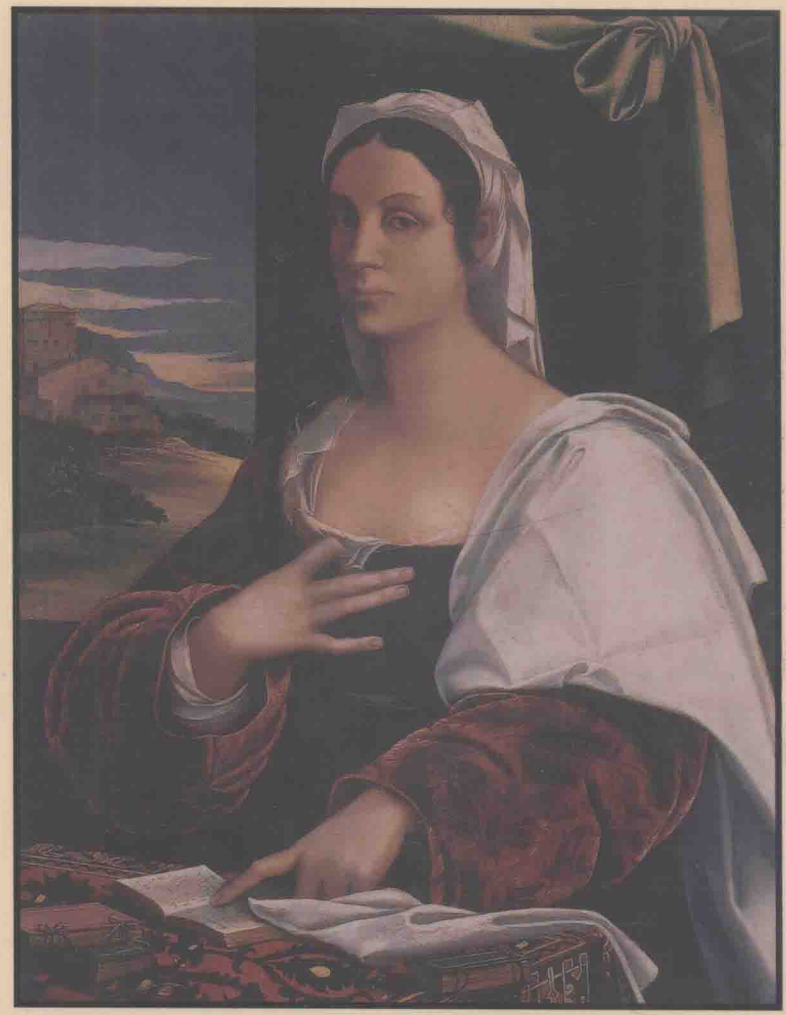
Women's Writing in Italy 1400–1650



Virginia Cox

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THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS
Baltimore

This book was brought to publication with the generous assistance
of the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper
2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

The Johns Hopkins University Press
2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21218-4363
www.press.jhu.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Cox, Virginia.
Women's writing in Italy, 1400–1650 / Virginia Cox.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN-13: 978-0-8018-8819-9 (hardcover : alk. paper)
ISBN-10: 0-8018-8819-0 (hardcover : alk. paper)
1. Italian literature—Women authors—History and criticism.
2. Italian literature—History and criticism. 3. Women and literature—
Italy—History. I. Title.
PQ4063.C69 2008
850.9′9287—dc22 2007036098

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Special discounts are available for bulk purchases of this book. For more information, please contact Special Sales at 410-516-6936 or specialsales@press.jhu.edu.

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For Paul

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book pulls together the findings and musings of almost twenty years of teaching and researching the literary history of women's writing in Italy. My intellectual debts are correspondingly vast, and I cannot hope to summarize them adequately here. The field has expanded and developed beyond measure since I first started to interest myself in it in the late 1980s. It has been an immensely gratifying experience, in all kinds of ways, to participate in this exploratory and still pioneering phase in the critical tradition, but not least of the gratifications it has offered has been the opportunities for dialogue and collaborative work.

