Moderata Fonte
(Modesta Pozzo)

THE WORTH OF WOMEN

Wherein Is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Their Superiority to Men

Edited and Translated by
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VERA MODERATÆ FONTIS EFFIGIES,
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First Day

The most noble city of Venice, as everyone knows, lies wondrously situated on the farthest shores of the Adriatic Sea; and not only is the city founded on the sea, but the walls that surround her, the fortresses that guard her, and the gates that enclose her are nothing other than that same sea. The sea, divided up and channeled into canals between the houses, forms a convenient thoroughfare, whereby people are ferried from one place to another with the aid of little boats. The sea is the high road of the city and the open countryside around it, through which pass all the goods and traffics that arrive there from various parts; and the same sea is a most diligent tributary and supplier of all that is needed for the nourishment and sustenance of so great a city. Because, as Venice herself does not produce anything (apart from the endless bounty of fishes that the sea proffers up to her daily), it is only through the endless traffic of the ships that constantly arrive there from across the seas with useful provisions that she is kept most abundantly supplied with all that is needed for human life.

And so this city is utterly different from all others and a novel and miraculous example of God's handiwork. And on account of this, and its many other rare and surpassing excellencies, Venice exceeds all other ancient and modern cities in nobility and dignity, so that it may in all justice be called the Metropolis of the universe.[1] The pomp and glory of this nation are beyond calculation; its riches are

1. Venetian writers were lavish in their praises of their homeland, even by Renaissance Italian standards, and many of the features of the city Fonte goes on to praise in this paragraph—its wealth, its beauty, its cosmopolitanism, the devoutness of its people, the prudence of its ruling class—were commonplaces of contemporary panegyric (see Muir 1981, 13–44; Megna 1991, 253–66).

inexhaustible; and the splendor of the buildings, the sumptuousness of the clothes, the remarkable freedom enjoyed by its inhabitants and their friendliness and charm are things that cannot be imagined or described. Venice is both adored and respected, both loved and feared; and it is quite remarkable how everyone loves living there, for it seems as though all newcomers, wherever they may come from, as soon as they have tasted the sweetness of life there, find it impossible to leave. And this means that there are people of every nationality in the city, and, just as the limbs and arteries of our body are all connected to the heart, so all cities and all parts of the world are connected to Venice. Money flows here as nowhere else and ours is a city as free as the sea itself; without needing legislation itself, it legislates for others.[2] And what is most marvelous of all is that although the city harbors such a great diversity of races and customs, nonetheless an incredible peace and justice reign there. This is entirely due to the careful foresight and skill of those who govern the city. Here the finest pick of talents in all the arts and professions gather; here every kind of excellence holds sway, pleasures and delights are enjoyed, vice is extirpated, and virtue flourishes. The courage, good sense, and courtesy of the men are remarkable, as are the beauty, intelligence, and chastity of the women. In short, this most fortunate city is showered by God with all the blessings anyone could desire, owing to the fact that the people are so God-fearing and devout, and so grateful for all God's gifts. And, next to God, it is devoted and obedient in the highest degree to its ruler, the doge, who (just so that nothing should be lacking to such a happy and well-ordered Republic) is unrivaled in his goodness, prudence, and justice.[3]

Well then, in this truly divine city, abode of all celestial graces and perfections, there was once not long ago (and indeed there still is) a group of noble and spirited women, all from the best-known and most respected families of the city, who, despite their great differ-

2. A particular source of pride for Venetians in the later sixteenth century was the status of the "Serenissima" as the last major surviving republic in Italy and the last of the Italian city-states to have retained independence from foreign control. It is this political autonomy that is referred to here in the phrase "without needing legislation itself." The reference to Venice's "legislating for others" is to the city's dwindling but still extensive land and sea empire, extending over much of northeast Italy, and parts of present-day Greece, Croatia, and Albania (*VDH*, 31–35).

3. The doge, the elected leader of the Venetian republic, was currently Pasquale Cicogna.

ences in age and marital status, were so united by breeding and taste that a tender bond of friendship had formed between them. These women would often steal time together for a quiet conversation; and on these occasions, safe from any fear of being spied on by men or constrained by their presence, they would speak freely on whatever subject they pleased—sometimes, their womanly labors; sometimes, their seemly diversions. Sometimes one of them, who was fond of music, taking up her lute or tempering her sweet voice with the notes of a well-tuned harpsichord, would provide a charming entertainment for herself and her companions; or another, whose tastes inclined to poetry, would recite some novel and elegant composition to entertain that judicious and well-informed audience in a fresh and pleasing manner. The women were seven in number.[4] The first was Adriana, an elderly widow; the second, a young daughter of hers, of marriageable age, called Virginia; the third, a young widow called Leonora; the fourth, an older married woman called Lucretia. The fifth woman, Cornelia, was a young married woman; the sixth, Corinna, a young *dimmessa*;[5] and the seventh, Helena, a young bride who had, as it were, temporarily left the group, for she had gone to stay with her new husband in a nearby villa on the mainland, and since the wedding none of the others had had a chance to see her.

4. The number of the speakers in the dialogue is probably not fortuitous: among its many meanings, seven was the number of the liberal arts; of the cardinal and theological virtues, and of the days of Creation; it was also associated with chastity (Kirkham 1978, 314–18; Butler 1970, 34, 39, 69). Seven is also the number of female speakers who gather at the beginning of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, before they are joined by their three male companions (whose company is deemed necessary because women, when alone, are "fickle, argumentative, mistrustful, pusillanimous and fearful" and incapable of interacting in an orderly way without the guiding presence of men [Boccaccio 1987, 37]). The names of the speakers are also allusive. Corinna, Cornelia, Virginia, Lucretia, and Helena were all names of heroines of classical history and myth, famed for their learning (Corinna, a Greek poet; and Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, celebrated for her eloquence), chastity (Virginia and Lucretia), and beauty (Helen). The name Adriana had patriotic resonances in Venice, which lies on the Adriatic sea.

5. The phrase *una giovane dimmessa* presents problems of interpretation. The noun *dimmessa* in this period (more usually spelled *dimessa*) most often indicated a member of a female tertiary order started by Padre Antonio Pagani in Vicenza in 1579, which had established a community in Venice by 1587. There is some evidence, however, that the term was used more loosely to indicate any respectable unmarried girl living at home, rather than in a convent (see Cox 1995, 548–50); and this may be the way in which it is being used here, to distinguish Corinna, who does not intend to marry, from Virginia, who is defined as *figliuola da marito*. Another possible sense of the phrase (taking *giovane* as the noun, *dimmessa* as the adjective) would be "a shy young girl," but this seems unlikely, in view of Corinna's forceful character and of the fact that the other women are all defined here in terms of their marital status.

Now this most worthy group of friends, hearing that the young widow Leonora had recently inherited a very lovely house with a very lovely garden, and that she had just moved into it, decided to pay her a visit there at the first opportunity, both for the pleasure of seeing Leonora (a sensible young woman, who, though young, rich, and a widow, was in no hurry to find herself a new husband), and to look over the new house and enjoy for a while the delights of its garden. And so one day they went in a party to pay a visit on this charming young hostess; and after the usual greetings had passed between them, they repaired at her invitation to a light and airy room (for it was the height of summer). There some—the older ones—went out onto a balcony overlooking the Grand Canal, and lingered there for a while enjoying the fresh air and watching the gondolas flying past below. The others, led by Virginia, drew up to a window that overlooked the garden and stood there larking about as young girls do when they are together, affectionately teasing one another and sharing delightful jokes. After a while, a gondola was seen pulling up to the quay; and, as the women looked at it, wondering whose it could be, they suddenly realized that it belonged to Helena. And indeed the young bride had just returned from the country and, hearing that all her friends were assembled at Leonora's, she had come there at once to see them all, and in particular Virginia, who before her marriage had been her closest friend. When the women realized it was Helena arriving, their happiness was complete, for she was a very charming young woman; and she had hardly got up the stairs before they all flocked around her, embracing her and smothering her with kisses in their joy at seeing her again after such a long absence. Then they led her into the drawing room, where they all sat down and feasted their eyes upon her; until finally Virginia spoke up and asked her how she had been all this time and whether she was happy. But before Helena could reply, Leonora, who had a keen wit, cut in with these words:

"My dear Virginia, how can you ask such a thing, when everyone already knows the answer? For popular opinion dictates that no new bride can be anything other than happy."

"Well, let's not say happy," added Lucretia. "Rather, as well as can be expected."

"When I think about it," said Helena, "I'm not sure I can say yet whether I'm happy or not. Certainly I greatly enjoy my husband's company, but there is one thing about him that dismays me a little. He is

quite insistent that I should not leave the house, whereas I long for nothing more than to go to all the weddings and banquets to which I am invited—partly because this is my time for diversion,[6] but also because I'm concerned to keep up my own and my husband's reputation by letting the world see that he is treating me well and that I can dress as befits a gentlewoman, as you can see."

"I hope to God," Cornelia interjected, "that you'll never have anything worse to complain of! But you have yet to learn how quickly a wedding cake can go stale."

"Our 'young married,'" said Lucretia, "is still unconvinced of this truth; she can't make up her mind to believe it. And she's quite right, of course, for everything is lovely when it has the charm of novelty."

"What you mean is that everything *seems* lovely when it has the charm of novelty," said Leonora.

"As to that," replied Lucretia, "seeming good in such cases is much the same as being good. For if something I eat, for example, seems good to my palate, even if it isn't, it's as good as if it were."

"Don't make me laugh," rejoined Leonora. "If that's the case, then we shouldn't wonder at the bakerwoman who, after toiling all day over her hot oven, ran outside to strip off her little ones' clothes, in the belief that they too must be suffering from the heat, without considering the fact that it was the depths of winter!"

Cornelia laughed at Leonora's joke and exclaimed, "Praise God that we are free to do just as we please, even tell jokes like that to make each other laugh, with no one here to criticize us or put us down."

"Exactly," said Leonora. "If a man could hear us now, joking together like this, how he would scoff! There'd be no end to it!"

"To tell the truth," said Lucretia, "we are only ever really happy when we are alone with other women; and the best thing that can happen to any woman is to be able to live alone, without the company of men."

"Indeed," said Leonora. "For my part, I derive the greatest happiness from living in peace, without a man. For we all know what a marvelous thing freedom is."

6. Venetian society was famed in the sixteenth century for the seclusion in which it kept young women of noble birth (Labalme 1980, 136). This seclusion was stricter before marriage, which marked, among other things, a bride's introduction to the "adult" pleasures of dancing and extravagant dress (Chojnacki [1980], 66–67).

"But surely men can't all be bad?" Helena said.

"Would that they weren't!" replied Cornelia. "And please God that you won't soon be in a position to bear witness to it from your own experience!"

"Who knows?" said Virginia. "What if Helena turns out to be lucky?"

"Well, she just might," said Lucretia. "Don't let's lose all hope."

"However badly you speak of men," Helena rejoined, "I don't believe that you will put Virginia off trying out what it's like to have a husband."

"If it were up to me," said Virginia. "I'd prefer to do without one. But I have to obey the wishes of my family."

"When it comes to that, dear child," said Adriana, "I'd be quite happy to respect your opinion, but your uncles have decided you must marry, because you've inherited such a fortune and it needs to be in safe hands, so I really don't know what else I can do with you. But, anyway, keep your spirits up and don't be afraid. Not all men can be the same, and perhaps—who knows?—you may have better luck than the rest."

"Oh, that really is quite a lifeline you're holding out!" cried Leonora. "That kind of vain hope, which so rarely comes true, has been the ruin of many a poor girl."

"Our boundless hopes often lure us to destruction," said Corinna. "But this vain hope you're talking about doesn't fool *me*. I'd rather die than submit to a man! My life here with you is too precious for that, safe from the fear of any great rough man trying to rule my life."

"O happy Corinna!" cried Lucretia. "What other woman in the world can compare her lot with yours? Not one! Not a widow, for she cannot boast of enjoying her freedom without having suffered first; not a wife, for she is still in the midst of her suffering; not a young girl awaiting betrothal, for she is waiting for nothing but ill (as the proverb says, 'husbands and hard times are never long in arriving'). Happy, thrice-happy Corinna, and all that follow your example! All the more so since God has endowed you with such a soaring intelligence that you delight in the pursuit of excellence, and devote your every lofty thought to the study of letters, human and divine, so that one might say that you have already embarked on a celestial life while still surrounded by the trials and dangers of this world. Though such trials barely touch you; for, by rejecting all contact with those falsest of creatures, men, you have escaped the tribulations of this world and are free to devote yourself to those glorious pursuits that will win you

immortality.[7] But perhaps you should devote that sublime intelligence of yours to writing a volume on this subject, as an affectionate warning to all those poor simple girls who don't know the difference between good and evil, to show them where their true interests lie; for in this way you would become doubly glorious, fulfilling your duties to God and to the world."

"It certainly would be a worthwhile thing to do," said Corinna, "and I must thank you for bringing it to my notice; perhaps one day I shall indeed write such a work."

"But in the meantime, surely you must already have written something on the theme: some sonnet, perhaps?" suggested Adriana.

"Well, yes," she replied, "but not, I fear, with much success."

"Oh come!" exclaimed Adriana. "Give us a little something, at least! It would give us all such pleasure."

At this, all the others gathered around Corinna and pleaded with her so earnestly that finally, to appease them, she recited the following sonnet, with a pleasing air of modesty:

Libero cor nel mio petto soggiorna,
Non servo alcun, né d'altri son che mia,
Pascomi di modestia, e cortesia,
Virtù m'essalta, e castità m'adorna.
Quest'alma a Dio sol cede, e a lui ritorna,
Benché nel velo uman s'avolga e stia;
E sprezza il mondo e sua perfidia ria,
Che le semplici menti inganna, e scorna.
Bellezza, gioventù, piaceri e pompe,
Nulla stimo, se non ch'a i pensier puri
Son trofeo, per mia voglia, e non per sorte.
Così negli anni verdi, e nei maturi,
Poiché fallacia d'uom non m'interrompe,
Fama e gloria n'attendo in vita, e in morte.

The heart that dwells within my breast is free: I serve no one, and belong to no one but myself. Modesty and courtesy are my daily bread; virtue exalts me and chastity adorns

7. The desirability or otherwise of marriage for a man was a popular debating point in the Renaissance, and one of the interests of Lucrezia's speech here lies in the way in which it appropriates and adapts one of the favorite arguments of male opponents of marriage, that a woman's company and the care of a household are distractions from contemplation and study (see, for example, Petrarca 1991, 62–64 [2: 18]).

> me. My soul yields to God alone, turning back toward its creator, even while still enveloped in the mortal veil; it scorns the world and its evil treacheries, that ensnare and ruin more ingenuous souls. Beauty, youth, pleasures, and pomp are nothing to me, except as a trophy to my pure thoughts, offered up of my own free will and not through chance. And thus in my green years, as in the riper ones that await me, since men's deceptions cannot obstruct my path, I may expect fame and glory, in life and death.[8]

The judicious ladies were utterly charmed by the sonnet that the talented damsel recited for them, on account both of its sentiments, which all applauded, and of the ease and dignity of its style. So they all heaped praises on Corinna and begged for a copy of the poem; and Virginia, who was particularly struck by it, entreated Corinna to sing it to them, accompanying herself on the harpsichord; which she did, to universal applause, following it with other songs.

