

Chapter 2

'Querelle des femmes' and Debates on the 'Woman Question'

This chapter presents two major formal debates which occurred in the Italian Peninsula: The first debate arose through written publications, beginning with Giuseppe Passi's outrageous views in a 1599 article, and Lucrezia Marinelli's response. The articles were published between 1599 and 1645. The second debate was in the form of public presentations made by Giovanni Volpi and Guglielmo Camposampiero, in 1723, at the Accademia dei Ricovrati in Padua. This second debate was followed by a publication some years later that included the voice of two women: Aretafila Savini de' Rossi and Maria Gaetana Agnesi. Before presenting these two debates, the chapter begins with an examination of several centuries of writings by men and women in the Italian Peninsula on the 'woman question'; the key points address how each writer viewed the importance and type of education women should receive and women's role in society.

Throughout the ages, Italians were as inclined as the rest of Western Europe to view women as less capable, less rational, and less able to govern themselves than men. This destined women to spend their lives within the confine of the domestic space, raising children, taking care of the household, and helping their husband in his activities. But during the Renaissance (fourteenth century) Italians began to assimilate the concept of the 'exceptional woman' into their culture. The term referred to a woman who transcended the weaknesses of her sex and was more like a man than like a woman. The notion that some women could make themselves like men was partly the result of the culture of competitiveness in Italian society. The Italian Peninsula was divided into a dozen or so States, some of which were republics governed by a small group of leading families, while others were principalities or dukedoms ruled by a family with a short pedigree; their ancestors had conquered the territory and turned it into a Sovereign State. Or, like the Medici, they were a leading family of bankers gaining hereditary control of the State; later the Medici became the Dukes of Tuscany. The Pope controlled a large section of territory in the central part of the peninsula called the Papal Estates which included Bologna in some periods. The States and the families ruling them competed with each other for pre-eminence. Competition was military, economic, artistic, architectural, and cultural. Some families distinguished themselves by the intellectual brilliance of their members and thus brilliant women reflected favourably

on their clan. Men were very proud of their 'exceptional women' who were as brilliant as the most brilliant men. Whenever they could, these women's knowledge and abilities were displayed publicly to enhance the prestige and reputation of the family, the community, and the City or State.

In the rest of the world, since Antiquity, Western cultures had defined women as inferior beings, only fit to be wives and mothers. In all ages, there have been men and women on both sides of the question: those in favour of women's education and those against. The Greek philosophers, in particular Plato (429–347 BC) and Aristotle (384–322 BC), are famous for their stance on this question. In Plato's *Republic*, able women could be guardians equally with men if they received the same education as men. But women were nonetheless considered lesser human beings than male guardians. For Aristotle, women were 'deformed males' and inferior in mind and body and it is his view that has been predominant over the past two thousand years. In fact, in the twelfth century, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), an Italian Dominican, sought to reconcile Aristotle's thoughts with the Christian doctrine. He had translated several of Aristotle's works including the *Generation of Animals*. Christianity, throughout the ages, have viewed women as the Daughters of Eve, the original temptress responsible for humanity being expelled from the Garden of Eden.

The widespread belief in the moral and intellectual inferiority of women was publicly challenged in the late Middle Ages by Italian born Christine di Pisan (1363–1434). Her vigorous defence of women was the beginning of the 'Querelle des femmes', a debate over women's education and social role. Christine grew up at the Royal Court in France where her father was physician and astrologer to King Charles V. He ensured that she was well educated, and that she had access to the vast library available at the Court.

Di Pisan took up the battle against the misogynistic depiction of women in the thirteenth century medieval poem: *Roman de la Rose*. The first part of this poem, written by Guillaume de Lorris (circa 1230) was an allegorical novel glorifying courtly love; the second part, added in 1275 by Jean de Meung, was a vicious, bawdy attack on women (Stock 1978, 41). When she read the *Roman de la Rose*, Christine Di Pisan was shocked by its systematic denigration of women and of marriage, an attitude which was fairly common among Churchmen like de Meung (Stock 1978, 42). Her first response was a poem titled *Epistle to the God of Love* (1399) in which the character Cupid presents to the other gods a women's petition asking for an end to the outrages they were forced to bear (Stock 1978, 42). Meanwhile, she engaged in a public debate over the value of the *Roman*. She was severely attacked for her audacity to criticize 'a great work of literature' (*Roman de la Rose*), the clergy, and men in general. However, she did receive support from men like Jean Gerson (1363–1429), a famous French theologian, scholar, educator, reformer, poet, and Chancellor of the University of Paris. He defended Christine and called the *Roman de la Rose* immoral for disparaging marriage and women.

