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Quaintance, Courtney. *Textual Masculinity and the Exchange of Women in Renaissance Venice*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. Pp. 272. ISBN: 978-1442649132. \$70 (hardcover).

In *Textual Masculinity and the Exchange of Women in Renaissance Venice* (2015), Courtney Quaintance explores the literary production of Venetian authors and intellectuals connected to Domenico Venier's circle during the sixteenth century. She analyzes the understudied works of Venier salon, adopting a fresh and rigorous approach that draws its theoretical foundation from masculinity studies and feminist theories. Quaintance bases her study largely on the theoretical modes articulated by Eve Sedgwick in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985). Sedgwick argued that in English literature male-male desire (sexual or otherwise) usually became intelligible through a woman, leading to a curious relational triangulation. Similarly, Quaintance argues that bonds between two men – rivalries and friendships – were mediated by the presence of a woman, who was fictionalized in their writings. Therefore, literary fiction of women in Renaissance Venice and its consumption and circulation among male readers help define the consolidation of literary and homosocial bonds between men.

Quaintance acknowledges the dual nature of the Venier salon's poetic production: in fact, its printed anthologies contain Petrarchan-style love poems where the poets lament the unavailability of chaste and honest ladies, while in these same authors' private exchanges, their writings in Venetian dialect feature promiscuous prostitutes. Therefore, the scholar works at the intersection of these two largely different literary apparatuses, explaining how the choice of Tuscan over Venetian, or vice versa, strongly influences the reasoning behind the selection of the register, theme and, ultimately, the medium. She claims that, although the writings are extremely diverse, the poets of the Venier salon both seem "preoccupied with preserving ideals of feminine beauty and comportment. (...) At the same time, they reinforce normative modes of masculine behavior and access to power" (8).

The book is divided into five chapters: in the first one, Quaintance investigates Lorenzo Venier's literary production in connection to Pietro Aretino. This section explores Venier's *La Puttana Errante* and *La Zaffetta* and examines the intertextualities that are recognizably drawn from Aretino's texts to elucidate that their writings could provide significant hints about male friendships, literary partnerships and relationships to a specific patron. In more detail, Quaintance focuses on the literary representation of gang rape in Venier's *La Zaffetta* and in Aretino's *Ragionamento della Nanna e della Antonia*. In both texts, rape is described as a corrective measure for unruly women who transgress social and gender hierarchies. Quaintance provocatively argues that literary sexual violence is the site of homosocial satisfaction. For instance, the graphic representation of violated female flesh can satisfy the libido of early modern readers who repay their authors with literary fame and, possibly, access to wealth and power. Therefore, literary rape leads to the creation of fraternal bonds between men: as Quaintance puts it, "the texts negotiate anxieties about the fragility of male authority over women. But they are also preoccupied with men's authority over one another" (49).

In the second chapter, Quaintance argues that Girolamo Parabosco's *I Diporti* and Valerio Marcellino's *Il Diamerone* dramatize the processes of literary collaboration that characterize the Venier salon. The two texts reflect the practices of men writing about women and provide the reader with a close look at the discussions and discourses that take place during the gatherings at the salon. In more detail, *I Diporti* describes the Venier circle as a space of antagonistic play where an eclectic group of intellectuals and artists could demonstrate their literary, musical, and artistic talent. Similarly, *Il Diamerone* offers a close description, even physical, of many of the members of the Venier salon.

The third chapter explores the erotic potential of Venetian dialect for creative writing during the sixteenth-century. Starting from the analysis of the printed anthology, *Rime diverse di molti eccellentissimi autori*, (Giolito, 1545) – which contains works of many of the members of Venier's group – Quaintance draws stimulating parallels and oppositions with their private

writings that circulated mainly in manuscript form. She especially looks at Domenico Venier's thirty-four poems, where he mourns the loss of Elena Artusi, using recognizable Petrarchan conceits and paradoxes. The scholar especially focuses on the different depictions of Elena Artusi, and she considers her the ideal example of the ambiguous treatment of fictionalized women among the members of Venier circle: for instance, she is depicted both as an angelic being and a corrupt whore.

Quaintance argues that this ambiguity reflects the choice of the linguistic medium adopted by the poets. In fact, Venetian poets could either write in Venetian dialect or standardized Tuscan. The scholar provides extensive evidence to support the claim that Venetian dialect was most often associated with a low register, unconventional and inappropriate themes and, ultimately, satire of the Petrarchan modes, which she interprets as a consequence of its marginal linguistic status in the Italian peninsula and its implied limited readership. Therefore, the use of Venetian dialect provides a better understanding of the complex ways in which Venier and his cohort negotiate issues of masculinity to define their individual and collective identity.

The fourth chapter examines the circulation of erotic poetry in Venetian dialect during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and its eventual dissemination in print. Quaintance underlines that "writing and reading in Venetian dialect was a way to assert membership in the gentlemen's club that met regularly at Venier's house" (133). Therefore, Venetian dialect provided not only an excellent linguistic vehicle for sexually charged topics, but it also guaranteed a sense of exclusivity and secrecy, which was further highlighted by the circulation of such literary production in manuscript form.

The fifth and final chapter explores the space women occupied in this male society by looking at the life and production of two now widely studied female authors connected to the Venier salon: Gaspara Stampa and Veronica Franco. Quaintance claims "they both resisted the tropes that could cast them as objects of exchange by presenting themselves as literary organizers and collaborators" (135), although the women reflected two opposite ways of embodying femininity (Stampa was a 'virtuosa,' while Franco was a 'cortigiana onesta').

The two women's literary talent was perceived as disconcerting, and their efforts to actively participate in the Venetian literary sphere were often opposed: in fact, they were the target of satirical attacks on the part of their male colleagues. Stampa was labeled as a 'puttana', while Franco was belittled from 'cortigiana onesta' to whore. As a consequence, their abilities were seldom recognized, and their presence at Venier's gatherings was almost never acknowledged in male writings. This situation, which Quaintance presents in great detail, shows that Venice was not a welcoming environment for female writers, especially for those coming from higher classes.

In conclusion, *Textual Masculinity and the Exchange of Women in Renaissance Venice* provides an original perspective on masculinity and on the negotiation of public and private male subjectivity in early modern Venice through the analysis of fictional depictions of women. This study is useful to scholars of Early Modern Italy, literature and gender. It will especially benefit those academics working on gender in Renaissance Venice, as they will have the chance to discover a largely unexplored side of *La Serenissima* at the time of Petrarchism and Pietro Bembo's *Prose della Volgar Lingua* (1525). Quaintance examines a large, unstudied archive of works written in both Tuscan and Venetian dialect, showing that the choice of language has strong ties with the election of the themes, registers, styles, and modes of circulation of these compositions. Due to the vastness of the material, it is obvious that the author could not provide an in-depth analysis for all the texts she takes in consideration. Despite this, *Textual Masculinity and the Exchange of Women in Renaissance Venice* remains a major contribution to the field of early modern gender studies and a groundbreaking text that brilliantly approaches the understudied issues related to masculine identity.

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