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Gabrielle de Coignard, *Spiritual Sonnets*. Ed. and trans. by Melanie E. Gregg. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003. xxxi + 195 pp. Bibliography and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-226-13983-2; \$21.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-226-13984-0.

Review by Megan C. Armstrong, University of Utah.

The Spiritual Sonnets is part of the series “The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe.” The two editors of this series, Margaret King and Albert Rabil, discuss the purpose of “The Other Voice” in the first of two introductions to this volume. As the editors make clear, the “other voice” is the female voice, one which was usually lost in the preponderance of male opinion during the medieval and early modern periods. The decision of the editors to focus on the years 1300-1700 reflects their view that this period gave rise to public as well as private discussion about “female equality and opportunity,” issues which, they point out, still reverberate in western society to this day. Sixty-eight texts are proposed for this series, and so far the vast majority of proposed editions feature well known female authors, among them Vittoria Colonna, Louise Labé, and Sara Copio Sullam. Two male authors have also made it into the collection to date, the humanists Francesco Barbaro and Alessandro Piccolomini.

The larger purpose of the series’ introduction is to situate its texts in the complex weave of ideological assumptions that comprised medieval and early modern conceptions about female nature. To this end, the introduction begins with a discussion of ancient Greek biology, philosophy, and Roman law, and proceeds to an overview of Christian doctrine, a brief discussion of the portrayal of the woman in medieval literature, and the place of women in medieval society. The final few pages focus specifically on the intellectual and religious currents that shaped European conceptions of gender and informed the writings of female authors. The editors touch on the influence of humanism, the writings of Christine de Pisan and the emergence of the *querelle des femmes*, manuals on witchcraft, female patrons, and the educated female author.

Lastly, the editors outline four major issues that they find underlying female writing during this period: chastity, power, speech, and knowledge. As the editors show, European ambivalence about the ability of women to remain chaste was directly linked to the perpetuation of familial power and the transmission of property as well as spiritual purity. From Christine de Pisan onward, female authors of the early modern period protested traditional assumptions about female lasciviousness in particular. Power was also an issue, since women for the most part were shut out of political leadership in early modern society. Those who exercised political authority faced a barrage of criticism from skeptics convinced of female incapacity for reason and good rule, though even their supporters were just as likely to reinterpret their true nature as “masculine.”

Given their own preference for ink and paper, we can understand why traditional conceptions of speech and knowledge also preoccupied early modern female writers. Early modern Europeans associated silence with chastity and, in consequence, female virtue, because Eve seduced Adam with words, and furthermore, speech was closely associated with reason in classical culture. Knowledge was traditionally another masculine domain for similar reasons, and female authors consequently argued for their capacity for learning as well as their right to express themselves within certain domains.

For early modern historians, this overview of traditional European perspectives on female nature is familiar territory, but from the perspective of the educator it is quite useful. While brief, the introduction is clear, nuanced, and readily accessible to the student. It also reflects the most recent historiographic concerns of early modern scholars. This is hardly a surprise given the caliber of the two editors of the series. Margaret King and Albert Rabil are renowned scholars of Renaissance intellectual and cultural life. King in particular has produced substantial scholarship on women and humanism, notably her monograph *Women of the Renaissance*.^[1] The two scholars previously collaborated together on *Her Immaculate Hand: Selected Works by and about the Women Humanists of Quattrocento Italy*.^[2]

The second introduction in this volume introduces us to the subject of the present volume. Gabrielle de Coignard (1550-1586), a French poet, has received little scholarly attention. In fact, the editor Melanie Gregg argues that it was not until Colette Winn's edition of her sonnets published in 1995 that Coignard began to generate even moderate interest. Gregg suggests that the religious nature of Coignard's work was one reason for such neglect, but she also suggests that her work from a literary standpoint cannot match the masters of her time. Issues of literary merit aside, Gregg argues that the scholar has a great deal to learn from Coignard's sonnets because they provide a window into the mind of a woman living during the sixteenth century.

