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

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Introduction

The end of 15th century marks a turning point in the European articulation of gender perceptions. Throughout the 16th century the long-established medieval misogynist discourse traversing the whole Europe gives place to new questions relating to the proper place of women in society, their moral and intellectual integrity and gender relations. The emerging debate reconstructed the traditional perceptions of the female sex and, in general, it favoured notions of women’s intellectual and moral equality or even superiority to the male sex, at times implying even the demand for a social and political equality between men and women. Under that new configuration, literature concerning women and gender relations, written mostly by male authors, flourishes in Italy from the second quarter of the 16th century. That increasing interest is manifested in various treatises or dialogues on the superiority/inferiority of women or men, works of biographical nature on illustrious women, conduct books on the proper female behaviour during each circle of life, texts on marriage and the different roles of husband and wife in domestic economy, works on love and female beauty in the light of the neo-Platonic thought or even medical writings about women’s illnesses or feminine embellishment. Besides, oral discussions and lectures taking place in Courts, Academies, literary salons and even universities and the themes circulating in the contemporary correspondence often reflect the same interest in gender issues.

In early modern Italian querelle des femmes features a repeated literary representation of the “defenders” and “enemies” of the female sex. My 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 topos and its place in the rhetoric of the period. Secondly, I focus on the socio-cultural milieu that produced those representations. Finally, I examine the portrayal 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 oppressive mechanisms of gender order, and I detect to what extent they challenged the male dominated scheme of their predecessors’ writings. By tracing the interrelation between that literary corpus and the established gender structures and social practices, the paper attempts to make some suggestions on the ideology, motives and pretensions of those writers and detect whether they suggested an improvement in the economic, social and political conditions of women, they expressed a change in the gender perceptions of early modern Italian society, or their writings were just part of a rhetorical performance.

The Literary Representation of the “Defenders” and “Enemies” of Women

The contrast between the groups of the defenders and enemies of women often indicates writers’ attempt to construct their own positive social identity. Their moral and intellectual uplift is achieved by the repeated comparison between themselves and “the others”, namely
women’s enemies. Most authors disapprove women’s enemies, without, however, giving specific information about them. The self-definition of the writer as a member of a distinguished group often counts more than the disapprobation of women’s enemies. Actually, the representation of women’s defenders as a small but enlightened group of men whose noble sentiments and ideals mark them out from the rest of people figures in most writings. According to Girolamo Ruscelli, the female sex is loved and honoured “by the most virtuous and perfect men”. This small but heroic and pioneering group is opposed to the common view that is ill disposed towards women. At times, women’s defenders are even supposed to risk their own reputation in order to defend women and reveal the truth they only know. In their dedications most authors ask for the protection of a powerful person, usually of a woman, from the “ill-natured” women’s enemies. In his dedication to Eleonora Medici of Toledo, Duchess of Florence, Domenico Bruni of Pistoia implies that women’s enemies will attack his work on female superiority. In a similar way, Tommaso Garzoni, addressing to Margarita Estense Gonzaga, Duchess of Ferrara, argues that his biographical work on illustrious women may be accused of its open support of the female sex and its direct opposition to the widespread slanderous opinions against women. Ortensio Lando dedicates to Sigismondo Rovello his collection of letters written by women in order to protect it from “the malicious languages slandering female honour” and to “defend that noble sex against its calumniators’ iniquity”.

The juxtaposition between women’s defenders and enemies is often schematized in their representation as two competing groups. The conflict is often depicted either as fight of arguments for the revelation of truth or as litigation through which the truth will shine. Domenico Bruni da Pistoia presents himself as “cordial advocate” of women and Mutio Justinopolitanus, one of the speakers in Lodovico Domenichi’s dialogue on female superiority, defines this conflict as a battle between the defenders and the enemies of the female sex. One way or another most authors imply that their writings belong to a pioneering movement that aims at revealing the truth and silencing women’s enemies who distort reality because of their envy, hatred, idiocy, pursuit of fame or love disappointment. Luigi Dardano stresses that his work will be both pleasant and useful to the readers since “today the world is full of wicked men that would like to slander the valorous female sex and they deserve a harsh punishment”. Lodovico Domenichi informs readers that he brought to light his collection of poems written by women with the help of some friends of his, “devoted to female honor as well, in order to prove in every possible way the excellence of the female intellect to those that are doubtful about it”.

