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Irma B. Jaffe with Gernando Colombardo. *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune: The Lives and Loves of Italian Renaissance Women Poets.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2002. xxxi + 431 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-2180-6; $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-2181-3.

Reviewed by Maria Galli Stampino (Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, University o Miami)
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Once Upon a Time ... and They Lived Happily Ever After

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Irma Jaffe's book is articulated in twelve chapters, each devoted to a woman writer from the early modern period in Italy. The table of contents reads as an alternative "canon" in the making, though some poets (such as Isotta Brembate) are less well known: Veronica Gambara, Vittoria Colonna, Tullia d'Aragona, Chiara Matraini, Isabella di Morra, Laura Terracina, Laura Battiferra, Gaspara Stampa, Isotta Brembate, Tarquinia Molza, Veronica Franca (or Franco), and Moderata Fonte (also known as Modesta da Pozzo) constitute the focus of one chapter each. As the subtitle makes clear, in the author's opinion "lives" and "loves" cannot be extricated; in fact the two are the main thrust behind each woman's poetic production, and therefore behind the readings that Jaffe proposes. This makes for a decidedly old-fashioned take on a topic that has recently attracted a lot of critical and philological attention.

Before proceeding further, I need to clarify that I will refer to Jaffe as "the author" since the author's note indicates that "Colombardo has prepared the bibliography" while Jaffe was "responsible for the conception and the text" (p. xxi). The two seem to have collaborated on translating the poems, about which more anon.

Jaffe reads these women poets' works as if they were biographical documents. I use this last term advisedly, since the book is replete with phrases such as "her [Colonna's] poems ... are also sincere expressions of her feelings as a woman" (p. 45); "authentic information about Gaspara's [i.e., Stampa] life is limited to a few contemporary documents and what can be gleaned from her poetry" (p. 241); or "she [Franco] seems to have fallen sincerely in love with some of the men with whom she made love, to judge from the anguished *capitoli* she addressed at various times to one or another of them" (p. 341). Yet Jaffe criticizes Benedetto Croce's reading and interpretation of Stampa's *Canzoniere* because he "calls it nothing more than a body of correspondence and a diary recording the great love of her life, as if Gaspara's poems described faithfully as they occurred the events and emotions centered on Collaltino," her lover (p. 242). She espouses Fiora Bassanese's view that "Stampa's *Canzoniere* is a literary work in the tradition of Love as an inspiration of art, carefully crafted, and not at all spontaneous outpouring of raw emotions" (p. 243).

Where does Jaffe stand, in the end? As she sums up in the preface, we can get a sense of what these women poets were like and how they lived, "for they have left a record of their thoughts, and we have only to listen to them, to let the poetry speak to us of their hopes, fears, anxieties, and above all, their loves, the blissful woe that was at once the reward and punishment of their generous-spirited feelings for men" (p. xxviii). Jaffe's position, then, is Romantic, down to the belief that poems were written in the heat of passion, rather than being the outcome of a concerned stylistic, linguistic, and literary effort. For example, see the discussion regarding Colonna's poem written after the battle of Ravenna, where her husband and father were taken prisoners (pp. 39-41). As a compilation of biographical "facts" drawn from poems, one devoid of archival documentation to support them, Jaffe's book is by and large not a work of scholarship. Yet it is valuable in other aspects.

The emphasis on biography, misguided though it is, allows for interesting motifs to emerge. The importance of men as mentors, protectors, educators, facilitators, and publishers, for most of these women writers, is pervasive, though not thematized. If one were to adopt Jaffe as a textbook, this aspect would be a useful one to underscore; given that recent scholarship has devoted attention to the interplay between men and women in cultural and intellectual arenas, it would be easy to find essays addressing these aspects and thus complementing the book at hand.

It is also remarkable that men played many roles in encouraging women writers: fathers and grandfathers who supported their female descendent's education (pp. 241-242, 311, 387); teachers who provided it (pp. 141, 311); husbands who allowed for additional education (pp. 311-312); admirers who read poems, offered criticism, and solicited further production (pp. 3, 8, 48, 72, 81, 90, 161-162, 208-215, 280-281); men gathering in groups (such as *accademie*) where poetry would become a form of cultural and social exchange (pp. 72, 167, 209, 241, 347); and, lastly, men who had women's poetry printed (pp. 151, 167, 392).

While men were crucial in their support of women writers, many connections emerge between the poets themselves. This motif, too, represents an underexploited theme in the book. Gambara and Colonna exchanged sonnets (pp. 13, 46-47); Colonna met and "formed an intellectual friendship" (p. 53) with Marguerite de Navarre, Francis I's sister and renowned author; she also wrote a poem praising Terracina (p. 166); both Franco and Fonte had likely "read Laura Terracina *Commentary*" to Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* (p. 389). We have an example of a woman publishing her sister's poetry, with the help of some male friends of the latter and the editorial expertise of a man (Cassandra and Gaspara Stampa, p. 246). We also have a poignant reminder that the canon of poetry was entirely male: in Fonte's *The Worth of Women*, eight contemporary male poets are cited as examples of poetic excellence on par with that of past times (p. 402). Jaffe earnestly asks her readers: "Can we believe that Corinna/Moderata [the character speaking and the treatise?s author, thinly disguised in Corinna] was unaware of Vittoria Colonna, Laura Terracina, Isabella di Morra, Tullia d'Aragona, Gaspara Stampa, and Veronica Franca, all of whose poetry was published in Venice? Their poems were available, and surely an intellectual woman interested in poetry must have come across at least some of their books" (p. 402). This would be an excellent starting point for exploring issues such as access to print, book circulation, the notion of "canon," among others, with a classroom full of students.

