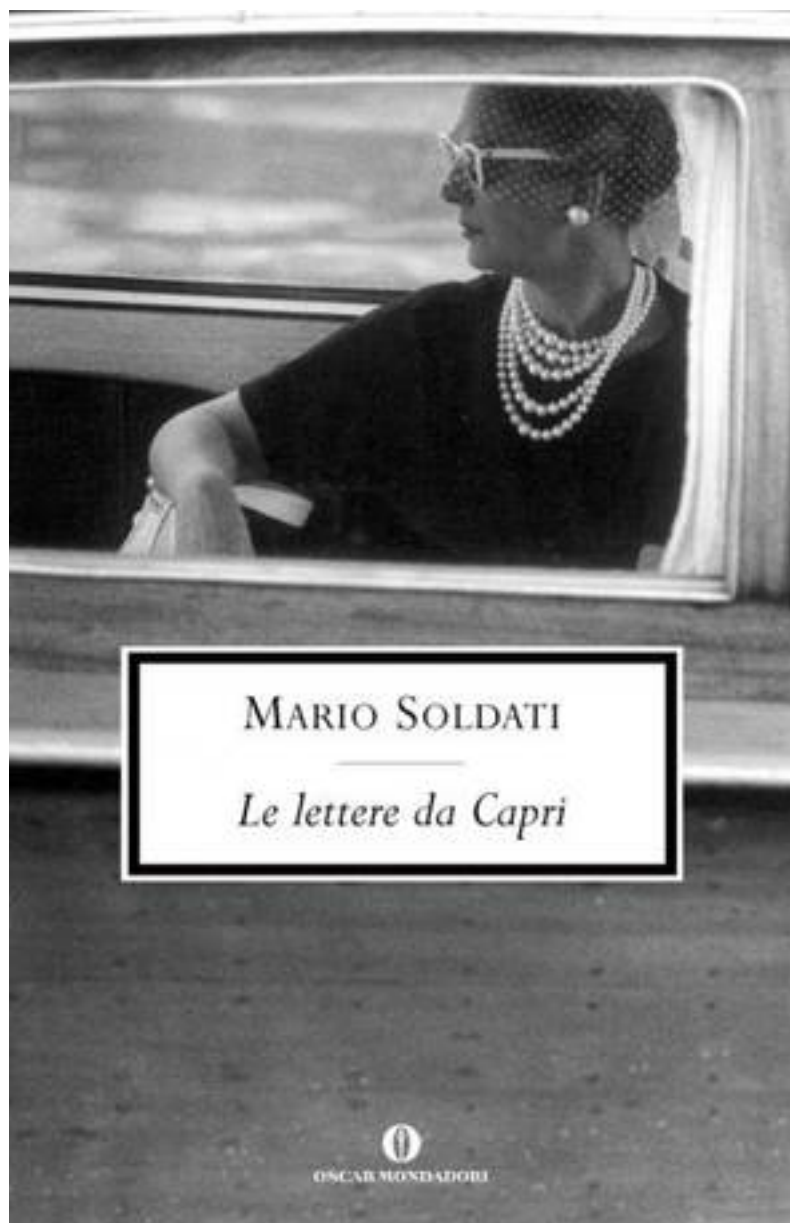




Le lettere da Capri

Traci Andrighetti (September 17, 2014)



Mario Soldati's Tragic Tale of Lust and Loathing in Paradise

Mario Soldati (b. Turin, 1906; d. Tellaro, 1999) was both a novelist and a director. He made over thirty films, working with such legendary actresses as Sophia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida. Soldati first achieved literary success in 1935 with [America, Primo Amore](#) [2] (America, First Love), a book based on the diary he kept between 1929 and 1931 when he was a guest professor at Columbia University. He is perhaps best known for [Le lettere da Capri](#) [3] (The Capri Letters), which won the 1954 Strega Prize, Italy's highest literary award. Those who knew Soldati, however, would say that he was most famous for his dogtooth tweed jacket and Toscano cigar.

