

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Milligan, Gerry. Moral Combat: Women, Gender, and War in Italian Renaissance Literature

Frank Lacopo

Volume 41, numéro 3, été 2018

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1085716ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i3.31632>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Lacopo, F. (2018). Compte rendu de [Milligan, Gerry. Moral Combat: Women, Gender, and War in Italian Renaissance Literature]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 41(3), 252-255.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v41i3.31632>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2018

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

McDermott's tropology from Robertson's allegorical decryption (completely convincingly, in my view). *Tropologies* is perhaps overly cautious in other ways as well, notably in its two chapters on early modern tropological practice. The claim that tropological interpretation informs the production of literature in an early modern, Protestant context is compelling, and one for which groundwork has been laid (notably in Brian Cummings's *Literary Culture of the Reformation*). It would thus be helpful for the last two chapters to expand their analytical scope beyond a selection of texts that consists primarily of fourteenth-century writing that was revised and edited in the sixteenth century. These minor criticisms, however, do not detract from the extremely significant contributions that *Tropologies* makes to the fields of medieval and early modern literary scholarship. Its reading of *Piers Plowman* as itself a kind of tropological intervention into medieval ethical discourse is extremely valuable and complements recent work on the poem by scholars such as David Aers and Kate Crassons. McDermott's model of the relationship between literature and ethics also offers an elegant rejoinder to early modernists, who often read ethical concerns in medieval writing as evidence of proto-humanist interpretive inclinations. Medieval literary culture possessed rich intellectual resources of its own that were brought to bear on ethical questions, and medieval interpretive and creative practices indeed proved so vital that, as this book demonstrates, they continued to exert important influence well into the post-Reformation era.

DAN BREEN

Ithaca College

Milligan, Gerry.

Moral Combat: Women, Gender, and War in Italian Renaissance Literature.

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018. Pp. xi, 332 + 3 ill. ISBN 978-1-4875-0314-7 (hardcover) \$75.

This monograph examines Renaissance literary discourses surrounding gender's relationship to military activity. Representations of women who acted in military roles are not new to Renaissance studies, and as Gerry Milligan notes, the work of Frédérique Verrier stands out as especially significant. Nevertheless, this monograph proves productive in its attention to how

representations of women related to broad commentaries on both sexes. Milligan's overall achievement is his demonstration that strong female warriors and military commanders in Renaissance literature were inextricably wrapped in criticism of ineffective male figures.

This book is divided into six chapters, which fall into two broad categories. The first three chapters examine the production and development of discourses surrounding women and war up to the Cinquecento, while the second three focus on ways in which biographical narratives of warring women fit into and challenged those discourses. In chapter 1, "The Philosophical History of the Armed Woman," Milligan shows that the motif of strong female characters in military roles came into the Renaissance through philosophical conversations dating to Plato's *Republic*. Plato saw women as potentially useful militants, while Aristotle held in his *History of Animals* that women are physically inferior to men, less prone to violence, and thus undesirable as military actors. As a result, medieval and Renaissance readers encountered ancient contradiction, not consensus, on the intersection between gender and war. Renaissance authors worked within this ancient inheritance diversely and often made the question of women's socioeconomic class a central factor. Christine de Pisan and Torquato Tasso, for example, conceded that noble women could act violently according to their knightly class. On a related note, writers including Lucrezia Martinella cited the example of the Sabine women in their claim that similar non-noble female groups could act as collective military assets in the Renaissance present.

Chapter 2, "The Poetic and the Real: The Chivalric-Epic Commentary on the Armed Woman," examines the subject of militant women in Renaissance epic and romantic literature. Milligan finds that, starting with the *Iliad*, Western epic treats war and masculinity as "bound together in a semantic knot" (45). Homer ties femininity to domestic matters but also frames the Amazons as formidable opponents to male warriors. More importantly, Virgil described the warrior woman Camilla as an orphan who was suckled by a mare. Taking cues from ancient literary themes, male Renaissance authors including Tasso and Ludovico Ariosto wrote of women warriors as powerful but exotic, exceptional, and to an extent wild and deviant. Female authors such as Moderata Fonte responded to female warrior exoticism with the retort that cultural, not natural, forces stemming from male writers produced female warriors' purported deviance, effectively breaching the patriarchal narrative.

