

**The Almost Forgotten Feminism of the Italian Renaissance:
A Look at Poets, Playwrights, and Prostitutes**

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During the sixteenth-century, feminist ideas flourished. The main factor of this trend was the Italian Renaissance. The Renaissance was an incubator for new ideas, as a result, society became more open to different voices in art; and women's voices entered the intellectual sphere. The Renaissance opened a door for women to establish themselves in intellectual society. Through this trend, women created and produced art through their wealth, creativity, and individualization. Examples of these women include Veronica Franco, Moderata Fonte, and Isabella Andreini. This paper will delve into feminist writing during the sixteenth-century and investigate the notions of societal female equality shared by Renaissance women.

The term Renaissance Feminism has been defined in many ways by historians in the field; one of the best interpretations of Renaissance Feminism looks at feminism through three different lenses. The first form of Renaissance Feminism is "Explicit Feminism," a critique of male supremacy. Explicit feminists believed that a woman's place in society did not correspond with natural law. Explicit feminism explores the idea of female community and articulates the woman's desire to have a public voice and platform.¹ The second form of Renaissance feminism is "Celebratory Feminism," which places an emphasis on female scholars and their status as such. This feminism strengthened the thought that women could be seen as intellectuals.² Finally, "Participatory Feminism," notes that women who complete the same authorial work as men shall be regarded as equal in matters of the mind. Whether or not the woman addresses this fact does not change the reality, which is that she is equal. This type of feminism challenges judo-Christian misogyny.³ These models of the feminist argument provide clear definitions of what categories of feminism existed during the sixteenth-century.

¹Sarah Gwyneth, Ross. *The Birth of Feminism: Woman as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England*. Harvard University Press (2009), 132.

²Ross, *Feminism*, 132.

³Ross, *Feminism*, 132.

Renaissance feminism was born in the home, successful females benefited from their families legitimacy. This domestic paradigm was a major contributor that made room for female voices; specifically during a period of extreme male dominance in the fields of literary, artistic, and musical exchange.⁴ Once female voices entered the sphere, their messages were spread and eventually, critiques of literary misogyny and the patriarchal system began to follow. This led to a more active call for female participation in male dominated fields. The continued praise of female participation ultimately proved that the literary world was listening, which prompted a growth of female literacy.⁵

It is important to note the role of patrons in the career of writers. All Renaissance writers published work with the aid of their patron who would supply funds. This was true for not only female writers, but male writers as well. But does this devalue the work of the authors?

The role of patrons does not devalue the work of authors. Yes, writers were given opportunities because of their patrons. In the case of female writers, the patron may have been their father or husband, in other cases, a sexual partner or mentor.⁶ This is true for all three of the Renaissance women I will be studying: Veronica Franco, Isabella Andreini, and Moderata Fonte. Veronica Franco entered the intellectual sector of society after meeting her patron and client Domenico Venier.⁷ Moderata Fonte made a name for herself through the collective effort of her grandfather Prospero Saraceni and family friend Niccolo Doglioni.⁸ Isabella Andreini exemplified a new range of possibilities for literary women but was able to do so with the help of

⁴Ross, *Feminism*, 133.

⁵Ross, *Feminism*, 133.

⁶Ross, *Feminism*, 133.

⁷Margaret, T. Rosenthal. *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice*. University of Chicago Press (1993), 5.

⁸Ross, *Feminism*, 195.

her husband Francesco Andreini.⁹ Without their patrons, these women would not have been heard during their time, and they may not have been discovered today. It is imperative to note that all writers needed patrons to support their work, regardless of gender.

Women of the Renaissance should not have their work, effort, or status as feminists diminished because they were supported by men.¹⁰ These women used men as a stepping stool of opportunity, and the men believed in them. These feminist writers were feminist because of what they wrote. Regardless of their male patrons, the work they produced were acts of feminism. And men can also be feminist, these patrons serve as an example of that; otherwise, why would they have supported womens work? The men had faith in their writers, they understood the value of the writers work.

When an opportunity presented itself to spread a message of equality, these women were not going to ignore it. And in every single case, the men were close relatives and friends of the females. Therefore, the women were taking the chance they received to further their literary careers. And within their work they were able to spread messages of equality. Their work popularized ideas of female equality in education and politics, which in turn spread support for the cause among willing readers. Readers who were educated in literacy were able to consume this information, and possibly became inspired by it. If a feminist sentiment is spread in order to create support, then the author must be a feminist.¹¹

Female writers used the power of their pen to shed light on their unequal treatment in everyday life. One of the main issues women faced was the perception of their intelligence by men; which was often negative. The Pre-Renaissance Period looked different for both men and

⁹Ross, *Feminism*, 212.

