BRIT 70970/90970 Gender, Saints, and Sinners in Early Modern Italy
Cross-listed with ARHI 70300: Special Topics Seminar (WGST)

Instructor: Babette Bohn, professor of art history
Spring 2017

Course description:
This interdisciplinary graduate seminar considers how notions of sanctity and sinfulness, virtue and vice were culturally constructed in early modern Italy, and specifically, how such notions were shaped by attitudes towards gender. Reading literary and religious works by female and male authors of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as well as secondary sources, we will also consider artworks by male and female artists in pursuance of this theme. We will employ a dialectical approach to exploring the impact of gender, comparing female and male saints, male and female writers, and female and male painters. Topics include: women’s literary contributions to the arguments over female nature; why celibacy was mandatory for female saints but not for their male counterparts; why the miracles of female saints were so frequently related to their bodies; why some of the leading Italian female poets of the period were courtesans; and how notions of virtue were conceived in masculinist terms by early modern authors. Virtue, fortitude, character, and even the capacity for artistic invention were all understood as masculine capabilities in early modern Italy. Such attitudes made the “woman artist” an oxymoron in early modern Italy, where women painters also faced formidable obstacles to receiving professional training and social constraints that complicated their capacity to undertake public commissions. The few women who overcame these obstacles, like Elisabetta Sirani (1638-1665), were commonly perceived as exceptions to female nature; she “painted not like a woman but always like a man,” according to her first 17th-century biographer. This course has been approved for credit for the graduate certificate in Women and Gender Studies; in past years, students from English, Art History, Brite Divinity, and History have enrolled.

Required texts:
All of the following, except for the last two, are translations from the original Italian 16th- or 17th-century text, published in the University of Chicago’s series, The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe:

- Moderata Fonte, The Worth of Women, Wherein is Clearly Revealed their Nobility and their Superiority to Men
- Cecilia Ferrazzi, Autobiography of an Aspiring Saint
- Veronica Franco, Poems and Selected Letters
- Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi, eds., Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy
- Various readings saved as PDF

Note on primary sources: All of our readings by women authors are works that have been excellently translated into English and are available in modestly priced paperbacks in the University of Chicago’s series, The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe.
Although we will discuss linguistic issues that arise in the original Italian when such issues are pertinent to gender, a knowledge of Italian is not required for this class.

**Requirements:**

- Six response papers (one in each topical area)  
  - 40%
- Leadership of one class, weekly emails in response to readings  
  - 10%
- Oral presentation of research topic  
  - 15%
- 15-20 page research paper  
  - 35%