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Publication Date

2013

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

*Joyful Miss: Gendered Perspectives
on Marriage in Renaissance Italy*

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Italian

by

Melina Rae Madrigal

2013

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION:

*Joyful Miss: Gendered Perspectives
on Marriage in Renaissance Italy*

by

Melina Rae Madrigal

Doctor of Philosophy in Italian

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Massimo Ciavolella, Chair

My dissertation investigates the convoluted layers comprising profeminist and misogynist precepts through the optic of marriage during the Renaissance period, particularly the *Cinque-* and early *Seicento*. My specific intention is to overturn some commonly held beliefs about each respective ideology and in the process unveil how tightly woven together they are, for their divergences are transparent but their points of convergence and overlap are less so. In fact, while many studies, such as Pamela Benson's *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman*, seek to underline the misogyny penetrating works commonly held as profeminist, my scholarship instead locates some very concrete marks of profeminism locatable in works commonly held as misogynist. My chapter on Giovanni Della Casa's *An uxor sit ducenda (Se s'abbia da prender*

moglie) is a prime example: his reputation as a steadfast misogynist precedes him, but his text on whether or not marriage is useful actually enlists logic that speaks to the profeminist cause, adopting misogamist arguments that simultaneously criticize social treatment of women and indirectly promote levels of emancipation for them. While works like Benson's provide useful insight into the lives of Renaissance Italians, I would argue my work brings an innovative and much-needed perspective to understanding gender studies in the early modern period.

My chapter on Moderata Fonte's *Il merito delle donne* takes a different approach. Her work is heralded as a critical text in the history of profeminist literature, and rightly so, but the complex type of feminism she practices is at the pith of my interest here. She represents the dramatic shift from the forward ideas of the first half of the *Cinquecento* to their abrupt curbing by the Counter-Reformation and post-Tridentine reforms in the latter half; she displays a fiery feminism that is concomitantly tempered and tailored for the social architectonic of her day. Fonte is what I term a reluctant feminist: she is abiding and approving of the patriarchal infrastructure—of her subordinate position—until the point abuse is introduced. She argues against the opprobrious practices of men, but in the end abandons calls for reform and instead resigns to advising on how women can fold as comfortably as possible into the existing misogynist framework. In this sense Fonte's text is realistic as it is meant to be a practical, rather than idealistic, manual for women. She avoids fantasy—an eradication of misogyny—in favor of counsel that could hopefully be of veritable use to women in her contemporary society. I argue that her discourse on the numerous existence of opposite pairings in nature (e.g. sun/moon) sustain her own resigned stance in regards to men: just as those pairs are pitted against each other by natural instinct, so men and women are naturally inclined to be contrary and there is no potential for rectifying it, as Nature has willed it so. Despite her impassioned feminist arguments,

in the end she adopts a defeatist attitude that acutely reflects the delicate state of profeminism in Renaissance Italy.

My chapter on Suor Arcangela Tarabotti explores the other type of marital path available to women in Renaissance Italy—that of spiritual marriage. The parallels between laic and religious marriages are numerous and many of the arguments Tarabotti adopts to abnegate forced vocation echo those of feminists who decry the injustices in the secular marriage market. However, Tarabotti’s work distinguishes itself fundamentally by invoking a tactic of shame to cogently persuade her stance, whereas other feminists tendentially employ softer approaches that attempt to appeal to sympathetic inclinations. I juxtapose her work specifically with that of Fonte’s (which relies more heavily on emotional pleas to incite pity and provoke change), to put into relief the vehemence and starkness of Tarabotti’s words, examining the elements and effectiveness of both strategies in the process. I also argue many paradoxes in Tarabotti’s work. Ironically, she is only able to be so unhinged in her condemnation of forced monachization because her lifelong confinement in the convent provides her an immunity against the socio-political repercussions other “worldly” feminists (i.e. writing outside the convent) faced. Additionally, Tarabotti’s rebellious nature in encouraging young maidens to defy their parents’ wishes to have them take the veil against their will is perplexed by her concomitant upholding of sense of honor: she encourages rebellion until the consecration of the vow, at which point honor and duty replace personal aspirations within the familial/societal framework. This mindset demonstrates at once her anachronistic feminism and her deep investment in contemporary culture.

All three authors offer intriguing insight into preconceptions of feminism, misogyny and marriage in early modern Italy. What I hope to reveal in my dissertation is the discordant issues

wringing the daily interactions of men and women did not stem primarily or firstly from natural inclinations to contrariness, but were exacerbated instead by ill-conceived institutional hegemony, meaning that the two main institutions which determined much of the quotidian details of married life—the Church and the State—put in place a set of ideologies they may have purported as ideal and right, but that ultimately failed to function practically in favor of marriage or in favor of male/female relations in general, having neglected much of the aspect of emotional well-being so critical for a successful marital union.

The dissertation of Melina Rae Madrigal is approved.

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2013

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INTRODUCTION:

“...Così come non c’è amore più grande dell’amore coniugale..., anche l’odio che prende radice fra i coniugi è il più profondo che ci sia...”¹

Jean Bodin’s words underscore the problem at the heart of the crisis of the institution of matrimony that pervaded Renaissance thought and was intensely debated in political, religious, juridical, economical, philosophical, and literary circles throughout the *Cinque-* and early *Seicento*. In his *République*, first published in 1576, the French jurist and political philosopher urges civil law to permit acts of *divortium*, reinvoking the privileges of ancient societies that enjoyed the divinely sanctioned action of *ripudio*, or the rejection of the wife. He argues that because marriage, and the supposed love that serves as its infrastructure, has the capacity to vacillate so extensively—from blissful, harmonious love to the most deleterious form of hate—, couples who find themselves in the nadir of the gamut should be able to dissolve the tie that united them. Bodin assumes primarily a misogynistic male point of view in his work, but he pleads on the part of both spouses when he declares it not just senseless but also noxious to force two individuals who despise each other to live in the most intimate proximity. Such instances only breed vile deviances that could otherwise be eschewed through the granting of divorce:

Quando si proceda diversamente [che non sia permesso il divorzio], avviene che le due parti sono costrette a convivere continuando ciascuna ad avere sempre la causa del suo male davanti agli occhi; e così, vedendosi ridotti in estrema servitù e in continuo timore e discordia, finiscono con l’arrivare ad adulterio,

¹ Jean Bodin, *I sei libri dello Stato*, as cited in Diego Quaglioni, “*Divortium a diversitate mentium*. La separazione personale dei coniugi nelle dottrine di diritto comune (appunti per una discussione),” in *Coniugi nemici. La separazione in Italia dal XII al XVII secolo*, eds. Silvana Seidel Menchi and Diego Quaglioni (Bologna: Mulino, 2000), 100.

delitti, avvelenamenti (e tutto questo avviene in segreto all'insaputa di tutti)...Cose del genere sono da temersi soprattutto quando il divorzio non sia consentito.²

Bodin's description calls into question the hypocrisy of the motors behind the construct of marriage—the Church and the State—which foster an ideology of marriage serving as a union that ensures peace, safety and stability for a given couple when those criteria are in actuality met for the government and Church with first priority, and often at the sake of the couple.

Bodin's urgings echo the clamorings of other distraught voices in Renaissance Italy, like those of Giovanni Della Casa, Moderata Fonte, and Suor Arcangela Tarabotti—the subjects of our present study—who all make vehement arguments against the marital state. They lambast the incongruencies between the projected image of marriage and its lived reality, though each writes for a different purpose and in a different context. Della Casa is a trained lawyer and humanist who establishes a career in the clergy and remains single his entire life; Fonte is a married woman who already had published amply and was well-known in the Venetian literary circle by the time she composed her final work, the subject of our interest, in 1592; and Tarabotti is a nun who was forced into the convent against her will and spent the entirety of her life fighting against the human rights violation inherent in forced monachization. And yet, though their differences are many, the similarities uniting them are powerful: they are joined by a common desire to live in a society in which marriage is not an action mandated by either political, social or religious expectations of compliance; they are all misogynists first and foremost, and would happily live independently of the other sex if it was easily feasible.

Yet the constraints of contemporary society made celibate life a difficult aspiration for men with politically career-minded goals and for women in general. From the male viewpoint, marriage played a role in qualifying a man as a viable politician. Despite humanists'

² As cited in Seidel Menchi and Quaglioni, *Coniugi nemici*, 101.

promulgation of the single man as ideal for a life of intellectual pursuits, socio-political philosophy believed a man's ability to establish and maintain order on the domestic front held strong implications for his ability to perform the same duties at the state level, and thus marriage was expected of him as some requisite proof of political competency.³ A man's ability to rule his household with success translated into an apt ability to lead in the public realm. Marriage was, in essence, a microcosm for the State.

Keeping on the same topic of order—"forma à perfettion d'ogni cosa"⁴—we find the implications quite different for females. In a multitude of works written in varying contexts—religious, philosophical, scientific, political—we find the literary characterization of women to be consistent with all that has to do with dis-order. From antiquity well through the *Cinquecento* the female is insistently conveyed as the physical embodiment of disorder. Her natural disposition is untamed, subject to volatile whim and unpredictable manner. She is "chaos, flesh, imperfection, non-reason...but the intervention of the man, that is to say of reason, can permeate her, modify her; through him she can be contained, reared."⁵ As the very incarnation of disorder, then, the female is obligated to marry for only through subjugation to male authority and reason is her *privatas* able to be remedied, or at the very least controlled, and she thereby no longer poses a threat to the social order. Marriage was therefore considered a redeeming action in that it held the power to produce and/or restore honor to both men and women.

³ For more on Renaissance political thought, see Quentin Skinner, *Renaissance Virtues* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University, 2002); Christine Raffini, *Marsilio Ficino, Pietro Bembo, Baldassar Castiglione: Philosophical, Aesthetic, and Political Approaches in Renaissance Platonism* (New York: P. Lang, 1998); Peter Stacey, *Roman Monarchy and the Renaissance Prince* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University, 2007); and for humanist conceptualization of women, see Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Early Humanist Reformation, 1250-1500*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002).

⁴ Sperone Speroni as cited by Daniela Frigo in her "Dal caos all'ordine. Sulla questione del *prender moglie* nella trattatistica del sedicesimo secolo," in *Nel cerchio della luna. Figure di donna in alcuni testi nel XVI secolo*, ed. Marina Zancan (Venice: Marsilio, 1983), 68.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 66. Translation is my own.

But the conceptualization and praxis of matrimony during the 16th century remained sources of great turmoil despite social conviction of its necessity, and despite dissentious opinions being circulated on the topic. Numerous movements and ideological rebellions took hold in the *Cinquecento* and inevitably had the effect of unearthing any stability the sacrament of marriage had previously maintained. Specifically, the ideas of the Reformists and the Counter-Reformists on the one hand and the pre- and post-Tridentine practices on the other all colluded to provide a turbulent historical context in which a uniform understanding of matrimony, though eagerly sought, was impossible.⁶ Though the complaints and criticisms of the Reformers were by no means novel, as they were already widely expressed during the medieval period, the amount of support they were able to garner so that the Church could not quell their vociferous protests was unprecedented. The Reformists, led primarily by Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli (though not to be thought of as one group united in solidarity, as there were many divisions within the overarching label of “Reformist”), brought forth issues that fundamentally turned Catholic doctrine on its head: they rejected the belief that marriage was a sacrament, rebuffed the mandate of celibacy,⁷ promoted the ability of the clergy to marry, condemned clandestine marriage and lay concubinage, and supported ideas about the role of sex in marriage that were in extreme contrast to those upheld by the Church. One of their main contentions was the hypocrisy of the Church’s decreeing marriage a sacrament and then vilifying marital sex as an unclean and filthy act. Reformers argued sexual impulses were natural to the human order and should be fulfilled within the realm of matrimony; failure to do so would lead, much as Bodin

⁶ For an overview of the Reformation in Italy, see Roland H. Bainton, *Women of the Reformation in Germany and Italy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1971).

⁷ In his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 7:1-9), St. Paul advocates celibacy as the path to righteousness. See Daniel Bornstein’s “Spiritual Kinship and Domestic Devotions,” in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, eds. Judith C. Brown and Robert C. Davis (New York: Longman, 1998), 173.

affirms, to the proliferation of sexual deviance and vice. It is for this same reason that the clergy should be allowed to marry, since denying them that right causes them to eventually take concubines and live in greater sin than their married counterparts. As contemporary theologian Philip Melanchthon declared, ironically, married people are more chaste because marriage provides a continual outlet for sexual gratification.⁸ In accordance with this sexual ideology, Reformers rejected the decree of sex in marriage as only to be conducted for procreation; they believed marital sex was virtuous, as long as it was performed with modesty and propriety, and should be engaged in as a form of affection that brings couples closer together. Sex's first virtue in marriage was that it expressed and augmented the couple's love for one another; procreation was a second-order virtue.⁹

The subject of divorce and remarriage was an equally divisive controversy. Roman Catholic canonists and theologians maintained severely rigid requirements for the dissolution of a marriage, with even adultery very rarely being grounds for granting an annulment.¹⁰ Yet because of their repudiation of marriage as a sacrament, Reformers were less rigidly attached to the idea of marriage being indissoluble. Luther believed in a couple's right to terminate their union if they were unable to perform sexual duties, in cases of adultery, or if one party refused to engage in sexual relations, all of which created conflict in marital relations. Though he was decidedly pro-marriage before pro-divorce, Luther maintained that in these situations the couple should be able to divorce and seek a more compatible partnership with a new spouse.

Fundamentally, he advocated for the physical and emotional well being of the couple and

⁸ James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 554.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 556-7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 371.

criticized canon law on divorce for not sustaining those same values, saying that its practices exposed it as “A net for gold and silver and a noose for the soul.”¹¹

The galvanizing efforts of the Protestant reformers incited conscientious Catholics to then evaluate their doctrine and led to an eventual Catholic Reformation. Amongst its leaders were Erasmus (ca. 1466-1536), Gian Matteo Gilberti (Bishop of Verona, 1524-43), Cardinal Gaspar Contarini (1483-1542), and St. Philip Neri (1525-95). They took issues with the same matters that distressed their Protestant counterparts: papal abuse of power and corruption, clandestine marriages, mandated celibacy for the clergy, requirements for divorce, annulment, and remarriage. Their stance differed, however, in that they were not prepared to rebuff Church authority but sought a legitimate alteration of canon law and praxis.

The turbulence caused by the both the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Reformation provoked the opposition into action. The Counter-Reformation, led by individuals like St. Peter Canisius (1521-97), Gian Pietro Caraffa (Pope Paul IV, 1555-59), and St. Vincent de Paul (ca. 1580-1660), conceded that revision of ecclesiastical practices and ordinance should be pursued, but it nevertheless took as its primary goal the protection of the papacy and Roman doctrine against its critics. It was agreed that a general council should be summoned to review the changes to be made within the Catholic Church, but this was not seriously pursued until the election of Pope Paul III (1534-49). In the summer of 1536 the council was formed and by the spring of 1537 a report was submitted, with the incriminating evidence gathered meant only to be seen by the pope and his chief advisers.¹² Yet the report leaked and within a matter of weeks the

¹¹ Ibid., 558.

¹² Ibid., 562.

stolen copy was published and circulated—it became a best seller and Luther translated it into a German edition and included his own scathing commentary.¹³ The result was an intensely increased pressure on the Catholic Church for action, but not until 1545 did that demand realize in the form of the creation of the Council of Trent, which sought to analyze and resolve both disciplinary and dogmatic problems.

After more than fifteen years of deliberation, the Council of Trent issued a number of edicts in 1563 that would change the course of marriage and establish the Church's role as ultimate authority over it. It created a number of marriage laws that were nestled under the *Tametsi* decree and which were aimed at establishing a linear regulation of all angles relating to marriage—touching on every aspect from its nascent phases of negotiation to its solemnization to divorce, and much in between. The regulations were expounded in texts that included a doctrinal preamble, twelve canons and a lengthy decree entitled *de reformatione matrimonii*. Amongst the most important declarations were the establishment of marriage as a sacrament, as an indissoluble tie, a reiteration of the Church's exclusive authority over marital jurisdiction, the requisite of mutual consent amongst spouses, and a banning on clandestine weddings.

Clandestine weddings had been a specific source of scandal in the courts, in large part because the element of 'nuptial consent' was extremely difficult to determine in matters of contested matrimony between discordant couples. Silvana Seidel Menchi reports:

Il consenso nuziale...—del quale una delle due parti in causa si faceva forte e che l'altra negava di aver prestato—poteva essere momentaneo e volatile. Poteva venire ritirato, magari dopo anni e anni di convivenza. Poteva essere espresso con riserva mentale. Poteva essere ambiguo, perché subordinato a una

¹³ Ibid., 563.

condizione più o meno consapevole, più o meno chiaramente espressa. E poteva essere finto. Quest'ultimo caso era il più frequente.¹⁴

The concept of consent therefore had a wide specter for interpretation and in turn caused innumerable discrepancies, especially when the consent was used as ploy for other gain. Those who falsely professed marital consent—usually males—utilized it as a perfidious measure to seduce the object of their desire into voluntary sexual relations, and then denied any nuptial consent had been given once the goal was attained.¹⁵ The presiding judge was then tasked with the exceptionally difficult challenge of deciphering if mutual consent had been established at any point, even whimsically; and if he found it to be so, the judge declared the marriage to be valid. Courts were inclined to rule in favor of matrimony, especially when a young woman's sexual honor was at stake.

The outlawing of clandestine weddings sought to eliminate the he-said/she-said hearsay of cases brought to the court for judgment on marital validity. Its outlawing then necessitated an introduction of new regulation regarding marriage celebrations, which the *Tametsi* duly addressed. It required the wedding to be a public ceremony performed by the parish priest, in the presence of two witnesses; wedding banns had to be announced before the ceremony, the marriage had to be registered in the official books of the parish, and it had to be consummated. If any of these conditions was not met, the union was determined invalid. And though after the *Tametsi* the number of registered weddings increased, as its inverse—the number of clandestine weddings—decreased, it did not completely eradicate the practices that had been in place prior.

¹⁴ Silvana Seidel Menchi, "Percorsi variegati, percorsi obbligati. Elogio del matrimonio pre-tridentino," in *Matrimoni in dubbio. Unioni controverse e nozze clandestine in Italia dal XIV al XVIII secolo*, eds. Silvana Seidel Menchi and Diego Quaglioni (Bologna: Mulino, 2001), 25.

¹⁵ On August 27th, 1577, local Venetian government passed a law that would punish those malicious males who had 'forcibly taken and enjoyed' women under the pretext of marriage, but without fulfilling their promise. See Daniela Hacke, *Women, Sex and Marriage in Early Modern Venice* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2004), 184.

Couples still married in secret, mutual consent was often lacking, parish priests were replaced with priests willing to officiate over a forced union, and other violations continued. However, the idea of ‘validity’ was amorphous and subject to a wide range of interpretation. Often a marriage that had been solemnized in defiance of the Tridentine decrees but was supported by the families and community who organized it still maintained a strong semblance of validity within the community, regardless of meeting official guidelines.¹⁶ Though the *Tametsi* issued a number of decrees all aimed at replacing secular control over marriage with religious control and was relatively successful in enacting this takeover at the institutional level, the scope of effectuating real change at the level of social practices revolving around marriage remained more elusive.

With marriage undergoing a sharp reevaluation during the 16th century—from the radical ideas of Reformists to the liberal notions being pushed forth by humanists¹⁷ to the strictures then imposed by the Tridentine rulings and the Counter-Reformation—the topic of women too saw a parallel period of intense examination. The subject of *donna* was treated primarily by men, whose ideas ranged from conjuring her as a sub-human she-devil to a mimicry of Eve with multiple variations spanning between the two. Discourse often took place on a rather abstract level, with men—independent of female input—assigning themselves the task of defining what woman’s role should be, how her appearance should be maintained, what her comportment

¹⁶ Joanne M. Ferraro highlights the case of Paolina Pirron’s marriage to Lorenzo Comelli, which was forced against her will. Though the mandate stipulating mutual consent and use of local parish priest were not met, the fact that the marriage was brought to court some fifteen years later for annulment (presumably because one or both spouses wished to remarry) demonstrates the union was held to be valid within the community, as indeed the community’s opinion was often the most important factor. See her *Marriage Wars in Late Renaissance Venice* (New York: Oxford, 2001), 45-49.

¹⁷ Alessandro Piccolomini and his advocacy of the feminine pursuit of pleasure come to mind, in his *Dialogo de la bella creanza de le donne* (Venice: Curtio Navo e fratelli), 1539.

should look like, how she could best serve society, etc.¹⁸ It is for this reason many modern scholars have sustained the notion of ‘woman’ in Renaissance times as an invented, formulaic idea rather than a true representation or revelation of women.¹⁹ Yet this declaration, one could easily argue, is true for men too and so should thus be interpreted as a precautionary evaluation tool in approaching Renaissance conduct texts rather than an offense against female historicity. There is no one prescriptive recipe for the definition of ‘female’ since various factors—tententially more entwined with matters economic and political in nature than gender based—prevent a comprehensive clustering of all women into one group. Indeed, most available information concerning the female situation in the early modern period is pertinent to women of the higher ranks of society, as is the case in this present study, as well.

Nevertheless, the concept of woman underwent an exhaustive examination during the 16th century with opinions being of a mixed variety; but the incontestable result was a stronger emergence of the female—both as conceptual and veritable figure—into the public realm of interest. In the first place, because ‘the question of woman’ was fervently pursued, it seemed only natural at some point that women themselves would enter the debate—even if at a far lesser rate than male participation—to provide their opinions, and defenses. Even if not addressing specific *querelle des femmes* topics, women began to make their presence known within literary circles simply by writing and publishing at all. Indeed, female-authored works soared to an

¹⁸ For example, Matteo Palmieri’s *Libro della vita civile. Composta da Mattheo Palmieri cittadino Fiorentino* (Florence: Per li heredi di Philippo di Giunta, 1529); Francesco Barbaro’s *De re uxoria* (Paris: Vaenundantur in aedibus Ascensianis, 1514); Giovanni Giorgio Trissino’s *I ritratti del Trissino* (Toscolano: Alessandro Paganini, between 1527-1538); Cosimo Agnelli’s *Amorevole aviso alle donne, circa alcuni loro abusi* (Ferrara: Benedetto Mammarello, 1592); Leon Battista Alberti’s *Avvertimenti matriomionali*, first published in *Opere volgari*, vol. I (Florence: 1844, pp. 192-210); Bernardo Trotto’s *Dialoghi del matrimonio, e vita vedovile del signor C. A. Bernardo Trotto* (Turin: Heredi di Nicolo Bevilacqua, 1583).

¹⁹ Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge, “Women as Historical Actors” in *A History of Women in the West: Renaissance and Enlightenment Paradoxes*, eds. Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University, 1993), 1-7; See also Pamela Benson’s *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University), 1992.

unprecedented level, with initial preference for the genre of lyric poetry, but later experimenting with *novelle*, comedies, treatises, and narratives, amongst other forms. There were groups of female humanists (understood in the strict sense of the word), that included individuals like Isotta Nogarola, Olimpia Morato, and Lucrezia Marinella; then there were others who pertained to a broader understanding of the word: Vittoria Colonna, Gaspara Stampa, Veronica Franco, Moderata Fonte, Laura Battiferri Ammanati, Tullia d’Aragona, and still many others. Invention of the printing press and the shift to vernacular language encouraged wide circulation of their works. Italy was especially progressive in this regard: during the 16th century alone, the country touted over two hundred published female writers, whereas France, as a very distant second, could boast only around thirty.²⁰

With the female expansion onto the literary platform came a concomitant broadening of the ways in which the female author practiced devices of self-fashioning. Humanistic conventions required the text to carry some level of self-effacement, and for female writers this was usually maintained by using forms of address that sustained the patriarchal hierarchy, such as Isotta Nogarola’s continued use of “father” for all her male addressees.²¹ Older models held firmly to this father-daughter filial role in which a level of reverential deference was relayed. The classical example is of Quintus Hortensius and his daughter Hortensia, whom he modeled in his like-fashion and took pleasure in training her in various academic pursuits. The projection of the father onto the learned daughter meant the accolades she won were then interpreted as a direct reflection of her father’s good merit and intellect, as was the case when Hortensia, renowned for her oratory skills, delivered a speech before the Second Triumvirate that forcibly

²⁰ Virginia Cox, *Women’s Writing in Italy 1400-1650* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2008), xiv.

²¹ Sarah Gwyneth Ross, *The Birth of Feminism: Woman as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University, 2009), 34.

led to the repeal of a tax on wealthy Roman women (she used her knowledge to advance feminist issues in ancient Rome). Sarah Ross calls the father-daughter dynamic that continued into the Renaissance the *hortensian hermeneutic*, which in part combatted the idea that female ‘learned virtue’ was a domestic liability but instead offered a positive reinforcement of family honor.²² She, the daughter, was a representative of the family, rendering her training and study worthwhile endeavors since her public performance too weighed on the social reputation of the family. Ross cites Christine de Pizan, Nogarola, Cassandra Fedele, Laura Cereta, and Helena Bembo as all exemplary cases of adopting the filial deferential standpoint to their literary advantage.

But Ross also argues that during the second half of the 16th century, the model shifts to one that encompasses a female figure that commands greater equality with her male counterpart: the learned wife. Fonte and Marinella serve as her prime examples of this endeavor, with each writing on issues regarding the identity and lifestyle of a more independent woman (as far as ‘independent’ can be understood in this period), and seeking to instill virtue into the traditional female tasks/characteristics that had been devalued by their detractors. Indeed, Ross contends Marinella’s most striking statement in defense of women is her declaration of being proud to be a woman.²³ This in turn meant a certain type of feminism was promoted—not one in which the feminine is denied and seeks to make the female identical to her male counterpart, but one in which the qualities that distinguish woman as such are exalted and held to be of equal value to those that men purport. Part of this type of feminism entailed embracing the domestic duties of women and recognizing their worth. And while Ross contends the use of domestic syntax was

²² Ibid., 193.

²³ Ibid., 287.

redeemed as a subversive strategy that called on women to avoid shunning their identities and instead catapult them into demanded attention and respect by publicizing them, she nevertheless concedes that at times abandonment of domestic rhetoric proved most effective for profeminist interests.²⁴

Positive ideas of equality were suggested and even accepted during the Renaissance, but these usually had to do with moral philosophy and lacked a corresponding effort before the law or in the political realm. The argument of woman being equal to man spiritually, because she too as a human possessed an immortal soul, became increasingly accepted. And the resurgence of Platonic and Aristotelian theory were aptly used by pro-mulieres writers to reinforce the defining of mankind in terms of the soul (Plato spoke in terms of a *rational soul* while Aristotle instead referred to man as *rational animal*). The soul was by all accounts genderless and therefore sustained woman's spiritual capacity as equal to man's. Furthermore, exegetical evidence was also strategically applied as the belief of her being made in God's likeness was used to accuse any detractors of blatant blasphemy, and the sanctity of Eve, which was incontestable even amongst vehement misogynists, was continually used to argue the worth of women.

In addition, the pro-woman argument of 'different but equal' gained much support in the *Cinquecento*. The female body was judged to be different from man's but distinctly perfect for its intended purposes and in that vein of equal value with the male body. Mario Equicola is one of the first to write an elaborate encomium of women in which he declares the "perfezione del corpo donnesco" and reminds that "l'anima e il corpo dell'uomo e della donna abbiano

²⁴ Ibid., 14.

un'identica origine ed un medesimo principio.”²⁵ He goes on to further promulgate the argument of nature vs. nurture by asserting women's current inferiority as only a product of male oppression, for if she were granted the same access to education and enterprise as men, she would most certainly prove her equality in all fields since the mind is an extraordinarily adaptable and competent engine.²⁶ Other more ambiguously profeminist attitudes were adopted; and though by today's standards they are more misogynistic than feminist, in the early modern period they prevailed as marked attempts to instill positivity into the female condition. Humanists like Leon Battista Alberti encouraged female erudition for the sake of becoming a more interesting, developed companion for the husband (though oratory skills were unnecessary because they served no purpose for woman, as she is to remain within the home); and others like Ludovico Dolce and Galeazzo Flavio Capella praised women for her excellence in domestic virtue—for maintaining a well-run household in her husband's stead.

The precarious state of feminism in early modern Italy thus affirms how sensitive, volatile and customized it was—adaptable to different needs depending on context, the protagonist who creates it, the recipient, and the goal at hand. Feminism as we know it today is difficult to locate in Renaissance Italy, but its early traces are visible and were expressed in a number of varying formats, though very often comprising some elements of misogyny as well. The inclusion of anti-female sentiments in works classified as profeminist should come at no surprise nor should it trigger an instinct to disqualify a certain author of this manner as actually *contra-mulieres*, for misogyny was instilled in the hegemonic framework of Renaissance society and must be understood as the prevailing ideology. Its ubiquitous presence was a dominant theme at all levels of religious, political, economical, and social thought and for this reason it

²⁵ Mario Equicola, *De mulieribus*, ed. Giuseppe Lucchesini (Pisa: Ist. Ed. e Poligrafici Internazionali, 2004), 25.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

was a societal problem, meaning that it was not just an issue between man and woman but a much larger issue that dealt with society's subliminal (or overt) subscription to a social infrastructure that seeped with misogynist rhetoric, laws, and practices. This meant that women, too, in abiding by the societal norms and expectations and adopting popular belief patterns, played a part in reinforcing misogyny. Their misogynistic efforts could take the form of either sustaining in-place patriarchal structures (as Fonte does, shortly to be explored) and affirming man's superiority or by creating friction and divisions amongst female unity, separating women according to male-sanctioned discriminatory policies.

Even in texts of the most formidable examples of feminist writers, evidence of female disunity and anti-female language are not foreign. In several works we find feminist writers who distinguish between women of moral rectitude and those they consider immoral, the difference philologically entrenched in the distinctness of *donna* from *femmina*. de Pizan, who is quite arguably the first feminist in Western tradition and the apotheosis of overt philogyny, nevertheless refuses to grant women of moral impropriety the honor of even being considered women; once they have transgressed lines of moral acceptable behavior, they are cast out from the female race. When the subject of licentious women comes up in her work, Pizan elects to not even address the issue "since women of that breed are technically no longer women, but rather should be classified as monsters."²⁷ Others, like Tarabotti, disdainfully denounce women who unlawfully flee the convent they were forced into against their will as being great sources of disgrace (which is addressed shortly). In both cases, there is a lack of empathy on the part of Tarabotti and Pizan that one would have expected in such situations. As women who have matured in sexually discriminatory societies, they are aware of the limited options for women

²⁷ As cited in Ross, *The Birth of Feminism*, 139.

and the forced expectations of them—aware of the suffering they endure at being coerced into a life path not of their choosing; or perhaps of the destitution that assailed her after being seduced and left without a marriage proposal, or being widowed with no financial security, and forced into prostitution as her only means of self-maintenance. But their own circumstances seem to have not softened but hardened their sympathies, as perhaps their ability to fulfill expectations and maintain good social standing subjectively inclines them to believe it is doable by all. The notion finds a parallel in many court cases, in which mothers played the role of the more threatening/coercive force in making a distraught daughter marry against her will; the mother demonstrates no palpable sympathy, though she, too, presumably understood perfectly the agony of her daughter having she herself most likely endured the same scenario of coerced union years before.²⁸ Laura Cereta is another example of a fiery feminist writer who lacks no hesitancy in chastising women. She accuses women of being too content with their present situation as dependents on males and blames women themselves for their lack of education instead of society, saying that women have the option to pursue knowledge if they so choose.²⁹

The boundaries of misogyny and feminism in early modern Italy, then, are clearly precarious and undefined. Misogyny can moonlight as feminism or simply contain particles of it and it can be used by both sexes, and its definition in one realm may be wholly inapplicable in another; profeminism can seamlessly fit into the Renaissance patriarchal architectonic without causing a stir and can take the form of a flattering comment that actually reinforces misogyny

²⁸ Hacke, *Women, Sex and Marriage*, 100.

²⁹ See Cereta's letter to Bibolo Semproni in *Laura Cereta: Collected Letters of a Renaissance Feminist*, ed. Diana Robin, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997), 74-80.

(women as carnal) or it could, on the other extreme, blame men for all of society's grievances and call for a world devoid of men.³⁰

The numerous forms and variations of both misogyny and profeminism were triggers of my interest for in-depth Renaissance studies. But these came only after an initial investigation into the *querelle des femmes* debate that waged well through the *Cinque-* and *Seicento*. I found the trope of consistently pitting men and women as clear opposites to be fascinating, as it was preserved in the writings of both the most vehement of misogynists (e.g. Giuseppe Passi) and the most eloquent of feminists (e.g. Lucrezia Marinella).³¹ Where women are depicted as cold, humid, volatile, imperfect, dim, weak, men are insistently characterized as hot, stable, perfection, intellect, strength; where women are chaste, honorable, kind, charitable, angelic, men are then deceitful, dishonest, brutish, violent, seducers. There seemed to be a strict, non-veering line of inverse joining men and women in which it was unthinkable to have them both falling into a shared category. Only some writers, those I deem most progressive, address a (at times equal) level of faults and virtues present in men and women (Tarabotti, in part, is one of these authors, and I will soon discuss how this approach is really more progressive for the feminist cause than applications of misandry).

Yet, their constant depiction as complete contraries led to an interest in then discovering points of similarities and points of congruence in their lines of thought. It was during my investigation into the state of marital union in Renaissance Italy that they were found readily. While marriage is contested by both the misogynist and philogynist camps with their arguments

³⁰ Underscored by the complete absence of men in Fonte's dialogue; also Cereta's call for a *respublica mulierum*.

³¹ See Lucrezia Marinella, *La nobiltà, et l'eccellenza delle donne, co' diffetti, e mancamenti de gli huomini. Discorso di Lucretia Marinella, in due parti diviso...ricorretto & accresciuto in questa seconda impression* (Venice: G.B. Ciotti, 1601); Giuseppe Passi, *I donneschi diffetti*. [microform] *Nuovamente formati, e posti in luce* (Venice: Iacobo Antonio Somascho, 1599).

naturally assuming their respective point of view (meaning either from the male or the female perspective), the actual arguments that were being delineated utilized similar rhetoric and expressed the same frustrations, grievances, and dismay. On the topic of marriage, misogynists and feminists could find a point of agreement: they were against it. All three of the authors I specifically examine—Della Casa, Fonte, and Tarabotti—advocate first and foremost the idea of living as a mature, decorous, productive, single individual unconstrained by the ties of matrimony. This state is their ideal, but sensitive to their respective socio-cultural milieus, they are aware of its disapprobation by the Church, State, and their families and that its active pursuit would be considered an act of subversion.

Beyond investigating points of confluence, I happened upon another finding that I believe to be a most understudied subject in Western literary tradition but that is emerging as a new scholarly interest—the existence of rhetoric and principles in misogynist works that advertently or inadvertently advance the profeminist effort. Scholarly trends over the past thirty years have typically been geared towards the opposite effort of finding anti-female elements in supposed feminist works. And while this effort has most certainly produced a plethora of studies devoted to retroactively denying feminist value in works that had previously been held as pioneers of philogynous literature,³² I find that though these specific studies are interesting and purposeful, they are not revelatory and border on dangerous lines of anachronicity. Feminism as we know it today cannot possibly be located in the Renaissance dialectic because its perpetually evolving nature renders it a new phenomenon peculiar to any one specific time-space context. At best, we can find its traces, its origins. Thus, finding rampant notions of misogyny in works traditionally

³² See Ch. 1-5 of Benson, *Invention of the Renaissance Woman*; Stephen D. Kolsky, “Women Through Men’s Eyes: The Third Book of *Il cortegiano*,” in *The Shared Horizon: Melbourne Essays in Italian Literature in Memory of Colin McCormick*, ed. Tom O’Neill, Blacknock (Co. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1990), 41-91; Valeria Finucci, *The Lady Vanishes: Subjectivity and Representation in Castiglione and Ariosto* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1992), 29-103.

classified as pro-female or containing pro-female notions (Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*, Castiglione's *Il cortegiano*, for example) is to be expected and considered a natural step on the trajectory of the evolution of feminism.

The inverse, however, is much more uncommon. When taking up Della Casa's *An uxor sit ducenda* (translated in Italian as *Se s'abbia da prender moglie*) for a preliminary study years ago, the finding of *pro mulieres* messages embedded within the work of an avid misogynist did not even enter as a possible scope; and yet, the pages of *An uxor* reveal themselves to not be anti-female first and foremost, but rather their intent is to discourage marriage on a universal level. It is principally a misogynist work, and the arguments Della Casa brings forth are tendentially gender irrelevant. It is only when he turns to providing examples that an adept inclusion of misogyny is adopted, as a means of bolstering his argument against taking a wife. But the differentiations between misogamy and misogyny are very important distinctions, despite how subtle they may first appear, because the former has to do with contrariness towards an institution while the latter is a discriminatory policy towards a group of human individuals—towards females. Not only was the uncovering of misogamy vs. misogyny a fascinating find, but even more so was the finding of Della Casa's incorporation of social criticisms that support progressive action for the feminist camp. He reproves social customs that limit woman's freedom and offers criticisms that, if obeyed and implemented, would result in greater privileges for women. It can be claimed almost without doubt that these profeminist messages and the overall amelioration of the female condition were not at the forefront of his intentions, but nevertheless because Della Casa's prime vexation is with the state of matrimonial union it means his arguments begin firstly from a perspective that does not include gender distinction. Della Casa's anti-marriage dialogue comprises the first chapter of the present study.

My work on Fonte, which comprises chapter two, fits more readily into the category of a profeminist work that encompasses misogynistic elements. But, as one may have already anticipated, my work does not seek to detract from her worthy reputation as feminist but instead evaluates the necessity of sporadically conceding to patriarchal inclinations in order to ensure greater success—in terms of reception and pragmatic application—of her text. My interest in Fonte therefore relates to my interest in uncovering different types and variations of feminism practiced in early modern Italy. Indeed, Fonte is an interesting figure for the paradox her private life poses with her literary endeavors, specifically *Il merito delle donne*, the text under examination for this study. Though relatively little is known about her private life, the biography her uncle Giovanni Niccolò Doglioni wrote (and which is included as a preface to *Il merito*), proffers a substantial picture of Fonte's extra-literary existence.

Fonte is a rare circumstance for her time in that she married very late (age twenty-seven) and her husband, Filippo de' Zorzi, a tax lawyer, was slightly younger than her, when most marriages typically saw a young bride (around twenty years of age) and a significantly older groom. Her marriage was probably arranged late in life as the family awaited the outcome of a lawsuit that had to do with her inheritance, but in any case the extra allowance of time permitted Fonte to grow and mature independently of an older, authoritative husband who would have imposed his ways upon her. Cox speculates the proximity in age potentially created a standard of equality not at all common for marriages of the time. The fact that Fonte continued to write and publish after her marriage suggests Zorzi was supportive of her literary endeavors, and from documented evidence in the Archivio di Stato di Venezia we can deduce a strong level of respect existed between Zorzi and Fonte based on exceptional gestures of generosity on their parts. In October of 1583, only eight months after their marriage was contracted, Zorzi:

...returned a portion of his wife's dowry to her control during his lifetime, attributing his decision to the 'great love and affection' (*grande amore et benevolentia*) he bore her. A further indication of the happiness of the marriage is that Fonte's will of 1585,...not only makes her husband the principal beneficiary, but also makes bequests to his mother, brother, and sisters, while studiously ignoring her own closest surviving blood relative, her brother Leonardo.³³

By all accounts available, it would appear Fonte enjoyed a most rare occurrence for her time period: a happy marriage underpinned by some bonds of equalized reciprocity. It is this point that then renders the forceful anti-marriage, anti-men rhetoric of *Il merito* somewhat paradoxical, for one would suppose at least some inclusion of pro-matrimony counsel based on her own personal experience, yet it is absent. It might help to explain, however, the more moderate stance she takes as a philogynous writer; for while Fonte clearly displays a fiery feminism throughout her work, she also concomitantly tempers and tailors it for the patristic architectonic of her day. She is measured in her approach—at once abiding and approving of the patriarchal infrastructure (and of her subordinate position therein), until the point abuse is introduced. She therefore is compliant with the overarching male-dominated framework of Renaissance Venetian society, but to a certain limit, for her feminism is triggered when the lines of decency and civilized treatment of women are violated by men. I will argue that despite the stalwart feminism pervading her text, Fonte ultimately abandons calls for reform and instead resigns to advising on how women can fold as comfortably as possible into the existing misogynist framework. Yet this should not be interpreted as a complete relinquishing from feminist efforts but rather is a pragmatic tactic on her part, with her dialogue serving more as a practical manual rather than an idealist propaganda piece.³⁴ She shuns fantastical ambitions of eradicating

³³ Moderata Fonte, *The Worth of Women: Wherein Is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Their Superiority to Men*, ed. and trans. Virginia Cox, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1997), 37, fn.19.

³⁴ For more on the instructive qualities of the dialogue, see Cox's introduction to her translation of Fonte's *The Worth of Women*, 9-12; and Stephen Kolsky's "Wells of Knowledge: Moderata Fonte's *Il merito delle donne*," in *The Italianist* 13 (1993): 57-96, esp. 80-1.

misogyny and instead provides an advice manual that could be of actual use in her contemporary society, spurring small feminist victories rather than a patristic overhaul.

Tarabotti's *La tirannia paterna* (which in later publications assumed the title *La semplicità ingannata*) comprises the textual analysis for the third and final chapter, and is indubitably the most ardent profeminist work of the three texts examined, and arguably of her time period. Tarabotti's unleashed passion is a result of her writing on a topic of which she herself is an unfortunate victim—coerced religious vocation. Whereas Fonte enjoyed a pleasant marriage yet discourages matrimony in her writings, suggesting she writes more from observational than personal evidence, Tarabotti's words blaze across the page in fiery accusations against the injustices practiced by wicked men with her passion fueled from personal experience. Though she refrains from making her own testimony a protagonist in her invective, she nevertheless writes on a topic that has been the ultimate source of pain and misery in her own life and her personal offense is sensed in the heightened emotion of her words.

Tarabotti's path was representative of the growing trend in Venetian society of 'dumping' girls into local convents to live out their lives under religious supervision, whether because they were deemed unmarriageable or families could not afford the marital dowry. As a member of the upper ranks of society like Fonte, who belonged to the *cittadini originari*, Tarabotti's elevated status meant marriage of some sort would be more fervently pursued, since women of upper class society were more rigidly constrained to marital obligations. But because she was born lame—like her father who, however, married without foreseen problems—she was labeled unfit for the marriage market and destined for the convent. She entered the convent of Sant'Anna in 1617 at age thirteen as an *educanda*, or a student-boarder, and would take the veil three years later in 1620, against her will. She would spend the rest of her days between the four walls of Sant'Anna, though was able to maintain an active presence in the Venetian literary

community, having forged relationships with prominent writers of the day, like Giovan Francesco Loredan, a founder of the Accademia degli Incogniti, who helped her publish.³⁵

Tarabotti's work distinguishes itself fundamentally by invoking a tactic of shame to cogently persuade her stance, whereas other feminists tendentially employ softer approaches that attempt to appeal to sympathetic inclinations. I juxtapose her work specifically with that of Fonte's (which relies more heavily on emotional pleas to incite pity and provoke change), to put into relief the vehemence and starkness of Tarabotti's words, examining the elements and effectiveness of both strategies in the process. I also argue many paradoxes in Tarabotti's work. Ironically, she is only able to be so unhinged in her condemnation of forced monachization because her lifelong confinement in the convent provides her an immunity against the socio-political repercussions other "worldly" feminists (i.e. writing outside the convent) faced. Additionally, Tarabotti's rebellious nature in encouraging young maidens to defy their parents' wishes to have them take the veil against their will is perplexed by her concomitant upholding of sense of honor: she encourages rebellion until the consecration of the vow, at which point honor and duty replace personal aspirations within the familial/societal framework. This mindset demonstrates at once her anachronistic feminism and her deep investment in contemporary culture.

