AN INTRODUCTION TO OLYMPIA MORATA, A FORGOTTEN, FEMINIST VOICE FROM SIXTEENTH CENTURY ITALY

Val Webb, Ph.D.

Augsburg College,
Minneapolis, MN,
USA

EMAIL: valmaurice@aol.com

I met Olympia Morata in the British Library while searching for women lost from history. My search word 'heroine' uncovered an 1864 inspirational collection *Heroines of the Household.* Olympia was the first entry. This paper is a report of my ongoing research on this elusive woman, including an analysis of how successive biographers determined her historical oblivion.

The Setting

The Sixteenth Century northern Italian Renaissance city of Ferrara vied with Florence as a center for learning and the arts. Its universities drew scholars from across Europe, and poets Ariosto and Tasso, artists Titian and the Dossi brothers, roamed the court of the Duke of Este. Like other influential Italian families, the Estinis sought political alliances through marriage. Thus in 1528, Ercole, son of

Alphonso I d'Este and the famous Lucretia Borgia, married eighteen year old Renée of France, cousin of King Francis I. The political alliance failed, leaving both spouses in a disappointing marriage. As the daughter of Louis XII, Renée, had she been male, would have been King. Instead, she was exiled in Italy, keeping a French court separate from her husband. Ercole was equally disillusioned, especially when he realized Renée was supporting church reform in her court, and sheltered reform fugitives from across Europe.

Church reform at this time cannot be packaged into later Protestant categories. At the beginning of the 1500's, papal hold on Western Christendom was being challenged across Europe as clergy and scholar demanded reform of the power of ecclesiastical hierarchies, of doctrine, and of morals. John Wycliffe had been condemned in England in 1382 for insisting on church reform, and his Bohemian follower Jan Huss was burned at the stake for the same reason in 1415 after his call for reform was condemned by the Council of Constance (1414 – 18). The Dominican monk Savonarola advocated church reform in Florence, meeting a similar fate in 1498. The scholar Erasmus fought for reform with a skillful pen and sharp wit, and Luther would soon post his theses for reform on the Wittenberg church door.

Italian reformers, the children of Renaissance humanism, were indignant at various abuses and hypocrisy in the Church -- the exploitation of popular belief, societal injustice, religious persecution and greed (Webb, C. J. 1970: 119). When the Fifth Lateran Council (1512 – 17) destroyed any hope *Rome* would initiate reform, and the reformers' champion Cardinal Contarini died in 1542, educated lay people kept reform ideas alive in religious houses and courts, creating a network of 'safe places' for refugees and discussion. This Italian movement began prior to Luther or Calvin's influence, although 'Lutheran' later became a general accusation for adherence to *any* doctrines contrary to official Church teaching. Italian reform leaders Ochino, Curione, Brucioli, Vermigli (Peter Martyr), Juan Valdes, Mollio, Fannio and Bembo, to name a few, were in touch with other European reformers, but retained the indigenous eclecticism and uniqueness of the Italian church's problems, deeply embedded in Italian politics. This short, diverse reform movement would be curtailed by the 1550s with the Council of Trent's restatement of Catholic orthodoxy.

Since Duchess Renée is important to Olympia's story, I will briefly outline her history. The orphaned daughter of Louis XII of France, she was raised at court by the mother and sister of her cousin, King Francis I. Margaret of Angoulene (later Queen of Navarre), Francis' sister, was a humanist scholar in her own right, in dialogue with Briconnet and LeFevre d'Estaples, early leaders of French church

reform. The publication of Margaret's spiritual writings brought censure from the theologians of the Sorbonne. Raised in a climate challenging both church hierarchical power and the cult of saints, Renée, while not able to control her destiny as political pawn and wife, would effect significant subversive change by encouraging reform to flourish in her Ferrara court.

