1 Introduction

On December 27, 1595, Lucrezia Marinella wrote a letter from Venice to the Duchess of Ferrara, Margherita Gonzaga. A month earlier she had sent the Duchess a copy of her first book, newly published, *La Colomba sacra, poema heroico* (*The Sacred Dove*), through an intermediary. After setting out that fact, Marinella writes:

> not having to date received any response I am surprised, and suspect one of two causes: either Your Highness was not pleased with the gift, or else Your Highness did write to me, and the letter has gone astray. However that may be, let Your Highness favour me, if she should consider me unworthy of her grace, at least by consoling me with one of her letters. That would give me heart to write poetry more happily. I wish to receive a response from you even more because I am often beset by this or that gentlewoman who asks me what response I have had from you.

Marinella was young, without an established reputation, but the tone of the letter is remarkably confident. She makes clear that she expects a reply, even if the book is not to the liking of the Duchess, and that the knowledge of the Duchess's displeasure would not stop her writing. The letter also reveals that Marinella had informed her acquaintance (the "gentlewomen") that she had sent a copy of *La Colomba sacra* to the Duchess, which suggests that she was open about her literary aspirations. The letter is polite and is signed "a devoted servant of Your Highness," but it is remarkably unfawning (particularly when compared with contemporary letters to the Duchess by male courtiers), without the customary inflated praise offered by someone seeking patronage. It reveals something of Marinella's character: the ambition, the confidence, the willingness to promote her work, the commitment to a writing career, and – if only implicitly – the appreciation of political power wielded by a woman. It was effective: on January 10, 1596, the Duchess sent a response through her secretary, enclosing "a small gift" that Marinella, in her reply of January 17, says she will keep with her "unto the dark tomb."[1]

2 Life and Works

2.1 Life

Lucrezia Marinella was born into a family of *cittadini* (citizens), "a peculiarly Venetian status category standing between the ruling patriciate and the *popolo* [people]" who were "excluded from holding political office but otherwise comparable to the lower ranks of the patriciate in terms of wealth, education,

[1] The original exchange of letters is in the Archivio di Stato di Modena, Archivio Segreto Estense Cancelleria, Archivio per materie, Letterati Busta 34, Fasc. 28.

and social prestige."[2] Her status as a *cittadina* allowed her to pursue her intellectual career; had she been a member of the "*popolo*" she would not have had the education or the liberty necessary to write and publish, and had she been patrician it would have been considered inappropriate for her to do so.

Of Marinella's mother no record survives. Her father, Giovanni Marinelli, was a physician, who published a number of medical works, two of which concerned women. They were written in the vernacular, which suggests that he intended them to be read by women; one was a guide to hygiene and beauty, the other a work on the illnesses of women.[3] Marinella's brother Curzio was also a physician who wrote medical treatises and commented on two historical works, which showed him to be a proponent "of a Machiavellian, aristocratic republicanism," popular in Venice in that period.[4] The family context thus embraced literary pursuits, a knowledge of natural philosophy and medicine, and an aristocratic republicanism, all of which had a bearing on Marinella's work.

There is conflicting evidence on the date of Marinella's birth in Venice, which was either in 1571 or in 1579.[5] In 1607 Marinella married another physician, Girolomo Vacca, with whom she had two children, Antonio and Paolina. Since her husband's family was property-owning and well-connected, it is likely that her marriage raised her status somewhat and placed her in a wider social milieu.[6] Marinella had lived in Venice until her marriage, and returned there with Vacca after some years in Padua. When her husband died in 1629, Marinella remained in Venice, where, as a *cittadina* and a widow, she was able to act on behalf of her family in legal and financial transactions.[7] Her primary political loyalty was to Venice – she declared herself to be "*suddita*"

[2] V. Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), p. 5; V. Cox, *The Prodigious Muse: Women's Writing in Counter-Reformation Italy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), p. 5.

[3] *Gli ornamenti delle donne* (1562) and *Le medicine partenenti alle infirmità delle donne* (1563, rev. 1574). On Giovanni Marinelli, see F. Lavocat, "Introduzione," in L. Marinella, *Arcadia felice* (Florence: Olschki, 1998), p. xi.

[4] Lavocat, "Introduzione," p. xii.