Subsequently, she published *The Book of the City of Ladies* in 1405, depicting the lives and accomplishments of several women, including natural philosophers (persons involved in science) and inventors. In this book, di Pisan demonstrated

that women could be as learned as men. She imagined a world, a 'city of ladies', where women could be whatever they wanted to be.

The dispute helped to establish di Pisan's reputation as a female intellectual who could assert herself effectively, and defend her claim to the male-dominated literary realm. As a widow with three children, Christine Di Pisan supported herself and her family with her pen. She continued throughout her life to counter the abusive literary treatment of women. The debate initiated by di Pisan quickly spread to Italy where the Renaissance was beginning to flourish under the influence of humanists (Frize 2009, xi–xii).

Italian Humanism and the Emergence of the 'Exceptional Woman'

Humanism was a reaction against the ossified teaching of the universities which frequently degenerated into formulaic arguments. It was sparked by the desire to study Ancient literature directly from original texts, and so emphasised the thorough study of classical languages and authors. The new learning quickly moved out of universities, which remained faithful to the old liberal arts curriculum (grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music). Princely courts became the new seats of knowledge and culture, with mixed gatherings of men and women. Humanism and courtly culture helped legitimize women's education. Most humanists believed education would make women virtuous. But this development did not prevent the issue of the education of women to be debated for several more centuries, especially regarding the type of education women should receive. Was the purpose to make women better wives and mothers or to be better guests or hostesses at evenings in aristocratic homes? Was it to add prestige to the men? Or was the purpose to prepare these women for the governance of the State or a real career? Likely it was all of the above, except for the last point, since it was widely agreed that women should not play a public role; (although in practice a few of them did).

Italian attitudes towards women's education present similarities and differences with what was taking place in the rest of Europe. In City States like Florence, hundreds of men were involved in governing a small population (90,000 in 1338). Italian civic humanists believed that the education of women could serve the needs of the community and should be focused on that goal. Edwards agrees that women should be educated so that they might be of greater value to the state as prospective brides, wives and household managers, and as mothers and educators of children (Edwards 2002, 2–6).

In those Italian States, a small number of intellectually gifted women deemed 'exceptional' were encouraged to study Latin, Greek, grammar, philosophy, and classical literature (Roman and Greek). In addition to these subjects, men were encouraged to study arithmetic, geometry, music, and astrology. A few women

studied mathematics and science, which mostly focused on cosmology, astrology, and botany. Edwards argues that the literacy rate in Florentine Italy was much higher than in England, and Florentines were significantly more educated than the English. Moreover, education in England centered almost exclusively on Christian texts and religious studies (Edwards 2002, 6–7).

In the fifteenth century, before the invention of the printing press, men provided advice through letters written in Latin to the boy or girl to be educated. For example, there were letters of advice provided by Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444) to Battista Malatesta da Montefeltro (1384–1447), Lady of Pesaro in Urbino. Bruni, in his *De Studiis et litteris liber* (1424) advised Battista to put religious and moral studies first, as all good women should, but also expected her to study grammar and read the best Latin texts by Cicero, Virgil, Livius, Sallust, Tacitus, and Caesar. He also encouraged Battista to study some geometry, arithmetic, astrology, and rhetoric. However, he did not expect her to become too deeply involved with any subject as she was not likely to use these in a public role (Logan 1999, 65–66).

Another philosopher, Lauro Quirini (1420–1475), guided the studies of Isotta Nogarola (1418–1466) who belonged to the aristocracy of Verona. He addressed Isotta as if she were a man and encouraged her to read several works of Aristotle before she was to move to the study of mathematics and natural philosophy. He also recommended that she study Arab philosophers, in particular Avicenna and Averroes.

In some instances, the students wrote letters to their teacher or to famous philosophers. For example, in 1488, Laura Cereta (1469–1499), a well-educated writer and philosopher, wrote a tract in which she profiled contemporary women as well as women from a recent past, which she sent in a letter on January 13, 1488 to Bibulus Sempronius. In her publication, *The Defense of the Liberal Instruction of Women* (1488), she profiled Isotta Nogarola of Verona (mentioned above) who, with her older sister Ginevra, studied Latin grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. These two sisters had written letters to some of the famous classicists of the day and Isotta had tried to be recognized officially as a humanist by obtaining the approval of one of her previous tutors, Guarino da Verona (from Verona). But he did not reply. In her second letter to him, she complained that his silence gave her much suffering and that she was deeply saddened to be jeered by people throughout the city of Verona. Isotta complained to Guarino that even the women were mocking her. Guarino da Verona replied: “I believed and trusted that your soul was manly. But now you seem so humbled, so abject, and so truly a woman that you demonstrate none of the estimable qualities I thought you possessed” (Web: Women philosophers). So he did not support her in obtaining some recognition for her work and talents.