Renée welcomed any reform that called the church to accountability. This non-sectarian approach attracted to her court a variety of reformers, including Marôt, Vergerio, and Ochino. John Calvin visited under the pseudonym of Charles d'Esperville in 1536, prior to encountering Farel and going to Geneva. The reason for Calvin's visit is not clear, but he corresponded with Renée until his death in 1564. Historian Bèza dedicated the first edition of Calvin's works to Renée (Webb, C. J. 1970: 143). Historian M'Crie noted:

> The most eminent of the Italians who embraced the reformed faith, or who incurred the suspicions of the clergy by the liberality of their opinions, resided for some time at the court of Ferrara, or were indebted in one way or another to the patronage of Renée (M'Crie 1833: 94).

Husband Ercole ignored Renée's activities until the Inquisition's anti-reform policies of the 1540's. Under pressure from the Pope whose favour he needed, Ercole agreed to a purge of Renée's court. Reform supporters fled, and Renée was forced to renounce her sympathies for reform. When Ercole died in 1559, Renée, having lost her lands for refusing to recant a second time, returned to France. Although her thirty-two years in Italy were crucial for Italian church reform efforts, her role has been minimized by biographers until recently.

The Life of Olympia Morata

Olympia Morata was born in 1526 into this lively period of Ferrara's history. Her father, Fulvio Pelligrini Morato, Professor of Classics at the Academy of Ferrara, also taught the Duke's children at court. Olympia grew up among scholars who debated, not only humanistic questions, but also ecclesiastical reform. Her father encouraged her rare genius by immersing her in Greek, Latin and the classics, and she became the darling of his scholarly circles. At fourteen, Renée invited Olympia to court as tutor-study companion to her daughter Anne, five years Olympia's junior, opening up a rare career opportunity for Olympia. At that time, Italian courts were engrossed in the *Quelles des Femmes* (the Woman question) debate which weighed women's essential worthiness against their essential deficiency. The church favored the latter position, but many Renaissance courts were ready to hear the former. Three years after Olympia's birth, Henricus

Agrippa's *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex* (Rabil 1996) had swept Europe, arguing for women's *superiority* against the cumulative opinion of church and philosophy!

In the Ferrara court, Italian reformer and academic Celio Secundo Curione tutored Olympia. Curione had been influenced by Luther, Melanchthon and Zwingli, and, prior to arriving in Ferrara in 1539 for a brief stay at Olympia's father's invitation, had been hunted across northern Italy for his reform protests. Curione would finally settle in Basel as Professor of Rhetoric at the University, and he corresponded with Olympia throughout her life, encouraging her scholarship. After her death, he collected and published her writings in four editions from 1560 to 1580, ensuring her place amongst humanist scholars of the time.

Olympia's contemporaries at court considered her a brilliant student and scholar. At fourteen, she gave readings in the classics, introducing them with prologues she wrote in Latin. Her defense of Cicero elicited the following comment from famous humanist Celio Calcagnini, to whom it was dedicated:

> Whilst it is the manner of other young maids to pluck here and there the flowers of Spring, to weave themselves a garland of many colors, you have gathered not those worthless flowers, which shed their colors

> for a brief space and quickly died, but immortal amaranths from the gardens of the Muses (Wilson 1864: 60).

Curione, her teacher, said of Olympia's youthful excellence:

> There we heard her declaiming in Latin, speaking Greek, explaining Cicero's paradoxes, and answering questions in such a way, that she appeared worthy of comparison with any one of those ladies of antiquity who have been preeminently renowned for genius (Wilson 1864: 59)

Olympia was convinced that learning was her vocation, and that it was possible to pursue a scholarly career as a woman in the court. She explored astronomy, meteorology, botany, zoology as well as the classics, writing at age sixteen:

> This spirit, formed by a divine hand, and kindled, perchance, as philosophers say, by a mysterious ray of that ethereal fire which churns in the stars and constellations above, can be perfected on earth only by the pursuit of learning, which raises it above the rest of creation. And if such is the excellence of study, how could the needle and the spindle, the appendages of my sex, render me insensible to the

> sweet language of the Muses? Too long did I try to resist their voice, as Ulysses did the sirens' spells. My efforts were powerless. The distaff and shuttle speak no language to me, and have for me no attractions. I therefore bid them adieu for ever (Wilson 1864: 58).