¹⁰Ross, *Feminism*, 314

¹¹Ross, *Feminism*, 314.

women when it came to education. Men were often educated and women were not. However, elite class women proved to have more opportunities than lower class women when obtaining education. In fact, they were more than able to attain an education which put them on an intellectually equal level with men. Therefore, the education of women depended heavily on their social status; and their status was contingent upon either their families or husbands wealth and popularity.¹²

Social class was a large factor in the everyday lives of Italian citizens. Peasant women worked with their husbands typically in farm work, later they would return home and take care of their children and the household. If they were the wife or daughter of a middle-class merchant, they would have assisted their husband within the business and taken care of their children and home. Upper class Renaissance women had a better chance at receiving an education. Upper class Renaissance women had two career choices; marriage or become a nun.¹³

One of the females studied in this paper chose neither of these options. Instead, she became a courtesan; which was not necessarily a career option however, it was a role that existed in society. A courtesan is a modern day prostitute. Courtesans would perform sexual favors on men for money. Typically these men would be wealthy enough to pay for such acts. These women were not necessarily highly respected for their work. They were especially not respected by the church and by wives of men who spent nights with courtesans. This career was a way to avoid a life of devotion to a man; the man being both God and a husband. It is important to note however that most women who had the option of becoming courtesans were upper class women. If they chose not to, they would likely be married off or sent to the nunnery.

¹²Virginia, Cox. *A Short History of the Italian Renaissance*. London, I.B. Tauris, (2015), 167.

¹³Virginia, Cox. *A Short History of the Italian Renaissance*. London, I.B. Tauris, (2015), 172.

In the Renaissance Period, marriages were far from the idea of love. They explicitly dealt with personal matters of family prosperity, loyalty, alliances, and civic institutional support. marriages were a form of currency and diplomatic exchange. Marriages reflected order and influence on society in each class; and only certain women could marry certain men within their social class. Typically, the young woman would be a child below the age of 20 and the man would be older around his 30s. The couple would be paired based on age in order to ensure the virginity of the young lady; of course, the man's virginity did not matter. A match would be identified by a broker or influential family member who had connections to the groom's family.¹⁴ But, before a woman could be married off she must present a dowry to her groom.

A dowry was a sum of value placed on a marriage. A dowry consisted of goods such as clothing, jewelry, property, and money. And families who wished to elevate their status would pay large dowries in order to marry their daughter off to a wealthy groom. Dowries were a substantial investment and if a family could not pay one then their bride could not be married off.¹⁵

Traditionally, one woman from a family would be able to marry; if she had sisters, they would likely become nuns but this was not always the desired choice. One young woman per family could reasonably be married off, otherwise it would be too expensive. Most, if not all families would not be able to afford another marriage dowry. This is because the dowry depended on the wealth of the bride's family. If the family wished to gain mobility, they would pay a large dowry to a groom of higher status. No woman would marry into a significantly less wealthier family, the ultimate goal was to marry richer. The richer the suitor, the more expensive the dowry would be. However, it is important to note that in order for a woman to become a nun,

¹⁴Virginia, Cox. *A Short History of the Italian Renaissance*. London, I.B. Tauris, (2015), 178.

¹⁵Virginia, Cox. *A Short History of the Italian Renaissance*. London, I.B. Tauris, (2015), 179.

a dowry would also be paid. This dowry would be significantly less expensive than a marriage dowry. Traditionally, socially upward families would use this strategy.¹⁶

Veronica Franco

Veronica Franco was the most famous Venetian courtesan in history. Franco's family could not afford a respectable marriage dowry and she refused to join the nunnery, therefore, she became a courtesan. Franco born in 1546 Venice lived a very illustrious life as both a poet and courtesan.¹⁷ Franco was born into a prestigious family with a venetian coat of arms; because of her family's nativeborn status they belonged to the professional caste that made up the government bureaucracy in Venice. Her parents were Paola Fracassa and Francesco Franco. Franco was the only daughter of her parents and was married to Paolo Panizza, although, not soon after, she separated from him. Franco birthed six children from all different men with only three children surviving beyond their infancy.¹⁸

Due to the circumstances Franco was born into, her intellectual life began at a young age. She was very fortunate compared to the other women of the time. She shared her brothers education by being present for their private tutor sessions.¹⁹ She continued her education in her later life by attending literary gatherings of writers and painters. In the late 1560s Franco began her life as the Cortigiana Onesta.²⁰ She began to provide men with physical favors in exchange for money; this is when her career as a poet flourished.

As a courtesan Franco captured the interest of Domenico Venier, head of the most renowned literary academy in Venice.²¹ Venier was a well respected poet; and one of Franco's

¹⁶Virginia, Cox. *A Short History of the Italian Renaissance*. London, I.B. Tauris, (2015), 182.

