

WOMEN OF THE WORLD

*Two new books offer
translations of popular
women writers*

APPLES FROM THE DESERT.

By Savyon Liebrecht; translated
by Marganit Weinberger-
Rotman, Jeffrey M. Green,
Barbara Harshav, Gilead
Morahg, and Riva Rubin.
The Feminist Press,
234 pages, \$19.95.

THE SILENT DUCHESS.

By Dacia Maraini; translated
by Dick Kitto and Elspeth
Spottiswood. The Feminist
Press, 263 pages, \$19.95.

BY PAUL SIGNORELLI

Two exquisitely crafted translations—one from Hebrew, the other from Italian—have just been released by the Feminist Press at the City University of New York, and both are as literate and emotionally satisfying as anything produced recently by much larger, more mainstream American publishers.

Israeli writer Savyon Liebrecht's *Apples from the Desert* is the first English-language translation of selected stories drawn from three collections written in Hebrew. Dacia Maraini's *Silent Duchess* is the first American publication of *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* (The long life of Marianna Ucria), released in Italian in 1990 and translated two years later for Peter Owens Publishers in Great Britain; it is this extraordinary rendition that is currently reaching American bookstores thanks to the Feminist Press.

Both books feature stunningly beautiful imagery, as well as emotionally wrenching narratives, intriguing depictions of unique worlds, and as the publisher's name suggests, unforgettable female protagonists.

The silent duchess of Maraini's novel is a deaf woman living in 18th-century Sicily. Forced to marry her uncle Pietro, Marianna Ucria inhabits a cruel yet fascinating world. Death comes quickly and unexpectedly to many who pass through her long and involved life—just as we might expect it to come to people living in periods of warfare and devastating disease. What continually holds our attention is Maraini's masterful rendering of this woman who, through her lack of hearing, finds rich and intriguing ways to experience all that surrounds her.

She does not, for example, need her hearing to sense impending disaster when her father takes her into a dungeon to visit a condemned prisoner: "Her nose tells her that something terrible is going to happen.... There are no windows, neither high nor low. Suddenly it is night, smelling of burnt oil, rat droppings, pork fat."

Nor does she need to listen for guidance later in her life when she explores a poorly lit series of rooms in a house: "She will rely upon her nose to lead her along corridors, through narrow passages, tunnels, store rooms, hiding-places, cubbyholes, unexpected slopes and treacherous stairs. She is guided by the various smells: dust ... old wax, grapes hung up to dry, rotting wood, chamber-pots, rose-water and cinders."

Faced with Marianna's superbly developed awareness of her surroundings, readers are left to ponder whether they should consider her deafness to be a disability or a source of inspiration. Seeing how she steadfastly overcomes the challenges she faces, we can only marvel at this magnificent creation from one of Italy's most popular and respected contemporary writers.

Equally strong are the 12 stories in Liebrecht's *Apples from the Desert*. Consistent themes—conflicts between Arabs and Jews, young and old, men and women; the importance of dreams to those who have little time for pleasant reveries; the necessity for memory among people who are struggling to bury the scars of their traumat-

ic past—connect the writer's tales. It is clear from the first pages of the initial story that the writer's prose is densely packed with stunning imagery and a level of tension that serves her material well.

The woman in "A Room on the Roof" is typical of Liebrecht's creations: independent, strong-willed, struggling to overcome the prejudices against Arabs that she has assimilated as an Israeli Jew. She recalls her efforts to hire three Arab laborers to add a room onto her house. Inviting these strangers into her home to complete the most intimate of transformations while her husband is away on a two-month-long business assignment, she takes the greatest of risks and then struggles to rise to the challenge.

Liebrecht's initial tone immediately draws us into the tension the character feels: "That summer, for a long time after they went off without ever reappearing, she avoided the roof when it was dark, fearing that they might pop up from behind the high potted plants. Sometimes, when she happened to pass the back corner, which was imprisoned within three walls and served, for the moment, as a storage area, and she saw the tools they had left behind and never came back to collect, a chill would climb up her back like a crawling creature with many legs, stirring a column of water in the depths of her belly like the pitching that afflicts you when you're sick."

With this paragraph—typical of her work—we confront numerous questions not only about the events that are about to unfold but also about the character's reactions to them, and we immediately expect the worst.

If Liebrecht spares us a traumatic denouement in this story, she is less merciful in some of those that follow. A rabbi's daughter, for example, is forced into a bordello serving German soldiers during World War II in "Morning in the Park among the Nannies"; the grandmother in "Compassion"

finds a particularly horrifying way to spare her granddaughter the humiliation she has experienced at the hands of the men she has known.

As emotionally wrenching as both Feminist Press releases are, they offer uncommon rewards. Both books avoid the disappointing flatness that often results from a translator's inability to transfer an author's artistry from one language to another. Each volume seems to retain the unique cultural references, the beauty and poetry that is so often lost when a translator lacks the sensitivity to, and awareness of, the unique musicality and rhythms of a specific language.

Apples from the Desert and *The Silent Duchess* are sensitive and remarkable works in their English-language versions. They serve both as tributes to the authors' individual approaches to craft and to the translators' skills.

Paul Signorelli, director of volunteer services for the San Francisco Public Library and co-owner of Authors and Audiences, has written for a variety of publications.

Dacia Maraini reads from The Silent Duchess, Nov. 21, 7:30 p.m., at Cody's Books, 2454 Telegraph, Berk. (510) 845-7852.