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**Title:** Book Review: *Arms and the Woman: Classical Tradition and Women Writers in the Venetian Renaissance* by Francesca D'Alessandro Behr

**Journal Issue:** gender/sexuality/italy, 6 (2019)

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**Publication date:** August 2019

**Publication info:** gender/sexuality/italy, "Reviews"

**Permalink:** <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/?p=4339>

**Keywords:** Book Review

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D'Alessandro Behr, Francesca. *Arms and the Woman: Classical Tradition and Women Writers in the Venetian Renaissance*. Columbus, Ohio: The Ohio University Press, 2018. Pp. 292. ISBN 9780814213711. \$89.95 (hardcover); ISBN 9780814276280. \$19.95 (Ebook Pdf).

With *Arms and the Woman* Francesca D'Alessandro Behr brilliantly contributes to the scholarship on Italian Renaissance Epic by analyzing the works of two key figures of the Venetian Renaissance, Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinella. The author focuses on how these writers subvert the main (gendered) narratives of violence, war, submission, and deviation, by proposing figures that promote mercy, peace, wisdom, education and intellectual inquiry for women. Divided into three main parts, this study is a timely examination of their epics through the lens of the Classical texts, within the context of the Humanist *querelle des femmes*.

The "Introduction" (1-30) is a key chapter that contextualizes Fonte and Marinella as writers and it grounds their works within the Venetian Renaissance culture. In this context, the classical notions of *humanitas* and *virtus* offer first-hand examples of an epic defined by gender biases. To frame the scope of her study, D'Alessandro Behr considers the situation of women's education and their relationship with classical studies and the humanistic culture. Thus, her methodology includes an analysis of sociological and cultural factors through which she evaluates these women's access to and elaboration of the Classics. The discussion of these women's epics is strategically anchored in three fields: Renaissance Epic, Classical Epic, and Humanistic education (as it regards to the study of the Classics and the *querelle des femmes*).

The chapters are then structured around specific female figures in these women's epic texts that amend and reinvent women's role in the Venetian culture and politics. Part I, "Female Fighters: On Women, War, and *Pietas*" (31-94), includes two chapters that focus on Moderata Fonte. Chapter 1, "Lady Knights and *Pietas*" (33-62), grounds Fonte's *Il merito delle donne / The Worth of Women* and *Tredici canti del Floridoro / Thirteen Cantos of Floridoro* within the *querelle des femmes*, by analyzing in particular the figure of Risamante and the episode of her victory over her sister Biondaura. Chapter 2, "Women and Compassion" (63-94), expands the comparison by including Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, its reuse of Virgil, Fonte's *Merito* and Marinella's amazons from *Enrico*. Part II, "Lovers at War: Virgil, Ovid, and Resistance" (95-150), focuses on Marinella's *Enrico*, and the context in which it is developed, particularly through the close evaluation of Virgil's *Heroides* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Chapter 3, "Epic and Elegy" (97-107) frames *L'Enrico, overo Bisantio acquistato / Henry, or Byzantium Gained* as a work influenced by and critical of the Venetian political and governmental environment, through the representation of Enrico Dandolo's Fourth Crusade. In chapter 4, "Love and Lamentation" (108-150) the scholar skillfully reconstructs Marinella's pro-women agenda, by looking into figures of abandoned wives (formed from Ovid's elegiac poetry that gives voice to these victims of male epic and heroes), and shows how Marinella promotes a Christian feminine morality, opposed to the patriarchal morality perpetuated in the Venetian environment. Part III, "Women in the Garden: Enchantresses Erina and Circetta" (151-230), revisits the figure of the sorceress/prophetess in both Fonte and Marinella's epics. Chapter 5, "Ancient and Modern Prototypes" (153-184), reviews the tradition of this character, through classical figures like Calypso, Nausicaa, Dido, and Circe, and connects them to Marinella's Erina. This connection is expanded in Chapter 6, "Away from the City" (185-220), where the scholar continues the reflection on the *locus amoenus* by contrasting Virgil's *Aeneid* and Cicero's *Somnum Scipionis*. Chapter 7, "Fonte's Enchantress and Beyond" (221-230), explores the adaptation of Homer's Circe in Fonte's *Floridoro*, where the figure of Circetta promotes an innovative view on the differences and antithetic nature of men and women. The "Epilogue" (277-243) further expands on the concept of *Pietas* by examining the ending

of Marinella's *Enrico*, in which the hero's tears seem to provide a conclusion on mercy, in line with the lamentations in the *Iliad*, overturning the poem's narrative of violence and conquest.

