

## Differentia: Review of Italian Thought

---

Number 6 *Combined Issue 6-7 Spring/Autumn*

Article 30

---

1994

### Italian Women and Other Tragedies by Glanna Patriarca

Anthony Julian Tamburri

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Tamburri, Anthony Julian (1994) "Italian Women and Other Tragedies by Glanna Patriarca," *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*: Vol. 6 , Article 30.

Available at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia/vol6/iss1/30>

This document is brought to you for free and open access by Academic Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought* by an authorized editor of Academic Commons. For more information, please contact [mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu](mailto:mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu), [hu.wang.2@stonybrook.edu](mailto:hu.wang.2@stonybrook.edu).

---

***Italian Women and Other Tragedies***

Gianna Patriarca

Toronto: Guernica Editions, 1994

*Italian Women and Other Tragedies* chronicles an immigrant woman's physical and emotional journeys. Yet, Gianna Patriarca's poetry does more than just speak to her immigrant experience. At the same time, Patriarca succeeds in chronicling the gender aspect of her migratory Italian/Canadian existence—Indeed, one might wonder about the serendipity of her Italian surname and its semiotic clash with her pro-feminist thematics. Patriarca's women in *Italian Women and Other Tragedies* represent the entire spectrum of Italian, North Italian/American, and North American women. As she escorts her reader along her personal journeys from the province of Frosinone, Italy, to Ontario, Canada, Patriarca introduces her reader to the pre-migratory women of Ceprano, Frosinone, in "Italian Women," to the post-migratory women of Toronto, Ontario, in her concluding, forward-looking poem "For Gia at Bedtime."

The gender dilemma, and I use this second term deliberately, opens the collection in Patriarca's first four poems, "Italian Women," "My Birth," "Daughters," and "Paesaggi," where the ethnic/immigrant theme shares the spotlight with the gender issue. Women are, in this pro-masculinist, bicultural Italian/Canadian world, second-class citizens. Their feelings and desires are shown to be categorically subservient to the men's, as Patriarca tells us in "Italian Women,"

these are the women  
who were born to give birth  
  
they breath only  
leftover air  
and speak only  
when deeper voices  
have fallen asleep

Similar dynamics of what may be readily considered second-class citizenry are more specifically underscored in the opening of the above-cited poem. These women's very existence are defined by their reproductive abilities—"born to give birth"; a notion that is punctuated by Patriarca's resort to alliteration in the second verse, as well as by the adverb "only," the poem's one true rhyme.

The collection's second poem, "My Birth," brings to the fore the masculinist notion of female qua procreator, where females as first borns, conversely, are "mistakes" of both those who are born as well as those who give birth to them. One-sidedly male, instead, the father, who in this case figures as the loser, has the magnanimity(?) to forgive "even [her] female birth": "my father is a great martyr / he has forgiven me everything / even my female birth." And if there is any solace for these women to find, it is possible only among themselves, as did this new-born female:

i swear i can still hear the  
only welcoming sounds  
were from my mother  
and she has always been  
blamed  
for the mistake.

The male (husband/father) is not a happy figure in this collection. Indeed, the same can be said for father figures in other Italian/American poetic and prose works. For these men, mothers and homemakers are the only acceptable roles for these women of multiple worlds. They are to be, in this well established male world, good, well-behaved girls before they marry ("Daughters") and well-behaved, faithful wives and mothers after they wed ("Paesaggi"). If otherwise, we become witness to violence done to women—daughters ("Daughters") and wives ("Stories from My Town")

and "Nina, la matta") alike. And if this one-sided relationship is to change, it seems it can only change dramatically, with finality, since if the conversations between daughter and father are to take place, they take place only after his death, as we see in "November 16, 1983" (or in "Beautiful Things" where the conversation is equally one-sided):

my father is dead  
and I have nowhere  
to put this anger

I was sure he would live  
forever  
to continue his battle  
with me and my  
poems.

But the world does change for these Italian women. We see in "College Street, Toronto," the Toronto street that constitutes the heart of the city's Little Italy, that "the Italians are almost all gone . . . [and that] Bar Italia has a new clientele / women come here now / I come here / I drink espresso and smoke cigarettes." We also see that the changes that take place are due to an array of reasons that are both external and internal to our narrating female I. Indeed, it is her own awareness of self, as it is for any one person to create positive change in her/his life, that helps her "get things right":

i am  
therefore  
i make no apologies  
woman  
Italian  
overweight, underweight  
tall, loud  
romantic bore  
...  
i am through  
blaming the forces outside  
my soul  
it is unproductive

Along with the gender issue that underscores the majority of the poems in this collection, as well as the narrat-

ing I's new-found liberation as female, there co-exists a strong sense of understanding, compassion, and empathy for the male as immigrant, stranger, and, ultimately, as in some cases, outcast, be this for internal or external reasons, in this new world without his family and friends of his native land. The same "College Street, Toronto" that chronicles the change of the Italian/ Canadian female's social role also alludes to the trials and tribulations of these men who came alone, lived in basements apartments ("by the light of a forty watt bulb"), scrimping and saving in order to have their families join them, when, finally, they could all move, literally, above ground and into the light.

In a similar manner, both the physical and emotional hardships are recounted in Patriarca's collection. Early on, we find an empathetic testament to the father's broken spirit, afflicted by thirty years of being elsewhere, as her use and juxtaposition of certain words punctuate the immigrant's dilemma. Indeed, the adjective for the present, "foreign," is now synonymous with old, which may also conjure up notions of futility and despair; the adjective for the past, "young," is synonymous with new, which may conversely conjure up notion of possibility and hope. But, in the end, all hope is lost ("rotted"), as the immigrant does not, and perhaps cannot, return to his native land:

but for thirty years now  
he's sleep in a foreign bed  
that has curved his spine

the corn husks of his young bed  
have rotted in a cradle

if he could return  
to smell the earth  
his father left him  
he would understand

All this because the "return," as we



are told ("Returning"), is "the other dream," for which "other" is another form of impossibility for these old immigrants who no longer "discuss the distance anymore" because for them it is no longer a reality.

