

1988

The Defiant Muse: Italian Feminist Poems from the Middle Ages to the Present (A Bilingual Anthology) edited by Beverly Allen, Muriel Kittel, and Keala Jane Jewell

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Recommended Citation

Migiel, Marilyn (1988) "The Defiant Muse: Italian Feminist Poems from the Middle Ages to the Present (A Bilingual Anthology) edited by Beverly Allen, Muriel Kittel, and Keala Jane Jewell," *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*: Vol. 2 , Article 31.

Available at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia/vol2/iss1/31>

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between the need for educational equality and social disparity, and the tension between ideal human unity and individual differences. He writes:

The problematicity of education is to be situated within pedagogical dialectics, which in its turn attains unity in the philosophy of education understood as the positioning of the idea of education on the one hand in the system of mind, and on the other as consciousness of the phenomenological realization of such a pure signification in the educational milieu. The problematicity is therefore resolved in life as well as in the life of the mind, a typical necessary form of the infinite search of the self which, however, is never attained, because in this search the self is endlessly creator, and in such a creating is freed, transcending itself, or, better, it celebrates the transcendence of its pure unity with itself. (239)

The pedagogy mentioned by Banfi is never considered outside of the institutions which can make it possible. From this stems his interest in political, cultural and organizational problems, especially in his post-World War II period: Banfi was in fact actively involved in the Casa della Cultura, the Centro di difesa e prevenzione sociale, the Convitti della Rinascita, the Riforma della scuola e dell'Università, and so on. His personality has had a deep and lasting influence on Italian cultural life. His acute and vibrant awareness of issues and his readiness to intervene with total participation and commitment are witness to the vitality of a mind rooted in a praxis that yearned "for the clear and open consciousness of reality in which what is human constructs itself historically" (from the Introduction to *The Search for Reality*, 1956).

ALESSANDRA CENNI
[Trans. by Fiorentina Russo]

***The Defiant Muse: Italian
Feminist Poems from the
Middle Ages to the Present
(A Bilingual Anthology)***

Beverly Allen, Muriel Kittel,
and Keala Jane Jewell, eds.
Introduction by Beverly Allen
New York: Feminist Press, 1986

This anthology of poetry, part of a series published by the Feminist Press that includes volumes of women's poetry in the French, Hispanic, and German national traditions, stands as an important addition to anthologies of Italian literature published in the United States and England. The editors of the volume conscientiously pay tribute to an impressive list of Italian women poets, who merit more recognition than they have received thus far. Moreover, much of their work has never been previously translated and anthologized.

Beverly Allen's introduction provides an overview of Italian women's literature (not only poetry) and of Italian women's relation to male-dominated literary traditions. (This overview is supplemented by biographical sketches at the end of the volume that give very basic introductory information about individual lives.) Allen deftly describes different voices, themes, and social and historical issues in a limited space (seven pages). With equal ease, she articulates her view of women's political struggle and its connection to women's literary commitments.

Like the editors of the companion volumes in the series, Allen is working under the constraint of the Press's label of "feminist poetry." Each editor for the *Defiant Muse* series struggles to identify a way of justifying this new pan-historical label. Allen takes her stand with a statement open to debate: "whatever the historical context, the

fact that these poems were written at all may itself be viewed as a feminist act" (xv). Aware that the circumstances of history concentrate women's voices in the last century, she is careful to point out that the contemporary poets included in this volume "are conscious of their own feminism and thus work within a context not previously available to the same extent to female poets" (xx). Her interpretation of poetry as a privileged mode of women's expression is a boldly drawn one: she sees poetry as offering "a honing of subjective awareness and a complementary recognition of subjective predicaments" (xvi) and, in particular, she sees contemporary feminist poetry as marked by "a recognition of the power of the poetic word in a culture where words make history" (xxi).