I feel a particular debt to my earliest interlocutors on the subject, back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Letizia Panizza, Pam Benson, and Adriana Chemello; also to Letizia Panizza, again, and to Pam Benson (in collaboration with Vicky Kirkham) for organizing two superb conferences in this area, respectively at Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, London, in 1994, and at the University of Pennsylvania in 2000, which did much to shape my understanding of the field.[1]

Another particular debt I should like to mention is to Al Rabil, who has proved himself an extraordinary promoter of work in this area. Two National Endowment for the Humanities institutes Al organized in North Carolina in 2001 and 2003 on *Women's Writing in Venice, Paris, and London, 1550–1700* contributed immensely to my scholarly development in this field, by offering me the opportunity to work together with Anne Schutte as a coordinator of the Venice segment and to meet and learn from a series of younger emerging scholars in the field such as—to mention only those active in the area of Italian studies—Babette Bohn, Julie Campbell, Maria Galli Stampino, Julia Hairston, Liz Horodowich, Julia Kisacky, Suzanne Maganini, Marjorie Och, and Lori Ultsch.

I had the great good fortune to have as my earliest PhD students at Cambridge in the 1990s Abigail Brundin and Lisa Sampson and have greatly profited from my conversation and collaborations with them over the years. It is my equal good fortune now to have Jane Tylus as a colleague and interlocutor in the Department of Italian at NYU.

Other scholars and graduate students working in the field from whom I have had the opportunity to learn in person as well as through their published work, or who have shared their work with me or helped me

with my researches in other ways, include Dick Andrews, Laura Benedetti, Amy Brosius, Judith Bryce, Barbara Burgess-Van Aken, Stephen Campbell, Eleonora Carinci, Alex Coller, Suzanne Cusick, Corinna da Fonseca Wollheim, Massimo Danzi, Valeria Finucci, Margaret Franklin, Susan Haskins, Ann Rosalind Jones, Vicky Kirkham, Stephen Kolsky, Kate Lowe, Molly Martin, Francesca Medioli, Giovanna Rabitti, Diana Robin, Tristana Rorandelli, Deanna Shemek, Gabrielle Sims, Janet Smarr, Alison Smith, Evelyn Welch, Emily Wilbourne, and Niccolò Zorzi.

Where the preparation and editing of the book are concerned, I should like to thank my editors at the Johns Hopkins University Press, Henry Tom and Claire McCabe Tamberino, MJ Devaney for her copy editing, and Anne Schutte for reading and commenting on the introduction. My greatest institutional debt is to NYU, though I would also like to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities, Harvard University Center for Renaissance Studies (Villa I Tatti) and the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation for support received across the broader time range of research for this book. I would also like to record my gratitude to the staff of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library of the University of Pennsylvania Library, the Houghton Library, Harvard, and the Biblioteca Aprosiana of Ventimiglia for help in obtaining copies of rare early printed books.

INTRODUCTION

Did women have a renaissance? In the three decades since Joan Kelly posed this question in her now classic essay of that title, an immense volume of work has been devoted to examining the position of women in the cultural era to which the slippery but convenient chronological label of "Renaissance" still clings.[1] This recent work has added vastly to our knowledge of the lives women lived in this period and the social, cultural, and economic factors that constrained and occasionally empowered them. Noblewomen, queens, working women, courtesans, nuns, and saints have all, to varying extents, been the object of meticulous scrutiny, as have the differing possibilities for female agency offered by different geopolitical and social environments, from the courts, cities, and convents of Catholic Italy to the country houses and market towns of Protestant England and Germany.[2] Much work has focused on women's status in the family, their legal position, and their educational opportunities; much, too, on their role as patrons and consumers and producers of culture. At the same time, attitudes to women—and, more broadly, to sex and gender—have been the subject of an intense and increasingly sophisticated analysis that has revealed ever more clearly the complexity of the role gender plays in the construction of identities, from the individual to the civic to the national.[3] Although the very copiousness of recent work on women can be daunting, we are undoubtedly now, as a result of the endeavors of the past few decades, in a better position to answer Kelly's question than she was at the time she asked it. While it would be unfair to claim that attention to women's history is an exclusively modern phenomenon, as that would neglect the considerable achievements of earlier scholars in this area, it is unquestionably true that our level of expertise in this field has been quantitatively and qualitatively immeasurably enhanced.[4]

