



THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS JOURNALS

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Author(s): Virginia Cox

Source: *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Autumn, 1995), pp. 513-581

Published by: The University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Renaissance Society of America

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2862873>

Accessed: 11-10-2017 16:46 UTC

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# *The Single Self: Feminist Thought and the Marriage Market in Early Modern Venice\**

by VIRGINIA COX

THE YEAR 1600 WITNESSED A significant though little-noted event in Italian cultural history: the publication of the first substantial full-length works by Italian women writers arguing the case for women's moral and intellectual equality with men.<sup>1</sup> The writers in question were two Venetians, Lucrezia Marinella and Modesta Pozzo (Moderata Fonte); their works, respectively, a polemical treatise, *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne*, and a dialogue, *Il merito delle donne*.<sup>2</sup> These texts, long neglected, have recently begun to

\*The research for this article was carried out with the assistance of a grant from the Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation. My sincerest thanks are due to Peter Burke, Alex Cowan, Conor Fahy, Patricia Labalme, Richard Mackenney, and Letizia Panizza for their help and suggestions.

<sup>1</sup>There is evidence of a feminist sensibility in the works of some earlier Italian women writers; see, for example, Tullia d'Aragona, *Dialogo dell'infinità d'amore*, in Pozzi, 1975, 185–248; and Veronica Franco, *Capitoli* 16 and 23, in Arslan et al., 50–54; also, on Tullia, Jones, 103–17; and on Franco, *ibid.*, 178–200 and Rosenthal, 1992 and 1993. Defenses of women's capacity for learning are also found in several earlier writers; see, for example, Rabil, 14–15 and 101–02. For a bibliography of works by Italian women published in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, see Zancan, Appendix III. For an overview of women's contribution to the Renaissance *querelle des femmes*, see Kelly, 67–69 and 93–94.

<sup>2</sup>Modesta Pozzo was born in 1555 to a wealthy *cittadino* family and orphaned very young. She received little formal education but was encouraged in her enthusiasm for learning by her guardians. She published several works in her lifetime under the pseudonym Moderata Fonte: an *ottava rima* romance, *Tredici canti del Floridoro* (1581); a *cantata*, *Le feste* (1581) and two devotional narratives in *ottava rima*, *La Passione di Cristo* (1582) and *La Resurrettione di Cristo* (1592). Around 1582 she married a lawyer and civil servant, Filippo Zorzi, with whom she had four children, dying at the birth of the last in 1592. *Il merito delle donne*, published in 1600 in Venice by Domenico Imberti, was her last work, left unfinished at her death. Lucrezia Marinella was born in Venice in 1571, the daughter of Giovanni Marinelli, a physician and writer whose works include *Gli ornamenti delle donne* (1562) and *Le medicine appartenenti alle infermità delle donne* (1563) (see Altieri et al., 15–16). Marinella was married only in middle age, to another doctor, Girolamo Vacca, with whom she had two children. She died in 1653 at the age of 82. Apart from *La nobiltà et eccellenza*, published in Venice in 1600 by Giambattista Ciotti and republished in a revised and expanded edition in 1601 and 1621, Marinella published numerous devotional works and enjoyed a certain renown as a poet. For more detail, see Chemello, 1983, 106, n. 15 and 150, n. 135; also, on Fonte, Collina, 147–48 and Dogliani, 1988.

attract a certain amount of critical attention: particularly Fonte's *Merito*, far the more accessible of the two and a work, as is now being recognized, of considerable literary merit.<sup>3</sup>

The obvious intellectual context for these works is the long-running debate on women's equality that by the end of the sixteenth century had been consuming a steady stream of ink in Italy and Europe for over a hundred years.<sup>4</sup> Marinella's *Nobiltà* very self-consciously enters the lists of this debate: commissioned as a reply to Giuseppe Passi's virulently misogynistic *I difetti e mancamenti delle donne* (1599), it eruditely recapitulates a century of debate on women and pits itself explicitly against the most prestigious vernacular exponents of traditionalist positions.<sup>5</sup> Fonte's *Merito* has a more oblique relation to the tradition of "defenses of women," but beneath the surface *sprezzatura* of its lively and spontaneous dialogue, it too draws heavily on the stock of arguments and exempla that had accumulated over a century of debate.

To this extent, then, Marinella's *Nobiltà* and Fonte's *Merito delle donne* may be viewed as tardy interventions in a long-running *querelle* whose parameters had been set in the early decades of the sixteenth century and which had for years been running rather wearily down well-marked polemical lines. It would be mistaken, however, to regard these writers' analyses of the injustices suffered by their sex simply as a rhetorical exercise, conducted in isolation from the social realities around them. Certainly we cannot ignore the massive presence in these works of elements deriving from literary sources: it would be hopelessly naive to read them as unmediated expressions of women's discontent with their lot. But it will be my contention here that it is only by placing these works in their sociohistorical context, by tracing their links—sometimes direct, sometimes more oblique—with the realities of women's condition

<sup>3</sup>See Chemello, 1983 and 1988; Labalme, 1981; Jordan 253–61; also, on Fonte in particular, King, 1991, 228–32; Rosenthal, 1993, 123–30; Collina; Malpezzi Price; Guthmüller; and Kolsky. English translations of both works are forthcoming from the University of Chicago Press in the series *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*.

<sup>4</sup>There does not yet exist a comprehensive study of the debate on women in Italy. For a bibliography of primary texts, see the appendices to Zancan; for secondary literature, Panizza. More generally, on the debate in Europe, see Jordan; also, on the broader intellectual context of the debate, Maclean, 1980.

<sup>5</sup>On the polemics excited by Passi's tract, see Chemello, 1983, 101–03 and Collina, 142–43; also, on the context of these debates, Marchesi. There were further editions of Passi's *Donneschi difetti* in 1601, 1605, and 1618 and of Marinella's *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne* in 1601 and 1621.

in Venice in the period, that we can fully understand the peculiar set of emphases they bring to bear on the subject under discussion.

The bulk of this study will be devoted to examining the social context of Fonte and Marinella's thought and the way in which the realities of women's condition are reflected in their writings. First, however, it will be necessary to examine in a certain amount of detail these writers' relation to the previous tradition of writing on women's equality and to identify those elements in their thought that distinguish them from their predecessors in the debate. A caveat seems appropriate here. It is already, in itself, a problematic enterprise to attempt to make thematic comparisons between two texts as disparate in their genre, method, and emphases as *Il merito* and *La nobiltà delle donne*. The problem is compounded in this case by the character of Fonte's *Merito*, which as a dialogue, and a particularly artful one, is peculiarly resistant to reduction or summary. It would take a great deal more space than is dedicated to them here to do justice to the complexities of these texts. It is hoped that the sacrifice of nuance in what follows will be forgiven in the interests of clarity.

#### TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN MODERATA FONTE AND LUCREZIA MARINELLA

As has been noted, by the time that Fonte and Marinella were writing, the debate on women's equality already had a venerable tradition. From Castiglione's day, and earlier, sympathetic *trattatisti* had affirmed that women were the equals of men in body and mind. Women's capacity to participate on equal terms with men in public life and even in warfare had been widely recognized and scrupulously documented with exempla from classical history and legend. By Fonte and Marinella's day, these arguments had become such commonplaces that a writer like Tommaso Garzoni—to cite a recent example they may well have known—could liquidate the question of women's capacity to govern a kingdom with no more than a rhetorical question and a handful of names.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Garzoni, 174: "Qual' è quel specie di governo, a cui non siano atte? Forse i Ducati? forse i Regni?" ("What kind of government is there for which women are not fitted? Can they not govern Duchies? Kingdoms?"); see also *ibid.*, 170–71, where Garzoni deals in an equally perfunctory manner with women's prowess in arms and letters. The hypothesis that Garzoni's work may have been known to Fonte at least is founded on the fact that his publisher Domenico Imberti also published her *Resurrettione di Cristo* (1592) as well as works by her guardian and biographer Giovanni Niccolò Dogliani.

Garzoni, however, in common with the majority of Cinquecento “defenders of women,” makes no attempt to move from affirming women’s natural abilities to analyzing the reasons why, historically, women have been denied the opportunity to exercise those abilities. Indeed, one of the principal forms of argumentation employed in defenses of women from Boccaccio’s *De claris mulieribus* onwards, the list of famous female figures from history, tends to militate against any such analysis. If exceptional women have written books, fought in battles, and governed kingdoms, then the implication is that there is nothing fundamental in the structure of society preventing others from doing the same.<sup>7</sup> The task of achieving equality between the sexes is perceived as a purely cultural operation: all that needs to be done is to modify men’s perceptions of women’s capacity for *virtù*.

Of course, this is a generalization: examples can be found of “defenders of women” who show some awareness of the social and political dimension of women’s subordination to men. One of the earliest of these and perhaps the most influential is the French humanist Henricus Cornelius Agrippa, whose *De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus* (1529) established many of the commonplaces of the Italian tradition of defenses of women.<sup>8</sup> After a highly ingenious (and often self-consciously sophistic) dismantling of the theological and biological scaffolding of misogyny, Agrippa concludes with a forthright denunciation of the “tyranny” men exert over women. In the eyes of God and nature, as he has amply proved, the sexes are of equal worth; indeed, if there is superiority, it lies on the side of women. But they are anything but equal in society; men have seized supremacy by illegitimate means and perpetuate their tyranny by keeping women in a state of unnatural ignorance and abjection.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup>For a discussion of the scope and limitations of humanist arguments on women’s role in public life (though it deals with the problem in a primarily English context), see Jordan, 242–43. Also, on the ambiguous function of lists of exempla of exceptional women (presented, precisely, as exceptions to the rule), see H. Smith, 7 and Wiesner, 14.

<sup>8</sup>The *De nobilitate*, though published for the first time in 1529, was written earlier, around 1509. It was translated into Italian by Francesco Coccio as *Della nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne* (Venice, 1549) and extensively plagiarized by Lodovico Domenichi in his dialogue *La nobiltà delle donne* (Venice, 1549; reprinted 1551, 1552, 1554). On Agrippa’s own sources, see Agrippa, 14–28.

<sup>9</sup>See Agrippa, 87–88: “Sed virorum nimia tyrannide contra divinum ius naturaeque leges praevalente, data mulieribus libertas iam iniquis legibus interdicitur, consuetudine usuque aboletur, educatione extinguitur. Mulier namque mox ut nata est, a primis

Agrippa was not alone in this dramatic and agonistic perception of the relations between the sexes: whether independently or through some direct or mediated influence, numerous subsequent “defenders of women” draw on and develop this same analogy with tyranny.<sup>10</sup> However, the apparent subversiveness of this notion—once male supremacy is defined as an illegitimate regime, the question of social change becomes pressing—tended to be, in practice, contained and defused by its context.<sup>11</sup> As the French critic Francine Daenens has observed in a justly skeptical overview of the debate, a prime concern of authors of defenses of women throughout the sixteenth century seems to have been to ensure that

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annis domi detinetur in desidia, ac velut altioris provinciae incapax, nihil praeter acus et filum concipere permittitur. Ubi exinde pubertatis annos attigerit, in mariti traditur zelotypum imperium, aut vestalium ergastulo perpetuo recluditur. Publica quaeque officia legibus sibi interdicta sunt. Postulare in iudicio licet prudentissime non permittitur. Repelluntur praeterea in iurisdictione, in arbitrio, in adoptione, in intercessione, in procuratione, in tutela, in cura, in testamentaria et criminali causa. Item repelluntur in verbi Dei praedicatione . . . His itaque legibus mulieres viris tanquam bello victae victoribus cedere coguntur, non naturali, non divina aliqua necessitate aut ratione, sed consuetudine, educatione, fortuna et tyrannica quadam occasione id agente.” (“But the excessive power of male tyranny prevails over both divine justice and the laws of nature, and women’s rightful freedom is forbidden to them by iniquitous laws, suppressed by custom and usage and extinguished in them by their upbringing. For a woman, as soon as she is born, is kept at home in idleness from her earliest years, and her world is confined to the needle and the spindle as though she were fit for no higher pursuit; then, as soon as she reaches marriageable age, she is given over into the keeping of a husband’s jealousy or is locked up for ever in the prison of the convent. She is forbidden by law to hold any public office. However prudent she is not allowed to bring a legal action. Furthermore, she is excluded from jurisdiction and judgment, from adoption, from standing surety, from acting on other’s behalf, from tutelage and guardianship and from cases involving inheritance and criminal proceedings. Similarly, she is not permitted to preach the word of God . . . With these laws, then, as though men had conquered them in war, women are forced to submit to their conquerors; and this has no base in any natural or divine necessity or reason—it is simply the result of custom, education, fortune, and a kind of tyrannical opportunism on the part of men.”) An awareness of the political dimension of women’s oppression is also apparent in the same period in Baldassare Castiglione’s *Libro del Cortegiano* (1528); see especially Castiglione, 3:16, 220, for Giuliano de’ Medici’s comments on the “dominio che gli omini si hanno vendicato sopra [le donne] per sua propria autorità” (“the power over women that men have appropriated on their own authority”).

<sup>10</sup>This analogy is best seen as a polemical inversion of the traditional, ultimately Aristotelian, notion of the natural relation between husband and wife as analogous to that between a legitimate ruler and his subjects; see *Politics* 1.12 [1259a 37ff] and for the use made of this passage in the Renaissance, Frigo, 86–87.

<sup>11</sup>This may be equally true of Agrippa himself; as Ian Maclean has noted, what may appear to be a “clarion call to radical change” is perhaps more safely regarded as “part of a rhetorical exercise in declamation” (Maclean, 1980, 80; see also *idem.*, 1977, 25–26 and 38, n. 59).

their affirmation of women's dignity did not threaten the dignity of men in any way, still less call into question "the logic of the social order."<sup>12</sup> As Daenens has pointed out, the only context in which the justice of male supremacy tends to be challenged is in self-consciously paradoxical works asserting women's superiority to men.<sup>13</sup> Read in isolation, some of the speeches of the protagonist of Girolamo Borri's dialogue *Della perfettione delle donne* (1561) sound like uncompromising denunciations of male supremacy and incitements to women to throw off their chains.<sup>14</sup> In context, however, these diatribes are drained of any persuasive force: as one of the female speakers in the dialogue notes after one of the aptly-named Telifilio Filogenio's more inflammatory speeches, the arguments for women's superiority over men on which his incitements to rebellion rest are less calculated to convince than to demonstrate the speaker's courtesy and wit.<sup>15</sup>

Those relatively few writers who adopt the tyranny argument in a serious context still tend to hold back from pursuing their argument to any socially subversive conclusion. A frequent strategy is

<sup>12</sup>Daenens, 23–24. See also Maclean, 1980, 56 and, most recently, Benson.

<sup>13</sup>Daenens, 15, 17–21, and 33; see also on Italian examples of this genre, Fahy, 254–72 and, more generally, on the place of paradox in the argumentation of the Renaissance debate on women, Maclean, 1977, 25–63 and Angenot, 155–59. Of course, to identify a work as paradoxical is not to deny its arguments any serious import: as modern critics have stressed and as Counter-Reformation inquisitors were well aware, the appeal of paradox as a mode of argumentation lies in the ambiguity of its *serio ludere*. There is some evidence that the assertion of women's superiority to men was regarded as socially subversive; see Daenens, 15.

<sup>14</sup>See especially Borri, 103–06, where a long speech by the feminist protagonist concludes with the exhortation: "Voi adunque valorose Donne . . . risolvetevi, come risolvere vi dovete, a guadagnar quel stato, che è ragionevolmente vostro." ("And so, valorous ladies, resolve—as you must—to win for yourselves that status that is yours by right.")

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 106–07: [Isabella] "Voi (Messer Telifilio) che pure huomo siete, nel preporre le Donne à gli Huomini, fede fate à chi vi ascolta parimente dello ingegno e della cortesia dell'animo vostro e dite cose, per avventura non vere, ma per lo interesse nostro [i.e. of his female listeners] care molto d'udire." ("Messer Telifilio, by asserting women's superiority to men, though you are a man yourself, you are convincing your listeners of both your wit and your courtesy and saying things that may not be true but that our own self-interest makes welcome to our ears.") This technique of undermining the credibility of the speaker is a frequent one in Renaissance "defenses of women": it is common for these works to be addressed to an audience of women (either directly or through the fiction of a dialogue) and for the writer (or his mouthpiece in a dialogue) to be characterized as unreliably gallant. The speech cited from Borri is closely modeled on a passage in an earlier dialogue, Sperone Speroni's *Dialogo della dignità delle donne* (1542), in Pozzi, 1978, 569.

to justify discriminatory practices on the grounds of public decency, a strategy clearly exemplified in Domenico Bruni da Pis-  
toia's interesting *Difese delle donne* (1552), whose first book contains  
a detailed, point-by-point analysis of the way in which the law dis-  
criminates against women, excluding them from the magistrature  
and from legal functions such as making contracts and administer-  
ing property. Bruni's chief concern in the *Difese* is to counter the  
conventional justification of such restrictions as reflecting women's  
natural fragility and weak-headedness, insisting instead that the  
laws that restrict women's public activity are a pure product of  
"usage" or "custom."<sup>16</sup> This does not mean for Bruni, however,  
that these discriminatory laws should be revised or revoked. For  
women to participate in public life, they would have to leave the  
home and mix freely with men, something clearly compromising  
to social decorum and the honor of the women involved. Looked  
at carefully, apparently "tyrannical" laws may be seen as justified  
by weighty considerations: the well-being and honor of women  
and the good of society as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

What is at stake for women in Bruni and in the Renaissance de-  
bate on women in general is not freedom or power or equal oppor-  
tunities but the respect and sympathy of men. When Cinquecento  
"defenders of women" talk about sexual equality, they are talking

<sup>16</sup>On essentialist justifications of the law's discrimination against women, see Ma-  
clean, 1980, 78–79; also 77, on the use of arguments from *mores* and *consuetudo* (Bruni's  
*costume* and *uso*) in contemporary legal commentaries.

<sup>17</sup>For similar arguments in early seventeenth-century treatises, see below, n. 26. An  
interesting historicist slant is given to a similar argument in Stefano Guazzo's dialogue  
*Dell'honor delle donne* (1586). See Guazzo, 131–32, where Lodovico Nemours, drawing  
on Plato's recommendations in *Republic*, argues that women should participate equally  
in public life and especially in warfare. His interlocutor Annibale Magnacavallo replies  
by disputing his reading of Plato and asserting that, in any case, "le leggi di Platone  
convenevoli a que' tempi sono disconvenevoli a questi per la diversità de' governi, e  
dello stato militare." ("Plato's laws, though appropriate enough in his day, are inap-  
propriate to ours because of the differences in the way states are governed and the way  
armies are run.") He concludes that "hoggidi non si lascia più cinger la spada alle donne,  
né condurre eserciti, né inserirsi nelle cose publiche, non già perché non fossero atte  
a tutto ciò al pari delle antiche, ma perché si conosce chiaramente ch'esse, in vece d'ac-  
quistarsi honore, aggraverebbono il credito à se medesime, et a gli huomini insieme."  
("These days women are no longer allowed to take up arms nor lead armies nor par-  
ticipate in public life, not because they are not just as capable of doing these things as  
women were in ancient times, but because it is quite clear that by doing them they  
would not win honor but would rather diminish both their own standing and men's.")  
For another example of this kind of strategy, see Benson, 71–72.



about nothing more than a theoretical acknowledgment that women have the same moral and intellectual capacities as men. The only context in which they appear to envisage women actually using their “masculine” talents is in the quite exceptional case of the female regent or queen.<sup>18</sup> For the rest, the possibility of women exercising their abilities on equal terms with men is regarded, perhaps inevitably, as an impossibility within society as it is currently constituted.

It is in this respect that I want to suggest Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinella most signally differ from their predecessors in the debate. In its basic outlines these two writers’ conception of the relations between the sexes is consistent with that of at least the more “political” of their male predecessors. Men’s dominance over women is represented as a tyranny that seeks to legitimate itself by spurious claims of male superiority.<sup>19</sup> Stripped of these essentialist justifications, the relation between the sexes is revealed as a struggle for power in which men exploit every instrument at their disposal to keep their “enemies” in a state of weakness, including crucially the exclusion of women from education, military training, and public office.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup>This distinction between “ordinary” women and women whose rank constrains them to the exercise of “masculine” virtues is formalized in Torquato Tasso’s *Discorso della virtù femminile e donnesca* (1572). On Renaissance discussions of the legitimacy of female rule and their place in the broader debate on women, see Jordan, 116–32.

