

Women in the Garden: Moderata Fonte and the Role of Boccaccio's *Decameron* in
Il merito delle donne

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“The queen, then, accompanied by her women and three young men...took the path to the west with slow steps, chatting, jesting, and laughing with her followers all the while...and she led them, well before midmorning to a most splendid and sumptuous mansion...after this they had a garden opened to them which was adjacent to the house and walled around, into which they went; upon entering it seemed to them of marvelous beauty... .and at the center of the lawn there was a fountain of white marble with superbly sculpted reliefs.”¹

- *Decameron*

“Realizing that the sun was somewhat hidden behind many little clouds, the women agreed to go down into the beautiful garden...and so they set off merrily, taking each other by the hand and descending the stairs. When they arrived there, one could not express with words how charming and delightful it seemed to them...there they saw the loveliest orange and lemon trees, with fruits and flowers of such sweet scent that the scent lightened the heart no less than the view delighted the eye...and wandering from place to place they arrived at a beautiful fountain, which stood in the middle of this garden”²

- *Il merito delle donne*

In 1600, literate society in the bustling Republic of Venice witnessed the publication of local author Moderata Fonte’s exuberant polyphonic dialogue *Il merito delle donne*. Set in a sun-splashed garden, the text features a *brigata* of witty noble ladies who engage in verbal sparring over the merits of the male sex and married life under the auspices of a benevolent queen elected from their company to guide the day’s conversation. The dialogue is open and its

¹ “La reina adunque con lento passo, accompagnata e sequita dalle sue donne e dai tre giovani...prese il cammino verso l’occidente, e cianciando e motteggiando e ridendo con la sua brigata...assai avanti che mezza terza fosse a un bellissimo e ricco palagio...gli ebbe condotti.” Giovanni Boccaccio, *Tutte le Opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, vol. 4, *Decameron*, ed. Vittore Branca (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1976), 235-237.

² “In tanto avvedutesi che’l sole si era alquanto nascoso dietro alcuni nuvoletti, si accordarono tutte di scendere nel bel giardino...e così presesi per mano e dicese le scale, vi s’avviarono allegramente. Quivi entrate che furono, non si potrebbe esprimere con lingua quanto parve loro vaghissimo e delizioso...quivi si vedevano aranzi e cedri soavissimi con fiori e frutti di così grato odore che non meno rallegravano il cuore che dilettaessero la vista di che gli odorava... E così camindando di luogo in luogo, pervennero ad una bella fontana, che era nel mezzo di questo giardino” Moderata Fonte, *Il merito delle donne: ove chiaramente si scuopre quanto siano elle degne e più perfette de gli uomini*, ed. Adriana Chemello (Venice: Editrice Eidos, 1988), 19-20.

characters split into two camps, the first of which is charged with “speaking as much evil as possible of [men],” the other with defending the traditional preeminence of Italian society’s husbands, fathers, and sons.³ The debate that ensues is by turns playful, biting, witty, and heartfelt. Although neither side is allowed to stifle the other and triumph absolutely, the text’s surface frivolity masks a serious purpose. Beneath the rhetorical quips and jabs and token praises of men, an insistent feminist critique of misogyny and patriarchal oppression of women is hammered home with the aid of Corinna, the work’s most eloquent and authoritative speaker.⁴ Through her Fonte incites contemporary women to “wake up and recover our liberty, along with the honor and dignity that they (men) have held usurped from us for so long.”⁵ *Il merito delle donne*’s independent and dynamic female speakers, who are presented to the reader as contemporary or potentially real Venetians, represent Fonte’s belief in a female right to intellectual and social autonomy and their deceptively entertaining speech has an edge that cuts.

Fonte’s subversive attack on the married state and her impassioned promotion of women’s worth was part of a larger early modern European literary movement known as the *querelle des femmes* or the debate on women. Historians traditionally date the inception of the *querelle* to 1405, the year in which Italo-French scholar Christine de Pizan wrote the masterpiece *La Livre de la Cite des Dames*.⁶ This text was produced in response to the overt misogyny that characterized late medieval poetry like the *Roman de la Rose*, and as Christine herself put it, to

³ “di dire di loro quanto male può dire liberamente” Ibid., 24.

⁴ This paper’s use of “feminism” is based upon Gerda Lerner’s definition of feminist consciousness as “the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group; that they have suffered wrongs as a group; that their condition of subordination is not natural, but is socially determined; that they must join with other women to remedy these wrongs; and finally, that they must and can provide an alternate vision of societal organization in which women as well as men will enjoy autonomy and self-determination.” Gerda Lerner, *Women and History*, vol. 2, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 14.

⁵ “Deh, di grazia, svegliamoci un giorno e ricuperamo la nostra libertà, con l’onore e dignità che tanto tempo ci tengono usurpate” Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 169.

⁶ Margaret King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 220.

find out “how it happened that so many different men...are so inclined to express both in speaking and in their treatises and writings so many devilish and wicked thoughts about women and their behavior.”⁷ The issue of women’s merit quickly became a popular rhetorical battleground for humanistically trained intellectuals of both sexes in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. At this time the debate was largely theoretical in nature; while its early female contributors like Laura Cereta and Olympia Morata served as living examples of female scholastic ability, their work was governed by the rhetorical dictates of *pro et contro* argument rather than a feminist agenda.⁸ Such female authors typically wrote in Latin, a language inaccessible to the majority of the population and the undereducated “other” sex especially, and although they urged men to acknowledge woman’s mental acuity, they did not advocate the eradication or restructuring of the institutions which upheld patriarchal society. As the Renaissance historian Joan Kelly once stated, the first female *querelle* writers “carried on their long and patient intellectual resistance at a remove from action.”⁹

At the beginning of the seventeenth century the *querelle des femmes* began to radicalize in Italy and transitioned from an elite rhetorical playground to a serious platform for social critique as the learned woman became culturally normal and female authors could take on new goals.¹⁰ Although the narrative of male excellence and the supposed link between social order and the hegemony of men perpetuated by patriarchal discourse remained strong, the precedent for arguing women’s merit coupled with increasing female dissatisfaction with their economic

⁷ Christine de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards, Rev ed. (New York: Persea Books, 1988), 3-4.

