

BOOK REVIEWS



Benson, Pamela Joseph. *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1992. Pp. 325.

This study of defenses of women produced in Italy through the 1530s and in sixteenth-century England before the death of Elizabeth I examines the various ways in which Renaissance authors of these two countries confronted the political implications of the Woman Question. Beginning with Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* Benson traces the debate through the writings of early Italian defenders of women (Antonio Cornazzano, Vespasiano da Bisticci, and Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti) and those of the Northern court circles (Capella's *Della Eccellenza et dignità della donna* and Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*), ending with a detailed analysis of Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*. She then turns briefly to the works of Thomas More, Juan Luis Vives, and Richard Hyrde, before devoting chapters to Elyot's *The Defence of Good Women*, to popular "native" English works by Robert Burdet, Edward Gosynhill, Edward More, C. Pyrrye, Jane Anger, and Nicholas Breton, and to the "long and sober volumes" that examine the case for and against rule by women (Howard and Aylmer). Here, as in the section devoted to the Italian controversy, she concludes with a lengthy exegesis of a narrative text—Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.

Benson defines these works as "profeminist." By this she means that they attempt to reconcile praise for women with support for the institutions that confined women to inferior positions in society. Beginning with Boccaccio's pronouncement in his Proem that he is rewriting the history of women, thus breaking with medieval literature by taking women's lives seriously, these Renaissance authors confronted the crucial questions of how a male author can relate to a female subject; whether the female sex is naturally able to perform great deeds; why women are absent from history; and why women have traditionally been excluded from positions of power.

Unlike Ruth Kelso and Joan Kelly, Benson reads these texts as paradoxical and open-ended rather than as social history of "doctrine." She sees them as literary rather than literal, dialogic rather than authoritative, more subtle, more provocative, and less patriarchal in the way they deal with the new notion of women they formulate. In other words, although none of these authors advocated total equality for women, the complex rhetorical strategies they used in debating the issue opened up spaces for re-evaluating the roles traditionally assigned to women. Benson is careful to point out, however, that although these works propound new ideas about women, they do not advocate political reform. Instead, they use genre, characterization, comedy, contrasting levels of style, and other literary means to allay the anxiety aroused by the prospect of women actually acceding to positions of political power.

Although scholars not familiar with the less-celebrated texts will undoubtedly find Benson's discussions of them one of the most valuable and informative aspects of the book, the heart of her analysis lies in her commentary on the intertextual relationship between the two canonical works that conclude the Italian and English sections of her study—*Orlando Furioso* and *The Faerie Queene*.

Unlike many twentieth-century critics, who believe that Ariosto merely incorporated elements of the profeminist argument into a work whose main concerns lay elsewhere, Benson suggests that he was actively engaged in demonstrating the fallacies of the extreme misogynist position, which he personified in Orlando's madness. She maintains that Ariosto contrasts two kinds of love in the Ruggiero/Bradamante and Orlando/Angelica plots in order to persuade his readers to revise their attitudes toward women. She isolates three narrative devices that work to bring this about: first, the three debates on the nature of women; second, the position of the narrator, who shifts between profeminist and anti-feminist arguments; and third, the wide variety of female characters, who are used to "illustrate the humanist argument that moral and intellectual potential is as varied in women as in men" (92). But if Ariosto demonstrates the error of misogyny, dismissing it as the product of disappointed love, he does not advocate a role for women outside marriage. Instead, in Bradamante he portrays a woman who is willingly submissive and morally commendable in her exemplification of the primary feminine virtues—chastity, piety, and dedication to family.

When Benson turns to Spenser, she finds a different context for the arguments about women: the reign of Elizabeth I, which produced the necessity for an eloquent encomium of femininity. Here too Benson departs from much contemporary criticism in her contention that the feminine is not simply an allegorical prop to male order but an essential principle in *The Faerie Queene*. In fact, she holds that Spenser establishes the feminine as fundamental to both social and cosmic order. In her view, he accomplishes this by three techniques: first, he uses female figures like Venus and Isis to constitute a feminine cosmology; second, he creates a new model of female virtue in Britomart; and third, he defends Elizabeth directly in the Proems. The result is a text that not only hypothesizes the feminine as a source of strength for the nation but defines it as vital for maintaining peace, justice, and order in the kingdom. Yet once again, as Benson shows, this defense of women is ultimately paradoxical. Spenser may define the feminine as inherent in good government, but he does not advocate an increased public role for women. "Like all writers of paradoxical defenses, he writes political action out of the script for most women because he writes political ambition out of their character" (281).

The Invention of the Renaissance Woman will, of course, be of interest to specialists working in the Italian and English Renaissance; but its analyses will also prove stimulating to the wider audience of those interested in the question of women and representation. By her insistence on the specificity of the rhetorical strategies she delineates and on the importance of applying them to these texts, Benson explores an important Historicist avenue.

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Getz, Faye Marie. *Healing and Society in Medieval England: A Middle English Translation of the Pharmaceutical Writings of Gilbertus Anglicus*. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1991. pp. lxxiii + 378.

Faye Marie Getz provides for the first time the entire text of a fifteenth-century English translation of Gilbertus Anglicus's *Compendium medicinae*. Until the editor's identification of over twelve manuscripts, no Middle English translations of this thirteenth-century learned Latin text were known to exist.