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The Ghost of Boccaccio originated with Stephen Kolsky's studies of Mario Equicola under the guidance of Conor Fahy, and follows in the wake of his recent

books on Equicola, Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*, and the north Italian courts. Put succinctly, this new book examines "the response of eight male writers to the legacy of the *De mulieribus claris* in Renaissance Italy" (2). Kolsky offers detailed readings of discourses on women written principally in Bologna, Ferrara, Mantua, and Milan between 1480 and 1530. Along with a close reading of the texts in question, Kolsky considers the relevance of each writer's social context and intended audience.

As Kolsky points out in the introduction, the *De mulieribus claris* alternated uneasily between a historical presentation of the deeds of famous women and a moralizing judgment of them according to traditional ideals of masculine and feminine. The writers examined in this study, in selectively appropriating different aspects of Boccaccio's work, express a wide divergence of views on women's rightful place in society. The Florentine Vespasiano da Bisticci and Jacopo Foresti da Bergamo represent the most conservative writers of the group. Reminiscent of collections of saints' lives, Bisticci's work "was structured according to the conventional categories of virgins, wives and widows" (26). Foresti, an Augustinian monk who lived mostly in Brescia, sought to reinforce "traditional female stereotypes and female subordination" that appeared to be losing ground in the Ferrarese court (7, 118–19).

Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti, Galeazzo Flavio Capra, and Agostino Strozzi, are authors of more transitional texts which combine conventional notions of female virtue with an openness toward the greater agency of women in the north Italian courts. Sabadino degli Arienti, a Bolognese intellectual also connected to the courts of Ferrara and Mantua, composed works that legitimized the exercise of political power by exceptional elite women, provided that they upheld traditional standards of modest female behavior. Capra, associated with the Sforza court in Milan, made an inconsistent and contradictory argument for the superiority of women, basing his claim on women's greater adherence to Christian virtues. Strozzi, while proclaiming the natural equality between the sexes, likewise praised contemporary women for their adherence to Christian values while further entrenching the idea of women's subordination to men.

In contrast, the most radical writers — Bartolomeo Goggio, Mario Equicola, and Henricus Cornelius Agrippa — rejected the old stereotypes and conventional models of female behavior. As early as 1487, Goggio dedicated a treatise to Duchess Eleonora d'Aragona of Ferrara criticizing the inferior social and legal status of women on the basis of the essential equality of the sexes. Equicola, writing for Eleonora's daughter, Isabella d'Este, criticized convention and official institutions as artificial constructs stifling female activity, and he provided "examples of oppositional women who had broken free from the gendered restrictions of marriage or the convent, or who had widened the ordinary boundaries of such institutions" (7). The German scholar Agrippa, although residing outside Italy, was nevertheless cognizant of the Italian *questione della donna* and made extensive use of Equicola's treatise, incorporating some material verbatim.

By situating these works in their social context, Kolsky shows the extent to which the increased presence of high-ranking women in the public life of the court

led to debate over women's role in society. The Ferrara-Mantua court in particular, thanks to Eleonora d'Aragona and Isabella d'Este, was "a dynamic centre of writing that privileged notions of female worth and visibility, power and agency" (14). Goggio's work lent support to Eleonora's active role in the governing of the Ferrarese state, while the biographies subsequently devised by Equicola and Strozzi served as guarantors of Isabella's aspirations to power. Indeed, evidence suggests that Isabella herself was behind the composition of Equicola's treatise.

In sum, Kolsky's engaging study shows that writings on women that appeared in Italy between Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* and Castiglione's *Libro del Cortegiano*, far from being simple rhetorical or encomiastic exercises, constituted a battle of ideas over the place of women in contemporary society. Although the war of words was waged by men, the most forward-looking ideas were presented in response to pressure from Italy's most powerful female patrons and gained further currency through their appropriation and circulation beyond the peninsula. This book should appeal to a broad range of readers interested in the Italian Renaissance and women's studies.

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