⁸ For a discussion of the *querelle* as a rhetorical game, see Lyndan Warner, *The Ideas of Man and Woman in Renaissance France: Print, Rhetoric, and Law*, Women and Gender in the Early Modern World (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011).

⁹ Joan Kelly, “Early Feminist Theory and the ‘*Querelle des Femmes*,’” *Signs* 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1982), 6.

¹⁰ Sarah Gwyneth Ross, *The Birth of Feminism: Woman as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 194.

disenfranchisement and lack of personal autonomy drove more women to enter the debate in order to articulate a true defense of women's worth.¹¹ Although female *querelle* writers did not advocate change from Italy's piazzas and halls of government, spaces respectable women had little or no access to, print offered them a viable means of protest. As feminist theorist Hélène Cixous argues, "writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures."¹² It was in this context of debate evolution that Moderata Fonte produced her vernacular *querelle* text *Il merito delle donne*.

The study of the European debate on women and of the lives and works of its female participants emerged as a legitimate field of historical research in the late twentieth century, largely thanks to the aforementioned scholar Joan Kelly. Her groundbreaking 1978 article "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" challenged academia to confront the then widespread absence of women in historiography and urged scholars to question the traditional assumption that men and women alike experienced positive change in the early modern period.¹³ Only after Kelly inspired historians to conduct their investigations of the past from the "vantage point" of women's emancipation were the compositions of early modern female authors like Fonte rescued from obscurity and reintegrated with the Italian literary canon.¹⁴ Over the last twenty years

¹¹ For a succinct discussion of the changing economic fortunes of women in Venice, where the *querelle* first radicalized, see Virginia Cox, "The Single Self: Feminist Thought and the Marriage Market in Early Modern Venice," *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2862873>. For the limited scope of female action and learned women's response to it, see the work of Sarah G. Ross cited above and Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

¹² Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. and ed. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 879.

¹³ Joan Kelly, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" in *Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly*, *Women in Culture and Society*, ed. Catharine Stimpson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 21-22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21-22. A century after the text's publication, *Il merito* disappeared from the cannon although anthologies of women writers sometimes listed Fonte's name as a past example. The first modern Italian edition of the text is Chemello's 1988 publication; it was translated into English for the first time in 1997.

Fonte's *Il merito delle donne* has received increasing scholarly attention as academics like Virginia Cox and Sarah Gwyneth Ross work to locate the dialogue's place in the *querelle* tradition and determine the specific literary models that influenced the text's creation.

Surprisingly, little analysis has been done on the relationship between Fonte's dialogue and the work of the fourteenth-century humanist and writer Giovanni Boccaccio. This is strange given the fact that Fonte's pages directly reference Boccaccio several times and that the debate on women evolved in part from the precedent of meta commentary on female worth set by Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*.¹⁵ In addition, the frame of *Il merito* clearly derives from that of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, which was incredibly popular with European reading audiences in the sixteenth-century and was printed four times in Venice in the fifty years prior to *Il merito*'s publication.¹⁶ Literary expert Janet Levarie Smarr's monograph *Joining the Conversation: Dialogues by Renaissance Women* does discuss Fonte's work in relation to Boccaccio, but only in the context of a larger technical study of rhetorical structure and the function of open dialogues.¹⁷ This paper proposes to fill the lacuna on the Fonte-Boccaccio link by performing a case study of *Il merito delle donne* and the *Decameron* in order to show that Boccaccio's work was inspired both the shape and content of Fonte's famed dialogue. I will argue that Fonte appropriated the structure of Boccaccio's frame and the notion of female license held in his *Valle delle Donne* in order to construct her text and promote an alternative vision of Venetian society

¹⁵ For a discussion of Boccaccio and the *querelle* tradition, see Stephen Kolsky, *The Ghost of Boccaccio: Writings on Famous Women in Renaissance Italy* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005). While this paper will not focus on the use of exempla as it is of secondary import in *Il merito*, I do wish to point out the majority of outstanding women discussed by Fonte's characters derive from Boccaccio's list. Moreover, Fonte follows Boccaccio's lead on using figures from antiquity as exempla.

¹⁶ I derived this statistic from the publishing records for Venice in the OPAC del Polo SBN di Venezia catalog.

¹⁷ Janet Levarie Smarr, *Joining the Conversation: Dialogues by Renaissance Women* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

in which women possess autonomy and are thus able to advocate the overthrow of patriarchal oppression.

To begin, it is necessary to say something about the fact that approximately two hundred and fifty years lay between the composition of the *Decameron* and the publication of Fonte's *querelle* text. As Judith Serafini-Sauli indicates in an article entitled "The Pleasures of Reading: Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Female Literacy," Boccaccio's book of stories was a "scabrous bestseller" in the early modern period.¹⁸ It circulated widely in manuscript form and, as the previously given publication statistic from Venice denotes, the text's fame only increased with the advent of printing. As a result, the sixteenth-century Italian literary tradition was heavily influenced by Boccaccio's masterpiece, especially where the dialogue format and the depiction of conversation were concerned.¹⁹ The dialogue form which Fonte and other Renaissance authors like Baldassar Castiglione and Pietro Aretino used to structure their writing originated in antiquity, most famously in the work of classical authors Plato, Cicero, and Lucan.²⁰ As a literary format designed for public consumption, the dialogue served as "an act of communication" between authors and their audience and its open format allowed writers to engage with a variety of materials and include the audience as a silent participant in the discussion of any given subject.²¹ Interestingly, the classical dialogue was masculine in nature and its productions assumed a male audience and featured character lists entirely devoid of female presence.²² In the early modern period by contrast, many dialogues featured mixed gender speaking groups, an alteration owed to the influence of Boccaccio. The insertion of

¹⁸ Judith Serafini-Sauli, "The Pleasures of Reading: Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Female Literacy, *MLN* 126, no. 1 (January 2011): 30.

