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Quaintance, Courtney. Textual Masculinity and the Exchange of Women in Renaissance Venice

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Quaintance, Courtney.***Textual Masculinity and the Exchange of Women in Renaissance Venice.***

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. Pp. ix, 259. ISBN 978-1-4426-4913-2 (hardcover) CDN\$70.

During his visit to Venice in the first decade of the seventeenth century, English traveller Thomas Coryat famously remarked both on the number of Venetian prostitutes (rumoured to be twenty thousand) and on their alleged licentiousness. Perhaps unconsciously, Coryat echoed Giordano Bruno's 1582 comedy *Il candelaio* which contained an ironic interpretation of Venice's famous myth of liberty: "because of the magnanimity and the liberality of the illustrious Republic, whores are exempt from every hardship [...]" (12) Venice's legendary libertinism is well known to Renaissance scholars, yet these audiences and others will embrace Courtney Quaintance's ingenious reconsideration of the prostitute as a literary cipher for pornography in *Textual Masculinity and the Exchange of Women in Renaissance Venice*.

Quaintance recreates in detail the literary circle or informal academy of Venetian patrician Domenico Venier, which included his brother Lorenzo (until his death), his nephew Maffio, other Venetian elites such as Benedetto Corner, and notable outsiders, including Girolamo Parabosco and Pietro Aretino. Quaintance shows that Venier's group coalesced in the years before formal academies existed, and probably drew inspiration from the *Compagnia della Calza*, male youth clubs of the fifteenth century that provided entertainments at Venetian social events and civic rituals. The notion of brotherhood may have been particularly pervasive both in the *Calze* and in Venier's group because of Venice's political identity: a republic that by its very nature excluded women. They formed what the author calls "a literary fraternity [...] relationships between men that were constituted through literary and social gatherings, companionship and conversation, and especially, the practice of exchanging texts about women" (27).

In addition to performing masculinity through their civic engagement, dress, and comportment, Venier and his cohort did so by possessing, controlling, exchanging, and sharing women—in their lyrics if not in real life. In print, they maintained their respectability and demonstrated their erudition, elaborating on the themes of love and female beauty manifested in Petrarch's sonnets. However in the relative privacy of their (mostly) unpublished manuscripts,

Venier's group followed Aretino's lead, and that of Lorenzo Venier, crafting exchanges about women and sexuality, many featuring prostitutes and violent attacks upon them. Quaintance thinks and writes lucidly about these often difficult texts, demonstrating their multiple functions. Male interlocutors restored order by literarily disciplining unruly female sexuality symbolized by the prostitute, while creating between themselves bonds of sociability and literary masculinity, a trope perhaps especially important for Domenico Venier, whose illness often rendered him physically weak and confined to bed.

The multivalence of the female character for the group is best seen in its poems concerning Elena Artusi, whose name recalled to them both the beauty and danger of her namesake, Helen of Troy, and by association the two poles of the literary female: angel and whore. The group's employ of Venetian dialect became their "secret code" and, like their continued use of the privacy afforded by the manuscript tradition, dialect provided some discretion when the group's most elite members chose to embrace salacious topics, such as the exchange between Venier and Corner in which the poets share Artusi as a lover, lament the control she has over them, and experiment with the boundaries of their own friendship. As Quaintance concludes, for the poets "the real fun [...] is in the telling of tales. The smuttier the better, since such racy material creates a sense of figurative intimacy between the teller and the confidante" (114).

Given the strong and complex bonds of male sociability (and concomitant misogyny) the question Quaintance poses in her last chapter makes perfect sense: is there any space for female writers in Venice, and in particular in the Venier circle? The author makes a compelling case that rather than reading Venetian poets as "male" and "female" writers, we will better comprehend the dynamic of authors and characters by reading the works of Gaspara Stampa and Veronica Franco "alongside and against their male counterparts"—a juxtaposition that "brings into sharp relief the sexual politics of literary exchange" (135). Both women managed to penetrate this male world by understanding and manipulating its strategies for their own purposes. Like other female writers, Stampa faced accusations of both wonton sexuality and plagiarism; like its male interlocutors, Stampa seeks out the literary legitimacy of the Venier salon through verse to restore her reputation. Likewise, Franco employed the tactics of "literary organizer," retaining discretion in naming her patrons and editing a volume (the only one of its kind edited by a female in this period) commemorating the death of a Brescian war hero, which included nine of her sonnets

interspersed with works identified with Venier and his circle. Particularly significant for Franco is the frank sexuality of her *terze rime*, which, as Quaintance shows, is also a rhetorical strategy: when her lover Marco Venier (a distant relation to the scion of the Venier circle) demands sexual gratification, Franco demands that “he satisfy her first by writing poetry on her terms” (165). Savvy comprehension of the literary waters gained Stampa legitimacy and allowed Franco to turn the tables of poetic power.

Quaintance’s *Textual Masculinity* elegantly weaves together social class and language, and cultures of manuscript exchange and print, academies and libertinism, in the late Venetian Renaissance. Several times the author connects both Venier’s circle and its themes to contemporary Italian visual culture: surely artistic examples (beyond the Tintoretto depiction of Susanna which graces the dust jacket) would have done much to enrich this jewel of a work, and to make a case for the rich intertextuality of word and image in sixteenth-century treatments of female beauty and sexuality.

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Rubright, Marjorie.

Doppelgänger Dilemmas: Anglo-Dutch Relations in Early Modern English Literature and Culture.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. Pp. 342. ISBN 978-0-8122-4623-0 (hardcover) US\$69.95.

It should be noted from the outset that while the title indicates a study of “literature and culture,” the predominant objects of study in the book are performance and printmaking. I note this to forestall any misunderstandings for readers who view “literature” and “culture” to mean different things than are dealt with in this book. If *Doppelgänger Dilemmas* does not appear, in a formal sense, as comprehensive as advertised, it is in a real sense a very important work once viewed within an adjusted frame. At its core, the book is a study of performances, playbooks, and other types of books in which black letter type and roman type are used to negotiate English and Dutch as separate but familiar languages, accents, and identities. Playbooks add an extra dimension