Exhortations to Women
and to Others if They Please

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Introduction

THE OTHER VOICE: A REDISCOVERY AND A REVISION

The publication of a portion of *Le Nobiltà et Eccellenze delle Donne* (*The Nobility and Excellence of Women*) in 1979 rescued Lucrezia Marinella from oblivion.¹ The pages in which the author defended women's virtues against detractors, counterattacked by underscoring men's flaws, and advocated equal access to education, struck late twentieth-century readers for their boldness and erudition.

The contemporary rediscovery of the works of Moderata Fonte and Arcangela Tarabotti drew additional attention to a traditionally neglected period in the history of Italian women's writings. While Carlo Dionisotti deemed 1560 the *terminus ante quem* for their production, the years between the end of the sixteenth century and the middle of the seventeenth suddenly revealed an unsuspected ferment of intellectual activity.² And while women's literary output in the mid-sixteenth century had been largely confined to lyrical poetry, Marinella, Fonte, and Tarabotti offered a refreshing variety of voices and genres.

Anyone interested in the history of Italian women’s writing owes gratitude to Dionisotti, who cleverly surveyed the field at a time when interest in the subject was virtually non-existent. The need to revise his outline, however, is a natural and healthy consequence of the progress the discipline has made in the past thirty years. Virginia Cox has recently argued that Dionisotti’s sketch, however influential, is “notably flawed.” Departing from the traditional view of the mid-sixteenth century as the heyday of women writers, Cox stresses the continuity in women’s literary production from the end of the fifteenth century through to the early decades of the seventeenth, effectively

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1. Ginevra Conti Odorisio prompted the rediscovery with the publication of excerpts of *Le nobiltà* in her volume *Donna e società nel Seicento* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1979).
2. In a much-quoted passage, Dionisotti claimed that women ‘fanno gruppo’, that is, constitute a quantitatively significant presence, only in the literature of the mid-1500s. See Carlo Dionisotti, *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana* (Torino: Einaudi, 1967), 191–92.
providing a much-needed new timeline. Indeed, the triad of Fonte, Tarabotti, and Marinella alone points to the need to direct attention beyond the mid-sixteenth century and the lyric tradition.

Compared with her contemporaries Fonte and Tarabotti, Marinella presents a more complex and elusive profile, despite the wealth of historical documents unearthed by Susan Haskins. It is now clear that *Le nobiltà*, which has earned the author the attention of modern scholars, can hardly be considered representative of a literary career in which it constitutes, on the contrary, an anomaly. The bulk of Marinella’s works is in fact hagiographical and fits well within the Counter-Reformation goal of promoting devotion through literature. Her forays into other genres, however, demonstrate both her ambition and her desire not to be confined to one category. Indeed, it is the sheer range of her production, rather than her achievements in any single genre, that deserves recognition. Marinella is the only early modern Italian woman writer to move so freely among different genres, leaving behind a number of hagiographical works, a psychomachy, a philosophical tract, a pastoral novel, and an epic poem. Her last work, *Essortationi alle donne et a gli altri, se a loro saranno a grado* (*Exhortations to Women and to Others if They Please*, hereafter *Esortazioni*), which she published at the remarkable age of 74, allows critics to add yet another genre to this formidable list: the book of advice.

**MARINELLA’S LIFE AND WORKS**

Like many early modern Italian women writers, including Fonte and Tarabotti, Marinella lived in Venice. Customs regarding women’s education and participation in public life were no more enlightened in

Venice than in other Italian cities. In his introduction to Moderata Fonte’s *Il merito delle donne* (The Worth of Women), Giovanni Niccolò Doglioni denounces “the false notion, so widespread in our city today, that women should excel in nothing but the running of the household,” while Arcangela Tarabotti decried the custom of forbidding women from attending university lectures. Yet the fact that some remarkable women of letters were able to emerge in this atmosphere suggests that this most learned of cities offered something of consequence even to its secluded female population. In the 1400s, Venice was home to Cassandra Fedele, who at age twenty-two was able to write in Latin the ornate *Oratio pro Bertucio Lamberto*; the 1500s witnessed the emergence of lyrical poets such as Gaspara Stampa and Veronica Franco; finally the 1600s produced the personalities of Marinella, Fonte, and Tarabotti, as well as that of the erudite Jewish poet Sarra Copia Sulam. Exactly twenty-five years after Marinella’s death, yet another Venetian, Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia, became the first woman in the world to be granted a university degree. Clearly, even women benefitted from the learned atmosphere of the Queen of the Adriatic, where in the mid-sixteenth century more books were produced and