¹⁹ Virginia Cox, *The Renaissance Dialogue: Literary Dialogue in its Social and Political Contexts*, Castiglione to Galileo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 15-16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, xi, 10.

²² *Ibid.*, 16.

female interlocutors into discursive Western literature was an early Renaissance innovation, seen for the first time in none other than the *cornice* of Boccaccio's *Decameron*.²³ Although the *Decameron* is not itself a dialogue, its frame is dialogic in nature and its influence on the early modern dialogue tradition can be seen in many places, most notably in the replication of idealized semi-historical speakers and an interest in the themes of women and love.²⁴ All of these Boccaccian elements are present in Fonte's *Il merito delle donne*. The lengthy time gap between the Venetian *letterata* and Boccaccio means that we should not treat *Il merito* as a work composed in direct response to the *Decameron* in the same way that Fonte's contemporary *querelle* participant Lucrezia Marinella's work corresponded to that of Giuseppe Passi,²⁵ but it does not mean that *Il merito* cannot have a meaningful connection to the older text. Indeed, as this paper will show the exact reverse is true. To demonstrate this connection, the bulk of this essay will deal in textual comparison and literary theorizing to flesh out the threads linking the two works; here however I would like to point out the more obvious evidence that Fonte had read the *Decameron* and purposefully incorporated it into *Il merito delle donne*.

By my count, there are two explicit references to the *Decameron* in *Il merito delle donne*. The first occurs in the midst of an attack on men's character made by the opinionated speaker Corinna. Corinna is a staunch opponent of the male sex and we catch her referencing a *Decameron novella* in order to support the view that the only men capable of virtue are those lucky enough to live with a woman and have her good qualities rub off on them. She claims that a man alone "is exactly like an unlit lamp - in itself it is good for nothing"; "if a man studies, if

²³ Janet Levarie Smarr, "The Uses of Conversation: Moderata Fonte and Edmund Tilney," *Comparative Literature Studies* 32, no. 1 (1995): 1.

²⁴ Cox, *The Renaissance Dialogue*, 15-16.

²⁵ Marinella's treatise *La nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne* was written in response to a specific work by Passi and addresses its arguments almost line by line.

he learns virtue, becomes polite and well-bred, and in short ends up equipped with a thousand great and pleasing qualities, all of it is due to women as occurred to Cimone and many others.”²⁶

The oafish *Decameron* character Cimone appears in *novella* one of the text’s fifth day and his antics as detailed by the narrator Pamphilo provide the ultimate example of a man transformed from bumbling fool to refined gentleman by the presence of a meritorious woman. Born “practically mad,” Cimone refused to learn or speak until he chanced upon the girl Iphigeneia as young man.²⁷ Upon glimpsing this maiden, Cimone was so struck by her beauty and the desire to be worthy of her that his “mindset went from one way to the opposite so swiftly that his father, his family, and all who knew him were rendered astonished...he turned into the most polished and most attractive man with more accomplishments than any other young man in the whole island of Cyprus.”²⁸ The astounding, even miraculous transformation of this *Decameron* character after exposure to a woman furnished Fonte and Corinna apt support for their supposition of premodern man’s inherently base nature and commendation of positive female influence.

The second direct reference to Boccaccio and the *Decameron* in *Il merito delle donne* is located in the discourse of the dialogue’s second day, on which Fonte’s *brigata* of loquacious women continue their debate on marriage and men while engaging in an ancillary exegesis of female knowledge about science, nature, and medicine. Inspired perhaps by their natural surrounds, Fonte’s characters decide to enumerate the species of birds and their uses known to them. While pondering the riveting question of whether or not birds of prey are edible, the

²⁶ “sia appunto come la lampada estinta, che da sé non è buona a nulla...così se l’uomo studia, se impara virtù, se va polito, se diviene accorto, e ben creato, e se in somma riesce compito di mille belle e graziose doti, di tutto ciò ne son causa le donne, comme avvenne a Cimone e a molti altri.” Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 25-26.

²⁷ quasi matto” Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 444.

²⁸ “in brevissimo tempo, d’uno in altro pensiero pervenendo, fece maravigliare il padre e tutti i suoi e ciascuno altro che il conosceva...egli riuscì il più leggiadro e il meglio costumato e con più particolari virtù che altro giovane alcuno che nell’isola fosse di Cipri” Ibid., *Decameron*, 445.

speaker Lucretia remarks that “regarding falcons...Boccaccio tells us that one was eaten and tasted delicious.”²⁹ This explicit citation of the fourteenth-century author refers to story nine of the *Decameron*’s fifth day in which a recently impoverished man named Federigo slaughters his prize possession, a hunting falcon, in order to feast the woman he loves.³⁰ The question of the falcon’s relative edibility and the *brigata*’s temporary conversational detour on birds ultimately has little bearing on *Il merito*’s greater function as a defense of women’s worth, but the reference to Boccaccio did serve as important evidence of Fonte’s own female fluency in Italian literature. More importantly for the argument of this paper, Fonte’s offhand gesture to Boccaccio’s writing illustrates how ubiquitous a knowledge of the *Decameron* was at the end of the sixteenth-century.

Now that I have shown that Moderate Fonte was well-versed in the novelle of the *Decameron*, I will demonstrate that the structural frame she used to construct *Il merito delle donne*’s action and verbal sparring clearly directly derives from the elaborate *cornice* that grounds the story-telling of Boccaccio’s masterpiece. Like the *Decameron*, *Il merito* features a historical Italian setting, semi-real speakers, and a garden that enables female speech as *locus amoenus*. To the first point, an author’s decision to locate the action of their literary compositions in a contemporary city immediately bestows a sheen of reality on an otherwise fictional account. Setting one’s story-tellers or dialogue speakers in a recognizable place also allows the writer to offer an alternate view of what that society should be. In the *Decameron*, the action of the frame is set in Florence in the year 1348, a grim time in which the Black Death was ravaging the city’s population. Boccaccio provides a stark account of the plague’s impact on

²⁹ “Del Falcone...il Bocacio ci afferma che fu mangiato e fu anco delicatissimo al gusto” Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 87.