[5] According to the record of her death in the church of San Pantalon in Venice, Marinella was eighty-two, which would have made her year of birth 1571; S. Haskins, "A Portrait," in A. Cagnolati (ed.), *A Portrait of a Renaissance Feminist: Lucrezia Marinella's Life and Works* (Rome: Aracne, 2013), pp. 13–14. But a portrait of Marinella painted in 1601 had a legend saying that she was twenty-two in that year, which would suggest, alternatively, that 1579 was the year of her birth; Haskins, "A Portrait," p. 12, n. 3; L. Benedetti, "Le *Essortationi* di Lucrezia Marinella: l'ultimo messaggio di una misteriosa Veneziana," *Italica*, 85:4 (2008), 393, n. 12. For the most comprehensive account of the facts of Marinella's life, based on notarial documents, see S. Haskins, "Vexatious Litigant, or the Case of Lucrezia Marinella? New Documents Concerning her Life (Part I)," *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* 1 (2006), 80–128, and "(Part II)," *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* 1–2 (2007), 203–230.

[6] Haskins, "A Portrait," p. 30.

[7] Haskins, "A Portrait," p. 33.

(subject) to the Republic of Venice in the dedication of *La vita di Maria Vergine imperatrice dell'universo* (*The Life of the Virgin Mary, Empress of the Universe*) to the Doges of Venice in 1602.[8] But she also implies an ongoing connection with Modena in a letter to the Duchess of Ferrara in that same year, written to accompany a copy of the same work, by saying that her father was born in Modena, and that she wished to be "*Suddita*" to the Duchess.[9] She died of quartan fever (malaria) in 1653, at the age of eighty-two.[10]

If Marinella's social class was one factor in making possible her literary career, her education was another. There is little documentary evidence of that education, but in dynastic families in the courts of northern Italy in the sixteenth century it was usual to educate women, and in some cases the aspirations of Venetian *cittadini* to emulate the patrician class may have motivated fathers to educate their daughters. Among humanists generally the literary and philosophical cultivation of daughters could be seen as a flattering reflection of their own education.[11] It is reasonable to assume that Marinella had access to her father's and eventually her husband's libraries, and that the knowledge of moral and natural philosophy, as well as literature, that she demonstrates in her work was obtained at home. Her references to Aristotle suggest a direct acquaintance with the Latin translations of some of his works, and she may have had instruction in that language.[12]

Marinella's intellectual connections extended beyond her family. She interacted with members of the second Accademia Veneziana, one of whom, Lucio Scarano, was its secretary and the dedicatee of her polemic *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne, co' diffetti et mancamenti de gli huomini* (*The Nobility and Excellence of Women, with the Defects and Vices of Men*) (Venice: Giovanni Battista Ciotti, 1601).[13] Boncio Leone, the author of a sonnet in praise of Marinella appended to *La Colomba sacra*, was the founder

[8] Lavocat, "Introduzione," p. xv.

[9] The Duchess was Virginia de' Medici, wife of Cesare d'Este (Haskins, "A Portrait," p. 13). The letter is in the Biblioteca Estense Universitaria in Modena (α.G.1.16 [54]).

[10] On the cause of Marinella's death, see Haskins, "A Portrait," pp. 33–34.

[11] Cox, *Women's Writing*, p. 6 and p. 262, n. 23, where Cox mentions Marinella as an example of this trend. For an excellent overview of humanism, see Margaret L. King, "A Return to the Ancient World?" in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 3–28. On the difficulties women encountered in obtaining an education in the century prior to Marinella, see Margaret L. King, "Six Learned Women of the Italian Renaissance," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 59:3 (Fall 1976), 280–304.

[12] See L. Marinella, *Exhortations to Women and to Others if They Please*, L. Benedetti (ed., trans., and intro.) (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2012), p. 38, p. 161, n. 299; see also S. G. Ross, *The Birth of Feminism: Woman as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 202.

[13] I refer to the Italian text as *La nobiltà* or *Nobiltà*; when citing the English translation by Dunhill, I refer to '*Nobility*'. Lavocat, "Introduzione," p. xiv; Cox, *Women's Writing*, p. 322, n. 3; S. Kolsky, "Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, Giuseppe Passi: An Early Seventeenth-Century Feminist Controversy," *The Modern Language Review*, 96:4 (2001), 975–977.

and president of the Accademia Veneziana.[14] The publisher of many of her works, Giovanni Battista Ciotti, was publisher to the Accademia; since Ciotti seems to have commissioned the *Nobiltà*, Marinella may have been writing her defense of women as a "semi-authorized spokeswoman for the academy"; certainly she had a "distanced but productive" relationship with the academy.[15] Many other of Marinella's dedicatees were women with some power at the courts of northern Italian cities (e.g., the duchesses of Mantua and Ferrara).[16] In dedicating her works to these women she may have hoped both to obtain cultural patronage and to reach a wider public among women.

