

Fashioning the Other Sex in Seventeenth-Century Venice: Ideologies of Gender and the  
Elevation of Women in the Writing of Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinella

By

Katherine R. McKenna

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Approved:

William Caferro, Ph.D.

Samira Sheikh, Ph.D.

In 1600, literate Venetian society witnessed the publication of two apologias of women authored by local female writers Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinella. The tracts belonged to a centuries old 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 *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* in response to the overt misogyny found in such medieval poetry as the *Roman de la Rose*.<sup>1</sup> Begun by Pizan, the *querelle* soon became a popular rhetorical battleground in which intellectuals contested the legitimacy of female claims to virtue and scholarly capacity. While the majority of *querelle* participants were male, educated Italian women like Isotta Nogarola, Laura Cereta, and Olympia Morata maintained a vital female presence in the debate in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These women served as living examples of female merit and their writing displayed an ideal marriage of feminine modesty, chastity, and intellectual know-how. In Venice, the strictures of a deeply patriarchal and hierarchical patrician society prevented respectable local women from engaging in the debate, but the city's renowned printing presses enabled European women's increasing literary production. In the twenty-two year period between 1538 and 1560, the Italian presses (led by Venice) published twenty works composed by women; from 1580 to 1602, the peninsula furnished the bookshelves of Europe with an additional thirty seven tracts authored by women.<sup>2</sup>

Prior to the seventeenth century, the *querelle des femmes* was largely theoretical in nature. Female debate contributors wrote in Latin, a language inaccessible to the majority of their sex, and used the *querelle* to showcase their skill in humanist rhetoric.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret King, *Women of the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 220.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy: 1400-1600* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 131.

While women writers urged their male peers to recognize female virtue and intellectual capacity, they did not demand the eradication or restructuring of the institutions which upheld patriarchal society. As the feminist theorist and Renaissance historian Joan Kelly wrote, the early “feminists of the *querelle* carried on their long and patient intellectual resistance at a remove from action.”<sup>3</sup> The entry of Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinella into the debate marked an end to such passive defiance. Although Fonte and Marinella were relative latecomers to the *querelle*, their secular scholarly success as respectable Venetian women of the *cittadini* or middle class was unprecedented.<sup>4</sup> Previous to their intervention, early modern Venetian society was entrenched in the cultural dichotomy that withheld the Republic’s well-bred women from intellectual intercourse even as the local presses spewed profeminist texts into the European literary market.<sup>5</sup> Customarily, a Venetian woman’s purchase of intellectual license entailed a heavy price tag: living internment behind the protective walls of a convent or the soiled reputation of a courtesan.<sup>6</sup> Fonte and Marinella incurred neither of these costs, yet their

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<sup>3</sup> Joan Kelly, “Early Feminist Theory and the ‘*Querelle des Femmes*,” *Signs* 18, no. 1 (Autumn 1982), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Fonte and Marinella were the first Venetian women of privilege to publish substantive works since the humanist Cassandra Fedele’s speech *Oratio pro Bertucio Lamberto*, authored on the occasion of her cousin’s graduation from the University of Padua, was printed in 1488. Diana Robin, Editor’s Introduction to *Letters and Orations*, by Cassandra Fedele, trans. and ed. Diana Robin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Here it is necessary to say something about this paper’s use of “feminism.” While Joan Kelly simply defined feminism as “women thinking about women,” I will use the term in a stricter sense. 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.” By this definition, Fonte and Marinella qualify as fully-fledged feminists while earlier *querelle* authors do not. Kelly, “Early Feminist Theory,” 5. 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.

<sup>6</sup> For an examination of Venetian women’s choice between a semi-public life via marriage and learning via the convent, see Margaret L. King, “Thwarted Ambitions: Six Learned Women of the Italian Renaissance,” in *Humanism, Venice, and Women: Essays on the Italian Renaissance*, Variorum Collected Studies Series see the treatment of Veronica Franco and Tullia D’Aragona in Fiora A. Bassanese, “Selling the Self; or, The Epistolary Production of Renaissance Courtesans,” in *Italian Women Writers from the Renaissance to*

writing transgressed conventional Venetian insistence on female silence and transcended early *querelle* rhetoric to criticize the institutionalization of misogyny and male supremacy.

The publication of Fonte and Marinella's respective apologias *Il merito delle donne* and *La nobiltà e eccellenza delle donne* thus marks a significant shift in Venetian cultural norms and debate rhetoric that demands academic study. While there are many important questions to pose about the sociocultural and intellectual processes that resulted in the texts' production, a social history of the scale required to adequately explicate them is beyond the current scope of this project. This paper will therefore concentrate on the authors' startling deviation from the rhetorical themes of the early *querelle*. By carefully comparing *Il merito* and *La nobiltà* using gender as a category of analysis, I will elucidate the dimensions of the subversive feminist critique of the hegemony of patriarchy that Fonte and Marinella introduced to the debate on women. I will argue that Fonte and Marinella successfully undermined masculine authority by using text to reshape early modern notions of womanhood, promote female claims to moral and intellectual parity or superiority, and, in Fonte's case, advocate female social solidarity. In doing so, I will also challenge the historiographic narrative that Marinella was the more progressive author of the two and demonstrate that Fonte's seemingly playful polyphonic dialogue in fact performed a more transgressive revision of contemporary gender norms.

As I analyze the ideologies of gender present in *Il merito* and *La nobiltà*, I will be contributing to a small but rich historiography on Fonte and Marinella's *querelle* works.

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*the Present: Revising the Canon*, ed. Maria Ornella Marotti (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

The two writers have only recently become the subject of intensive historical study, a circumstance owed to the relative youth of the academic fields of women's and gender history. These disciplines emerged as legitimate foci of academic research during the second wave feminist movement of the late 1970s and 1980s, largely thanks to the groundbreaking work of the Renaissance scholar Joan Kelly. Kelly challenged academia to confront the widespread absence of women in historiography and urged scholars to question the traditional assumption that men and women alike experienced a Renaissance in the early modern period.<sup>7</sup> Only after Kelly inspired historians to conduct investigations of the past from the "vantage point" of women's emancipation were the compositions of such authors as Fonte and Marinella rescued from obscurity and reintegrated with the Italian literary canon.<sup>8</sup>

The extant historiography on Fonte and Marinella's writing takes a variety of forms. Encyclopedias and compendia fulfill the important task of reinscribing the authors' names in the historical and literary narratives from which they have long been excluded.<sup>9</sup> Among scholarly monographs, Margaret King's *Women of the Renaissance* examines Fonte and Marinella's *querelle* tracts in a section devoted to "Women and High Culture." Although King does not expound on the writers' preoccupation with

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<sup>7</sup> 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. Conventional understanding of women's place in the Renaissance stems from the nineteenth-century Burckhartian notion that Renaissance "women stood on a footing of perfect equality with men." See Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, vol. 2, *The Discovery of the World and of Man, Society and Festivals, Morality and Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), 389.

<sup>8</sup> Kelly, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" 21-22. A century after the texts' publication, *Il merito* and *La nobiltà* largely disappeared from the cannon, although anthologies of women writers sometimes listed their names. Panizza, Introduction to *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, by Lucrezia Marinella, trans. and ed. Anne Dunhill (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 32.

<sup>9</sup> For examples, see Rinaldina Russell, ed., *Italian Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook* (London: Greenwood Press, 1994) and Anne Larsen, Carole Levin and Diana Robin, *Encyclopedia of Women in the Renaissance: Italy, France, and England* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2007), ebrary e-book.

overturning conventional gender roles and the reign of patriarchy, she does note that Fonte and Marinella wished “to probe in a critical and comprehensive mode the predicament of female existence in male society.”<sup>10</sup> King also correctly identifies the Venetians’ mutual advocacy of a woman’s right versus ability to learn and Fonte’s desire to establish feminine social space.<sup>11</sup>

More recently, the literary expert Paola Malpezzi Price has produced two books that depict Fonte and Marinella as the “true forerunners of modern feminism.”<sup>12</sup> In *Moderata Fonte: Women and Life in Sixteenth-Century Venice*, Price contends that early modern women have been “excluded from History” because of their “marginality in the meaning-giving process” or construction of social institutions, theory, and law.<sup>13</sup> Price redresses this exclusion by explicating the *cittadini* social realm to which Fonte (and Marinella) belonged in hopes of locating the author within it. Price also uses her books to call attention to Fonte’s demand for female intellectual sovereignty and Marinella’s attempt to destabilize masculine philosophical authority and assert herself as a newly empowered model of womanhood.<sup>14</sup> In *Lucrezia Marinella and the “Querelle des Femmes” in Seventeenth-Century Italy*, Price and her co-author Christine Ristaino argue that the pro-woman nature of the Venetians’ writing “deflates and challenges the premises on which society is based.”<sup>15</sup> Price’s works have taken important steps in highlighting the presence of feminism and gender concerns in Fonte and Marinella’s

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<sup>10</sup> King, *Women of the Renaissance*, 219.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 184, 228-230.