<sup>19</sup>See, for example, Fonte, 1988, 27: [Leonora] “Se [gli huomini] ci usurpano le nostre ragioni, non dobbiamo lamentarci e dir che ci fanno torto? Percioché, se siamo loro inferiori d’auttorità, ma non di merito, questo è un abuso, che si è messo nel mondo, che poi a lungo andare si hanno fatto lecito ed ordinario; e tanto è posto in consueto, che vogliono e par loro, che sia lor di ragione quel che è di sopercheria.” (“If men usurp our rights, should we not complain and make it clear that we are being wronged? Because if we are their inferiors in status, but not in merit, then that is an abuse, an abuse that has crept into the world and then gradually over time has come to seem legitimate and normal—that has become so well-established, in fact, that men claim and genuinely believe that what they have gained through their usurpation is theirs by right.”) See also Marinella, 120, where the relation between the sexes is compared with the situation in a kingdom where a refined and sensitive ruler has been deposed by a brutish younger brother: “Il sesso donnesco, il quale è più delicato del sesso virile, et anco meno robusto, per non essere assueffato alle fatiche, vien tiraneggiato, et calpestrato da gli insolenti, et da gli ingiusti.” (“The female sex, more delicate than the male and less robust because women are not accustomed to physical fatigues, is tyrannized and trodden underfoot by the arrogant and unjust.”)

<sup>20</sup>On the exclusion of women from public office, see Marinella, 124: “Gli Huomini fanno le leggi, e però come tiranni escludono da’ magistrati le Donne, ma non già perché conoscono che à reggere elleno non sieno buone, et ottime.” (“It is men who make the laws and so they tyrannously exclude women from office, even though they

If the building-blocks of Fonte and Marinella's arguments are not original, however, the character and function of the edifice they use them to build certainly is. As I have noted above, in the previous male tradition of defenses of women, the specter of social criticism conjured up by discussions of male tyranny tends to be carefully exorcised by bracketing these discussions as facetious or insincere. In Fonte and Marinella, by contrast, we are given no reason to think that their criticism of male supremacy is not to be taken seriously.<sup>21</sup> A significant indicator of this seriousness is the fact that unlike previous "defenders of women," Fonte and Marinella dedicate some of their energy to contemplating ways in which women might rouse themselves from their "long sleep" and use their energies to free themselves from their dependence on men.<sup>22</sup>

The theme of emancipation recurs in these writers' works in different contexts and with different inflections, from the fantastic to the quotidian, the deliberately utopian to the tantalizingly attainable. At one extreme—self-consciously fantastic but nonetheless expressive of real tensions—is Leonora's proposal in *Il merito delle donne* for an armed uprising by women against men.<sup>23</sup> More

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are well aware that women are quite capable of governing; indeed, that they are eminently suited to the task.") On women's exclusion from education—a commonplace of the tradition of defenses of women from Christine de Pizan onwards—see especially Marinella, 32, where it is noted that "poco [sic] sono quelle, che si dieno à gli studi, overo all'arte militare in questi nostri tempi; perciocché gli huomini, temendo di non perdere la signoria, et di divenir servi delle donne, vietano a quelle ben spesso ancho il saper leggere, e scrivere." ("One finds few women today devoting themselves to study or to warfare, because men, fearing that they may lose their sovereignty over women and fall into servitude, very often prevent women from even learning to read and write.") See also Fonte, 1988, 170; idem, 1581, 17.

<sup>21</sup>For a different view of *Il merito delle donne*, see Chemello, 1983 and 1988, where the ludic and paradoxical elements in Fonte's dialogue are stressed. Where Marinella is concerned, it is interesting to note that Ian Maclean, who is generally and rightly skeptical about the sincerity of Renaissance defenses of women, identifies *La nobiltà* as an exceptional instance of a work that appears to advocate women's emancipation in all sincerity (Maclean, 1977, 53, n. 129).

<sup>22</sup>For the notion of women awakening from their sleep, see Marinella, 120: "Ma se le Donne, come io spero, si sveglieranno dal lungo sonno, dal quale sono oppresse, diveranno mansueti, et humili questi ingrati, et superbi." ("But if women, as I hope, will rouse themselves from the long slumber that has oppressed them, their ungrateful and proud oppressors will be humbled and tamed.")

<sup>23</sup>Fonte, 1988, 163: "Vorrei che noi donne tutte si armassimo come quelle antiche Amazzone ed andassimo a combattere contra questi uomini." ("I should like to see all us women arming ourselves like the Amazons of antiquity and battling against these men.") She goes on to suggest that "in quello che mancherebbe la nostra delicatezza, per non vi essere avezze, suppliremmo co 'l maggior numero" ("what we lacked in strength—for we are not used to fighting—we should make up in numbers"). See also

realistic aspirations center on improved educational opportunities for women and, crucially, the opportunity to participate in public life. "Would to God," Marinella exclaims, "that women in our days were allowed to train in warfare and letters! For then we should see wondrous and unprecedented achievements in the spheres of both government and conquest."<sup>24</sup>

Marinella is dismissive of the argument that women are unsuited to public activity: outside Italy, as she points out, women's horizons are far less circumscribed than at home. In France, Spain, and England, women are permitted to succeed to fiefs and even kingdoms, while, on a humbler level in Germany, Flanders, and France, they play an active role in commerce. In France, indeed, the financial reins of households and family businesses are firmly in female hands: "Men cannot dispose of a single penny and women are in charge of not only keeping shop and selling but also handling all the revenue from the land."<sup>25</sup> The capacity of women to participate in commerce cannot be contested in the face of such evidence: these foreign women, after all, "conduct their business with such diligence that they are the equals of the foremost merchants of all Italy."<sup>26</sup>

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ibid., 73, for Leonora's account of a dream involving a struggle between women and men.

<sup>24</sup>Marinella, 33: "O Dio volesse che a questi nostri tempi fosse lecito alle donne l'essercitarsi nelle arme e nelle lettere, che si vedrebbero cose meravigliose e non più udite nel conservare i regni e nell'ampiarli."

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 29: "Non possono gli huomini disporre pur di un quattrino . . . e le donne hanno cura non solamente de' traffichi delle botteghe, e del vendere, ma di tutte l'entrate rusticane." For the conventional position that Marinella is contesting here, see for example, the dedicatory letter to Niccolò Vito di Gozze's *Dialogo delle bellezze* (Venice, 1581), where man is characterized as "stronger" and "bolder" than woman ("più forte" and "più animoso") and therefore as more fitted for commercial life ("più atto alli negocii e alle mercantie").

<sup>26</sup>Marinella, 67: "attendono a' traffichi con tanta diligenza, che non cedono al primo mercante di tutta l'Italia." See Labalme, 1981, 105, for the suggestion that this argument may derive from observation of the practices of foreign merchant communities in Venice in this period. It is interesting to note that subsequent male defenders of women who take up this point revert to traditional justifications of women's exclusion from public life (on which see above, 519). See, for example, Cristoforo Bronzini's *Della dignità, e nobiltà delle donne* (1625), day 4: 20, where Bronzini's mouthpiece Onorio recalls that he has read of many women who run businesses, especially in Flanders, England, and France, but then goes on to note that this is wisely prohibited in Italy in the interests of women's modesty ("per maggior honestà del sesso muliebre"). There can be little doubt that Bronzini's source is Marinella; see ibid., day 4: 74, for an unacknowledged quotation from Marinella's defense of women's capacity to participate

However much wishful thinking may be involved in Marinella's description of foreign women's freedoms,<sup>27</sup> this passage is important in that it presents a broadening of women's opportunities as a possibility lying only just beyond her readers' grasp. The notion of women participating in public life is not being discussed in this passage as a historical curiosity or as one of the more eccentric and unworkable ideas in Plato's *Republic*.<sup>28</sup> What Marinella is demanding for Italian women is no more than what she claims women enjoy elsewhere in Europe at the present moment: the opportunity to exercise their native energies and talents in the public sphere.

A similar focus on aims that, if ambitious, are at least conceived of as relatively attainable, is apparent in the remarkable second book of *Il merito delle donne*. This book is largely occupied by an encyclopedic overview of the major fields of secular knowledge, from geography and meteorology to politics, law, rhetoric, and medicine. It would be easy to dismiss this section of the dialogue as an empty display of erudition, an unmotivated interruption of the feminist themes of the first book. In fact, however, the place of this apparent digression in the overall economy of the work is indicated by one of the speakers, Lucrezia, when after a lengthy discussion of the medicinal properties of herbs, she replies to a companion who has suggested that discussions of healing are best left to professionals. "On the contrary," she argues, "it is right that we

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in trade; also, for evidence of his esteem for Marinella, day 6: 4–5 and day 4: 112–14, where Marinella's *Nobiltà* is lauded as "a truly fine work, worthy of the greatest esteem" (at 116–17 Fonte's *Merito* receives similar acclaim). Another interesting case of a Seicento male writer influenced to some extent by Marinella and Fonte but unwilling to follow them in their more radical proposals is Luciano Bursati da Crema, author of *La vittoria delle donne* (1621); see 11, 189 and 192–93, for praises of Fonte and Marinella, but also 174 and 187 where on the crucial issue of the reasons for women's exclusion from public office and from education, the author treads the same equivocal path as Bronzini.

<sup>27</sup>It is generally acknowledged that the sixteenth century saw a significant contraction in women's scope for participation in commercial activities throughout Europe, but for the suggestion that this development may have been particularly acute in Italy, see Brown, 224, and n. 29. It is interesting to note in this context that the English ambassador to Venice in 1612 thought the fact that Venetian women "sell nothing abroad" worthy of comment in a draft for a report (Chambers and Pullan, 27). See, however, Burke, 1987, 35–38, for the evidence of women's participation in commerce offered by seventeenth-century Venetian census reports.

<sup>28</sup>For Plato's recommendation that women participate in the civic and military life of the state on equal terms with men, see *Republic* 451c–457c; also N. D. Smith. The passage was much discussed in the Renaissance; for one reading, see above, n. 17.

should learn these things in order to be able to look after ourselves, with no need for any help from men; and it would be a good thing if there were women schooled in these matters as well, so that men did not have the boast of knowing more than us in this respect and we did not need to go through their hands."<sup>29</sup>

The hint in this passage of the possibility of women achieving effective autonomy from men is, as I have suggested, one that may help explain the intended function of this second book. If the principal means by which men exert their "tyranny" over women is by their jealous monopoly on learning,<sup>30</sup> then women's first task if they want to break free is to set about educating themselves. It is perhaps exaggerated to suggest that it is concretely envisaged in book 2 of *Il merito delle donne* that women might one day be in a position to engage in the same kind of professional activities as men. But to show a group of women conducting a reasonably informed discussion of traditional male provinces like medicine and law was at least a strong reminder that if women were excluded from these professions, it was not because they lacked the native abilities necessary for participation in these fields.

This reading of book 2 finds support in an extraordinary passage toward the end of the book that marks perhaps more clearly than any other the distance that separates the perspective on the question of women's equality in *Il merito delle donne* from that of the previous tradition of "defenses of women." The "official" theme of the second day's discussions—pursued in a semi-serious way—has been the question of whether and by what means men could be persuaded to abandon their misogynist views. At the end, one of the speakers, Cornelia, in a moment of frustration dismisses this whole line of inquiry by pointing out that there is no use in women's at-

<sup>29</sup>Fonte, 1988, 125: "Anzi . . . è bene che noi ne impariamo per tenir da noi, acciò che non abbiamo bisogno dell'aiuto loro; e sarebbe ben fatto che vi fussero anco delle donne addottrinate in questa materia, acciò che [gli uomini] non avessero questa gloria di valer più di noi in ciò e che convenimo andar per le man loro." See also the passage at the end of the book (ibid., 169–70), where Corinna defends the group's incursion into "male" preserves of knowledge ("certe cose ch'abbiamo così discorso tra noi, di cui lor [ie. agli uomini] pare che non si convenga se non a loro il trattarne") with the argument that "possiamo ragionarne ancor noi come essi, che se ci fusse insegnato da fanciulle . . . gli eccederessimo in qual si voglia scienza ed arte che si venisse proposta." ("We are just as capable of discussing these things as they are, for if we were educated as girls, we would outstrip men in any art or science you might care to name.")

<sup>30</sup>See above, n. 20.

tempting to win their enemies round. The only way in which women could achieve a genuine equality with men, she suggests, would be by freeing themselves from economic dependence and learning to fend for themselves. "Surely it would possible for us just to banish these men from our lives and escape their carping and jeering once and for all? Could we not live without them? Could we not earn our own living and manage our affairs without help from them? Come, let us rouse ourselves and claim back our freedom and the honor and dignity they have usurped from us for so long. Do you think that if we put our minds to it, we would be lacking the courage to defend ourselves, the strength to fend for ourselves, or the talents to earn our own living?"<sup>31</sup>

While it would be rash to place too much significance on an isolated outburst in the dialogue, it is important to recognize the novelty Cornelia's proposal represents. As I have stressed, an unstated assumption of the tradition of "defenses of women" prior to *Il merito delle donne* is that what is at stake for women is no more than a recognition on men's part of the dignity of their sex. In the words of one participant in the debate who brings this assumption into the open, women have no desire to escape from the unjust tyranny under which they must live ("uscir fuori della ingiusta tirannide in che vivono.")<sup>32</sup> They are content to remain in their subservient position ("di vivere soggette"). What is intolerable is that men fail to pay due respect to the "dignity" and "honor" of their sex.<sup>33</sup>

What is striking in the passage quoted above from *Il merito delle donne* is that Fonte's Cornelia does not stop at demanding the restitution of women's *onor* and *dignità*, but proposes instead a full-scale recuperation of their *libertà*. A world is envisaged in which women might enjoy a concrete and substantive parity, where their qualities and strengths would be not simply acknowledged but exercised. This utopian possibility is only sporadically glimpsed,

<sup>31</sup>Fonte, 1988, 169: "È possibile che non si potrebbe un tratto metterli [gli uomini] un poco da banda con i loro scherni e foie che si fanno di noi, sì che non ci dessero più noia? Non potremmo noi star senza loro? Procacciarsi el viver e negoziar da per noi senza il loro aiuto? Deh, di grazia, svegliamci un giorno e ricuperamo la nostra libertà, con l'onor e dignità che tanto tempo ci tengono usurpate. Forse che se si mettiamo ci mancherà l'animo per difenderci, forza per sostentarci e virtù per acquistarsi le facoltà?" For the context of the passage, see below, n. 111.

<sup>32</sup>L'Umile Invaghito [Pompeo Baccusi], *Oratione in difesa et lode delle donne* (Mantova, 1571), cited in Daenens, 24.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.: "Ma ch' altri lor tolga l'honore, e la dignità diminuisca, non è da sofferire."

both here and in Marinella's *Nobiltà et eccellenza*; there is nothing here approaching a coherent manifesto for social reform. But this is scarcely surprising given the circumstances within which these women were writing. What is more surprising—and what needs to be stressed in view of its absence from the previous tradition—is that this possibility of effective equality is envisaged at all. This aspect of their writing gives Marinella and Fonte some claim to be viewed less as exponents of the feminist thought of the century that was ending as they wrote than as precursors of developments in the century to come.<sup>34</sup>

One element of novelty in the passage just quoted that deserves further attention is the emphasis it gives to the economic dimension of women's subordination. The possibility of women achieving a real and effectual equality with men is squarely perceived as dependent on their ability to "earn their own living," to "fend for themselves." This attention to an aspect of women's condition almost entirely ignored in the tradition of "defenses" is a consistent feature of Fonte's *Merito*, and even in the more rarefied atmosphere of Marinella's *Nobiltà* we find traces of an awareness of the financial realities of women's lives.<sup>35</sup> The importance of this in assessing the originality of these texts can hardly be exaggerated: it is their firm grasp of the links between money and power, between financial self-sufficiency and freedom that underpins much of what is most new and vital in their analyses of women's condition.

This stress on the economic realities of women's lives is an aspect of Fonte and Marinella's thought that can plausibly be related to the Venetian cultural environment. It is perhaps prudent not to exaggerate the extent to which the Venetian patriciate retained its traditional mercantile ethos in the period when Fonte and Marinella were writing: the Cinquecento had seen a decisive shift away from trade toward landed investment, and the works of Venetian mor-

<sup>34</sup>I am thinking in particular here of seventeenth-century English feminists like Mary Astell; for discussions of their views, see H. Smith and Nadelheft. For a differing assessment of the import of the elements of social and economic criticism in Fonte, see Guthmüller, 279.

<sup>35</sup>See, for example, Marinella, 133, where discussing the traditional misogynist claim that women are avaricious by nature, the author points out that women have no scope to be avaricious because "men usurp all wealth, to such an extent that women have nothing at their disposal" ("l'uomo usurpa in guisa tutto l'havere che [le donne] non possono disporre d'alcuna cosa"). See also Marinella's observations on the financial power and responsibility accorded to women outside Italy, discussed above, 522.

alists of the period are filled with reproofs against the decadent attitudes of young patricians who neglect the mercantile traditions of their forefathers and dedicate themselves to a life of *rentier* ease.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, these complaints in themselves testify to the persistence of more traditional values, and certainly it seems safe to maintain that even at the end of the century Venice retained a more robust attitude to money than the courts of the *terraferma* in which much of the preceding discourse on women's equality had been produced.

This aspect of Venetian culture may help to account at a general level for the sensitivity Fonte and Marinella display to the economic realities of women's condition. It cannot, however, alone account for the extremely marked sense of financial grievance that pervades the treatment of women's relations with men in *Il merito delle donne*. Women are presented consistently in *Il merito* as the hapless victims of men's greed: we hear of fathers cheating their daughters of their inheritance; of brothers misappropriating their sisters' portions; of husbands mismanaging dowries; of sons reducing their widowed mothers to penury. Even the state is implicated in this conspiracy to cheat women of their dues: in a rare moment of insight into the institutional dimension of women's oppression, it is suggested that the Venetian justice system is simply a mechanism for legitimating male tyranny and greed.<sup>37</sup>

To understand the emphasis that is placed in the dialogue on women's financial powerlessness, it is necessary to consider the circumstances in which *Il merito delle donne* was written. The second half of the sixteenth century in Italy witnessed a series of social and economic changes which had profound and far-reaching implications for upper-class women's lives. Specifically, due to a

<sup>36</sup>See Pullan, 1965, and Tucci. More generally, on the change from commercial to landed investment in Venice in this period, see below, 530.

<sup>37</sup>Fonte, 143–44: "Che avemo a far vi prego con magistrati, corti di palazzo e tali disviamenti? Or non fanno tutti gli huomini questi uffici contra di noi? Non ci domandano se ben non gli siamo obligate? Non procurano per loro in nostro danno? Non ci trattano da forestieri? Non fannosi proprio il nostro mobile?" ("What do we [women] have to do with magistrates, law courts, and irrelevancies like these? Are not all these offices practiced by men against our interests? Do they not make claims on us even though we are not in their debt? Do they not plead their own cause against us? Do they not treat us as aliens? Do they not usurp our possessions?") It should be noted that this outburst is exceptional: in general, consistent with Cinquecento tradition both Fonte and Marinella tend to represent the relation between the sexes in purely personal and psychological terms.



combination of factors bearing on families' financial strategies, the prospects of marriage for women of these classes were drastically reduced. As a prolonged period of economic retrenchment coincided with a widespread adoption by the urban upper classes of aristocratic practices and aspirations, there was an increasing tendency among these classes to attempt to keep family patrimonies intact by limiting marriages to one or two in each generation, thus ensuring concentration of inheritance on a single line and preventing dispersal of resources through the payment of dowries.<sup>38</sup>

The consequences of this policy for women's lives, as I have suggested, were dramatic and far-reaching. Most obviously, it resulted in an influx of "excess" daughters into convents; though not unprecedented it was during this period that the practice of *monacazione forzata* or forced claustration, most notoriously exemplified by Manzoni's *Monaca di Monza*, first began to become the widespread social phenomenon it would remain for the whole of the seventeenth century.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, as pressure on convent places grew and the cost of placing daughters in convents increased, this period saw the appearance of the virtually unprecedented figure of the secular spinster.

It is against the background of these dramatic changes in women's position and prospects that we should situate Fonte and Marinella's analyses of women's condition. At the time they were writing, vast numbers of upper-class women in Italy were finding themselves deprived of their traditional career of marriage, while a significant number—though the extent of the phenomenon is difficult to estimate—appear to have found themselves precluded as well from the alternative of the convent. This was a development whose importance can scarcely be exaggerated in a society that offered no real alternative to women of this class. The reduction in marriage opportunities cut many women adrift from the only identities their culture could offer them. At the same time, more concretely, in a society in which women's financial standing depended crucially on their possession of a dowry, the crisis in the marriage market left many women severely disadvantaged, deprived of even

<sup>38</sup>For an overview, see Zarri, 361–68 (esp. 366–67, on the social and economic factors underlying this change in families' economic strategies); also Toscani, 588–89.

<sup>39</sup>On this phenomenon, see Zarri, 400–01 and (on Milan) Cattaneo.

the limited degree of financial power and autonomy that their mothers and grandmothers had enjoyed.<sup>40</sup>

Two characteristics I have noted as distinguishing Fonte and Marinella from previous “defenders of women” are the seriousness with which they contemplate the possibility of a broadening of opportunities for women and their acute sensitivity to the economic realities of women’s lives. What I want to explore now is the possibility that these novel elements in their analyses of women’s condition may be linked with the set of historical circumstances I have outlined above. My suggestion will be that if it is now for the first time at the end of the sixteenth century that we find Italian women contributing to the long-running debate on the status of their sex, this may be because a whole class of women—and precisely those most likely to be readers and writers—were finding their status and identity under threat.<sup>41</sup>

The next section of this study will be devoted to exploring the evidence we possess, aside from Fonte’s and Marinella’s treatises, of the ways in which the policy of marriage limitation affected contemporary perceptions of women’s role. This investigation will be limited to Venice, for although reduced nubility in the urban upper classes was a development common to the whole of Italy in this period, the extent of the phenomenon and the precise nature of its effects depended to a great deal on local social and economic circumstances. There is evidence, moreover, to suggest that the effects of marriage limitation were particularly acute and visible in Venice; this may, indeed, be one of the reasons—though the question is obviously a complex one—why it should be in Venice alone in this period that we find women writers in this period coming forward to challenge the subordinate position society allotted to their sex.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup>The financial consequences for women of the policy of marriage limitation are examined below (532–34) in a Venetian context.

