



Voices from the margin. Italian Renaissance paratexts and women's knowledge production

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Abstract

This article investigates the role of Renaissance paratextual sources – particularly dedicatory epistles authored by women – as a key space for understanding female contributions to knowledge production in the early modern period. Focusing on Italian works from the late sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, it analyses how female authors, within contexts such as the *querelle des femmes*, epistolary practices, scientific dialogues, and poetry, used these marginal spaces to negotiate gender roles, claim authority, and position themselves within the circulation of knowledge. Approaching these texts through the lens of privacy studies and the history of emotions, and applying a slow close-reading methodology, the article reveals how dedicatory epistles served both as self-defense and as a declaration of intellectual agency in the Italian Renaissance.

Keywords

natural philosophy, *querelle des femmes*, paratexts, Renaissance Italy, women authors

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I respond to these words that since man was made from four elements he could not live eternally, speaking in terms of natural philosophy.

Camilla Herculiana¹

Introduction

The aim of this article is to highlight the importance of Italian Renaissance paratextual sources and especially dedicatory epistles authored by women in revealing women's contribution to the production of knowledge and their efforts to participate in philosophical discourse, namely natural philosophy. As Eckerle points out, for women, who already wrote from the social margins, the marginal space of the book represented one of the strategic ways to express ideas which could not be formulated either in the main text of the book, or in some other form.² It therefore provided authors "more possibilities for innovation and even personal commentary than such writers would be allowed in a primary text".³

More recently, scholars have begun to recognize early modern women's intellectual contributions, highlighting "the significance of epistolary exchanges, paratexts, and private writings as venues for philosophical discourse and as tools to challenge traditional gender norms".⁴ Whether in the context of the *querelle des femmes* (a debate about the nature and worth of women), religious writings, epistolary practice, scientific dialogues or poetry, women authors often needed to defend their daring to appear in public and to publish a book. It is precisely in paratexts that women authors announced their forthcoming books and occasionally, as it will be shown, engaged in scientific debate. However, the strategic function of the early modern paratext – particularly the dedicatory epistle and the address to the reader – as a mean to negotiate and legitimize authorship and to articulate ideas of defence (which, in some cases, move beyond mere rhetorical convention) is

¹ Camilla Erculiani, *Letters on Natural Philosophy: The Scientific Correspondence of a Sixteenth-Century Pharmacist, with Related Texts*, ed. by Eleonora Carinci, trans. Hannah Marcus, foreword Paula Findlen (New York, Toronto: Iter Press, 2021), 155-168, here 162. See Jacopo Menocchio, "Consilium DCCLXVI, 766", in *Consiliorum sive responsorum* (Frankfurt: Andreas Wächeli and Johann Gymnich, 1604-1616), 180-183.

² Julie A. Eckerle, "Prefacing Texts, Authorizing Authors, and Constructing Selves: The Preface as Autobiographical Space", in *Genre and Women's Life Writing in Early Modern England*, ed. by Michelle M. Dowd and Julie A. Eckerle (London: Routledge, 2007), 97-113.

³ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁴ Emilio M. De Tommaso and Delfina Giovannozzi, "Not Simply 'Impertinencies of a Woman's Pen'", in *Lo Sguardo – Rivista di Filosofia* 38, 1 (2024): 7-15.

also typical of male-authored paratexts. In contrast, female-authored books exhibit a significant, and often overlooked, difference. Women writers used these paratextual spaces as rare opportunities to express ideas related to their private lives and gendered experiences, and not infrequently, to reveal the private practices behind their knowledge production. These moments also allowed them to contribute to broader intellectual debates, such as the *querelle des femmes* and emerging discourses in science – topics that male authors, by contrast, could address more openly in full-length works. In some cases, they engage with the same topic explored in the main text, while, in the others, importantly, use this space as a unique opportunity to refer to their knowledge, regardless the topic of the book, as it will be shown further.

The term ‘paratext’, introduced in literary studies by French theorist Gérard Genette in 1987,⁵ refers to the liminal devices that frame and mediate the main text. Gérard Genette defines paratexts with the influential formula “paratexts = peritext + epitext”.⁶ ‘Peritexts’ include features within the book such as titles, dedicatory epistles, addresses to reader, and notes, and ‘epitexts’ materials located outside the book but still connected to it, such as letters and diaries. As thresholds between the texts and its readers, paratexts function as a site that draws attention to certain themes or aspects of a work. At the same time, it allows space for innovation, offering Renaissance authors, especially marginalized ones, an opportunity to assert their voices, introduce new ideas, and, in some cases, engage with scholarly discourse in ways that might not have been accepted if they had done so in the main text.⁷ An important aspect of paratexts is that they reveal not only patronage relationship, but also cultural networks, which in case of women’s writing become very important. It was exactly thanks to these cultural networks that women were allowed to print.⁸

⁵ Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 [1987]). See also Kevin Dunn, *Pretexts of Authority: The Rhetoric of Authorship in the Renaissance Preface* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Furio Brugnolo and Roberto Benedetti, “La dedica tra medioevo e primo Rinascimento: testo e immagine”, in *I margini del libro. Indagine teorica e storica sui testi di dedica*, ed. by Maria Antonietta Terzoli (Roma, Padova: Editrice Antenore, 2004), 13-54. Helen Smith and Louise Wilson, eds., *Renaissance Paratext* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Two academic journals are dedicated exclusively to paratextual studies: *Paratesto: rivista internazionale* (Pisa, Roma: Fabrizio Serra Editore) and *Margini. Giornale della dedica e altro* (Basel: Universität Basel. Institut für Italianistik) [www.margini.unibas.ch].

⁶ Genette, *Paratexts*, 5.

⁷ See Eckerle, “Prefacing Texts, Authorizing Authors, and Constructing Selves”, 97-113.

⁸ Apart from highly important work by Virginia Cox, Brian Richardson’s study provides an important overview of female engagement in material textual culture during the early modern period. Richardson analyses women’s contribution to culture as patrons and dedicatees of books, female engagement with the text in its production and consumption. See Brian Richardson, *Women and Circulation of Text in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

By focusing on the paratextual elements of books by female authors who wrote in Italian during the second half of the 16th century,⁹ this article aims to provide an overview of women's contribution to knowledge – primarily in the domain of natural philosophy – within the context of the *querelle des femmes*, as reflected in paratexts. Women authors did contribute to natural philosophy and at the same time they invited other women to gain and produce knowledge. Therefore, this article explores how women referred to their own authorship and authority, articulated their intentions regarding book production, expressed ideas that are connected with natural philosophy, and consequently positioned themselves within the system of knowledge circulation and production.

Paratexts are examined here as spaces of social, authorial, and cultural negotiation, through an interdisciplinary lens that draws on rhetorical and literary studies, privacy studies, and the history of emotions.¹⁰ However, it is important to clarify from the outset that this article does not provide a detailed analysis of scientific ideas expressed by women authors, apart from the case of Maria Gondola, which is represented in greater detail than the cases of the other authors.¹¹ This article emphasizes the importance of close paratextual analysis in understanding women's contribution to science and to culture in general.

Recent significant developments in historiographical studies – primarily in English,¹² and more recently also in Italian¹³ – have opened important avenues for scholars to ex-

⁹ I would also like to mention the online catalogue of the Italian Renaissance women's paratexts, which I have developed with the support of Elisabeth Tauber (University of Bolzano), entitled "Parity in Renaissance", designed by Alena Dziedzitz. A work in progress, it is now available for researchers to consult at www.parityinrenaissance.net [last accessed 14 May 2025].

¹⁰ See Jelena Bakić, "Paratext and Privacy in the Early Modern Period: Toward an Interdisciplinary Theoretical and Methodological Approach", in *Privacy in Early Modern Paratexts*, ed. by Jelena Bakić and Liam Benison, *Studies in the History of Privacy* series (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming 2025).

¹¹ See Jelena Bakić, *Defence from the Margin* (PhD diss, University of Prague and University of Porto, 2017), 98-144, and appendixes, 263-279. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/10216/105856> [last accessed 14 May 2025].