<sup>12</sup> Paola Malpezzi Price, *Moderata Fonte: Women and Life in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 21. See also Paola Malpezzi Price and Christine Ristaino, *Lucrezia Marinella and the “Querelle des Femmes” in Seventeenth-Century Italy* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Price, *Moderata Fonte*, 13.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 50. Price and Ristaino, *Lucrezia Marinella*, 109, 113, 160.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

*querelle* works; however, her monographs treat the authors in isolation from each other and so fail to fully convey the extent to which Venetian patriarchy came under fire in 1600. This paper will look at *Il merito delle donne* and *La nobiltà e eccellenza delle donne* comparatively and thus can provide a more nuanced interrogation of gender and social criticism.

My discussion of Fonte and Marinella's transgressive gender ideologies and attack on patriarchy will build off of the work of Sarah Ross and Virginia Cox particularly, Renaissance scholars whose research has been instrumental to fashioning the field of Italian women's history. Ross's monograph *The Birth of Feminism: Women as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England* traces the development of a "counterargument to centuries of biblical and Aristotelian antiwoman sentiment and to the patriarchal structure of Western society" in the writing of female intellectuals.<sup>16</sup> Ross argues that this counterargument and women's learning originated in fourteenth-century households led by enlightened father figures. She contends that as education moved from homes to the salons of the seventeenth century, learned women became "culturally normal" and the counterargument was consequently able to become explicitly feminist.<sup>17</sup> In a case study of Fonte and Marinella's apologias, or defenses of women, Ross states that as this process occurred women started to "use their pens to dismantle gender categories" and identify "new possibilities for women's intellectual and social self-realization."<sup>18</sup> Virginia Cox's 1995 article "The Single Self: Feminist Thought and the Marriage Market in Early Modern Venice" also emphasizes *Il merito* and *La nobiltà*'s progressive pro-woman tone

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<sup>16</sup> Sara Gwyneth Ross, *The Birth of Feminism: Women as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 276, 278.

and preoccupation with gender. Cox calls the texts the first political *querelle* contributions by women and argues that the Venetian *letterate* sought female emancipation from “a tyranny that seeks to legitimate itself by spurious claims of male superiority.”<sup>19</sup> Later in her career, Cox significantly revised her opinion of the authors’ commitment to social criticism; in 2008 she averred that Fonte and Marinella fought “for no more in effect than a cultural recognition of the dignity of women...there is little by way of a real call for social reform.”<sup>20</sup> This shift in the historiography must be combated if our cultural memory of women’s historic struggle against social repression is to be maintained. The 2009 publication of *The Birth of Feminism* began the crucial task of reasserting Fonte and Marinella’s push for political gender transformation; however, Ross limits its discussion to a description of the sex roles found in *Il merito* and *La nobiltà*. My paper will expand on Ross’ efforts and undertake a comprehensive investigation of the ways in which the Venetians actively manipulated gender for the sake of social change. By allowing Fonte and Marinella’s subversive gender ideologies to take center stage, my paper will reassert the extent of the authors’ transgressive assault on patriarchy.

Finally, by shining a light on gender in a more profound way than has previously been done, this paper will counter the pervasive historiographical narrative that Marinella was the more radical of the two authors.<sup>21</sup> This inaccurate notion results from historians’

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<sup>19</sup> Virginia Cox, “The Single Self: Feminist Thought and the Marriage Markey in Early Modern Venice,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2862873>, 520.

<sup>20</sup> Virginia Cox, *Women’s Writing in Italy*, 212.

<sup>21</sup> See Panizza, Introduction. Paola Malpezzi Price, “Lucrezia Marinella (1571-1653),” in *Italian Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, ed. Rinaldina Russell (London: Greenwood Press, 1994); Paola Malpezzi Price, “Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella and their ‘Feminist’ Work,” in *Italian Culture* 12, (1994): 200-214; Stephen Kolsky, “Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, Giuseppe Passi: An Early Seventeenth-Century Feminist Controversy,” *The Modern Language Review* 96, no. 4 (October 2001): 973-989, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3735864>; and Cox, *Women’s Writing in Italy*.



incomplete application of gender theory to the Venetians' texts and from a longstanding academic tendency to privilege the debating treatise (Marinella's chosen literary vehicle) over the polyphonic dialogue (Fonte's) as a serious literary platform from which to subvert masculine authority. These propensities can be discerned in statements like Paola Malpezzi Price's averment that "Marinella's treatise displays its author's stronger consciousness of women's under privileged status in its direct and overt criticism of past and present detractors of the female sex."<sup>22</sup> Marinella's radical view of gender and patriarchy adorns the exterior of her text and is undeniably prominent - a debating treatise has no use for subtlety. In Fonte's work, feminism seethes under the surface. This paper will reconsider the diverse methods by which Fonte and Marinella manipulated the treatise and dialogue forms to convey a pro-woman message in order to illuminate the surprising and unorthodox ways Fonte utilized gender to successfully subvert the legitimacy of patriarchal society.

Any discussion of Fonte and Marinella's critique of male authority must begin with the acknowledgement that in the early modern period, the authors' decision to put pen to page and so enter the public sphere via the written word constituted a subversive act in itself. By the seventeenth century, European society had accepted the promotion of woman's learning so long as it "would encourage her obedience to familiar duties and virtues."<sup>23</sup> Female writing on the other hand, was still a fraught subject. A woman's composition of letters, lyric poetry, and devotional literature was generally not frowned upon, but for a woman to utilize her education to publicly engage in a debate like the *querelle des femmes* was not admissible. As the Italian humanist Lionardo Bruni

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<sup>22</sup> Price, "Moderata Fonte," 212.

<sup>23</sup> King, *Women of the Renaissance*, 165.

declared, “neither the intricacies of debate nor the oratorical artifices of action and delivery are of the least practical use”...“rhetoric in all its forms – public discourse, forensic argument, logical fence, and the like – lies absolutely outside the province of women.”<sup>24</sup> Thus the mere existence of the woman-authored tracts *Il merito delle donne* and *La nobiltà e eccellenza delle donne* represents an overthrow of traditional gender roles and female regard for the strictures of conservative patriarchal society.

Seen in this light, Fonte and Marinella’s innovative decision to craft their apologias in the conventionally masculine literary forms of the dialogue and academic treatise can be understood as a doubly transgressive assertion of female intellectual capacity and rejection of male command. The tie between dialogic writing and masculinity dates to antiquity and the works of Plato, Cicero, and Lucan. Classical dialogue assumed a male audience and its productions contained no speakers of the “other” sex.<sup>25</sup> According to scholar Janet Smarr, female participants first appeared in dialogue in Renaissance works like Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Decameron* and Baldassare Castiglione’s *The Courtier*, texts in which the female interlocutors are largely decorative and no discourse occurs without the mediating presence of a rational and masterful male figure.<sup>26</sup> Fonte’s dialogue jettisoned all such male roles and inscribed female names on page after page of reasoned debate, an unprecedented flood of literary femininity for the seventeenth century. Her dialogue performs its attack on patriarchy within the context of an imagined two-day conversation about marriage and the effects of male-female

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<sup>24</sup> Lionardo Bruni, “The Tractate of Lionardo Bruni d’Arezzo, *De Studiis et Literis*,” in *Vittorino da Feltre and Other Humanist Educators*, ed. William Harrison Woodward (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 126.

<sup>25</sup> Janet Levarie Smarr, *Joining the Conversation: Dialogues by Renaissance Women* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 16.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 190-191.

relationships held amongst “a group of noble and courageous women of different ages and marital states, but of similar lineage and taste.”<sup>27</sup> Fonte’s unorthodox topic and purposed decision to populate her text with intelligent female interlocutors critically destabilized the dialogue’s previously masculine associations.

Marinella’s format, the literary treatise, was also a longstanding masculine type whose use “presupposed immersion into an erudite literary tradition familiar with the classics, as well as practice in debating skills learned by the study of rhetoric and dialectic.”<sup>28</sup> Italianist Letizia Panizza describes Marinella’s employment of the treatise with the following words: “in the long polemical tradition of attacks against women, and their defense, Lucrezia Marinella’s treatise occupies a unique place. It is the only formal debating treatise of its kind written by a woman.”<sup>29</sup> Unlike previous *querelle* texts authored by women, Marinella’s apologia was crafted in direct response to a specific misogynist work, Giuseppe Passi’s 1599 tract *Dei donneschi difetti*, which cataloged female vice and warned men against marriage.<sup>30</sup> Marinella’s writing challenged Passi’s inventory point by point and offered additional condemnation of the anti-woman sentiments found in texts by Ercole Tasso, Sperone Speroni, and Boccaccio. *La nobiltà* completed its feminine assault on misogyny by appending a section on such horrific male vices as patricide and brutality, a move no male treatise writer was likely to make. Her feminine appropriation of the treatise, and Fonte’s of the dialogue, deviated strongly from

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<sup>27</sup> “si trovano alcune nobili e valorose donne di età e stato differenti, ma di sangue e costumi conformi, gentili, virtuose e di elevato ingegno” 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), 14.

