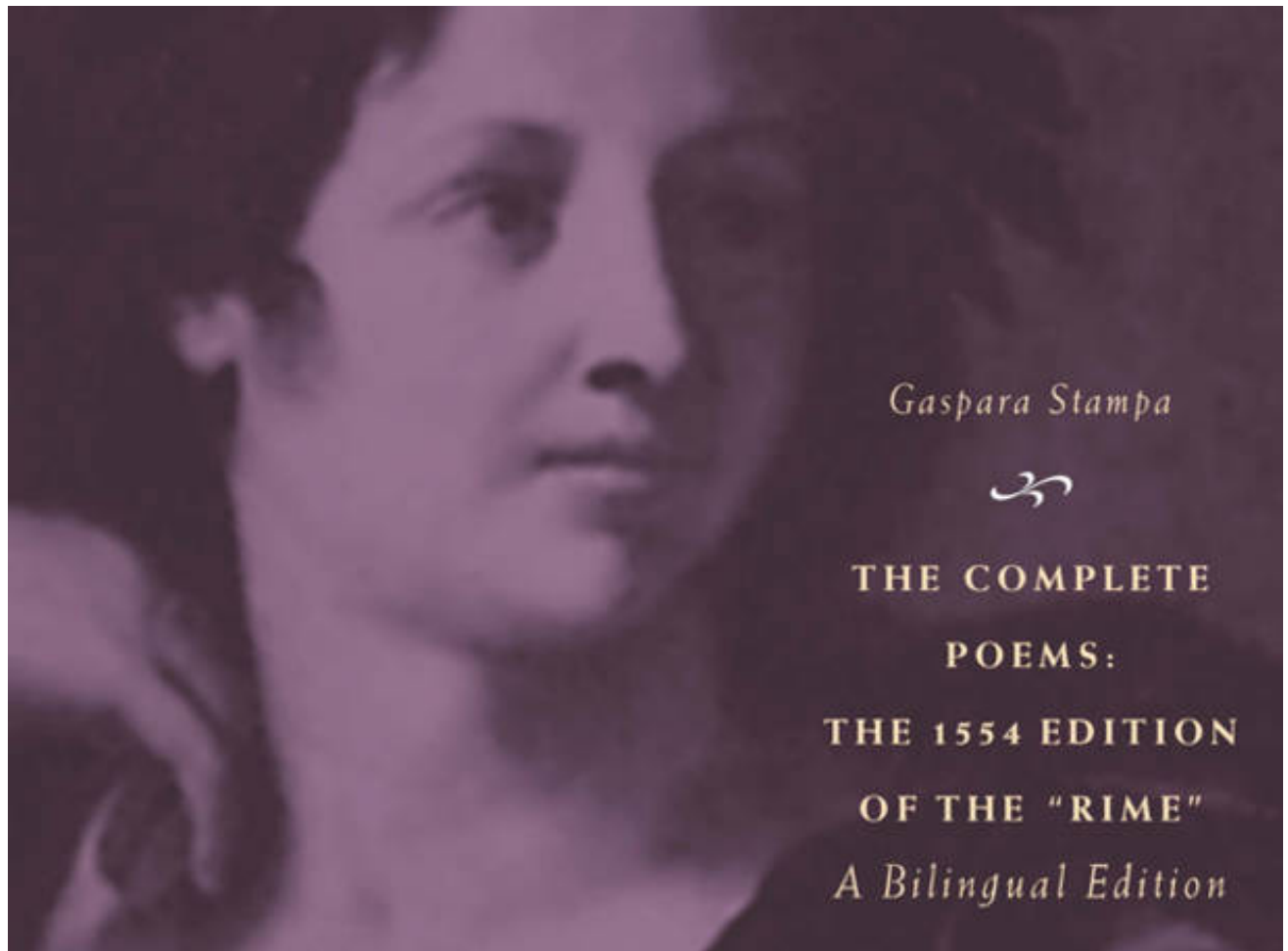




Gaspara Stampa: 16th Century Poetess, Singer

Inga Pierson (February 21, 2011)



Poet, singer and musician, Gaspara Stampa was a star in Venetian literary circles. Her complete poems, originally published in 1554, are available in English translation for the first time

Gaspara Stampa: 16th Century Poetess, Singer

The passion and splendor of Italian female poet Gaspara Stampa are ours to enjoy once again, thanks to NYU scholars and the University of Chicago Press. Stampa, who lived briefly but vibrantly between 1523 and 1554, collected a great many admirers in her native Venice before expiring at the tender age of 31. Often compared to Sappho, any enduring depiction of her likeness seems to have been inspired by images of the Greek poetess or by the allegory of Music.