My reasons for including Tarabotti's *La tirannia paterna* may not seem as immediately apparent as those for selecting Della Casa's dialogue, which deals directly with the subject of marriage, or for Fonte's work, which though not directly geared at marriage provides ample commentary on contemporary marriage problematics. Tarabotti's text is far more political in nature and scope: her invective is pointedly aimed at the abuse wielded by the State and fathers

³⁵ To better understand the breadth of Tarabotti's literary reach in early modern Europe, see Stephanie Jed's "Arcangela Tarabotti and Gabriel Naudé: Libraries, Taxonomies and Ragion di Stato," in Weaver, *A Literary Nun*, 129-140.

against their daughters, with supplementary commentary on common tropes of the *querelle des femmes* and even less material specifically addressing marriage. And yet, her text is profoundly insightful given the strong correlatives persisting between forced monachization and (forced) marriage in Renaissance Italy. Many of the arguments Tarabotti adopts to abnegate forced vocation echo those of feminists who decry the injustices in the secular marriage market. Indeed, women in early modern times were tied together by their unifying status as bride, since contemporary socio-cultural and economic factors demanded women subscribe to the institution of marriage in some form or another—whether as bride of Christ/God or of man. The act of marrying signaled not only their non-threatening stance to societal order but an open display of their (at least outward) acquiescence to it when they took their vows. Thus, while Fonte and Della Casa provide insights on the malpractices of secular marriage, Tarabotti's grievances provide a window into the other lifestyle possible for women—that of ecclesiastical marriage, simultaneously putting into relief the remarkable parallels between the two. Facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the female marital condition in early modern Italy therefore necessitates an investigation into both.

For each author and his/her given text, I have created two sub-chapters: On Women and On Marriage. The On Women portion is dedicated to an examination primarily of the feminine symbolic—the use, creation and application of the female voice, image, persona; but in being able to aptly study and measure the feminine, the masculine symbolic must also be studied and so some inclusions of the male representation are also present in this portion. The On Marriage part treats the way in which the author in question views, critiques and idealistically reforms marital customs and marriage ideology according to his/her own personal credence, however much influenced by external sources of a political, religious, social or economic influence.

CHAPTER 1.1:

Giovanni Della Casa: On Women

Much in the same way different types of feminism and varying levels of extremism prevent a uniform definition of the term ‘feminism’, so too is it true of its antithesis—misogyny. The oppression of women exists in various forms and in the Renaissance it at times even moonlighted under the pretense of profeminism, with many works purporting to be pro-female but ostensibly seeping with misogynist rhetoric. The gamut, then, was long and wide for establishing one’s (dis)beliefs in gender equality. In her seminal work *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance*, Ruth Kelso generalizes the situation by distinguishing four different attitudes she argues dominated the *querelle des femmes* debate and represent the variable outlooks of its participants: 1) some considered woman a necessary evil; 2) some thought her to possess goodness but in a limited and modest way inferior to that of men; 3) others took her as good and necessary on a plane equal with men; 4) while a still smaller group claimed her superiority over men.³⁶ Despite the thoroughness of Kelso’s work, these four categories are too narrowly conceived to accurately convey the complexities rooted in the relationship between misogyny, profeminism and gender relations in general.

Giovanni Della Casa is a perfect case in point. He would for the most part fit somewhere between the first and second attitude (leaning heavily towards the first), but elsewhere in *An uxor sit ducenda*³⁷ he evidences an attitude more suited to the third category. Based on Della Casa’s well-known reputation as a misogynist even before his composing *An uxor*, it would appear a

³⁶ Ruth Kelso, *Doctrine For the Lady of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 10-11.

³⁷ I have used the Italian translation of Giovanni Della Casa’s *An uxor sit ducenda: Se s’abbia da prender moglie*, trans. Ugo Enrico Paoli, 2nd ed. (Florence: Felice Le Monnier), 1944.

stretch to place him in the third category. Readers familiar with him would approach the work knowing his background and consequentially expect a certain conclusion (a misogynist one), resulting in a narrow interpretation of his work. But if read with careful distinction, the findings in *An uxor* are that much of what has been labeled misogynist is not so but rather misogamist. The two ideologies very often overlap or are lumped together, or even at times treated as the very same thing. This tendency is in part due to women's status revolving around marriage in the Renaissance period—as either a maiden, wife, or widow—but it is nevertheless an erroneous superimposition of the one on top of the other. Men, women, and the institution of marriage need at some point, and depending on the context, to be regarded separately; especially when considering the female point of view of marriage too was not favorable, as Moderata Fonte and Arcangela Tarabotti attest. Separating the misogyny from the misogamy in Della Casa's text is key to understanding that the former is actually in large part a byproduct of the latter and that his misogamy is not misogynist but rather surprisingly embodies concrete profeminist ideals. Indeed, very often when launching into his anti-marriage diatribes, Della Casa speaks in a gender-neutral tone, as shall soon be explored.

Della Casa's anti-women sentiments should not be discounted, however, for they are palpable. It is appropriate therefore to assess what kind of misogynist Della Casa is, where his misogyny stems from, how he practices it and how it is encouraged in the socio-cultural milieu he frequents. He falls categorically into a special group of misogynists whose *contra mulieres* attitudes result from a reaction to their own personal pathologies, rendering their anti-female views as issues concerning more themselves than women.³⁸ The 'gentler sex' for Della Casa and

³⁸ In his treatise on women, Galeazzo Flavio Capra denotes unrequited love, and the subsequent rejection by the unmoved lover, as the most blatant reason for inciting men to speak badly of women: "Quello che abbi mosso il più de le genti a dir male de le donne, credo che a niuno quasi sia occulto, imperò chi non sa che per essere talvolta negato loro quello che più in amore si desidera molti e molti, parendogli già dover gli ultimi termini de' suoi disii

other misogynists like him serves as an easy scapegoat upon which he could lay blame for his own shortcomings and facilitate a self-denial that functioned as a coping mechanism; with his own tormented soul better assuaged by deflecting his aggression onto women. To comprehend how Della Casa appropriated this particular form of misogyny, it is necessary to begin with a brief biographical profile.³⁹

Della Casa was born on June 28th 1503 to Lisabetta and Pandolfo Della Casa. The family hailed from the city of Mugello, just outside of Florence, and was reputed for its wealth and high social standing. Della Casa lost his mother when he was only seven years old, the same year in which his father purchased a position for him within the Church—(“comprato il canonicato”).⁴⁰ His relationship with his father was extremely strained: they never understood each other and were distant throughout Pandolfo’s life. Della Casa considered him a miserly, uncompassionate man and referred to him as an “animale silvestre”⁴¹ (wild animal).

There is very little information available regarding his youthful years. Della Casa never wrote a single word about his mother. In fact, he does not mention any figures who played predominant roles in his upbringing but limits his recollections to the friends he enjoyed during his childhood, believing them to be the most influential and formative figures for him. The lacuna in his relationship with his mother is extremely significant, the effects of which unfortunately can only be hypothesized without supporting evidence. Losing his mother at such a young age could have resulted in feelings of abandonment for Della Casa and resulted in an

aver guadagnati e trovandosi niente aver fatto, rivolto l’amore in odio, ogni ingegno posero per trovare modo e via de vituperarle,” in his *Della eccellenza e dignità delle donne*, ed. Maria Luisa Doglio (Roma: Bulzoni, 1988), 63.

³⁹ The source from which I have gathered the majority of information on Della Casa’s personal life is the expansive biography by Antonio Santosuosso, *Vita di Giovanni Della Casa* (Rome: Bulzoni), 1978.

⁴⁰ Santosuosso, *Vita*, 22.

⁴¹ As cited in Santosuosso, *Vita*, 28: original source: Rome June 6th 1532, in *Opere*, vol. IV, 12.

initial resentment towards women, whom he would write about later in life as objects of perdition.⁴²

An area of particular interest in considering Della Casa's misogyny is of course his sexual orientation. His sexuality was markedly ambiguous and his adventures with male companions, as was not unusual for men of letters in the Renaissance period, have been noted.⁴³ Though Della Casa was able to follow an ambitious trajectory for pursuing his career goals,⁴⁴ his biggest impediments to procuring a focused, prolific literary career were his sexual impulses. He was in continual conflict trying to quell his fervent predilection for the prostitutes abounding in Rome. Sexual transgressions were quite common at the time, especially among those who worked in the ecclesiastical setting and were therefore obliged to remain unmarried. Most simply turned a blind eye to the matter. Yet Della Casa's sexual appetite seems to have been a more extreme case, being insatiable, uncontrollable—to the point that even his friends were disturbed by his behavior.⁴⁵ As Della Casa's longtime acquaintance Carlo Gualteruzzi wrote in a letter to their mutual friend Gheri, speaking of both Della Casa and Giovanni il Fanti: "l'uno di corpo et l'altro di mente non [sono] troppo sani"⁴⁶ (one is not right in the head while the other is not right in the body). Della Casa himself is aware of the torment he suffers as a result of his deviant inclinations, revealing his sense of desperation over the matter when he writes to Gheri:

⁴² Ibid., 20.

⁴³ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁴ He studied law (though never graduated) at the Università di Bologna then went on to study classical Greek in Padua where he befriended Pietro Bembo and by 1529 was in Rome ready to begin a career having all the right tools necessary to do so: wealth, a good family name, connections, and a humanist education. See Antonino Sole, *Studi su Bembo e Della Casa* (Palermo: Salvatore Sciascia, 2006).

⁴⁵ Santosuosso, *Vita*, 33.

⁴⁶ As cited in Santosuosso, *Vita*, 33; original source: Rome April 26th 1533, B.P.P., Palat. 1026, fasc. 1, the pages are not numbered.

“Vostra Signoria [è] sì piena di filosofia, e di buon costume, ed io pieno di che?”⁴⁷ (Your Lordship [is] so overflowing with philosophy, with good manners, and I am overflowing with what?)

Antonio Santosuosso, who has written the most complete biography of Della Casa to date, accredits the troubled writer’s behavior to being a victim of his times. For almost the first thirty years of his life, Della Casa knew only a war-torn Italy, a land continually invaded and ransacked at different times by the French, Spanish, Landsknecht, and Turkish armies. Anguish, fear, distrust of authority, and cynicism were just a few of the sentiments and subsequent attitudes adopted by those generations who knew nothing but violence and havoc wreaked upon their homeland.

One type of refuge the intellectuals of the day found was the formation of and participation in academies—intellectual circles of cultural congruence that not only discussed literary theory but produced works as well. Della Casa belonged to the Accademia dei Vignaioli, which later merged with the Accademia Della Virtù, an anti-classicist circle infamous for producing obscene but comical works. Francesco Berni was head of the Vignaioli while other members included Giovanni Mauro, Giovan Francesco Bini, Agnolo Firenzuola, Francesco Maria Molza, Paolo Giovo, Bartolomeo Carli Piccolomini and Marcantonio Soranzo. When they joined with the Virtù, the group expanded to include Claudio Tolomei, Annibal Caro, Marcantonio Flaminio, Luca Contile, Gandolfo Porrino and Antonio Blado. All members, like Della Casa, descended from illustrious families with aristocratic ties and had grown up in an atmosphere of violent wars.

The works of the Berneschi, as the members of the Accademia Della Virtù were called, were deeply satiric in nature and usually took aim at one of two targets: the ecclesiastical world

⁴⁷ As cited in Santosuosso, pp. 34; original source: Rome February 4th 1536, *Opere*, vol. IV, 19.

or women. The relationship they had with the Church was a paradoxical one: they were both dependent on the institution for economic reasons (potential employment) and yet they resented it because often they were unable, as was the case with Bini, to swiftly procure themselves a career within that sector. The corruption and weak leadership styles of popes like Clement VII and Adriano VI enticed their distrust of the papacy and the *berneschi* hurled their criticisms freely.

The group, which consisted predominantly of homosexuals or sexually inadequate men, used no less restraint in expressing their contempt towards women (Berni would later write, “La peggior di tutte è l’aver moglie”).⁴⁸ Della Casa, though having admitted to having had some pederast experiences in his life, belonged more readily to the minority group of sexually inadequate men of the Accademia. His feelings of incompetence and disdain for women are epitomized in poems written in the *terza rima*, such as the *Capitolo sopra il forno* in which he laments over his “*pan*” being decidedly too “*piccino*” for the “*forno delle donne*”.⁴⁹ He surrounded himself with others who shared his same insecurities so that through the joint commiseration and caustic attacks momentary reprieve from his own personal afflictions was found.

The bitter contempt with which the *berneschi* assaulted not only women but other aspects and institutions of society is a poorly masked self-hatred. Santosuosso elaborates:

In reality, as is typical of many writers who attack society, the *berneschi* are disgusted with themselves. They are hateful of all those things they are slaves to, or which render them slaves.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁹ See “Capitolo sopra il forno,” in Baldassar Castiglione. *Giovanni Della Casa. Opere*. Ed. Giuseppe Prezzolini (Milano-Roma: Rizzoli, 1937) 695. For further investigation on Della Casa’s general insecurities about his work, see Walter L. Bullock’s *The Lyric Innovations of Giovanni Della Casa*, in *PMLA*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (March 1926), 82-90.

⁵⁰ Santosuosso, *Vita*, 50. Translation is my own.

In essence, the Berneschi aimed to construct a reality that countered the problems existant in their current reality, allowing them to feel dominant again. The recognition of their weaknesses would spur a frustration over their inability to improve the situation; through this frustration they were moved to write, wherein they would deceive themselves into believing they had reclaimed some of the power which they felt they had lost during their ‘enslavement.’

For Della Casa especially, whose hedonistic lifestyle only slowed somewhat after his nomination as cleric of the Camera Apostolica in 1537, women represented an evil he was unable to escape. His antipathy for women is representative of the hatred he bore those parts of his character which he disliked but was unable to control or change; and he managed the problem by electing to inculcate women for his sexual inadequacies and insecurities rather than a direct confrontation of the issues. The sport of women-hating for male writers as a means of covering up their own vices by blaming others before the finger could be pointed at them was not an uncommon practice.⁵¹

Understanding Della Casa’s relationships with women, or rather lack thereof, is an essential tool for interpreting *An uxor* correctly. In sum, he had no substantial relationships with women: not with his mother nor did he ever, as far as is known, have a long-term, romantic relationship with a woman.⁵² He was only able to, or perhaps just preferred to, establish an emotional, intimate connection with male companions,⁵³ and reserved pure sexual gratification for prostitutes.

⁵¹ Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady*, 7.

⁵² Della Casa did father a child with a Venetian prostitute but did not engage in a formal relationship with the mother; he had others rear the boy and refused to let the mother see him. See Santosuoso, *Vita*, 49.

⁵³ Della Casa was especially close to Ludovico Beccadelli, with whom he escaped into the Florentine countryside to dedicate themselves to classical studies for a period of seventeen months, after abandoning his law studies at the Università di Bologna. *Ibid.*, 24.

In *An uxor*, Della Casa creates a space where he can freely express his *contra mulieres* sentiments. He uses the ubiquitous dialogue structure for his work, even though the usual polyphony characteristic of dialogue form is suppressed by the monologic observations of the elder Venetian Senator, the main protagonist.⁵⁴ The Senator takes center stage as the wise elder who imparts his “wisdom” to a group of young men—one of whom is about to marry—against marriage. The musings of the Senator are typically taken to be representative of Della Casa’s perspective and even though the inclination to assume the protagonist as the voice of the author can at times be erroneous, there seems ample evidence that makes this case justifiable and not haphazard.⁵⁵

However, Della Casa uses the characterization of the Senator to maximize the conviction of his argument by rectifying any misgivings in his own reputation. In other words, he creates the fictitious Senator as the antithesis of himself (in terms of age, civil status, temperance) in order to lend more authority to the Senator’s preaching. The protagonist is a sage, old,

⁵⁴ It is interesting to note how the choice in literary structure serves his message. A dialogic format is commonly chosen to present various opinions and hypotheses, sometimes arriving at a conclusion and sometimes not; the value rests in the exploration of perspectives and various ideologies. Della Casa’s treatise maintains the formal outward appearance of a dialogue, with a circle of men purportedly engaging in conversation. However, the elder senator dominates the “dialogue” with little interruption by the young men, denying the back and forth rhythms that typically define dialogues as well as refusing an exchange of ideas which are considered, weighed and then debated evenly. It is a one-sided argument that assumes the form of a lecture rather than a dialogue, thereby exposing it not as an open discussion but the tunneled promotion of only one conclusion—do not take a wife! For further study on the dialogic genre, see David Marsh’s *The Quattrocento Dialogue: Classical Tradition and Humanist Innovation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); Virginia Cox’s *The Renaissance Dialogue: Literary Dialogue In Its Social and Political Contexts, Castiglione to Galileo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992).

⁵⁵ His well-known reputation as a misogynist already aligns Della Casa greatly with the Senator, but additionally the writing functions as a meta-textually self-serving piece: Della Casa used the dialogue to help assure his nomination to the Camera Apostolica (which came only seven days after finishing the work) by demonstrating his antiuxorial views were in line with the misogyny upheld by the ecclesiastical world, thus making him appear a well-suited contender for the position. More on this in the section Giovanni Della Casa: On Marriage, 57-8.

experienced, widower who chooses his words wisely.⁵⁶ Contrarily (at least at the time he was writing *An uxor*), Della Casa was young, inexperienced, and unmarried. The characterization acts as a tactical measure to deflect the shortcomings of his own situation while bringing greater conviction to the reader, being more apt to accept the affirmations of the experienced Senator whose background instills a certain level of authority Della Casa's own lacked.

The text—drawing heavily from other anti-women pieces like Giovanni Boccaccio's *Il Corbaccio* and the *Trattatello in laude di Dante*⁵⁷—follows conventional misogynist rhetoric of the time by attacking both women's physical and mental capabilities. There are several chapters in *An uxor* in which the female is depicted as the worst image of woman possible—lazy, stupid, deceptive, and uncontrollably hypersexual. He also employs a common paradox that sprang up time and again in the *querelle des femmes* debate and which proved a debilitating factor to the misogynist argument: he paints a picture of woman as obtuse and so intellectually incapable as to have to fully rely on men on the one hand; then subsequently depicts her as a conniving, manipulative being who fervently preys on the poor male victim on the other. The contradictory image of her intellectuality—one moment being near brainless and the next being a calculated predator—is transparent.

Perhaps the most important point to make in analyzing Della Casa's attacks, however, is that they at times assume a gender-neutral language that distinguishes from the harangues of other female detractors. In other words, his diatribes are separable into two distinct categories: those against women and those against marriage in general. The neutralized language acts to

⁵⁶ In the very first chapter the Senator clarifies that he will not be discussing his personal life. Having outlived his wife, he could easily say if life was better with or without her, but he says, “Ma ciò non ha attinenza con la presente questione, chè l'una o l'altra cosa si può attribuire a caso e fortuna. Non aspettate, allora, che io vi parli di me...”

⁵⁷ Santosuosso, *Vita*, 58.

separate what would seem misogynist as actually just misogynist and therefore applicable to both sexes. This distinction is extremely important because by neutralizing his rhetoric on marriage, Della Casa creates a platform where men and women too are equalized, with their equality manifesting in a joint commiseration over the drawbacks of married life. The Senator of course speaks from the male point of view, which means he uses negative examples of females to convey his point, but the concluding message—the lesson to be learned from the numerous parables expounded—is applied with gender neutral language.

The points expounded therefore move from a specific-to-general filtering, with the ‘specific’ portion containing anti-female examples, again, since told from the male perspective, and the ‘general’ portion being gender neutral. For example in Chapter VIII, the Senator describes the irritation and eventual disgust that grows having to live with (and be intimate with) the same person day in and day out. Even if a man has the great fortune of having an aesthetically pleasing wife, monotony is inevitably the death of physical attraction: “Passati i primi sei mesi, ne saremo sazi sino alla nausea.”⁵⁸ He shares with the young men a story from his youth in which he describes himself as “assai vago di donne” and how his “grande stimolo di amorosa voglia” led him to pursue many a young maiden; but his desire to leave her bedside was always greater than any love that spurred him to arrive there in the first place:

Fui io nella mia prima età assai vago di donne, e nulla mi è stato così difficile come contrastare al mio temperamento femminiero; ma, ad esser sinceri, non mai con sì grande stimolo di amorosa voglia mi sono recato a trovare colei che amavo, che molto più intensamente non desiderassi poi di venirmene via...⁵⁹

The Senator uses this example from his youth to reassure the fleeting nature of ‘caldo desiderio,’ but more aptly to provide a specific example that will then lend support to his concluding maxim.

He ends by saying:

⁵⁸ Della Casa, *Se s'abbia*, 112.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Tenetevolo a mente, o giovani; di nulla così presto l'uomo si stanca come della donna, specie se non si varia; solo la novità impedisce la noia; sempre, invece, dall'aver quanto si vuole di una medesima cosa si genera la sazietà...A conclusione di ciò, dovrebbe apparirvi chiaro e lampante, quanto sia stolto, per andare in cerca di un piacere che la sazietà presto uccide, ed è sì facile procurarsi altrove con non minore nostro diletto ed anche con poca fatica...⁶⁰

The excerpt demonstrates the Senator's transitioning from male perspective exempla to an overall concept that is equally applicable to women as it is to men—moving from the specific (misogynistic) to the general (gender-neutral). This pattern is used repeatedly by Della Casa throughout the text and reaffirms the great difference between his use of anti-female supportive arguments and his overriding anti-marriage message.

Della Casa's misogyny in *An uxor* is thus a byproduct of his misogamy. Marriage can be deduced as his target first and foremost, though again his strategy for cogent persuasion is the employment of misogynist dialogue. The strategy works because contemporary society identified women through marriage, rendering the two separate concepts of *donna/matrimonio* practically interchangeable⁶¹ and Della Casa exploits this tendency to serve his own purposes, he himself being a product of that society and understanding how to manipulate it. Though an

⁶⁰ Ibid., 113.

⁶¹ Women in early modern Europe were only seen in connection to the family (meaning either the property of a father, brother, or husband) and were not regarded as legal persons individually but only in terms of some male relation. The idea of equating women with marriage dates back to the classical era as is evidenced by the contrast in perspective amongst the Greeks and the early Romans. While for the Greeks the debate around marriage resulted in the question *Ci si debba sposare?* (or, "Should one get married?"), the correlative of that question in Latin was *Si debba prender moglie?* (or, "Should one take a wife?"). The issue of *both* men and women's duty to get married in Greek then becomes translated into a purely masculine consideration of taking a wife in Latin, while the woman is removed from any active decision-making and is instead superimposed with the notion of marriage itself. Thus, by the time we reach the Renaissance, several authors have taken advantage of this equating of *donna-matrimonio*, wherein by praising one the other is inevitably praised, and, inversely, by condemning one the condemnation falls ineluctably on the other as well. Paoli, in his preface to his 1943 translation of *Se s'abbia da prender moglie*, remarks on Della Casa's strategy of slandering women in order to successfully dissuade the idea of marriage, noting: *...with a sly candor, full of treachery--"it is not my intention to speak badly about women;" not a deliberated intention, but a logical necessity that coerces him, against his will, to assume the part of women's adversary, hoping to dissuade the proposition of marriage, and not being able to succeed using any other strategy but that one.*

Della Casa knows being able to argue successfully against marriages rests in convincing the young listeners of the unpleasantness of women.

admittedly convoluted structure and seemingly paradoxical to argue that the essence of *An uxor* is not misogynist even though misogyny is used to persuade the point, it is not: it is practical. Della Casa uses the ammunition he knows to be most potent and convincing (misogyny) as an aid to persuade his real argument (misogamy).

An uxor opens with the Senator accepting the young men's supplication to address the question of whether it is useful or not to take a wife: "*Voi mi proponete, o giovani, una questione, che difficile è vedervi chiaro e trovare le acconce parole.*"⁶² After a general introduction of the topic—accompanied by the usual humble formalities that typify the incipit of a dialogue—the Senator does not move directly into disparaging women but instead focuses his speech on the harsh realities of daily life in marriage, in Chapter VI, while the previous chapters serve to stir anxiety of there being no remedy for an infelicitous matrimony. Now, with the mood set and before the young men's anxiety can wane, the Senator declares there is nothing worse than being forced to live quotidianly with a woman you find contemptuous, unattractive, or even worse as an enemy who stirs aversion in you:

Nulla, credete a me, o giovani, è più molesto, più acerbo, più miserevole che l'essere costretto ad abitare giorno e notte con una donna che non ti attragga, non t'ispiri amore e piuttosto desti in te avversione, e sentirla verso di te astiosa e nemica.⁶³

The argument fundamentally has nothing to do with gender, but is rather posited as the consequence of human frailty. The Senator criticizes human habit as one that fantasizes an image that later (and only too late) reveals itself to be far removed from reality.

...come di solito avviene nelle cose incerte e pericolose, noi ci lasciamo trarre in inganno dal contemplare e vagheggiare solo ciò che ci appare utile e diletto ed ha la parvenza del piacere;⁶⁴

⁶² Della Casa, *Se s'abbia*, 73.

⁶³ "Nothing, believe me, young men, is more bothersome, more unendurable, more miserable than being forced to live day and night with a woman who does not attract you, who does not inspire love and more than anything else stirs in you aversion and to feel her behave towards you as a spiteful enemy," *ibid.*, 103.

He uses the analogy of war to further explain his point:

Quanto pochi...si condurrebbero nelle battaglie e nel folto della mischia, dove si combatte a corpo a corpo, con quell'alacrità che vediamo nei più, se avessero dinanzi agli occhi, e seriamente si rappresentassero, le ferite sgorganti sangue, le mutilazioni, la prigionia, la servitù, la morte? Ma tale è la nostra natura: ciò che con eccessivo ardore desideriamo, inconsideratamente lo speriamo.⁶⁵

The deeper lying issue, expressed through the analogy of war, is the hyper-glorification of an event (marriage) that in truth is assailed with numerous hardships; hardships that are not considered due to human shortsightedness and general propaganda. Marriage is conventionally publicized as a harmonious undertaking bringing additional joy to one's life while the numerous challenges it presents are tendentially masked until the union has been sanctified. But the Senator charges it is each person's individual responsibility to ponder the situation appropriately; indeed, he balks at the ephemeral amount of time and sincerity given to consider such matters of great weight. The criticism is one of human nature, then, just as the aforementioned complaints of being inescapably tied to a person whom you despise are universal in nature. And, again, the argument is as easily applied to women as it is to men. The Senator, at least at this point, refrains from disparaging women directly and instead decries the negative effects felt in unhappy unions.

Still on the topic of monotony, continuing with chapter VIII and adding IX, the conversation begins to narrow onto the subject of physical beauty. The Senator has already warned the young men that a husband will soon tire of his wife even if she is the most beautiful. Routine is the enemy of sexual appetite, he affirms, and a man who takes an angelic wife soon learns the strength of attraction begins to wane as soon as conquest has been made. The beauty of the subject becomes more and more irrelevant as desire lessens with every physical contact

⁶⁴ Ibid., 104.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 104-5.

made. The Senator anecdotally includes the story of a friend who indeed cannot suffer climbing into the same bed with his wife, though by all accounts the town holds her to be a most stunning beauty.

Non si dà, per esempio, il caso di questo mio vicino...il quale ha una moglie bellissima...egli nondimeno, del facile usar con essa ha preso tal nausea, che neanche più si sente di giacere in letto con lei; e si dice che vada ora dietro a qualsiasi mala femmina, di quelle che si concedono a tutti.⁶⁶

The message is clear: that which comes too easily loses its attraction, and without attraction, beauty holds little power.

Though the Senator proffers this point from the male perspective, it is irrelative to gender, since again the idea of monotony is pertinent to both men's and women's complaints about his/her spouse. The argument the Senator makes is not specifically anti-female but rather against the reality of married life. Being confined to the same person, day after day, will indubitably result in a reduction or even total loss of the attraction that first sparked at the beginning of the relationship. It is a fact of human behavior and has little to do with actual aesthetics, as the story of his friend and his beautiful wife exemplifies. Marriage means, as the Senator suggests, an official union that signals the end of courting and all the excitement of the hunt/chase qualities it purported at the beginning.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ibid., 113-4.

⁶⁷ Part of the Senator's tactic of persuasion is to concede as little as possible to the possibility of a good marriage, though examples are present. The concessions are made almost as asides, mentioning them quickly and swiftly moving onto the next topic so as to not let the thought linger in the minds of his young listeners. After having declared that all spouses lose their attractiveness sooner or later, the Senator remarks in the opening of the next chapter about a scenario where sexual desire has not completely dissipated (*Se s'abbia*, 115):

...la moglie, supposto anche che si rimanga sempre pieni del desiderio di lei, nè mai si arrivi a provarne la sazietà e nausea, ...

Though posited in a hypothetical manner, he nevertheless admits to the possibility of a man retaining his desire for his wife for the duration of the marriage. The admission is fleeting, however, as he quickly moves onto the next topic of how nothing fades quicker than the beauty of a woman. His ability to persuade is therefore dependent on his limiting as much as possible the variations feasible in a marriage, keeping the young men's vision of marriage (and women) a narrow one, tunneled around only negative scenarios.

The complaints over loss of attraction and the decrease in pleasure a partner can bring are universal complaints voiced by the female contingency as well. In fact, Renaissance *trattati sul matrimonio* reveal that many of the criticisms of marriage expressed find unilateral support from both men and women. For every complaint men have about women there is typically a corresponding complaint rendered from the female perspective about males. This is again why it is crucial to separate misogyny from misogamy, because both men and women shared common ground in their aversion to the latter. Ugo Paoli points out an excerpt from Alessandro Piccolomini's *La Raffaella* in which the female protagonist voices discontent over how the love and caresses of a husband soon lose their magic:

Le carezze e i piaceri co' mariti son poco manco sciapiti e disutili che sieno a queste monache i trastulli dei lor passatempo.⁶⁸

For women as well, then, the physical dynamic with their husbands soon loses its power and excitement since the novelty of physical affection tends to diminish before long. The argument has more to do with human nature and the natural shifting from intrigue to disinterest when something becomes too consistently available. Its applicability to both men and women decreases its misogynist undertone and instead underlines one of the drawbacks of a committed union.

Further on in the dialogue, in Chapter XII, there is a short paragraph in which the Senator speaks of marriage having a damaging effect on both men and women. It is indubitably the best example of gender-neutral perspective on marriage. He states that marriage removes a sense of vigor from a virtuously led life, not just for men but for women as well.

Il matrimonio, dunque, toglie vigore alla virtù, e il lungo stare con una donna, quasi per una forma di contagio, ammorbida l'animo dell'uomo, e lui alla femmina fa il simile. Nulla, infatti, ha tanto potere nel cambiare e render degenerare la mente degli uomini come la consuetudine della vita comune.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Ibid., 114.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 143-4.

The “routine” quality of the married life, according to the Senator, wreaks havoc on both the mental and physical state of an individual; it is the most powerful weapon for deteriorating the mind and diminishing one’s spirit. He presents this point first from the male vantage point, but follows it up quickly with the assertion that husbands have this affect on wives just as much as they do on their husbands (“...*e lui alla femmina fa il simile*”). It is not a quality specific to men or women, but specific to marriage and the lack of spontaneity therein—with each spouse inadvertently having this sapping effect on the other. Here again the argument is momentarily centered on an all-gender encompassing analysis and this should also be the understood interpretation of the subsequent use of “uomini” (men) to include all mankind when he shortly thereafter declares habitual, domestic life to have a most forcible ability in rendering the brain degenerate.

After these initial moments of gender-neutral criticism are conveyed, Della Casa’s language begins assuming a more heavily misogynist tone. However, women are not the only targets of the Senator’s lambasting but those men who choose to marry are equally deprecated, once again adding evidence to the claim that Della Casa’s primary focus is misogamy and not misogyny since he condemns married men as well. Before proceeding into a direct criticism of husbands, the Senator first limns a scenario to stir up insecurity in his listeners, making them ripe for the harsher criticism soon to follow. Up until this point, the discussion has been from the point of view of the husband: how the husband will fair with his wife, how he will tire of her, how he will find no repose, etc. But in Chapter X he invites his listeners to consider for the first time the female point of view. He begins by stating that even in the very unlikely case a man be so blessed to find a wife with all the traits necessary to make him happy, there is still the strong

possibility that the wife herself may not reciprocate this feeling and will find the husband repulsive.

Qual dolcezza può esservi... in una stretta comunione di vita, nella quale uno sia obbligato a rimanere contro sua voglia e recalcitrando? Qual gioia può dare l'amplesso, se non ne venga vicendevole piacere, e ad more non corrisponda amore?⁷⁰

Evoking the horrors of a situation in which “*amor, ch’a nullo amato amar perdona*”⁷¹ is unapologetically defied, the Senator seeks to stir male insecurity by conjuring images of the rejected husband and the subsequent wounded male ego. His young listeners—confident, ambitious, of high standing—have presumably not considered the possibility of being rejected by their future wife and are thus presented with a scenario foreign to them. Embedded in this point there is an element of appreciation for marriage as a partnership in which the willingness of both spouses to participate is essential to cultivating a blissful, or at least amicable, union. By shifting to the female perspective, Della Casa recognizes the importance and relevance of the wife’s feelings in determining the success of a marriage. It is, on some level, a profeminist inclusion in his overall argument.

After riling the insecurities of his audience, the Senator moves on to using blatant machismo to further dissuade marriage. He threatens irreparable damage to his young listeners’ masculine identity if they choose to marry by recounting stories of other men who, after taking a wife, became “soft”⁷² and no longer possessed the courage or virtue necessary to conduct a successful life in the social public realm, mainly in politics. Men lose their boldness and are rendered limp by the growing affections they have towards their wives and children; family

⁷⁰ Ibid., 124.

⁷¹ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, vol. 1 *Inferno*, ed. and trans. by Robert M. Durling (New York: Oxford University, 1996), V.103.

⁷² “*Potrei ricordare molti tra i nostri cittadini, ..., preso che ebber moglie e procreata prole, divennero per amor di quella di sì molle animo...*” Della Casa, *Se s’abbia*, 142.

drains a man of his ambition, intelligence and prowess.⁷³ He reinforces his point by utilizing machismo peer pressure, calling those who marry “*di sì molle animo, che di far qualcosa veramente degna di un uomo non più ebbero neanche il pensiero.*”⁷⁴ The question at the pith of the dialogue is, again, whether taking a wife and having a family is useful for a man of the State. The Senator’s response is an obvious one but goes further by promoting a certain level of stoicism in a political man, encouraging a lack of sentimental ties that would otherwise distract and take away his full attention from government matters. In this sense, the robotic nature he prescribes is perhaps ideal for the full exploitation of a man who’s dedicated his life to the public realm, however unrealistic it may be. Contrarily, when a man elects to become a husband and a father, he is choosing to un-become a man, according to the Senator: he loses his masculine identity in the process of developing a family. It proves an interesting contrast to women’s relationship with marriage, since it is through marriage that she gains her identity but a man loses his.

The remainder of the dialogue follows fairly traditional patterns of anti-female rhetoric, with attacks usually manifesting in two different forms: lambasting women as weak, obtuse, and incapable of functioning both physically and mentally on a level par with men; or the opposite (but equally negative) as calculating, manipulative and treacherous deceivers.⁷⁵ One paints a

⁷³ The debate over family as a useful endeavor for a man of political aim dates back centuries. Socrates decreed the family to be a positive attribute for a political figure, while many others objected. See Plato, *The Republic*, eds. G.R.F. Ferrari and Tom Griffith (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University, 2000); and Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, ed. Michael C. Stokes (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1997) for further insight.

⁷⁴ Della Casa, *Se s’abbia*, 142.

⁷⁵ In his essay on medieval misogyny, R. Howard Bloch exposes an interesting irony in misogynistic argumentation: “...given the intention of most misogynistic literature to dissuade its audience from associating with women...how is it possible for any writer to seek to persuade his or her intended audience not to be seduced without himself or herself performing the very acts of verbal deceit and seduction s/he denounces?” See the introduction to *Misogyny*,

picture of woman as an empty vessel and the other as a conniving schemer. The two images are paradoxical in nature: one declares her to be without intellectual capabilities while the other asserts her intellect, though used for evil intent. It is indeed one of the most noted flaws of the misogynist camp's argument: how can women, presumably so dim, be able to consistently dupe men against their will?

Della Casa's text includes this problematic, with the first part of his anti-female diatribe centered on a negative-weak image of women and the second half on a negative-powerful image. The shift from one to the other also implies a shift in the male role: in the first scenario men have to tolerate the imbecilic woman, and in the second he is the poor victim of her conniving ways. Both men and women see their roles shift on a 180° plane, but that which remains constant is that women are always posited in the negative as evil-doers (whether intentional or not seems irrelevant) and men in the positive as perpetual victims of these she-devils.

Chapter XIII adheres to critiques in accordance with the first image of women—the negative-weak image. The Senator declares women to be feeble both in mind and body and the example of war is used to highlight the uselessness of women:

Ed è una razza non utile alla guerra quella delle donne. Anzitutto il corpo femminile è naturalmente plasmato e conformato in modo, che chiaro appare poter le donne far l'ufficio loro solo in pace e nell'ozio... In secondo luogo, supposto anche che avessero un corpo quanto si voglia robusto e atto a guerreggiare, la natura ha dato loro un animo così tenero, molle e debole, che solo a veder qualcosa che abbia aspetto un po' truce, rabbriviscono; e ad ogni insolito rumore son prese da tremito e cadono svenute.⁷⁶

Women, the Senator declares, are not physically strong enough to participate in war nor are they mentally capable since they cannot stomach the horrific sights encountered therein (blood, death, disease, murder, etc.). The argument reaches a nadir when the evidence against women becomes

Misandry, and Misanthropy, eds R. Howard Bloch and Frances Ferguson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), viii.

⁷⁶ Della Casa, *Se s'abbia*, 145-6.

noticeably weak and hollow: the Senator claims women's bodies are unable to support the weathering effects of war and the required armor—with their frail necks unable to uphold a helmet and their protruding breasts incapable of even fitting into armor.

Come...con quella loro faccia delicata e col molle collo sopporterebbero, non dico il peso dell'elmo, ma la polvere e il sole? Lo sporgere dei seni e la rotondità del ventre da qual mai corazza potrebbero esser contenuti?⁷⁷

The critique is not just unsound but near absurd, perhaps even inserted as a moment of comic relief. If this is indeed the case, it could potentially lend to a subliminal critique of misogynistic ideology; for the comedy would be in implying armor is not a man-made contraption that could simply be re-configured for the female body. It could possibly be poking fun at misogynist proponents who deny all accountability for the effects of active female oppression, effectively rejecting the role of nurture in the nature vs. nurture debate and reaffirming the female is simply born inferior.

While the comedic intention is difficult to determine with this point, the subsequent points are more seriously posed though they follow the same logic. The Senator continually criticizes a point as if it were a permanent condition and could not be changed, reformed, or improved. He poses the question of asking who would entrust themselves to a female lawyer.⁷⁸ Naturally, the answer is no one. And expectedly he eschews the larger discourse at hand—that of women being rendered near-futile because the male denies her education; nor does he point out the years of training and study an individual must endure to become a competent lawyer, as if man were born with the inherent skills. The Senator's arguments in this chapter demonstrate in part how deeply ingrained misogyny was in the propensity to consider possibilities, limiting

⁷⁷ Ibid., 145.

⁷⁸ "*Chi mai, se ha fior di senno, si farebbe assistere nei processi da una femmina avvocata?*" Ibid., 147-8.

them within a viewpoint that denied rather feasible remedies—universal education—when taken out of temporal context. The problems are hollow and yet the solutions anachronistic.

Chapter XIV onwards sees the shift from characterizing women as negative-weak to negative-powerful (i.e. as deceivers). The sharp change in tone is acutely felt from one chapter to the next. In Chapter XIII, for instance, the Senator argues against women serving in public posts by noting, “...*la loro mente, incapace di saggezza, non sa procedere con metodo, nè riflettere, nè accortamente deliberare.*”⁷⁹ The female is likened to a hollow capsule, incapable of rational thinking or even thinking at all. Yet, in the subsequent chapter, she is painted as a studied con-artist, an expert in the field of subterfuge who uses her tricks “*contro il proprio marito nella studiosissima cura ch’ella pone nell’ingannarlo...*”⁸⁰ The use of the word *studiosissima* (highly studied) indicates the high level of intelligence employed by the wife in order to masterfully deceive her husband. The Senator reaffirms their intellectual capacity by referring to their practice as a science (“...*grande la scienza di ingannar...*”) and declaring them to have refined their practice of the art (“...*raffinata la loro arte nel simulare.*”⁸¹). From one chapter to the next, the image of the female has shifted from that of a dense, feeble being to a dominating, indefatigable deceiver. Depending on the misogynist wind, women are poised either as futile burdens that only prevent husbands from productivity and success or as fierce deceivers almost oppressive in their relentless mind control.⁸²

⁷⁹ Ibid., 148.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 153.

⁸¹ Ibid., 154.

⁸² “*La maggior parte dei mariti siamo in poter loro*” Della Casa 158; and later “*la soggezione in cui ci tengono*” Ibid., 164.

In the same vein of paradoxical criticisms, the beauty of women that earlier in the dialogue was lauded as a value and a quality every man will surely seek in a wife is now posited in a negative light. Women's attempts to make themselves more attractive are chastised as deceptive tricks used to falsely lure men. Those who have not been graced with natural beauty (the majority, according to the Senator⁸³) are therefore not only discarded but are also looked down upon if they make any attempt at aesthetic self-improvement.⁸⁴ Della Casa's dialogue microcosmically represents the essential problem for the state of women in Renaissance Italy: nothing she can or does do can ever be right. She will be criticized and outcast for being unattractive, and will equally be criticized and outcast if she tries to improve upon her physical appearance. If she is beautiful, perhaps she will not be outcast but will only suffer criticism as a type of she-devil incarnate who ensnarls men in her trap, her beauty serving as bait. This is her best-case scenario, as physical beauty is one of the most prominent feminine virtues of the Renaissance and a woman is considered truly blessed if naturally endowed, despite potential rebuffs by female detractors.⁸⁵

The diatribe continues with the topic turning to emotional subterfuge whereby women employ tears to ensure their wishes are met. The Senator warns the tears of a woman are not to be interpreted as an indication of pain, but as an artifice used to manipulate: "*È artificio il pianto*

⁸³ "E non dico quanto sia irragionevole il ripromettersi di sposare una donna avvenente. Come si può sperarlo? È legge di natura che infinito sia il numero delle donne brutte e delle belle scarso. Si dice che in ogni città di donne veramente belle non se ne mostri che una..." Ibid., 111.