One of her poems in Greek at this time also echoes her commitment:

> Never does the same desire enlist us all.
> Tastes are not conferred by Zeus on all alike.
> I, a woman, have dropped the symbols of my sex,
> Yarn, shuttle, basket, thread.
> I love but the flowered Parnassus with the choirs of joy.
> Other women seek after what they choose.
> These only are my pride and my delight (Bainton 1971: 254).

In 1548, aged twenty-two, Olympia's happy court life came to an end. As her father was ill, she had temporarily returned home. On returning to court, everything had changed. Renée's daughter had married, and Olympia's services as tutor were no longer required. Many reform advocates, who professed dangerous opinions in matters of faith while not breaking ties with the Church, had fled under persecution. The remainder, including Renée, had turned against

Olympia for reasons unclear, but somehow related to reform. Olympia wrote of the court atmosphere, "now no one is permitted to learn divine wisdom or even to read the books of either Testament" (Smyth 1834: 161).

Dismissed, she returned home with no options for a scholarly career except private study and writing. In 'her disgrace,' as she called her expulsion, she married Andreas Grundler, a German doctor from Schweinfurt studying in Ferrara. That Olympia was implicated in reform is evident by their flight to Schweinfurt in 1551 to escape persecution by the Inquisition. One biographer suggests that opposition against her was so great she was in serious danger had she stayed (M'Crie 1833: 248). Her scholarly fame throughout Europe enabled the couple to take refuge at various courts en route.

In Schweinfurt, encouraged again by Curione, Olympia translated the Psalms into Greek verse and corresponded with reform colleagues across Europe. Concerned for persecuted Italian friends, she urged reformer Vergerio, exiled in Tubigen, to translate Luther's larger catechism into Italian. She condemned the reformers' Eucharist debate, writing to Vergerio, "I know there is a great controversy about the sacrament. I think it could easily be resolved if men would consider not their own glory but that of Christ and the salvation of the church, which includes concord" (Wilson 1864: 94).

Commitment to church reform now dictated her life after their experiences in Italy. Andreas refused a professorship at Linz because papal wrath was strong in that city against those rebelling against Catholic tradition. They could not return to Ferrara for the same reason.

In 1553, Schweinfurt fell under siege to Albrecht of Brandenburg-Ansbach. Plague swept the encamped army and town, and, when Albrecht withdrew, his opponents destroyed the city. Olympia and Andreas fled, barely alive and stripped of possessions. Andreas was captured, but Olympia's pleas brought his release. Detained in town after town, Olympia became ill with malaria. Finally the Counts of Erbach, reform supporters who knew of Olympia, secured a medical professorship for Andreas at Heidelberg. There they settled in the summer of 1554, and Olympia continued her scholarly and reform activities. Curione assembled a new library for her to replace the one lost in Schweinfurt. She surrounded herself with learned people, including her husband's colleagues at the University. She was an advocate for persecuted French Protestants, urging her childhood friend Ann d'Este, now married into France's Guise family, to help them.

The physical traumas had weakened Olympia. In July 1555, a year after arriving in Hiedelberg, she wrote to Curione:

> I must inform you that there is now no hope of my surviving long. No medicine gives me any relief … It is probable this may be the last letter you shall receive from me. My body and strength are wasted … Nothing therefore remains but that I breathe out my spirit (M'Crie 1833: 281-2).

Olympia died aged twenty-nine in October, 1555, three months before the plague killed her husband and brother. They are buried in the cemetery of St. Peter's Church in Hiedelberg.

Her Writings and Scholarship

There is no doubt Curione and his contemporaries considered Olympia an important scholar, and they supported her desire to exchange the female domestic role, symbolized in Renaissance art and literature by yarn and shuttle, for the realm of the Muses. The fact that Olympia was still unmarried and at court at twenty-two indicates she had successfully side-stepped the normal female options of convent or hearth. The numerous courts across Germany willing to provide refuge because of her fame also attest to her accomplishments. When she was only twenty-seven, Curione published an edition of her poems *Selectarum epistolarum libri duo* (Morata 1553), and, when she was dying, she put more of them on paper at his request:

> I send you such of the poems as I have been able to write out from memory since the destruction of Schweinfurt. All my other writings have perished. I request that you be my Aristarchus, and polish them. Again farewell. From Hiedelberg. (M'Crie 1833: 482).

