

A photograph of a grand, vaulted library interior, likely the Bodleian Library in Oxford. The image shows a long, narrow aisle with high, arched ceilings and rows of bookshelves on both sides. The lighting is warm and focused on the central aisle, creating a sense of depth and grandeur. The architecture is classical, with dark wood paneling and ornate details.

Ambra Moroncini &  
Aaron M. Kahn, eds.

EARLY MODERN VOICES  
IN CONTEMPORARY  
LITERATURE  
AND ON SCREEN

**EARLY MODERN VOICES  
IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE  
AND ON SCREEN**

Edited by  
Ambra Moroncini  
and Aaron M. Kahn



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A FEMALE GENEALOGY IN THE MARGINS:  
FROM MODERATA FONTE  
TO CARLA LONZI

Carlotta Moro

Lina, who in 1907 read everything written by Sibilla Aleramo, learned that despite the great distances between women thinking, we might still enter into intimate correspondence.

Selby Wynn Schwartz, *After Sappho*.<sup>1</sup>

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Renaissance encomiastic discourse on women's merits, of which *Il libro del Cortegiano* [*The Book of the Courtier*] (1528), by Baldassare Castiglione, and the third edition of Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1532) gave exemplary evidence,<sup>2</sup> facilitated the rise of women "as a cultural group conscious of their own power".<sup>3</sup> In the elite literary sphere, Vittoria Colonna, Veronica Gambara, Gaspara Stampa, Laura Battiferri Ammannati, and Tullia d'Aragona were some of the finest female authors enjoying publishing commissions. "In the visual culture too, women artists such as Properzia de' Rossi, Lavinia Fontana, Elisabetta Sirani, Sofonisba Anguissola, and Artemisia Gentileschi achieved

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<sup>1</sup> Wynn Schwartz, 2022, 63.

<sup>2</sup> See Castiglione, *Il Libro del Cortegiano*, III: 34, and Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, XXXVII, 23.1-6. For the numerous pro-feminist texts of the Italian Renaissance, as well as for the debate about the excellence of women in Castiglione's and Ariosto's works, see Joseph Benson 1992, 33-155.

<sup>3</sup> Moroncini 2017, 37.



a remarkable degree of public visibility”.<sup>4</sup> Yet, it is with Moderata Fonte’s (1555-1592) *Il merito delle donne* [*The Worth of Women*], followed by Lucrezia Marinella’s (c. 1571-1653) *La nobiltà et l’eccellenza delle donne* [*The Nobility and Excellence of Women*], both published in Venice in 1600, that one may appreciate the first full-scale, female-authored literary works explicitly advocating for women’s dignity. In the following decades, Arcangela Tarabotti (1604-1652) joined her compatriots as a torch-bearer for female liberty, with incendiary writings such as *Tirannia Paterna* [*Paternal Tyranny*] (1654) and *L’inferno monacale* [*Convent Hell*] (c. 1643).<sup>5</sup> As Virginia Cox has noted, contrary to previous “defenders of women”, Fonte, Marinella, and Tarabotti did not regard the challenge of achieving gender equality as a purely theoretical endeavour and instead considered the question of how women might break free from their subjugation.<sup>6</sup> Although in early modernity Fonte’s dialogue and the treatises by Marinella and Tarabotti were read and debated, they subsequently fell out of print and sank into relative obscurity. Yet, the voices of Renaissance women resurfaced four hundred years later, when they played a key role in the resurgent Italian feminist movement of the 1970s. Focusing on the overlooked recovery of Fonte’s *Il merito delle donne* by the feminist collective Rivolta Femminile in 1975, this chapter examines the afterlives of Renaissance female authors within modern Italian feminism. The reception of Fonte’s dialogue in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century serves as a case study to answer the following questions: How has the contemporary Italian feminist movement been shaped by Renaissance authors who championed women’s rights? And how have modern feminist groups negotiated a genealogy of early proto-femi-

<sup>4</sup> Moroncini 2017, 37.

<sup>5</sup> In the words of Letizia Panizza, “one has to wait until Sibilla Aleramo’s *Una donna* (1906) to hear such anger against family and society again”. Panizza, 2000, 76. For Arcangela Tarabotti’s efforts to resist patriarchy, and her influence on Italian literature, see, in this volume, Moroncini and Santovetti’s chapter.

<sup>6</sup> Cox 1995, 515-16.

nist thinkers, drawing upon their works for political inspiration? I will argue that the rediscovery of Renaissance philogynous writers influenced 1970s Italian feminism in significant ways. In doing so, I will make the case for a more expansive and capacious understanding of the Italian feminist tradition, one that recognises its deep historical roots.

### 1. The birth of Italian proto-feminism: Lucrezia Marinella, Moderata Fonte and the case for women's dignity

By the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Italian women's writing had a tradition that dated back generations. Numerous women of letters were highly regarded, and they had begun to explore new genres such as pastoral drama, the epic poem, and the treatise besides their traditional remit of lyric poetry. In the words of Virginia Cox, "the figure of the creative woman, the *virtuosa*, is one of the Italian Renaissance's most clearly documentable cultural novelties, and one of this period's most potent anticipations of modernity".<sup>7</sup> In the same arc of time, gender norms were undergoing a revolution, as traditional theories of sexual difference came under strain and more affirmative conceptions of femininity emerged.<sup>8</sup> Since the mid-1580s, the literary academies of the Veneto had witnessed a revival of the *querelle des femmes* – a heated intellectual debate on woman's nature and status.<sup>9</sup> The controversy sparked by Giuseppe Passi's misogynistic treatise, *I donneschi difetti* [*The Defects of Women*] (1599), provided the impetus for the publication of Lucrezia Marinella's and Moderata Fonte's works. Marinella's polemic was commissioned by the Venetian press of Giambattista Ciotti as a rejoinder to Passi, whose high-profile attack on women also prompted Domenico Imberti to print Fonte's dialogue eight years af-

<sup>7</sup> Cox 2016, 167.

