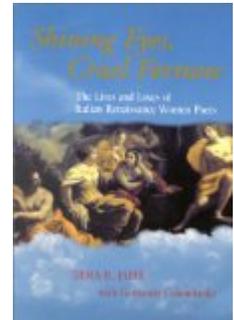


**Irma B. Jaffe with Gernando Colombardo.** *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune: The Lives and Loves of Italian Renaissance Women Poets.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2002. xxxi + 431 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8232-2181-3.



**Reviewed by** Jana Byars

**Published on** H-Women (November, 2007)

This attractive volume covers, as the title suggests, the lives and work of twelve female poets active on the Italian peninsula in the late fifteenth- and sixteenth centuries. In her brief but effective preface Irma B. Jaffe opens, a bit tongue in cheek, with the questions of her awestruck friends: "Sixteenth-century women poets? ... Were there any?" It is from this point that the book starts and it is in answering this question that the book excels. Although female poets of the Renaissance have begun to get some attention, with a few monographs and edited volumes addressing some individuals, their story remains largely untold. Jaffe helps to remedy this situation with this sumptuous volume. With chapters devoted to Veronica Gambara, Vittoria Colonna, Tullia d'Aragona, Chiara Matraini, Isabella di Morra, Laura Terracina, Laura Battiferra, Gaspara Stampa, Isotta Brembate, Tarquinia Molza, Veronica Franca (often spelled Franco), and Moderate Fonte (the pen name of Modesta da Pozzo), this book serves to gather some of the Renaissance's most accomplished women, in one place. Some, such as Veronica Franco and Gaspara Stampa are very well known, while others, such as Isotta

Brembate and Chiara Matraini, receive their most complete treatment from Jaffe. Each chapter contains biographical information, places the poet in question in her historical context, and, through an analysis of her work, comments upon the position and condition of Renaissance women more broadly. This work, then, is suitable for students as well as for more general readers.

There are some features that particularly recommend this work for a broad audience. Throughout, Jaffe demonstrates a knack for storytelling and streamlining the messiness of history. The preface swiftly runs through the explosion of printed material, the triumph of the vernacular, and the development of the individual with efficiency. Brief bits of scene setting pepper the book wherein she quickly and clearly explains the historical background or particular events in an interesting and effective way. The volume is quite beautiful. In addition to the dozens of black and white illustrations, there are eight color plates depicting the poets. The color plates are addressed and analyzed in the text, making them useful as well as attractive. Other illustrations vary in type

but not in interest or utility. As well as reproductions of contemporary art, the reader will find reproductions of art under study by the poets, maps and modern photographs, and more likenesses of the poets. And finally, in what is certainly its greatest virtue, the book contains a great deal of poetry. Jaffe intersperses the text with her analysis in the main body of the chapters, then appends more poetry at the end of the chapter. The book comes with a companion CD featuring readings by native speakers.

In her preface, Jaffe explains her intentions with this book. In some ways, this is women's history in its most pure form: Jaffe wishes to drag these women from obscurity and expose them more broadly. In this, she is certainly successful. In addition, she wishes to explain what their lives were like; to do this she reads their poetry for answers. She gleans biographical information and attempts to explore the way they felt and what they thought about the world around them and their own lives. Nor are these women divorced from their surroundings. Readers see that these women were exceptional, and the product of comparatively privileged upbringing. While this means they might not speak for all women, they do shed some light on the lives of all women. In addition, Jaffe explores the importance of their ties with men—other poets, family members, and patrons—as well as the women's networks in which they were enmeshed.

The last of these—the poets' relationships with the men around them—is the overarching concern of the volume and reflects both the best and the worst of the work. The chapter on Chiara Matraini begins by identifying her class and her kin group, the man who made decisions for her as a child, and the husband he chose for her. Placing her so quickly and appropriately within her cultural and social milieu is exactly what makes this book such a useful reference and pleasant read. But almost immediately some of the problems of the book become clear. Much of this chapter's analysis re-

gards Matraini's 1555 volume, much of which covers an affair recently and unhappily concluded. Even as she explores the Petrarchan influence on the style of the poetry, Jaffe reads the emotion contained therein literally, asserting that "separated from her lover, she was distraught, and, dramatically, she wanted to die" (p. 109). It is this attempt to know what is largely unknowable, rather than focusing on what can be analyzed, that makes the book a frustrating read, at times. In her chapter on Veronica Gambara, Jaffe provides good but brief coverage of Gambara's attempts to cultivate a literary relationship with Pietro Bembo; her written exchanges with Pietro Aretino and Vittoria Colonna; and her choice to milk her brother's position as governor of Bologna for all its social benefits. Jaffe briefly tantalizes the reader with the news that Gambara founded a literary academy, but offers nothing else about it. Rather, she plumbs her later correspondence and poetry for Veronica's feelings about aging and the pursuit of virtue.

Jaffe is able to summarize and narrate the history rather neatly. Unfortunately, this quick march through the political and religious context of the Cinquecento, while useful, glosses over some of the nuances of these topics. Some medievalists would take issue with the idea that "the awareness of the person as an individual of independent thought and action" (p. xxv) was a Renaissance development that was working in concert with the "fifteenth-century discovery and revival of classical antiquity" (p. xxiii). Throughout the book, Jaffe relies on what many historians of the Renaissance might regard as old-fashioned, or even outdated interpretations. In addition, her method of inquiry is problematic. She often reads these poems as accurate reflections of the authors' "hopes, fears, anxieties, and above all, their loves" (p. xxviii), and spends little attention on literary convention, the taste and desires of patrons, the market, and any of a number of other issues. Jaffe occasionally addresses these issues (though one is more likely to find the criticism in the notes than

in the text), but she still reads the poetry with a fairly uncritical eye. Despite the problems, this is a handsome and useful volume that will be much appreciated by the majority of readers.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-women>

**Citation:** Jana Byars. Review of Colombardo, Irma B. Jaffe with Gernando. *Shining Eyes, Cruel Fortune: The Lives and Loves of Italian Renaissance Women Poets*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. November, 2007.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13872>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.