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Marilyn Migiel. Veronica Franco in Dialogue

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Marilyn Migiel. *Veronica Franco in Dialogue*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022. Pp. 200. ISBN 9781487542580.

Marylin Migiel's analysis of the first fourteen (of twenty-five) poems in Veronica Franco's *Terze rime* (1575) is a much-welcomed breath of fresh air in the field of gender studies. Too often, Renaissance women's writings are evaluated based on how well they can be used to compile personal narratives independently from, and despite, men, as well as to champion women's political, social, and cultural aspirations. Franco's poetry and familiar letters have been insistently subjected to such evaluations at the expense of the poet's own complex persona, as Migiel laments. Without doubting the strong character of a woman who, as a courtesan, embraced her sexuality as much as her intellectual talents and moral principles, Migiel revives the elements of Franco's multifaceted personality (e.g., her insecurities, concerns, and ambivalences) that are also present in her writings.

The poems selected by Migiel correspond to the exchanges between Franco and an unknown male interlocutor to whom poems 1, 4, 6, 7, 9, and 14 are attributed. Migiel, who believes that these poems were in fact penned by more than one male writer, highlights the importance of contextualizing Veronica's self-image as poet, lover, and sex worker against the dynamics she establishes with the man asking her to love him.

Chapter 1 identifies the recurring strategy that Franco applies to tackle her lover's aggression. Whether articulated as threats or concealed by love declarations (poem 1), the act of re-establishing control over the woman appears to be the male author's goal since the onset of this battle of the sexes. Contrary to the common view of Franco's response (poem 2) as exclusively a proud self-affirmation of agency and personal worth, Migiel ascertains Franco's desire and availability to find a common ground between her aspirations (beyond sexual expertise) and those of the man pleading for female submission to his love and passion.

The interpretations of poems 3 and 4 in chapter 2 follow the pattern of critically expanding on previous scholarship. They focus on sections of each text that have been routinely set aside to prioritize those in support of an unwavering self-depiction of Franco, particularly against the backdrop of the traditional role of "beloved" assigned to women in poetry. The scholar concurs that in poem 3, Franco is not a silenced love object who is acted upon; rather, she voices her suffering over the physical separation from her lover that she herself has caused. However, Migiel questions such steadfast and heroic identity. She recuperates the fragmentation of

the poet's self in the two narrating voices of poem 3 and the ambiguity around the object of her longing, the male lover versus Venice. More importantly, she detects self-empowerment from Veronica in this fracture as well as a desire for a female community of support while enduring separation from her lover.

As chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate, Migiel throughout her analysis magisterially recreates the additional dialogue that Franco establishes in her collection—the one with her literary sources from the Italian and Latin traditions. Franco confidently manipulates the Petrarchan and Ovidian lyrical discourses to communicate her composite identity as poet, woman, and courtesan. As the analysis of poem 5 documents, such identity includes the will for the challenging conversion to embrace reason as guide in love, distancing the senses. Getting to know the virtuous and supportive unnamed author of poem 6 has put such a shift into motion. In the helpful conclusion of chapter 3, Migiel retraces the steps through which Veronica has so far affirmed herself within the ongoing dialogue with the varied male personalities, who resolutely attempt to redirect the attention of the pined-over courtesan onto themselves.

The exchanges chronicled in poems 7–12 and analyzed in chapters 4–6 offer instances of Franco's autonomy through her refusal of adulation (poem 11) as well as criticism of her apparent cruelty, to which the male author resorts in poems 7 and 9. Migiel convincingly observes how the Venetian *cortegiana onesta*'s strategies implemented to deal with these interlocutors share a common denominator: in granting herself the last word in the diatribe, she shifts the focus from the personal, around which the male pleading revolves, to pondering more generally the diverse approaches to, and consequences of, unrequited love (especially in poem 8).

The final interaction between Franco (poem 13) and a lover (poem 14) shows her adopting aggression as a tool to counterattack male defamation and expectations, unlike in the first exchange of *Terze rime.* There, as Migiel reminds the reader, coming full circle in her sophisticated analysis, the courtesan promoted mutuality and reciprocity between herself and the unknown author to the point that she declared herself open to loving him, provided he met set conditions. Now her belligerency takes front stage. However, unlike previous readings of these poems, in particular those of Sara Maria Adler (1988) and Margaret F. Rosenthal (1992), Migiel once again questions the one-sided victorious self-portrait that Franco supposedly intended to communicate. She credits the contenders with a composite approach to the battle fought on the bed and on the page that ultimately brings them to a stalemate due to their mutual attacking and conceding.

Marylin Migiel's readdressing of the dialogical poems in *Terze rime* is exemplary of the respect and the voice primary texts should be granted. Instead of engaging with them to affirm pre-conceived political and theoretical notions, the Cornell University scholar dissects the poems, concentrating on each level of significance (grammatical, metrical, and rhetorical), and correlates them to poetic traditions. This endeavour is consistently conducted with clarity so that the reader never feels at a loss, despite the depth of the meticulous analyses, nor does it unilaterally promote the image of Veronica Franco as a feminist icon. By highlighting those ambivalences and contradictions that may be uncomfortable, yet are nonetheless extant in the poems, Migiel tells a less straightforward story about Veronica—indeed, one that allows the complexity of "I" to manifest itself.

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