

Textual Masculinity and the Exchange of Women in Renaissance Venice.

Courtney Quaintance.

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Perhaps reflecting human ontology as well as biology, love and sex are among the most common themes of art — maybe the only themes, as Ovid noted. Poets since Ovid have addressed love and sex, with varying degrees of reverence. A poet is, however, first an

artist, and much of what he or she writes is a meditation on language and creativity. Ovid claimed that his seductive elegies about Corinna made her alluring, as men rushed to look her over (in print) and devour her charms. Ovid was bragging about how his highly crafted works could conjure desire in the reader and compete with ancient poets. Other artists took up the challenge, creating a tradition of literary eroticism. In *Textual Masculinity*, Courtney Quaintance translates and analyzes sixteenth-century Venetian amorous poetic texts. Quaintance's translations are lively and effective. Her analysis focuses on a semiformal academy involving members of the Venier family. These men alternate between the public personas of aristocratic poets — courtly and Petrarchan — and the private posture of raunchy dialect authors. Quaintance's study of this group's manuscript writings is detailed and enriched by archival finds.

According to Quaintance, the literary culture of homosocial solidarity, the “fraternity of discourse,” is a “network that was supported by the trafficking of the fictional female body” (135). Women are, in the poetic texts, confined to the restrictive roles of idealized, remote love object or unruly, debased whore. Quaintance's final chapter, focusing on Gaspara Stampa and Veronica Franco, explores how women poets “negotiated” the terrain of male discourse, creating disruptions in the literary conventions. Quaintance shows that this poetic world is dangerous for women. Domenico Venier and Benetto Corner, for example, wrote poetry about Elena Artusi: in print, she is “*donna angelicata*,” while, in dialect, she is “*puttana di natura*” (“whore by nature”). Quaintance observes that, even though “direct evidence that Elena Artusi was a prostitute by trade has not surfaced, [there are] . . . many allusions to the contrary in the dialect poems” (103). Here Quaintance blurs the distinction between literary and historical realms; rather than question the sexual morality of Artusi, we should examine the social context of literary veneration and denigration.

Our understanding of the poetry is deepened by grasping the context in which male poets malign women as promiscuous or gloat about rape. Ovid wrote a poem about hitting his mistress — but the elegy highlights the boorish cruelty of such male behavior. This is not the case with the works Quaintance discusses in her chapter “Gang Rape and Literary Fame,” featuring two poems by Lorenzo Venier, a wealthy playboy and confederate of the notorious Pietro Aretino. Discussing *La Zaffetta*, about the gang rape (the “*trentuno*”) of Angela del Moro, Quaintance theorizes that, like the *charivari* and *mattinata* traditions, “the *trentuno*, whether literary or historical, was an instrument of social discipline and community judgment” (42). Linking rape to shaming rituals is problematic and deserves more explanation. Could any offense justify the extreme brutality Angela suffers?

Quaintance describes *La Zaffetta* as “unsettling for modern readers, in part because its graphic sexual violence is imbedded in a comic frame” (43). One has to interrogate here what is comic about rape. Quaintance details how the eighty men shout abuse and commands to Angela while beating and brutalizing her. Quaintance suggests that the laughter creates homosocial bonding, although she presents no evidence to show that all men, even at the time, would have laughed. Many Christians bonded over the abuse of

Jews (see Aretino, *La Cortigiana* and *Il Marescalco*), and people today unite over violent racist jokes. Quaintance too readily accepts the form of the joke, ignoring the importance of content, the political and moral impulse behind the comic frame.

Invoking a Freudian perspective, Quaintance asks, “What is so funny about rape?” (45). However, a smutty joke, one type of humor Freud analyzes (*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* [1960]), is different from an account of a violent gang rape. Freud was concerned about how humor gives vent to repressed thoughts, but he acknowledged it could be derisive and dehumanizing; he witnessed its use against Jews. Freud distinguished between ethnic jokes that poke fun at mildly stereotypical traits and those that allowed the powerful and hateful to dehumanize others. This theory is broadened by Michael Billig, who notes that “the bigot derives pleasure from being outrageous, enjoying . . . freedom from the constraints of liberal rationality and truth” (“Violent Racist Jokes: An Analysis of Extreme Racist Humor,” in *Beyond a Joke* [2005]).

Quaintance casts the *trentuno* as “a site of homosocial bonding . . . an exposé that reveals the truth — the beastly and violent natures of the courtiers Aretino targets” (44). This is belied by Aretino’s opportunism but consistent with his demeaning portrayals of women. Despite the revolutionary significance attributed to Aretino’s whores, little is liberating for men or women, unless raping is liberatory and snatching desperately at material comfort is freedom. Aretino’s works, like Veniers’s, deserve to be studied historically. There is nothing inherently revolutionary (or reactionary) about explicit sexuality; there is nothing positive or humorous about rape. Adducing a Freudian perspective for studying violent humor is a promising start; Freud’s examples may be dated, but his fundamental insights are more relevant than ever.

We have much to learn from the material Quaintance analyzes, and I would not advocate the censorship of violent or bigoted writers and artists. Indeed, we need more studies of these works, about the people who supported and questioned them, as well as about the most effective ways to understand and teach them.

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