So, *did* women have a renaissance? The question is a complex one, and any answer must be correspondingly nuanced: perhaps more so than that of Kelly herself, who replies to her own query with an emphatic negative. Kelly's central point, trenchantly argued, is that the period from around the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries in Europe saw a significant reduction of opportunities for women. Specifically, within the upper strata of society, on which Kelly focuses, changes in inheritance patterns and configurations of political power are presented as having conspired to restrict elite

women's economic, social, and cultural agency. Kelly takes as paradigmatic here the contrasted figures of the medieval feudal chatelaine and the Renaissance court lady, arguing that, where the former had often wielded considerable power, whether ruling in her own right or in proxy for a husband who might be absent for periods of years, the latter, sidelined by patrilineal inheritance practices and blessed or cursed by a typically more sedentary spouse, found herself increasingly corralled into the subordinate and largely decorative role of dynastic consort. More generally, both within these exalted circles and beyond them—for example, in the bourgeois elite of mercantile cities like Florence—Kelly sees the division of gender roles becoming more marked in this period, with the public sphere being increasingly demarcated as male, the domestic as female. This was culturally reflected in a prescriptive literature that delineated increasingly sharply dichotomized ideals of male and female behavior, the male defined by the active virtues of leadership and intellectual vigor, the female by docility and obedience. Kelly concludes that the very social and political forces that are often seen as heralds of modernity in this period—the decline of feudalism, the development of mercantile protocapitalist economies, the emergence of the nation-state in much of Europe—may be seen as having worked in many ways to the detriment of women. Thus, seen from the perspective of women's history, the teleological narrative underlying the notion of the Renaissance is inverted in that a greater enlightenment is apparent the more nearly the "dark ages" are approached.

To what extent has Kelly's pessimistic vision of women's history in the transition from medieval to early modern Europe been borne out by subsequent research? The results are, perhaps inevitably, mixed.[5] While Kelly focuses near exclusively on secular women of the nobility and relies—to a contentious extent—on literary evidence to prove her thesis, her analysis ultimately takes as its starting point a broader tradition within the Marxist-inflected feminist history by which she was influenced that saw early capitalism as a turning point in women's relationship with the world of work. In the later middle ages, this tradition argued, women's possibilities for engaging in paid work outside the home were progressively curtailed by guild protectionism and changing working practices, in a way that plausibly diminished their status within the family and enhanced the distinctness of sex roles.[6] This reading of history has been widely contested, and a more nuanced and less dramatic pattern now tends to be preferred, stressing continuity over change and emphasizing the distinctiveness of particular local contexts and trades.[7]

Concomitantly and relatedly, something of the same shift has also been seen on the home terrain of Kelly's thesis: the situation of those women

of the upper strata of society, especially within the privileged domain of the princely courts. Much recent work in this area has tended to react against what is perceived as the overdeterministic and overgeneralized character of earlier studies by stressing the possibilities for individual agency that existed even within the most seemingly unpromising environments.[8] Similarly, it has been argued that general social factors that appeared to work to the detriment of elite women, such as the dowry system that made them pawns in families' social and economic strategies, could in some circumstances contribute to their financial empowerment and hence, arguably, enhance their status within the family.[9] Despite these revisionist trends, however, the notion that women did not experience any kind of true "renaissance"—however we might like to define that—remains widely shared. If the period between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries did not see the kind of dramatic deterioration in women's position that Kelly posits, it would be difficult to argue conversely that this was a time that saw a general improvement in women's social or economic position, either universally or within given environments or social groups. Where their legal status was concerned, certainly, women remained firmly subordinate to men, and their position within the family was generally one of subservience. Women had fewer choices than men in most areas of their life, and those choices did not substantially increase in this period. The professions remained closed to them, as did most lucrative fields of work; with a few notable exceptions, they were excluded from political life, and their educational opportunities were—again, with some exceptions—far inferior to those of their brothers. Further, the Aristotelian notions of gender difference dominant within law, medicine, theology, and natural philosophy served to reinforce and perpetuate this social inferiority, justifying women's subordinate status as the reflection of a hierarchy hardwired into the divine order of creation.[10]