Included in her 1488 publication, Laura Cereta presented Cassandra Fedele (1465–1558) who was the most renowned woman scholar in Italy during the last decades of the Quattrocento (fifteenth century). Fedele was born in Venice to Barbara Leoni and Angelo Fedele. Her father took a great interest in his daughter’s education, perhaps seeking to advance his own reputation. When Fedele reached fluency in Greek and Latin at the age of twelve, she was sent by her father to

Gasparino Borro, a Servite monk who tutored her in classical literature, philosophy, the sciences, and dialectics. In 1487, at twenty-two years of age, she achieved success in Italy and abroad when she delivered a Latin speech in praise of the arts and sciences at her cousin's graduation at Padua. Her speech, *Oratio pro Bertucio Lamberto*, was published in Modena (1487), in Venice (1488), and in Nuremberg (1489). From 1487 to 1497, she exchanged letters with prominent humanists and with the nobility throughout Italy and Spain (Web: University of Chicago, Fedele).

Cassandra Fedele achieved her fame through her writing, oratorical abilities, and elegance. In addition to her letters and orations, a volume of 123 letters and three orations were published in Padua in 1636. She is said to have composed Latin poetry, although none of this work survives. She participated in public debates on philosophical and theological issues with influential humanists and was asked to speak in front of the doge Agostino Barbarigo (1420–1501) and the Venetian Senate on the topic of the higher education for women. In a letter to Lorenzo de' Medici (the ruler of Florence), Angelo Poliziano (1454–1494), a famous Florentine writer and tutor to Lorenzo de' Medici's children, praised Fedele for her excellence in both Latin and Italian, as well as for her beauty. Fedele wrote little during the sixty years that followed her marriage in 1499. She seemed to believe that a woman had to choose between domestic duties or study and writing; but they could not do both. This is unfortunately the advice she gave other women (Web: University of Chicago_Fedele).

Laura Cereta, like other women of her time, initiated intellectual debates with male counterparts through her letters. Given the difficulties women had in earning recognition in the educational arena, many of Cereta's letters went unanswered (Rabil 1981). Despite these obstacles, she continued her education with diligence. Through her letters, she questioned women's traditional roles and attempted to persuade many to alter their beliefs about the role of women and education (Rabil 1981).

In the sixteenth century, several men published treatises on education which had a wider circulation since they were now in printed form. These provided advice to men and women who could read in the vernacular. The Siense Alessandro Piccolomini (1508–1579) was a member of the Academy of the Intronati of Siena and of the Inflammati of Padua; both academies provided translations of classical authors for women and men who had no knowledge of Greek or Latin. In his 1542 treatise written in the vernacular *De la institutione di tutta la vita de l'huomo nato nobile*, Piccolomini discussed the concepts of happiness, friendship, love, marriage, family, and he provided advice for the care and education of aristocratic children, from birth to adulthood. However, he still maintained that the role of women was subordinate, not as a servant but as a companion to her husband, and that she should remain confined to the home. He believed women were more gullible, religious, and compassionate than men, that their body was weaker than men's, but that women could be as gifted as men in their soul. Although his treatise was written for Alessandro Colombini, the son of his friend Madonna Laudomia Forteguerra of Siena, it could apply to any family who could read Italian. In spite of the traditional role he assigned to women, Piccolomini was

a humanist and therefore conceded that in some cases, women were wiser than their husband and should be well educated and rule the man. He also expected aristocratic women to be fairly well educated (Logan 1999, 69–70).

Piccolomini also started a new genre of scholarly writing to make it accessible to a larger public; he wrote in Italian instead of Latin, and used very little mathematics. His book on cosmology, astronomy, and natural philosophy was written as a discussion between teacher and pupil, a style later imitated by Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle (1657–1757) and by Francesco Algarotti (1712–1764). But Piccolomini was far less patronizing to a female audience than Algarotti was in his book *Newtonianismo per le Donne* (*Newtonianism for Ladies*) published in 1737.