³⁰ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 513.

Florentine society at the beginning of the book, writing that sickness had resulted in social chaos: “our city was in such misery and distress that divine and human laws fell and their ministers and executors disbanded...one citizen avoided the next and almost no one would take care of his neighbor.”³¹ According to literary expert Tobias Foster Gittes, Boccaccio’s choice to preface the action of his *cornice* with a destructive event like the plague enabled him to use the *Decameron* as a platform of cultural recreation.³² When Boccaccio’s audience first meets the *Decameron*’s female interlocutors, it is in the midst of this tragedy: they are gathered at the church of Santa Maria Novella to hear mass and pray for Florence’s reprieve from disorder.³³ It is this very state of disorder that permits the *cornice* characters to take charge of their own lives and bring about the story-telling that defines the book.

While the Introduction and framing sections of the *Decameron* may be brief, the gritty image of an Italian city felled by an epidemic remains with Boccaccio’s reader throughout the relaying of romantic capers in the *novelle* that follow and constantly remind the audience that Boccaccio’s storytellers are “real.” The chaos of the plague also allows Boccaccio to wield his Florentine story-tellers and the remnants of an ended era as social instruments by which to create a new version of Florentine society in which men and women can speak, travel, and enjoy each other’s company together without fear of dishonor.³⁴ As the narrator Pampinea declares, the lethal scythe of the plague had left the text’s *brigata* alone – “with truth we can say that we are abandoned, for it is our families, dying or fleeing from death as if we weren’t theirs, who have

³¹ “E in tanta afflizione e miseria della nostra città era la reverenda autorità delle leggi, così divine come umane, quasi caduta e dissoluta tutta per li ministri e essecturoi di quelle...l’uno cittadino l’altro schifasse e quasi niuno vicino avesse dell’altro cura” Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 13-14.

³² Tobias Foster Gittes, *Boccaccio’s Naked Muse: Eros, Culture and the Mythopoeic Imagination* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 141.

³³ Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 19.

³⁴ Gittes, *Boccaccio’s Naked Muse*, 145, 182-183.

left us alone to this misery.”³⁵ It is this kind of detachment from the world that prompts the Decameron’s narrators to join forces, flee the city, and create a mini-society in which female eroticism is embraced without leading to unchaste behavior and women are granted greater autonomy in speech and deed. Although the narrators’ mini-society is ultimately fictional, the historical Florentine scene that grounds it grants the weight of reality to the brigata’s deeds and forces Boccaccio’s audience to treat the endorsement of romantic female agency and public action contained in the *cornice* and the speakers’ tales as potentially sincere and actionable speech. In other words, Boccaccio’s decision to historicize the *Decameron*’s context raised the work’s stakes and opened a door for readers to interpret the text’s content as more than mere entertainment.

In the sixteenth century, Fonte followed Boccaccio’s example and crafted a similarly realistic setting for the transgressive debate on men and marriage that she conducts in *Il merito delle donne*. While Fonte did not rely on a preface of social collapse in order to justify or enable her characters’ formulation of a sovereign female mini-society, there can be no doubt that *Il merito* recreated contemporary society in the guise of Venice to lend the weight of reality to its feminist agenda. The opening of the dialogue’s first day emphasizes the fact that all ensuing events take place in the Republic of Venice during the dogeship of Pasquale Cicogna sometime after the 1571 victory against the Turks at Lepanto.³⁶ To hammer home the work’s contemporary backdrop, Fonte’s interlocutors expound on the positive qualities of a number of real local citizens including doctors Alessandro Massaria and Orazio Guarguanti, lawyers Lodovico Usper and Giovanni Vincenzi, and patrician women Marina di Vincenzo Pisani and

³⁵ “anzi ne possiamo con verità dire molto più tosto abbadonate: per ciò che i nostri, o morendo o da morte fuggendo, quasi non fossimo loro, sole in tanta afflizione n’hanno lasciate” Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 23.

³⁶ Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 141.

Chiara Loredana.³⁷ These details give Fonte's work the same sheen of realism as Boccaccio's description of the famous plague that devastated Florence in his own time.

Il merito's celebration of the Venetian triumph against the Ottomans, naming of prominent residents, and paean to republican values, trade, and the Adriatic Sea, "the high road" of the city, would have resonated deeply with the notoriously proud residents of La Serenissima.³⁸ At the same time however, Fonte's audience may have been bemused by the ease with which the female denizens of the dialogue move about their literary version of Venice. Fonte's characters travel from various parts of La Serenissima to gather and socialize in a palazzo that overlooks the Grand Canal;³⁹ such female freedom to navigate the public spaces of Venice, assemble sans chaperone, and engage in debate sharply contravened the social norms of the period. As the literary scholar Ann Rosalind Jones observes, the condition of respectable Renaissance females in the humanist and bourgeois tradition was supposed to be a blank: "the proper woman is an absence: legally she vanishes under the name and authority of her husband...she is silent and invisible; she does not speak and she is not spoken about."⁴⁰ In elite and middleclass Venetian culture such silent women were also expected to remain behind the walls of their home or convent in order to safeguard their reputations and respect male dominance of public space.⁴¹ Fonte's autonomous interlocutors defy such expectations and indeed condemn them, attacking contemporary Venetian men's insistence on "having such absolute power over us...and acting as if we are their slaves who cannot take a step without

³⁷ Ibid., 125-126, 138, 149, 152.

³⁸ From "Il mare l'è via publica" Ibid., 13.

³⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁰ Ann Rosalind Jones, "Surprising Fame: Renaissance Gender Ideologies and Women's Lyric," in *Feminism and Renaissance Studies*, Oxford Readings in Feminism, ed. Lorna Hutson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 317.

⁴¹ Paola Malpezzi Price, *Moderata Fonte: Women and Life in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 51-53.

asking their permission nor say a word without them making a thousand comments.”⁴² In a fantastical setting, the subversive sting of such words would be drawn by the safety of unreality; proclaimed as they are from a literary facsimile of the Venetian Republic, their arraignment of patriarchal hegemony cannot be so easily dismissed.