⁸⁴ For an interesting study on women and the aesthetic, or rather women as ornament, see R. Howard Bloch's "Medieval Misogyny," in *Misogyny, Misandry, and Misanthropy*, 9-15.

⁸⁵ See for example Agnolo Firenzuola, *Dialogo della bellezza delle donne* (Venice: Giovan. Griffio, Ad instantia di Pietro Boselli, 1552); Federigo Luigini, *Il libro della bella donna, composto da Messer Federico Luigini da Udine*, (Venice: Plinio Pietrasanta, 1554); Trissino's *I ritratti del Trissino*; Ludovico Domenichi, *Dialoghi di M. Ludovico Domenichi: cioè, d'amore, della vera nobiltà, de' rimedi d'amore, dell'impresse, dell'amor fraterno, della corte, della fortuna et della stampa* (Venice: Gabriel Giolito, 1562).

*nella donna, non è dolore;*⁸⁶ and that their ability to deceive is their natural armor, provided them by nature for their protection and survival:

Si direbbe che la natura, come ha armato gli altri animali e chi di corna e chi di denti e chi di zoccoli, nella stessa guisa ha fornito la donna di certe sue armi singolari che sono la menzogna e le lagrime.⁸⁷

Women are fortified with lies and tears for their endurance the same way an animal is fortified with sharp claws and dagger teeth, the Senator affirms. He then compares women to the eagle, who is able to stare into the sun undaunted and unaffected, as exemplification of her tenacity to disregard truth. Here again, the contrasts persist. The female is depicted as a voracious, intrepid deceiver determined to have her way; only the chapter before, she was limned as a frail being horrified not only by sights of war but frightened by even the littlest things (“...*che solo a veder qualcosa che abbia aspetto un po’ truce, rabbriviscono.*”)⁸⁸ The paradoxes are significant, however, because they disprove one of the foundations upon which Della Casa is building his argument: all women are the same. The very fact that the criticisms range from disgust with the weak woman (both physically and mentally) and then transition to an almost fearful distrust of woman as an unscrupulous egomaniac employing deceptive means to get her way, simply do not correspond. The Senator’s argument, therefore, has a counterproductive effect: the paradoxical image of women creates more doubt than conviction, as the baffling question over how women can at once represent two opposing natures goes unanswered, or rather, not even addressed.

The paradoxical connotations behind these arguments also spark questions about the concept of victimization. Since post-lapsarian times, women have indubitably been the victims of political, social, legal, and religious discrimination. Yet, despite the odds, women still represent a strong threat to male power, leading misogynists like Della Casa to meticulously

⁸⁶ Della Casa, *Se s’abbia*, 153.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

secure their anti-female arguments from all sides. This meaning that if traditional misogynist arguments (i.e. female intellectual inferiority and overall incapacity to learn) are not enough to ensure the success of misogynist argumentation, then reinforcement is enacted in the form of conveying men as helpless victims of calculated female treachery. The shift is dramatic, but again the constant in both cases is women being construed as a wholly negative being. It would appear to be a somewhat damaging move for Della Casa's argument, since introducing contradictory notions reflects a weakness in the argument. Adhering to one perspective then—for example the negative-weak image—and leaving out contradictory points—the negative-powerful image—would have rendered a stronger argument. This, of course, is to be understood in the case of an objective reader, but such was not the case for Della Casa's readers. He writes for a misogynist audience, so the contradictories would presumably have gone unnoticed or even lauded as a thorough examination of the role of the wife.

For Della Casa, the female is categorically placed between the perfect man and the savage animal, but is indubitably closer to the primitive animal. She serves only one purpose: that of procreation, but even this is not a justifiable reason for marrying. His perception of women is hostile, but the inclusion of men in many of his criticisms demonstrates a larger hostility aimed more narrowly at marriage itself. Not only, but some of the Senator's later criticisms about men and women induce an idea of the Senator as a curmudgeon who does not discriminate primarily according to gender. Examples of how one spouse, regardless of gender, inevitably diminishes the vigor of the other—for life, activity, productivity—have already been elucidated. Gender has no importance for this argument, a case that is seen again towards the end of the dialogue when the Senator expresses another complaint that includes men as well. He

describes women as hyper-sexual beings, unable to control their libidinous whims, before moving into an unexpected criticism of men for the same reasons.

Nulla si può giungere a immaginare che più dell'animo femminile sia molle, incapace di resistenza, facile a esser piegato, nè più proclive a cercar sollazzo e diletto; nulla che per più spontaneo impulso sia ardentemente portato a quel piacere amoroso di cui sto parlando. E non intendo dire che in noi uomini l'istinto del piacere abbia minor violenza: oh, quanto pochi sono quelli fra noi che hanno la forza di frenarlo, di reprimerlo, di tenerlo soggiogato alla ragione! Voi certo non ignorate a quali vituperevoli eccessi giungessero in tali cose uomini come Giulio Cesare, ..., e tanti altri, che sono fra i più grandi; e bene pur tuttavia intendevano di essere indirizzati ad imprese eccelse.⁸⁹

By including men, the Senator's criticism softens the misogynistic angle and assumes a more matter-of-fact tone as he shares his observations on human nature, albeit still with a condemning stance. Della Casa's decision to include these male-encompassing remarks, and the language used to express them, is rather progressive for a supposed misogynist text. "*Vituperevoli eccessi*" is a forceful phrase charged with connotations of extremism and despicable behavior, placing man's actions on par with those of his sexually charged female counterpart. The difference in the criticism directed towards men and that towards women comes down to the level of conscious awareness: the lame brained female is completely controlled by her physical inclinations—subject to their whims; whereas the male's capacity to reason is present but ignored in favor of sensual gratification.

Della Casa's use of the phrase "*Voi certo non ignorate...*" is also significant because it calls misogynists into accountability for their hypocrisy. For centuries, female detractors often have used classic exempla (Cleopatra, Clytemnestra, Jacosta,) to exemplify the uncontrolled female sexual impulse, and even though female champions most certainly have been able to rebut with their own exempla of virtuous women, it is indeed rare to witness a misogynist text calling into question the sexual integrity of men. In other words, men are not protected from

⁸⁹ Ibid., 178.

Della Casa's harangue.⁹⁰ He, via the Senator, gives vent to social issues he views as fallacious, with men being subject to these criticisms as well (though obviously not as much or as harshly as women). The examples of both all-gender and male criticisms present in Della Casa's text are crucial for the way in which they detract from the more blatant examples of misogyny and make room for other more profound interpretations of the text: the diatribe against sexual prowess in both sexes lightens the criticism of women and simultaneously brings them closer to men (sharing this similarity) rather than wholly alienating them.

The aim of this particular study has not been to revert Della Casa's long-standing reputation as a misogynist, but rather to reveal the complicated strata of his misogyny. At times his attacks seem to have little to do with women at all, as they are more narrowly aimed instead at the socio-political customs surrounding marriage practices, at the way humans—both men and women—behave in marital unions, and at the way society in general (both civic and religious) has undermined the importance of what a marital union should signify. A selection of the messages he brings forth support profeminist values by giving weight to the female opinion in matters of marriage and by including gender-neutral language that criticizes both sexes equally and recognizes the sacrifices and sufferings both sexes endure when joined in holy matrimony. With an understanding of the way in which Della Casa viewed the female, let us now take an even closer look at how he specifically addresses issues of matrimony.

⁹⁰ The hypocrisy of Della Casa's criticisms is potent given his real life dalliances. As a suitable explanation I refer back to Della Casa's aim of using the text as a propaganda piece to convey an image in line with ecclesiastical values in order to ensure his nomination to the Camera Apostolica.

CHAPTER 1.2:

Giovanni Della Casa: On Marriage

As we have by now established, Della Casa's position on marital union is initially deceptive. He is forcibly anti-marriage, but the reasons elucidated in *An uxor* reveal his contentions have less to do with misogyny or the ideology of marriage (two spouses willingly joined together through mutual affinity, respect, and affection), but instead are targeted on the social skewing of not just marriage ideology but the practices employed to purportedly ensure that ideology is realized. In other words, the criticisms in *An uxor* are directed towards the socialized ways in which people arrange, contract and execute marriages. He argues society approaches the marriage market with a lightness that fails to correspond to the weight of what marriage actually signifies: a permanent union between man and woman for the duration of their lives. The necessary elements to ensure a successful union—attraction, affection, compatibility, friendship—are disregarded in favor of more economically pleasing assets—rank, wealth, property, social and political alliances. Individuals from the elitist levels of society, who are both the topic and audience Giovanni Della Casa addresses, often find themselves the pawn with which their families seek to enhance the prestige of their lineage. Consequentially, couples are matched with little interaction prior to matrimony, sometimes none at all, as their emotional compatibility has little to do with enriching their kin's repute.

The pages of *An uxor* declare this approach to be already abhorrent in itself, but the matter is further exacerbated by the irremediability of the predicament, given the possibility of divorce was highly unlikely. The fact that a calamitous marriage could not be undone as easily as it was entered into—forcing couples to live in joint misery—combined with the fact that little provisions were taken to guarantee the success of the match in the first place leads Della Casa to

promote the entire endeavor as simply too risky and wholly unworthwhile. Della Casa's misogamy, ironically then, appears to stem from a due respect and appreciation for matrimony, at least from the optic of what marriage should represent ideally. His misogyny, meanwhile, pervades as supplemental fodder for argumentative purposes. But, as I hope to have already begun to prove and will continue to do so in this portion of the chapter, Della Casa's misogamy is quite distinct from his misogyny⁹¹ and at times his misogamy even displays notions that coalesce seamlessly with profeminist values.

Two important notes should be made before proceeding. First, it is important to understand the specific context in which Della Casa discusses marriage.⁹² His analysis is from the perspective of what is best for the State: whether men of political activity and elite rank are more beneficial to the government when married or single, and whether it is indeed a man's duty to the State to marry.⁹³ His point of view will continue to be made expressed from this specific

⁹¹ Because the ideas of 'women' and 'marriage' were often erroneously superimposed, much of the literary output critiquing marriage resulted in a direct criticism of women as well. Yet some singular texts exist that managed to distinguish the differences between the two, aptly criticizing marriage without tearing down women. Shulamith Shahar reminds that courtly literature "negated marriage without condemning woman," in his *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (Methuen: London & New York, 1983), 81. See also Héloïse's arguments to Abélard seeking to dissuade him of marriage, claiming it impeded both Christian and philosophical endeavors of the studious man. Peter Abélard, "The Story of My Misfortunes" in *Historia Calamitatum*, as referenced in Shahar, *The Fourth Estate*, 76.

⁹² Frigo juxtaposes Della Casa's work with other contemporaneous uxorial compositions and reveals Della Casa's argument as rather unique in the way it devalues the family structure as a necessity for the State when it usually was upheld as a fundamental institution in guaranteeing social order (specifically in terms of inheritance rights) and therefore the success of the government (e.g. Pietro Lauro's *De le lettere. Il primo libro* (Venice: M. Tramezzino, 1553): "Se si potesse tener famiglia, haver figliuoli heredi de le facultà e del nome de la casata, senza pigliar moglie, non è dubbio che sarebbe assai meglio di viverne senza... Ma perche l'esperientia manifesta, che ogni altro stato, nel quale l'huomo si trovi, gli manca ogni via buona di poter haver questi beni...siamo pur astretti à viver tra tanti incomodi con la moglie..." , 121.) in Zancan, *Nel cerchio della luna*, 57-93, esp. 88-93.

⁹³ "...se a condurre vita comoda e piacevole e a compiere i doveri che ciascuno ha [to the State], sia o non sia utile l'aver moglie," Della Casa, *Se s'abbia*, 73.

perspective and it is significant to keep this in mind since it does not treat the overall question of marriage being useful or not, but specifically in terms of benefiting the State.

Second, there are extra-textual implications to consider as well: Della Casa's nomination to the clergy only seven days after having signed and dated his anti-uxorial composition provides additional motivation behind undertaking the penning of a misogynist work.⁹⁴ The dialogue shows a number of ways in which Della Casa could have possibly been polishing his work to be especially pleasing to the ecclesiastical world, thereby more readily assuring his nomination. While there are some critics who have defined the work as an "exaltation of the celibate man, which the clerics were inclined to be,"⁹⁵ others have further developed the argument by asserting the text signifies a certain rite of passage for Della Casa. He leaves behind his libertine past (whose gadabout nature was embodied in the rhymes of his *terze rime*) and matures into a more pensive, serious man of letters (highlighted also by using a more reputable form of literature—dialogue—in which to express his thoughts).⁹⁶ It would appear a subliminal message is being conveyed to the clergy in which Della Casa affirms his preparedness for a position within the Church. Both the misogynist and misogynist themes serve to display his suitability for a post in an ecclesiastical world that had always viewed women as suspect and marriage itself as a debased state compared to the cloister.⁹⁷ The work aims to promote Della Casa, a contemplative

⁹⁴ The original manuscript is part of the Fondo Magliabechiano collection in the Biblioteca Nazionale Firenze, Classe XXI, 111, c. 12 v.

⁹⁵ Paolo Pissavino, "An uxor sit ducenda: un'interpretazione politica," *Per Giovanni Della Casa. Ricerche e contributi*, eds. Gennaro Barbarisi, Claudia Berra (Bologna: Cisalpino, 1997), 471. Translation is my own.

⁹⁶ Santosuosso, *Vita*, 60.

⁹⁷ Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 9. The Bible and other canonical texts like Gratian's *Decretum* anchored the misogynist tradition in the Church. For further insight on women and the Church, see Ch. 4 of Shahar's *The Fourth Estate; Donna e matrimonio alle origini della Chiesa*, ed. Enrico Dal Covolo (Rome: LAS, 1996); Jean La Porte, *The Role of Women in Early Christianity* (New York: E. Mellen), 1982.

man who despises mindless chatter and prefers discussions undertaken methodically with people of intellectual integrity,⁹⁸ as an ideal candidate for a role in the clergy. His personal agenda is palpable and should rightly remain at the forefront while interpreting *An uxor*.

From the very beginning of the dialogue, the principal interlocutor clearly marks fortune as the active determinant in whether one will end up with a calm, docile wife or an irritating, intrusive one. The Senator warns that despite man's best efforts to procure himself the former, he can never ensure full control over the decision and is essentially risking ending up with the latter when he agrees to marry. He declares a good marriage is determined not by reason ("*legge naturale*") but rather by chance ("*pura combinazione*").⁹⁹ It is for this reason the Senator refrains from speaking about his personal situation—"Dirò...*il mio pensiero su tale argomento, senza alludere ai casi miei*"—¹⁰⁰ as it would be based only on his singular experience with Fortune and indicative only of his personal encounter with chance, whether he was looked upon favorably or not.

The Senator's stated refusal to speak from personal experience serves additionally as a tactical measure to appear more objective in his broaching of the subject. He thus lays claim to an abstract philosophical approach, shunning personal narrative and those of his married friends:

...anch'io ho avuto moglie, ci ho vissuto insieme alcuni anni...Moltissimi poi fra quelli che mi sono stati amici e familiari, erano sposati. Facile, adunque, mi sarebbe il dire se migliore e più piacevole mi sia stata la vita quando vivevo con la moglie, o dopo; ma ciò non ha attinenza con la presente questione, chè l'una o l'altra cosa si può attribuire a caso e fortuna.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Della Casa, *Se s'abbia*, 89.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁰⁰ "I will give my thoughts on the topic of marriage, without alluding to my own experience," *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

Despite the Senator's emphasis on refraining from using personal experience, he has already betrayed himself earlier on in the chapter, at the beginning of the paragraph cited above, when he says that if intelligence fails him in the present discussion then experience will come to his aid.

In preparation for the dialogue on marriage they are about to begin, the Senator says:

Quanto a me, risponderò come meglio posso a quel che desiderate di sapere. E se per far ciò non ho ingegno bastante, un poco mi aiuta l'esperienza; giacchè, come sapete, anch'io ho avuto moglie, ci ho vissuto...¹⁰²

The contradiction is not revelatory, however, but expected; a momentary lapsus where the subconscious prevails and reveals knowledge that was already known despite the Senator's best efforts to negate it: that an impartial perspective is incompatible with persuasive argumentation. But keen strategy requires at least outwardly conveying aspirations of objectivity as a first pass in establishing trustworthiness as a source, and the Senator amply obliges.

In the first chapter, the Senator does not assume a direct attack on women. Rather, he begins his persuasion by pointing to general facts and tendencies common amongst both men and women, though naturally he speaks about them almost exclusively from the male perspective. The elder Senator begins by negating the widespread belief that without marriage, the human race would cease to exist—a presumption based on the logic that without marriage, procreation would cease.

...si sente ripetere...che, abolendosi il matrimonio, il genere umano andrebbe ad estinguersi, e che, se i nostri antenati si fossero astenuti dalle nozze, nessuno di noi vedrebbe ora la luce, e noi al mondo non ci si sarebbe...Un siffatto ragionamento...è invece vizioso...Si può forse dubitare che fra i primissimi uomini 'moglie' e 'matrimonio' fossero nomi addirittura ignoti? Non perciò nasceva minor numero di figli...¹⁰³

He asserts the presumption to be an absurd one, since human procreation far outdates the creation of marriage and that human nature, as much as socialization may attempt to contain it,

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 76-7.

cannot be fully suppressed. People will always produce offspring, with or without the formality of marriage, as it has been so since the beginning of time. He also predicts the number of births would actually *increase* because by nature humans easily tire of monotonous routine—of the same woman, of the same meal, of the same work, etc. On the topic of variety, the Senator uses a music analogy to support his thought:

...preferiamo un canto men bello a uno che sia sempre quel medesimo, ancorchè mirabile. Grandissimo potere ha la varietà nel rianimare il gusto e gli altri sensi illanguiditi.¹⁰⁴

The Senator argues that change and novelty are continually more enticing than repetition of one thing, even if that thing is of higher quality. He claims that if marriage were abolished and man were not chained to only one woman, the number of citizens would actually far surpass the present number since man would not tire of exploring new “tastes.”¹⁰⁵ Variety is the spice of life that keeps man fresh, spritely, animated and better able to contribute to the population growth of the State.

One of Della Casa’s foremost contentions is with socialization and the overall process of hegemony. At the beginning of Chapter III, the Senator offers a transparent understanding of the contorted ways in which marriage has come to be viewed. It is a crisp meta-textual moment wherein Della Casa unleashes his thoughts on the futility of marriage, concomitantly exposing his frustration and vexation at how contemporary social beliefs have made marriage seem a necessity when indeed it is not.

...il matrimonio si dimostra non necessario, e neanche utile. Ma vivendo noi sotto l’impero di siffatte leggi e consuetudini, che chiunque abbia cura del suo buon nome (e tutti dobbiamo averne), solo se ha moglie può senza vergogna dichiarar di aver figli, poniamo pure che, secondo il dire dei più, si addica a bene ordinata repubblica, e sia anzi necessario, che i matrimoni vi siano in uso e in onore, e che non può altrimenti lo Stato rimanere in piedi ed aver coesione; ne consegue forse l’obbligo di prender moglie? Sembra in realtà che si debba venire a questa conclusione, non ritenendosi lecito ad alcuno il respinger da sè e ricusare ciò che è richiesto a costituire, conservare, far grande lo Stato. Dobbiamo dunque accoglier le

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 79.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 80.

nozze e sottoporcene all'uso; e se così è, e se voi, cari giovani, nulla trovate da opporre a chi ragioni in tal modo, la nostra questione è senz'altro risolta sul limitare.¹⁰⁶

Della Casa's words contain a radical element as they seek to incite the young men to shun inclinations of traditional obligations toward marriage. He encourages his audience to question what logical sense marriage embeds and what supposed 'necessity' it carries; to question imposed, institutionalized authority. The tone is thus set as a challenge to the youthful listeners to renounce socially constructed ideas about obligations to marry; he challenges them to think freely and decide for themselves if marriage is the right path, though of course the very presence of the cogent elder imparting his own views on the impressionable young men renders the scene ironic.

Nevertheless, before delving into a full diatribe against marriage, the Senator continues with his preface by specifically asking his young listeners to abandon the imparted ways in which they have been brought up to think about marriage, unions and weddings—leaving behind the glorification instilled in each one of those words by family, the Church, and society at large—and instead considering what each stands for when stripped of its pleasant packaging and left in its stark essence.

Premettiamo che, qualsiasi argomento si tratti, l'oggetto della ricerca va considerato in sè, nella sua pura nudità, liberandolo da tutto ciò che è belletto, appariscente scintillio, estrinseco adornamento... Temo, infatti, che siano proprio i nomi di 'connubio', 'matrimonio', 'unione', 'nozze' a tenere come infuscate la vostra mente e a farle impedimento.¹⁰⁷

Here the Senator expresses fear over not being able to facilitate an objective discourse on marriage because of the ways in which words associated with it have been embedded with idyllic images. He implies the problem is the deceitful way married life is presented to young, single persons as a charmed life, an elevated status to work towards, while the difficult realities

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 81-2.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 84.

inherent in the unbreakable union are slyly left by the wayside and only discoverable once in the marriage. Della Casa seeks to counter the sentimental imagery of marriage by proffering images of the more trying aspects, as the Senator continues:

Ci lascino dunque un po' in pace codesti bellissimi nomi, e ciò di cui noi andiamo indagando quale cosa sia e di quale importanza sia, cerchiamo di giustamente stimarlo e pesarlo non dalla parola, ma per quello che è; quella tal cosa, intendo, che con nome severo noi chiamiamo 'matrimonio', perpetua unione dell'uomo con la donna, comunanza non solo degli averi, ma di vantaggi e traverserie, sia l'ordine materiale, sia dell'animo, e della vita tutta quanta, e della sorte.¹⁰⁸

Della Casa puts a negative spin on elements of marriage that are propositioned as positives—perpetual union between man and woman, sharing of all goods both material and otherwise, a partnership through the highs and lows of life—in order to depict a more balanced picture of matrimony and to combat the false marketing of marriage. His aim here is to ensure all sides of the information gamut are provided *before* making a decision on whether to marry, since in practice he would argue wistful youths tend to only realize the gravity of their undertaking once in the marriage, when it is too late to retract the “I do”, or rather “Miser si”,¹⁰⁹ that solidified the union. Della Casa’s words are well-suited for the character of the elder Senator, then, since the attitude assumed speaks to the urgency of the more experienced individual needing to warn the naïve youths on the brink of imminent danger.

Della Casa utilizes numerous analogies to bolster his argument throughout the text, particularly that of friendship. The Senator reminds of the difficulty of finding sincere, quality people with whom to share one’s life: “...*non potete certamente non ricordare quanto sia raro in*

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 84-5.

¹⁰⁹ “Miser si” was the typical reply during the wedding ceremony when the officiant asked the bride if she took her groom as lawfully wedded husband and vice versa. See Stanley Chojnacki, “Valori patrizi nel tribunal patriarcale: Girolamo da Mula e Marietta Soranzo (Venezia 1460),” in *Matrimoni in dubbio. Unioni controverse e nozze clandestine in Italia dal XIV al XVIII secolo*, eds. Silvana Seidel Menchi and Diego Quaglioni (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2001), 230. See also p. 22 of the same anthology for further elaboration on the formulaic verbal rituals of wedding ceremonies.

ogni tempo il numero dei veri e sinceri amici.”¹¹⁰ The truest of friends, those with whom the most intimate secrets are shared, the most intimate joys cherished, and the most painful moments softened, are the rarest and even when found, the connection may not always endure for life but reach an impasse at some point:

Anche fra uomini non cattivi il più delle volte le amicizie non durano; perchè non è possibile che nature diverse ed opposte vadano d'accordo e, per così dire, divengano tutt'una.¹¹¹

The Senator declares the complexities of human nature, with each individual being so uniquely intricate, possessing his own manner of doing, seeing, believing, as rendering the possibility of finding a friend with whom perpetual companionship occurs nearly impossible. Thus, even when a true friendship is made, the question of durability, let alone being able to live intimately with the person, is a rather fragile matter despite the closeness shared. The employment of the friendship analogy occurs because it is presumably a scenario and a lexicon familiar to the young men: they have experienced friendship on a first-hand basis and know both the advantages and disadvantages of such bonds. Contrarily, a discussion of male/female relations without the aid of such analogies seemingly renders the topic abstract. The young men are less apt to understand the concept from a firsthand point of view given their lack of experience, never having been married before and presumably never having engaged in a substantial relationship with a woman (since among the elites those almost indubitably would have resulted in marriage, and again none of the men are married). Relationship terminology is foreign to them, a second-hand experience and this underscores one of the primary issues Della Casa takes with marriage practices: the inability to effectually court in order to facilitate a visceral understanding of relationship dynamics in order to then make the soundest choice in terms of a spouse. It is a contention that

¹¹⁰ Della Casa, *Se s'abbia*, 88.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

will come up multiple times and will lead to Della Casa's inclusion of messages advocating social changes—changes that if put into effect would bring incremental emancipation to women.

We will examine it more in depth shortly, but first more on the friendship analogy.

The Senator commences by stressing the amount of time, diligence and care needed to seek out and establish if an individual would make a favorable friend.

Allorchè si pensa di stringere un'amicizia...con che diligenza, con qual circospetta attenzione si procede, e badando a tutto, noi almeno che, nel vivere, si suol far le cose a ragion veduta! Ci informiamo anzitutto minutamente sul genere di vita che ciascuno ha sino allora condotto, e quali ne siano le facoltà e i costumi, e quel che ne dica la gente...nulla ha tanta importanza ed è così pericoloso come l'eleggere fra i molti che ci circondano, quell'uno o quei due a cui si possa, in piacevole comunione di vita, confidar tutto, mettendoli con sicurezza a parte di ogni nostro segreto.¹¹²

It becomes a study in itself, as the friend inevitably becomes a reflection of the individual, whether desired or not. Utmost trust is amongst the most indispensable of qualities to locate in a potential friend, along with an impressive reputation of his own founded on agreeable intellect and manners. The parallels with romantic relationships at this point are apparent and bear no need for further elaboration, as the points the Senator makes are applicable to both relationship dynamics.

Once the gravity of choosing friends wisely is conveyed, the Senator transitions to a negative scenario in order to better illumine the high risk for misery marriage carries. He describes a scene he retains happens "*spesso*": encountering someone in a public space, the sight of whom alone is enough to bring chills, as if a sixth sense detected some sinister energy suddenly present.

Spesso c'imbattiamo in uomini che non conosciamo, ma basta la loro faccia repugnante e odiosa a farci provar per essi una profonda avversione; in tal caso noi, non soltanto evitiamo di far con loro amicizia, ma li scansiamo, e il vederli ci dà lo stesso ribrezzo che il toccare le cose malefiche.¹¹³

¹¹² Ibid., 86-7.

¹¹³ Ibid., 94.

The corporeal reaction would lead to an instinctive inclination to flee his presence, shunning all contact with the individual let alone consider a possible friendship. The Senator then poses the question in the context of a marital union to emphasize the element of randomness in spousal selection: what if they were forced to live with such a person, to marry them, to be *intimate* with them?—“*Supponiamo ora di dover vivere con uno di quelli; quale insopportabile vita sarebbe la nostra!*”¹¹⁴ Despite the Senator’s proposition approaching the realm of sensationalism, it is not wholly unfounded. It underpins one of Della Casa’s main grievances—the lack of self-determination in choosing a life partner.

Though there was more than one kind of road to matrimony in Renaissance Italy, in the patriciate especially the amount of control a bride or groom had in deciding a spouse was relatively little, if at all. Familial obligations overrode personal sentiments as the patriarchs—but in some cases also matriarchs¹¹⁵—of the family negotiated a union that would most benefit the kin, whose essentialness in marriage contraction is demonstrated by numerous cities upholding laws requiring parental consent.¹¹⁶ Molho’s study of late medieval marriage trends in Florence chronicles the multiple strata of both societal and family networks intimately involved in marriage contraction. It was a process often initiated as a preliminary negotiation between marriage brokers or two prominent citizens of the ruling class who had something at stake in the

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Hacke provides insightful commentary on women’s influence in marriage contraction in the section entitled “Spousal and maternal influence and power,” *Women, Sex and Marriage*, 99-104. Chojnacki reports a sampling of 101 marriage contracts produced during the 15th and 16th centuries evidences an active role by female family members in marriage negotiations, in his “At Home and Beyond: Women’s Power in Renaissance Venice,” in *Donne di potere nel Rinascimento*, eds. Letizia Arcangeli and Susanna Peyronel (Rome: Viella, 2008), 32-3; See also Ferraro, *Marriage Wars*, 47-50.

¹¹⁶ Pertile, *Storia*, III, p. 278, as cited by Trevor Dean in his “Fathers and Daughters: Marriage Laws and Marriage Disputes in Bologna and Italy, 1200-1500,” in *Marriage in Italy, 1300-1650*, eds. Trevor Dean and K.J.P Lowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1998), 89.

alliance and thus took an active role in contracting it, then moved on to the direct involvement of the patriarchal heads of household (both bride's and groom's), with the next step of approval sometimes including the input of the groom, but rarely did the contraction arrive at actively involving the bride. Her presence at the solemnization of the oath to marry did not even require her presence, as it technically had no bearing on the procedure.¹¹⁷

Marriage contraction in the ruling class initiated several layers above the personal interests of the bride and groom, with a tight web of personal relationships dictating the details of the contract. The more affluent a family was, the more restrictions and requirements were imposed on the negotiation process. There was an understanding on the part of all involved parties that unofficial rules of the marriage market existed (primarily the bride's and groom's absolute submission to their kin's wishes) and a strict adherence was indispensable if one wished to remain a part of the patriciate society into which he was born. Failure to comply would result in social anathema. Molho highlights the specific case of Filippo di Tommaso Minerbetti, who took a wife without consulting his family members or gaining their approval and suffered a subsequent expulsion from the family, as a case in point.¹¹⁸ The inclusion of not only the family but the entire social network in which one participated was essential in marriage brokering;¹¹⁹ the

¹¹⁷ Molho offers the example of Cino di Filippo Rinuccini's marriage negotiations and other's in Chapter 5 of his *Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1994), specifically 181-185.

¹¹⁸ For a counter example, in terms of when spouses overtly went against the desires of their families in marital alliances and suffered social ostracization as a consequence, see *ibid.*, 188-191.

¹¹⁹ Chojnacki details the case of Girolamo da Mula and Marietta Soranzo to underscore the problematic of disregarding family involvement in marriage negotiations. An eighteen year old Girolamo married Marietta without the consent of his father, Francesco, who did not approve of the match for several reasons least of which the disparity in wealth of the two families. He maintained the Soranzo family to be inferior and thus a financially unattractive match. The case is interesting because in theory it was initiated by Girolamo, who supposedly claimed he married Marietta under legitimate fear ("*iustus metus*"), after being threatened by force by members of the Soranzo. But Chojnacki speculates Francesco filed the suit, arguing on behalf of his son against the marriage (though in reality Girolamo was enthusiastically privy to it), and even taking measures to imprison his son in their family domicile in order to prevent Girolamo from appearing in court and overturning his deposition. For a full account, see Chojnacki, *Matrimoni in dubbio*, 211-243.

union symbolically influenced the social reputes of honor of both the family and the community at large, rendering their involvement in the marriage contraction a personal affair. At times priests also colluded with the wishes of a family who forced a daughter into an unwanted marriage, turning a blind eye to the mandate of ‘willing consent’ as a favor to the family in return for having elected him. (Property owners in the community elected priests for a life term and wielded substantial power and influence over the local clergy, resulting in a mutually flowing circuit of favors.)¹²⁰

For Della Casa, then, the small amount of power in determining one’s own fate is illogical, if not reprehensible. In matters of friendship—a most important human bond—the tools and freedoms necessary to make a wise decision are at least accessible, but as already outlined above even in those situations a valuable friendship is exceptional and difficult to maintain. The requisites for a lasting marriage, according to popular treatises on marriage in circulation during the 16th century, are even more demanding than those of a friendship given the overriding marital scope is promoted as the unification of souls—two spouses becoming one¹²¹—making the possibility of a failed marriage loom even larger under this difficult pretext, let alone that of cordial compatibility.¹²²

¹²⁰ Ferraro, *Marriage Wars*, 28.

¹²¹ “È dunque l’ufficio del matrimonio congiungere il Marito & la Moglie con si stretta unione, che non siano piu che uno...” in Ludovico Dolce’s *Dialogo della institution delle donne, di messer Lodovico Dolce; da lui medesimo nuovamente ricorretto et ampliato* (Venice: Gabriel Giolito de Ferrari, 1547), 38. Here Dolce’s comments are made in specific reference to the unification that comes from procreation, i.e. a physical connectedness. In referring to the joining of two souls in one, Dolce’s perspective resumes its misogynistic take by proclaiming the mixing of the two souls together equates to the wifely duty of conforming her soul to that of her husband’s: “...percioche non pur tra il marito & la moglie due animi & duo corpi un solo divengono: ma di questi due mescolamenti un solo huomo si forma: atteso, che l’animo della moglie de’ vivere in quello del marito; & ella a lui, come a parte migliore di se medesima, in tutte le cose obbedire, & render honore,” 43.

¹²² The Renaissance witnessed the emergence of the ever-growing importance of companionship in marital unions. See St. Bernard of Siena’s preachings on matrimony, which testify to the need for mutual love and respect in the form of companionship. *Siena 1427*, I, 556, 568-9; *Florence 1424*, I, 412; *Florence 1425*, II, 177. David Herlihy

The friendship analogy finishes with the Senator asserting it is wholly in God's hands—*“solo a Dio piacendo”*¹²³—whether or not one will be blessed with good friends (or spouse). Essentially, it is a matter of fate, or luck. But the last point he makes on the topic is that which constitutes the seminal difference between friendship and marriage: *“Comunque si sia, vi è nell'amicizia questo vantaggio, che è un libero vincolo.”*¹²⁴ Regardless how awful or unbearable a friendship may become, despite its promising beginnings, solace is found in knowing it can always be undone. It is a bond mutually entered into and subject to termination at will at any moment and without any formalities of legal, ecclesiastical or familial involvement. The friendship simply ends when one or both parties are no longer inclined to participate further. The Senator posits the dissolution of a marriage in stark contrast, however, as an arduous process involving numerous outside parties and revealing itself a painstaking, time-consuming effort, and ending often times unfavorably for the husband.

Part of the reason for this was that institutionally, the idea of *favor matrimonii* (literally, to favor matrimony) prevailed in the court system. The presiding judge was obliged to oppugn the *'attore,'* the party that was requesting the annulment, who was treated as suspect and who was delivered interrogative questions with the aim of trapping him/her in contradiction.¹²⁵ The annulment, just like the marital contract, was an issue whose effects rippled out into broader

and Klapisch-Zuber also discuss marriage increasingly posited in a positive light in their *Les Toscans et leur familles: une étude du catasto florentin de 1427* (Paris: Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1978), 586-8.

¹²³ Della Casa, *Se s'abbia*, 94.

¹²⁴ “Nevertheless, in friendship there is the advantage of being able to end it at any time,” *ibid.*, 95.

¹²⁵ Historian Arturo Jemolo writes: “Nei processi di nullità matrimoniale il fattore che domina è il *favor matrimonii*...che si manifesta anzitutto dal punto di vista della psicologia del giudice, nel farne in tutta l'istruttoria il vero avversario della parte che chiede la nullità...La parte che chiede la nullità si sentirà sospettata, le domande che le saranno rivolte mireranno spesso a farla cadere in contraddizione...” in his *Il matrimonio nel diritto canonico* (Milano: Francesco Vallardi, 1945), 354-5.

society, making the judge more keen to establish a verdict that favored the overall good for the entire community, not simply that of the couple. In this vein, sentimental inclinations and personal sufferings did not constitute a strong case for separation; rather, indications of the union's inability to uphold patriciate values proved more cogent in determining the decision to dissolve a marriage. Ferraro explains:

An argument based on 'incompatibility' would not meet legal criteria for a marital dissolution. An annulment could not be won on grounds of estrangement, irreconcilable differences, lack of love, physical unattractiveness, or bad breath...the underlying discourse was about the unsuitability of a union that had not cohered or sustained the values perceived to uphold the fabric of society. The best marriages were those that provided financial security, safeguarded honor, and ensured community stability. When they suffered serious deficiencies in these areas, there was some community consensus that they should be dissolved.¹²⁶

Marriage's microcosmic symbolism for civic peace and order meant in turn that its dissolution had to be determined in the context of its potential to damage that peace and order.

Additionally, the role of honor—such a driving force in all Renaissance proceedings—should not be underestimated. The very fact that family and community members orchestrated the details of a given marriage contract meant they conceded their approval of the match, an approval which assumed an inadvertent nod to the presumed success of the marriage. Arriving at the tribunal to seek an annulment, therefore, signaled the incompetence of the match-making skills and in turn damaged the honor of the family responsible for them. Daniela Hacke elaborates:

If marriage between high-ranking Venetian families was seen above all as a business deal, its success was evidence of the shrewdness and credibility of the instigator. In the same way, its failure meant a loss of credibility and honour which threatened his livelihood.¹²⁷

The problems stemming from the difficulty of procuring a legal marriage annulment (*separatio quoad vinculum*) were thus heavily rooted in the strong culture of honor, an extremely delicate

¹²⁶ Ferraro, *Marriage Wars*, 41.

¹²⁷ Hacke, *Women, Sex and Marriage*, 99.

and volatile matter that reigned at the epicenter of Renaissance society. The maintenance of honor huddled under the overarching Venetian umbrella, which bred a culture especially geared toward a communal spirit in which the good of the whole trumped all other needs, including personal sentiments and affects.

In Chapter V, Della Casa continues to describe the irrational contemporary habits of contracting marriage, though now in terms of courtship. Here again, women do not serve as the primary target of his attack. His dismay is born out of the illogic of inhibiting men and women to freely interact before making the monumental decision of selecting a spouse for the remainder of their days. The practice of contracting marriage ran in accordance to a rigid business infrastructure that reflected the overall Venetian mentality, which again deemed the priority to be the good of the whole rather than the individual; marriages were contracted according to how to best benefit the lineage. This approach heavily negated the relevance of factoring in mutual affection in the selection of a spouse, though theoretically still prevalent. Della Casa argues in favor of unadulterated interaction between potential spouses, displaying a notion that esteems the emotional compatibility between a man and a woman as being fundamental to a relationship. He sustains natural, spontaneous chemistry as critical to the success of a marriage.¹²⁸ It is the only way to assure a true connection and constitutes a lasting quality that far surpasses any sexual attraction, since sexual attraction is most often tempered before long:

¹²⁸ The notion of mutual affection gained support from the middle of the 16th century onward, as evidenced in Dolce (1547); the Introduction to Giovanni Battista Giraldi's *Hecatommithi* (1565); Flaminio de' Nobili's *Trattato dell'amore umano* (1567); and Stefano Guazzo's *La civil conversatione* (1574). Though reciprocal love is a central point in each of these writings, it should be noted, as Brian Richardson astutely does, that "mutual love" often took the form of a duty imposed on the wife, tasking her with making all sacrifices necessary to procure it. See Brian Richardson's "'Amore maritale': Advice on Love and Marriage In the Second Half of the Cinquecento", in *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society*, ed. Letizia Panizza (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), 197.

...supposto (ed è cosa impossibile) che la moglie mai non cessi di aver su di noi un'attrattiva, e che ci sentiamo sempre accesi per lei da caldo desiderio di amore, neanche in tal caso ci sarà dato vivere con tranquillità e con diletto, non potendo essere senza querimonie e liti e dissidi un'unione che non sia nata da spontaneo consenso.¹²⁹

With spontaneous chemistry purported to be the key to successful matchmaking and its discovery only possible through natural interaction, Della Casa is then also promoting a more liberal expansion of women's socio-spatial confines, as he simultaneously laments mothers keeping their daughters constantly behind closed doors.

Perchè nello stabilire una simile unione [di matrimonio] non si usa la stessa cautela che nello stringere amicizie; e se anche volessimo, non si potrebbe; chè anche le madri, com'ognun sa, stanno attente a non lasciar uscir di casa le figlie adulte, e che non si facciano vedere e che nessuno ponga loro gli occhi addosso, sicchè, per la maggior parte, noi sposiamo una donna di cui neanche ci è noto il viso, nè sappiamo, come suol dirsi, se bianca ella sia o nera...È veramente da insensati in cosa di tanta importanza e rischio comportarsi, come facciamo, con negligenza, a casaccio e senza ponderazione alcuna.¹³⁰

Even if the willingness to participate in the act of courting was present, meaning a young man wished to personally measure his "investment" in a certain woman, he was unable to do so because of the restrictive customs of the time which, amongst the patriciate class (and especially for females), prevented liberal movement in public.

Here Della Casa takes to indirectly criticizing the economic nature of the marriage market. In a capitalistic, competitive arena such as it was, the Venetian marriage market became a platform where a competitive edge determined the loftiness of the marital alliance obtained. This often translated as wealth and a dowry reflective of it, but the preeminence of the bride's sexual honor should not be underestimated. The intactness of the female's sexual reputation was preeminent, with her virginity being incontestably her most precious asset; though it was viewed as a collective possession, belonging to the entire family with members both male and female taking care to safeguard it. Measures to protect her virginal status often equated to domestic

¹²⁹ Della Casa, *Se s'abbia*, 122-3.

¹³⁰ Della Casa, *Se s'abbia*, 97.

confinement, especially for women of respectable rank, who were held under lock and key and prevented from freely moving about in public spheres and thus impeding substantial interaction with men. It also explains why women were either married young or, if not marriageable, entered the convent at an equally youthful age.¹³¹ Literary efforts also reinforced the notion of female domestic detention, with works like that of Cesare Ripa portraying “‘Modesty’ as a young girl, veiled and dressed in white, with a tortoise as her attribute, ‘to show that modest women should stay assiduously at home, just like the turtle in the house given her by Nature,’” in his *Nova iconologia*.¹³²

The discourse on women and their domestic detention is an expansive topic with a far-reaching history, much too ambitious an undertaking to be examined here in all its thoroughness. Suffice it for our purposes, however, that besides the usual (from antiquity well through the Renaissance) prevailing ideas about females being more adept to the private sphere based on their biological dispositions,¹³³ the 16th century also produced a more heavily engrained correlation between female honor and sexual behavior. Hacke argues the surge in reform laws concerning marital matters in late sixteenth-century Venice resulted in the “disciplining of women and thus the reform of the female sex,” making the notion of a sexualized female body more potent than ever and placing upon her complete responsibility in the case of its violation.¹³⁴

Whereas a man’s honor was viewed independent of his sexual activity (and mattered little if

¹³¹ Michael Rocke, “Gender and Sexual Culture in Renaissance Italy,” in *Gender and Society*, 152.

¹³² As cited by Gabriela Zarri in her “Gender, Religious Institutions and Social Discipline: The Reform of the Regulars,” in *Gender and Society*, 206.

¹³³ For further elaborations, see Ch. 3 “Medicine, Anatomy, Physiology” in Ian MacLean’s *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1980), 29-46.

¹³⁴ Hacke, *Women, Sex and Marriage*, 185-6.

married or not), a woman's honor was entirely dependent on her sexual conduct throughout her entire life. True, other factors influenced her honorable reputation, but if she lost her chastity she lost everything. Marriage was the only means by which acts of sexual transgression (understood as anything from consensual pre-/extra-marital sex to rape) could be rectified and restore lost honor. However, the *preservation* of sexual honor, and not its restoration, was the primary goal of patrician families in guarding their daughters' future prospects.