Meanwhile, realizing that the sun had retreated behind some little clouds, they all agreed to go down and enjoy the lovely garden for a while; and so they set off gaily, taking each other by the hand and going down the stairs. When they got to the garden, words could not express how utterly charming and delightful they found it.[9] For there were rows of little emerald-green espaliered shrubs, in all kinds of different shapes—some in the form of pyramids, others mushroom-

8. Corinna's sonnet, a manifesto for the single life, contains the first of the dialogue's two references to the figure of the female knight Marfisa, a character in Lodovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1532), and important in this context as a highly unusual (if not unique) instance of a representation in sixteenth-century literature of a woman committed to independence from men. The second line of the sonnet, in fact, quotes directly from a famous speech of Marfisa's, in which she rebukes a knight who is planning to claim her as booty, having defeated her male companions, pointing out that she is her own woman and that anyone who wants her must win her from herself (*OF*, 26, 79, 7–8).

9. The description of Leonora's garden that follows is a reworking of a favored topos of Renaissance literature, that of the *locus amoenus* (literally "pleasant place"): a place of natural beauty offering shelter from the travails of life, often explicitly or implicitly associated with the notion of the earthly paradise. The most immediate literary model for this passage is a description of Caterina Cornaro's garden at Asolo in *Gli Asolani* (1505), a dialogue on love by the Venetian writer Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), which itself draws on earlier descriptions of paradisaical gardens in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Fonte's description deviates from these models, however, in its greater stress on the elements of order and artifice. In this, and specifically in details like the topiary and the shaped lawns, her description accurately reflects contemporary tastes in garden design (Lazzaro 1990; cf. Bembo 1954, 13–14 [1, 4]).

shaped or melon-shaped, or some other shape—alternating with carefully pruned and beautifully intermingled laurels, chestnuts, box trees, and pomegranates, all cut to precisely the same height, without a leaf out of place. There were the loveliest orange trees and lemon trees[10] to be seen, with such sweet-smelling flowers and fruit that they gladdened the heart with their scent as much as they delighted the eyes. I shall not attempt to list the countless lovely and varied carved urns filled with citrus trees and the daintiest flowers of all kinds, nor the quantities of slender myrtles and the fresh lawns of tiny herbs, cut into triangles, ovals, squares, and other charming conceits. There were jasmine arbors, labyrinths of bright ivy, and little groves of shaped box trees that would have astounded any connoisseur. And the fruit! I shall not attempt to describe it, for there were vast quantities of fruits of all kinds, according to the season; and the useful plants, mingled charmingly with the purely decorative, made up such a lovely sight that the women could not rest from exploring.

And in this way, wandering on from one place to the next, they came upon a lovely fountain which stood in the middle of the garden, constructed with indescribably rare and meticulous workmanship. All around this fountain, at each of its sides, there stood the statue of a very beautiful woman with braided hair, from whose breasts, as from a double fountain, there artfully flowed streams of clear, fresh, sweet water.[11] Each of these statues wore a garland of laurel on her head and carried a slender olive branch in her left hand, with a little scroll

10. The Italian word used here, *cedro*, presents some ambiguity. The term is frequently used in sixteenth-century descriptions of gardens to indicate a type of juniper, *Juniperus phoenicea* (Lazzaro 1990, 25). Another sense of the word, however, is "citrus tree," and, paired as it is here with *aranzi* ("orange trees"), this seems the more probable meaning in this context.

11. The adjectives used here, *chiare, fresche e dolci*, echo the opening line of one of Petrarch's most famous *canzoni* (*RS*, 126). Fountains whose waters flowed from the breasts of female figures were found in a number of Renaissance gardens, the most famous example being the fountain representing Diana of Ephesus at the Villa d'Este in Tivoli; they also feature in the descriptions of ideal gardens in the influential anonymous *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (*The Dream of Polyphilius*) (1499). Such figures are normally interpreted as symbolic of the fertility and abundance of nature, but it is relevant to Fonte's use of the image here that the figure of a woman with full breasts also had associations with intellectual and imaginative fertility: such a figure is used to symbolize Poetry in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1603). It may be the case, then, that the iconography of the fountain is best read as a celebration of the author's own literary creativity, already proclaimed in her chosen pseudonym, Fonte ("Fount," "Spring," "Source"), and further evoked in the wreaths of laurel—the plant of Apollo, god of poetry—worn by the statues. The olive branches carried by the statues are symbols of peace and harmony.

with writing on it wrapped around the branch; while, in her right hand, each carried a different emblem.[12] So that one of them was holding a little snow-white ermine over her shoulder, holding it away from her breast to keep it dry; and the scroll she held in her left hand bore the following verse:

Prima morte, che macchia al corpo mio

Let this body rather perish than suffer any stain.

The next carried in her right hand an image of the phoenix, who lives unique in the world; and in her left hand she bore the message:

Sola vivomi ogn'or, muoio e rinasco

Alone I live for all time; I die and am reborn.

The third carried a sun and her motto read:

Solo, porgo a me stesso e ad altri luce.

Alone and unique, I illuminate myself and all around.

The next was holding a lantern, in whose flame a little butterfly could be seen burning to death; and her scroll bore the words:

Vinta da bella vista, io stessa m'ardo

Victim of a vision of beauty, I burn through my own doing.

The fifth had as her device a peach, with a leaf from a peach tree and a verse that read:

Troppo diverso è da la lingua il core.

All too different is the message of the heart from that of the tongue.

But the sixth carried a crocodile and her scroll read:

Io l'uomo uccido e poi lo piango morto

12. The elaboration of emblems—visual riddles encoding moral messages—was immensely fashionable in sixteenth-century Italy and throughout Europe. One important use of emblems, as here, was as personal devices (*imprese*), chosen to express an individual's sense of his or her qualities or aspirations.

I first kill my victims and then, when they are dead, mourn them.

Besides these verses, the figures had written on their brows a letter each: the first had an A, the second a T, the third an S, the fourth an H, the fifth an I and the sixth an M.[13] And the statues as a whole were so precisely carved and so divinely turned that they seemed rather a natural, living thing than something artificial and a product of human skill. And as the women gazed on and marveled at now this thing, now that, in the lovely garden, filled with rapture and wonder, Adriana said to Leonora, "Come, Leonora, what paradise is this? You have a real paradise on earth! Who could fail to be charmed by this place?"

"It seems to me," added Cornelia, "that since this is a paradise in which food and drink are also on offer, you may be seeing rather a lot of us here." For in the meantime Leonora's maids had arrived on her orders with the finest wines and sweetmeats as refreshments for the group.

"I am only sorry you have not been before," replied Leonora, "and I hope now you will all wish to return soon."

"I shouldn't make too much of a point of inviting us," said Lucretia. "For the place is so delightful that we shan't need much persuading."

"You are all forgetting the best bit in your praises of the garden," said Corinna. "You haven't mentioned that among its other charms there's the very important fact that there are no men here."

"And *you*'ve forgotten an important thing, too," Helena added, "that the lady of the house is so kind and charming that that alone would be enough to make us wish to come back often."

"That's true," said Adriana; "Charming, sweet, lovely—no one could deny it. But it's a pity that you don't think of remarrying, Leonora, young and lovely as you are."

"Remarrying, eh?" replied Leonora. "I'd rather drown than submit again to a man! I have just escaped from servitude and suffering and you're asking me to go back again of my own free will and get tangled up in all that again? God preserve me!"

13. I have been unable to decipher the meaning of these letters. It is perhaps worth noting in this context that Fonte's friend and biographer Giovanni Niccolò Doglioni was the author of a work on codes (1619) (Romanello 1991, 368).

And all the others agreed that she was talking sense and that she was lucky to be in the position she was. And Cornelia, kissing her, said, "Bless you, my sister! You're a wiser woman than I knew."

"Come, that's enough of all that," said Leonora. "Will you not all take some refreshment while the wine is cool?"

And so they went and ate some fruit and larked about for a while, playing *inviti tedeschi*[14] and other silly games, knowing that there was no one there to see them or overhear them (which was what they all enjoyed more than anything). When they had finished eating, Cornelia asked Leonora whether she knew what the figures around the fountain represented and, if so, whether she would be kind enough to explain it to them, together with the significance of their mottoes and devices.

"I shall, with pleasure," Leonora replied. "First, I must remind you that this house, together with this garden, belonged to an aunt of mine: you must have heard about her, though I know none of you can have met her, as she lived in Padua for many years (she has just passed away there, in fact). This aunt, from the time she was a girl, was resolved never to marry and so, on the good income she inherited from my grandfather (and thinking nothing of the expense, for it was her greatest delight) she transformed this garden into the beautiful state in which you see it now; and at the same time she had this fountain built, with these figures, as a statement of the way in which she intended to live her life and of the views she held against the male sex. For the first figure is there to represent Chastity, to which she was devoted; and the meaning of the device and the motto are clear enough in themselves.[15] The next figure represents Solitude and her device is the phoenix, to show that my aunt enjoyed living alone and that she lived on her own terms and, after death, was reborn in the fame she gained by her good works.[16] The third is

14. I have been unable to establish the nature of this game (lit. "German invitations," or, if it is a card-game, "German calls or bids").

15. The ermine as symbol of chastity is a frequent motif in Renaissance literature and art (as in Leonardo's famous portrait of Cecilia Gallerani). In his popular *Dialogue on Emblems* of 1555, Paolo Giovio explains the appropriateness of the symbol by reference to the myth that the ermine prefers to suffer death from starvation or thirst rather than soil its fur by passing through muddy ground (Giovio 1978, 56).

16. The phoenix was a mythical bird, of which classical authors such as Herodotus, Ovid, and Pliny gave varying accounts. It lived to a great age and finally died by throwing itself on a pyre of aromatic herbs, whereupon a new, young phoenix grew from its ashes. The phoenix was popular as a device in the Renaissance among both men and women, mainly to indicate uniqueness, faith in resurrection, or an aspiration to secular

Liberty and her device is the sun, which stands free and alone, giving light to itself and sharing its light with the whole universe, to show that my aunt, living free and alone as she did, won a shining renown through her many fine and respected qualities; and also that she shared the treasures of her mind with every person of refinement with whom she came into contact—something she might not have been able to do under the rule and command of a husband.[17] The fourth figure is Naïveté and her device is the butterfly burning in the flame, signifying that women (poor wretches!), when they are to be married, put too much faith in the false endearments and empty praises of men, who seem so kind and charming that women, believing that they will always live up to the fair image they present at first sight, allow themselves to be caught in their snares and fall into the fire that burns and devours them.[18] The fifth is Falsehood and her device is a peach, which is shaped like a heart and has a leaf shaped like a tongue; and the motto too tells of the deceit and falsity of men, whose words to women all speak of love and good faith, but whose hearts tell a very different story.[19] The sixth is Cruelty; and the device of a crocodile means that men harrow and kill those women who become involved with them and then feign a brutish compassion for their victims."[20]

"immortality" through great achievements, but also, occasionally, as here, a commitment to celibacy, as in the famous cases of Elizabeth I of England, who is portrayed wearing a cameo depicting a phoenix in a famous portrait of the 1570s (in the Tate Gallery, London), and of Ariosto's warrior heroine Marfisa (see Ruscelli 1584, 137–42, for a gloss on this use of the image).

17. The use of the sun to symbolize a virtue and glory that illuminates the entire world is discussed in Ruscelli 1584, 191–93, in the context of the device of the Emperor Philip II; see also Giovio 1978, 103.

18. The image of love as a flame to the lover's butterfly was a frequent motif in the Renaissance literature of love: it is discussed in Pietro Bembo's influential dialogue on love, *Gli Asolani* (1505) and in Paolo Giovio's *Dialogue on Emblems* (1555), where a Pavian noblewoman is described as wearing a dress embroidered with butterflies to warn prospective suitors of their fate (Bembo 1954, 40 [1, 27]; Giovio 1978, 40). For an instance of the use of the image to warn women of the wiles of men, see Matteo Bandello, *Novelle*, 1: 18, where it is observed that women "run toward what will obviously bring about their ruin, just as a butterfly drawn by the beauty of a lamp races toward certain death" (Bandello 1974, 169).

19. A precedent for this emblem is offered by Andrea Alciati's influential and much-translated *Emblemata* (1531), where a peach and a peach leaf are similarly employed to symbolize the heart and the tongue (Alciatus 1985, no. 143). In Alciato, however, the imagery has positive connotations very different from those Fonte gives it here.

20. The crocodile, said to shed tears over the bodies of its victims, was used reasonably frequently as a symbol of hypocrisy in the Renaissance and is identified as such in Erasmus's *Adages*. Paolo Giovio records its use as an emblem by Cardinal Sigismondo

"Excellent," replied Corinna. "We are very grateful to you for having explained these riddles to us and I feel much beholden to the memory of this lady who knew so much about the world and whose opinions are so close to my own. Lord! Why can she not still be here with us today?"

"One thing I can tell you," Leonora added, "is that she brought me up to share in her opinion. In fact, she did not wish me to marry, but my father insisted on it against the wishes of both of us; and now that it has pleased God to liberate me, you may be sure that I am just as she was."

As they were talking away like this, Adriana said to her companions, "Now that we have had this explained to us, what do we wish to do next? For the days are long at the moment and the sun is still very high and, now it's come out again, it's quite impossible to walk in the garden. So I would think it wise for us to retire into the shade of these cypresses and settle down here and amuse ourselves in whichever way took the fancy of each of us, some making music, some playing games, some reading."

"That's a good idea," said Cornelia. "But would it not be better for us to choose some game in which we could participate as a group?"

"Rather than play a game," said Helena, 'it would be more fun if we were to tell each other stories or to have a discussion on some subject that interests us."

And as all the women started disagreeing among themselves, with one suggesting one topic for discussion, another a different one, Corinna stepped in and said, "Come now, let us please elect one amongst us to take command of the others—and let the others obey her, for, in truth, in the private as well as the public sphere, obedience is not merely useful but one of the most necessary virtues. And, that way, we shall harmonize the desires of all."

Corinna's plan met with the other women's approval and by common accord they elected Adriana as their queen,[21] knowing her to be

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Gonzaga (Giovio 1978, 125).

21. As has often been observed in the case of Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, the social organization in the miniature societies constituted by the group of speakers in literary dialogues often tends to reflect the political conventions of the broader society to which they belong. Thus Boccaccio's speakers, consistent with Florentine republican tradition, distribute the task of leadership sequentially among all the members of the group, while Castiglione, writing in a hereditary principality, naturally delegates leadership of the group to the unelected duchess. Fonte's speakers, too, fall into this pattern, electing a single "queen" on the model of a Venetian doge, but on the grounds of wisdom, character, and experience (and age, an

a woman of great discernment and someone who, though no longer young (for she was past fifty) was nonetheless very humorous and of an easy and cheerful nature. So they elected Adriana and swore obedience to her for as long as their gathering lasted, and she accepted the charge graciously, saying, "As the oldest of the group, this role you have given me sits well on my shoulders, but, by other criteria, there are others of you who are far more deserving of the honor. However, since this has been your courteous wish, I thank you for it and gratefully accept the governance and command you have assigned to me, and I promise to maintain justice and to govern you in the manner that faithful subjects deserve."

