ABSTRACT

“DEFENDERS” AND “ENEMIES” OF WOMEN IN EARLY MODERN ITALIAN QUERELLE DES FEMMES. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CATEGORIES OR EMPTY RHETORIC?

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In 16th and 17th century emerging Italian literature treating women’s social status and ontological nature, or gender relations, there is a repeated mention of the “defenders” and “enemies” of the female sex. The paper aims at examining the implications and discussing the literary and social dimensions of those representations. Firstly, I deal with the formulation of that literary motif and its place in the rhetoric speech of the period. Secondly, I focus on the social milieu and the cultural perceptions that produced those representations. Finally, I examine the depiction of the “defenders” and “enemies” in the writings of Lucrezia Marinella and Moderata Fonte, the first Italian women writers to treat in detail the female excellence and the repressive mechanisms of gender order, and I detect to what extent they challenged the male dominated scheme of their predecessors’ writings.

By examining the interrelation between that literary corpus and the established gender structures and social practices, the paper attempts to draw some conclusions on the ideology, motives and pursuits of those writers and trace whether they argued an improvement in the economical, social and political status of women, they expressed a change in the gender perceptions of early modern Italian society, or they were just self-advertised through an empty rhetoric.

The paper is based on 16th and 17th century Italian treatises or dialogues on the superiority/inferiority of the female/male sex, works of biographical nature on illustrious women, conduct books on women’s proper behaviour, texts on marriage and the different roles of husband and wife in the family, works on love and beauty in the neo-platonic terms or even medical writings on women’s illnesses or feminine embellishment.