

1999

## The Lady Vanishes: Subjectivity and Representation in Castiglione and Ariosto. by Valeria Finucci

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### Recommended Citation

Zimmerman, Susan (1999) "The Lady Vanishes: Subjectivity and Representation in Castiglione and Ariosto. by Valeria Finucci," *Differentia: Review of Italian Thought*. Vol. 8 , Article 48.  
Available at: <https://commons.library.stonybrook.edu/differentia/vol8/iss1/48>

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thought, I would say to you: no, the principle of female freedom is of a symbolic nature. It is not an actual behavior, however valid and precious such a behavior may be toward the empowering of women in society.

Finally, de Lauretis notes that the theory of social-symbolic practice espoused by the MWBC "makes little space for differences and divisions between—and especially within—women, and so tends to construct a view of the female subject that is still too closely modeled on the "monstrous" subject of philosophy and History" (18). But, she concludes, if the project of this feminist philosophy can be rightly criticized for its unquestioning acceptance of the classic, unified subject of philosophy, nevertheless the notion of essential and originary difference represents a point of consensus and a new starting point for feminist thought in Italy" (19).

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<sup>1</sup>For example, Lucia Chiavola-Birnbaum, *Liberazione della donna: Feminism in Italy*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), and *Italian Feminist Thought. A Reader*, ed. Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

<sup>2</sup>*Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*, op. cit.

## ***The Lady Vanishes: Subjectivity and Representation in Castiglione and Ariosto.***

by Valeria Finucci.

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992.

Finucci's book is concerned with modes by which the depiction of women-- or more precisely, of female subjectivities-- in canonical works of the Italian Renaissance is shaped by male writers and through the gaze of male characters. Contesting a strong critical tradition stemming from Burckhardt which locates protofeminist attitudes in Castiglione's *Il libro del cortigiano* and Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, Finucci argues that in both these works the representations of women actually legitimize patriarchal constructions of the female. Even militantly aggressive female figures are ultimately recuperated into the patriarchal economy and thereby serve to define that economy and the males within it. Thus there are no "female" subjectivities in Castiglione and Ariosto at all, only representations which function reflexively to validate male fantasies of their own sexual identity.

Finucci's discussion, rooted in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, proceeds from the post-structuralist assumption that subjectivity is the product of discourse. Although at times Finucci implies that it is language itself that denies the female any possibility of independent identity within the symbolic order, her real interest lies in specific discursive strategies to be found in Castiglione and Ariosto for contain-

ing the female. She brings a formidable erudition to this task.

Buttressing psychoanalytical theory with analytical models drawn from semiotics and film criticism, Finucci establishes a sophisticated framework for textual interpretation. But she is equally adept at positioning her analysis synchronistically. She finds corroborating evidence for her views in a variety of classical and Renaissance texts, both literary and visual, and she also takes into account contemporary political factors which influence literary design and narrative voice.

Finucci devotes three chapters to Castiglione's treatise. In the first of these, she deconstructs Castiglione's sleight of hand: on the one hand, demanding that female courtiers "produce discourse and excel in conversation" (41), and on the other, rendering it impossible for them to do so. Despite the injunction embedded in his text, "the possibility of speaking in Castiglione's taken away from both named and unnamed women, and the duchess and her deputy intervene only in their role of normalizing and dedramatizing content and contest" (36). Since "only the person manipulating discourse can construe himself narratively" (39), it is the male courtier who assumes the exegetic function in the *Cortigiano*. The female courtier, assimilated to what is fundamentally an Oedipal and homocentric narrative, functions iconically: positioned as radically different and non-representable, she has no choice but to assent "to her own removal from the process of signification" (42).

In the two succeeding chapters,

Finucci illustrates several modes by which the icon of the female courtier serves to reinforce homosocial bonds in the *Cortigiano*.

Especially interesting in this connection is her treatment of the jokes told by the courtiers at the conclusion of Part I. In an original and arresting connection, Finucci demonstrates how Freud's analysis of the tripartite structure of the dirty joke has important affinities with Todorov's description of the triangularity of discourse: in both joke and discourse, woman can be seen as the excluded third term that is nonetheless necessary to make these phenomena happen. Thus the jokes of Castiglione's courtiers exclude women in a double sense, and serve as an emblem of the male-controlled discourse of the treatise itself.

Although the prevailing critical tradition finds in *Orlando Furioso* "numerous possibilities of self-definition for women, including transgression" (19), Finucci argues that Ariosto, like Castiglione, works to contain disorder by "reaffirming the need for alignment through normalization (marriage) or elimination (death or displacement to mythical lands) of the different female characters" (16). Each of Finucci's five chapters on Ariosto's romantic epic thus focuses on the way in which a transgressive female (Angelica, Olimpia, Isabella, Fiordispina and Bradamante) is made ultimately to function as metaphor for male identity.

Finucci's superb analysis of the myth of Medusa—representing man's attraction to and fear of female sexuality and his need to fix it in a sanitized symbol beyond desire and

worthy of worship—operates as a leitmotif binding these individual narratives. Taken collectively, the chapters trace the trajectory of the *Orlando Furioso* itself, which moves from "romance and deviation" (Angelica) to "epic and closure" (Bradamante) (19).

Although as warrior woman, Bradamante might seem the most disruptive of Ariosto's collection of female figures, Finucci identifies Angelica as his most formidable female. Narcissistically self-enclosed and self-contained, uninterested in suitors and equipped to thwart would-be ravishers such as Ruggiero, by becoming invisible, Angelica "desires nothing but escape from the desire that creates a place for her in representation" (118). But an Angelica who is "the subject of her own desire" (120) is outside the economy of the symbolic order. As such, she unmans—or castrates—men who control or possess her (as seen in Orlando's madness), and therefore must be radically degraded in the narrative. Bradamante, on the other hand, although ostensibly threatening by virtue of her fiercely male exterior, is never phallically empowered: Ariosto's narrative strategy with her is to show "at each opportunity that she is only pretending to be a man" (243).

Finucci's examination of both the *Cortigiano* and *Orlando furioso* is extraordinarily rewarding because of the polished way in which she integrates theoretical premises with richly detailed textual exegesis. It is true that occasionally her insistence on narrative strategies of recuperation flattens out contradictions suggested

by her own evidence. For example, Bradamante, the "unimpeachable female subject" whose military phase ... constitutes only a temporary activity before her public espousal of the joys of domesticity" seems incompatible with the Bradamante who understands that Rodomonte's mausoleum for Isabella "should not replace a woman, dead or alive, but should represent a woman's right to choose a life of her own" (194). Such a contradiction suggests a destabilizing crux which might work to contravene or at least compromise a recuperative narrative strategy. But if Finucci chooses not to foreground such cruxes in her analysis, it is because her main objective—an ambitious one—is to dismantle an entrenched critical tradition which mistakenly attributes profeminist attitudes to Castiglione and Ariosto. In terms of this task, she is unquestionably successful. Thus her book represents a keystone study which will prompt an important shift in critical approaches to major writers of the Italian Renaissance. Especially as a first book, it is a remarkable accomplishment.

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***Anti-Semitism, Misogyny  
and the Logic of  
Cultural Difference:  
Cesare Lombroso and  
Matilde Serao***

By Nancy A. Harrowitz.  
Lincoln & London: University of  
Nebraska Press, 1994.