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sold than in any other European center and where less expensive titles were affordable even for the average manual worker.\textsuperscript{11}

In examining the education imparted to young Renaissance women, Margaret King observes that its difference from the one received by men lay not as much in content as in outcome. While historical evidence suggests that educators did scrutinize with greater caution the materials to be used in women’s intellectual development, what made the position of the woman of letters particularly precarious was that her humanist training and knowledge had no professional application and could even hinder her pursuit of the main occupations available to her, those of wife and mother:

Far from conferring upon women a new equality with men, a humanist education may well have created for women new and agonizing problems: for it opened up vistas of intellectual freedom among those whose sex confined them to traditional social roles in which intellectual attainment was unnecessary and, indeed, unwanted.\textsuperscript{12}

King identifies two main patterns among women educated in the humanities, which are exemplified by the destinies of Isotta and Ginevra Nogarola. Pupils of Guarino Veronese, the two sisters earned enthusiastic praise in their youth but took different paths in adulthood. Isotta (1418–1466) “constructed within her mother’s house an austere and book-lined cell where in near solitude she combined religious devotions with the study of sacred letters.”\textsuperscript{13} Ginevra (c. 1417–1461/8) married a Brescian nobleman and ceased all intellectual activity. King discusses other humanist women who also fall into one of these two categories: they either remained unwed or took religious vows and


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 286.
continued to pursue some form of learning, like Costanza Barbaro and Cecilia Gonzaga, or they married and abandoned their scholarly pursuits, like Cataruzza Caldiera and Cassandra Fedele, although Fedele managed to return to her studies after her husband’s death.\(^\text{14}\)

The pattern King identifies lasted well beyond the 1600s. A university degree and the title of “magistra and doctrix” did not spare Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia from facing the same dilemma that had haunted her humanist predecessors. For one, both her social status and her gender prevented her from being a “magistra” in the full sense of the word. Barred from teaching and therefore from serving as a model for future generations, she was destined to have her accomplishments die with her.\(^\text{15}\) Although she lived two centuries after the Nogarola sisters, her choices were no less stark, and she followed in Isotta’s footsteps. A Benedictine oblate, Cornaro Piscopia “learned how to conduct her life with her family as if she were in a monastery,” leaving the house only to visit the Abbey of San Giorgio Maggiore.\(^\text{16}\)

This brief overview of the possibilities available to women in early modern Italy highlights Lucrezia Marinella’s singularity. Unlike her humanist predecessors, she escaped the limitations of female adulthood. She was neither a courtesan nor a member of a religious order, yet she continued to write for most of her remarkably long life. Marriage slowed her down, but did not stop her.\(^\text{17}\) She did not fall into the “either/or” pattern that has influenced women’s creativity well

14. Another possibility, which King does not take into consideration in her study, is that of the so-called “cortigiana onesta,” a sort of high-end prostitute who combined physical attractiveness with refined conversation and some poetic and musical ability. Veronica Franco is the most famous example in this category which, however, fell out of favor in the more austere times of the Counter-Reformation. See Margaret F. Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

15. Indeed, Cornaro Piscopia’s achievements convinced the Reformers of the University of Padua to issue a document that explicitly prohibited granting degrees to women. It would take more than fifty years for the University of Bologna to crown Laura Bassi, its first female graduate (1732), and almost exactly a century for Pavia to do the same for Maria Amoretti (1777). See Maschietto, *Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia*, 83.


17. Marinella was also lucky enough to escape the fate that befall Moderata Fonte and many other early modern women, who died during or soon after delivery. On the risks associated
beyond the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{18} The circumstances that enabled her to achieve this significant feat deserve further scrutiny.

Giovanni Marinello, Lucrezia’s father, is a fascinating figure, a man of science and letters whose publications included a tract on rhetoric (La copia delle parole \textit{[The Abundance of Words, 1562]}), a manual on cosmetics (Gli ornamenti delle donne \textit{[Women’s Ornaments, 1562]}), and a treatise on gynecology (Le medicine partenenti alle infermità delle donne \textit{[Medicines Pertaining to Women’s Illnesses, 1563]}).\textsuperscript{19} In the introduction to this last volume, Marinello defends his project against possible objections. He justifies writing a medical treatise in the vernacular by pointing to natural philosophers such as Hippocrates, Galen, and Avicenna who also wrote in their own language. And in response to those who deride him for wanting to serve women, the author explains that his work addresses those who can most benefit from it.\textsuperscript{20} Marinello introduces Gli ornamenti delle donne in similar terms, claiming to be the first to deal with this topic in the vernacular and rejoicing “in being born in an age which has women more noble in lineage and virtue than any who ever lived in the past: These women, I am most confident, will gladly read this work, the fruit of sweet labors I bore because of them.”\textsuperscript{21}

Marinello’s preference for a female audience—which, he claims, had also enjoyed his vernacular treatise on rhetoric, La co-


\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Medicina per le donne nel Cinquecento}, 46-7.