After Olympia's death, Curione collected her writings from her colleagues across Europe, publishing them in 1558, 1562, 1570, and 1580 as *The Orations, Dialogues, Letters and Poems, both Latin and Greek, of Olimpia Fulvia Morata, a Learned and Almost Divine Woman*. The final edition contained essays and dialogues in Latin; Greek poems, chiefly paraphrases of Psalms; and fifty-two letters in Greek, Italian, and Latin, including correspondence with Curione (Wilson 1864: 50). Explaining this project to her husband, Curione said, "I have determined to publish, as soon as possible, such works of our Olympia as are in my possession, along with the opinions and praises of her, written by so many learned men" (Southey 1834: 339).

A German colleague who taught Olympia in Ferrara wrote to Curione:

> With regard to Olympia, that admirable and accomplished woman … However highly I ventured to prognosticate concerning her, has she

> not far more than confirmed my expectations by her piety, her erudition, and her sweetness of manners, while the high excellence she had attained in languages, and in the knowledge of sacred Scriptures, her writings, as well as the letters which you have published, sufficiently point out and prove. I envy you and Italy such an ornament; and wish this honour to the female sex throughout the world had been born in Germany where she died (Southey 1834: 341-2)

Curione also assured Olympia's grieving mother that, through Olympia, her family, friends, and Italy, would ever be famous:

> I say Olympia lives! She lives even in this world, and will live while there are men on the globe, in the immortal memory of her works, those divine moments, and in the remembrance of all excellent minds. For that which is confined to body and sensation is not the only life; there is a brighter existence which shall flourish through all ages, which posterity shall augment, and which eternity itself shall not diminish … The applause of all shall celebrate her learning, piety, faith and charity (Southey 1834: 336-7).

Olympia's French contemporaries, Mesdames des Roches, listed her in their catalogue of scholarly women (Larsen 1987: 238), and historians of the Italian reform ranked her importance greater than her father's (M'Crie 1833: 93; Stoughton 1881: 201). Barton, her Twentieth Century biographer, adds to the list of Olympia's admirers:

> Scholars of her day never doubted that her name would be immortal. Amerbach kissed the letters she wrote to Curione. Theodore de Beza added his elegy to those written by close friends and circulated them throughout Europe. Melchior Adam, Rector of the University of Hiedelberg, ranked her in his compendium among the German philosophers of note. De Thou proclaimed her equal to the noblest women of antiquity (Barton 1965: 225).

Translations, Biographies and Articles in English

Although Italian and German translations of Olympia's work have appeared in this century, the only English translations, based on Nolten's Eighteenth Century Latin translation (Nolten 1731, 1775), accompany Nineteenth Century biographies (Bonnet 1854; Smyth 1834; Southey 1834; Turnbull 1846). A new English translation is currently in process for the University of Chicago Press series, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*. Olympia's story is included in

some Nineteenth Century collections of pious women (Wilson 1864; Gearey 1886), and she is mentioned in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century books on the Italian Reform (M'Crie 1833; Stoughton 1881; Brown 1933; Church 1932). She is also mentioned in books about women of the Italian Renaissance and Reform (Hare 1912; Larsen 1987; Barton 1989; King 1991). Bainton included a chapter on her in his book on women of the Reformation (Bainton 1971) and she is featured in my book *Why We're Equal: Introducing Feminist Theology* (Webb, Val 1999). The only complete book on Olympia in English since the mid Eighteen hundreds is a well-researched novel by an American, Florence Barton (Barton 1965). The Index of Periodical Literature lists only thirteen articles on Olympia in English since 1800, the latest in 1934. I have found no scholarly articles in English, although some appear in Italian and German.

The Shaping of Olympia's life and work by biographers.

Why did Olympia eventually disappear from English-language literature and history? I suggest two reasons.

1. Her writings were destroyed in the siege of Schweinfurt. Those surviving were either composed in Hiedelberg, transcribed from memory on her deathbed, or retrieved from colleagues – a fraction of her work.