The first of her works to be published, *La Colomba sacra*, appeared in 1595; her last work, *Holocausto d'amore della vergine Santa Giustina* (*The Inferno of Love of the Virgin Saint Justine*), was published in 1648. Between 1595 and her marriage in 1607, Marinella published nine books; nothing more from her appeared in print until 1624, when her biography of Saint Catherine of Siena was published, followed by several more works in a variety of genres until a few years before her death. To explain the hiatus in Marinella's publishing career, most scholars assume that during the period between 1607 and 1624 she was occupied with child-bearing and rearing.[17] One speculates that "the silence may have been due to the reception of *La Vita di Maria* [*Vergine*]" – but Marinella published three more works after it and before her marriage.[18] Another suggests a link between the demise of the second Accademia Veneziana around 1609 and this period of silence from Marinella.[19] What is clear is that Marinella wrote and published in every phase of her life: before marriage, in the later years of her marriage, and in widowhood. Neither youth, nor age, nor domestic duties suppressed her intellectual activity for long.

2.2 Works

Marinella wrote in Italian, sometimes quoting from Latin sources. Her oeuvre is remarkable for its extent, for the variety of genres in which she wrote, and for her interest in moral and natural philosophy.[20] Many of her works, including the

[14] Lavocat, "Introduzione," p. xiii.
[15] Cox, *Prodigious Muse*, pp. 18–19; Kolsky, "Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, Giuseppe Passi," pp. 976–977 and p. 975, n. 11. On the relation of women to academies, see V. Cox, "Members, Muses, and Mascots: Women and the Italian Academies," in J. Everson, D. V. Reidy, and L. Sampson (eds.), *The Italian Academies, 1525–1700: Networks of Culture, Innovation, and Dissent* (Cambridge and Abingdon: MHRA and Routledge, 2016), pp. 132–167.
[16] Cox, *Women's Writing*, p. 207.
[17] See, for example, Benedetti, "Le *Essortationi* di Lucrezia Marinella," p. 382.
[18] Haskins, "A Portrait," p. 31.
[19] Lavocat, "Introduzione," p. xiv.
[20] Cox, *Prodigious Muse*, pp. 6, 11; Meredith K. Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy: Women and Scientific Culture in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 93–110.

first and the last published, were hagiographies, biographies in prose or poetry of a number of saints and of the Virgin Mary that highlighted the inner lives and the spiritual authority of women; there was also a volume of religious verse (*Rime sacre* [*Sacred Rhymes*]) in 1603 that placed particular emphasis on women martyrs and their moral strength.[21] In addition to these devotional works, Marinella published fictional narratives in various genres: *L'Arcadia felice* (*Happy Arcadia*) (1605) is the first female-authored pastoral romance; *Amore innamorato, et impazzato, poema … con gli argomenti, et allegorie a ciascun canto (Love in Love, and Impassioned)* (1618) is a mythological-allegorical epic poem; *L'Enrico, ovvero Bisanzio acquistato, poema eroico* (*Enrico, or Byzantium Conquered*) (1635) is a historical "heroic" poem. Finally, and most importantly for Marinella's standing as a philosopher, are two polemical treatises defending and encouraging the moral worth of women, written at the beginning and the end of her career: the *Nobiltà* and the *Essortationi alle donne et a gli altri, se a loro saranno a grado* (*Exhortations to Women and to Others if They Please*) (Venice: Francesco Valvasense, 1645). These reflect the interest in women apparent in the devotional and fictional works, especially an interest in women who possess political power, spiritual authority, and moral agency. The polemics both conceive of women as moral agents with rational motivations, spiritual aspirations, and political aims.[22]

What Marinella wrote, and how her works were received, were influenced by certain historical and political events and trends. The Council of Trent (1545–63), an ecumenical council of the Catholic Church that decided matters of doctrine and practice, issued a number of condemnations and decrees in response to criticisms from Protestantism. This, on most accounts, led to a turn toward religion and morality in Italian literature at the end of the sixteenth century. Because this turn included an emphasis on traditional gender roles, it is sometimes assumed that the norms of post-Tridentine literature were unfriendly to women. But one of the consequences of the moral rigor encouraged in the period was that it gave rise to a "congenial habitat for women," allowing them to write in a wide variety of genres from which they had effectively been excluded when the norms of those genres would have marked a woman as licentious.[23] This may explain in part why Marinella was able to publish so much, in such a diverse range of genres, and why the reception of her work was laudatory. She

[21] Cox, *Prodigious Muse*, pp. 71, 156–157.
[22] For an overview and discussion of Marinella's literary career, see Stephen Kolsky, "The Literary Career of Lucrezia Marinella (1571–1653): The Constraints of Gender and the Writing Woman," in F. W. Kent and C. Zika (eds.), *Rituals, Images and Words* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), pp. 325–342.
[23] Cox, *Prodigious Muse*, pp. 27–28, 134–136.