Very little is known about Coignard's life. The daughter of a counselor at the Parlement of Toulouse, Coignard naturally married within the magisterial families of the city, in this case Pierre de Mansecal, the seigneur de Miramont and son of a president in the Parlement. Mansecal died in 1573, leaving Coignard a widow at the age of twenty-three. According to Gregg, Coignard refused to remarry despite familial pressure to do so and instead focused on the education of her two young daughters, Catherine and Jeanne. She died at the age of thirty-six after a lengthy illness. In 1594, her two daughters published a collection of her sonnets entitled *Oeuvres chrestiennes de feu Dame Gabrielle de Coignard*.

The present edition is based on the spiritual sonnets comprising the first half of the 1594 publication. Any reader looking for references to the historical events of her era will be sorely disappointed. Although Coignard lived in Toulouse, a Catholic bastion in a region infiltrated heavily by Calvinism, she offers little commentary on the political and religious events of her day. Her periodic invocation of Ronsard and other French poets does nevertheless point to her engagement in contemporary French intellectual culture. Certain homely references--her daughters, pressure to remarry, chronic illness--also provide tantalizing glimpses into a very personal world. Sonnet 103, for example, expresses her worsening physical condition: "My blood was drawn, and my arteries were dried; they made me swallow a stinking potion. Despite all that, I am worse than before, Enduring very bitter pains every day."

The real historical value of her work lies, I suggest, in the light it sheds on the religious views of a woman living in an age of spiritual unrest. Coignard's work is devotional in nature. Gregg argues that many of the various sonnets should be classified as penitential lyric, passion poetry, prayer poetry, and death poetry. Coignard ponders Grace, the cross, the state of her own soul, and passionate love of Christ. She addresses female saints such as Radegund (sonnet 106). Other sonnets could more easily be labeled nature poetry for their tender portrayal of the creations of God. Overall, the various sonnets reflect Coignard's preoccupation with the journey of her own soul and as such have a meditative, introspective quality. Gregg notes Coignard's use of the first person singular, and the remarkably intimate nature of her musings: her loneliness following the loss of her husband, desire for spiritual purity, and anguish over her own inability to reach a state of perfection. Her work is extremely emotional, the mood frequently shifting between optimism and despair.

Coignard's poetry provides yet another window into female spirituality during the Wars of Religion, one which should interest the historian as much as the literary critic. Above all, what struck this historian forcibly was Coignard's passionate assertion of her right to ponder the nature of her own spiritual imperfection in prose. Even as Coignard doubts her worthiness as a female sinner to do so, she turns to the written word to express her inmost fears, thoughts and desires--including her ambivalence about writing poetry. In sonnet 86, Coignard denounces her resort to writing: "I want to quit these verses, I want to leave the muse; I am abandoning the lute; I shall not sing any longer." Here Coignard seems to express typically tridentine assumptions about the nature of female spirituality--a spirituality that should be passive rather than active, silent rather than shouted.

A later sonnet (122), however, suggests a more positive view of female authorship, one that associated the act of spiritual writing with the female goddess of wisdom, Athena. For Coignard, the quill was an "instrument of Pallas," a "distaff laden with fine, gently folded flax." Coignard begs it to "teach [her] the way to twist the spindle laden with weight, to moisten my finger tips, to stretch out your threads." She does not question Athena's harsh treatment of the proud Arachne for arrogantly challenging the spinning skills of the goddess: "Thus one often sees even the greatest ones get angry if they see the little ones desirous of approaching the rock of virtue so difficult to climb." Nevertheless, Coignard makes a powerful claim for the right of women to write spiritual works in the pursuit of spiritual perfection, and she does so by pointing out Zeus's merciful decision to protect Arachne by transforming her

into a spider: "But God, who takes pleasure in His humble workers, Gives them quite often the triumphant laurels, Because the worldly ones despise their cloth."

The above excerpts show that Coignard was no feminist in waiting. She was deeply ambivalent about her own spiritual status and just as ambivalent about the moral value of spiritual writing for women. Coignard wrote on, regardless, even so, and her literary legacy wonderfully complicates our assumptions about female agency and spirituality at a time of spiritual crisis.

NOTES

[1] Margaret King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[2] Margaret King and Albert Rabil, *Her Immaculate Hand: Selected Works by and about the Women Humanists of Quattrocento Italy* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1992).

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