¹⁷Edited by Margaret F. Rosenthal and Ann Rosalind Jones. "Veronica Franco" in *Poems and Selected Letters*. University of Chicago Press (1998), 2.

¹⁸Rosenthal and Jones, *Poems and Letters*, 2.

¹⁹Rosenthal and Jones, *Poems and Letters*, 4.

²⁰Rosenthal and Jones, *Poems and Letters*, 3. Translation: Honest Courtesan

²¹Rosenthal and Jones, *Poems and Letters*, 7.

clients. Franco often visited him at his private library. Venire would later become Franco's reader, protector, and patron; after which, her work began to be published. By Franco's mid-twenties she was requesting to publish her sonnets that commemorated men of the Venetian elite.²² Nine of her sonnets were published in a volume named *Rime di diversi eccellentissimi autori nella morte dell'illustre sign*; she was also selected to edit this work. In the same year, Franco published her own volume of poetry, *Terze Rime*.²³

Franco took her opportunity as a courtesan and wrote about the situation of courtesans as well as everyday women. Franco wrote about women not only in her work but also in her private life. She spoke of practical economic concerns for a woman like herself in her two wills.²⁴ A common practice for women in the Renaissance was creating wills when they became pregnant. This was done in order to provide for their family in the possibility of death during childbirth. Franco left two wills, the first in 1564 when she was 18 years old. This was the first time that she was pregnant. In this will she left money for a dowry for her child if her child were a girl. She also left money to her female servants, and two poor unmarried Venetian women eligible for a charitable donation through her will.²⁵ Her second will was completed in 1570 and showed similar concern. In this will she left money for the marriages of two other Venetian women.²⁶ She wanted to assist other women who were not fortunate enough to have a dowry and who would ultimately lead lives as nuns or worse.

Franco was very open about her career as a courtesan in her poetry. And this is because people knew her for being a courtesan *meretrice sumptuosa*. A courtesan *meretrice sumptuosa*

²²Rosenthal and Jones, *Poems and Letters*, 7.

²³Rosenthal and Jones, *Poems and Letters*, 5. Translation: *Rhymes of various excellent authors in the death of illustriousness* and *Third Rhymes*.

²⁴Rosenthal and Jones, *Poems and Letters*, 4.

²⁵"Veronica Franco" in her will. University of Southern California, Dana and David Dornsife, College of Letters, Arts and Sciences (2013), will 1.

²⁶"Veronica Franco" in her will, will 2.

was a way of calling her a dirty prostitute. Therefore she had nothing to hide in her work. She celebrated her sexual enterprise rather than being ashamed by it.

Through her work, Franco challenges masculine discourses. She often directed her poems to particular men whom she requested responses from. An example of this is her work *Capitolo 16*. In this poem, Franco directly responds to a man who challenges her. Franco mainly defends herself against insults penned by Maffio Venire. Yes, Venire as in Domenico Venier, Franco's patron; Maffio was the nephew of Domenico.

“And blade in hand, I learned warrior skills, so that, by handling weapons, I learned that women by nature are no less agile than men. So devoting all my efforts to arms, I see myself now, thanks to heaven, at the point where I no longer fear harm from anyone...when we women, too, have weapons in training, we will be able to prove to all men that we have hands and feet and hearts like yours; and though we may be tender and delicate, some men who are delicate also are strong, and some, coarse and rough, are cowards.²⁷”

Franco was not afraid to challenge men through her poetry and work. She challenged traditional masculine ideas of strength and knowledge. She valued herself and other women higher than most men. She understood that women and men could be on the same level. In fact, she states that if men and women were given the same amount of opportunity, then they would be regarded as equals. She challenged men who challenged her. She told her challengers that women are no less agile than men in matters of the mind.²⁸ She knew that on an intellectual level she was more capable than a man; and she was not afraid to let this be known.

Franco stated that she would pick up her weapon and she would strike it down upon any enemy.²⁹ Her weapon was her pen and she would use it through writing. She boasted her intelligence and stated that she could write in multiple dialects of Italian. She goes so far as to

²⁷Rosenthal and Jones, *Poems and Letters*, 163.

²⁸Rosenthal and Jones, *Poems and Letters*, 166-7.

²⁹Rosenthal and Jones, *Poems and Letters*, 166-7.

say that her competitor could choose the dialect they write in. For she would be equally happy with them all, because she learned the dialects for the purpose of dueling intellectually with a man.³⁰ She was confident that she would win in a joust of words not only because of her education but because of her character and truth as a woman.