And, after a while, having seated them all around the beautiful fountain on some boxwood seats provided for that purpose, she added, "I had been thinking, since none of us likes to be idle and since evening is still far away, that to pass the time we should tell stories on various themes that I would set for you. But now I have changed my mind and decided, since you have been doing nothing all day but talking about men and complaining about them, that our conversation this afternoon should be on that very same subject. So I hereby give Leonora the task of speaking as much evil of them as she can, and Corinna and Cornelia can join in and take her side. And since I have the impression that Helena is so captivated by the charms of her new husband that she has some leanings toward the male camp, I give her leave to speak in defense of men, if she so wishes, and she may have Virginia and Lucretia as her companions."

When the women heard the Queen's commandment, they were delighted at the idea of talking on this subject; and Leonora said, "Your Highness has given us a most onerous task, which would need stronger shoulders than ours; nonetheless, to obey you, I am ready to plunge into this vast shoreless and bottomless ocean. But I cannot believe that these ladies will be prepared to take on a case in which they know right is not on their side."

"If right is not on our side," replied Helena, "then at least propriety is; and you well know that many disputes are won not so much because of the justice of one side's claims, but because it has decency on its side."

"If that's going to be the whole foundation of your argument, that men have decency on their side," said Cornelia, laughing, "then

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important factor in Venice's somewhat gerontocratic political culture), rather than social rank.

you might as well give yourselves up for beaten before you even start. You would as well look for blood in a corpse as for the least shred of decency in a man."

"Oh and that's the least of their faults," said Leonora. "But I am amazed that our respected young bride here, just because she has taken up with one man, should want to defend the whole crew of them and should immediately bring up this matter of their 'decency.' Especially since I'm not sure that her husband has behaved so decently toward her: in fact, I suspect that he has caused her to lose something she had before."

Helena smiled at this and blushed and said, "It cannot be said with any reason that it is indecent for a woman to unite herself physically with her husband, since in that act of generation necessity is the natural mother and license the legitimate daughter. And as you know all things that are licit may also be considered decent. So if the effect—the act of propagation—is not merely decent in itself, but legal and necessary, it can well be said that when a man unites with his wife, he is the agent and cause of a decent act, and hence a decent subject. And for this reason he cannot be said to have taken away any part of the woman's natural decency."

"Where that particular point is concerned," Cornelia replied, "you have made out a very good case. But you are starting to praise men too much, which is against the laws laid down by our Queen; and so I warn you that you will lose the dispute not just because justice and decency are against you, but also because you are disregarding the rules."

"In any case," said Corinna, "Helena has not managed to prove anything except that men do have some merits when they are married—which is to say, when they are united with a wife. Now *that* I don't deny, but without that help from their wives, men are just like unlit lamps: in themselves, they are no good for anything, but, when lit, they can be handy to have around the house. In other words, if a man has some virtues, it is because he has picked them up from the woman he lives with, whether mother, nurse, sister, or wife—for over time, inevitably, some of her good qualities will rub off on him. Indeed, quite apart from the good examples women provide for them, all men's finest and most virtuous achievements derive from their love for women, because, feeling themselves unworthy of their lady's grace, they try by any means they can to make themselves pleasing to her in some way. That men study at all, that they cultivate the virtues, that they groom themselves and become well-bred men of the

world—in short, that they finish up equipped with countless pleasing qualities—is all due to women. Just look at the examples of Cimone and many others."[22]

"If it is true what you say," said Virginia at this point, "and if men are as imperfect as you say they are, then why are they our superiors on every count?"

To which Corinna replied, "This pre-eminence is something they have unjustly arrogated to themselves. And when it's said that women must be subject to men, the phrase should be understood in the same sense as when we say that we are subject to natural disasters, diseases, and all the other accidents of this life: it's not a case of being subject in the sense of obeying, but rather of suffering an imposition; not a case of serving them fearfully, but rather of tolerating them in a spirit of Christian charity, since they have been given to us by God as a spiritual trial. But they take the phrase in the contrary sense and set themselves up as tyrants over us, arrogantly usurping that dominion over women that they claim is their right, but which is more properly ours. For don't we see that men's rightful task is to go out to work and wear themselves out trying to accumulate wealth, as though they were our factors or stewards, so that we can remain at home like the lady of the house directing their work and enjoying the profit of their labors? That, if you like, is the reason why men are naturally stronger and more robust than us—they need to be, so they can put up with the hard labor they must endure in our service."[23]

22. The argument that women and love were the prime civilizing factors in society was a familiar one in Renaissance defenses of women and is given eloquent expression by Cesare Gonzaga in book 3 of Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* (Castiglione 1994, 262–64 [3: 51–52]). The reference to Cimone is to Boccaccio's famous development of this theme in the first story of day 5 of the *Decameron*. The story, set in Cyprus (traditionally, of course, a haunt of Venus) concerns a high-born idiot boy, Cimone, who falls in love with a young woman he finds asleep in a forest and, as a result, transforms himself in the space of four years from an apelike figure into "the most charming, well-mannered and accomplished young man the island had ever seen."

23. Corinna's argument here is directed implicitly at the vastly influential tradition of argument stemming from Aristotle's *Politics*, where it is maintained that women are men's natural inferiors, and the pseudo-Aristotelian *Economics*, which maintains that men's and women's differentiated social roles and spheres of activity are rooted in their biological nature (men, strong and active by nature, work outside the house accumulating wealth for the household, which women, weaker and more sedentary by nature, then conserve at home through good household management) (see Aristotle, *Politics*, 1259b1–4 and 1260a1–30; *Economics*, 1343b30–1344a8). Her argumentational technique is the deliberately paradoxical and sophistic one characteristic of at least a substantial portion of the Renaissance tradition of defenses of women: she accepts without demur the premises of her opponents (including the fact, which Fonte challenges elsewhere

"So you're saying that all men's hard labor," said Lucretia, "and all the endless exertions they undergo for us deserve so little gratitude from us that all they merit is the contempt you're expressing! And yet you know full well that men were created before us and that we stand in need of their help: you yourself confess it."

"Men *were* created before women," Corinna replied. "But that doesn't prove their superiority—rather, it proves ours, for they were born out of the lifeless earth in order that we could then be born out of living flesh.[24] And what's so important about this priority in creation, anyway? When we are building, we lay foundations on the ground first, things of no intrinsic merit or beauty, before subsequently raising up sumptuous buildings and ornate palaces. Lowly seeds are nourished in the earth, and then later the ravishing blooms appear; lovely roses blossom forth and scented narcissi. And besides, as everyone knows, the first man, Adam, was created in the Damascene fields, while God chose to create woman within the Earthly Paradise, as a tribute to her greater nobility. In short, we were created as men's helpmates, their companions, their joy, and their crowning glory, but men, though they know full well how much women are worth and how great the benefits we bring them, nonetheless seek to destroy us out of envy for our merits. It's just like the crow, when it produces white nestlings: it is so stricken by envy, knowing how black it is itself, that it kills its own offspring out of pique."[25]

"Not content to charge men with pride, you must label them envious as well," said Helena. "And you full well know that envy reigns only in inferiors, so you are trying to imply that men are inferior. But since it is envy that poisons the tongue of slanderers, if we

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(p.100) that women are constitutionally more delicate than men), but shows that quite different conclusions may be reached from the same premises.

24. Having dispatched the secular, philosophical arguments for women's inferiority, Corinna moves on to the other pillar of misogynistic thought, the account of the creation and fall of the human race in Genesis. Her points here are not original, but probably derive, directly or more probably indirectly, from Cornelius Agrippa's influential *On the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex* (c. 1529), which contains a discussion of Genesis in which it is argued that Eve's superiority to Adam can be inferred from her name (meaning "life" to Adam's "earth"); the time of her creation (as God's last and, thus, plausibly, best product); the place of her creation (in the "Earthly Paradise" and not outside it, as Adam was); and the material of which she was made (living flesh—Adam's rib—rather than mud) (Rabil 1996, 50).

25. The legend of the crow's rejection of its white offspring derives from the medieval bestiary tradition.

speak ill of men, we shall be taken to be envious of them and, by implication, their inferiors."

"We are not speaking ill of them out of envy," Leonora said, "but out of respect for the truth. For if a man steals (to take an example), he must be called a thief. If men usurp our rights, should we not complain and declare that they have wronged us? For 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. And we women, who, among our other good qualities, are eminently mild, peaceable, and benign by nature, are prepared to put up even with an offense of this magnitude for the sake of a peaceful life. And we would suffer it still more willingly if they would just be reasonable and allow things to be equal and there to be some parity; if they did not insist on exerting such absolute control over us and in such an arrogant manner, treating us like slaves who cannot take a step without asking their permission or say a word without their jumping down our throats. Does this seem a matter of such little interest to us that we should be quiet and let things pass in silence?"

"But perhaps they do all this through ignorance," Virginia said, "and not because they wish us any ill."

"Now you really sound like the naïve little creature you are," Cornelia replied. "Ignorance does not excuse a sin and, besides, their ignorance is a willful vice and they are all too aware of the evil they are doing. In fact they accuse *us* of ignorance and senselessness and uselessness. And they are right about one thing: we are indeed senseless to suffer so many cruel deeds from them and not to flee their constant, tacit persecution of us and their hatred of us as we would a raging fire. But we should not think that they behave like this only toward our sex, for even among themselves they deceive one another, rob one another, destroy one another, and try to do each other down. Just think of all the assassinations, usurpations, perjuries, the blasphemy, gaming, gluttony, and other such vicious deeds they commit all the time! Not to mention the murders, assaults, and thefts, and other dissolute acts, all proceeding from men! And if they have so few scruples about committing these kind of excesses, think of what they are like where more minor vices are concerned: just give a thought to their ingratitude, faithlessness, falsity, cruelty, arrogance, lust, and dishonesty!"

"So, if, as I have shown, even amongst themselves they cannot show any mercy but rather despise one other and seek to harm one another, just consider how they will behave toward us. As fathers, as brothers, as sons or husbands or lovers or whatever other relationship they have to us, they all abuse us, humiliate us, and do all they can to harm and annihilate us. For how many fathers are there who never provide for their daughters while they are alive and, when they die, leave everything or the majority to their sons, depriving their daughters of their rightful inheritance, just as though they were the daughters of some neighbor?[26] And then the poor creatures have no choice but to fall into perdition, while their brothers remain rich in material goods and equally rich in shame."

"You have not mentioned all those," said Leonora, "whose cruelty toward their daughters has been such that they have wretchedly deprived them of their honor or their life."

"That is something I can't agree with," said Helena, "and I don't want to hear you trying to make too much capital out of it. For *my* father has shown me every regard and, in a spirit of true paternal love, has seen to it that I was married and married extremely well. But you have no father yourself and that is the reason why you are taking such a desperate line."

"Gently now," replied Cornelia. "Do not interrupt her, please, because one swallow does not make a summer. Besides, what you say does not surprise me. What surprises me is rather that men do not all behave as well as your father did, when we consider that irrational beasts, from whom less charity may be expected, work hard to care for their young, and the pelican in particular is prepared to suck its own blood from its breast to nourish its offspring, motivated purely by paternal love.[27] For every wise and loving father should see to it in good time that his daughters are settled; and if by some accident they should happen to die before they are able to do so, they should at

26. Under Venetian law, daughters were entitled to a share of their father's estate equal to that of their brothers, though daughters' portions took the form of a dowry rather than an independent inheritance (Cowan 1986, 132–42; Ercole 1908, 211–30). This principle, not always scrupulously respected in practice, was in danger of being eroded altogether at the time at which Fonte was writing, as the practice became widespread in patrician families of restricting marriages among their daughters in the interest of conserving family wealth (see Davis 1975, 106–11; Cowan 1986, 148–49; and Cox 1995, esp. 527–29, 544–45, and 558–69).

27. The legend that the pelican fed its young with its own blood derives from the bestiary tradition, and is the rationale for the widespread use of the pelican in art as a figure for Christ.

least ensure that their affairs are in order, so that the poor creatures, seeing themselves disinherited in this way, are not left cursing their fathers' souls after their death.[28] Besides which they are forced, if they want to provide for themselves, to have recourse to those means that (as I have said) are blameworthy and despicable. Then there are others who are lucky enough to be left a dowry by their father, or to receive a share in his estate along with their brothers if he dies intestate, but who then find themselves imprisoned in the home like slaves by their brothers, who deprive them of their rights and seize their portion for themselves, in defiance of all justice, without ever attempting to find them a match. And so the poor things have no choice but to grow old at home under their brothers' rule, waiting on their nephews and nieces; and they spend the rest of their lives buried alive."[29]

But Lucretia, who had been married by her brothers, could not suffer Cornelia to go on any longer and interjected almost angrily, "You are wrong, Cornelia—there are also loving brothers who treat their sisters better than they would their own daughters. And I can testify to that, since my father when he died left me very little and my dear brothers found me a husband using part of their own inheritance. And I believe there are many other such brothers in the world."

"Are you not aware," replied Cornelia, "that God on occasion performs miracles?[30] Besides which many brothers marry off their sisters not out of affection, but just to enhance their standing and improve their own chances of getting a wife; but those who perform this good deed (even for their own interest) are very rare, though it is something all brothers should do, both for the honor of the house and as

28. It is possible that personal experience underlies Fonte's warning to fathers here, as she refers in a passage of her romance *Il Floridoro* (1581) to a lawsuit regarding her inheritance from her father, who had died prematurely when she was an infant (Fonte 1995, 44–46 [canto 3, 3–6]).

29. For further discussion of the fates of such women, see Cox 1995, 546–50. Note that Fonte's speakers do not mention the more frequent alternative method of disposing of unwanted daughters, by encouraging them to become nuns.

30. Fonte's relationship with her own brother Leonardo appears to have been rather chilly, perhaps in consequence of disputes over their inheritance: her will of 1585 makes no mention of her brother, while Leonardo's, drawn up some years after his sister's death, complains that his brother-in-law retains in his possession property that should rightly be his (including, interestingly, the family library: "molte scritture di casa nostra, e in particolare i libri") (ASV, Notarile Testamenti: Crivelli, Girolamo fu Francesco, b. 222, n. 1176; 23 April 1595).

an act of benevolence. Because if there are some men who are prepared to aid other people's daughters and do good to many who have nothing to do with them, how much more is a man obliged to help those who were born of the same womb? Who are of the same flesh and blood as him? But now let us speak a little of sons."

"Oh, now what is there to say about them?" exclaimed Adriana, the Queen.

"What I have to say," replied Cornelia, "is this. How many wretched mothers there are who not only carry their sons for nine months in the womb at the cost of great suffering and give birth to them with great pain and danger, but also feed them, wean them and care for them as children with great love and equally great trouble and, if they have had the misfortune to lose their husbands, toil, sweat, and work their fingers to the bone to bring them up decently, in the hope of reaping that pleasure from them that one has from a job well done—only to find that when these sons have reached the age when they should begin to support their mothers (in their own home or elsewhere, as the mothers desire) they choose instead to reward their many labors and troubles by abandoning them and refusing to help them in their need, completely forgetting that they owe their blood, their early nourishment, their upbringing, entirely to their mothers' care. And, what is worse, if the mothers have money, these sons will squander it all, at the same time making their mothers suffer countless hardships, scorning their loving warnings and treating them with churlish contempt. There are even those who beat their mothers cruelly."