Women’s enemies are supposed to have distorted the historical truth in order to underestimate women’s great contribution to civilization. So, they deliberately omit to mention women’s attainments in arts and letters and their heroic deeds. The authors-defenders attribute this historical bias, expressed in the absence of women from the historical foreground, to the fact that history has always been written by men. Male historians, wishing to praise only their own sex and being envy of women’s achievements, have concealed the truth. The circulation of biographical works on illustrious women is supposed to be a common endeavour to retrieve women’s prestige. Giovanni Boccaccio wrote the first collection of biographies devoted exclusively to women in 1362. De mulieribus claris and its various translations and adaptations had great effect in the following years. In his Lives of Illustrious Women Tommaso Garzoni attempts to make known “to the whole world and reveal to the centuries to come the heroic deeds of women that male writers had concealed because of their envy”. Luigi Dardano’s dialogue on female superiority also challenges the male structured historical discourse through his forceful female speakers that give a different version of historical facts. Similarly, at the beginning of the 17th century, Francesco Agostino della Chiesa argues that his biographical work on lettered women intends to bring to light the achievements of erudite women that modern authors have concealed “in order to bite and lacerate like rabid dogs the poor women, demolishing their reputation and dignity and attributing to them defects that most times are found in men rather than women”. That historical reconstruction signifies a
spiritual regeneration of the female sex and an imaginary historical continuity of female excellence that is supposed to have its origins in the ancient Greek lyrical poetesses Sappho and Corrina and the philosopher Diotema.

Furthermore, according to the writers-defenders their main aim is to awaken women to their splendour and provide them with the necessary arguments in order they themselves to be able to cope with their enemies’ challenges. In the proem of his work on female excellence Alessandro Piccolomini informs women readers that he will supply them with many arguments and countless examples to silence “those ill-natured men that among many lies argue that female soul is not capable of profound concepts and witty judgments, proving them that women can dispute and reason as skillfully as men”. It is clearly implied here that women need a male protector to prove the superiority of their sex. It is interesting that Piccolomini hastens to clarify that the main speaker of his dialogue, the elderly and of humble origin Raffaella, is just a *dramatis persona* since if she was a real figure it would be impossible to have formulated such an argumentation, apparently because of her social origin and sex, and that it is he himself that has formulate those arguments. Actually, the schema of the male protector of the female sex is a commonplace of the writings in question. In most dialogues on female excellence there is a male speaker that delivers a speech in support of women against his male rival that argues against female sex. Women attending the conversation just intervene to encourage their protector in his defence and express their gratitude to him. The motif of the male protector is already found in the Third Book of Baldesar Castiglione’s *The Courtier*, published in 1528, one of the most influential works on female superiority. The female speaker, Emilia Pia, asks Magnifico Giuliano to clarify his views in simpler words in order women to understand them and to develop further his pro-woman reasoning so that women’s enemies’ argumentation do not prevail. In Lodovico Domenichi’s dialogue, the female speaker, Violante Bentivoglia, thanks God exclaiming that finally a man undertook to defend the female sex when one of the male speakers begins to argue for female superiority. It’s an exception to the rule when the author permits female speakers to develop forceful argumentations in defence of their own sex.

The representations of women’s enemies are usually quite vague, without giving specific information about them. Most references remain in a psychographical analysis of the adversary group, attributing to it an immoral, vindictive, egocentric and weak character. However, at times, writers give clearer indications of enemies’ socio-cultural identity. The representatives of the Classic and Christian tradition are often regarded as great enemies of female sex. Hebrew, Greek, Roman and Christian tradition had formulated a seminal misogynist rhetoric that became the cornerstone of the intellectual, legal, religious, social and medical misogynist theories and perceptions of the next centuries. Many writers impugn Aristotle’s authority, challenging his gender theories epitomized in *Politics*, *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Generation of Animals*. Based mainly on biological observations, Aristotle claims that woman is a monstrosity of nature that normally intends only to the reproduction of males. In that schema, man is superior to woman and consequently only he has the ability to be citizen and to take part in the politics whereas woman is intended only to bear and bring up children. However, even in the insemination Aristotle diminishes the role of the female. Moreover, other ancient Greek biology theories such as the existence of four humors -black bile, yellow bile, blood and phlegm- render female sex inferior because of its supposed dampness and coldness. Lodovico Domenichi, attempting to demolish ancient Greeks’ misogynist theses notices that the Greeks “having been the most untrustworthy and vainglorious people” argued that according to the natural laws, women are intended only to bear children. He continues that unfortunately in his days many people continue to hold similar harmful views and especially those of the high ranks of the society. On the contrary, scarcely are openly charged the Fathers of Church, although the Christian misogynist tradition, based especially on the book of Genesis, is often demolished. Actually, rather than refuting the doctrines of the Scriptures, the writers-defenders of the female sex suggest different interpretations of them, wishing to testify women’s superiority. By the refutation of
the cultural notions of the past, writers imply that their theses offer some innovative interpretations. In one of the first treatises on female excellence in 1525, Galeazzo Capra makes a direct reference to the novelty of the matter, stressing that he wrote his work in the vernacular in order everybody to be able to read it at least for its novelty.

