

La Compiuta Donzella of Florence (ca. 1260)  
The Complete Poetry

INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION BY

Fabian Alfie

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La Compiuta Donzella of Florence (ca. 1260)  
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Introduction and Translation by Fabian Alfie

THE CURRENT STUDY represents the first complete translation into English of the poetry of the thirteenth-century Italian poet La Compiuta Donzella; it also includes all the extant texts addressed to her. The author of three extant sonnets, La Compiuta Donzella combined the conventions of courtly love poetry with emotional reflections about women's lived experience in medieval Florence. Thus far, the only English translation of her poems is by Joseph Tusiani, who rendered two of her sonnets, 1 and 2 below, into modern English poetry.<sup>1</sup> Recently, Guittone d'Arezzo's epistle to her was translated by Antonello Borra as part of a larger edition of Guittone d'Arezzo's works, but, conversely, it does not contain La Compiuta Donzella's poetry.<sup>2</sup> The intent of this study is to present a more complete picture of her, including her impact on her contemporaries. The translations below render thirteenth-century Italian into readable and accurate English; to that end, no attempt has been made to reproduce the rhyme scheme or meter of the original works. In addition, the Italian originals appear alongside the translations, reproduced from sources considered authoritative by scholars.<sup>3</sup> In sum, my

1. Joseph Tusiani, "Compiuta Donzella," in *The Age of Dante: An Anthology of Early Italian Poetry, translated into English Verse and with an Introduction* (New York: Baroque Press, 1974), 155–56.

2. Guittone d'Arezzo, *Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. and trans. Antonello Borra (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 26–29.

3. The sonnets of La Compiuta Donzella, the anonymous poet, and Mastro Torrigiano are reproduced from Gianfranco Contini, ed., "La Compiuta Donzella di Firenze," in *Poeti del Duecento*, vol. 1 (Milan: Ricciardi, 1960), 435–40; Guittone d'Arezzo's epistle is cited from *La prosa del*

purpose for this translation is to provide English-language readers with the complete information to study the verse of this fascinating writer of medieval Florence.

Italian literature developed rapidly in the thirteenth century with the explosion of poetry that appeared first in the court of Emperor Frederick II (the “Sicilian School,” ca. 1230–1250) and then subsequently flourished in the city-states of central Italy (the “Siculo-Tuscan School,” ca. 1250–1290). Despite the large number of writers active throughout those decades, the names of only three female poets have come down to us: Gaia da Camino, Nina Siciliana, and La Compiuta Donzella.<sup>4</sup> Yet even that small number is misleading. Dante mentioned Gaia da Camino in *Purgatorio* 16, and some fourteenth-century commentators on the *Divine Comedy* stated that Gaia was a renowned poet; if so, none of her poems have survived. The poet traditionally called Nina Siciliana is known by one sonnet, a complaint about the cruel lover who abandoned her. Another anonymous writer replied to Nina with his own sonnet, offering words of encouragement.<sup>5</sup> Nina’s sonnet imitates the tropes of

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*duecento*, ed. Cesare Segre and Mario Marti (Milan: Ricciardi, 1960), 52–53; and Mastro Rinuccino is cited from *Sonetti di Mastro Rinuccino di Firenze*, ed. Stefano Carrai (Florence: Olschki, 1981).

4. Paolo Cherchi, “The Troubled Existence of Three Women Poets,” in *The Voice of the Trobairitz: Perspectives on the Women Troubadours*, ed. William D. Paden (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 197–99.

5. The sonnet ascribed to Nina is “Tapina ahimè, ch’amava uno sparvero,” and the response to her is “Vis’amoros’, angelico e clero.” Both sonnets appear in Gianfranco Contini, “Tenzone di donna e uomo anonimi,” in *Poeti del Duecento*, vol. 1 (Milan: Ricciardi, 1960), 441–43. A translation of Nina’s sonnet appears in Tusiani, *The Age of Dante*, 6. Nineteenth-century critics developed the legend that Nina’s respondent was Dante da Maiano, and they claimed that he fell in love with Nina without ever seeing her; however, in 1878 the legend was disproven, and the attribution of the second sonnet to Dante da Maiano is now considered unreliable. For more information about Nina’s critical reception, see Cherchi, “The Troubled Existence of Three Women Poets,” 199–202.

*fin’amor*, the predominant literary style of the time, and she casts herself as the *abbandonata* of medieval love literature.

Given the near total silence of women’s voices in thirteenth-century Italy, the third poet, La Compiuta Donzella, takes on great significance. La Compiuta Donzella authored three sonnets that survive to this day (1–3 in this edition), one of which was a response to an anonymous writer. Mastro Torrigiano also addressed two sonnets to her (A and B in this edition), and it is probable that a literary giant at the time, Guittone d’Arezzo (ca. 1235–1294), wrote an epistle to her (the final item in this edition). In addition, Rinuccino of Florence composed three sonnets that are most probably about her (I, II, and III in this edition). The two correspondences with her, and the works about her, abound with the language of courtly love. Like Nina, she is knowledgeable about the commonplaces of love poetry derived from Provençal verse;<sup>6</sup> yet unlike the Sicilian poet, La Compiuta Donzella uses her poems to explore questions of personal concern. Specifically, she contrasts the stereotyped language of courtly love to an anguishing situation: in two of her poems, she decries her father’s decision to marry her to a man she does not want. Thus, she offers a glimpse into the lives of women in the flourishing communes (city-states) of central and northern Italy during the late Middle Ages in crucial juxtaposition to the idealized ladies of medieval literature.

