

Preface

Carolyn James

The literary achievements of the Sicilian writer, Federico De Roberto (1861-1927), were long overshadowed by those of his contemporary compatriots, Giovanni Verga and Luigi Capuana. Annamaria Pagliaro is among a distinguished group of scholars who have shown that De Roberto was a significant and original literary figure, whose works deserve far greater appreciation than they had hitherto received. Pagliaro's monograph, *The Novels of Federico De Roberto. From Naturalism to Modernism*, published in 2011 by Troubadour Press, was the first book-length study of the novelist in English and did much to bring a writer previously little known outside Italy to a broader readership. While not denying that *I Viceré* (1894) is De Roberto's most accomplished novel, Pagliaro convincingly demonstrates both in her book and in several essays that the novelist's other works also repay close analysis. She argues that De Roberto's six novels all form part of a consistent and coherent literary project that took the genre beyond the *verista* approach associated with the School of Naturalism, first embraced by French novelists such as Émile Zola and Honoré de Balzac.

To demonstrate the sophistication and complexity of De Roberto's relationship with Naturalism and the *veristi*, Pagliaro begins her monograph on the author by closely analysing the author's novels in the light of his journalistic output. The latter writings had previously received only limited attention because the newspaper articles and essays were dispersed and often difficult to access. They show that from the 1880s De Roberto displayed increasing detachment from Naturalism. He began to question the very possibility of reproducing an objective

reality through literary means and wrestled with the problematic relationship between external observation and the introspective perceptions of the individual.

Pagliario concedes that there are vestiges of a scientific and rational approach to reality in De Roberto's novels. However, she argues that rather than failing to reconcile contradictory impulses in his work, the author consciously experimented with representing the deeper workings of the human mind within a narrative framework that remained faithful to rational exposition and the requirements of verisimilitude. Pagliario concludes in her analysis that De Roberto's major literary innovation arose from the stark juxtaposition in his novels between a convincing portrayal of the interiority of characters, whose thoughts and emotions are laid bare for the reader, and representations of an external reality that has little relationship with the perceptions of his protagonists. Moreover, she demonstrates how De Roberto's experiments in this vein constituted an important moment of transition from the belief of many 19th-century writers that mimesis was achievable in a novel to a more skeptical position which assumed that reality and truth were entirely subjective notions.

De Roberto's accomplishments as a writer were constrained by his conviction that women were inherently inferior to men, a conservative notion that had deep roots in European culture and one that was endorsed in his own time by a soon-to-be discredited scientific discourse. De Roberto regarded individual experience as shaped by genetics as well as environment. Thus, the author's belief in women's physical, intellectual, and moral weakness shaped his representations of the interiority of his female characters and rendered them unconvincing. Indeed, Pagliario shows that the women in De Roberto's novels are mere ciphers of male desire.

In several essays devoted to the novels and other writings of Luigi Capuana, Pagliario argues that, like De Roberto, Capuana was concerned to chronicle the tumultuous times in which he lived. Both authors explored traditional feudal societies subject to the powerful forces of modernism and created characters afflicted by an imbalance between the world of their thoughts and emotions and the society in which they existed. In the case of Capuana, however, Pagliario sees a greater readiness to be critical of a prescriptive social order that aimed to keep women in subjection. Capuana questioned the normative conception that male sexual violence and female subjection were an intrinsic and inevitable consequence of human sexuality and psychology. By creating a convincing subjectivity for his female characters, the traumatic consequences of rape on victims are shown in raw detail, exposing a social paradigm in crisis.

The recently published collection of essays, *Luigi Capuana: Experimental Fiction and Cultural Mediation in Post-Risorgimento Italy*, edited by Pagliario and her former doctoral student, Brian Zuccala (published in 2019 by Firenze University Press), makes an important contribution to our understanding of this significant literary figure. The seamless way in which the two editors have collaborated testifies to the strong collegial relationships Pagliario built with Zuccala, and with other former students such as Andrea Pagani and Michela Barisonzi, who have

contributed to the present volume in her honour. So too have internationally based scholars who share Pagliaro's interest in 19th- and early 20th-century literature. As her long-time colleague at Monash University, I join with the community of academics represented in this volume to express admiration for her scholarship and gratitude for many years of friendship.