The translations, the majority of them by Muriel Kittel, are fluid and eminently readable. Appreciative of the difficulties of translating poetry, I will not quibble about the occasional phrase that does not render a word, or word play, or rhythm as well as one might like. (For example, "Non chieder altro" in a poem addressed to the World is mysteriously translated as "Nothing else I ask" [40-41].)

The resources and virtues of this volume are such that the anthology promises to be most useful to the general reading public and in university courses addressing the issue of women's writing. Its value for scholars in Italian studies or women's studies is limited, however. Many readers will be disappointed by the failure of the book to aid the interested reader in pursuing the subject further. Anthologies are not bound to make a display of the erudition that underlies their organization, of course. But while the editors acknowledge contemporary women poets in Italy who have kindly made their work, both published and unpublished, available, they do not reveal whether the poems written by women

before the twentieth century are being reproduced from archival material, premodern editions, or modern publications. This decision appears to have been made by the Press, since the German and the French companion volumes in the series do not differ significantly from the Italian volume on this point of organization—although the editor of the German volume did choose to include a brief comment about other helpful anthologies at the conclusion of her introduction. The space necessary in order to provide rudimentary bibliographical information is not great (a page or two), and the utility of the anthology—not to mention the numbers in its potential reading public—would be greatly increased.

Also disappointing are the assumptions about literary conventions and women's relation to them that surface in some readings of the poems offered in the biographical profiles at the end of the anthology. The insertion of isolated interpretive comments in this forum seems arbitrary and willful. And since, as I have already noted, Beverly Allen's introduction deals explicitly with this issue with subtlety and refinement of tone, I confess bewilderment at the appearance of disturbingly simplistic readings of the poems. The ideological assumptions of which I speak emerge with most force, as might be expected, at the site of premodern poetry.

My first example rises from the comments on the opening poem of the anthology, "Tapina ahimè, ch'amava uno sparviere," a sonnet by an anonymous poet of the thirteenth-century Sicilian School (2). The biographical sketch of Anonymous, cast as a synopsis literary history of the origins of Italian literature, declares:

We know little about the authors except what the poems themselves tell us. We may assume that the first one in this volume was written by a woman, a member of the

landed nobility or gentry who practiced falconry as a sport, and that she was sufficiently educated or "accomplished" to write a sonnet—although perhaps not as perfectly as "La Compiuta Donzella." (134-35)

To assume a connection between biography and poetry, to flatten the figurative level of the poem by imposing upon it an autobiographical matrix, bespeaks an unsophisticated theoretical orientation. Assumptions like this one are fired, it seems, by the attempt to claim for women a different relation to their experience and the language with which they express their experience; but launched in a one-sided manner, such assumptions are most unfortunate for the reputation of feminist studies because they reinforce the prejudice that feminist endeavors lack sensitivity, literary or otherwise.

The sonnet in question cannot be read as invested with the same subjectivity we expect in a post-Romantic poem. It arises within a conventional frame that fixes symbolism and theme: the falcon as beloved, falconry as erotic activity, the control of the falcon as the assurance of the primacy of the lover/narrator. The sonnet, probably written in the first half of the thirteenth century, brings to mind at least one other poem, written ca. 1160 by Der von Kurenberc, the earliest named German poet. In Der von Kurenberc's poem, a narrator (sometimes assumed to be a woman) speaks of a falcon that s/he trained; the narrator makes explicit the erotic context by concluding, "May God bring together all people who want to be lovers." Finally, the Italian sonnet arises within a poetic tradition that on occasion, for reasons that are inevitably varied, is capable of adopting a female narrative voice. Assumption of a female narrative voice is no guarantee of female authorship, however. What is the function of an "officially feminist" reading that appears unable to recognize and appreciate these traditional literary conventions

or to respond to the figurative language essential to all poetry and especially to poetry in the pre-modern epoch?