However, some writers indicate the socio-economic conditions of the supposed women’s enemies as well. The misogynist rhetoric is attributed both to the written and oral speech that either permeates all social strata or is limited to the “ignorant mob”. According to Domenico Bruni da Pistoia, women’s enemies are found in all social strata and fields of knowledge, “both among ordinary men and among the erudite writers, philosophers, astronomers, poets, legists and canonists that think or write against the female sex”. Similarly, Tommaso Garzoni locates women’s enemies in both upper and lower classes of society, “in the ignorant mob and the demented wise men”. Moreover, rather than being limited to those that defame female sex through the written or spoken word, the denunciations direct at the common social practices and the mechanisms of gender order as well. In that framework, women’s enemies are identified with the legislators that have made laws against women, the husbands and male relatives that maltreat women and confine them in home and whoever does not permit women to develop their social role. Mutio Iustinopolitano, one of the speakers in Lodovico Domenichi’s dialogue, accuses men of having deprived women of every social, political, military and intellectual role, excluding them from “the squares, senate, councils and schools”. He denounces further the “arbitrary and tyrannical” imposition of male power on women, underlining that male domination derives from the legislation, custom, women’s exclusion from education and political participation and their confinement in home or convent. Cervone, a speaker of Giovanni Thomagni’s dialogue, also points out the decisive role of the legislation, custom and discriminatory interpretation of the Scriptures in women’s oppression.

From a different point of view, Cristofano Bronzini makes a social differentiation of women’s defenders and enemies. According to Bronzini, the social elites -emperors, kings, princes, knights and courtiers- honour and love women whereas the men of the lower classes, the “mud”, as he calls them, degrade women, offending, ridiculing and scorning them. In the houses and Courts of the princes and **ottimati** women have always been held in high regard whereas in humble houses they confront only quarrels, murmurs and offences. According to Bronzini, the cause of women’s maltreatment is ignorance and ill breeding. Various authors regard **volgo** as a great enemy of women without, however, being always clear whether they mean the common view or the popular culture and practices. A speaker of Sperone Speroni’s dialogue on female excellence presents again **volgo** as the eternal enemy of women. However, he refers to both written and spoken word, implying the common view rather than the culture of the lower classes: “the ignorant people writing and speaking in public claim that women are irrational creatures a little better than the beasts”. Later, another speaker implies once more the common view by using this time the term **mondo**: “the world believes that being male is a kind of perfection whereas being female is a defect”.

Be that as it may, it seems that in 16th century Italy the identity of women’s defender lent splendour and prestige and was regarded as a sign of sensibility, noble ideals and civilized manners. Some writers remind at every chance that they have supported female sex in the past and present themselves as firm defenders of women. In his collection of poems written by women, Lodovico Domenichi declares that he had also supported female excellence in the past implying in all probability his dialogue on female excellence published ten years earlier. Similarly, in his dialogue on female excellence, Alessandro Piccolomini assures female readers that he has always been women’s faithful defender and has supported them in every debate he had participated in. Furthermore, not only do authors present themselves as women’s defenders but also other contemporary writers often portray them as such, to whom women are supposed to owe a debt of gratitude. Such representations of the writers are often found in the poetical compositions that introduce their works. Intellectuals’ and high-ranking
persons’ profound interest in being regarded as women’s defenders is also reflected in authors’ compliments to the dedicatees of their works. Often the dedicatory letters depict the dedicatee as a strong defender of the female sex. Lodovico Domenichi delineates Giovanni Vincentio Belpatro, Conte d’Aversa, as a “gentle cavalier” highly esteemed by women. Vincenzo Busdragho, the publisher of Lodovico Domenichi’s collection of poems written by women, dedicates the work to Gerardo Spada, a nobleman from Lucca, “for having always been a prompt and steady defender of the female excellence”. Similarly, in his panegyric to Marchioness of Padulla and Lucretia Gonzaga of Cazuolo, Ortensio Lando stresses Bernardo Michas’ love for women marking that Michas is delighted more than anyone else hearing arguments in favour of illustrious women.

It follows from the above that at least to some extent the defence of the female sex operated as a way of constructing a positive male identity. The rhetorical dimension of the querelle des femmes is often implied by the texts themselves. An interesting example is Giovanni Thomagni’s dialogue published in Venice in 1565. It is a peculiar work in the sense that although in its form and argumentation reminds the dialogues in support of women, it aims at proving the male superiority. The correspondence preceding the main text, between the author and Alessandro Piccolomini, known for his writings in support of the female sex, implies the rhetorical character of that literature. Both Thomagni and Piccolomini share the opinion that instead of the basic idea of a text, namely whether it is on men’s or women’s side, the subtle and well-documented argumentation carries greater weight. The presentation of the querelle des femmes just as a witty rhetorical controversy comes up in Thomagni’s main text as well. Already from the beginning of the dialogue a speaker clarifies that the aim of their meeting is to demolish with oratorical skill the statements of a certain writer-defender of the female sex, whose name is not given. Later the author argues that the writers-defenders rather than wishing to reveal the truth, formulate their arguments either on account of their love for a certain woman or for displaying their rhetorical skill and keen intellect. Actually, it seems that Thomagni’s purpose was neither to be hostile to those writers nor to prove women’s inferiority. Thomagni rather chooses that literary devise -the defence of the male sex- in order to develop in the most skilful way his argumentation on a topic that had been so popular.

