

BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE?

5TH - 6TH
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'25

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FEMININE
IN DOMESTIC SPACE

CALL FOR PAPERS
PROPOSALS BY FEBRUARY 16, 2025

Scientific committee

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DISL DIPARTIMENTO DI STUDI
LINGUISTICI E LETTERARI



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

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Representations of the feminine in domestic space

The conference organized by the 38th cycle of the Doctoral Programme in Linguistic, Philological and Literary Sciences at the University of Padua aims to investigate how the female figure is represented (or represents herself) in relation to the household. Throughout their history, patriarchal societies have imposed this space to women as a means to define their subordination; it has thus marked the boundary between that which is permitted and that which is forbidden, everyday life and the unknown. Following on the increased interest for the female condition of the recent decades — to which the critical perspectives related to gender studies have contributed since the beginning — this conference welcomes readings and reflections that will consider a topic that is perhaps still insufficiently investigated in the research field constituted by “the space of women” (Brogi, 2022).

In the pre-modern Western cultures, the representation of the feminine is indissolubly connected to the *domus*. Confinement to the domestic space is an essential trait of female characters in epos and drama (Medea, Penelope, Euriclea), comedy (like with Aristophanes' caricatured heroines), satire, elegy and historiography. The transition from pagan culture to Christianity brought about numerous transformations in the conception of female domesticity, as attested by the epistles of Jerome, the cases of female sainthood portrayed in hagiographic works and the development of mystical literature. But pre-modern literature also sees this theme equally developed in texts of philosophy and politics or concerning gnomic material (like Hesiod's *Works and Days* or Plato's *Republic*) or in technical and scientific treatises, monastic rules or preceptive writings. Beyond the texts containing narratives or regulations, the physical and social boundaries of the *domus* also constricted the intellectual activities of women, both as writers and as readers. Still, that which can be reconstructed of women's everyday life depends on the written sources: their inevitable distortion must be taken into account. Such a variety of literary genres and figures requires the study of the mechanisms of textual production and transmission from a historical-philological perspective, which can help unravel the intertwining of compositional dynamics and the domestic condition of women.

The tools of literary analysis can help define how the texts can reveal the constrictive quality of the association of woman and house. There are different ways to do this: by depicting the everyday life of the characters they represent — this happens, for instance, with some characters in Boccaccio's *Decameron* or in James Joyce's Eveline —, or also by describing attempts to re-negotiate power dynamics from within the system, as do the protagonists of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, who develop underground networks of resistance to defend their identities. But, as explained in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, the house can turn from a place of constraint to the intimate and protected space where women can develop their own agency. On the other hand, there are also female characters who do not evolve and adhere, either by conscious choice, by inertia or because they are given no space to speak out, to the role of mothers and wives that society has assigned them: examples of this case are Ma Joad in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and the narrating “I” in the collection of poems *L'oter*, by Franca Grisoni. And the domestic space can be the metonymy of a social order that cannot be tolerated any longer and from which one must try to escape, as do Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *Doll's House* or the narrator of Sibilla Aleramo's *Una donna*. Contemporary literature finds a powerful source of inspiration for the fantastic imagination in the domestic environment, which it depicts as an

increasingly sentient being that reflects the psychological conflicts of the people that inhabit it: this happens, for instance, in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*. Alternatively, the house can respond to the chaos of globalization by transforming into a pathological space "where things and relationships are made unfamiliar" (Jossa, 2020), as happens in *Distancia de rescate* and *La respiración cavernaria* by Samantha Schweblin.

The traditional relationship between women and the domestic environment is also reflected in the language they use or have used during the centuries. Nüshu, a written language in 14th century China used exclusively by women, and the specialized lexicon the lace makers of Burano still use to this day (Castro, 2023) testify how, throughout history, women have devised strategies to assert their independence both inside and outside domestic contexts. The importance of studying and preserving these linguistic practices has been acknowledged only recently; it has generated an interest in recording their peculiarities and in finding the common traits between places and social contexts that are very distant from each other. Among the most noteworthy traits of these languages are the degree to which they resist to linguistic contact, but also how these women are aware of being the most reliable informants for linguistic studies.

The conference welcomes contributions on philology, linguistics and literary studies. The examples that have been presented above and the themes that will be proposed below are to be considered as simple directions; their expansion, both from a historical and geographical point of view, is sincerely hoped for.

Philology

- The transmission, circulation and reception of literary works that describe the everyday life of women, with a specific interest in intertextuality and the interaction between different literary genres.
- The problematic intersection between the literary representation of the status of women and the reality of domestic life as it can be reconstructed from material sources.
- Women writers and readers: the everyday life of women as it emerges from the practices of reading, writing and annotation that can be reconstructed through material philology, book history, codicology and paleography (even quantitative paleography), etc.

Literary studies

- The house as a literary figure and its intertextual connection: its use as a metaphor for the conscience of female characters and the place where memory is preserved and relived through the symbolic power of the domestic objects; investigation of intertextual references that signal the continuity of the theme during the history of literature.
- Style and tradition: stylistic and lexical surveys on the representation of the association between woman and house; rhetorical strategies that consolidate or deconstruct the stereotypical portrayals of women in the text.
- Non-mimetic narration: the relationship between speculative fiction and the construction of the domestic space as the place where female characters experience conflicts or transformations; an investigation on the use of uncanny or supernatural elements in interpreting the association between woman and house.

- The application of cultural studies (postcolonial theory, genre studies, intersectional approaches, etc.) to the theme: analyses of power, genre and identity dynamics in the representations of female domesticity, highlighting their relationship with the dominating social conventions.

Linguistic studies

- Linguistic variation: of genre, mansion (especially if it is conducted in a domestic environment) and social context.
- Lexicology: specialized lexicon that is connected to women's everyday mansions in the domestic environment; methods and instruments for the preservation of this lexicon; the jargon of professions traditionally associated to women.
- Linguistic mutation: historical and diachronic studies on change concerned with the use of language by women in the domestic space; the writing of these languages as a practice that evolved through history.
- Cognitive linguistics: the relationship between the language used by women in the domestic environment and thought; the relationship between the encyclopaedia developed by the speakers of said language and the *langue* of the greater community they refer to.

Those who are interested in participating can send a proposal for a paper within February 15, 2025 to the email address burningdownthehouse.disll@gmail.com. The file must be sent in pdf format and must contain an abstract (max 350 words), an essential bibliography (max 5 titles) and a bio-bibliographical note (max 200 words). Notification of acceptance will be sent by the scientific committee by March 2, 2025. Each paper will last 20 minutes at maximum. Travel and accommodation expenses are at the participants' charge. The conference will be held on the 5th and 6th of June at the the Department of Linguistic and Literary Studies (DISLL) of the University of Padua.

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