was able to use the norms of the post-Tridentine period to strategic advantage in the *Nobiltà*, criticizing men for their divergence from the moral ideals of the time.[24] There was, however, a backlash, with a rise in misogyny in response to the increasing participation of women in literary culture by the turn of the century that led to an increase in their polemical writing.[25] That was the context in which Marinella wrote the *Nobiltà* in 1600–1. As the seventeenth century progressed, the climate for women as authors deteriorated, as it became more difficult to find powerful women as patrons, and publishers became less willing to print feminist work without such patronage.[26] This may explain why Marinella's second polemic, the *Essortationi* (1645), was couched in terms that suggested that women should accept their traditional roles in the household and as help-meets to men, although, as I will argue in Sections 7 and 8, the message of the *Essortationi* is also feminist.

Marinella's reputation was founded on brilliance, learning, and religious devotion. As a woman of literary and philosophical accomplishment Marinella was not unique, but she was exceptional. Her work was held in unusually high esteem by her contemporaries. As early as 1596 her intellect was praised in print by Girolamo Mercurio in his *La commare o riccoglitrice* (*La commare, or, the Midwife*).[27] Pietro Paolo Ribera lauded Marinella in 1609 as one of a series of "heroic" women, and emphasized her "noble and most religious ways."[28] In 1620 Francesco Agostino Della Chiesa characterized Marinella as the "sole phoenix of our time," remarking on her unequaled eloquence and erudition in his compendium of biographies of women writers, *Theatro delle donne letterate* (*Theatre of Learned Women*). Cristofano Bronzino praised Marinella as a "glory of our century, with that excellent discourse, entitled *The Nobility and Virtue of Women*," adding that she was "highly versed in natural and moral philosophy, devout, humble"; he took her *Nobiltà* as a model for his dialogue, *Della dignità e nobiltà delle donne* (*On the Dignity and Nobility of Women*).[29]

Despite this extensive and effusive praise, Marinella did not altogether escape the hostility that confronted many women writers, nor the disappointments of

[24] A. Dialeti, "A Woman Defending Women: Breaking with Tradition in Lucrezia Marinella's *La nobiltà, et eccellenze delle donne*," in A. Cagnolati (ed.), *A Portrait of a Renaissance Feminist: Lucrezia Marinella's Life and Works* (Rome: Aracne, 2013), pp. 69, 97.
[25] Cox, *Prodigious Muse*, p. 49. [26] Cox, *Women's Writing*, pp. 207, 222.
[27] Haskins, "A Portrait," p. 24 and n. 57.
[28] Cox, *Women's Writing*, pp. 141–143; Haskins, "A Portrait," p. 24.
[29] C. Bronzino, *Della dignità e nobiltà delle donne* (*On the Dignity and Nobility of Women*): (Florence: Zanobi Pignoni, 1622), first week, first day, p. 30, cited in Lavocat, "Introduzione," p. xv. See also Haskins, "A Portrait," p. 24. On the *Nobiltà* as a model for Bronzino, see R. Gogol, "The Literary Exchange between Lucrezia Marinella and Cristofano Bronzini," in L. Marinella, *De' gesti eroici e della vita meravigliosa della Serafica S. Caterina da Siena*, A. Maggi (ed.) (Ravenna: Longo, 2011), p. 218.

every writer. Some contested the authorship of her *Vita di Maria Vergine* (1602); the rumors were widespread enough that in a foreword to Marinella's *Arcadia felice* (1605) the publisher defended Marinella against "malicious slanderers."[30] Marinella may have had this episode in mind in the *Essortationi* when she deplores the inclination of men to doubt the authorship of learned women.[31] Even among feminists, Marinella was not immune to criticism: Anna Maria van Schurman, in a letter to Andrea Rivetus in 1638, referred to Marinella's *Nobiltà* as "extraordinary" (*insignem*), but also disapproved, saying that it was incompatible with virginal modesty, which perhaps says more about van Schurman than it does about the *Nobiltà*.[32]

Although Marinella's fame diminished soon after her death, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries some of her verse was reissued in anthologies of women poets.[33] Marinella appears in Bayle's *Dictionary* as "a Venetian lady who had considerable intelligence, and published among other books a work entitled *The Nobility* . . . . she carried the convictions of her sex, not merely to equality, as other authors did, but also to superiority."[34] By the nineteenth century her reputation was largely eclipsed, along with the reputations of many women philosophers.