Franco's confidence in dueling male poets was something never before seen during the Renaissance Period. No female poet had ever challenged a male in such a public way. It was a true medieval duel, except instead of swords and blood the knights/writers used pens and ink. Franco's ability to ascend into upward nobility through her career as a courtesan is unlike any trajectory seen from the time period. Franco was able to propel her career as a poet through her career as a courtesan. She made a name for herself and was able to accrue enough money to support herself without a husband or father present in her adult life.

She served as an inspiration to other women although she did not always want other women to follow in her footsteps. When friends reached out to her for guidance in beginning their daughter's career as a courtesan, Franco warned them against the unpleasantries of the job.³¹ In a letter to her friend she stated "Although it is mainly a question of your daughter's well-being, I'm talking about you, for her ruin cannot be separated from yours... if she should become a prostitute, you would become her go-between and deserve the hardest punishment."³² She put women before men and she was open about her feelings about this during her lifetime. So much so that later in her life she began to receive a lot of hate. Which would allegedly attribute to her near death experience with the Venetian Inquisition in 1580.

³⁰Rosenthal and Jones, *Poems and Letters*, 166-7.

³¹ARTH 470. "Franco and the Women of Venice." University of Mary Washington, (2008). <https://venice.umwblogs.org/exhibit/veronica-franco-courtesans-and-venuses/franco-and-the-women-of-venice/>.

³²ARTH 470. "Franco and the Women of Venice."

Franco, accused of practicing magical incantations was pardoned after providing her own defense against these accusations.³³ After living a long life of 45 years Franco died impoverished after the plague and the trial took all her monetary worth from her. But, Franco lives in time as the wealthiest woman of the Renaissance in regards to her historical significance. Her mere existence as a courtesan who served as an example to others at a time where women were regarded as less than, proved to be true act of feminism that is still relevant today.

Moderata Fonte

Moderata Fonte, also known as Modeste Pozzo, was an Italian writer of the sixteenth-century. Fonte, another Venetian citizen, was born to a family of elite professional class. Her family was wealthy and privileged but her parents passed away of the plague a year after her birth in 1555.³⁴ Fonte's situation is quite unique; her possessions and money were subject to a lengthy court process following her parents death. Due to this, her marriage was delayed well into her twenties; because she did not have a proper dowry. Fonte went on to live with her grandparents.³⁵

While women did not have access to formal education Fonte, similar to Franco, received education through home tutors. Her step grandfather was a present force in her life that encouraged reading and writing; which would later inspire her career as a writer. Fonte's career took off in her early twenties when she began to live with her uncle Niccolò Doglioni; Doglioni became her guardian and he was also married to her childhood friend Saracena. Doglioni was well connected with the literary elite of Venice and pushed for Fonte to publish her work.³⁶

³³Marylin, Migel. *Veronica Franco in Dialogue*. University of Toronto Press, 2022.

³⁴Virginia, Cox. Biography of "Moderata Fonte (1555-1592)." University of Chicago Library, 2004. <https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/IWW/BIOS/A0016.html>.

³⁵Cox, Biography of "Moderata Fonte."

³⁶Cox, Biography of "Moderata Fonte."

Her work would be well received by many, so much so that her dialogues were performed for the Venetian Doge. Fonte, like the two other women studied in this paper, authored volumes of verse dedicated to kings and Venetian noblemen.³⁷ These types of works were very important for writers to produce at the time because it would earn them respect.

After gaining respect as a writer Fonte became most known for her publication: *The Worth of Women*. Her writing solely centered on the role of male dominance over women in society. When *The Worth of Women* focused on the life of women rather than commemorating the life of the man.

The Worth of Women is a fictional dialogue between seven Venetian noblewomen that takes place over the course of two days.³⁸ Though fictional, this may have been a discussion that took place in real life during the time. On the first day, the seven women debate whether men are good or bad. They discuss the dignity of women and the traditional job and role women had in society. On the second day, the women review their general knowledge of natural history and culture. They relate this back to their discussion on the sexes. In *The Single Self* by Virginia Cox, the author focuses on the female arguments made by Moderata Fonte; she specifically narrows in on Fonte's emphasis on women challenging their role in society. Rather than arguing that a woman is better than or equal to a man Fonte focused on the empowerment of Renaissance females.³⁹ Cox believes that this was extremely clever. She states "a significant indicator of this seriousness is the fact that unlike previous 'defenders of women'...(Fonte) dictate[s] some of [her] energy to contemplating ways in which women might rouse themselves from their 'long

³⁷Cox, Biography of "Moderata Fonte."

³⁸Virginia, Cox. "The Single Self: Feminist Thought and the Marriage Market in Early Modern Venice." *Renaissance Quarterly* 48, no. 3, 1995, 514.