Looking at women's concrete opportunities in this period, then, and their position within dominant ideological constructions of gender, the general picture would appear to be one of stasis, if not of deterioration. Intriguingly, however, within some circumscribed areas, this is eminently not the case; on the contrary, within these areas, the evidence for a renaissance—or perhaps a "naissance" tout court—seems clear. The most striking instance of this is the emergence of secular women in this period as cultural protagonists in a quantity and with a prominence unprecedented in the ancient or medieval world. This is most apparent from the sixteenth century, and particularly from the 1530s and 1540s, when the first literary works by living secular women began to be published in any numbers. While the development was to an extent pan-European, its center of grav-

ity was undoubtedly Italy: a recent comparative study of published women writers in the sixteenth century across Europe lists just over two hundred Italian writers for the period, where France, Italy's closest competitor in this field, can supply only around thirty.[11] Italian women also began to emerge strongly as artists, particularly painters, especially in the later sixteenth century, while the last decades of the century saw some achieve extraordinary success as actresses, composers and singers. The remarkable extent of women's creative activity in this period has only very recently begun to become apparent, as literary historians, art historians, musicologists, and historians of theater have worked to uncover this underexplored area. A further striking fact that has emerged in this process is the level of acceptance and appreciation many of these women artists enjoyed in their lifetime. We are not confronted here—or not inevitably—with the marginalized and stifled voices that so often greet us in later women's history; on the contrary, in many cases in the Italian sixteenth century we encounter figures later sidelined by history who were the object of much acclaim in their day. The painter Sofonisba Anguissola (1532–1625)—little known within art history until her recent rediscovery—was the recipient of a court appointment for which many male painters of her day would have happily sold their soul to the devil.[12] Similarly, the top performers in late sixteenth-century female vocal consorts were paid at a rate their male peers could only envy.[13] Women writers, too, received much appreciation, though of a type generally less susceptible to quantitative analysis: leaving aside durably canonical figures such as Vittoria Colonna and Veronica Gambara, it is not difficult to cite cases of women writers, now forgotten, who received signal tokens of respect in their lifetime from their male peers, ranging from election to literary academies, to inclusion in anthologies, to selection as public speakers on civic occasions.[14] Although their place within Italian literary culture remained undoubtedly marginal, we are not talking of a silence broken by a few exceptional voices but of something more like an established minority presence, increasingly accepted over time as a matter of course.

If this flowering of female creative talent may give pause for thought to those who would dismiss the notion of a Renaissance *al femminile,* so too might the emergence in this same period in certain circles of powerfully affirmative new attitudes to women. The sympathy and acclaim that often characterized the reception of women's creative endeavors was rooted in a more general appreciation among the Italian elites of women's moral and intellectual virtues and their contribution to society—their "dignity" or their "nobility and excellence," to cite the most frequent formulae of the day. If one considers both general theoretical or exemplifi-

catory treatises on female virtues and celebrations of individuals or of groups of contemporary women, the quantity of literature in praise of women in this period is immense.[15] Nor is this praise literature entirely limited, as might be expected, to lauding the qualities conventionally considered as comprising female virtue: while modesty, chastity, and beauty can hardly be said to be underrated, less obviously "feminine" qualities such as fortitude, erudition, and articulacy also receive their due share of attention. Most strikingly, a notion sufficiently voiced in this period to rate as a commonplace is that women were created men's equals and that their subordination to men derives from social custom and inadequate opportunities rather than any inherent inferiority.[16] These arguments for female equality, generally deriving from courtly and humanistic environments, stand as a counterweight to the powerful discourse of female inferiority that continued to prevail in scholastic contexts. As was noted above, within law, theology and the natural sciences, the dominant position on gender was that most authoritatively articulated by Aristotle, in which women's subordination to men was regarded as justified by their natural "imbecility." By the sixteenth century, however, this dichotomizing and hierarchical scheme was far from being the only available means of conceptualizing gender difference. On the contrary, it is not the least of the intellectual achievements of Renaissance humanism to have formed a cogent set of arguments to counter this position, based both on an internal critique of the logical defects of Aristotelian arguments for women's inferiority and a massive barrage of empirical evidence of women's capacity for "masculine" virtues, drawn initially, as one might expect, from the ancient world, but increasingly, as time went on, also from the modern.[17]