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of this phenomenon see Cox 2016, 167-192; Sanson 2016, 9-38.

<sup>9</sup> Cox 2011, 237. On the *querelle des femmes*, see also Schnieders 2021, 5-53.

ter its completion (and its author's death).<sup>10</sup> Marinella's *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne* occupies a unique place in the Italian *querelle des femmes* landscape as the first female-authored academic treatise that systematically argues for women's superiority through theoretical reasoning, extensive citations from scholarly sources, and an array of examples.<sup>11</sup> This learned work presents several quotations from mostly male philosophers, historians, and poets, whose assumptions serve as a pedestal for the author's own ideas or, more often, are put forward only to be demolished.

Conversely, harnessing the dialogue genre, Moderata Fonte approaches the *querelle* in a creative and original manner: instead of articulating a formal and methodical disputation on the relationship between the sexes, *Il merito delle donne* takes the form of a fictional, witty conversation among seven Venetian ladies, who convene to discuss their persecution at the hands of fathers, brothers, and husbands over the course of two days. Two factions are created, one charged with defending women and celebrating their merits; the other with praising men and upholding patriarchal views. The ensuing exchange articulates a relentless critique of misogyny, putting forth an argument for the dignity and excellence of women. Although the sexes should be equal, Fonte observes that women are systematically infantilised, deprived of education, refused financial autonomy, and compelled into a condition of subalternity that exposes them to abuse. Cornelia, one of the speakers in the pro-woman camp, remarks:

Quelle donne che vanno poi a marito, o al martirio  
(per meglio dire) [...] si trovano più soggette che mai;

<sup>10</sup> Kolsky 2001. Lucrezia Marinella's *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne* ran through three editions: in 1600 and 1601 (Venezia, Giovanni Battista Ciotti), and in 1621 (Venezia, Giovanni Battista Combi).

<sup>11</sup> For a detailed analysis of the form, structure, and methodology of *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne* see Panizza 1999, 2.

[...] confinate tra le mura, sottoposte [...] ad un odioso guardiano.<sup>12</sup>

[Women who are married – or martyred, more accurately – have endless sources of misery. [...] They [...] find themselves [...] constricted [...] within four walls and subjected to a hateful guardian.<sup>13</sup>]

The debate is marked by several disagreements, yet the seven friends reach one shared verdict: Venetian women inhabit a prohibitive geography, where they are unjustly othered, denied access to formal schooling and professions, and excluded from institutions. Fonte seemingly proposes that the historical dominance of men over women is neither predetermined by nature nor divinely ordained, but rather constructed over time through men's abuse of power. In Leonora's words:

Se siamo loro inferiori d'auttorità, ma non di merito, questo è un abuso che si è messo nel mondo, che poi a lungo andare si hanno fatto lecito ed ordinario; e tanto è posto in consueto, che vogliono e par loro, che sia lor di ragione quel che è di soperchiaria.<sup>14</sup>

[If we are their inferiors in status, but not in worth, this is an abuse that has been introduced into the world and that men have then, over time, gradually translated into law and custom; and it has become so entrenched that they claim (and even actually believe) that the status they have gained through their bullying is theirs by right.<sup>15</sup>]

This perspective opens the door to the possibility that patriarchal society may not be an immutable system but rather a human creation, and therefore that it may be subject to critical scrutiny and, potentially, to transformation. Accusing men of "abuso [...] tirannia e crudeltà" ["abuse [...] tyranny and cruelty"],<sup>16</sup> *Il merito delle donne* develops the humanistic theoretical discourse on women into the

<sup>12</sup> Fonte 1988, 33.

<sup>13</sup> Fonte 1997, 68.

<sup>14</sup> Fonte 1988, 27.

<sup>15</sup> Fonte 1997, 61.

<sup>16</sup> Fonte 1988, 182.

questioning of societal structures that is central to modern feminism.

The polyphonic dialogical form encloses the conversation within a fictitious and playful dimension where the unspeakable can be communicated as well as contested, diluting the radicalism of Fonte's attack and allowing her to intervene in the male-dominated literary domain.<sup>17</sup> *Il merito delle donne* tethers on a tension between the conciliatory desire to be accepted as an equal in patriarchal arenas of power, and the utopian urge to assert one's difference, creating an entirely separate society. As noted by Cox, in comparison to other writings in the *querelle des femmes* tradition, the dialogue's toying with the dream of a single, independent life for women may represent its most notable theoretical novelty.<sup>18</sup> This revolutionary intention to establish an autonomous matriarchal community is clearly reflected in the gynocentric garden which serves as a setting to the conversation. Adorned with statues of beautiful women crowned with laurel, this *locus amoenus* was designed and bequeathed to one of the characters by a bold, unconventional aunt who chose to remain single, and who is evoked throughout the text as the emblem of female creativity and liberty. The final pages of *Il merito delle donne* praise the aunt's way of life and exhort women to abandon the masculine world:

Possibile che non si potrebbe un tratto metterli un poco da banda con tutti i loro scherni e foie che si fanno di noi, sì che non ci dessero più noia? Non potressimo noi star senza loro? Procacciarsi el viver e negoziar da per noi senza il loro aiuto? Deh, di grazia, svegliamoci un giorno e ricuperamo la nostra libertà, con l'onor e la dignità che tanto tempo ci tengono usurpate.<sup>19</sup>

[Wouldn't it be possible for us to just banish these men from our lives, and escape their carping and jeering once and for all? Couldn't we live without

<sup>17</sup> Levarie Smarr 2005, 195.