2. Her writings were not translated into English until the Nineteenth Century, by which time her image had changed from famous Italian humanist to German Protestant wife and martyr, not the stuff of which history is made!

Margaret King describes a new category of 'learned woman' which emerged in the Renaissance -- 'female trespassers of the boundaries of sexual definition' who were hated and feared by some, but admired by others because their achievements were manly, overcoming their 'own nature.' For the first time, intelligent, privileged women could choose beyond convent and marriage. That Olympia was one such woman is reflected on her epitaph, "... her body was female, her mind male, her spirit, God's" (King 1991: 191). This scholarly breed of women did not survive, especially if their scholarship ventured into theology and the Church. A few opportunities for celibate women to claim visionary powers existed in convents or under supervision of confessors (Webb, Val 199: 51 – 55), but the Council of Trent came down strongly against lay people, especially women, reading and interpreting Scripture themselves. Contempt oozes from Luis de Maluenda's pen:

> The literal, let alone the spiritual meaning of the Epistles, is difficult for wise men to understand. How much more so for the silly woman

> who neglects her spinning and has the presumption to read Saint Paul. Holy angels, what a tempest! (Weber 1990: 32)

When Olympia despaired of being able to read the Scriptures during persecution at court, she was referring to this accelerating condemnation by church Inquisitors of women studying Scripture and theology.

In Schweinfurt, Olympia continued to write, sending work to Curione for critique. She taught students at home and dialogued with colleagues at the University in Hiedelberg. Her correspondence with reformers across Europe, and her frustration at their internal Eucharistic battles, situate her as a player in *European* Catholic reform, not any sectarian part of it. However, since she died in Germany, and since the Italian reform disappeared as an entity, biographers who continued Olympia's story were Protestant. While the German reform, unlike the Council of Trent, permitted women to read Scripture, such reading was restricted to the private confines of the home – the proper place for women according to Luther, because of Eve:

> The woman … is like a nail driven into the wall. She sits at home … for just as the snail carried its home with it, so the wife should stay at home and look after the affairs of the household, as one who has been

> deprived of the ability of administering those affairs that are outside and that concern the state. She does not go beyond her most personal duties (Webb, Val 1999: 33-34).

Olympia's first biographers looked for qualities that exemplified Protestant teachings, thus she was domesticated and privatized -- first as a Protestant reform wife; later as a gentle Victorian woman occupied with correspondence and poetry; and finally as a martyred young girl, dying for her faith through escape and exile. In each transformation, Olympia's words were used out of context to justify re-writing her story.

Olympia's male contemporaries, her father Morato, Curione and John Calvin, were humanist scholars *also* involved in reform. Their Protestant biographers had little problem with this dual allegiance. Stoughton said of Curione, "his popularity as a professor of polite literature earned him high repute, and it may be inferred that he did not neglect to help on the work of reformation in the duchy" (Stoughton 1881: 263). He also described Olympia's father thus, "... another celebrity in the palace, a learned man, first engrossed by classical studies, then coming into communication with ...(Curione), who inspired him with a sympathy for evangelical religion (Stoughton 1881: 201).

Stoughton, however, describes Olympia's dual interests differently. *Her* move from philosophy to theology is read as a *conversion* – bad to good; old to new; frivolous to pious. The court environment in which Curione and Morato were celebrated becomes, in relation to Olympia, a place 'unfavourable to the culture of piety' (Stoughton 1881: 201-2). Stoughton takes Curione's description of Olympia's early enthusiasm for the classics, and interprets it negatively as a *pre-conversion* stage, "...during that period she (Olympia) gave no signs of deep personal religion, whatever leaning she might have had to the Reformed opinions" (Stoughton 1881: 201).

To further substantiate this, Stoughton uses Olympia's comment that, had she stayed at court, it might have been over for her and her salvation. "… (F)or never whilst I was there could I relish anything exalted and Divine, nor could I read the books of the Old or New Testament" (Stoughton 1881: 202). But this quotation is out of context. Olympia could not read Scripture at court, not because she was distracted by secular scholarship, but because it was dangerous for a woman! She *literally* feared for her life and salvation! Within a few years, the Council of Trent would forbid any woman to teach or study Scripture outside a convent. Olympia's *complete* comment, describing the Inquisition's purge of the court, reads:

> I was deserted by my princess, who was alienated not only from me but from my entire family by detraction. You can imagine my grief. No one had any regard for us. If I had stayed at the court I would have imperiled my salvation. I was not allowed to read the Old and the New Testament (Bainton 1971: 254).