The second facet of Boccaccio’s frame appropriated by Fonte is the contrivance of a *brigata* of female speakers, seven in number and expansive in speech. As stated previously, the inclusion of female participants in literary depictions of conversation was a Boccaccian innovation. Boccaccio was the first author to populate a text with female speakers who possess their own distinct personalities and agency in spite of their sex. According to Teodolinda Barolini, the use of a *brigata* or speaker group was a common convention of late medieval and early Renaissance Italian literature that can be seen in the works of such authors as Forese Donati, Dante, and Folgore da San Gimignano.⁴³ Prior to the composition of the *Decameron*, the term *brigata* denoted an exclusively male group bound by friendship, youth, and the desire to acquire authority and the right to action via a collective (Italian society was often gerontocratic in this period, depriving young men of clout).⁴⁴ The *novelle* of the *Decameron*, which are reminiscent of pre-plague Florence rather than the alternative version of society created in the frame, do in fact feature just such groups, most notably the cadre of the buffoonish Calandrino and his friends Bruno and Buffalmacco and the dining club led by Betto Brunelleschi.⁴⁵ As Barolini argues in the 2012 article “Sociology of the *Brigata*,” there was no room for women or

⁴² non ci volessero aver tanto imperio sopra [noi]...che vogliono, che siamo loro schiave e non possiamo far un passo senza domandar loro licenzie; nè diciamo una parola, che non vi facino mille comenti” Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 27.

⁴³ Teodolinda Barolini, “Sociology of the *Brigata*: Gendered Groups in Dante, Forese, Folgore, Boccaccio – from ‘Guido, i’vorrei’ to Griselda,” *Italian Studies* 67, no.1 (2012), 4-7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 6-7, 9.

⁴⁵ Calandrino and his male *brigata* feature in *Decameron* 8.3, 8.6, 9.3, and 9.5. Brunelleschi’s attempt to recruit Guido Cavalcanti to his club is the subject of *Decameron* 6.10.

the possibility of male-female friendship in such groups; in the spaces of the *novelle* the norms of fourteenth century misogyny ruled and women could only be the entities whose honor men either safeguarded or threatened. No middle ground was possible.⁴⁶ The strict gender norms that dominate the *novelle* of the *Decameron* make the inclusion of female narrators in the text's *cornice* stand out that much more. Here the contribution and even leadership of female speakers are integral to the *Decameron*'s stated mission of recounting one hundred tales because the semi-historical Florentine women must dominate the story-telling by virtue of their greater numbers (seven to the men's three). This example of authoritative women linked to a recreation of contemporary society must have stood out to Fonte, for a comparison of her own female interlocutors with those of Boccaccio reveals a striking similarity.

In the *Decameron* Boccaccio introduces the female members of his *brigata* as a group of women "all united one to another by friendship or kinship, or else as neighbors, of which not one was past twenty-eight nor younger than eighteen years of age, and each one of them was adorned with wisdom, good birth, beauty, charm, and a fetching innocence."⁴⁷ *Il merito*'s cast of characters is depicted thusly: "in this truly divine city...amongst the best known and most respected families there was once (and indeed still is) a group of noble and spirited women who differed in age and marital status, but were so united in breeding and morals...that a precious and considerate bond of friendship had formed between them."⁴⁸ According to this description, Fonte's female speakers could easily stand in for those of Boccaccio; the groups are practically identical bar the inclusion of married women in Fonte's text. Each feminine *brigata* is described

⁴⁶ Barolini, "Sociology of the *Brigata*," 19.

⁴⁷ "tutte l'una all'altra o per amicitia o per vicinanza o per parentado congiunte, delle quali niuna il venti e ottesimo anno passato avea né era minor di diciotto, savia ciascuna e di sangue nobile e bella di forma, e ornata di constumi e di leggiadra onestà" Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 19.

⁴⁸ "In questa dunque veramene città divina...fra le più chiare e reputate famiglie si trovarono non ha gran tempo ed ancor si trovano alcune nobili e valorose donne di età e stato difernenti, ma di sangue e costumi conformi...tra loro contratto una cara e discreta amicizia" Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 14.

as “real” or representative of actual Italian women, each contains an instigator (Pampinea for Boccaccio, Corinna for Fonte)⁴⁹ and an innocent (Neiphile and Virginia), and the allegorical names of their interlocutors refer to the women’s respective virtues and personality traits. Furthermore, each group constitutes a mini-society for the duration of the texts’ discourse and both *brigade* elect to govern themselves via the election of a king or queen who is put in charge of directing their daily activities and conversation.⁵⁰ Finally, the women in both Boccaccio and Fonte’s *brigade* are portrayed as capable of forming friendship; while Fonte is more progressive than her predecessor on this score, it is still an important link between their works.

Similarly to the dialogue format, genuine friendship was customarily understood as an exclusively male phenomenon in the periods in which Boccaccio and Fonte wrote. The western roots of friendship date to antiquity and the writings of the Greek philosophers Plato, Zeno and Aristotle. Throughout the Renaissance, Aristotelian relationship ideology held pride of place in the popular imagination and would have been familiar to Boccaccio and Fonte alike.⁵¹ As Dirk Baltzly and Nick Eliopoulos show in the essay “The Classical Ideals of Friendship,” Aristotle

⁴⁹ Fonte’s decision to name her leading character Corinna is subject to several interpretations. In her notes to the English language translation of *Il merito*, Virginia Cox notes simply that the character is named after a famous Greek poet, an association that plays on the character’s learning and poetic skill. It is also interesting to note however that Corinna is also the name of Ovid’s lover in the *Amores* and as such an extremely sensual character. Ovid’s verse introduces her thusly: “Behold, Corinna comes, enfolded in an ungirded tunic, her white neck covered by her parted hair, just as beautiful as Semiramis entering the bedroom one might say, or Lais loved by many men.” That Fonte named her leading detractor of men and lovers Corinna may be a purposed and pointed reversal of the role of the *Amores*’ love object. After all, it is fitting that in a *querelle* text the subject female lover becomes the independent woman, one whom Fonte calls a *dimessa*, or a woman belonging to a tertiary order vowed to chastity and the single life. See Virginia Cox, Introduction and Notes to *The Worth of Women: Wherein Is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Superiority to Men*, by Moderate Fonte, trans. and ed. Virginia Cox (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 45n4. For the Ovid quote – “ecce, Corinna venit, tunica velata recinta, candida dividua colla tegente coma, qualiter in thalamos formosa Sameramis isse dicitur et multis Lais amata viris” Ovid, *Ovid’s “Amores”* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 14.