<sup>18</sup> Cox 1995.

<sup>19</sup> Fonte 1988, 169.

them? Couldn't we earn our living and manage our affairs without help from them? Come on, let's wake up, and claim back our freedom, and the honour and dignity they have usurped from us for so long.<sup>20]</sup>

The connection with the nonconformist female ancestor, coupled with this “call to arms”, the summoning of powerful women from the past, and the symbolism of the laurel crowns implies that one of Fonte's aims is the pursuit of a female genealogy that could serve as the foundation to a proto-feminist society.

Moderata Fonte's corpus of writings, which also includes the chivalric poem *Tredici canti del Floridoro* [*Thirteen Cantos of Floridoro*] (1581) and two religious poems on the Passion and Resurrection of Christ (1582; 1592) among other texts, is deserving of scholarly attention and wider fame on literary, social, and philosophical grounds. After her death in 1592, she was posthumously hailed as “the glory of Venice” in travel manuals,<sup>21</sup> and her prowess as a writer was praised in several literary histories.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, she was adduced as an exemplar of female erudition in a pamphlet advocating for the unprecedented conferment of a degree to the noblewoman Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia (1646-1684).<sup>23</sup> What is more, excerpts from her texts featured in the first anthology of Italian female-authored poetry edited by a woman, Luisa Bergalli's *I Componimenti poetici delle più illustri Rimatrici d'ogni secolo* [*Poetic Compositions of the Most Famous Women Poets of All Ages*] (1726). Yet, gradually, most of Moderata Fonte's texts fell out of circulation until 1975,

<sup>20</sup> Fonte 1997, 237.

<sup>21</sup> Cox 2008, 148.

<sup>22</sup> For instance, in Pietro Paolo Ribera's *Le glorie immortali de' trionfi et heroiche imprese d'ottocento quarantacinque donne illustri antiche e moderne* (1609). On Fonte's fortunes and reception see Cox's ‘Introduction’ in Fonte 1997; Cox 2008, 144 and 200.

<sup>23</sup> Felice Rotondi, Ms. XXII-588 int. 07. Pro Doctoratu in Sacra Theologia Nob. et Doctissimae Virginis Elenae Corneliae Piscopiae Venetae (Padova, Pontificia Biblioteca Antoniana).

when Anna Jaquinta unearthed *Il merito delle donne* in the National Central Library of Florence.

## 2. Rivolta Femminile and Anna Jaquinta's recovery of *Il merito delle donne*

In 1975, Anna Jaquinta was a thirty-five-year-old teacher with an educational background in Comparative Literature and Law.<sup>24</sup> She was also an active member of the prominent feminist group Rivolta Femminile, which had been co-founded in 1970 by former art critic Carla Lonzi with artist Carla Accardi and journalist Elvira Banotti. In those years, the Italian movement was “the most strongly mass-based and internally most diverse among Western feminisms”.<sup>25</sup> Like many feminist collectives of the 1970s, Rivolta Femminile developed politics that took place outside institutions, rather than seeking equal participation in patriarchal culture and society. Among the most original and iconoclastic feminist thinkers in Italy, Rivolta's co-founder Carla Lonzi (1931-1982) argued that real change could not be induced by social reform, and that equality with men could not lead women to authenticity and freedom. To disrupt the dominant order and cut ties with male conditioning, Lonzi advocated for the practice of “deculturalisation”, the deconstruction of “given modes of identification, norms, categories, meanings, representations of what it means to be a woman as a creative autonomous subjectivity”.<sup>26</sup> To this end, she introduced and popularised in Italy *autocoscienza* (consciousness-

<sup>24</sup> The only biographical information available on Anna Jaquinta is a short note within a catalogue of upcoming publications by Scritti di Rivolta Femminile. It reads: “Anna Jaquinta was born in Arcidosso (Grosseto) on 5 November 1940. She earned a degree in Law from the University of Siena in 1963, and she subsequently studied comparative literature at the University of California, San Diego from 1968 to 1970. Having resided in the United States at different times, she now lives in Rome, where she teaches. She has been a member of Rivolta Femminile since 1971”. Archivio Carla Lonzi, Oggetto 45.

<sup>25</sup> Bracke 2014, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Bueti 2023, 20.

raising), which entailed gathering among women to discuss gender-specific issues, unhindered by androcentric paradigms. This practice was rooted in “self-narration and active listening, in a collective effort to withhold judgment and suspend conventional thinking, fostering a horizontal, non-hierarchical approach”.<sup>27</sup> *Autocoscienza* was “a process of [...] discovery and (re-)construction of the self, both the self of the individual woman and a collective sense of self”<sup>28</sup> with the purpose of learning from one another and facilitating alliances among women through conversation. Lonzi’s group owned *Scritti di Rivolta Femminile*, a publishing house that issued the greatly popular “green books”, containing individual or collective reflections borne of consciousness-raising. Anna Jaquinta contributed to the *Scritti*’s endeavour with key texts, including the biography *Vita di Carla Lonzi* (1985), co-written with Marta Lonzi.

Jaquinta’s solitary journey amidst forgotten books,<sup>29</sup> which eventually led her to discovering Moderata Fonte, was prompted by a discussion within the Rivolta group in 1974, when they entertained the idea of establishing a publishing company named after *Compiuta Donzella*, the earliest Italian female poet. “A me sembrò che quel nome antico e femminile scivolasse armonioso fra noi, fresco come acqua sorgiva”,<sup>30</sup> Jaquinta recalls: “qui scattò l’idea di [...] guarda[re] la tela della tradizione al suo rovescio, cercando magari per via tortuose e marginali tracce scritte di donne del passato”.<sup>31</sup> The chapter “Espressione di sé e cultura” [“Self-Expression and Culture”], in the vol-

<sup>27</sup> Zapperi 2019, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Bono and Kemp 1991, 9.