<sup>41</sup>It is difficult to estimate the literacy rate among women in Italy in this period. Grendler, 46, estimates that approximately 5–6% of Venetian women received some form of education in the convent or the home. See also Medioli, 137–38.

<sup>42</sup>Apart from Marinella and Fonte, feminist views are expressed by two other Venetian women writers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries: the poet and courtesan Veronica Franco (1546–91) and the *monaca forzata* Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–52). For a discussion of Tarabotti’s work, see 535–39 below; on Franco, see the bibliography cited in Arslan et al., 46; also Rosenthal, 1992 and 1993; and Jones, 178–200. On factors in the social and cultural environment of Venice that may have encouraged this flourishing of feminist thought, see Labalme, 1981, 104–09.

THE POLICY OF MARRIAGE LIMITATION IN  
VENICE AND ITS SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL  
EFFECTS

The sixteenth century saw a decisive change in the economic life of the Venetian patriciate, a shift from the commercial activities through which the Serenissima's wealth had been accumulated to safer and less speculative investment in the farmlands of the mainland.<sup>43</sup> The chronology of this process, its motives and effects are still a matter for discussion: landed investment was already becoming common in the Quattrocento, and it has been suggested that, by the early Cinquecento, Machiavelli's well-known characterization of the Venetian nobility as merchants rather than genuine *gentiluomini* reflects an outsider's view of a reality which was already undergoing change.<sup>44</sup> In the early period of land purchases on the mainland, however, investment in real estate seems to have gone hand in hand with a continued commitment to commerce. The real change occurred in the later decades of the Cinquecento, when increased investment in land coincided with a large-scale withdrawal from trade.<sup>45</sup>

Moderata Fonte's *Il merito delle donne* reflects the social realities of an economy in transition. The dialogue opens with an impassioned tribute to Venice as a city of the sea, and a later passage reveals the speakers' appreciation of the "important science" of ship-building and their imaginative engagement with the travails of the merchant sailor.<sup>46</sup> There are frequent mentions as well, however, of the pleasures and pains of life *in villa*, ranging from expressions of concern for the tribulations of tenants in the recent bad harvests to appreciations of the dancing of local shepherdesses and gleeful anticipation of the bird-hunting season.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>43</sup>For accounts of this process, see Pullan, 1973, 380–87; and Woolf.

<sup>44</sup>See Machiavelli, 206; and Tucci, 346. For estimates of the extent of investment in real estate prior to the War of the League of Cambrai (1509–17), see Woolf, 188–90. On the difficulties involved in establishing when the decisive change to landed investment occurred, see also Burke, 1974, 101–08.

<sup>45</sup>Woolf, 198, identifies the half-century from 1570–1630 as "the crucial period of the change to landed activities." On the chronology of this process and the reasons for the retreat from commercial activities, see also Pullan, 1973, 381–86.

<sup>46</sup>Fonte, 1988, 96–97. Fonte is doubtless speaking from experience in such passages: we learn from Doglioni that she spent her summers as a child on her guardian's estates on the mainland, and she herself declared ownership of a small estate near Padua in her tax return of 1582 (Doglioni, 6; Rosenthal, 86).

<sup>47</sup>Fonte, 1988, 89 and 122–23.

One consequence of the economic retrenchment of which the shift to landed investment was both a symptom and a cause was an increasing preoccupation with the conservation of family wealth. This concern with wealth conservation was reflected in changes in inheritance patterns during this period. It had long been customary in Venice for a father's estate to be divided equally between his sons, who then continued to live and trade together *in fraterna*.<sup>48</sup> This practice had had advantages when Venice was a great trading power as it maximized the possibilities for entrepreneurial activity. By the late sixteenth century, however, when increasingly large portions of patrician estates were in *immobili*, this practice of division threatened patrimonies with dispersion. Since custom forbade a simple transition to the practice of primogeniture practiced elsewhere in Italy, the means adopted were, firstly, to entail the estate; secondly, to limit the succession to a single line of descent by ensuring—it seems by informal agreement—that only one male member of the family married.<sup>49</sup>

More hung on the practice of marriage limitation than simply the fortunes of individual households: the future of the Venetian patriciate as a ruling class was perceived as being at stake. The dangers that would result for the Venetian state from a failure to keep patrician marriage rates down are clearly exposed in Ludovico Settala's *Della ragion di stato* (1627):

And because this kind of government is made up of a determinate number of families . . . reason of state demands that the fathers should ensure that few of their sons marry. . . . For any great increase in the number of those qualified to participate in government might transform the republic into a popular regime. Moreover, the disputes over inheritance that would ensue might impoverish the nobility and bring it into disrepute, for, to live well, noblemen would be forced to engage in sordid trades. Alternatively, there is the danger that poverty among the nobility would reach intolerable levels, since it would affect so many, and that this might lead to such social upheaval that it would bring down the regime.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup>See Davis, 85–86 and 98–101; Cowan, 1986, 6–8.

<sup>49</sup>On this policy of marriage restriction, see Davis, 74–92; and Cowan, 1986, 144–49; also, on the beginnings of this trend in an earlier period, Chojnacki, 1991, 147.

<sup>50</sup>Settala, 109: “E perché questa specie di repubblica è composta di un determinato numero di famiglie . . . per ragion di stato devono i padri procurare che pochi dei suoi figliuoli piglino moglie . . . acciò, moltiplicandosi tanto quelli che possono partecipare della repubblica, non si muti in forma popolare; o venendosi alle discussioni de' beni, la povertà non facci avvilire la nobiltà, impiegandosi per ben vivere in sordidi esercizi, o, non potendola moderatamente sopportare, essendo comune a molti, sia causa di rivoluzione tale che muti la forma della repubblica.”

Though the fears expressed here were not always so clearly articulated, they underlie the strategies of the Venetian patriciate from the mid-sixteenth century onwards. The imperative of marriage limitation was political as much as economic: the impoverishment of the nobility was a threat to the well-being and survival of the state.<sup>51</sup>

What were the consequences for women of these changes in the financial strategies of patrician households? Most crucially they resulted in a sharp reduction in Venetian noblewomen's prospects of marriage. Dowry payments had represented an increasing strain on family resources since the early fifteenth century as the growing exclusivity of the Venetian patriciate and the central place occupied by marriage in families' social strategies pushed up the market value of eligible matches.<sup>52</sup> This trend was exacerbated in the late sixteenth century with the reduction in the numbers of male patricians marrying; dowry inflation soared, and precisely at a time when the conservation of resources was imperative.<sup>53</sup> The result was a tendency increasingly to concentrate what resources were available on one or two daughters, frequently the younger ones, while consigning the others to the cheaper alternative of the convent.<sup>54</sup>

To understand the full implications of this drastic reduction in marriage opportunities for women, it is useful to consider what it meant for women in economic terms. When marriage was an available option for the majority of patrician women, the male and female offspring of patrician families had received equal shares in their father's estate.<sup>55</sup> A daughter's dowry constituted legally her

<sup>51</sup>See Pullan, 1960, 27. The problem was a real one: on the relative poverty suffered by a substantial sector of the patriciate in this period, see (besides Pullan) Cowan, 1982.

<sup>52</sup>On the causes of dowry inflation in Renaissance Venice, see Chojnacki, 1980, 69; though see also Queller and Madden.

<sup>53</sup>On dowry inflation in Venice in this period and the Venetian government's largely ineffectual attempts to regulate it, see Pullan, 1965, 138–39; and Ferro, 3:390–91. Inflation in dowries was, of course, not an exclusively Venetian problem: see Zarri, 365–66; Klapisch-Zuber, 124 and 215.

<sup>54</sup>The most detailed study of the implications of dowry inflation for women's prospects of marriage is Medioli (esp. 111–35); see also Davis, 106–11; and Cowan, 1986, 148–49. On the tendency to reserve marriage for the younger daughters in a family in order to delay the moment when dowries would have to be raised, see Medioli, 111. It should be noted that, as the example of Arcangela Tarabotti illustrates (see below, 535–39), the practice of limiting marriages was not exclusive to the patriciate, but extended down to the *cittadino* class and the richest strata of the *popolo*.

<sup>55</sup>For a clear statement of women's rights under Venetian law, see Ferro, 3:380–98.

share of the family patrimony and must by law be congruent with the portions of her brothers.<sup>56</sup> A woman's dowry was not a privilege but her right; if a father died without providing for his daughters, their dowries were considered an outstanding debt and the obligation passed to his heirs.

One result of the reduction in marriage opportunities for women in the latter decades of the sixteenth century was to undermine the principle that women were entitled to a share in the family estate.<sup>57</sup> Where the law continued to recognize equal inheritance rights for men and women, in actuality women's rights were dependent on their families' ability and willingness to find them a partner. The consequences of this change were more than purely formal: although it is true that a woman's dowry passed into her husband's administration during his lifetime, it remained in law her property and was returned to her on his death.<sup>58</sup> A series of recent studies by Stanley Chojnacki has stressed that with the dowry inflation of the early Renaissance, patrician women came to play a far more active role in the city's economic life than is generally supposed.<sup>59</sup> As dowries rose, the amounts of money controlled by women became more and more significant; and Chojnacki has argued convincingly

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For a full treatment of dowry law as it evolved in the medieval Italian communes, see Ercole, 1908 and 1910.

<sup>56</sup>On the status of the dowry as a woman's share of the patrimony, see Cowan, 1986, 133; and Ercole, 1908, 211–30. In practice, obviously, the allocation of dowries within a family tended to take place in a messier and more ad hoc way than might be suggested by looking at the law codes, depending less on strict equity than on circumstantial factors like the nature of the match and the financial circumstances of the casa at the time the marriage was contracted. On the actual workings of the dowry system in Cinquecento Venice, see Cowan, 1986, 132–42; and, on an earlier period, the various studies of Chojnacki.

<sup>57</sup>Nuns renounced their inheritance rights on taking the veil, though a monastic dowry was paid to the convent (see below, n. 81).

<sup>58</sup>See Ferro, 1908, 395; Davis, 106–07; Pullan, 1965, 136; idem, 1973, 390; Labalme, 1980, 132. The degree to which, even during the lifetime of both spouses, the wife's dowry continued to be considered as her own property is intriguingly illustrated by the penalties exacted for adultery and fornication in Renaissance Venice: an adulterous or absconding wife might be ordered to pay her dowry over to her husband (Ruggiero, 53–55), while a man who seduced an unmarried girl might be offered the chance to make amends by marrying her and crediting a dowry to her from his own property (*ibid.*, 31, 33, 35).

<sup>59</sup>See Chojnacki 1974, 1975, 1980, 1988, 1990, and 1991. A factor of particular significance for Chojnacki is the freedom women had, in Venetian law and custom, to divide their dowries as they wished, on death, among their natal and married kin: a freedom that gave them considerable leverage within both families.

that this financial power was reflected in an enhancement in the status of married women and widows within households.

We must not be tempted to exaggerate the extent of patrician women's financial autonomy, but nor should we underestimate the very significant change it signaled for the status of women of this class when a considerable proportion of them began to find themselves excluded from the possibility of marriage. Women's power and standing in the family depended crucially on the possession of a dowry, and law and custom had encouraged them to regard a dowry as their due.<sup>60</sup> When at the end of the sixteenth century many patrician women found themselves dowerless and effectively disinherited, it must have been a cruel reminder of their status as pawns in the financial and social strategies of the *casa*.

How conscious were Venetian noblewomen—and men—of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century of the extent to which women's prospects had changed since the days of their grandmothers? It is a problem to which it is difficult to provide even a conjectural answer. The changes I have been examining did not happen overnight; nor, obviously, did they affect women in a uniform way. Many women did, of course, continue to marry, and with the vast inflation in dowries those fortunate enough to find husbands were better off than before. This variety in individual destinies must to contemporary observers have obscured the broader patterns which emerge with the hindsight of history.

Nor should it be forgotten that to identify a change in the status of women, it is necessary to have a conception of women—women of a certain class at least—as a distinct social (as opposed to simply biological) group. Although this kind of feminist awareness is apparent in a highly developed form in the treatises of Fonte and Marinella, it would be rash to assume that it was an awareness shared by many of their peers. Certainly, a century of intense debate on the status of their sex had supplied literate men and women with at least the rudimentary conceptual tools for an analysis of the political and social dimension of sex difference. But it must be remembered that in their mental map of social groupings, this relatively novel and as yet faintly traced division by gender was

<sup>60</sup>For evidence of this, see below, 558–59. On the central role played by dowries in Renaissance women's "status system," see Queller and Madden, 698.

competing with other far more clearly-defined groupings of family and class.

Nevertheless, a certain amount of evidence does suggest that at least by the early Seicento, Venetian patricians were beginning to become aware that an injustice was being done to a large section of the female members of their class. There is also some evidence of a certain discontent and resentment on the part of women, most of it, unsurprisingly, from the convents where unmarried noblewomen were "stored."<sup>61</sup> The majority of this evidence of women's perceptions is indirect, as is inevitable in a society that excluded women almost entirely from the means of self-expression. We are, however, fortunate enough to possess one direct testimony of the experience of a woman directly affected by the policy of marriage limitation in the extraordinary writings of the recalcitrant nun Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–52).

Tarabotti's most memorable writings, *La semplicità ingannata* and *L'inferno monacale*, both deal with the phenomenon of forced claustration, of which she had herself been a victim.<sup>62</sup> The nucleus of her analysis of the phenomenon and the strongly feminist terms in which it is conducted are indicated by the original title of *La semplicità*, *La tirannia paterna*. The practice of coercing unwanted daughters to enter convents is presented as a tyrannical abuse of authority on the part of Venetian fathers intent on preserving their wealth. Any pretense at more creditable motives is mercilessly stripped away: while fathers of nuns may hypocritically pride

<sup>61</sup>The metaphor is a contemporary one; see below, 540.

<sup>62</sup>The term "forced claustration" is used for convenience, as a translation of the conventional Italian term, *monacazione forzata*. On the actual level of constraint involved, see below, n. 74. Elena Tarabotti was born, the eldest of five daughters, to a non-noble family of respectable means. She entered the convent of St. Anna di Castello at the age of thirteen and took her vows at sixteen with the name of Suor Arcangela. On her life and works, see Medioli; and Letizia Panizza's introduction to Tarabotti, 1994; also Labalme, 1981, 98–102; Spini, 223–29; and Zanette (the most detailed study of Tarabotti's life to date, though marred by the author's patronizing attitude to his subject). Apart from the two works discussed here, Tarabotti's other writings are a treatise in praise of conventual life when freely chosen, *Paradiso monacale* (Venice, 1663), and two works of feminist polemic, *L'Antisatira*, a reply to Francesco Buoninsegni's satire *Contro 'l lusso donnesco* (Venice, 1644) and *Che le donne siano della spetie degli huomini. Difesa delle donne di Galerana Barcitotti contra Horatio Plata* (Nuremberg, 1651), recently reissued in an English translation, in Tarabotti, 1994. A number of other works mentioned by the author, including a *Purgatorio delle mal maritate*, are lost. Tarabotti's collected *Lettere familiari e di complimento* (Venice, 1650) reveal the extent of her connections outside the convent.



themselves on their concern for their daughters' spiritual welfare, the least scrutiny reveals that theirs is a "self-interested action, motivated purely by worldly pride and the desire to pile up riches."<sup>63</sup>

The blame for this outrage does not, however, stop at individual fathers: their crimes are carried with the complicity of the government itself and the Church. It is this institutional involvement, in fact, that makes the practice of forced claustration so peculiarly reprehensible: "that private citizens should commit such enormities for their own self-interest is in itself a detestable abuse, but that those in authority should allow this to happen is something that would strike horror into insensibility itself."<sup>64</sup> The irony is stressed of the Venetian state's condoning a practice in flagrant contradiction of its stated principles: while ostensibly Venice is the home of liberty, in fact "Paternal Tyranny, concealed under the majesty of

<sup>63</sup>Baratotti [Tarabotti], 1654, 133–34: "È una vostra bestialità, non una vostra santità. Credete forse che Dio gradisca questi sacrificii impuri, queste vittime sforzate [?]. Non lo crediate, perche i vostri capricci non s'accordano con gli eterni decreti della legge di Dio, e voi gli andate vantando, come se fosse disceso dall'Empireo un'Angelo per nome del sommo Motore à comandarvi, ch' incarcerate queste povere prive d' ogni bene, ch' è una vostra interessata attione, per sola alterigia mondana, e per accumular ricchezze." ("It is a bestial act on your part, not a pious one. Do you really believe that God appreciates these impure sacrifices, these victims, constrained by force? Disabuse yourselves! For your whims do not accord with the eternal decrees of divine law; and yet you go around boasting of them, as though an angel had descended from the Empyrean in the name of the Prime Mover to command you to incarcerate these poor creatures and strip them of all happiness. But this is a self-interested action on your part, motivated purely by worldly pride and the desire to pile up riches.") See also Tarabotti, 1990, book 1. On the publishing history of *La semplicità ingannata*, see Medioli, 128, n. 3, 151, and 158.

<sup>64</sup>Baratotti [Tarabotti], 1654, 49: "che i privati per loro interesse . . . commettano tal' enormità, è abuso detestabile; ma che i superiori, e principi il permettano, è cosa da far stupidir d'orrore la stessa insensibilità." On the Church's responsibilities, see *ibid.*, 130: "Qui la mia penna vorrebbe volar troppo ardita nella censura de' superiori Religiosi, come complici in simili affari, perché il centro del loro scopo non dovrebbe esser altro, che 'l servizio di Dio . . . nè altra massima dovrebbero avere, che 'l nutrir nel grembo di santa Chiesa anime lontane da peccati . . . ma l'interesse di stato, padre di tutti gli errori, contamina anche questi supremi ministri." ("At this point my pen is itching to launch into all too daring an attack on the religious superiors, as accomplices in these dealings. Because these men's central aim should be nothing other than to serve God, nor should they have any other maxim but to nurture souls free from sin in the bosom of the Church; but political interest, the father of all errors, contaminates even these supreme ministers.") For an attack on reason of state as "un'ombra infernale, una contrafatta chimera del Diavolo . . . un'infamissima magia machinata dall'ambitione" ("an infernal specter, a false and devilish chimera, a most infamous form of wizardry, fruit of the machinations of ambition"), see Tarabotti, 1990, 42.

senatorial robes, has set up its seat in the Ducal Palace and now rules the entire city.”<sup>65</sup>

Tarabotti shows herself familiar with political justifications for marriage limitation but denies the suggestion that such considerations can justify an abuse of the magnitude she describes. She acknowledges the fear that were the patriciate to attempt to furnish all its daughters with dowries, this would reduce the nobility to bankruptcy, with dangerous results.<sup>66</sup> However, she suggests, if the Venetian patriciate is so concerned about the economic and political effects that would result from “paying out so many dowries,” then instead of subjecting young women to the living death of conventual life, it would do better to eliminate the excessive dowries that constitute the cause of the problem or to relax the insistence on endogamy that so limits their possibilities of marriage.<sup>67</sup> At the very least it could absolve women from the vows that condemn them to a lifetime of hypocrisy and allow them to live in relative peace and comfort at home. After all, as Tarabotti notes with bitter sarcasm, the dangers of an armed uprising by women

<sup>65</sup>Tarabotti, 1990, 27–28 (dedicatory letter addressed to the Serenissima Repubblica): “La Tirannia Paterna . . . celatasi sotto la maestà delle vesti de’ vostri senatori, ha . . . piantata sua sede nel palaggio ducale e domina la città tutta.” For interesting discussions of the ways in which the cult of liberty in Venetian political thought is reflected in the writings of Fonte, Marinella, and Tarabotti, see Collina, 161; Labalme, 1981, 108.

<sup>66</sup>Baratotti [Tarabotti], 137 (addressing Venetian noblemen): “Se stimate, che ’l numero grande desse figliuole pregiudichino alla ragion di stato, poiché se si maritassero tutte troppo crescerebbe la Nobiltà e s’impoverirebbono le case, con lo sborso di tante doti, pigliate la compagnia che vi è stata destinata da Dio senza avidità di danari.” (“If you believe that the great numbers of young noblewomen may be prejudicial to reason of state because if they were all to marry, the nobility would expand too much and noble houses be reduced to poverty as a result of paying out so many dowries, then you should take on the companionship God has destined for you without thinking of monetary gain.”) See also on the subject Tarabotti, 1990, 93.

