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See also **Brigit; Hagiography; Ireland; Misogyny; Monasticism and Nuns, Celtic; Supernatural Women; Virile Women**

LITERATURE, ITALIAN

The issue of gender is central in early Italian literature and is clearly posed by the texts themselves: Italian literary texts of this period feature male lover-poets and the female figures that they love. This entry sketches a paradigm for evaluating the treatment of women in this tradition, looking at Italian literature from its lyric origins to Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch through the lens of the competing ideological systems to which these authors subscribe: on the one hand, they subscribe to the ideology of courtly love, which permeates the beautiful love poetry for which the tradition is so well known, and, on the other, to an often violent, anti-courtly ideology that permeates their moralistic poetry. These two ideologies underwrite very different attitudes toward women and toward gender.

Courtly vs. Anti-Courtly

The dialectic between courtly and anti-courtly ideologies is a historical constant in this tradition: it is present not only in Dante, but in poets before Dante, like Guittone d'Arezzo, and it is a major feature of Boccaccio's work as well. Poetry based in a courtly logic is narcissistic and centered on the male lover-poet; the female object of desire serves as a

screen on which he projects questions and concerns about himself. Whether we are speaking of the early courtly poetry of the Sicilian Giacomo da Lentini or the later theologized courtliness of Dante and his fellow *stilnovisti* (poets of the "new style"), including Guido Cavalcanti and Cino da Pistoia, the fundamental logic of the courtly poem remains narcissistic, as Dante acknowledges in the *Vita nuova*, when he sets himself the task of breaking from it. The didactic works of writers like Guittone d'Arezzo, Dante in his late moral *canzoni*, and Boccaccio, on the other hand, are marked by a utilitarian stamp: women are supposed to *use* this literature, to be instructed by it, to learn from it. These texts demonstrate a need to communicate with women, to treat them as subjects who can learn, rather than as objects to be desired.

The courtly conventions of troubadour love poetry—based on the notion of the lover's feudal service to *midons* (Italian *madonna*), his lady, from whom he expects a *guerdon* (Italian *guiderdone*), or reward—were transplanted to the court of Frederick II in Palermo. Palermo became the capital of the first group of Italian vernacular lyric poets, the so-called Sicilian School, whose leader was Giacomo da Lentini, most likely the inventor of the sonnet. At the heart of troubadour poetry is an unresolved tension between the poet-lover's allegiance to the lady and his allegiance to God, a conflict that Giacomo distills in the sonnet *Io m'aggio posto in core a Dio servire*, where the first quatrain identifies one pole of his desire—he wants to serve God, to go to paradise—while the second quatrain poses the problem: he does not want to go without his lady. The last verse brings together the two terms of the conflict (the lady and paradise) in a nonresolution that keeps the focus of the poem squarely on the "divided" (*diviso*) self of the lover-poet.

From Sicily the courtly lyric moved north to the communes of Tuscany, where it was cultivated by Guittone d'Arezzo, the *caposcuola* of the Tuscan School; Guittone writes love poetry in the courtly style, but unlike Giacomo da Lentini, he also writes moralistic poems like his didactic poem on female chastity, *Altra fiata aggio già, donne, parlato*. This canzone offers an early model of a paradigm that Dante will adopt, whereby paternalistic morality defeats courtliness and ironically enhances the status of women by conceiving them as moral agents. Women are moral agents in Guittone's *canzone*, albeit weak-minded ones, who need to be prodded and pushed in the direction of virtue. Although highest praise is reserved for absolute chastity, Guittone allows that a woman may choose marital chastity over absolute chastity, and he acknowledges a woman's right to desire a husband. Guittone is explicit about the

double standard that applies to the sexes: carnal vice is bad in men, but much worse in women. The importance of cover is one of the topoi common to moralizing discourses on female conduct that we find in *Altra fiata*, along with the stress on appropriate speech and the caution against ornamentation. It is significant that Guittone directs his instructions on covering dress and modesty not to a male protector but directly to the woman, who is thus placed in charge of covering herself. Guittone ends *Altra fiata*, a poem that addresses women and “women’s issues” throughout, by affirming the moral value and utility of a discourse to and about women.