<sup>29</sup> “un viaggio solitario fra libri dimenticati”. Jaquinta 1977, 68.

<sup>30</sup> Jaquinta 1997, 67: “It seemed to me that this ancient, feminine name slipped harmoniously between us, fresh as spring water”. Translation mine. Further translation of citations will also be mine unless otherwise stated.

<sup>31</sup> Jaquinta 1977, 77: “This sparked the idea of [...] looking at the canvas of tradition from its back, perhaps searching for written traces of women from the past via winding, marginal paths”.



ume *È già politica [It is already politics]* (1977), chronicles Jaquinta's research on Italian women's writing in an overwhelmingly patriarchal literary history. Her essay resonates with the personal necessity to free herself from her hopeful attachment to the androcentric cultural world.<sup>32</sup> Jaquinta's conflicted attitude towards the possibility of attaining authentic subjectivity within male-dominated cultural institutions resonates with Carla Lonzi's "radical refusal to participate in those systems [...] that have been shaped by the historical exclusion of women".<sup>33</sup>

Availing herself of archival materials and early modern anthologies, Jaquinta lists the women writers uncovered during her research, which include Compiuta Donzella (fl. ca. 1260s), Atalanta Senese,<sup>34</sup> Leonora della Genga (fl. 1360s), Lucrezia di Raimondo (fl. 1540s),<sup>35</sup> Laura Terracina (c. 1519-1577), Vittoria Colonna (1492-1547), Isabella Andreini (1562-1604), and Petronilla Paolini Massimi (1663-1726). In their literary creations, Jaquinta registers a recurring feeling of distress about the incomprehension that awaits their writing upon publication, alongside the persistence of a debilitating inferiority complex in relation to male intellectuals. This phenomenon has been designated as "female anxiety of authorship" by literary critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who ascribe it to "the loneliness of the female artist, her

<sup>32</sup> "Liberarmi dal mio attaccamento [...] al mondo culturale, dalla mia stima di esso e dalla mia speranza di trovarvi una via per esprimermi". Jaquinta 1977, 75: "Free myself from my attachment [...] to the cultural world, my appreciation of it and my hope of finding a way to express myself in it".

<sup>33</sup> Ventrella and Zapperi 2021, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Not much is known about "Atalanta Senese". Anna Jaquinta encountered her poetry through Lodovico Domenichi's anthology *Rime diverse d'alcune nobilissime e virtuosissime donne* (1559). The author in question is probably Atalanta Donati, previously mentioned by Domenichi in his pro-woman treatise *La nobiltà delle donne* (1549).

<sup>35</sup> According to Luisa Bergalli, who included Lucrezia di Raimondo's verse in her collection of women's poetry, the author was active around 1540. Bergalli 1726, 264.

feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors, [...] her culturally-conditioned timidity about self-dramatisation, [...] her anxiety about the impropriety of art”.<sup>36</sup> Female authors, Jaquinta observes, encounter “una reiezione costante da parte dell’uomo”<sup>37</sup> when they try to participate in a culture that is hostile to their flourishing and antithetical to their creativity. In contrast to this continuous strain to adapt,<sup>38</sup> however, she also discovers surprising “tracce di femminismo in epoche impensate”.<sup>39</sup> In particular, Jaquinta marvels at Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, and Arcangela Tarabotti, who ignited the first sparks of Italian feminist awareness, establishing “un filone di femminismo a Venezia di cui restano tracce a partire dalla fine del 1500”.<sup>40</sup>

The essay “Tentativi di Autocoscienza in un Gruppo del Cinquecento” [“Attempts to Practice *Autocoscienza* in a Sixteenth-Century Group”] published by Rivolta Femminile within the collection *La presenza dell’uomo nel femminismo* [*The Presence of Man in Feminism*], (1978), recounts Jaquinta’s electrifying first encounter with Moderata Fonte:

Quando per la prima volta lessi [...] questo dialogo [...] delle sette donne veneziane che [...] si ‘tagliavano il tempo’ di conversare ‘senza haver rispetto di huomini che le notassero o le impedissero’ - e che anzi di questo facevano un punto associando l’assenza fisica [...] con un senso di riposo e di libertà - e quando lessi che l’argomento di cui intendevano dibattere era il problema dei legami emotivi con l’uomo, feci un balzo sulla sedia [...]. Mi venivano in mente discussioni non lontane [...] discussioni animate con donne moderne, intelligenti, emancipate [...]. Ecco qui un gruppo! Vecchio di secoli. [...] Copiai alcune pagine

<sup>36</sup> Gilbert and Gubar 2000, 50.

<sup>37</sup> Jaquinta 1977, 82: “a constant rejection by man”.

<sup>38</sup> “Logorio continuo per adeguarsi”. Jaquinta 1977, 82.

<sup>39</sup> Jaquinta 1977, 86-87: “traces of feminism in unthought-of eras”.

<sup>40</sup> Jaquinta 1977, 86-87: “a strand of feminism in Venice of which traces remain from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century”.

per il desiderio di comunicarle subito alle amiche di Rivolta e la sera stessa [...] andai a trovare Carla. Così attorno a un tavolo di pietra, al centro un bicchiere colmo di fiori di campo, mi misi a leggere Moderata Fonte: e mi si incrinava la voce su vari passi.<sup>41</sup>

[When I first read [...] the dialogue [...] of the seven Venetian women who [...] were 'taking their time' to converse 'without having respect for men who only hindered them' - and indeed made a point of this by associating physical absence [...] with a sense of comfort and freedom - and when I read that the topic they intended to discuss was the problem of emotional ties with men, I jumped in my chair [...]. I was reminded of discussions not far away [...] animated discussions with modern, intelligent, emancipated women [...]. Here was a group! Centuries old. [...] I copied some pages out of a desire to communicate them immediately to my friends in Rivolta, and that same evening [...] I went to see Carla. So, around a stone table, in the centre a glass filled with wildflowers, I began to read Moderata Fonte, and my voice cracked on several passages.]