It is important to recognize the precursors to La Compiuta Donzella’s verse. While thirteenth-century Italian literature includes few women authors, the same cannot be said of the poetry of Provence, whose troubadours stood at the beginning of many European literary traditions.<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, some twenty named female troubadours, known as *trobairitz*, were active between 1170 and 1260.<sup>8</sup> It is probable

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6. Janet Levarie Smarr, “Compiuta Donzella di Firenze,” in *Medieval Italy: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Christopher Kleinhenz, 2 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1:243.

7. F. R. P. Akehurst, introduction, in *A Handbook of the Troubadours*, ed. F. R. P. Akehurst and Judith M. Davis, Publications of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies; 26 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 1.

8. Meg Bogin, *The Woman Troubadours* (New York: W. W. Norton,

that the example of the *trobairitz* influenced La Compiuta Donzella, as their repertoire of about forty compositions is well represented in Italian manuscripts.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore the commentaries on Provençal poetry known as *vidas* (short biographies) and *razos* (anecdotes that explain the origins of a poem) appear in those Italian manuscripts, and they name thirteen *trobairitz*, offering short biographies for five of them.<sup>10</sup> The biographers depict the *trobairitz* in similar ways, calling them *domnas* (ladies) who are *gentil, bella, avinens*, and *enseignada* (noble, beautiful, charming, and educated).<sup>11</sup> As is evident in the texts of this edition, La Compiuta Donzella's correspondents describe her in identical ways, suggesting at the very least that her verse was interpreted through the lens of the *trobairitz* during her lifetime.

La Compiuta Donzella's poetry appears only in the manuscript Vatican Latin 3793 (*unicus*), one of three extant compendia of thirteenth-century Italian verse.<sup>12</sup> Containing about a thousand poems, Vatican Latin 3793 is crucial for understanding the literature of central Italy in the mid-1200s. It was compiled in Florence around the 1260s in a proto-*mercantesca* hand, reflecting the mercantile culture of the Florentine city-state at the time.<sup>13</sup> The manuscript rubrics above her poems read only as "La Compiuta Donzella di Firenze" (La Compiuta Donzella of

Florence) (ff. 129r, 170v).<sup>14</sup> The manuscript, then, relates very little information about the poet, only her provenance and designation. Indeed, it is not clear if La Compiuta Donzella is even her name. It might be, as other women named Compiuta appear in the registers of the age (e.g., "Compiuta Beatrice").<sup>15</sup> It is also possible that "Compiuta Donzella" was a title or *nom de plume*, because it translates to "the fulfilled maiden" or "the accomplished damsel."<sup>16</sup> The phrase "donzella compiuta," moreover, was an expression more generally indicating an unmarried woman of marriageable age.<sup>17</sup> Thus "La Compiuta Donzella" might have been her name, a pseudonym that possibly referred to her skills as a writer, or simply acknowledgement of her young age. Given the lack of information, her identity as an individual is lost, and with it her family, social class, and the immediate cultural context that informs her verse. Most importantly, the questions regarding her compelling life story remain unanswered.

The only information about La Compiuta Donzella that seems certain is that she was a mid-twelfth-century Florentine woman, but even that has been debated. In the nineteenth century, Adolfo Borgognoni objected that a young woman would not have been praised for publicly contradicting her father and, therefore, the poet must have been a man

1976), 11; see also William D. Paden, in Paden, *Voice of the Trobairitz*, 14.

9. Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, "Trobairitz," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Stephen Cushman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 1461.

10. Elizabeth W. Poe, "The *Vidas* and the *Razos*," in Akehurst and Davis, *Handbook of the Troubadours*, 186-87; Bruckner, "Trobairitz," in Cushman, *Princeton Encyclopedia*, 1461.

11. Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, "The Trobairitz," in Akehurst and Davis, *Handbook of the Troubadours*, 206-7.

12. The other two compendia are Redi 9 at the Biblioteca Mediceo-Laurenziana in Florence and Banco Rari 217 at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence.

13. Justin Steinberg, *Accounting for Dante: Urban Readers and Writers in Late Medieval Italy* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 125-27. See also Claudio Giunta, "Un'ipotesi sulla morfologia del canzoniere Vaticano Lat. 3793," *Studi di filologia italiana* 53 (1995): 25.

14. Information about the Vatican Latin 3793 manuscript is from Francesco Egidi, *Il Libro de varie romanze volgare, cod. Vat. 3793* (Rome: Presso la Società, 1908), 359, 479. A facsimile edition of Vatican Latin 3793 is also available; see Lino Leonardi, ed., *I canzonieri della lirica italiana*, vol. 1, *Il canzoniere Vat. Lat. 3793* (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2001).

15. Justin Steinberg, "La Compiuta Donzella e la voce femminile nel manoscritto Vat. Lat. 3793," *Giornale storico della letteratura italiana* 183 (2006): 3.

16. Christopher Kleinhenz, "Pulzelle e maritate: Coming of Age, Rites of Passage, and the Question of Marriage in Some Early Italian Poems," in *Matrons and Marginal Women in Medieval Society*, ed. Robert R. Edwards and Vickie Ziegler (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1995), 89.

17. Steinberg, "La Compiuta Donzella," 8-9. See also Francesco da Barberino, *I Documenti d'Amore*, vol. 3 (Rome: Presso la Società, 1913), 407-12.

writing in a woman's voice.<sup>18</sup> Such a position is not quite as absurd as it might appear on the surface, because there was a tradition of men writing in female personae, reflecting the tropes of the courtly love tradition.<sup>19</sup> That said, La Compiuta Donzella's unhappiness about the marriage arranged by her father does not recall any literary commonplaces and instead seems to reflect the lived experience of many women at the time.<sup>20</sup> After Borgognoni, others argued that she was actually an allegorical figure crafted by a man, the symbol for a group of Florentine love poets who felt compelled to submit to the rules of the Church.<sup>21</sup> By the mid-twentieth century, however, critics stopped doubting that the poet was, in fact, a woman.<sup>22</sup> It is clear that she writes about the experience of many women at the time, expressing fear and frustration over the lack of control over her own life.

