatedly distancing themselves from a now established line of women’s writing and body of feminist criticism. Yet, as many of the chapters in this volume amply demonstrate, self-pronouncements are not always supported by the texts themselves, where more indebted forms of intertextuality can be discerned, and in some cases U-turns have occurred in these young writers’ self-identity as writers. (See, for instance, Bernardi, Chapter 4; Gremler, Chapter 7; Jordan, Chapter 8; Giorgio, Chapter 9; Fanning, Chapter 15; Minelli, Chapter 16.)

These recent developments in women’s writing – particularly striking within our own specialisms of French and Italian literature – make it imperative for critics to return to the issue of legacies and inheritance between generations of writers, and to examine the nature of intergenerational influences, sources and intertextuality in relation to the literary production of contemporary European women writers. The aim of this volume is to investigate these issues by analyzing the texts of writers for whom “generation” is a major concern in one or more of the following ways: paratextually, as a declared allegiance to, or distancing from, a particular or general literary genealogy; thematically, as a
focus on literal or symbolic familial relationships or parental inheritances; or
textually, as a conscious or unconscious, emulative or subversive, rewriting of
earlier literary or critical texts. The chapters of this book will examine whether
generation is felt as a burden to be thrown off, or experienced as a means of
empowerment crucial to women writers’ positive self-identity; whether the
notions of legacy and influence may be revalued as multidirectional, rather than
seen as a linear inheritance to which women writers must passively submit;
whether intergenerational dialogue can provide a means, especially for women
writers from minority groups of different kinds, of overcoming their exclusion
from a female literary tradition, from the literary canon and from other
institutions and discourses; and whether and how the transmission of female and
feminist knowledge can reach across national and cultural boundaries and
beyond different temporalities, to act as a symbolic space for intergenerational
and intragenerational communication.

Reading women’s writing

As already indicated in our Preface, we have divided the chapters of this volume
into three broad sections, corresponding to the key areas of thematic and
theoretical concern that have emerged from our collective investigations of the
issues of “gender,” “generation” and “legacy” in contemporary women’s writing
from western Europe. These are, of course, far from prescriptive or hermetic
divisions: most of the papers engage with the terms of more than one of the
groupings and interrelate with each other in diverse and fascinating ways. There
are thus innumerable possibilities of how the material might have been arranged
and our readers are, of course, at liberty to select and read the chapters in
whatever order and according to whatever parameters their own particular
interests dictate. We shall, however, now briefly explain the reasoning behind
our own choice of arrangement and, in so doing, tease out some of the recurrent
areas of convergence or debate in approach, concerns or findings. The aim of
this volume is not to dictate particular approaches or to draw definitive
conclusions, but to take stock of the vast body of material, both past and present,
that is European women’s writing and to suggest some directions for future
reading and future research.

Part I, “Intertextual Generations and Female Literary Legacies,” gathers

Together chapters which explicitly investigate the nature of intertextual relations
between different generations of women writers from and across different
national literatures. Together, they demonstrate the rich and multifarious forms
that such intergenerational legacies may take and so nuance our understanding
of the nature of intertextuality. Miller’s opening chapter addresses head-on the
conflictual dynamics inherent in the traditional representation of
intergenerational influence in terms of the mother-daughter paradigm. In her analysis of Satrapi’s non-linear, comic-format autobiography, and in her foregrounding of the book itself, rather than the author, as the means of transmitting an inheritance between generations of women, Miller advocates a more egalitarian, parallel and shared model of intergenerational and intertextual relations. In her study of the legacy of Colette for subsequent generations of French and British women writers, Holmes (Chapter 2) presents a more celebratory example of influence, in which the portrayal of a nurturing mother-figure, an emphasis on lyrical writing and the combination of mind and body form the basis of a powerful and empowering female literary inheritance. Marven (Chapter 3) discusses the reworkings of a key German feminist text by Morgner in the works of the contemporary women writers, Hensel and Schmidt, and shows how parody and pastiche act as forms of intertextuality that acknowledge both their debt to, and their simultaneous revision of, their common precursor.