\textsuperscript{21} “E molto piú mi debbo gloriare di esser nato in una età, la quale ha le piú illustri donne per sangue, et per virtù, che forse nel preterito siano state: le quali vivo io certissimo, che volontier leggeranno questi dolci affanni a lor cagione sostenuti.” (Giovanni Marinello, \textit{Gli ornamenti delle donne tratti dalle scritture d’una reina greca} [Venice: Francesco de’ Franceschis, 1562], vii). Here and elsewhere, translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
pia delle parole—and self-imposed role as a popularizer support the hypothesis that he played a formative role in Lucrezia’s education, in spite of the fact that nowhere she provide details about his influence. The family environment was certainly learned and presumably stimulating. Curzio, one of Lucrezia’s brothers, followed in his father’s footsteps and became a physician and a writer.\(^\text{22}\) Lucrezia mentions both Giovanni and Curzio in her dedication of Le nobiltà to Lucio Scarano, a physician himself. Little is known of another brother, Antonio, a Servite monk at the monastery of S. Giacomo della Giudecca under the name “Fra Angelico,” and of a sister, Diamantina, who married in 1594.\(^\text{23}\) Lucrezia writes of them in affectionate if generic terms, without mentioning their relationship, at the end of Vita del serafico et glorioso S. Francesco (Life of the Seraphic and Glorious St. Francis). She describes Fra Angelico as a man who left the turbulent world to follow Saint Francis and Diamantina as a model of beauty, chastity, and goodness who showed mature judgment at a young age.\(^\text{24}\) The information available on Lucrezia’s father and siblings only underscores the mystery surrounding her mother, who is never mentioned and whose very name has not survived.

The origins of the family are not completely clear. In a letter that accompanies Vita di Maria Vergine, imperatrice dell’universo (Life of the Virgin Mary, Empress of the Universe) Lucrezia presents herself—somewhat instrumentally—as a servant and subject (“serva e suddita”) of the duchess of Modena, on the basis of her father’s birth in that city.\(^\text{25}\) Other sources, however, point to a possible Southern origin. Giuseppe Tassini reports in fact that the Marinelli came from Naples,\(^\text{26}\) while a list of Renaissance medical doctors suggests instead that Giovanni was originally from Mola, near Bari.\(^\text{27}\)

The entry concerning Marinella in the Register of the Dead in the Venetian Parish of Saint Pantaleone indicates that she died in 1653

\(^\text{22}\) See Tiraboschi, Biblioteca modenese, 157–58.
\(^\text{24}\) Marinella, Vita del serafico et glorioso S. Francesco III, 57–58.
\(^\text{25}\) See Tiraboschi, Biblioteca modenese, 161.
\(^\text{26}\) Archivio Storico Veneto, Miscellanea Codici I, Tassini, Busta 13, p. 1285.
\(^\text{27}\) Juliana Hill Cotton, Name-List from a Medical Register of the Italian Renaissance [Oxford: [s.n.], 1976], 78. I thank Daria Perocco for bringing this work to my attention.
at the age of 82. On this basis, it is often assumed that she was born in 1571. This assumption, however, contradicts Marinella’s presentation of herself as a young woman in the dedication of the *Vita di Maria Vergine* (1602). Since it would have been odd at the time for a thirty-one-year-old woman to refer to herself as “young,” her date of birth may be somewhat closer to the end of the sixteenth century, although it is also possible that Marinella was intentionally trying to create a younger authorial persona. It is likely, however, that Lucrezia was the youngest in her family and lived for some time—presumably after her father’s death and before her marriage—with her brother Curzio in Campiello dei Squelini, as reported in the census of 1591.

Marinella entered the literary scene in 1595 with the publication of *La colomba sacra* (*The Sacred Dove*). Dedicated to Margherita Gonzaga, duchess of Ferrara, this poem combines hagiography and the epic. While the title exploits the allegorical symbolism surrounding the name of the protagonist, Saint Colomba of Sens, the subtitle of “poema eroico” and the use of *ottava rima* are indicative of Marinella’s fascination for the epic tradition.