Dante

The utility of discourse is a theme common to texts addressed to women, as we see in one of Dante’s great moral poems, *Doglia mi reca nello core ardire*, a *canzone* whose signature anti-courtliness allows Dante to attack women for their “vile desire” of base men, rather than focusing—as courtly poetry does—exclusively on male desire. It may seem counterintuitive to read the harsh paternalism of *Doglia mi reca* in a progressive light, but Dante accomplishes a lot in this *canzone*. The ladies of *Doglia mi reca* are definitely off the courtly pedestal. They have more to worry about than the behavior of their male lovers: they have to take care of themselves, including their immortal souls, which Dante cautions are in danger of perishing. They have acquired the status of moral agents and although they do not yet speak—an activity for which we have to await characters like Francesca da Rimini in the *Commedia*, where Dante’s move to construe women as moral agents rather than as mirrors for male poets is fulfilled—they are expected to be able students, fully receiving and intellectually digesting the poet’s message. Whereas the courtly *canzone* frequently opens with a conventional address to ladies who then disappear from the poem (Cavalcanti’s *Donna me prega*, Dante’s *Donne ch’avete intelletto d’amore*), the female addressees whom Dante enlists in the struggle against vice in *Doglia mi reca* are summoned again at mid-*canzone*: “because I want my discourse to be of use to you, I’ll come down from the general to the particular, and to a lighter form of expression, so that it may be less hard to understand.” Dante here demonstrates a pedagogic pragmatism that may well be a hallmark of texts addressed to women: the emphasis on the utility of discourse—“perchè lo meo dire *util vi sia*”—anticipates the *Decameron*, a text addressed to women not once or twice but consistently and indefatigably.

Boccaccio

In the *Commedia* women explode the courtly code by becoming speakers, in the case of Beatrice a veritable *Beatrix loquax*, and in Boccaccio’s texts as well women are endowed with language. Boccaccio is the Italian author who explicitly places the category “woman” (rather than just a particular woman) at the core of his opus, which ranges from early courtly works in the vernacular to the misogyny of the later *Corbaccio*, also in the vernacular, and the Latin encyclopedic *De mulieribus claris*. At the center of this great woman-oriented literary production stands the *Decameron*. Boccaccio defends his targeting of female readers precisely on the basis of their greater need and his greater utility. Women are cloistered and enclosed, constrained by the wishes of their families and immured in their rooms, while men have access to a host of distracting activities: “men, if they want, are able to walk abroad, see and hear many things, go fowling, hunting, fishing, riding and gambling, or attend to their business affairs” (*Proemio*, 12). This dichotomy between the relative access of men and women to the benefits of human and social intercourse—including sexual—is the ethical template on which Boccaccio constructs his masterpiece.

The *Decameron* belongs to a specific tradition, which, if not feminist, is arguably the tradition in which feminism could later take root. This is the tradition in which female interlocutors are not just tropes, not just part of the poet’s self-construction, as they are for courtly poets. Standing between courtliness on the one hand and misogyny on the other, this tradition is moralizing, didactic, utilitarian, pragmatic—and truly addresses issues of women in society.

Petrarch

This tradition—starting with Guittone d’Arezzo and going forward to Boccaccio—is in my view the more open and progressive toward women. It is extremely interesting, from this perspective, that Petrarch did not write moralizing *canzoni* to women like Guittone’s *Altra fiata* and Dante’s *Doglia mi reca*. His vernacular output does not include such poems; when he turns Boccaccio’s programmatically ambiguous Griselda story (*Decameron* 10.10) into a treatise on female obedience he also translates it into Latin, indicating that his target audience is not female. Petrarch forged his identity against Dante’s by returning in his vernacular lyric collection *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* to the courtly paradigm that Dante

abandoned, thus institutionalizing a model of gender relations that endured for centuries and that, through the extraordinary network that was European literary Petrarchism, became a cultural trope. In another demonstration—this time in the area of gender roles—of what it means that Petrarch triumphed over Dante as the model for subsequent generations of Italian poets, we can hazard the following: the commitment to female historicity and selfhood that we find, for instance, in Dante's treatment of the damned Francesca da Rimini, is not a feature that we associate with Petrarch, and it is Petrarch who set the agenda for the subsequent Italian literary tradition.

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See also Beatrice; Boccaccio, Giovanni; Chastity and Chaste Marriage; Conduct Literature; Courtly Love; Dante Alighieri; Defenses of Women; Education, Lay; Griselda; Italy; Literature, Occitan; Misogyny; Petrarch; Women Authors: Italian

LITERATURE, LATIN

At the turn of the third millennium, the field of medieval women's studies in general, and in particular the still quite under-researched subfield of Latin literatures, is very much in flux. Since the topic has only recently found serious scholarly attention, there are no definitive studies, but there is a great deal of activity, with an astonishing array of very high-quality collaborative ventures (essay collections, handbooks) leading the way. Recent studies have been opening up multiple new perspectives, and also complicating what we might mean by "women in literature," using newer strains of cultural studies, feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and queer theory, as well as new archival research, to rethink women's roles, and the gendering of medieval Latin literature in general.

A few initial cautions are necessary. First, it is debatable whether there is such a thing as "medieval Latin literature." Unlike the vernacular literatures, which have fairly tight geographical and even temporal boundaries, "medieval Latin" covers all of western Europe and as much as a thousand years, from about 500 to about 1500. Second, we need to consider what we mean by "literature." Since the vast majority of written texts in the medieval West are in Latin, by a broad definition—"all written texts"—"Latin literature" would cover almost the entire intellectual output of the millennium under consideration. By a narrow