To reiterate, the more elite a family was the more intensely the daughters were protected from public exposure. The direct result was impeded courtship, if any was facilitated at all, before entering into marriage. In cases when courtship rituals were played out, the overall dynamic is still characteristically a public affair and lacking in 'natural' (not spurred on by an outside party) affinity, as male/female interactions were often monitored by relatives or neighbors. The "natural chemistry" factor that Della Casa promotes was therefore suspect given third party involvement in the couplings. If patrician women were allowed to leave the domicile, it was typically in order to attend a local parish service, where their interactions would be under the observation of community members.¹³⁵ In other situations, courtships took place in a space that could furtively circumvent strict social restrictions of socio-spatial confines: the balcony, which was a space pertaining ambiguously to both public and private spheres. Hacke reports:

Before prospective grooms were introduced into the households of their future brides, the women occasionally stood on the balcony while the men courted them from the street—a practice that transformed the courting ritual into a public act. The balcony thus allowed women to make contacts with the outside world while remaining within the household. This particular 'private' space carried an ambivalent meaning. It not only allowed the neighbourhood to participate and observe more directly the life of female parishioners; it also enabled men to address women.¹³⁶

Despite the ability to interact via the balcony, it should be noted, as Hacke makes mention in the first line of the above excerpt, that the courtship is the effect of an already pre-

¹³⁵ Ibid., 79.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

meditated intention to connect the prospective bride and groom. The insinuation would be that the families of both condoned the courting interplay. Della Casa castigates these types of restrictive norms that completely eradicate elements of ‘natural chemistry,’ and upholds the prospect of women being able to penetrate the public sphere on some level in order to let that unscripted interaction occur. Furthermore, because the very nature of ‘spontaneo consenso’ means both parties have to be privy to a union, it again promotes profeminism by asserting the importance of the female’s stance—taking into consideration how *she* feels towards a potential suitor and endowing it with as much importance as the suitor’s own regard. Mutual, reciprocated connection.

Della Casa goes continues on the topic by employing another analogy to further illustrate his point. He laments the purchase of a house, even of a slave, being given more weight—in terms of time and consideration—than marriage when the former two purchases can easily be undone if the buyer is unsatisfied or comes to find there were hidden defects not made known to him from the start. Neither Della Casa nor his literary alter ego is subject to effusive romanticism, however. In fact, he maintains a very pragmatic perspective when he argues that before taking a wife, a husband should be able to thoroughly “inspect” his potential investment for any defects displeasing to him before committing to the “purchase.” His frustration over not being allowed to do so is palpable and expressed through the analogy of buying a slave:

Se si vende uno schiavo, bisogna chiaramente enumerare i difetti occulti; e se i difetti son taciuti, il compratore ha diritto di farsi risarcire il danno o di chiedere la rescissione del contratto mediante l’actio redhibitoria; perchè io non debba a causa tua e della tua poca lealtà essere raggirato e frodato.¹³⁷

Della Casa asserts purchases and investments of a less serious commitment—such as buying a slave—are attributed more attention and caution than the lifelong, unbreakable tie of marriage. He charges a deceitful quality at play in contracting marriage, something resembling false

¹³⁷ Ibid., 99.

advertising. Since women are often withheld from any interaction with men before marriage, the result is a union between virtual strangers unfamiliar with one another, though the parties have presumably been fed an enticing promotional campaign enumerating each spouse-to-be's assets—while withholding the detractions. Given each individual's unique predilections, only through a direct “inspection” would some semblance of potential compatibility be determinable. Despite Della Casa's words positing man's role as the active decision-maker and woman as the passive object to be inspected then bought, the underlying message of men and women becoming acquainted before committing to marriage nevertheless implies expanding women's overall social mobility and in the process establishes a stance that indirectly calls for the improvement of women's social conditions.

Additionally, Della Casa criticizes the law for taking measures to ensure the most menial injustices are avoided and yet offers no aid or remedy for an incompatible marital union, a union which itself was formed, according to him, under false pretenses:

Or dunque, come poc' anzi dicevo, nello stringere un vincolo [di matrimonio] così ingannevole e pericoloso non si è soliti di cautelarsi in alcun modo; nè, volendo, lo consente la legge, da cui non hai da attenderti aiuto o rimedio; sebbene...anche in cose di minima importanza, tema anche avvengan raggiri e, prevedendoli, ce ne garantisca.¹³⁸

The Senator's criticisms of the disregard with which marriage is treated inadvertently have the effect of conveying a simultaneous message—a message that decries social infrastructures for having relinquished traditional marital values and replaced them with business practices that suppress the relevance of personal affect and well-being in a sentimental relationship. It is not to say Della Casa does not recognize the economical factor in marriage contract, as his analogy with other “purchases” attests. But his chastisement of neglecting compatibilities beyond those

¹³⁸ “...the law, from which you shouldn't expect any help or remedy, even though for the smallest matters it seeks to anticipate injustices and protect you from them,” *ibid.*, 100-1.

financial suggests the misogamy in *An uxor* derives, ironically, from an appreciation of traditional marital values.

The Senator's words demonstrate a conviction that the institution of marriage should be approached with appropriate deference at each level of its conception since it is, after all, a union sanctified by God Himself, having been recognized by the Church as an official sacrament from the 8th century onward, when male-female relations metamorphosed from a sinful state to a holy union.¹³⁹ His words remind of the typical characterization of an elderly curmudgeon who waxes on to the youth about the deterioration of society from its glory days of the past. Despite the potential humor found in such a scene, his words indicate a longing for a resurgence of marriage as a valorized state, duly appreciated and respected not just by the common man but by religious and political authorities as well.

Chapter XVII is an apotheosis of my argument. The topic at hand is adultery, and the Senator discusses the damaging and overshadowing effects it can have on a man's reputation. Even the most virtuous man is susceptible to the disdain of society if his wife's extra-marital dalliances come to light; all his other attributes will be undone by this one stain in his character, regardless of his being the victim of the situation, not the active offender. As has already been conveyed, a wife's sexual honor was to be safeguarded by the leading male figure in her life, in this case her husband. Her adultery was therefore viewed as a direct indication of the husband's inability to contain his wife, an act which attacked the very core of the male ego, exposing him as a weak and inefficient head of household. Indeed, the Senator maintains, it is the most tragic affliction a man can suffer:

¹³⁹ Shahaar, *Fourth Estate*, 66.

Che se poi a uno accada di esser sicuro che la moglie lo fa cornuto, o la sorprenda sul fatto, pensate, o giovani, che non può all'uomo accader nulla di più calamitoso, nè può essere inflitta più acerba ferita.¹⁴⁰

Though the Senator has begun the topic speaking from the male point of view, he laments the tragic effects of romantic betrayal on all levels with its subsequent condemnation significant because it is gender neutral, abhorring infidelity as an atrocious crime irrelevant to the sex of the perpetrator. The only solution for a civilized community, he argues, is to practice continence:

... fra tutte le virtù la continenza più di ogni altra debba essere osservata, custodita, tenuta in pregio; tolta la quale, verrebbe senz'altro a mancare la società umana e la possibilità della convivenza.¹⁴¹

The Senator's moral compass characteristically points to lessons applicable on a universal level, such as this one, demonstrating again that his driving messages concerning marriage are not focused on female defamation but entail criticisms independent of sexual distinction. Sexual restraint is promoted as the correct path for *both* sexes, for the sake of order in an individual's marriage and for maintaining order in society as a whole.

Additionally, and even more surprising to find in a categorically misogynist piece, is a progressive denunciation of the double standard with which society reacts to adultery when committed by women as opposed to men. Men are given license to satiate their sexual appetites as they seem fit while women, if similar libidinous pleasures are pursued, are punished so fervently that at times only their life is enough to redeem their error and restore lost honor to her husband and kin. But again the Senator maintains the laws of continence are intended for all beings:

Siano dunque sacrosante ed inviolabili le leggi della continenza, ma siano anche uguali per tutti.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Della Casa, *Se s'abbia*, 204.

¹⁴¹ "...amongst all virtues, continence more than any other must be observed, managed, and held in esteem; if not, society would suffer the consequences and make living together impossible," *ibid.*, 171.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 172.

He continues by calling any society that upholds such an egregious double standard both barbaric and inhumane:¹⁴³

...è costume disumano e degno di gente barbara il punire con aspra disciplina e in modo atroce e crudele nelle donne, esseri per loro natura deboli, un fallo che, se sei tu a commetterlo, non par che meriti la benchè minima riprovazione.¹⁴⁴

Despite the carefully inserted assertion of characterizing women as weak by nature, the fundamental point of the Senator's words are rather striking for their profeminist, progressive implications. They are radical for the way in which they oppose the popular (misogynistic) ideology of the day, which condones male hedonistic practices but hypocritically holds women to requirements of the strictest sexual purity. In this way, Della Casa equalizes men and women by categorizing them as subject to the same set of rules; he asserts that the social code by which all are to abide is intended for all human beings, removing gender as an influential factor in the process.

However, reflective of Della Casa's willingness to criticize and lament the contemporary practices of society but refrain from reformist efforts, the Senator too relinquishes his discourse on how he believes society should operate and instead resumes the discourse based on how society actually operates. He argues that because the actions and consequences of adultery—though unjust—are deeply ingrained in the minds of men, it is futile to seek to extirpate these convictions but rather one must conform and adhere to the social code thereby established:

Ma tali storte opinioni si possono bensì biasimare, non tuttavia cambiare; risiedono nella mente dei più e vi si sono radicate al segno che, nonchè svellerle ed estirparle, neanche appena le scrolleresti. Non resta,

¹⁴³ Rocke cites Giovanni Scarabello's study of Venetian sexual culture, reporting the extreme discrepancy in prosecution for male and female adultery; mainly citing a lack in the former: "...from 1480-1550 not a single Venetian husband was convicted for infidelity, unlike scores of wives prosecuted from the 1360s on," in *Gender and Society*, 158. He also comments that religious precepts condoned a husband's expelling an adulterous wife from the home, but contrarily a wife was never to abandon her philandering husband under any condition, *ibid*.

¹⁴⁴ Della Casa, *Se s'abbia*, 171.

allora, che regolarsi secondo il giudizio dei nostri concittadini e uniformarsi alla loro opinione, quale essa sia, dal momento che non è in poter nostro il farla diversa.¹⁴⁵

The defeatist attitude echoes that of other feminist paladins, like Fonte, whose ability to distinguish between reality and the ideal provide insight into the lives of disheartened Renaissance citizens and the institutional shortcomings of their respective society.

In Chapter XXI, the Senator returns to the topic of jealousy and suspicion. It is significant to note that the beginning of the chapter finds him expressly clarifying his position: his intention is, despite contrary evidence, not to speak badly about women.¹⁴⁶ He makes this statement to once again attempt to render his musings on women and marriage more objective; that he is a neutral arbiter simply relaying facts *talis qualis*. He follows up the statement by countering the negative effects generalizations can have on an entire species, when he specifies that not all women are reckless, libidinous creatures, but only some.¹⁴⁷ He wishes to convey to his young audience an awareness that removes any naïve misgivings on their part; an awareness that encourages them to neither idealize women as angelic, infallible beings but simultaneously discourages conceptualizing all women as unleashed sexual heathens.¹⁴⁸

Despite the initial disclaimer, the Senator immediately brings paradox to the situation by affirming two conclusions he asserts as absolutisms (“*Si tengano, dunque, per ferme queste due conclusioni*”)¹⁴⁹: 1) women, by nature, are inclined to matters of love and apply all of their

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 172.

¹⁴⁶ “Nè in verità è mio proposito dir male delle donne...” ibid., 198.

¹⁴⁷ “...voglio anzi ammettere che le tante sciagurate che si ricordano, fossero...sfrenatamente rotte alla più furiosa libidine, ma non già perchè perversa a tal punto sia la natura delle donne, sì bene perchè tali erano esse,” ibid., 198.

¹⁴⁸ “Non ci sia dunque da temere che ci càpiti una Clitennestra; ma guardiamoci anche dal sentirci sicuri che la nostra compagna sarà una Penelope,” ibid., 199.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 199.

energy and focus to these efforts; 2) there will never be a shortage of men who will attempt to seduce (even with money) a woman, married or not, into illicit relations. The Senator claims the natural result of the first conclusion is women's proclivity to betray their men,¹⁵⁰ since they have ardently studied the game of love, actively engage in it, and are masters of it. This "fact," combined with the effects of the second conclusion, constitutes enough evidence to assure that taking a wife equates to a man's opening his life to the floodgates of constant jealousy, suspicion and all ensuing pangs. Marriage is presented as the ultimate risk, one in which a man gambles his most valuable possessions—his pride and self-confidence¹⁵¹—with the odds looking on him unfavorably. His life will become a painful existence—incessantly doubting the intentions of not just his wife but of his most intimate friends and family as well—never ascertaining with certainty if their actions are genuine or rather deceptive calculations used to finagle proximity with his wife. In short, a husband's paranoia will come to rule his life and if attempts to control his wife's actions by putting her under lock and key become known, he will undoubtedly become the gossip of the town for the insecure man his actions expose him to be.¹⁵² This underlines once again the paramount importance of honor in the face of the community, and is reinforced by postulating an exacerbated scenario in which a cuckolded husband comes to find all of society was aware of his wife's infidelity while only he was ignorant of her indecencies:

E soprattutto ci tribola il pensiero che ciò che la moglie a noi soli riusciva a tener celato, noto era e manifesto agli occhi di tutti.¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 199-200.

¹⁵¹ On the topic of adultery and honor among the nobility, Shahar reports: "There are no records of cases among the nobility where a wife took revenge on an adulterous husband;" a fact that brings into focus the distinctly male quality of vengeance as an attempt at re-appropriating lost honor. *Fourth Estate*, 107.

¹⁵² Della Casa, *Se s'abbia*, 203.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 207.

Perhaps yet, the most foreboding part is the Senator's admonition of there being no recovery from such a tragic betrayal:

E sempre la sofferta beffa e il nostro disonore avendo davanti agli occhi [di tutti], neanche si ha più il coraggio di uscire di casa, e con fiaccato e dimesso animo si conduce la più tormentata vita che uomo viver possa.¹⁵⁴

The decimating effects of marital treachery are saved for the finale, having the most impactful force in swaying the young men from marrying since they drive straight at the heart of the male ego and social positioning. In finishing with this warning, it is interesting to note that Della Casa counters the argument with which he began—whether taking a wife is useful in terms of benefitting the State and if it falls under one's obligations to the State. At the core of this dilemma is the question of reputation, with the underlying connotation sustaining that marriage elevates a man's reputation (in accordance with popular political philosophy of the time that judged a man unfit to run the government if he could not run a household). And yet Della Casa takes measures to convince readers the probability of a ruined reputation is greatly increased at the prospect of taking a wife. If reputation and honorable social standing are of interest, then avoiding marriage is the most astute manner of preserving them.

Della Casa's text moves through the procedural stages of marriage contraction and conjugal living while deconstructing each in order to show both the faults in the procedures and the damages incurred as a consequence. The entire dialogue is an elaborate warning, an attempt to undo the glorification that marriage is at times awarded and to counter the eager yearnings of young men who think only in short-term timeframes. The strife Della Casa expresses regarding marriage is thus fundamentally caused by the sharp disconnect between marriage in theory and marriage in practice. He would seem in favor of a restoration of ideal marital values—mutual

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

love, respect, honor, adulation—though he does not push for reform but instead accepts that a said restoration is not likely to occur.¹⁵⁵ Therefore, like Fonte, Della Casa writes for a very current society and in accordance with its mores, despite his own discordant views.

CHAPTER 2.1:

Moderata Fonte: On Women

The term *feminism* is technically anachronistic for the Renaissance period. Yet the early stages of what would eventually culminate into the 20th century feminist revolution are easily visible in the early modern period and thus given their shared ideologies, I use the terms *feminism* and *profeminism* interchangeably. Classifying the type of feminism an individual practices, however, is a much more convoluted process, especially in regards to the socio-cultural *milieu* of 16th century Italy. There is not one group nominated “feminist” to which a person either belongs or does not, but rather several different classifications of feminism with varying degrees of extremity. Not only, but the events of the Counter-Reformation effected a severe shift in feminist ideology in the 16th century, providing for an interesting backdrop in observing the actions of a feminist, like Moderata Fonte, active in the latter half of the century.

While the first half of the *Cinquecento* witnessed an efflux of treatises and dialogues dedicated to the erudition and psychological development of the female, the second half was

¹⁵⁵ Della Casa assigns the Senator an overall attitude of resignation in his criticisms of social mores, typically arriving at a level of frustration that stems from a sensed notion of helplessness, of being unable to effect change. See p. 80, fn143. This attitude also parallels Fonte’s own resignation to predominant social practices; see Ch. 2.2: Fonte On Marriage, 138-141.

subject to the harsh and abrupt restrictions enacted by the Counter-Reformation and the edicts of the Council of Trent (1545-1563), as is explored in my introductory chapter.¹⁵⁶ The philosophical concept of *donna* saw progressive ideas, formulas, and advice gathered in its favor in popular works like Capra's *Della eccellenza et dignità delle donne* (published for the first time in Rome by Francesco Minicio Calvo in 1525), Castiglione's *Il cortegiano* (1528), Piccolomini's *Dialogo nel quale si ragiona della bella creanza delle donne* (published for the first time in Venice by the Curzio de' Navò publishing house in 1539), and Domenichi's *La nobiltà delle donne* (published for the first time in Venice by Gabriel Giolito de' Ferrari in 1549). The subject of woman as a being capable of spiritual and psychological development on par with man was treated as a serious topic and investigated with sincere intention. In addition, the idea of woman as a viable player in Renaissance society—possessing a conscious awareness of the social ladder and strategically making decisions to actively climb it—united her with her male counterpart who found himself tasked with the same goal.¹⁵⁷ Ideas of women's potential emerged, circulated, and were accepted. Yet, the effects of the Counter-Reformation took a sharp toll on this budding feminism, not just paralyzing it but seeking to undo it as well by re-instilling traditional, misogynistic ideas of the female role. The image of a more independent woman of the first part of the 16th century began to be seen as near heretical by the Church. The Counter-Reformists aimed at rectifying the situation—with the simultaneous effect of reinstating societal control—by purporting a domestic role to be the only suitable role for a respectable woman. She was

¹⁵⁶ Providing an interesting contrast to popular scholarly thought, the arguments provided by Samuel K. Cohn Jr. sustain that at least in one particular case—that of Siena—women enjoyed greater freedoms during the Counter-Reformation period. See Ch. 4, “Women and the Counter-Reformation in Siena: Authority and Property in the Family,” in his *Women in the Streets: Essays on Sex and Power in Renaissance Italy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins), 1996.

¹⁵⁷ For an informative profiling of the feminist shift in the 16th century, see Francesco Sberlati's “Dalla donna di palazzo alla donna di famiglia: Pedagogia e cultura femminile tra Rinascimento e Controriforma,” *I Tatti Studies: Essays in the Renaissance*, vol. 7 (1997): 119-174.

relegated once again to wife and mother, her domain restricted to the household—once again objectifying her into a purely carnal figure who *does* but does not *think*.

The literary output of the latter half of the century in large part reinforces the anti-feminist sentiments of the Counter-Reformation. The *Della institution delle donne* by Dolce (published for the first time in 1545 and edited four times within the 1500s) is an exemplary case.¹⁵⁸ Though written in dialogue form, it functions more as a manual that addresses how women should operate within the highly circumscribed triad of possible lifestyles: maiden, wife, or widow. Dolce attacks the impractical model of the intellectual Renaissance woman constructed in the early 1500s as detrimental to the true value a woman has to offer—that of *il governo della casa*, a most-esteemed duty by his accounts but one that has fallen into disuse by the new female image. His discourse aims at reinstating the perfect Christian woman, shunning and condemning the laic model of woman proffered in earlier decades.¹⁵⁹

To be a feminist writing in the latter half of the century, then, is a rather complex issue. The wave of feminism forcefully felt in the first half of the 16th century lost much of its might but it was impossible for it to dissipate completely, and Fonte seems to be a reflection of the elements of feminism that survived into the second half of the century as well as the elements representative of this shift. Naturally it is impossible to know how her work would have differed if written in the late 1520s, but her work is very much a product of its environment in that it upholds many of the progressive feminist proposed in the first half of the century while still surprisingly adhering to the patriarchal framework reinforced by the Counter-Reformation.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 162-174.

¹⁵⁹ For further information on the formation of the laic/religious woman, see Fiorenza Taricone and Susanna Bucci, *La condizione della donna nel XVII e XVIII secolo* (Rome: Carucci, 1983), 23-71.

Fonte is, in a sense, a reluctant feminist. It may seem almost oxymoronic in meaning, but a clear sense is understood when considered in direct connection with her dialogue, *Il merito delle donne*. The dialogue takes place over the course of two days at the house of Leonora, a young, recently widowed woman who vows never to remarry. The purpose of their convening is to celebrate the return of Elena, who is recently married and whom they have not seen since the wedding. Quite naturally, the discussion turns to the topic of marriage. The seven noble women, all of different age and marital status, decide to debate the topic, dividing the women into pro- and con- groups with Adriana, the matriarch of the group, presiding. The opponents of men are Cornelia, a married woman with a dismal view on married life; Corinna, who forsakes marriage in pursuit of literary endeavors; and Leonora. The other contingency is made up of Elena, still reeling in the happiness of her recent marriage; Virginia, a young, naïve maiden; and Lucrezia, an unhappily married older woman who nevertheless lends some support to her younger companions. It is clearly a feminist piece but there are notable moments throughout the text that indicate Fonte's position as a feminist is not unprovoked, but rather one she assumes as a defense tactic, left with little or no other options given the inundating misogyny which characterized contemporary society. She has chosen to fight because she has been attacked, in turn making her feminism reactionary.

And though her dialogue is an exemplary piece of feminist literature in the *Cinquecento*, *Il merito delle donne* nevertheless displays her tendency to tread between feminist and anti-feminist ideology. She vacillates between more extreme ideas like a world without men (reinforced by the absolute absence of men in her dialogue, creating a utopic *respublica mulierum*¹⁶⁰) and supplications to men to love them, promising men they wish only to love and

¹⁶⁰ To the best of my knowledge the concept is first introduced by Laura Cereta in her letter to Bibolo Semproni in *Collected Letters*, 74-80.

serve them in return (exemplified by Leonora's direct address to men in the *Giornata Seconda*). Her aim is indubitably to promote philogynist values, but not in a way that would bring veritable change to the female condition in Renaissance Italy. Her philogynist values are suited for a male-dominated society, meaning the profeminist notions she advances would doubtlessly ameliorate the female existence in terms of relations with men, but without effecting official change in the social, political, religious or legal realms. In short, she does not push for institutionalized reform.

Fonte's position as a feminist writer is incontestable, however. She is doubtlessly one of the strongest examples of feminism literary history has for the time period in which she lived. My research seeks to delineate a clear understanding of Fonte's natural gravitation toward traditional patristic standards even whilst attempting to improve the female situation within the preexisting patriarchal framework, providing in the process a lucid insight into the lives of women in the early modern period. Thus, assessing her in accordance to the socio-historical context of her time, Fonte's feminism is appropriate given its realistic approach towards possible ameliorations within her contemporary environment, instead of seeking an impossible ideal. She aims for smaller feminist victories rather than an overthrow of the patriarchal hierarchy and her writing reflects this. Fonte understands her audience and knows who her detractors are, which enables her to construct her argument in a way that will successfully penetrate the dominant misogynist literary milieu. She at times presents her thoughts in a male-friendly terminology which permits her to bring to the forefront feminist issues that would have otherwise been discarded if they appeared without some misogynist concession. Other times she is bolder in her approach, but even then this occurs usually after the misogynist concession has been made. Thus, her moderate approach is arguably one of the more effective approaches for instilling feminist values in a society that was decidedly anti-feminist.

There is ample evidence of this tempered feminism found within her dialogue, but the following reasons are the strongest indicators of her moderate feminist stance:¹⁶¹ 1) her adherence to a traditional female image; 2) the tone of the female interlocutors; 3) the shift in attitude from the first day of dialogue to the second day.

From the outset, Fonte provides readers with an imagery that subscribes to conventional ideals of the female identity. She opens her work with a panegyric to Venice—a panegyric whose lavish, descriptive language serves primarily to display her credibility as a writer and follows the stylistic trend of dialogic incipits. Indeed, praise of one's city, especially by Venetian writers whose pride abounded for their wealthy, international, cosmopolitan homeland, was a common practice for Renaissance writers.¹⁶² And even though Venice is almost always characterized as female in these encomia, Fonte's interpretation of her city pushes the symbolism even further by identifying Venice not only as female, but on some level as a female whose merits are often times neglected. This association recalls the women of whom she speaks in her dialogue; women who have been mistreated by men. She makes a correlation between merchants who exhaust Venice's assets without recognizing their good fortune in having the advantages of living in such an illustrious city and men who rely on women for so much of their livelihood without fully recognizing the values a woman offers. Venice, like women, is the sturdy foundation needed for productivity despite the fact that its essential role is often

¹⁶¹ Taxonomically distinguishing the various types of feminism prevalent in the early modern period is admittedly difficult to do without falling victim to biases of modern day considerations, but even a comparison with her predecessors (Christine de Pizan) and near contemporaries (Angela Tarabotti) posits Fonte as maintaining a more moderate approach to feminism.

¹⁶² See Laura Megna, "Comportamenti abitativi del patriciato veneziano (1582-1640)" *Studi Veneziani*, n.s. 23 (1991): 253-323; and Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

overlooked. Thus, while many Venetian writers praise Venice to bring glory to their city, Fonte praises her city with the ultimate purpose of praising women indirectly.

The descriptive language she uses is maternal and unifies the attributes that women provide their families with the attributes Venice provides its citizens:

Il mare l'è via publica e aperta campagna, per mezzo del quale vengono e vanno tutti gli trafichi e mercanzie, che da varie parti in essa si partono; l'è diligentissimo tributario e somministratore di quanto fa bisogno per il nutrimento e sostegno di tanta patria.¹⁶³

Fonte limns Venice as a provisional mother of its citizens, giving them life and sustenance through her natural endowments. Already she is positing Venice and its sea as the life-giving source responsible for the greatness of the city, with life-giving being understood as a uniquely feminine ability. Indeed, the connection between women's role in reproduction and Venice's role in the city's economic success is rooted in the imagery of both figures being the carrier, the nurturer, and a space in which development and care must be observed before the dependent can depart for its own success.

Immediately after, she shifts the imagery slightly to highlight the similarities between the esteemed city and women by comparing them in more blatant economical terms:

Percioché (oltra la infinita copia de' pesci, che di giorno in giorno egli le porge) non producendo ella in sé cosa alcuna, dal continuo concorso dei navili, che con ogni sorte di provesion opportuna, per via di esso quivi concorrono, è provedata abundantissimamente di tutte le cose necessarie al vivere umano.¹⁶⁴

Here Fonte's words are reminiscent of traditional misogynist arguments that at once recognize the special function of women in creation and yet simultaneously devalue it. Fonte does this by first denoting the economical essentialness of Venice's sea, though follows it directly with the

¹⁶³ Moderata Fonte, *Il merito delle donne. Ove chiaramente si scuopre quanto siano elle degne e più perfette de gli uomini*, ed. Adriana Chemello (Venezia: Eidos, 1988), 13.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

suggestion that it may not have been seen as a viable economical contender in and of itself (“*non producendo ella in sé cosa alcuna..*”), but rather in relation to the economic success of the merchants who appropriated it. After this admission, however, Fonte then seeks to reaffirm the sea’s role as the most crucial source for Venetian productivity. She moves therefore from a feminist proposition (the Venetian sea as mother of productivity), to downgrading its role (not producing anything itself), and then returns to empowering feminist notions (abundant provisionary for all living things). In this way, she refocuses attention on its vitality independent of its users to highlight its individual merits yet at the same time links it to them to underscore their dependence on it. She emphasizes the power relation being in favor of the sea, with men being indebted to its generous provisions, and the thought carries obvious inferences to male/female relations, with men being indebted to women’s provisional role.

Furthermore, the line “*non producendo ella in sé cosa alcuna...*” implies not just connotations directly linked to women’s general economic role in Renaissance society but also in terms of her role in familial structures. The description acutely reflects attitudes regarding wives’ and daughters’ role in the family economical hierarchy. Parents (*both* mothers and fathers) were more welcoming of a son than a daughter given the financial burden (in the form of a dowry) they were legally bound to provide her at the time of her marriage or entrance into a convent. Venice in particular experienced a crisis with inflation causing great panic in patrician families who found themselves responsible for soaring dowry expectations. In the middle of the 14th century, an average dowry was estimated at 650 ducats; by the early 1500’s the dowry had inflated so much so that the Venetian Senate passed a law capping it at 3,000 ducats (though enforcement of this restraint law is sketchy).¹⁶⁵ Though in theory the dowry was considered a

¹⁶⁵ See Chojnacki’s *Women and Men in Renaissance Venice: Twelve Essays on Patrician Society* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), particularly pages 132-152.

daughter's right to a (presumably equal) portion of the patrimony, the fact that it was gifted in a large, lump sum at the time of marriage tended to alarm parents' financial security. However, the financial backing parents provided for their sons was often times a more costly expenditure but usually felt less detrimental because it was incurred on a more gradual basis—expensing academic pursuits, travel, business undertakings, leisure, etc. since birth. Hence, despite the reality that sons could easily cost more in the long run, short-sighted families considered daughters to be more damaging to the accrual of kin wealth due to the sudden shock of parting with the large sum the dowry required.

A daughter was considered burdensome because she failed to balance out the monetary efflux of the dowry by not being able to produce any financial gain for the family. She symbolized a departure of the family's wealth and/or property whereas a son, through marriage and acquisition of a bride, symbolized an aggrandizement of the family's wealth. The limited ways in which a female could be productive (i.e. primarily domestic labor) were usually discounted as an invaluable contribution and even for those women who performed the same duties as men, their work was consistently judged to be worth far less.¹⁶⁶ In essence, she was considered a financial loss for the family.

Though Fonte's description of Venice's sea and the corollary with female productivity is initially depreciative, her overall scope is to reposition these popular misogynist thoughts by arguing that the sea and women are the stability and driving vehicles for the city's/family's success. She—the sea/woman—is herself somewhat immobile but is the platform that allows for the mobility and success of men who have appropriated her. Fonte thus ends on a positive

¹⁶⁶ Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 18.

rebuilding of the feminine role in economic success: women care for and maintain the household (and the goods accrued by their husbands), which is essential to the preservation and growth of family wealth.¹⁶⁷ Women, as guards of their family's property in the private sphere, relieve men of this duty and enable them to produce and gather more in the public sphere. Fonte credits the female contribution by denoting the inability of men to be productive without female efforts, just as Venice's merchants would be incapacitated without the support of the sea.

Besides the metaphoric use of the Venetian sea depicting women as passive yet ultimately fundamental for economic stability, the beginning of her dialogue also takes a moment to define women in very traditional terms in an even more straightforward manner. In praising Venice's citizens, she attributes conventional characteristics to both men and women:

Qui a gara i più scelti ingegni in tutte le arti e professioni convengono, tutte le virtù regnano, le delizie e piaceri si gustano, i vizi si estirpano e vi fioriscono tutti i buoni costumi. Negli uomini il valor, senno e cortesia è notevole; la bellezza, accortezza e castità è riguardevole nelle donne...¹⁶⁸

Of the three characteristics Fonte chooses to boast Venetian women, two of them—beauty (*la bellezza*) and chastity (*la castità*)—are undeniably the most important qualities promoted by humanist male (misogynist) writers.¹⁶⁹

Yet the arbitrary nature of these qualities could potentially prove very harmful to the social reputation of a woman, in most cases for reasons beyond her control. Firstly, the question of beauty is a subjective one. Nature is the determinant factor of a woman's aesthetic status, leaving her only artificial means to enhance anything she is deprived of naturally. The obvious

¹⁶⁷ In a somewhat polemical display of feminism, Capra lauds women as being excellent preservers of familial wealth accumulated by their husbands. See his *Della eccellenza*, 76; also Benson, *The Invention*, 66-73.

¹⁶⁸ Fonte, *Il merito*, 14.

¹⁶⁹ See Firenzuola (1552), Guazzo (1574), Dolce (1547), Luis Vives's *De institutione feminae Christianae. The Education of a Christian Woman: A Sixteenth-Century Manual*, ed. and trans. Charles Fantazzi (Chicago: Chicago University, 2000); and for commentary see Chapter Three of Kelso's *Doctrine For the Lady*.

point to be made here is that the inflation of beauty detracts from an emphasis on intellectual merits (though Fonte does list *accortezza*, or intelligence, as another quality of Venetian women). But the subordination of intelligence to beauty trickles into other damaging effects for women: most importantly a disregard for educating females, subsequently maintaining them in an inferior position. Beauty, then, becomes a rather ambiguous quality to praise for it seems to entail certain implications that align themselves more with oppressive results for women. Beauty leads to admiration, which can be considered its positive aspect, but it is also an objectification and a reaffirmation of woman's only value as a carnal one.

In an historical period inflamed by the debates of the *querelle des femmes*, however, it is once again significant that Fonte repeatedly grounds herself in arguments that can simultaneously please the overwhelming majority of her readers who lean towards antifeminism yet she herself simultaneously pushes forward to insert feminist ideology (for instance the inclusion of *accortezza*). It is, ironically, her footing in the misogynist realm that enables her to take a step forward toward successfully including philogynist notions. It provides her the stability needed in an already well established context that, once she has garnered some credibility in that realm via her misogynist concessions, allows her then to reformulate popular thought by gently including pro-feminine messages; for if she had written her dialogue as a vehement attack on men using only radically feminist language, it would doubtlessly have had a more controversial reception and perhaps alienated many readers, resulting in her overall feminist message falling on deaf ears.

As highly valued as beauty is in a woman, it is still a far second to the worth of chastity. Indeed, it is doubtlessly the most important quality for a woman to possess and is symbolic of any economic power she might have, in terms of value she can bring to her kin through

competing advantageously in the marriage market. If a maiden loses her chastity, she has nothing even despite her other virtues¹⁷⁰; she is marginalized from society and likely doomed to a meager existence since she has now lost her most attractive quality for enticing a potential husband. The loss of purity was considered so egregious that the maiden's death (executed by her family in many cases) as a means of restoring honor to the family name was not viewed as an unthinkable course of action in punishing her. Even more important to remember, however, is that the preeminence of chastity was not upheld solely by misogynist (or simply male) writers, but by the larger society as well. Many of the early feminists—Christine de Pisan, Laura Cereta, Lucrezia Marinella, and of course Moderata Fonte herself—sustained the supremacy of purity in their writings by often excluding impure women from their *encomia mulierum*, citing they no longer even considered those persons to be real women.¹⁷¹ To reiterate, Fonte's selecting both beauty and chastity as two of the most praiseworthy virtues to be lauded in Venice's female population demonstrates how ensconced her views are in contemporary ideology, which is clearly misogynist in nature.

Let us turn now to a broader consideration of Fonte's representation of women in *Il merito delle donne*. She maintains a rather black and white representation of women and men, consistently conveying women as the perpetual victims and men as the cruel abusers. For Fonte, women can do no wrong and she thus struggles to understand the motivation behind men's contempt when they have done nothing but act as bastions of love and support for their men (whether in the role of mother¹⁷² or as wife¹⁷³).

¹⁷⁰ "Chi si lascia di suo honor privare, ne donna è piu, ne viva." Dolce, *Dialogo della institution delle donne*, 23-4.

¹⁷¹ See the introductory chapter, p. 21.

¹⁷² Fonte, *Il merito*, 30.

To further emphasize the innocence of females, she depicts them as infallible beings playing no active part in warranting the disdain of men. The term infallible, however, is not to be understood as denying the existence of flawed women, but rather Fonte refigures any flaws in women to be the responsibility of men; any imperfection in a woman is traceable to man, planted and cultivated by him. The female then is unburdened of accountability for her actions since her male counterpart (father, brother, or husband) is responsible for her and therefore ultimately responsible for her doings. Cornelia illuminates her listeners on the topic:

...io oso affermare, che se gli uomini fussero buoni, non vi sarebbe alcuna donna cattiva; che se ve n'è alcuna, è per cagion del marito, che non sa governarla; e quello che ella ha in sé di cattivo, non è suo proprio, ma perché l'è avvenuto di partecipar troppo della natura del padre, al che il savio e buon marito, se tal si trovasse, dovrebbe provvedere sopportandola e facendole cangiar quel poco di mala disposizione in buona con buone parole e miglior fatti.¹⁷⁴

Cornelia admits rather reluctantly the presence of wayward women but then disavows them of any culpability by reasserting men as the source for their improprieties. Cornelia is by far the most outspoken, vehement feminist of the group and she more than any other interlocutor insists on the infallibility of women.

With this writing strategy, Fonte adopts a conventional technique of selectively choosing points that will strengthen her feminist agenda from the larger *querelle des femmes* debate while concomitantly discarding those that would damage her argument, even at the risk of seeming contradictory. The contradiction presents itself when contrasting the frequent lamentations over men's restricting women's every move ("*...siamo lor schiave e non possiamo far un passo senza domandar lor licenzia; né diciamo una parola, che non vi faccino mille commenti.*"¹⁷⁵) and then changing attitude by retreating from criticism of female misbehavior by diverting the blame to

¹⁷³ Ibid., 61.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 37.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 27.

men. Essentially, in one moment independence is being clamored for and in another moment, when it is less convenient, the female interlocutors (led by Cornelia) reject accountability for their actions by claiming men to be ultimately responsible for them. Women can in one moment complain about men's absolute control over them and in the next moment use it to their advantage to deflect any responsibility for their misgivings.

Though there is indeed a legitimate paradox here, upon further consideration, and with sensitivity to the socio-historical context, the paradox seems less cogent. The best way to approach Fonte's argument is to analyze the two points as mutually exclusive arguments rather than attempting to gather a unified sense in treating it as one argument. Understanding Fonte in this manner is critical to deciphering between where her pioneering for a reformed dynamic between the sexes stops and where criticism of current, real life matters begins. For they are two separate species, with one reflecting a desired state and one being the actual state of things. In the instance of lamenting over men's controlling female comportment, though her criticisms are of contemporary social mores, the underlying message of her lament is a longing for an ameliorated relationship between men and women. The criticism is based in reality but with the conclusion of seeking a new reality, still unrealized.

The very fact that this improved relationship between the sexes exists only as an idealized state and not as reality is what allows Fonte to then blame men for women's faults. Fonte prefers the situation to be one way (parity or at least mutual respect) but since it is not, and since it is not so because man has not made it so, she does not hesitate then to give them blame in a construct that they themselves have masterminded.

Let us now turn to a brief analysis of Fonte's use of tone and its role in her representation of women in the dialogue. The pervading tone of the dialogue is a highly emotive one (though

softened with frequent humorous interjections), surging especially when speaking on men's ill treatment of women. The tone is an important point to reflect upon because in the case of Fonte, the emotional nature driving it is often characteristic of feminine writing (as is the case with other writers like Cereta and Tarabotti). The tone is intimate and personal, making the dialogue at times read like an entry into a diary and giving the reader the feeling of entering into a place that is sensitive and confidential.¹⁷⁶

Indeed, one of the details that sets Fonte's dialogue apart from other dialogic archetypes (such as Castiglione's *Il cortegiano*) is that her interlocutors speak from their own personal experience rather than bringing up general topics of conversation and offering their opinions on that topic. The women instead openly share with one another their pains, wounds, frustrations and continual trials; the palpability of their speech is in effect heightened because of its rooting in first-hand experience. At the very incipit of the dialogue, Elena, a newlywed, shares some concerns that have already arisen in her short-lived marriage:

Ben mi dubito...che il mio sposo abbia da esser uno di questi così gelosi e buccini, perché già comincia e me ne incresece molto...¹⁷⁷

Cornelia responds to Elena's worry by telling her to pray that a jealous husband is the worst she has to fear given how exponentially worse a husband could be. For instance, she could be dealing with a far worse scenario, like the numerous cases of unfortunate wives whose husbands habitually stray, and to intensify the insult even more they stray with women of dishonest repute.

¹⁷⁶ Interpreting Fonte's own investment in the issues she addresses and how much she speaks from personal experience is a perplexing matter. As an upper class female, she endured conventional anti-female prejudices she wails against in *Il merito*, such as living virtually in seclusion (Fonte's own seclusion is sustained by the account of an admirer, Francesco Sansovino, who penned *Delle cose notabili della città di Venetia* in 1587, who writes of her: "Moderata Fonte is a young girl, a respectable cittadina of this city, extremely learned in all disciplines, as far as one can gather (for to tell the truth, no one can actually claim to have seen her in person," Cox's introduction to *The Worth of Women*, 4, fn4.) but enjoyed a husband, Filippo de' Zorzi, who appears to have demonstrated great respect for her as is evidenced by his encouraging her literary pursuits and by returning her dowry to her shortly after they were married; see Cox, *The Worth*, 37, fn19.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

Cornelia speaks of the pain these cheating husbands cause their wives, often times producing illegitimate children and expecting the wife to raise the child as if it were her own.

This new direction of the argument spurs Adriana, the eldest of the group, to share her experience of a disloyal husband:

Tale appunto fu il mio primo marito, figliuola mia...che io essendo giovinetta e tenuta delle belle di questa città, egli mostrandosi di me svogliato, in capo di due anni s'accese in guisa d'una meretrice, la qual era di assai tempo e poco sana...¹⁷⁸

The juxtaposition of Elena's and Adriana's comments represents Fonte's admonition to her young, female readers that even if a man seems decent initially, he will always fail her through some illicit behavior or activity (whether cheating, gambling, or any other abuse where the wife is the primary sufferer of the consequence). Elena, a naïve newlywed, represents the hopefulness of young women who are just entering into the phase of life (matrimony) where they will be able to gain a discernible experience of men and will be able to finally distinguish for themselves how practice holds against theory; for thus far they have only heard about men and marriage, but will now be able to judge for themselves how the hearsay holds up against their own experience. Adriana, as the eldest of the group, represents the other end of the spectrum—a seasoned woman who has accumulated much experience with regard to men and male/female relations. Though what is interesting about Adriana is that despite her role as the matriarch of the group, she simultaneously represents Elena (or the wide-eyed newlywed) at the same time; at one point in time she too was in the same position Elena finds herself in presently. Adriana's story of her having been reputed one of the most beautiful maidens in her town and yet her husband still betraying her shortly after their marriage is supposed to represent the progression of married life. Elena marks the initial phase where happiness is the most reigning sentiment, but already there has arisen some problem that gives reason for dismay and worry. Adriana represents the end of

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 35.

the line, where she can attest to its end result being nothing but pain for the wife while her story is given even more credit because she can reflect back to that time where she too was in Elena's position—a young, beautiful newlywed presumably optimistic about her new life. Adriana thus serves as a gloomy foreshadowing of what kind of life Elena can expect—one afflicted by a treacherous husband.