Silvio Antoniano, a musician, canon lawyer, priest, and later cardinal published a treatise on education in three volumes. *Tre libri dell' educazione cristiana de' figliuoli* was published in Verona in 1583, discussing the christian education of children. Antoniano was much more restrictive than many of his contemporaries, as he did not approve of aristocratic girls learning languages, rhetoric, and poetry like the boys. In his view, girls from the lower class need not learn to read; those of middle class suffered no harm if they could read; and girls from the nobility could learn to read, write, and basic arithmetic; however their reading should be limited to the lives of saints and spiritual books. In spite of his traditional ideas, he was aware that some fathers provided far more education to their daughters than what he prescribed (Logan 1999, 70–71).

Antoniano's attitude was similar to that of Juan Luis Vives whose book (1523) was dedicated to Catherine of Aragon, the first wife of Henry VIII of England. Vives set the tone for his treatise by noting that innumerable things must be taught to men, who are active at home and abroad. Although Vives found no defects in women's ability to learn, he believed that girls only needed to learn cooking, spinning, and their letters and be concerned only with honesty and chastity (Stock 1978, 52; Frize 2009, 124–125). Vives agreed with Erasmus that women should not be teachers. His attitude to women's learning shows clearly in his treatise when he wrote that a maiden cannot be chaste if she thinks of knights in shining armour. Vives believed that educated women were morally suspect, but they would not be harmed by knowledge if fenced in by holy counsel (Stock 1978, 52; Frize 2009, 75).

Although conduct books were initially directed at royal and aristocratic women, they gradually filtered down to other social classes and Vives' work became a popular conduct book, with forty editions, and appearing in several languages. The conduct books, aimed at a middle-class audience, insisted that female learning had one goal: make them better mothers and wives.

Gian Michele Bruto (1517–1592) published *La Institutione di una Fanciulla Nate Nobilmente* (*The Mirrhor of Modestie*) which stressed the importance of traditional female virtues such as chastity, piety, and humility. Bruto, like Vives, reserved his greatest opprobrium for chivalric fiction and plays. The Bible, the teachings of the Church fathers, and narratives of virtuous women were judged appropriate reading material to impart male constructs of female virtue to women (Frize 2009, 124–125).

Stefano Guazzo (1530–1593), founder of the Academy degli Illustrati in Casale Monferrato, wrote *Civile Conversation* in 1574. The book stressed that a woman's education was to fit her subordinate role within the family. But he admitted that this role did not fit everyone; that some women could be instructed in science, and the manner of educating daughters could vary from one region to another. For example, in the region of Piemonte, in Casale Monferrato, and in Siena, daughters and wives had more freedom, as opposed to Roman wives whose life was more reclusive. Some daughters were only taught to spin, sew, and govern a house, while others learned to read, write, poetry, music, and painting. He also believed the future role of the woman would dictate her education. For example, if she was to live at Court, she needed a broad education. If she married a merchant or artisan, then accounting would be added to reading and writing. He educated his own daughter Olimpia who married a lawyer like himself (Logan 1999, 71–72).

As mentioned previously, Italians cultivated the memory of the 'exceptional woman', and this in turn made it possible for them to accept those contemporary women deemed to be 'exceptional women'. For example, in 1729, Guglielmo Camposampiero, a patrician from Padua, stated being most impressed with Elena Cornaro Piscopia (1646–1684) who had received a doctoral degree from the University of Padua in 1678. Elena had studied Latin, Greek, music, theology and mathematics and eventually learned Hebrew, Arabic, French, English and Spanish. She also studied philosophy and astronomy. By the time she was 17 years old, she could sing, compose, and play instruments such as the violin, harp, and harpsichord.

Camposampiero was also in favour of admitting women to the study of science and the arts and used examples of highly educated women to argue this point. He added Clelia Borromeo (1684–1777) to his list of erudite women. Clelia had founded the Clelia Academy of Milan and was knowledgeable in science, mathematics, mechanics, and language (Logan 1999, 2).

In the Italian City States, there was a long tradition where some academies involved women either as members or as participants in the evening discussions. Some academies were even created by women, whereas in all other parts of Europe and America, academies were a world without women. In the Italian Peninsula, gatherings began in *Salons*, much earlier than in France or elsewhere in Europe, encouraging conversations between gentlemen and ladies on various subjects. Several of the early academies were started as a 'conversation club'. An example is the Academia degli Intronati in Siena and the Academia degli Illustrati in Casale di Monferrato. These early academies were fairly informal. Academy members, their wives, and friends would meet at the house of an academician or at a lady's house to discuss literature, philosophy, and to play word games. By the turn of the century (early 1600s), some women were associated with the Academy of the Incogniti in Venice and in Rome (Logan 1999, 82–83). Margherita Sarrochi (1560–1617) created an academy in her Roman home. She even had Galileo Galilei as a guest in 1611 during his stay in Rome. She helped found two academies in that city: the Academia dei Umoristi (1603) and the Academia dei Ordinati (1608) and was a member of the latter. Another academy with some

