
Although only recently discovered, the Paduan writer Giulia Bigolina is speedily entering the Italian Renaissance canon. Her full-length prose romance, Urania (ca. 1552–54) lay unnoticed for 450 years in a Milanese library until it was first printed in 2002 and then reprinted in English translation in 2005. The neglect was undeserved; Bigolina is the only woman writer to have experimented with the form of the prose romance in the very years in which the genre, so to speak, was being invented as a combination of novellas, chivalric epics, pastorals, and somewhat philosophical discussions. No other example exists of a woman writer using the genre in Italy over the next two centuries. Urania, moreover, proves gold for researchers in two other ways: first, it contains a short treatise on the questioni d’amore, harking back to Giovanni Boccaccio’s Filocolo and forward to later female-friendly literature—Tullia d’Aragona’s Dialogues on the Infinity of Love of 1547 comes to mind. Second, it contains a section on the worth of women, the first intervention ever by a woman writer in Italian on the issue of women’s place in Renaissance society, preceding by almost fifty years the heftier work of Moderata Fonte’s The Worth of Women. Thus it is refreshing, let alone delightfully surprising, to see a full-length critical book on her work appear less than ten years after she was first introduced to the reading public. Christopher Nissen’s Kissing the Wild Woman firmly assesses Bigolina’s place within the larger output of sixteenth-century Italian prose and makes Bigolina “converse” with the main male writers of the canon, from Giovanni Boccaccio to Pietro Aretino.

The book is made up of six chapters plus a conclusion and an appendix. The first chapter, “The Reformation of the Prose Romance,” brings the reader up to date on Bigolina’s biography and output. It also introduces the two main arguments of the book: first, that Bigolina refuses the idea of the objectification of women abundantly present in the male visual and written narrative of the period; and second, that in outlining a deep contrast between a “wild woman” (“femmina salvatica”) and a more proper and less
sexualized female protagonist, Urania, Bigolina shows that women “must consistently dare to display a combination of courage and cleverness if they are to flourish and attain their desires” (222).

The first point is made in three consecutive chapters that I am going to treat together because they tend to repeat almost obsessively the same ideas: “Writing a Portrait,” “Ekphrasis and the Paragone,” and “The Sight of the Beautiful.” Nissen argues, quite rightly, that in her prose work, Bigolina rejects the worship of beautiful women as they appeared in the painting of her contemporary, Titian, and in the writings of, among others, Pietro Aretino. She does this by inventing a character, the Duchess, who is outwardly similar to the numberless beautiful women portrayed in literature, but who suffers greatly for it. In Urania, the striking Duchess is convinced by her court painter to use her beauty by way of a portrait in which she poses as Venus in order to make a prince fall in love with her. But the portrait does not move the prince to lust, as literature through the centuries has led us to expect, and she dies in pain, rejected. Nissen’s points of departure are two letters that Aretino wrote to Bigolina a few years before she presumably started her work on Urania. In one, he mentions the presence of Titian physically next to him. The letters are somewhat belittling and disparaging, and thus they become for Nissen good motivators for Bigolina’s later portrayal of a court painter in Urania as, in his words, “an unpleasing caricature of Titian.”

Nissen argues that the reason Bigolina rejected the visual objectification of women was ethical, thus implying that all male writers through the centuries knew that by being outwardly voyeuristic they were less moral. It is easy to find examples of corporal display in all medieval and Renaissance texts, given that such descriptions were ubiquitous in Petrarchan poetry and Neoplatonic thought. By privileging ethics, Nissen is condemned, however, to be repetitive and to belabor his point as he offers an endless list of male writers preferring sight to hearing as a mode of reception. It would have been more useful for him to have considered the work of women writers, since the issue in the end is one of gender, I believe, and not of morals. No woman writer or woman painter would choose to be present in visual or written narrative only as an object to be spectated and owned.
Nissen makes the same point finally at the end of his fourth chapter, when he briefly moves to Veronica Franco, a courtesan, who had everything to gain in displaying herself in two sonnets of her book, *Lettere familiari*, dedicated to King Henri III of Valois, but still found a way to escape the trap of objectification. Ironically, for a critical work that devotes so many pages to decry the displaying of naked women for the delight of male eyes, the book’s cover picture proposes just that: *Venus with a mirror* by Titian (c. 1555).

Chapter 5, “Kissing the Wild Woman,” is a stimulating exploration of the two sides of womanhood: the wild one, with its connotation of madness, explicit sexual behavior, and irrationality, and the more proper one that women writers emphasized: non-judgmental, poised, and generous. The book ends with an appendix that reproduces Bigolina’s will of 1563, which the author includes because, he asserts, it is the only writing we have in Bigolina’s hand. Actually, it is not, since there is also a tax return of 1561 that she wrote “di mia mano”—“in my own hand”—as well as a letter in a manuscript at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Nissen also contends that the will offers a “grandiose vision of [Bigolina] herself” since it was written, for example, in two inks as if to demonstrate that she had plenty of property to will or had the right to change her mind as to whom should inherit it. As dozen of contemporary wills in Venice’s Archivio di Stato and elsewhere testify, changing inks was hardly unusual in the period, given that the writing of complete wills was frequently done at different times. Since, however, it has not been published earlier, Bigolina’s disposition of property is indeed of historical interest because it shows that women in the Venetian territory had power in distributing their estate.

More than once in the book, Nissen states that “Christine de Pizan had considerable influence on Bigolina,” a claim for which he unfortunately gives no background or possible source. Given that not one but three works by Christine are cited here (*La cité des dames, Autres Ballades*, and *Epitre Othea*), if it were true, this link would change the way we look at Italian Cinquecento women writers’ output. As far as I know, however, there was regrettably no translation of Christine’s work into Italian in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and her name is not mentioned by any author.
of the period. Apart from these issues, *Kissing the Wild Woman* is well researched and deserves to be read in Renaissance classes to show the richness and range of an extraordinary woman writer.

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In his latest monograph, which garnered an honorable mention from the 2012 Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Publication Award for a Manuscript in Italian Literary Studies from the Modern Language Association, Konrad Eisenbichler amply displays his uncommon abilities as a persistent archival researcher, astute reader of poetry, and gifted scholar of early modernity in Italy. He concentrates on what he calls “a sudden, unprecedented, and regrettably short springtime of women poets in Siena” (15), “from about 1538 to 1560” (2), variously known at the time and since then largely forgotten.

The brief “Introduction” frames the specific political and cultural circumstances in which these women poets lived and operated; it also refers to the most recent contributions to the field (Virginia Cox, *Women’s Writing in Italy, 1400–1650* [2008]; Diana Robin, *Publishing Women: Salons, the Presses, and the Counter-Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Italy* [2007]) to signal continuities and differences in the cases explored in the book. Lastly, it offers an overview of the book’s goals: to reconstruct the lives and cultural engagements of several women poets in Siena, to set the historical record straight, to offer their poetry to Italian- and English-speaking readers, and to explore the reasons behind such a unique flourishing of texts.

Chapter one, “At Petrarch’s Tomb,” presents a series of sonnets penned by Sienese women in response to Alessandro Piccolomini’s poem, “Giunto Alessandro a la famosa Tomba,” written in the summer of 1540 after his pilgrimage to Petrarch’s tomb in Arquà, not far from Padua, where he was a university student. Eisenbichler first expounds the connections