Interesting conclusions can also be drawn from Girolamo Parabosco’s I Diporti (1552), a collection of novellas in the form of conversation among various Venetian noblemen and intellectuals in a villa in the Venetian suburbs. The first chapter is dedicated to the querelle des femmes. In that introductory dialogue Conte Alessandro Lambertino degrades once more the whole debate to a rhetorical game pinpointing that, such as everyone else, he will praise female sex for practicing his mind, converting skillfully a vile topic into a noble one. He also underlines another pretension motivating the defence of the female sex, namely the benefits of patronage. He sets as example Girolamo Ruscelli’s Lettura dedicated to Maria d’Aragona, Marchioness of Vasto, implying Ruscelli’s anticipation of winning the favour of that powerful woman. Lambertino’s statement must be taken as a factual account of events since most writings in defence of the female sex have been actually dedicated to female political figures. The rhetorical dimension of the querelle des femmes has been pointed out in other contemporary writings as well. In Cristofano Bronzini’s dialogue on female excellence, a speaker claims that women’s defenders do not aim at truth but only at novelty that always pleases. Similarly, in Sperone Speroni’s dialogue, a speaker remarks that the arguments of women’s defenders, although not corresponding to the truth, are pleasant to the ear thanks to their novelty.

**The Socio-Cultural Milieu of Early Modern Italian Querelle des Femmes**

Despite, its rhetorical factor, the cultural conflict between women’s defenders and enemies indicates at least three contemporary cultural currents competing with the pro-woman orientation: a misogynist corpus of ideas rejecting the female sex as a whole as wicked, immoral and dangerous, a moralistic view, based mainly on the traditional religious doctrines,
imposing women a passive role and limiting them to the private sphere of activity and finally a popular and often humorous misogynist discourse. Giuseppe Passi’s *I donneschi Difetti* (The Defects of Women) is an indicative example of the misogynist tradition. Divided into chapters that treat a different female defect each time, the work epitomizes stock features and stereotypes, such as female vanity, greed, lustfulness, envy, hypocrisy and unfaithfulness. The author quotes countless relevant examples and cites the best-known classical and scriptural sources. Despite its popularity, Passi’s work must have been criticized by a number of intellectuals. In his moralistic treatise on marriage, published three years later, Passi claims that his previous work had been misunderstood and admits that women are superior to men at least in some aspects. It is striking that now he disparages women’s enemies and at the same time praises the authors that have written in support of the female sex. In particular, he argues that leveling accusations against female sex is characteristic of the “ignorant mob” whereas duty of every lettered man is women’s defence. Furthermore, in 1603 Passi published a treatise depicting men’s defects and misdeeds in a structure similar to that he had used four years earlier in *I donneschi Difetti*, rather wishing to retrieve the bad impression that must have made his misogynist work.

Most moralistic writings treat marriage and the different roles of husband and wife in domestic hierarchy and economy or give advice on the proper female behaviour during each circle of life -virginity, marriage and widowhood. Although it had been based on traditional cultural norms, moralistic literature flourished in the last decades of the 16th century and it was mainly intended for middle class families and their morals. It ranges from a mild paternalistic attitude towards women to an oppressively imposed subservient role to them. The dominant thesis is that women are inferior to men and they have to obey them. Men in turn should treat them in a gentle but paternalistic way in order family to prosper. The ideal wife or mother should abstain from every social association and pleasure and confine her intellectual interests to religious and conduct books. Women are excluded from the public arena on the grounds of female chastity. According to Lodovico Dolce, women should be strictly controlled by their parents and especially their fathers during virginity, taking no initiative in their marriage, absolutely subject to their husbands during marriage and live with the continuous remembrance of their husbands during widowhood, abstaining from every kind of pleasure. Giulio Cesare Cabei suggests that widows and especially the young ones should be humble, avoid laughing and rambling and treat only matters that do not imperil their chastity. Speaking when being in church or on the street, “a common misconduct of women” does not fit female honesty. All women and especially widows are permitted to speak only at home and only with virtuous women and no public expression is acceptable. Cabei’s schema reflects the stereotypical anxiety about widows that, taking advantage of the lack of male guidance, indulge in sinful desires, endangering the moral social order. Passi in his treatise on marriage recommends wives to speak the less possible and especially when talking to their husbands and to follow and obey them in any case. In his treatise on home economics, Giovanni Battista Assandri claims women’s inferiority even in biological terms.