At that point, Adriana, the Queen, spoke almost with tears in her eyes:

"Ah, but Cornelia, if you had had the son it pleased the Lord to give me and then to take from me, I am not sure whether you would speak in the same way. For he was an angel of goodness—nothing at all like his father, who was a cruel husband to me. But when I lost my husband, and my son soon afterward, I was forced to marry again to have children and I had this one (pointing at Virginia). But though I hoped for something better from this second marriage, it turned out exactly the opposite, for if my first husband was bad, this one was worse and I cared little for the deaths of either of them compared with that of my poor son."

"This son of yours," Cornelia replied, "may have indeed been an angel of goodness, as you say, or else, by great good fortune, he simply happened to take after you more than his father. Or it could be that

he was going to turn out worse than other men, for you do not know whether he would have changed character with the years—it's something you can't know, if we are to believe that line,

> *La vita il fine, e 'l dì loda la sera.*
>
> The quality of a life is revealed by its end; of a day, by the evening.[31]

And it is all the more plausible that he should have been destined to change for the worse, if the Lord God took him from you early, so you did not have to witness this wretched spectacle. For I can tell you quite surely that having a wicked son is the worst misfortune a woman can suffer in this life: for if, as the proverb goes, the worst of husbands is still better than the best of sons, what can we say about a bad son? And the reason is this: that just as wounds hurt us more the more deeply they penetrate our flesh, so the son who goes to the bad, being flesh and blood with the mother, will afflict and torment her more than her father or husband could, because the bond goes deeper. And, since, in addition, love flows downward rather than upward, a mother in her tenderness will always suffer her son's evils, however wicked he may prove, as she cannot abandon or disown her own flesh. That isn't the case where her husband is concerned: if she is unable to live with him because of the extent of his wickedness, after suffering long and hard, she can at least finally leave him, if circumstances permit. It's something one sees every day, in fact: many sensible women, unable to put up with them any more, leave their wicked husbands to avoid a living hell.[32] The same is true of fathers, because, besides the fact that as I have said, love flows downward rather than upward, it is also easier and less painful for daughters to leave their unloving fathers, who do not care for them as they should. But sons may be far more wicked and cause them far more grief and yet women will put up with their offenses, however grave, so great is the power of maternal love. And children in return are much indebted to their mothers and should by rights treat them as well as they would their own selves."

Then Corinna said, "The other day I was sent a stanza on this subject written from the point of view of a young woman whose father, husband, and son were all in grave danger of death and she

31. The line quoted is from one of Petrarch's most famous *canzoni* (*RS*, 23, 31).

32. On the incidence of marital breakdown in Venice in this period, see Ferraro 1995.

had the power to save just one of them, whichever she wished.[33] But she, not knowing whose life to spare, since all three were extremely dear to her, asked advice on how to resolve so great a problem, in these lines that I shall now recite:

Lassa, che in mezzo a le nimiche squadre
Veggio il mio sposo, il genitor, e 'l figlio,
E l'un d'essi o 'l marito, o 'l figlio, o 'l padre,
Posso ad eletta mia trar di periglio.
Deh, sarò miglior sposa? o figlia? o madre?
Chi porge a l'alto mio dubbio consiglio?
Qual am'io più, che più prezzar debb'io,
O 'l natal, o le nozze, o 'l parto mio?

Wretched me! In the midst of the enemy throng I see my husband, my father, and my son, and one of these three—spouse, child, father—I may choose to release from danger. Alas! shall I choose to be a better wife? or daughter? or mother? Who can offer an answer to this cruelest of dilemmas? Whom do I love most, whose life should I most value—he who gave me life, he who joined himself to me in marriage, or he to whom I gave birth?

The women were all extremely attentive as Corinna recited this stanza, listening to it with great pleasure and satisfaction; and when it was over, after they had all praised it highly, some of them said that the woman should save her husband from the incipient danger, since he was one flesh with her, while others considered that she should save her father's life, since she had herself received life from him. But Corinna said, "Just listen first, please, to the view of someone who replied with this other, very beautiful stanza and then say what you think."

And she went on:

Salva da le crudel nimiche squadre,
Se sei pietosa madre, il caro figlio,
Che dando vita al sposo, o al vecchio padre,
La stessa vita tua poni in periglio.
E'naturale amor quel de la madre,

33. The rather tortuous dilemma envisaged in this stanza is perhaps inspired by a historical (or quasi-historical) anecdote mentioned later in the text (see p. 106 below).

Verso il padre è pietà, l'altro è consiglio;
Quanto pietà e consiglio avanza Amore,
Tanto il parto, le nozze, e 'l genitore.

If you are a loving mother, you must rescue your dear son from the cruel enemy ranks, for, if you choose to give life to your husband or your aged father, you are endangering your own life. A mother's love is instinctive, natural love, while a woman's love for her father contains an element of duty, that for her husband, an element of principle. And, by as much as love outweighs duty and principle, so the bond of maternity outweighs those of marriage or filial obligation.[34]

It would have been impossible to express how well satisfied the women were by this elegant response; if the first stanza had pleased them, they praised the second a thousand times more. The Queen and the others all insisted that Corinna must have composed both of them, since it was her habit to share her new creations with them under the pretense that they were written by someone else, and she was finally compelled to pledge her word that the reply was by someone else, a person of great refinement whose skill far outstripped the powers of her poor wit and of whose worth and wisdom she would be grateful to possess a thousandth part.

"Well, in any case," said the Queen, "the subject of the poem and the problem it poses are very relevant to our discussion, but what I like most is the opinion expressed by this highly judicious man, as well as the happy wit he shows in his writing. And since Cornelia, as well, has argued so convincingly that our love for our children is greater than any other love, my own final judgment would be to confirm the sentence given: that the woman in question should save her son rather than her father or husband from the danger described."

After this she gestured to Cornelia that she should continue with the discussion; and Cornelia, remembering that the next topic to discuss was husbands, announced the topic with considerable relish:

"Well, having spoken about fathers, brothers, and sons, it is high time we talked a little about the evils of husbands."

34. The second stanza is something of a showpiece, using as it does, for the first six lines, the same rhymes (and, indeed, rhyme words) as the first. For the conventions governing such *risposte* ("reply poems"), see Ruscelli 1563, 148–53.

Almost the entire company was in full agreement with this plan, except for Helena and Virginia.

"It seems to me," said Helena, "that you will not find very much to say on the subject."

"Oh, but what are you saying?" replied Leonora. "It's all too obvious that where marriage is concerned you haven't got past the opening words of the speech. You are just like someone drawing close to a fire on a winter evening: at first, you begin to warm up and the feeling is quite delicious, but then as you draw closer and stay longer, you start baking in the heat, or get covered with soot or blinded by the smoke."

"Let Cornelia speak," Corinna added. "She may speak ill of marriage, but it will be the truth."

"You have about as much experience of marriage as I do," said Virginia. "What do you know about it? Anyone who did not know you and listened to you talking in that way would think you had had a hundred husbands."

But at that point Cornelia, interrupting their argument, continued, "Women who are married—or martyred, more accurately—have endless sources of misery. First there are those husbands who keep their wives on so tight a leash that they almost object to the air itself coming near them; so that the poor things, thinking that by marrying they are winning for themselves a certain womanly freedom to enjoy some respectable pastimes, find themselves more constricted than ever before, kept like animals within four walls and subjected to a hateful guardian rather than an affectionate husband. And it cannot be doubted that husbands such as these, through this kind of contemptuous treatment, cause the downfall of countless women who would be better behaved if their husbands were more kind and loving."

"You might add that there are some men," said Leonora, "who convince themselves that being so jealous and making life so unpleasant for their wives is the best way to keep them in line. Little do they know, poor fools, that their wives, seeing how little they are respected and how little faith their husbands have in them, finish up behaving as badly as they can! Whereas when a wife can see that her husband trusts her and is not going to interfere with her freedom, then she takes the yoke on her shoulders of her own free will and becomes jealous of herself. Because, quite apart from the respect she gains through her behavior, when a wife is treated so well by her husband, it would never occur to her to repay him so badly for his kind-

ness, however many opportunities came her way; she would prefer to abstain and suffer and conquer temptations. And truly there is no better guardian of a woman's honor than her own will and resolve. So I would never advise a man to take it on himself to police his wife's behavior in a cruel, overbearing way, because he will finish up making a misery of both of their lives and very often he will finish up getting what he deserves."

"I have a fear that my own husband may turn out to be one of these jealous and brooding types," said Helena, "for he is already showing signs of it. And I am very sorry for it, for I would never be one of those who would wish to risk my soul, my honor, and my life to avenge myself on him."

"Just pray to God," Cornelia retorted, "that he turns out to have no worse vice than this! Think of all those men who have wives as young and beautiful as angels and who, even so, neglect them and make fools of themselves over some shameless woman (for inevitably you do find a few such amid the masses of virtuous women), who may even be getting on in years and have very little going for her. Such men inflict endless sufferings on their wives, even stripping them of their most treasured things to give them to prostitutes;[35] besides which, they very often make mistresses of their servants and fill the house with bastards and expect their wives to keep quiet and bring them up for them; so that the poor wives see themselves turned from the mistresses of a household into the prioresses of an orphanage."

"That's just what my first husband was like, my dear," the Queen interrupted. "I was young and regarded as one of the beauties of this city, but he showed no interest in me at all, and after two years he fell in love with a prostitute, who was quite old and none too salubrious a proposition—fell in love so violently that it was as though the sun shone out of her face—and my beauty and my caresses were of no avail and my patience no use in the face of his obsession. He seemed to hate his own home, our home; and all the time he should have

35. I have translated *meretrice* here as "prostitute," though the word was also used more loosely in this period to indicate any woman living in an "irregular" relationship (Martin 1989, 235). The word *cortigiana* ("courtesan"), used below by Adriana, is more specific, designating the kind of high-class prostitute whose clientele derived mainly from the social elite of the city. The problem discussed here must have been a real one for many Venetian noblewomen of the period: Venice was famed for the number and sophistication of its courtesans, and some, at least, do appear to have made considerable fortunes from their liaisons with Venetian patricians (see Barzaghi 1980, Casagrande 1968, Santore 1988, and Rosenthal 1992).

been spending with me, he frittered away at the home of that corrupt courtesan of his."

"Perhaps she had cast some kind of spell on him, so that he couldn't help himself,"[36] Lucretia suggested.

"That won't wash," Cornelia replied. "Believe me, all that talk about magic spells is just words: men do what they do because they want to. And if you want proof, you will find men who are just as obsessed, or even more obsessed, with gambling as they are with women. So you can see what the problem is: men have vicious tendencies, to which they give too free a rein, and that's the explanation for all the crazy things they do."

"It's quite true what you say," replied the Queen. "For it was just my luck as a wife that after a first husband who was so intent on running after other men's women that he didn't have any time for his own wife, I then took a second who was so taken up with gambling that I can't tell you what a wretched life he led me, until it finally pleased the Good Lord one fine day to take him off my hands."

"You've never said a truer word," Cornelia continued." They get so wrapped up in that cursed game of theirs that they stay out all day and all night with their gambling companions and leave their poor wives at home, so that instead of enjoying their nights in bed with their dear husbands, they have to spend their time sitting by the fire, counting the hours passing, like the watchmen on guard at the Arsenal, and waiting until dawn for their reprobate husbands finally to come home. And when they do come home, if by some unlucky chance they have lost, it's the wives who have to suffer for it, because the scoundrels take out all their anger on them, poor wretches. That's quite apart from the fact that they use up and squander all their wives' resources with this kind of perverse and vicious habit.

"Then there are those husbands who spend all their time shouting at their wives and who, if they don't find everything done just as they like it, abuse the poor creatures or even beat them over the most trivial matters, and who are always picking fault with the way in which the household is run, as though their wives were completely useless. And the poor women who are married to men like this gradually come to realize that they haven't, as they'd thought, left their childhood

36. Belief in the efficacy of spells and love potions was widespread in this period in Venice, as the records of Inquisition trials for witchcraft testify; and there is much evidence that courtesans were perceived as particularly given to the practice of love magic (Martin 1989, 103–10 and 235).

home to go and run their own household (which is the office of a wife, just as it is the husband's task to bring in the money and deal with the world outside); instead, it's as though they'd been sent to a strict schoolmaster. In fact, the poor things are so cowed and angered by the fury and nagging of their overbearing husbands that rather than loving them and longing to spend time with them, they find them irksome and want them to spend as much time as possible out of the house and out of their sight. You can tell from that quite how much pleasure the poor things get out of their husbands' bullying, to which they are condemned for life! And you can find endless examples of husbands who are irascible and intolerable in this way, though there may be different reasons why they are like that: some are bad by nature, while others undergo some kind of humiliation outside the home and then come home and try to give vent to their frustration by taking it out on their hapless wives."

"While we're on the subject," Lucretia said, "I can think of one example, at least, of a woman whose husband is so foul-tempered that she has no peace except when he leaves the house."

"That woman isn't you, by any chance, is she?" Corinna asked with a smile.

"Would that she were not!" replied Lucretia.

"Well, if it's not one thing, it's another," said Leonora. "*My* husband was one of those men who are so mean they're afraid to eat because it costs money."

"Oh yes!" Cornelia continued. "Misers are often regarded as good men, yet they too put their wives through agonies—they keep them short of money for food and clothing and, if their wives complain, they start putting the word around that the wives are ruining them and wasting their substance and have no idea how to run a household; so that the poor things find that without having taken a vow of poverty they have become nuns in all but habit, with respect to all the basic necessities they are lacking. Then there's another group of bad men who are regarded as good because they lack the kind of obvious vices we've been talking about up to now, but who do have the vices of ignorance and ill judgment. Those are the men who throw away their money without realizing what they are doing and finish up mismanaging things to such an extent that they are left without a penny to call their own. And if their wives, who may well be shrewder than they are, try to warn them tactfully about the consequences, they refuse to listen and ignore their wise and loyal advice, so that they often reduce themselves to poverty and their wives have to pay

the price for their faults. And one of my dearest friends, whom you all know, has had the ill luck to marry someone like that."

"I might just have an inkling whom you mean," said Corinna.

"I shan't attempt to disguise it," Cornelia continued. "I am that unfortunate woman. For I can see clearly that things are going to rack and ruin through his mismanagement and I keep reminding him in the kindest possible way to be careful about things and not to throw away his money, but he always takes it badly and doesn't want to listen. So, to sum up, we women are tortured and racked in such a countless number of different ways by these murderous sadists, these covert enemies, that it would be impossible to tell the thousandth part of what they do to us."

"You've told us quite enough," Lucretia said. "After all, when it comes down to it, women are the cause of all evils that befall men. That's what men like to claim, anyway, as they scornfully dismiss our every attempt to advise them and set them straight, accusing us of stubbornness and capriciousness and all those other vices they like to attribute to us. And yet I'd be prepared to stake that if men were good, no woman would be bad; for, if there are bad women around, it is their husbands who have made them so, by not knowing how to handle them. Anyway, whatever faults a woman has in her are not really her own, but are inherited from her father; and a wise and good husband (if there were such a thing) would deal with it by helping his wife along and correcting that little flaw in her disposition through kind words and even kinder actions. For, if you can tame irrational beasts by being kind to them and giving them what they need, how much easier should it be to convert an artless young girl who has inherited some stubbornness of character from her father?"

"That's quite true," said the Queen. "When we want to keep and tame a puppy, we give it bread; with a little bird, we feed it millet—whereas, if we hit it, it would get angry and fly off."