Stoughton also ignores other comments by Olympia that her classical pursuits were *not* incompatible with Christianity, and that Cicero, for example, contained much *not* repugnant to Christian religion (Bainton 1971: 254).

Stoughton's 'pre-conversion' reading of Olympia's scholarship is rather his judgment on Olympia as unmarried, female scholar -- a woman out of place. While Curione and Morato are praised for classical pursuits, Stoughton says of Olympia:

> ..it was, at the very time when she was exalted to the heavens by the praises of courtiers and friends, that she discovered, to use her own language, "her destitution and ignorance of all true learning." Her conversion was deep, genuine and complete, not a mere transition from Popery to Protestantism (Stoughton 1881: 202).

Again, her words are misrepresented. Her comment about 'destitution and ignorance of all learning' comes from a hypothetical dialogue written to an Italian friend describing the transition in her scholarly interests. Despite her many achievements at court, she was ignorant at that time of the *theological* issues now occupying her mind. This comment did not negate her classical studies, but positioned them as part of her development -- her 'duty to God and his glory' (Bainton 1971: 254).

M'Crie's history of Italian reform acknowledged the important role many Italian women of high rank played, but he adds that these women acted appropriately within 'their private place' -- "their names are not associated with any public transaction in the progress which the reformation made through Italy" (M'Crie 1833: 187). M'Crie described Olympia as the most enlightened female of the age, but characterized her scholarly pursuits as "improvement in every elegant and useful accomplishment" (M'Crie 1833: 93). M'Crie regrets that Olympia's love of the classics kept her from developing 'womanly' piety earlier, but credits the court as the place she "...first acquired that knowledge of the gospel which supported her mind under the privations and hardships which she afterwards had to endure" (M'Crie 1833: 93). Thus her scholarly pursuit did not *entirely* frustrate her higher destiny of pious woman martyr!

G. K. Brown also described Olympia's scholarship as preparatory for something greater. He calls Olympia "a delightful person, and a remarkable prodigy," but sees her departure from court – Olympia called it her 'disgrace' -- as a *misfortune* which providentially turned her back on 'barren speculation.' (Brown 1933: 104). Such negativity towards classical scholarship never surfaced in Brown's comments about Morato or Curione. They were revered as classicists *and* reformers throughout their life.

Not only were Olympia's scholarly achievements interpreted as mere preparation for a greater role of feminine piety, she was also transformed from Renaissance woman to young girl whose early martyrdom created her identity. Wilson acknowledged her youthful brilliance, but rearranged her credentials as a 'heroine of the household,' those exhibiting

> … the true dignity and duties of their sex in various spheres of usefulness in high and humble life … Here rather we see weakness, supported by the strong arm of goodness, climbing the upward slope to life above, and smoothing for the poor, the forsaken, the mourner, and the little ones the rugged road of everyday existence. (Wilson 1864: 4-5).

Hare, perhaps a woman writing under a male pseudonym, reduced Olympia to a single sentence and an entirely different persona -- a female martyr who learned religious devotion as a court companion -- "...that accomplished and devoted young girl, who, as a companion to the young Princess Anna, first acquired that knowledge of the Gospel which supported her through all the hardships and sufferings which she was called upon later to endure" (Hare 1912: 164).

Church called Olympia a "favorite subject of the historians of martyrdom" (Church 1932: 65). He mentions her three times, each in relation to a man -- Curione's friend's daughter, Curione's pupil, and a refugee from Italy 'with her husband.' He refers to her writings as 'Curione's letters and hers' (Church 1932: 229). Thus the re-shaped Olympia slides from history because pious girls dying from the physical traumas of persecution are side-notes in the greater story of reform.