³⁹Cox, "Single Self," 516.

sleep' and use their energies to free themselves from their dependence on men."⁴⁰ Cox indicates that the tone behind Fonte's ideas suggest that she should be taken seriously. Fonte was genuinely and openly criticizing male supremacy.⁴¹

Fonte conveys thoughts of an armed female uprising through her character Lenora. Again while fictional, these were thoughts that Fonte and other women may have had during the time. Her more realistic aspirations centered on improved educational and public life participation opportunities.⁴² Furthermore, Moderata Fonte's use of character development in the second part of her book reinforces the idea that women are and could be intellectually equal to a man.⁴³ In the second part of the book the women have discussions on topics such as geography, meteorology, politics, law, and medicine. Not only was Fonte conveying female intelligence through her characters but, she was vicariously showing the readers that she had knowledge on these areas. Cox states, "the '*official*' theme of the second day's discussions... was the question of whether and by what means men could be persuaded to abandon their misogynist views."⁴⁴ This was an extremely controversial dialogue to put in a work that would inevitably be read by thousands during the time. Especially due to the fact that Fonte had made a name for herself before releasing *The Worth of Women*. Nonetheless, she did so without holding back.

It is more than clear that Fonte's work directly opposed the traditional values of society. In fact, it was an open challenge; the very name *The Worth of Women* proves this point. Fonte essentially stated that women are worth more than society believed them to be; this is especially on the intellectual level. In Fonte's work she writes about things that she learned in a modern

⁴⁰Cox, "Single Self," 521.

⁴¹Cox, "Single Self," 526.

⁴²Cox, "Single Self," 520.

⁴³Cox, "Single Self," 525.

⁴⁴Cox, "Single Self," 524.

education, such as politics and medicine. These are the topics that she may have learned as or been inspired to learn from her home tutors and step grandfather as a child. Fonte used herself as an example through the voices of her characters in her pastoral drama. Ultimately, Fonte held the knowledge that she wrote into her female characters. This drama would inspire those that were able to read it. Her play exemplified her life experiences and showed other women that it was not normal for women to be considered less than. It placed emphasis on the female education and mind; it displayed the true worth of women.

Isabella Andreini

In Italy during the late sixteenth-century, the genre of pastoral dramas began to become increasingly popular. Additionally, during this time professional theater took up roots on the stage, in the amphitheater, and in the streets. Women began to act on the stage rather than men acting out female roles. This helped advance theater as more and more people became devout followers, mostly because there were females on the stage. Females empowered and enabled the expansion of the theater. And with the introduction of women to theater, came *Commedia dell'Arte* which focused around romantic plot points between two characters, the *innamorati*. These *innamorati* scenes drew heavily from the Petrarchan model. The pastoral theater drama drew inspiration from *Commedia dell'Arte* and pastoral writing. It emerged from poetry that idealized nature and rural life. Pastoral dramas put an emphasis on romanticizing the lives of country folk. Isabella Andreini, the first feminist we are taking a look at in this paper, revolutionized the pastoral drama during her time.

Isabella Andreini was born in Padua to Venetian parents in 1562. Andreini became very well known for her work as a *Commedia dell'Arte* actress.⁴⁵ Andreini was extremely famous for

⁴⁵Ilana, Walder-Biesanz. "Writing Pastoral Drama as a Woman and an Actor: Isabella Andreini's *Mirtilla*." *Italian Studies* 71, no. 1, 2016, 49.

her work as an actress and writer. She published two major works in her lifetime and her patron helped publish two final works after her death in 1604. Her first and most famous work was *Mirtilla*, 1588. In this work Isabella used her first-hand experience as an actress to rewrite the traditional pastoral play *Aminta* by Torquato Tasso with a feminist twist. She inverted and satirized a standard patriarchal work into her own. The second work she became known for was *Rime*, 1601.⁴⁶ Published over 10 years later in 1601 *Rime* reflected ideas in both *Mirtilla* and in Andreini's life. In this work Andreini demonstrated her awareness of literacy and the dramatic process.

In the same year Andreini noted in a letter to a friend that she had begun a third literary project; a collection of letters. The work would not be released until three years after her death in 1607. The piece was called *Lettere di Isabella Andreini padovana comica gelosa*, and although the name alludes to a collection of "letters," it was a collection of monologues. The work was published under Andreini's name by her husband and patron Francesco Andreini.