¹² Here, I primarily refer to works from the series *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*. See: Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil Jr., series editors, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe – The Toronto Series*, as well as important contributions by Virginia Cox and Meredith K. Ray (see further references below). See also the groundbreaking studies by Londa Schiebinger, particularly her seminal work *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989). In addition, the extensive scholarship of Paula Findlen on early modern women in science, especially: "Translating the New Science: Women and the Circulation of Knowledge in Enlightenment Italy", *Configurations* 3, no. 2 (1995): 167-206; "Becoming a Scientist: Gender and Knowledge in Eighteenth-Century Italy", *Science in Context* 16 (2003): 59-87; "Women on the Verge of Science: Aristocratic Women and Knowledge in Early Eighteenth-Century Italy", in *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, ed. by Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 265-287.

¹³ I mainly refer to the recent works by Sandra Plastina and Eleonora Carinci (see further refer-

plore women's contribution to knowledge production in scientific fields, from which they had long been excluded. Virginia Cox has demonstrated that women participated in intellectual culture not only as consumers, but also as producers. Cox convincingly argues that it was during the Italian Renaissance that the model of the modern creative woman – a “cultural protagonist” – emerged, along with new ways of thinking about gender.¹⁴ In her foundational work on the recognition of women's contribution to science in Renaissance Italy, Meredith K. Ray underscores the fact that “women contributed in crucial ways to the production of knowledge on the cusp of what has traditionally been known as the Scientific Revolution.”¹⁵ Likewise, Sandra Plastina has extensively contributed to the reconstruction of the history of philosophy by examining women's roles in Renaissance and early modern philosophical discourse.¹⁶ These studies suggest that early modern women authors – mainly those from privileged and elite backgrounds (but not exclusively) – found strategic ways to enter scientific discourse. In the Italian context during the sixteenth century, several women authors demonstrated knowledge in natural philosophy, including Fiammetta Frescobaldi (1523-1586), Camilla Gregetta Herculiana (Erculiani) (c. 1540-c.1590), Maria Gondola (Marija Gundulić, c. 1584), Moderata Fonte (1555-1592), Lucrezia Marinella (1571-1653), Margherita Sarrocchi (c.1560-1618), Isabella Cortese (pseudonym, c. 1561), Tullia d'Aragona (1510-1556), and Tarquinia Molza (1542-1617).

In the first part of this article, I focus on the importance of early modern paratexts for understanding women's contribution to the *querelle des femmes* debate. Particular attention is given to ideas that come from natural philosophy expressed within this discourse,

ences below). See also, for an overview that covers the later centuries as well, Paola Govoni, “The Power of Weak Competitors: Women Scholars, “Popular Science” and the Building of a Scientific Community in Italy, 1860s-1930s”, *Science in Context* 26, no. 3 (2013): 405-436; Ead., “Liminali in sé: studi di donne, natura e scienza”, *Storia della donna*, 18-19 (2022-2023): 185-204; Federica Favino, *Donne e scienza nella Roma dell'Ottocento* (Roma: Viella, 2020); Natacha Fabbri, *Profili di donne sulla Luna. Riflessi di scienza, filosofia e letteratura* (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2022).

¹⁴ See the works by Virginia Cox, especially: Virginia Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy, 1400–1650* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008) and Ead., *Prodigious Muse, Women's Writing in Counter-Reformation Italy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Meredith K. Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 1.

¹⁶ Sandra Plastina, “Italian Women Philosophers in the Sixteenth Century. From a Critique of the Aristotelian Gender Paradigm to an Affirmation of the Excellence of Women”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Women and Early Modern European Philosophy*, ed. by Karen Detlefsen and Lisa Shapiro (New York and London: Routledge, 2023), 381-395; Sandra Plastina and Eleonora Carinci, eds., *Corrispondenze scientifiche tra Cinquecento e Seicento* (Lugano: Agorà & Co., 2016). Sandra Plastina, “Considerar la mutatione dei tempi e delli stati e degli uomini: *Le Lettere di philosophia naturale* di Camilla Erculiani”, *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 20, no. 1 (2014): 145-158.

in order to uncover the strategies employed by women authors to engage with scientific knowledge – a theme developed further in the second part of this contribution. Rather than offering a conventional conclusion, this article closes by highlighting the significance of a close, contextually grounded, reading of early modern paratextual sources for understanding women's contribution to culture, science, and knowledge in general.

Why paratexts?

The historical and theoretical significance of the paratext in representing women's contributions to knowledge deserves greater emphasis, as its strategic function proves to be underestimated. As scholars have noted, the paratext is “not only the text, but also the space”,¹⁷ suggesting that it offers more than mere textual framing; it creates a site for cultural and authorial negotiation, and innovation. Paratextual elements such as titles, dedicatory epistles, addresses to the reader, and *errata corrige* were composed according to strict rhetorical conventions rooted in manuscript culture and the classical tradition of letter writing. Paradoxically, these strict rhetorical rules make it possible to uncover private messages and authorial intentions that could not have been expressed or published elsewhere due to the cultural and literary conventions of the early modern period. The rhetorical rules of early modern dedicatory epistles, in particular, created space for implicit confession, authorial claim, and the use of subtle self-authorizing strategies that are rarely found in other literary forms.

In the context of female knowledge production in the Renaissance and especially in the sixteenth century, special attention should be given to addresses to readers (*a lettori*) and dedicatory epistles, particularly in light of their epistolary character. Recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of epistolary exchange to the circulation of scientific knowledge and the formation of intellectual networks. In the sixteenth century – a transitional period from manuscript to print – the epistolary form of book dedications emerged as a defining feature, making early modern dedicatory epistles a unique source for understanding authorial and cultural negotiation.

Women authors “had to explain themselves in order to create an audience receptive to their (that is, women's) work”,¹⁸ and the prefatory genre – which was shaped by the rhetorical conventions of apology and self-presentation – offered a strategic rhetorical framework for doing so. Emotions conveyed in these texts, shaped by cultural, religious, political, or ideological norms, often reflect broader gender expectations of the period, which

¹⁷ Philipe Bossier and Rolien Scheffer, “Introduction”, in *Soglie testuali: Funzioni del paratesto nel secondo Cinquecento e oltre* [*Textual Thresholds: Functions of Paratexts in the Late Sixteenth Century and Beyond*], ed. by Philipe Bossier and Rolien Scheffer (Roma: Vecchiarelli, 2010), 16.

¹⁸ Eckerle, “Prefacing Texts, Authorizing Authors, and Constructing Selves”, 99-100.

Natalie Zemon Davis refers to as the 'gender system', allowing readers to discern prevailing moral and social codes. Authors referred to their gender and to prescribed female roles, using different strategies that exemplify a community's values regarding femininity and womanhood within the gender system. Natalie Zemon Davis defines the 'gender system' as "the patterns of social and political relations in which men and women were involved with each other, as expected by their gender... [and] symbolic systems of defining the 'masculine', and the 'feminine' at a given period"¹⁹ At the same time, the commercial function of paratexts should not be overlooked: rhetorical and emotional language often operated as a persuasive device, serving not only the author's self-positioning but also the publisher's aim to support the book's success in a competitive print market.

Paratexts and the querelle des femmes

Renaissance dedicatory epistles were often written separately and added to the book later. They usually blend private messages with genre conventions, and not rarely, Renaissance dedicatory epistles and addresses to the reader offered women authors an ideal platform for defending their ideas, engaging in reflection and observation, and at times, expressing positions related to scientific discourse –sometimes within the boundaries of rhetorical convention, and at others, extending beyond them. Indeed, it may be convincingly argued that paratexts provided early modern women with a strategic space to assert intellectual authority, because "most early modern women writers recognized the value of the preface and exploited it for their own benefit, often to make arguments in defence of women that have no place in the primary texts but that, paradoxically, create the space in which those texts can be written".²⁰

Between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries, the cultural debate about nature, status and worth of women, later named as the *querelle des femmes*, challenged the entrenched view of women. The *querelle des femmes* circulated not only across the Italian peninsula, but throughout other parts of Europe as well.²¹ One of the first examples of

¹⁹ Natalie Zemon Davis, *A Passion for History: Conversations with Denis Crouzet*, ed. Michael Wolfe, trans. Natalie Zemon Davis and Michael Wolfe, *Early Modern Studies* 4 (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2010), 115.

²⁰ Eckerle, "Prefacing Texts, Authorizing Authors, and Constructing Selves", 99.