⁵⁰ According to Virginia Cox, the election of a conversational leader was a popular Renaissance literary trope – dialogic mini-societies generally reflected the greater society to which they belonged; thus the *Decameron* narrators reign for a day each in a semblance of republicanism and *Il merito*’s speakers elect a permanent queen modeled on the Venetian doge. Cox, Introduction and Notes to *The Worth of Women*, 56n21.

⁵¹ Dirk Baltzly, and Nick Eliopoulos, “The Classical Ideals of Friendship,” in *Friendship: A History*, ed. Barbara Caine (London: Equinox Publishing, 2009), 2-6.

classified all positive human interactions under the term *philia* or friendship. According to this model women were allowed to partake in lesser manifestations of *philia* that were based upon advantage or pleasure, but their perceived deficiencies prevented them from sharing in the lofty bond of virtuous or true friendship.⁵² Virtuous friendship was founded upon reason and a similarity in general excellence between two people, qualities women supposedly lacked. Before the modern period, it was commonly felt that woman's so-called excessively passionate and irrational disposition rendered her participation in such elevated human connections impossible.

In *The Governance of Friendship: Law and Gender in the "Decameron,"* scholar Michael Sherberg examines the role of amity in Boccaccio's *cornice*. He claims that Boccaccio's decision to portray a mixed gender brigata bound by friendship in the *Decameron*, while transgressive, was actually based on a fairly conventional interpretation of Aristotle's discourse on amity in the *Ethics*. According to Sherberg, the ties between the Florentine storytellers can be understood as manifestations of the lesser brands of Aristotelian rapport between social unequals rather than as examples of true or virtuous friendship.⁵³ To Sherberg's mind, Boccaccio crafted his female *brigata* members as witty persons capable of independent action and intelligent conversation but always subject to the threat of domination or the re-establishment of patriarchal gender norms at the hands of the three men who accompany them to the Florentine countryside.⁵⁴ As the stories of male authority and friendship of day ten and the *brigata*'s eventual break from the mini-society of the villa and subsequent return to Florence demonstrate, Boccaccio was cognizant that the reality of women's subjection was never far away in his time. As the grim treatment of Griselda at end hands of Gualtieri in the final *novella* of the

⁵² Ibid., 22-24.

⁵³ Michael Sherberg, *The Governance of Friendship: Law and Gender in the "Decameron"* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 2-3, 5.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 57-58, 115.

Decameron illustrates, Boccaccio's transgressive prowoman sensibility allowed him to imagine an alternate vision of society in which women could engage in friendship with men (even if they remained the second sex), but he ultimately saw this vision as unsustainable.

Il merito delle donne also takes up the issue of women and friendship, but where Boccaccio allowed women to partake in the basic bonds of amity on a provisional level, Fonte radically portrayed contemporary Venetian women as capable of permanently partaking in the highest level of *philia*, virtuous friendship. Moreover, she chose to discard the trope of masculine oversight altogether and subversively populated her dialogue's pages with an entirely female speaking group capable of creating a mini-society on their own. As this paper has made evident, it is obvious that Fonte's *brigata* was directly modelled on that of the *Decameron*; because of this correlation I theorize that the feminist Venetian writer purposefully appropriated Boccaccio's *brigata* and willfully sheered it of male influence as a blatant comment on women's capacity for independence that contemporary readers could hardly fail to appreciate. This is born out in both the speakers' discussion of friendship and their contrasting opinions on the merits of male supervision. For example, where Boccaccio's female story-tellers are happy to interact with men, Fonte's characters challenge Aristotelian notions of ideal masculine friendship and declaim that "women are more inclined to love than [men] because women are subjects more disposed by nature to compassion and love"... "thus it can be seen in friendships that a woman is quicker to make friends with another woman and better maintains the relationship than men do amongst themselves."⁵⁵ Similarly, while Boccaccio's womanly narrators balk at the thought of acting without male oversight, claiming that "we are all women and not one of us is too young a girl to be able to realize that women are not able to govern themselves rationally without the

⁵⁵ "Così si vede anco nelle altre amicizie, che una donna presto se amicherà con un'altra e manterrà meglio l'amore che non fanno gli uomini tra essi." Fonte, *Il merito delle donne.*, 76.

guidance of some man,” Fonte’s interlocutors heartily rebut such sentiments.⁵⁶ After finding themselves alone in a villa owned and run exclusively by women, they rejoice that here “we are able to speak pleasantries in order to laugh amongst ourselves and do what we desire because there is no [man] here to observe and reprimand us.”⁵⁷

The third and perhaps most important element of Boccaccio’s frame to appear in Fonte’s writing is the use of a paradisiacal garden within the text’s greater Italian setting as a *locus amoenus* in which daring discourse can occur. As the epigrams which open this paper allude, the botanical spaces of the *Decameron* and *Il merito* are closely related; here this paper will show that Fonte combined features of Boccaccio’s second and third gardens to fashion the secluded Venetian topiary garden in which her speakers are able to form an ideal female society and excoriate the evils of patriarchy. To start, it is important to note that the gardens of each work are separated from the world and can only be reached by a journey, in the *Decameron* a trip from the Florentine city-center to the countryside, and in *Il merito* via the public watery roads of the Republic to a palatial enclave in which there are no men. These movements away from the fishbowl of contemporary society to private spaces give Boccaccio and Fonte’s characters the “license to let ourselves go” or partake in potentially transgressive speech.⁵⁸ In the *Decameron* such speech takes the form of discourse and story-telling on love-making and in *Il merito* it manifests as a debate on marriage and condemnation of the wrongly subordinate position of women. In addition to borrowing the Boccaccian trope that a journey must occur for the *locus amoenus* to be reached, Fonte’s work also emulates the *Decameron* in its appropriation of the

⁵⁶ “noi siamo tutte femine, e non ce n’ha niuna sì fanciulla, che non possa ben conoscere come le femine sien rationate insieme e senza la provedenza d’alcuno uomo si sappiano regolare” Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 24.