A final project would be released in 1620, again with the assistance of Francesco Andreini; although this time, Andreini did not prepare for the piece to be published. Instead, it was released by Flaminio Scala in order to commemorate her life's work.⁴⁷ The literature was a collection of dialogues that Isabella had created after her experience in the Commedia dell'Arte theater space. It was titled *Fragment di alcune scritture della signora Isabella Andreini comica gelosa e accademia intenta*.⁴⁸

It is important to note that all of Andreini's works centered around the thing she loved most: theater. Each of them incorporated her experiences as an actress in Commedia dell'Arte. And most of them were satirized versions of Commedia dell'Arte which was a play form that

⁴⁶Walder-Biesanz, "Writing Pastoral Drama," 51.

⁴⁷Walder-Biesanz, "Writing Pastoral Drama," 51.

⁴⁸Walder-Biesanz, "Writing Pastoral Drama," 52.

ironically served as a comedy. The traditional list of Commedia dell'Arte characters includes the innamorati. The Innamorati are the two main characters in love. One of the most notable uses of the innamorati are Romeo and Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Andreini took these traditional characters and turned them on their heads. Andreini would expertly display how these classic stylized compositions of love and relationships focus on the man rather than the woman. She showed how the woman was an object of the man's desire.⁴⁹ Andreini was able to show this stylistically by having two characters, a male and female, played by one person. This was a style that Andreini herself was famous for on her own; as one of the skills her most notable acting skills was adopting a hermaphroditic stage presence.⁵⁰ And by doing this, she became popular for her work not just as an actress, but as a writer.

Part of what distinguishes Andreini from the other female playwrights of her time was how popular she was when her first play came out. Her performances were seemingly unlike any other. While men enjoyed watching women in the theater, they often regarded actresses as less than. But, Andreini was able to gain the respect of many; so much so that her first play *La Mirtilla*, sold out rather quickly. The play was re-printed nine times, issued in both Paris and Italy for a two and a half decade period.⁵¹

The plot of *La Mirtilla* is rather complicated but that was the point of pastoral dramas. The play centers around love entanglement. A man named Igilio is in love with Filli and Filli loves Uranio who is also loved by Mirtilla but, Uranio is in love with Ardelia and Ardelia wants

⁴⁹Walder-Biesanz, "Writing Pastoral Drama," 54.

⁵⁰Walder-Biesanz, "Writing Pastoral Drama," 54.

⁵¹Walder-Biesanz, "Writing Pastoral Drama," 56.

to love no one. By the end, a man named Tirsi falls in love with Mirtilla, Igilio wins the love of Filli, and Uranio gains the love of Ardelia; all through threats of suicide of course.⁵²

The feminist ideas shine through in Andreini's reflection scene. This scene centers around Ardelia, it aims to inspire the audience by holding up a mirror to the character; this is why it is the reflection scene.⁵³ Whereas in the original drama this character fails to self-reflect, in Andreini's version, she successfully does so. In the height of the dramatic love entanglement Andreini's character Ardelia finds out she is the romantic victim of her own reflection.⁵⁴

Andreini undermines the purity of the Petrarchan model by shifting the traditional view of the audience from the male gaze into a much more poetic understanding of the character.⁵⁵ And although this does not fully eliminate the male gaze from the character Ardelia, it essentially satirizes the excesses of it. Andreini takes her character Ardelia and allows her to speak for herself during the reflection scene. She draws on classical models of knowing one's self and echoes lines of metamorphosis.⁵⁶ Ardelia states "spero che si come ho rinnovato, di narciso infelice il crudo scempio, così a guisa di lui debba fortuna, dar fine al mio dolor con la mia morte."⁵⁷ This self-awareness shows the audience that Ardelia sees what the audience sees. She understands the mockery of it all; and what the audience would have been laughing at during the

⁵²Edited by Valeria Finucci and Julia Kisacky. *Isabella Andreini: Mirtilla, A Pastoral*. Iter Press, 2018.

⁵³Alexia, Ferracuti. "Reflections of Isabella: Hermaphroditic Mirroring in *Mirtilla* and Giovan Battista Andreini's *Amor nello specchio*." Escholarship.org
https://escholarship.org/content/qt4br8n5zs/qt4br8n5zs_noSplash_e8a8b6555e28afe23d041f8dcdf90bb.pdf?t=ntbubx.

⁵⁴Finucci and Kisacky. *Mirtilla*, Scene 4, The Nymph Ardelia.

⁵⁵Walder-Biesanz, "Writing Pastoral Drama," 56.

⁵⁶Finucci and Kisacky. *Mirtilla*, Scene 4, The Nymph Ardelia.

⁵⁷Finucci and Kisacky. *Mirtilla*. Scene 4, The Nymph Ardelia 2601-4, 212-213. Translated: I hope that just as I have renewed the cruel havoc of an unhappy narcissus, so, like him, fortune should end my pain with my death.

entire play. It even adds a note of tragedy to her life because the play becomes more serious as a result of this reflection.

