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Migiel, Marilyn. Veronica Franco in Dialogue

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Migiel, Marilyn.

Veronica Franco in Dialogue.

Toronto Italian Studies. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022. Pp. xi, 186. ISBN 978-1-4875-4258-0 (hardcover) \$65.

This volume is an insightful and succinct example of the best type of literary reading: philologically astute, historically informed, properly contextualized, critically informed, and unafraid to advance distinctive, well-grounded evaluations of the poems under analysis. In several instances, Marilyn Migiel offers us a veritable master class on the depth and intricacies of early modern poetry.

Let me start from the volume title: “in dialogue” circumscribes and defines the poems that Migiel studies, specifically “the first fourteen poems (out of twenty-five) in *Terze rime* (*Poems in Terza Rima*), which was published under [Veronica Franco’s] name in 1575. These poems feature her back-and-forth exchange with an unknown male author, to whom poems 1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, and 14 are ascribed” (4). The collection’s structure requires an in-depth examination of both poems in each pair—in dialogue, to be sure. Migiel brings to this task her encyclopedic knowledge of Italian poetic forms utilized before and during Franco’s lifetime as well as classical antecedents; inevitably, this dialogue involves authors, topoi, and technical elements that go well beyond late-sixteenth-century Venice. Another facet of this dialogic exploration concerns much more recent texts, both scholarly and not: around the turn of the 1990s, articles, monographs, poetry translations, and even a Hollywood movie were devoted to Franco. Presented as a feminist *avant la lettre*, as a sex worker who defended herself and her profession, Franco was construed as a standard bearer of a specific ideology, to the point that “[t]o put [her] victory into question has become tantamount to putting the feminist project into question” (6). Importantly, Migiel makes the point that texts must “express not only those views that we want to privilege in a particular moment but also the views that they, in their historical moment, chose to express” (9). This monograph, then, is in dialogue with our own positions and positionality, and in creative tension with our blind spots.

Migiel excels at close readings of poetic passages; some instances are exemplary. Taking the dialogic nature of the poem pairs seriously, she devotes the same attention to the male-written poem as to Franco’s corresponding one.

In chapter 5, “Seductive Insinuation and Obliquely Frank Refusal: *Terze rime* 9 and 10” (100–18), Migiel uncovers echoes from Petrarch and from Boccaccio’s *Corbaccio* in the male-penned poem, allowing her to conclude that “[t]he male poet of *Terze rime* 9 [...] remains exclusively focused on securing Veronica Franco’s gaze. Nowhere in his poem does he refer to her speech, and nowhere in his poem does he speak about her virtue” (109). By so doing, Migiel offers a fuller context in which to analyze Franco’s own poems.

Close attention to metrical matters underscores simultaneous, at time ambiguous, meanings emerging from Franco’s and her male interlocutors’ poems. This is nowhere clearer than in chapter 7, “Attacks and Concessions under Erasure: *Terze rime* 13 and 14” (140–61). Poem 13 has been deemed crucial to understanding Franco’s persona and, as Migiel reminds us (141n2), is frequently anthologized; as she cogently explains, “the poem offers a surface message about Franco’s triumph over a man in battle and in bed. But if we look closer at the poem’s rhetorical texturing and its intertextual recall, we will see that in this verbal duel there is at some level an awareness that, for a woman, to threaten hostility in writing is an imperfect strategy and can backfire” (141). Migiel devotes almost two pages to her analysis of the second tercet (lines 4–6), underscoring verbal ambiguities, punctuation modifications, and resulting metrical changes (depending on where accents fall, line 4 could be a hendecasyllable *a maiore* or *a minore*) (142–43). No final reading is offered here; both are possible, coexisting and not mutually exclusive.

Throughout the volume Migiel devotes close attention to texts, including to existing translations of Franco’s and other authors’ works. Examples abound: I will only mention the definition of “mostrare” from the *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana* (113n3) and the complex unravelling of the syntax in Migiel’s analysis of Franco’s *terza rima* 10 (115). Poetry, she reminds us, defies hurried reading, insisting on what we might call “slow reading.”

Migiel’s closing phrase deserves to be reiterated here: we must “remain faithful to nuance and complexity” when “we are confronted with the dialectic of victimization and the rally from victimization” that marks Franco’s poetry (170). I would expand her assessment to reading texts, especially those that reach us from the past and from other cultures. “Nuance” and “complexity” make texts and human experiences worth exploring; we have to resist the urge to “read into” them what we want to find out. Migiel’s monograph in this sense is necessary, in fact, indispensable to our teaching and to our research, at a time

when non-human “intelligence” seems poised to take over an ever-growing array of human activities.

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