At the same time there are indications of a popular culture expressed by authors of a lower social origin or in some anonymous pamphlets. Those writings thanks to their small size and obscure editions should have been cheap and accessible to a broader reading public. They were associated with the oral tradition and some of them were sung or performed during feast occasions such as Carnival. They often express misogynist views in a humorous way or deal with love and gender relations in a rather derisive and everyday tone. Such an approach is found in Paolo Briti’s writings during the first half of 17th century. Briti was one of the most prolific Venetian popular authors whose few page writings were published by obscure presses of the Republic of Venice. In all probability it was he himself that sold them during his peregrinations as storyteller in Veneto. Various similar anonymous works of few pages and often poetical form also circulated, such as the 16th century *Historia nova, piacevole laquale tratta delle malitie delle Donne e le Pompe che cercano adonarsi* (A new pleasant story about women’s malice and their pursuit of pomp). Cristofano Bronzini cites another anonymous
misogynist pamphlet entitled *Nuova Nave di Novemila novecento novantanove malizie delle Donne* (A new ship of nine thousand nine hundred ninety nine female defects). Popular songs that circulated in print reflect again a practical and daily approach to gender relations. However, it seems that at least in some Italian cities there was a popularization of the *querelle des femmes*. The theatrical performance of Falotico de’ Rozzi *Ricorso di villani alle donne* (Peasants’ Appeal to Women), during a Sienese Carnival around 1576 reflects such a process. Its main topic is the vindication of the peasants that appear in public to assure the female audience that their calumniators are not the peasants but the representatives of high culture.

The different way each author treats the bipolar schema of women’s defenders and enemies within the pro-woman literature often reflects his social background and cultural identity. Cristofano Bronzini coming from an upper middle class family and having associated with the socio-cultural setting of the Florentine Court of Medici in 1615, regards as women’s defenders only the high-ranking persons and the representatives of high culture. Bronzini’s approach derives from the Court culture where female presence held a particular position within the framework of the neo-Platonic idealization of the female beauty and love and the civilized social behaviour. Actually, many dialogues on love or female superiority are placed in a Court setting and their authors often had personal experience of the Court cultural life. The literary paradigm of that tradition was Baldesar Castiglione’s *Third Book of The Courtier*, a dialogue that takes place in the Urbino Court at the beginning of the 16th century. Similarly, Bronzini’s dialogue is placed in the Medicean Garden in Rome, where some noble women from Rome, Tuscany and Lombardy and some Cavaglieri, experts in the arms and letters, are also present. Bronzini also implies the Knightly Orders that were often related with Court intellectual life through a chivalric culture epitomized in defending and serving female sex. In his dedication to Horatio Ruino, Cesare Barbabianca characterizes the dedicatee as heroic cavalier. Pietro Paolo Porro, Cavalier of Santi Mauritio e Lazaro, presents Carlo Emanuele of Savoia, to which the author subscribes as “humble vassal”, as a cavalier whose duty is always defending women’s honour.

Nevertheless, it seems that gradually some aspects of the Court culture, such as the neo-Platonic tradition, influenced groups of intellectuals who were not related to some Court and permeated the broader Italian intellectual life, such as the Academies and the unofficial literary salons. The neo-Platonic thought, having its origins in Marcilio Ficino’s commentaries on Platonic works, Pietro Bembo’s dialogue of platonic love *Gli Asolani* (1505) and the Neo-platonizing love poetry, especially Dante and Petrarch, implies that every man of noble intellect should love and serve women. The writers in question often argue that their defence of women derives not only from their love and respect towards them but also from their sympathy with men in love. Galeazzo Capra reproves not only those that defame women but also those that vituperate love. Similarly, Scipione Vasolo defends at the same time the female sex and love. Sperone Speroni’s speaker, Girello, is presented as a former women’s enemy who became a devout defender of them after having fallen in love. However, although the neo-platonic configuration of gender relations gives a spiritually enlightening and morally uplifting impetus to men, it leaves women out of the limelight of this male-centric schema since they have no active role, being just the vehicle for men’s perfection.