<sup>28</sup> Letizia Panizza, “Polemical Prose Writing, 1500-1650, in *A History of Women’s Writing in Italy*, ed. Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 65.

<sup>29</sup> Panizza, Introduction, 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-19.

conventional *querelle* praxis and thus served as the Venetian authors' first step in their radical attempts to undermine male sovereignty over women.

Fonte and Marinella's newly feminist awareness of their gender's oppressed status in the early modern world is clearly articulated in *Il merito* and *La nobiltà*. Their words leave the reader in no doubt that the status quo in which virtuous Italian women are made subservient to men is simultaneously unnatural and unfounded. As a female interlocutor in Fonte's dialogue states, "if we are their (men's) inferiors in authority but not in merit, this is an abuse that has been put into the world" by wicked men.<sup>31</sup> Both authors claim that men have historically sought to control the female sex and that women's current paucity of functions outside the domestic realm is a direct result of patriarchal despotism. According to Fonte, man's social "preeminence is something they have arrogated to themselves" due to a "wish to be tyrants over us, arrogantly usurping the dominion that they wish to have over us, but which should be ours."<sup>32</sup> Marinella writes that patriarchal oppression takes the form of the suppression of her sex's collective ability to attain the crowning achievements of a seventeenth century person: a solid humanistic education and physical glory. "There are few women" she states, "who give themselves to study or the military arts in our time, since men, fearing to lose their authority and become women's servants, often forbid them to learn to read or write."<sup>33</sup> If such male obstacles to female advancement were to be overthrown she continues, "how

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<sup>31</sup> "Perciocché, se siamo loro inferiori d'auttorità, ma non di merito, questo è un abuso, che si è messo nel mondo..." Moderata Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 27.

<sup>32</sup> "Questa preminenza si hanno essi arrogate da loro..." "e ci vogliono tiranneggiare, usurpandosi arrogantemente la signoria, che vogliono avere sopra di noi; e la quale anzi dovremmo noi avere sopra di loro." Ibid., 26.

<sup>33</sup> "Na poco sono quelle, che dieno opera à gli studi, ovvero all'arte militare in questo nostril tempi; perciocche gli huomini, temendo di non perdere la signoria, et di divenir servi delle donne, vietano à quelle ben spesso ancho il saper leggere e scrivere." Lucrezia Marinella, *La nobilta et l'eccellenza delle donne co'diffetti et mancamenti de gli huomini*. (Venice: G.B.Giotti, 1601), microfilm, 32, History of Women R59.

many women there are, who with their greater prudence, justice, and experience of life, would govern empires better than man!”<sup>34</sup>

In order for Fonte and Marinella’s female contemporaries to transcend the restrictive virtues of obedience, chastity, modesty, and silence imposed on them by early modern culture, the patriarchal authority that advanced and enforced such narrow roles had to be undercut.<sup>35</sup> The current historiography on the authors’ *querelle* texts maintains that Marinella accomplished this demotion of male supremacy best, by dint of her use of the academic debating treatise.<sup>36</sup> The strength of a treatise relies on its employment of exempla, short historical and literary narratives and anecdotes illustrative of a debater’s point. Letizia Panizza describes Marinella’s treatise as a literary tour de force which contains a “stunning range of authorities, examples, and arguments” and “mounts a blistering attack on men.”<sup>37</sup> Marinella herself obviously believed that the power to destroy or found a *querelle* argument lay in an author’s skillful arrangement of exempla and she emphasized their use when describing *La nobiltà* to aspiring readers. Indeed, in the introduction to *La nobiltà*, Marinella confidently claimed that her tract would confirm “that the defects of men surpass by far those of women” through the use of “true reasoning and various examples from innumerable ancient and modern historical texts.”<sup>38</sup>

Marinella’s choice to structure her apologia as a debate treatise that directly rebutted a known male attack on women with exempla enabled her to supplant masculine

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> For a contemporary enumeration of these virtues 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.

<sup>36</sup> Cox, *Women Writing in Italy*, 174.

<sup>37</sup> Panizza, Introduction, 2.

<sup>38</sup> “si conferma co’uere ragioni, e co’uarij essempl da innumerabili Historici antichi, e moderni tratti, che i Diffetti de gli huomini trapassano di gran lunga que’della Donne” Lucrezia Marinella, *La nobilta et l’eccellenza delle donne*, front matter.

authority with her own. To argue via the treatise was to assert herself as a qualified philosophical combatant, a role she played well. The pages of *La nobiltà* assault the reader with a battery of pro-woman exempla that pithily denounce misogyny or illuminate “new” female attributes like business acumen and political leadership.<sup>39</sup> In addition, Marinella drew her examples from an expansive range of famous texts widely accepted by Renaissance intellectuals as authoritative documents, including Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso*, Aristotle’s *History of Animals*, Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, and Plato’s *Republic*. Yet herein lies the little discussed but inherent problem of Marinella’s decision to craft a text meant to challenge gender roles and the hegemony of patriarchy as a treatise: the scope of this format was strictly legislated by the rigorous conventions of intellectual rhetorical debate. For one’s argument to be taken seriously it had to wield positions supported by already established experts, and as the source list above demonstrates, these figures were invariably men. Thus Marinella’s attempt to displace male jurisdiction with her own paradoxically rested on her reader’s ultimate acceptance of the very authority she challenged, the command of the male intellectual.

Moderata Fonte is sometimes criticized by scholars for writing a dialogue that “hides its attacks against men’s oppression of women behind its playful frame and the characters’ ambiguous statements” (aka it avoids the use of exempla) while Marinella seemingly tackled patriarchy head on.<sup>40</sup> Such statements overlook the problematic relationship between women and the exempla tradition. They are also indicative of an overly simplistic reading of Fonte’s work that doesn’t take gender theory into account. An analysis of *Il merito delle donne* that pays proper attention to issues of gender

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<sup>39</sup> Marinella, *La nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne*, 28-29, 66.

<sup>40</sup> Price, “Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella,” 212.

demonstrates that Fonte's success in destabilizing male authority was equal to her contemporary's and that negative assessments of her work like that given above are both misleading and inaccurate. Unlike Marinella, Fonte realized that using male words to promote female excellence was a dubitable undertaking; as her character Cornelia insightfully observes, "the majority of men, believe me, who have taken on the task of praising us, (women) do it more for their own use and honor than for ours."<sup>41</sup> Fonte reinforced the precept that male authority figures and their written discussion of the sexes can't be trusted by directing Cornelia to disparagingly ask the audience, "do you believe...that everything the historians tell us about men and woman is really true? You must know that these histories were written by men, who never tell the truth unless by accident; and because of the jealousy and ill will they bear towards us (women), they rarely speak well of us."<sup>42</sup> Statements such as these perfectly illuminate Fonte's sage decision to eschew exempla as rhetorical devices tainted by masculine corruption.

Unlike the treatise, the dialogue format granted its users a high amount of constructive freedom and Fonte's decision to utilize the dialogue form allowed her to advance woman's authority and display female knowledge without permeating her pages with the words of men. The discourse of *Il merito*'s second day is principally concerned with a demonstration of the characters' and thus Fonte's grasp of scientific, historical, and literary information that ranges from astrology to the medicinal properties of plants and herbs. To further cement the tract's attack on male-driven knowledge, Fonte directs

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<sup>41</sup> "Io credo – rispose Cornelia – come de gli altri, che alcun non sia, che l'abbia fatto per molto amore, ma la più parte, credetemi, si ha messo a tale impresa più per suo utile ed onor proprio che per il nostro..." Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 43.