Returning, then, to the question of whether women had a renaissance, we are confronted with a paradox. On the one hand, where women's legal, socioeconomic, and political position is concerned, we find substantially no change in this period. However we choose to assess male "progress" in this period—and, as the shadow of Burckhardt fades, it becomes ever more tendentious to claim that *men* had a renaissance in this kind of concrete sense—it cannot be claimed that women entered the seventeenth century more men's "equals" than they had been in the thirteenth or fourteenth. On the other hand, however, if we turn to the cultural sphere, it is evident that something has changed in women's position. In what has been called a cultural "Copernican revolution in miniature," women had passed from a status as consumers of culture to producers, and by the end of the sixteenth century could cite an impressive, two centuries-long record of attainment as writers, as well as shorter, but still striking, histories of creative achievement in music and the visual arts.[18] Moreover,

this record of female creative activity was not limited to private, family circulation; on the contrary, the names and works of female writers, artists, and musicians circulated widely and were touted routinely as a source of pride and cultural capital by families, acquaintances, and hometowns. At the same time, within polite literary culture, at least, the view that saw women's energies as properly directed only toward silence and obedience had been marginalized, and women were routinely lauded for "exceeding their sex" in their "noble" aspirations to creative immortality and for "abandoning the needle and spindle" for the higher pursuit of letters.[19] Of course there was much that was patronizing and trite about these wearily circulating commonplaces: as has often been noted, female writers continued to be eulogized hyperbolically rather than seriously critically assessed and to be considered apart, as a separate canon of "miracles of nature," rather than being genuinely integrated into the ranks of their male peers.[20] Nonetheless, our justified skepticism regarding the seriousness with which female artists were taken should not eclipse the remarkable fact of their ascendancy in this period; that this was a period in which female artistic creativity and eloquence were publicly celebrated and in which female aspirations to fame and glory were regarded as laudable and proper marks it out as a remarkably rare moment in the premodern history of the West. It is all the more remarkable, and the more demanding of close analysis, precisely *because* this was not a period of significant advances in women's social, economic, and legal status. Cultural ascendancy seems here, very oddly to the post-Marxist eye, detached from any material base.

What should we conclude from all this? How can we square the fact of women's continuing social inequality in this period with their unprecedented self-assertion in the field of elite culture? How can we account for the encouragement women seeking a public voice seem often to have received from the men in their circle, within a culture that, in other respects, appeared so intent on restricting their actions to their "proper," domestic sphere? And how should we read the many texts from the period proclaiming women's aptness for "masculine" endeavors and condemning their subordination as a social injustice when these same texts seem so assiduously to stop short of pursuing their argument to its logical conclusion and calling for reform in this area?[21] One response to these conundrums—a frequent one in feminist scholarship—is to regard the seemingly "progressive" or protofeminist trends apparent within Renaissance culture as little more than a distracting froth of gallantry playing across the surface of an unchanging patriarchal society. Thus, discourses on women seemingly affirmative of their equality with men, such as we encounter in

texts like Castiglione's *Cortegiano* or Ariosto's *Orlando furioso,* are found, on closer examination, to reinforce the masculinist gender attitudes they ostensibly seek to challenge or critique.[22] Male attitudes to women writers and artists are susceptible to the same skeptical scrutiny: as was just noted, the hyperbolically inflated praises routinely addressed to creative women can easily be dismissed as vacuous rhetorical window-dressing. Within this perspective, "real" attitudes to gender are perceived as those revealed in the concrete ordering of society. Cultural attitudes that seem inconsistent with these are, by contrast, dismissed as inauthentic.