The immigrant's life of long ago is, as we see, a bitter-sweet experience. To be sure, Patriarca could not better describe the immigrant worker's plight than she does in "Dolce-Amaro," a tribute to her father's experience of close to thirty years "under the white weight / of endless Januarys":

this country has taken everything  
his health, his language  
the respect of his modern children  
the love of his angry wife.

in some forgotten lifetime  
he was a young, dark-haired man  
in a ship packed with young  
dark-haired men  
floating uncomfortably towards  
a dream they didn't want to bury  
with the still young bones  
of mothers and fathers  
among the ruins of a postwar Italy.

The result of the hard voyage and the clash of two diametrically different worlds are expressed by Patriarca's keen use of adjectives—as seen earlier with "foreign" and "young"—such as "modern" and "angry," where "modern" may also signal change, and "angry" may also underscore the frustration brought about by the men and women no longer knowing and/or understanding one another. And Patriarca's compassion and understanding for these men and their trials and tribulations continue, as their dream was just that, a dream that "did not come easily / the golden paved North America / wasn't paved at all." For "there was the smell of group sweat / cheap meals seasoned with resentment / by the wives of aspiring landlords." This is not unfamiliar imagery for those knowledgeable of

the immigrants' plight, be they Italian, Hispanic, Irish, Jewish, or any other ethnic/racial group, or, for that matter, of any one time of immigration to North America. For those conversant with Italian/American literature, Pietro Di Donato's classic *Christ in Concrete* comes to mind as we find out that not only did the dream end early for our narrator's father, but there was no true concern from either employer or state:

when his knees were crushed  
by the weight of steel  
along some railroad line  
he was thirty-one  
there was no insurance then  
and little interest  
for the benefits of the immigrant man.

he bends easily at fifty-  
seven  
walks with a cane  
rarely opens his lifeless eyes

the government sends him  
fifty-one dollars a month  
in recognition.

Not all is tragic in *Italian Women and Other Tragedies*. The last five poems, especially, communicate feelings of sweet nostalgia for the past ("Compleanno"), peace and serenity for the present ("Beautiful Things" and "Grace Street Summer"), and hope and good things for the future ("For Gia at Bedtime"). Patriarca's creativity transcends the story she wants to tell. Along with what she wants to say, her creative originality is equally rooted in how she says what she says. Patriarca's language is, on the surface, straightforward—something that, along with its recall of realistic narrative prose, has an artistic function. It adds a certain realistic tone to Patriarca's not infrequent narrative technique of non-linearity. Within a framework of seemingly direct language combined with her use of gut-wrenching imagery, Patriarca succeeds

in portraying problematic situations of human interactions: more specifically, gender issues and family relationships. Whereas narration, in both prose and poetry, tends to be more descriptive than expressive, Patriarca's narration maintains its descriptive component while adding an explicitly expressive one. The result is an intensely emotional, quasi-visual work of art—poetry—that engages the reader in its communicative act—the reader, that is, becomes a co-participant in the collection's point of view and signifying act and, therefore, experiences the narrator's emotional iter.

ANTHONY JULIAN TAMBURRI  
*Purdue University*

***The Italian Dream: The Italians  
of Queens, New York City***

*Giuseppe Fortuna*

*San Francisco: Mellen Research  
University Press, 1991*

Part-time Assistant Professor in Urban Studies at Queens College, Giuseppe Fortuna has produced a very informative, intelligent, and multilayered description of the Italians who have lived and/or live in the county of Queens, the New York City borough. Although one might be led to believe *The Italian Dream* is of interest only to specialists, this is not the case with Fortuna's book, which besides being an exemplum of how good sociological research is done, plucks the chords of the title image throughout. Proof of data abounds, and references are extensive (which makes it useful, also, as a bibliographic source on the topic), as Fortuna wends his analysis through the concrete harsh facts of the social process, of capital history. This is in part aided

by his providing us, early in Chapter II, with an accurate and synthetic historical reconstruction of Italian history in the 19th century, the relationship between migration, North-South dynamics, class struggles, and what was going on during those same years on this side of the Atlantic. For this alone, I would recommend *The Italian Dream* to my students, as it also acts out its methodic praxis, the necessity to have a multiperspectival view, a network of referents or semantic fields, or themes, before any general evaluative statement can be made. Sociology does not have to be simply and solely charts and diagrams (which I personally always find illuminating in some ways): the "object of study" happens to be a "subject category," with all the deconstructive potential of the latter syntagm. This sociology must be relational, it must account for meanings created and shared and (ex)changed at some point. I find it noteworthy that the author relates the political economy behind the great exodus of 1890-1913 to the industrializing/imperialistic politics of France, England, the Hapsburg Empire, and the United States.

Against this background, the Italians of Queens lived various degrees of dividedness, going through all the pretty established categorical passages (adaptation, accommodation, integration, acculturation and assimilation), although I feel they were infused in a most fundamental way with a future-watch kind of approach to life, to social existence. (We shall leave aside whether that's the way these Queens immigrants were, or whether it was the entirety of the experience of having to leave that changed their psyches in relevant ways.) Certainly that's a character feature that fits in well with the trumpeted American version of the Dream. Among the most complex obstacles