While we cannot determine more about her as an individual, a discussion of the status of women in medieval Florence contributes to our understanding of her poetry. In the thirteenth century, Florence experienced the economic boom taking place in Italy. The population of Florence expanded five-fold within one hundred years, and a new multilayered society, composed of merchants, artisans, and laborers, as well as the nobility, flocked to the cities.<sup>23</sup> Wealthy merchants ennobled their families through expedient marriages to aristocrats, leading to a

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18. Adolfo Borgognoni, "Rimatrici ne' primi tre secoli (1886)," in *Studi di letteratura italiana* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1891), 169-70.

19. Kleinhenz, "Pulzelle e malmaritate," 90-93.

20. Paola Malpezzi Price, "Uncovering Women's Writings: Two Early Italian Women Poets," *Journal of the Rocky Mountain Medieval and Renaissance Association* 9 (1988): 7-9, <http://rmmra.byu.edu/files/2018/12/9.pdf>.

21. See Guido Mazzoni, "I Fedeli d'Amore e la Compiuta Donzella," in *Almae luces, malae cruces: Studii danteschi* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1941), 149-56; and Luigi Valli, *Il linguaggio segreto di Dante e dei "Fedeli d'Amore,"* vol. 1 (Rome: Bertoni, 1969), 249.

22. Contini, "La Compiuta Donzella di Firenze," 435.

23. Philip Jones, *The Italian City-State: From Commune to Signoria* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 153-57.

blending with old bloodlines.<sup>24</sup> Despite the changes taking place, the ethos of the medieval landed aristocracy persisted and was brought into the communes, sometimes with devastating effects; blood feuds among the aristocracy and abuses of non-nobles became prevalent in the cities.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, however, non-noble merchants coopted the trappings of the aristocracy, even parading about on horses shod in silver.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the flourishing urban centers allowed for the development of a lay culture, with advances in such areas as civics, law, and rhetoric.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the thirteenth century, an increasing number of parents named their children not after Christian saints, but after the paladins of Charlemagne or the knights of Arthur's Round Table, reflecting the idealization of the aristocracy from popular literary texts.<sup>28</sup> The cultural development throughout Italy during the century was merely one facet of the broader urban expansion. Whatever the social class of La Compiuta Donzella, noble or not, the manuscript containing her verse is a product of Florentine merchants with aristocratic aspirations.

Throughout the socioeconomic developments of the Italian communes, traditional notions about women persisted. Some of the attitudes were derived from early Christian thinkers. Due to Eve's responsibility for the Fall, women were to be subjugated to men in all things, and following Saint Paul's dictum, they were expected to remain silent in public.<sup>29</sup> Women as a group were consistently viewed as more sinful

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24. Philip Jones, "Economia e società nell'Italia medievale: la leggenda della borghesia," in *Storia d'Italia: Annali*, vol. 1, *Dal feudalesimo al capitalismo*, ed. Ruggiero Romano and Corrado Vivanti (Turin: Einaudi, 1978), 196.

25. Daniel Waley, "A Blood-Feud with a Happy Ending: Siena, 1285-1304," in *City and Countryside in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy: Essays Presented to Philip Jones*, ed. Trevor Dean and Chris Wickham (London: Hambledon Press, 1990), 47-49.

26. Jones, *Italian City-State*, 313.

27. Franco Cardini, "Intellectuals and Culture in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Italy," in Dean and Wickham, *City and Countryside in Late Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, 15-19.

28. Carol Lansing, *The Florentine Magnates: Lineage and Faction in a Medieval Commune* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 156.

29. Marie-Thérèse d'Alverny, "Comment les théologiens et les



and less intelligent than men.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, women took on new roles as Florentine society evolved. They became heavily involved in the silk and woolen industries, and there is evidence of tradeswomen such as barbers, fruit vendors, chicken vendors, innkeepers, and cooks.<sup>31</sup> Women at the upper echelons also exerted new authority. Although property was still held by male relatives, throughout the century Florentine courts increasingly allowed wives to reclaim their dowries when their husbands were deemed fiscally incompetent.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the fourteenth-century chronicler Giovanni Villani boasted that Florentine schools taught arithmetic and reading to fully 10% of the population, boys and girls.<sup>33</sup> Economic realities necessitated a basic level of education for females in the event that they needed to assist in—or take outright control of—the family’s commercial enterprise.

La Compiuta Donzella’s poetry draws attention to a particularly difficult aspect of women’s lives during the thirteenth century. Historical studies underscore the marginalization of brides-to-be during marriage arrangements such as that described by La Compiuta Donzella. In the thirteenth century, marriage served as a means for men to acquire or

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philosophes voient la femme,” *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 20, no. 78-79 (1977): 107-10, [https://www.persee.fr/doc/ccmed\\_0007-9731\\_1977\\_num\\_20\\_78\\_3067](https://www.persee.fr/doc/ccmed_0007-9731_1977_num_20_78_3067). Danielle Régner-Bohler, “Literary and Mystical Voices,” in *A History of Women in the West*, vol. 2, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, ed. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 1992), 429.

30. Eleanor Commo McLaughlin, “Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes: Woman in Medieval Theology,” in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 251-52.

31. David Herlihy, “Women’s Work in the Towns of Traditional Europe,” in *Women, Family and Society in Medieval Europe: Historical Essays, 1978-1991* (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1995), 77-79.

32. Julius Kirchner, “Wives’ Claims against Insolvent Husbands in Late Medieval Italy,” in *Women of the Medieval World: Essays in Honor of John H. Mundy*, ed. Julius Kirchner and Suzanne F. Wemple (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 268-69.

