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Eisenbichler, Konrad.

The Sword and the Pen: Women, Politics and Poetry in Sixteenth-Century Siena.

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“In the mid-sixteenth century, as the ancient republic of Siena was coming to an end, a group of women suddenly appeared on the city’s cultural landscape and began to compose poetry that attracted the attention not only of the local literati but also of prominent writers elsewhere in Italy”(1). So begins Konrad Eisenbichler’s book on sixteenth-century women poets in Siena, a work that has garnered the attention of Italian scholars and was awarded the 2013 *Premio Internazionale Flaiano per l’italianistica*. The work builds on Eisenbichler’s own extensive archival research and that of other scholars who have shown that Italian women wrote in all genres over the ages. Historians of the early modern period, such as Sarah Gwyneth Ross and Diane Robin, have suggested that if women’s writing has been lost, forgotten, or excluded from national canons, it is too simplistic to argue that such works were written in isolation and marginalized. The history of how gender functioned on the literary scene, what it meant at different periods, and how it linked to other networks is central to Eisenbichler’s study.

Eisenbichler presents his research in four narrative tales in which gender implies complementarity and participation, not exclusion. The opening chapter tells the story of a dialogue reopened by an aspiring Sienese *literato*, Alessandro Piccolomini. Piccolomini visits Petrarch’s tomb and writes a sonnet

that joins topical debates over which is more powerful in immortalizing great deeds, the sword or the pen (hence the title of Eisenbichler's work). Like others of his time, Piccolomini actively solicited a cultivated and noble female reading public, as shown in the dedication of his translations—book 6 of Virgil's *Aeneid* (1540–44) and later Xenophon's *Oeconomicon* (1538)—to Eufrasia Placidi de' Venturi. All we have of this Eufrasia, however, is the constructed image of a woman who supposedly “triumphed in gaiety, sensibility, wit and modesty” (22), but who could have functioned simply to showcase the poetic skills of her (male) praiser. Piccolomini also believed that getting others to write about his poetry was a good way to ensure his own immortality, so he solicited responses to his sonnet from members of both the *Infiammati* and the *Intronati*. Significantly, though, he involved many women interlocutors, including Laudomia Forteguerra, Virginia Martini Casolani Salvi, Virginia Luti Salvi, Eufrasia Marzi Borghesi, Camilla Piccolomini de' Petroni, and Girolama Biringucci de' Piccolomini. Of this supposed publication (entitled *La Tombaide*), only a few partial manuscripts with female responses have survived (233). Nevertheless, the dialogue between Alessandro Piccolomini and female players in this literary world shows women participating in what Eisenbichler calls a virtual academy of women (217), since they responded to male writers and did not write in isolation or solely of their isolation. While they neither immortalized Piccolomini nor his poetry, they showed their education and poetic skills while voicing diverse opinions in the political, religious, and topical questions of the time.

Eisenbichler puts in a tremendous amount of archival work to identify these six women. They belonged to famous, and sometimes infamous, families who were not always on the same side of the power plays orchestrated by the Hapsburg and Valois families for control of Siena and Italy. The female responses allow for portraits of women schooled in Petrarchan poetics. Like a good historical detective confronting unknowables about his women, Eisenbichler amasses evidence, witnesses, and corroborators. He adds historical data to their literary representations and then applies literary analysis to their extant writings before making cautious conclusions. For example, because Laudomia Forteguerra never responded to Piccolomini, Eisenbichler proposes that her silent role allowed her to play both Laura and Beatrice in this exchange. Virginia Martini Casolani Salvi, on the other hand, responds rhyme for rhyme in order to protest that she cannot go to the tomb. Virginia Luti Salvi and Eufrasia Marzi Borghese are

more cautious in warning Piccolomini of his possible heretical religious beliefs. The poems, and Eisenbichler's historical research, show that Sienese women were involved in group activities that engaged them singly and collectively, thus distinguishing them from the images of the isolated Italian woman writer of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While himself dancing through problems of legend, convention, and the written word, Eisenbichler opens a series of windows on the minefields these women navigated in their own poetry.

In the following three chapters, Eisenbichler examines as case studies Aurelia Petrucci (chapter 2), Laudomia Forteguerra (chapter 3), and Virginia Martini Salvi (chapter 4). Aurelia Petrucci had the most volumes dedicated to her, including the first edition of Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi d'amore*. With only two extant sonnets in her name, what we know about her voice is what she wrote in her oft-quoted sonnet warning the warring factions of Siena that they must solve their problems internally. Putting together what was written about her as a woman interested in science (albeit one who could not read Latin), Eisenbichler demonstrates how gender functioned in the larger struggle for the vernacular language as well as in the struggle to publicize new scientific knowledge.

Only Virginia Martini Salvi left a large number of sonnets and poems. Some of her works were published after the fall of Siena, and her *glosa* of Petrarch's lyrics from the *Rerum Vulgarium fragmenta* was set to music by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina and the Flemish Jean de Turnhout. Yet Laudomia Forteguerra has the most constructed "self"—including, as Eisenbichler has argued in other venues, that of being the first lesbian poet in the Italian tradition. She first appeared as a fictional character in Marc'Antonio Piccolomini's dialogue (1538) on whether woman's beauty is produced by nature, design, or chance. Laudomia, as a naïve young woman, argues for chance—a risky business since the belief was heretical. Eisenbichler then analyzes the same-sex sonnets she wrote to Margaret of Austria, whose life was also a subject of scandalous gossip. Both women were pawns, albeit strong ones, in the Hapsburg game of marriage for territory. Alessandro Piccolomini himself "outed" Laudomia by commenting on one of her poems to Margaret in his lecture at the newly formed Academy of the *Infiammati*. Was her sonnet motivated by lesbian desire or by family politics, or was it part of the debate that women (like men) could reach perfection though love expressed in poetry, a less than popular opinion argued by Agnolo Firenzuola? The weight of posterity's gendering is yet another layer

in the myth surrounding Laudomia. She eventually becomes an Italian Joan of Arc, trying to save Siena during the siege, a role the most political and probably most talented poet of them all—Virginia Martini Salvi—is denied when she is forced into exile due to her family's support of the French.

Our knowledge of how gender functions on many levels during the Renaissance has been greatly enhanced by Eisenbichler's work. The inclusion of sonnets and poems composed by several other Siennese women, and their excellent translations, raises many more questions than it answers on the history of gender in Italy—which is Eisenbichler's goal. A job well done.

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