interest in science, Brescia's Academy Mondella, was attended by Laura Ceretta in the late 1490 s. However, the Academy dei Lincei, a science-based academy in Rome, did not admit any women. Its founder, Federico Cesi, organized the academy in a manner similar to a religious order, so this would definitely not make it amenable to admitting women members, no matter how qualified women were (Logan 1999, 154). Like the Lincei in Rome, the Neapolitan Academy of Sciences founded by Celestino Galiani (1681–1753) did not accept women as members (Logan 1999, 83, 87).

The Genoan philosopher and mathematician, Paolo Mattia Doria (1667–1746) supported the participation of women in intellectual discussions. He founded the Academy of the Ozioso in 1734 in Naples which accepted women members. Doria wrote on science and mathematics in a way that women could understand. He approved of meetings and conversations between men and women who had received a virtuous education. Doria believed such conversations would improve society and he believed that women could understand science; however, he doubted greatly that they could create it. At a time when science was becoming more popular and important for society, it made sense to teach these subjects to girls and women, although this was probably kept at a fairly elementary level (Logan 1999, 85).

In the eighteenth century in Bologna, several women became members of the Academy of Sciences in Bologna. The sisters of the founder of the *Accademia dei Inquieti* in 1690, Eustachio Manfredi, were members of that academy which eventually evolved into the Academy of Sciences of Bologna. Laura Bassi and Maria Gaetana Agnesi were added to its membership in the eighteenth century. Similarly, the Academy of Sciences of Padua, evolved from the *Accademia dei Ricovrati*, had two women members: Elena Cornaro Piscopia in the seventeenth century and Cristina Roccati in the eighteenth.

None of the other academies in Europe had women members. The Royal Society in London was created in 1662 and l'Académie royale des sciences in Paris in 1666. There were around seventy academies in Europe by the year 1700, but none admitted women. On the other hand, the Academy of Sciences of Bologna invited women from other countries, and particularly from France, to become members. These women could not join such a body in their own country. Several academies in other Italian City States had women members, but these were not science-based; they were focused on the Arts and the Humanities.

[Note: In London, it was not before 1945 that two women, Kathleen Lonsdale and Marjorie Stephenson, were elected as full members of the Royal Society. It was much later, in 1979, that the Académie des Sciences in Paris admitted its first woman member, Yvonne Choquet-Bruhat] (Schiebinger 1989, 20; Frize 2009, 62).

The discussion in the previous pages demonstrates the long history of debates on the issue of the education of women taken-up by several men and some women throughout the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries. The treatises, publications, and letters to students made recommendations on what to teach boys and girls, and some were even specific on what was appropriate for the various social classes. However, the concept of the 'exceptional woman', and the participation of

these brilliant women in some of the academies from the earliest time of their creation showed that men encouraged these women to study, to join the academies, and in a few rare cases, to acquire a degree. However, the integration of 'exceptional women' in these intellectual activities did not open the door to all women and the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were witness to two major debates in the Italian Peninsula. These two debates were eventually to have some positive impact for the general education of women in Italy. The earlier debate occurred in 1599 when Giuseppe Passi published his extreme misogynistic views, which was followed by the sharp and spirited response from two women: Lucrezia Marinelli and Moderata Fonte. The second public debate in 1723 was organized by the Academy of the Ricovrati with two men debating the question of the education of women and their social role.

The Earlier Debate: Passi and Responses by Marinelli and Fonte

For the *Roman de la Rose*, published 200 years before Passi's polemic, the response came after 100 years from the pen of Christine Di Pisan. Allen and Salvatore (1992) argue that in the last decade of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, the misogyny in the literature was particularly violent. Women were seen as sinners and to have a devilish nature. (1992, 2) In 1599, Giuseppe Passi published a tract titled *I donneschi difetti* (The defects of women), a deeply misogynistic tract. Passi's piece had two major points: "first, the deflation of female endeavour in the field of learning, pouring scorn on the possibility of women challenging classical male models, and second, the repetition of the dictum that women should be silent" (Kolsky 2001, 975). In this way, Passi was assuming women would remain silent and omit to challenge his views. He must have been highly surprised by the immediate and vigorous response from two women. Passi's work was an onslaught on women who refused to be controlled and subjugated by men. He argued that ideally women should be locked up in their home under the surveillance of their husband; he also warned young men against women's wiles. He was quite scathing about women who dared write poetry, believing these activities to be the preserve of male scholars. Passi reiterated the most extreme form of Aristotelian arguments about female weaknesses, inferiority, and inadequacy. The spirited response to Passi's diatribe by two educated women must have confirmed his notion that women should not be heard nor seen (Kolsky 2001, 975–976).