This book is certainly a key addition to Italian Renaissance and Gender Studies. The study of these texts through the lenses of their authors' classical sources brilliantly reveals the possibilities hidden within Fonte's and Marinella's discourse, particularly as it concerns a proto-feminist approach to the epic genre. The analysis substantiates how they favor atypical representations of love, war and philosophy to those explored by Venetian humanists; furthermore, D'Alessandro Behr re-evaluates typical humanistic and classical topoi, such as *cortesia* (courtesy), *humanitas* and *locus amoenus*, as characteristics of women's representation and their active contribution to the genre and the society, reshaping and recasting the idea of power and war typical of male contributions to the genre. The main claim (although only clearly expressed in the second part) of the book is to unveil how women's private concerns become worries for the community, through the celebration of Venice's history. These female characters, therefore, become symbols of peace, wisdom, sacred love, family and contemplative life, ultimately a representation of female authors that privileged erudition, a trait that isolated them from their community, which ultimately deprived women of a public "worth."

D'Alessandro Behr effectively reconstructs the scholarship on these subjects (Burkhardt, Cox, Finucci, Ong) and at the same time sets her own study apart from it as she argues for the consideration of these women's works as an *engendered* Renaissance epic, a response from women to the rhetoric of silence to which they were relegated. In fact, the author sets Fonte and Marinella aside from the Venetian culture of the Renaissance, because historically they should not have had access (or had limited access) to the Classics, and education and power in general, as there were no practical reasons for women's education. The idea of a gendered education and gendered culture becomes, therefore, the pillars over which D'Alessandro constructs each chapter, by showing how in fact these women not only acquired an education and a deep knowledge of the Classics, but also how they used them in their works to re-define the concept of power in the Venetian context. The very use of female characters in the role of warriors or philosophers recasts the idea of the practical function of women in the government of warfare and politics, which furthers a feminist view of these characters in line with previous scholars, such as Stoppino, Cox, and Finucci.

However, while the hermeneutical analysis of the texts is effectively and productively expanded through the close examination of Classic and Renaissance models the scholar seems to limit her analysis to very specific passages, assuming a great deal of knowledge of the texts from her readers, while instead overexplaining general concepts that are well-known to an audience of Renaissance scholars. Nevertheless, even though the analysis is very referential and particularized through Fonte's and Marinella's works, the productive integration of these two authors, and the dialogue with the classical models seems to prove the scholar's initial hypothesis that women's epics are able to refashion the roles of female characters (warriors, lovers, and enchantresses in particular), suggesting the possibility that there is a difference between female and male writers in how they approach these characters and in the significance they give to those roles within the epic genre, as contribution to its wider use. More specifically, a larger discourse on ideal mercy versus historical violence appears in the pages of *Arms and the Woman*, which is substantiated by D'Alessandro Behr analysis. As a consequence, this study offers a solid argument for a re-evaluation of these women as writers of epic and their contribution to the genre, and splendidly contributes to the assessment of female authorship, readership, education, and interpretation of sources during a period when women were at a disadvantage in comparison to men. Together with Milligan's *Moral Combat* (recently published) this book launches a new season for Italian Gender and Renaissance Studies, with regard to women's representation of and through violence and war, a season firmly rooted in the previous

scholarship (e.g. Cox, Stoppino, Finucci, Ross), but one that contributes with both innovative thoughts and methodologies, and texts and figures that are still mostly understudied.

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