"That's why I'm telling you that the fault is all the husband's," said Lucretia. "He can't have much judgment or wisdom if he can't communicate some of it to his wife. And if both husband and wife are bad, why place all the blame on her, without giving him his share? It's really both of them that should be blamed, or neither, or just the husband, for the reasons we've been discussing."

"Let's leave this complaining about husbands to one side for a moment," said Corinna, "and talk about the worse type of man there is: the false and deceitful lover."

"Now there you're really talking about a task that's not for lightweights,"[37] said the Queen. "Not because of the loftiness of the subject matter, of course: I'm talking about its sheer difficulty. In fact, I can't imagine you'll be able to cover the tiniest part of what there is to say on the subject, let alone to find a safe route across this mighty ocean, unbounded on all sides. Still, plunge in happily, for on the way out, you can always ask Love to lend you his wings.[38] If not, you will need the waxed wings of Daedalus to make your escape, before those countless lovers against whom you are preparing to speak all turn their wrath against you."[39]

"Or rather," Lucretia said, "she will need Leombruno's magic cloak so that she can escape hidden and invisible."

"I have nothing to say against true lovers (if any such exist)," replied Cornelia. "My targets are those who pass as lovers but who are actually quite the opposite."

"Oh, come now, Cornelia dearest,' said Virginia. "Are you now going to try to claim that lovers are as flawed as you have shown all other conditions of men to be? I could never believe, if I saw before me a well-mannered young man, behaving respectfully, sensibly, and politely, not staring at me, not complaining, not asking for anything, but just showing with his burning sighs and other subtle signs that he loves me and will serve me faithfully and that, in short, he is mine and mine alone—I could never believe, as I say, that such a man would ever deceive me. On the contrary, it would seem to me as though I could see his heart lying open before me and I should be overcome by his displays of love and humility and would not be able to help loving him in return."

"You have just painted the outward semblance of a lover, as though his inner self must necessarily conform to this appearance," replied Cornelia. "You poor thing, it's very clear that you've had no

37. The phrase used in the original (*da coturni e non da socchi*: lit. "for the tragedian, rather than the comedian," referring to the characteristic footwear of actors in the two genres in classical antiquity) echoes a line of Petrarch's *Triumph of Love* (4, 88).

38. The God of Love, Eros or Cupid, was conventionally represented as a winged boy. This sentence is obscure in the original and the sense has been reconstructed conjecturally.

39. Daedalus, in Greek mythology, created a pair of wax wings for his son Icarus. The latter, however, on his test flight, forgetting his father's advice flew too close to the sun, whereupon his wings melted and he plummeted to his death. I have not been able to identify the source of the allusion to "Leombruno's cloak," immediately following in the text.

experience in these things—and please God you may remain so innocent! Not that I'm speaking from experience myself, but surely you too must have read or heard all those endless cautionary tales, which have enabled a woman like me to learn all too well, at others' expense, what this love business is all about? Believe me, lovers such as you described scarcely exist (ones that truly love, I mean, rather than just look the part). And it's these ingratiating striplings of yours who are to be avoided most of all, for, being young and thus more fiery in their passions than older men, they are also (however much they try to hide it) more impetuous and unstable in their affections. They are also foolish, even though they think they know better than anyone else; besides which they are proud, insolent, and utterly shameless, so that even though they hardly know what the word 'love' means, they expect to be loved, obeyed, granted favors, and, in short, given everything they demand. And these young men go about everything so indiscreetly and openly that everyone knows about it. As soon as they are the least bit in love, they lose all patience; once they realize that they are loved, they lose all discretion; if they are given some favor, they want the whole world to know about it; if they deceive a woman, they boast about it, do her down in public and glory in their cunning; and, if they manage to possess a woman, they immediately lose interest in her. Their love is no more than a flash in the pan; their loyalty, a laugh in the tavern; their devotion, a day out hunting the hare; their fine appearance, a peacock's tail. The only good thing about these young boys, from a woman's point of view, is that being so fickle and changeable, as I have said, they cannot—they would not know how to—hide their falseness and treachery for long. They are like bronze with a layer of gilding: it takes very little for that thin layer to start peeling off and showing it was just a false coat, so any woman with half a brain becomes aware very quickly what they're up to and doesn't allow herself to be trapped so easily in their snares; she either casts them aside or uses these frivolous creatures as a pastime, to amuse herself—like a fan made of light plumes, whose only use is for cooling you down in the summer."

"Oh, you really have it in for these poor little lads," Helena said at this point. "You're following the advice of that poet who advises us to:

Coglier i frutti non acerbi, e duri,
Ma che non sian però troppo maturi.

> Pick fruits when they are no longer hard and unripe, but not ones that are overripe, either.[40]

What do you have to say about more mature lovers? Can't we trust older men, at least, when they appear to love faithfully?"

"We can trust them even less than those I've been talking about," Cornelia replied. "For their experience has taught them not to love more truly, but rather to deceive more effectively. Dearest sister, the greatest threat to our innocence comes precisely from these more experienced lovers, fiendish creatures that they are! And you mustn't be taken in for a moment when you see them pining away in front of your eyes, consumed by their love for you, looking up at you with their piteous eyes and speaking honeyed words. Just think of them as an unreliable clock that tells you it's ten o'clock when it's in fact barely two. These men never really take a woman into their ungrateful hearts. When they meet a woman they pretend to be her slave and to love her desperately, but at the same time they are laying down traps for every woman they see, trying out each one in turn, deceiving them all, saying the same words to each and laying down the same nets—they aren't fussy about who it is, as long as they have some woman in their power. These men, if nature has endowed them with some talent or charm or beauty or prowess, are so proud and vain that they behave as though (and genuinely believe that) women should be grateful to them for courting them; and if they realize that these qualities of theirs have made a woman fall in love with them, they immediately demand a full satisfaction of all their desires, and if they encounter any difficulty or resistance they immediately get offended and pretend they want to claim back that heart which in reality they never gave away. They complain that they are not loved, because they haven't seen any of the proofs they were demanding—and, believe me, these men who are obsessed with having this 'proof' are a perfidious breed and of the nature of the Jews:[41] they don't

40. The quotation is from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (*OF*, 10, 9), where, following a tale of monstrously callous infidelity on the part of a young man, the middle-aged poet slyly advises his women readers that they are safer with men of his age.

41. Antisemitism was obviously too widespread a phenomenon in this period to need particular comment, but Cornelia's remark may perhaps be seen as reflecting a hardening of attitudes toward Jews in Venice at the time Fonte was writing, partly as a result of the intolerant climate fostered by the Counter-Reformation, which resulted in increasingly stringent restrictions being placed on Venetian Jews' business activities and freedom of movement (see Pullan 1971, 538–78).

really love the woman, as they claim, but rather nurture a mortal hatred against her. And this is very clear, because when, as sometimes happens, these men attain what they desire, once they have won their victory by deceiving some poor girl, they immediately despise her and abandon her; and to free themselves of any obligation to love her, they try to justify themselves by pretending to believe that she did not grant them the favors they asked because she was carried away by an overwhelming love for them, but just out of caprice or shamelessness. And then the poor girl, who has been led into doing wrong by the strength of her feelings, thinking that this will make her seducer love her all the more, realizes at once that she has picked up a snake along with the flowers she has been gathering and that all that her labors have gained her is the loss of her faithless lover. So sensible women will regard this kind of lover as being like the panther, the cruelest of all animals, which, when it is hungry, pretends to be dead, so that other animals do not fear to come near it; and the poor incautious little things, attracted by the beauty of its spotted coat and lulled into a false sense of security by its cunning, are emboldened to come up and play around it; until finally it leaps on them and dispatches them ferociously and devours them, feeding ravenously on their flesh.[42] The only advantage mature lovers have over younger men is that being older and wanting to be thought wiser and better than they in fact are, they conduct things rather more discreetly than the others and handle things rather more shrewdly."

"My dear Cornelia," said Virginia. "What you're saying is sowing confusion throughout the whole kingdom of love. What of all the famous stories of lovers in the past? All the faith of those in the present day? You're turning everything on its head. Haven't you read about all those countless men who have died for the great love they have borne for women?"

'Do you really believe,' Cornelia replied, 'that everything historians tell us about men—or about women—is actually true? You ought to consider the fact that these histories have been written by men, who never tell the truth except by accident. And if you consider, in

42. I have been unable to find a source for Fonte's description of the panther's hunting habits that corresponds in every detail with the account given here (for example, ancient and medieval sources that mention panthers' mysterious powers of attraction tend to attribute this to the animals' scent rather than the visual enticements of their coat). See, however, McCulloch 1960, 148–50; and Pliny (*NH*, 8, 23, 62–63). Regarding the panther's spotted coat, it should be noted that Pliny and many medieval sources use the term "panther" to describe a species of leopard.

addition, the envy and ill will they bear us women, it is hardly surprising that they rarely have a good word to say for us, and concentrate instead on praising their own sex in general and particular members of it, as a way of praising themselves.[43] But, even accepting that there have been many men who have gone wretchedly to their deaths while flaunting their love for a woman, do you believe that the real reason for their downfall is the overwhelming passion they feel for the woman? Not on your life! The cause of death is their overwhelming rage at not having been able to achieve their end and not having enjoyed the victory they so longed for: the triumph of deceiving and ruining these women whom they purported to love. As evidence of this, you'll find that very few men, if any, have died for love *after* achieving the supreme end of love. The only exceptions are those men who are caught in the act and wretchedly put to death, as often happens—but their deaths are brought about not by their love for the woman but by their eagerness to satisfy their disordered desires. In fact, if they really loved the woman, they would take care not to put themselves and her in such a dangerous situation, so as not to be the ruin of her."

"Well, that's enough about these middle-aged lovers," said Virginia. "Are you saying that we should love old men, then, since we can't have youths, still less men in their prime?"

"That's not my point at all," replied Cornelia. "Because, as they say, 'a bird in a child's hand and a girl in an old man's both spell danger.' Old men are just as crafty as middle-aged men—worse, in fact; and, besides, they are deficient in many ways, because their years of happiness are long over and all their charm and beauty have faded: they've used up all the best of their flour and there's nothing left in them except what they call chaff or bran. Besides which, they are

43. The point made here by Cornelia about male historians' lack of objectivity was a staple argument of Renaissance defenders of women, first employed by Christine de Pizan in her *City of Ladies* (c. 1405). The theme received what is perhaps its most sustained development in the period in a work with which Fonte may possibly have been familiar: Luigi Dardano's *Fine and Learned Defense of Women* (Venice, 1554), the bulk of which consists of a critical "trial" of celebrated and reviled male and female figures from history, conducted by a male and a female advocate. The most prominent discussions of the issue, however, are those found in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, in the proem to canto 37, which deals with the problem of gender bias in history at some length, and in the proem to canto 20, which treats the same question in a more offhand manner. There may be an ironic allusion to this latter passage in Fonte's phrase *invidia o mal voler* ("envy or ill will"): compare *OF*, 20, 2, 8, where men's failure to record women's achievements is more generously attributed to their *invidia o non saper* ("envy or ignorance").

extremely jealous and suspicious by nature, lazy and averse to the dangers, the ordeals, and the long vigils lovers have to suffer; and they are also fussy and mean. Though when I talk about their being mean, it's not because I think lovers, whether old or young, should seek to buy their way into a lady's good graces, or that any woman should wish this or seek this of her lover, because that would be to behave like a whore. The reason I mention meanness is that when a man is mean with money (which is the last thing in the world we should care about), that's a sign that he must be just as mean, or more so, with his heart and his word. Because a man who loves truly and so gives up his heart and his soul and his whole self will not make a fuss about giving up his money and what he owns, since it isn't a part of him. So when a man is mean with what is no part of himself, how do you think he will behave when he himself and his heart and his faith are concerned? And that, after all, is the most precious jewel, the greatest treasure a lover can give to his lady and that she can give him in return; and that's the reason why true love is said to make people liberal and magnanimous, noble and brave. And, since old men are for the most part just the opposite of this, because of their age and all the ailments that go with it, let us leave them to one side. For they are more fitted to find their pleasure in drinking good wine than in chasing pretty girls; and better qualified to give advice than to act themselves."

"Now which men are you defining as old?" asked Virginia. "Up to what age do men deserve to be loved (if they themselves love truly, that is)?"

"A man of forty-five or even fifty may deserve to be loved as long as he is decent and steadfast in character," replied Cornelia. "But I'll leave it to you to try to find such a man. For, young and old alike, not one of them truly loves from the heart."

"But tell me, pray," Virginia went on. "Those men who have labored so hard and spent so much time writing works in our praise (and there are many, many such men)—do you refuse to believe that they, at least, love our sex in general and the particular women who are the objects of their affection?"[44]

44. In addition to the many works of the period devoted to arguing the case for women's equality with (or even superiority to) men, Virginia is probably thinking of the massive output of Neoplatonizing love poetry in the period, which, following the conventions established by Dante, Petrarch, and more recent writers like the Venetian Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), portrayed women as beings of such supernatural perfection that a man could ascend through a meditation on their beauty and virtue to a contem-

"I'd say that they are no different from other men," Cornelia said. "None of these writers has been driven to write by the intensity of his love: in fact, the majority of them, believe me, have taken on the task of praising us more out of self-interest and concern for their own honor than out of any genuine concern for ours. Because knowing that they have few merits of their own to win them fame and glory, they have used the achievements of our sex instead, clothing their fame in our virtues and perfections—just like those men who want to attend some ceremony even though they are not in favor with the Prince and have nothing decent to wear, and who take advantage of the invitation and the wardrobe of a friend and tag along with him to watch the festivities. There are many, as well, who praise us in the belief that we are like that crow who let himself be tricked by the hungry fox, who saw the crow carrying off a great piece of cheese and started praising it extravagantly and, at the same time, begging it to sing a little, because it had heard so much about the crow's lovely voice; when the crow finally opened its beak to give the fox a song, it dropped the cheese and the fox snatched it up and ran off with it.[45] In the same way, men think that if they praise a woman enough, she'll be so carried away by vanity and self-love as to allow herself to be tricked into releasing her grip on her own will, so that they can get their hands on it, along with her honor, her soul, and her life. And, anyway, what do you say about all those many men who have written attacks on our sex? Because for every one man who praises us, speaking the truth, there are a thousand who attack us quite without motivation. So you should let none of these vain discourses persuade you that any man loves as he should, perfectly and sincerely."

"So we should love no one, since, as you insist, no man loves truly," said Virginia. "Is that what you're saying?"

"I don't mean to imply that there are no exceptions," replied Cornelia, "just as I acknowledged in the case of fathers, brothers, sons, and husbands. But what I do say is that those who love truly are

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plation of the divine. Though this lyric tradition was undoubtedly important in offering a counterpoise to contemporary misogynistic views of women as base and animalistic, most modern critics would share the skepticism Cornelia expresses in her reply (below) concerning the degree to which Petrarchism's exaltation of women may be attributed to feminist motives.

45. The story of the fox and the crow (like that of the lamb and the wolf, mentioned below) derives from the collection of moral fables attributed to the shadowy figure of Aesop (sixth century BC), which enjoyed immense popularity throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and was still, in this period, used in some Venetian schools as an elementary Latin text (Grendler 1989, 175).

so rare that they are lost among the vast hordes of false lovers; and it is extremely difficult to identify them and pick them out. It's just like those tokens you use playing the lottery:[46] among all those thousands of blank cards you find maybe eight or ten winning cards, which only come up by an amazing stroke of luck; and whether you win or lose depends on luck, not on judgment."