This excerpt of the dialogue is also exemplary of Fonte's style of interweaving personal testimony with more objective observation. The sequence begins with Elena's complaint about her jealous husband, then is interjected by Cornelia's general observations on how much worse a husband could be, and then moves to Adriana's confession of the wayward ways of her first husband. The trajectory is thus from personal to impersonal and then back to personal. The shifting of the discourse between these two realms has significant effects in that the personal validates the impersonal; it serves as the specific proof of the more general assumption (in this case of men being unfaithful) and lends strength to Fonte's anti-men/anti-marriage argument because the women themselves have witnessed the damages rendered by men. The elder, more experienced women of the group can bare their scars in a moment of confidence to forewarn their younger companions of the dangers against which they need to be cautious or avoid altogether, if possible. The personal component of the dialogue, with all its connotations of intimacy, trust and confidence, is also what reinforces the notion of friendship amongst the ladies, a concept that Fonte aims to reassert continually throughout her work.

The intimacy of the tone is further emphasized by the way in which Fonte has presented the dialogue. She describes the scene of the women at the incipit of the *Prima Giornata*:

In questa dunque veramente città divina, . . . si trovano alcune nobili e valorose donne di età e stato differenti, ma di sangue e costumi conformi, gentili, virtuose e di elevato ingegno, le quali, . . . spesse volte si pigliavano il tempo e l'occasione di trovarsi insieme in una domestica conversazione; e senza aver rispetto

di uomini che le notassero, o l'impedissero, tra esse ragionavano di quelle cose che più loro a gusto venivano...¹⁷⁹

The Boccaccian influence is easily noted here in Fonte's creation of a *locus amoenus* serving as a type of refuge—a safe, pleasant place that is seemingly detached from reality and therefore allows its temporary inhabitants to conduct themselves as they wish with little or no regard for the expectations of the outside world. Yet, this is not a refuge from a plague ridden Florence where a youthful group of three males and seven females seek to forget the pains of their time and entertain themselves through story telling, as is the case in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. In *Il merito delle donne*, the refuge is from men themselves (“...*senza aver rispetto di uomini che le notassero, o l'impedissero*”). The mathematical evidence is there as well, when noting that Fonte too has chosen to include seven female interlocutors, but has completely eliminated men from the equation. With Boccaccio it is seven women to three men, justified also in part by the young ladies' need to be accompanied by men into the countryside where their story telling takes place; while Fonte's absence of men implies not only that women do not need to depend on men for assistance for their discourse but contrarily that men would negatively alter the discourse, their presence making women become reticent and preventing them from speaking openly.

The gathering is a celebration of female friendship wherein they are free to speak about whatever topic they so choose and entertain themselves however they see fit, whether through music, poetry, conversation, etc. Though Fonte is describing a festive scene, there is a subservient undertone to her description since a gathering of seven noble women who spend two days in free discourse was a very unlikely event and was furthermore discouraged since female conversation was perceived more often than not as idle gossiping. Furthermore, a diphonic (rather than a polyphonic) conversation was a more realistic possibility and even then occurred

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.,14.

more commonly between two relatives rather than two friends since friendly gatherings required more socio-spatial freedom than women were typically granted.¹⁸⁰ The basic set up of Fonte's dialogue, therefore, is already a fairly radical event; even though its full force may not be immediately apparent to many readers, the creation of an all-female dialogic interaction lasting two days is a great push in the direction of female empowerment.

The subtle rebelliousness of Fonte's scene continues when she reports the women speaking and doing as they wish, specifically in the forms of playing music and reciting poetry. Both activities were identified as not particularly appropriate feminine endeavors, though for different reasons. Music was believed to lead to lascivious thinking, given its sensual stimulation. Fonte's mention of creating music could possibly be an attempt at restoring value to a skill that was considered ambiguous for females to practice. Poetry, as well, was a male dominated practice but Fonte's inclusion of poetically inclined women is a redress aimed at overturning popular notion that women are unfit for and unable to excel in intellectual pursuits (though this was presumably easier to do given the acclaim of earlier *poetesse* like Vittoria Colonna, Laura Battiferra, etc. who legitimated women's ability in poetic composition). The women, then, partake in two activities that were distinctly categorized as not wholly appropriate for women; but Fonte has sought to create a safe environment, free of men, where they are unrestrained by the illogical categorizations (male) society has placed on them and can pursue any activity, discourse, or behavior to which they feel so inclined. Furthermore, despite the work being a fictional dialogue, it nevertheless conveys the idea of women being capable and even excelling (for Corinna's recitations of her poetry win her many accolades from her listeners) when they are allowed the chance to participate. The ambiance Fonte has created is one that

¹⁸⁰ Janet Levarie Smarr *Joining the Conversation: Dialogues by Renaissance Women* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 2.

grants access to her (male) readers; access to a world—the *respublica mulierum*—that is unknown to them for their very presence would extinguish its existence.

To illumine the idea of tone being an indicator of Fonte's tempered feminism, a brief analysis of the genderizing of tone is in order, for tone is one of the literary constructs that most potently controls the mood of the dialogue and is therefore a useful tool in interpreting the author's viewpoint. The difference in tone between a male author who writes disparagingly about women and a female author who writes disparagingly about men is where the gendered difference is most poignantly felt: the female tone is intimate, vulnerable and reflects a personal relationship to the argument at hand whereas the male tone is detached, observant from the outside, and maintains a certain formality by opting to offer general opinion over personal experience. Fonte's feminine tone reflects a deep sense of hurt and offense when speaking about the evils and deceits men have subjected them to, whilst men's disparaging words towards women are characterized by disgust, incomprehension, and an overall abhorrence to women as a result of being unable to understand them (Della Casa in *An uxor*, for example, and Boccaccio in his *Corbaccio*).

In the *Giornata Prima*, the discussion turns to the damages women have suffered at men's hands and how as a result they have adopted the stance that nearly every man is a potential enemy driven by dubious intentions. Cornelia enlightens her listeners of the wiles of older lovers, whose maturity has not led them to love more genuinely but rather to deceive more effectively:

...apunto da questi più savi,...ci bisogna guardar la nostra semplicità ed anzi a questi, che vi fanno il morto inanzi per amor vostro, con occhi pietosi e con parole lusinghevoli, non gli credete punto. Imaginatevi pure che essi sono come l'orologio falso, che segna ventidue ore, benché non siano a pena le quatordecì. Questi tali non accettano mai alcuna nel loro ingrato cuore, ma fingendo con cadauna d'esserle suo soggetto ed amarla svisceratamente, in un medesimo tempo pongono insidie a quante ne veggiono, tutte tentano, tutte

ingannano, a tutte dicono le istesse parole e tendono le medesime reti; tutte fanno per loro, pur che possano averne alcuna in lor balia.¹⁸¹

Cornelia's words convey not only the hurt women feel once they recognize they have been deceived, but an additional element of humiliation as well when they realize they are but one of many; the man they have chosen to let into their hearts has been practicing his same wily ways on multiple women, revealing his brutishness and lack of regard for her sentiments.

Cornelia continues her warning by presenting the wretched state in which a gullible maiden is likely to find herself in if she relents to a flattering lover:

...qual volta lor [gli uomini] vien fatto di acquistar ciò che bramano, ottenuta la vittoria con ingannar qualche povera giovane, subito la sprezzano ed abbandonano e per non averle obligo alcuno d'amarla, si fanno anco ragione con finger di non creder che la tale abbia lor concesso alcun favore, vinta da grande amore che gli porti, ma così per capriccio e per sfrenatezza. E allora la misera, che per la soverchia affezione si averà lasciato trasportar in qualche errore, pensando esserne a doppio amata, subito si avvede di aver colto la serpe insieme co i fiori e che ha perduto ogni sua industria insieme co'l disleale amante.¹⁸²

The pain and resentment of being deceived by a false lover are intensified by the fact that the lover (and perhaps then society) does not recognize the girl's love but rather classifies her as a dishonest, whimsical youth.

Cornelia's comments also represent the importance of female companionship and reliability—two of the backbones of the *respublica mulierum*. For it can be assumed as quite possible that women learn about men's artifice through sharing their own experiences and commiserating upon them, which, of course, is what the ladies are presently doing. The falseness of a lover is clearly seen when an acquaintance can testify that the beguiling lover used the same tricks on her. Thus, women form a dependence on their peers in which they expect a certain system of checks and balances to help each other maintain both their reputations and their hearts.

¹⁸¹ Fonte, *Il merito*, 40.

¹⁸² Ibid.

Another point to be made on this subject is that though in this particular example (Cornelia's admonishment) she does not state that she is speaking from personal experience, Fonte's earlier implementation of switching between conversation based on personal experience and that based on general observation gives the overall dialogue a very personal feel. Because the women have openly confessed their trials and tribulations with regard to men, a formality has been lifted and the conversation has transgressed certain bounds of privacy that in other (more formal) situations would normally apply. Therefore, even though Cornelia is speaking generally, the tone has already been set as a very intimate one which encourages the reader to assume that even in generalized discourse, the dialogue that is being proffered stems from personal experience.

I would like to now examine the tone in *Giornata Seconda* because there is a distinct shift that further strengthens my argument of Fonte's moderate feminism. While the *Giornata Prima* is characterized by a more staunch anti-male stance, the second day of dialogue displays the women showing more vulnerability when their talk turns to questioning why men refuse to love them the way they love men. Leonora reflects upon this dysfunctional component of male/female relations:

Se...è vero...che essi abbino bisogno del nostro aiuto, essendo noi in ogni qualità e sostanza simili a loro, adunque sono essi inferiori a noi e ci dovriano cedere; ma non niego che non doviamo governar loro per amor, essendo essi una carne stessa con noi, ma mi doglio e lamento che essi così per amor non vogliano scambievolmente aiutar, favorir e governar noi e non ci tengono in quel conto che dovriano tenerci; e pur come ho detto, tutte le altre creature ci riconoscono tanto per patrone, quanto essi, se non più.¹⁸³

The interlocutors, here represented by Leonora, speak of viewing themselves as men's equals and seeking the rightful parity that follows. This not being possible, the women are left to fight men in the same manner men have attacked women—through derogatory language which aims to lessen their value at least to a point where men will either be able to a) recognize their faults

¹⁸³ Ibid.,114.

and/or b) appreciate women more. The interesting point to note about the male/female dynamic is that it seems to operate on an inverse scale: in order for female worth to increase, male worth has to be diminished and if the goal is reversed then so is the process. This is, in part, how misogyny came to rule, as a continual reaffirmation of female inferiority concomitantly juxtaposed with male superiority. More on this point shortly, in the On Marriage section.

Let us now return to a final thought on the change in tone from the first to the second day. The women complete the first day of discourse having delineated the wickedness of men and the atrocious way they behave both individually and in relation to women. The second day, however, is characterized by a more inquisitive tone in which the women ponder over why it is men treat women as they do; for the female speakers it is inconceivable how men could treat women—so good and pure by nature—so wrongfully. Since there is no reciprocated love or respect, however, the women are left with no choice but to verbally attack men the same way men have attacked them. Again, the women are reluctant to battle, but feel justified in doing so because men have initiated the controversy, as Leonora attests:

...in prima essi ci hanno offeso che noi si siamo lamentate, prima hanno detto mal di noi, che noi diciamo mal di loro.¹⁸⁴

Despite the childish nature of the “they started it” comment, it reflects their feeling forced to take up arms against men; to protect themselves against men’s verbal assaults by slinging their own back at men.

The fact that the interlocutors speak openly about their pain and frustration in not comprehending misogynistic behavior has an affect on the interpretation of the discourse of the first day. Essentially, it results in making what was said in *Giornata Prima* assume a more vengeful connotation, for in day two the women express their anguish and incomprehension of

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 140.

being mistreated which have been the catalysts for the anger they express in *Giornata Prima*.

The movement from day one to day two is reminiscent of a psychological diagnosis in which the problem (and the emotions involved—anger, sorrow, betrayal) are manifested in the first phase (day one); while day two is dedicated to a deeper investigation of why the problem exists in the first place. Though the women are unable to reach any sustainable conclusion for misogynistic practices, they in the process begin a discourse on nature and other oppositional pairings found in nature, seeking to draw conclusions from these examples and apply them to their own lives. The resulting conclusions will have a dramatic impact on the overall denouement of the work, as we will explore shortly in the next section.

CHAPTER 2.2:

Moderata Fonte: On Marriage

The discourse on marriage is inherently a discourse on relations between men and women. As a fundamental part of the battle of the sexes debate, the advantages and disadvantages of marriage were considered from both male and female perspectives, with both female detractors and defenders publishing on the subject. Fonte's dialogue, however, is one of very few examples of a female-authored work written in this time period dealing directly with the topic of marriage, though her titular choice—*Il merito delle donne*—eschews spotlighting matrimony and instead places focus specifically on the individual worth of women, emphasizing her feminist agenda.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ Adriana Chemello suggests the use of “merito” in the title as opposed to “nobiltà” reflects the shift the latter term underwent in the 16th century: in the early part of the century the “nobiltà delle donne” was treated as a respectable literary *topos*, but the end of the century saw a resurgence of misogyny and a correlative depreciation of

Fonte puts forth her anti-marriage message unabashedly, taking measures to outline the drudgery of married life, the imprisonment and suffering at the hands of a cruel husband a wife is almost sure to encounter. The promotion of a life without men—a type of *locus amoenus* again textually reinforced by the absence of men in the dialogue—continually resurfaces as the ideal lifestyle for a profeminist woman in early modern Italy. However, there is a disconcerting shift in tone and attitude from the first day to the second day, with many critics noting great changes between the two.¹⁸⁶ The end of the dialogue endures a turn of events that would seem to counteract the propaganda laid out during the entirety of the dialogue, as Fonte abandons the vigor characteristic of the majority of the text and instead passively concludes in the final pages that women must acquiesce to their lot in life—that of an obedient wife.¹⁸⁷

The most fascinating part of Fonte's argumentative tactic, however, is that she uses the same ideology to first justify her criticisms of men and marriage and then uses it again at the end of the dialogue to justify her conclusion of marriage being a necessary evil for women. They are undoubtedly paradoxical messages, the first being anti-marriage and the second encouraging marital union, and yet she manages to justify them both with the same reasoning. She employs the concept of inversion—placing men and women at opposite poles of extremes—to first warrant her claims of men and women being too different to function well in marriage; but she then seems to undo all of her anti-marriage reasoning by conceding marriage as the only viable path for a woman's life in early modern Italy. The disparities between men and women, she argues, like many opposing dichotomies found in nature, are simply to be accepted as is. Having

the term, rendering the use of it almost tongue-in-cheek by that point. Her point may hold true in the case of Moderata Fonte, but finds friction with the case of Lucrezia Marinella's *La nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne*, published in the same year as Fonte's work, 1600.

¹⁸⁶ See Cox, *The Worth*, 9-12; Kolsky, *the italianist*, 81-86.

¹⁸⁷ Fonte, *Il merito*, 170-172.

spent the better part of the dialogue defiling men and marriage based on their incompatibility with women's desires, she then ends it by demonstrating that this inverse nature between the sexes is a naturally occurring phenomenon and, being irremediable, marriage should simply be undertaken as a duty, despite its almost guaranteed bleak outcome. The theme of opposites, as we shall see, is heavily germane to Fonte's work, from the use of what I term the exceptional man theory to the concept of inversion being utilized as dominant ideologies. Before delving more heavily into these points, a few words on the general overview of marriage in *Il merito delle donne* is appropriate.

The bleakness of marriage is, again, elaborated upon throughout the majority of the dialogue. Fonte argues there being no positive advantage for women, only an accumulation of more heartache and travail than she already has without a husband in her life. Towards the end of the first day, Corinna provides a synopsis of the additional burdens a woman can expect upon entering into marriage:

...la donna pigliando marito entra in spese in figliuoli e in fastidi e ha più bisogno di trovar robba che di darla; poiché stando sola senza marito, con la sua dote può viver da regina secondo la sua condizione. Ma pigliando marito e per aventura povero, come spesso accade, che altro viene ad acquistar grazia, salvo che di compratrice e patrona diventi schiava e perdendo la sua libertà, perda insieme il dominio della sua robba e ponga tutto in preda ed in arbitrio di colui che ella ha comprato, il quale è bastante in otto giorni a farle far di resto d'ogni cosa? Mirate, che bella ventura d'una donna è il maritarsi: perder la robba, perder se stessa e non acquistar nulla, se non li figliuoli che le danno travaglio e l'imperio d'un'uomo, che la domini a sua voglia.¹⁸⁸

Though Corinna's admonition presents a rather accurate description of a woman's losses upon entering marriage, her use of the word "*pigliare*", or "to take", conveys the idea of there being an option—to take or to not take a husband—when the reality was that marriage was for most

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 69.

women a necessary obligation. As the property of her male kin¹⁸⁹ (father, or brother in the case of the father's absence), women often had little to no power in weighing in on her fate, and this was almost always the case in choosing a husband. She served as a strategic tool used to contract a marriage that would ideally lead to the family's increased status in society, at times even elevating the family to nobility.¹⁹⁰

Marriage was an institution that not only constituted normalcy, but the married state was also regarded as necessary for being able to deem a family "honorable." A woman was incapable of living outside of the sphere of masculine protection and therefore an unmarried female was considered suspect. Even if she chose a reclusive, ascetic lifestyle, her solitude and celibacy (unless carried out within the walls of a convent) threatened her family's honor.¹⁹¹ The numerous manuals and dialogues written on marriage in the *Cinquecento* describe it almost exclusively from the male point of view, with women being regarded as an object to be trained, molded. *Il merito delle donne*, however, marks an important step in literary history because it allows a space for expression for the *emotional* perspective of women. The overall process of contracting marriage takes into consideration little of what women *feel* about the matter, thus rendering Fonte's even more exceptional by providing insight into the female point of view. In a sense, especially when juxtaposed with other works of the time, *Il merito delle donne* closes somewhat the gap between literary re-presentations of women, which are constructed images

¹⁸⁹ Advice manuals on marriage and the selection of a wife often compare the "purchase" of a female with that of buying a horse, or a slave. See Passi, *I donneschi difetti*; and Stefano Guazzo, *La civil conversatione, del sig. Stefano Guazzo, gentiluomo di Casale di Monferrato; divisa in quattro libri* (Brescia: Tomaso Bozzola, 1574).

¹⁹⁰ See Alexander Cowan's *Marriage, Manners and Mobility in Early Modern Venice* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007).

¹⁹¹ Christiane Klapisch-Zuber "The Cruel Mother" in *Feminism and Renaissance Studies* ed. Lorna Hutson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 187-8.

detached from reality, and the actual concrete reality of female life in Renaissance Italy.¹⁹² In Fonte's dialogue there is no middleman (emphasis on the "man") to muddle the transfer from personal experience to the page, a fact especially significant when keeping in mind how little extant documentation reveals of the female perspective on marriage contraction.¹⁹³

Fonte's awareness of female obligation to marry is evidenced earlier in the dialogue when the topic of entering into marriage is initially discussed. The scene is rather significant in that it juxtaposes two different time periods of female life and the relative power they hold (or rather lack) in each given moment. The sequence in question begins with Elena playfully saying she believes all the negative talk against men is sure to dissuade Verginia, young and of marriageable age, from wanting to marry. Verginia expresses she is disinclined to marry (and was so even before the present conversation), but understands her lot and acquiesces to her duty in life to obey her (male) elders' wishes. Adriana, her mother, responds by agreeing with her daughter's indisposition to marriage and pledging that she would support her if she could, but that unfortunately the wish of Verginia's uncles that she marry in order to protect her large inheritance takes precedence.

"Con tutto il male che dite," replicò Elena, "io non credo che Verginia voglia restar di provar anch'ella, che cosa sia aver marito."

"Quanto a me," disse allora Verginia, "io so bene che non lo piglierei, ma mi conviene obedir li miei maggiori."

"A questo," aggiunse Adriana, "figliuola mia io sarei del tuo parere, ma li tuoi zii hanno deliberato che io ti mariti per la gran facultà che tu hai eriditata, la quale alcuno non tu può usurpare; io però non so che altro

¹⁹² Sheila Fisher's and Janet E. Halley's Introduction specifically addresses this issue in *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Writings: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism*, eds. Sheila Fisher & Janet E. Halley (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 1-17.

¹⁹³ A useful source for gathering information on marriage specifically from the female point of view is to be found in Renaissance annulment documents, wherein wives must declare their reasoning for wishing to dissolve the union. See Ferraro, *Marriage Wars*, 33-67.

farmi di te; e poi sta' di buon animo; e non ti dubitare che tutti gli uomini non devono essere ad un modo; e forse, chissà, tu l'averai miglior delle altre."¹⁹⁴

This scene is of interest, however, not because of the difference in power between the two ladies, but rather that there is no difference in the power they wield whether young and unseasoned or older and experienced. From the position of youthful daughter to elder matriarch, the female does not gain considerable authority in respect to her relationship with male family members: she is subject to their volition throughout her lifetime. The absence of power is further heightened by the realization that even the sanguine tie of mother-daughter does not entitle Adriana to any active authority over the marital decisions concerning her own daughter. Women were at most able to exercise some power of influence, but authority to project the matter toward a specified outcome was in most cases never granted to them. Adriana is only able to offer her daughter words of encouragement that hopefully she will be one of the lucky ones who procure a good husband. And though Adriana wishes to console her daughter with these encouraging words, the overall mood of the text, which views marriage in a negative regard, underlines a general disbelief (even on Adriana's own part) of the likelihood of finding a good husband. The momentary hopefulness of Adriana's words is quickly dismissed by the other women, who clearly believe instilling hopes of finding an exceptional husband will only end in disappointing results for young women (...*questa è vana speranza, che di raro riesce, è certa la rovina delle povere figliuole*¹⁹⁵). To reinforce the unlikeliness they recall the numerous cases of abused wives and in effect any hopeful propositions are quickly renounced and the despair of the marriage market is once again reestablished.

¹⁹⁴ Fonte, *Il merito*, 17.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

This last point leads into another which deserves some attention, a point that I have labeled the exceptional man theory. It is a concept that plays inversely on the ideology of the exceptional woman theory, a very common literary *topos* during the late Medieval/early Renaissance period. Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* serves as a prime apotheosis of the exceptional woman theory, with him typically describing each notable woman first in an admirable, laudable manner but finishing his profile of the woman by denigrating her achievements for one reason or another.¹⁹⁶ The exceptional woman theory, then, is a misogynistic claim that views women who have accomplished themselves in any kind of public sector—political, legal, religious, literary—as a rare figure. They are not to be treated as benchmarks for what women can achieve if provided certain enabling opportunities, like education, but rather as women who are extraordinary, understood in the most literal—and negative—sense. The exceptional woman's accomplishment is abnormal and uncommon for her sex; so uncommon that it is at times regarded more as a fluke than an exception, thereby diminishing the more positive connotation enveloped in the term “exception.” Furthermore, any praise she could potentially claim for her actions is quickly re-appropriated by misogynists who declare her success a demonstration of her *masculinity*. Her ability to achieve equates her possessing more virility, being more in sync with the male mind and/or body, which allows her to excel.¹⁹⁷ For misogynists, success has a gender, and it is irrefutably male. The exceptional woman's extraordinariness may elevate her to a level that allows her to penetrate the threshold that divides men from women, but her virile competence does not put her on par with her male

¹⁹⁶ See Attilio Hortis's *Studi sulle opere latine di Boccaccio. Con particolare riguardo alla storia della erudizione nel medio evo e alle letterature straniere* (Trieste: Libreria Julius Dase, 1879), 68-110; and Chapter 1 of Benson, *The Invention*.

¹⁹⁷ On Boccaccio's *De mulieribus Claris*, see Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism*, 34-40.

counterparts. She has simply risen on the hierarchical scale of gender, finding herself now somewhat ambiguously located between women/feminine and men/masculine; not quite one or the other but pertinent to both.

The exceptional man theory, contrastingly, implies not a feminine man but a man who represents the ideals feminists, like Fonte, desire in a man but are very rarely found. Both sexes find those of the opposite gender who are more in tune with their own gender to be “exceptional.” Even the interlocutors of Fonte’s dialogue who have the task of arguing against men concede that there are some “exceptional” men but they are so uncommon as to almost not be worthwhile in mentioning since the overwhelming majority of men are mendacious, arrogant and self-serving. In a scene where Elena, given her own personal experience of a loving father, objects to the proposed notion of all fathers being cruel towards their daughters, Corinna cynically responds to her optimism with a brisk retort, “uno non fa numero.”¹⁹⁸ And again later, when Lucrezia interjects to defend men by affirming there are those who act as good, kind brothers to their sisters, Cornelia answers her sardonically:

Non sapete ben voi...che Iddio qualche volta mostra dei miracoli? Oltra che i fratelli molte volte accasano le sorelle, non per amorevolezza, ma per far buon nome e per trovar meglio essi condizion d’aver moglie; ma sono rarissimi quei che fanno una tal buona opera (ancor che per util loro) come dovrebbero, sì per onor della casa, come per far effetto di carità.¹⁹⁹

Cornelia’s response is typical of any concession of goodness to be found in males. Though her admission of some men being good brothers is rather sarcastic by comparing its likelihood with that of a miracle, it is still an admission that some decent men do exist. However, the concession is quickly disavowed by calling into question the *motivation* behind the men’s actions, suggesting they are self-promoting. The tactic employed here is similar to the one used by

¹⁹⁸ Fonte, *Il merito*, 28.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

misogynists with the exceptional woman theory: the power that is temporarily granted to the one sex must be reappropriated, thereby restoring power to their own sex and shifting the balance back in their favor. Fonte's strategy finds a parallel with the argumentation style of female detractors, though of course functioning on an inverse.

The concept of inversion is very prevalent in Fonte's work and is also a commonplace theme for the literature of the *querelles des femmes*. Women are almost exclusively described in direct relation to males, with women's shortcomings being compared against a backdrop of men's abounding resources and talents. It is a sort of definition *ex-negativo*, where women are defined not by defining what they are, but by defining what they are not.²⁰⁰ A brief word on the topic of contraries is therefore useful before returning to textual analysis.

In *querelle des femmes* literature, men and women are typically distinguished along lines used to separate other antipodal pairs (light/darkness; right/left; good/evil). When breaking down the dichotomous pairs, there emerges a larger connotative categorization that umbrellas the individual pairings, with the assumption that the parts in each category are somehow related. For instance, men, light, right, and good are tendentially grouped together while their opposites—women, darkness, left, and evil—are left to form their own grouping. A general assumption of the elements in each group being somehow intrinsically linked is then made, even though the assumption is unfounded. Men, light, right and good all share a common base in the same way women, darkness, left and evil share their own commonalities.²⁰¹ By this equation, misogynists

²⁰⁰ Chemello explores the metaphorical imagery of woman defining herself through her "diversity". Self-realization is processed by moving from the external to the internal, quite opposite of man, who discovers himself moving from internal to external. See her "'Minerva al tavolino' ovvero l'intellettualità femminile," in *Problemi* vol. 61 (1981): 172-182.

²⁰¹ Misogynists would prefer to have this deductive reasoning appear a natural conclusion, almost instinctive, though it is not bounded at all in nature. It reflects, rather, the effect of implemented misogynistic hegemony over the course of thousands of years.

secured the concept of inversion to work to their advantage by upholding their superiority, since men were aligned with light and goodness and women contrarily with darkness and evil. Again, this deduction is not supported by reasoning or empirical data but rather should be understood as an act of misogynistically constructed reasoning.²⁰²

In Aristotle's *Categories*, the fruit of which would serve as a model for Renaissance thought, the philosopher divides opposites into four different categories: correlative (double/half; father/son); contraries (black/white; odd/even; health/sickness); positive and privative (sight/blindness); and contradictories ("he sits/he does not sit").²⁰³ Ian MacLean argues the relationship between men and women falls (or rather is represented) at times within the positive and privative opposites, at times within the category of contraries, and other times within the correlative category. Though this analysis is exceptionally concise and surely insufficient for an enlightened understanding of Aristotle's elaborate explanation of opposites, it is sufficient for our present purposes.

Fonte's relationship with the concept of inversion is rather convoluted (perhaps even hypocritical at moments): she at once condemns its ideology, arguing that it has served primarily as a tool of oppression against women and a means for men to crystallize women in an inferior position; and yet she herself is guilty of utilizing the same logic (though inversely, of course) consistently throughout her dialogue. She laments that men have created not just an inverse but a hierarchical inverse wherein men reside at the apex and women at the bottom; however, she does not hesitate to flip the hierarchy in her own dialogical world, placing women now at the top and men at the lowest point. This, for Fonte, is acceptable, at least superficially. But despite her

²⁰² On the subject of opposites, see Chapter One of MacLean, *The Renaissance Notion*; and G.E.R. Lloyd's *Polarity and analogy: two types of argumentation in early Greek thought* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1992).

²⁰³ These exempla are taken from Maclean's introductory chapter, *The Renaissance Notion*, 3.

apparent promotion of a female-dominant inversion scale, Fonte is a woman that would be ready to accept the male proffered hierarchy in which men dominate and women are subordinate, if this dynamic was absent of abuse, disrespect, and cruelty. Fonte is doubtless a feminist, but her feminism is not anachronistic: her philogyny is appropriately suited to her time, to her culture, and to her class. She accepts a life of less public privilege and more domestic duty, but cannot accept the improper and unwarranted disregard with which women are treated.

First let us explore the ways in which Fonte adapts the concept of opposites towards the promotion of female empowerment. I will begin with two examples of stylistic inversion found in her dialogue before moving onto more contextual examples of Fonte's positing men and women on polar scales in terms of nature, comportment, and ability. Then I will examine how she simultaneously criticizes the misogynist use of inversion theory and address whether or not this is hypocritical on her part.

The first and most notable appearance of inversion has to do with the title of her work and the incipit of the dialogue in *Giornata Prima*. The title of a literary work, or any work for that matter, is the first indicator of what is expected to be encountered within the pages of the text. It is the first point of direction and guidance the author proffers her reader, functioning almost as a foreshadowing to prepare him subtly for what is to come. Fonte's chosen title, *Il merito delle donne*, suggests the dialogue will focus exactly on that—the merit of women. However, from the very first moment her interlocutors begin their dialogue, the central point is not the worthiness of women, but rather the unworthiness of men. The first words uttered are not just about the unworthiness of men in and of itself, but as it is situated within the context of marriage and therefore immediately marriage is posited in a dubious light when it comes to its advantages for women.

The scene is Leonora's newly inherited home; Fonte has just finished her brief panegyric of Venice and has introduced her protagonists. The speakers are all gathered waiting eagerly to see Elena to inquire about her new life as a wife, since she has just recently married. Upon her arrival, Elena is asked if she is happy and before she can respond Leonora interjects and says she must of course be happy, as all newlyweds are prone to be. At this point, with Leonora's assumption and the ladies' eagerness to hear about the excitement of Elena's newlywed life, the scene is set for a potential lauding of marriage and the happiness it affords its participants. Though it becomes apparent very quickly that Fonte has intentionally constructed this crescendo to bring her audience to a precipice where marriage (being emphasized as male control over women) plummets to a negative status. Elena's reply triggers the plunge:

... Non dico di starne male né bene, perché lo sposo mi fa assai buona compagnia, ma una cosa sola mi dispiace, che egli non vole che io mi vada fuor di casa ed io per me non desidero altro... sì per esser questo il mio tempo...²⁰⁴

Elena's role in the dialogue is that of a young woman who has recently entered into matrimony, but so recently that she is symbolic of the passage from maiden to wife, with one foot still planted in both realms. She therefore represents a woman who is in the process of losing her naïveté and residually gaining a more realistic view of marriage. Aware of this, the ladies of the group who have been married for some time transform their regard for Elena, recognizing that she has just begun to open her eyes to a harsh reality they have long lived. After Elena's admission of worry concerning her husband's treatment of her, the tone of the group is no longer presented as light and merry as it was when they awaited Elena's arrival. Instead, the tone of the immediate response to Elena's preoccupation turns somewhat sardonic:

Piacesse a Dio-disse Cornelia-ch'egli così sempre vi trattasse, e non ve ne seguisse peggio, ma voi non sapete che'l pan delle nozze si mangia presto.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ Fonte, *Il merito*, 16. For Fonte's own situation with domestic seclusion, see fn175.

Cornelia's response that hopefully Elena's husband's jealousy is the most she will have to worry about is a feeble attempt at consolation and instead functions more as a bleak warning for what she can expect (more heartache) in her lifetime as a wife.

Fonte starkly contrasts the descriptive beginning of the text—the gushing panegyric to Venice, the serene and lighthearted setting of Leonora's house—with an abrupt introduction of negativity in the form of men/marriage. Men are immediately posited as enemies to women's peace and happiness and at their first mention the more experienced women of the group are prepared to reveal their battle scars received throughout their lifetime of interaction with men.

To reiterate, this is also the point where the conversation is begun and it is significant to note that women (and their worth) are removed from focus here while Fonte is more concerned with edifying her readers (or chastising in the case of her male readers) of the misery men wreak on women. She adheres to an inverse relationship between men and women by establishing men's position as cruel tyrants and women as oppressed victims. The scenario translates into a subliminal message of female greatness being dependent on the un-greatness of men, as if there is only room at the apex of greatness for one sex and not the other. Therefore even while neglecting a direct praise of women at the very beginning of the dialogue, Fonte's male bashing ultimately serves a double function that indirectly satisfies her overall goal: the more men are demeaned, the more women are elevated to a status of great worth. Fonte is here subscribing to the same ideology behind the concept of inversion as her misogynist counterparts: men and women cannot share an equal level of excellence—there needs to be an establishment of a

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

superior/inferior relation. For misogynists, the beneficiary of the inverse is men; for feminists like Fonte, women are privileged with the superior position.²⁰⁶

Fonte continues to incorporate themes of polarity in the exposition to convey her anti-marriage resolve. In describing the setting of the dialogue—Leonora’s newly inherited home—Fonte constructs an underlying message of the gathering being possible only due to Leonora’s widowhood (i.e. absence of husband). And it is the newfound fortune of Leonora, with her lavish new home and sublime garden (itself a monument to feminism²⁰⁷), that are described as treasures needing protection from men, since men’s entrance onto the scene would mean Leonora’s subjection and would remove the pleasure she now receives from her abode. Men/marriage are posed as opposite to female pleasure and thus Leonora elects not to remarry in order to guarantee her being able to enjoy her good fortune:

...era una discretissima giovane e (benché vedova, ricca e bella fosse) non avea più animo di maritarsi, come per veder la suddetta casa e godersi un pezzo la vaghezza del sopradetto giardino.²⁰⁸

Leonora’s steadfast resolve never to remarry (thus safeguarding her happiness) is later confirmed more vehemently in her own words some pages later:

Rimaritarmi eh?...più tosto mi affogherei che sottopormi più ad uomo alcuno; io sono uscita di servitù e di pene e vorresti che io tornassi da per me ad avvillupparmi? Iddio me ne guardi.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁶ It is significant to observe here that the idea of equality (or even equally important but in different ways) is negated. Fonte’s willingness to battle with extremist language—fighting fire with fire—in a sense puts her on par with her detractors, utilizing their own terms of the game to participate in the *querelle*. Whether this is a positive or negative concession for feminism I will leave to the reader’s conjecture.

²⁰⁷ For a description of the garden and its feminist allusions, see *ibid*19-23.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

She speaks in terms of life and death, again reinforcing several dualities: death as opposed to life, marriage as opposed to widowhood, servitude as opposed to pleasure. Leonora chooses pleasure, and in so doing she simultaneously chooses life/widowhood. The positing of men as beings fundamentally contrary to female happiness means the one must be eschewed in order to procure the other.

The entire gaiety of the scene derives from its freedom from men: the women have complete liberty to speak and do as they wish without fear of male reproach (“...*senza aver rispetto di uomini che le notassero, o l’impedissero*”).²¹⁰ Indeed, as the women complement Leonora on her beautiful new home, Corinna makes it a point to mention that one of its best assets is the absence of men:

Avete lasciato di dir il meglio...Voi non dite che fra le altre sue grazie, egli vi ha questo, che non vi sono uomini.²¹¹

With this, Fonte substantiates the inverse nature of men and marriage being oppositional to pleasure; yet again, not only oppositional, but with the emphasis of inverse, i.e. the less male presence (not only husbands but brothers, fathers, uncles, etc.) the increased personal felicity in a woman’s life.

Let us now turn our attention to examples of Fonte’s reinforcing an oppositional nature between men and women in two areas heavily treated in the dialogue: love and friendship.

For matters of love, Fonte retains women to be simple and pure-intentioned whilst men (though she does admit to there being some truly enamored men with honest hearts)²¹² are for the

²¹⁰ Ibid., 14.

²¹¹ Ibid., 21.

most part selfish deceivers; once again, she creates a palpable friction between well-intentioned women and badly intentioned men. The strategy Fonte adopts for arguing the antipodal nature between men and women is similar to what we have already seen with the point made about the title of her work and how the worth of women is made apparent through demonstrating the unworthiness of men. The focus is on the incorrigible spirit of men and this indirectly is her encomium for women, without making the meritorious female qualities the focal point. For in delineating the malign characteristics she believes inherent in men, Fonte is reasserting the opposite correlative to be found in women without specifically saying so, as the result would be a rather prosaic listing of opposites. Fonte shuns conducting a strict side-by-side comparison of male versus female qualities, opting instead to focus attention on the corruption of men with the inferred understanding that women are the opposite of whatever the quality the interlocutors may be discussing at the moment.

This is not to say that Fonte does not at times go into further detail in enumerating female attributes, but only that they are second in priority and are given less attention than the topic of male wickedness. Yet, despite the focus on men, the end is unaffected by the means, meaning the same result as if she had structured it with focus on women is produced: a defense of women and an attempt at an overall elevation of the popular view of women in society.

In the middle of *Giornata Prima*, the women turn to natural philosophy to discuss the innate behavioral (based in part on physiological) differences between men and women. The speakers have been engaged in a conversation about love and Elena inquires why women continue to love men when they are so often disappointed, duped or even ruined by them when it comes to matters of the heart. The topic of women's natural disposition is first addressed:

²¹² “Io non dirò mal de gli innamorati, se pur ve n'è alcuno, ma di quelli che son detti con questo noe, e poi in effetto son tutti il contrario,” Fonte, *Il merito*, 38.

Ditemi un poco, cara dolce Corinna...dove nasce questa tanta bontà e semplicità che...si ritrova in noi altre donne più che ne gli uomini?

Io non credo—rispose costei—che proceda da altro rispetto, salvo che dalla nostra natural disposizione e complessione, la qual per esser...fredda e flemmatica, ci rende per conseguenza più quiete, più deboli, più apprensive di natura, facili a credere ed a piegarsi.

Corinna argues women are naturally calmer, weaker, and more apprehensive based on the humors characteristic of the female body and in accordance with popular Renaissance medical theories.²¹³ She continues by asserting the necessity of women's using their intellect to counter the ill-intentioned advances of men since their natural inclination is to believe the words of false lovers; it is only through their keen intelligence that they will be able to thwart men and maintain their reputation.

In opposition to female disposition, the male socio-physiological characteristics are enumerated as the conversation continues:

Questa ragion mi quadra—disse Elena—che noi siamo di tale natura, dove non domina alcuna ferocità, per non vi aver molto luogo la colera ed il sangue e però riusciamo più umane e mansuete e meno inclinate ad essequire i nostri desideri che gli uomini, dove all'incontro gli uomini di complessione calda e secca, signoreggiati dalla colera, essendo tutti fiamma e fuoco, sono anco più inclinati ad errare e manco si ponno astenere da i loro disordinati appetiti. Quindi nasce il loro sdegno, impeto e furore nell'ira, quindi l'impacienza immoderate nelle loro voglie intemperate e ardenti, sì nelle carnalità, come in ogni altro loro desiderio, il quale in loro è di tanta forza, che a i sensi sottopongono la ragione e, operando l'uomo perciò, secondo la inclinazione de i sensi e senza alcun ordine di ragione, non è da maravigliarsi, se la più parte di loro poco attende alle virtuose azioni, ma tutto si dà in preda ai dilette e concupiscenze viziose, poiché lo spirito unito alle membra di tale temperamento non può causare effetti fuori della sua natura e proprietà...²¹⁴

Here Fonte both relies on and reinforces popular Renaissance scientific beliefs: women, being of a cold and phlegmatic composition, are tamer, more delicate and more cautious; men, in contrast, being hot and dry, are prone to anger and caprice. Nature, or more specifically the different biological coding of the sexes, is pinned as the determinant factor in explaining why men and women are so contrary in their outward behaviors. And nature operates as the accepted, irrefutable determinant; whilst also implying there is not much, if anything at all, to be done

²¹³ See, for an example on Renaissance natural philosophy, Marsilio Ficino, *De triplici vita* (Bologna: Benedicto Hectoris, 1501).

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46-7.

about changing it. This point will become especially pertinent later on but for a much different purpose.

The argument of women's honest intentions juxtaposed with men's deceit stems from a larger argument regarding desire and love. Once again, men and women are placed on opposite spectrums with women being designated as those who *love* first and foremost while men are typecast as those who *desire* above all else. The women speakers deem lust as the prime motivators behind men's amorous actions, but their dialogue deconstructs the argument even further, analyzing the way women love as opposed to the approach men take.

The interlocutors have just been discussing the way men chase after women, falsely making it seem like the love they carry is so great they would be willing to die for it, when Corinna takes over the discourse to contribute her theory on these "romantic" actions:

Questa dimostrazion di servitù e d'amor... veramente non ci fanno perché ci amino come ha detto Cornelia, ma perché ci desiderano ed in questo caso l'amor in loro è figliuolo e 'l desiderio è padre, ovvero l'amor è l'effetto e 'l desiderio la causa. E perchè si dice che rimossa la causa si remove l'effetto, da ciò nasce che l'uomo ci ama tanto, quanto ci desidera e però mancato che è in lui il desiderio, che è causa di quel vano amor o per averlo conseguito o per non lo poter conseguire, viene a mancar insieme l'amor che è l'effetto di quella causa. Dove se all'incontro noi amiamo, l'amor in noi è causa e padre ed il desiderio è il figliuolo ed effetto di esso; e sì come può esser il padre senza il figliuolo e la causa senza l'effetto, ma non il figliuolo senza il padre, né l'effetto senza la causa, così nell'uomo può star desiderio senza amore, ma non amore senza desiderio; ma per la contrario nella donna è amor senza desiderio, ma non può star desiderio senza amore.²¹⁵

Corinna concludes that love presides in women, and that sometimes desire follows; but certainly they do not desire without having love already in place. Men, contrarily, do not require love. They can desire without loving and often times do, rendering any kind of "love" they profess a false one based on carnal desires. Men's love is characterized by physical appetite whilst women's is identified as having a more spiritual quality, resulting in an indirect reinforcement of female superiority since the mind is superior to the body.

It is exactly because women and men are so contrary in their approach to love that

²¹⁵ Ibid., 61.

Fonte admonishes her female readers of love's potential dangers. It is the battlefield where these two opposites (men and women) collide, usually to the detriment of the woman given her sincerity in love affairs. Her natural inclination is to approach love with optimism and an open heart, but Fonte likens love to a battle of the sexes to emphasize their need to view love instead as a potential pitfall for their moral character. Therefore, the utmost caution is required to ensure the safety of not only her well being but her reputation (so easily damaged and often irreparable) as well.