33. Charles T. Davis, “Education in Dante’s Florence,” *Speculum* 40, no. 3 (1965): 415, doi:10.2307/2850918.

maintain power, and the daughters of the upper classes had little say in the matter.<sup>34</sup> Marital rituals in medieval Florence included elaborate negotiations between families, arranged by marriage brokers, including the extended kin of the intended spouses and resulting in a symbolic handclasp between the fathers of the bride and the groom. After these steps were concluded, the male members of the two families appeared together in a solemn public meeting, and an agreement was drawn up by a notary. The marital engagement was now binding and could not be broken without severe consequences, and at no point in the negotiations was the family required to consult the future bride.<sup>35</sup> A young woman faced with an unwanted future spouse had almost no recourse, as La Compiuta Donzella’s poetry highlights.

David Bowe has recently argued, however, that it is important not to read La Compiuta Donzella’s poetry merely as a means to establish her biography.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, we cannot assume that she wrote autobiographically, as she might have been putting into words the concerns and distress of other women around her. Bowe then demonstrates that her works are highly engaged with the literary movements and literary tropes of the late thirteenth century.<sup>37</sup> As evidenced from her poetry, La Compiuta Donzella’s knowledge of Italy’s culture far surpasses the basic knowledge gained through the Florentine schools. She is adept at using the sonnet form, a poetic innovation invented in the Sicilian School only a few decades prior. In addition, she employs poetic techniques of the Provençal masters,<sup>38</sup> such as *coblas capfinidas* (e.g., a stanza

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34. Claudia Opitz, “Life in the Late Middle Ages,” in Klapische-Zuber, *Silences of the Middle Ages*, 273.

35. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, “Zacharias, or the Ousted Father: Nuptial Rites in Tuscany between Giotto and the Council of Trent,” in *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 183-84.

36. David Bowe, “Versions of a Feminine Voice: The Compiuta Donzella di Firenze,” *Italian Studies* 73, no. 1 (2018): 1-14.

37. Bowe, 13.

38. “Compiuta Donzella, La,” in Peter E. Bondanella and Julia Conaway Bondanella, *Dictionary of Italian Literature* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 129.

that begins with the same word as the last word of the previous stanza; see her response to the anonymous poet below, lines 8-9).<sup>39</sup> She also adopts the learned technique of using the last line of the poem to echo the first (see her first sonnet below, lines 1, 14).<sup>40</sup> Whoever she was, La Compiuta Donzella was a masterful poet in her own right.

Furthermore, La Compiuta Donzella exhibits intimate knowledge of the literature of the age. Two of her three sonnets are freestanding, meaning that they do not respond directly to another writer's work. In them, La Compiuta Donzella puts her artistry fully on display by fusing literary topoi with personal expression. In the first freestanding sonnet, La Compiuta Donzella gracefully employs the courtly love language of the troubadours. In the opening quatrains, she presents the stylized image of lovers in springtime, wooing one another in bowers to the sounds of birdsong. The comparison of one's sorry state to the general gaiety of spring is a commonplace in the courtly love tradition.<sup>41</sup> For La Compiuta Donzella, however, the happy image of aristocratic lovers forms a harsh contrast to her distraught state in the two tercets; there she explains not that she loves someone else but that her father wants to force her to marry a man for whom she has no desire. In this sonnet the sweet fiction of love in the quatrains serves as a foil to the bitter reality of parental and social control in the tercets.

In her second freestanding sonnet, La Compiuta Donzella taps into a long-standing tradition of religious writers, the satire of the world known as *contemptus mundi*, in which the world has decayed from the perfection of the time of God's creation, and human sin has resulted in the perversion of all goodness. La Compiuta Donzella similarly depicts

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39. Stefano Carrai, "Il dittico della Compiuta Donzella," *Medioevo romanzo* 17 (1992): 209-10.

40. Roberto Crespo, "La Compiuta Donzella," *Medioevo romanzo* 13 (1988): 204.

41. As but one example, see Rinaldo d'Aquino's poem "Ormai quando flore," in which the narrator states that she is pensive because she does not return the love of a man who loves her ("ma 'l tempo mi 'namura / e fami star pensata / d'aver mercè ormai / d'un fante che m'adura"; lines 30-33). Rinaldo d'Aquino is cited from Bruno Panvini, ed., *Le rime della scuola siciliana* (Florence: Olschki, 1962-64).

the world as degenerate, with Christian values upended and folly and sinfulness rewarded.<sup>42</sup> La Compiuta Donzella more closely follows in the footsteps of numerous other authors of *contemptus mundi* before her, such as Peter Damian (1007-1072), Roger of Caen (d. 1139), and Pope Innocent III (1160-1216).<sup>43</sup> Like them, her purpose in portraying the world as fallen is to justify her desire to flee secular life and enter a religious order. Numerous love poets turned away from the pleasures of the world to follow God.<sup>44</sup> La Compiuta Donzella personalizes her sonnet in its closing verses, however, not by discussing love, but by mentioning her father's unwelcome plans for her. In her second sonnet La Compiuta Donzella reiterates her feelings of dread regarding the impending marriage imposed upon her by her father. Thus, in both poems she effectively situates her personal statements within established literary discourses familiar to readers at the time.

The third sonnet of La Compiuta Donzella's corpus corroborates Bowe's observation about her biography because it does not touch on the topic of an unwanted marriage. The dating of her poetry is imprecise, and one possibility is that this lyric was composed prior to the situation created by her father (if indeed the author truly faced the unhappy prospect of unwanted marriage in real life). It is difficult, therefore, to construct a biography from the extant texts. In addition, the poetic correspondences too are imbued with the language of *fin'amor*. La Compiuta Donzella's third sonnet is a reply to an anonymous poet; another writer, Mastro Torrigiano, addressed two poems to her as well. Both her correspondents, the anonymous poet and Mastro Torrigiano, compare

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42. Ronald E. Pepin, *Scorn for the World: Bernard of Cluny's De contemptu mundi: The Latin Text with English Translation and an Introduction* (East Lansing, MI: Medieval Texts and Studies, 1991), xii.

43. Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear: The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th-18th Centuries*, trans. Eric Nicholson (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 9-22.

44. As one example, see Guittone d'Arezzo, who entered the lay order of *Milites Beatae Virginis Mariae* in 1265, after which he wrote poems under the name Frate Guittone (brother Guittone). For information about Guittone's biography, see Achille Tartaro, "Per Guittone d'Arezzo," in *Il manifesto di Guittone e altri studi fra due e quattrocento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1974), 13.

her to characters from the Arthurian legends, indicating the cultural currency of those literary figures. In his first sonnet, the anonymous poet also compares her to Constance, perhaps a reference to the mother of Emperor Frederick II, Constance of Altavilla (1154-1198).<sup>45</sup> The anonymous writer praises La Compiuta Donzella, requests her friendship, compliments her as a poet, and asks for advice about an amorous situation, possibly described in another work now lost. She replies in kind, proclaiming that she too is under Love's lordship and she strives to obey him. Throughout her response, she speaks of herself with the humility expected of a woman, describing her talents as, at best, modest. In this third sonnet, she presents herself exclusively according to the strictures of medieval womanhood and not at all like a distressed daughter.

The poetic correspondences with these two writers demonstrate that contemporaries admired her as a poet, even while they simultaneously affirmed the beliefs about women's inferiority prevalent in their culture. In his first sonnet, Mastro Torrigiano echoes the assessment of La Compiuta Donzella made by the anonymous versifier; like the unnamed writer, Mastro Torrigiano treats her as an exemplary poet. In his sonnet, Mastro Torrigiano openly marvels at the knowledge and literary acumen that she possesses, explaining that she honors Florence with her sheer presence. He also describes her as unnaturally intelligent, given her sex, like a horse that had taken to playing a musical instrument. Her response to Mastro Torrigiano does not survive, but in his follow-up, he clarifies that he intended only to honor La Compiuta Donzella in his previous lyric. Therefore, it can be conjectured that if she answered him, his initial poem was not well received. He explains that her skills far surpass those of other women, and asserts that the amount of effort she put into honing her craft only increases her worth.

While Mastro Torrigiano discusses her poetic skills, Guittone d'Arezzo praises his correspondent for her religiosity. In his letter to her, Guittone echoes her desire to serve God, as expressed in her sonnet about *contemptus mundi*. Guittone encourages her to humble herself to God and to feel "consoled" (*consolato*), implying perhaps that she could fulfill her Christian ardor while also consenting to the marriage

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45. Contini, "La Compiuta Donzella di Firenze," 436.

arranged by her father. The epistle, in short, alludes to the unhappy circumstances she describes in her sonnets. It has been argued that La Compiuta Donzella's stated desire for the cloister in her second poem was inauthentic, but rather she was trying to exert the only option other than marriage available to her.<sup>46</sup> Such an interpretation for the sonnet is plausible, but it is not the only explanation. Her work needs to be understood in the light of the social restrictions placed upon women of course, but as Guittone's epistle demonstrates, her desire to take vows was treated as genuine at the time.

To be sure, Guittone does not explicitly name the recipient of the letter as La Compiuta Donzella but as "Donna Compiuta" (accomplished Lady), and he crafts other puns on her name (e.g., "compiuto sapere" [complete knowledge], "compiuta fede" [complete faith], "compiuta laude" [complete praise], "compimento" [fulfillment]). Furthermore, Guittone's praise of the lady hews closely to the praise of La Compiuta Donzella in Mastro Torrigiano's sonnets, calling her miraculous and an honor to the city. Due to these characteristics, scholars have accepted the argument that Guittone intended the epistle for La Compiuta Donzella. Far from seeing her as an example of daughterly disobedience, Guittone praises the recipient of the letter for her Christian devotion as well as for her knowledge.

Mastro Rinuccino of Florence's three sonnets also contain reminiscences of the other writers; it appears, therefore, that he had read those other correspondences with her.<sup>47</sup> In his poems, Rinuccino presents her in accord with troubadour poetry, portraying her as replete in good manners, virtue, wisdom, and beauty, and describing himself as her devoted servant. He evokes the poems of the anonymous writer, apostrophizing her in a similar manner (e.g., Anonymous: "Highest, and most educated noble damsel / I have understood such honor to be in you"; Rinuccino: "Noble damsel, named with praise / worthy of lauds and of all honor");

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46. Flora Ghezzi, "Compiuta Donzella (Thirteenth Century)," in *The Feminist Encyclopedia of Italian Literature*, ed. Rinaldina Russell (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), 53.

47. Gianfranco Contini, "Guido Guinizzelli," in *Poeti del Duecento*, vol. 2 (Milan: Ricciardi, 1960), 474.



## La Compiuta Donzella of Florence (ca. 1260) The Complete Poetry

indeed, Rinuccino imitates the anonymous poet's rhyme scheme, suggesting that he intended to contribute to the correspondence between the unknown poet and La Compiuta Donzella.<sup>48</sup> Both of them, it should be noted, depict La Compiuta Donzella in a manner similar to that of the *trobairitz* in the Provençal *vidas* and *razos*. Yet Rinuccino appears to know Guittone d'Arezzo's epistle as well. Like Guittone d'Arezzo, he repeatedly refers to her as a "damsel" (*donzella*), and puns about her "fulfillment" or "completeness" (*compiuta*, *compimento*). Additionally, Rinuccino's poems seem to paraphrase the opening portion of Guittone's epistle, which describes her as having been crafted by God to resemble an angel.<sup>49</sup> While Rinuccino does not explicitly name the addressee of his lyrics, the connections with the other writers strongly suggest her to be La Compiuta Donzella. In closing his sonnet, he draws on racist (yet traditional) medieval Christian anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim tropes to emphasize his firm devotion to her.