In her study of the recent “pulp” generation of Italian women writers (Chapter 4), Bernardi demonstrates that the writers’ explicit denial of affiliation with a female literary tradition is belied by textual evidence of their varied forms of intertextual engagement with the works of female predecessors. Such textual and intertextual evidence highlights the continued need, amongst women writers, to find a specifically female voice and to seek authorization via association with literary foremothers. In Chapter 5, Waters investigates how Roze’s explicit acknowledgement of debt to her foremother, Duras, is reflected in her recent novel’s intertextual reworking of her precursor’s iconic work. Whilst this reworking represents a form of intertextual homage, it also has a strongly corrective function, revising, updating and filling gaps in the earlier writer’s work, and so signalling major intergenerational shifts between the writers in relation to the ethical and political content of their novels. Germanà’s analysis (Chapter 6) of Fell’s and Tennant’s subversive rewritings of canonical British texts by male authors highlights the implicit ambivalence that underlies their feminist reinterpretations of the originals’ misogynist tropes.

In her examination of the work of Hermann, Gremler (Chapter 7) shows that the young German writer’s explicit disavowal of debt to female precursors and disconnection from politics are, as in the case of the young Italian writers discussed by Bernardi, contradicted by textual evidence. Gremler uncovers strong intertextual links between Hermann’s work and those of Wolf and Kirsch, but shows how her reworkings betray a strong sense of disillusionment with the dreams of past generations. The new generation of French women writers examined in Chapter 8, also characteristically rejects any sense of belonging to a feminist heritage. Yet, as Jordan argues, the themes and issues with which their texts engage, especially the female body and sexuality, are the
same as those of 1970s French feminists, albeit pushed to parodic, violent extremes. Finally, Giorgio (Chapter 9) discusses the often problematic nature of intertextuality, that Gilbert and Gubar characterized as an “anxiety of authorship,” as exemplified by the Italian writers Morante and Di Lascia. Whilst Di Lascia adamantly denies any debt to Morante, Giorgio uncovers a compelling web of intertextual links between the two. Identifying a gradual reconciliation with the literary foremother over time and across texts, Giorgio argues that intertextuality should be seen as a mutually beneficial process: whilst Di Lascia gains legitimization via association with Morante, Morante’s status is reciprocally reinforced by Di Lascia’s canonization of her.

The first four Chapters of Part II, “Gendered Genealogies and Familial Paradigms,” all reinvestigate, from different perspectives, the centrality of the mother-figure in feminist theories and in women’s writing. Humm starts (Chapter 10) by foregrounding the tensions inherent in conceiving of intergenerational influences in terms of the mother-daughter bond. Her investigation of the intertextual influence of Woolf on Beauvoir, however, argues that their common experience of the difficulty of figuring the mother leads to a process of intergenerational reconciliation. Ingman’s examination of recent Irish women’s writing (Chapter 11) asserts that both the reality and the representation of the mother-daughter relationship are profoundly influenced by changes in the material, socio-political conditions of women. Only in recent years, Ingman posits, have circumstances in Irish society, and hence in Irish women’s writing, become ripe for the application of French feminist theories of the maternal to such narratives. Echoing Ingman, Di Ciolla (Chapter 12) examines Italian women writers’ appropriation of the male genre of crime fiction as an implicit critique of contemporary Italian society. The focus of these novels on the family, on flawed mothers and on a profoundly dysfunctional mother-child bond, brings into question cultural myths of maternal love as well as received, patriarchal notions of justice and social order. Maestri (Chapter 13) discusses the influence of Irigaray’s theories of the maternal on the Italian Diotima group’s notion of “female realism” and how this in turn informs the representation of the mother in the Italian translation of works by A. S. Byatt – thus demonstrating the truly international, cross-cultural and interproductive nature of much feminist theory on the mother.

The next three chapters, by Pazos Alonso, Fanning and Minelli, all examine texts which, for different reasons, avoid the vexed mother-daughter relationship in favour of a re-evaluation of the father-figure. Pazos Alonso (Chapter 14) argues that the mother-daughter relationship is a problematic one for recent Portuguese women writers, on account of the mother’s perceived collusion with a repressive patriarchal regime. She thus analyzes women’s narratives, from both during and after the dictatorship, which bypass the mother by focusing on
the theme of female illegitimacy and on the protagonists’ quest for the father. Fanning (Chapter 15) asserts that the focus of feminist theory on the mother has been largely responsible for the critical neglect of the father. She then shows how the influence of Aleramo on Maraini – an influence which the latter author denies – can be detected in both writers’ representation of the child’s primary adoration of the father. Only later does disillusion with the father lead, in both texts, to a reconsideration of the mother. A similar pattern can be detected in the texts analyzed by Minelli in Chapter 16. Whilst Fusini explicitly denies being influenced by Kristeva, Minelli uncovers compelling, implicit intertextual links between the two writers’ textual depictions of love. Yet, whereas Kristeva presents the mother as the primary source of love, Fusini replaces her with a Lacanian father-figure, so demonstrating, once again, the often corrective and conflictual nature of interfemale intertextuality.