⁵⁷ “pur possiamo dire delle piacevolezze così per ridere tra noi e far ciò che più ne aggrada, che qui non è chi ci noti o chi ci dia la emenda” Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 16-17.

⁵⁸ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 412.

look of the texts' second garden in which Boccaccio's storytellers talk the most and spend the majority of their time. Both gardens are enclosed, planted with fruit trees and flowers, are intersected by wandering paths, and centered around fountains that serve as literal springs of intelligent discourse, for the conversation of both works always occurs while the interlocutors are seated around a water-work.⁵⁹

Where the spoken action of *Il merito delle donne* is confined to a single space, the *Decameron* features a third garden, a glen named the *Valle delle donne* which hosts the storytelling of the book's seventh day. While Fonte modeled the visual details of *Il merito's* Venetian garden on the *Decameron's* walled garden, I contend that the liberal atmosphere of the *Valle delle Donne* pervades the entirety of her dialogue. Literature expert Thomas Stillinger describes the function of the *Valle delle Donne* as a symbolic escape from normative society to a state of nature.⁶⁰ This notion is useful in understanding why the garden is important for Fonte. In the *Decameron*, Boccaccio's seven female speakers escape to this idyllic landscape in order to enjoy time together away from the male members of their party.⁶¹ They venture to the valley at the end of day six accompanied only by their maidservants and spend an afternoon together exploring the valley according to their own whims and delighting in swimming naked in the pool at the space's center.⁶² When the whole group returns to the *Valle delle Donne* on the seventh day, the *novelle* they relate there focus on self-determining women who buck the rule of their husbands, play

⁵⁹ For descriptions of the gardens in question see Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 19-20 and Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 236-237. The requisite conjunction of fountain and speech is conveyed at the opening of each day in the *Decameron*; for instance the introduction to day five states that "they all assembled by the fountain according to their usual manner and the queen having seated herself *pro tribunal*, looked toward Pamphilo and smiling bid that he open the round of happy stories." "ma tutti... vicini alla fonte secondo l'usato modo si ragunaronol e essendosi la reina a seder posta *pro tribunali*, verso Panfilo riguardando, sorridente a lui impose che principio dessed alle felici novelle" Ibid., 441.

⁶⁰ Thomas C. Stillinger, "The Language of Gardens: Boccaccio's 'Valle delle Donne,'" *Tradition* 39, (1983): 303.

⁶¹ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 577-579.

⁶² Ibid.

tricks on men, and manipulate their own lives as they please. While the *Decameron* limits the portrayal of such female autonomy to the valley, this episode stands out for its seeming suggestion that there are places in the world where it is natural for women to be alone and/or govern their own affairs. For the dominant characters who argue against the marital state in Fonte's *querelle* text, such spaces are integral to their vision of ideal society and indeed within the villa garden owned by the character Leonora, a rich widow loathe to remarry, female independence operates as the natural order of things.⁶³ In Fonte's mind, the patriarchal control of women that characterized contemporary Venetian society was wholly unnatural. As she directs Leonora to state, "if we [women] are their [men's] inferiors in authority but not in merit, this is an abuse that has been put into the world that then over a long time men have made law and custom."⁶⁴ Although Fonte never references the *Valle delle Donne* directly, I think the garden iconography, combination of speech and fountain, and idea of natural female independence shared by *Il merito* and the *Decameron* allows me to theorize that the female garden space of *Il merito delle donne* can be understood as a reinterpretation and intensification of Boccaccio's *Valle delle Donne* for the sixteenth-century.

A final area in which the influence of Boccaccio's *Decameron* can be seen in *Il merito delle donne* is the character of female speech acts. While Fonte was the more radical writer, Boccaccio's work set an important precedent for depictions of women's intellectual and discursive capacity. The *Decameron* contains many varieties of female speech, some good,

⁶³ It is fitting that Fonte chose a widow to possess a space characterized by the sovereignty of women. While early modern Italian society sought to control the wealth and sphere of action of widows through inheritance practice and remarriage, this segment of the female population still enjoyed the greatest personal freedom of all female groups. For a discussion of widows in the Renaissance, see Isabelle Chabot, "Lineage Strategies and the Control of Widows in Renaissance Florence," in *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner, 127-144 (Harlow: Longman, 1999).

⁶⁴ "se siamo loro inferiori d'auttorità, ma non di merito, questo è un abuso, che si è messo nel mondo, che poi a lungo andare si hanno fatto lecito ed ordinario" Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 27.

some bad; however whether the text is portraying a female scolding a beleaguered husband, seducing a lover, or defending female personhood, the fact remains that Boccaccio was the first early modern author to allow women a voice. This paper contends that the powerful speeches delivered by such *Decameron* characters as Ghismonda and Madonna Philippa constitute an important prototype that Fonte looked to when fashioning *Il merito's* womanly disquisitions inspired by her adoption of a *Valle delle Donne* sensibility re female liberty.

The exceptional Boccaccian figure Ghismonda who features in *novella* four of the *Decameron's* first day served as a significant model for Fonte in terms of delineating the proper purposes of female speech. The character Ghismonda is an independent woman who acts on her own inclinations and opts to take a lover of her choosing when her possessive father declines to find her a husband.⁶⁵ When forced to confront her father's anger about her autonomous actions, Ghismonda refuses to conform to cultural imperatives that mandate female silence⁶⁶ and instead proclaims that she will "admit the truth and with valid reasons defend my reputation so that with right deeds I shall proceed according to the greatness of my spirit."⁶⁷ Fonte's characters are similarly self-aware and support the Boccaccian notion that honor and female speech are not inimical categories. Fonte's leading interlocutor Corinna best demonstrates this likeness; in her exposition on the merits of independent female life Corinna maintains that women possess both the right and ability to "delight and train in excellent pursuits, devoting [her] lofty thoughts to the

⁶⁵ Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, 355-356. For an early Renaissance declamation on the importance of female silence and general subservience, see Leon Battista Alberti, *The Albertis of Florence: Leon Battista Alberti's "Della Famiglia,"* trans. Guido Guarino (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1971), 216-225.