The poetry of and about La Compiuta Donzella thus enhances our understandings of the literary traditions of medieval Italy. In her first sonnet, which she imbues with the poetics of Provence, she discusses a matter of personal relevance, her impending marriage to a man she does not desire. The same subject matter appears in her second poem, this time treated through the language of *contemptus mundi*. Well versed in the poetics and techniques of troubadour literature, La Compiuta Donzella masterfully expresses personal matters through these established tropes, in the process also giving voice to the lived experience of women in the medieval Italian communes.

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48. Bowe, "Versions of a Feminine Voice," 12.

49. Carrai, *Sonetti di Mastro Rinuccino*, 121.

*Two Sonnets by La Compiuta Donzella di Firenze*

**Sonetto 1**

A la stagion che 'l mondo foglia e fiora  
acresce gioia a tut[t]i fin' amanti:  
vanno insieme a li giardini alora  
che gli auscelletti fanno dolzi canti;  
la franca gente tutta s'inamora,                   5  
e di servir ciascun trag[g]es' inanti,  
ed ogni damigella in gioia dimora;  
e me, n'abondan mar[r]imenti e pianti.  
Ca lo mio padre m'ha messa 'n er[r]ore,  
e tenemi sovente in forte doglia:                   10  
donar mi vole a mia forza signore,  
ed io di ciò non ho disio né voglia,  
e 'n gran tormento vivo a tutte l'ore;  
però non mi ralegra fior né foglia.

**Sonnet 1**

In the season when the world grows flowers and leaves,  
gaiety grows for all fine lovers;  
they wander together to the gardens  
when the little birds sing sweet songs;  
all honest people fall in love with each other,                   5  
and they come forth to serve one another,  
and every damsel lives in joy;  
and for me, tears and pains abound.  
For my father has treated me wrongly,  
and he keeps me in harsh pain;                   10  
he wants to give me by force to a lord  
and I have neither the will nor the desire for that,  
and I live each hour in great torment;  
neither flower nor leaf rejoices me.

## Sonetto 2

Lasciar vor[r]ia lo mondo e Dio servire  
e dipartirmi d'ogne vanitate,  
però che veg[g]io crescere e salire  
mat[t]ezza e villania e falsitate,  
ed ancor senno e cortesia morire           5  
e lo fin pregio e tutta la bontate:  
ond'io marito non vor[r]ia né sire,  
né stare al mondo, per mia volontate.  
Membrandomi c'ogn'om di mal s'adorna,  
di ciaschedun son forte disdegnosa,           10  
e verso Dio la mia persona torna.  
Lo padre mio mi fa stare pensosa,  
ca di servire a Cristo mi distorna:  
non saccio a cui mi vol dar per isposa.

## Sonnet 2

I wish to abandon the world and serve God  
and distance myself from all vanity,  
because I see insanity and villainy  
and falsity growing and flourishing,  
and I see wisdom and courtesy dying,           5  
along with fine honors and all goodness;  
for I wish to have neither husband nor lord,  
nor to stay in the world of my own will.  
Recalling that all men adorn themselves with evil,  
I am strongly disdainful of all of them,           10  
and my person turns instead toward God.  
My father makes me be melancholy,  
for he wishes to turn me from serving Christ:  
I don't know to whom he wants to give me as bride.

*Correspondence between an anonymous poet  
and La Compiuta Donzella of Florence*

**Sonetto 3A (Anonimo)**

Gentil donna somma ed insegnata,  
poi c'ag[g]io inteso di voi tant'or[r]anza,  
che non credo che Morgana la fata  
né la Donna del Lago né Gostanza  
né fosse alcuna come voi presc[i]ata;      5  
e di trovare avete nominanza  
(ond'eo mi faccio un po[ca] di mirata  
c'avete di saver tant'abondanza):  
però, se no sdegnaste lo meo dire,  
vor[r]ia venire a voi, poi non sia sag[g]io,    10  
a ciò che 'n tutto mi poria chiarire  
di ciò ch'eo dotto ne lo mio corag[g]io;  
e so che molto mi poria 'ntantire  
aver contia del vostro signorag[g]io.

**Sonetto 3 (La Compiuta Donzella)**

Ornato di gran pregio e di valenza  
e risplendente di loda adornata,  
forte mi pregio più, poi v'è in plagenza  
d'avermi in vostro core rimembrata  
ed invitate a mia poca possenza      5  
per acontarvi, s'eo sono insegnata,  
come voi dite c'ag[g]io gran sapienza;  
ma certo non ne son [tanto] amantata.  
Amantata non son como vor[r]ia  
di gran vertute né di placimento;      10  
ma, qual ch'i' sia, ag[g]io buono volere  
di servire con buona cortesia  
a ciascun ch'ama senza fallimento;  
ché d'Amor sono e voglio ubidire.

**Sonetto 3B (Anonimo)**

Perc'ogni gioia ch'è rara è graziosa,  
mi son tardato, Compiuta Donzella,  
d'aver scritto a la vostra risposa  
la qual faceste a me fresca e novella.  
E ben si testimonia, per la losa      5  
che di me usaste, che voi siete quella  
in cui altezza e gran valor riposa:  
cotal a[l]bor mostr'alto sua fior bella.  
Sua fiore bella e d'amare lo frutto  
mostra 'n altezza com'è d'alto stato:      10  
però in gioia ab[b]o vostro detto tutto,  
e pregovi che mi sia perdonato  
s'io m'invitai laove sone al postutto  
ch'io non son degno d'esser presentato.