<sup>67</sup>For Tarabotti’s plea for men to marry “senza avidità di danari,” see the passage from *La semplicità ingannata* quoted in the previous note. For her suggestion that fathers might consider less ambitious matches for their daughters outside the nobility, see Baratotti [Tarabotti], 1654, 32–33: “Se non potete accompagnar le vostre figliole ad Imenei dovitosi e nobili, conforme richiederebbe la vostra vanagloria, congiungetele in matrimonii alti meno, e più modeste.” (“If you cannot join your daughters in marriages as wealthy and noble as your vanity would require, then find them less elevated, more modest matches.”) On the regulations governing marriages between patricians and non-patricians, see Pullan, 1965, 139–40; Cowan, 1986, 168–70; and Medioli, 114.

overthrowing the republic is not one that should cause the Venetian government too much lost sleep:

Women cannot lay claim to your ruling status or seize it from you: they cannot even recoup those powers that you have so rashly and high-handedly usurped from them. It is true that if all nuns who lacked a vocation were on the outside, their number would be great enough to form a vast army, but they would not turn their attention to conquering kingdoms; on the contrary, they would be quite happy to remain confined within their paternal homes . . . Can it be that you are afraid at the number of women in the world? What cowards! We are no longer living in the days of those valiant Amazon women, who so prudently killed their menfolk in order not to be subject to them.<sup>68</sup>

As this last quotation illustrates, Tarabotti's denunciation of the abuse of forced claustration is embedded in a more general analysis of the subordinate condition of women. Her writings, in fact, make an illuminating point of comparison with those of Marinella and Fonte: while she goes considerably further than they, in some respects, especially in her condemnation of the institutional dimension of women's oppression, there are also interesting continuities between her work and theirs.<sup>69</sup> Of particular interest in the present context is the fact that like her predecessors Tarabotti not only insists that women are naturally the equals of men, but also concretely envisages the possibility of women entering male fields of activity and competing with them directly for "honor and gain" ("gli honori e i guadagni").<sup>70</sup> In Tarabotti's case these fantasies of emanci-

<sup>68</sup>Baratotti [Tarabotti], 137; "Non ponno le donne pretendere, ò levarvi non solo una regia grandezza, ma ne anche quelle giurisdittioni, che voi sopra di loro con temeraria prosontione vi sete usurpate. Vero è, che se tutte le Religiose involontarie fossero al secolo, potriano col loro numero formar un grandissimo esercito, ma non attenderiano à impadronirsi di regni, anzi stariano volentieri chiuse nelle paterne habitationi . . . Temete forse della molteplicità delle femine del mondo? Sete pusillanimi. Non sono più i tempi di quelle valorose Amazoni, che prudentissime ucciderano i maschi, per non esser a loro soggette." This kind of self-consciously fantastic speculation about the possibility of a female uprising against men is also found in *Il merito delle donne* (see above, 521 and below, 565).

<sup>69</sup>For evidence that Tarabotti was acquainted with at least some of Fonte and Marinella's work, see Labalme, 1981, 103.

<sup>70</sup>Baratotti [Tarabotti], 100 (addressed to men): "Benissimo operate secondo la vostra politica, in tenerci lontane dall'operationi dell'intelletto, come quelli, che conoscendo, ch'aggiunte le scienze alla naturale e spiritosa dispositione delle donne, arriverebbono ad usurparvi gli honori, e i guadagni." ("You do very well, in your own self-interested lights, in keeping us from any intellectual activity. For you realize that if women added learning to their natural keenness of wit, they would eventually do you

pation can easily be related to the circumstances in which she was writing, circumstances calculated to provoke meditation on the limited choices society offered to women. In the case of Marinella and Fonte the links between experience and theory are less easily traced; but the similarities we find between their thought and Tarabotti's lend some support to the notion that the particular strain of feminist thought we encounter in their writings may have its genesis, in part, in the same conjunction of circumstances.

If Tarabotti's denunciation of the practice of forced claustration is unique in its radicalism, other, more complacent commentators also display a certain sensitivity to the injustice of this abuse. This is most evident in documents dealing with the problem of conventual reform. The period following the Council of Trent saw a prolonged struggle on the part of the Roman Church to tighten the

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out of the honors and earnings you now enjoy.") See also *ibid.*, 102, where Tarabotti protests against women's exclusion from both politics and higher education: "Come potrà mai svegliarsi l'ingegno a quelle, che son private d'ingresso ne' Senati, e d'applicatione a' maneggi, ed alle quali è tolto . . . la libertà di riempire, come a gli huomini è dato, gli studi di Padova, Bologna, Roma, Parigi, Salamanca e d'altre Università famose?" ("How can women's minds ever be roused into action when they are barred from entering government or participating in worldly affairs and when they do not have the freedom that men enjoy to attend the universities of Padua, Bologna, Rome, Paris, Salamanca, and other famous schools?"); also 150, where she compares the limited opportunities allowed to women in Venice with the wider freedoms enjoyed by women elsewhere, in terms reminiscent of those of Marinella in *La nobiltà* (see above, 522): "O mentecatti [the rulers of Venice], grande infamità è questa vostra, praticata più da gli abusi delle città d'Italia, che da giusta ragione, ovvero commandata da legge humana, ò divina. In quanti regni è permessa un'estrema libertà alle donne? In quante città esercitano esse que' carichi che frà di noi sono esercitati da gli huomini [?] In Francia, e nella Germania, e in molte provincie del Settentrione, le donne governano le case, maneggiano i denari, tengono registro delle mercantie, e fino le gentildonne vanno alle pubbliche piazze per gl'interessi della famiglia, godendo di quella libertà, e valendosi di quel libero arbitrio, ch'hanno ottenuto dal dator di ogni bene, senza tanti riguardi, e rispetti, anzi abusi, e rigori, che si costumano in questa nostra città." ("O fools! What a shameful abuse this is on your part, with no foundation in reason, nor in any human nor divine law, but simply in the unjust customs of Italian cities. Are there not many kingdoms where women enjoy the highest degree of freedom? Are there not many cities where they carry out those offices that among us are reserved for men? In France and Germany and many other Northern lands, women manage households, handle money, keep accounts; and even noblewomen [can be seen] in public speaking up for their family's interests, happily making use of the freedom and free will that have been given them by the Giver of all good things, without so much caution and circumspection—I should say, without so many abuses and draconian rules—as we are used to in this city.")

notoriously lax regulations of Venetian convents.<sup>71</sup> However, papal projects for reform frequently met with opposition not only from nuns themselves but also from the Venetian clergy and government aware of the function that convents fulfilled as a safety-valve for patrician domestic finance. Comments on this issue frequently reveal a consciousness on the part of Venetian clerics and patricians of the economic roots of many novices' "vocations," and a distinct unease about the justice of submitting unwilling noblewomen to a discipline not freely chosen.

One such comment is particularly revealing. In 1629 the Venetian Patriarch Giovanni Tiepolo, justifying to the doge and the senate his action in softening the regulations governing convent discipline, observed that the nuns he was concerned for were noble and brought up in the utmost luxury and refinement: their status was such that if they had been of the opposite sex, they would have been destined to government and high office. Instead, being women they had been forced to sacrifice their liberty for the good of the state and their families so that the least they could expect in return was a reasonably pleasant and unconstrained life.<sup>72</sup> After all, Tiepolo reflects, if the two thousand or more Venetian noblewomen stored in convents "as though in a public warehouse" were to have insisted on remaining in the world, their action would have plunged the whole of Venetian society into a maelstrom of disorder and scandal.<sup>73</sup> Set against Tarabotti's fierce outrage at the same abuse, Patriarch Tiepolo's well-meaning pragmatism may seem

<sup>71</sup>There had, of course, been earlier attempts at reforming convent discipline, organized on a local basis, but the post-Tridentine reforms were different in scale and severity than anything attempted previously. For an account of convent reform in Venice, see Menetto and Zennaro, 109–30 and 145–74; also, for the broader Italian context, Creytens; Zarri, 398–420; and Paschini, esp. 47–56 and 58–59, on Venice.

<sup>72</sup>"[A tutte le monache raccomandate alla mia cura], ho usato di permettere . . . tutte quelle agevolezze che io ho potuto dentro ai termini della honestà . . . riflettendo in me stesso come esse siano nobili, allevate . . . con somma delicatezza et rispetto, che se fossero d'altro sesso ad esse toccarebbe il comandare e governare il Mondo [e] che si sono confinate fra quelle mura non per spirito di devotione ma per impulso dei loro, facendo della propria libertà . . . un dono non solo a Dio, ma anco alla Patria, al Mondo et alli lor stretti parenti." The document in question is in the Museo Correr, Fondo Cicogna, ms. 2570, *Scriptura Reverendissimi Domini Patriarchae*, 299–304; see also the discussions in Zanette, 35–37; Labalme, 1980, 138 and n. 36; and Tramontin, 49.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*: "Se duemilla e più Nobili che in questa città vivono rinserate nei monasteri quasi come in publico deposito, havessero potuto o voluto altramente disporre di loro stesse, che confusione, che danno, che disordine, quali pericoli, quali scandali . . . et quanti riflessi di molestie et indecentie alla pubblica pace."

chilling, but given the difference in their circumstances, this difference in tone is scarcely surprising. What is more interesting is the degree to which this eminent cleric's argument shares the feminist premises exhibited by Tarabotti herself or by Marinella or Fonte. Women are seen here indisputably as a sociological group, their position defined by custom and politics rather than nature. Their moral and intellectual equality with men is assumed ("se fossero d'altro sesso") and it is accepted that only their gender precludes them from playing the same role in the life of the state. How representative Tiepolo's position on the issue is we do not know. But his arguments do suggest that some members at least of the Venetian establishment did perceive women as a group as having a justified grievance against the state.

Another striking feature of this commentary of Tiepolo's is the keen sense it displays of women as potentially a disruptive social force. The "public warehouse" of the convents is represented as a kind of powder keg: "if they had been able to or wished to choose some other future," the hordes of unmarried women being kept in cold storage would have had the potential to unleash a tide of "confusion" and "disorder" into society that we might see as an echo of the armed uprising ironically threatened by Tarabotti. Of course, as Tiepolo was well aware, women's choice in the matter was in real terms severely limited since there was little they could do to resist the decision family interests forced upon them. But an element of choice did exist: a women's consent was required for her to enter a convent.<sup>74</sup> "If they had been able to or wished to choose differently"—"*se havessero potuto o voluto*": in this fragile margin of uncertainty lay the possibility, as Tiepolo recognized, of women holding their society to ransom.

To what extent can we assume that Tiepolo's reasoning in his plea to the senate is a reflection of the views of Venetian nuns themselves? Aside from Tarabotti there is some evidence that this was

<sup>74</sup>A series of measures intended to ensure the genuineness of nuns' vocations was introduced in the post-Tridentine period; see Zarri, 400–01, who concludes, however, that these measures were not enough to guarantee freedom from family pressure. On the mixture of persuasion and coercion to which prospective nuns were subjected by their families and the convents, see Medioli, 31–32, 35–36, and 41–42. Medioli notes that nuns had the right to renounce their vows within five years of taking them on the grounds that they had been coerced, but points out that this was near-impossible in practice (*ibid.*, 125 and 134, n. 55).

the case. Certainly Venetian novices can hardly have been unaware of the financial interests which had constrained them to take the veil;<sup>75</sup> and it seems probable that their consent to being placed in the “public warehouse” of the convent for the good of the family fortune was conditional on being allowed to live a reasonably untrammelled life. A nun in Udine in 1601, questioned about the authenticity of her vocation, commented artlessly that she had taken the veil “of my own free will, because, having many sisters, it seemed to me that I had no choice,” and maintained that she had not realized this decision implied any real constraints on her freedom.<sup>76</sup> Attempts to impose a stricter regime on convents were met with resentment; even, it seems, with revolt. A nuncio’s report of 1580, following Gregory XIII’s proposal for a tightening of regulations, speaks of the concern expressed in the Venetian Senate that young noblewomen, already showing signs of a reluctance to embrace conventual life, might be provoked by the proposed reforms into a position of outright defiance (“le figliole dei nobili che prima anco entravano [nei conventi] mal volentieri, dopo la riforma non vi vorrebbero entrare in modo alcuno”).<sup>77</sup> The fear is not merely a speculative one: even now, with the rumor of reform in the air,

<sup>75</sup>Medioli, 170, n. 60, quotes an interesting letter (undated) from the libertine writer Gianfrancesco Loredan (1607–61) to his niece Laura Pasqualigo advising her to renounce her wish to marry and resign herself to the convent, presenting the choice in unequivocally pragmatic terms: “V[ost]ra S[ignoria] deve star lontana da simili pensieri [ie. of marriage] e per riputazione della sua casa e per quiete del suo animo. È nata nobile, di degnissimi parenti, ma non havendo dote uguale alla nascita, bisogna o che degni della sua condizione o che avventuri agl’incomodi della povertà. Il macchiare la nobiltà con soggetti inferiori è incontrare lo sprezzo universale. L’unirsi a povere fortune, è un accumunar le miserie, che vuol dire moltiplicarle . . . Il monastero è un ricovero di tutte l’ingiurie del destino.” (“You would do well to banish all thoughts of marriage, for the sake of the family name and for your own peace of mind. You are a noblewoman, born to a most respected house, but since you do not have a dowry equal to your breeding, you must of necessity in marrying either descend into another class or subject yourself to the discomforts of poverty. To stain your nobility by marrying down would be to meet with universal contempt. To unite yourself with someone else of mean fortunes would be to pool the trials of poverty and thus to compound them. . . . The convent is a remedy for all the blows of destiny.”) On Loredan’s relations with Tarabotti, see Medioli, 145 and 152.

<sup>76</sup>Cited in Zarri, 386.

<sup>77</sup>The document is discussed in Menetto and Zennaro, 178; Paschini, 58–59. It is interesting to note that the Senate’s resistance in this case resulted in a compromise: a successive report notes that though Venetian convents will be subject to inspection, “it is not planned to make the rules any tighter than they have been in the past” (“non si pretende di ridurle a maggior strettezza di quella che sono solite di servire”). For evidence of resistance to the Tridentine reforms outside Venice, see Creyten, 66–67; and Greco, 327.

some young women are “boldly refusing to take the veil” (“arditamente ricusano di monacarsi”).

Even apart from direct testimonies like this, the reluctance of Venetian nuns to accept any constraints on their freedom is amply testified by the sheer number of apparently ineffectual attempts at reform that followed each other in close succession over the period in question. Nuns, it appears, were simply not prepared to sacrifice personal comfort, freedom from dress restrictions, and access to their families and friends. It would be rash, of course, to deduce from this low-key quotidian rebellion that Tarabotti's fellow-victims shared her acute and highly politicized consciousness of the injustice of their position.<sup>78</sup> But such consistent infractions of conventual regulations do suggest that the *monache forzate* of this period were conscious enough of the anomalous nature of their position to consider themselves as in some sense standing outside the rules.<sup>79</sup>

The practice of forced claustration, the area from which all my evidence to this point has been drawn, was only the most dramatic social consequence of the policy of marriage restriction. Another associated effect, which also aroused comment, was the appearance in society of the virtually unprecedented figure of the secular spinster.<sup>80</sup> As the going rate for secular dowries spiraled and the demand

<sup>78</sup>It is also worth noting that, as Francesca Medioli points out (Medioli, 122), conventual life could offer certain advantages to women: “Chi entrava in convento era . . . al riparo dalle preoccupazioni materiali, poteva ricavarsi il proprio *modus vivendi* dentro la regola mai applicata troppo severamente . . . e godersi persino una certa autonomia, gestendo un qualche potere attraverso le cariche.” (“Those women who entered the convent were free from material worries; they could carve out their own *modus vivendi* within a set of rules that were never too strictly enforced; and they could even enjoy a certain degree of autonomy and power through the offices they held within the convents.”) See also King, 1991, 95–97.

<sup>79</sup>See Tarabotti, 1990, 53, for the suggestion that many nuns, “because they have taken the veil under constraint, live in an utterly secular manner and show no inclination to observe those restrictions to which they have not consented in their hearts” (“per ché sono coperte di quegli abiti a forza, vivono alla secolaresca né s'intendono punto ad osservare quello a che l'anima non concorre”).

<sup>80</sup>On the virtual non-existence of secular spinsters at least in the upper classes before this time, see Klapisch-Zuber, 119; also Medioli, 113. That the phenomenon was not entirely unknown in Venice before this period is indicated by the preamble to an edict of 1420 regulating the level of patrician dowries, cited in Bistort, 107–08, and discussed in Chojnacki, 1990, which claims that the rise in dowries was leading many patricians not only to “imprison” their daughters in convents against their will (“aliqui eorum filias coguntur in monasteriis carcerare, cum dignis lacrimis et plantibus ipsarum”) but even to resort, unprecedentedly and shamefully, to keeping them unmarried at home (“aliqui tenent ipsas innuptas, cum rubore et periculo, nec in aliqua parte mundi talis est consuetudo”). The terms in which this latter expedient is described indicate clearly



for places in convents increased, the monastic dowry that the convent demanded from the family of any new novice also underwent inflation. Placing a daughter as a nun remained cheaper than attempting to buy her a suitable marriage partner, but it was by no means cheap enough to be within every patrician family's means.<sup>81</sup> Despite the government's attempts to curb the expenses involved in placing daughters in convents, a significant number of patrician families must have found themselves with unmarried and unmarriedable daughters left on their hands.<sup>82</sup>

What happened to these women? Custom offered no precedent for their position and, unsurprisingly, in a society that valued women primarily as breeding stock, the lives of these patrician spinsters have vanished almost without record. A valuable clue to their fate, however, is offered by Moderata Fonte in an important passage of *Il merito delle donne* that will be discussed at greater length later in this study. The context is a rehearsal of the evils resulting to women from the improvidence and avarice of their fathers and brothers. Fathers, it is claimed, frequently fail to make provision for their daughters in their wills; and, in such cases, the poor creatures have little alternative but to turn to "blameworthy and reprehensible means."<sup>83</sup> But even when a father has thought to provide

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quite how anomalous the presence of unmarried women outside the convent was felt to be.

<sup>81</sup>On monastic dowries and the other expenses involved in placing a daughter in the convent, see Zarri, 400–01; Medioli, 117–18; Labalme, 1980, 137 and n. 30. Medioli, 118, n. 33, estimates the proportion between monastic and secular dowries in this period as varying between 1/3 and 1/40. On inflation in monastic dowries in Venice in this period, see Menetto and Zennaro, 184–86; on the strain they represented for family finances and on government attempts to restrict them, see Pullan, 1965, 140–43 and Medioli, 118.

<sup>82</sup>This was also the case outside Venice, see Cattaneo, 169, and Zarri, 403. It is interesting to note that two of Arcangela Tarabotti's sisters remained unmarried at home (Medioli, 113 and n. 6).

<sup>83</sup>Fonte, 1988, 28–29: [Cornelia] "Quanti padri sono che non provvedono mai alle lor figliuole vivendo ed al fin morendo lasciano il tutto, o la maggior parte delle loro sostanze a' mascoli . . . e così sono cagione che le povere giovani cascano in mille errori per necessità . . ." [Corinna] "Dovrebbero tutti gli accorti ed amorevoli padri provveder a buon'ora di locar le loro figliuole; e se per disgrazia occorre loro di mancar prima che se le trovino aver locate, debbano almanco ordinar in tempo i casi loro, acciò che le poverine non restino dopo la lor morte, veggendosi così disereditate, a bestemmiar le anime loro; oltra che si convengono provvedere per quelle vie che (come ho detto) sono biasimevoli e vituperose." ([Cornelia] "How many fathers there are who do not provide for their daughters while they are alive and then finally, when they die, leave their whole estate or the greatest part of it to their sons, leaving their poor daughters

for his daughter, her dowry is often usurped by her brothers who keep her on in the house as an unpaid servant, effectively “buried alive.”<sup>84</sup>

Although the blame for these women’s sad fate is attributed to carelessness and cruelty rather than economic necessity, it seems reasonable to interpret the passage as a reflection of the situation outlined above. It is difficult to substantiate Fonte’s claim that girls of good family were forced into prostitution for want of a dowry, through the unexpected sympathy with the plight of prostitutes shown on another occasion in the dialogue might lead us to conjecture that the author knew of such cases within her own circles.<sup>85</sup>

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to fall into all kinds of errors through no fault of their own!” [Corinna] “All wise and loving fathers should arrange a match for their daughters in good time; and if they should unluckily happen to die before their daughters are settled, they should at least provide for their futures before they die, so that the poor creatures are not left after their deaths cursing their fathers’ souls when they see themselves disinherited in this way, not to mention the fact that (as I have said) they are forced to provide for themselves by blameworthy and reprehensible means.”)

