



Frédérique Verrier. *Le miroir des Amazones: Amazones, viragos et guerrières dans la littérature italienne des XVe et XVIe siècles*

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Frédérique Verrier. *Le miroir des Amazones: Amazones, viragos et guerrières dans la littérature italienne des XV^e et XVI^e siècles.*

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This study explores the figure of the female warrior and the question of the military aptitude of women in Italian literature of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The introduction announces that the volume's four chapters correspond to the genres of biography, treatise, history, and epic poem, each with its distinct treatment of the question (didactic, polemical, historical, and poetic). This division is useful, albeit somewhat artificial, and thus references to works such as Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* and Domenichi's *La nobiltà delle donne* are spread across various chapters. The author provides a wealth of primary sources when discussing biographies, treatises, and histories, including some lesser-known works not republished after the sixteenth century, while the treatment of the epic is less satisfactory.

The first chapter opens with a description of the virago in works celebrating illustrious women by Boccaccio, Sabadino degli Arienti, and Lucrezia Marinella, and then proceeds by theme rather than by author. Verrier frequently offers insights on how perspectives regarding women can be understood as mirrors of society. For example, she finds that the positive treatment of the "rustic" *virago* arising from the peasantry goes beyond the "questione della donna" and is tied to a democratization of the military and the ideal of a meritocracy in military and social life (49).

The second chapter covers various attitudes regarding the martial aptitude of women found in civil and military treatises. Verrier argues that increasing openness to female involvement in battle corresponds to a shifting emphasis in warfare from physical force to mental agility and astuteness. In this context, she contrasts Boccaccio's assumption that women's physical weakness was accompanied by an intellectual inferiority (apart from his illustrious exceptions) with later treatises in which women's physical weakness becomes inversely the gauge of their intellectual superiority. At the same time, she notes that such an argument could give rise to ambiguities and contradictions since the very astuteness of women that make them adept in warfare could be turned around to demonstrate their falseness in all spheres of activity.

In noting that texts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries extend the figure of the Amazon to Africa, Asia, and America, Verrier points to recent discoveries and subsequent "récits de voyage" that describe women performing tasks traditionally reserved for men in Western European society. While she makes the important point that these alternative scenarios reveal the division of roles between the sexes to be culturally and not biologically determined, at the same time she misses the fact that such travelogues also relied on ancient accounts. The passages cited from a sixteenth century publication by Johann Boemus regarding the Egyptians (104) were not the result of recent voyages of exploration, but anecdotes from Herodotus's *Histories*, available at the time in the Latin and Italian translations of Valla and Boiardo. Herodotus would have also provided a useful

reference point for the cultural relativism the author uncovers in Renaissance travel literature.

The third chapter maps out the actual participation of women in military actions during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries through chronicles and contemporary histories. Verrier addresses the problem of rape and prostitution, the presence of daughters in military campaigns, the example of women actively defending their besieged cities, and the progressive normalization and legitimization of firearms which allowed for a greater presence of women in the military. The information provided is useful for measuring the representations of female warriors in biographies and treatises against the historical relation of women to war. Particularly fascinating were the accounts of unexceptional women who rose to defend their families and cities under siege. Verrier argues that in such cases the domestic space, the traditional realm of women, was extended to the city walls.

The female warrior of the epic, occasionally mentioned in passing during the first three chapters, was the announced subject of chapter 4. The chapter title, however, indicates a different direction, that of “réductions et parades,” and indeed much of the chapter deals with miscellaneous subjects (parades, carnival, folklore, domestic battles). When Verrier does turn her attention to the epic, the treatment is disappointingly reductive. The opening paragraph anticipates her thesis: “on verra comment les poèmes épiques, malgré les libertés consenties par la fiction, font de l’expérience amazonienne une impasse et proposent aux viragos des solutions ‘bourgeoises’ de compromis” (173). This theme was discussed in Ariosto studies with regard to Bradamante’s “transformation” from intrepid warrior to dutiful wife, and Verrier neither offers new insights regarding the episode nor attempts to support her thesis through other cases.

Part of the problem is an almost exclusive reliance on Ariosto. Thus a single moment from the *Furioso* is used to exemplify such a general statement as “Les paladines dissimulent leur chevelure pour abuser les hommes sur leur sexe, car ceux-ci refuseraient des les affronter, s’ils les savaient femmes” (93); similarly, one episode is offered to support the generalization “toute la poésie épique du XVI^e siècle et du premier tiers du XVII^e siècle s’efforcera de normaliser et de féminiser les Amazones” (297). As a result, the multiplicity and richness of romance episodes are reduced to a static point of view.

Boiardo and Tasso are cited along with Ariosto in the introduction, yet their epics are absent from the bibliography just as their female warriors are absent from the study (Tasso’s Clorinda is simply mentioned in passing in the initial chapter on biographies). Verses from three other epics are cited from Tomalin’s 1982 study of the warrior heroine in Italian literature. The pages on Moderata Fonte’s *Tredici canti del Floridoro*, while a welcome inclusion, are not placed within the larger context of the chivalric epic.

The section entitled “le syndrome d’Hercule,” regarding men’s fear of powerful women, begins with the following affirmation: “La promotion de la femme signifie la déchéance de l’homme” (179), and goes on to relate the militarization of women to the domestication of men. Once again, the epics do not support such

a view. On the contrary, it is the luxurious *maga* and not the female warrior who “effeminizes” the knight by depriving him of his martial valor and identity. Attention to the epic paradigms in which the female warrior is the friend/beloved/wife on equal terms with her male counterpart would have offset the author’s insistence that in Italian Renaissance literature the militarization of the female necessarily brought about the emasculation of the male.

In sum, despite the reservations stated above, I found this volume to be a valuable contribution to the “questione della donna” in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, offering a viable method of testing “representation” in literature against “reality” in non-fictional writing. Verrier not only presents a vast array of primary texts on the subject, but is interested in uncovering the various forces and ideologies at play. Although some of her assertions are more convincing than others, the volume has much to offer regarding the social and psychological motives behind attitudes running through two centuries of writing about women and warfare.

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