

Recorded notes for Thursday, June 22

Murray Baumgarten asked us to offer responses to the lecture materials, and to set up a schedule relating to the deadlines for the material we're generating. He suggested a conference on Jewish women writers from Venice, to be held in Santa Cruz, and perhaps to invite Judith Baskin.

Will Wells and Deanna Shemek offered to work on translations of Sara Coppia Sullam and other poems in Hebrew.

Allene Olsen and Madhuri Yadlapati offered to help assemble the Venetian Jewish Anthology.

We were invited to theatre rehearsals for a Goldoni play on the Giudecca, as well as a potluck Saturday at the Bassi's, and to the opening of the Harvard/Ca'Foscari summer school at the Biblioteca.

Also, it was announced that on the following Wednesday, Paul Skenazy would lead a group study exercise using the short stories by Zangwill, Rilkie and Howells as texts. How can we use these materials in our own teaching?

Deanna Shemek lectured on Sara Coppio Sullan and "The Voice of the Shuttle in Venice's Jewish Ghetto."

Deanna spoke of nine women writers as examples of the situation in Venice—and Italy--at the time of Sara Coppia Sullam; it isn't clear that these women read each others' work, but probably they knew of each other if only by reputation. These women weren't necessarily looking to each other as models, but common patterns emerged: the idea of a reluctance to take up the task and lead the argument ("Why me? Why must I do this?"), but nonetheless a sense that they could not avoid it, because God was calling them and asking them to abandon their timidity. A sense of solidarity emerged that encouraged other women to write.

- 1) Sister Bartolomea Riccoboni (d. 1436) wrote "The Chronicle of Corpus Domini", one of the earliest texts on the relationship between writing and religion. She too speaks of her sense of inadequacy, but that she could no longer resist the call of the Holy Spirit to edify her sisters.
- 2) Laura Cereta (b. 1469) wrote "To Lucilia" and "To Agostino Emilio"; a Brescian, Laura had been educated as a Latin Humanist by her father. She then married a liberal Venetian husband, who died the year she married him, leaving her a widow with time to devote to her work. She wrote in Latin, primarily using the form of biting epistolary invective (which may have later influenced Sara Coppia Sullam in her defense against accusations she had denied the immortality of the soul). Among her writings was "Against Women Who Disparage Educated Women," in which she declares among other things that such biddies should have their tongues cut to pieces, compares them to fleas that a dog has a right to scratch out, and states that she'd rather pardon criminals than the babbling women who harm their sex and themselves.

As a widow, a woman without a man, she represented a number of women who chose to be educated, often by entering religious orders, rather than submit to a husband and family obligations; a sense of preferring "book-lined cells" to the "freedoms" of normal life.

- 3) Giulia Bigolina (b. 1518) wrote a manuscript discovered in Padua, "Urania." This was unusual in that it was a prose romance—most were written in verse—and is a kind of soap opera tale in which an educated young woman longs to be

admired more for her virtue and learning than for her beauty. A young gallant named Fabio indeed does fall in love with her on these conditions, but soon succumbs to the love of another woman, leaving our heroine crushed. So she puts on men's clothing, and begins a series of picaresque adventures.

