

Laura Giannetti. *Lelia's Kiss: Imagining Gender, Sex, and Marriage in Italian Renaissance Comedy*.

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Laura Giannetti's *Lelia's Kiss* is a welcome and valuable contribution to the study of Renaissance comedy. At the crux of Giannetti's investigation are issues of sex, gender, marriage, and how these "fit imaginatively with deeper concerns about

social order, hierarchy and values” (13). A historicist approach together with new historicist, new social–cultural historicist, and close readings inform the author’s methodology.

Chapter 1 studies the theatergram of the young maiden cross-dressed as a male as it looks at some of the most popular comedies of the period alongside less well-known texts. For instance, Cornelio Lanci’s *Pimpinella* (1588), Girolamo Parabosco’s *Il marinaio* (1549), Niccolò Secchi’s *Gl’inganni* (1560), and Giambattista Della Porta’s *Cintia* (1601) are set side by side with Bernardo Dovizi da Bibbiena’s *Calandra* (1521), Angelo Beolco’s *Anconitana* (1534?), and the anonymous *Gl’ingannati* (1537). The last, written collectively by the Accademia degli Intronati of Siena, was perhaps the most successful comedy of the century. Cross-dressing by young female protagonists, as shown, most notably by Lelia in *Gl’ingannati* (the play that would constitute a model for future playwrights), offered a reversal of fortune for women who would otherwise lack the freedom to move about unharmed, escape economic liabilities, and negotiate their own choices, most importantly, in marriage. As Giannetti points out, in most Italian cities women — by virtue of their sex — were excluded from family inheritances. By taking Parabosco’s *La fantesca* (1556), Curtio Gonzaga’s *Gli inganni* (1592) and the Sienese comedy *Ortensio* (1574) as cases in point, the author shows the overlap between dramatic scripts and Renaissance social ideals, economic realities, and cultural paradigms. As such, cross-dressing “scripted . . . gender inequality on stage, underlining that such economic strategies were social in origin and not inherent in the binary division of sexes” (69). Thus, Giannetti highlights the “potential” (70) for influence between the genre itself and everyday issues and concerns of the Renaissance world. A good portion of this chapter is devoted to analyses of *Gl’ingannati* and, more broadly, to the profeminist stance of the Sienese academy that wrote and performed the play. It is surprising to note that other recent scholarship on this topic, such as my article “The Sienese Accademia degli Intronati and its Female Interlocutors” (*Italianist* 26 [2006]) or my “*Bella creanza and female destrezza: Women in Italian Renaissance Comedy*” (PhD diss., New York University, 2005) goes unmentioned. A number of the less well-known comedies Giannetti studies are in fact analyzed in my 2005 doctoral dissertation.

Throughout, the inclusion of the original text alongside Giannetti’s translations would have enhanced our appreciation of the evidence brought forth. This is important, in my view, given that so much crucial evidence comes from Giannetti’s close readings and given that many of the texts studied do not have modern editions. I note, for instance, a difference in translation referring to the same important passage (cited in both chapters 2 and 3), from Alessandro Piccolomini’s *Alessandro* (1544), used to validate Giannetti’s argument in chapter 3 — a passage that, I suggest, is the book’s most captivating moment. Using historian of medicine Gianna Pomata’s findings as the basis for her argument, in this chapter Giannetti convincingly shows us how the sexual ambiguity of the cross-dressed male youth played a normal part of the maturing male’s rite of passage into manhood on as well as off the Renaissance stage. In contrast to the English stage,

then, the “feminine apprenticeship” (118) of the young male character did not pose a threat but was, rather, enjoyed humorously by Italian audiences.

Virtually every comedy studied in the first chapter — though especially the “canonical” *Calandra*, *Mandragola*, *Gl'ingannati* — is revisited from a slightly different angle in subsequent chapters. As such, chapter 4 repeats and expands on the earlier discussion of sodomy to show the prevailing trend of homoerotic practices in Renaissance daily life and engage with a humanist “fascination” (160) on the subject. Machiavelli’s *Mandragola* and *Clizia* are taken as cases in point, as well as Lodovico Ariosto’s *I suppositi* alongside Pietro Aretino’s *Il marescalco* and, of course, Giordano Bruno’s *Il candelajo*, that most intricate and unperformable comedy of the century. Drawing on the scholarship of historian Guido Ruggiero, Giannetti concludes that the comic genre’s (positive) depiction of sodomy and homoerotic play was based, in fact, on a “consensus reality” (Ruggiero, *Machiavelli in Love* [2007]) or societal perceptions of the period. Interestingly, then, the comic genre did not view the practice of sodomy as deviant or queer but, rather, scripted it from a positive and humorous perspective which the audience most certainly enjoyed.

The book’s last chapter relies heavily on the previous scholarship of Michael Roche, Guido Ruggiero, and Joanne Ferraro and is, for this reason, less innovative than one might expect in its investigation of the comic genre’s scripting of (clandestine) marriage and the *malmaritata*. The discussion returns to Bibbiena’s *Calandra*, the anonymous *Veniexiana* and Machiavelli’s *Mandragola* and *Clizia*.

Giannetti must be given credit for her efforts to dispel both reductionist and dismissive views of this very rich and rewarding genre. Looking forward, what would be useful would be an even more sustained study of less well-known comic texts as well as the inclusion of other dramatic forms — such as pastoral and tragedy — alongside comedy with some of the same noteworthy questions Giannetti poses here. More precisely, how did these genres engage with, contradict, and sometimes revise standard practices discursively and in the everyday life of the Renaissance? Giannetti’s book certainly provides some of the groundwork for future scholarship.

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