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Marinella, Lucrezia. Exhortations to Women and to Others if They Please

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absent from the volume. But of course no selection, however broad, will meet everyone's expectations. King's anthology is the biggest and broadest—and therefore the best—introduction to Renaissance humanism currently available and is surely destined for long life in university classrooms.

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Marinella, Lucrezia.

Exhortations to Women and to Others if They Please.

Ed. and trans. Laura Benedetti. Toronto: Iter Inc. / Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2012. Pp. 220. ISBN 978-0-7727-2114-3 (paperback) \$21.50.

The nine *Exhortations to Women* by Lucrezia Marinella (1571–1653) may be seen as the literary and cultural testament of the Venetian author—if not for its content, at least because it was her last published work (1645). In this treatise Marinella, once a champion of women in the *querelle des femmes*, now exhorts women to live a secluded life, abandon the study and practice of literature, focus on their womanly and wifely duties, exercise silence, use modesty and moderation regarding fashion and jewels, and exercise prudence in managing their homes and educating their children.

That the author of *Le nobiltà et eccellenze delle donne* seems to have changed her mind completely is a disturbing thought for the modern reader who would like to see a *continuum* in “le magnifiche sorti e progressive” (Giacomo Leopardi, “La ginestra”) of the history of early modern women writers. But this work is what it is: a call to return to traditional patriarchal values. Laura Benedetti, editor and translator of *Exhortations*, situates Marinella's work in its historical and cultural context—Venice in the first half of the seventeenth century—and rightly advises against dismissing or deconstructing a work that does not fulfill our expectations. This is clearly wise advice and the best approach to reading this unexpected but interesting work.

Lucrezia Marinella, the daughter of the famous physician and writer Giovanni Marinello, was educated in a learned household with male relatives sympathetic to her intellectual ambitions, a situation similar to that of the older

Moderata Fonte. Fonte's *Il merito delle donne* was published posthumously in 1600, the same year Marinella saw the publication of her celebrated *Le nobiltà et eccellenze delle donne*. As Benedetti explains, in that period of her life Marinella was writing in a cultural and familiar environment that allowed space for women to pursue their intellectual interests. And we can imagine that those favourable conditions continued since Marinella kept writing and publishing all her life, although with longer periods of inactivity during her marriage and when her children were born. Besides her ambitious *Le nobiltà et eccellenze delle donne*, she published religious works, a psychomachia, a pastoral novel, and finally *L'Enrico*, an epic poem on the fourth crusade, a work that did not have the success she had hoped for. Marinella published the *Exhortations*, a book of advice for women, when she was seventy-four years old. One is tempted to ask what happened during the years that separate *Le nobiltà et eccellenze delle donne* from the *Exhortations* to justify such a change in content, ultimately an unanswerable question.

Still, several factors probably played a role: the less favourable social climate for women writers in the early seventeenth century, as analyzed by Virginia Cox; Marinella's disenchantment with literature after the lukewarm reception of *L'Enrico*, as Benedetti suspects; and finally her own experience as a *litterata* and a wife/mother, a major theme of the second *Exhortation*. There, Marinella describes with bitterness how difficult it is for a woman writer to find the time to dedicate herself to intellectual pursuits while relatives and friends blame her for overlooking her domestic chores. She warns that the learned woman will lose her happiness and her beauty in writing philosophical works that an audience of male scholars will not even consider, while wasting her life searching for someone to publish her works. Thus, Marinella concludes, it is not worth the suffering; instead, she invites women to focus on their "natural" womanly works and be happy.

Something, however, does not ring true in these claims. For a book that advises women to reject intellectual pursuits and learning, it is itself an exemplar and implicitly a paean to the enormous learning of the author, demonstrating her impressive mastery of Aristotle's and Plato's philosophy as well as of Ariosto's and Tasso's poetry and a host of other ancient and contemporary writers. In addition, in reading more closely one still encounters, lost in the quotations attesting to the worthiness of womanly duties, rather more familiar claims by Marinella such as "men do not realize that a woman's intellect may be

equal to theirs,” or “women can become learned as easily as men” (62). If one adds to this her affirmation that there are no records of women’s works simply because they were never published or recorded by historians, it is clear that we have to read the *Exhortations* with a grain of salt.

Giovanni Niccolò Doglioni, Moderata Fonte’s uncle and the source of information on her life, some years earlier wrote about the “misguided belief current in this city that women should excel in nothing but the running of their household” (Virginia Cox, “Introduction,” to Moderata Fonte’s and *The Worth of Women*, University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 2). It is true that this prejudice had not prevented Marinella from writing and publishing her previous works, but it may have had an influence later in her life. Interestingly, some sections of *Exhortations* that attack luxury and vanity seem to be an attack on her Venetian contemporary, the nun Arcangela Tarabotti, who defended intellectual pursuits, luxury, and public life for women. While Marinella praises seclusion and silence as a natural condition for women, Tarabotti presses for the opposite, and implicitly rejects Marinella’s claim that fighting to publish is not worth the effort, battling all her life to publish her works. Benedetti supports Cox’s hypothesis that *Exhortations* was written as a sharp response to Tarabotti’s work—a hypothesis that makes Marinella’s work even more interesting. However, I would like to conclude this review in a tone of half-jest, noting that in one thing at least Marinella and Tarabotti agreed: women should be allowed to wear the *pianelle*, the famous high Venetian shoes that “bestow gravitas and decorum upon them” (116).

With this clear translation and rich commentary in both the introduction and notes, Benedetti has greatly enriched our understanding of Marinella’s work as well as the cultural environment of seventeenth-century Venice—with a complex and fascinating picture that scholars and students alike will find interesting and rewarding in their studies of gender and women’s writing.

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