²¹ Although a comprehensive monograph on the *querelle des femmes* in early modern Italy has yet to be written, for selected studies see: Joan Kelly, "Early Feminist Theory and the Querelle des Femmes, 1400-1789", *Signs. Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 8, no. 1 (1982): 4-28; Margarete Zimmermann, "The Querelle des Femmes as Cultural Studies Paradigm", in *Time, Space, and Women's Lives in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Anne Jacobson Schutte, et al. (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2001), 17-29.

this literature was the *Book of the City of Ladies*,²² 1405 by Christine de Pizan, which raised questions about gender equality that remain topical in the present. Both female and male authors engaged with emerging questions about gender roles, the intellectual and moral equality of the sexes, and women's position within society, often presenting arguments in defense of female equality – or even superiority – in relation to men.

At least three discernible tendencies can be identified in this debate on the role of women in society. First, some texts offer a direct response to specific attacks, in which the author (male or female) defends women by reacting to a particular case or insult. Second, some authors offer a broader defence of women in entire books – or in substantial dedicated sections of them – arguing for women's intellectual, moral, or social equality with men. Third, some works – in a variety of literary genres – include isolated examples intended to demonstrate either the equality or superiority of women. While treatises and dialogues were common formats for expressing arguments associated with the *querelle des femmes*, similar ideas also emerged in orations, declamations, poetry, pastoral plays, and letters – including, as this article emphasizes, in early modern dedicatory epistles and addresses to the reader of books not necessarily focused on the topic of women's intellectual, moral, or social equality with men.²³

The *querelle des femmes* reached its peak in the Italian context during the sixteenth century, especially around mid-sixteenth century, within the literary academies of the Veneto region. Although the debate continued into the eighteenth century, “after 1630, it seems that the *querelle* in its original form had passed its climax.”²⁴ Some female authors contributed to the debate by translating philosophical texts²⁵ (it should be noted that translation can also be understood as a form of paratexts),²⁶ other collected books and manuscripts, and notably, women began publicly to question accepted ‘truths’, authorities, and scien-

²² Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. by Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1982).

²³ See repertoire included in: Marina Zancan, *Nel cerchio della luna. Figure di donna in alcuni testi del XVI secolo* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1983), 236-264; for online repositories dedicated to the *querelle des femmes*, see, for example: a website devoted to the works of authors who contributed to the pro-woman side of the *querelle des femmes* debate in Italy and France, <https://querelle.ca/> [accessed on 14 May 2025]; some male authors participating in the Italian *querelle des femmes* are represented in <https://menforwomen.es/it/autori> [accessed on 14 May 2025].

²⁴ Zimmermann, “The Querelle des Femmes as Cultural Studies Paradigm”, 23.

²⁵ See Luisa Simonutti, “Invisibili traduttrici. Donne e scienza nella prima età moderna”, in *Donne, filosofia della natura e scienza*, ed. by Delfina Giovannozzi and Emilio Maria De Tommaso (Roma: Iliesi Digitale, 2024), 132-154.

²⁶ See Marie-Alice Belle and Brenda M. Hosington, eds., *Thresholds of Translation. Paratexts, Print, and Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Britain (1473-1660)*, *Early Modern Literature in History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

tific paradigms.”²⁷ Cassandra Fedele (1465-1558),²⁸ for example, advocated for women’s rights to education, declaring that “even if the study of literature offers women no rewards or honors, I believe women must nonetheless pursue and embrace such studies alone for the pleasure and enjoyment they contain.”²⁹

Some scholars argue that the *querelle des femmes* should be seen as a literary genre devoid of thematic substance, little more than an exercise in logic, parody, and paradox.³⁰ It is true that some authors expressed pro-women ideas in one work, while voicing misogynist views in another; Lucrezia Marinella is a notable example, although her case should not be understood as straight forward reversal of pro-women ideas.³¹ Nevertheless, the rhetorical character of the *querelle des femmes* remains evident. What should be emphasized is that, even if these texts were rhetorical exercises, their rhetoric was deeply rooted in the social, cultural, political, geographical, and moral norms of the time. Moreover, it is particularly important to note that the use of rhetoric by female authors within the *querelle des femmes* differs significantly from that of their male counterparts. Women authors often use inclusive language, referencing their personal position and socially prescribed gender roles. They employ a variety of rhetorical strategies that reflect the values and norms of their communities – *the gender system*. Finally, they reinterpret historical, medical, philosophical, and literary sources and authorities, in a substantially different way from male authors – they refer to their proper gender. As Sandra Plastina notes, women bring their own lived experience into history. Thus, their contribution to knowledge is inextricably

²⁷ On the Renaissance *querelle des femmes* and its intersections with scientific discourse, see: Gianna Pomata, “Was There a Querelle des Femmes in Early Modern Medicine?”, *Arenal* 20, no. 2 (2013): 334-335 and Meredith K. Ray, “Prescriptions for Women: Alchemy, Medicine and the Renaissance Querelle des Femmes”, in *Women Writing Back/Writing Women Back*, ed. by Anke Gilleir, Alicia Montjoy, and Susan van Dijk (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 135-162.

²⁸ From the fifteenth century, among the women who contributed to humanist knowledge and advocated for women’s rights, apart from Fedele, there are: Isotta Nogarola (1418-1466) and Laura Cereta (1449-1499), to mention a few.

²⁹ Cassandra Fedele, *Letters and Orations*, ed. and trans. by Diana M. Robin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 162.

³⁰ See Francine Daenens, “Superiore perché inferiore: Il paradosso della superiorità della donna in alcuni trattati italiani del Cinquecento”, in *Trasgressione tragica e norma domestica. Esempi di tipologie femminili dalla letteratura europea*, ed. by Vanna Gentili (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1983).

³¹ On this topic see: Stephen Kolsky, “Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, Giuseppe Passi: An Early Seventeenth-Century Feminist controversy”, *The Modern Language Review* 96, no. 4 (2001): 973-989; Amy Sinclair, “Latin in Lucrezia Marinella’s *Essortationi alle donne* (1645): Subverting the Voice of Authority”, in *City, Court, Academy: Language Choice in Early Modern Italy*, ed. by Eva del Soldato and Andrea Rizzi (London: Routledge, 2017), 117-134. Compare also: Lucrezia Marinella, *Exhortations to Women and Others if They Please*, ed. and trans. by Laura Benedetti (Toronto: Iter Inc. and Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2012).

linked to their embodied, gendered existence, and the experience that they bring to it.³²

The writings produced within the context of the *querelle des femmes* drew upon at least five key sources that were considered authoritative – and largely uncontested – for centuries, in some cases even into the present day.³³ Paradoxically, the same sources, and often the same arguments, were invoked to support both the superiority and the inferiority of women.³⁴ Authors such as Aristotle, with his essentialist views on gender³⁵; Galen of Pergamon, Hippocrates, and Aristotle for medicine and humoral theory; Plato, particularly in dialogues such as *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo*, and *Symposium*, where the beauty of the body is linked to the beauty of the soul; Neoplatonic ideas advanced by Marsilio Ficino; Christian thought and the principle of *sola scriptura*; and Roman law, were often reinforced by historical examples, etymology, and a rhetorical appeal to so-called “common sense”. Science, within the *querelle des femmes* debate, is particularly visible in the reliance on Galenic medicine and humoral theory. Although some participants in the debate were scholars with formal or informal education in medicine and philosophy, the majority referenced widely recognized authorities and influential texts of the time; therefore, their status as original scientific inquiry should be questioned.

The sixteenth century holds particular significance for this analysis. It was often referred to as the ‘feminine century’, as Tommaso Campanella called it.³⁶ Virginia Cox argues out that the common notion that the Counter-Reformation was “programmatically misogynistic and [involved the] silencing of women” should be reconsidered. She states: “Strikingly, it is during this period of Italian cultural history, that we first find treatises on women’s ‘nobility and excellence’ being published by clerics rather than laymen.”³⁷ The ‘feminine century’ was, therefore, a period marked by the Counter-Reformation, the expansion of print culture, and, crucially, the vernacular translation of key philosophical texts by Plato, Aristotle, and Plutarch.³⁸ The end of the sixteenth century, especially, brought

³² See Plastina, “Italian Women Philosophers in the Sixteenth Century”, 381-396.

³³ For a short, but very useful overview, see the introduction to the series by King and Rabil, Jr., “The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: Introduction to the Series”, in *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*, vii-xxvi.