Jaquinta's emotive reaction bespeaks her astonishment at the contemporary relevance of Fonte's text, as well as her identification with the dialogue's subject matter:

Veramente io provo commozione per la fedeltà con cui questa donna ha riferito le vicende di un gruppo, [e] l'attenzione che ha prestato - dunque l'importanza che ha attribuito - a tutto quanto accadeva.<sup>42</sup>

[I feel deeply moved by the faithfulness with which this woman reported the events of a group, [and] the attention she paid - thus the importance she attached - to everything that was happening.]

This first-person narrative yields a hybrid form which merges the diary with the academic essay and the political treatise: while chronicling her discovery of Fonte, Jaquinta also reflects upon Italian literature, politics, and

<sup>41</sup> Jaquinta 1978, 53-54.

<sup>42</sup> Jaquinta 1978, 67.

the reasons that drive her research. This intimate approach to *Il merito delle donne* produces an interpretation that verges on the autobiographical. Mirroring herself in Moderata Fonte, Jaquinta seemingly considers her an elective, although flawed and distant, “mother” – a fellow precursor on the feminist path. The act of guarding the legacy of prior feminist thinkers is borne of a personal claim and a vital need, writes Jaquinta.<sup>43</sup> Memorialising the Renaissance writer emerges as a way of understanding herself, of finding companionship and mentorship, and of untangling her ties with the cultural world.

Surprised by the timeliness of *Il merito delle donne*, Jaquinta is particularly anguished by ideas that presciently foreshadow the insights of Rivolta Femminile:

L'amore è un sogno desiderabile come una bella fioritura ma non è possibile né realizzabile se non [...] lasciandosi adorare a distanza [...] – il sesso è un dovere procreativo, il matrimonio è l'unica forma di sopravvivenza sociale [...] – questa è proprio una radiografia tragica di uno stato disastroso dei rapporti fra i sessi. [...] La cosa mi agita perché è vero anche oggi che i rapporti sono disastrosi, le differenze macroscopiche non intaccano la lontananza, l'incomprensione di fondo.<sup>44</sup>

[Love is a desirable dream, like a beautiful bloom, but it is neither possible nor realisable unless [...] one allows herself to be adored at a distance [...] – sex is a procreative duty, marriage is the only form of social survival [...] – this is really a tragic x-ray of a disastrous state of relations between the sexes. [...] It upsets me because it is true even today that relations are disastrous, the macroscopic differences do not affect the distance, the basic incomprehension.]

Jaquinta even detects in the Renaissance dialogue a motto analogous to the modern feminist slogan “I am mine”: “Li-

<sup>43</sup> “Una necessità mia, personalissima e vitale, di superare equilibri apparenti e di chiarire nodi e temi”. Jaquinta 1978, 50: “A very personal and vital need of mine to overcome apparent equilibriums and to clarify certain knots and issues”.

<sup>44</sup> Jaquinta 1978, 55.

bero cor nel mio petto soggiorna, | Non servo alcun, né d'altri son che mia".<sup>45</sup> Four centuries after the composition of *Il merito delle donne*, she identifies in the text an ancient attempt to foster alternative modes of living and independent modes of expression among women, experimenting with the same principle of separatism that characterised Rivolta Femminile's political praxis:

Mi aveva colpito [...] lo spirito di "separatezza" di questo gruppo antico, quale confortante conferma storica di una contrastata "novità" che avevo vissuto e me ne attendevo grandi risultati.<sup>46</sup>

[I had been struck [...] by the spirit of "separatism" of this ancient group as a comforting historical confirmation of a controversial "novelty" that I was experiencing, and from which I expected great results.]

In the circle of Venetian ladies, Jaquinta glimpses more and more an ancient reflection of the women of Rivolta Femminile: indeed, her appreciation of Moderata Fonte grows alongside her understanding of her peers in the feminist group.<sup>47</sup> The two share significant affinities. The garden setting of *Il merito delle donne* serves as a metaphor for Fonte's wish to create a proto-feminist society, mirroring Rivolta Femminile's symbolic construction of female spaces. In Fonte's text, marriage is singled out as the foremost tool of patriarchal oppression: a discussion of the humiliations that most wives endure from their husbands (including infidelity, reckless expenditure, vio-

<sup>45</sup> Fonte 1988, 18-19: "The heart that dwells within my breast is free: I serve no one, and belong to no one but myself".

<sup>46</sup> Jaquinta 1978, 58.

<sup>47</sup> "La comprensione di Moderata andava di pari passo con la comprensione di me e delle altre, in quanto prendevo coscienza del nostro modo di essere e dei nostri comportamenti potevo comprendere meglio lei, anche se così lontana nel tempo". Jaquinta 1978, 55: "My understanding of Moderata went hand in hand with my understanding of myself and the others. As I became aware of our ways of being and of our behaviours, I gradually came to better understand her, even though she was so far away in time".

lence, proprietorial surveillance, and domestic seclusion) runs throughout the dialogue. Similarly, the Rivolta Femminile *Manifesto* rejects marriage as the institution responsible for fettering women to their husbands.<sup>48</sup> Between the lines, Fonte suggests that freedom can only be achieved within an autonomous matriarchal community built upon separatism and female friendship, thus providing a prototype for Carla Lonzi's path towards liberation, which requires the abandonment of male culture to stay among women. Fonte's characters, like the collective's activists, voice a desire to communicate exclusively with each other, and to live peacefully in each other's company. And just as Fonte's seven friends resist their oppression through conversation, the members of Rivolta Femminile use *autocoscienza* to challenge the influence of patriarchal ideas on their lives. It is no surprise, then, that *Il merito delle donne* served as a platform for discussion, and as a springboard to reflect on the effectiveness of Rivolta Femminile's methods.