### Sonnet 3A (Anonymous)

Highest and most educated noble lady,  
I have understood such honor to be in you  
that I don't believe Morgan Le Fay  
or the Lady of the Lake, or Constance,  
or any lady could be as valorous as you are; 5  
and you have such renown in poetry  
(where I feel more than a little stupor  
that such abundance of knowledge is in you);  
but, if you don't disdain my verse  
I would want to approach you, though I'm not wise, 10  
so that you could clarify for me  
what it is I doubt deep in my heart;  
and I know that you could assist me  
by letting me befriend your ladyship.

### Sonnet 3 (La Compiuta Donzella)

You're adorned in great valor and worth  
and resplendent in decorated praise,  
so I now value myself more, since it pleased you  
to have remembered me in your heart;  
and you invite my weak powers 5  
to befriend you, if I am as educated  
with such great wisdom, as you say;  
but surely I'm not so endowed.  
I'm not so endowed as I'd like to be,  
with great virtue nor pleasantness; 10  
but, whatever I am, I have the good will  
to be of service, with fine courtliness,  
to whomever loves me without failing,  
for I belong to Love and want to obey him.

### Sonnet 3B (Anonymous)

Since every jewel that's rare is gracious,  
I've delayed, Compiuta Donzella,  
to reply to your response  
that you sent me, fresh and new.  
And it is indeed a witness for the praise 5  
that you bestowed on me, for you are that lady  
in whom high and great valor resides:  
such a tree shows its lovely flower on high.  
It shows its lovely flower and the fruit of love  
on high, just like its own high state; 10  
but I have told you all this with joy,  
and I beg you to pardon me  
if I invited myself there beforehand,  
for I'm not worthy of being presented to you.



*Two Sonnets addressed to La Compiuta Donzella*  
by Mastro Torrigiano di Firenze

**Sonetto A**

Esser donzella di trovare dotta  
sì grande meraviglia par a 'ntendre  
ca, se Ginevra fosse od Isaotta,  
ver' lor di lei se ne poria contendre;  
ed eo fo a questa meraviglia motta,           5  
ché ne voria da voi certezza aprendre:  
ca, s'egli è ver caval sonar la rotta,  
ben si poria la natura riprendre.  
Ma, se defender voglio la natura,  
dirò che siate divina Sibilla           10  
venuta per aver del mondo cura.  
Ed eo ne tegno di miglior la villa,  
e credo ch'èci miglior aventura,  
che ci è aparita si gran meravilla.

**Sonnet A**

For a damsel to be educated in composing poetry  
seems such a great marvel to comprehend  
because, if Guinevere or Isotta were here,  
she could hold her own with respect to them;  
and I say a word to this marvel           5  
because I would like to learn something with certainty;  
for, if it is truly a horse playing the crouth<sup>1</sup>  
then one would do well to castigate Nature.  
But if I wanted to defend Nature  
I would say that you are the divine Sybil           10  
who came to have the world in her care.  
And I consider our city that much the better,  
and I think it is a greater fortune  
that such a great marvel has appeared before us.

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1. According to the *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, “rotta” was a linguistic variation on the word “crotta,” a musical instrument of Celtic origin with either three or six strings, either bowed or plucked. The term “crotta” is rendered into English either as “crouth,” “cruth,” “crwth,” or “croud.” See “Ròtta” in *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, vol. 17 (Turin: UTET, 1961), 148.

## Sonetto B

S'una donzella di trovar s'ingegna  
e d'ogni ric[c]o saver s'asot[t]iglia,  
poi ch'esso par che rade volte avegna,  
a dritto se ne fa l'om meraviglia;  
ché 'l savio par la fema senpla tegna,           5  
ca per natura senno illei non piglia:  
la prima fema fue di ciò la 'nsegna,  
ch'ella fu sempla, ond'ogn'altra somiglia.  
Dunque, se l'om dicesse a la donzella  
che for natura il suo senno paresse,           10  
a me sembrara che i saria gra[n] lode:  
ca, s'om per padre malnato s'apella  
e tralignasse sì c'assai valesse,  
a tutta gente piace più, che l'ode.

## Sonnet B

If a damsel strives to compose poetry  
and sharpens herself with rich learning  
(since that seems to occur only rarely),  
then rightly does it inspire marvel;  
because the sage seems to view woman as simple           5  
since Nature doesn't affix wisdom in her—  
the first woman was a symbol of that,  
for she was simple, hence all others resemble her.  
Therefore, if a man said to the damsel  
that her wisdom seemed out of her nature,           10  
it would seem to me to be great praise of her;  
because if a man were named after an ill-born father  
and he worked so that he was worth much more,  
he would be more pleasing to all who heard of it.

*Three sonnets addressed to La Compiuta Donzella*  
by Maestro Rinuccino di Firenze<sup>2</sup>

**Sonetto I**

Gentil *Donzella*, di pregio nomata,  
degnà di laude e di tutto onore,  
ché par de voi non fu ancora nata  
né s' *Compiuta* de tutto valore,  
pare che 'n voi dimora onne fiata           5  
la deità de l'alto deo d'amore;  
de tutto *compimento* siete ornate  
e d'adornesse e di tutto bellare:  
ché 'l vostro viso dà sì gran lumera  
che non è donna ch'aggia in sé beltate       10  
ch'a voi davante non s'assicuri in cera;  
per voi tutte bellezze so' afinate,  
e ciascun fior fiorisce in sua maniera  
lo giorno quando voi vi dimorate.