Again renouncing the mother but emphasizing the enduring power of familial metaphors, Capancioni’s and Williams’ chapters both focus on the figure of the grandmother as an alternative model of intergenerational influence. Capancioni (Chapter 17) examines the role of Italian novelist, Lussu, as reader and rewriter of the work of her British grandmother, Margaret Collier, and her search, by means of intergenerational intertextuality, for an Anglo-Italian familial and literary inheritance. In her study, Williams echoes Pazos Alonso’s assertion that mothers are perceived as having been complicit with Portugal’s former patriarchal dictatorship. In order to elude the tensions inherent in both maternal and patriarchal models, Williams argues, many contemporary Portuguese women writers have thus skipped a generation and chosen instead to depict grandmothers as alternative models of intergenerational affiliation.

Reflecting the nature of the terms in its title, Part III, “Female Experience and Gendered Identities,” is the most heterogeneous of the volume’s groupings. This heterogeneity reflects both the multiplicity of female experience and the rich and diverse developments in the theorization of gender and identity: from early 1970s feminist projects that focused on silenced female voices, to later conceptions of sexual difference that attempted to reconcile essentialism and constructionism, to more recent notions of the performative nature of identity, in which gender is just one subjective constituent. The first two chapters of this section, by Lazzaro-Weis and Wilson, tackle broad, generic and thematic issues of female experience across different generations. The remaining chapters discuss the intersections between gender and other constituent factors of identity in different texts and different contexts.

In her overview of the development of the female-authored historical novel in Italy (Chapter 19), Lazzaro-Weis shows how the common project, across generations, of restoring women’s history and memory, in opposition to the mainstream, male, historical canon, is tied up with a continued need to validate
women’s identities. Wilson’s analysis (Chapter 20) of the characterization of domestic space in the novels of different generations of Italian women writers uncovers the ongoing, complex relationship between individual female subjectivities, on the one hand, and dominant ideological discourses, on the other.

Anderson’s analysis of the largely neglected genre of the short story (Chapter 21) uncovers a multiplicity of representations of old women characters: a multiplicity which counters the traditional, homogenizing view, identified by Beauvoir, of old women as monstrous objects of dread. These new and multifarious representations reflect the demographics of contemporary society, as well as confirming recent theoretical notions of age as a social construct. In her examination of the works of Ginzburg and Sereni (Chapter 22), Cicioni argues that the double sense of the Italian word “appartenenza,” as connoting both “belonging” and “being part of,” better describes the authors’ (and, more generally, women’s) negotiations of their multiple subjectivities – as, amongst other things, Italian, Jewish and women – than the rather opaque term, “identity.”

In Chapter 23, Kačkutė examines recent novels by Azzopardi and NDiaye in relation to the shift in French thought, from an understanding of self in opposition to the other, to a more recent conception of the self as other. Her textual analysis demonstrates that, in both cases, gender represents just one issue of many in the female characters’ exploration of the relation between self and community. In her investigation of the recent autobiographical work by Cixous, Edwards (Chapter 24) also engages with theories of identity and alterity. She argues that the destruction of boundaries between self and other in the text’s construction of a plural, intergendered and intergenerational subject conforms to Cixous’s early feminist theory of the healing qualities of the female libidinal economy, whilst also casting doubt on the categories on which recent theories of female autobiography have been based.

Both Shilton’s and Benchouha’s chapters discuss the interrelation of gender and ethnicity in recent semi-autobiographical novels by immigrant writers to France and Belgium, and to Italy, respectively. Shilton examines (Chapter 25) the ways in which, in novels by Houari and Guène, the domestic separation of sexes and generations in patriarchal Muslim households intersects with cultural and ethnic segregation in the public sphere. Shilton’s focus on gendered spatial hierarchies and on the creation of specifically female spaces echoes, though in a very different socio-cultural context, many of the concerns of Wilson’s study of the topos of the house in Chapter 20. Benchouha’s discussion of immigrant women’s writing in Italy (Chapter 26) focuses on the interrelation of gender and race in the protagonists’ sense of identity when confronted with the otherness of Italy and, for the first time, with the idea of
themselves as other. She also uncovers subtle differences between the literary practices of the women writers studied and those of an earlier “generation” of male immigrant writers, and so sketches the tentative contours of a developing literary legacy of immigrant writing, both in and alongside mainstream Italian literature. Finally, Robson (Chapter 27) discusses recent French women writers’ literary representations of one of the most extreme and violent of possible female experiences, rape, and the various textual strategies employed, by different generations of women writers over three decades, in order to survive such an affront to one’s sense of identity.