### 3. Carla Lonzi's contribution to the feminist reclamation of historical precedents

Fonte's dialogue provoked self-reflection and provided political guidance, warning Rivolta Femminile about the potential shortcomings of the practice of separatism: formal banishment of male authorities and a superficial withdrawal from patriarchal society are not sufficient to attain liberation.<sup>49</sup> In Fonte's case, Jaquinta believes that separatism is reduced to a falsely protective shell through

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<sup>48</sup> "Riconosciamo nel matrimonio l'istituzione che ha subordinato la donna al destino maschile. Siamo contro il matrimonio". Lonzi 2010a, 6: "We recognise marriage as the institution that subordinated women to male destiny. We are against marriage".

<sup>49</sup> "L'assenza fisica non escludeva affatto una presenza sotto forma interiorizzata (cosa che del resto avevo già constatato nella mia esperienza)". Jaquinta 1978, 58-59: "Physical absence by no means excluded presence in an internalised form (something I had already observed in my experience)".

which resentment erupts without being accompanied by the authenticity of *autocoscienza*. None of the text's protagonists, she concludes, fully overcomes the oppressive ideal of woman painted by men. In the article "Altro che riflusso! Il tifone femminista soffia da secoli" ["Talk about an ebb! The feminist typhoon has been blowing for centuries"] Carla Lonzi similarly draws insights from *Il merito delle donne*, maintaining that feminist discourse has remained stuck on the same issues since the 16<sup>th</sup> century:

Il femminismo ha il così detto riflusso perché [...] dobbiamo prendere atto che la soluzione interna, solo fra donne, [...] è parziale [...]. Ecco dove il testo di Moderata Fonte [...] è stato per noi un'avvisaglia di tutti i punti morti che un gruppo incontra quando le premesse dell'autocoscienza non sono state portate fino in fondo [...]. Lì la baldanza di un gruppo di donne si sfalda di fronte alla constatazione che non esiste vittoria se il prezzo da pagare è la solitudine e la rinuncia a un tentativo di intesa affettiva con l'uomo. Su questo scoglio siamo inceppate e rientrate a più riprese per quattro secoli. Ora è il momento di affrontarlo [...]. Il punto di partenza è appena sfiorato.<sup>50</sup>

[Feminism undergoes the so-called reflux because [...] we must take note that the internal solution, only among women, [...] is partial [...]. This is where the text of Moderata Fonte [...] was for us a warning of all the dead ends a group encounters when the premises of *autocoscienza* have not been completely carried through [...]. There, the boldness of a company of women crumbles in the face of the realisation that there is no victory if the price to be paid is loneliness and the renunciation of an attempt at affective understanding with man. On this rock we have stumbled and retreated on and off for four centuries. Now is the time to face it [...]. The starting point has been barely touched.]

<sup>50</sup> Excerpt from Carla Lonzi, "Altro che riflusso: il tifone femminista soffia da secoli", in *Quotidiano donna* (September 1979), cited in Lonzi and Jaquinta 1990, 63-64.

Since early modernity, Lonzi notes, all attempts to breathe life into women's communities have been colliding against the desire for genuine, loving, non-hierarchical relationships with men. It is imperative, she claims, to recover and revisit Fonte's conclusions, taking them as the starting point for developing new feminist practices that will break this impasse.

Between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, a similar operation of historical reclamation and feminist counter-memory had been carried out by Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinella: both *Il merito delle donne* and *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne* condemned the exclusion of women from history, strove to rescue forgotten powerful ancestors, and attempted to nourish their ideas with the writings and example of precursors in the past. In Fonte's words, "son uomini quei che l'hanno scritta [la storia], i quali non dicono mai verità [...] per la invidia e mal voler loro verso di noi".<sup>51</sup> Within the treatise *Essortationi alle donne et a gli altri, se a loro saranno a grado* [*Exhortations to Women and to Others if they Please*] (1645), Marinella asks:

Quanti libri di huomini antichi si sono conservati, e si conservano, e di Donne non ne veggiamo alcuno? [...] Da ciò conoscerete che gli huomini non vogliono favorire le vostre compositioni [...]. Non vogliono che la Donna gareggi seco, hanno acquistato la tirannide del Regno della gloria; onde tutte le opere vostre corrono nel grembo dell'oblivione.<sup>52</sup>

[Why have many ancient books written by men been preserved, while none written by women have? [...] This proves that men do not want to favor your compositions, whether they are good or not. [...] They have gained power in the kingdom of glory, and therefore all your works are destined to oblivion.<sup>53</sup>]

<sup>51</sup> Fonte 1988, 41: "men wrote history, and they never tell the truth because of their envy and hatred towards us".

<sup>52</sup> Marinella 1645, 60-61.

<sup>53</sup> Marinella, 2012, 57; 73-74.