Late in the conversation of the first day, the women have begun discussing the disaster that befalls a woman who lets herself love. Corinna speaks to the ladies of the trauma that can be endured from letting oneself fall privy to amorous whims:

La donna che ama di cuore, o che vince il suo desiderio, o che si lascia vincer da esso, in tutti i modi patisce pericolo; se sta salda e costante per non errare, eccovi che maggior travaglio se gli appresenta quanto la continua battaglia che soffre in se stessa, e'l gran ramarico di non ottener mai ciò che brama,... Non è dubbio che le saria mille volte più caro il morire che vivere in simil tormento; se anco si lascia vincere, vinta insieme dalle lusinghe e molestie dell'amante, ben potete pensarvi i pericoli ne' quali incorre nell'onore, nella vita e nell'anima, che più importa. Si che in ogni modo per tutto questi rispetti si devon le donne schivar d'amar gli uomini, ancor che molte non possino farlo tanto son buone,... se ben essi son cattivi.²¹⁶

Women then are faced with a lose-lose situation: either their honor is sacrificed by giving into the romantic pursuits of men or, if they are able to abstain, they maintain their honor but suffer and yearn in their hearts for something they are unable to have. Both scenarios are bleak, but the latter is indubitably the lesser of two evils and consequently is the option encouraged by Corinna. Despite the women's dismay over their options, Fonte does not hesitate in her role as the harsh bearer of dismal news: the contrariness of men and women is seemingly unchangeable and therefore women must act accordingly and for their own best interests.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 59.

The topic of friendship also reinforces the binary oppositional relationship between the sexes. In essence, it is really not a separate topic from that of love, but rather the two are inextricably connected since love is an indispensable requisite for true friendship. Men, not being capable or inclined to truly love, are deemed equally inept at forming and maintaining friendships. Unlike women, they are not composed of a matter that is predisposed to friendship and therefore are unable to receive it, mold it, and make it their own. Corinna affirms the inability to exact a certain result out of something that is not created for that purpose: “...*non si può pigliar forma ad alcuna cosa, se prima non è la materia disposta.*”²¹⁷ The elements necessary to cultivate love and friendship are not found in man’s innate disposition and it is this deficiency that prevents them from enjoying the multifarious benefits of friendship, which is esteemed by the ladies as the “*cagion d’ogni bene.*”²¹⁸ The discourse at this point intrigues because for a moment, the interlocutors note that men’s natural adversity to friendship is apparent even from their interactions with other men; for a moment, the dialogue departs from a purely male/female context to testify to men’s nature in general and not necessarily in relation to women. Men are configured as beings incapable of even being kind and sincere to each other, not just to women. Their selfishness and haughtiness are deemed the vices that impede their ability to form real friendships:

...ma per la malignità de gli uomini,...di raro si trovano queste così rare ed inseparabili amicizie tra essi medesmi e tra essi e noi, perché...sono poco amorevoli, ed infra essendo per lo più di natura superbi e vani, stanno tanto su questa sciocchezza di voler farsi stimar ed esser riputati da ognuno con usar certi costumi schifi, mostrando far per cortesia quel che fanno per arte, che invece di onorar gli amici disonorano l’amicizia e le sue sante leggi che non patiscono alcuna affettazione ed in ciò si mostrano non meno sciocchi, che disamorevoli, poiché par che non sappino che differenza sia dal praticar con cui si vuole esser tenuto vero amico, al conversar che si fa con li conoscenti solamente.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Ibid., 76.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 80.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 77.

Because the argument purports to relate biological facts rather than opinion, nature is once again presupposed as the final judge and women are concluded the superior being for their genetic predisposition to kindness and friendship.

The argument on friendship is intriguing not only for what is presented, but also for what is missing: there is no talk about the possibility of friendship between men and women, not even within the context of husband and wife. It is especially interesting when situated within this time period, because it is with the arrival of the Renaissance that the idea of companionship becomes a desirable quality in a marriage and is (at least in theory) sought after when choosing a spouse. Several treatises on marriage speak to the necessity of companionship for the spiritual and mental well-being of the couple.²²⁰ The absence of talk of friendship between a husband and wife, then, leads the reader to arrive at two assumptions: it is possibly a sign of great discrepancy between theory and practice, in which companionship is recommended but often cast aside for other more profitable aspects (dowry, rank, alliance) in contracting a marriage, and therefore friendship is relegated to a sub-important position; or that friendship between spouses is often impossible given the numerous abuses present in the relationship between an oppressive husband and a subordinate wife (analogous to the likelihood of a friendship forming amongst a slave and his master). In any case, Fonte's text seems to work in contradiction to what contemporary published "guides" or treatises on marriage say—they promote companionship but Fonte's dialogue claims the reality of most marriages was far detached from the prescribed method of mutually enjoyed companionship.

²²⁰ See fn121 and fn127 for references.

At this point we can clearly identify various points in the text where Fonte reveals her reluctant feminism. Again, reluctant feminism can be understood as a type of feminism that is forced because of attack; there is not an innate inclination to fight against men, but their vicious misogyny makes it impossible not to take up arms.²²¹ Furthermore, reluctant feminism can be characterized by a slight but extremely critical distinction between subordination and abuse: it accepts subordination but refuses the abuses enacted under the hierarchical domination of men. Fonte's work embodies reluctant feminism by making her diatribes lambast men's abusive nature towards women and not the overall inequality held in place by male-dominated society. She is willing to accept an inferior status and is overall acquiescent to forfeiting authority in both the public and private spheres; but this acquiescent disposition firmly draws the line at abuse. She refuses to tolerate the violence (both psychological and physical) that men afflict women with in the numerous facets of daily activity.

This is a major distinction when attempting to limn the different kinds of feminism in Renaissance Italy. Fonte is not a reformist—she does not seek parity on levels of education, legality, or in terms of political access. Though she may lament at how men have usurped total authority in these fields for the purpose of highlighting their ruthless ambition, it is done to exemplify the disregard and disrespect men have shown towards women in their climb to total domination. Fonte is a pragmatist in that she seems to forego equality between the sexes as an unrealistic goal for her lifetime and instead focuses her work on beseeching the cruelty towards women to come to an end. If this could happen, women would happily serve their men, according to Fonte.

²²¹ “...non si ode se non biasimo, vergogna, dispreggio e mille mali, che siamo sforzate a trattar di essi con bestemmiarli, maledirli e disonorarli contra di nostro genio, costume e volontà...” *ibid*, 159.

Her anger is enticed not just by the abuse of men, but more significantly by the deceitful way in which they have made abusiveness seem acceptable. To keep one's wife as a slave, controlling her every move and forbidding her even the smallest pleasures that he allows himself freely, has become a hegemonic way of life that Fonte finds abhorrent. Early on in the *Giornata Prima*, we find Fonte's first remark on women's benign nature inducing them to suffer men's cruel treatment; she entreats her male audience to understand that women's kind nature would not change if they treated women with gentleness and some level of dignity. On the contrary, women would be even *more* dedicated to their men.

...noi che fra le altre qualità e buone parti, siamo tanto di natura umili, pacifiche e benigne, per viver in pace sofferimo tanto aggravio e sofferiremmo più volentieri, se pur avessero essi un poco di discrezione, che volessero almanco che le cose andassero egualmente e vi fusse qualche parità e non ci volessero aver tanto imperio sopra e con tanta superbia, che vogliono, che siamo loro schiave e non possiamo far un passo senza domandar loro licenzia...²²²

Though Fonte speaks here of parity between the sexes, she does so not implicating social reforms, but rather on a level of emotional/intellectual interchange. Her words are meant to fight against the misogyny that discredits women as ranking sub-human, and consequentially not being treated humanely.

Fonte's crusade seeks equality in the form of civilized respect along with the elimination of the double standards enforced in society. Because her efforts do not focus on reform, her feminism can be identified as a rather patriarchally friendly feminism, seeking only to extirpate the brutality shown towards women in daily interactions. This is evident not only from the absence of reformist language, but is supported also by the types of complaints the interlocutors choose to vent. Having been discoursing on the topic of sexually charged encounters, Cornelia voices her frustration at the double standards that benefit men and condemn women. She uses Biblical support for the argument—"...io non trovo in nissuna legge divina che siano assolti gli

²²² Ibid., 27.

uomini da questa colpa e condannate le donne sole”—before moving into a more secular contextualization:

E pur non so...chi abbia lor dato questa licenza di peccare più che a noi e se la colpa è commune, come non ponno negare, perché non anco la vergogna? Perché vogliono che lor sia d'onore e a noi di biasimo?²²³

Fonte's speakers long for an equality of consequences: a de-genderization of actions and consequences so that when a deed is committed, whether good or bad, the effect is unaffected by the gender of the agent. This is not an equality that would change anything in the public hierarchy of authority men have constructed (in which they maintain all authority), but doubtlessly would change the private interactive dynamic between men and women, which is Fonte's aim. Nevertheless, it would mutate the way women are *seen* in society, creating some parity by elevating women, who would be granted more freedom in their own comportment, while concomitantly lowering men, who would no longer enjoy such licentiousness.

The frustration and hurt over their uncivilized treatment culminates with Leonora's monologic address to men in the *Giornata Seconda*. She speaks on behalf of all the women, voicing their perplexity over men's poor treatment of women when they have done nothing to entice such hatred;²²⁴ they have always treated men with gentle, feminine grace and are exasperated by the cruelty they receive in return. Leonora's inability to understand whence their hatred stems is highlighted by the numerous questions she asks during her three and a half page monologue. The questions are seventeen in total and all speak to their confusion at how men do

²²³ Ibid., 53.

²²⁴ Leonora provides a sort of disclaimer in her speech, however, saying that if there are some women that have done anything to incite men's anger, it is an effect of men's mistreatment and driving women to desperate acts of callous rebellion against their authority: "...e voi mariti sete spesso ancora causa di far pericolar le mogli, perché dando lor mala vita, le ponete in disperazione di far il peggio che fanno," 134.

not love nor treat them with the reciprocity females show them, even calling on Dante's theoretical explanation of love to underline the injustice of their unreciprocated love:

...che ragione avete per non amarci?...perché di grazia ci abbandonate?...E non ci trattate come è il debito vostro?...Né vi attribuite ragione?...dove nasce che voi non amate noi?...E se noi vi amamo e se amor a nullo amato amar perdona, deh perché non amate noi?"²²⁵

Besides an expression of their grievances, Leonora's speech also serves as a supplication to men to change their ways, attempting to 'sell' them on the idea by convincing them it is in their best interest:

...carissimi ed inseparabili amici, tutte le leggi divine ed umane vi fanno nostri, come noi siamo vostre. Deh fateci buona ed amorevol compagnia; dateci buon esempio; che se ci amarete, noi vi amaremo, se ci tenirete per mogli noi vi teniremo per mariti ed anco patroni, non per obbligo ma per amore.²²⁶

Leonora begins her supplication by referencing first divine law to sustain the mutual dependency and obligation men and women have for each other. It is presented as a mandated order from God but, not entrusting this to be enough to convince men of their duty to love women, she further emphasizes the 'selling' of the argument by utilizing hypothetical language. She seeks to entice their interest in the deal through guarantee of a desirable outcome if their end of the bargain is fulfilled: "*if you will love us, we will love you, if you will have us for wives we will have you for husbands and as our masters, not out of obligation but out of love.*" She is essentially drawing up a contract with men—a mutually beneficial contract—in which she attempts to persuade men they will lose nothing by entering into it. On the contrary, they will benefit because women's already obvious inclination to serve men ("*...vi amamo tanto, vi servimo e seguimo e siamo ossequiose, obediendi, e pazienti e tutte vostre care e*

²²⁵ Ibid., 133-4.

²²⁶ Ibid., 134.

fidelissime... ²²⁷) will only increase. In fact, they will be gaining far more in the deal than women because there is a willingness and acceptance of a subordinate position: Leonora states that if men will have them for wives, women would not only have them for their husbands but would honor them as their masters as well. This, ideally and according to the constructs in which Leonora is defining the proposal, would not be an egregious submission on the female's part; rather, it would be a self-imposed act of love on the part of the wife, displaying her trust that in so-doing, she will not suffer but be kept as a beloved wife.

Earlier in the dialogue, in *Giornata Prima*, Leonora gives a foreshadowing of her later, more direct supplication to men. She again presents her thoughts on husbands' treatment of their wives, arguing that it is in a man's best interest to respect his wife and allow her to be the *padrona* of her own life.

Ma voi non dite di tal...che con l'esser così geloso e perciò far mala compagnia alla moglie, si persuade da sé stesso di poterle far la guardia, e non sa il povero sciocco, che la donna allora veggendosi esser in poca stima ed averle poca fede il marito, si lascia appunto trasportar a far il peggio che sa. Ove all'incontro, quando una moglie si vede esser in buona fede appresso il marito, e che egli la lascia nella sua libertà, ella stessa si pone il giogo al collo e diventa gelosa di se stessa...E veramente, non vi è la miglior guardia dell'onore d'una donna, quanto la sua propria volontà e disposizione. Sì che non consiglieri mai alcuno uomo a volersi pigliar egli l'assunto di guardar una moglie con asprezza e strane maniere perché è causa che l'un e l'altro vive sempre in tormento...²²⁸

The logic is that if a woman is denied her freedom, she will contrive any way possible to retrieve it, often to the detriment of both her and her husband; it is motivated by a desperation that does not take consequences into consideration, but has its sights set only on acquiring self-determination. If, however, husbands grant their wives a certain level of autonomy, women's pride and natural inclination towards goodness leads her to be fiercely guarded of her own reputation and behavior. As a direct reflection of her husband, then, both their images in society are elevated. Essentially, Leonora is proposing the idea that women are better entrusted with

²²⁷ Ibid., 132.

²²⁸ Ibid., 34.

their own guardianship than men and that both parties profit much more from it in terms of personal well-being. Fonte again proffers a patriarchal friendly notion of feminism: women will be able to enjoy a certain amount of freedom but within the well-restricted confines of male domination. Fonte does not seek to reform on a macro level, but rather on a micro level; foregoing any hope of changing the misogyny-laden societal structure in which she lives, she instead strives only to change some of the constructs that fall within that structure. She does not seek a philogynist society, but rather a more subdued patriarchy from which feminist ideologies are not completely excluded.

Important to note is Fonte's presentation of the argument as being male-centric. She does not support the argument by claiming women's worthiness as the primary reason for justifying their self-determination, but rather focuses on how it will benefit men. This stylistic tactic, however, is difficult to assess; for the problem exists in gauging how much cunning astuteness (in seeking to appease men's ego) it envelops as opposed to how much Fonte's own submission to patriarchy is driving her male-appeasing proposal. In simple words, is Fonte being strategic by playing to men's desires or is she sincerely playing to men's desires? While knowing *how much* of each is factored in is nearly impossible to measure, I believe it can safely be established that both are present in her argumentative style. Though critics may presume this is a weak point in Fonte's feminism, I would argue it is what makes Fonte a smart feminist, knowing her audience well and intuiting the most cogent way to convince her logic.

The two main points I have been arguing thus far are: 1) Fonte's maintaining men and women on an inverse scale, where men comprise all that is evil and women all that is good, allowing very little flexibility within these categorizations, and; 2) Fonte's fortifying women's roles *within* the current masculine power structure in place, but shirking efforts at concrete

reform of misogynistic practices in society. The significance of these two arguments culminates in the transition from *Giornata Prima* into *Giornata Seconda*. Though the work has often been criticized as seeming disjointed due to the different styles exacted in each day creating friction in the “flow” of the argument, there is a very strong interconnectivity between the two days of dialogue that explains the apparent shift in tone.

While the dialogue of the first day situates itself neatly into the *querelle des femmes* debate by treating many of its commonplace topics, the dialogue of the second day is instead devoted to an encyclopedic listing of facts, with the interlocutors digressing from one topic to another and with topics ranging from constellations to animal nature to herbal remedies and still others. The apparent disunity between the two days is heightened by a notable change in tone, but recent scholarship suggests what superficially seems disunited is in actuality rather intimately connected, if somewhat on an abstract level. In the introduction to her translation of *Il merito delle donne*, Virginia Cox contends the link between the first and second dialogues has to do with theory and practice: the first day discusses female competencies and superiority, while the second day provides the knowledge women need to know to free them from dependency on men. The second day therefore serves as a practical guide empowering women with the first steps of basic knowledge needed to alleviate their reliance on men. It is also a demonstration of Fonte’s own cultivated and far-reaching knowledge, symbolic both textually and meta-textually as an example of female capability. Fonte herself seems to anticipate criticism of discontinuities and preemptively remedies the situation by inserting a playful interchange between Leonora, who herself cannot understand why they are talking about herbs and medicine when they are supposed to be discussing men, and Lucrezia, who asserts that there is indeed a pertinence to their discoursing on other topics:

LEONORA. Oh Dio...che odo, che sento oggi?...sete entrata in gerondio d'animali, di arbori, di erbe e di medicine e non mirate, che sono sonate 21 ora e non avemo detto niente di quel che importa. Che è il caso nostro, di grazia, il discorrer sopra cose tali?

LUCREZIA. è bene che noi ne impariamo per tenir da noi, acciò non abbiamo bisogno dell'aiuto loro...²²⁹

Hence, Fonte (via Lucrezia) points to education as a *solution* to the complaints enumerated in *Giornata Prima* and with this proposal the eccentricity of the subject matter of day two is justified and the interlocutors continue their broad-gauge discussion.

Cox's argument is well-founded and permits a more comprehensive understanding of Fonte's dialogue with the second day adding a practical value to the theoretical musings of the first day. However, I argue there is an even stronger connection between the two days of dialogue and that connection prepares Fonte's reader for her ambiguous, if not resigned, dénouement of the overall dialogue. The inverse dynamic between the sexes delineated in the *Giornata Prima* is the tying force that unites the first and second dialogues. Though the topic of conversation in *Giornata Seconda* moves away from men specifically, the interlocutors commence a conversation that revolves around other examples of opposite pairings found in nature, often characterized by discord between the stated dichotomies. The interlocutors' commentary on these other dyads draws a parallel with the commentary on male/female relations expounded upon in day one; and the ideas concluded about the opposites found in the natural world are then bestowed unto the male/female dynamic by association. It would seem that the female speakers, left befuddled about the way men and women interact after day one's discussion, resort to using the examples of opposite couplings in nature—from which they *can* extract some sense—and apply that understanding to male/female relations in an attempt to make sense of it all.

Let us examine.

²²⁹ Ibid., 124-5.

The incipit of the *Giornata Seconda* begins with concluding remarks about the discourse on men and their shortcomings in terms of friendship, with Corinna having the final say on the topic and providing a transition into the next topic: she remarks, in a matter of fact manner, that there are those things in life that bring harmony and others that instead bring dissonance:

“*Dicono alcuni ritrovarsi alcune cose naturali che hanno virtù di mantener concordia e pace, altre che pongono discordia.*”²³⁰ With this phrase, the women move on to discuss forces in nature that are in conflict, but the focal point of their discussion becomes the interaction and characteristics of the sun and the moon—pitted here as clear opposites. There is an unequivocal allusion to the sun representing man and the moon woman, with their respective temperaments reflecting those attributed to the opposing anatomical make-up of men and women (men, like the sun, are considered to be of a hot, dry temperament and woman, like the moon, cold and humid). Beyond the discourse of humors, there are other *double entendres* in the conversation that indicate a discussion about men and women via talking about the sun and moon:

CORNELIA. La luna...per esser, come ho udito dire, corpo che riceve il lume dal sole, potrebbesi perciò attribuire ogni sua virtù alla propria virtù del sole?

CORINNA. Signora no...che se ben ella ha il suo lume dal sole, è però differentissima di proprietà e virtù...²³¹

Here Cornelia concedes the moon to be an inferior celestial body—“receiving its light from the sun”—but the feminist bedrock is maintained by affirming the individual merits of the moon despite its dependency on the sun, a relationship which reflects prior comments made about male/female rapport.

²³⁰ Ibid., 80.

²³¹ Ibid., 82.

Hence, from the beginning of the discourse on opposite pairings allusions are made to the dynamic between men and women, creating a strong correlative and an inclination to associate what is deduced to the relationship between the sexes. Further parallels are then made comparing women and men to certain animals. When the discourse turns to the topic of avian species, Elena reminds the ladies of a derogatory connection made between women and the magpie, since both have a penchant for incessant chattering: “*Dicono gli uomini...che noi si assimigliamo alle piche, perché abbiamo molte ciance.*”²³² While Leonora responds that men are instead compared to the crow, since their presence is an ominous sign: “*Al corvo...poiché ovanno non ci apportano se non triste augurio.*” Another comment is later made which again reveals the interlocutors’ drawing inferences to male/female relations: the women have begun to discuss the sturgeon fish, which they note as being a noble and faithful creature that never abandons his own kind, but on the contrary is always prepared to defend them. The speakers immediately pose the question of why men, then, cannot behave the same towards women who are, after all, the same species as men.²³³ Through these various comparisons the women underscore the lessons to be learned from nature, looking to find answers in the animal world applicable to their own given their inability to reason their own situations with men.²³⁴

The general consensus among the women is that in every pairing in nature there is a dominant/dominated dichotomy at play. It is regarded as genetic predisposition, as an irreversible process that is decided well before birth and is more or less immune to efforts to

²³² Ibid., 85.

²³³ “Ah...e che dovriano poi far gli uomini verso di noi? Che siamo una cosa istessa con loro? E pur sempre ci opprimono e ci traffigono...” ibid., 94.

²³⁴ The following creatures signal points in the dialogue where other connections, inferences, or lessons applicable to human life are drawn from nature: the peacock serves as a reminder to continually better oneself (ibid., 86); the partridge, purported to have two hearts, is likened to men who falsely give many hearts away but never the true one (ibid., 88); the fan mussel, or pinna, a blind shellfish that partners with shrimp to catch prey, demonstrating the importance of friendship (ibid., 95).

counteract it during life. The very process of natural selection and continued evolution dictates the necessity of superior animals preying on inferiors, as is their natural instinct for survival. At one point, Elena expresses confusion over why such a power struggle exists in discordant pairs—a confusion which again reverberates from the discourse on male/female dynamics:

Egli è gran tempo... ch'io desidero di saper che inimicizia ocolta s'abbia il lupo con l'agnelo, il leone con la pecora, la volpe co'i polli, il topo con la gatta... donde sia nata questa lor gran discordia, che sempre l'un perseguita e l'altro fugge.²³⁵

Corinna responds to Elena's query about clashes in nature by using nature itself as the answer:

Questa... non è nimicizia dalla parte più potente, ma proprio istinto, che la natura le ha dato di pascersi di quello; e però non perseguita o mangia la sua preda per odio che le porti, né per disamicizia che s'abbi seco, ma solo perché conosce che quello è il pasto datole dalla natura.²³⁶

The interlocutors arrive at the conclusion, then, that the discords in nature are not fueled by hatred or animosity of any kind; rather, they are representative of the natural instinct to survive, with one creature's survival determined by its ability to overpower another weaker being.

Corinna reaffirms this notion by remarking that the sheep (or any of the “weaker” beings) does not hesitate or question why the lion seeks to exterminate him, but rather relies on his own instinct to recognize the lion's instinct to kill and subsequently flees for survival.²³⁷ Instinct, then, suppresses reasoning and allows for the natural order to occur; it is the most natural reaction and therefore blameless. Each being is innately equipped with his own instinct for survival but beyond this it is up to him how to utilize it—whether he rejects or follows it.

The speakers take comfort in recognizing the existence of numerous other creatures that suffer unjustly at the hands of their persecutors, not just them. They accept it as nature taking course: for while they could not reason men's illicit, cruel ways in an isolated manner, when seen

²³⁵ Ibid., 112.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ “All'incontro il meno potente, che è per essemplio la pecora, fugge il leone non perché l'odi, ma perché teme, sapendo anco essa, per natural istinto, che quel tale è suo persecutore a tal fine di mangiarselo e cibarsi di esso, e perciò come nemico mortale lo fugge e s'allontana dalla sua morte,” *ibid.*, 112.

under this umbrella of Nature they are able to accept that each being has a role and a natural inclination towards a certain behavior. They cannot understand man specifically, but they can understand nature generally. This understanding provides them some comfort, but it also signals the point in the dialogue where resignation begins to form as the best possible solution. By concluding nature to be the only (yet still overall unsatisfying) answer to the question of why men are the way they are, the interlocutors simultaneously consign themselves to the prescribed action recommended to the “weaker” half of the discordant pair: to flee, to avoid men as best as possible. They accept Nature as having the final say and since they, as women, find themselves as part of the weaker set in the oppositional pairing, then any means to escape the clutches of their predator is advisable. As Leonora remarks at the very end of the discourse, when advising the young Virginia: “...*la essorto ed amonisco a guardarsene più che dal fuoco.*”²³⁸ At this point, however, theory and practice come to their own discord: Leonora’s advice is regarded as presumably the best, but it is also rather improbable for the socio-political marital expectations imposed upon a woman in 16th century Italy. The conclusion of fleeing men’s clutches as the best solution seems to fade away into the realm of the fantastical as the conversation turns to recalling the practical obligations a woman is faced with, especially in terms of marriage.

Indeed, the final pages of the discourse demonstrate this oscillation between idealized profeminist potential and reality. Fonte’s dialogue reveals a yearning for independence from men but, knowing this to be nearly impossible, folds to the concessions dictated as necessary for her time period. Cornelia expresses the desire to be free of men:

E possibile che non si potrebbe un tratto metterli [gli uomini] un poco da banda con tutti i loro scherni e foie che si fanno di noi, sì che non ci dessero più noia? Non potremmo noi star senza loro? Procacciarsi el viver e negoziar da per noi senza il loro aiuto? Deh, di grazia, svegliamoci un giorno e ricuperiamo la nostra libertà, con l'onor e dignità che tanto tempo ci tengono usurpate.²³⁹

²³⁸ Ibid., 172.

²³⁹ Ibid., 169.

Cornelia's words are a charismatic bolstering of profeminist sentiment, reminiscent almost of a battle cry to surge the feeling of empowerment necessary just before charging. She seeks a *respublica mulierum* in which women can fend for themselves without the aid or harassment of men. But in the subsequent paragraph, Elena quickly extinguishes any excitement conjured by Cornelia's words:

Io per me...penserei che si burlassero, se ci udissero favellare di certe cose ch'abbiamo così discorso tra noi, di cui lor pare che non si convenga se non a loro il trattarne...²⁴⁰

Elena's response dissipates the hope created by Cornelia's words by harshly interjecting a realistic, probable reaction by men who would hear their conversation: derision and laughter. She reminds that feminism, in the 16th century, is still a nascent phenomenon that has not yet gained the vigor or support necessary to effect real change.

The discourse continues with highs (profeminism) and lows (misogynist-laden realities) being continually asserted and pitted against each other, but the acquiescing to misogynist reality prevails in the end with Adriana advising her daughter, Verginia, to accept her status as inferior to man and concede to his wishes in every situation, upon entering marriage. Adriana's words are a depressing jolt back to the bleak reality for a woman in 16th Italy, reminding her daughter she has no choice but to marry, as her male relatives command it. The sequence of exchange between mother and daughter highlights the fears of a young woman about to enter into a life of servitude and submission while the endearing advice proffered by her mother is both heartbreaking and heartfelt: Adriana would like to tell her daughter that marital union is a life of joyful bliss, so as not to squander the hopeful innocence of Verginia, but alas she cannot deceive and assumes responsibility for preparing her for the stark reality to come. Verginia poses

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 169.

hypothetical, disagreeable scenarios of an unpleasant husband while her mother addresses each preoccupation with her best advice. Adriana's words are meant to soothe but ring of a foreboding pain and suffering her daughter can surely expect in married life.

VERGINIA. "E s'egli fusse superbo che farò io?"...

ADRIANA. "E tu vagli con umiltà...perché poi che pur convenimo di star loro soggette, è di necessità andar loro con carezze."...

VERGINIA. "E se egli fusse rigoroso e terribile, come farei?"

ADRIANA. "E tu paziente e tacita lo soporta;"...

VERGINIA. "E se fusse geloso, come avrei da governarmi?"

ADRIANA. "Non gli darai occasione di esservi...e poiché non hai da piacer ad altri che a lui, se egli non vuole che tu ti lisci e ti rimanti di farlo; se non vuole che tu esci di casa e tu contentalo; potrai con questi mezzi mover così l'animo suo, ed affidarlo di maniera che ti lasciasse poi far tutto quello che tu volessi."²⁴¹

Adriana conveys submission and concession to be the best methods for Verginia's conduct in regards to her husband, even if he be arrogant, vile, jealous; she leaves Verginia with the idea that the only chance to find some happiness with a wretched husband is to win him over with the kindness of her submissive heart. This proposal is devastatingly unlikely; as devastatingly unlikely as seeing Cornelia's call for a feminist revolution—reclaiming "*la nostra libertà*"—coming to fruition. The stark, bleak reality that looms over head is not just misogyny, but their sensed notion they have little other choice than to accept it and render it as painless as possible.

To conclude, the denouement of Fonte's dialogue is representative of the ebb and flow of the profeminist/misogynistic interplay elucidated throughout her work. She carefully inserts profeminist notions and ideals, propping them up with force in her interlocutors' discourse, but does not reinforce them so that they can stand with strength on their own. Indeed, Fonte's inclusion of anti-female rhetoric and ideology that often follows the proposed feminist notion is exactly what ensures its disempowerment. However, this pattern, and the overall submission to the hegemonic patriarchal framework, does not detract from Fonte's stance as an extremely

²⁴¹ Ibid., 170-1.

significant figure in the history of feminism. It simply demonstrates a keen sensitivity to her specific socio-cultural milieu and an understanding that the inclusion of profeminist thought *within* an overriding misogynist society was the most progressive action conceivable for a feminist in 16th century Italy. Her contributions to the feminist movement that would ultimately culminate in a revolution some four hundred centuries later are no less significant because of her concessions to misogyny; indeed, and as I hope to have conveyed, they are entirely appropriate.

CHAPTER 3.1:

Arcangela Tarabotti: On Women

On September 8th, 1620, a young Elena Tarabotti stood beside two companions, all three dressed in white with long, flowing locks sweeping their shoulders. A full procession accompanied the young women to the Church of Sant'Anna in Venice, while the *monacande* sang the psalms in unison, with a heavy breath and a desolate sadness: "*come il cervo desidera l'acqua della sorgente, così l'anima mia sospira a te, o Signore; l'anima mia è assettata di te. Le mie lagrime mi furono di cibo di giorno e di notte. Perché è triste l'anima mia?...*" The procession of the hundred virgins then headed to the door of the monastery, in front of which already stood the officiating priest. The three maidens crossed the threshold, the door closing firmly behind them, and, kneeling, received the sign of the cross from him. On each of their heads he placed a crown of fresh flowers; then one of them knocked twice on the door. From inside the Abbess asked: "*È pacifico il vostro ingresso?*" And the three responded: "*È pacifico;*

siamo venute per immolare al Signore.” Then the door opened and the abbess invited them to enter, symbolically shedding themselves of all worldly aspirations and assuming their identity as nuns—as the brides of Christ. After crossing the threshold the doors closed behind them forever, forfeiting even the hope of death from freeing them of monastic confines, since upon passing their burial would be administered within the convent grounds.

In his *Suor Arcangela*, the most comprehensive biography of Tarabotti to date, Emilio Zanette begins his chapter on Tarabotti’s *La tirannia paterna* painting this pivotal scene of the Benedictine nun pledging her monastic vows, surrendering the remainder of her life to the veil in the process.²⁴² The moment signaled her transformation into Arcangela Tarabotti, *sponsa Christi*, an unwanted identity accompanied by an even more unwanted lifestyle that would torment her until her death at forty-eight in 1652. She would later reflect on that day as a surrealistic moment in which her body performed but her mind was far from involved in the ceremony, saying, “*Non sapevo che cosa importassero quelle parole.*”²⁴³ Yet the arrival of the moment of her religious consecration was not haphazard nor should it have come as a surprise; it was the culminating point of a destiny that had long been decided for Tarabotti—from the moment her birth revealed her physical handicap and instantly rendered her uncompetitive in the Venetian marriage market. Upon taking the veil, she dedicated the rest of her life to denouncing the injustice of the Venetian inheritance system and condemning both the deceitful fathers and men of state who sanctioned it, beginning the crusade with her first and most vehement work, *La tirannia paterna*, published posthumously in 1654.

²⁴² Zanette, *Suor Arcangela*, 83-111.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 86.

Tarabotti begins her work with a dedication to the Venetian Republic. It is the first of three dedications, followed by one to God and another to her readers. Like Fonte's incipit, Tarabotti's dedication functions initially as a panegyric, but her praise of Venice is truncated shortly thereafter as she moves her discourse to the topic of paternal tyranny and its corrosive effects on the republic. The phrase paternal tyranny, adopted by Tarabotti throughout her discourse, is used to describe the widespread practice of fathers (or families in general) coercing their daughters into the convent against their will. The Benedictine nun charges the practice stained the purity of the Venetian State, which, she maintains, has slowly waned throughout time and gradually dulled from its original shine.²⁴⁴

By the time Napoleon conquered the Republic in 1797, Venice had enjoyed its independence for nearly a millennium, a period during which the Venetian patriciate managed to successfully create "social and political institutions so outwardly stable, harmonious, and just that the tensions inherent in any community seemed to be contained in Venice."²⁴⁵ In large part because the Venetian Republic had survived so long while all neighboring territories crumbled around it at some point, it was endowed with a certain mythical quality that catapulted it into the apotheosis of excellent government, greatly admired and often imitated.²⁴⁶ Though modern

²⁴⁴ Tarabotti addresses how the 'fama' of Venice soared throughout the lands telling of the great liberty characterizing the city, only to have that 'fama' later reveal itself a corruptive force: "*Sul'ali della fama vola ad ogn'angolo più rimotto dell'universo che palesa come Voi, Serenissima Regina, concedete a qual si sia nazione della vostra bella metropolis libertà non circonscritta...*" and later "*Nella primiera edificazione della vostra città in queste lagune penetrò questa fama fin ne gli abissi, di dove trasse che, celatasi sotto la maestà delle vesti de' vostri senatori, ha finalmente piantata sua sede nel Palaggio Ducale e domina la città tutta, seguendo per l'ordinario i vassalli l'orme de' precipi, come fa l'ombra e 'l corpo. È riuscita tanto accetta ed è statta tanto volentieri abbracciata e seguita, questo mostro d'Inferno della Tirrania patterna...*" Tarabotti's Dedication to Venice served as the original introduction to *La tirannia paterna* and is preserved in the manuscript of *L'Inferno monacale*, ed. Francesca Medioli (Turin: Rosenberg and Sellier, 1990), 27-8. Upon its publication, and with the new title of *La semplicità ingannata*, two more conciliatory dedications (to God and to the Reader) were opted for instead.

²⁴⁵ Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 13.

²⁴⁶ The purported "mixed" government of Venice garnered admirers like Pier Paolo Vergerio, Francesco Patrizi, Poggio Bracciolini, Marc Antonio Sabellico, Francesco Negri and Donato Giannotti. See Felix Gilbert's "The

scholars comment on the myth being drawn from Venice's historical reputation for beauty, moral reverence, liberty, harmony and republican values, it should be fresh in readers' minds that the same mythical aura was very present in the conscience of Renaissance Venetians, who saw it expressed in their daily civic rituals, architecture, artistic efforts, and also in their own history.²⁴⁷ And yet not surprisingly, as most seemingly perfect entities are far from it in actuality, many historians have unearthed the incongruence between the Venetian Republic's paradisiacal exterior and the reality of the inner-workings of society, a point which Tarabotti herself calls to attention.²⁴⁸ The fragility of the myth was particularly felt from the early 16th century onwards, when Venice suffered a succession of political and economic blows: losses of Eastern possessions to the Ottoman Turks, the discovery of alternative non-Mediterranean navigation routes to the East, and the devastating warfare against the League of Cambrai.²⁴⁹ In such a newly delicate condition, Venetian self-confidence and the Republic's political security came unhinged. Federico Chabod notes the reaction to the instability resulted in citizens' retreating into a hyper-exaggeration of the Venetian myth, serving ultimately as a source of comfort for the war torn Republic. The dynamic assumed an inverse relationship: the more Venice's might

Venetian Constitution in Florentine Political Thought," in *Florentine Studies*, ed. Nicolai Rubinstein (London: 1968), 463-500.

²⁴⁷ Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 21.

²⁴⁸ For more on the exposition of the Venetian myth during the Renaissance, see Federico Chabod, "Venezia nella politica italiana ed europea del Cinquecento," in *La civiltà veneziana del Rinascimento* (Florence: 1958), 27-55; Franco Gaeta, "Alcuni considerazioni sul mito di Venezia," in *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et Renaissance* 23 (1961): 58-75; Alberto Tenenti, *Piracy and the Decline of Venice, 1580-1615*, translated by Janet and Brian Pullan (Berkeley: 1967); Felix Gilbert, "Venice in the Crisis of the League of Cambrai," in *Renaissance Venice*, ed. J.R. Hale (London: 1973), 274-92; Gaetano Cozzi, "Cultura, politica e religion nella 'pubblica storiografia' veneziana del '500,'" in *Bollettino dell'Istituto di Storia della Società e dello Stato Veneziano* 5-6 (1963-4): 215-94.

²⁴⁹ Chojnacki, *Women and Men*, 63.

diminished, the more the myth was pumped; its power had become illusory and the façade it created relied heavily on the recycling of its past glory.²⁵⁰

Tarabotti seemed to be fully cognizant of this inverse dynamic. Indeed it was a specific point of frustration for the secular nun: it bespoke an elaborate misconception being construed by the Republic *about* the Republic, with its citizens (like coerced nuns) suffering the consequences as they were sacrificed for the *Ragion di Stato*. Though Tarabotti does not directly imply paternal tyranny to be the only means by which the state has deteriorated under corruptive practices, she makes it clear in her dedication the Republic's sanctioning of locking up its virtuous virgins, sometimes by brutal means, is her main point of contention with the state. She argues it played a critical part in accelerating Venice onto a path of continual deterioration, a path fueled first and foremost by the greed of its male leaders to procure themselves an indulgent life at the expense of their daughters: "...predicano la rettiratezza, e castità, mentre s'affaticano di goder liberi, e sciolti ogni appetibil diletto, immergendossi in mille viti." ²⁵¹

To begin the analysis of Tarabotti's work, I would like to address her use of notions of the feminine and masculine in her first dedication. Her brief praise of Venice followed by a harsh denunciation of its leaders is a deliberate and immediate separation of the feminine from the masculine: the image of Venice—feminine, graceful, virtuous—is distinct from the Venetian Senate—male, corrupt, self-serving. They are two separate entities and the former, representing women, has suffered at the hands of the latter, representing men. The city has continually eroded under the governing of nefarious men who have been entrusted with its charge, to the point that

²⁵⁰ Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 27.

²⁵¹ Tarabotti, *La semplicità*, 83; Panizza's edition, 73: "...he preaches withdrawal and chastity...At the same time, footloose and fancy-free, he strives to enjoy every possible delight, drowning himself in a thousand vices."

Tarabotti contests present-day Venice as being internally far removed from the image it conveys outwardly. The State may operate in certain sectors where its progressiveness and tolerance are demonstrable, such as the welcoming of a multi-cultural presence (particularly tolerant of those of Judaic heritage) in its domain,²⁵² and may set itself apart from other more primitive places because of these attitudes, but for the unwilling nun the State's good graces are cancelled out by its atrocious practices in other sectors like the marriage market.

The business of marriage contraction during Tarabotti's time merits some analysis before proceeding: it was a convoluted system of financial planning, strategy and negotiation aimed almost exclusively at elevating the status of the respective bride's and groom's families, tending to give little (if any) focus to the affections of the soon-to-be-spouses. Fundamental to a marital union was the dowry, without which no marriage could take place, regardless of class or personal wealth. Some form of exchange had to be made, as the dowry symbolically represented the economic foundation upon which a new couple was to begin their life together—for example the groom typically used his wife's dowry as an investment in his future business (buying artisan tools, opening a shop, etc.).²⁵³ Thus, whether in the form of actual money or monetary value embedded in tangible goods, citizens of all classes were to abide by the dowry mandate.

For the patriciate, where the wealth of the Venetian public lay, the dowry was a particularly frightful matter as expectations of ostentatious dowry sums seemed to continually surpass all limits. The marriage market crisis resulted in widespread panic amongst patrician

²⁵² “...ogn'angolo più rimotto dell'universo...palesa come Voi, Serenissima Regina, concedete a qual si sia nazione della costra bella metropolis libertà circonscritta, di modo che ne godono tutt'i crocifissori dell'Figliolo della vostra Santissima Protettrice.” The original dedication to Venice in Medioli's *Inferno monacale*, 27; in Panizza's edition: “As far as the remotest corners of the known world...news of how you, Most Serene Queen, grant unconditional liberty to people dwelling in your beautiful city, whatever their nationality; even those who crucified the Son of your Most Holy Protector, the Virgin Mary, are its beneficiaries,” 37.

²⁵³ Sharon T. Strocchia, “Gender and the Rites of Honour in Italian Renaissance Cities,” in *Gender and Society*, 44.

families to both maintain and potentially accrue their wealth through marriage alliance. Elite families competed for rank (social, political and/or economic) and an enviable reputation within the community, often utilizing an impressive dowry as one of the most effective means in achieving this. It served both as an indicator of a family's present position within society as well as a predictor of a family's future success, with the spotlight being specifically on the couple being united in matrimony but extending to the larger family unit as well.

Fortunately for scholars, dowry inflation has been well documented in Renaissance Italy, and the case in Venice can give a sense of the overall pattern. Chojnacki reports that in a sample of fifty mid-Trecento patrician dowries the average was around 650 ducats and the largest reached 1,540 ducats. By the 15th century, however, it was highly unlikely to find a patrician dowry under 1,000 ducats, and the tendency to exceed this number was great. The problematic of the dowry system caused enough alarm to invoke intervention by the Senate, which passed a dowry limitation in 1420 of 1,600 ducats. Chojnacki suggests, however, the mere fact that the limit was set at 1,600 ducats is evidence enough that many dowries were already greatly surpassing this figure.²⁵⁴ And documentation reveals that despite state legislature, the limitation was not abided after the instatement of the law. Dowry inflation continued to rise well through the 15th century with some reports claiming instances of it reaching 10,000 ducats or more in the late 1490s.²⁵⁵ The lack of control over the situation led the Senate to pass a second limit on the dowry in 1505, capping it at 3,000 ducats—a figure which was to include “all furnishings, personal effects, gifts, corredo, and all other items.”²⁵⁶ The majority of families abided by the new law: in the subsequent two years after its institution, forty-six of the seventy-two nobles who

²⁵⁴ Chojnacki, *Women and Men*, 132.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁵⁶ As cited by Chojnacki, *Women and Men*, 67.

registered their daughters' marriage contracts listed an exact 3,000 ducat dowry. Yet some flagrantly ignored the limit and continued to fuel the dowry inflation dilemma, resulting in once again a new legislation placing the limit at 4,000 ducats in 1535.²⁵⁷

With marriage contracting holding social reputé at stake, families succumbed to a certain desperation to maintain status, which inevitably had the effect of relegating familial sensitivities in the process. Most parents opted to endow one of their daughters with an impressive *dote* instead of creating numerous mediocre ones for each daughter,²⁵⁸ a strategy which was estimated the best means of procuring the most profitable marriage in such a competitive market. The daughters who were determined least marriageable were then destined for the veil, aligning with the popular view of the cloister as the only other respectable path for a woman of substance. If she stayed in the home her sexual honor would have been suspect and would have tarnished the family name, since a woman's sexual integrity was doubtlessly her most valuable asset and, on a metaphorical level, was symbolically representative of her entire family's reputation within greater society.²⁵⁹ Her sexual honor was not considered her own possession—indeed she wielded little authority over it; her chastity was thus safeguarded by all members of her kin, especially the dominant males of her family.²⁶⁰ By the mid-Cinquecento, however, new ideas beyond the strict binary of *aut maritus aut murus*—either a man or the cloister—began to emerge

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 70.

