

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Mardikes, Catherine M., and Elissa B. Weaver, general eds.;  
Courtney K. Quintance, biography ed.; and Charles M. Cooney  
and Mark Olsen, programmers. Italian Women Writers.  
Database

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**Italian Women Writers. Database.**

Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Library, 2001. Accessed 2 February 2022.  
lib.uchicago.edu/efts/IWW.

Despite their under-representation in scholarship and the canon of works studied in undergraduate and graduate classrooms, there are an abundance of Renaissance and early modern Italian women who wrote treatises, poetry, plays, religious tracts, and dialogues. They exchanged letters, attended informal literary salons, joined academies, were members of artistic circles, performed at court, and exchanged ideas with one another and their male contemporaries. Some of them, like the Venetian courtesan Veronica Franco (1546–91), were bestsellers, many of them were famous or infamous, some were highly regarded, some were scorned, yet it has been difficult to grasp the full extent of the corpus of their works, trace their histories and biographies, follow their intellectual genealogies and influences, and insert them into literary and intellectual history.

While their letters, poetry, and plays were circulated in manuscript or published editions, some of these only exist in one or two copies and are only accessible in archives, except in the cases where a scholarly edition has been published. Of course, the numbers of these scholarly editions are just a fraction of early modern women's writing. Until the last half century, much of this work remained unread and unstudied except by specialists with access to archival holdings, with the exception of wonderful editions published by the series *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* shepherded by Margaret King and Albert Rabil, Jr. (The series was formerly published by the University of Chicago Press and is now published by Iter Press.)

The Italian Women Writers (IWW) project led by the University of Chicago Library has dramatically changed this picture by making available for the first time the writings of these women, many of whom had been largely forgotten or ignored. While IWW does not exclusively contain works by Renaissance and early modern Italian writers, it is the most extensive corpus that is publicly available. It provides access to some of the more well-known writers such as Isabella Andreini (1562–1604), Laura Cereta (1469–99), and Vittoria Colonna (1492–1547), and more obscure writers like the poet Elisabetta Dalle Valle

(n.d.–1614) and the mystic Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi (1566–1607), as well as numerous others.

The database is divided into several search features. The first search feature is “Find Authors,” where one can find biographic information. Each entry includes known biographic details such as alternate names, parentage, siblings, children, marital status, lovers, and occupation. In the individual entries, links are provided to bibliographic entries on known editions, alternate editions, and references to forthcoming print editions and electronic editions in Italian where available. Some entries also have portraits. These biographic and bibliographic details make the project highly useful for scholars interested in taking a deeper dive into these women’s writings and invaluable to those looking for further editions. Built on PhiloLogic, an open-source suite of relational database software developed by the University of Chicago Library and the ARTFL Project for large encoded databases, the search interface is highly useful and allows for fine-grained searches, including searching by the usual terms of author name, title, year and place of birth, century, year and place of death.

The search interface includes other indexing terms that are highly useful and provide interesting patterns, including region, class, maternal status, religion, and prizes for any accolades that the author earned—for example, “married + Tuscany + dates.” Another search function is “Find Divisions,” which allows one to search for specific prefaces, acts, scenes, epigraphs, and tables of contents. Users can also search for letters, including by the year written and the recipient. A great advantage is that searches can be sorted by century, which is most useful for scholars interested in the medieval and early modern periods. This provides the user with a sense of the full extent of women’s writings that we have yet to study.

The search function “Find Editions” allows one to search according to author, editor, translator, title, place of publication, year of publication, and alternate title, which is a highly useful feature for a period in which titles and author names could vary. Also useful in this database is the ability to search by genre, dedicatee, table of contents, and subject. And the project provides a search feature for full text titles where available, which sorts by author, title, year written, dialect, composition, and prizes won in addition to biographical information.

Not only can users search for authors using the above search functions, but they can also search in the full texts that are available in the database using a basic keyword search, which can be sorted by author, title, year written, genre, composition, and region; an advanced search is also available. It is perhaps this feature that is most exciting as it allows users to enter a word or term (*vendetta, amore, cuore*) as used in the texts. The keyword search returns a list of occurrences in context or by line. The user can then re-sort results by search term(s), words to the left of the term, words to the right of the term, author, and title, and can then sort the terms by absolute and relative frequency (*cuore*, for example, is used most often in the phrase *cuore di donna*) and by facet, which allows one to see which terms are used most frequently by which authors as well as sorting by date and genre. Lucrezia Marinella (1571–1653), for example, used the term *cielo* or sky in her writing 173 times, *amore* or love was used 324 times by women writers in 1617, and *Dio* or God, which appears in the database 6,367 times, was used by Vittoria Colonna, known for her religious poetry, 390 times. This extensive database search with co-location and frequency could prove highly useful for corpus linguistics scholars and could fuel an abundance of future studies.

These above features and search functions make IWW a useful tool for the classroom. While the teaching apparatus is minimal (it does not include a teaching resource, for example), its user interface is intuitive enough to be used by students. The database itself has been around since 2001 and thus is a bit clunky although utilitarian. It is unfortunate that the website does not appear to be maintained on a regular basis and it has not been updated recently since some links are broken and certain searches return a “server error” message. Still, it is a highly useful and usable resource and an inspiring model for the recovery of women’s voices. It was one of the first digital resources I used and one I still use frequently today.

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