What of her women biographers? Amelia Gillespie Smyth described her excitement at discovering Olympia, and her desire to introduce her to others:

> With this, as the pleasing task proceeded, might mingle a spark of pardonable female exultation, at the discovery of ... how compatible are not only great natural talents, but the deepest acquired erudition,

> with the most feminine delicacy and gentleness of character ... a sweetness of disposition ... and an unostentatious fervour of piety... (Smyth 1834: ix).

Smyth praised Olympia's accomplishments, but was careful to hold them in suitable balance with her 'proper' Victorian womanly virtues. The motivation of Smyth's biography, however, was obviously her thrill at discovering a gifted, famous, but forgotten, woman scholar.

Olympia's only Twentieth Century biographer is an American historian Florence Barton, who, in 1965, on the eve of the feminist movement, published a *novel* about Olympia. I was puzzled, since Barton's later book *Calvin and the Duchess* (Barton 1989) is a scholarly work on Duchess Renée. While Barton was aware of Olympia's fame in Renée's court, she poured her extensive research into a *novel,* portraying Olympia as, "...an Italian girl, neither martyr nor saint, who lived and loved for a brief moment of time; she is merely a footnote to history, a grace note in the 'Fugue of the Reformation'" (Barton 1965: viii).

Why? After an intriguing search in order to ask her this question, I finally met Florence Barton in Iowa. Ninety-six years old and, in her words, "hip-deep" in a biography of Renée's mother Anne of Brittany, Florence described her attempts in

the Sixties to recover Olympia, having found her during research on Renée and John Calvin. Florence sent her proposal for a biography on Olympia to a publisher. The editor requested instead a *novel* since no one would be interested in a Sixteenth Century forgotten woman scholar! Two editors left during the writing process. A third assigned her manuscript to a friend who requested instead a novel 'with no hostility' for fourth grade students, then promptly lost the manuscript. Florence re-typed it for yet another editor, who assumed Henry VIII's sister Mary (wife of Louis XII of France), "Bloody Mary" (Henry VIII's daughter) and Mary Stewart (Queen of Scots, executed in 1587) were one and the same person! Florence recalled, "I gave up at that point and only wanted out. I still have an ambivalent feeling about the book." This answered my question. Florence Barton had researched and proposed a *serious* biography to resurrect Olympia, the first in English for over 100 years, but was told, prior to the Feminist movement, that Olympia was of interest only as inspirational fiction for girls!

Bainton, also at the beginning of the Feminist movement, included a chapter on Olympia in his book *Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy* (Bainton 1971). However, his book's aim was to challenge the 'gross exaggeration' of emerging feminist claims that western women have been 'in a continuous state of

subjection.' Bainton argued that the Reformation had a *positive* effect on domestic relations, the home being:

> ... the area *par excellence* for the exemplification of the gentler Christian virtues: love, tenderness, sharing of goods, self-effacement, humility, reconciliation, compassion, and the bearing of one another's burdens (Bainton 1971: 9).

Choosing forty 'notable exceptions' to prove that *all* women were not subjugated, he revived Olympia as a scholar studying theological works and writing letters of instruction in faith and resistance to friends.

Margaret King's discussion of Olympia in *Women of the Renaissance* is the first feminist reimagining of Olympia. She includes Olympia in two categories -- bold 'heretic' who witnessed to her faith and died as a result of persecution, and, at last, an Italian 'humanist and Protestant convert' challenging women's *natural* role of spindle and needle (King 1991: 180). King says of this latter category:

> These women turned to the finest curriculum available to men of the day...Unlike their contemporaries ... (they) mastered the authors whose works were the grand edifice of European thought. These women's

> letters, poems, orations, and treatises place them alongside the humanists of the day. They set a standard for female academic achievement that was scarcely equaled before the modern era (King 1991: 194-5).

It is this Olympia I seek to recover – a Renaissance and Reform scholar whose star shone brightly before being extinguished by early death and successive transformations. As her latest biographer, I will *also* read her from *my* context, that of feminist historian and theologian. I hope this perspective will recover aspects of Olympia's life and work that have been lost, returning her voice to the story of the Renaissance and the Reformation.

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