<sup>42</sup> "Credete voi – ella rispose – che tutto il ben de gli uomini, e tutto il ben delle donne che dicono gli storici, sia cosa vera? Dovete sapere, che son uomini quei che l'hanno scritte, i quali non dicono mai verità se non in fallo; ed anco per la invidia e mal voler loro verso di noi; pensate pur che rare volte ne dicono bene..." Ibid., 41.

her characters to discourse on the crimes of masculinity. The female discussion of *Il merito* casts a shade upon the male sex by depicting it as prone to deception, the most “pernicious and incurable” human vice.<sup>43</sup> This argument is similar to her condemnation of the male historian’s inability to tell the truth, but it places doubt on the words, actions, and intentions of all men, be they high or low, young or old, scholarly or lay. Through her interlocutors, Fonte dramatically claims that men are the “falsest” creature in existence and that “in them one is as likely to find honesty as blood in the dead.”<sup>44</sup> Such sentiments are neither playful nor hidden, and their presence in *Il merito* leaves the attentive reader in no doubt that Fonte found conventional male claims to excellence and the right to govern Venetian women’s lives illegitimate. Unlike Marinella, Fonte managed to undermine patriarchal authority through her own feminine intellectual creativity, wit, and social insight rather than an artillery of male-authored exempla. In doing so, she surpassed her contemporary’s efforts to establish female authority and incidentally fulfilled feminist theorist Helene Cixous’ definition of woman’s writing as that in which “woman must write her self” and “put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.”<sup>45</sup>

The destabilization of male claims to intellectual supremacy and social command allowed Fonte and Marinella to credibly undertake the task of manipulating gender roles in order to shape new models of womanhood for the seventeenth century. In *La nobiltà e eccellenza delle donne*, Marinella advanced a version of woman that superseded man. As she stated in the opening to *La nobiltà*, her work was designed to make “this truth

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<sup>43</sup> “perniciose ed incurabili” Ibid., 98.

<sup>44</sup> “fallacissimi uomini” and “poiché in essi così si trova onestà, come il sangue nei morti” Ibid., 18, 24-25.

<sup>45</sup> Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. and ed. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976): 875.



shine forth to everyone, that the female sex is more noble and excellent than the male.”<sup>46</sup>

Marinella resolved to defend this view until “every man, however unyielding, shall be

forced to confirm it with his own mouth.”<sup>47</sup> In order to craft a superior version of

femininity, the Venetian author deconstructed the widely accepted gender binary in

which men were positioned as inherently wise, moderate, and virtuous beings while

women, their natural opposites, were portrayed as weak, irrational, and prone to vice.<sup>48</sup>

Marinella utilized etymology, a reimagined account of Adam and Eve, and the

manipulation of Aristotelian science to break down the binary and invert it, toppling man

from the pedestal of human supremacy and replacing him with woman.

In the early modern period it was generally believed that “the proper names by which things are called reveal the nature and essence of those things.”<sup>49</sup> Marinella

recognized that her literary audience would likely agree with the notion that “the most

noble and unique object will be adorned by the most worthy and honorable name” and so

she began her attempt to reshape female gender roles by analyzing the significance of

five terms commonly used to denote femininity: *donna*, *femina*, *eva*, *Isciah*, and *mulier*.<sup>50</sup>

By discussing these “rare, marvelous, and worthy names,” Marinella hoped to promote a

transgressive feminist understanding of women as inherently noble, divine, and peerless

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<sup>46</sup> “che questa verita resplenda appresso ad ogn’uno la quale è, che il sesso femminile sia più nobile, e eccellente di quello de gli uomini” Marinella, *La nobiltà et l’eccellenza delle donne*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> “che ogni uomo, ancor che pertinace sarà sforzato con la propira bocca à confermarla” Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Panizza, Introduction, 19-20.

<sup>49</sup> “i propri nomi, co’quali si chiamano le cose, dimostano e fanno manifesta la natura e essenza di quelle” Marinella, *La nobiltà et l’eccellenza delle donne*, 3. For support of Marinella’s claim, see Panizza, Introduction, 20. The belief that names signify the nature of a thing derives from Aristotle’s discussion of a thing’s name, definitions, substance, and form in book VIII of his *Metaphysics*. See Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2 trans. and ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1645-1648.

<sup>50</sup> “onde senza alcun dubbio noi affermeremo quella cosa esser più nobile, e singulare, laquale sarà ornate di più degno e honorato nome” Marinella, *La nobiltà et l’eccellenza delle donne*, 3.

creatures.<sup>51</sup> For instance, Marinella linked *donna*, the ubiquitous Italian word for woman, to the Latin term *domina*, *dominae* which literally denotes the mistress of a household, but can also signify an elite lady or imperial power. The Venetian author privileged the latter definition and told her reader that the Latin term and its Italian cognate specifically refer to woman's "peaceful dominion, corresponding to the nature of she who dominates."<sup>52</sup> She also contended that men, historically jealous of the word's and hence woman's power, usurped *domina* to form a vocabulary capable of justifying masculine dominion (for instance, the Italian word *il donno*, or lord).<sup>53</sup>

Marinella's discussion of the etymological roots of empowered womanhood also took the words *eva* and *femina* into account. According to Marinella, both terms are meritorious because they represent life or generation; Marinella cast woman's role as child bearer as another sign of her superiority to man and avowed that "it is only right that [these] name[s] should be given to the feminine sex, considering that it gives life to the masculine one."<sup>54</sup> As we will see in this paper's later investigation of Marinella's manipulation of Aristotelian science, early modern Europeans typically subscribed to the belief that men rather than women were the primary actors in reproduction. Per this viewpoint, the male sex created and gave form to the world while the female sex merely provided the material to be worked.<sup>55</sup> Marinella subverted this logic and assigned women the leading role in reproduction. Thus via the scrutiny of several seemingly small nouns, Marinella affirmed the etymological primacy of female claims to not only personal

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<sup>51</sup> "O che nomi rari, meravigliosa, e degni..." Ibid., 8.

<sup>52</sup> "placido dominio à punto corrispondente alla natural della Dominante" Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> "e pero con ragione è attribuito questo nome al sesso femminile, si come quello: che da l'essere e la vita à maschi" Ibid., 7.

<sup>55</sup> For a brief explanation of Aristotelian biology see Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 30-31.

autonomy, but also an innate right to rule and fashion the world. *La nobiltà's* interrogation of words on female terms thus represents a bold upheaval of seventeenth-century patriarchal social norms in which womanhood was most often “a role, an image, a value imposed upon women by male systems of representation.”<sup>56</sup>

After asserting the superiority of the common words that signified femininity, Marinella further undermined early modern notions of male dominance by combating the idea that the female gender was rendered inferior and subservient to man at creation, a helpmeet only.<sup>57</sup> *La nobiltà e eccellenza delle donne* posed a compelling counterargument to this view, contending that woman was the better sex via a reimagined Adam and Eve narrative and an inversion of classical Aristotelian theories of creation and the body. According to traditional Christian views, Eve or woman, was lesser than man because she was created last, took her being from man, and was designed to serve the male sex rather than rule Eden. Marinella refused to credit this conception of her sex and forthrightly opposed it by declaiming that “woman’s proper purpose is not to gratify man, but to understand, govern, generate, and adorn the world.”<sup>58</sup> She denied that “woman does not possess her own being, given her by God and nature, though I concede that man’s rib was the material for it, as was mud for man” and argued that woman “will certainly prove more excellent than man, as a rib is without a doubt nobler than mud.”<sup>59</sup> Here Marinella cleverly molded Aristotelian ideals to fit her own agenda, overturning the claim that woman was a defective version of man even as she used Aristotle’s doctrine of

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<sup>56</sup> Luce Irigaray, “Interview: The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine,” in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 130.

<sup>57</sup> See Genesis 2:18.

<sup>58</sup> “[I]o dico che il proprio fine della Donna non è diesser fatta in gratia dell’huomo, ma di’ intedere, e di governare, di generare, at et di adornare il mondo.” Marinella, *La nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne*, 123.

<sup>59</sup> “Si nega, che la Donna non habbia il proprio essere datole da Dio, et dalla natura, cecededo però che la costa dell’huomo le fosse Materia, si come fù il fago all’huomo.” and “...sarà certamente più del Maschio eccellente essendo la costa più del fango senza comparatione nobile” *Ibid.*, 11, 123.

four causes to support her insurrectionary belief in the female gender's superiority.<sup>60</sup> Per Aristotelian science, every object in existence has four causes – the material cause or substance from which it derives, the formal cause that shapes the material, the Efficient cause or agency behind this process (Christians understood this to be God), and the final cause or the purpose towards which the process worked. Marinella hoped to demonstrate to her audience that if women (a final cause) were shaped by God from a superlative material, a rib as opposed to mud, then surely their souls were created nobler than men's.<sup>61</sup>

After establishing the innate superiority of woman via a highly altered understanding of her origins, Marinella continued to use the inversion of Aristotelian doctrine to destabilize the hegemony of male supremacy by depriving man of his role as formal cause and allotting it to woman. As previously demonstrated in this paper's discussion of etymology, Marinella associated the female sex with such powerful words as *eva* or life. Per classical models of reproduction, women were believed to be little more than human incubators or the material cause, while men formally gave shape to new life. In *The Generation of Animals*, Aristotle wrote that “there must needs be that which generates (man) and that from which it generates (woman)...the male contributes the principle of movement and the female the material. This is why the female does not produce offspring by herself, for she needs a principle, i.e. something to begin the movement of the embryo and define the form it is to assume.”<sup>62</sup> Marinella innovatively

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<sup>60</sup> Aristotle on women: “Now a boy is like a woman in form, and the woman is as it were an impotent male, for it is through a certain incapacity that the female is female, being incapable of concocting the nutriment in its last stage into semen (and this is either blood or that which is analogous to it in animals which are bloodless) owing to the coldness of her nature.” Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 1 trans. and ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1130.