Last week saw the conclusion of a series of interdisciplinary lectures on 16th century Italy at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò. In January Lina Bolzoni (of the Scuola Normale Superiore at the University of Pisa) presented her latest book, *Il cuore di cristallo* [The Transparent Heart, Einaudi, 2010] on Bembo's poetry and portraiture. Her talk was followed by Leonard Barkan's on Michelangelo's sketches earlier this month. Jane Tylus, who provided enlightened commentary on both occasions, presented her own edition of Gaspara Stampa's rhymes - *The Complete Poems: The 1554 Edition of the "Rime"* - on Tuesday. A bilingual volume, Tylus and co-editor Troy Tower bring us the first complete edition of the Venetian poet's work- in either English or Italian - since the 18th century.

Tylus and Tower entertained early modern music scholar Martha Feldman, from the University of Chicago, and Casa director Stefano Albertini invited several performers - including a lutenist and soprano Amy Brosius - to bring Stampa's poetry to life. The interdisciplinary approach has become a hallmark of Casa Italiana programming - which aims to deliver Italian culture and history to an audience beyond academia.

In Feldman's words, 16th century Venice was "a riot of diversity". The city's literary salons were frequented by a music loving aristocratic (and masculine) public and provided one of the few opportunities for female authorship and celebrity. It was in these glamorous and progressive venues that poetizing courtesans such as Veronica Franco and "virtuosos" - as Stampa and her sister were called - made their brief-but-brilliant careers.

Among other female poets of the era, Stampa's voice was "irrepressible", Troy Tower affirmed in his introduction. Tower echoes like-minded 20th and 21st century scholars who find the sense of immediacy and urgency in her verses both singular and laudable. And yet the question of voice is doubly interesting when it comes to Stampa. Tylus's research reveals that, in her own time, Gaspara was renowned above all for her angelic voice and musical talent. In an age in which such women were entertainers and society 'stars', we might imagine Stampa to be the latter day equivalent of a Rihanna or a Beyoncé. A controversial analogy, perhaps - but Stampa was unapologetic about her desire for expression and fame, the scandal of her associations with unmarried men, and the multiplicity of her lovers. She lived to write songs. Love fed her flame and she longed to burn.

A corpus of rather voluptuous sonnets reveals that her ambitions transcended the ephemeral musical performances the academies allowed for. While properly acknowledging literary tradition in Petrarch "Voi che ascoltate in queste meste rime" [You who hear in these troubled verses], Dante "Mi sento il cor di novo stile impresso" [destiny's/ impressed upon my heart a sweet new style] and Sappho, it seems that Stampa aspired to a glory all her own. Like the following tercet, much of her poetry betrays a vaguely defiant desire for distinction among the laurel-crowned lyrists of history:

Et io ringratio Amor, che destinata
M'habbia à tal foco, che da Battro à Tile
Spero anche un giorno andar chiara e lodata.

I thank Love who destined me for such a flame,
As I hope that from Bactria to Thule,
Someday I will be renowned and praised.

Sadly it seems that, like so many other feminine voices, Stampa's was wholly connected to her body and persona and thus, the acclaim she enjoyed in her lifetime all but vanished upon her death. That her legacy survives at all is a credit to her sister Cassandra who labored to publish her work posthumously.

A skilled musician in her own right, Tylus says she aimed to capture the "spirit" of Gaspara - singer, songwriter and poet -, and the "ambiance" of the original 1554 edition. Emphasizing the bilingual character of her translation efforts, she said she hoped to provide a kind of "accompaniment" for Stampa's extraordinary voice - that it might be properly celebrated once again.

Jane Tylus is Professor of Italian Studies and Comparative Literature, Vice Provost for Academic



Affairs and Faculty Director of The Humanities Initiative at New York University. Her most recent book is *Reclaiming Catherine of Siena: Literacy, Literature and the Signs of Others* (University of Chicago Press, 2010). She has also translated Lucrezia Tornabuoni's poetry (*Sacred Narratives: The Poetry of Lucrezia Tornabuoni de' Medici*, University of Chicago, 2002) and she teaches a graduate seminar on translation in the department of Italian Studies.

Troy Tower graduated from New York University. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

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