³⁴ See: Sandra Plastina, *Mollezza della carne e sottigliezza dell’ingegno: la natura della donna nel Rinascimento europeo* (Roma: Carocci, 2017). Among other studies, I would also like to mention my article dedicated to this topic, see: Jelena Bakić, “Girolamo Camerata and the *Querelle Des Femmes* between Discourse and Paradox”, *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 46, no. 3/4 (2023): 191-216.

³⁵ See: Allen Prudence, *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution, 750 BC–AD 1250* (Montreal: Eden Press, 1985).

³⁶ Mentioned in Plastina, “Italian Women Philosophers in the Sixteenth Century”, 72.

³⁷ Virginia Cox, *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 9.

³⁸ See a searchable catalogue of Aristotelian works written or published in Italian between 1400

major changes when gender and scientific communities are taken into consideration. The engagement of nuns with natural philosophy reveals their often-overlooked participation in scientific and intellectual culture.³⁹ As Sandra Plastina points out, thanks to the new discoveries in science, Aristotelian natural philosophy showed its limitations, and women writers such as Moderata Fonte, Maddalena Campiglia, Camilla Eruculiani, Margherita Sarocchi, and Lucrezia Marinella incorporated arguments from natural philosophy into their works. Plastina writes:

These women philosophers, through their works, placed themselves on an equal footing with their male contemporaries, opposing their theories with vigor and conviction and denouncing their clear contradictions. The writings of these women philosophers show they were conscious of the difficulty they faced in making their voices heard, as well as the conviction they had in their ideas and their determination in introducing these ideas in contemporary scientific discourse.⁴⁰

Natural philosophy, in its broadest sense, was shaped by Aristotelian thought, and influenced by Hippocrates' humoral theory and Galen's reinterpretation of it. It was also informed by Platonic philosophy and by various occult sciences, including the cabala, magic, astrology, and alchemy. A key figure in the development of Aristotelian logic was Giacomo Zabarella (1533-1589), whose *Opera Logicae* (1578) and *Tabula Logicae* (1580) emphasize the necessity of Aristotelian method for understanding the natural world, advocating for "a productive relationship between observed experience and procedures of knowing".⁴¹

Apart from Camilla Greghetta Herculiana who engaged in philosophical and medical debates through her published letters, notably in *Lettere di filosofia naturale* (1584), two names are particularly important where natural philosophy penned by women authors is concerned: Moderata Fonte (1555-1592) and Lucrezia Marinella (1571-1653). Moderata Fonte advises in the second day of *Il merito delle donne* (*The Worth of Women*) that "it is best to ignore the foolish suggestions of many people who are not doctors by profession

and 1650: <https://vari.warwick.ac.uk> [last accessed 12 May 2025]. The importance of vernacular in approaching natural philosophy is analysed in Letizia Panizza, "Alessandro Piccolomini's Mission: Philosophy for Men and Women in their Mother's Tongue", in *Interpreting Aristotle from the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century*, ed. by Luca Bianchi, Stephen Gilson, and Jill Kraye (London: The Warburg Institute, 2016).

³⁹ Sharon T. Strocchia, "The nun apothecaries of Renaissance Florence: marketing medicines in the convent", *Renaissance Studies* 25, no. 5 (2011): 627-647.

⁴⁰ Plastina, "Italian Women Philosophers in the Sixteenth Century", 382.

⁴¹ Mentioned in Eruculiani, *Letters on Natural Philosophy*, 20. See foreword by Paula Findlen, 1-49.

and are completely ignorant of natural philosophy”.⁴² Her ideas expressed in the second part of her work represent, in the words of Virginia Cox, “a symbolic first step toward the task of empowering women by equipping them with the kind of practical and theoretical knowledge of the world from which they had been traditionally excluded by their inadequate education”.⁴³ Lucrezia Marinella, a “supreme expert in moral and natural philosophy”,⁴⁴ in her treatise *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza delle donne* (*The Nobility and Excellence of Women*), 1600,⁴⁵ argues for the moral and intellectual superiority of women, using knowledge that comes from natural philosophy. Although, as concluded by Cox, Fonte’s *Merito* and Marinella’s works are quite different in structure, they are connected with the main idea that “knowledge is empowering and that women’s exclusion from ‘science’ lies at the root of their subjection to men”.⁴⁶ Apart from these, contributions to the field include the letters by Margherita Sarocchi (1540-1591),⁴⁷ Caterina Sforza’s (1463-1509) *Gli Experimenti*, Isabella Cortese’s *I segreti della signora Isabella Cortese* (1561), dedicated to the nobleman from Dubrovnik Mario Caboga.⁴⁸ These texts demonstrate the various ways in which women participated in and shaped scientific culture in the early modern period.

Among these, the paratextual material of Marinella’s works is interesting because it is “abstract and intellectual in tone,”⁴⁹ and for her explicit and firm intent to contradict authorities, not only Aristotle, but also Tasso, Speroni, and Boccaccio. Lucrezia Marinella dedicates her *La nobiltà et l'eccellenza* (1601) to physician and philosopher Luciano Scarano (1540-1610), and positions herself alongside established scholars within the intellectual discourse of her time to reinforce her intellectual authority.⁵⁰ In this work she reacts strongly against Aristotelian philosophy and gender prejudice. In the address to the reader of her epic poem *Enrico, or Byzantium Conquered* (1635), Marinella explains the process behind the composition of her work by referencing Aristotle’s *Poetics* and *Metaphysics*. She writes: “I aimed to fashion my poem according to Aristotle’s directions in his

⁴² Moderata Fonte, *The Worth of Women: Wherein Is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Their Superiority to Men*, ed. and trans. Virginia Cox (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 184.

⁴³ Cox, “Introduction”, in *ibid.*, 10.

⁴⁴ Cristofano Bronzini, *Della dignità, et nobiltà delle donne. Dialogo di Cristofano Bronzini d’Ancona, Diviso in quattro settimane; e ciascheduna di esse in sei giornate* (Firenze: Zanobi Pignoni, 1625), 82.

⁴⁵ Lucrezia Marinella, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women, and the Defects and Vices of Men*, ed. and trans. by Anne Dunhill, introduction by Letizia Panizza (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁴⁶ Cox, *Prodigious Muse, Women’s Writing in Counter-Reformation Italy*, 238.

⁴⁷ See: Meredith K. Ray, *Margherita Sarrocchi’s letters to Galileo. Astronomy, astrology and poetics in seventeenth century Italy* (London-New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁴⁸ See: Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy*, 14-46.

⁴⁹ Plastina, “Italian Women Philosophers in the Sixteenth Century”, 389.

⁵⁰ See Laura Nocito, “Ai margini della letteratura femminile: per un primo approccio alle dediche di poetesse nel Cinquecento”, in *Margini. Giornale della dedica e altro* 3 (2009).

Poetics, without straying far from Homer, whom Aristotle called the living and true ideal of heroic poetry”.⁵¹ In *The Life of the Virgin Mary, Empress of the Universe* (1602),⁵² Marinella continues her critical approach to Aristotle expressed in *La Nobiltà e l'Eccellenza delle Donne*, and writes in her address to readers a clear explanation of her knowledge production. What is obvious in this four-page dedicatory epistle is the absence of the topos of modesty, and clear references to authors such as Ficino and Plato.

During the seventeenth century, the Jewish woman intellectual Sarra Copia Sullam (1592-1641) used the dedicatory epistle as a means of asserting her philosophical and theological stance. In her 1621 *Manifesto di Sarra Copia Sulam*,⁵³ she refutes accusations of denying the immortality of the soul – allegations she attributes to Baldassarre Bonifacio.⁵⁴ Dedicated to her deceased father, the *Manifesto* serves not only as a defense of her beliefs but also as a compelling example of how personal experience can function as a rhetorical strategy. In Venice, Arcangela Tarabotti (1604-1652) offered a powerful critique of patriarchal control in her invective against the forced enclosure of daughters in convents. Her dedicatory letter in *Paternal Tyranny*, 1654, addressed to God and framed explicitly as “a matter of moral duty”⁵⁵ provides a unique window into the paratextual strategies early modern women employed to claim intellectual and moral authority. It provides unique

⁵¹ Lucrezia Marinella, *Enrico; or Bysantium Conquered. A Heroic Poem*, ed. and trans. Maria Galli Stampino (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 77.