<sup>61</sup> Marinella, *La nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne*, 11.

<sup>62</sup> Aristotle, *The Complete Works*, 1132-1133.

overturned this theory and argued that aside from God, it is woman who plays the highest role in creation. She wrote that the female “produce[s] the ungracious man, gives him soul and life, illuminates him with the splendor of divine light, [and] confers on him heat and light on this bare earth.”<sup>63</sup> In so claiming, Marinella deprived men of their customary generative preeminence and assigned a powerful new role to the female sex. Marinella’s reimagined potent model of womankind was capable of fashioning life and so would force men “in spite of themselves...to honor worthy women with words and writings and praise them to the skies.”<sup>64</sup>

Not content with subverting conventional ideas about woman’s origin and her role in creation, Marinella concluded her subversion of Aristotelian gender norms by addressing the final cause itself, the body. Scientific consensus in the seventeenth century dictated that men were hot and rational beings inclined to virtue, while women were cold, moist, and prone to weakness. This negative view of the female sex was used to justify women’s social subjugation and exclusion from the public sphere.<sup>65</sup> The Venetian author upended such notions in a similar manner to her treatment of Aristotle’s four causes in order to demonstrate feminine physical and moral superiority. While Marinella did not refute the importance of temperature in determining a person’s character, she did reverse which traits were linked to hot and cold. She wrote of the body

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<sup>63</sup> “che la donna produca il poco cortese maschio, li dia anima e vita, lo illumini con lo splendor della divina luce; lo conservi in questa terrena spoglia co’l calore, e con luce...” Marinella, *La nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne*, 8.

<sup>64</sup> “nondimeno à lor mal grado sono sforzavi dal rimorso della propria consienza...di honorare e con dettie, e scritti inalzar fino al Cielo le meritevoli donne” Ibid., 24.

<sup>65</sup> Ross, *The Birth of Feminism*, 286. For an example, consider poet Torquato Tasso’s statement that “As nature has produced men and women of very different temperature...they are not likely to be suited to the same tasks. Men, as stronger, is inclined to some, and women, as more delicate, to others. Thus bravery and liberality would be male virtues, and modesty female”...they should favor “a retiring life and private and solitary places.” Torquato Tasso, “*Discorso della virtù femminile, e donnesca*,” In *Women in Italy, 1350-1650*, ed. Mary Rogers and Paola Tinagli (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 26.

that “nearly all of its virtues and defects depend on its temperature...a temperate body like a woman’s is most suited to moderate workings of the soul, as the hot temperature of man is not.”<sup>66</sup> She also contended that women’s soft and delicate bodies were not a sign of fragility, but rather the most “fitting dwelling for kindness and virtue.”<sup>67</sup> She professed that because of women’s cooler temperature, “we never see or read about...them giv[ing] themselves unrestrainedly to pleasure” or vice.<sup>68</sup> To cement her claims, Marinella next overturned the association between the male sex, heat, and moderation, alleging that man’s hot nature made him mercurial and subject to “the vice of proud and precipitate wrath.”<sup>69</sup> Per her structural use of the debate treatise, she supported this assertion with literary exempla including Ariosto’s discourse on anger in *Orlando furioso* and Petrarch’s discussion of Herod’s rash decision to murder his wife based upon an unfounded rumor.<sup>70</sup>

Marinella clinched her analysis of the female body’s ability to indicate woman’s inherent goodness and superiority by performing an examination of beauty. *La nobiltà* avers that “the most elegant poets have clearly taught us that the soul shines out of the body like the rays of the sun do through transparent glass” (in other words, beautiful souls equal stunning bodies) and claims that the ugliest female is prettier than the most handsome man.<sup>71</sup> “Therefore” Marinella writes, “if women are more beautiful than

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<sup>66</sup> “percioche dalla sua temperature dipendono quasi tutti i vitru e diffetti...percioche un corpo temperato come è quello delle donne, è molto atto alle aperationi modera te dell’anima” Marinella, *La nobiltà et eccellenaa delle donne*, 31.

<sup>67</sup> “la compositione del corpo di gentilezza è virtù e proprio albergo” Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> “perche non si vede, ò legge...che sfrenatamente si dieno ad altri piaceri” Ibid., 44.

<sup>69</sup> “il vitio della fiera e precipitosa iracondia” Ibid., 166.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 166-167.

<sup>71</sup> “ma piu chiaramente ci hanno insegnato questa cosa i leggiadrissimi Poeti, che hanno mostrato, che l’anima splede fuori del corpo, come fanno i raggi del Sole fuori di un purissimo vetro” Marinella lists twenty-one poetic exempla that verify the connection between beauty and goodness. Marinella, *La nobiltà e eccellenza delle donne*, 13-18.

men...who can ever deny that they are also more excellent?”<sup>72</sup> After demonstrating her conception of women’s preeminence in traits and body, Marinella hammers home *La nobiltà’s* radical upset of classical notions by directly confronting Aristotle, the ultimate representative of male authority, himself: “[t]hus it appears to me that Aristotle goes against all reason...when [he states] that women are imperfect in comparison to men” for “nature, knowing the perfection of the female sex produces a greater abundance of women than of men, as it always does when objects are better.”<sup>73</sup> The male-female gender binary had officially and thoroughly been turned on its head.

Establishing a strong argument for female superiority allowed Marinella to confidently advance a new model of empowered womanhood that could theoretically exist in contemporary society. Marinella showcased her vision of ideal femininity by cataloging exempla of great mythological, historical, and contemporary women whose achievements she used to ascribe female virtues and gender roles, some traditional, some less so. In a section entitled “Learned Women and Those Who Are Illustrious in Many Arts,” Marinella engaged in the standard *querelle* defense of woman’s intellectual prowess, claiming that, “the few women who are interested (aka allowed access to) in learning become so skilled in the sciences that men envy and hate them, as lesser people tend to detest greater ones.”<sup>74</sup> To demonstrate her gender’s capacity and urge her female readers to pursue education, she discussed the mental prowess of figures like Cassandra of Troy, Athena, the Greek muses, Sapho, Damone daughter of Pythagoras, and

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>73</sup> “onde la natura, conoscendo la perfettione del sesso fememile, produce piu copia di donne, che di huomini, come quell ache sepre ò per lo più genera in tuttle le cose quell, che è miglior...però mi pare che Aristotile contra ogni ragione...voglio che la donne sieno imperfette in comparatione de maschi” Ibid., 23-24.

<sup>74</sup> “[A]nzi quell le poche, che alle dottrine attendono, divengono tanto delle scienze ornate, che gli huomini le invidiano e le odiano, come soglio no odiare i minori i maggiori” Ibid., 37.

Catherine of Aragon.<sup>75</sup> These women excelled in such diverse intellectual pursuits as prophecy, law, invention, drama, geometry, poetry, philosophy, and religious composition. These exempla promoted a version of womanhood in which the “other” sex could pursue the same scholarly activities as man and claim control of her own mind, rather than submit to having her thoughts shepherded by overbearing early modern men convinced of woman’s need for mental guidance.<sup>76</sup>

*La nobiltà’s* enumeration of accomplished women is sustained in additional chapters devoted to female continence, bravery, and wisdom. In “Temperate and Continent Women,” Marinella detailed a second normative female trait – chastity. She extolled sexual purity and praised the noble if extreme example set by female figures like Daphne and Lucretia, who sacrificed themselves to remain chaste.<sup>77</sup> While urging female readers to be virginal was nothing new, Marinella’s transgressive conception of gender manifested itself later in the same passage. Marinella pressed women to emulate the warrior queen Zenobia of the Palmyrenes, a classical figure who combined chastity with military and political know-how. According to Marinella, Zenobia ruled an empire and

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 38-39, 41-42.

<sup>76</sup> This mentality is evident in the words of Sieneese writer Piccolomini, who described women as “somewhat credulous and easily deceived...they debate matters and size things up quickly, swiftly resolving points at issue and deciding almost immediately about the best options before them.” Alessandro Piccolomini, “Excerpt of Tre Libri dell’educazione cristiana dei figliuoli,” In *Women in Italy, 1350-1650*, ed. Mary Rogers and Paola Tinagli (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 23. Popular author Juan Luis Vives used the writings of Saint Paul to support limiting the reading women’s learning - “Let a woman learn in silence with all subjection. I do not allow a woman to teach or to usurp authority over a man, but to stay silent...since woman is a frail thing and of weak judgment and may easily be deceived.” Juan Luis Vives, *The Education of a Christian Woman*, trans. and ed. Charles Fantazzi (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000), 72. Derived from I Tim 2:11-14.

