

## DACIA MARAINI

### *Donna in guerra*

Torino: Einaudi, 1975. Pp. 269.

Among Italian women writers of today perhaps no one is as deeply committed to the feminist movement as Dacia Maraini. Her commitment stems from long-standing and genuine convictions, for much of her literary activity in the last ten years has pointed to the evolving consciousness of the Italian woman. Forceful and direct in her approach to sensitive issues, Maraini's most recent works, such as *La donna perfetta* (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), betray a sense of impatience with unfulfilled expectations, impatience which increasingly is translated into sharp criticism of those conservative forces in Italian society, chiefly the family and the church, which are seen as obstacles to woman's total emancipation.

*Donna in guerra* is a thought-provoking novel in which a woman's individual condition and her yearning for self-fulfillment are examined with unusual depth. The diary form of the work compensates for its limitations as a closed structure through a measure of candor which elicits the reader's emotional support. The central figure, a young woman named Vannina, sees herself as happily married to a mechanic, so much so that, at the outset, she is pictured as the image of the "ideal" wife: "goodhearted, even-tempered, affectionate, submissive" (p. 141; my translation). In truth, Vannina's Southern upbringing has taught her to feign happiness while accepting her gray existence with resigned apathy. Tradition prevents her from realizing that in her marital life she exists only in relation to her husband, as the expression of his perception of a good wife. She remarks at one point: "It never occurred to me to contradict him. I feel he is better than I am, that I love him and that what he says holds true for both of us" (p. 90).

In the course of a summer vacation on a small island, Vannina comes in contact with a group of young radicals. In the process of her gradual adherence to their extremist ideas, she undergoes a drastic change in self-awareness which leads to a reassessment of her marital relationship and to the search for an independent identity for herself. At the same time, Vannina's rejection of her past is tied to a broad and deeply

critical view of Italian society. Through her association with young radicals, Vannina becomes an eye-witness to the dismal living conditions in the backstreets of Naples, the exploitation of Neapolitan women doing piecework at home, and the corruption of political officials. This shift from the individual to society broadens the scope of the work but it fails to contemplate, both on a social and personal level, a novel system of values apt to replace what is successfully undermined. In this regard, the definite break, at the end, between the young wife and her husband ("Now I am all alone and must start anew"; p. 269) underlines the main flaw of the book.

A serious and compelling work, *Donna in guerra* reflects, with its feminist theme, a disturbing vision of present Italian life, marked by confusion, social unrest, and disintegrating traditional values. Even so, one can not overlook a certain condescension to fashionable taste: Maraini's language is throughout blunt, profane, and anti-establishment. Her persistent indulgence in depicting explicit sexual activity proves gratuitous and often distasteful.

Augustus Pallotta

## MARY E. RAGLAND

*Rabelais and Panurge: A Psychological Approach to Literary Character*  
Amsterdam: Rodopi N.V., 1976.  
Pp. 165, Hfl.35.

The past twenty-five years have witnessed a remarkable upsurge of interest in sixteenth-century art and literature. Rabelaisian studies have received their full measure of this renewed attention, Mary Ragland's *Rabelais and Panurge* being one of the latest in an impressive series of major critical studies devoted to one of the giants of Renaissance letters.

As the subtitle indicates, Ragland attempts to analyze problems of character's unity and evolution and to determine the function and importance of Panurge, the very "soul of Rabelais's work" (p. 9). Her primary conclusion is that, for all his contradictions, Panurge is a character unified by a pattern of childlike behavior, "natural, spontaneous, asocial, rebellious, comic and

fearful" (p. 8), and that his obvious principal function is to "bring the central themes of Rabelais's work to life" (p. 8).

In chapter one, Ragland considers the various critical interpretations of the character advanced since the time of Rabelais. In chapter two she develops her own position based largely on the psychoanalytical theories of literary character proposed by Surmelian, Harvey, and Forster. The remaining chapters examine Rabelais's texts, accumulating evidence and giving credence to Ragland's primary stand.

A perpetual child-figure, Panurge is seen as a medium through which the reader participates in Rabelais's essential fantasy—"the desire for free expression pitted against a search for certain security" (p. 29). He embodies the implicit intellectual/emotional tension common to all men throughout time and space, expressing the "existential reality of the human condition" (p. 36). Once one has accepted this point of view, one reads *Rabelais and Panurge* with pleasure and profit. Ragland successfully avoids the use of jargon despite her psychoanalytical approach to the subject. She substantiates her premises and interpretations, sometimes with clear textual analyses, sometimes allowing Rabelais's works to speak for themselves.

One minor quibble: Ragland occasionally repeats herself, leaving the reader with the impression that he is covering the same ground a second time. On the whole, *Rabelais and Panurge* is a work of sound scholarship and refreshing honesty. Ragland presents a truly original interpretation of the essential role of Rabelais's most ambiguous and paradoxical character.

Dalton London

## YURI VETROV

### *Et cinq Bouteilles de Vodka*

Translated from the Russian by  
Marina Gorbov  
Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont,  
1975. Pp. 220.

"Yo-ho-ho! et cinq bouteilles de vodka!" (p. 27), bellows a landlocked pirate aboard a train from Siberia steaming through a Ukrainian night in Yuri Vetron's stark and well-paced tale of a modern gangster's communion in "solitude" with "Dieu" or "le diable" (p. 10). The fate of Vetrov's protagonist, Igor Belaev, like that of Frank White in Paul Bailey's *A Distant Likeness*, expresses the essential unreason of existence, in which distinctions between crime and law have little or no meaning.

Belaev ("l'Intellectuel") has a profound respect for "les lois du milieu" (p. 9), the code of the Soviet underworld. By returning a stolen suitcase to its owner, Natacha, his childhood sweetheart, however, he acts according to his own conscience and thus deprives his comrades of their share of the booty. They suspect that he has not returned the stolen item and is keeping the money for himself, a suspicion validated in their eyes by their subsequent arrest the night of their arrival at Poltava, the Intellectual's native town. Belaev also is self-deceived. Thinking that he and his comrades have been betrayed by his old friend and associate, Kostia l'Abruti, he lies in wait for the traitor, only to learn the identity of the true informer, "le Noiraud," moments before the latter (with the permission of Sergueevitch and Protzenko, local agents of society's law) kills the faithful Kostia, who had unmasked the traitor. Belaev avenges the death of his friend, but finds this noble deed misread by the underworld, which believes that Belaev killed both "le Noiraud" and Kostia to ensure their silence and his cover as a police informer. Now hunted by both the police and the underworld, Belaev, with the help of Natacha, goes into hiding.

Unknown to Belaev, however, the traitor had been followed by Sergueevitch, whose subsequent testimony during a drinking bout clears Belaev in the eyes of the criminal world, an ironic turn of events which the protagonist finds both perplexing and improper. Ironically, Protzenko and Sergueevitch arrange the murder of