The first response to Passi came from Lucrezia Marinelli Vacca, a writer from Venice (1571–1653). Lucrezia was the daughter of Giovanni Marinelli, a physician who came from Modena and a man who greatly admired Aristotle. Lucrezia was taught Latin and she had access to her father's well-stocked library; she was also quite familiar with her father's writings. She was also aware of other women

writers like Cassandra Fedele and Isotta Nogarola which helped to form her knowledge on gender issues. (Allen and Salvatore 1992, 3) Lucrezia was most enraged by Passi's publication and she wrote a powerful rebuttal titled: *La nobilit  e l'eccellenza delle donne e i difetti e mancamenti degli huomini* (On the nobility and excellence of women, and the defects and weaknesses of men) in which she rejected the Greek biological theories on women, and particularly Aristotle's. She claimed that women's inferior position was due to historical conditions and not to physical causes and she argued that if boys and girls were taught the same things, girls would learn faster than boys. Lucrezia responded to each example used by Passi and rejected every single one of his arguments one by one. She claimed that women were superior to men and demonstrated this through her own choice of examples. Her tone was uncompromising and provocative. She provided a 'genealogy of misogynous thought' from Boccaccio to Passi which, she said, needed to be destroyed. Lucrezia also argues that anti-women thoughts originated with Aristotle (Kolsky 2001, 978).

The publisher, Giovanni Battista Ciotti, who had links to one of the two Venitian academies, gave Lucrezia only two months to compose the rebuttal if it was to be published in his next issue. Passi had published his piece with the other Venitian academy. Ciotti knew well Lucrezia's abilities as a writer since he had already published some of her work (Kolsky 2001, 975–976). Lucrezia's piece was a departure from her previous writings which had been quite conventional and different from this feminist piece. Later, in 1635, Marinelli published an epic poem, *L'Enrico*, which was another exception to her conventional writings. It contained some hint of the arguments she had used in her earlier polemical treatise on women.

The second rebuttal to Passi's tract was authored by Moderata Fonte, a pseudonym for Modesta Pozzo (1555–1592), the Venetian author of a romance and of some religious poetry. Ciotti published Moderata's response to Passi with the title *Il merito delle donne* (The Worth of Women) in 1600, eight years after her death in childbirth. Ciotti decided it was a most fitting piece as a response to Passi. It is not sure why Moderata's piece was not published earlier, before her untimely death. But it is certain that Ciotti knew about it and he decided that it was a good fit to respond to Passi. In her rebuttal, Fonte asserted the nobility and superiority of women to men and she presented the negative side of marriage and the pitfalls of love. She portrayed men in a very negative light. But her tract was more ambiguous in its conclusions than Marinelli's, as she presented both sides of the question. It was also less biting and hard-hitting. Together, the two texts provided a powerful response to Passi's extreme negative views of women (Kolsky 2001, 975–979).

Lucrezia Marinelli published a second edition of her rebuttal in 1601 in which she added ten chapters, including many more examples and much stronger arguments. Unfortunately, in 1645, she undermined some of her previous arguments in a new work titled *Essortationi*. For example, she had said formerly that men wrongfully shut women in their home without contact with the outside world. But in this new work, she considered 'seclusion' as a positive value. Further along in

this piece, she satirically portrayed the closed world of male literary circles, but she did not challenge them, nor did she defend the usefulness of having women included in them (Kolsky 2001, 982–983).

Passi also backtracked to some extent in another text published in 1601 titled *Dello stato maritale* (On the marital state). In this piece, he seemed obsessed with clarifying his position and retreating from his previously extreme statements. He claimed wanting to correct the impression that he was anti-marriage and suggested being a misunderstood victim. But he maintained his position that most women were evil and the weaker sex (Kolsky 2001, 985).

In this period, there were other detractors who were opposed to women getting involved in intellectual debates and conversations. Clerics saw danger in conversations between men and women and felt that public discussions by women contravened the Pauline Edict which imposed silence for women in public places. Canon Antonio Francesco Ghiselli (1670–1730), a member of the Bologna Academy dei Gelati, was particularly vociferous in his attack of women, claiming they were wasting time in frivolous conversations instead of concentrating on their religious and household duties. Paradoxically, he was full of praise for Vittoria Delfini Dosi who defended a thesis in law in 1722 at the Real Collegio Maggiore of Bologna. According to Ghiselli, Dosi provided a public example of knowledge at a time when women were mainly concerned with pleasure and entertainment (Logan 1999, 84–85). The year following Dosi's thesis defense in Bologna, the second major public debate occurred.