This choice of topic seems curious for a writer who would later devote volumes to the celebration of much more famous religious figures such as Saint Catherine, Saint Francis, and the Virgin Mary. It is tempting to read Marinella’s cautious first attempt at hagiography as an effort to follow the precepts Torquato Tasso outlined in *Discorsi dell’arte poetica*: while the subject matter for a heroic poem must derive from sacred history, it should be neither related to a dogma nor too recent. These conditions are essential to preserving what Tasso calls “la licenza del fingere,” that is, the poet’s prerogative to create characters and situations. A recent event may also have influenced Marinella’s choice. In 1581, the bishop of Rimini had brought back relics of Saint Colomba from the cathedral of Sens to his archdiocese, thus reinvigorating her cult.

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A victim of Aurelian’s alleged persecution of Christians, Saint Colomba lived in the third century and was killed in Sens.\textsuperscript{32} While most of Marinella’s account follows the events as presented in a manuscript devoted to Saint Colomba’s martyrdom,\textsuperscript{33} one significant departure suggests another, more probable source. In *La colomba sacra*, the story takes place not in Sens, but in Scenoa, an imaginary Arab town on a tributary of the river Jordan (*La colomba sacra* I, 11). This surprising geographical transposition is found in the popular *Legendario delle Santissime Vergini*, which, first published in 1511, underwent several editions during the sixteenth century. The anonymous editor of the *Legendario* located the town of Saint Colomba’s martyrdom in some generic region in the East (“nelle parti d’Oriente”), and Italianized Senones—the Latin name of Sens—as Scenoua, which could in turn have become “Scenoa” in *La colomba sacra*. Marinella, seemingly intrigued by the possibility of merging Saint Colomba’s story with Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*, infused the confrontation between Aurelian and Colomba with the same, subtle erotic tension that marked the encounter between Aladin and Sophronia in the second canto of the *Liberata*.\textsuperscript{34}

Two years later, Marinella dedicated her second work to Cristina of Lorena, grand duchess of Tuscany. Once again, she chose a powerful woman as her addressee and neglected her ties to Venice. The *Vita del Serafico e Glorioso San Francesco, descritta in ottava rima, con un discorso del rivolgimento amoroso verso la Somma Bellezza* (*Life of the Seraphic and Glorious St. Francis, with a Discourse on the Loving Turn toward the Supreme Beauty*) is divided, as the title suggests, into two parts. The discourse that precedes the poetic account of St. Francis’s life is remarkable for its vehement contempt for the body, described as a “ladro domestico […] fracido cadavero […] oscura tomba dell’anima” (“domestic thief […], rotting corpse […], dark grave for the soul”) that those wishing to rise to the “infinita luce” (“infinite light”) must despise and neglect. This paroxysmal aversion to all earthly at-

\textsuperscript{32} Modern historians are skeptical that such a persecution ever took place. See for instance Alaric Watson, *Aurelian and the Third Century* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 200.

\textsuperscript{33} The manuscript was published as an appendix to Chastel, *Sainte Colombe de Sens*.

\textsuperscript{34} For a more detailed analysis see Laura Benedetti, “Saintes et guerrières,” 98–100.
attachment does not even spare one’s family and children, mutable entities who serve as distractions from God, the “sommo sole” (“supreme sun”). Marinella also criticizes women’s use of cosmetics, a striking departure from her father’s recommendations on how women may improve their physical aspect. “I maintain that, although a woman may be beautiful,” the elder Marinello wrote, “it is not inappropriate for her to try to improve her appearance, as nothing in this world is perfect.” Marinella’s polemical stance would return in *Esportazioni*, which suggests a certain consistency of her views. Another recurring feature of her career is her production of hagiographical works, both in prose and in rhyme. After *La colomba sacra and Vita del Serafico e glorioso San Francesco*, she wrote *Vita di Maria Vergine* (1602), *Vita di Santa Giustina* (Life of St. Justina, 1606), and *De’ Gesti heroici, e della vita maravigliosa della Serafica Santa Caterina* (*The Heroic Deeds and Wonderful Life of the Seraphic Saint Catherine*, 1624).