On the other hand, Lodovico Domenichi represents a different socio-cultural group, the *poligrafi*, which emerges during the 1540s and 1550s. The gradual abandonment of the Latin, the establishment of the vernacular and the consequent printing expansion favored that new type of intellectual who depended on the large circulation of his writings, editions and translations rather than the Court system. Most *poligrafi* settled in Venice, one of the most important printing centers of Europe, and collaborated with the new successful printing presses, such as that of Gabriel Giolito de Ferrari. Both the new publishers and the *poligrafi*, whose incomes almost exclusively depended on the success of their editions, wished the greater possible increase in the reading public, including now women and less educated male readers. Domenichi, born in 1515 in Piacenza into a middle class but not very rich family and
having studied at the universities of Padova and Pavia, was writer, translator and editor and collaborated during the 1540s with Gabriel Giolito de Ferrari in Venice and with the printer Bernardo Giunta in Florence. Giolito de Ferrari published Domenichi’s dialogue on female superiority in 1549 with the expectation to be responsive to the evolving demands of the new reading public. Giolito had a profound interest in attracting and maintaining a female reading public as it is indicated not only from the number of original works, translations or adaptations relating to women but also from the proems and dedications of his editions that often present him as women’s defender. Within that framework it is natural that Domenichi does not adopt an elitist approach, such as that of Bronzini, but locates women’s enemies among every social strata. Often poligrafi came from the lower or middle classes, were distanced from the Court culture, mocked patronage system and often defamed authorities and classical studies. It is probably in that ideological setting that Domenichi places explicitly women’s enemies among the Ancient Greeks and those that share their culture. Actually when in 1564 he published another work on women, his approach is quite different. Having associated in the meantime with the Court life and having become in 1559 the official historiographer of the Court of Medici, Domenichi in *La donna di corte* portrays the ideal Court Lady and the proper conduct of the Courtier.

Generally speaking, the early modern Italian defence of women developed into two main directions; on the one hand within the courtly and neo-Platonic culture flourishing in the Courts of Central and Northern Italy and on the other hand in the framework of printing expansion, vernacular literature, increase in the literary production and broadening of the reading public. It was mainly in the Republic of Venice that the pro-woman literature flourished. Between 1530 and 1560 Venice became one of the greatest printing centers in Europe. New presses were set up and Venice offered better chances to people wishing to get involved into the printing activities. That printing process was not limited in the narrow circle of Venice, though. The Venetian editions supplied the reading public through Italy and the bookmen who worked in Venice were coming from the whole Italy, or even from abroad. Writers such as Girolamo Parabosco, Giuseppe Betussi, Lodovico Domenichi and Girolamo Ruscelli, known for their writings on women and gender relations, passed or settled in Venice during the 1540s. A basic precondition for those new developments was the greater possible satisfaction of the expectations of the reading public, which was accomplished both by the relatively low prices and the promotion of new topics. It seems that themes relating to women and gender relations attracted the attention of the new reading public and especially the female readers.

*Moderata Fonte’s and Lucrezia Marinella’s defence of women*

Women themselves played an important role in the formulation of the early modern Italian *querelle des femmes* as readers, writers and literary patrons. Despite their limited participation in social gatherings, such as Courts, literary salons and Academies, they often endeavoured to affect the contemporary popular debates on gender issues. Powerful women played an important role in the Court culture as literary and art patrons, especially after their husbands’ death, which was often followed by their refusal to get married again. Those female literary patrons often showed a profound interest in writings in defence of the female sex and works on gender relations. Such writings have frequently been dedicated by the writer or publisher to those women, whose Courts had often offered hospitality to the authors. Besides, usually dialogues have as literary setting the Courts of those women. Although a certain woman does not seem to have gathered a large number of such dedications or have exclusively committed herself to the promotion of those texts, many important female figures undoubtedly encouraged that initiative. Besides, that most works written by women authors have been dedicated to female dedicatees indicates a female solidarity between women of different social strata. Those female writers express their gratitude to their female patronesses who helped them abandon the feminine occupations of “needle, thread and cloth” and engage in
letters, and acknowledge their role in the intellectual promotion of the female sex and female emancipation.

In the Republic of Venice where the unofficial literary salons partly substituted the cultural role of the Northern and Central Italian Courts, some women played an important role in the intellectual life of the city, participating in fertile contemporary literary and philosophical debates taking place there. Furthermore, women themselves set up their own literary salons. Distinguished courtesans, such as Veronica Franco and Tullia d’Aragona, often formed their own salons. Gaspara Stampa’s and Francesca Baffa’s salons in Venice and the salon of Beatrice Pia degli Obizzi in Padua hosted important literary figures of the Venetian and Paduan intellectual circles. Debates relating to women and gender relations must have been frequent in those female salons as it is often portrayed in the contemporary literature. In such dialogues female speakers normally develop a forceful argumentation in defence of their sex.

Besides, women occasionally associated themselves with the intellectual life of the Academies. Early modern Italian Academies were traditionally masculine institutions that as a general rule did not accept women, and female presence within the world of the Academies most times remained in the light of neo-Platonic thought, since women were mainly regarded as the stimulating muses of the male intellectuals. Nevertheless in comparison with the Universities, Academies sometimes accepted women as members offering them intellectual stimuli and important acquaintances. Moreover, many Academies were open to a broader public including women in some of their activities. The Sienese Academy of the Intronati, with leading member Alessandro Piccolomini, is known for its open performances that often took place during feast occasions, especially during Carnival. Although women played a secondary part in those performances, they were offered opportunities to participate in the intellectual life of their cities and, at times, even affect the debates on women and gender issues that were integral parts of many Academies’ culture.

