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Early Modern Europe: The Female Perspective

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Mary Andino

Early Modern Europe: The Female Perspective

This collection of texts about women and early modern Italy commenced, with some serendipity, during my first semester of undergraduate study. As a freshman with low registration priority, the only history class open to me was “Women’s Lives in Renaissance Italy.” I had given little thought to women’s lives in the past, other than being glad I was a woman in the twenty-first century and not the fifteenth. This course began my collection of texts, which has directed my scholarly development and led me to my current position as a graduate student, studying women and religion in Early Modern Italy.

The first book I acquired in my collection completely transformed my conception of the historical roles of women. For the aforementioned course on women and the Renaissance, my professor assigned Arcangela Tarabotti’s *Paternal Tyranny*. Tarabotti, a wealthy woman whose family forced her to join a convent, spent page after page vehemently arguing against this forcible enclosure of women. I was shocked by Tarabotti’s resistance and invective language. In high school, the Nineteenth Amendment was the only instance in which I had learned about women. After reading such strong, feminist language from the seventeenth-century, I realized that my gaps in knowledge were profound. This course’s texts, including other proto-feminist works by Lucrezia Marinella and Moderata Fonte, drew me to reconsider and think deeply about women’s roles in the past. Soon, I found myself writing research papers for other undergraduate courses, irrespective of their core subjects, on women’s roles and contributions to society. A professor brought this fact to my attention, and questioned why I was not concentrating on the topic.

While Tarabotti and her fellow female Italian Renaissance writers first caught my interest, three other texts significantly shaped my future scholarship. For a research paper, I wanted to study women and religion, and stumbled upon the trial and autobiography of Cecilia Ferrazzi, a seventeenth-century Venetian woman, whom the Inquisition accused of false sanctity, or pretending to be a saint. As part of her trial, the Inquisition requested she dictate an account of her life. I found myself completely enthralled by Ferrazzi's story. She took orthodox holy women's spiritual devotions, such as fasting, asceticism, and charity to new heights. Ferrazzi housed and cared for over 200 female wards, and frequently and viscerally fought with the Devil. I relied on her trial records and autobiography to explore questions of confessor-penitent relations, female spiritual autonomy, and the role of the body in female spirituality. In my research, I also read Anne Schutte's *Aspiring Saints*, a secondary source on the phenomenon of false sanctity. Schutte assumed an approach quite divergent to my own. Rather than focusing on false saints' unique forms of spirituality and actions they took to grow their following, Schutte took a much more structural approach, focusing on clerical and Inquisitorial views of these women. My strong disagreement with Schutte, who I believe had too greatly reduced these women's agency, motivated me to further study the topic. As I prepared to embark on my undergraduate honors thesis, I knew I wanted to analyze Ferrazzi and other false saints like her in a new light, and hunted for other primary sources on the subject.

After extensive investigation, I acquired *Santi Barocchi*, which contained detailed summaries of other false saints in Italy from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Since I could not enter Italian archives as an undergraduate student, this text was invaluable, as it contained information I found nowhere else. I also cherish this book because it represents a personal accomplishment. The work is completely written in Italian, and it was the first time I had to

apply my nascent Italian language skills. I did so successfully, translating the work and using my translations in my honors thesis. Whenever I harbor some doubt regarding my ability to work with Italian documents, I remember the 400 page Italian text and my ability. The book is also significant because it represents my future academic pursuits. Scholars have not studied the particular Inquisition cases contained in the book. For my doctoral dissertation I plan to expand my honors thesis and embark on a wide ranging analysis of false sanctity, based on the archival documents of these cases. Cecilia Ferrazzi sparked my interest in this subject, and *Santi Barocchi* matured it.

As I entered graduate school and considered what scholarly approaches I wanted to pursue, Jodi Bilinkoff's *Related Lives: Confessors and Their Female Penitents*, acquired new significance. I admire Bilinkoff's work because she is so skilled at maintaining balance in her work. In *Related Lives*, Bilinkoff depicts the confessor-penitent relationship in a complex and nuanced way, in which both the priest and woman held power in the relationship. She avoids taking the easy route and characterizing it in absolute terms, instead digging into and analyzing the intricate back and forth of the relationship. Bilinkoff's work serves as the example of the type and caliber of scholarship I aim to produce in the future

As I reflect on my collection, I recognize gaps that not coincidentally, represent the subjects I plan to study as I advance in my graduate program. For example, my existing group of texts focuses primarily on Christian women. Jewish history is also one of my fields of study, and as I continue to study the history of Judaism, this collection will expand to address questions of women's role in Judaism. Although I focus primarily on Italy, I am also studying the larger Mediterranean world during the early modern period. This necessitates enlarging my collection to include the Iberian Peninsula. This collection has personal value because it represents my

growth and potential as a scholar. I went from knowing virtually nothing about a subject to becoming passionate enough about it to devote my graduate career to its study. Although this collection and my study of women commenced through an unplanned confluence of events, since then, I have diligently worked, through reading, researching, and writing, to expand and enhance my knowledge.