Obviously, there is much that is justified in this approach. A naive reading of the textual evidence of Renaissance "feminism" would today be rightly regarded as untenable: no one would wish for a return to the days in which Burckhardt could blithely state, on the basis of the type of cultural evidence alluded to above, that women in Renaissance Italy, "stood on a footing of perfect equality with men"—or, indeed, the more recent ones where a study of the figure of the warrior heroine in Renaissance epic could be subtitled "an index of emancipation."[23] Women in the Renaissance were not "emancipated" in any modern sense of the word, and Renaissance texts that appear to evoke the specter of female emancipation deserve to be the object of skeptical and historicizing analysis. This said, however, there are problems implicit in a mode of proceeding that operates, essentially, by measuring Renaissance texts against modern parameters and finding them lacking. Faced by a phenomenon as wide-ranging and culturally salient as the emergence of "protofeminist" or "profeminist" or "prowoman" discourses within elite society in Renaissance Italy, it seems unsatisfactory to concentrate our analytic energies entirely on the fact of its failure to translate into a coherent and radically transformative critique of social values such as might merit it the epithet of "feminist" tout court. More productive would be simply to accept this limitation as a historical fact and to attempt to interrogate this phenomenon on its own terms. Indeed, if we accept as our starting point that, despite some thematic similarities and consonances of argumentational strategy, Renaissance "'feminism" does not overlap with modern feminism, the questions that we can ask of it, and, potentially, the answers it can provide, become in some sense more interesting. If Renaissance men had no interest in "emancipating" women, what were their agendas in proclaiming women's *potential* for emancipation? If they found it difficult genuinely to conceive of women equaling men's achievements as writers or artists, what investment did they have in encouraging women's creative activity and in praising—often hyperbolically—its results? Even if we dismiss these "profeminist" gestures as attempts to please female patrons, or influential female

contacts, or a female reading public in general, the question remains of why such female addressees should have attained a position of sufficient power, real or symbolic, in this period as to influence literary output in such a significant way. A further question is why these *particular* forms of discourse should have evolved in response to female patrons' and readers' perceived tastes and interests—as opposed to, say, simple encomia of female beauty, or female sanctity, or devotion to the hearth.

These questions become the more pressing, and the more interesting, when we observe that, where Italy is concerned, at least, the closely-linked phenomena of female literary and artistic creativity and the "profeminist" discourses that enabled and promoted it, are, though durable, quite clearly historically circumscribed trends. This fact tends to be obscured when these phenomena as they occur in Italy in the Renaissance are studied as part of a more widespread and chronologically extended story, such as the history of the so-called *querelle des femmes* in medieval and early modern Europe. Several factors here collude to blur the distinctness of the Italian phase in this tradition. One is that a sharp enough distinction is not always drawn between debate in general on the merits and demerits of women, as it may be traced from classical antiquity through patristic, medieval, and early modern culture down to the present day and the specific humanistic discourse on sex and gender difference that we see emerging in Europe—and particularly in France and Italy—in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. While the Renaissance "defense of women" is continuous in certain respects with previous traditions of prowoman argument, it is also quite distinct in its methods and emphases, not least because its prime theoretical arguments evolved as a response to a particular, scholastic position, in itself the product of a defined historical moment, though admittedly durable in its influence.[24] It is only if we recognize the historical distinctiveness of this discourse that we can properly identify its originating contexts, which is in turn essential if we are to understand the dynamic through which secular women's writing emerged.

If Renaissance "feminism," in the sense just defined, had a beginning, it also had an end, at least if we keep our focus on Italian contexts. Between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, a distinct shift is apparent in the prevalent gender attitudes within elite literary culture in Italy. While discourses supportive of women do not vanish from the scene, they certainly lose something of their cultural centrality in this period, while misogynistic discourses of a type that had enjoyed only a relatively marginal status throughout most of the sixteenth century began to feature more prominently within elite literary culture, initially exciting quite sharp polemics, but later, in the course of time, seemingly

gaining an increasing acceptance.[25] At the same time, and relatedly, the sympathetic reception that had greeted women's creative activity to a great extent in the sixteenth century gave way in numerous instances to something more rancorous and negative: one finds women writers, in particular, increasingly subjected to damaging imputations of unchastity or jeered at for the indecorousness of their ambitions or the poverty of their output. As a consequence, in this period—especially, again, where literature is concerned—one finds a sharp drop in women's creative output, persisting at least to the 1690s when the Arcadian movement emerged.