The dedication of *Amore innamorato et impazzato* (*Cupid in Love and Driven Mad*, 1598) to Caterina Medici Gonzaga, duchess of Mantua, attests to Marinella’s desire to strengthen her ties with the Gonzaga court. Recalling the favors and gifts already received (“titoli, e […] magnificenza de’ doni”), the author pledges all of her future works to the Gonzagas—a promise that she would not honor. Marinella introduces her poem, a psychomachy, with an explanation of its allegory: the protagonists Cupid, Iridio, and Ersilia respectively symbolize the struggle among the concupiscible, irascible, and rational parts of the soul, a battle that eventually ends with the triumph of rationality and faith. In the poem’s elaborate allegorical system, Venus, who asks Jupiter to forgive wayward Cupid, symbolizes the saint who intercedes with God on a sinner’s behalf, while Cupid’s cleansing

36. “Questo cotanto voglio dire, che, benché una donna sia bella; non le si disidca lo accrescere della sua bellezza: conciosia che niuna cosa sia al mondo perfetta” (Giovanni Marinello, *Gli ornamenti delle donne vi*).
37. In *Le nobiltà*, Marinella instead considers luxury a sign of women’s superiority (26).
38. Plato discusses the tripartite structure of the soul in the *Republic* (see in particular 439e–441a).
in the fountain of Ardenna indicates the importance of the “redeem-
ing waves of confessions, sacraments and penance.”

Nothing about Marinella’s first steps into the literary world foreshadowed the ambitious treatise that she would publish in 1600 and that has earned her fame among modern readers: *Le nobiltà et eccellenze delle donne et i diffetti, e mancamenti degli huomini* (*The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Flaws of Men*). This work appears to be inspired in part by the author’s desire to respond to Giuseppe Passi’s *I donneschi difetti* (*Women’s Defects*), a 1599 misogynist tract. In thirty-five chapters, Passi employed religious and classical sources to denounce women’s alleged shortcomings. In *Le nobiltà*, Marinella relied instead mainly on vernacular authorities to affirm women’s superiority and denounce men’s wrongdoings. The volume underwent two subsequent editions, in 1601 and 1621. The former is particularly important and often considered, implicitly or explicitly, to be the reference edition.

In this version the first part, which is in praise of women, concludes with an additional four short chapters that reject the opinions of Ercole Tasso and Arrigo of Namur, Sperone Speroni, Torquato Tasso, and Giovanni Boccaccio. The audacity with which Marinella confronts such established authorities makes these chapters particularly impressive. She debunks Torquato Tasso’s


42. The 1601 and 1621 editions bear a slightly different title: *La nobiltà et l’eccellenza delle donne co’ difetti et mancamenti de gli huomini*.

distinction between “female virtue” (virtù femminile) and “womanly virtue” (virtù donneasca), and proceeds to claim equal rights for all women, regardless of social class or public role. These are the most revolutionary passages Marinella would ever write. She also considerably expanded the part devoted to men’s flaws, bringing it to thirty-five chapters—the same number in Passi’s tract.

Marinella’s attitude toward Aristotle is complex. The philosopher provides the foundation for her arguments—especially as far as the definitions of virtues and vices are concerned—but is also chastised as “tiranno et pauroso” (“a tyrant and a coward”) and “huomo di poco ingegno” (“man of little wisdom”). She mockingly calls him “buon compagno” (“good buddy”) and “cattivello” (“mean little guy”), a man whose judgment was ultimately obfuscated by negative personal experience. Plato, on the contrary, is celebrated as wise, a great man, and truly fair (“saggio”, “grande huomo, in vero giustissimo”) for his support of women’s participation in public life and access to education, especially in the fifth book of Republic.

Apart from customary references to the classics, Marinella’s work displays a considerable degree of familiarity with the vernacular tradition, from Dante and Petrarch to Ariosto, Tansillo, Tasso and Fonte. She amasses quotes and examples, demonstrating her awareness of the tradition’s preference for erudition over originality. As the first Italian woman to experiment in this genre Marinella needed to convince readers of her credentials, and she successfully accomplishes that goal.

The ambitious Le nobiltà constitutes a parenthesis in Marinella’s outpouring of devotional literature, which resumed in 1602 with the publication of La vita di Maria Vergine imperatrice dell’universo. Forgetting her pledge to the Gonzagas, Marinella addressed this new work to the Venetian doge and Senate. La vita presents its subject in two formats, poetry and prose, and judging from the number of edi-

45. Marinella, La nobiltà (1601 edition), 32.
46. Marinella, La nobiltà (1601 edition), 27 and 119.
47. Marinella, La nobiltà (1601 edition), 33 and 32.