<sup>77</sup> Marinella, *La nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne*, 49, 51. According to mythology, Daphne was a follower of Diana or Artemis, the goddess of the hunt and chastity. When the god Apollo fell in love with her, she begged the a river god to relieve her and was so transformed into a laurel tree. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1973), 16-20. Lucretia was made famous by Roman historian Livy; a married woman, she was raped by the son of the last Tarquin king. To demonstrate her innocence to her husband and father, she stabbed herself rather than live with the shame of submitting to another man, saying “[n]ever shall Lucretia provide a precedent for unchaste women to escape what they deserve.” Livy, *The Early History of Rome: Books I-V of “The History of Rome from its Foundations,”* trans. Audrey de Sélincourt (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 100-102.



intrepidly waged war against the Romans after her husband's death, proving her ability and therefore woman's to be "a most noble and valiant captain and a brave warrior."<sup>78</sup> By discussing such a personage, Marinella undercut early modern notions of women as both mentally and physically weak, going so far as to claim that if "it were permitted for women to be skilled at arms...what marvelous feats we should see, the like of which were never heard, in maintaining and expanding kingdoms."<sup>79</sup> In the remaining portion of exempla, Marinella assigned women additional unorthodox gender roles including defender of Christianity, political adviser, and business leader. Through this discussion of virtuous but strong women and the unstated but obvious instance of herself, woman, author, and intellect as the ultimate exemplary female, Marinella fashioned a fixed model of superior womanhood that existed outside the bounds of patriarchal authority for her contemporaries to emulate.

In 1600, Marinella's fellow Venetian *querelle* contributor Moderata Fonte similarly put forth a progressive model of womanhood designed to challenge male dominance in her posthumously published tract *Il merito delle donne*. This polyphonic dialogue deconstructed the male-female binary in order to fashion a dynamic version of femininity defined by personal female autonomy and equality with, rather than superiority to men. Fonte believed this task to be vital because if women were left under the thumb of men for too long, they would be "deceived into dropping [their] will and letting it fall into the grip of men together with honor, the soul, and life."<sup>80</sup> To construct

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<sup>78</sup> "nelle guerre mostrò valore di nobilissimo Capitano, et dip rode guerriero" Marinella, *La nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne*, 44.

<sup>79</sup> From "O Dio volesse, che à questi nostri tempi fosse lecito alle donne l'essercitarsi nelle armi...che si vedrebbero cose meravigliose e non piu udite nel conservare i regni, e nell'ampiarli." Ibid., 33.

<sup>80</sup> "per ciò ne rimaniamo ingannate, lasciando cadere e precipitare in lor balia la nostra volontà con l'onore, l'anima e la vita insieme" Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 43.

a newly independent model of woman, Fonte manipulated traditional understandings of gender in numerous and deeply subversive ways, surpassing the achievements of her contemporary in both her recognition of gender's social component and her construction of a theoretical feminine Venetian society. To conduct a proper investigation of *Il merito*, I will first address the text's relation to *La nobiltà* - that is, I will consider where the methodologies of Fonte's apologia overlap those of Marinella's, as they do in the reimagining of the Adam and Eve story, inversion of Aristotelian conventions, and listing of noteworthy female figures. I will then explicate the other functions of gender in *Il merito* and so demonstrate that Fonte was the more radical of the two authors.

Like Marinella, Fonte informed her readers that woman was not created inferior to man. Through Corinna, the interlocutor most closely associated with her authorial voice, Fonte declared that "they (men) were born before us...not on account of their nobility, but because of ours, for they were born from the lifeless earth so that we could then be born from living flesh."<sup>81</sup> Although Fonte did not specifically tie this sentiment to the Aristotelian doctrine of four causes as Marinella did, the fact that she privileged the substance or material cause from which woman derived clearly indicated her familiarity and intellectual engagement with the classical theory. In the course of *Il merito*'s greater discussion of marriage and the relationships between the sexes, Fonte also refuted the standard belief that Eve and woman were formed to be man's helpmeet; she contended instead that God meant for the sexes to aid each other equally and without coercion.<sup>82</sup> As

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<sup>81</sup> "Sono nati inanzi di noi – rispose Corinna – non per dignità loro, ma per dignità nostra; poiché essi nacquero dell'insensata terra perché noi poi nascessimo della viva carne" Ibid., 26.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 26, 113. In these pages, the character Leonara puts forth the idea that Eve was designed as Adam's helpmeet and companion, and that he in turn was specifically created to be of aid to her.

Corinna recites in a poem on woman's ideal state of being, "A free heart dwells in my (Woman's) chest, I serve no one, I belong to no one but myself."<sup>83</sup>

Fonte completed her reimagining of the Adam and Eve narrative by subverting conventional interpretations of the story of original sin. Traditionally the Church blamed Eve and her female "descendants" for the fall of man because she was the first to eat of the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge.<sup>84</sup> Such rhetoric was commonly used in Fonte's time to justify the suppression of women. Early modern men portrayed the female sex as weak-minded, carnally inclined daughters of Eve and argued that such creatures were apt to wreak chaos on social stability if not overseen by rational and authoritative male figures.<sup>85</sup> Such misogynist attitudes directly challenged Fonte's desire to prove her gender noble and capable of self-determination; to counter them, she boldly reassigned blame and made man accountable for human kind's fall. She twisted the biblical tale, lessening Eve's culpability "because it was to a good end – the desire of learning the knowledge of good and evil – that [Eve] allowed herself to be carried away

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<sup>83</sup> "Liberò cor nel mio petto soggiorna, Non servo alcun, né d'altri son che mia" Ibid., 18.

<sup>84</sup> For example, the sixteenth century Milanese writer Galeazzo F. Capra wrote that "[t]he ranks of Heaven would have been filled had they not been emptied by the pride of Lucifer...and had it not been woman who dared to eat the forbidden fruit, with such disobedience and temerity. From this sin followed the universal damnation of all people." Galeazzo F. Capra, Excerpt from "Della eccellenza et dingità delle donne," in *Women in Italy, 1350-1650*, ed. Mary Rogers and Paola Tinagli (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 13.

<sup>85</sup> King, *Women of the Renaissance*, 2, 38-42. In Fonte's time, a plethora of advice manuals existed to help men restrain woman's troublesome nature. One manual said that a father "should strive to see that she is trained in virtuous practices and in activities appropriate to a future housewife. Of the [virtuous] practices, we would place the knowledge of God and of chastity first... in my daughter I would look for timidity and modesty, which should almost be the basis and foundation of the entire fabric of virtue with which we intend to construct her and without which, I believe, the whole edifice would fall." Such sentiments illuminate the masculine desire to shape and control women. "secondo questi due fini s'affatichi di fare, ch'ella si ammaestri nelle discipline virtuose a ne gli esserciti che canvengono a chi ha ad essere Donna de famiglia. nelle discipline porremo la contezza di Dio e dell'honesto...io di questi ragion voglio direi che cose ricercarei nella mia fanciulla, timidita e vergogna, legqualie habbiano ad esser quasi base e fondamento di tutta la fabrica delle virtù in che noi intendiamo disciplinarla e senza queste e da credere, che tutto lo edificio rovinera" Lodovico Dolce, *Dialogo della institution delle donne* (Venice: Giolito: 1560), 14. Boston Public Library e-book.

and eat of the forbidden fruit.”<sup>86</sup> In Fonte’s retelling, Adam “was not moved by this, but by greed.”<sup>87</sup> Fonte concluded the case for man’s guilt by emphasizing the fact that Adam was not corrupted by Satan as Eve was, but by mere human words – “and thus it was that God did not throw them from paradise as soon as Eve sinned, but after Adam did.”<sup>88</sup>

To further discredit early modern notions of female inferiority and encourage society to abandon the hegemony of masculinity and instead “allow things to be equal and for there to be some parity,” Fonte manipulated Aristotelian views of the body.<sup>89</sup> Here again her tactics were similar to Marinella’s, although the specific ways in which the authors reinterpreted classical theory sometimes differed. In example, where Marinella upended Aristotelian norms by allotting women the role of formal cause in reproduction, Fonte did not. She allowed man to keep his elevated function, but cleverly deployed his association with the formal cause to explain the bountiful existence of wicked men explicated by the anti-marriage camp of her dialogue. She wrote, “it is said that the father has the greater part in generating the son than the mother, from which it follows that the son more strongly resembles the father and in consequence is badly made.”<sup>90</sup> Thus contemporary Venetian society was plagued by men riddled with such vices as miserliness, deception, gaming, theft, and bloodlust, and who were wholly undeserving of positions of power over women.<sup>91</sup>

Such one-sided logic may seem problematic to modern readers unfamiliar with

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<sup>86</sup> “Anzi fu Adam – rispose Corinna – poiché ella a buon fine desiderosa d’intender la scienza del ben e del male si lasciò trasportar a gustar del vietato frutto.” Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 56.