⁵² On this dedicatory letter and Aristotle see: Bryan Brazeau, “‘Defying Gravity’: Prose Epic and Heroic Style in Lucrezia Marinella’s 1602 *Vita di Maria Vergine*”, *Classical Receptions Journal* 13, no. 1 (2021): 107-125; and also (but not specifically on Aristotle) Eleonora Carinci, “Una riscrittura di Pietro Aretino: La vita di Maria Vergine di Lucrezia Marinella e le sue fonti”, *The Italianist* 33 (2013): 361-389. On Marinella and Aristotle see also Eleonora Carinci’s chapter, “Lucrezia Marinella e Aristotele: *La nobiltà et l’eccellenza delle donne* (1601) e *Le Essortazioni alle donne et agli altri* (1645)”, in *Rinascimento Veneto, Rinascimento europeo*, ed. by Romana Bassi (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2020), 145-161. Although the dedicatory epistle is not translated, see: Lucrezia Marinella’s *Life of the Virgin Mary, Empress of the Universe*, in *Who is Mary? Three Early Modern Women on the Idea of the Virgin Mary*. By Vittoria Colonna, Chiara Matraini, and Lucrezia Marinella, ed. and trans. by Susan Haskins (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008), 119-247.

⁵³ Sarra Copia Sulam, *Jewish poet and intellectual in seventeenth-century Venice: the works of Sarra Copia Sulam in verse and prose, along with writings of her contemporaries in her praise, condemnation, or defense*, ed. and trans. Don Harrán (Chicago: The University of Chicago press, 2009). On Sara Copio Sullam see: Lynn Lara Westwater, *Sarra Copia Sulam: A Jewish Salonnière and the Press in Counter-Reformation Venice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).

⁵⁴ For an audio-visual representation of the addressee the reader, I would refer to the online exhibition I made in collaboration with Daniela Zambaldi and Alena Dziedzitz: <https://parityinre-naissance.net/exhibition/> [last accessed 14 May 2025].

⁵⁵ “per obbligo di buona coscienza”, see: Arcangela Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, ed. and trans. Letizia Panizza (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 39.

material for understanding the importance of paratexts in approaching women's contributions to knowledge in the early modern period.

However, as the main aim of this article is to discuss late-sixteenth-century female contributions to the natural philosophy within the *querelle des femmes*, we should start with one of the most interesting examples that enter scientific debates through the dedicatory epistle. The name of Maria Gondola (Marija Gundulić, c. 1557-after 1585) is found twice in texts belonging to the corpus of sixteenth-century Ragusan (Dubrovnik) literature written in Italian.⁵⁶ She first appears as one of two female interlocutors in a book of Neoplatonist dialogues, *Dialoghi* (1581),⁵⁷ written by her husband Nicolò Vito di Gozze (Nikola Vitov Gučetić). A year later, in 1582, Maria Gondola's name appeared in print at the end of her dedicatory epistle, as the author-dedicator to another book by her husband, *Discorsi sopra le Metheore d'Aristotele* (1584).⁵⁸ The book of dialogues, *Discorsi*, written by Di Gozze, is divided into four parts (four days) and represents a discussion about topics from Aristotle's *Meteorology*, such as the characteristics of the elements, stars, comets, and atmospheric states in general. The interlocutors in the dialogue are the author and Michele Monaldi.⁵⁹ This book had two editions, the second one appearing a year later in 1585, with a revised dedicatory text, one and a half pages shorter. The dedicatory epistle is signed by Maria Gondola, and dated 15th July 1582. Both books were written by Nicolò Vito di Gozze, a philosopher, statesman, and writer. In this dedicatory epistle, 1582, Gondola not only defends and praises Fiore Zuzzori (Cvijeta Zuzorić), a woman living at the time of publication without political or economic power, but also introduces "present dis-

⁵⁶ For a detailed analysis – including a full transcription of the text, selection and an in-depth commentary on the rewritten sections, an English translation of this dedicatory epistle – please refer to my doctoral dissertation: Bakić, *Defence from the Margin*. Eleonora Carinci, in Plastina and Carinci, eds., *Corrispondenze scientifiche tra Cinquecento e Seicento*, presents a transcription and analysis of the same dedicatory epistle. While there is a significant overlap between her findings and the results of my PhD research, such similarities are perhaps to be expected when working on the same sources. Please note that throughout this article all references and interpretations are based exclusively on material and findings of my PhD dissertation: Bakić, *Defense from the Margin*. For an important recent discussion on Gondola's dedicatory epistle in Croatian, see: Maria Gabrielli, "Dinamike intertekstualnosti u posvetnoj poslanici Marije Gundulić: Camerata, Guevarra i Sannazaro", *Književna smotra* 56, no. 213(3) (2024): 71-106, available at: <https://hrcak.srce.hr/322260> (last accessed 27 August 2025).

⁵⁷ Nicolò Vito di Gozze, *Dialogo Della Bellezza Detto Antos, Secondo la mente di Platone* (Venezia: Francesco Ziletti, 1581).

⁵⁸ Nicolò Vito di Gozze, *Discorsi di M. Nicolò Vito di Gozze, gentil'huomo ragugeo, Dell'Academia de gli occulti, sopra le Metheore d'Aristotele, Ridotti in dialogo & divisi in quattro giornate* (Venezia: Francesco Ziletti, 1585).

⁵⁹ On Monaldi see: Borna Treska, "The Rime of Miho Monaldi, or the Fate of a Book", *Colloquia Maruliana* 32 (2023), 243-245; Ljerka Schiffler, *Miho Monaldi: Ličnost i djelo* (Zagreb: Odjel za Povijest Filozofije, Centar za Povijesne Znanosti u Zagrebu [Sveučilišna Naklada Liber], 1984).

courses on the protection, or defence of the female sex”.⁶⁰

This dedicatory epistle is important because of at least three important facts: it rather introduces the other book, published one year before, namely Di Gozze’s Neoplatonist dialogues, *Dialoghi* (1581), it is the only contribution to the debate of *querelle des femmes* in Italian from the eastern shore of the Adriatic; and it is a kind of literary mosaic, as Gondola rewrote the words of the other authors, namely by the Sicilian physician Girolamo Camerata (c.1567) and by Spanish bishop and author Antonio de Guevara (c. 1481-1545). Additionally, this dedicatory epistle attracted significant attention in the first half of the 20th century, because one part of the dedicatory epistle was cut from the text in the second book’s edition.⁶¹ The second, revised version of the dedicatory text is dated March 27th, 1585, when the second edition of the book was published. The first version of the dedicatory epistle (signed in 1582, and published in 1584) is thirteen pages long, and the next edition from 1585 is shortened by 1.5 pages – precisely 430 words. These 430 words were simply cut from the body of the text, and then at the end a different date is provided. The place and the dedicator in both editions are the same: Ragusa (Dubrovnik) and Maria Gondola.

At the outset, Gondola grounds her argument in personal relationships and intellectual influences, citing Aristotle, and two interlocutors in the dialogue: her husband, and the Dubrovnik-born poet and philosopher Michele Monaldi (c. 1540-1592). She writes: “Being introduced by my husband to the discourses on Aristotle’s *Meteorologica*, which he conducted in these days with the very gentle Michele Monaldi. He is never praised enough for the wisdom of his soul, nor for his very gentle customs [...]”.⁶²

Although her words are rewritten from the works by Girolamo Camerata, Antonio De Guevarra and as shown by Gabrielli, characterized by multiple echoes of Sannazaro’s pastoral novel *Arcadia* (1504), they are authored by Maria Gondola. She assumes responsibility for the text of the dedication to this book about natural philosophy, written by her husband. To have somebody else sign the dedication of the book was a common practice, but usually it was somebody from the press, or a relative, in the case of the death of the writer. Here we have a rather atypical case, the wife of a living author, who in fact did rewrite the words of the other authors. However, rewriting practice, in Renaissance context is mainly understood as producing knowledge, and this fact does not diminish her authorship.⁶³

Gondola delves into Aristotle’s *Historia animalium* (which regards women as imper-

⁶⁰ Maria Gondola, “To a woman no less beautiful than she is virtuous and gentle, Fiore Zuzori, in Ragusa”, in Di Gozze, *Discorsi di M. Nicolò Vito di Gozze*, f. 1v.

⁶¹ See Bakić, *Defence from the Margin*; Carinci, *Corrispondenze scientifiche tra Cinquecento e Seicento*.

⁶² All translations of this dedicatory epistle are my own. See Gondola, “To a woman no less beautiful”, in Di Gozze, *Discorsi*, f. 1v.