In this Element the focus is on Marinella's most philosophical and feminist works: the *Nobiltà* and the *Essortationi*. I read both polemics as arguments for the worth and the abilities of women. The *Essortationi* appears to be much more conservative and includes specific denials of some of the claims of the *Nobiltà*. This leads some to construe it as a rejection of the vehemently pro-woman stance of the *Nobiltà*.[35] I agree, however, with those scholars who see clear evidence in the *Essortationi* that, as Amy Sinclair writes, it is "an extension of the [*Nobiltà*'s] targeted and explicit critique of the mechanisms used by male writers to propagate and reinforce the notion of women's subservience and their appropriate confinement within the home."[36] The apparent retractions are, on this interpretation, likely to be concessions to the changing context of

[30] Cox, *Women's Writing*, pp. 207, 219, 368, n. 224. [31] Marinella, *Exhortations*, p. 57.

[32] L. Panizza, "Introduction," in A. Dunhill (ed. and trans.), *Lucrezia Marinella: The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 31 and n. 67.

[33] Lavocat, "Introduzione," pp. xiv–xv, n. 90; Panizza, "Introduction," pp. 31–33.

[34] P. Bayle, *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, 3rd ed. (Rotterdam: Michel Bohm, 1720), vol. III, pp. 1937–1938, translation mine. Cited in Lavocat, "Introduzione," p. xiv, n. 43.

[35] See Benedetti, "Introduction" in Marinella, *Exhortations*, for the view that we should not "take Marinella's texts at face value when they proclaim principles appealing to twenty-first-century readers but … dismiss or creatively deconstruct them if they let us down" (p. 34). Benedetti treats the *Essortationi* as a "recantation" of the views Marinella expressed in the *Nobiltà*.

[36] A. Sinclair, "Latin in Lucrezia Marinella's *Essortationi alle donne* (1645): Subverting the Voice of Authority," in E. Del Soldato and A. Rizzi (eds.), *City, Court, Academy: Language Choice in Early Modern Italy* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 117. For a similar view, see P. Malpezzi Price

publication for women in the seventeenth century, concessions that are always followed by an undermining of their surface message, as we will see in Sections 7 and 8.[37]

3 Context

3.1 The *querelle des femmes*

Marinella's *Nobiltà* and her *Essortationi* were contributions to the *querelle des femmes*, a debate about the nature and the worth of women that unfolded in different phases in Europe from the medieval through the early modern period. Contributions to the *querelle* appeared in Latin and a number of vernacular languages, both in printed editions and as manuscripts that circulated in courts. Both men and women participated in the debate in a variety of genres; women almost always defended their sex, while men, both clerics and secular authors, wrote misogynist as well as pro-woman works.[38] Pro-woman contributions to the *querelle* introduce the claims and the arguments that are the origins of feminist theory in Europe.

The *querelle* began, on most accounts, with Christine de Pizan's response to *Le roman de la rose* (*The Romance of the Rose*), an allegorical poem by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung, written in the thirteenth century, that characterized women as unfaithful, deceptive, vain, loquacious, and lubricious.[39] De Pizan was critical of the *Roman*, objecting to the poem's obscene language, unfounded generalizations about women, and its incoherent suggestion that men should both pursue women and avoid them as "venemous serpent[s]."[40] That incoherence was characteristic of many works that represented women both as ideals and as distractions or temptations to men, with courtly love (a medieval code of attitudes to love and of behaviors appropriate for the nobility) and gallantry as one expression of masculinity, and misogyny as another. The exchange between the advocates for the *Roman* and de Pizan effectively established a structure for the *querelle*, in which those arguing for the worth of women were responding to those

and C. Ristaino, *Lucrezia Marinella and the "Querelle des Femmes" in Seventeenth-Century Italy* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), pp. 154–155.

[37] On the conservatism of the *Exhortations* and the likelihood that it was a response to political circumstances, see L. Benedetti, "Arcangela Tarabotti e Lucrezia Marinella: appunti per un dialogo mancato," *Modern Language Notes*, 129:3S (2014), S95.

[38] J. Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the 'Querelle des femmes,' 1400–1789," *Signs*, 8:1 (1982), pp. 4–28. See also J. J. Parry, "Introduction," in A. Cappellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), and C. McWebb, *Debating the "Roman de la rose": A Critical Anthology* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

[39] D. F. Hult, "The *Roman de la rose*, Christine de Pizan, and the *querelle des femmes*," in C. Dinshaw and D. Wallace (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women's Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 2.

[40] Hult, "The *Roman*," p. 2; see also C. de Pizan, *Debate of the "Romance of the Rose*," D. F. Hult (ed. and trans.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).