



The Invention of the Renaissance Woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England

Pamela J. Benson

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During the Renaissance the nature of womankind was a major topic of debate. Numerous dialogues, defenses, paradoxes, and tributes devoted to sustaining woman's excellence were published, and in them history was rewritten to include the achievements of womankind. Often these texts demonstrate that women are capable of acting with prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice, and thus are capable of being independent of male political and moral authority. Pamela Benson argues that the writers use literary means (genre, characterization, narrator, paradox, plot) to defeat the political challenge posed by female independence and to restrain women within a traditional role. *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman* is a study of the literary strategies used both to create the notion of the independent woman and to restrain her.

Traditionally, the profeminism of most of these texts has not been taken seriously because their playful or extreme styles have been read as a sign that they were nothing but a game. Benson demonstrates that the flamboyant and frequently paradoxical style of these texts is the key to their successful profeminism. She defines the literary and conceptual differences between the Italian and English traditions and argues that two of the greatest literary works of the Renaissance, the *Orlando furioso* and *The Faerie Queene*, are major texts in the tradition of defense and praise of women.

The Inventions of the Renaissance Women is the first substantial contextual discussion of the majority of the Italian texts and many of the English ones. Benson uses the insights of feminist theory and of cultural studies without subordinating the Renaissance texts to a modern political agenda. Among the authors discussed are Spenser, Boccaccio, Ariosto, Castiglione, Vespasiano da Bisticci, Thomas More, Thomas Elyot, Juan Luis Vives, Richard Hyrde, Jane Anger, and Henry Howard.

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