Some traits of Jaffe's book make it especially suitable for classroom use. When introducing specific historical events, for example, she provides concise summaries that would afford students a starting point to understand circumstances and to explore them further (see pp. 139-140, 292-293). In addition, the poets, whose lives she explores, are representative of various areas of Italy, and of different socio-cultural milieus: from Rome to Venice, and from Basilicata to Bergamo; from noblewomen (Gambara and Colonna) to courtesans (d'Aragona and Franco), and from active participants in intellectual gatherings (Terracina and Molza) to more isolated figures (Brembate and Fonte). Other issues emerge, such as legal rights for early modern women (p. 8), or women's political involvement (evident in the cases of Gambara and Colonna). Yet by and large they remain unexplored or, worse, are dealt with facilely, having recourse to cliches.

Other caveats are in order for those inclined to utilize this book in a classroom setting. A few key terms, such as "mannerism," "neo-Platonic," and "Petrarchist" are never explained; nor are references for further exploration provided in the endnotes. Cliches abound: *cortigiane oneste* owe their existence to "the rebirth of ancient culture in Italy in the fifteenth century," specifically to their classical "prototypes, the Greek *hetairae*" (p. 71). The intellectual circle in which Stampa prospered is described in the following way: "Unconventional, indifferent to the manners and morals of Venetian society, they congregated among themselves, self-conscious elite, sophisticated, engaged in the kind of literary issues, witty gossip, extravagant praise that lorded over professional jealousies, and casual sex that seems always and everywhere to have been characteristic of such groups" (p. 241). Such generalizations might appeal to students who do not (yet) possess a historical perspective; at the same time problematizing them might be an effective way to engage them and help them gain a critical standpoint over their own assumptions as well as the book author's.

The same applies to most literary issues. Since poetry is "read" in a biographical perspective, no attention is paid to style, differences among genres, sources or inspiration. Cursory assessments abound: "we are in familiar Petrarchist territory: the lover reproaching his lady for her unwillingness to surrender" (p. 348); "it must be remembered that the dialogue is a work of fiction, and its speakers are inventions of the author, who is mirroring real people and who is, of course, the only 'speaker"' (p. 313); or "a *capitolo* has no set number of lines and lends itself well to a flowing expression such as narrative, as used by Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, or speech, as used by Veronica Franca" (p. 384, n. 5). Again, these cursory statements could provide the starting point for fruitful explorations of early modern style, "self-fashioning," genres, and so forth.

Certainly the fact that new translations of many poems are integrated in the text, with the originals provided at the end of each chapter, would make this book a handy choice for classroom use. The translations, however, are less than optimal and, at times, altogether wrong, for example: Peter's boat, the Church, "strangely light and

empty, / rides quickly over the choppy sea," but, in the original, "non come suol leggera e scarca / sovra'l turbato mar corre" (pp. 54-55, original on p. 67). What makes this book unique, however, is the CD with sixty-five poems recorded in the original. The musicality of sonnets, ballads, *canzoni*, and *capitoli* emerges forcefully when they are recited aloud; too rarely do we approach poetry from the standpoint of aural pleasure, and this CD surely allows us to do so.

Two more positive aspects make this book worth reading. The first is the attention paid to the role of music in the lives of women poets and in spreading of poetry to larger audiences. Jaffe points out that poems by Gambara (pp. 6, 16), Colonna (pp. 50, 52, 55), Stampa (p. 239), and Molza (p. 321) were set to music. Further, singing was an important asset for women, though it was often associated with loose morals: d'Aragona "learned the arts of singing and dancing along with lovemaking" (p. 71) and was praised by a Ferrarese, "she sight-reads every motet and song" (p. 77). Both Stampa sisters "sang well, although by all accounts, it was Gaspara who had the more beautiful voice" (p. 242). Molza "was gifted with an extraordinarily beautiful singing voice" (p. 314), which allowed her to become part of the court retinue in Ferrara starting in 1583 (p. 324). Of Franco, we are told in passing that she performed music for "the various men on whom she was dependent" (p. 362). This will come as no surprise to musicologists, who have devoted attention to the role of lyrical poetry in the emergence of new forms of music composition and performance, but it is too little explored a field for literature scholars. Another interesting aspect is the attention paid to extant portraits of these twelve women poets. Since Jaffe is professor of art history, this is not surprising; but as Aldo Scaglione mentions in his preface, "combining portrait analysis with poetry and social biography" makes this book a "new and original achievement" (p. xvi). Further, eight color plates and sixty black-and-white illustrations make it more appealing for students.

Once upon a time, an imperfect book came into being. Yet for all its shortcomings, or quite possibly because of them, it might be a useful text to exploit in the classroom setting.

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