²⁵⁸ Families with multiple sons also tended to select just one heir to marry off. However, the other sons were typically free to remain bachelors; they were not expected to enter the Church as monks, priests, or otherwise.

²⁵⁹ Guido Ruggiero notes that the loss of a girl's virginity resulted in a four tier loss of honor: in one fell swoop her unchaste actions dishonored God, civilized society, Venetian social order, and the family---in particular the males, who "lost most in the balance of honor," in his *Boundaries of Eros: Sex Crime and Sexuality in Renaissance Venice* (New York: Oxford University, 1985), 17.

²⁶⁰ For further commentary on sexual honor in Renaissance society, see Strocchia, *Gender and Society*, 55.

as options for women's livelihood, though they did not by any means seriously compete with the more common paths designated for women.²⁶¹

The practice of forced monachization was surely not unique to Venice (in Florence the convent population reached roughly 6,000—nearly double that of Venice), yet as Gabriella Zarri points out the Venetian situation was unique because of its cultural and political awareness of the problem, in large part thanks to works like those of Tarabotti.²⁶² By 1581, an estimated three-fifths of all patrician women were in convents, with the problematic of this rapidly growing population demonstrated by an anecdotal fact: in 1553 officials were unable to fill the magistracy position that supervised nuns due to the fact that part of the prerequisite was not having any female relatives who were contemporaneously living in a convent.²⁶³ By the mid-seventeenth century, there were approximately 2,500 nuns in Venice disseminated in about thirty different convents, according to the information documented in reports given by the Venetian patriarchs to the Roman See; yet Zarri is quick to point out that this figure regarded only the *terrafirma* and did not take into account the surrounding islands. The *Notizie storiche delle chiese e monasteri di Venezia* published in 1740 by Flaminio Corner confirms the islands of Burano, Mazorbo, Murano, and Torcello housed an additional twenty-two monastic institutions, bringing the grand total closer to fifty-two or more convents in Venice proper and its hinterlands. Tarabotti casts Venice as the chief practitioner of forcing young women to take vows: “...*quella Repubblica nella*

²⁶¹ Gabriella Zarri investigates the Ursuline order of nuns who permitted for a ‘third state’ in which virgins took the veil but remained in their domestic realm. Their presence in the home was not considered a disgrace but purportedly brought a certain holiness to the domicile. “The Marriage of Virgins in the Sixteenth Century,” in *Creative Women in Medieval and Early Modern Italy: A Religious and Artistic Renaissance*, eds. E. Ann Matter and John Coakly (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), especially p. 261-2.

²⁶² Gabriella Zarri, “Venetian Convents and Civic Ritual,” in *A Literary Nun in Baroque Venice*, ed. Elissa B. Weaver (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 2006), 39.

²⁶³ Chojnacki, “Daughters and Oligarchs: Gender and the Early Renaissance State,” in *Gender and Society*, 71.

quale, più frequentemente che in qual altra si sia parte del mondo, viene abusato di monacar le figliuole sforzatamente."²⁶⁴ Though an erroneous statement given the situation in Florence exceeded Venice in numbers, her words nevertheless underpin both the severity and ubiquity of the problem not just in her homeland but throughout the peninsula.

Having spotlighted the politics surrounding the Venetian marriage market, let us now return to the text. Tarabotti's short-lived panegyric does not serve first and foremost as an actual praise of Venice, then, but rather as a vehicle for exposing the sham of Venice, and more precisely the Venetian myth. Again, Tarabotti's issue is the troubling disconnect between the reality and the myth. She highlights specifically the Republic's far-reaching repute as a place granting unconditional freedom to its inhabitants, whether native or otherwise, rendering it an emblem of a sort of refuge characterized by tolerance and acceptance, and yet for its very own innocent, youthful virgins, Venetian authorities reserved the right to shut them away between the four walls of the convent as a measure taken for the good of the State. In Book One, she says of these men:

Mà questi non solo non piangono tal'inconveniente [forced vocation], anzi i più Catolici, ò spirituali, ò più tosto i più Ippocriti, per non degradar i loro interessi, hanno per massima d'offerire à Dio con ingiusto sacrificio quelle creature [virgin daughters].²⁶⁵

For Tarabotti, it is not just the inhumanity but more so the hypocrisy that lies therein that cannot be left without reproach.

²⁶⁴ Tarabotti, Dedication to Venice in Medioli's edition of *Inferno monacale*, 28.

²⁶⁵ Tarabotti, *La semplicità*, 3; Panizza's edition, 43: "But these men do not weep; on the contrary, the most Catholic and spiritual of them—or rather the most hypocritical—consider it their right to offer up these young creatures to God in unlawful sacrifice for the sake of preserving their own advantages."

The hypocrisy she lambasts against in her dedication is double, however, with women being the point of congruence between the two. Her first exposé is on a macro scale: she criticizes the branding (to use modern terms) to be falsely representative of the product.

...la *Tirannia Paterna* che, celatasi sotto la maestà delle vesti de' vostri senatori, ha finalmente piantata sua sede nel Palaggio Ducale e domina la città tutta...²⁶⁶

She charges the Republic is plagued with a serious set of misgivings and injustices that it seeks to cover up from public awareness. The second hypocritical attitude Tarabotti exposes, and the one that interests me more, is the disconnect between praise and adulation for the feminine as a symbolic (based on the Venetian myth) and the anti-female practices widely diffused within the Republic in all sectors of life—political, religious, sociocultural. How can femaleness be so effusively praised by the Venetian constituent but women themselves be treated so poorly by these same citizens?

Tarabotti, like many other paladins of women, balks at the illogical disconnect between a simultaneous praise of feminine symbolism yet with continued application of misogynist behavior. She attempts to counter the hypocrisy by correlating the positive emphasis on femininity to women, in the hopes of closing the elusive gap that has always allowed hyperbolic praise of female imagery but rarely of females themselves. Towards the end of her *Dedication to Venice*, in the two penultimate paragraphs, Tarabotti constructs a feminist trifecta with each part serving as a reinforcement of the good of women and with a palpable *double entendre* of anti-misogyny. We have already seen how she has separated the female Venetian Republic from the male (tyrannical) Venetian Senators. She then proceeds to say:

Vi [a Venezia] dedico dunque e consacro questo mio primo parto come capriccio d'intelletto femminile. Non vi suplicherò volerlo diffendere da lingue detratrici per ché son sicura che non da altri che da' vostri nobili, che son parte di voi, e da' vostri sudditi, che a voi son soggetti, son per incontrar malignità di censura.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁶ Original dedication to Venice in Medioli's edition of *Inferno monacale*, 27.

Tarabotti's personification of Venice serves as a direct stab at the pride and mendacity that fuel misogyny. Naturally, her address to Venice is directed not to the Republic but of course to its leaders; it is to them that she wishes to communicate her message despite addressing it otherwise. But by speaking directly to Venice, she is "talking over" men, sidestepping them as any kind of authority in the matter while she reserves that right for the eminence of the *Serenissima*, a female. In the process, she reinforces the preeminence of the Venetian State (feminine) and then underlines that its leaders—its male senators—are beneath her; they are subject to her and her ultimate authority.

Tarabotti then continues to more overtly call into question male hypocrisy by referencing the adulation of the Virgin Mary by Venetian citizens as well as citing a historical moment in which a woman was responsible for saving the Republic from capture.²⁶⁸

Ell'è una grand'ingratitudine che quella patria che è protetta parzialmente dalla Vergine, che per mezzo d'una donna ottene già vittoria contro gli'impiti ribelli di Baiamonte Tiepolo, più di qual si vogl'altro dominio del mondo avvilsca, inganni e privi di libertà con forza le sue vergini e donne.²⁶⁹

Here Tarabotti utilizes tactics of guilt to shame men for their ingratitude towards the sacrifices and protection women have granted them. She especially draws attention to the protection provided by the Virgin Mary, who superseded all saints as the supreme protector of the

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 27. In Panizza's edition, 38: "*To you, then, I dedicate and consecrate this first offspring of mine, a fancy of a woman's mind. I shall not beseech you to deflect the tongues of detractors, because without fail I shall encounter spiteful censure from no others than your own nobles, who are part of you, and your own subjects, who are subordinate to you.*"

²⁶⁸ Panizza reports that a coup d'état against the Doge Gradenigo was plotted in 1310, but rebel forces were dissembled and Venetian forces were able to regain control after a woman interceded to kill Tiepolo, the rebel leader. *Paternal Tyranny*, 38 fn5.

²⁶⁹ Original dedication to Venice in Medioli's *Inferno monacale*, 28; Panizza's edition, 38: "*What else is it but deep ingratitude when that country under the special protection of the Virgin Mary, that country which once triumphed against the uprising of Baiamonte Tiepolo by means of a woman, finds itself engaged in degrading, deceiving, and denying liberty to its own young girls and women more than any other kingdom in the world?*"

Republic.²⁷⁰ Venetians held their hagiolatry as a specific point of pride but furthermore retained their state to be especially united under the aegis of the Holy Mother who, throughout time but particularly in the *querelle des femmes* debates of the Renaissance, served as the prime counter to Eve's tainted image and as the exemplar of female perfection—particularly as the apotheosis of the bride figure.²⁷¹ Her dedication emphasizes the femaleness of Venice and the great love its countrymen share for it, a gratitude which found its expression in numerous civic rituals and celebrations that often venerated the Virgin Mary. Tarabotti creates a derivative linkage in which she associates Venice (female) with the Virgin Mary (female) and then concludes the association by including Venetian female citizens, with the overall scope of highlighting the great disparity in Venetian male attitudes toward the former two and the latter. Venetian citizens are indebted to the Holy Mother for providing them protection that guarantees their liberty, and yet in turn they proceed to lock up their virgin maidens, denying them those same liberties they deem indispensable.²⁷² She demonstrates that men shower affections on the feminine on an abstract level, lavishing reverence on the *essence* of the feminine but stopping short at executing the equated respect and admiration in real life dealings with women, which for Tarabotti is one of the more acute forms of hypocrisy budding in Venetian society.

Whilst we remain still on the topic of the dedication, an interesting comparative point should be made here before moving on to Tarabotti's general treatment of women in her text. A

²⁷⁰ Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 138-45.

²⁷¹ For further insight on the role of the Virgin Mary in Venetian society, see Giovanni Musolino's "Culto mariano," in *Il culto dei santi a Venezia*, ed. Silvio Tramontin, *Biblioteca agiografica veneziana*, 2 (1965): 239-74.

²⁷² For insight on the rules and regulations of convent life, see Ch. 3 of Jutta Gisela Sperling's *Convents and the Body Politic In Late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999), 115-169; and the chapter on "Sant'Anna di Castello" in Emilio Zanette's *Suor Arcangela. Monaca del Seicento veneziano* (Venice: Istituto per la collaborazione culturale, 1960), 31-82.

similarity can be drawn between Tarabotti's dedication and Fonte's Venetian panegyric at the opening of *Il merito delle donne*, as they both call upon the undeniable feminine symbolism of their state and the fact that men have, in some way, abused it. But the two openings contain some fundamental differences as well.²⁷³ Fonte depicts Venice as a female victim, seeking to entice sympathy for the ways in which the state has been used and neglected without full credit given to her fruits and labors. Her intent is to summon up some compassion for Venice and, by drawing a direct correlative to male/female relations, for women in general. Fonte's focus in this specific sense is rather female-centric, using emotional supplication against men to attempt to better their actions towards women. She desires for men to share the kind of love women share for them, a reciprocal love, and from this mutual sentiment, she upholds, there could be no means for men to treat women badly. For Fonte, women and men will live harmoniously together when men learn to love and appreciate all that women have to offer, just as women do for them. The situation is certainly different for Tarabotti, who, though focused on an overall amelioration for women, keeps her efforts directly focused on men: she speaks directly to them, denouncing them for their egregious behavior towards women and demanding they change their ways. Her *modus operandi* for effecting change is to shame them for their misogynist actions (while Fonte relies more heavily on pity), and she does so especially by utilizing a religious context, in which they are rendered even more abominable. While Fonte attempts to first spark sympathy, Tarabotti sets her sights on exacting shame as a more effective method. Both women yearn for a reformation of male behavior which will then lead to an amelioration of attitudes toward women, but their strategies for achieving it are quite disparate.

²⁷³ See Fonte: On Women, p. 88-92.

With regard to her treatment of women in her text, Tarabotti practices a strategy of inclusion. She does not seek to alienate men and women but rather attempts to realign them side-by-side; that pariposition, according to the nun, is woman's rightful place whence she was relegated by man and she personally endeavors to reclaim that stance for women. She uses religion as her most formidable evidence of the equality/partnership God intended between men and women, noting in her commentary on Genesis that "...*senza il consenso loro commune [Dio] non vuol niuna cosa.*"²⁷⁴ She makes several attempts to unite the sexes in their common humanity, which Tarabotti firmly believes in and which is why it is that much more egregious that men could attempt to exclude women from their natural and rightful role in (hu)mankind. Specifically on the topic of forced monachization she says:

Abuso grandissimo, errore inescusabile, rissoluzione iniqua, temerità evidente, quando si vede chiaro, che quell'alta Provvidenza hà conceduto alla creatura, sia ò dell'uno, ò dell'altro Sesso, il libero arbitrio, e dottò non meno la donna, che l'huomo, d'intelletto, memoria, e volontà...²⁷⁵

Tarabotti reminds persistently that God is not a misogynist and that he never intended it nor does he approve it, a tactic that again highlights her focus on utilizing shame and even ungodliness to persuade men of their wrongdoings.

The opening dedication too is indicative of the kind of feminist strength Tarabotti purports throughout her work. She commands a kind of reckoning not often provoked by other female writers of her time because of the way she boldly lays out the harsh truths as she sees them occurring around her. She is not hesitant in her speech though her words are calculated²⁷⁶

²⁷⁴ Tarabotti, *La semplicità*, 19; Panizza's edition, 49: "...*He did not wish anything from them without their common consent.*"

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 4; Panizza's edition, 44: "*What a gross abuse, what an unforgiveable error, what a wicked decision, and what sheer audacity is this deed when Divine Providence, after all, has granted free will to His creatures, whether male or female, and bestowed on both sexes intellect, memory, and will!*"

²⁷⁶ Francesca Medioli, "Alcune lettere autografe di Arcangela Tarabotti," in *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 1 (1996), 140.

and she has been noted as one who is able to write on subjects so personal yet still maintains an impersonal stance.²⁷⁷ Yet what I find even more interesting about Tarabotti's writing, specifically within the context of gender issues, is the way in which she is able to command such fierce feminism without ever completely identifying herself with the women she defends. She has been a victim of the forced monachization she wails against but her writing is not about her victimization; she writes on behalf of other women who have suffered this tragic fate and still of others for whom it is imminent.

This in part touches on the argument of her manipulation of the personal/impersonal: Tarabotti manages to keep herself ambiguously situated between the two, coinciding with both the personal and impersonal at times but without ever fully embracing one or the other in her writing. She performs this same maneuver with the male/female binary, a task she is able to do because what spurs her to write is not primarily misogyny, but rather the injustice therein. It may seem impossible at first to separate the two, but understanding that unjust actions are what motivate Tarabotti first and foremost to put pen to paper is essential to understanding her work. Her prime concern is not pitting women against men or vice versa or even elucidating the differences between the two. Rather, her purpose is found in distinguishing the wicked from the just and seeking to prevent further abominations from occurring between the two, "*Poiche nè tutti gli uomini sono tristi, nè tutte le donne buone.*"²⁷⁸ Sex is overall extraneous for Tarabotti in the context of good versus evil but in this particular case she has chosen to crusade (i.e. forced

²⁷⁷ For further enlightenment on Tarabotti's manipulation of the personal/impersonal, internal/external dynamics (particularly in her *Lettere familiari*), see Meredith Kennedy Ray's "Making the Private Public: Arcangela Tarabotti's *Lettere Familiari*," in *Arcangela Tarabotti: A Literary Nun in Baroque Venice*, 173-89.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*; Panizza's edition, 40: "...since not all men are bad and not all women are good."

monachizations), gender is decidedly relevant. Because the fate of daughters is ineluctably tied to their sex, and because fathers have been granted near absolute authority over the direction of their daughters' lives because of *their* sex, the issues involving the discrepancies and injustices played out between men and women have to perforce take center stage in Tarabotti's argument.

She is focused on fighting against the powerful who have acted without conscience in the face of their weaker counterparts, saying "*Biasimo i vitii dell'huomo, non l'huomo,*"²⁷⁹ and later:

Quelli, che si sentiranno mordere dal verme della propria coscienza diranno, ch'io con ardimento soverchio parlo generalmente di tutti gli huomini, ma di gran lunga s'inganneranno, perche coloro, che coll'operar giustamente si rendono sicuri dalle mie, e dall'altrui offese, rimangono medianti le loro operationi, segregate da quegli iniqui, de quali io ragiono.²⁸⁰

Injustice is therefore her biggest enemy, followed immediately by misogyny, since it envelops the injustice in this case. It is this ordering that allows Tarabotti to depict herself as an impartial arbiter;²⁸¹ she assumes the responsibility of defending the weak and defenseless, but refrains from outwardly placing herself in that category in the pages of *La tirannia paterna*.

Part of the way in which Tarabotti maintains a neutral detachment is through her choice of point of view. Per my observations, she consistently refrains from using the first person plural "*noi*" when speaking of victims of forced vocation, instead opting to utilize forms of the third person plural "*loro*." In this way she places a deliberate distance between herself and the victims, a distance that in part attempts to anticipate and refute potential criticism of her writing for her own self-serving means and to avert her work from appearing solely as a woeful

²⁷⁹ In the Dedication to the Reader, *La semplicità*; Panizza's edition, 40: "*I condemn men's vices, not man himself...*"

²⁸⁰ Ibid.; Panizza's edition, 40: "*Some men will say that I speak with excessive temerity about all men in general. They are greatly mistaken. If they behave justly, they will be protected from my attacks and those of others.*"

²⁸¹ I intend here the words 'impartial' and/or 'neutral' not in their wider implications, but in the very specific sense that Tarabotti does not unite herself as one with the subject she is treating, but rather acts as a third party mediator between men and women, despite her obviously siding with the latter.

lamentation of her own wretched life. She makes this distinction clear in her dedication to God, when she says:

...mentr'io protestando al mondo tutto (testimonio voi) che non essagero contro à gl'ingannatori per isdegno; mà per obligo di buona coscienza, perche n'hò sentito *dall'altrui relationi* le rigidezze...²⁸²

Tarabotti's speaking as a third person party ("*n'hò sentito dall'altrui relationi*") decentralizes her from the argument as victim, while simultaneously centering her as impartial crusader. The cases of injustice she decries are material shared with her by other unfortunate secular nuns while she eschews what would seem the most forceful point her argument could contain: her own personal experience.

Certainly, the communal spirit of the convent and particularly that of the *parlatorio*, where the nuns would gather and receive visitors, provided an atmosphere conducive to a sharing of personal experiences, hobbies, passions, and heartache.²⁸³ Even though these exchanges were officially in contradiction with ecclesiastical law of conduct, the camaraderie found through these shared experiences was a unique, if only temporary, source of relief from the misery of leading a life of false religiosity.²⁸⁴ The enforcement of ecclesiastical regulation in the convents was notably lax in the pre-Tridentine era—to the extent that convents were often notoriously indistinguishable from bordellos. But even after the implementation of Tridentine reforms, the unwilling nuns imprisoned therein found support in sympathizers like Giovanni Tiepolo, patriarch from 1619 until 1631, who noted their gravest error was the unpreventable action of being born of the *gentil sesso*: “...*riflettendo in me stesso come esse siano nobili, allevate e*

²⁸² Dedication to God (italics my own), *La semplicità*; Panizza's edition, 39: “*While declaring to the entire world with You as my witness that I have not exaggerated against deceivers out of contempt, but under the compulsion of conscience (for I have heard about their harshness from others' accounts)...*”

²⁸³ For an overview of both the physical and psychological architecture of the convent, see Anne Jacobson Schutte's “The Permeable Cloister?,” in *Arcangela Tarabotti: A Literary Nun in Baroque Venice*, 19-33.

²⁸⁴ For an overview of parlor culture, see Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic*, 158-169.

nodrite con somma delicatezza et rispetto, che se fossero d'altro sesso ad esse toccarebbe il comandare e governare il Mondo."²⁸⁵

Moreover, Tarabotti's reluctance to bring her own history to light at times results in a boldfaced contradiction to the extratextual information available to the reader. Her reputation as a coerced nun was not unknown, and yet her audience must have arched an eyebrow in peculiar confusion when she states, in her address to the reader, that "... *'l mio cuore non hà mai avuta particolar occasione d'irritarsi contro al sesso virile...*"²⁸⁶ The statement seems to make a clear denial of having any event in her personal life that would have induced her to harbor bitter anger against the male sex when, in reality, the most significant male figure in her life—her father—is solely responsible for her eternal imprisonment in the cloister. Why does she deny this? Or— even more difficult to swallow—could it possibly be true? The self-control Tarabotti maintains in refraining from speaking about her personal life, and specifically about her relationship with her father, whom she mentions only once in her entire body of writings (and there only with minimal reference),²⁸⁷ makes it extraordinarily difficult for scholars to postulate any concrete theories about her feelings toward her family.

The choler with which she writes makes it difficult to imagine her not channeling some of that acutely in the direction of her father, yet we must ask why she refrains from elaborating on it. Though I cannot claim with certainty, I would argue that whatever amount of anger Tarabotti harbors against her father is greatly muffled in contrast to the anger she holds against

²⁸⁵ Zanette, *Suor Arcangela*, 36.

²⁸⁶ Tarabotti, Dedication to the Reader, *La semplicità*; Panizza's edition, 40: "...my heart has never had any personal reason for growing angry against the male sex..."

²⁸⁷ Lynn Lara Westwater reports Tarabotti as mentioning her father only once in a letter in which she chastises the anonymous correspondent (most likely Girolamo Brusoni) for ridiculing her for her lameness, which she inherited from her father. The tract is in *Lettere familiari e di complimento*, 81 [letter 53]. Westwater, *The Disquieting Voice: Women's Writing and Anti-Feminism in Seventeenth Century Venice*, Diss. Univ. of Chicago Dec. 2003, 246fn7.

the socio-political custom of forced monachization. Tarabotti has a keen political sense and understands that in order to have any real effect, the problem needs to be uprooted at its source, not dealt with in the individual cases created by it. She abhors and condemns the system, not the individual man. The Venetian patriciate is the corrupt epicenter while individual fathers act as agents on behalf of the wishes of the patriciate; rightfully so Tarabotti directs her castigation more forcefully on the primary instigator of treachery and less so on the abettors. Her work is ultimately an extremely political piece seeking to expose the wrongdoings of the political system of Venetian society. She condemns the injustices of the system—(again, “*Biasimo i vitii dell’uomo, non l’uomo...*”)—and in so doing separates the individual man from the corrupt political hegemony that guides him. Knowing this then makes it possible to ponder Tarabotti’s regard towards her own father from a different perspective: though it is highly probable she could not avoid reserving some anger and resentment towards him, it is possible that she did not necessarily blame him, but recognized him too as a victim of the society in which they lived.

In the case of Tarabotti, the creation of the “other” in her text is a most peculiar event because the tension between the personal and impersonal is at once caustic and yet subtle. She deliberately sets herself apart from the nuns she defends through her choice of language and her censorship of her own life; and yet, since the work is not anonymous and her reputation as a coerced nun was well-known, it is nearly impossible to avoid succumbing to sporadic temptations of reading it as autobiographical, more intensely in some moments than others. She strives to construct the “other” as an entity distinct from herself, but she consistently haunts the pages of her work as the emboldened “other” come to life, and it is this dynamic that brings such great force to her work.

The question to be asked is, then, how aware was Tarabotti of this delicate interplay? Arriving at a concrete answer is impossible, but I believe Tarabotti, based on her sharp literary sense and advanced political awareness for an enclosed nun with no formal education, was very conscious of the power the “other” played both textually and meta-textually.²⁸⁸ As far as I am aware, Tarabotti only makes textual reference to her situation as an unwilling nun when she refers to herself as a secular woman. Towards the middle of Book One, when speaking about her inability to speak from a firsthand experience about both nuns who have freely chosen the religious life *and* those forced, she comments:

...nè io posso parlarne, che per udità, ò per letta relatione, sicom’anche di questo moderno vivere delle Religiose sforzate, essendo io secolare, non posso haverne cognition, che confuse, ò per ombra.

Despite her reluctance to place herself within the category of forced nuns, the public knowledge of her forced monachization is very likely at the forefront of readers’ minds as they read *La tirannia paterna*, rendering the work more powerful because, whether admittedly or not, the work stemmed from an author who had personally endured the hardship about which she wrote. Her personal embodiment of the “other” is painfully palpable yet never completely addressed or recognized in her penned words in this particular text, creating a somewhat uneasy but more vivid tension between the text and its readers. Yet by organizing her work in this way, she is able to render it universal while concomitantly underpinning it with the subliminal force of her authentic testament. Meta-textually, and specifically for readers who choose to consider possibilities on a deeper level, Tarabotti’s rejection of her personal experience is a phenomenal display of literary strength and unwavering belief in her cause. She presumably felt such conviction about the crime of forced monachization that she believed justice itself was enough to convince her audience of the atrocities occurring and move them to change. She refrained from

²⁸⁸ For a better understanding of Tarabotti’s literary acumen, see Weaver, *A Literary Nun*, 173-189.

employing the pathetic happenings of her own life, for the tragic details of coerced vocation were enough to stand alone, abstractly and cogently persuading readers of the urgency to rectify such corrupt cultural customs. This silence serves only to further strengthen her argument, for it represents Tarabotti's confidence in her agenda while shaking the grounds on which those *huomini malvagi* stand. She is strategic but shuns artifice in this particular example; she boldly believes in the veracity of her argument and uses that as her primary combative weapon:

*"...niuna cosa sia d'asscriversi alla virtù, mà alla sola verità, con la cui lingua parlo."*²⁸⁹

Because she does not pursue a strategy of pity in order to catalyze a change in misogynist behavior, instead opting for shame, she sacrifices the pertinence of her own story in hopes of producing a discourse free of overtly biased experience. Whether she succeeds at this or not is questionable and dependent on perspective (because after all her being a secular woman living as a forced nun was well-known and documented in her time, so the personal is relevant to readers even without her specifically invoking it), but the fact that she avoids divulging into her own experience reflects a powerful step forward in the plight of feminism: she avoids using those qualities negatively stereotyped as feminine—the stirring of emotional pity through sorrowful lamentation of her own dismal existence—and instead chooses unapologetic, forceful language to convey her thoughts. She seems to be aware of the manifold misogynist treatises circulating that warn against the artifices of women and their use of feigned tears to get what they want.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁹ Tarabotti, Dedication to the Reader, *La semplicità*; Panizza's edition, 42: "Do not think I lay claim to any ability, only to the truth, whose tongue I make my own."

²⁹⁰ Della Casa depicts the tearful eyes of women as a false display of emotion and one of the most powerful weapons used to manipulate and deceive men: "...il piangere, per la donna, ...è così agevole cosa come il rivoltar la mano. È artificio il pianto nella donna, non è dolore...la natura...ha fornito la donna di certe sue armi singolari che sono la menzogna e le lagrime; ed essa è esperta nel servirsene...sia per diffendersi, sia per sopraffare gli uomini," 152-3; Giuseppe Passi, in Discourse XIII of his *I donneschi difetti*, also warns against women's artificial use of tears: "Ma non creda però alcuno à' vezzi suoi stravaganti, nè alle lagrime loro, perche piangono

Tarabotti, however, is not crying, not enticing pity—she is unabashedly arguing in the name of justice. She rejects using her own emotional experience in order to speak “man to man,” to use an inappropriate and yet most suitable axiom.

If readers can understand this as a necessary component of the specific goal she is trying to achieve in her work, they can then also recognize that in a larger context—outside of this specific argument—Tarabotti’s stance on gender issues proves to be rather progressive evidenced by her claiming equality for men and women. There is an abundance of Renaissance writers who claim male superiority, and a much smaller number who claim female superiority, but the number of those claiming equality is still even more rare, in part because many female champions felt the need to match the extremism of misogyny with extreme philogyny rather than arguing in favor of equality, which can be interrupted as a sign of weak admission in the face of misogyny.²⁹¹ But for Tarabotti, the sexes are equal since there are good and bad to be found in both—“...*nè tutti gli huomini sono tristi, nè tutte le donne buone.*”²⁹² This kind of equality is refreshing in early modern debates of the sexes, for it reasserts an equality of defects typically denied in self but lambasted in the enemy and in doing so ties men and women closer together by acknowledging that for every fault findable in man there is the correlative in women, and for every virtue locatable in man there is, again, the correlative in women. In Book One of *La tirannia paterna*, she quotes a passage from Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* as an honest

artificiosamente; per trar gli uomini all’amor loro, et a far le lor voglie,” 117. In interesting rebuttal, Tarabotti pits the real problem as men’s weakness against the female stare/tears: “...*non havete forza ad resistere ad un vezzo, à una lagrima, à un girar d’occhi, ch’à caso, e non per elezione vi mirino* [le donne], *anzi pur sempre cadete superati dalla debolezza del vostro proprio senso,*” 12; in Panizza’s edition, 47: “...*you do not have the power to resist a caress or a tear or a flutter of a pair of eyes glancing at you by chance, not choice. You always fall, overcome by the weakness of your own senses.*”

²⁹¹ For a list of authors and their stances in the *querelle des femmes*, see the Notes in Kelso, *Doctrine For the Lady*, 282-303.

²⁹² Tarabotti, Dedication to Reader, *La semplicità*.

exemplification of male defects and credits him for his truthful reporting of the frailties of both men and women. The passage from Ariosto:

O degli uomini inferma e instabil mente!
Come sian presti a variar disegno!
Tutti i pensier mutamo facilmente.²⁹³

Followed immediately by Tarabotti's commentary on the excerpt:

Benedetta lingua, ch'al dispetto dell'inclinazione maligna de gl'huomini, in diversi luoghi del suo Poëma veritiero, e senza partialità veruna, spiega i difetti non men dell'huomo, che della donna, e dà à dividedere, che siamo indifferentemente sottoposti alle fragilità...²⁹⁴

She praises Ariosto as a rare male-writer (whose work of course is not vacant of misogyny) who is able to admit, even in a disapproving tone, the shortcomings of men. But her praise is not solely for his recognizing male defects, but even more so for his balanced ability to criticize both male and female, since all are "*indifferentemente sottoposti alle fragilità.*" Again Tarabotti overtly reinforces the idea of equality in demerits while covertly implying the opposite—equality in merits—to be true as well.

In Book One, however, shortly after ideas of egalitarianism have been expounded in the Dedication to the Reader, they are transformed somewhat as her claim of equality begins to take a different shape. She insists that despite the existence of evil and good on both sides, the sheer number of evil men far exceeds the number of evil women, leaving the inverse—the number of good women far outnumbering the number of good men—unsaid but most certainly asserted.

Conosco il mancamento delle femine ancor'io: siamo imperfette, conforme all'opinione d'Aristotele; mà voi animali perfetti ci superate ne gli'inganni, fallacie, e crudeltadi...confesso, che la donna è piena di difetti, volubile, superba, incostante; mà di quanto la supera l'huomo? Già, che da voi stessi, senza

²⁹³ *Orl. fur.* 29.1 as cited by Tarabotti, *La semplicità*, 36; Panizza's edition, 55: "*Oh the weak, inconstant minds of men! How ready we are to vacillate, how ready we are to change our ideas!*"

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 36; Panizza's edition, 56: "*Despite men's malign propensities, that blessed tongue exposes without prejudice the defects of men as well as women in various parts of his truthful poem and gives us to understand that we are all subject indiscriminately to frailty...*"

fondamento di sussistente ragione, sin dal principio del mondo v'andate milantando d'esser nostri superiori, e tali vi sete fatti in ogni conto, non per merito d'operationi, ò di natura; mà per sfacciatissima usurpatione, noi ci dichiariamo vostre inferiori ne' mancamenti e vi cediamo la palma di tutti i vitii.²⁹⁵

Under the umbrella of overall equality, then, there is a new inequality which rings in favor of women: the quantity of goodness to be found in women as opposed to that found in men is indubitably much higher, thus rendering them superior. The transition then from overall equality to a more discriminate categorization of equality is an interesting elaboration on the topic. For this reason, Tarabotti can be viewed as one who pushes forward progressive thought in the pacification process between the sexes all whilst maintaining unshakeable ties to a profeminist agenda by declaring women to exceed men in goodness in quantity, if not quality as well. The particular balance she strikes between male and female agendas is remarkable exactly because that is not her express concern: it is in making the wicked versus the just her focus that by default a more balanced and unbiased chord is drawn in her perspective on gender differences, or similarities. For Tarabotti, there is a clear equality to be reckoned between men and women, but when the dynamic at hand shifts to one between oppressor and oppressed, that equality dissipates completely.

Despite the ferocity with which Tarabotti writes, her messages strike some of the most balanced chords in depicting male/female dynamics within the larger battle of the sexes debate. Meaning that her ideal of men's and women's reciprocated relationship is centered around an idea of Christian humility, respect and reverence; but her fury comes into play at witnessing the

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 55; Panizza's edition, 63: "I know only too well the 'defects' of our sex: we are 'imperfect,' just as Aristotle opined, but you "perfect" animals surpass us in your wiles, your cunning, and your cruelty...when I confess that woman is full of "defects"—proud, inconstant, changing her mind—I wonder how far men outshine her in the same qualities. From the first day of creation you have been bragging about your own superiority over us, on no substantial grounds whatsoever; and indeed if you have made yourselves 'superior,' this is not because of natural talents or achievements, but impudent usurpation. In contrast, we gladly declare ourselves your inferiors in "defects," and yield the victorious palm of vice to you!"

violation of these ideals which then catalyzes an unleashing on men's trespassing of decency and goodness in the face of women. Tarabotti's unapologetic stance has earned her a reputation as the first modern day feminist, with her work in *La tirannia paterna*, her first literary effort, remaining the most forcible component in garnering her that title.

CHAPTER 3.2:

Arcangela Tarabotti: On Marriage

The similarities between religious and laic marriage during the Renaissance, in terms of rituals, roles, celebrations, expectations, are as striking as they are numerous. Stemming from the same conceptual idea, they can be viewed as varying versions of the same initiative and are fundamentally linked as the prevailing binary that predicated the two major life paths available to women in early modern Italy—*aut maritus aut murus* (marriage or the convent). In order to provide the proper context for analyzing Tarabotti's text, a brief note highlighting the more predominant similarities between laic and holy matrimonies should be limned before delving into a more in-depth analysis of the text.²⁹⁶ Though the process of becoming a nun could potentially become much more convoluted than a secular marriage by involving up to four ceremonies (acceptance or entrance into a convent; the taking of the religious habit (vestition); profession; consecration or veiling), the various rituals demanded of the elongated process display a clear

²⁹⁶ The following points comparing religious and secular marriages are taken primarily from Kate Lowe's work on the subject. See her "Secular brides and convent brides: wedding ceremonies in Italy during the Renaissance and Counter-Reformation," in *Marriage in Italy: 1300-1650*, eds. Trevor Dean and K.J.P. Lowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1998), 41-65.

derivation from secular marriage practices. From ritual acts to symbolic meaning to the aesthetics of the nuptial performance, the two types of marriages persistently demonstrate a strong unity.

Following the Council of Trent,²⁹⁷ the Catholic Church sought to exercise and expand its control over both secular and religious marriages. It attempted to render the former more religious in nature while aiming to reinsert a lost spirituality into the latter; however, despite efforts to increase the ‘holy’ component in both, it concomitantly sought to differentiate the two by extirpating the worldliness out of convent ‘weddings’ by outlawing all non-religious aspects (though the numerous repetitions of the condemnations attest to the Church’s inability to successfully enforce it).²⁹⁸ The power of the people wielded its force by tendentially disregarding Church decrees (which banned excessive displays of wealth in marriage ceremonies) because the momentous occasion provided an opportunity to publicly display pomp and circumstance—an opportunity not to be missed, regardless of whether the ceremony was laic or religious. The latter was usually far less indulgent than the former, as would be presumed, but was often not without its own sizeable expenditures.

The most defining characteristic for both was the requirement of a dowry, because both acts equate to a financial and physical (property) transaction in which the stewardship of a girl is transferred from her father to a man (Christ or God in the case of religious ceremony). Her care was being reassigned and the cost of such transferral had to be observed in both instances. For families who chose to deposit their daughters in the convent, a set price of 1000 ducats was fixed. (Tarabotti’s own father was able to pay the full amount in one lump sum, indicating the

²⁹⁷ See Elena Brambilla, “Il Concilio di Trento e i mutamenti nella legittimità dei rapporti tra sposi,” in *Famiglie e poteri in Italia tra medioevo ed età moderna*, eds. Anna Bellavitis and Isabelle Chabot (Rome: École française de Rome, 2009), 51-76.

²⁹⁸ Lowe, *Marriage in Italy*, 51-2.

economic stability of their family.) Secular marriage dowries, however, could and usually did soar much higher given money was always the most powerful factor in indicating the importance and high status of not only the bride's family but of the illustrious union taking place between the two families of the bride and groom. Richard Trexler reports that in the fifteenth century, convent dowries amounted to between one-third and one-tenth of the value of the marriage dowry, with inflation continuing to grow into the 16th and 17th centuries. Because the dowry highlighted the fact that a financial transaction was taking place, the presence of a notary was also required at both ceremonies.

Both secular and religious wedding ceremonies demanded a liturgy in which the brides received rings and wore bridal crowns. Such practices were recorded in popular paintings like *The Mystical Marriage of Saint Catherine of Alexandria* in which the baby Jesus is depicted placing a wedding ring on Catherine's finger. Both ceremonies involved music and a banquet feast afterwards, though post-Tridentine canonical law attempted to extirpate this practice of excessive luxury from religious wedding ceremonies. The ceremony was a public platform where they could make it known that an alliance between two families, or between a family and a convent, was being inaugurated. Each bride was also furnished with a trousseau—usually consisting of wedding baskets and holy dolls. The trousseaux of secular brides were, unsurprisingly, much more ostentatious than their religious counterparts; interestingly, the terminology used to describe the bridal gifts is the same for both the laic and spiritual varieties, with no distinction made between the two.

The ceremonies also represented a change in identity—the young maiden was now leaving behind her role as 'daughter' and moving into a new role as wife, an act which symbolically and functionally necessitated a change in name. Secular wives kept their Christian names but henceforth were required to list their husband's name as well as their father's on any

legal document, and their official form of address changed to Mona, a truncated form of Madonna. Nuns, however, officially discarded their surnames since they were supposed to sever ties to their families and usually had their Christian names changed. They were also now addressed with the title of Suora or Madre.

Perhaps the most interesting parallel in the cases of secular and religious marriages, after the decrees of Trent were released, was the insistence on mutual consent. Theoretically, in order for a valid marriage to take place, the consent of both bride and groom was necessary and in the case of a nun, her willing consent to enter into monastic life was essential. The Tametsi Decree was issued to specifically outline marital regulation around this idea of mutual consent and also served as a means of combatting the medieval practice of clandestine marriages, which had continued to inundate the courts with discrepancies over the validity of marriages well into the Renaissance period.

The Tametsi changed the nature of marriage procedures by rendering it a much more public affair, thereby involving community accountability in hoping to preemptively avoid miscalculated matches. However, though the Tametsi in theory demonstrated a tightening of the qualifiers of a certifiable marriage, in usage they were still undermined and clandestine marriages persisted.²⁹⁹ Despite that under the Tametsi couples no longer needed parental approval to marry—thereby providing couples with a legitimate path for undermining parental authority—the matter was not met without resistance by willful families. For though parental control was unearthed in canon law, it sought to re-root itself by other means: the local Venetian

²⁹⁹ Ferraro, *Marriage Wars*, provides an ample number of case studies which reveal the term “valid” was subject to a variety of interpretations. Specifically, there seemed to be a sizeable disconnect between common practice amongst the polity and official authority on the matter. Even if it did not fulfill all the Tametsi requirements, a marriage sanctioned by the involved families and condoned by those in the community was often upheld in practice as valid, only launching that validity into question if annulment was sought after and the case was brought to court. The power and influence of the community in effecting its own form of marital regulation should not be underestimated. See especially Chapter 2.

government, for instance, fought back by making it legal for parents to disinherit their children in order to prevent an ill-fated match that would potentially harm the social, economic, and political interests that held the Venetian matrix together.³⁰⁰ Families shrewdly used civil law to restore what the Tametsi had deprived them of—power over their children—demonstrating also the ruthlessness behind keeping family wealth intact. Because of the backlash, some argue the Tridentine principle of free choice of a marital partner was completely devalued.³⁰¹ Indeed, there is much evidence proving the lack of efficiency of the Tametsi particularly in terms of the offspring’s free will in choosing a partner; considering most matches occurred when a child (daughter) was between the ages of twelve and nineteen, their youthful dependence on family coupled with their impressionability resulted in parents forcing their will upon the child.³⁰²

Nevertheless, the decree marks a pivotal moment in profeminism by providing a retroactive resource for wives who had been forced into marriage by their parents, guardians, benefactors, etc. With the Tametsi on their side, unconsenting wives could now take their case to court to argue the union was made against their will (many women opted to wait to file for annulment until the death of the person responsible for arranging the marriage (father, guardian, etc.), fearing their retribution).³⁰³ Between 1565 and 1624, 118 requests for annulment were made in the Venetian courts; women initiated 75% of the cases and although the final outcome is not known for all of them, of the forty-three recorded verdicts, thirty-nine ruled in favor of

³⁰⁰ Hacke, *Women, Sex and Marriage*, 90.

³⁰¹ Volker Hunecke, as cited by Hacke, *Women, Sex and Marriage*, 90.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 110.

³⁰³ For case study exempla, see the chapter “Consensual Marriage and Parental Authority,” in *ibid.*, 89-118.

women.³⁰⁴ The most forceful statement a woman could make in defense of her being forced into a union was, “I said yes with my voice but not with my heart,” a line that is echoed by Tarabotti when she says, reflecting on her vows ceremony, “*diversa dalla lingua e dagli atti esteriori, altro intendeva la mia mente.*”

The tie that binds Della Casa, Fonte and Tarabotti together is the upholding of the concept of mutuality. Della Casa argues of the necessity of mutual affection/attraction as requisite in effecting a successful marital union, while Fonte focuses more keenly on mutual efforts of love and companionship once the union has already been sanctified.³⁰⁵ In other words, one focuses on mutual consent before the nuptials (Della Casa) and the other focuses more keenly on reciprocated actions post-nuptials (Fonte). Tarabotti discusses the idea of mutual consent on a broader scale that envelops both contexts but emphasizes the pre-nuptial phase. However, her scenario is more peculiar because the other half representative of the duality inherent in “mutuality” is Christ, or God, an intangible entity not of this world. The symbolic of a marriage with Christ signals the convergence of religious and secular, where concepts of love, commitment, service, and faith retain religious meaning but have function in the secular world. In other words, the form of marriage is secular while the content is holy. Tarabotti occupies the

³⁰⁴ Ferarro, *Marriage Wars*, 29; An interesting precedent of marital litigation can be observed in the Bolognese situation between 1544 and 1563: based upon examination of some 200 ecclesiastical law suits in the archbishop’s court, it is recorded that women started the legal action in 60% of them and in 87% women won the case. For more detailed information, see Lucia Ferrante’s “Marriage and Women’s Subjectivity in a Patrilineal System: The Case of Early Modern Bologna,” in *Gender, Kinship, Power: A Comparative and Interdisciplinary History*, eds. Mary Jo Maynes et al. (New York: Routledge, 1996), esp. 117.