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., 29: [Corinna] “Altre, cui pure i lor padri, o per buona sorte lasciano loro la dote, o morendo *ab intestato* di ragione succedono in parte nelle facoltà co’ fratelli, sono da quelli tenute in casa per ischiave ed usurpato la lor ragione, e goduto il loro, contra ogni giustizia, senza mai trattar di locarle; e così convengono sotto il loro imperio invecchiarsi in casa, servendo ai nepoti e finiscono la lor vita sepolte innanzi che morte.” ([Corinna] “Other women whose fathers have by some lucky chance left them a dowry or who are legally entitled to a share in the estate along with their brothers because their fathers have died intestate are nevertheless kept as slaves in the family home by their brothers who usurp what is rightfully theirs and enjoy it themselves in contempt of all justice, without ever trying to find a match for them; and in this way these women must grow old at home under the command of their brothers, looking after their brothers’ families, and drag out the rest of their life already buried before they are dead.”)

<sup>85</sup>I am assuming here that Fonte’s “blameworthy and reprehensible means” are a euphemism for prostitution in the modern sense, although it is possible that the phrase has a more general sense comprehending any kind of sexual relationship outside marriage. For the later passage concerning prostitutes, see Fonte, 1988, 52, where Cornelia defends the women Elena has just condemned as a “disgrace to our sex,” pointing out that the shamelessness and rapacity of which she accuses them might be interpreted as a legitimate revenge for men’s sexual abuses. Most prostitutes, she points out, were launched on their careers after being seduced and abandoned, after which “ridotte poi le misere a questi termini e conoscendo bene che gli uomini ne sono stati colpevoli con lor malizie ed importunità, per cavar qualche utile del lor gran danno, non amano più alcuno di quel sesso . . . ma pagandoli dell’istessa moneta, sì come furono essi ingordi del loro onore, elle divengono ingorde della lor facoltà e fingendo anch’esse d’amarli, se per mala sorte alcuno lor pone amor sopra . . . vi so dir che sta fresco, e che gli cavano insino all’anima, e meritamente.” (“Having been brought to this pass and knowing that men with their scheming and pestering were responsible, they resolve to recoup something from the great injury they have suffered and never place their love in a man again;

Where Fonte's other claim is concerned, however—that unmarried sisters were retained at home by their brothers as effectual servants—there is interesting evidence that this was indeed the case. In his introduction to a treatise in praise of virginity (Venice, 1584), the publisher Giovanni Giolito piously notes that one of God's greatest gifts to the current age has been his rekindling of the spirit of female celibacy even outside the usual context of the convent with the creation of secular orders like the order of St. Ursula.<sup>86</sup> This new state of secular celibacy is particularly welcome because many women, though "feeling called to observe the state of virginity," are unable to enter a convent, among other reasons, "for the lack of a sufficient dowry." It is patently unfair that such worldly considerations should interfere with these women's vocation; and the institution of an alternative "second degree of celibacy" provides a valuable compromise solution to this dilemma.<sup>87</sup>

After this lofty beginning Giolito rapidly descends to more practical matters. Apart from the spiritual satisfaction of the individuals concerned, another advantage of this new estate is its social utility, which makes it almost a necessity. Although he insists on the vol-

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instead, they pay men back with the same coin, becoming as greedy for men's money as men were once greedy for their honor and pretending to love them as men once pretended to love them. And if some unlucky man chances to fall in love with one of them, then I can tell you he's done for: they will strip him of all he possesses—just as he deserves.") On prostitution in Venice in the period, see Menetto and Zennaro, 37–64; Casagrande; Barzaghi; and Santore. Little is known of the social provenance of Venetian courtesans, but for evidence that it was not unknown for women of the patrician and cittadino classes to drift into prostitution, see the letter cited in Pullan, 1971, 386, from a group of noblewomen involved in the foundation of the Zitelle, expressing concern for "the poor children who are sold [into prostitution] by their own mothers at the age of twelve or thirteen, or even less, and who come of every social rank—nobility, citizens and workers."

<sup>86</sup>Valier, 1744, xxi: "Tra i molti benefizi che dalla divina e larga mano di Dio deve riconoscer l'età nostra, questo non è il minore, che ha svegliato e rinnovato lo spirito della santa Verginità (oltre il modo comune de' Monasteri) sotto l'invocazione e protezione di Sant'Orsola, gloriosa Vergine e Martire." Giolito's letter was originally published as a foreword to a *Trattato del D. Dionisio Certosino della lodevol Vita delle Vergini* (Venice, 1584).

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., xxii: "essendo la prima lode, e il primo grado di Verginità, di quelle che in perpetua clausura si consacrano a Dio, si trovano però molte giovani che sentendosi ispirate ad osservar Verginità, non possono tutte entrar ne' Monasteri, chi per mancamento di dote sufficiente, chi per non volersi obbligare a perpetua Clausura, chi per non potervi avere quegli aiuti spirituali che sono necessari . . . Onde restando escluse dal primo grado ne' Monasteri sotto ubbidienza, non è ragionevole che restino escluse dal secondo, cioè che non possano, o non debbano, fuor de' Monasteri, con voto, o senza voto . . . servir a Cristo, che s'hanno eletto per isposo."

untary nature of the commitment and explicitly notes that secular celibacy is not merely a cheap way to dispose of one's daughters, Giolito's consideration of the "various benefits" ("diversi commodi") deriving from the presence of such "second-grade" virgins brings us very close to the economic realities that made this "third estate" so attractive to the Venetians of his day. "Would it not be most welcome to any father with a modest income or with many daughters, not all of whom he could afford to marry or to send to a convent (and even to those fathers who *could* afford it), that there should be a respectable third estate that would allow these young women who felt so inclined to serve God in a celibate state in their own homes, without any danger to their reputation? And, in addition, these women could help their mothers and sisters-in-law, help bring up their nephews and nieces in the fear of God and keep the house in good order."<sup>88</sup>

Giolito's letter and the treatise it accompanies are addressed to the Congregation of St. Ursula, and it is within the relatively formalized context of this order that he envisages secular celibacy. The late sixteenth century in Italy saw the appearance in Italy of a number of new or refounded tertiary orders of this kind, supplanting in some cases the older orders suppressed as a result of the Tridentine rulings on enclosure.<sup>89</sup> In part, these foundations can be seen as manifestations of the new forms of spirituality fostered by the Counter Reformation. Giolito's enthusiasm, however, reminds us that another factor determining their emergence was their practical usefulness as a response to the social needs of communities of declining nuptuality.

Another document of the period, slightly earlier than Giolito's *Lettera*, provides a valuable insight into the social need which orders

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., xxii–xxiii: "Non doveria avere a caro ogni Padre di famiglia con poche facoltà, o con molte figliuole, che (non potendo maritarle tutte, nè anche monacarle, e quando ben l'uno e l'altro potesse), si fosse un terzo Stato lodevole, nel quale quelle chi si sentissero a ciò disposte, potessero, senza nota, nella propria casa servire a Dio in Verginità, e insieme aiutar la madre, e le cognate ad allevare i figliuoli nel timor di Dio, e a governar ben la casa?" Giolito goes on to suggest other ways in which unmarried women may be of service to the community: teaching Christian doctrine in girls' schools, helping in women's hospitals and other charitable foundations and, in later life, assisting in the administration of charity.

<sup>89</sup>For the impact of the Council of Trent's rulings on enclosure for the tertiary orders, see Zarri, 402–03; and Creytens, esp. 63–64 and 76. On the emergence of new orders in the later sixteenth century, see Zarri, 402 and 427.

like the Ursulines met. The *Modo di vivere proposto alle vergini che si chiaman dimesse* (Venice, 1577) by Agostino Valier or Valiero, Bishop of Verona, was published a decade before the introduction of the order of the Dimesse in Venice.<sup>90</sup> An advice book for unmarried women living at home with their families, Valier's treatise is valuable for our present purposes as beneath its pious and reassuring surface, it gives a good impression of the difficulties the existence of such women presented for a society which had no recognized place for them.

Valier was well placed to speak of the problem, as he had himself after his father's death been in the position of settling his sisters. One, Laura, he married very respectably to the patrician Giorgio Gradenigo; but at least one other, Donata, the dedicatee of the treatise under discussion, remained unmarried, presumably through a lack of funds for a dowry.<sup>91</sup> Valier is too delicate to mention the

<sup>90</sup>The *Modo di vivere* is the first of three treatises (on, respectively, spinsterhood, widowhood and marriage) published together under the title of *La istituzione d'ogni stato lodevole delle donne cristiane* (Venice, 1577) and republished in Padua in 1744 by Gaetano Volpi, along with Valier's *Ricordi lasciati alle monache nella sua Visitazione fatta l'Anno del Santissimo Giubileo, 1575* (first published in Venice in 1575). The Compagnia delle Dimesse was founded in Vicenza by Padre Antonio Pagani in 1579 but was introduced in Venice only in 1587 with the encouragement of Valier himself and Michele Priuli, Bishop of Verona (see Volpi's introduction to Valier, 1744, xvi; Tramontin, 49–50; and Mantese, 4/1:526–40). In the *Modo di vivere*, as Volpi notes (*ibid.* xvi–xviii and xxi), the term “Dimesse” is generally used to refer simply to unmarried women living at home. This appears the most likely interpretation of the term as it is used in *Il merito delle donne* to designate one of the speakers, Corinna, first introduced (Fonte, 1988, 15) as a “giovene dimessa,” in contrast to the other unmarried speaker, Virginia, designated “figliola da marito” (“a girl of marriageable age”). Given Corinna's assertive character, it is unlikely that the word is being used here adjectivally in its non-technical sense of “meek” or “humble,” while there is no indication in the rest of the dialogue that she is a member of the order of Dimesse (though cf. Guthmüller, 262). Tramontin, 50, n. 160, notes that in Seicento usage, the term “Dimesse” was also used of Ursulines and it may be in this sense that the word is used on those occasions in the *Modo di vivere* where it appears to refer to a member of an order (Valier, 1744, 9 and 19).

<sup>91</sup>On Laura Valier's marriage to Giorgio Gradenigo, see Cicogna, 2:36. Valier writes feelingly of the financial pressures that led to the policy of restricted marriages in his *Dell' utilità che si può ritrarre delle cose operate dai Veneziani*, written at some time after 1580 (on its dating, see Bouwsma, 196–99) and published in Padua in 1787. See Valier, 1787, 387–88: “Oggi non ci è modo di concludere trattati di Nozze senza una dote di venti mila Scudi d'oro, mancando la quale non si troverebbe uno appena, ancorché avesse mediocre patrimonio, il quale volesse ammogliarsi. I Genitori, che anno figliuole, sono spesse volte concitati, perché, non potendo lasciarle in potere dei Fratelli senza qualche pericolo, sono costretti o di lasciar poveri i figliuoli, o di chiuderle nei Monasteri: e l'uno e l'altro riesce ad essi assai molesto.” (“It is impossible these days to seal a marriage contract without a dowry of twenty thousand gold scudi: one can

financial considerations that might lead to the choice of an unmarried life for a woman, but in other respects his prescriptions ironically underscore Fonte's bleak description of the fate of a sister in this situation as a life sentence to unpaid service. The Dimessa can ensure her conquest of the flesh by contenting herself with eating "the plainest of foods" and eschewing the finery of her married sisters for clothes of "poco prezzo."<sup>92</sup> Her functions in the home will include those of governess, confidante, and spiritual guide, but she should not disdain, when necessary as an exercise in the virtue of humility, to "perform any household task that may be required" ("[fare] ne' bisogni qualsiasi sorte di servizi in casa").<sup>93</sup>

Much stress is placed in Valier's treatise on discipline and self-discipline. The Dimessa must exert great vigilance and energy in detecting and repressing her sinful urges; and she must entrust her spiritual guidance to a reliable confessor in a spirit of utter obedience.<sup>94</sup> Of course, this emphasis on repression and obedience is common to much of the conduct literature of the period, especially that produced in ecclesiastical circles and addressed to women.<sup>95</sup> In Valier's treatise, however, this advice is given a particular urgency by the fact that he is conscious of the equivocal position in which women like his sister found themselves. For all the efforts of writers like himself and Giolito to present their situation as a valid new "estate" to be added to women's traditional estates of marriage and the conventual life, spinsters like Donata Valier must at some level have been conscious that their position was less that of pioneers than of economic refugees.<sup>96</sup> No cultural models existed to validate their

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hardly find anyone prepared to marry for less, even men of modest means. So that parents with daughters very often find themselves in the situation—since there are risks involved in simply leaving them in the keeping of their brothers—of having to choose between impoverishing their sons or shutting their daughters up in convents, both of which solutions are highly undesirable.”)

<sup>92</sup>Valier, 1744, 14 and 31. Unsurprisingly, in view of the author's admiration of Carlo Borromeo, Valier's recommendations here and elsewhere are close in spirit and detail to the regulations of the refounded Compagnia di S. Orsola (on which see below, n. 99). See Mellano, 1091–93.

<sup>93</sup>Valier, 1744, 17.

<sup>94</sup>See the chapters entitled "Come si custodisce la Verginità del cuore" ("How to Observe the Spirit of Virginity") and "Dell'obbedienza" ("On Obedience"), *ibid.*, 13–16 and 18–19.

<sup>95</sup>On this literature, see Grendler, 89.

<sup>96</sup>There is only one hint at a recognition of this in Valier's *Modo di vivere*, 41, when after enjoining the Dimessa to be generous in alms-giving, Valier notes that "la Dimessa povera" can prove her generosity by giving freely of her time, adding that "there are many such in Venice" ("di queste ne sono molte . . . a Venezia").

lives, no institution existed to regulate them, and they took no formal vows of obedience to a husband or to the Church. They lived in the world and could hardly be expected entirely to ignore its temptations. Valier assumes the presence in the family circle of married sisters or sisters-in-law often “madly infatuated with worldly pleasures” (“innamorate pazzamente del mondo”).<sup>97</sup> The Dimessa’s only protection against temptation was self-discipline and a self-imposed insulation from the world.<sup>98</sup> It is not difficult to imagine the threat such women potentially presented to social stability; nor the enthusiasm with which Venetian clerics like Valier advocated the foundation of institutions like the Casa delle Dimesse of Murano (1594) to put barriers more solid than that of a voluntary deafness between these vulnerable creatures and the world.<sup>99</sup>

Up to this point, I have been considering only the negative effects on women of the policy of marriage restriction pursued by the Venetian patriciate. It should not be forgotten, however, that at the same time that dowry inflation was condemning many women to

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 9. The author goes on to point out that not the least valuable of the social tasks the Dimessa can perform is to offer a perpetual reproach to her sinful sisters by the example of her devout and ascetic life. There are further hints the worldliness of the Dimessa’s social environment at, for example, *ibid.*, 38–39, where she is warned that while visiting relatives in convents, she should avoid talk of “teatri . . . , feste . . . [e] giuochi” (“theaters, parties, and trivial pastimes”); or 33, where she is enjoined to show compassion to her married sisters for the showy dressing that custom forces on them as young brides.

<sup>98</sup>See *ibid.*, 13, where the Dimessa is advised to protect herself from temptations by exercising a vigilant control on her senses: “Studia [il diavolo] di entrare per gli occhi nel cuore delle Vergini, invitandole alle vanità, ai luoghi pubblici, a gli spettacoli, ai conviti de’ parenti; le quali cose molto prudentemente fa la Dimessa a fuggire.” (“The Devil schemes to find his way into virgins’ hearts through their eyes, by inviting them to vain pursuits, to public places and public spectacles, to family banquets. The Dimessa will be do wisely to flee these temptations.”) See also *ibid.*, 14: “È molto a proposito, che la Dimessa abbia custodia all’orecchie, non ascolti né fratelli, né sorelle, né cognati, né parenti che parlino cose che non siano in onor di Dio.” (“It is appropriate to note here that the Dimessa should keep a close guard on her ears and refuse to listen when her brothers or sisters or sisters-in-law or relatives are saying ungodly things.”)

<sup>99</sup>For evidence from outside Venice of the unease provoked by the phenomenon of unmarried women living outside a religious community, see Zarri, 403. The Ursulines are an interesting case: founded in the 1530s by Angela Merici in Brescia as an association of women living in the community outside any formal structure, they were soon under pressure to accept enclosure. When the order was refounded after the Council of Trent (in 1567 in Milan, on the initiative of Carlo Borromeo), its members were organized in communities under close supervision from the authorities (see Prodi). For further discussion of institutional responses to the social problems caused by reduced nubility in Counter-Reformation Italy, see Cohen, esp. 170.

the “public depository” of the convent or the private one of the home, others—those fortunate enough to marry—were reaping the benefits of that same inflation. As dowries rose in a period in which the returns from trade were diminished, the importance of wives’ financial contribution to the household into which they married became ever more decisive. If we assume a continuation of the dynamic identified by Stanley Chojnacki in an earlier period of dowry inflation, the result of this may have been a further enhancement of the financial power and status of married women within families.<sup>100</sup>

An area which yields tantalizing if oblique evidence of married women’s sense of this power is that of dress and sumptuary legislation. Government protests against extravagance in dress were nothing new in the late Cinquecento, but the frequency and stridency of sumptuary laws in the period under discussion suggests that the problem of extravagance was perceived as being particularly acute.<sup>101</sup> Contemporary observers attributed the increase in sumptuary expenditure to the inflation in dowries: the patrician Domenico Moro, for example, in a senate debate of 1575 reported by Agostino Valier, identifies as the prime cause of the “sickness” of extravagance which was bringing many families to ruin, “the perverse custom of giving inflated dowries” (“la perversa abitudine di aumentare le doti”).<sup>102</sup>

Moro goes on to explain this mechanism in more detail, claiming that dowry inflation leads to extravagance because “women are emboldened by their rich dowries and become ever more insolent, always dreaming up new ways of squandering money.”<sup>103</sup> Moro’s psychological interpretation of the phenomenon is of interest as beneath his blustering moralism his observations on married

<sup>100</sup>See the various studies of Chojnacki; also Labalme, 1980, 132.

<sup>101</sup>The best overview of sumptuary legislation in Venice remains Bistort. On the period under discussion here, see also Casagrande, 47–84; Labalme, 1980, 133–34.

<sup>102</sup>Valier, 1747, 388.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., 388: “Le femmine colle dote opulenti divengono audaci, e si fanno vieppiù insolenti, pensando sempre a nuove mode per consumar denaro.” See also Valier’s *Istruzione del modo di vivere delle donne maritate* (1577), 1744, 19, for a further attack on the “insolence” of moneyed wives: “E quanto più le donne avessero portato buone doti, volendo insolentemente perciò soprastare al marito, e tiraneggiarlo, tanto più offendono il Signor Dio.” (“And the more that wives having brought a good dowry to the marriage expect as a consequence to be able to dominate and tyrannize their husbands, the more they offend God.”)



women's "audacity" and "insolence" tend to confirm the intriguing hypothesis recently advanced by Stanley Chojnacki that patrician women's systematic defiance of sumptuary laws may be seen as a kind of flexing of financial muscle, an expression of their awareness of the economic power they exerted through their dowries and a demonstration of their ability to impose their choices on men. Patrician women found themselves in an equivocal position in Venetian society, empowered by wealth but excluded from all forms of political power. Their conspicuous consumption, Chojnacki suggests, can be read as "a campaign to get themselves noticed: . . . to assume a degree of consequence in society that was denied to them in the central poles of male patrician society, politics and commerce."<sup>104</sup>

It would be misleading, of course, to reduce the complex causality of sumptuary extravagance to the single factor of individual patrician women's desires. The splendor of women's dress was a calculated factor in a family's public relations, even, despite its austere protestations, in the public relations of the state.<sup>105</sup> With this caveat, however, Chojnacki's hypothesis seems one worth pursuing, especially in view of the dearth of other evidence about the values and self-image of Venetian upper-class women. It is of all the more interest in light of the fact that Fonte, Marinella, and Tarabotti all afford considerable prominence to the issue of dress and explicitly relate it to questions of women's status and freedom.<sup>106</sup>

Perhaps the best starting point for an investigation of women's attitudes to dress is Moderata Fonte's brief but fascinating discussion of the subject toward the end of *Il merito delle donne*. The nucleus of Fonte's argument here is a defense of women against the twin accusations of misogynists that women's insistence on adorning themselves was a sign of frivolity and vanity and, more seri-

<sup>104</sup>Chojnacki, 1980, 68: "una campagna femminile per farsi notare, [per] assumere una rilevanza nella società . . . che fu negata loro ne' poli centrali della società patrizia maschile, la politica e gli affari." See also Hughes for a broader Italian perspective on the problem.

<sup>105</sup>The most striking instance of this occurred in 1574, on the occasion of the visit of Henri III, when the government temporarily lifted sumptuary restrictions to add luster to the official celebrations. See Labalme, 1980, 134. For a balanced treatment of the whole question of the semiotics of Venetian women's dress, see idem, 1980, 133–36; and 1981, 94–96 and 101.