Already from the 15th century some upper class women had made their appearance in the literary scene participating in the Italian humanistic movement. However, it is the 16th century that marks a more ambitious participation of women, even from the middle class, in the intellectual life, remaining a tiny minority in comparison with the male participation, though. Since women did not enjoy university education, the abandonment of the Latin and the establishment of the vernacular facilitated their participation in the literary production both as writers and as readers. Vittoria Colonna, Veronica Gambara, Gaspara Stampa, Tullia d’Aragona, Laura Terracina, Laura Battiferri, Veronica Franco, Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella and Arcangela Tarabotti are the most prominent among them. Early modern Italian women writers excelled in every literary genre - letter writing, pastoral drama, chivalric romance, treatise and dialogue- although they focused on poetry that was traditionally considered easier and consequently more suitable to them. Women writers often formulated proto-feminist arguments in their works. In Discorso Laura Terracina has written a poem entitled “on women’s enemies”. Her interest in women’s position is reflected in many poems. By eulogizing some powerful contemporary women, she praises at the same time the female sex as a whole. Comparing those women with illustrious women of the past, she creates an imaginary continuity of women’s achievements through history. The presentation of those women as paragons of female excellence aims at proving the potential of the female intellect. In her poem to Veronica Gambara, Terracina wishes more women abandoned “the needle, thread and cloth” and excelled in letters for silencing men that slander women in prose and verse and she encourages women to abandon vile occupations and handle “pen and paper”. Similarly, in her philosophical dialogue on love, Tullia d’Aragona discusses gender issues, and the female speaker, Tullia herself, defends the female sex, putting under question the traditional misogynist stereotypes of the period. Lending a social dimension to the debate, Veronica Franco, in a letter to another courtesan, delineates the misfortunes and problems women suffer and especially those of the low ranks of society when they fall victims to sexual abuse.
Nevertheless, it is not until the end of the 16th century that women writers wrote substantial full length works in defence of their sex, criticizing the patriarchal value system. Both writers came from the upper middle class of Venice. Moderata Fonte, born in 1555 and having been orphan at an early age enjoyed a primary education at the convent of Santa Marta. At the age of nine she returned at her relatives’ home where she continued her studies with her brother’s help. About 1582 she married a Venetian lawyer and civil servant. Having written a chivalric romance and some verse narratives in 1592 she wrote *Il merito delle donne* (The Worth of Women) that was published posthumously in 1600 in Venice. Fonte’s dialogue takes place among seven women of different marital status with no male figure present. Fonte’s main speakers, Corrina, a young unmarried woman, and Cornelia, a young married woman, argue forcefully against women’s marriage, condemning the economic exploitation, mistreatment and home seclusion of women by their husbands and other male relatives. Lucrezia Marinella born in 1571 was the daughter of the physician and natural philosopher Giovanni Marinelli. Her brother was also a physician and she was married a physician as well. Both her great learning and her father’s interest in women’s issues, expressed in two treatises on female beauty, hygiene and gynecology, indicate that Marinella’s family did not consider female education superfluous. Her *La nobilità et l’ eccellenza delle donne, co’ difetti et mancamenti de gli uomini* (The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the defects and vices of men) claiming the superiority of the female sex was published in 1600 as an answer to Giuseppe Passi’s *I donneschi difetti*.

Both in her proem and in a chapter entitled “A Reply to the Flippant and Vain Reasoning adopted by Men in their own Favor” Marinella criticizes strongly women’s enemies in order to reply to “the false objections of women’s calumniators”. She implies two different enemy fronts, that of the lettered men and that of the everyday perceptions and practices, saying that she will reply only “to those capable of reasoning and not to the opinions of vulgar and ignorant men who speak obstinately and without any basis or cause”. Marinella presents Aristotle among the Classics and Giuseppe Passi among the contemporaries as women’s greatest enemies motivated by their scorn, hate or envy. This criticism is natural since Aristotle’s theories had been the ideological cornerstone of later misogynist formulations and Passi had written the best-known substantial misogynist work of early modern Italian literature. Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Il Corbaccio* written in 14th century and having been broadly regarded as misogynist by the contemporaries and Arrigo di Namur’s *Malvagità delle donne* (Women’s Malice) written in 15th century are also included in Marinella’s criticism. However, she places among women’s enemies, writers, such as Giovanni della Casa, Jacopo Sannazaro and Angelo Ingegneri that had not written full length works against women. It seems that various misogynist stereotypical views that come up in their works had led Marinella to argue that they had turned against women after having suffered a love disappointment.