In *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne*, she accuses historians of ignoring women's noble deeds and virtues.<sup>54</sup> Yet, Marinella warns them: "in danno vi affaticate; perciocchè la verità, che risplende in queste mie [...] carte, le inalzerà a vostro malgrado fino al Cielo".<sup>55</sup> Like the Venetian authors, Jaquinta regards the past as a treasure that belongs exclusively to men:<sup>56</sup> leafing through library files, the prevalence of male names initially seems to confirm to her that thought and knowledge are solely male prerogatives.<sup>57</sup> For this reason, Jaquinta compares her research to adventuring on quicksand, or exploring a submerged Atlantis.<sup>58</sup> Her study of women's literature, she reveals, arose precisely from the urgent need to break a circle of loneliness that made her feel that she had a desert behind.<sup>59</sup> Until 1975, she observes, Fonte's voice had not been lost but rather *buried* in this desert.<sup>60</sup> In Jaquinta's eyes, the systematic silencing of female voices and stories causes, among other things, "periodici ritorni e naufragi di femminismo", which make impossible an authentic dialogue amongst women.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>54</sup> "Le nobili attioni e virtù delle donne". Marinella 1601, 81.

<sup>55</sup> Marinella 1601, 82: "your attempts will be fruitless, because the truth, shining forth from my [...] pages, will raise them to the skies in spite of you".

<sup>56</sup> "Una ricchezza appartenente tutta e solo all'uomo per suo uso e consumo." Jaquinta 1977, 77: "A wealth belonging all and only to man for his use and consumption".

<sup>57</sup> "Il pensiero e la conoscenza sono prerogativa maschile." Jaquinta 1977, 80.

<sup>58</sup> "Avventurarsi su sabbie mobili da un lato, dall'altro su un continente inesplorato, una sommersa Atlantide". Jaquinta 1977, 81.

<sup>59</sup> "Un cerchio di solitudine che mi aveva spesso fatto sentire con il deserto alle spalle". Jaquinta 1977, 77.

<sup>60</sup> "Sepolta in mezzo a una cultura nei confronti dei cui canoni e dei cui valori aveva ben poco di interessante da dire". Jaquinta 1978, 46: "Buried in the midst of a culture about whose standards and values she had little of interest to say".

<sup>61</sup> Jaquinta 1978, 48: "periodic returns and shipwrecks of feminism".

Carla Lonzi concurred that the erasure of historical precedents hindered the evolution of the feminist movement. The Rivolta Femminile *Manifesto*, which she co-authored, opens with a quotation from the 18<sup>th</sup>-century playwright and feminist thinker Olympe des Gouges (1748-1793), hailing the resurgence of feminism after a long silence. The *Manifesto* urges women to resist their marginalisation by reclaiming their submerged past and illuminating their untold stories:

Unifichiamo le situazioni e gli episodi dell'esperienza storica femminista: in essa la donna si è manifestata interrompendo per la prima volta il monologo della civiltà patriarcale. [...] La donna ha avuto l'esperienza di vedere ogni giorno distrutto quello che faceva. Consideriamo incompleta una storia che si è costituita sulle tracce non deperibili. Nulla o male è stato tramandato della presenza della donna: sta a noi riscoprirla per sapere la verità.<sup>62</sup>

[Let's join the events and episodes of the historical feminist experience: in it, woman manifested herself by interrupting for the first time the monologue of patriarchal civilisation. [...] Woman has witnessed the quotidian destruction of her work. We consider incomplete a history that was built on omissions. Nothing or too little has been handed down about the presence of woman: it is up to us to rediscover her in order to know the truth.]

In her diary, Lonzi expresses anguish at the prospect of being forgotten, much like her ancestors:

Non è vero che prima di me le donne erano più oppresse o più spaventate o meno coscienti, semplicemente non sono state registrate come esistenti: la loro vita, la loro voce si sono perse nel nulla come è destinata a perdersi la mia.<sup>63</sup>

[It is not true that before me women were more oppressed or more frightened or less conscious, they simply were not registered as existing: their lives,

<sup>62</sup> Lonzi 2010a, 8-9.

<sup>63</sup> Lonzi 2010b, 753.

their voices were lost in the void as mine is bound to be lost.]

In 1979, she articulated her belief in the transhistorical and cyclical nature of feminism, writing:

Ci vuole l'incoscienza di chi studia l'umanità secondo criteri maschili per affermare che il femminismo deriva dal Sessantotto o dalla Rivoluzione francese o chissà da dove. Il femminismo è presente in ogni documento lasciato da una donna che non avesse di mira l'inserimento nella cultura e nella società maschili, che non parlasse da un'identità gradita all'uomo per riconfermarlo. È presente negli occhi di chi è in grado di leggere quel documento e non lo trascura perché non rientra nei messaggi che l'uomo capisce.<sup>64</sup>

[It takes the recklessness of those who study humanity according to masculine criteria to claim that feminism comes from 1968 or the French Revolution [...]. Feminism is present in every document left by a woman who did not aim to fit into male culture and society. It is present in the eyes of those who are able to read that document without overlooking it because it is not part of the messages that man understands.]

Until her death, Lonzi remained anchored to this conviction: the notes for her unfinished last book (posthumously published under the title *Armande sono io!* [*Armande, That's Me!*]) reveal an effort to reconstruct a bond with women from previous centuries who expressed affirmative conceptions of femininity and experimented with feminist lifestyles.