The question of biography and poetry becomes no less complicated as we move into the Renaissance era, even though there are more women writers in this period and rather more information is available about their lives. In the biographical sketch of Gaspara Stampa, for example, information that is much disputed by scholars—notably, whether she was indeed a courtesan—is presented as fact: "Gaspara Stampa became a member of the Accademia dei Dabbiosi with the name of Anasilla [sic] and lived the free life of a high-ranking 'honest' courtesan" (145). (In contrast, information about the philandering of Ferrante D'Avalos, husband of Vittoria Colonna, is curiously suppressed; this bit of censorship renders the picture of her life with him an ideally passionate and positive one, as if she had more control over his antics than in fact she did. This perhaps is information not usually included in biographical sketches of Colonna, but also missing is any mention of the Inquisition's disapproval of Colonna, and the result is to make her appear fully on the side of orthodoxy.)

Gaspara Stampa is frequently cited as the most important woman writer of the Italian Renaissance, possibly because Stampa is seen as the woman poet who accomplished the most interesting literary and musical effects in her poetry. The editors do not repeat this critical opinion about Stampa; in general, they shy away from aesthetic judgments about the poetry. But the claim that the editors make for Stampa's poetic accomplishment is quite astonishing:

She writes of joy, fear, jealousy, and disillusion in language that, although it uses established forms and conceits, is intensely personal. When Stampa invokes Death (*la morte*: "she, who makes pale the world . . .") she is following a Petrarchan conven-

tion that male poets used to impress upon the women they courted that they were "dying" from love. This was part of the game of courtship: Before marriage the bride was supposed to be remote and to hold the power of life or death over her lover. Stampa has reversed this situation—with the added difference that what she felt was real and not an artificial or poetic attitude. (145-46)

Real and not artificial or poetic? How amazing is such a belief in the authenticity of female expression!

This opinion seems indebted to Natalia Costa-Zalessow's description of Gaspara Stampa in her *Scrittrici italiane dal XIII al XX secolo* (Ravenna: Longo, 1982), a book that the editors acknowledge as one of their main sources for the biographical information. While excising Costa-Zalessow's moderate statements about Stampa's erotic life, the editors have retained her view that

Il solito petrarchismo del Cinquecento assume un tono nuovo sotto la penna di Gaspara, in quanto ci troviamo davanti a un sentimento sentito con vera passione. Le sue variazioni sull'effetto dell'amore non sono mai eruditi concetti e pure esercitazioni letterarie. (86-87)

Since feminist literary criticism privileges the study of the figure of Woman, Other par excellence in Western culture, it exhorts us in the best of instances to refine our readings of difference and of all discourses that have been marginalized. To continue this struggle for a more informed notion of the construction of the canon is a commendable task. We must also resist the flattering belief that any methodology—feminism included—can maintain a privileged relationship to demystification; the supporters of feminism must above all struggle against the reification of interpretation. An anthology such as *The Defiant Muse* is a crucial effort in this struggle to affirm the complexity of the Italian literary canon, and

by extension, of all literary traditions; but the mere publication of women's words and works will never suffice as the affirmation of the feminist enterprise. Women historically may not have had the same privileged relationship to writing as men have had; under present historical circumstances, which have permitted women a forum, women cannot relinquish the power of reading, which is indeed, the power of literature.

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Introducción al pensamiento de Vico

By Pietro Piovani

Traducción de O. Astorga,

J.R. Errera, C.I. Pavan

Caracas: Ediciones de la Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1987

This book is a collection of eight Vico studies, written mostly in 1968, which the great Italian philosopher Pietro Piovani (1922-1980) had prepared for publication in Spanish. These studies can be said to represent Piovani's interpretation of Vico, who was without a doubt one of his preferred authors. In fact, beginning with his 1953 study *Vico nella filosofia di Rosmini*, down to his posthumously published *Oggettivazione etica e essenzialismo* (1981), he constantly referred to Vico, at times implicitly. Piovani left behind new materials he had gathered for a book "ex prophesso" he planned to dedicate to the Neapolitan philosopher, with the announced title *The New Philosophy of Vico*.