It is not the aim of this volume, as we stated above, to draw definitive conclusions from the rich diversity of material analyzed in its many chapters. There do, however, appear to be several recurrent patterns and areas of convergence, in both the works analyzed and the terms of analysis, which relate directly to the central concepts of “gender,” “generation” and “legacy” as elaborated in contemporary women’s writing in western Europe, and which thus warrant highlighting. Whilst the notion of a “female literary tradition” may no longer be a central creative or theoretical concern, extensive evidence has been uncovered of the continued importance of intergenerational legacies between women writers in all of the national literatures discussed. The often covert, conflictual and corrective dynamics of these legacies have resulted in a fascinating multiplicity of intertextual relations. The names and works of certain writers and theorists – notably, Beauvoir, Woolf, Rich, Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva – recur with insistent regularity throughout this book, so attesting to the existence and multiple applicability of a truly international female and feminist canon. Other women writers – including Colette, Duras and Aleramo – are shown to have acted as influential precursors or “foremothers” to both 1970s feminist thinkers and to later generations of writers, and several of the contributors recognize and celebrate the existence, after several decades of feminist enquiry, of both precursors and descendants in the field of female literary and critical creativity.

Whilst several chapters discuss the problematic nature of the mother-daughter bond and the tensions inherent in applying such a paradigm to the notion of intergenerational influence, the mother-figure – whether positive or negative – continues to exert a powerful hold on women’s writing. Even when the maternal paradigm is eluded, other familial paradigms (the father, illegitimacy, grandmothers, surrogates) have tended to take their place. An alternative model of influence that is posited, in different guises, by several contributors, is that of the transmission of female and feminist knowledge via the lending and reading of books themselves – be they feminist classics such as Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* or Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* or the purportedly “postfeminist” novels of iconoclastic younger writers.
There are striking similarities between the notions of “filiation” and “affiliation,” posited by Miller, and Cicioni’s discussion of the double sense of “appartenenza” (belonging and choice) in relation to women’s sense of subjectivity – and this emphasis on the multiplicity and mobility of female identities is echoed across many of the volume’s studies. Whilst many of the chapters examine the relationship between different generations of women writers in relation to the evolution of feminist theories, many others also demonstrate that generational differences between women writers are the direct or implicit result of broader, socio-political and demographic changes: that is, that women’s writing does not just engage with issues of female experience but also with the broader world.

In the introduction to the 1999 re-edition of her *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter readily concedes that her “hypothetical model of a chain of female literary influence needs to be understood as a historically specific strategy rather than a dogmatic absolute” and argues that “in the 1990s, criticism of women’s writing has to take the fullest possible account of the whole network of literary forces in which each text is enmeshed.”23 We are confident that the current volume contributes, in multifarious, comparative and intergenerational ways, to a greater understanding and elaboration of just such a cross-cultural network of forces on the literary production of women writers from across western Europe. Whilst Showalter herself questions the validity of the notion of a female literary tradition – a notion that she originally posited in 1977 – it is worth noting that its continued relevance is more than amply demonstrated by the very republication of her canonical literary-critical text more than twenty years later. The chapters united in our volume produce compelling evidence that, as Showalter writes, “‘contact with a female tradition and a female culture’ has been a centre, inspiring women writers to ‘take strength in their independence to act in the world,’” but also that “with the globalization of culture, [...] the national boundaries of the novel are fading and disappearing.”24 Whilst the terms of enquiry of the current volume – “gender,” “generation” and “legacy” – have, like ourselves or the writers and theorists whom we analyze in the following pages, matured and developed in different directions over time, they are still highly relevant and productive notions today. Furthermore, contemporary women’s writing, whether acknowledging a debt to earlier generations or asserting its independence from them, continues to be an important and dynamic area of creative and critical innovation. We take pride in being the inheritors of a dynamic female literary and literary-critical tradition, as well as the originators of creative new paths of enquiry.

23 Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*, xvii.
24 Ibid., xxxii–xxxiii.