The most interesting feature is that Marinella criticizes strongly Sperone Speroni’s *Dialogo della dignità delle donne* (1542) and Torquato Tasso’s *Discorso della virtù feminile e donnesca* (1582) that had been regarded by Marinella’s male predecessors as writings defending the female sex. According to Marinella, Speroni’s work claims female inferiority and consequently women’s natural subjugation to men. Marinella levels her criticism at Speroni’s choice to put the female speaker, Beatrice Pia degli Obizi, to develop the argumentation against women. According to Marinella, Speroni’s misogyny derives from “the tyrannical insolence of those many men who make not only their wives serve them but also their mothers and sisters, showing greater obedience and fear than that with which humble servants and slaves serve their lords and masters”. Accordingly, Marinella passes from the writer-enemy to the man-enemy, tracing the interrelation between literary representations of women and the everyday male-dominated social practices. Nevertheless, Marinella does not mention that in Speroni’s dialogue there is also a speaker that argues for female superiority. In all probability Speroni’s argumentation in defence of the female sex and the dialogue-form of the text presenting two competing but equivalent views on women did not satisfy
Marinella. According to Marinella, Torquato Tasso’s work also claims women’s imperfection. Marinella criticizes Tasso’s division of female virtue between donnesca that “belongs only to queens, princesses and those whom he calls heroic women” and feminile that belongs to ordinary women. According to Tasso’s treatise, ordinary women should be characterized by modesty and chastity whereas virtues related to the intellect, such as justice, clemency, prudence and vigoroulessness fit only heroic women that excel in governing. Belonging to the middle class, Marinella is excluded from Tasso’s schema that rejects her potential social and intellectual role; consequently she attempts to refute this division arguing that there are “a thousand examples of strong women, and not just of queens”.

Fonte is similarly suspicious of male writers’ rhetoric. When the speaker Virginia asks Cornelia whether she acknowledges that at least those men who have written in women’s praise, love the female sex, she answers that they are not different from the other men since none of those has been driven to write by his love. She continues that in fact, the majority of them defend women more “out of self-interest and concern for their own honor than out of any genuine concern for women”. Furthermore, Cornelia argues that there are also many male authors who praise women “in the belief that women will be so carried away by vanity and self-love as to allow themselves to be tricked into releasing their grip on their own will, so that they can get their hands on it, along with their honor, their soul, and their life”. Placing together women’s defenders and enemies, Fonte degrades a whole literature produced for almost a century by male authors regarding themselves as the strongest and firmest defenders of women.

Despite their heavy criticism, both writers are deeply influenced by the pro-woman literature of their male predecessors. They broadly draw on male writers’ arguments, sources and examples. The 16th century socio-cultural climate and the formulation of new gender cultural notions undoubtedly paved the way for Fonte’s and Marinella’s writings. Actually, their works signify the maturing of a body of ideas free from the rhetorical burden of their predecessors’ writings and now constituted around the construction of a new female identity. This was the first time women had formulated the defence of their own sex so that their tangible social experience rendered their writings less rhetorical and enriched them with more social references. Although they draw on the already formulated arguments in favour of women, Marinella and especially Fonte underline the sexual discrimination women suffer in their actual family relations, economic condition, education opportunities and social representation. Marinella’s and Fonte’s identification of women’s enemies moves from those that deliver a misogynist rhetoric to those that do not express a so forceful pro-woman ideology as to satisfy their increased demands, and at times to the whole male community.

Actually, Fonte and Marinella were restrained by the cultural norms imposed on middle class women especially after the Council of Trent (1545-63) and the impetus of the Catholic renewal that followed. In that context they had not the same opportunities as some of their female predecessors to indulge in a social intellectual life. Although both were encouraged by their families to engage in studies, their social profile was limited in their family circles. Their familiarity with the contemporary literary developments was accomplished more through reading rather than personal contacts and acquaintances. Fonte and Marinella wrote during a period of moral reform epitomized in the idealization of marriage and domestic virtues. Towards the end of the 16th century moralistic treatises on marriage have greatly substituted the writings in defence of the female sex. In Venice those limitations on female social activity were even stricter and in all probability Fonte’s and Marinella’s writings expressed a reaction to those new limitations. The words of Giovanni Niccolò Doglioni, Fonte’s relative and biographer, are indicative of the new climate, “as a woman, she had to attend to womanly tasks like sewing, and she did not wish to neglect these labors because of the false notion, so widespread in our city today, that women should excel in nothing but the running of the household”. Marinella’s and Fonte’s writings reflect women’s anxiety about the divergence
between the circulation of a pro-woman discourse for almost a century and the fixed power relations and value systems that remained at their very core unchangeable.

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