<sup>87</sup> “Ma Adam mon per ciò mosso, mas per avidità...” Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> “E per ciò si trova che non subito, che Eva peccò, Iddio li scacciò del Paradiso, ma dopo Adam le ebbe disobedito.” Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> “volessero almanco che le cose andassero equalmente a vi fusse qualche parità.” Ibid., 27.

<sup>90</sup> “si dice che’l padre nel generare ha più parte nel figliuolo che la madre, di qui nasce che’l figliuolo riesce più simile ad esso padre e per conseguenza così malvagio di maniera” This is said by Cornelia, a member of the anti-marriage/men side of the debate. Ibid., 55.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 28, 36.

intellectual Renaissance thinking. Surely if man has the greater part in generation, then his daughters should also be poorly made and inclined to vice rather than to the gentleness and kindness which Fonte ascribes to them.<sup>92</sup> Fonte's selective incrimination of fathers and sons via bastardized Aristotelian science is representative of early modern rhetorical technique's often paradoxical nature. Fonte and her fellow *querelle* participants exploited any and all materials relevant to their cause and manipulated them to fit their arguments. Such practice was widespread and so long as authors did so eloquently, any inconsistencies resulting from a wider application of their reasoning were overlooked.<sup>93</sup> Thus Fonte was able to convincingly argue on a literary plane that man's role as formal cause resulted in the production of vile sons without concomitantly casting a pall upon her own sex.

Fonte's adaption of classical understandings of the body more closely mirrored Marinella's on the subject of temperature. Like her contemporary, Fonte did not dismiss the idea that a person's hot or cold nature influenced their disposition, but inverted the conventional association of virtue with heat and vice with cold. Thus she described men as "hot and dry, dominated by choler, being all flames and fire" and therefore "more inclined to err" than to behave rationally or honorably.<sup>94</sup> In contrast, Fonte found that woman's "cold and phlegmatic" bodily composition rendered her "more calm, delicate, and apprehensive" than man and so better able "to govern [her]self by reason and not by

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>93</sup> Floyd Gray, *Gender, Rhetoric, and Print Culture in French Renaissance Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 13. I disagree with Gray's interpretation of the *querelle* as a largely insincere intellectual game, but his description of early modern rhetorical strategies is useful.

<sup>94</sup> "dove all'incontro gli uomini di complession calda e secca, signoreggiati dalla colera, essendo tutti fiamma e fuoco, sono anco più inclinati ad errare" Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 47.

appetite.”<sup>95</sup> This feminist revision of classical ideas of the body cast woman’s physical nature as superior to man’s; however, unlike Marinella, Fonte did not doom the male sex to unmitigated mediocrity. Fonte composed *Il merito* to establish her sex’s worth and right to operate independently in society; thus an inversion of anti-woman Aristotelian norms was required. However, Fonte did not depict temperature as the final determinant of human character and the lasting impression given by her interlocutors’ debate over mankind’s relative ability to overcome the urges of the body is that both sexes could live virtuous lives if they sublimated nature via willpower and the rational mind.<sup>96</sup>

In Fonte’s gender ideology, to be a superior or degenerate human was more complicated than to be biologically female or male. As an early modern person, the Venetian author could not entirely escape the mental framework characteristic of her time – thus the need to reimagine rather than discard bible stories and classical doctrine of the body in order to demonstrate female value. However, Fonte’s nuanced discussion of the sexes far outstripped the essentialist writings of Marinella, for she recognized the role of socialization in shaping gender roles. Fonte’s cognizance of the interplay between gender and society is made manifest throughout the pages of *Il merito delle donne*. For example, after Fonte first identified the existence of male hegemony, she directed an interlocutor to comment that contemporary ideals of male supremacy were not representative of fact but of an injustice that men “have over a long time made law and custom.”<sup>97</sup> In other words, the persistence of illegitimate masculine dominance in Venetian society had caused its husbands, fathers, and sons “to claim to be theirs’ by

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<sup>95</sup> “Derived from: “nostra natural disposizione e complessione, la qual per esser....fredda e flemmatica, ci rende per conseguenza più quiete, più deboli, più apprensive,” also “si governano per ragione e non per appetito” Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 46-49.

<sup>97</sup> “che poi a lungo andare si hanno fatto lecito ed ordinario” Ibid., 27.

right what is actually an abuse of power.”<sup>98</sup> Leading interlocutor Corinna further illuminates the artificiality of patriarchal dominance by declaiming 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.”<sup>99</sup>

These statements showcase Fonte’s progressive understanding that a human’s place in the world, be they male or female, was in part determined by social factors external to any inherent nature of the self. The Venetian author’s vision of gender as socially malleable is best seen in her speakers’ discourse on the subject of male dignity. The maiden Virginia, a member of the pro-marriage faction, inquires of her fellows: “couldn’t we come up with some remedy to improve [men] a little?”<sup>100</sup> After all, “if one has a ragged dress, repairs can make it good again” and “if there is a displeasing meal, adding butter and spices can make it palatable.”<sup>101</sup> Why should such a panacea not exist for unwholesome masculinity? A close reading of *Il merito* reveals just such a transformative physic: the long-term association with a good woman. As the character Leonora avers, “the man that is alone is noxious, but the company of a woman is his cure.”<sup>102</sup> Fonte found that “when a man contains in himself some good values and morals, the woman with whom he lives – be she mother, sister, nurse, or wife, gave them

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<sup>98</sup> “e tanto è posto in consueto, che vogliono e par loro, che sia lor di ragione quel che è di soperchiaria” Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> “[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 pacienza.” Ibid., 26.

<sup>100</sup> “[N]on vi sarebbe qualche remedio, di grazia, per farli diventa un poco buoni?” Ibid., 112.

<sup>101</sup> “[S]e si ha una veste trista, racconciandola ci scusa per buona, se vi è una cattiva vivanda, mettendoci del bottiro e delle spizierie si fa deventar saporita.” Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> “[L]’uomo che solo è mortifero, ma la compagnia della donna è la sua teriaca.” Ibid., 115.

to him.”<sup>103</sup> Female worth is admittedly privileged in these scenarios, but they nonetheless make clear Fonte’s comprehension of the ultimately unfixed nature of masculinity and hence gender as a whole. Like Marinella, Fonte successfully used her writing to deconstruct the male-female binary, undermine male authority, and assert female worth; however, where Marinella simply reassembled the binary after placing woman in the position of preeminence, Fonte left it in pieces. In her view, although the bodily nature of the sexes differed, the social component of gender made it possible for men and women to share roles and find a way “to reconcile and live in peace with each other.”<sup>104</sup> In sum, *Il merito*’s depiction of gender markedly approached modern understandings that “masculine and feminine are not inherent characteristics but subjective constructs.”<sup>105</sup>

The radical nature of Fonte’s vision of gender is further revealed in her attempt to construct a new model of womanhood for her female readers’ consideration. Here again, comparing Fonte’s work to Marinella’s will help us better understand the extent to which *Il merito* subverted seventeenth century norms. As this paper has shown, Marinella utilized an extended discussion of exempla to craft an archetype of empowered womanhood in *La nobiltà e eccellenza delle donne*. Drawing upon a broad range of examples of great female figures, Marinella assigned women a variety of meritorious gender roles, some orthodox, some not. In the discourse of *Il merito*’s *seconda giornata*, Fonte also employed exempla to build her model of autonomous femininity. Her

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<sup>103</sup> “[C]osì, se l’uomo contiene in sé qualche buon costume, lo ha dalla donne con cui pratica, o madre, o sorella, o balia, o moglie che ella di sia.” Ibid., 25.

<sup>104</sup> “si accordassimo un tratto e facessimo questa santa pace insieme” Ibid., 158.

<sup>105</sup> Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis,” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1064.



interlocutors briefly list famous women commonly cited in pro-woman *querelle* literature to show that females “are a source of the greatest value to the world through their wisdom, virtue, and goodness.”<sup>106</sup> The characters extol many of the same figures as Marinella, praising female bravery in the form of Queen Zenobia and female chastity in the guise of Lucretia.<sup>107</sup> The ubiquitous Sappho is raised as a model of feminine intellectual vigor.<sup>108</sup> Fonte’s interlocutors also recite odes in honor of such local women as Chiara Dolfin and Elena da Mula, the patrician wives of contemporary Venetian political leaders.<sup>109</sup> Such instances of distinguished native women are noticeably not present in Marinella’s lengthy discussion of female exempla. Ostensibly, Fonte included their names in *Il merito* to demonstrate woman’s ability to combine mental and physical beauty, but their discussion also served to underline the immediate social relevance of her writing. In Fonte’s tract, women of virtue deserving of a status equal to that of men were blatantly not a chimera of history and myth, but living persons who could be encountered in the reader’s Venice.