"But surely," said Helena, "there must be some distinguishing feature or particular trait that would let us identify these few good men who you admit do exist among the whole mass of them? Some sign that would teach us how to avoid the deceits and treachery of those countless lying predators who are stalking us to take away our freedom? And that would allow us to reward those few deserving lovers by returning their love?"

"Well, yes, my dear," said Cornelia. "But, as I've said, it's extremely difficult, because both true lovers and false

Dimostran tutti una medesima fede

All outwardly display the same faith.[47]

But if you were by some chance to find one who showed all the devotion and had all the good qualities Virginia was talking about, but who persisted in his love over time, without ever demanding anything from you that compromised your honor or your soul, so that if you loved him in return you could be sure that there was no other woman in the world he was courting, and that all his energies were concentrated on pursuing your love and pleasing you in every way he could, then such a man would be a true lover and you could believe that he loved you from the depths of his heart. Another sign by which you can tell a man who is truly in love is that if he happens to catch sight of the person he loves or hears her name unexpectedly, his heart turns over, his expression changes, his voice and whole body start trembling; he grows pale, sighs deeply, and speaks with a broken and troubled voice. The man who loves from the depths of his heart desires nothing, hopes for nothing, and demands nothing except to

46. Public numbers lotteries like that referred to here were known in Italy from the early sixteenth century, and were organized on occasion by the Venetian government (Endrei and Zolnay 1986, 41–42).

47. The line (slightly misquoted) is taken from the first stanza of canto 19 of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, which deals with adversity as the test of true friendship.

be loved in return; he keeps within the bounds of decency; stands in awe of the woman he loves; loves her in her presence; praises her in her absence; interests himself not only in her but in everything that concerns her, as though it were his own business. And if a man who has all these qualities deceives you by pretending to love you, though in fact you find out the opposite is true, then you can just laugh it off, for such a love cannot harm you much and he has little to gain by it."

"Well," said the Queen, "if all those who professed to be lovers were men of this kind and loved truly, then love would be the sweetest of things. For if men contented themselves with little and women were prepared to give them that little, the sweetest and most blissful harmony and peace would reign between them, and you wouldn't keep hearing all these complaints from men who want what they can't have, or from women who have given away what they can never take back."

"And what exactly do you mean by this 'little' with which lovers should be content?" asked Lucretia.

"That the woman does not object to being loved, sincerely and within the bounds of decency," replied the Queen.

"One writèr has observed on this subject," added Cornelia, "that a refined love will extend only as far as a sigh, meaning that it is permissible for the woman to sigh at the anguish she sees her lover going through for her sake, and that her lover must be satisfied with her sighs."

"As the poet said," added Corinna:

Certo il fin de' miei pianti,
Che non altronde il cor doglioso chiama,
Vien da' begli occhi al fin dolce tremanti
Ultima speme de' cortesi amanti.

And certainly the end of my weeping (for my sorrowing heart aspires to nothing else) will come from those lovely eyes, when at last they will turn on me, gentle and trembling—the utmost ambition of the courtly lover.[48]

"Well, either way," the Queen went on, "a love as restrained as

48. The lines are from Petrarch's canzone "Gentil mia donna, i' veggio" (*RS*, 72), one of his most confident assertions of the ennobling power of a sublimated love.

this would be, if not quite the father of virtue, then at least a school of manners, a source of happiness, and a breeding-ground for all the graces."

"It may be seen from experience," added Cornelia, "that those few men who have loved truly have acted virtuously as well and have never been a cause of scandal to anyone. True love makes the proud humble, the ignorant learned, the timorous brave, the irascible gentle; it makes the foolish clever, and madmen wise. In brief, it can change men's nature, make the bad good and the good better. That's why love is often compared to fire: just as gold is refined in the fire, so man reaches a state of perfect refinement in the flame of true love. But, then, those who have none of the qualities we have just listed strive to appear what they are not, and, as I have said, they often succeed very well (much to our harm and peril), in concealing their falsity and ill intentions beneath an appearance of decency. So even if a man does seem, over a long period, to display that loyalty and true love that we have talked about, I should advise any woman who is sensible, well-respected, and virtuous to proceed cautiously, if she values her virtue and her reputation. Thus when some man sets himself to courting her, however sincere his courtship appears to be, she should never take him seriously in any way, and should neither allow herself to believe him, lest she find herself loving him in return, nor accept his messages or his favors, lest she find herself in his debt. In fact, right from the start, she should energetically defend and protect herself against these temptations (it should not be difficult for her), and she should behave this way with everyone who tries to lure her, rejecting each man's advances equally and refusing to listen to anyone, whether seriously or even in jest (in case she falls into the trap of those who feign sleep and finish up falling asleep in earnest). But above all things, even if she does feel some leaning toward a lover, she should on no account let this be understood: she should hide her feelings as much as possible and not give the man the least encouragement, in case he becomes arrogant and importunate, and dares to try and tempt her to something more serious. Because it can often happen that over time the pestering and the constant pleading of someone one loves and trusts are enough to move a heart, especially the heart of a tender, trusting, and impassioned woman—for, as the proverb says, even the hardest stones are worn away by drops of water."

"That would be fine," Leonora replied to this, "if it were something within our power to do. But we women are so trusting, so kind

and sensitive by nature that we are quick to trust; and then, since we are also compassionate and warmhearted, we cannot help loving in return (though in a sincere and virtuous manner). For we assume that men are like us, both in truthfulness and in purity of motives; and this tendency to judge men by ourselves is the cause of our downfall."

"Tell me, my dear, sweet Corinna," said Helena. "Why is it that women, as Leonora says, are kinder and more innocent and trusting than men?"

"In my view," Corinna replied, "the explanation for this lies in women's natural disposition and complexion, which is, as all learned men agree, cold and phlegmatic.[49] This makes us calmer than men, weaker and more apprehensive by nature; more credulous and easily swayed, so that when some lovely prospect opens up before us, some enticing vista, we immediately drink in the image as though it were true, when it fact it is false. But despite all that, where our natural disposition is at fault, we should bring our intellect into play and use the torch of reason to light our way to recognizing these lovers' masks and protecting ourselves against them. In fact, we should pay about as much attention to them and give them about as much credence as the sensible little lamb gave to the wolf when it was imitating its mother's voice and begging it to open the gate."[50]

"That makes good sense to me," said Helena. "For women's nature is such that ferocity cannot dominate in it, since choler and blood make up a relatively minor part of our constitution. And that makes us kinder and gentler than men and less prone to carry out our desires,

49. The passage that follows rests on the theory, central to medieval and Renaissance thinking on medicine and psychology, that a person's psychosomatic makeup ("complexion") was determined by the combination in his or her body of the four essential bodily fluids or "humors" (blood, phlegm, yellow bile or choler, and black bile or melancholia), which in turn were combinations of the four essential properties ("qualities" or "contraries"), hot and cold, moist and dry. A dominance of blood (hot and moist) in the complexion made a person extrovert and "sanguine" (the word derives from the Latin for "blood"); while choler (hot and dry) made one quick-tempered ("choleric"); phlegm (cold and moist), dull and placid ("phlegmatic"); and melancholia (cold and dry), melancholic. The notion that women were by nature less hot than men (and thus, by implication, duller, more sedentary, and more timid) derives from Aristotle, whose views on sexual difference dominated medical thought on the subject throughout the Renaissance (see especially *HA*, 608a19–608b15, where the psychological implications of the distinction are most clearly brought out). This argument was frequently used to provide support for the thesis of women's inferiority to men (see Maclean 1980). However, by the early sixteenth century, defenders of women had elaborated a set of strategies for responding to it, similar in some respects to those found here (see for example Castiglione 1994, 221–28 [3: 12–18]).

50. The reference is to a fable of Aesop.

while men, by contrast, being of a hot and dry complexion, dominated by choler—all flame and fire—are more likely to go astray and can scarcely contain their tempestuous appetites. And that is the reason for the fierceness, waywardness, and fury of their anger, and the urgency and excessiveness of their burning, intemperate desires, carnal and otherwise. Desire in men is so powerful that their senses overpower their reason; and since that is the way in which men function (following their senses, without the controlling influence of reason), then you can hardly wonder if most of them have little time for virtuous deeds and give themselves up entirely to the pleasures and promptings of vice. For when the human spirit is joined to a body so constituted, the effects that follow can hardly be other than those that the nature and properties of the cause dictate. Isn't that the case?"

"Indeed," replied Corinna. "But by saying that, you are not refuting the claim that women are superior to men. On the contrary, you are rather lending further weight to it, because, in addition to what has already been said, you are now adding the fact that women's physical nature is superior to men's and that women act according to reason rather than appetite and thus refrain from evil and devote themselves to good. The same is not true of men, even though they certainly could be good and emend their nature if they wished to, considering the perfection of their intellect, resulting from the greater liveliness of spirit they are said to possess. But they do not care to use their intellect, nor to make the effort to contain their sensuality, and thus they go from bad to worse. So men are vicious both by nature and by will—and they try their best to corrupt us as well."

"So women's goodness derives from their nature rather than their will," said Helena. "Which means that since we are less naturally inclined to evil than men, if we abstain from it we hardly deserve much credit for it, while if we do succumb, our sin is a grave one—for, if the urgings of our nature are not strong, it implies a conscious decision to sin. Men, on the other hand, are almost forced into sin by their nature, as we have been saying; and when they succeed, through sheer moral strength, in controlling their urges, then their virtue must be recognized as outstanding and they deserve great credit for it."

"Aha!" said Corinna. "Even now, you are still having to admit that women are superior in nature to men; indeed, your whole argument rests on that assumption. And a consequence of that is that women

are more perfect then men and of greater dignity. But you are wrong when you assert that for this reason men are more praiseworthy than us when they refrain from evil, because their urge to sin is greater and more powerful than ours. That is something I cannot concede, for it's easy to find any number of examples of women who have suffered the torments of sensuality more violently than many men. It may be that the inclination toward sensuality is stronger in men than in women, because their nature is more capacious and their will more imperious. But that does not mean that women are not just as fiercely assaulted as men by these natural forces and powers of the soul, or that women are not drawn toward sensual pleasures by as strong an urge of the will as their nature will allow. It's just as though there were two glasses, one large and one small: when both are filled with water, the large obviously contains a greater volume of water, but that does not change the fact that both glasses are full, brimming, and fully occupied with that volume of water which their maker designed them to hold. And thus we must conclude that women have fewer mental and physical resources for resisting temptation, but are still, within the limitations of their nature, as subject to the temptations of the senses as men—perhaps even more so, because of their yielding and unsuspecting nature, which lends them to be all the more easily carried away and overcome by natural passions. Yet women struggle to be good and resist their evil inclinations with a stout heart. And women do not simply face the obstacle of their own inclinations; they also need to summon enough strength to pit themselves against men's corrupting influences. A double strength, then; and a kind of strength, you might say, that comes all the less easily to women because of their natural gentleness and kindness, which make them inclined, in all other areas of life, to put others' good and others' pleasures before their own. In this case, though, because they know that virtue must come above their own life and others', they accept the need to repress their desires and deny all pleasure both to themselves and the men they believe love them. But they do so at the cost of great violence to their hearts, and they deserve an infinite amount of credit for their victories."

"But even if I were to allow, for the sake of argument, that we women were less naturally inclined to error than men, then it must be taken into account that we are also less well equipped than they are to restrain ourselves; for if we want to claim that men are naturally more inclined to sensual desires, then they are also possessed of greater strength and judgment, so they can guard against those

desires and rein them back. So when we women carry off our double victory, over our own desires and those of others (for that is, for the most part, what happens), then the honor we win for ourselves should be all the greater, just as a captain placed in charge of a well-manned fortress does not attain any particular glory when he defends it, for even when the attackers are many, he has many more in defense. The real praise goes, instead, to those who defend themselves with few supporters and succeed in defeating and beating off their enemies. It scarcely matters if those enemies—some of whom may lie within their own walls—are also few in number, for where there are few defenses, there is a real danger that the fierceness or length of the siege will bring the city to its knees. So we must conclude that women are more virtuous than men both by nature and through the exercise of their will."

"You are quite wrong, Corinna," Lucretia said. "In fact, would to God women were as steadfast as you make out, for then men would behave in a more reasonable way. What really happens is that men learn from experience that we are all too easy and yielding, and it is this that encourages them to try their luck with us. So they set themselves to tempting and pleading with such dedication that in the end they carry off the victory over some woman or other—something that would not happen if women behaved with true womanly dignity[51] and rejected them firmly right from the start, as they deserve. Because when a woman really sets her mind to it, she can dismiss any lover, however importunate and shameless he may be, with a single gesture."

"It is rather you who are in the wrong when you try to attack women in this way, Lucretia," Corinna retorted, "as though it were women who provided the opportunity for enterprising men to start laying traps for them. On the contrary, it is men who are the origin and source of all the evil, for women are like the flint in a tinderbox, which, though it encloses a potential flame within itself, does not issue that flame except when it is persistently struck by the steel. And, if men through their actions are the efficient cause and the prime movers in awakening women's senses (and we see the proof of this every day, watching the way they solicit women and molest them), then why should women bear the blame for something they do under duress? For a sin that arises from accidental causes and not from

51. The original (*se le donne fessero da donne*) puns on the etymology of the Italian word for "woman," *donna* (*domina*: "lady of the household," "woman of power and standing").

their own nature or from a clear act of will on their part? For something men have goaded them into? Women can hardly be expected under these circumstances to be colder than water or harder than iron; and even water and iron change their form when heated.

"And besides all this, to reply to what you say about women being able to lift this burden from their shoulders if they only wanted to, I tell you that all women do try, and it sometimes works for them and sometimes doesn't, either just through bad luck or because they happen to be dealing with particularly bad men. For there are some men who will never desist from their enterprise, fueled as they are by vain hopes arising from their overwhelming arrogance and their conviction of being so desirable that women should be chasing after them rather than the contrary and practically hurling themselves out of windows to please them. And with this conviction firmly in their mind, these men simply cannot believe that sooner or later the women they are courting will not soften in their behavior toward them (they are convinced, of course, that their *hearts* have already softened, and that they are acting coldly toward them only to keep up appearances and preserve their reputation for virtue). So we women encounter just the same problem as farmers do when they sow the same crop in different fields: each may pull his weight and try as hard as he can to ensure a good harvest, but they do not all get the same results, as they ought when they are using the same seed; instead, one gets a splendid crop, while the other's withers and comes to nothing. In just the same way, women's virtuous reproaches and dissimulations and rejections, when planted in the hearts of more reasonable men, produce the harvest of remorse and goodness on their part and make them forget their follies, but with men like those just mentioned, the same methods are no use at all; on the contrary, instead of producing a good crop, they often just serve to turn the wheat fields into a bed of nettles. For if their feigned love never got a real foothold in their hearts, once they are disabused of their foolish illusions they become possessed of a hatred for us that is genuine and heartfelt; and through pique, they try to convince people by words that they enjoyed those favors they were denied in deed. How many women suffer this fate!"

"Those cursed scandalmongers!" exclaimed the Queen. "Don't I just know about them! I have come across endless examples. How many poor women are slandered, alas! who are quite innocent."

"Well, let them talk away," said Corinna. "And let us concentrate on behaving well, because the truth always comes out in the end."

