



2002

Review Essay: Lucrezia Tornabuoni de' Medici. *Sacred Narratives*

Deanna Shemek
University of California, Santa Cruz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Philosophy Commons](#), and the [Renaissance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Shemek, Deanna (2002) "Review Essay: Lucrezia Tornabuoni de' Medici. *Sacred Narratives*," *Quidditas*: Vol. 23 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol23/iss1/9>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quidditas by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Lucrezia Tornabuoni de' Medici. *Sacred Narratives*. Ed. and trans. Jane Tylus. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. 286 pages plus notes and index.

Recently issued from Chicago's series *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* is Jane Tylus's translation and edition of biblical narratives and religious songs by Lucrezia Tornabuoni (1427–82). Wife to Piero, mother of Lorenzo (“il Magnifico”) de' Medici, and grandmother to two popes (Leo X and Clement VII), Tornabuoni was a capable politician and businesswoman in her own right, as may be seen in the substantial surviving correspondence to, from, and about her. She was also a poet who wrote popularized versions of Bible stories (*storie sacre*) and spiritual songs (*laudi*) for performance in private settings and which she shared with Poliziano and Pulci, among others. Her neglect by literary and cultural historians for over five hundred years has been unfortunate and unjustified indeed, as this splendidly crafted volume attests.

Tornabuoni's five known *storie sacre* and her nine identified *laudi* appear together in this translation, constituting the most complete edition of her poetry to date in English or Italian. Tylus's introduction, a substantial and informative essay entitled “Gender and Religion in Fifteenth-Century Florence,” emphasizes “the inextricable link between female religiosity and social and cultural practices of Renaissance Florence” (26). This link, which fostered women's particular familiarity with popular sacred legends, folk songs, and romances, is one possible explanation for the lack of attention of Tornabuoni's writings by literary historians and critics, who have historically followed the humanists' lead and focused primarily on Latinizing princely culture rather than on the vernacular and popular production of Florentine writers. As Tylus points out, Tornabuoni's poetry lacks linguistic innovation and was written quietly in the shadow of such Tuscan giants as Pulci, Poliziano, Ficino, and Lucrezia's own son Lorenzo. She probably knew little Latin, and her sources—the Bible, the songs of strolling *cantari*, and the sacred plays (*sacre rappresentazioni*) performed on holy feast days—had different cultural functions from those of the revived ancient genres and the prodigious formal experiments favored by the humanist avant-garde. Humanist writers “gentrified” (26) these popular forms when they adopted them, but Tornabuoni practiced them as she found them, vibrantly circulating in the streets and churches of Florence, unselfconsciously popular in their diction and their traditional orientation. Readers of Tylus's translation will marvel that it has taken so long for editors and teachers to surmount that humanist, male, and elite cultural bias, for Tornabuoni's retellings of the stories of Susanna, Tobias, Judith, Esther, and John the Baptist, and her songs on the Nativity, the Crucifixion, and Christian salvation are eloquent and

compelling, delightfully engaging examples of Quattrocento Florentine vernacular culture.

Tornabuoni's sacred narratives, as Tylus makes clear through well-apportioned footnotes and commentary, are not simple translations. They deviate skillfully from their biblical sources, incorporating elements from popular literature and apocrypha in ways that underscore both the Florentine civic context in which Tornabuoni was writing and the special significance these particular stories may have had for a Medici woman. The story of John the Baptist was an obvious choice in the city where he is patron saint; and the tale of Tobias, notes Tylus, "served as a handbook for proper sexual relations between newly married couples" (73) among Tornabuoni's contemporaries. But having made these predictable choices of subject matter, Tornabuoni tailored the stories to her concerns with family, maternity, political loyalty, and the difficulties women confront in a world controlled officially by powerful men. For example, she "seems to be at pains to rescue Salome...from the denigration to which she was often subjected" (219) for having obeyed her vengeful mother in asking Herod for the head of John. Her story of Tobias expands the role of Tobias's wife Anna, on the one hand assigning her a berating speech criticizing her blind husband for his inaction, and on the other sketching in loving detail Anna's patient, maternal longing for her absent son. Taken together with Tornabuoni's renderings of the stories of Susanna, Esther, and Judith (which similarly deviate from the Vulgate and vernacular Bibles), these revisions of the John and Tobias stories contribute to a sense that Tornabuoni used the devout texts coherently to mediate her reflections on her own complicated position as a woman in the most powerful family of Renaissance Florence. Thus emerges in her *storie* an emphasis on women's use of the subtle forms of power Tornabuoni terms "meddling" (*frammettersi*) to achieve legitimate political and charitable aims. If Susanna remains a figure of innocent and steadfast chastity vindicated by a God, Judith combines her stunning beauty with personal initiative and nerves of steel to kill the giant Holofernes and save her people, while Esther profits from her privileged position as beloved queen to disobey her husband, dramatically approaching him unsummoned with a request that he save the Jews from the wicked king Haman's persecution. Having nearly fainted as she neared the throne, she "turns to the king with a sweet laugh. / And she said to herself, 'Now I will have vengeance: / O my Lord, teach me how to speak; / so I will know how to utter words that will persuade.'" Tylus's notes indicate departures from the biblical sources and, where possible, signal plausible apocryphal and vernacular texts Tornabuoni may have used, thus providing in addition to the translation an illuminating picture of Tornabuoni's own textual culture and her literary skills. Introductions to each of the *storie sacre* trace their biblical and medieval traditions and

offer valuable points of departure, both for teaching and for further critical work on Tornabuoni and the stories themselves. A similar introduction precedes the section of *laudi*, placing this form in its textual tradition and opening ways of understanding its significance.

The nine *laudi* in translation transmit, however faintly, a culture of sound and song in which Tornabuoni's poems circulated along with others as a vital component of popular religious participation. Tylus conveys well the spiritual excitement and musical momentum of these simple ballads, as for example in "Vienel messaggio et lo spirito saggio," which she renders: "Here comes the messenger, / and the wise spirit! // He comes from celestial kingdoms / Where sweet new sounds are heard, / They are joyful and not discordant, / They issue from the high choirs; / He comes in the form of vapors / And rays of luminous light" (270). These translations of the *laudi*, as of the *storie sacre*, are sensitive and sure, with footnotes on difficult passages giving excerpts from the original so that readers may consider alternative renderings for themselves. Though we still await a full edition of these works in the author's original language, readers of Italian, too, will find Tylus's versions, her informed commentary, and her bibliography an excellent starting point for further study of Lucrezia Tornabuoni.

Deanna Shemek
University of California, Santa Cruz

Richard Utz. *Chaucer and the Discourse of German Philology: A History of Reception and an Annotated Bibliography of Studies, 1793–1948*. Making the Middle Ages 3. Turnhout: Brepols, 2002. xxi + 446 pp.

It might be considered a mistake to read a review of a book before writing one's own evaluation. *Die Süddeutsche Zeitung* has called Richard Utz's comprehensive and impressive work a *Wissenschaftskrimi* (an academic thriller), and I wholeheartedly agree. Utz meticulously researched and eloquently chronicled the development of Chaucer studies in Germany and their intriguing connections to philology and politics. This study, ambitiously conceived and excellently executed, lists in its first chapter, "Philology vs. Enthusiasm," the major thesis and its five corollaries: "the emphasis of this study's narrative sections is less on a complete, linear reception history of Chaucer in the German-speaking world...but rather on how German Chaucerians built a particular discourse through language used in tandem with actions, interactions, non-linguistic symbol systems, objects, skills, tools, technologies, and distinctive ways of thinking, valuing,