<sup>106</sup>See Labalme, 1980, 94–96; and on Tarabotti, Medioli, 151.

ously, that adornment was a means of advertising sexual availability.<sup>107</sup> The basis of her defense against both accusations is that dress is a form of self-expression, a “language,” and that the external adornments adopted by women are a reflection of the nobility of their souls.<sup>108</sup> If men choose to interpret them differently, it is a sign of their “corrupt minds” (“cattivo animo”); after all, the flamboyant fashions that men often claim are women’s downfall “would not do us any harm at all, if these troublesome men would only leave us in peace.”<sup>109</sup>

The overall tone of the passage is one of intolerance at male overbearingness and interference: “What on earth has it got to do with men whether we choose to dress our hair on one side rather than the other?”<sup>110</sup> In a particularly interesting passage, a parallel is drawn between men’s attitudes to extravagant dress and their attitudes to women’s learning, which is also frequently identified by misogynists as a token of moral looseness. In fact, Fonte’s speakers point out, there is no evidence whatever to support this contention: illiterate peasant-women and poorly-dressed servant girls are more likely than their social superiors to fall victim to men’s lustful designs. In both cases, for all their stated concern with morality, the real motive of censors of fashion is a desire to curtail women’s liberty and freedom of expression.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>107</sup>A characteristic statement of the misogynistic position alluded to here can be found in the text that was the immediate stimulus for the composition of Marinella’s *La nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne*, Giuseppe Passi’s *I Donneschi difetti*, 161–95. Disapproval of vanity in dress was, of course, not limited to misogynist writings: it is also found in the conduct literature of the period.

<sup>108</sup>Fonte, 1988, 166–68. The discussion on fashion arises out of a more general consideration of “the many languages that make themselves understood without words” (“i molti linguaggi che s’intendono senza parlare”), a category that includes the “languages” of glances, sighs, and colors. An influential justification of the importance of dress that may have influenced Fonte is that of Castiglione’s *Cortegiano* 2:26–28, 122–25, esp. 123, where Federico Fregoso states that “outward things are often witnesses to what lies within” (“le cose estrinseche spesso fan testimonio delle intrinseche”), and 124–25, where he defends this assertion against Gaspare Pallavicino’s contention that it is wrong to judge by appearances.

<sup>109</sup>Fonte, 1988, 168: “non ci nuocerebbon . . . se gli huomini molesti ci lasciassero in pace.”

<sup>110</sup>Ibid., 167: “che hanno di grazia da impacciarsi gli uomini, se noi si volgemo i capelli più ad un verso che ad un altro?”

<sup>111</sup>Ibid., 168: [Corinna] “Quanto senza comparazion è maggior il numero delle donne di basso stato le qual, si può dir senz’alcuna sorte de attilamento, si rompono il collo mosse dalla importunità de gli uomini, che non è quello delle gentildonne con tutti i loro strisci, percioché non li fanno esse a fin di male, ma . . . per galanteria e per

Fonte's speakers do not discuss the question of how women finance their wardrobes, and there is nothing in *Il merito* that explicitly confirms the relation between dowry inflation and self-assertion through dress. It is, however, noted by the eldest of the speakers that extravagant dress is on the increase;<sup>112</sup> and there are allusions to the two most exaggerated and controversial modes of the time: the habit of wearing the hair dressed forward in two peaks or "horns," up to six inches high, and the still more extravagant fashion of wearing platform shoes so high as to make the wearer incapable of walking without support.<sup>113</sup> It would perhaps be whimsical to interpret these synthetic accretions to their stature as a symbolic expression of patrician women's new sense of their power. But it is surely not unreasonable to suggest that the popularity of these controversial and outlandish fashions at such a crucial moment in Venetian women's history tends to support Chojnacki's thesis that dress was at least for one influential group of women a bid for visibility, a display of power, and in some sense a gesture of defiance.<sup>114</sup>

seguir l'uso della città." [Leonora] "Sogliono anco molti . . . proibir alle lor donne l'imparar a legger e scriver, allegando ciò esser ruina di molte donne . . . e pur non si aveg-giono che, come voi avete detto del pulirsi, così, e con più ragione si dee dir dell'imparar alcuna scienza, poichè è da creder che più facilmente possa cascar in errore un ignorante, che un saputo ed intelligente; poichè si vede per esperienza, esser molto più le impu-diche ignoranti, che le dotte e virtuose." ([Corinna] "Women of the lower classes go, one might say, completely unadorned. Yet how many more women of the people are brought to grief by the impurity of men than noblewomen, for all their frills, be-cause patrician women do not dress up for any wicked ends but simply to be elegant and to follow the custom of the city." [Leonora] "There are many men as well who will not have their womenfolk learn to read and write, claiming that it is the downfall of many women. But they do not realize that what you have said about women's adorn-ment applies just as much and more to learning, for it is plausible that someone who is ignorant is far more likely to err than someone who is well-informed and intelligent; and we see from experience that far more uneducated women misbehave than educated and virtuous women." The passage is followed closely by the separatist outburst of Cornelia, discussed above, 524-25.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid., 168: [Adriana] "Al presente le donne [vanno] più che mai su la galanteria e si fanno di gran foggie nove." ([Adriana] "Nowadays women go in for far more fin-ery and there are all these striking new fashions.")

<sup>113</sup>Ibid., 167 and 169. On the latter fashion—which was already attracting comment in the Quattrocento, but which seems to have reached a new height of extravagance in the period under discussion here—see Passi, 193-95; Rodocanachi, 149-50 and 174; Labalme, 1980, 136.

<sup>114</sup>It is interesting to note that a misogynist speaker in Luciano Bursati's dialogue *La vittoria delle donne*, 238, suggests that Venetian women have taken to wearing plat-form soles in order to "farsi uguale, e anco superiore [sic] alla grandezza dell'huomo"

This thesis receives further confirmation from a passage in Lucrezia Marinella's *Nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne* in which dress is explicitly interpreted as a token of status and power. For Marinella, the fact that wives customarily dress more splendidly than their husbands is a reflection of the relative dignity of the sexes in nature: it is as fitting that a woman should dress gloriously "as a mark of her natural merits and dignity" as it is that her husband should be less finely dressed, "like the servant he was born to be."<sup>115</sup> Men may have succeeded tyrannically in inverting this hierarchy of nature and reducing their female superiors to a state of political subjection. But a secret consciousness of the sexes' true relation still permeates society at the level of custom: particularly revealing is the fact that women are allowed to adopt the symbolic adornments of power, like purple and cloth of gold—adornments expressly forbidden to men, "with the exception of those in power."<sup>116</sup>

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("to make themselves equal and even superior in stature to men"). Arcangela Tarabotti, in her *Antisatira*, 1654, 142–43, interprets the physical elevation provided by *pianelle* as a sign of women's spiritual dignity: "Non mai troverai che le cose magnifiche e grandi stiano in terra bensì esposte in altezza per oggetto dell'altrui stupore e riverenza." ("Grand and magnificent things are never at ground level: they are always exposed on high, as objects of wonder and reverence.")

<sup>115</sup>Marinella, 25–26. "È cosa meravigliosa il vedere nella nostra Città la moglie di un calzolaio, o di un beccaio, ovvero di un fachino vestita di seta con catene d'oro al collo, con perle, e annella di buona valuta in dito, accompagnata da un paio di donne che la sostentano da ambo i lati e le danno mano; e poi all'incontro vedere il marito tagliar la carne tutto lordato di sangue di bue, e male in arnese ò carico, come un Asino da soma vestito di tela, della qual si fanno i sacchi; a prima vista pare una deformità da fare stupire ogn'uno il vedere la moglie vestita da gentildonna e il marito da huomo vilissimo, che sovente pare il suo servo, o fachino di casa; ma chi poi bene ciò considera, lo ritrova ragionevole, perché è necessario che la donna, ancorché sia vile e minima, sia di tali vestimenti ornata per le sue eccellenze e dignità naturali, e che il Maschio come servo e Asinello, nato per servir lei, meno adorno se ne stia." ("It is an astonishing thing in our city to see a shoemaker's wife or a butcher's or a porter's dressed in silk with gold chains round her neck and pearls and expensive rings on her fingers, accompanied by a couple of women holding her up on either side [because of the height of her *pianelle*]; and then to see the husband cutting up carcasses, covered with ox blood and shabbily dressed, or laden down like a pack-ass and dressed in sack-cloth. At first appearance, it seems shockingly perverse to see a wife dressed like a noblewoman while her husband looks like the basest of plebeians, but whoever considers it closely will realize it is justified. Because however low their status, woman deserve to be adorned with these fine clothes as a mark of their natural merits and dignity, while the male should be less well-dressed to denote his status as a servant, a beast of burden, born to serve woman.")

<sup>116</sup>*Ibid.*, 25: "[Alle donne] è lecito vestirsi di porpora e di panno d'oro con vari ricami, fregiati di perle, et di diamanti, ed onarsi il capo con vaghi ornamenti d'oro con smalti finissimi et pietre preziose, le quali cose sono vietate a gli huomini, eccettuando

Marinella's reasoning here is obviously sophistic, but her argument is of the greatest interest in this context: women's dress is explicitly presented here as a symbolic figuring of the power they are denied.

Ultimately, of course, speculation about the level of proto-feminist consciousness that may be read into Venetian women's sartorial habits is doomed to be inconclusive. What can be noted with certainty, however, is that the very significant gulf in wealth and lifestyle that had always existed between married and unmarried women must have been greatly exacerbated in the Cinquecento by the effects of dowry inflation.<sup>117</sup> The spending power of patrician brides increased to unprecedented levels at the same time that an unprecedented number of women of the same class were finding themselves deprived of a dowry. If, as Patricia Labalme has suggested, one of the factors we should take into account when considering the background to the feminist thought of Fonte, Marinella, and Tarabotti was the "provocative variety" of the lives led by different categories of women in Venice, we should perhaps add to Labalme's contrasts between the lives of upper-class Venetian women and those of actresses, foreign women, and courtesans, a further contrast within the category of upper-class women itself, between those "audacious" and "insolent" spendthrifts who had been lucky enough to be given a dowry, and the *monache forzate* and *vergini dimesse*—perhaps from the same family—condemned to a lifetime of poverty.<sup>118</sup>

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però quelli che hanno dominio." ("Women are permitted to dress in clothes of purple and cloth of gold, richly embroidered and studded with pearls and diamonds, and to adorn their heads with beautiful gold ornaments, with fine enamel-work and precious stones—all things that are forbidden to men, with the exception of those who wield power.") It should be noted that traditionally in Venice distinctions in male dress reflected office rather than wealth or social status: the usual dress for Venetian patricians and cittadini over the age of twenty-five was a black robe, while red togas were reserved for members of the Senate and from the late fifteenth century high-ranking civil servants of the cittadino class. For a detailed discussion of male Venetian dress codes and their political implications, see Newton, 9–31.

<sup>117</sup>The difference between the extremely cloistered life led by Venetian women before their marriage and the much freer life they enjoyed afterwards is stressed in Chojnacki, 1980.

<sup>118</sup>See Labalme, 1981, 104. This contrast is the subject of some of Arcangela Tarabotti's fiercest complaints; see 1990, 43–45, 48, 60–61 and 66. Interestingly, the privileges enjoyed by married women are perceived as consisting not only in wealth and luxury but also in freedom and power; see *ibid.*, 43: "Quella esce di soggettione. Questa entra in prigione." ("The bride is escaping from subjection. The nun is entering prison.") See also 48: "Quella entra in una casa per dominatrice ad essercitar il comando

Such a contrast can scarcely have gone unnoticed, and it does not seem too fanciful to suggest that Venetian women's perception of this difference may have provided the first stimulus for the development of the kind of feminist sensibility we encounter in the works of Fonte, Marinella, and Tarabotti. Indeed, the social consequences of the crisis in the Venetian marriage market were so striking and so visible that it would have been surprising if it had not had repercussions in women's understanding of their status and role. The presence in ever-increasing numbers of unmarriedable spinsters and reluctant nuns must have sharpened women's awareness of their vulnerability and powerlessness to decide their own fate. At the same time, the inflation in dowries, by enhancing women's status within the family, must have given those women who did marry an exhilarating new sense of their worth. This powerful fusion of gains and grievances, resentment and self-confidence may have given women—some women at least—the incentive to look at their condition anew.<sup>119</sup>

This is, of course, only a hypothesis, but it is one that deserves to be taken seriously if in addition to what we can deduce about women's reactions from reports of the behavior of rebellious nuns and extravagant wives, we also possess more direct evidence in the writings of Fonte, Marinella, and Tarabotti. The first section of this study identified a number of characteristics of Fonte and Marinella's thought that distinguish their works from previous "defenses of

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sopra molte serve e diventa patrona degli haveri del consorte. Questa s'imprigiona in un monastero per esser comandata senza haver pur ardimento di replicar una parola." ("The bride is entering a household as a ruler to exercise command over many servants and taking charge of her husband's finances. The nun is being imprisoned in a convent to be ordered around without daring to say a word in reply.") Tarabotti's bitterness, of course, reflects her own situation: her complaints about the injustice of privileging younger sisters over the first-born (45) are doubtless related to the fact that her own family arranged very respectable—and correspondingly expensive—matches for two of her younger sisters (111).

<sup>119</sup>Some evidence that this period saw a heightened sense among women of the injustices of their condition is offered by the accounts of women's reaction to the publication of misogynist texts. The appearance of Giuseppe Passi's *Donneschi difetti* in 1599 provoked protests by women in his home town, Ravenna; and Arcangela Tarabotti presents both her *Antisatira* (1644), against Francesco Buoninsegni's satire *Del lusso donnesco*, and *Che le donne siano della stessa specie degli uomini* (1651), against 'Oratio Plata's Italian translation of the anonymous *Disputatio Nova qua anonimus probare nititur mulieres homines non esse*, as written on the request of groups of women outraged at these attacks on their sex. On these incidents, see Marchesi; Chemello, 1983, 102–03; and Collina, 142–43.

women” and that we might tentatively relate to the circumstances in which they were writing. The remainder of this study will be dedicated to examining a series of themes in Fonte’s *Il merito delle donne* that were not touched on in this earlier section and that reveal in a rather more direct way the connections between these circumstances and Fonte’s own particular brand of feminist thought.

THE SINGLE SELF: THE THEME OF MARRIAGE  
IN *IL MERITO DELLE DONNE*

The echo of contemporary realities can be caught most clearly in *Il merito delle donne* in those areas of the text that touch on men’s financial injustices to women. In a passage already alluded to, toward the beginning of the first book of the dialogue a speaker denounces fathers’ and brothers’ unwillingness to provide as they should for their daughters and sisters. Many fathers “do not provide for their daughters while they are alive and then finally, when they die, leave their whole estate, or the greatest part of it, to their sons, depriving their daughters of their inheritance, as though they were their neighbors’ children, rather than their own.”<sup>120</sup> Even when a man does think to provide for his daughters, this may not guarantee their well-being: “Others, whose fathers have by some lucky chance left them a dowry or who have succeeded by right to a share in the estate along with their brothers since their fathers have died intestate, are nevertheless kept as slaves in the family home by their brothers, who usurp what is rightfully theirs and enjoy it themselves in contempt of all justice without ever trying to find a match for them.”<sup>121</sup>

“In contempt of all justice” (“contra ogni giustizia”): one feature to note in this passage is the speaker’s firm sense of a dowry as a woman’s legal due. The obligation to marry one’s daughters is a legal, not merely a sentimental, one; to fail to do so, as many men do, is a grave dereliction of duty.<sup>122</sup> There are biographical reasons for Moderata Fonte’s keen awareness of women’s inheritance rights. She came from a legal background—her father, her two guardians, and her husband were all notaries or lawyers—and there

<sup>120</sup>Fonte, 1988, 28: “non provedono mai alle lor figliuole vivendo ed al fin morendo lasciano il tutto, o la maggior parte delle loro sostanze a’ mascoli e le privano della propria eredità, non altramente, che se fossero figliuole di loro vicini.”

<sup>121</sup>Ibid., 29. For the text, see above, n. 84.

<sup>122</sup>On women’s rights under the law, see above, 532–33.

is ample evidence in *Il merito delle donne* of its author's informed interest in the profession.<sup>123</sup> Moreover, she herself had been personally involved in a protracted legal dispute over her share of her father's estate, which she alludes to in her verse romance *Tredici canti del Floridoro* (1581).<sup>124</sup> This personal experience may account for the note of bitterness in her attack in *Il merito* on fathers who die intestate without settling their daughters' futures. But more significantly, Fonte's youthful experience of battling for her own inheritance rights must have left her well placed to observe the discrepancy—a discrepancy we can assume was becoming more and more obvious—between the rights that women enjoyed under the law and the treatment they suffered in practice. The same sense of outrage at the violation of women's rights is registered by Tarabotti in her *Semplicità ingannata*, where she points out bitterly that *monache forzate* do not embrace their vow of poverty willingly “but spend their time with all their thoughts fixed on the world, sighing over that share of the family wealth *that is due to them under every law* but has been taken from them *in breach of all justice*” (my italics).<sup>125</sup>

<sup>123</sup>See, in particular, her discussion of legal oratory in Fonte, 1988, 137–39.

<sup>124</sup>Fonte, 1581, 12v. The context is a comparison between the chivalrous knights of old whose adventures Fonte has been describing and the avaricious lawyers of her day who are not prepared to take on the case of an orphan whose inheritance is disputed “se lor prima la man non s’empie d’oro” (“if their palms are not first lined with gold”). She goes on to praise and thank by name those few exceptions “who are seeking with loyalty and affectionate zeal to free me from the oppression I am suffering” (“i quai cercan con fede, e amico zelo / Di solvermi, ove s’oppressa sono”). The biography of Fonte by her guardian Giovanni Niccolò Doglioni gives some clue to the origins of the dispute to which she is alluding; see 4: “Ma non giunse ella anco ad un anno di vita, che morirono entrambi i suoi genitori e così ne restarono i poveri orfanelli [Modesta and her brother Leonardo] nella guisa che si può ciascuno c’ha giudizio immaginare. Quanto di buono fu, che i loro parenti e vicini e lontani tutti a garra [sic] cercavano di averli alla lor cura e governo insieme con le facultà sue, che arrivavano alli cinquecento e più ducati di entrata.” (“But she had not reached her first year of age when both her parents died, leaving the poor little orphans in a state anyone of sound judgment can easily imagine. The only good thing was that their relatives both near and distant all fought to have them in their care and charge, along with their inheritance, which came to five hundred or more ducats a year.”)

<sup>125</sup>Tarabotti, 1654, 51: “ma sempre col pensiero al mondo, sospirano quella parte de’ beni che, *dovuta loro per ogni legge*, vien loro tolta *contra ogni ragione*.” See also idem, 1990, 44: “Non si trova già legge per la quale habbiano più ragionevoli pretensioni le maritate che le monacate sopra le case de’ loro parenti, essendo l’un e l’altra legittime.” (“There is no law in existence that stipulates that a married daughter has more rights over the family estate than a nun when both are legitimate.”)



In the passage from *Il merito* just quoted, it is only the abuses of the dowry system that are attacked. Elsewhere the dialogue goes further and attacks the assumptions on which the whole system rests. The foremost of these was, of course, that since marriage constituted a considerable financial burden for a man, it was fair for his bride or her family to offset a portion of the costs. In the passage in *Il merito* mentioned above, this conventional argument is put by one speaker, Elena,<sup>126</sup> but her point is swiftly and energetically contested by another, Corinna:

You are looking at things the wrong way . . . On the contrary, a woman, when she marries, takes on the burden of expenses and children and worries; she should receive money rather than giving it away, because if she lived alone without a husband, she could live like a queen on her dowry (more or less, of course, depending on her status). But when she takes on a husband—who may be a poor man, as often happens—what else does she gain, pray, except to go from being a woman of means and her own mistress [*comperatrice e patrona*] to being a slave? She relinquishes her freedom and, at the same time, her control over her own possessions, and she places all she has at the mercy and in the governance of the man she has bought for herself.<sup>127</sup>

Several features of Corinna's speech deserve comment. One, particularly striking, is the strength of her conviction that a woman's dowry is her own, to dispose of as she wishes. In talking about women's "control" over their dowry, their status as "compera-

<sup>126</sup>Fonte, 1988, 68–69: "Si dà la dote al marito, perché pigliando egli moglie viene a torsi una gran spesa alle spalle, che quelli che hanno poca robba non potranno mantener casa senza il suffragio della dote." ("Dowries are given to the husband because in marrying he is taking on a great burden, and men of modest means could not maintain a household without the subsidy of a dowry.")