⁶³ On rewriting practices and authorship in Italian Renaissance see: Paolo Cherchi, *Polimatia di riuso: Mezzo secolo di plagio (1539-1589)* (Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 1998); Paolo Cherchi, ed., *Sondaggi sulla riscrittura del Cinquecento* (Ravenna: Longo Editore Ravenna, 1998).

fect men) and his *Politics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* (in which nature is held to determine female submission to men). Gondola argues that it is impossible to say that one sex, either male or female, is superior. Her resolution to defend women's aptitude for science is made explicit in the following passage, with direct reference to Aristotle's idea of female passiveness, exemplified by his statement that "nature does not assign defensive weapons to any female creature". Gondola writes:

and many will wonder what the reason was which made me extract these present discourses on the protection, or defense of the female sex, considering maybe that, *as we are not capable of wielding weapons because of our nature, in the same manner we also lack knowledge of the sciences, and awareness about things in general*, and that we are far away from the customs of moral virtues, a thought which did not reach men from anywhere else other than from their affections...⁶⁴

To prove her statement, in line with the main rhetoric of the *querelle des femmes*, Gondola refers to Plato's *Phaedrus*, claiming that "the beauty of the soul is the beauty of the body; Plato in his *Phaedrus* shows this very clearly: which is easily persuaded through reason, because in well-formed matter, the form performs better its operations".⁶⁵ Reasoning, as an approach to getting to know the truth is pointed out throughout the dedicatory epistle. In the following examples, Gondola reuses Camerata's original text, employing inclusive language and situating it within a different context. These adaptations offer a meaningful contribution to knowledge:

[Regarding] the beauty of the body (which is the real matter of our soul) being an effect of the proportion of the bodily humours, and of their regulation in forming virtue, it is surely possible to say that the soul in a well-formed body is more virtuous in its operations; where it is clearly known, that the beauty of the body is a sign of the beauty of the soul; and with no doubt, the body of our sex is more beautiful than that of the male sex;⁶⁶

It is important to observe that, although Gondola refers to unquestioned authorities, she introduces her experiential knowledge, as she refers to the knowledge gained through direct learning, rewriting again Camerata's original text:

and if men would like to deny that our beauty surpasses that of their bodies, a single eye affirms and shows the opposite, because we are the ones lacking in hair, which makes them

⁶⁴ Gondola, "To a woman no less beautiful", f. 3v. All italics in quoted material are mine.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, f. 4r.

appear wild, and painted by nature in white and red colours.⁶⁷

Accepting Aristotle's version of humoral theory, that moist and cold humours correspond to women, and dry and hot ones to men, Gondola manages to invert the meaning, and come to the conclusion that women are not only equal with men, but better than them.⁶⁸ She continues, drawing knowledge from humoral theory, and Aristotle, writing:

where Aristotle said that those who are made of *tender flesh* are more inclined to mental work, because the soul operates upon the corporeal instrument, the *constitution when tender, that is to say, humid and hot, or humid and cold, is more apt to receive that which is not possible when the constitution is dry and hot, as it is in the male sex*: by this mechanism, therefore, it is concluded that women are more perfect than men.⁶⁹

Gondola continues: "Moreover it is clear, that our sex is more mentally capable of grasping the forms of intelligence, which the male cannot do, because the female constitution is more tender, *which is also proved by the senses*, as they have a humid temper... and the truthfulness of this consideration is confirmed by many ancient women, who were wise, both in Rome and in Greece".⁷⁰

Gondola does not question that men are closer to dryness and hotness, and women to coldness and moistness. However, according to Gondola, a more temperate complexion and weakness made women more stable and more apt to understand, and since knowledge comes through the senses, women are in a better position to understand intellectual things, and logically they are more intelligent, therefore superior. The same argument rewritten by Gondola, is used by Girolamo Camerata in his tenth argument proving women's superiority.⁷¹ According to Plastina, this kind of argument should be understood as turning the Aristotelian paradigm upside-down.⁷²

Now, don't you see, that the nature of our sex does not lack the capacity to make us not only ready, and also suitable to weapons, as it did to letters, and that the strength of the soul appears in us, no less than in men; and we are more disposed to these effects, to which men are not, if we want to believe to our reason; because it is clear, if this disposition proceeded from the essence of soul not being the same kind as the male one, we would be ready for all these

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ This is, however, common argument in a pro-women literature. On this topic see Plastina, *Mollezza della carne e sottigliezza dell'ingegno*.

⁶⁹ Gondola, "To a woman no less beautiful", f. 4v.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ See Bakić, "Girolamo Camerata and the *Querelle Des Femmes*", 191-216.

⁷² Plastina, "Considerar la mutatione dei tempi", 14.

effects, not less, which are active in men; but as the diversity in this disposition to weapons, and to letters, proceeds from the diversity of constitutions: we have the temperate constitution, and when compared with ours we can say that the male's constitution is intemperate, ours has greater convenience in everything, which the intemperate does not have, as the means are closer to the two extremes, and not to one or the other; where it appears that we have a better disposition for what men are disposed to, which are weapons; what men have not is the thing to which we are disposed, that is, letters; and if we want to cede partially to men, that they are braver, and pluckier, from this it does not follow that they are more perfect; because we are inclined to more perfect things, which are the excellent disciplines of the intellect, more so than men, as we have a more perfect and more temperate sensibility.⁷³

To prove female excellence in learning and science, Gondola provides a list of women who were known to have contributed to science, using examples of knowledgeable women found in other works written in the context of the *querelle des femmes*. Over six pages of Gondola's dedicatory text, she provides fifteen examples of illustrious women from the history of ancient Rome and Greece,⁷⁴ which she presents as proofs of female genius and equality or superiority. She explains why this list is important, stating: "I believe there should be some encomia to women in order to shut the mouths of those who are their detractors, and open their eyes to reason."⁷⁵

Still I leave Cornelia, the mother of Gracchi, who in Rome was very well known, but was more honoured for the sciences she read in Rome, than for the successes of her sons in Africa, who once was asked by a certain Roman, what was her greater honour, to see herself as a master of so many disciples, or to be mother of many children; Cornelia answered, I pride myself more for the science I learned, that for the children I bore; because children maintain honour only during life, whereas disciples affirm fame perpetually after death.⁷⁶

⁷³ Gondola, "To a woman no less beautiful", f. 6v.

⁷⁴ The exemplary women from the past are all rewritten from the influential book by Antonio De Guevara, *Libro di Marco Aurelio con l'horologio de principi* (Venezia: Francesco Portonaris, 1568). They are: Arete of Cyrene (fourth century B.C.), a philosopher; Themistoclea or Theoclea, who lived in the sixth century B.C., a priestess at Delphi; Carmenta, a goddess of childbirth and prophecy; Lastheneia of Mantinea, one of Plato's female students; Myrtis of Anthedon, an ancient Greek poet; Cornificia (c. 85-40 B.C.) a Roman poetess; Laelia the daughter of Gaius Laelius Sapiens (185-115 B.C.); Cornelia Africana (c. 189-110 B.C.), Roman princess; Cloelia (around 506 B.C.); Porcia Catonis (c. 70 B.C.); Aretaphila of Cyrene (c. 50 B.C.); Camma, a Galatian princess and priestess of Artemis; Cornelia Africana (c.189–110 B.C.), Roman princess, mother of Gracchi brothers, Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus. For a detailed analysis of this part I would refer to my doctoral thesis: Bakic, 2017.

⁷⁵ Gondola, "To a woman no less beautiful", f. 3v.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, f. Sr.

On 25 February 1584, late in the “feminine century”, another female author, Camilla Herculiana (Erculiani) writes in her dedication to Queen Anna of Poland: “I wanted, through my studies, to let the world know that we, like men, are capable in all areas of knowledge.”⁷⁷ Her writing belongs to the *querelle des femmes* but is less rhetorical than Gondola’s.⁷⁸ In her addressee to readers, Herculiana writes that everyone “with good judgment and without prejudice” should understand that times changed, and that “women do not lack the foresight and virtues that men have”.⁷⁹ Expressing her own opinion, she writes: “I won’t hide the fact that I have read several authors and reflected on their definitions, and our own opinion can be expressed, once I too, duly impressed by their ingenuity and their various opinions, undertook to write down my own thinking.”⁸⁰

Herculiana announces her work on the virtue of the soul, a topic which would need a privileged reader, “it will seem without doubt difficult to prove this to anyone, though to intelligent people it will not seem a thing beyond truth.”⁸¹ The matter of the soul was very topical in the Renaissance. It was discussed in *Phaedo*, and commented by Sebastiano Erizzo in his *Commento nel Fedone*, published together with Plato’s *Dialogues*. In Plato’s *Dialogues*, the immortality of the soul is contrasted with the mortality of the body. The condition of the soul, he suggests, is shaped by the way one lives, and intellectual growth is closely tied to the soul’s purity. In this view, the cultivation of the intellect is intrinsically linked to the cultivation of the soul.