"Oh, come now!" Helena spoke up at this point. "Surely you're

not trying to deny that women too have their part in sin, despite what you've been saying about men being the instigators and causes of all evil and it always being men who put us up to it? For the most part, that's nonsense. To take their part for a moment (for, after all, we are alone here and they can't hear us), what about all those shameless and corrupt women who dishonor our sex publicly, soliciting men openly and selling off their honor to the first bidder? Such women destroy men, stripping them of all their money and often bringing them to the point of death. And men certainly aren't going to let us forget they exist—especially since many of them are upright and virtuous, like Scipio, Xenocrates, Alexander, and the others we read about in history."[52]

"Well that last point is true as far as it goes," replied Cornelia. "But you aren't going to find men like that often: they are like patterns of virtue that God sends into the world for others to imitate (though few manage to get anywhere near the mark), and that's the reason why historians pick them out for special mention, as something remarkable, outlandish, and memorable, like those amazing comets that appear once in the course of many years. By contrast, there have been endless good and virtuous women. But where shameless women are concerned—and I am not trying to deny that such women exist (would that they didn't!)—I repeat what I said earlier, that the source and the true cause of this terrible evil lies in the men who trapped, tempted, solicited, and lured on these women while they still had their honor, leading the most naïve and easygoing of them to fall head-over-heels to their ruin. But for all that, these women, wretched as they are, preserve a little more dignity than the men they consort with, because at least they aren't the ones paying the men; whereas men fall into their traps like animals and pay for *them*, however corrupt, vile, and wretched they are. Which is something that certainly wouldn't happen if they kept their heads and

52. The episodes referred to here are among the most famous classical exempla of male chastity: Alexander the Great's continence in refraining to take advantage of the wife and daughters of Darius, King of Persia, after his defeat of the latter in 331 BC; the similar restraint shown by the Roman general Scipio Africanus on his successful campaign in Spain in 210 BC; and the exemplary self-control displayed by the Greek philosopher Xenocrates (fourth century BC), who preserved his chastity through a night with a famous courtesan, Phrine, despite her energetic attempts to seduce him. All three exempla are wittily debunked in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* by Cesare Gonzaga, who points out that Scipio and Alexander had sound tactical reasons for their self-restraint, while Xenocrates' continence should be attributed to his decrepitude and drinking habits, rather than his virtue (Castiglione 1994, 253–54 [3: 44–45]).

showed some of that modesty and virtue we find in women. Just tell me: have you ever come across the case of a young girl, a virgin, so bold and shameless as to tempt a man into vice? It cannot be doubted that when a virgin loses her honor, it can be blamed entirely on a man who has shamelessly flattered and solicited her in all the ways he can find: eventually, as I say, he takes advantage of her naïveté and gradually strips her of all her natural feminine dignity and power until she is finally reduced to prostitution, either because he has abandoned her, as often happens, or because some other hardship forces her into it. And once the wretched creatures are reduced to this state, knowing as they do that men, with their tricks and relentless pestering, have been responsible for their downfall, they decide to get something back for the great harm they have suffered and resolve never to love a man again, since they have been so deceived by them, but rather to give them a taste of their own medicine and, just as men once preyed on their honor, they prey on men's purses; they pretend to love them and if, by some chance, a man falls in love with one of them (for it does happen sometimes that men get more involved with these women than with decent women, because these women have become like men and share their propensity to vice)—if that happens, I can tell you, he's had it, because they will drain him to the last penny, just as he deserves.[53]

"And besides all this, those poor women have only one sin (and that one caused by men, as I have said), whereas most men have endless vices. So why should so much blame be heaped on our sex? I'm not denying that it is a most shocking and shameful thing, but it is unfair that all women should be blamed for the transgressions of a few, or that their vice should reflect on women in general. Though even those few do not deserve to get all the blame while men stand by smugly congratulating themselves, because I have not come across any divine law that absolves men of this sin and punishes women alone. And even in human law, when the courts find themselves with a great number of culprits on their hands after some major crime, they generally try to establish who the ringleader was; and once they find him, they very often absolve his accomplices and punish only the

53. The degree of sympathy for prostitutes evinced here is unexpected in the context of a work by a "respectable" woman. It should be noted, however, that this was a period that saw several important new religiously inspired initiatives in Venice directed at rescuing "fallen women" and sheltering young girls perceived to be in danger of being drawn into the trade (Pullan 1971, 276–394, esp. 386, 393, on Venetian noblewomen's participation in these initiatives).

principal mover in the crime. So you can see that both human and divine laws demand that wicked men should receive the same opprobrium and punishment as wicked women—indeed more, since they are the cause and the instigators of women's errors, as I have pointed out. And besides all this, those few women who fall into sin in this way (I am not talking about prostitutes any more) are led into it, as I have said, by their good nature and compassion."

"Oh come now, Cornelia dearest," said Lucretia. "You're not trying to tell us that vice is goodness? That really is a load of nonsense you're trying to make us swallow."

"But when you hear men talking," said Cornelia, "all they ever do is speak ill of women. 'Did you know what such-and-such a women is up to with such-and-such a man?' 'And that other one! What a whore! What a slut! I'd never have believed it: she seemed like such a saint!' 'Oh, these women all make out that they're so prudish because they haven't got the opportunity. If they had, they'd all be at it; there'd be no stopping them.' And they can keep up these curses and insults all day without once looking down at themselves and seeing that they may need to take some of the blame. And I don't quite know how they've managed to make this law in their favor, or who exactly it was who gave them a greater license to sin than is allowed to us;[54] and if the fault is common to both sexes (as they can hardly deny), why should the blame not be as well? What makes them think they can boast of the same thing that in women brings only shame?"

"Oh, let them get on with it!" said Corinna. "They think they have shamed and lowered us by introducing this convention into the world, but in fact it works to our advantage and their disadvantage, because it teaches us to avoid their company, which, in any case, is beneath us."

"Who knows?" said Leonora. "Perhaps it was women themselves—some wise and courageous women of ancient times—who first introduced this distinction between the ways in which men and women are treated. For when a man has amorous concourse with a woman, the result is the greatest shame for her and a certain amount of credit and praise for him; so that the woman always tries to disguise it as much as

54. The wording here recalls a passage in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* in which a male speaker acknowledges that the sexual double standard in society is due to the fact that "we [men] have by our own authority claimed a license to consider trivial or even praiseworthy in men those same offenses which are in women regarded as punishable by a shameful death or, at the least, perpetual infamy" (Castiglione 1994, 247 [3: 38]; translation modernized).

possible, while the man cannot wait to tell the whole world about it, as though his glory and happiness depended on it. Surely this is a way of declaring clearly the dignity and nobility of women and the corresponding indignity of men. Because, since this great gulf in perfection exists between the sexes, it *is* a very shameful thing when we, who are so far superior to them, stoop so far as to have anything to do with these inferior creatures—especially outside the necessity of marriage, which, since it is imposed on us, we can hardly avoid. But even in marriage, this intercourse with men abases us. For the ancient Romans held virgins in great esteem and treasured them and honored them as something sacred—as have all peoples, in fact; and the same thing applies in our own day, right across the world. The vestal Tuccia, who had never had intercourse with a man, was able to carry water in a sieve.[55] Claudia, too, another vestal, was able to pull to the shore with her girdle the ship that so many thousand men had been unable to shift. For a woman, when she is segregated from male contact, has something divine about her and can achieve miracles, as long as she retains her natural virginity. That certainly isn't the case with men, because it is only when a man has taken a wife that he is considered a real man and that he reaches the peak of happiness, honor, and greatness. The Romans in their day did not confer any important responsibilities on any man who did not have a wife; they did not allow him to take up a public office or to perform any serious duties relating to the Republic. Homer used to say that men without wives were scarcely alive.[56] And if you want further proof of women's superior dignity and authority, just think about the fact that if a man is married to a wise, modest, and virtuous woman, even if he is the most ignorant, shameless, and corrupt creature who has ever lived, he

55. The Vestal Virgins, in ancient Rome, were priestesses of the temple of Vesta, goddess of the hearth fire. They were sworn to chastity and any who transgressed were punished by being buried alive. The two mentioned here by name were both accused of unchastity, but cleared their names by performing miracles: Tuccia miraculously carried water in a sieve without its leaking, while Claudia, with her girdle, dragged free a ship that had run aground at the mouth of the Tiber. Both figures were frequently represented in art and literature as exemplars of chastity, and both gained a quasi-sacred status in the Middle Ages, when they were perceived as prototypes of the Virgin Mary.

56. I have not been able to identify the source of this supposed view of Homer's. Where the point about Rome is concerned, Fonte may have been thinking of the Augustan legislation that sought to encourage marriage and procreation by making celibacy socially and economically disadvantageous for men between the ages of twenty-five and sixty. This legislation did not, however, extend so far as to exclude unmarried candidates from office: it simply introduced mechanisms for favoring the election of married men, especially those with large families (Treggiari 1991, 66–75, 83–84).

will never, for all his wickedness, be able to tarnish his wife's reputation in the least. But if, through some mischance, a woman is lured by some persistent and unscrupulous admirer into losing her honor, then her husband is instantly and utterly shamed and dishonored by her act, however good, wise, and respectable he may be himself—as if he depended on her, rather than she on him. And, indeed, just as a pain in the head causes the whole body to languish, so when women (who are superior by nature and thus legitimately the head and superior of their husbands) suffer some affront, so their husbands, as appendages and dependents, are also subject to the same misfortune and come to share in the ills of their wives as well as in their good fortune."

"It's quite true," said Cornelia, "that if we were not by nature so kind, compassionate, and meek, then these facts alone would be enough to make us avoid men's company altogether, since it can bring us only harm, shame, and downright ruin. We should be more circumspect, and preserve our dignity and our natural feminine authority, without mixing so much with these creatures, who are not only unworthy of us, but also speak ill of us into the bargain, when it is they who are responsible for all our ills."

"Listening to all these dire things you're saying," said Virginia, "I'm being to get frightened and to go off the idea of men. Who knows? I may even start to have second thoughts about marriage."

"Steady now, daughter," said the Queen. "These ladies would not wish to deny that there are a few good men among all these scoundrels."

"No, indeed," said Cornelia. "For, apart from anything, men may inherit some of the innocence and goodness of their mothers. It is said that in generation the father contributes more to the son than the mother does;[57] and that is the reason why sons turn out to resemble their fathers more (in other words, to be as bad as their fathers). So it can be said that the least bad men are those who have taken most from their mothers."

"Oh, but when all's said and done," said Lucretia, "with all these arguments of yours, you surely can't deny that women have been and still are the cause of countless evils in the world. That's the reason

57. The reasons for this are discussed at length in Aristotle's *Generation of Animals*, 4, 3 (767a36–768b14), though Fonte is very far from sharing the misogynistic premises of Aristotle's arguments (on which see Maclean 1980, 36–37).

they are known as 'women,' in fact: the word *donna* derives from *danno* ['harm']."[58]

"That's not true!" replied Corinna. "Women are called *donne* to signify that they are a *dono celeste*, a gift or donation sent from heaven to bring goodness and beauty to the world. Why *danno*, for heaven's sake?"

"You're asking me why?" Lucretia retorted. "Don't we read that the fall of Troy and the ten years of continual war that led up to it were caused by a woman?[59] What do you have to say to that?"

"I say," Corinna replied, "that even though the woman of whom you are speaking admittedly did go astray, overpowered by love and by the flattery and entreaties of the man who solicited her (and who, indeed, sought her out precisely for that purpose, at a time when she wasn't giving him a thought), her example serves rather as further evidence of the dignity of her sex. First, because it was the man who went to seek her out, not she him: which, besides demonstrating her superiority, also excuses her in great part and reveals her as innocent, and a victim of his wiles. And also, because both her lover and her husband were prepared to countenance such ruin, such expense, so much death and destruction, over so long a period, the one in order to keep her, the other to win her back; both, in fact, whether it was love that moved them or honor, felt the loss of this one woman as something grave enough to justify all this. Whereas it has never happened that a woman has stolen a man, or carried him off, or done anything of this kind for the sake of a man. Nor, for that matter, have men ever shown themselves to hold one of their own sex in such high regard, or undertaken any such enterprise for the sake of another man."

At this point, Helena broke in, "So who was the cause of the Fall, if not Eve, the first woman?"

"On the contrary, the blame lies with Adam," replied Corinna.

58. Arguments from etymology (often extremely fanciful ones) were a much-favored technique among both defenders of women and their misogynist opponents. For a pertinent example, see Bramoso 1589, 35, where *danno* is defended as the etymology of the word *donna* over both *dono*, proposed below in the text by Corinna, and the correct *domina* (see Daenens 1987, esp. 22–23).

59. The reference is, of course, to Helen, the wife of the Greek leader Menelaos, whose abduction by her Trojan admirer, Paris, was the stimulus for the Greek invasion of Troy. Similar vindications of Helen may be found in earlier defenses of women: see, for example, Maggio 1545, 25v–26r; also, for a later example, Marinella 1601, 117–18.

"For it was with a good end in mind—that of acquiring the knowledge of good and evil—that Eve allowed herself to be carried away and eat the forbidden fruit. But Adam was not moved by this desire for knowledge, but simply by greed: he ate it because he heard Eve say it tasted good, which was a worse motive and caused more displeasure.[60] And that is the reason why God did not chase them from Paradise as soon as Eve sinned, but rather after Adam had disobeyed him—in other words, he didn't respond to Eve's action, but Adam's prompted him to give both the punishment they deserved, which was and is common to all humankind. And, besides, how about the woman chosen above all others to redeem that sin? God never created any man (a man who was simply a man, that is) who could match that woman who was entirely a woman. Just you try finding me a man in all the annals and chronicles of ancient times, however wise and virtuous, whose merits stretch to the thousandth part of the rare excellencies and divine qualities of our Lady, the Queen of Heaven. I don't think you're going to have much luck there!"

"I must say I don't really know how to reply to that," said Lucretia.

"Do you really believe," Leonora said, "that men do not recognize our worth? In fact, they are quite aware of it, and, even though envy makes them reluctant to confess this in words, they cannot help revealing in their behavior a part of what they feel in their hearts. For anyone can see that when a man meets a woman in the street, or when he has some cause to talk to a woman, some hidden compulsion immediately urges him to pay homage to her and bow, humbling himself as her inferior. And similarly at church, or at banquets, women are always given the best places; and men behave with deference and respect toward women even of a much lower social status.[61] And

60. This defense of Eve appears to have originated in a work by Bernardo Spina of the 1540s: see Ruscelli 1552, 18v, where he congratulates Spina for being the first defender of women to attempt to defend Eve, rather than simply concede her guilt and attempt to counterbalance the slur by the example of the Virgin Mary. For an influential example of this latter, more conventional, strategy of defense, also drawn on by Corinna later in this same speech, see Castiglione 1994, 228 (3: 19).