- 4) Gaspara Santa (d. 1554) breaks the mold of moralizing with her poems. These are Petrarchist in form, often sonnets, as were many of the period, but they break from tradition by being overtly erotic. One opens with the theme of her having a lover. In her poems, her man is handsome but faithless, while she, the female, is deathly; but for all her tears, she can win no pity from her lover. However, these are not poems about helplessness: in a frontal assault on Petrarch's pleas for pity and pardon for his having sought fame and fortune—things no more real than a dream—Gaspara instead discards this humility and boldly declares that she wants glory, daring to hope that some woman will be capable of honoring a "sorrow so noble," so that this reader might even wish "to walk as equal to that lady" (the author).
- 5) Veronica Franco (d. 1591) was the most notorious of these women, as a well-known, highly visible courtesan. Responding to Domenico Vernier, a man from an important Venetian family who had mocked her by turning her name into "Ver Unica Puttana" ("A Truly Unique Whore"), she wrote "A Challenge to a Poet Who has Defamed Her." This response helped make her famous; in it, she symbolically challenges her male opponent to battle, using a variety of sexual double-entendres from jousting, fighting bare-breasted, etc. She presents herself as a victim, almost Christ-like as she's pierced in the side, yet declares that she's up for the fight, that women are "no less agile than men," and that she is no longer afraid of anyone, and warns that women will be equal foes with weapons and training. With a heart aflame for revenge, and a focus on her own equal humanity ("men will learn we too have hands") Veronica offers an echo of Shylock. She also mirrors her attacker's rhymes, offering a kind of poetic duel. Sara Coppia Sullam, while more spiritual, reflects the same kind of defiant attitude.
- 6) "Moderata Fonte" (Modesta Pozzo, d. 1592) wrote in dialogue form, "The Worth of Women," which was published posthumously, in 1599 perhaps. It is a unique text, four volumes and over three hundred pages long, about a group of seven noble and spirited women, united by breeding and taste, who gather by gondola at the inherited home of the widowed Leonora to discuss all manner of things. The opening is a splendid evocation of the magic of Venice, with imagery of the sea, of the traffic of ships and the city as a center for trade, utterly different from all other cities—the free "heart of the world," attracting all sorts of people, all connected to Venice as arteries are to the heart. The seven women recall the symbolic number of seven virtues, seven theological arts, the number of women guests in the Decameron, etc. One of them, Helena, is a new bride, and they welcome her with a discussion of marriage. Cornelia never wants to marry; other wives and an older widow join the debate. They discuss marriage as a property relationship, with mother warning daughter that she may have no better luck than the rest, who end up in servitude. They bring Ariosto and "Orlando Furioso" into the discussion, with its women warriors, and go on to discuss science, geography, astronomy, domestic violence, etc., in a display of their knowledge.
- 7) Lucrezia Marinella (d. 1653) came a bit later, but wrote a response to the misogynistic tract by Giuseppe Passi, "Women's Flaws," which she titled "The Nobility and

Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men", of which the chapter "On the Nobility of Names Given to the Female Sex" uses a kind of symbolic etymology to counter similar etymologies written by men; this was a reasonably common response to men's writings of the type. She also wrote a romance with a female protagonist.

- 8) Arcangela Tarrabotti (d. 1592), an angry writer of tremendous energy, penned "Paternal Tyranny," a protest against the forced cloistering of female children by their fathers, which often happened to deny them their inheritance. She herself had been cloistered as a child. Deanna noted that this sentiment was not always the case: some women chose the cloister rather than face a life of serving a man, risking dying in childbirth, etc., and found convent life a preferable option. However (as we see later in "Promessi Sposi"), convent life was sometimes presented to young girls in a dishonest fashion, that it would be a magical place of fun and enjoyment, instead of the often harsh environment it turned out to be. Tarrabotti rages at the hypocrisy of Venice, which speaks of itself as a bastion of liberty but harbors forced incarceration.
- 9) Lastly, Deanna referenced Isabella d'Este, who wrote a number of letters dealing with everyday relations with Jewish subjects—about collecting taxes from them, protecting those facing persecution (for example, she wrote on behalf of the Jew Salamoncino, who was being evicted from his rented home by a new owner, in which she asked that the Jew be allowed to stay for as long as he'd paid for—until Christmas, ironically; also to the Governor of Parma in defense of "David Hebreo", who had been accused of running contraband food—this being an interesting contrast to how the Jews in Dana Katz's articles were badly treated). But after 1496, in response to threats from the church, even Isabella issued an edict requiring Jews to wear the identifying yellow badges, hats and veils.

There were a wide range of responses:

Paola Servino asked about the connection to and anticipation of modern women writers, and about whether these women were writing for a wider audience than might be assumed—including male as well as female readers. These writings represent a challenge in the public square, going beyond incidental love poems or defenses. How are they connected to the nature of Venice? In regard to Sara Coppia Sullam, did she identify more with being a woman, or as a Jew? Was she consciously part of a tradition of (often Christian) women writers? Deanna pointed out that her title page does identify her as Sara Coppia Sullam Ebreia—she was a shuttle between cultures.

Luis Shein mentioned a number of Latin or Mexican contemporary female writers (such as Sor Juana Inés de La Cruz) who express similar sentiments, about men being stubborn and stupid for blaming women, and asking to be left alone. He raised the question about other intellectual endeavors by Venetian women, such as mathematics, science, etc., and what other kind of counter-accusations did men make? Deanna noted there was a well-known 18<sup>th</sup> century female astronomer, as well as Galileo's daughter; that many women were dealing with math because they were in charge of the family and business finances (and noted that this must have been seen as a problem, as Alberti, in his "I Libri della Famiglia", warned men to show women only what they needed to see, but not the account books!) Regarding counter-accusations, Veronica Franco was in fact accused of witchcraft and brought before the Inquisition (as detailed in "The Honest Courtesan"), but was freed. Others, especially courtesans, were sometimes accused of using love potions to control men.