Fonte’s discussion of exemplary women and gender further exceeded that of Marinella in her treatment of the vibrant cast of exclusively female characters that populate her dialogue. As creations of Fonte’s intellect rather than history or literature, the interlocutors of *Il merito* provided a tabula rasa through which Fonte could complicate the simplistic virtues associated with traditional *querelle* exempla. For example, while both Fonte and Marinella extolled sexual purity, Fonte used her characters to deepen the trait’s meaning and make even this most conventional feminine

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<sup>106</sup> From “[N]on si può dire con verità che le donne siano di danno al mondo, anzi di grandissimo utile per lor sapere, virtù e bontà.” Fonte, *Il merito*, 62.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 62, 67.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 151, 153.

virtue subversive. In the discourse of *Il merito*, her speakers explain that the true point of female celibacy was not the preservation of women's virginity and reputations, but its theoretical ability to allow women to escape male rule (aka the husband) and so retain their agency as fully-human individuals. As the young widow Leonora avers, "a woman segregated from masculine contact is a semi-divine creature and can work miracles."<sup>110</sup> The avoidance of male company enabled by chastity allowed Fonte's foremost character Corinna to "delight and train in excellent pursuits, devoting [her] lofty thoughts to the study of letters, human and divine."<sup>111</sup> Fonte's depiction of female independence and rejection of male supervision was deeply inflammatory in a culture whose familial and political structures were dependent upon the maintenance of subservient female positions as wives and daughters governed by a patriarch's will.

The creative license granted by the use of imagined dialogue characters also allowed Fonte to nuance her vision of an independent womanhood by setting her speakers discourse on marriage in a theoretical Venetian society characterized by female self-determination and social cohesion. Unlike Marinella, whose writing was hemmed in by the strict rules of proper treatise construction and her desire to directly combat the

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<sup>110</sup> "Poiché la donna segregata dalla viril conversazione è una creatura quasi divina e può operar cose maravigliose..." Ibid., 54.

<sup>111</sup> "vi dilettrate ed essercitate nelle virtuose azioni e impiegando i vostri alti pensieri nei cari studi delle lettere, così umane, come divine" Ibid., 18. Corinna's independence is made additionally interesting by Fonte's description of her as a *dimnessa* (see page 15). There is an interesting problem of translation regarding this term and the strength of its disassociation with men; while *dimnessa* could broadly refer to an unmarried female, it could also indicate a member of a sixteenth century Venetian tertiary order that housed unwed women disinclined to the confinement and religiosity of convent life. Both definitions of the term promote female autonomy, but the second constitutes an especially strong endorsement of female disassociation with men. We cannot ask Fonte which definition is correct; perhaps the text is purposefully ambiguous. I subscribe to the stronger definition of *dimnessa* because *Il merito* fiercely criticizes any relationship in which woman is made subordinate to a male figure. See Smarr, *Joining the Conversation: Dialogues by Renaissance Women*, 216 and 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), 45n5.

work of Giuseppe Passi, Fonte was free to direct her apologia in any direction she chose so long as she portrayed a two-sided debate. Thus her seven characters come together to celebrate the joys of female companionship and analyze the harm done their sex by patriarchal society in an alternate version of Fonte's Venice. The outspoken women travel from various parts of the city to meet in a contemporary Venetian palazzo overlooking the Grand Canal (a hub of Venetian public life) and utilize their female agency to elect the matriarch Adriana queen of their conversation.<sup>112</sup> Under the benign rule of this female authority, each character is granted room to argue her views and suggest additional topics for discussion. For Fonte to so confront the reader with a cast of autonomous early modern females free to navigate the public spaces of Venice, assemble, and engage in debate sharply contravened Venetian social norms. As the literary scholar Ann Rosalind Jones writes, the condition of respectable Renaissance females in the humanist and bourgeois tradition was 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."<sup>113</sup> Fonte's autonomous interlocutors defy such expectations and indeed condemn them, attacking 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 asking their permission nor say a word without them making a thousand comments."<sup>114</sup> In doing so, they furthered both Fonte's subversive

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<sup>112</sup> Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 15, 23-24.

<sup>113</sup> 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.

<sup>114</sup> "non ci volessero aver tanto imperio sopra [noi]...che vogliono, che siamo loro schiave e non possiamo far un passo senza domandar loro licenzie; né diciamo una parola, che non vi facino mille comenti" Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, 27.

condemnation of patriarchal hegemony and vision of independent womanhood more than any catalog of exempla could do.

Finally, *Il merito*'s interlocutors advanced Fonte's vision of womanhood and belief in female social cohesion by daring to label the relationships they shared true friendship. Like the dialogue, genuine friendship was customarily believed to be an exclusively male phenomenon. The western roots of friendship date to antiquity and the writings of such Greek philosophers as Plato, Zeno and Aristotle.<sup>115</sup> Aristotle classified all positive human interactions under the term *philia* or friendship, but limited the lofty bond of virtuous or true friendship to rational men.<sup>116</sup> In the classical and early modern periods it was felt that woman's supposedly passionate and irrational disposition rendered her participation in such elevated human connections impossible.<sup>117</sup> Fonte's *querelle* text dismissed this conception of amity and boldly portrayed its female speakers as participants in "a dear and attentive friendship."<sup>118</sup> As this paper has mentioned, the speakers ranged on opposing sides of the book's debate on marriage, but they always paid their companions the courtesy of listening because "by conversing with good people" it is possible to "learn good habits and become better people through their example."<sup>119</sup> Through this depiction of amicable and respectful interpersonal female exchanges, Fonte displaced men with women as the true acolytes of friendship, stating 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

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<sup>115</sup> Dirk Baltzly, and Nick Eliopoulos, "The Classical Ideals of Friendship," in *Friendship: A History*, ed. Barbara Caine (London: Equinox Publishing, 2009), 2-6.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 22-24.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 14. See also Neville Chiavaroli and Constant J. Mews, "The Latin West," in *Friendship: A History*, ed. Barbara Caine (London: Equinox Publishing, 2009), 76.

<sup>118</sup> "avendo tra loro contratto una cara e discreta amicizia" Fonte, *Il Merito delle Donne*, 14.

<sup>119</sup> "perché conversando con persona da bene, impari buoni costumi ed abbia occasione di andar di bene in meglio con tale esempio" *Ibid.*, 79.

woman is quicker to make friends with another woman and better maintain the relationship than men do amongst themselves.”<sup>120</sup> It was important that Fonte advocate such tight bonds between Venetian women, fictional or otherwise, for if her contemporaries were to follow her transgressive exhortation for the female sex to “wake-up and recover our liberty, along with the honor and dignity that [men] have held usurped from us for so long,” such ties would be needed.<sup>121</sup> While Marinella also supported such a claiming of female independence, it is Fonte’s radical portrayal of her characters as a close-knit society of autonomous individuals that truly advances this cause and secures her position as the more progressive author.

The French feminist theorist Luce Irigaray once said “when women’s movements challenge the forms and nature of political life, the contemporary play of powers and power relations, they are in fact working towards a modification of women’s status. On the other hand, when these same movements aim simply for a change in the distribution of power, leaving intact the power structure itself, then they are resubjecting themselves...to a phallographic order.”<sup>122</sup> As this paper has shown, the *querelle* texts published on behalf of Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinella in 1600 represent the first female effort to dismantle accepted gender norms and the repressive institution of patriarchy in Venetian society. The Venetian writers’ determined effort to undermine male authority and reshape early modern notions of womanhood to promote female superiority or equality to men far surpassed the largely rhetorical writings of the early

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<sup>120</sup> “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.” Ibid., 76.

<sup>121</sup> “Deh di grazia, svegliamoci un giorno e ricuperamo la nostra libertà, con l’onore e dignità che tanto tempo ci tengono usurpate.” Ibid., 169.

<sup>122</sup> Luce Irigaray, “Interview: The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine,” in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 128.

*querelle*. While Fonte and Marinella's call for social change in *Il merito* and *Là nobiltà* did not translate from the literary world into material action in the seventeenth century, their powerful words mark a vital moment in which women were able to recognize and challenge their collective suppression. The feminist authors' compositions also delineate the fact that women, whom are so often described as culturally and intellectually dormant prior to the modern period, were actively doing or engaging with their intellectual and cultural setting in earlier times. Going forward, it is important that historical analysis continue to be performed on Fonte and Marinella's writing in order to shine a light on early modern women's actions and cement the authors' rightful place in our cultural memory of women's historic struggle against social oppression.

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