

Differentia: Review of Italian Thought

Number 8 *Combined Issue 8-9 Spring/Autumn*

Article 39

1999

Gaspara Stampa: Selected Poems edited by Laura Stortoni and Mary Prentice Lillie

Daniela Gioseffi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia>

Recommended Citation

Gioseffi, Daniela (1999) "Gaspara Stampa: Selected Poems edited by Laura Stortoni and Mary Prentice Lillie," *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*: Vol. 8 , Article 39.

Available at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia/vol8/iss1/39>

This document is brought to you for free and open access by Academic Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought* by an authorized editor of Academic Commons. For more information, please contact mona.ramonetti@stonybrook.edu, hu.wang.2@stonybrook.edu.

"After a long wait the beauty of Rimbaud/comes to sit on my knees..." The voices of poets, kindred spirits, visit and console him in his isolation. Their work is like a rope ladder hurled through the barred windows of his cell, a gentle force which persuades the barricades to lower.

KATHRYN NOCERINO

***Gaspara Stampa:
Selected Poems***

Edited & translated by

Laura Stortoni & Mary Prentice Lillie.

New York: Italica Press, 1994.

It should thrill women of every background, and men, too, to discover or rediscover Gaspara Stampa, an extraordinary poet, a contemporary of Vittoria Colonna and Veronica Gamba—two other famous Italian Renaissance poets. Her consummately crafted verse is adequately translated into an English which gives us a sense of her Renaissance Italian idiom in a beautifully designed bilingual edition. Her work invites comparison with the original Italian sonnets, the exquisite Petrarchan form in which this pioneer woman writer composed her poetry. Gaspara Stampa's poetry is one of longing and of suffering over love—an inheritance from the troubadour tradition.

"Who is Gaspara Stampa?" Americans might well ask, if they are unfamiliar with the Italian Renaissance. She was a light among Renaissance poets, and one of the few

women of her time to gain immortality through the love lyric. From Stortoni's informative introduction, we learn that Stampa "was born in 1523 in Padua of a noble Milanese family in decline." Her beloved was a handsome count of Treviso, one Collaltino di Collalto who seems to have brought her far more suffering and unfulfilled longing than joy—a tradition found in lyric poetry and opera as well. In 1548, at the age of twenty-five, Stampa met Collaltino in the salon of Domenico Venier, and fell passionately in love. Collaltino was the same age as Stampa and a patrician patron of the arts with some literary taste. The young lord fancied himself a poet, but Stampa must have overwhelmed him with her consummate mastery of the art of the sonnet. She showered him with her love in the form of poetry, no doubt frightening him away with her superior skill, or so this feminist imagines in the introduction. It seems that the better she expressed her love to him, the less he loved her.

Yet, reading her sonnets I am saddened. Here is a woman possessed by unrequited love, a story of painful love with which many women artists can identify. That is what makes this volume so interesting to contemporary feminists and to the men who long to understand them. Robert Bly is only one of many contemporary American poets very interested in the theme of courtly love in our time of gross sexual manners and mannerisms, and he, among others, would no doubt relish this volume written by the world's most famous female courtly love poet. Most of us are unaware of the women who wrote in

this traditionally male form, and *Gaspara Stampa: Selected Poems* is an important education for us. Stampa's luminary sonnets are living proof that the passion to court the loved one ran as deeply in the Renaissance female breast as in the male's—or the swaggering Madonnas—of our time.

It was about the day when the Creator,

Who could have stayed in His sublime abode,

Came down to show Himself in human form,

Issuing from the Holy Virgin's womb,

When it occurred that my illustrious lord

For whom I wrote so many love laments,

Who could have found a nobler resting place,

Made his own nest and refuge in my heart.

So I embraced this rare and lofty fortune

With joy, only regretting that so late

I was made worthy by Eternal Care.

Since then I turned my hopes and thoughts and glances

On him alone, so noble, brave and gentle

Beyond all others that the sun beholds.