Amy Kaminsky added that there were humanist women in Spain who studied math and natural philosophy; and that some Spanish writers had changed the traditional concept of honor seen in male writing—of regaining honor by causing the death of an offending female—to the idea of women regaining honor by surviving and being redeemed. Deanna pointed out that women's honor, none the less, consisted there of being free of vice.

Maria Esformes pointed out that Sor Juana (see above) was also a scientist and mathematician, as well as a nun. Maria asked what other common themes emerged in the Venetian women's writings. Deanna answered that a desire for honor and a formulaic insistence on being unworthy were the standard themes, as well as chastity—though the courtesans inverted this to honor erotic accomplishment—and also pride in citizenship in Venice, as expressed by Veronica Franco.

Paul Michelson asked about the more personal group dynamics, especially between Jews and non-Jews. Deanna referred to the Fortis book as identifying this community of writers as part of an upper crust, who also had a lot of interaction with the Jewish community but mostly because of financial needs.

Madhuri asked, in relationship to "The Worth of Women," what such writings can tell us about the lives of real women at the time--were such conversations actually possible? What were the literacy rates among women? Deanna answered that literacy was low, but didn't have specifics and recommended "Women and Men in Renaissance Venice" by Stanley Chojnacki. She added that among educated women, such conversations were possible, although probably they required male permission. Surviving letters confirm evidence of gatherings for good conversation; also, as in Bembo and Castiglione's writings, there is evidence of mixed gatherings of men and women.

Mehnaz Afridi asked if and how these writings affect contemporary women writers in Italy. Deanna thought they didn't have much effect, since many have only recently been rediscovered, and in general they're not widely known. Fixed university curricula add to the problem, making it hard to add to the canon of required readings.

Allene wondered whether Jewish women had a choice analagous to that of Christian women, between marriage or the convent. Cynthia responded that among Jewish women, marriage was pretty much an imperative, although perhaps rich or divorced women might have had more latitude. Men were always expected to have children, though women were not.

Ariella Lang pointed out that Jews were expected to have big families. Murray added that as a minority community, the Jews were under different pressures.

Russell Valentino noted that, unlike Veronica Franco, Sara Coppia Sullam could not be a citizen. He also suggested a comparison of her salon with "The Brothers Karamazov," in which Dmitri, distressed, wants to go on a "spree" with Gypsies, but since they're gone, Jews have to fill in. Deanna felt this was unlikely before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but Murray noted that Jewish entertainers were in fact given more latitude to stay out of the ghetto later.

Ronnie Scharfman wondered about Jewish prostitutes--were there any? Who were their clients? Did Jewish men visit Christian prostitutes? Ben Ravid has written about laws banning this, so it must have happened; also, two Christian prostitutes were executed for this.

Shirley Kagan added that Leon Modena refers to visits to and fights with Jewish prostitutes. She wondered about Mikvah practice in Venice--as there was in Ferrara?

Someone noted that Adinah Miller, a young scholar, is doing work on Jewish prostitutes in Venice.

Miriam Shein added that we know these women's names, which is significant. In "The Case of the Orphaned Bassoonist," set in Vivaldi's time, children born to single women were left on a convent's steps, raised as musicians to play behind the grille, each wondering if their mother was out there listening. Some became composers, but published under their husbands' names.

Karina Attar noted that in Italian tradition, men sometimes "saved their honor" by killing women who'd fallen into disgrace. She asked if there was more from Bigolina, but there appear to be just two texts, only recently discovered and edited. It was noted that Aretino did not find Bigolina's work interesting.

Murray asked if Jewish women in Venice might have been aware of Latin American writers such as Doña Gracia (sp?). Amy suspected that they might have been. In Spain, poets did travel quite a bit; also, with the founding and spread of new religious orders, ideas were disseminated. Salons were intended to introduce interesting foreigners to the local intelligentsia. Women also married into foreign families--how politics was done--and brought entourages with them. Libraries were often filled with foreign titles. One Spanish novella was even titled "It's a Bad Idea to Marry Far Away."