In *Le lettere da Capri*, Harry, a journalist and art scholar, writes the story of his complicated relationship with his devout Catholic wife, Jane, as a screenplay pitch to his Roman director friend, Mario. Harry explains how he and Jane met during World War II in Italy, and why he married her despite his ongoing affair with a Roman prostitute. Although Harry feels no passion for Jane, he believes that she is deeply in love with him. But then some shocking letters surface, letters that Jane wrote to an Italian lover from the island of Capri. And then Harry, the director, and the reader finally hear Jane's side of the story—with its tragic and surprising consequences.

The language of *Le lettere da Capri* is, as one would expect of a sixty-year-old novel, somewhat dated. Among the numerous Italian archaisms, there are also some English lexical borrowings that have fallen into disuse. Interestingly, however, although dialect is disappearing in Italy, the dialectal terms mentioned in *Le lettere da Capri* are still linguistically relevant. Another notable aspect of the language is the occasional use of diminutives to convey the romance and charm of the setting.

ARCHAISMS

Isvizzera (contemporary Ital. **Svizzera**; Eng. **Switzerland**)

La mandai in Isvizzera, nel Cantone del Vaud, a Sierre, paesello di mezza montagna che, a quella stagione, era l'ideale per Duccio.

(I sent her to Switzerland, to the Canton of Vaud, in Sierre, a little town halfway up a mountain, which, in that season, was ideal for Duccio.)

od (contemporary Ital. **o**; Eng. **or**)

Mi mancava ormai di desiderio, al quale ero nato od abituato, ero vuoto, sgomento, piccino.

(By then I was lacking desire, to which I was born or accustomed, I was empty, dismayed, small.

massaia (contemporary Ital. **casalinga**; Eng. **housewife**)

Dorothea non era più una massaia mascherata da prostituta; era, invece, una prostituta mascherata da massaia.

(Dorothea was no longer a housewife masquerading as a prostitute; instead, she was a prostitute masquerading as a housewife.)

DIALECT

scarcella (Eng. **a sweet Easter bread with sprinkles**) (Pugliese)



Dorothea stava impastando la farina per la scarcella, il pane rozzo e dolce che già altre volte aveva gustato e che essa faceva di tanto in tanto lungo l'anno, ma che per Pasqua, al suo paese era di rito.

(Dorothea was kneading the flower for the scarcella, the coarse and sweet bread that I had already tasted various times and that she made from time to time throughout the year, but that for Easter was customary in her hometown.)

pallonaro (Ital. **bugiardo**; Eng. **liar**) (Romanesco)

"Sei un gran pallonaro!" (che in romanesco significa contastorie, bugiardo).

("You're a big liar!" [which, in Romanesco, means storyteller, liar].)

BORROWINGS

uno sleeping diretto (Eng. **a direct sleeping [train] car**)

L'indomani mattina, con uno sleeping diretto, partimmo per Parigi.

(The next morning, in a direct sleeping car, we departed for Paris.)

fotoreporters (Eng. **press photographer**)

Mi avvicinai a uno dei fotoreporters e lo pregai di non dare ciò che avesse scattato alla stampa.

(I approached one of the press photographers and begged him not to give what he had shot to the press.)

un rest camp (Eng. **a rest camp**)

Tacqui un istante, pensai, poi finì di ricordarmi. "Ah sì, 1944. Durante la guerra?"

"E come no? Capri era un rest camp. La signora era in uniforme, bellissima."

(I fell silent for an instant, thought, then pretended to remember. "Oh yeah, 1944. During the war?"

"Of course! Capri was a rest camp. Your wife was in uniform, very beautiful.")

DIMINUTIVES

tavolini (Eng. **small tables**)

caffeuccio (Eng. **little café**)

orchestrina (Eng. **small orchestra**)

...dopo un cognac seduti ai tavolini di un caffeuccio o tenendoci per mano come due innamorati, mentre laggiù tra il verde e i lampioni suonava dolcemente un'orchestrina, e l'Italia era bella e santa...

...after a cognac seated at the small tables of a little café or holding hands like two lovers, while down below among the green and the street lamps, a small orchestra was playing sweetly, and Italy was beautiful and holy...

Concluding Remarks: Le lettere da Capri is not a story of love but rather of lust. For Harry and Jane, there can be no middle ground between conjugal affection and extramarital passion. And while in some ways these characters seem as dated as the language in the text, they nevertheless serve as a reminder of the ever-present dangers inherent in conforming to social expectations and in



idealizing 'the other.'

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