The next chapter, “Women Writers Demanding Warrior Masculinity: Catherine of Siena, Laura Terracina, Chiara Matraini, and Isabella Cervoni,” continues the conversation on female Renaissance authors’ depictions of gender normalcy and deviance. While men imagined exceptional viragos, female Renaissance writers including Catherine of Siena and Terracina generally framed unexceptional, standard masculinity as valorous and protective of female victims of violence. In all, fighting females and cowardly men were equally possible, yet deviant, as epic and romantic characters. Within this gendered discourse, female agency could perpetuate violence even if women did not view themselves as battlefield characters.

Chapter 4, “Classical and Christian Models of Warring Women: From Plutarch to Boccaccio,” inaugurates a shift in Milligan’s focus from generalized discourses to specific biographical narratives. Biographies of “illustrious women” became a sub-genre during the Renaissance and took its inspiration from Plutarch’s *The Virtues of Women*. Petrarch and Boccaccio brought Plutarch’s template into the Renaissance. The former expressed remorse at female warriors’ strength—especially when they bested male opponents—while the latter frequently bemoaned viragos for their gender transgression. However, Boccaccio praised warrior women when they exhibited chastity and humility.

The fifth chapter, “The Noble Warrior Women (1440–1550),” in some ways acts as an elaboration upon and conclusion to the previous one. While women who wielded actual weapons and drew blood on the battlefield were commonly seen as repulsive (and were typically members of lower social classes), noblewomen who held power to rule male soldiers proved more acceptable to biographers. Noblewomen such as Caterina Sforza could be depicted as simultaneously vulnerable and, since their very vulnerability could inspire male action, militarily effectual. By the mid-sixteenth century, biographers could depict contemporary noblewomen like Maria of Hungary as present on the battlefield while performing their functions through speech and gesture, though not as engaged in actual combat.

Chapter 6, “The Fame of Women and the Infamy of Men in the Age of Warring Queens (1550–1600),” provides a strong conclusion. Italian literature influenced ways in which some of the most powerful women of the sixteenth century—including Catherine de’ Medici and Elizabeth I of England—were presented by biographers, and how queens presented themselves. Effectively,

Catherine, Elizabeth, and other powerful female leaders “served as the backdrop of the illustrious woman genre that flourished in a time when great women were leading by example” (198). Biographies of powerful sixteenth-century women had the dual effect of empowering women and drawing attention to men who did not wield power on behalf of those women. Given repeated military disappointments in ongoing wars, Italian authors’ anxieties over masculinity are comprehensible.

This final chapter drives home an overall positive appraisal. For its simultaneous focus on the literary discourses and its awareness of the broader history and historiography surrounding its texts, Milligan’s monograph will prove enlightening to scholars of literature and history alike.

FRANK LACOPO

Pennsylvania State University

Montfort, Marie-Laure.

Janus Cornarius et la redécouverte d’Hippocrate à la Renaissance. Textes de Janus Cornarius édités et traduits. Bibliographie des éditions Cornariennes. Turnhout : Brepols, 2017. 513 p. + 6 ill. ISBN 978-2-503-53803-7 (relié) 85 €.

C’est un très bel et vivifiant ouvrage qu’offre Marie-Laure Montfort avec cette publication sur Johann Haynpol de Zwickau, dit Janus Cornarius (ca. 1500–1558), et la redécouverte d’Hippocrate à la Renaissance. Ce livre prolonge sa thèse en littérature et civilisation grecques déjà consacrée à « l’apport de Cornarius à l’édition et à la traduction de la Collection hippocratique » et soutenue en 1998. Si c’est la qualité de la traduction latine cornarienne d’Hippocrate publiée en 1546, couplée à la méconnaissance quasi complète des circonstances de sa publication, qui expliquait cette recherche de doctorat, la découverte d’autres textes méconnus du médecin de Zwickau a entraîné Marie-Laure Montfort vers la présente étude. En ces textes inédits, Janus Cornarius apparaît comme un médecin de premier plan en son temps qui, en faisant d’Hippocrate l’autorité principale de sa théorie des souffles, constitue une étape importante de la rénovation médicale et de la compréhension des maladies infectieuses (appelées alors les fièvres). Auteur de la traduction néo-latine