This chronological narrative is distinctive to Italy, and tends, again, to be obscured within treatments of early modern women's writing that examine this phenomenon on a pan-European scale. Within this geographically more expansive perspective, it is possible to reconstruct some kind of satisfyingly teleological narrative, in which the pioneering women writers of sixteenth-century Italy pass on the baton of female creativity to their successors in the salons of seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century France and England, in a manner that takes us to the threshold of modernity with a figure like Mary Wollstonecraft. A similar trajectory, involving many of the same protagonists, may be traced for the history of protofeminist discourse.[26] It is perhaps this perspective—a local variant, of course, of the more general habits of teleological vision implicit in the notion of "Renaissance"—that leads us to scrutinize the fragile tissue of Italian Renaissance feminism through the distorting lens of anachronistic expectations. Refocused in a more geographically localized manner, the oddly circumscribed historical character of Italian Renaissance "feminism" becomes apparent. Rather than regarding it typologically, as the first glimmerings of a revelation destined to be realized with increasing clarity with the progression of "reason," we may be in a better position to see this phenomenon for what it was: a defined historical development, reflecting a particular set of cultural circumstances obtaining within a society very different from our own.

All this is important for the project of this book because it is one of its central contentions that the history of women's writing in this period cannot be studied in isolation from that of the cultural discourses that enabled it. The chronological trajectory just sketched for the emergence and decline of the specifically Italian Renaissance discourse on "women's dignity" coincides more or less exactly with that of the parallel narrative of women's emergence as writers. As we will see in chapter 1, the first humanistic formulations of a rhetoric affirmative of women's capacity for "masculine" attainment may be dated to the later fourteenth century, with Boccaccio and Petrarch, while the earliest secular women writers to win pub-

lic fame for their writing rose to prominence a generation later and within the same contexts. Similarly, as chapter 6 shows, the end of the long philogynist season in polite Italian literary culture, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, coincided reasonably closely—given a predictable degree of historical lag—with the marginalization and eventual near disappearance of the figure of the secular woman writer. This may sound entirely obvious and predictable to one approaching the subject from outside. Within a stubbornly patriarchal society, how could the level of women's participation in literary culture *not* be determined fundamentally by elite male social attitudes, positive or negative? How could women gain a hearing within the public literary sphere except through the tolerance of men? The historical correlation just noted has, however, not always been clear in the scholarship, for two principal reasons. One—the more localized, though undoubtedly powerful—has been the influence on the historiography of early modern Italian women's writing of the periodization proposal put forward by Carlo Dionisotti in his classic essay *La letteratura italiana nell'età del Concilio di Trento* (1967), which has remained dominant within studies of this area until very recently.[27] While acknowledging women's longer-term presence as protagonists within Italian literature from the time of Catherine of Siena onward, Dionisotti limited the time in which they can be considered as constituting a true collective presence—"making up a group," in his much-quoted phrase—to a period of around two decades in the mid-sixteenth century: precisely, from 1538, with the first publication of Vittoria Colonna's *Rime,* to around 1560, when, for a variety of economic and sociocultural reasons, the publication of vernacular literature entered a decline.[28] Women's writing was thus framed as the product of a particular, temporally circumscribed phase in the history of Italian literature, when an enterprising publishing industry, based in Venice, was reaching out to the new vernacular reading public created by printing. It is within this short-lived "euphoric" period that Dionisotti locates the emergence of women as published writers, their novelty emblematizing the opening of literature to new practices and readerships.[29]

While Dionisotti's proposal has much power and interest as an analysis of the cultural dynamics of the mid-sixteenth century, taken as a broader sketch for the history of women's writing in Italy, it is notably flawed. To say that women had a "group presence" within Italian literary culture only in the central decades of the century is misleading. On the contrary, as it is one of the purposes of this study to demonstrate, this presence was far more durable than Dionisotti allows for: by at least the last decade of the fifteenth century, women had attained a fairly high-profile place within Italian literature, a place they held, with fluctuations, for over