The translation of Stampa's first sonnet in the book is quoted here in full, to demonstrate that the renderings in English, though somewhat stiff and unpolished in comparison to their artful originals, capture the spirit of the Italian Renaissance, printed side-by-side for easy reference. The translators have captured the meter

and idiom, if not the rhyme and graceful flow of the original. The English language is not as full of possible rhymes as Italian, with its end vowels, allows.

Editors Ronald Musto and Eileen Gardiner of Italica Press, have given us a treasure by publishing a book which bridges, like so many of their volumes, an historical and cultural gap for us. The strong voice of a marvelously original, bold and daring woman of the Italian Renaissance—who even in her sorrow, scolds her cold lover—has been rendered into English for the many readers, both male and female, who would enjoy discovering her. In the tradition of Italian love poetry, the poet is always led to sorrow and healed only, finally, by his/her greater love of the spiritual or of "God." This is the way for Gaspara Stampa, as it was for Dante. Italica Press, with its venerable reputation as one of the most able innovators of small press production techniques, is now celebrating its tenth anniversary and was recently honored with a feature story in the *Small Press Center News*. Italica has dedicated itself to designing beautiful books specializing in English translations of Italian medieval and Renaissance texts designed to be read and enjoyed by a wide audience.

In addition to these texts, Musto and Gardiner publish English translations of contemporary and modern Italian novels. Italica recently published *Cosima*, by Grazia Deledda, who was the second woman and the second Italian to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Like Stampa, Deledda was almost totally unknown in America before the pioneering press

brought her to American readers with her autobiographical novel about growing up in a Sardinian mountain village. Deledda has been resurrected as a lost woman writer with whom all writers can identify, just as Stampa is for us in this new book from Italica. I will close with the quote in which Rilke refers us to Stampa as a model for love and poetry:

But, Nature, spent and exhausted,
takes lovers back
into herself, as if there were not
enough strength
to create them a second time.
Have you imagined
Gaspara Stampa intensely enough
so that any girl
deserted by her beloved might be
inspired
by that fierce example of soaring,
objectless love
and might say to herself, "Perhaps
I can be like her?"
Shouldn't this most ancient of sufferings
finally grow
more fruitful for us? Isn't it time
that we lovingly
freed ourselves from the beloved,
and quivering, endured:
as the arrow endures the bow-string's
tension, so that
gathered in the snap of release it
can be more than
itself. For there is no place where
we can remain.

DANIELA GIOSEFFI

*Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by Stephen Mitchell, N.Y.: Vintage, 1989, as quoted in the introduction of the Italica book.

The Composition of Images, Signs and Ideas

By Giordano Bruno.

Translated by Charles Doria.

Edited and annotated by Dick

Higgins. New York: Willis, Locker & Owens, 1991.

Giordano Bruno has fascinated philosophers and revolutionaries for centuries. Now his spell has reached visual artists (I am thinking of the well-received Adam Berg 1992 multimedia installation at the Italian Cultural Institute in Toronto), *The Heretical View of Knowledge*, which drew its inspiration from the philosophy and life of Nolan). Dick Higgins, who edited and annotated this first and only English translation of Bruno's *On the Composition...* is a visual artist too—a performance artist who co-founded Happenings and Fluxus. Among other things, he translated Novalis's *Hymns to the Night* and wrote three books on "Intermedia", a concept he named and that he claims to have found in Bruno. Charles Doria, the translator, is the author of several books of poetry and has translated various classic texts. Manfredi Piccolomini, who signed the Foreword, is a well-known critic and a scholar of Renaissance painting. Are these signs that Bruno is becoming an art icon? Such a fate would not be totally disrespectful of Bruno's legacy. He was a visual thinker, after all, who attempted poetry and comedy as well. Attention to Bruno from the world of art is a sign of the semiotic nature of his thought, and it is welcome especially when the focus is on Bruno's most