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The emergence of female ‘vernacular writings’ in the Italo-Romance space between the Middle Ages and the Early Modern Age

The report will start from a reflection on the ways in which, in the transition between the Medieval and Early Modern Ages, ‘elementary education’ activities were organized within the Italo-Romance space, aimed at mediating the skills of ‘reading’ and ‘writing’.

Particular attention will be paid to the great differences characterizing these activities according to the socio-cultural macro-contexts, with particular reference to the imbalances specific to individual areas and, within them, those specific to urban contexts vs. those of agricultural-rural areas.

The essential practices of ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ which were already uncommon – with a few rare exceptions, and always linked to privileged social frameworks – among children and young male adults were, generally, very little widespread among girls at which, very frequently, were taught essential rudiments that made them capable of ‘decrypting’, in some way, a written text.

In the report I will present some documents of considerable interest: the ‘confession’ of Bellezze Ursini from Collevocchio who, as a healer and in an environment characterized by widespread ignorance, was accused of witchcraft and, in 1527 or 1528, in Fiano, in Roman countryside of Sabina, wrote in her own hand a perfectly ‘vernacular’ text which reflects the common vernacular of the area; and, equally, I will also talk about the ‘deposition’ of Maria, widow of Tommaso Polizan da Romeno, known as ‘la Piona’, and that of Maria known as ‘la Grill’, widow of Giacomo [*sic!*] Righi, who, accused of witchcraft, were burned in Coredo (Trento) on 19 January 1614.

I will also talk about other ‘practical writings’ – notes, leaflets, coupons – written with ‘scramble of the language’ – indicative, however, in later times, of the literacy process in the sectors of production and commerce: the case of the vernacular writing of Ipermestra Damini, embroiderer, who, in July 1636, in Rome, drew up a payment certificate for work done; or the case of Mad(d)alena Morelli who, again in Rome, in September 1689, drew up a ‘receipt’ through a third party regarding work carried out by her husband Gioseppe [*sic!*] Morelli: she, able to write, he illiterate ...