The Famous 1723 Debate at the Accademia dei Ricovrati in Padua

The Academy of the Ricovrati was founded in 1599 in Padua by Venetian nobleman and Cardinal Federico Baldissera Bartolomeo Cornaro (1579–1653) and by the famous natural philosopher, Galileo Galilei. At the end of the seventeenth century, the Academy of the Ricovrati was one of the few academies which had women as members, but only as honorary ones; women could not vote, hold administrative positions, or address the assembly except on rare occasions when invited to do so. Of the twenty-six women admitted to the Ricovrati prior to the 1723 debate, four were Italian. The others were French, so did not attend meetings of the Academy in person due to the distance to travel. One of their members was Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia, the first woman in the world to be awarded a doctoral degree. She defended her Theses on June 25, 1678 when she was 32 years old. The Ricovrati also had women members from France: Anne Dacier (née Le Fèvre: 1654–1720) was invited to be a member in 1679, and Madeleine de Scudéry (1607–1701), a prolific writer, joined in 1685. An Italian poet, Maria Selvaggia Borghini (1656–1731) was made a member in 1689 (Messbarger and Findlen 2005, 126).

In 1722, the newly elected head of the prestigious Academy dei Ricovrati, Antonio Vallisneri (1661–1730), a natural philosopher and chair of medicine at the University of Padua, wrote a letter to his friend, the librarian at Modena Ludovico, to present his plan for a reform of the academy. He wished to replace what had become frivolous conversations in academy evenings by serious intellectual debates. Vallisneri planned to start with a critical re-examination of the issue of the education of women. His proposal appears to have been stimulated by ideas generated during the early Italian Enlightenment period and by the consideration of ethics regarding the treatment of women (Messbarger and Findlen 2005, 67–68). The centuries of discussions in the Italian Peninsula and elsewhere in Europe about the 'woman question' were bound to culminate in this important debate and this was a good opportunity for Vallisneri to launch his new plan.

Prior to the debate of June 1723, the Academy had debated the 'woman question' in a theoretical and formulaic manner. It had asked: (1) whether it is better for those who serve women to win their hearts by enduring or by resenting women's amorous injuries; (2) what would be more laudable, to exclude women from government as the Romans did, or to admit them as did the Greeks? (3) Which would be more desirable: a government led by a woman, a woman dedicated to arms, or to letters? Vallisneri judged these questions to be unrealistic, irrelevant, stereotypes, and wished instead to discuss the question of women's education in practical terms. He was responding to the bitter, vigorous complaints and harsh disputes made by illustrious, noble, and spirited women who had been denied admittance to the study of science and the arts. These women were challenging men concerning their exclusion (Messbarger and Findlen 2005, 69–70).

Prior to discussing the elements of the 1723 debate, it is important to mention that negative attitudes toward women were still seriously entrenched, so dismantling them would take a monumental effort. Four main issues had formed the debate until this time: (1) The issue of chastity; (2) the issue of power; (3) the issue of speech in a public space; (4) and the issue of the acquisition of knowledge (Messbarger and Findlen 2005, xxv). This new debate would be focused on one specific issue. At nine o'clock in the evening of June 16, 1723, the intellectuals and social elite of Padua met to discuss the following question: Should women be admitted to the study of the sciences and the liberal arts?

The debaters were two men: Guglielmo Camposampiero (1691–1765), poet, scholar and Chief librarian at the University of Padua, was supposed to make the case for the education of women. On the other side was Giovanni Volpi (1686–1766), a scholar, publisher, and professor of philosophy, Greek, and Latin at the University. In their arguments, the two men divided women into social and economic groups.

In his presentation, Camposampiero used examples of many accomplished women. He also used arguments from patriarchs whom he judged to be sympathetic towards women. But he added that it would be absurd to think of educating all women; he even questioned whether elite women, worthy of this privilege, should be taught.

For his part, Volpi reiterated the old argument: "fluids women require to perform their primary reproductive function leave their physical fibers too weak and

flaccid to sustain concentrated activity in the brain, thereby precluding women from serious thought and analysis” (Messbarger and Findlen 2005, 71).

