

BOOK REVIEW

Arms and the Woman: Classical Tradition and Women Writers in the Venetian Renaissance. By FRANCESCA D'ALESSANDRO BEHR. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2018. Pp. x + 292. Hardback, \$89.95. ISBN: 978-0-8142-1371-1.

Francesca D'Alessandro Behr argues compellingly that greater attention to the reception of the *Aeneid* and other classical texts should inform interpretation of two Italian language poetic compositions: Moderata Fonte's *Floridoro* (1581), a chivalric romance set in the generation after the Trojan War, and Lucrezia Marinella's *L'Enrico, overo Bisantio acquistato* (*Enrico, or Byzantium Conquered*, 1635), a romance-epic celebrating Enrico Dandolo and the Venetian part in the Fourth Crusade's conquest of Byzantium in 1204. In preparation for later close readings and larger arguments, the introduction presents humanism's role qua classical education in 17th-century Venice in stimulating thought about alternatives to the social order and the contingent nature of gender roles.

(Chapter 1) *Floridoro*, like the *Aeneid* and *Orlando Furioso*, ends immediately after a duel. Unlike them, the victor, Risamante, is a woman who spares her fallen foe. One influential reading identifies this as a refusal of closure designed to preserve the author's freedom from masculinist norms requiring that the hero kill their adversary. *Floridoro's* ending is consistent, counters Behr, with two important tendencies in the reception of the *Aeneid* from antiquity onward. First, it both imitates and diverges from Vergil's model in order to resist certain aspects and embrace others. Second, in order to avoid celebrating the ascendancy of any given character, Fonte follows poets like Lucan in undoing the Vergilian fusion of closure and total victory. Behr argues persuasively that Fonte adapts Vergil's plot in which Aeneas overcomes the open-ended trauma of defeat through closural victory over Turnus. In *Floridoro*, it becomes Risamante's act of closural clemency that overcomes the masculinist norm identifying brute force with virtue.

(Chapter 2) While Fonte's Risamante demonstrates conclusively to her defeated male adversary that women may eclipse men in any respect, Lucrezia Marinella depicts warrior women as dwelling inside the dilemma of the

masculinist norm. In *L'Enrico*, Meandra and Emilia fight for Byzantium and Claudia for Venice. Meandra and Claudia test their virtue in a duel and kill each other. Emilia's arrow kills the noble Venier as he pursues spoils – a reversal of the similar death in the *Aeneid* of Camilla, an Italian warrior. Emilia, however, ultimately accepts the futility of further destruction and returns to her woodland home, where she lives out a pastoral existence.

(Chapter 3) *L'Enrico* depicts Venetian military exploits, but also features voices deeply critical of their impact on women. Desire for reputation draws Venetian Lucillo away from Clelia and Byzantine Corradino from Areta. Lucillo dies ingloriously in a storm and Corradino is killed in battle. The elegiac sympathies of Ovid's *Heroides* – poems styled as letters from mythical women to their lovers – inform how the two women respond to their undeserved suffering, and problematize the masculinist values that cause it. (Chapter 4) These episodes counter the stigmatization in male-authored epics of women's perspectives on the impact of masculinist enterprises on their lives. Marinella intensifies these episodes through allusion especially to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *Heroides* and *Amores*.

(Chapter 5) The ill-fated Venier is waylaid on the island of the enchantress Erina, who counsels him that return to the Venetian-Byzantine conflict means death as well as glory. Alternatively, he can stay, living peacefully in the pastoral space of her island. Venier chooses war; and Erina tries again. Erina takes Venier aloft in her magical chariot from which he can gaze upon the cosmos and enlarge his perspective. Still unpersuaded, he leaves and is slain by Emilia.

(Chapter 6) Venier's choices, observes Behr, underscore the competing perspectives of the episode's pastoral and epic frames. His return, praiseworthy in epic, remains lamentable in the pastoral context. One model for Venier's brief acquisition of cosmic perspective is Aeneas' poignant witness in the Underworld of souls awaiting rebirth into the strife of mortal existence. Unlike the empathetic Aeneas, Venier's blinkered desires overwhelm any capacity to see other realities. Instead, Erina feels the helpless sorrow for Venier that Aeneas does for the waiting souls. Erina's origin story begins in Venice. She is descended from Pietro IV Candiano, an infamous *Doge* assassinated by his fellow citizens. In her telling, Pietro realized at his death the folly of his life. Accordingly, Erina chooses to live apart from the site of such folly.

(Chapter 7) In *Floridoro*, Circe and Ulysses have a daughter named Circetta, who is an enchantress like her mother. Like Ulysses, she also seeks escape from her island. Attracted to a self-interested visitor there, Circetta seems poised to suffer the too common fate of rescue followed by abandonment. Nevertheless, she

also speaks authoritatively for the positive potential of relations between women and men. Circetta interprets carvings made by her mother depicting the future history of Venice up to its celebration of the happy marriage in Fonte's own time of the *Floridoro's* dedicatee, Bianca Cappello, to Francesco de' Medici (styled a descendant of Ulysses).

(Epilogue) Behr compares Fonte's correction of violent behavior with Marinella's fictionalization of the conquest of Byzantium as a noble exploit in which the victorious Enrico treats defeated Byzantines with empathy, weeping for their losses. Whereas Circetta seeks escape from isolation but we worry for her treatment, Erina's determined isolation manifests a recognition of women's intellect and society's failure to integrate it.

Behr offers an impressive combination of historical framing, reference to literary tradition and theoretically informed close readings. With proper guidance, the book is accessible for advanced undergraduates. Scholars interested in Renaissance classical receptions have much to be grateful for in this book.

SEÁN EASTON

Gustavus Adolphus College, seaston@gustavus.edu