<sup>127</sup>Ibid., 69: "Voi non la pigliate per lo verso . . . ché anzi la donna pigliando marito entra in spese in figliuoli e in fastidi e ha più bisogno di trovar robba che di darla; poiché stando sola senza marito, con la sua dote può viver da regina secondo la sua condizione. Ma pigliando marito e per aventura povero, come spesso accade, che altro viene ad acquistar di grazia, salvo che di comperatrice e patrona diventa schiava e perdendo la sua libertà, perda insieme il dominio della sua robba e ponga tutto in preda ed in arbitrio di colui che ella ha comprato." Corinna concludes that "se pur non dessero la dote a i mariti e che essi dotassero le donne, se potria meglio tolerar la loro compagnia." ("If dowries were not given to men and if they were instead to give dowries to their wives, then the married state would be rather more tolerable.") See also for an earlier occurrence of this argument Labalme, 91, n. 28, and, for a later one, Tarabotti, 1990, 93: "già a comprar schiave, come voi [ie. voi uomini] fatte le mogli, saria più decente che voi sborsaste l'oro, non elle, per comprar patrone." ("If you are going to buy slaves—for that is how you treat your wives—it would be only right that you should shell out gold for them rather than their having to pay to buy themselves masters.")

trici," Corinna defiantly ignores the traditionally ambiguous status of a woman's dowry as at the same time her share of her father's estate and the purchase-price of her husband. Women's dowries in her representation belong to them as absolutely as their brothers' inheritance belongs to them, and they are—or should be—free to invest them in marriage or not as they see fit.<sup>128</sup>

The passage conveys very forcefully the speaker's—or the author's—awareness of the link between financial independence and self-determination. A woman's liberty depends crucially on her maintaining control of her money, and, as we learn slightly later, to lose this control effectively signifies losing oneself.<sup>129</sup> Whether this, too, was a lesson Moderata Fonte learned from her experience of fighting for control of her inheritance as a girl is something we can only speculate about. But we know from her will of 1585 that it was a danger she was alert to in her own life: at her marriage to Filippo Zorzi, it appears, she had her husband sign an *istruttione* recognizing that she would retain control over her dowry during her lifetime.<sup>130</sup>

Corinna's answer to the financial injustices of marriage is more radical than her creator's: she proposes very simply that women should renounce the married state. Marriage is not simply an unsound financial deal for women but a bad bargain altogether. "What a splendid deal marriage is for a woman! She loses her money, she loses herself, and she gains nothing in return, except children who are nothing but trouble and subjection to a man who orders her around at will."<sup>131</sup> Corinna's conclusion cannot be dismissed as a personal eccentricity or a gratuitous provocation: the undesirability of marriage is a constant theme of *Il merito delle donne*,

<sup>128</sup>This is, of course, an idealized view. See below, notes 149 and 150 for the awareness displayed elsewhere in the dialogue of the constraints women suffered in reality.

<sup>129</sup>See the passage at Fonte, 1988, 69, quoted below in the text.

<sup>130</sup>See Modesta da Pozzo, fu Girolamo, *Testamento* (11 July, 1585): Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Atti Sacco, busta 1192 (f. 467). Fonte leaves the main substance of her estate to her husband, but stipulates that, if he should remarry, "non lo lasso altro che il [?] titolo] della mia Dota, la qual lui per sua gentilezza mi lha donato per l'Istruttione fatta nelli atti di Messer Hierolamo Luran nodaio di Vinezia." ("I am leaving him nothing but the title-deed to my dowry, which he kindly signed over to me through the instruction drawn up by Messer Girolamo Luran, a notary of Venice.") I have not been able to find the relevant document in the acts of the notary in question.

<sup>131</sup>Fonte, 1988, 69: "Mirate, che bella ventura d'una donna è il maritarsi: perder la robba, perder sé stessa e non acquistar nulla, se non li figliuoli che le danno travaglio e l'imperio d'un'uomo, che la domini a sua voglia."

and it is an argument that enjoys a large measure of consensus among the speakers. Corinna, unmarried and determined to remain so, is perhaps the most outspoken opponent of wedlock, but in case her opposition should be dismissed as owing to her inexperience, she is joined by Leonora, a young widow who vows she would prefer to drown than to marry again.<sup>132</sup> The only speakers in the dialogue to put in a good word for marriage are the elderly and rather sentimental Adriana and the newly-married and still relatively starry-eyed Elena. But their arguments are undermined when we discover that Adriana's own two marriages have been unmitigated disasters and that Elena's husband is already showing signs of unmotivated jealousy.<sup>133</sup> If marriage has appeals, they quickly wear off: "a wedding-cake is soon eaten." The only woman who can describe herself as truly happy is the woman who lives without men.<sup>134</sup>

The polemic against marriage in *Il merito delle donne* deserves close examination as one of the most strikingly novel features of Fonte's thought and one of the elements in her argument that seems most clearly to derive from experience rather than literary tradition.<sup>135</sup> Of course, it would be naive to interpret the more extreme utterances of her feminist speaker at face value as a direct incitement to Venetian women to rebel against the institution of marriage. There is undoubtedly an element of playful provocation in the dialogue, which Fonte's modern editor Adriana Chemello has rightly related to the Renaissance tradition of paradox and *serio ludere*.<sup>136</sup> However, there is perhaps as much of a danger in underestimating the seriousness in Fonte's attack on marriage as there is in ignoring its ludic qualities. In a society in which circumstances were daily forcing the injustices of the dowry system further into the light, it

<sup>132</sup>Ibid., 21: [Leonora] "Rimaritarmi eh? . . . Più tosto mi affogherei che sottopormi più ad uomo alcuno; io sono uscita di servitù e di pene e vorresti che io tornassi da per me ad avilupparmi?" ("Marry again? I should rather drown than submit myself to a man again! Here I am, at last free from servitude and suffering, and you would have me go back and get tangled up in it again of my own accord?")

<sup>133</sup>Ibid., 33–35.

<sup>134</sup>Ibid., 16–17.

<sup>135</sup>On the absence of any serious opposition to marriage within the French Renaissance tradition of defenses of women, see McDowell Richardson, 159–60. On the evidence of my researches, the same observation could be made of the Italian tradition (though see 571–72 and n. 175 below).

<sup>136</sup>See Chemello, 1983, 126–34.

seems unlikely that readers would have interpreted an attack on this system purely and simply as an amusing paradox.

That Moderata Fonte's attack on marriage in *Il merito* is not intended as pure provocation is suggested by the fact that her speakers do not limit themselves to listing the disadvantages of the married state. They also discuss, apparently in all seriousness, an alternative to marriage: a freely chosen, entirely secular and uncloistered single life. When Corinna announces her decision to remain single at the beginning of the dialogue, her choice is commended by the unhappily married Lucrezia in enthusiastic terms: "O fortunate Corinna! What woman in the world is as happy as you? None—no widow, for she has had her share of suffering in the past; no wife, for she is suffering still; no young girl waiting for a husband, for she is waiting her turn to suffer."<sup>137</sup> Lucrezia's speech may be seen as an attempt to establish an exemplary status for Corinna by listing her chosen life as an "estate" on a par with nubility, marriage, and widowhood. Corinna's heroic singularity may be stressed, but Lucrezia expresses the hope that others will follow her example and concludes by recommending that she write "a volume on this subject" to dissuade innocent girls from rushing into marriage.<sup>138</sup>

It is difficult not to see in this proposal an allusion to *Il merito* itself. Certainly, Fonte's dialogue sets out quite systematically to tackle what would have been Corinna's first task in her "volume": to establish a clear status and a clear identity for the secular unmarried woman, a model strong enough to compete with the model of the ideal wife and mother codified and promoted in numberless rule books of behavior for women. This was no easy task. Not only was there no precedent for the figure of the secular unmarried

<sup>137</sup>Fonte, 1988, 17–18: "O felice Corinna! . . . e quale altra donna al mondo è che vi possa agguagliare? Certo niuna: non vedova, poiché non può vantarsi di non aver prima penato un pezzo; non maritata, poiché stenta tuttavia, non donzella che aspetti marito, poiché aspetta di penare."

<sup>138</sup>Ibid., 18: [Lucrezia] "Felice e beatissima dunque voi e chi segue il vostro stile . . . E certo che voi, mediante il vostro sublime intelletto dovereste scrivere un volume in questa materia, persuadendo per carità alle povere figliuole che non sanno ancora discernere il male dal bene quello che sia il loro meglio e così voi diverreste a doppio gloriosa e fareste servizio a Dio ed al mondo." ("How happy, how truly blessed you are, and all who follow your example . . . And you should certainly employ your sublime talents to write a book on the subject, charitably persuading poor young girls who cannot yet tell good from evil of what is in their best interests. And in this way you would become doubly glorious, serving both God and the world.")

woman in the previous *trattatistica* on women, but—with one notable exception discussed below—it is difficult to think of potential models within the realm of literature. Moderata Fonte was faced in *Il merito* with a problem analogous to that of Agostino Valerio in his *Modo di vivere proposto alle vergini che si chiaman dimesse*: that of creating a role and an identity for a social group not officially acknowledged to exist.

Moderata Fonte sets about this difficult task with considerable energy, ingeniously exploiting the scarce resources her culture afforded her. In her representation of Corinna, she draws on and triumphantly reverses the humanistic topos of the scholar who rejects the lure of marriage to dedicate himself to his studies.<sup>139</sup> By rejecting the commerce of men and giving herself over to virtue and study, Corinna is, as Lucrezia admiringly reminds her, on the path to eternal fame.<sup>140</sup> What might have been presented as a purely negative decision—a rejection of the evils of marriage—becomes instead a positive, indeed a heroic choice.

Another, more straightforward instance of Moderata Fonte's skill in appropriating from literary tradition is her allusion on two occasions in the dialogue to the figure of Ariosto's warrior-heroine Marfisa, perhaps the only, and certainly the best-known, literary representation available to her of a woman who had refused marriage and chosen a single life for other than religious reasons. The first of these references to Marfisa occurs in the sonnet with which Corinna announces her choice not to marry, which directly quotes in its second line Marfisa's proud statement that "[non] d'altri son

<sup>139</sup>See Frigo, esp. 59–66.

<sup>140</sup>Fonte, 1988, 18: [Lucrezia] "Felice voi . . . poiché vi ha Dio dato così sublime ingegno che vi diletate ed essercitate nelle virtuose azioni e impiegando i vostri alti pensieri nei cari studi delle lettere, così umane, come divine, cominciate una vita celeste, essendo ancora nei travagli e pericoli di questo mondo, li quali voi rifiutate, rifiutando il commercio delli fallacissimi uomini, dandovi tutta alle virtù che vi faranno immortale." ("How fortunate you are that God has given you a mind of such sublime temper that you delight in and practice virtuous actions, and by turning your soaring thoughts to the sweet study of letters, both secular and divine, you have embarked on a heavenly life while still amid the trials and dangers of this world—trials and dangers you manage to avoid by refusing any commerce with those most treacherous of creatures, men, and giving yourself up entirely to those virtues that will win you immortality.") Corinna's erudition and literary talents are on constant display in the dialogue (see, for example, 18–19, 31–32, 149–52, and 171–84) and she has been identified by some critics as a figure for the author; see, for example, Chemello, 1983, 147–48; Kolsky, 73 (though cf. Collina, 154).

che mia."<sup>141</sup> The second occurs in a more appropriately warlike context, when Leonora, fantasizing about organizing an Amazonian army to avenge men's wrongs against women, adopts a phoenix as her emblem in imitation of Marfisa.<sup>142</sup> There is a certain irony perhaps in these decorous Venetian ladies' adoption as their role-model of Ariosto's bellicose heroine. But there is an aptness in their choice as well. Apart from her independence of spirit—the quality that these references directly allude to—Marfisa is, of course, also remarkable for her prowess in the art of war. Like Corinna, she provides a positive model of spinsterhood as not simply as an escape from marriage but an opportunity for women to develop their capacities to the full.

Both Corinna's sonnet and Leonora's emblem are elements in a broader strategy in the dialogue of embroidering the bare outline of the decision to remain single with a complex pattern of literary and iconographic suggestion. The most striking example of this mythologizing occurs in a passage at the beginning of *Il merito*, describing the *locus amoenus* in which the dialogue takes place. This setting is a garden inherited by the hostess Leonora from an aunt who had elected not to marry but to live alone on the income inherited from her father. At the center of the garden is a fountain surrounded by six laurel-wreathed statues of women whose allegorical significance is revealed by the motto and the emblem which each displays.<sup>143</sup> Three of the figures, Naïveté, Deceit, and Cruelty, form a miniature narrative of the dangers of marriage: women's innocence and naïveté make them an easy prey to the deceitful words of their suitors who promise them love but deliver no more than a lifetime of cruelty and suffering. The other three figures, Chastity, Solitude, and Liberty, represent the virtues and benefits of the

<sup>141</sup>Ibid., 18, for Corinna's sonnet beginning "Libero cor nel mio petto soggiorna, / Non servo alcun, né d'altri son che mia." ("Free is the heart that dwells within my breast; / I have no master and belong to no one but myself"); compare Marfisa's words at *Orlando Furioso*, 26:79, 7.

<sup>142</sup>Ibid., 163. It is Elena who points out the appropriateness of Leonora's choice, citing the lines from *Orlando Furioso* 36:17–18, in which Marfisa's emblem is interpreted as denoting either her unique strength or her "casta intenzion . . . di viver sempremai senza consorte" ("her chaste resolve to live her whole life without a consort"). On Leonora's own devotion to the single life, see 21 and 23; for another use of the emblem of the phoenix in the dialogue to symbolize a freely-chosen celibate life, 20.

<sup>143</sup>On the iconography of the fountain and its sources and significance, see Chemello, 1983, 110–12 and 146.

single life wisely chosen as an alternative by Leonora's aunt. An interesting feature of the allegory is that this single life is not conceived of as one of cloistered retreat. Solitude may be one of its tutelary deities, but Liberty is another; and, as Leonora makes plain in her gloss on the statue, this liberty includes the freedom to enjoy social intercourse untrammelled by the constraints of marriage. The figure of Liberty, she explains, bears the emblem of a sun to signify that her aunt was free to illuminate the whole world with her virtue, sharing her company with "every person of refinement," as she would not have been able to do if married.<sup>144</sup>

The novelty of the ideal encoded in this allegory of an uncloistered, sociable, and creative single life for women, is perhaps best conveyed by a comparison of Leonora's aunt's garden with another analogous but sharply contrasted allegorical construct: the "Temple of Chastity" described by the Trecento humanist Antonio Loschi in his *Domus pudicie* as a fit setting for the early Paduan scholar Maddalena Scrovegni and brilliantly analyzed by Margaret King as an emblem of male humanists' problematic attitude to female intellectuality.<sup>145</sup> Loschi's description of the *domus* reflects an obsessive and paralyzing concern with chastity: the widowed Scrovegni is imagined enthroned on crystal in its vast white spaces, surrounded by figures of Modesty, Virginity, and Frugality. The threat posed by a woman who insists on intruding into the masculine sphere of intellectual activity can only be defused by denying her sexuality, deep-freezing her physical self.

The environment envisaged for the single woman in *Il merito delle donne* could scarcely be more different. Leonora's aunt's garden is a locus of pleasure, ripe with images of fertility and abundance and reminiscent of the ravishing settings where the speakers of the *De-*

<sup>144</sup>Ibid., 22: [Leonora] "La terza [figura] è la Libertà e l'impresa è il Sole, il quale libero e solo illustrando se stesso comparte la sua luce a tutto l'universo, dinotando che ella libera e sola divenne chiara per molte degne ed onorate qualità e ha compartito anco i tesori della sua virtù ad ogni gentile spirito, che ne ha avuto conoscenza; il che sotto la signoria ed imperio del marito, forse non averia potuto fare." ("The third figure is Liberty and her device is the Sun, which stands free and alone, giving light to itself and sharing its light with the whole universe, to show that my aunt, living free and alone as she did, won a shining renown through her many fine and respected qualities, and also that she shared the treasures of her mind with every person of refinement with whom she came into contact—something she might not have been able to do under the rule and command of a husband.")

<sup>145</sup>See King, 1980, esp. 78–79; idem., 1981.

*cameron* or Bembo's *Asolani* meet to talk of love.<sup>146</sup> Chastity still has its place in Leonora's aunt's system of values, but it is a chastity transformed by its context from a negative to a positive choice. Celibacy here does not signal a denial but a rechanneling of sensuality, and much stress is placed throughout the dialogue on the pleasures afforded by a life without men: the company of women, the pleasures of poetry and music, good food, laughter and wine.<sup>147</sup>

In proposing this ideal of a carefree, sociable, and above all autonomous existence, Moderata Fonte is never in danger of forgetting that it *is* an ideal. A few scattered remarks in the dialogue make clear that Fonte was painfully aware that women who chose or were forced to remain single led a life very different from the charmed existence of Leonora's aunt.<sup>148</sup> Further, for a woman to choose to live alone was not only an eccentric but a potentially dangerous choice: as Lucrezia remarks at the end of the dialogue, "with things as they are in this world" ("stando il viver del mondo nei termini in che si trova"), the protection of husband, however regrettable, is virtually a necessity for women.<sup>149</sup> Finally, Moderata Fonte is

<sup>146</sup>For the description of the garden, see Fonte, 19–20. Parallels with *Gli Asolani* are noted in Chemello, 110, n. 20. Particularly interesting in the context of my argument here is the detail of the fountain adorned with statues of female figures with water flowing from their breasts. On the occurrence of such figures in contemporary gardens and garden literature, and on their symbolic associations with both the fertility of nature and poetic creativity, see Lazzaro.

<sup>147</sup>See, for example, Fonte, 1988, 17, 21–22, 74, and 117–24. In view of contemporary moralists' insistence on the dangers for women of any form of sensual indulgence, these passages should perhaps be read (along with the later discussion of the pleasures of dress discussed above, 552–54), as part of a consistent effort to disengage sensuality from sexual transgression and to establish a space for "innocent" hedonism.

<sup>148</sup>See, for example, the passage at Fonte, 1988, 29 (cited above, n. 84) on the fate of women whose brothers are too avaricious to marry them and who have to remain as effectively unpaid servants. See also *ibid.*, 171, for Adriana's warning to her daughter Virginia of the drab life which awaits her if she refuses to marry: "Se questa vita non ti piace [ie. life with a jealous husband who will keep her locked up] imaginati che se non ti marito, medesimamente ti converrà star sempre in casa e vestir sobria senza tanti strisci, né pratiche, come fai ora, poichè non è lecito a una donzella, che non voglia accasarsi, far altrimenti." ("If the idea of life with a jealous husband does not appeal to you, just think what will happen if I do not find a husband for you: you will have to spend your whole life within four walls just the same, dressing soberly, without all the frills and flounces you wear now, because a young girl who does not wish to marry is not permitted to live in any other way.") On the cloistered life led by unmarried women in Venice and the greater freedoms allowed to them on marriage, see Chojnacki, 1980.

<sup>149</sup>Fonte, 1988, 171–72: [Lucrezia] "Con tutto che gli uomini avessero tutte le imperfezioni che si son dette, stando il viver del mondo nei termini che si trova, è assai



conscious that it is illusory to talk about marriage as though it were a matter of free choice for a woman. As the lives of the speakers in the dialogue amply demonstrate, the decision to marry a woman rests with the household more than the woman herself.<sup>150</sup> Marfisa's phoenix is an appropriate emblem for the free and single woman for more reasons than one. At least until the longed-for day when women will be permitted to earn their own living, the option of a single life will only be available to those mythical women like Leonora's aunt, fortunate enough to enjoy an independent income and a mysterious lack of family pressure.<sup>151</sup>

However, the fact that a life of this kind is presented as a practical impossibility should not lead us to conclude that it is simply a lit-

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meglio l'aver il governo e la compagnia loro, che 'l starne senza, perché ci occorrono alla giornata mille accidenti, mille oppressioni, chi insidia la robba, chi l'onor e chi la vita a noi misere donne, di modo che è meglio averne uno almanco per amico, che si difenda da gli altri, che stando sole averli tutti per nemici." ("But even acknowledging that men have all the faults you have listed, with things as they are in the world it is far better to have their protection and company than to be without it. For we poor women every day experience countless dangers and attacks: our wealth, our honor, our lives are constantly at risk. So it is better to have one man at least as a friend to protect us from the others than to remain single and have all men as our enemies.")

<sup>150</sup>See *ibid.*, 29, where Cornelia remarks that many brothers arrange marriages for their sisters not out of affection but for reasons of family prestige and to improve their own chances of a good marriage ("accasano le sorelle, non per amorevolezza, ma per far buon nome e per trovar meglio essi condizion d'aver moglie"). On the speakers' own circumstances, see, for example, *ibid.*, 23, where Leonora states that she was determined to follow her aunt's example and refuse to marry, until forced to by her father; also 17, where we learn that Virginia would be disinclined to marry, and her mother Adriana disinclined to insist, except that, as Adriana points out, "Li tuoi zii hanno deliberato che io ti mariti per la gran facultà che tu hai ereditata, la quale alcuno non ti può usurpare." ("Your uncles have decided that I must arrange a marriage for you, so that no one can attempt to get their hands on the large estate you have inherited.")

<sup>151</sup>See *ibid.*, 22, where Leonora notes that her aunt possessed "a large sum of money that she had inherited from my grandfather." There is some evidence that it was not unknown for women who had inherited money to choose to remain unmarried. Chojnacki, 1988, 133, notes an "emerging tendency" in women's wills in the fifteenth century "to allow daughters complete freedom of vocational choice, including even lay spinsterhood" (see also *idem*, 1991, 149–50). For a Seicento case, see Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Archivio Notarile, Testamenti 343 (Giovanni Niccolò Doglioni), no. 207, where Isabetta Bembo, widow of Antonio, in a will dated 27 August 1609, leaves her estate to her sons and her unmarried daughter in equal shares, and stipulates that the latter, Augusta, should have free use of her inheritance "stando nello stato ch'ella si ritrova . . . et il simile anco mutando stato, purché sia condecante, et convenevole alla persona, et conditioni di quella" ("if she remains in her present estate . . . or if she changes estate, as long as her new situation is fitting and appropriate to her person and her status").

erary caprice with no bearing on real women's lives. Fantasy and reality in the idiosyncratic universe of *Il merito delle donne* stand in a strangely intimate relation. The book ends with the recital by Corinna of a narrative poem on the defeat of Love at the hands of Avarice, which may be read either as a pastoral fantasy or as a shrewd commentary on the state of the Venetian dowry market.<sup>152</sup> Similarly, Fonte's myth of heroic spinsterhood is an excursion into the "marvelous" that leads straight to the heart of an urgent issue of contemporary social concern.