In view of the many elite women present in the assembly, both men added some pro-women arguments in their presentation. For example, Volpi restrained somewhat his misogynistic comments. Women were quite incensed that only men took part in a debate concerning them. The opportunity for a public response by women came six years after the debate. In 1729, Volpi prepared a publication to present the main arguments against the education of women he had put forward in the 1723 debate. However, in this new publication, he both defended and disclaimed his position against the education of women, so he continued to show an ambiguous position. This volume finally included the voice of women. Volpi published a supplement that contained refutations of his ideas by a woman, Aretafila Savini de’ Rossi (1687-?), and by a girl of eleven, Maria Gaetana Agnesi (1718–1799). These two rebuttals pleaded in favour of the education of women. Aretafila contributed in two ways: First, she challenged each of Volpi’s arguments in terse and sarcastic footnotes. Secondly, she wrote *An Apology in favor of studies for women, against the preceding discourse by Signor Giovanni Antonio Volpi, written to a gentleman by Signora Aretafila Savini De’ Rossi, a Sieneese Lady*. De’ Rossi’s piece was written in the form of a letter using examples of contemporary women to illustrate her arguments about women’s abilities and the need for their education. She argued that serious study of science and other subjects made women less idle, better partners and managers of homes, as well as better educators of children. However, she did not challenge the social role of women.

The second text was by Maria Gaetana Agnesi who had disputed on this subject in Latin for the Milanese nobility in 1727, two years before the 1729 volume was published by Volpi. Now eleven years old, Agnesi wrote her text based on the ideas she had disputed in Milan when she was nine years old. In her tract, Agnesi’s eloquent and sometimes ironic style challenged Volpi’s views on social custom, female incapacity, and the fear of social disorder, arguments he had used to proscribe women’s learning (Messbarger and Findlen 2005, 17).

In spite of its equivocal message, the debate did contribute to the evolution of the question during the Enlightenment era. It opened the door to revisiting the issue and the arguments, for and against, on the role of women in the public arena and in the home. The debate of the two men in 1723, and the subsequent publication in 1729 with a supplement written by women, must have had some positive impact on the extraordinary event of 1732.

Consequently, we can see that it made sense for the Bolognese and their University to showcase a particularly ‘exceptional woman’, one who happened to have an interest in science. Showcasing exceptional people was part of the culture, what Marta Cavazza calls the ‘spectacularization of female knowledge’ (Cavazza 2009, 280). Initially, Laura Bassi was expected to do what exceptional women always did: come out and perform when called, stay home otherwise, and write command pieces of literature when asked. It was probably assumed she would remain single, or sink back into obscurity if she married as her predecessors like Cassandra Fedele and others had done. To be truly exceptional, a woman had to

'make herself like a male' and that meant renouncing her sexuality as Elizabeth I had done in England in the sixteenth century, deliberately defining herself as a 'Virgin Queen'. Laura Bassi was faced with the same dilemma very early in her career: should she marry or should she remain the 'virginal Minerva' consumed solely by the love of science and of God? If she married, who would be an appropriate husband? Would he support her work and career? Laura fell in love with science, as many men did in the eighteenth century; she was determined to use her position as an 'exceptional woman' to continue her studies and to pursue a career in science. Her strategy would require a careful negotiation within existing gender norms, but she succeeded. This 'exceptional woman' became Italy's first woman appointed as a university lecturer with a salary.

By 1700, there was still dualism of thought from most authors on the question of the education of women and many continued to make misogynistic statements about women's abilities. However, several writers advocated for a more general access to education by women. In the past, it was only the exceptional woman who was encouraged to study. A major influence on this changing trend of the eighteenth century was the more prevalent association of women with the academies. This is an important difference between the Italian Peninsula and the rest of Europe. Contact with men in these institutions exposed women to greater knowledge in their fields of interest and men were exposed to bright and intelligent women's discourses and disputations.

The debate continued in the eighteenth century with Diamante Medaglia Faini (1724–1770), a poet and intellectual from Brescia. Diamante became a member of several academies: Agiati of Rovereto, Arditi of Brescia, Orditi of Padua, Unanimi of Salò, and the national academy of the Arcadia. During the last ten years of her life, her interests became focused on science and on philosophy. She championed the education of women and proposed a curriculum that included science, philosophy, religious history, logic, mathematics, and physics. This was most unusual, as the feminine curriculum was normally made up of poetry and composition. However, she favoured the new knowledge in science and philosophy, not for its own sake, but again, like Aretafila, to enhance women's domestic skills and Christian modesty (Messbarger and Findlen 2005, 144–145).

The next chapter presents examples of women who were involved in science prior to the eighteenth century.

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