³⁰⁵ See Chapter 1 for Della Casa and Chapter 2 for Fonte.

conspicuous space where the two meet, being a secular woman³⁰⁶ forced to live according to the precepts of a holy life.

And yet the ambiguity blurring the confines where these two worlds converge provides Tarabotti the ability to monopolize on her situation of pertaining to both worlds, though to neither one wholly. She is able to relate information as a secular insider in the convent but is also able to emphasize her spiritual sense of authority to bolster her argument when needed. In the section on the merits of a freely chosen religious life, she posits herself between the religious and lay:

Mi duole però di non haver almeno eloquenza, ò dottrina, che ritrarrei forse i padre, ò convinti di così iniqua barbarie, & essortando i superiori ad investigar con un poco più diligenza, se le vocazioni delle figliuole siamo dettami dello spirito celeste, ò persuasione di spiriti humani, che meritano titolo d'Infernali.³⁰⁷

This passage puts into relief Tarabotti's desire to assume a role as defender of women on the verge of forced vocation/marriage, acting as a mediator both in the religious and secular realms. Both literarily and figuratively she juxtaposes the institution of religion with the secular world and its practices, while depicting herself on the one hand as the most suitable go-between because of the first-hand knowledge she possesses on forced vocation and yet on the other as falling short due to her lack of polished education. Her literary humility should be interpreted only mildly so, however, since her putting pen to paper clearly attests to her own self-

³⁰⁶ In Book One, Tarabotti makes her most overt assertion of her not considering herself a true nun: "...nè io posso parlarne, che per udita, ò per letta relatione, sicom' anche di questo moderno vivere delle Religiose sforzate, essendo io secolare, non posso haverne cognitione, che confuse, ò per ombra," p. 59; "I can only relate what I have heard or read, since even when it comes to the modern condition of religious forced to take vows, I am only able to have an imperfect and shadowy knowledge, as I myself am a layperson," *La semplicità*, 65.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 59; Panizza's edition: "It nevertheless pains me not to have at least eloquent speech and learning, as I might perhaps be able to restrain fathers or other men convinced of such wicked barbarity. I might exhort religious superiors as well to inquire more diligently whether the vocations of young girls are dictated by a heavenly spirit or rather a kind of human spirit deserving the title of infernal," 65.

confidence³⁰⁸ in her ability to crusade a cause literarily (and furthermore is plausibly her concession to Renaissance literary conventions which expected humble self-regard on the part of the author).³⁰⁹ Tarabotti's words here testify not only to her viewing herself as ambiguously placed between religion and laicism, but also to a revelation of a social justice hierarchy in which God rests at the apex and tyrannical fathers and their religious cohorts at the nadir, with Tarabotti between the two. She posits herself as the ideal mediator because she is secular in nature but religious in circumstance. This positioning effectively allows Tarabotti to at once claim the rightful spiritual superiority over the lay that is typically allotted to nuns (not in religious theory but in social practice), and yet also addresses her suitability for intervening with secular fathers given her self-ascribed status as a layperson.³¹⁰ Though she depicts herself as situated between the two, in each case her moral rectitude is asserted over both; and rather than viewing her status as a problematic impediment, Tarabotti monopolizes on her dual identity to reinforce her authority in both sectors.

Because Tarabotti indirectly accepts her marriage to God by in part accepting her status as nun,³¹¹ making Him her husband, she ironically uses his ultimate authority as her most powerful weapon in decrying forced vocation. She paints a picture not just of an unhappy 'wife'

³⁰⁸ Additionally, the illustrious addressees (the doge of Venice Francesco Erizzo, Giovanni Francesco Loredan, the French ambassador and cardinal Mazarin, the grand duchess of Tuscany, the duke of Parma) in her *Lettere famigliari e di complimento* (Letters, Personal and Public, 1650) demonstrate a declaration of the quality of her writings, since Tarabotti apparently deemed them worthy of such a noble audience.

³⁰⁹ Schutte claims nuns used the "rhetoric of humility" as a psychological defense mechanism that "served to reinforce their acceptance of isolation and subordination. Hence it prevented most nuns from paying full, consistent attention to how closely and permanently they were imprisoned in that 'total institution,' the cloister." See *Arcangela Tarabotti: A Literary Nun*, 33.

³¹⁰ See footnote 12 above.

³¹¹ We will soon see that though Tarabotti vehemently condemns forced vocation, she does so for women who are in danger of having to succumb to it in the future, not for those, like herself, who have already suffered their fate.

(i.e. nun), but of an unhappy couple, demonstrating that God too condemns actions going against free will. The acute utilization of her situation attempts to endow her words with an absolute authority; for though she decries her present situation, she draws time and again on her religious relationship as if to convey she speaks for her ‘husband’, as well. She cunningly maximizes her situation to its fullest potential despite it being the source she speaks against and detests being a part of.

Though she never goes as far as referring to Christ as her husband, Tarabotti conveys herself in a light greatly attuned to the will of the Lord and gives the impression that in writing *La tirannia paterna* she has simply acted as a vehicle for relaying the Lord’s message. In her dedication to God, she says, when speaking of her work:

...à voi la consacro, che mirate sempre il midollo della buona intentione, non la corteccia dell’apparenze. Non ad altri, che alla stessa verità si devono queste linee, c’hanno per iscopo loro finale lo spiegare la verità.³¹²

By dedicating her work to God, describing Him as an unwavering paragon of moral truth and goodness, and then declaring that her words owe their very existence to this truth which is the Lord, she puts into play a transitive reasoning that results in labeling her work as the Truth, harkening biblical authorship which claims the human as motor but God as driver, as if to say He penned it Himself. Shortly after, she characterizes herself as a figure of moral propriety, indirectly inviting her audience to consider her words to be in line with Christian values: “*À me, che d’altro non godo, che della rettitudine della coscienza.*”³¹³ She therefore situates her work from the outset as having a kind of religious seal of approval, which allows her to speak on behalf of God, a privilege she assumes persistently throughout the text. Phrases like “*Iddio non*

³¹² Tarabotti’s dedication to God (pages unnumbered), *La semplicità*; in Panizza’s edition: “*These lines owe their existence to You, who are Truth itself, not to others, as their final aim is to display the truth,*” 39.

³¹³ Tarabotti’s dedication to the reader (pages unnumbered), *La semplicità*; in Panizza’s edition: “*My one satisfaction lies in an upright conscience,*” 41.

*vuole fraporsi, nè opporsi alla volontà delle creature, anzi lascia, che tutte ne dispongano à lor gusto*³¹⁴ and “...vuol’Iddio, che noi concorriamo con la volontà à suoi eminenti favori, e poi ce li concede, e così con tratti tutti d’amore andava facendo rapina de’ suoi seguaci”³¹⁵ are commonplace in her work, often times included as the conclusive lesson to some parable or biblical quotation just elucidated.

Towards the beginning of Book One, in the section in which she appeals directly to the rulers of Venice, Tarabotti evidences an oppositional nature between religious intentions and secular interests:

V’è nottissimo, che la moltitudine di religiose non può haver perfezione, perche sono astrette à tal vita, dalla forza fatta loro da’i genitori, e congiunti: le infelici non dicono, *Hac requies mea in seculum seculi*. La maggior parte di loro non sono mosse, come santo Antonio dalla persuasione evangelica. *Vende omnia, quae possides, & sequere me*: Mà sempre col pensiero al mondo, sospirano quella parte de beni, che dovuta loro per ogni legge, vien loro tolta contro ogni ragione; e pur Iddio mostra d’haver in odio ogni attione, che non nasca da una volontaria dispositione, mentre non addimanda, che il cuore. *Fili prabe mihi cor tuum*...mà gl’huomini le imprigionano, per non incontrar dispendii e per poter accommodar le cose loro con ogni sorte di lussi, delitie, e soprabondanti vanità, anzi per poter haver più commodo di satiar l’infami voglie con lè ingorde meretrici, di perder le facultà ne’ giochi, scialacquando in adempimento d’ogni loro ingiusto desiderio. Chi per legge politica abusa la Christiana merita d’esser cancellato dal libro della vita.³¹⁶

³¹⁴ Ibid., 37; Panizza’s edition: “God does not wish to interfere with or oppose the will of His creatures; indeed, He permits us all to dispose of our wills as we please,” 56.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 104; Panizza’s edition: “God wants us to agree to His favors, which He then grants; and so He would capture His followers by treating them kindly,” 81.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 50-2; Panizza’s edition: “You know only too well that the vast number of women in religious life cannot reach spiritual perfection because they are unfortunately compelled to that state by parents and family. It is not theirs to say, “This is my rest forever and ever: here will I dwell for I have chosen it” (Ps 131: 14). The greater part is not moved, like Saint Anthony, the desert father, by Christ urging them , “Go sell what thou hast...and come, follow me” (Mt 19:21). Rather, their hearts are turned to the world; they long for their portion of the goods, theirs by right, which has been taken away unlawfully. And yet God has shown He loathes actions springing from a reluctant disposition, since He requires only our hearts: “My son, give me thy heart” (Prv 23:26)...But men today imprison women to avoid expense and make life easier for themselves by enjoying every kind of luxury, with prostitutes, losing their wealth in gaming houses, and spending money like water in the satisfaction of every base whim. Men like this who abuse the law of Christ for political interests deserve to have their names effaced from the Book of Life!,” 61.

She contends a religious calling must be spontaneous and unforced, awakened in the sincere hearts of those content to devote their lives to spiritual service, renouncing the world of their own accord. Not only does she elaborate on the necessity of a genuine religious calling, but she additionally underscores the element of mutual consent by shedding light on God’s perspective on the matter. She maintains that God is contrary to any actions born of a reluctant disposition—*“...pur Iddio mostra d’haver in odio ogni attione, che non nasca da una volontaria dispositione...”*—thereby underlining God’s opposition to any union that has been forced upon one or both involved parties. In doing so, Christ is equated with those husbands as undesirous of a contrived union as the wives who are coerced into them—neither spouse is content and the union is destined to fail for lack of willful sincerity, *“...la moltitudine di religiose non può haver perfettione, perche sono astrette à tal vita, dalla forza fatta loro da’i genitori e congionti...”* The point echoes Della Casa’s own thoughts on the subject when he declares unnaturally created unions to surely be full of trials and tribulations: *“...non potendo essere senza querimonie e liti e dissidi un’unione che non sia nata da spontaneo consenso.”*³¹⁷ Their viewpoints are underpinned by a denominator common to both men and women in early modern Italy: a general dismay regarding the undermining of the importance of mutual consent in the contracting of unions, considered an essential element needed to ensure matrimonial success.

The excerpt is significant also for its exemplification of the caustic tension between religion and laicism that epitomizes both Tarabotti’s text and her life. Tarabotti anchors her argument in biblical evidence, citing three different verses in this excerpt alone, yet the root of the problem she oppugns is not religious in nature but rather political and economical, as she is well aware. She confirms this towards the end when she condemns fathers consigning their daughters to the veil for selfish, worldly indulgence: *“...mà gl’huomini le imprigionano, per non*

³¹⁷ See Chapter 1, p. 77.

incontrar dispendii e per poter accommodar le cose loro con ogni sorte di lussi, delitie, e soprabondanti vanità...” There is a certain irony to be noticed here: while Tarabotti unveils men’s enclosing daughters within convent walls using false pretexts of religious purposes, claiming to lock their daughters up for their own Christian safe-keeping when in reality the motives are econo-political, Tarabotti herself performs the same type of maneuver. Her aspirations are for political reform at the statewide level, advocating a change in the inheritance system that would alleviate the family economic pressure that forces parents to elect one offspring to endow plentifully while the others either struggle for financial survival or are deposited in convents. And yet, while her motivations are not religious in nature either, she too grounds her argument in exegetical evidence. This leads to questioning why she has done so, with a couple possible answers, though neither conclusive.

Firstly, Tarabotti’s use of religion to support her cause is clearly not innovative, but falls in line with a long tradition of exegetical argumentation, a practice excessively employed in debates over superiority/inferiority of the sexes in early modern Europe, focusing especially on the episodes of creation and Adam’s and Eve’s fall from grace in Genesis. And Tarabotti, like her predecessors, plays very keenly on the advantages biblically based argumentation has to offer: on the one hand, she utilizes religious ammunition much like any other activist, carefully selecting from the plethora of scriptural evidence available to support her argument as she sees fit (and—again in line with other enthusiastic activists—ignoring the fact that exegetical evidence to the contrary is always equally locatable).³¹⁸ Thus, from a given angle, it would seem

³¹⁸ Tarabotti does make mention of the futility of the exempla form of argumentation since every rule has its exception, yet proceeds to utilize historical examples throughout her work to prove her point: “*Ne giovi per difesa à gli’huomini il ramentar le Semiramidi, le Cleopatre, le Lesbie, e le Messaline...perche...ogni regola patisce*”

Tarabotti is simply engaging in the choice rhetoric characteristic of literary debates of the *querelle des femmes*. Another possible answer—not totally exclusive of the first possibility but rather branching off from it—is that she must engage in religious rhetoric in order to successfully battle and defeat the claims made by men using religious pretext. She must answer them in the language men have chosen to argue their point in order to efficiently demonstrate her points equally cancel theirs out. It would seem both sides are aware the root of the matter is far removed from holy inclinations and duties, and yet religion and scriptural evidence become the abstract language with which the battle must be waged, taking advantage of hegemonic belief that whoever proves himself to be most closely aligned with Christian precepts is indisputably in the right.

When waging the literary battle of the sexes, both feminists and misogynists and those who categorically fell between utilized scripture as the most cogent evidence to support their cause, usually underpinning it with their own social observations and opinions.³¹⁹ Tarabotti's method is no different. What merits some critical attention, however, is her use of a series of associations that ultimately lead to a near total appropriation of God. As we have already seen, she immediately aligns God on her side in her dedication to Him, inadvertently aligning Him with feminism as well. Tarabotti does not halt, however, at making God a philogynist—using exegetical evidence only to demonstrate God's reassertion of female equality—but tests the limits further by characterizing Him as a sort of misandrist.

eccettione...,” *La semplicità*, 73; Panizza's edition: “It is no use men reminding us of supposedly wicked women like Semiramis, Cleopatra, Lesbia, or Messalina, since there are exceptions to every rule...,” 69.

³¹⁹ For a general overview of the battle of the sexes, see “Women in the Scheme of Things,” Ch. 1 of Kelso, *Doctrine for the Lady*, 5-37; Margarete Zimmermann, “The *Querelle des Femmes* as a Cultural Studies Paradigm,” in *Time, Space, and Women's Lives in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Anne Jacobson Schutte et al. (Kirkville, Missouri: Truman State University, 2001), 17-28.

She paints a picture of men being in direct contravention of God's will, making them His enemy by delineating a clear oppositional force between what God represents—all that is good—and what (wicked) men represent—all that is bad. The very first lines of Book One exemplifies this oppositional positing:

Non poteva la malitia de gli huomini inventar la più enorme sceleratezza, che quella d'opporsi immediatamente alle determinationi di Dio, che dovrebbero esser'irrefragabili, e pur eglino con attioni interessate non cessano giornalmente di violarle.³²⁰

It is significant to note that Tarabotti commences her work by referencing the 'crime' wicked men commit but does not specify right away what that crime is; there is no mention of enforced closure within convent walls just yet. And yet the syntactical structure of the first clause of the line—"*Non poteva la malitia de gli huomini inventar la più enorme sceleratezza, che quella d'.....*"—leads readers, using their prior knowledge of the subject of the text, to intuitively expect what follows would be a labeling of just what that crime is. She creates a precipice in which readers safely assume they know the direction in which the point is headed but then trumps expectations and surprises by repositioning the crime in a religious context. She clarifies the crime not by definition but only in terms of where it falls within a moral, Christian setting. In doing so, she immediately juxtaposes God and men, showing them to have contrary agendas and to therefore be in discord, highlighting a criminal activity that alludes as well to Lucifer's own wanton and arrogant defiance of the Lord's will.³²¹

³²⁰ Tarabotti, *La semplicità*, 1; Panizza's edition: "Men's depravity could not have devised a more heinous crime than the wanton defiance of God's inviolable decrees. Yet day in and day out, men never cease defying them by deeds dictated by self-interest," 43.

³²¹ Later, Tarabotti makes a more explicit reference to man's similarity to Lucifer: "*Dovea l'huomo, che si vanta di fortezza, non cadere; mà far resistenza à un poco d'aura d'ambitione; nè credulo troppo dar fede à quelle parole, che gli promettevano la similitudine di Dio, con che venne ad immitar la retensione di Lucifero, ch'havea preteso di potersi far simile al suo creatore,*" *ibid.*, 30-31; Panizza's edition: "The male who boasts of his strength should not have fallen but should have withstood that little breeze of ambition; nor should he have given faith to words promising him that he would be like God—words making him similar to haughty Lucifer, who had also claimed for himself the power to become like his Creator," 53.

The fact that Tarabotti's first lines—those arguably most important for setting the tone—underscore not the practice of forced vocation but rather men's inimical nature towards God contextualizes and supports Tarabotti's overriding scope of shaming men into reform. Throughout her text, she persistently pits men against God, decrying their misogynist actions as ostensible violations of the Divine Order. In Book One when she speaks of free will belonging equally to both men and women, she says:

...il pretendere di levar la libera volontà alla donna, è un contraponersi immediatamente alla determination dell'*omnipotente*, che creando gli elementi commando loro, che concorressero alla creatione d'ogn'altro animale, fuori che à quella dell'huomo, ò della donna, a' i quali indivisi impone, che da se stessi generino. *Crescite, & multiplicamini*, disse egli, per accertarne, che senza il consenso loro commune non vuol niuna cosa."³²²

Tarabotti carefully selects biblical excerpts from a specific context and applies the lesson in a general manner, a practice not uncommon in polemical debates.³²³ She interprets God's instructions for humans to reproduce—an action in which the presence of women is as crucial as that of men—as a direct mandate for mutual consensus in all things, casting God in a decidedly anti-misogynist light. Later in Book One, when speaking on the inability to dissolve monastic vows, we find yet another example of men subverting God's will:

Solo la tua ambitione, ò huomo ingannevole, e la tua soverchia arroganza, senza verun contento della volontà suprema, condanna contro il loro genio le tue innocenti carni all'inferno d'un monastero, dove ancorche perseguitate, lacerate, e vilipese, bisogna che stiano à loro dispetto..."³²⁴

³²² Ibid., 18-19; Panizza's edition: "...any attempt to remove free will from a woman is a direct contravention of the Almighty's decision when He ordained that all living things should reproduce themselves, but to man and woman He commanded 'Increase and Multiply' (Gn 1:22) as if to make clear that He did not wish anything from them without their common consent," 49.

³²³ A prime example of selective appropriation of biblical evidence is found in the argument/counter-argument interplay between Passi's *I donneschi difetti* and Marinella's response, *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne, co' difetti e mancamenti de gli uomini*.

³²⁴ Tarabotti, *La semplicità*, 48-49; in Panizza's edition: "Your ambition alone, added to your overweening insolence in taking no account of God's will, allows you to damn your own flesh to a monastic hell, where these innocents remain in spite of beatings, insults, and torments," 60.

The passage highlights Tarabotti's use of disparate measures to bolster her argument in hopes of eventual reform; whether it be in highlighting men's shameful attributes ("*ambitione*," "*soverchia arroganza*,") in a secular setting or using a religious backdrop to paint them as malicious sinners ("*senza verun contento della volontà suprema*"), or even simply attempting to appeal to any inkling of sympathy they might have hearing of the cruel existence daughters must suffer ("*perseguitate, lacerate, e vilipese*") once confined to the convent. Her passionate plea is reverberated through her multifarious and exhaustive supplications to induce reform.

In *La tirannia paterna*, Tarabotti offers very little critique specific to secular marriage. Though she was well aware of the social practices and injustices inherent in the marriage market, having even acted as a matchmaker herself for some couples,³²⁵ the injustices inherent in spiritual marriages so inundate her present mind of concern that secular marriage can only be conceived as a progressive state in comparison. For Tarabotti, her forced marriage to God and the subsequent imprisoning in convent life is her own personal hell, as she describes in Book One:

La stanza di queste infelici (parlo sempre dell involontarie monache) non si può paragonare (cosa in vero
horribile da sentirsi; ma vera) che ad un'inferno. l'Inferno solo hà similitudine con l'infelicità di queste
sfortate serve di Christo.³²⁶

For the Benedictine nun, whose suffering is tangible, quotidian, and ironically an impediment to religious aspirations, her imprisonment in the convent of Sant'Anna is the nadir of existence, rendering secular marriage by default an elevated state. She alludes to this point when

³²⁵ Meredith K. Ray, "Letters and Lace: Arcangela Tarabotti and Convent Culture in Seicento Venice," in *Early Modern Women and Transnational Communities of Letters*, eds. Julie D. Campbell and Anne R. Larsen (Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 67.

³²⁶ Tarabotti, *La semplicità*, 60; Panizza's edition: "*The place where these unfortunate women dwell—I refer always to unwilling nuns—can be likened to an inferno. The word is dreadful to hear, but a true comparison. Only Hell itself bears a likeness to the suffering of these enforced slaves of Christ,*" 65.

discussing how fathers dupe their daughters into the convent by degrading the marital state and exalting a religious existence:

Troppo, ah! troppo repugnano i liberi e rilassati costume d'un padre di famiglia...a' i consigli, che danno alle giovanette, di chiudersi in gabbia, con pretesti ridicoli à chi potesse haver cognition quanto siano ingannate, con larghe, e liberali, mà mentite, e fraudolenti promesse: perche non possono negare alle figliuole, che da loro non sia stato rinuntiato alla vita religiosa, & abbracciato il matrimonio, vanno dicendo, che lo stato de' maritati è pieno di tubulenze, e travagli... Così vanno con descrizioni di miserie, & infelicità biasimando quello, à ch'essi s'appigliano, e con apparente velo mascherano la verità, come soliti di fare in ogni occorrenza...³²⁷

Tarabotti inadvertently suggests secular marriage is an appealing alternative to forced spiritual marriage when she denounces wicked fathers who “*mascherano la verità.*” She claims they falsely advertise benefits of monastic life and accuses them of depicting marriage in a horrendous manner in order to render the veil more enticing. Her use of the word ‘truth’ here is interesting and ambiguous, however, for it is not clear how she intends it exactly.

From one angle, she could be referring to the truth as the many ascetic hardships that accompany monastic life (which fathers deceitfully cover up). If the “truth” is taken to have this primary definition, moreover, it would also mean there is inherently embedded within it a secondary connotation: that marriage is a less harsh state. And yet if the “truth” is understood from a different angle, Tarabotti could be intending that the truth is marriage is not as abject as wicked fathers would make it out to be. Despite being unable to say with certainty which meaning she intends precisely, both angles ultimately convey the same message: forced spiritual marriage is a worse state than secular marriage. However, if the latter definition (marriage is not as bad as it's depicted) is intended, Tarabotti reveals how deeply mired she is in her own personal state of hell, unable or unwilling to fathom secular marriage as a more miserable existence for women. Naturally, the element of first-hand experience creates a bias in forming

³²⁷ Ibid., 53-4; Panizza's edition: “*They [fathers] prate on and on how their daughters must on no account ever think of giving up the religious life to embrace instead the state of matrimony and how the married state is full of trials and tribulations for a woman[...]. And so fathers continue in their depictions of the woes and miseries of marriage, inveighing against their own state of life, veiling the truth as they are used to do whenever it suits them,*” 62-3.

judgments over which civil status was worse: for nuns like Tarabotti, secular marriage, which appeared to offer a connection to worldly matters coupled with a much more ample socio-spatial environment, seemed like a sanctuary in comparison to their present situation; and yet for those unhappy wives in secular marriages, they viewed the convent as a blissful reprieve where they would be safe from the torments of their malicious, cruel, abusive husbands and where they could engage in activities in a serene, all-female community.³²⁸ The reality, of course, is subjective and dependent on the individual.

Additionally, Tarabotti's words serve to categorically construct a tri-strata hierarchy for the various civil statuses of women. The lowest and middle points are designated for the two different types of marriage: she places forced nuns at the nadir, equating it to Hell; then comes secular marriage, based on her belief secular wives enjoy more freedom; the top position is delegated to maidens who never marry and remain in the paternal home—the *dimesse*—(a status she beseeches men to allow their daughters in her Dedication to the Reader and that will be shortly elaborated). This particular ordering reflects Tarabotti's woeful lament over the permanency of monastic vows as well as her recognition of the potential reprieve some women were afforded from secular unions. She viewed the convent and its eternal inescapability as identical to the dooming permanence of Hell. On the other hand the prospect of dissolving a secular marriage, though by no means an easy process to annul, was by comparison a much easier and more likely possibility than dissolving religious vows.³²⁹ The hope a wife had of annulling her marriage, or even just outliving her husband and enjoying the release from marital

³²⁸ See Weaver, *Convent Theatre in Early Modern Italy: Spiritual Fun and Learning for Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2002); K. J. P. Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2003).

³²⁹ Ferraro reports that in Venice only 210 records of full-scale investigations are preserved in the *Causarum Matrimoniorum* for the period between 1564 and 1650; the small number of suits filed testifies to the difficulty of the process and discouragement from seeking annulment because of that difficulty. Ferraro, *Marriage Wars*, 31.

obligation that typified widowhood³³⁰ seemed to offer a hope that was unknown to Tarabotti and other forced nuns. She specifically addresses the issue in Book One, saying:

...con giuste cause si concede il divorzio, e tuttoche sia nodo cosi santo, e cosi stretto, può nondimeno in qualche maniera sciogliersi, ò almeno per la morte d'una della parti finire; perche denno esser condannate le monache con inappellabile decreto nel sacramento della loro professione, ad osservazioni eternamente irrefragabili?³³¹

The cruel injustice of being deceived and forced into the convent, as Tarabotti believes, is matched only by the inability to do anything about it once it's been sanctioned.

At the apex of her trifecta, she has in place the *dimesse*.³³² In her Dedication to the Reader, she supplicates fathers to let those daughters who have no desire for the veil to remain at home:

...se non vuoi esser annoverato frà gli ingannevoli, procura alle tue figliuole, ò parenti (se ne hai) che non havendo voglia di monacarsi, godano nella tua casa una vera educatione Christiana, accompagnata da una modesta ritiratezza, nè chiuder loro in horrida prigione il corpo, perche d'indi habbiano à precipitar l'infelice anima nel baratro infernale.³³³

For Tarabotti, leading a modest, virtuous life at home provided the ideal balance between worldly freedom and Christian propriety. This was all she desired for her own life, and it served as her vision of the ideal feminine existence in 17th century Venice.

Though Tarabotti knew her own fate was already sealed, she nevertheless fought and campaigned against forced monachization with unrelenting vigor. The fact that the nun, in *La*

³³⁰ In Venice, widows were allowed more flexibility with their dowries than in other contemporary societies, such as Florence. See Chojnacki, "Getting Back the Dowry: Venice, c. 1360-1530," in *Time, Space, and Women's*, 77-96.

³³¹ Tarabotti, *La semplicità*, 48; Panizza's edition: "*The knot of matrimony, despite its sanctity, may nevertheless be dissolved under certain conditions—or at least come to an end with the death of a partner. Why, then, must nuns be condemned to keep their vows forever by the sacrament of their religious profession, with no appeal whatsoever?*," 60.

³³² This stratum could arguably include widows who were left in a good state by their deceased husband.

³³³ Tarabotti's Dedication to the Reader, *La semplicità*; Panizza's edition: "...if you do not want to be counted among the betrayers, make sure that your daughters or any other female relatives of yours who have no wish to become nuns enjoy a true Christian education at home accompanied by modest retirement from the world," 41-2.

tirannia paterna, seeks reform as her ultimate goal is a distinctive point differentiating her from Fonte and Della Casa. Despite their apt ability to elaborate and then lament over the procedural rituals in marriage contraction and married life itself, Fonte and Della Casa stop short at demanding an overhaul of the system. Fonte's conclusion ultimately bows to the necessity of conforming to socialized ways of understanding matrimony while Della Casa proffers (anti-marriage) advice only in the context of marriage as it is presently understood.³³⁴ Their perspectives fall in line with what many contemporaries conceded: despite the numerous economical, social, emotional and even physical travails marriage could solicit, it was nevertheless viewed as a necessary evil. Tiepolo is a prime example of one who was torn over the need for a secure inheritance system and distressed by the forced nuns it produced symptomatically. He greatly sympathized with their plight³³⁵ and yet concomitantly believed their sacrifice a necessity for the well-being of the state, reportedly having said to the Doge and the Senators: "*Se in questa città vi è ordine, tranquillità, prosperità, se i maggiori pericoli e scandali sono evitati, lo dobbiamo a queste migliaia di povere recluse!*..."³³⁶ Furthermore, his words confirm awareness of the injustice taking place against unwilling nuns reached all the way

³³⁴ See *On Marriage* portions of Chapters 1 and 2 for detailed commentary.

³³⁵ Zanette relates the contents of a letter in which Tiepolo expresses sincere anguish over the state of forced nuns: "si sono confinate fra quelle mura, non per spirito di devotione ma per impulso dei loro, facendo della propria libertà, tanto cara anco a quelli che mancano dell'uso della ragione, un dono non solo a Dio, ma anco alla Patria, al Mondo, et alli loro più stretti parenti; che in quei strettissimi forni delle lor celle, dove stanno a cuocersi la vita, et crucciarsi con l'animo, ritrovandosi bene spesso molte di esse a tale strettezza, che, mancandole il necessario cibo, convengono pascersi solo di lagrime et di affani, ho cercato col temperare il rigore nelle cose oneste, accrescerlo poi nelle altre contrarie alla medesima honestà. Con questa forma di governo ho stimato...di sodisfare in uno stesso tempo al Signor Dio, alla Patria, alla propria conscientia, et anco a medesimi interessati, e guadagnarli non meno la pubblica che la privata sodisfattione, facendo bene spesso un tal riflesso dentro al mio animo, che se duemille e più Nobili, che in questa Città vivono rinserate nei monasterij come quasi in publico deposito havessero potuto o voluto altramente disporre di loro stesse, che confusion! che danno! che disordine! quali pericoli! quai scandali, et qual male conseguenze si sariano vedute per le case, e per la Città, e quanti riflessi di molestie, e di indecentie alla pubblica pace, e servitio!..." *Suor Arcangela*, 36-7.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

to the level of the patriarch, simultaneously highlighting both the corruption of the Venetian government and its unwillingness to rectify the situation.

Because Tarabotti so audaciously and forcefully condemned the system, she was a rebel who attacked both Venetian reality and myth, exposing the former as corrupt and the latter as false. Her writing stands apart from her contemporaries not only because of its unique perspective and her ability to combine so fluidly the personal with the impersonal, but it distinguishes itself very much by its tone—one of rage, of brazen honesty, of desperate sorrow all enveloped in courageous revelations and vehement condemnations. Her word differs from her contemporaries, like Fonte, who often make misogynistic concessions in their works presumably to ensure better audience reception and to maintain a certain level of social acceptability, but Tarabotti rejects these types of concessions.³³⁷ In *La tirannia paterna*, she is fearless in her literary combat, un-intimidated by potential rebuttals and continuously poised for attack, believing firmly in women's rights being a most just cause to defend.

Ironically, however, the nun's renegade stance was afforded her only through the dismal reality of her situation. Her eternal confinement in the convent of Sant'Anna provides her an immunity that frees her from having to conform to the societal norms that dictated hegemonic acceptability. Whether her writings were well received, attacked or banned made little difference to her state of being as it remained permanently unaltered: she was, in a word, untouchable. As she herself noted, "*Non resta che perdere a chi ha perduto la libertà.*"³³⁸ The same convent life she thrashed against was the very same one that protected her and enabled her to bring forth such a starkly honest voice; she did not have to suffer the type of repercussions that

³³⁷ Ten years after its publication in 1654, *La tirannia paterna* (or rather better known under its published title, *Semplicità Ingannata*) was consigned to the Roman Index of Forbidden Books.

³³⁸ The original dedication to Venice in Medioli's edition of *Inferno monacale*, 28.

would have manifested if functioning in regular society. A case that highlights this is when Francesco Buoninsegni's derogatory *Contro il lusso donnesco* appeared on the literary scene in 1644. Venetian women offended by the misogynist text hurried to Tarabotti, bringing her Buoninsegni's manuscript so that the nun could respond, taking up arms with him on behalf of all women. The convent offered Tarabotti a kind of armor that the average woman was lacking and this added protection enabled Tarabotti's straightforwardness: her writing, in comparison to many authors who had to bow to the rules of literary etiquette, comes at a very face value, comparatively speaking.

A final point about Tarabotti and one which I will continue to investigate, is why she never left the convent. For a woman who so passionately believed that once liberty is lost there is nothing left to lose, it is indeed intriguing that she never sought to regain it. Though the monastic vows were meant to be lifelong, and in most cases were, there were some nuns who were able to dissolve them and for those who were not, they fled. Tarabotti, as far as I can find, made no attempts to legally or officially dissolve her vows. This is especially interesting when looking at the timeline of her trajectory interweaving her writings and convent life. Article 19 of the Tridentine decrees permitted both men and women to claim within five years of their admission to a monastery that they had been forced into the religious life against their will, or that they had been under-age when they took their vows, making it, in effect, legally possible for women and men to leave monasteries within this 5 year time frame. Zanette upholds that Tarabotti wrote *La tirannia paterna*, her first work, at the age of twenty: this would have been four years after taking her vows, making her officially eligible to utilize Article 19, but she never did.

The fact that Tarabotti could write such angry invectives, comparing convent life persistently to a hellish torment full of suffering and insults, but never attempt to leave

underlines a very strong observance on her part of contemporary social and religious norms even while simultaneously fostering a sharp divide against political practices of the day. She herself makes this distinction in her first autograph letter, when speaking of *La tirannia paterna*, saying, “*So la materia essere scabrosa, ma contraria al politico vivere, non al cattolico.*” Tarabotti presents a sort of paradox in her stance then, for she promotes free-thinking and female empowerment within a political framework but not as vehemently in a religious/social context. In her *Inferno monacale*, written after *La tirannia paterna*, she speaks of daughters thinking independently and judging for themselves what orders they should follow based on what is licit; they should avoid blindly following the orders of parents simply because they are their parents: “*Devono obedirsi [a]i genitori nelle cose lecite e giuste e non nell’irragionevoli.*”³³⁹ Beyond this, Tarabotti affirms, they have only to obey and answer to God.

It would seem Tarabotti’s rebellious encouragement goes only so far, for once a vow has been taken, as in her own case, her sympathies are trumped by her sense of honor and she displays an adherence to a decorum both social and religious in nature when she indirectly asserts the person in question is now obligated to honor that vow. In several of her works she denounces with disdain nuns who flee the convent—the same women, like herself, who have worldly aspirations and never should have been nuns. On these she comments: “*Sai pure quante di queste, sciolto il freno della dishonestà e macchiata la continenza, fuggitesi dall’aborrita prigione, habbiano dishonorato le loro case e anche quelle di Dio.*”³⁴⁰ Indeed, her writings are peculiarly characterized by this tension between past and present: for while she laments over what *has happened* to her, she nevertheless accepts it as an irreversible action, and yet, she

³³⁹ Tarabotti, *Inferno Monacale*, ed. Francesca Medioli (*Progetto Manuzio. Liber Liber*. 25 June 2008. Web 24 May 2013), (http://www.liberliber.it/mediateca/libri/t/tarabotti/l_inferno_monacale/pdf/l_infe_p.pdf), 8.

³⁴⁰ Tarabotti, *Inferno monacale*, 126.

simultaneously cries out for reform for girls who are presently in danger of suffering forced monachization in their futures. Though her stance is rendered somewhat paradoxical by accepting her own “death” and yet still crusading for others, it offers her the only balance possible between accepting her duty as an obedient daughter and nun while still satiating somewhat her longing to participate in a society that has banished her away. Tarabotti’s is a voice straight from the depths of Hell, come to denounce fathers and warn girls of the imminent danger they face much in the same way Fonte’s *Il merito delle donne* seeks to warn of the hellish state of holy matrimony.

Feminist literature is greatly indebted to Tarabotti’s sacrifice of her life, of her free will, of her freedom, for these sacrifices fostered the production of unique works that no other female author of the time rivals: works that offer an unhinged, passionate criticism of contemporary social practices and blatantly calls into question the illogic of marriage contraction and forced vocation. Her efforts may not have had immediate impact on the way these unions were contracted, but they did change the course of feminism in a way that made her sacrifice one not done in vain.

CONCLUSION:

The problematics surrounding matrimony in early modern Italy reflect problems typical of any institutionalized system whose roots reach deep into the personal: the theoretical values instilled within consistently clash with outcomes of its practical implementation, revealing palpable discords between public obligations and private desires, between communal well-being and the well-being of the individual, between civic duty and romantic sentiment, between social

expectation and personal aspiration. These dissentious issues caused a number of marriages to reign as a primary source of suffering and were triggers that spurred many, like Della Casa, Fonte, and Tarabotti, to write against marriage. But the problem originates even before this level of conceptualization since the decision to marry or not was in all actuality not a personal decision. Especially for members of the elite ranks of society, the preliminary freedom to choose between celibate life or matrimony was unrealistic in most cases. The political and economic demands of the State, whose cohesion in large part depended on maintaining the wealth of illustrious families in its constituency, demanded in turn that its citizens marry in order to keep civic order intact. Despite being well aware of the machinations and expectations of their contemporary culture, all three of the authors scrutinized in this study—Della Casa, Fonte and Tarabotti—strongly advocate remaining single. Della Casa argues a man dedicated to civic affairs is more advantageous to the State if he refrains from marrying, preserving his time and energy more amply for governmental matters; Fonte argues a woman who lives off the dowry (that would have otherwise been used to marry her) will be happier as she will be able to pursue her own interests and maintain a level of freedom that would have been impossible under the watch of an overbearing husband; Tarabotti argues women should have the option to decline marriage and remain single in the paternal home while simultaneously cultivating and practicing a Christian education and lifestyle.

Though all three recommend a single civil status, the degrees to which they do so are varying and indicative of the power embedded within gender roles during their time period. Della Casa asserts his anti-marriage beliefs in a way that demonstrates the gap that separates his ideal with real possibility is smallest, since for his audience—young, affluent men—the potential to actually remain single is not wholly out of the realm of possibilities. Fonte’s perspective, and rightly so, gives her preachings a more fantastical element since the feasibility of a woman never

entering into marriage was highly unlikely. Women were much more tightly entwined with the concept of marriage and in topics of debate the two were often treated as one in the same. This in part explains why Della Casa can end his dialogue with the lingering message of shunning marriage but why Fonte, who spends the better part of her dialogue denouncing men and marriage, nevertheless ends by conceding a woman must marry and the best she can do is try to render it less miserable by conforming to the expectations of a meek, obedient wife. Critics might observe some level of hypocrisy in a denouement that finds itself contrary to the message of the entire text, but the issue is one that reflects the author's understanding of their social environment—that the ideal and the real are in conflict just as the theory and practice of marriage are in conflict—and fantastical advice is eschewed in favor of practical advice in the last moments of the text.

Marriage, then, was a distressing issue for both men and women in Renaissance Italy; both sexes were subject to socio-political conformities surrounding the idea of matrimony and therefore shared a joint understanding of the hardships that lay therein, with hardships being understood as anything from suffering the daily bad breath of a spouse to physical abuse and adultery. Yet despite the acute ability for empathetic understanding, marriage seemed to be a source that caused even more division between men and women during the *querelle des femmes* debate rather than uniting them on an issue about which they both held the same opinion. Misogynists like Della Casa elected to blame women for the malicious aspects of marriage just as feminists like Fonte chose instead to blame men for the pains endured in holy matrimony. But the relation dynamics between married men and women, more commonly negative than positive, were not the cause but rather the effects of the problem—the problem being a badly formed, poorly regulated endeavor of marriage alliance. Relationships were near-destined to fail when questions of veritable compatibility were relegated under the supreme priority of economic

advancement, with emotion being replaced by tangible goods in the hierarchy of importance. But both Della Casa and Fonte only remark on the root of the issue as being the corrupt and unjust norms put in place by the Church and State in a peripheral manner, in comparison to the entire body of their respective texts. They make reference to the dysfunctional customs of marital alliance upheld by the two institutions, but dwell more heavily on the incompatibilities of men and women in general, recognizing only every so often that these incompatibilities could be lessened if the problem were rectified at the institutional level.

It is only with Tarabotti that we see a full-fledged attack against both Church and State and vehement calls for reform from both institutions. Her text is significant because, compared with that of Della Casa's and Fonte's, it demonstrates a progressive stance in the *querelle des femmes* debate. Her focused attention is directed toward the root of the problem, and not at its pervading branches of effects, like the former two. That is not to say she refrains from lambasting men in *La tirannia paterna*, but the men she does target are the men directly responsible for the crime of forced monachization—greedy politicians and clergymen--and not men in general. Her work displays a progressive trajectory on the gender plane exactly because gender is not the primary issue, but rather injustices that stem from gender issues.

The study of marriage in Renaissance Italy, taking into account both male and female perspectives, sheds phenomenal light on the study of misogyny and profeminism, two fields which, despite the enormous amount of scholarship dedicated them, continue to elude a definitive understanding and definition. Della Casa's case is particularly exciting because of the emerging interest in researching elements of profeminism in misogynist works, exciting exactly because of the rarity of such findings. His work demonstrates an incontestable positioning within that category and further demonstrates our previous understanding of misogyny is not as decisive as had been thought. Fonte's work spotlights the development of feminism at a specific

moment in sociotemporal history, capturing many elements of what it meant to be a feminist in 16th century Italy. She reveals the delicate balance between promoting pro-female progression and appeasing the still fervid misogynistic overlay of her time period, enacting an interplay between the two in her dialogue that reaffirms just how powerful literature is in the reflection of contemporary mores. Tarabotti's work, though written only less than fifty years after the publication of Fonte's *Il merito*, demonstrates a dramatic increase in the development of the feminist voice in philogynous historicity, so much so that it almost seems anachronistic, similar to the anachronistic fierceness of Christine de Pizan in late medieval times. Though her work is seminal in feminist literature for fighting issues that functioned as a great source of oppression for women, her influence on gender issues is even more remarkable for taking a more balanced perspective of men and women, conceding levels of equality between them. For in the end, feminism, like any social cause, has as its ultimate scope civil rights and equality for all.

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