⁶⁶ The pervasive notion that women should be silent in early modern European culture was owed in great part to the following injunction of Paul: "women should be silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says." I Corinthians 14:34-35 (New Standard Revised Edition). While this Pauline saying was most common, the bible offered other justifications for the subjection of women i.e. "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. Permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man she is to keep silent." I Timothy 2:11-12 (New Standard Revised Edition).

⁶⁷ "il vero confessando, prima con vere ragioni difender la fama mia e poi con fatti fortissimamente sequire la grandezza dell'animo mio" Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 360.

study of letters, human and divine.”⁶⁸ Without such skills, no woman could hope to speak eloquently on her own behalf. Like Ghismonda, Corinna also repeatedly challenges the patriarchal concept that women should regulate their words and deeds to suit men. Although she acknowledges that Italian women are traditionally subservient to their fathers and husbands, she avers that “when it is said that we (women) are subject to [men], the phrase must be understood in the same sense that we are subject to natural disasters, illness, and the other accidents of this life: that is to say, it is not a subjection of obedience but of fortitude.”⁶⁹

A more specific incident of Fonte’s manipulation of the example of positive female speech set by Boccaccio in the *Decameron* is her depiction of a female oration given in defense of woman’s rights in the mode of Hortensia. Hortensia was a storied figure of antiquity made famous by a legend that credits her with utilizing the ancient *lex hortensia* to successfully argue against the imposition of a tax on women’s luxuries and dress in front of the Roman Triumvirs on the grounds that women had had no part in formulating the law enacting the tax.⁷⁰ According to Livy, the *lex hortensia* was instituted by Quintus Hortensius in the Republican period as a remedy to the longstanding tension between the Roman patrician and plebian classes, the latter of which resented elite attempts to garner supreme power to themselves and disregard the decisions of the people’s assembly.⁷¹ This episode bears a striking resemblance to the seventh *novella* of *Decameron* day 7 in which a woman named Madama Philippa rousingly defends herself against a Prato law that mandated capital punishment for all women found guilty of

⁶⁸ “vi diletate ed essercitate nelle virtuose azioni e impiegando i vostri alti pensieri nei cari studi delle lettere, così umane, come divine” Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 18.

⁶⁹ “[S]e ben dicono che dovemo star loro soggette, si deve intender soggette in quella maniera, che siamo anco alle disgrazie, alla infermità ed altri accidenti di questa vita, cioè non soggezione di ubidienza, ma di pazienza.” Ibid., 26.

⁷⁰ Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings Book III*, ed and trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 213.

⁷¹ Titus Livius, *The Early History of Rome: Books I-V of “The History of Rome from its Foundations,”* trans. Aubrey de Selincourt (London: Penguin Books, 2002), 338.

adultery.⁷² Like Hortensia, Philippa carries the day on the grounds that a law made without the consent of those it claims to control is unjust and illegitimate.⁷³ Regardless of whether or not Fonte viewed Philippa as a “modern” Hortensia, I believe that the oration she wrote for the character Leonora to give in defense of women’s rights was engendered by the *Decameron* story of women’s ability to effect legal change.

In the climax of *Il merito delle donne*’s second day, the widow and independent female speaker Leonora delivers a pretend speech to an imagined Venetian legislative body of men in order to prove that men should love and respect women and abandon their custom of “always seeking to oppress and abuse us by means of all the words and deeds that lie in your powers.”⁷⁴ Through Fonte, she denies that woman’s rightful place is beneath men and insists that the laws of nature and grace oblige men to love women and treat them well.⁷⁵ Because this speech is given to a theoretical audience, no verdict is returned on Leonora’s case that condition of women should be improved other than the approbation of her female fellows in the garden; however, Moderata Fonte was a *querelle* author and this speech should be understood as serving a greater purpose than a literary demonstration of female rhetorical skill. After all, for Fonte the true court of opinion her text was geared to address was not the fictional court of characters who discourse in her pages, but sixteenth-century literary European society – her audience. I theorize that Fonte realized that if the conventions of the *lex hortensia* or all peoples’ right to self-determination were upheld, male society could not ignore the protests of the other sex, which had historically been allotted little say in its own disenfranchisement.

⁷² Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 556-557.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 558-559.

⁷⁴ “sempre avete cercato di abbassare ed offenderci à tutto vostro potere in parole ed in fatti” Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 132.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

To end, this paper has demonstrated that Moderata Fonte's dialogic contribution to the *querelle des femmes* was fundamentally shaped by that author's familiarity with the work of the fourteenth-century Florentine writer Giovanni Boccaccio, specifically his *Decameron*. Fonte's use of a historicized Italian setting, a *brigata* of seven discursively adept women, and a garden as the medium to daring female speech directly derive from the *Decameron's* famed *cornice*. Although Boccaccio's text first circulated in Italian literary circles two centuries before Fonte put pen to page, his innovative inclusion of witty and capable female speakers in Italian literature ensured that his work would only grow in fame and relevance with time. The *Decameron's* *cornice* and description of effective and honorable female that receives full if temporary license to exist in the *Valle delle Donne* provided Fonte a robust foundation from which to build a newly radical argument for the permanent recognition of female autonomy and an end to the subjection of women at the hands of patriarchy. *Il merito delle donne* is a masterpiece of rhetorical play and sincere feminist social critique, and there are many approaches by which to do study its contents; however, I hope this paper has shown that the relation between the work of Moderata Fonte and Giovanni Boccaccio should never be left out of the conversation.

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