**Sonnet I**

Noble damsel, named with praise,  
worthy of lauds and of all honor  
since your equal hasn't yet been born,  
nor has anyone been so fulfilled with all valor;  
it seems that, at all times, there resides in you           5  
the divinity of the highest god of Love.  
You're entirely adorned with fulfillment  
and with beauty and with loveliness  
because your face emits such strong light  
and there is no other woman who possesses beauty       10  
that, compared to you, doesn't seem darkened;  
through you all beauty is brought to perfection,  
and every flower blossoms in its own way  
on the day when you appear.

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2. All italicizations and capitalizations that suggest La Compiuta Donzella as the addressee are Stefano Carrai's in *I sonetti di Maestro Rinuccino di Firenze*. In addition, this sonnet also appears in Gianfranco Contini, "Guido Guinizelli," 474; the other two sonnets attributable to Rinuccino are not included there.

## Sonetto II

*Donzella* gaia e sag[g]ia e canoscente,  
in cui dimora tutora ed avanza  
bontà e senno e valore valente  
e biltà tanta, ch'io credo in certanza      5  
che Dio co le suo mani propiamente  
formasse voi d'angeli[ca] sembianza,  
ché non si truova tra l'umana gente  
bieltà nesuna a vostra somiglianza.  
E qual è quella che più bella pare,  
istando di voi presso (chi ciò vede,      10  
mirabil cosa sembra), sì dispare;  
ond'io son tutto in vostra merzede:  
potendo vostro servo dimorare,  
più paradiso lo mio cor non crede.

## Sonnet II

Gay and wise and knowledgeable damsel  
in whom always reside and grow  
goodness, and wisdom, and valiant valor,  
and such goodness, that I believe with certainty  
that God, with His own hands,      5  
formed you with an angelic appearance,  
for there isn't found among the human race  
any beauty that resembles yours.  
And even the woman who seems most beautiful,  
being close to you (to whomever sees it,      10  
it seems miraculous!), she thus disappears.  
Hence, I'm entirely at your mercy:  
being able to live as your servant--  
my heart doesn't believe in any greater paradise.





Soprapiacente donna, di tutto compiuto sapere, di pregio coronata, degna mia Donna Compiuta, Guittone, vero devotissimo fedel vostro, de quanto el vale e pò, umilmente se medesimo racomanda voi.

Gentil mia donna, l'onipotente Dio mise in voi sì meravigliosamente compimento di tutto bene, che maggiormente sembrate angelica criatura che terrena, in ditto e in fatto e in la sembianza vostra tutta, ché, quanto omo vede de voi, sembra mirabil cosa a ciascuno bono conoscidore. Per che non degni fummo che tanta preziosa e mirabile figura, come voi siete, abitasse intra l'umana generazione d'esto seculo mortale; ma credo che piacesse a lui di poner vo' tra noi per fare meravigliare, e perché fuste ispecchio e miradore, ove se provedesse e agenzasse ciascuna valente e piacente donna e prode omo, schifando vizio e seguendo virtù, e perché voi siete deletto e desiderio e pascimento de tutta gente, che vo' vede e ode. Or dunque, gentile mia donna, quanto el Signor nostro v'ha maggiormente allumata e smirata a compimento de tutta preziosa vertute più ch'altra donna terrena, e cusì più ch'altra donna terrena dovete intendere a lui servire e amare de tutto corale amore e de pura e de compiuta fede. E però umiliatevi a lui, riconoscendo ciò ch'avete da lui, in tal guisa che l'autezza dell'animo vostro, né la grandezza del cuore, né la beltà, né 'l piacere de l'onorata persona vostra non vo' faccia obbriare, né mettere a non calere lui che tutto ciò v'ha dato; ma ve ne caglia tanto che 'l core e 'l corpo e 'l pensieri vostro tutto sia consolato in lui servire, acciò che voi siate indela corte di paradiso altresì meravigliosamente grande come siete qui tra noi, e perché l'onorato vostro cominciamento e mezzo per preziosa fine vegna a perfezione de compiuta laude. Ché troppo fòra periglioso dannaggio e perta da pianger sempremai senza alcun conforto, se per defetto vostro voi falliste a perfetta e onorata fine.

Most pleasing lady, of all complete knowledge, crowned with merit, my worthy Accomplished Lady, Guittone, your true and most devoted faithful servant, however much he matters or can do, humbly commends himself to you.

My noble lady, Omnipotent God put into you such marvelous fulfillment of all goodness that you seem more to be an angelic creature than an earthly being in speech and action and in all your appearance because whatever part of you a person sees seems, to anyone with sound knowledge, to be a miraculous thing. We are not worthy of such a precious and marvelous figure as you living among the human race in this mortal century; but I believe it was pleasing to Him to put you among us to inspire awe, and because you are a mirror and looking-glass for every valorous and pleasing lady or courageous man to anticipate the future and act accordingly, by avoiding vices and pursuing virtues; and because you are the delight, desire, and nourishment of all the people who see or hear you. Now therefore, my noble lady, for as much as Our Lord illuminated and admired you so that you contain all precious virtue beyond any other earthly woman, you should intend to serve Him more, and love Him with all your heart, with a pure and complete faith, more than any other earthly woman. And therefore, humble yourself to Him, recognizing all the gifts you received from Him, such that neither the grandeur of your mind, nor the greatness of your heart, nor your beauty, nor the pleasure of your person cause you to forget or overlook all that He has given you; but rather, you should take care that your heart, body, and thoughts are all consoled to serve Him, so that you will be as marvelous in the court of paradise as you are among us, and so that this honored beginning of your life will come to a precious end with perfection and complete praise. Because it would be a dangerous peril and loss, to be wept over forever, if through some defect you were to fail to come to a perfect and honored end.

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