THE THEME OF MARRIAGE OUTSIDE VENICE:  
CRISTOFORO ZABATA'S *RAGIONAMENTO DI SEI  
NOBILI FANCIULLE GENOVESI*

We can only speculate, of course, about the degree to which *Il merito delle donne* reflects feelings shared by other women of Fonte's era. There is, however, one other work of the period, by a little-known Genoese writer, that offers some support for the suggestion that the changes in the marriage market that occurred in the later sixteenth century in Italy may have led some women to reexamine the institution of marriage. This work, a dialogue, is of particular interest in the context of the present argument since its formal and substantive similarities with *Il merito* are sufficient to raise the question of whether it may have served as a model for Fonte.

The work in question is Cristoforo Zabata's *Ragionamento di sei nobili fanciulle genovesi* (1583),<sup>153</sup> with *Il merito delle donne* one of the

<sup>152</sup>See Fonte, 1988, 173–81. The poem starts with a description of a mythical age in which Love reigned the earth unchallenged and goes on to describe the machinations of Pride and Avarice to regain their ascendancy. It concludes with an exhortation to women to scorn men's self-interested advances and dedicate themselves instead to "miglior opre ed a più bei studi" ("worthier deeds and finer studies"). Doglioni, 9, records that the *stanze* were written as an independent work and only later integrated in *Il merito delle donne*, interesting evidence that the anti-marriage position sustained by Corinna in the dialogue was also maintained by the author when writing *in propria persona*. The poem is obviously indebted for its basic scheme to contemporary pastoral literature, but its setting is not consistently pastoral (stanzas 11–14 make explicit reference to city life); and its relevance to contemporary reality is underscored by a number of direct references to the financial realities of marriage. See, for example, stanza 15 for the lament: "Felici voi, che con sì caldi amanti / Donne vi ritrovaste a quella etade, / Dove per non aver doti bastanti / Non invecchiava mai vostra beltade." ("Happy the women of that bygone age, who enjoyed such ardent lovers and whose beauty was never suffered to wilt [in solitude] for the lack of a sufficient dowry.")

<sup>153</sup>Apart from this *Ragionamento*, Zabata's main publication was a collection of *facezie*, *Il Diporto de' viandanti* (Treviso, 1600); he may also be the author of a *Dialogo*

very few dialogues of the sixteenth century to use exclusively women speakers.<sup>154</sup> The identities of Zabata's speakers, like Fonte's, are shrouded by classicizing or Boccaccian names, but, as in Fonte, the setting of the dialogue is realistic and we are given to understand that it represents a conversation that actually took place.<sup>155</sup> The *Ragionamento* follows a pattern by no means uncommon in sixteenth-century dialogues in which a lively initial discussion airing views felt to be extreme or "paradoxical" is followed by an unconditional surrender to a single conventional viewpoint. The bulk of the dialogue is taken up by a virtual monologue by the author's spokeswoman, Fiammetta, rehearsing traditional pieties about marriage and married life.<sup>156</sup> The incipit however, the section I propose to examine here, has considerably more originality and touches far more closely on the realities of contemporary Genoese life.

The discussion starts with the speakers complaining about the difficulty of finding a husband in an age in which the going rate for dowries has reached previously unimaginable levels. In their mothers' time, as one speaker remarks, a dowry was seven or eight thousand lire, while now no self-respecting suitor would accept less than ten or fifteen thousand scudi.<sup>157</sup> This "pernicious innovation,"

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*nel quale si ragiona de' cambi et altri contratti di merci* (Genova, 1573), for which he wrote a dedicatory letter. His poetry, some in Genoese dialect, was included in a number of anthologies; for details, see Giustiniani, 170–71; Soprani, 76; and Oldoino, 139.

<sup>154</sup>The only other vernacular dialogues I have encountered with solely women speakers (apart from erotic dialogues like Pietro Aretino's *Ragionamento* and *Dialogo* or Alessandro Piccolomini's *Raffaella*) are Niccolò Vito di Gozze's two Neoplatonic dialogues, *Della bellezza* and *Dell'amore* (Venice, 1581), and—closer in form to Fonte though the speakers are identifiable historical figures—two much earlier Siennese dialogues, Marcantonio Piccolomini's *Se è da credersi che [la] donna . . . sia prodotto dalla natura o a sorte o pensatamente* (1538), on which see Piéjus, 93–95, and Aonio Paleario's *Dell'economia o vero del governo della casa* (c. 1555), see Paleario, 1983. Both the latter, however, remained unpublished and can virtually be discounted as sources.

<sup>155</sup>In his prefatory letters Zabata, 3–5 and 7–10, makes an elaborate pretense that the dialogue is a real conversation recorded by one of the participants, Laura, immediately after it took place in 1570. In a postscript to the dialogue, he suggests that the delay in publication was due to his reluctance to offend or embarrass any of the participants.

<sup>156</sup>*Ibid.*, 31–72. The last pages of the dialogue are occupied with a curiously cynical, and perhaps intentionally satirical, discussion of the techniques a woman without a sufficient dowry may use to win herself a man.

<sup>157</sup>*Ibid.*, 13: [Fiammetta] "Meritiamo questo [i.e., the difficulty in finding husbands they have just been discussing] e peggio poiché habbiamo introdotto questa mala usanza, che per parer di superar l'altre di ricchezza vogliamo darli i dieci, quindici, e

it is noted, has had ruinous consequences for Genoese society: it has proved “our ruin and ultimately the downfall of our whole city” (“la rovina delle facultà nostre e finalmente della nostra Città”).<sup>158</sup> The sensible conclusion the speakers reach is that since the possibility of marriage is uncertain, they should concentrate on enjoying themselves as much as they can while they are young.<sup>159</sup> This, however, provokes the comment from one of the speakers, Virginia, that enjoying oneself (“darsi buon tempo”) is impossible for a girl under parental control. It is only by marrying that a woman can escape the ferocious surveillance of her parents and at last enjoy freedom of movement, company, and a certain degree of financial autonomy. The appeal of marriage for her is that “I shall be able to go out and enjoy myself with the other young women . . . and my purse will never be so empty that I cannot find ten scudi in it to spend, whereas now I cannot lay my hands on a penny.”<sup>160</sup>

Virginia's remarks precipitate a new stage in the dialogue, the stage in which the *Ragionamento* most closely approaches the themes of *Il merito delle donne*. Lavinia, the Corinna or Leonora of the dialogue, reminds Virginia that “there are two sides to everything” (“ogni dritto ha il suo roversio”). In marrying she is not, as she naively thinks, purchasing her freedom; rather “with your own money you are buying yourself not a husband but a tyrant to whom you will have to be so subject that you would be no worse off if you were a slave; he will lord it over your life and your money,

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vinti mila scudi.” (“We deserve this and worse, because we have introduced the corrupt custom of bringing our husbands in dowry ten, fifteen, or twenty thousand scudi, in order to show off how much richer we are than our rivals.”) See also, 14: [Fiammetta] “O quanto sarebbe meglio che tutti s'accordassero insieme, à non voler dar più che sette, ò fino in otto mila lire, come era solito darsi dalle principali al tempo della buona memoria di mia Madonna Madre.” (“How much better it would be if everyone reached an agreement not to give more than seven or at most eight thousand lire—the amount that used to be given even by the most high-ranking women of the city in the times of my late lamented mother.”) On the high level of dowries in Genoa as a factor in encouraging the practice of forced claustration in the seventeenth century, see Rosi, 69–74.

<sup>158</sup>Zabata, 14, and, more generally, on the crisis in the Genoese economy, 17–18, where a speaker warns her listeners of the danger of marrying within the city in view of the considerable number of bankruptcies the city has seen in recent times and advises them instead to seek more stable fortunes outside Genoa, in Lombardy.

<sup>159</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>160</sup>Ibid., 19: “. . . potrò uscir fuori con l'altre giovani . . . a solazzo . . . e la mia borsa non sarà mai così vuota che non vi siano dentro dieci scudi da spendere, che hora non son patrona pur d'un solo cavalotto.”

and the moment you have given him an heir, his dearest wish will be to see you in the grave.”<sup>161</sup> Lavinia continues in this vein for some time, pointing out the same disadvantages in marriage which Fonte’s speakers dwell on in *Il merito delle donne*. Men’s frequent infidelity and their jealous surveillance of the movements of their wives is bitterly noted while the pleasures of childrearing are identified as “bodily torment, mental anguish, and spiritual distress.”<sup>162</sup> Lavinia concludes that “the life of married women is one of wretched misery”<sup>163</sup> and remarks sarcastically on her companions’ pathetic eagerness to rush to their doom.

Lavinia’s tirade has its effect, and her listener is quick to declare herself converted: “You have banished any desire I had for a husband, and if I once toyed with the idea of marriage, it is now quite alien to me.”<sup>164</sup> With the possibility of a secular single life ruled out from the outset as indecorous, however, Zabata’s Virginia, unlike her namesake in *Il merito delle donne*, is left with the sole option of entering a convent.<sup>165</sup> When she announces her intention to do so in a manner that clearly indicates her naïveté and thoughtlessness,<sup>166</sup> the scene is clearly set for the authoritative intervention of Fiammetta, who sets about persuading her that despite Lavinia’s slanders “marriage is not simply a good thing, but the best, the optimum, state” (“il maritarsi non solo . . . [è] cosa buona, ma ot-

<sup>161</sup>Ibid., 19: “Con li vostri proprij denari . . . vi comprarete non un marito, ma un tiranno, à cui bisogna che siate sottoposta in modo tale, che se foste schiava non sareste peggio, e che di continuo vi tiraneggi nella vita e nella robba, e che havuto un figliuolo li par mille anni che siate sotto terra.”

<sup>162</sup>Ibid., 20–22: “cruccio del corpo, estimolo della mente, et alteratione dell’animo.”

<sup>163</sup>Ibid., 22: “La vita delle maritate [è] misera, et infelice.”

<sup>164</sup>Ibid., 22–23: “Mi havete fatto passar la voglia di marito, e se già mai ne ho havuto pensiero, me ne ritrovo hora molto lontana.”

<sup>165</sup>Ibid., 28: [Virginia] “Voi mi havete dipinto tanti travagli, e tante difficoltà nel Matrimonio, ch’io per men male m’era eletta di farmi Monaca, come che non vi fosse altro stato migliore; parendomi non convenire che quando una di noi Fanciulle trapassa una certa età, di star più al mondo senza l’appoggio del marito.” (“You have represented so many trials and tribulations in marriage that I [have] resolved in preference to become a nun, in the absence of any better alternative, since it seems unfitting to me that girls like us should remain in the world outside the convent after a certain age without the support of a husband.”)

<sup>166</sup>Ibid., 24–25. Virginia states among her reasons for wishing to enter a convent that it is a quiet life and that nuns do not have to worry about what to wear in the morning!

tima, e perfetta").<sup>167</sup> Lavinia's attack on marriage is revealed as having been no more than an exercise in paradox,<sup>168</sup> and her argument concerning the injustice of women's having to purchase their "servitude" with their dowry is dismissed on the grounds that the dowry is a reasonable compensation for a husband's sacrifice of his freedom.<sup>169</sup> The long disquisition of Fiammetta's that follows is relentlessly conventional and illiberal in tone: women are to obey men unquestioningly and forgive their every transgression.<sup>170</sup> A wife must be diligent, frugal, cheerfully ignorant of everything outside the house, and submissive enough to let her husband win arguments when she knows her position to be right.<sup>171</sup>

I suggested at the beginning of my discussion of Zabata that the *Ragionamento* might plausibly be suggested as a model for Fonte's *Il merito delle donne*. There are few other precedents for dialogues with all women speakers, and it is striking that a character with the same name is used in both dialogues for a similar function.<sup>172</sup> If the hypothesis is accepted that Moderata Fonte may have modeled *Il merito* on Zabata's *Ragionamento*, the nature of the relation between

<sup>167</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>168</sup>Lavinia's speech is implicitly defined "paradoxical" at the beginning of Fiammetta's intervention (ibid., 31), when Fiammetta comments on the "keenness of wit" ("acutezza d'ingegno") her opponent has shown in constructing her case. Following Fiammetta's counter-arguments, a dramatically converted Lavinia is happy to acknowledge that a husband is deserving of his sway over his wife (ibid., 44): "sì per esserlo capo e superiore, come anche per esser per commune opinione più prudente estimato" ("both because he is her ruler and her superior and because he is held to be more prudent by common consent").

<sup>169</sup>Ibid., 46.

<sup>170</sup>See ibid., 43–45, for the fundamental point that a wife should acknowledge her husband's divinely-sanctioned superiority: "È necessario che [la donna] faccia espressa professione d'esser in ogni cosa ossequente al marito, e che del voler di lui faccia legge, a se stessa, pensando che Iddio ce l'habbi imposto per congionzione del matrimonio." ("It is necessary that a wife should make an express profession of absolute obedience to her husband and that she should accept his will as law, remembering that God has imposed this obedience on her as a condition of the union of marriage.") On the duty of a good wife to forgive her husband's transgressions, see 47–48.

<sup>171</sup>Ibid., 47, for the latter point; 44–45, on the need for diligence, frugality, and ignorance.

<sup>172</sup>The role of the character named Virginia in both dialogues is to polarize and focus the arguments for and against marriage. In both dialogues she is characterized as young, inexperienced, and easily swayed; and in both she presents herself at a certain point as convinced by the arguments of the antimarriage faction and is submitted to persuasion by the other side (though in the case of *Il merito* this "conversion" is a great deal more equivocal and consists rather in the acceptance of marriage as a necessary evil: compare Fonte, 1988, 170–71, with Zabata, 22–23 and 31ff).

the two works should now be clear. *Il merito delle donne* takes what in Zabata's dialogue is clearly labeled as a paradoxical position and uses it as the germ of a serious debate. In doing so, Fonte's dialogue neatly exposes the deviousness of Zabata's strategy in using women to voice his comfortably patriarchal arguments. The *Ragionamento* uses the fiction of a conversation between women to lend an air of impartiality and authority to its frequent misogynistic darts, sometimes very self-consciously as when Claudia, coming out with the favorite misogynist cliché that women are more volatile and inconstant than men by nature, reassures her companions she would never have let such an admission slip in the presence of a listener of the opposite sex.<sup>173</sup> Moderata Fonte was not to be taken in by such devices any more than Lucrezia Marinella, who comments sarcastically on the use of a similar strategy in a dialogue of Speroni's.<sup>174</sup> *Il merito delle donne* might be seen as an attempt to rewrite Zabata's *Ragionamento*, releasing his female speakers from the malign grip of their male ventriloquist.

Whether or not *Il merito delle donne* is a response to Zabata's *Ragionamento*, it is an illuminating exercise to read the two works in conjunction. The *Ragionamento* provides slim but suggestive evidence that it was not only in Venice that the policy of marriage restriction necessitated by the economic situation of the late Cinquecento was provoking something of a crisis in women's attitudes to

<sup>173</sup>Zabata, 28–29. The episode is triggered by Virginia's changing her mind about her future for a second time. Claudia remarks that this wavering is hardly surprising, "essendo la natura di tutte noi, di non star ferme in un proposito pure un solo momento" ("since it is the nature of all us women never to stay firm in one opinion from one moment to the next"). There follows a brief altercation, in the course of which Cassandra accuses Claudia of disloyalty to her sex, adding that if she had spoken in the presence of men, it would have fueled their misogynistic prejudices. Claudia replies that she would not have been so careless ("poco accorta") as to come out with such an admission in men's presence; rather "haveria tolto à difendere la parte nostra contraria, in favor nostra." ("I should have taken it on myself to defend our side, in favor of our sex").

<sup>174</sup>Marinella, 126: "Lo Sperone in un suo dialogo . . . si sforza di provare che le donne sieno nate per servire l'uomo . . . facendo raccontare l'opinione della signora [Beatrice] Obiza ad uno interlocutore (bella finzione) per dimostrar, che le donne stesse fanno la sentenza." ("Speroni in one of his dialogues attempts to prove that women were born to serve men and has one of his speakers recount this as the opinion of Signora [Beatrice] Obizza (a fine fiction!) in order to show that even women themselves pass this judgment on their sex.") For the dialogue in question, see Pozzi, 1978, 565–84, and for an analysis of the use made of women speakers in dialogues to legitimate anti-feminist positions, see Daenens, 32–33.

marriage.<sup>175</sup> Though we must be cautious in regarding Zabata's highly manipulated women speakers as accurately portraying the attitudes of Genoese women, the very fact that the writer chose this unconventional manner of presenting what is essentially a very conventional treatise on marriage suggests, at the very least, a certain anxiety on his part. The groundswell of female dissent Zabata releases briefly and then smothers may have been, as I have suggested, the same which was to resurface with such vigor in the polemical work of Fonte, Marinella, and Tarabotti.

### CONCLUSION

Introducing my discussion of Moderata Fonte's advocacy of spinsterhood, I compared her enterprise in *Il merito delle donne* with that of Agostino Valier in his *Modo di vivere proposto alle vergini che si chiaman dimesse*. The parallel may seem a strained one: there is an enormous gulf between Moderata Fonte's shimmering fantasies and Valier's grim, prosaic rule-mongering, between the former's spirited heroines and the latter's *vergini dimesse*. However, both treatises, as I have suggested, may be seen as attempts to invent an identity for a new social group—unmarried women of the patrician and citizen classes—that the tides of economic change were beginning to wash up on the shores of the Venetian lagoon.

The collapse of the marriage market in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Venice was an event which had vast and far-reaching consequences for Venetian women. My contention in this study has been that one of these consequences was the emergence

<sup>175</sup>Another work from the period that deserves to be considered in this context—although the formal parallels with *Il merito delle donne* are less marked—is Bernardo Trotto's *Dialoghi del matrimonio e della vita civile* (Turin, 1578). Trotto's first dialogue observes the same basic structure as Zabata's *Ragionamento*: an initial attack on marriage (this time, interestingly, voiced by a clearly identified contemporary figure, Ippolita Scaravella) is followed by a more authoritative defense, which shades off into a series of conventional prescriptions for wifely conduct. Ippolita's speech against marriage and in praise of widowhood (Trotto, 13–52) shares certain of the feminist arguments and emphases of the antimarriage polemic in *Il merito delle donne*. See especially the passage near the beginning of the speech where she attempts to construct a cultural identity for the secular single woman by an ingenious assembling of materials from history and classical mythology. It is intriguing to note that Ippolita Scaravella was also the dedicatee of Trotto's dialogue, a fact that—however rightly cautious we may be in assessing the pretensions of literary dialogues to record actual conversations—must at least contribute to the likelihood that what we are reading here is a representation of a view the speaker was known actually to hold.



of the particular form of feminist thought we find in the works of Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, and Arcangela Tarabotti. An important characteristic of this strain of feminism—what perhaps best distinguishes it from the previous Renaissance tradition—is that it evinces a robust sense of women as autonomous entities, with their own economic and existential agendas.<sup>176</sup> Women are regarded here only secondarily as wives and mothers and muses, primarily as individuals whose worth is not measured by their usefulness to men. In Lucrezia Marinella's proud words, "Women were not put on earth for men's sake; their purpose in life is to gain knowledge, to govern, to generate children, and to embellish the world with their beauty."<sup>177</sup>

It is this new sense of women as at least potentially autonomous beings that lies at the root of these writers' other novelties: their concern with the economic realities of women's condition, their fantasies of financial self-sufficiency, their criticism of the social roles traditionally allocated to women. It is here, in the sense of self that crystallizes in Moderata Fonte's myth of heroic spinsterhood, that we can identify the source of the powerful new charge of energy these writers brought to an exhausted debate. The aim of this study has been to show that this new sense of the self—the *single* self—cannot be accounted for without taking into consideration the peculiar set of circumstances that conspired in late sixteenth-century Venice to pry women away from their traditional notion of themselves.

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<sup>176</sup>See in contrast, Daenens, 24, for the observation that in the male Cinquecento tradition of defenses of women, "l'immagine che viene data della donna, sovrana o obbediente, è un'immagine funzionale al bisogno e al desiderio dell'uomo" ("the image that is given of women, whether it is one of supremacy or subservience, is always an image functional to the needs and desires of men").

<sup>177</sup>Marinella, 123: "Il proprio fine della Donna non è di esser fatta in gratia dell'huomo, ma d'intendere, di governare, di generare e di adornare il mondo." The context is a reply to the arguments of Ercole Tasso. The relatively low place accorded to child-bearing on this list is significant. See Chemello, 1983, 131, on the limited emphasis given by Fonte in *Il merito delle donne* to women's maternal role and the novelty this represents within the tradition of defenses of women.

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