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Moderata Fonte. *Floridoro, A Chivalric Romance.* The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe Series. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. xxx + 493 pp. $29.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-25678-8; $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-25677-1.

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The Same Food and Speech

The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe series from the University of Chicago Press has produced nearly fifty volumes of translated texts by, about, and in defense of women. One of the first in the series was a work by Venetian Moderata Fonte (born Modesta Pozzo) called *The Worth of Women*, edited and translated by Virginia Cox.[1] Now, appropriately marking the series' tenth anniversary, comes another work by Fonte, a chivalric epic entitled *Floridoro*, edited and with an introduction by Valeria Finucci, translated by Julia Kisacky, and with notes by both. Despite their differing genres and the period of a dozen years that separated the original publication of the works, Fonte's cleverly highlighting of the unappreciated strengths and myriad struggles of her sex is amply evident in both.

As is typical for the series, the introductory material is particularly valuable. The series editor's introduction provides a broad overview of period ideas about women drawn from ancient philosophy, law, and the church, and then considers how various literary genres, from medieval romances to humanist treatises, contributed to or combated the overwhelmingly negative ideology surrounding women. The historical and literary contexts presented are of immense benefit to readers, be they students or scholars. Similarly, in her introduction to the text, Finucci anticipates a diverse readership and carefully considers Fonte's life and works as well as placing *Floridoro* in the complex milieu of Renaissance chivalric literature. This is perhaps the most significant element of the introduction, as it permits Finucci to consider gender broadly across the romance genre, allowing her to assert that Fonte's work is a careful reconsideration of previous romances modeled to allow commentary on the unfair and unnecessary oppression of women. The copious and helpful footnotes, which tease out historical, literary, and mythological context, as well as parallels to *The Worth of Women*, return to this point several times.

Although its title character is a man, Fonte's narrative focuses on women and the challenges patriarchy presents to them, highlighed by Fonte with references to her own era. The main female character, a knight called Risamante, is on a quest to regain her stolen kingdom, a plot device that permits Fonte to extemporize about Renaissance female inheritance practices, which Finucci believes may reflect the author's own experience. Risamante also champions female skill at arms, and allows the author to explore her ability to describe battles that as a woman she likely did not witness or experience (pp. 27-28, 10, 71). Fonte also inverts traditional patriarchy when she appoints as prizes in the tournaments that frame her narrative a shield and later a crown awarded by Princess Celisdea, who in other tales would have herself been the trophy. Fonte's epic world is one in which women are people rather than prizes and people with skills that, as she is at pains to point out, would be equal to if not surpassing those of men if women were given the same opportunities as men, since the genders are in many ways comparable. "Why, if their bodily form is the same, if their substances are not varied, if they have the same food and speech, must they have then different courage and wisdom?" (p. 144) Fonte also uses her tale to highlight the dangers inherent in being female by contrasting male characters who seek to satisfy sexual urges at the expense of beautiful women (as in the case of Marcane's near rape of Celisdea) with those, like the "good lovers" Nicobaldo and Floridoro, who seek to marry them. Marriage is so essential to Fonte's thinking that she uses the occasion of her characters' arrival at the oracle of Delphi to lament that in her own age there is not an oracle to gauge the success of marital unions.

Even Fonte's hero is in touch with his feminine side, as "every part of him, except his speech appeared that

of an illustrious and beautiful girl" (p. 180). Floridoro wears white, traditionally a female color, but also a pun on the name of Venetian Bianca Capello, mistress and later wife of Fonte's erstwhile patron, Grand Duke of Tuscany Francesco de Medici. Fonte explains in her dedicatory letter that she rushed the poem to press incomplete at the insistence of friends, but her haste may also have been in order to mark the occasion of the Capello-Medici marriage in 1579. The author references her intended patrons multiple times in the plot, particularly in Canto 3, wherein it is foretold that Risamante's daughter will be the progenetrix of the Medici. Finucci suggests that Fonte never returned to the work perhaps because Medici seemingly failed to take interest in it (p. 9).

Medici's ambivalence may have resulted from the feminist undertones of *Floridoro*–perhaps because the duke did not appreciate his fictional ancestor's total disregard for the rules of gender and patriarchy. Or, perhaps he saw it as the work of a Venetian poet whose prose championed more her homeland than his. Although the epic contains a lengthy celebration of famous members of the house of Medici, it also traces the foundation of Venice to the poem's male title character, Floridoro. Further, Fonte lauds not only Capello's family but also Venice's history and its literati in great detail. Fonte's oracle of Delphi contains a monument to great poets (all Venetian or from the Veneto), and a banquet hall decorated by Circe depicts a triumphant Venetian historical tableau not dissimilar to the program in the Great Council Hall in Doge's Palace, which was constructed contemporaneously to Fonte's composition of the poem.

Fonte's epic is most compelling and perhaps most successful as a piece of feminist literature when she places herself in the narrative, and where her own efforts as an author contribute to her defense of women. In one such instance, in the hall of great Venetian poets, she situates herself, albeit in the shadows, "quite ashamed that she, too bold, aspired to the way which leads to heaven, having as low and dull a mind as her design was clear and sublime" (p. 36). Elsewhere, she shows herself adept at tackling genres generally reserved for male authors. Not only does Fonte take on the courtly epic but also, as Finucci points out, her description of Venice's history amounts to the first history of that city authored by a woman (pp. 335-36).[2] One might argue that just as Fonte's epic is gendered so is her history. In her accounts both of the Medici and of Venice, Fonte takes care to reference not only well-known women, such as Caterina Sforza and Bianca Visconti Sforza, but also lesser-known women, such as the Venetian doges' wives. Although these figures appear occasionally in male-authored chronicles, including the work of Fonte's uncle Nicolò Doglioni, presumably one of her sources, one cannot help but wonder if Fonte drew attention to them intentionally, as part of her wide-ranging catalog of female virtue and ability, here so ably foregrounded by Finucci and Kisacky. Like the series for which her work has been so eloquently translated, Fonte sought to place women's voices in the mainstream.

Notes

[1]. Moderata Fonte, *The Worth of Women: Wherein Is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Their Superiority to Men*, trans. and ed. Virginia Cox (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

[2]. Finuccci and Kisacky overall provide excellent historical background for Fonte's treatment of Venetian history, although I disagree with their assertion that Fonte would choose to depart from her strict chronological treatment of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to reference the 1573 visit of King Henry III of France, who is identified later as "successor to France" (p. 377). Thus "the lordly grandson of the king of France" (p. 360) must refer to a member of the French royal family who may have visited the city in the period Fonte is discussing at this point in the narrative.

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