In the 1970s, the alienation felt by Rivolta Femminile vis-à-vis historiography and the literary canon brought about some pragmatic solutions. Closing the volume *È già politica* is an announcement from the feminist collective: they founded Casa Editrice Fantasma [Phantom Publishing House], a new publishing house with the aim of pro-

<sup>64</sup> Excerpt from Carla Lonzi, "Altro che riflusso: il tifone femminista soffia da secoli", in *Quotidiano donna* (September 1979), cited in Lonzi and Jaquinta 1990, 63-64.

moting forgotten books by women. As the women of Rivolta reveal in *È già politica*, they were reading Arcangela Tarabotti's *Antisatira* [*Antisatire*] (1644) when they came across a reference to a female-owned publishing house in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Venice which served as the impetus for their own venture.<sup>65</sup> However, in this case, the Rivolta group's impatience with deadlines, distribution mechanisms, contacts with power, and radical rejection of any compromise led to the spurning of traditional publishing companies in favour of an alternative mode of "publication".<sup>66</sup> In fact, Casa Editrice Fantasma did not publish any books. Instead, they only printed the title pages – the "ghosts" of the texts – within *È già politica*. Casa Editrice Fantasma's first "phantom" catalogue included the *Rime* [*Rhymes*] by Atalanta Donati and *Il merito delle donne* by Moderata Fonte.<sup>67</sup> One year later, a substantial section of Fonte's dialogue was published for the first time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Scritti di Rivolta Femminile within *La presenza dell'uomo nel femminismo* (1978).

Galvanised by the "green books" of Rivolta Femminile, numerous women throughout the Italian peninsula devoted themselves to similar projects of historical recovery. In the 1980s, Italian feminism moved from the grassroots collectives and protests in the streets to the world of cultural institutions, giving rise to several organisations.<sup>68</sup> Among these was the Associazione Moderata Fonte, founded in Mirano (Veneto) in 1989 with the aim of promoting women's culture through plays, public lectures, and conferences. The initiative, which selected the Venetian author as the symbol of women's exclusion from traditional history, supported numerous dramatic performances of *Il merito delle donne*, adapted for the theatre by writer and playwright Daria Martelli. According to Martelli, who first read Fonte's text in Anna Jaquinta's edition, the members of the association and the wider circle of people involved in their initiatives formed a relationship

<sup>65</sup> Chinese *et al.* 1977, 96.

<sup>66</sup> Subrizi 2023.

<sup>67</sup> See Chinese *et al.* 1997, 97-99.

<sup>68</sup> On this see Campanaro 2019.

of empathy with the Venetian author, who became an emblem for their feminist struggles. Through this symbolic mother, they sought to build a female genealogy for contemporary women.<sup>69</sup> In the late 1970s and early '80s, Moderata Fonte's dialogue made its way into the academy. In 1979, excerpts from Fonte's text were included in Ginevra Conti Odorisio's study of 17<sup>th</sup>-century women writers.<sup>70</sup> In 1988, the first complete edition of *Il merito delle donne* in Italian was published by Eidos, edited by Adriana Chemello.<sup>71</sup> Nine years later, Virginia Cox produced an English translation of Fonte's dialogue with an extensive exegetic apparatus.

Despite the efforts of Carla Lonzi, Anna Jaquinta, Adriana Chemello, and countless others, Moderata Fonte is still omitted from the Italian canon alongside most of her female contemporaries. Cox documented the presence of approximately 200 published female writers in the peninsula between 1580 and 1630.<sup>72</sup> Yet, in literature manuals for the *triennio* (Italian high school years three–five, ages 16 to 19), the representation of women is strikingly low, ranging from a mere 2.74% to 8.83%.<sup>73</sup> A survey of contemporary Italian literature degree programmes revealed that during the 2018/2019 academic year, in twenty-five universities male authors constituted 91% of the course offerings, while women accounted for only 9% on average.<sup>74</sup> Long before Italy existed as a unified state, the canon provided the peninsula with a shared identity, and this discourse of national belonging has always been dominated by men. This exclusionary narrative, marred by omissions and critical dismissals, attest that Italian

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<sup>69</sup> This information is collected on the website of the Associazione Culturale Moderata Fonte and it has also been relayed to me by Martelli herself in an email exchange in May 2022. See also Martelli 2017.

<sup>70</sup> Conti Odorisio 1979.

<sup>71</sup> The publishing house Eidos is owned by Vittoria Surian.

<sup>72</sup> Cox 2016, 194.

<sup>73</sup> Orsi 2023, 23.

<sup>74</sup> Bazzoni 2021, 148.

women writers and feminist thinkers have often been – and still are – relegated to the margins of Italian culture.<sup>75</sup>

The considerations raised in this chapter show that an important consequence of the loss of female voices in the Italian literary tradition is that an accurate genealogy of the long history of Italian feminism has not yet been constructed. Lea Melandri once aptly described the Italian movement as a “revolution without memory”.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, Italian feminists tend to locate the genesis of their tradition in a relatively recent past: some detect its inception in 18<sup>th</sup>-century England with Mary Wollstonecraft, others even later with Virginia Woolf.<sup>77</sup> However, Moderata Fonte’s *Il merito delle donne* should be recognised as an important proto-feminist text that has inspired and influenced trailblazer Italian feminist thinkers and women’s collectives in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The dialogue allowed modern Italian feminists to incorporate a *longue durée* perspective on their activities, to vindicate and legitimise their theories, and to reflect critically on aspects of their work that required development. The 20<sup>th</sup>-century readers of Moderata Fonte forged a kinship with the Venetian author that bridged an immense temporal gap. Their collective efforts sought to reclaim a marginalised history of Italian women’s writing in order to find an antidote to what Elena Ferrante calls “the solitude of women’s minds”<sup>78</sup> and Lauren Berlant describes as a form of “aloneness”, which is the “affective experience of being collectively, structurally unprivileged”.<sup>79</sup>

<sup>75</sup> See Brogi 2022.

<sup>76</sup> Melandri 1997.

<sup>77</sup> See Libreria delle Donne di Milano 1987; Bono and Kemp 1991; Cavarero and Restaino 2002.

<sup>78</sup> Ferrante 2014, 323. See, in this volume, Moroncini and Santovetti’s chapter.

<sup>79</sup> Berlant 2008, ix.

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