In the address to the reader of her only published book, *Letters*, Herculiana writes:

And I would also like to explain what is the nature of the soul, if it pleases God, and in other letters to expound what, and where, and when, and with which characteristics our soul is generated. It will seem without a doubt difficult to prove this to anyone, though to intelligent people, it will not seem a thing beyond truth. And this other work will be published a short time after the present letters, if it happens that these few lines are acceptable to you and received with the same goodwill that I bring to their publication.⁸²

⁷⁷ Eleonora Carinci, “Una ‘speziala’ padovana: *Lettere di philosophia naturale di Camilla Erculiani* (1584)”, *Italian studies* 68, no. 2 (2013): 202-229. Camilla Herculiana, *Lettere di philosophia naturale, di Camilla Herculiana, speciala alle tre stelle in Padoua, indirizzate alla serenissima Regina di Polonia: nella quale si tratta la natural causa delli diluuij, et il natural temperamento dell’huomo, et la natural formatio* (Krakow: stamperia di Lazaro, 1584). Erculiani, *Letters on Natural Philosophy*, 110. Discussed also in Meredith K. Ray, *Daughters of Alchemy*, 141-131.

⁷⁸ See Jelena Bakić, “Camilla Herculiana (Erculiani): Private Practices of Knowledge Production”, in *Women’s Private Practices of Knowledge Production in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Natacha Klein Kafer, Natália da Silva Perez (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 43-72.

⁷⁹ Camilla Herculiana, “To Readers”, in Erculiani, *Letters on Natural Philosophy*, 111.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, 111-112. For an audio-visual representation of this part see the online catalogue of the

Unfortunately, her other work has never been identified. Between 1585 and 1588⁸³ Herculiana was questioned by the Inquisition because of the ideas in her only published book. A defence based on the proceedings of the trial is documented over four pages in “Consilium DCCLXVI”, in a book by Jacopo Menochio, *Consiliorum sive responsarum* (1604).⁸⁴ Since Camilla refers clearly to her work in her defense, the text of a defence based on the proceedings of the Inquisitorial trial should be understood as an epitext, and included in paratextual analysis. What is valuable about Menochio’s written testimony is the fact that some of Herculiana’s answers are written in Italian in the form of direct speech, the common praxis in the proceedings of inquisitorial trials. She defended herself by insisting on the fact that she wrote philosophically. According to Menochio, Herculiana stated: “I respond to these words that, since man was made from four elements, he could not live eternally, speaking in terms of natural philosophy”,⁸⁵ insisting that it was possible to discuss all those things in a philosophical way. Another of her answers is also reported in direct speech:

These are things that are disputable in philosophy [...] speaking philosophically, I tell you, that one can never determine a thing to be true [...] In theology, I turn always to Sacred Scripture, and I affirm that the Flood and death came about because of sin ... As I have already said, speaking theologically, I affirm that sin was the cause of the death of man ... I spoke philosophically.”⁸⁶

When she was asked about the fact that her book of letters was written against the opinion of the theologians and the council, Herculiana responded: “I say that these ideas are disputes that are habitually made in philosophy, and this is how I intend to speak”.⁸⁷ Menochio mentions that there was a second interrogation wherein she provided the following answer: “I explained, speaking in terms of natural philosophy, that a flood can both be universal and natural, and at the same time miraculous.”⁸⁸ This strategy of defense, a double-truth, that the expressed ideas should be connected only with philosophy and not with real belief, is also found in the documentation saved from Giordano Bruno’s trial,⁸⁹ as

PARITY catalogue: <https://parityinrenaissance.net/exhibition/>

⁸³ The *consilium* was first mentioned and analysed in Carinci, “Una ‘spezials’ padovana” and further discussed and translated in English in Erculiani, *Letters on Natural Philosophy*.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁸⁹ On Giordano Bruno’s trial see: Luigi Firpo, *Il processo di Giordano Bruno*, ed. by Diego Guaglioni (Roma: Salerno editrice, 1993).

well as in many others who were sentenced to death.⁹⁰

Within the context of the *querelle des femmes*, paratextual strategies, and contributions to early modern science, the name of Giulia Bigolina (c.1518-c.1569) emerges as significant. Her work – never printed and surviving only in manuscript⁹¹ – is entitled *Urania*, and is dedicated “to the magnificent and excellent doctor of law in Padua, Signor Bartolomeo Salvatico.”⁹² The name *Urania* was common in pastoral literature; for example, in Maddalena Campiglia’s *Flori*,⁹³ *Urania* is a nymph. Yet *Urania* also evokes the muse of astronomy, traditionally depicted in a light blue dress adorned with stars and holding a globe; a characterization that allowed the Neoplatonists to play with the distinction between a divine, contemplative Aphrodite *Urania*, the inspirer of divine love, and an Aphrodite *Pandemos*, her terrestrial counterpart.⁹⁴

Bigolina’s dedicatory epistle – and indeed the entire text – reveals her engagement with Neoplatonic philosophy. Like Gondola, Bigolina was one of the female interlocutors within the Neoplatonic dialogue tradition.⁹⁵ In this paratext, she refers explicitly to the relationship between goodness and beauty:

Since the image can then represent only material things to the intellect, through the sight, and since we have two eyes, there are then two things extracted from the image and represented to the intellect, namely, the good and the beautiful. The good, being more appropriate to the nature of the intellect than the beautiful, passes directly through it, whereas the beautiful, more disjoined from its nature, is appropriated for the most part from the imaginative side, which partakes of all the senses more than any other power of the soul. The beautiful stops there only long enough to become able to ascend to the intellect. After having considered the beautiful in itself, the intellect makes of it the concept it most prefers, whether it likes it or not. If it likes the thing known and desired, the intellect sends it to the

⁹⁰ On “double truth” see Craig Martin, *Subverting Aristotle: Religion, History and Philosophy in Early Modern Science* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

⁹¹ The manuscript is saved in Biblioteca Trivulziana, in Milano: Cod. Triv. 88, available at: <https://graficheincomune.comune.milano.it/graficheincomune/immagine/Cod.+Triv.+88,+piatto+anteriore> [last accessed 14 May 2025].

⁹² Giulia Bigolina, *Urania. A Romance*, ed. and trans. Valeria Finucci, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 2005). See also: Sandra Plastina, “Ritrovandomi in termine di dover da me stessa la propria ragion difendere e sostenere: *Urania* di Giulia Bigolina”, *Bruniana & Campanelliana: Ricerche filosofiche e materiali storicotestuali* 27, no. 1/2 (2021): 433-446.

⁹³ See: Maddalena Campiglia, *Flori. A Pastoral Drama: a Bilingual Edition*, ed. and trans. Virginia Cox and Lisa Sampson, *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁹⁴ Bigolina, *Urania. A Romance*, 16.

⁹⁵ Mario Melechini, “A ragionar d’Amore”, mentioned in *ibid.*, 16, 8.

memory to be kept; if it does not, it banishes it and rejects it.⁹⁶

The main ideas of Neoplatonism, rooted in Plato's *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo* (*On the Soul*), and *Symposium*, came to early modern writers through the revival of translation from Greek, and mostly, as already mentioned, through the work done by Marsilio Ficino and his commentary on the *Symposium* (between 1480 and 1489).⁹⁷ In the doctrine of Neoplatonism, love is understood as the desire for beauty, which can be found in three aspects: the beauty of the body, perceived by the eye; the beauty of the voice, perceived by the ear; and the beauty of the soul, which can be perceived only by the mind.⁹⁸ The beauty of the body should never be put before the beauty of the mind, according to Neoplatonists. Love is strictly connected with goodness,⁹⁹ which represents the splendour of divine beauty. Perfection in a human being could be internal (which is the goodness of the soul) or external (the beauty of the body). Anyone who has both characteristics is called a blessed person.¹⁰⁰ Two people who love each other want to enjoy beauty (*pulcritudine*), and there are four ways to do so, which includes owning four characteristics: "prudence, fortitude, justice, and temperance".¹⁰¹

Now if the image represents only the beautiful or the good to the intellect, I do not know what beautiful or good thing is in you that you want your image to represent to that young man, since you never have done anything worthy enough to move a noble soul. I do not want to talk of the beautiful any further with you, since I judge that one should leave an image only for the good and never for the beautiful because truly the beautiful is too vain and lewd in itself.¹⁰²

These two passages by Bigolina can be read as offering an account of aesthetic judgment informed by Neoplatonic thought and natural philosophy. Physical beauty is por-

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16, 80.