So what exactly makes Isabella Andreini a feminist? How does her work as a playwright an actress attribute to proto-feminism during the Renaissance Period? Andreini's rewriting of traditional play styles like Commedia dell'Arte and the pastoral drama creates a new level of satire theater. She helped raise the professionalism of female actresses as well as aiding the transition of presentational and representational styles of theater. Not only this but, Andreini was already famous when she published her first play *La Mirtilla*; as stated, she was well known for her acting. She pushed the boundaries of what a woman was able to do in the theater while also remaining well respected in her community. This was because she successfully filled her societal gender roles. She was a woman who fulfilled her motherly and wifely duties in the home and maintained a perfect reputation. And with this, she could on stage transgress most acceptable forms of femininity. She played with gender, she crossed lines, she pushed the envelope and she did more so than any other woman during her time. Andreini revolutionized the theater by changing theater gender expectations of her time. She blazed a valuable future for female playwrights and actresses to come.

So much so, that her work was published even after her death; and by men nonetheless. Her work that challenged the male gaze and Petrarchan ideas was published by men after her death. They chose to posthumously honor her because they knew how innovative her work was. This displays how Andreini was able to successfully make a name for herself and create a new platform for women in the theater space.

Franco, Fonte, and Andreini each made waves in their own ways during their time. Franco, born in Venice built a life on the wealth she accumulated in her career as a courtesan.

She used her career as the cortigiana onesta to advance her writing in Venetian society. Through her role as a courtesan, she met her patron Domenico Venier who helped her grow her career as a poet. She was well respected and well known for her talents as a courtesan. So much so that King Henry III chose her to bed. Once the plague hit Venice, the church took a much larger role. The Inquisition accused Franco of witchcraft. This was a front, they had believed prostitutes like Franco, angered God which caused him to send the plague. They argued that Franco was a witch because she bewitched so many men, especially married ones. Although Franco survived her trial, it took her money and reputation. While her life comes to an unfortunate end, one can not help but be inspired by her story. Franco put other women before men, even though she had sex with men all the time. It is interesting because she ultimately benefited from the relationships she had with men as a result of her job. She used being a courtesan to her advantage. Not only did she make money bedding men but she made a name for herself, and met her patron through being a prostitute. And while all of this is true, she also warned others about the courtesan lifestyle, she knew it was not a sufficient way to live. Ultimately, she wanted to change the world so that courtesanship would not have to be the best option that young women had to live independently.

Moderata Fonte expertly defined the worth of women in her play *The Worth of Women*. Ironically, women were not worth much in society. However, what Fonte displays in her work is that women were worth so much because of their dowries. She made others question why dowries were so expensive, especially if women were not worth much in society. It made people reflect on the worth of women, which of course forced them to understand that women were worth a lot. In fact, they were worth just as much as men; not only metaphorically but intellectually. Fonte rightfully held up a mirror to society and said “look.”

Finally, Isabella Andreini liberated women in the field of acting. She set new precedents in the career. She used gender and sex as a way to make change; and she did this by playing both men and women on stage. She used her talent as an actress to bring hermaphroditic characters played by women to the acting world. Not only that but she used her popularity as a well established and respected woman to her advantage when she published her first play *Mirtilla*. *Mirtilla* would also serve to change the world of theater. This is because it brought a level of self awareness to a comedic play structure, one where the woman would often be depicted as clueless. This new level of consciousness proved to pull back the curtain on the traditional understanding of women in society. It showed that women were in fact not clueless, they were not simply searching for love, and they could be as intelligent as men.

Each of these womens publishing's were a testament to the thoughts of Italian women during the Renaissance. A great portion of females were thinking like Franco, Fonte, and Andreini. Female liberation was at the forefront of society, even feminist men were getting on board with the thought. These women were the pioneers of feminism in Italy. They wrote the blueprints for females to come. Without these women, society would not have advanced as much as it did, although, it is a shame that female liberation did not occur sooner.

For centuries, women have been separated from education and from one another in order to discourage connectedness. These writings were a way for women to communicate; and the three women in this paper were all alive for a certain amount of years at the same time. Veronica Franco 1546 to 1591, Moderata Fonte 1555 to 1592, and Isabella Andreini 1562 to 1604. These women were living amongst each other for 29 years. However, the chance that they knew or read each other's work is low. Franco's poetry was released in the mid 1570s and early 1580s, Andreini's was released in the late 1580s, and Fonte's most famous work was published in 1600

after two of their deaths. Although I would love to imagine a world where Franco and Fonte attended a performance of Andreini, I am a realist and I understand that the likelihood of this is little to none. There are certainly no surviving accounts of this happening. However, I can not help but think to myself: what if these women were releasing work at the same time? It would most certainly serve as a form of communication between them. In fact their writing may have gotten even more “radical” as they played off each other’s ideas. Now I pose the question, if these three women sat down together in a room, what conversations would they have had?

