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Kolsky, Stephen. *The Ghost of Boccaccio: Writings on Famous Women in Renaissance Italy*. Late Medieval and Early Modern Studies; 7. Turnhout: Brepols, 2005.

With *The Ghost of Boccaccio: Writings on Famous Women in Renaissance Italy*, Stephen Kolsky continues a line of research begun with his 1991 book on Mario Equicola, a courtier at the court of Isabella d'Este, which was followed by *Courts and Courtiers in Renaissance Northern Italy* (2003), and *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio's* De mulieribus claris (2003). His interest in the question of gender in Renaissance Italy, especially in regard to illustrious women, has thus been a long time developing. *The Ghost of Boccaccio: Writings on Famous Women in Renaissance Italy* continues where *The Genealogy of Women* by necessity leaves off, moving from Boccaccio's seminal text to its legacy of a "discursive preoccupation," manifested in the form of an extended "*querelle des femmes*" (1–2) whose participants employ the "internal contradictions and ambiguities" of *De mulieribus claris* to uphold diverse positions (225). If Boccaccio marks a point of departure, Kolsky views Baldassar Castiglione's *Il libro del cortegiano* of 1528 as offering a "critical point of arrival," in which the debate sparked by *De mulieribus claris* is reconsidered and finally given a more courtly reconciliation with attention paid of necessity to Christian values, a "summa" of the question of women in Renaissance Italy (11, 229–30).

To navigate from Boccaccio's encyclopedic work to Castiglione's manual of courtly conduct, Kolsky limits the scope of his study to the years 1480–1530, examining the responses of eight male authors to *De mulieribus claris*: Vespasiano da Bisticci, Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti, Jacopo Foresti, Mario Equicola, Agostino Strozzi, Bartolomeo Goggio, Galeazzo Flavio Capra, and Henricus Cornelius Agrippa, tracing an intellectual geography that includes such prominent northern Italian courtly locales as Ferrara and Mantua (two courts described by Kolsky as forming a nexus of influence and ideas), while reaching out to other European centers of humanism. Readers interested in the works discussed in *The Ghost of Boccaccio: Writings on Famous Women in Renaissance Italy* will not be able to find all of them in modern editions; however, currently Vespasiano da Bisticci's *Il libro delle lodi delle donne*, Galeazzo Flavio Capra's *Della eccellenza e dignità delle donne*, Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti's *Gynevera de le clare donne*, Agostino Strozzi's *La defensione delle donne d'autore anonimo*, Henricus Cornelius Agrippa's *Declamatio de nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus*, and Mario Equicola's *De Mulieribus delle Donne* are available as of this writing. (In addition, Kolsky states in his footnotes that he is currently at work preparing critical editions of other,

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similar texts regarding women, specifically, Arienti's *Trattato della pudicizia* and *Elogio di Isabella*.) Kolsky includes a bibliography of his primary sources, separated into manuscripts and printed sources, which includes an appendix of Arienti's citations from *De mulieribus claris*, as well as the usual bibliography of secondary sources and an index, handy for locating persons mentioned in *The Ghost of Boccaccio* and in its group of texts.

Overall, Kolsky offers a nuanced analysis of the authors' writings on women, drawing upon his previous reading of the *De mulieribus claris* to again eschew simple dichotomies that would pit proto-feminist views more easily embraced by modern readers against misogynistic ones; or that would support seemingly more disinterested and/or theoretical examinations of women's roles against those that display signs of authorial self-interest or opportunism at court. However, Kolsky does not overlook the importance of authorial choice in "extratextual" matters: manuscript or printed, Latin or vernacular, patron-supported or patron-seeking, authors' decisions regarding their texts' production, circulation, and audience are scrutinized as an important though unwritten and/or material component of their arguments.

Kolsky describes his study as presenting a "cluster" of works that bring to life an often forgotten stage "in the development of strategies devised by men to shape women's lives" (225). Although at times he discounts specific feminist approaches to texts which he sees as overly reductive or too confined by a particular theoretical frame, he nonetheless generally embraces academic feminism as having reintroduced scholars to the importance of this Renaissance *querelle des femmes* and of gender in general and thus having been responsible for various forerunners to his own research. Kolsky's synthesizing approach serves him well as he moves within the constellation of his selected authors, usually with attention to their context and intertexts, devoting a chapter each to Vespasiano da Bisticci and Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti, and combining Jacopo Foresti, Mario Equicola, and Agostino Strozzi into one chapter surveying the debate regarding women in Ferrara and Mantua; and, similarly, he groups together in his fourth chapter Bartolomeo Goggio, Galeazzo Flavio Capra, and Henricus Cornelius Agrippa, all of whom strikingly argue for female superiority in the final flurry of this stage of the debate on women in Italy. With this approach, Kolsky also attempts to elicit the delicate ironies, ambiguities, and symbolic exchanges surrounding such texts, especially in regard to such prominent female patrons such as Isabella d'Este (13–14). Likewise, he strives to situate these authors within the debates of their time, with reference to the cogent Christian and Aristotelian arguments, rather than strictly along a reductive continuum from conservative to radical vis-à-vis patriarchal notions of women's place. Although Kolsky usually

provides English quotations, his footnotes offer these quotations in their original language, thus making his book perhaps more accessible to scholars who are not Italianists while satisfying those who are.

Progressing chronologically, Kolsky's analysis demonstrates that for his group of authors, women serve as a measure of societal health, a repository of cultural values, and a mirror for male identity and masculine roles. Accordingly, women can be associated with social "renovation," whether a return to past traditions or the creation of new patterns suitable for courtly life is proposed by the text. Additionally, the texts he examines, though not always explicitly conduct manuals, reflect the changing mores of their era in their prescriptive nature, stimulated by the ambivalence surrounding female celebrity (fame borders uneasily herein upon infamy), which often implicitly challenges male normativity even if ultimately serving to reify it. The authors Kolsky discusses are united in their challenge to the legacy of *De mulieribus claris*, which as Kolsky notes lacks a sustained theoretical apparatus for its presentation of female biographies (6), thus affording space for the later reconfiguration of female images and roles by these Renaissance figures. With *De mulieribus claris* as their contested "architext," Kolsky's eight authors espouse an array of positions, buttressed by Boccaccio and Christian scriptures, positions which can be roughly and reservedly categorized as ranging from radical to conservative. Nonetheless, Kolsky observes, each text in describing the female reinscribes male authority as an arbiter of femininity, however carefully negotiated — as, for example, the convolutions of a male voice asserting female authority to govern in the case of Equicola, who wishes to advance both himself and his potential female patrons such as Isabella d'Este and her friend Margherita Cantelmo.

In conclusion, with *The Ghost of Boccaccio*, which smoothly takes its reader through this phase of Renaissance and humanist constructions of gender, Kolsky illuminates not only these eight authors' relatively unknown texts, but also Boccaccio and Castiglione; his preface and to some extent his conclusion would well serve students of Boccaccio and the Renaissance seeking a brief primer in the intersections of gender, textual materiality, and the court in Renaissance Italy (although, as Kolsky notes, scholarly works of a broader scope are necessary to appreciate these and other Renaissance texts fully). In addition, *The Ghost of Boccaccio* will interest scholars familiar with the courts of northern Italy, in particular the Estense court, although Kolsky focuses of course upon textual analysis.

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