⁹⁷ Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499). Apart from his comments on Plato's *Symposium*, *De amore*, his most important and widely read and translated books during the early modern period are: *De vita*, *De voluptate*, *De Christiana Religione*, and *Theologia Platonica*. See: Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life* (*De vita libri tres*), ed. and trans. Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark (Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1989). See also: Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary on Plato's Symposium* (*Commentarium... in convivium Platonis de amore*), ed. and trans. Sears Reynolds Jayne (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1944).

⁹⁸ Marsilio Ficino, *El libro dell'amore*, ed. by Sandra Niccoli (Firenze: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1987), 14-16.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁰² Bigolina, *Urania. A Romance*, 80.

trayed as inferior to the beauty of the soul and intellect. Only the good is deemed worthy of the intellect's attention, as it alone contributes to the elevation of the soul and gaining the true knowledge.

Conclusion: toward further research questions

Rather than offering a definitive closure, this discussion invites further reflection on the cultural roles of paratexts and the recovery of women's early modern voices. In the early modern period, paratexts served as a distinctive and strategic public space for authorial self-assertion – particularly for women. Early women writers adeptly exploited the preface's "marginality" and epistolary form, turning these liminal spaces into powerful platforms for self-representation. This space functioned not simply as an introduction, but as a venue into the world of print – a world from which most women remained excluded. Through the use of dedicatory epistles and addresses to the reader, women writers engaged in acts of self-promotion, demonstrating rhetorical skills, classical learning, or practical experience. While the rhetorical nature of the *querelle des femmes* is undeniable, it is crucial to recognize that these texts signed by women were not merely rhetorical exercises but rather deeply embedded in the gender system of the time. These paratexts allowed women to initiate intellectual exchange with friends, patrons, and influential figures, thus negotiating both cultural authority and visibility within a predominantly male literary and philosophical tradition. Through a range of rhetorical strategies, female authors both reflected and subtly challenged the gender norms of their communities, the important fact that distinguishes paratexts connected with female authorship from those by male authors.

Women authors presented in this article used paratexts as a space to show that they, too, could contribute to scientific debate. They demonstrated this by rewriting texts from other authorial sources (e.g., Gondola), quoting undeniable authorities (e.g., Marinella), or – following the main rhetorical strategies of the *querelle des femmes* – claiming their authority and inviting other women to contribute to science and knowledge. The case of Camilla Herculiana is particularly noteworthy. Natural philosophy is the main focus of her book, but both the peritext in her book and the epitext – namely, the proceedings from the inquisitional trial – offer important testimony to her lack of modesty in referencing her own work and asserting her position in knowledge production. As for the case of Maria Gondola, although her words are largely rewritings of Camerata's and De Guevara's, the text nonetheless clearly demonstrates Gondola's knowledge of Neoplatonism. Such statements – whether aligning with the genre's typical rhetoric or the *querelle des femmes* – contribute to knowledge and science by adding a gender perspective and showing that philosophical knowledge and participation in philosophical discussion were also part of women's intellectual aspirations.

Renaissance women authors also used the paratextual space to explain their ideas on scientific themes beyond the *querelle des femmes*, in works not dedicated to scientific themes. Tarquinia Molza (1542-1617),¹⁰³ a Modenese poet, translator, natural philosopher, and musician, was also an interlocutor in Neoplatonic dialogues, much like Gondola and Bigolina.¹⁰⁴ In the 1577 dialogue *L'amorosa filosofia* (Philosophy of love) by Francesco Patrizi,¹⁰⁵ Molza is depicted as the Renaissance ideal of the perfect woman, inspired by knowledge in both psychological and naturalistic fields. Known by the academic name 'Unique' when she was elected to the Accademia degli Innominati (Academy of the Unnamed), Molza was an influential figure in the intellectual circles of her time.¹⁰⁶

In terms of her paratextual contributions, Molza's translations of important philosophical works from Greek to Italian including *Il Carmide*,¹⁰⁷ *Il Critone Dialogo di Platone*,¹⁰⁸ provide insights into her intellectual engagement with classical thought.¹⁰⁹ These translations offer valuable material for considering her role in the dissemination of philosophical knowledge. Furthermore, an important "opinion" by Molza is preserved in the paratext of *Unpublished Works* by Tarquinia Molza, in which she references Aristotle's *Metaphysics* – an important moment in understanding her philosophical perspective and her contribution to the intellectual debates of the time. "The Opinion of Lady Tarquinia Molza":

Philosophy is the science of all things, that is, of human, natural, mathematical, and divine matters. Some claim that it is not the science of any of these except for the mathematical ones, because these have a certain and necessary subject, while the human ones do not, nor do the natural ones. As for the divine, they argue that, because they are the first causes, having no cause preceding them, it cannot be said that there is a science of them, since science is knowledge of the cause through its causes. To this, it is responded that they are not absolutely first causes, since before them is the first mover, the cause of them. As for natural things, it is acknowledged that the elementary ones do not have a certain cause, but the

¹⁰³ On Tarquinia Molza, see: Meredith K. Ray, "Tarquinia Molza and 'Le cose del Cielo': Gender, Natural Philosophy and Celebrity in Early Modern Italy", in *Redreaming the Renaissance: Essays on History and Literature in Honor of Guido Ruggiero*, ed. by Deanna Shemek and Mary Lindemann (New Brunswick: University of Delaware Press, 2024), 192-214.

¹⁰⁴ On the role of women as interlocutors in Renaissance dialogues, see: Virginia Cox, "The Female Voice in Italian Renaissance Dialogue", *Modern Language Notes* 128, no. 1 (2013): 53-78.

¹⁰⁵ Francesco Patrizi, *L'amorosa filosofia*, ed. by John Charles Nelson (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1963).

¹⁰⁶ See Helena Sanson, "'Io che donna indotta e minima sono': Women, Translation and Classical Languages in Early Modern Italy", *Women Language Literature in Italy*, 3 (2021): 29-51.

¹⁰⁷ *Il Carmide. Dialogo di Platone tradotto dal greco dalla signora Tarquinia Molza*, in *Opuscoli inediti di Tarquinia Molza modenese. Con alcune poesie dell'istessa quasi tutte per l'addietro stampate, ma ora la prima volta raccolte, e poste insieme* (Bergamo, Pietro Lancellotti, 1701), 39-69.

¹⁰⁸ *Il Critone. Dialogo di Platone, tradotto dalla medesima*, in *ibid.*, 70-80.

¹⁰⁹ On this theme see Helena Sanson, "Io che donna indotta e minima sono".

celestial ones do. Regarding human matters, the subject is not necessary, but nonetheless, there is some science about them, though not perfect, because these things can be known through their causes, according to the definition of science.¹¹⁰

Molza's thought reflects a synthesis of classical influences, ranging from Aristotle's concept of causes and classification of the sciences, through Neoplatonism, to the early modern emphasis on mathematics as the most certain form of knowledge, alongside elements of Scholasticism.

This "opinion", like the other liminal texts presented in this article, allowed women authors to assert their intellectual authority, demonstrate their knowledge or practical experience, and negotiate their position within gender system of their time.

¹¹⁰ My translation. Tarquinia Molza, "Che la filosofia è veramente scienza, ancor fuori delle Matematiche facoltà", in *Delle poesie volgari e latine di Francesco Maria Molza. Corrette, illustrate ed accresciute, volume secondo: contenente le cose inedite, e gli opuscoli di Tarquinia Molza nipote dell'autore*, a Pierantonio Serassi (Bergamo: Pietro Lancellotti, 1750), 94. The dedication of this book is signed from Modena, 15 April, 1614, by Camillo Molza.

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