If these women were in a room together there would be an incredible flow of ideas and imaginative visions of a utopian society. The society of course would be one where women were regarded as equal to men. I imagine that their conversations would have mirrored those described in *The Worth of Women*. These conversations could have been an explosion of feminist ideals.

Both Franco and Andreini have sexual undertones in their work. Franco played off of her role as a courtesan in her writing. She did not hide this part of her life from her readers, she embraced it. And Andreini’s performances were very sexual as female actresses were often thought of as sexual beings. Therefore, I imagine sexually liberating discussions from these two women. They would have certainly talked about sex and dominance; especially the power that can come along with sex and the sexual being.

Moderata Fonte and Veronica Franco both had sufficient childhood educations and both resided in Venice. This is not to say that Andreini was not of their caliber, but, I believe the two women would have connected on this front and begun to discuss topics in literature, science, and the humanities. Perhaps they would have discussed the piloted ideas of the scientific revolution which began in 1543.

Andreini and Fonte may have talked about men's hostility towards women. This is specifically because both of their famous works focus on the relationships between men and women; especially the love and hate between the two.

Ultimately, together, the three women would have discussed the way in which women could make advancements in society to be considered equal to men. Again, their conversations may have mirrored ideas in *The Worth of Women*. They may have discussed their ambitious individual work and how they sought to elevate the status of women to that of men; of course these ideas were presented through their writing. They would have argued amongst themselves that women had the same innate abilities as men, especially when similarly educated; Fonte and Franco could have attested to this. And one example of women being equal to men were the cases of widows. From this point the women would discuss dowries.

Dowries implied that women were a burden, so much so that a man would be paid to marry a woman. However, this opened the door for women to reclaim this wealth in the case of death. If a woman's husband and father both passed, then she would be the sole owner of her dowry. In this case, the woman would be in charge of her own life as she had jurisdiction over her money and property. The women would have discussed this idea and how it could lead to females becoming more aware of their societal worth. I believe that Fonte, Franco, and Andreini would have played upon this and used it as a tool to educate other women about how powerful they could be in society. If widows were able to claim this power, then the average woman could as well.

Marriage in general was a practice that focused on eliminating all moves for female equality. Marriage was, in its basic form, a transfer of property between a woman's father and husband. The biggest issue is that women did not have much of a choice Franco, Fonte, and

Andreini knew this and would have examined the role of marriage and work in female lives. They would have argued for more choices for women especially when it came to work. They would have focused their efforts for equality on social and educational equality. And my reason for believing so is because neither of them brought this up in their work. Instead however, they focused on the social equality of women and their arguments centered around education. If women were as intelligent as men then why were they not equal? Why were they powerless in choosing their destiny?

While, women were seemingly powerless, they had one extremely powerful tool: their voices; and these women knew how to use their voices to ignite feminism in others. This is something that they would have collectively understood and respected about one another. Therefore, they may have strategically found ways to do this together. Perhaps they would have joined forces to create a collection of letters, poems, or dialogues which would have been published. If this were the case women from all over Italy would have seen it and possibly acted upon it. For all we know there could have been a feminist uprising in the late sixteenth-century that had everything to do with these three powerful women getting together. This is exactly what men were afraid of and why they took such great lengths to isolate women from one another. Because, if women were able to have these intellectually stimulating conversations with each other, then the world would have looked much different. Gender equality would have been achieved considerably sooner than it was; and in the same breath I will say that women are still fighting for equality today.

If these women were able to congregate and have intellectual discussions in a room together, they would have more than likely been able to ignite a feminine uprising. It is without a doubt that female liberation would have been achieved sooner. These three women are more

alike than not, and this can be said about most women during the Italian Renaissance; mostly because they shared one thing in common: suppression. The strive to equality was a large goal to reach but it ignited a passion within and together, these women would have been unstoppable at reaching such a goal.

Ultimately, the path to equality is a constant struggle. So much so that women are still feeling the effects today. And it is no secret that women are as capable and in some cases superior to men. So why is it that equality is still a goal being strived for not only in Italy but all over the globe? It is our history that often defines us; so let these women serve as an example of what was and let their writing serve as an example of what should be. They held the torch that lit the way for women to come. This is a constant struggle but a struggle nonetheless; and they would be proud to see the strides made today. But, women will not stop fighting for equality until equality is achieved. Therefore, we must use women like Veronica Franco, Moderata Fonte, and Isabella Andreini as examples of women who stood up against oppression in a time where women were not supposed to stand; and we as women must be inspired to blaze a new trail ourselves.

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