61. The ingenious argument that the deference shown to women by men may be seen as a kind of involuntary acknowledgment of women's natural superiority is also found in Veronica Franco and Lucrezia Marinella (Marinella 1601, 24; Franco 1995, 149–50 [24, 103–11]). A possible source is the first of the Roman examples in *MSD*, 5, 2, 1 ("On Gratitude"), where it is recounted that in recognition of the part played by Coriolanus's mother in saving Rome from the ambitions of her son, the Roman Senate decreed that men should cede precedence to women in the streets and that women

where love is concerned, what can I say? Which woman, however low-born, is below men's notice? Which do they shrink from approaching? Is a man of the highest birth ashamed to consort with a peasant girl or a plebeian—with his own servant, even? It is because he senses that these women's natural superiority compensates for the low status Fortune has conferred on them. It's very different in the case of women: except in some completely exceptional freak cases, you never find a noblewoman falling in love with a man of low estate, and, moreover, it's rare even to find a woman loving someone (apart from her husband) of the same social status. And that's why everyone is so amazed when they hear of some transgression on the part of a woman: it's felt to be a strange and exceptional piece of news (I'm obviously excepting courtesans here), while in the case of men, no one takes any notice, because sin for them is such a matter of course and an everyday occurrence that is doesn't seem remarkable any more. In fact, men's corruption has reached such a point that when there is a man who is rather better than the others and does not share their bad habits, it is seen as a sign of unmanliness on his part and he is regarded as a fool. Indeed, many men would behave better if it were not for the pressure of custom, but, as things stand, they feel it would be shameful not to be as bad as or worse than their fellows."

"Well, that's the way it is," said Cornelia. "The good and the wise cannot live as they would any more; they have to behave badly in spite of themselves. It's like that story of the seven philosophers whose great wisdom allowed them to foresee an epidemic of madness that was about to fall on their city, and who agreed among themselves, without saying a word to anyone, to take certain preventive measures to ensure that they alone would remain sane.[62] Their idea was that once all the others had gone mad, it would be easy for them as wise men to take control of the madmen, and that their wisdom would allow them to become the lords of the city and seize everything for themselves. The plan was a bold one, their hopes infinite; they impatiently waited their moment. When the time arrived and everyone in the city suffered the mishap of losing their wits, out jumped these characters, who were sane and who recognized that their moment had come, and they strolled wisely into the midst of

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should be allowed to wear purple robes and gold adornments, otherwise reserved for those in positions of power (another detail noted by both Franco and Marinella).

62. I have not been able to identify the source of this story.

their fellow citizens, who were all dancing and cavorting around and generally behaving like madmen, and signaled to them to calm down. But as soon as the madmen saw these people who weren't cavorting around like them, but instead soberly trying to command them—these people who weren't behaving in what they saw as a sane way—they concluded that they must be mad and turned on them with such fury, using their fists or sticks or stones or whatever came to hand, that the poor wise men found it wisest to leave their wisdom on one side and to dance and cavort around with all the others and behave like madmen, even though they weren't. And that's just the way that men behave: since most of them are chasing around madly after all kinds of ridiculous things, the few good men get jeered at. So, through bad example as much as anything else, they go from bad to worse, without there being anyone to reprimand them, because they are all tarred with the same brush."

"And who, precisely, would you expect to reprimand them when they do something wrong?" Cornelia said. "We women, perhaps, who are too meek to open our mouths in their presence? Or they themselves, who, as you say, are all up to their necks in it as well?"

"I remember reading," said Helena, "that in antiquity they used to punish women's transgressions extremely severely by law, while men went unpunished."[63]

"Well, the reason is obvious," replied Corinna. "Men may be wicked but they aren't stupid, and since it was they who were making the laws and enforcing them, they were hardly going to rule that they should be punished and women go free. And anyway, they made that law knowing that they would only rarely have to enforce it, since so few women went astray, whereas if they had wanted to punish men in the same manner, they would have had to kill them all, or most of them."

"Oh, come now," said Lucretia. "Surely we've said everything there is to say about these poor men?"

"Oh, anyone who wanted to could easily carry on," said Cornelia.

63. Fonte is perhaps thinking here of the legislation passed by Augustus which brought adultery under Roman criminal law for the first time. Although the Augustan laws did stipulate punishments for the male lovers of married women, as well as the women themselves, they were certainly anything but symmetrical: while men were entitled (and sometimes obliged) to punish or repudiate adulterous wives and daughters, no corresponding entitlement or obligation existed for women (Treggiari 1991, 277–98; Gardner 1986, 127–29).

"In fact, you'd never get to the end of it: the volumes would pile up, you'd wear out all known languages, and need to live as long as Methuselah or Nestor. All we've done is to point to a tiny fraction of men's baseness and iniquity, but even so it's enough to make you wonder how women can bear to so much as look at them, let alone love them."

"That's exactly what I was trying to say just now," said Lucretia.

"So you're all quite convinced by this fantasy of yours that, as men aren't capable of loving sincerely, they don't deserve to be loved in return?" said Virginia.

"We are indeed," said Cornelia. "But there's more to it than that. I've said before and I'll say again that even if a woman does find a man who is genuinely in love with her, unless he is her husband or in a position to marry her she should refuse to love him and should stay out of his way so as not to fall into those dangers and errors women fall into so often because of their innocence and goodness. That's what I've always said and I'm reaffirming it now."

"And what dangers are these?" said Virginia.

"I haven't told you yet," Corinna stepped in. "The dangers are these. A woman in love is in danger, whether she conquers her desire or is conquered by it. If she stands firm so as not to fall into error, what greater emotional turmoil can be imagined than the battle taking place within her and the anguish of knowing that she will never be able to fulfill her desire? Death would be a thousand times more welcome to her than continuing to live in such torment. But, then, if she lets herself be vanquished by her desire, won over by the flattery and pleading of her lover, you can very well imagine the dangers she is laying herself open to: her reputation is at stake, her life, and, gravest of all, her immortal soul. So, for all these reasons, women should avoid the love of men—though, as Cornelia has said, many find it hard, because they are so kind and good they cannot spurn men, however bad men are."

"Well, as far as that's concerned," said Virginia, 'you're quite right that we shouldn't fall in love with men if we can possibly help it, to avoid the two dangers you mentioned, even if we could find men who were virtuous and loved us sincerely. I'm not trying to contradict you on that. I just think there's more to say on the subject. One thing I don't want to let pass, in particular, is this idea that men in general are bad and that they don't love us genuinely, from the bottom of their hearts. Come now! Surely if they didn't love us, they

wouldn't spend so much time and energy in courting various women from dawn to dusk, as we're always seeing?"

"Oh don't make me laugh," said Corinna. "You're such a baby! This courtship of yours is just a pastime for young men with nothing better to do. Haven't we talked enough about the kind of courtship that men go in for? Hasn't Cornelia already told you it's nothing but a hare hunt? Don't you remember the words of the Ferrarese poet?

> *Come segue la lepre il cacciatore*
> *Al monte, al bosco, a la campagna, al lito,*
> *Né stima poi che già presa la vede,*
> *E sol dietro a chi fugge affretta il piede.*
>
> Just as the hunter tracks the hare, through mountains,
> woods, fields, and shores, and then, when he catches her,
> loses all interest in her and is only interested in pursuing
> those that flee from him . . .[64]

And he goes on to compare young lovers to these hunters, and so on."

"Aha!" said Leonora. "I think our poor Virginia herself must have one of these young striplings chasing her—someone who, apart from her beauty, has heard she has a considerable dowry awaiting her and has set himself to tempting her innocence with the kind of flattery and feigned love we've been talking about. And because she's just a little girl still, she has fallen for the idea that this man is dying of love for her, and that's why she's claiming men really do love women."

"That's not true!" said Virginia, blushing a little. "That's not at all the reason why I said it. It's just that that's how things seem to me—or, at any rate, how things should be."

"But, as Cornelia said," replied Corinna, "it's not because they love us that they go in for all these displays of love and undying devotion; rather, it's because they desire us. So that in this case love is the offspring, desire the parent; or, in other words, love is the effect and desire the cause. And since taking away the cause means taking away the effect, that means that men love us for just as long as they

64. The lines are from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, from a passage already alluded to earlier in the dialogue (see n. 40 above), in which the poet warns his women readers about the faithlessness of young men.

desire us and once desire, which is the cause of their vain love, has died in them (either because they have got what they wanted or because they have realized that they are not going to be able to get it), the love that is the effect of that cause dies at exactly the same time. But when *we* love, love is the cause and the father (as it were), desire the effect and the child. And just as the father can exist without a child and the cause without an effect, but not the child without the father or the effect without the cause, so in a man you can find desire without love but not love without desire, while in a woman you find love without desire but never desire without love."

"But perhaps," said Virginia, "the reason why men don't love us is that we don't deserve to be loved. I know you and Cornelia will claim that's not true, but you're not going to convince me unless you tell me your arguments and prove them with examples."

"Do you really think that's the reason?" replied Corinna. "We've already proved that on all counts—ability, dignity, goodness, and a thousand other things—we are their superiors and they our inferiors. So I don't see any reason why they shouldn't love us, except for the fact that, as I said before, men are by nature so cold and ungrateful that they cannot even be swayed by the influences of the heavens. Though another factor, as we were saying earlier, is their great envy of our merits: they are fully aware of our worth and they know themselves to be full of flaws that are absent in women. For where men have flaws, women have virtues; and, if you need proof, it's quite obvious that in women you find prudence and gentleness where men have anger, temperance where men have greed, humility in place of pride, continence in place of self-indulgence, peace in place of discord, love in place of hatred. In fact, to sum up, any given virtue of the soul and mind can be found to a greater degree in women than in men."

"What poor wretches men are," Cornelia exclaimed, "not to respect us as they should! We look after their households for them, their goods, their children, their lives—they're hopeless without us and incapable of getting anything right. Take away that small matter of their earning money and what use are they at all? What would they be like without women to look after them? (And with such devotion!) I suppose they'd rely on servants to run their households—and steal their money and reduce them to misery, as so often happens."

"It is we women," said Leonora, "who lighten men's burden of

worries. When we take charge of household affairs (and we do so not in order to dominate our husbands, as many men claim, but simply in order to give them a quieter life), we take over a part of their work, overseeing the whole household. And it's certainly true that a man can never really find true domestic contentment and harmony without the fond companionship of a woman, whether she be a wife or a mother or a sister; without someone to look after him and take care of all his needs, and to share all the good times and the bad times with him. So it cannot be said with any truth that women are a source of harm in the world: on the contrary, they bring great benefits to the world with their wisdom, their virtue, and their goodness.

"And besides all that (and besides their physical beauty and grace) women have other merits that should give them a claim on men's love. There's our fortitude, for one thing—fortitude of mind *and* body, for if women do not bear arms, that isn't because of any deficiency on their part; rather, the fault lies with the way they were brought up. Because it's quite clear that those who have been trained in military discipline have turned out to excel in valor and skill, aided by that peculiarly feminine talent of quick thinking, which has often led them to outshine men in the field.[65] And, as proof, just think of Camilla, of Penthesilea, the inventor of battle-axes, of Hippolyta, Orithya, and all those other warlike women whose memory not even the history written by men has been able to suppress.[66] And where

65. This defense of women's capacity to excel at warfare, if given the proper training, takes on a particular significance when one considers how central a place arguments derived from women's supposed physical inferiority to men had within the Aristotelian tradition of misogynist thought. Fonte's arguments here are not original: defenders of women from the fifteenth century onward had used classical allusions to physically developed women, from the Amazons to the athletic female "guardians" of the fifth book of Plato's *Republic*, as evidence that contemporary women's physical weakness was the result of their upbringing rather than any innate deficiency. Over the same period, female warriors like Ariosto's Bradamante and Marfisa became popular figures in chivalric romance (see Tomalin 1982); and Fonte herself, in her romance, *Floridoro*, includes a female warrior, Risamante, whose prowess at arms is presented explicitly as evidence of women's suppressed potential.

66. Here Leonora initiates the second part of the "feminist" camp's response to Virginia's challenge to prove women's merits by "reason and example." The listing of examples from classical history and mythology was an essential element in most Renaissance defenses of women and, by the time Fonte was writing, two centuries of research on women's history had unearthed an impressive range of recondite anecdotal evidence. Camilla, a native Italian warrior princess, features in Virgil's mythological account of the founding of Rome in the *Aeneid*. The other figures named were from the legendary race of warrior women in Greek myth, the Amazons. Orithya was joint ruler of the Amazons at the time of their defeat by Hercules. Hippolyta, the sister of the other queen, Antiope, was taken to Athens by Theseus as a spoil of battle, provok-

letters are concerned—well, that's obvious: it was a woman, Carmenta, who first invented the alphabet, and poems are called *carmina* after her. And what shall I say of Sappho, who was counted among the sages of Athens? Or Corinna of Thebes, who outshone Pindar in eloquence? Or all those famous Roman women: Hortensia, Sulpicia, who dedicated the Temple to Chastity, Lucan's wife Bella, Pliny's Calpurnia, Laelia, Proba, Pythagoras's sister, Aristippus's daughter; or the Sibyls, to go further back; or all the others, who are innumerable?[67] And if women should be loved for their courage and for famous deeds, think of Judith's remarkable deed,[68] or Tomiris's revenge against

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ing a retaliatory attack by the Amazons. Penthesilea was the successor to Orithya and Antiope, and was killed by Achilles while assisting Priam in the defense of Troy.

67. Fonte's rather perfunctory list of learned women of antiquity reproduces, with some errors and omissions, lists found in earlier defenders of women like Galeazzo Flavio Capra (1525) (see Capra 1988, 90–93). Carmenta, or Nicostrate, is a legendary figure of the prehistory of Rome: the mother (or, in other sources, the wife) of Evander, the exiled king of Arcadia, founder of a city that later became part of Rome. She was credited, among other things, with the invention of the Latin alphabet. Sappho is the famous Greek love poet (sixth century BC); Corinna, another, slightly earlier, Greek poet, of whom a few fragments remain. Hortensia was the daughter of the Roman orator Quintus Hortensius Hortalus (114–50 BC). During the period of the second Triumvirate, in a famous speech, she successfully pleaded the case of Roman women against a proposed measure of punitive taxation, earning Quintilian's later tribute that her father's eloquence seemed to breathe again in her words (Hallett 1984, 58–59). Sulpicia was a Roman poet of the Augustan age, some of whose love poetry is included in book 3 of Tibullus's work. Fonte appears to have confused her with an earlier figure of the same name, however: the Sulpicia mentioned in Pliny (*NH*, 7, 35, 120) and Valerius Maximus (*MSD*, 8, 15, 12) as having been elected to the honor of dedicating a temple to Venus Verticordia, in recognition of her chastity. Polla (not Bella) Argentaria was the wife of the poet Lucan. A poet herself, she helped her husband in his revision of the first three books of his *Pharsalia*, and was praised by Statius in his *Sylvae* as a model wife. Calpurnia was the wife of the younger Pliny, who praises her in his letters for her love of reading (especially her husband's works). Laelia, the daughter of the orator Gaius Laelius (consul, 140 BC), was praised for her eloquence by Cicero and Quintilian (Hallett 1984, 338). Little is known of the early Christian (fourth-century) poet [Falconia] Proba except that she wrote a poem made up of verses from Virgil, adapted to convey a Christian meaning, which won lavish praises from Boccaccio in his *On Famous Women* and was published well into the sixteenth century. Of the last-named figures (Greek, of course, rather than Roman, as Fonte states), Pythagoras's sister Themistoclea, supposedly a priestess at Delphi, is unfortunately an apocryphal figure, the result of a linguistic misunderstanding (Caujolle-Zaslawsky 1989, 350). Aristippus's daughter, Arete, was, by contrast, a historical figure, who studied philosophy under her father and ran his school after his death. The Sibyls, in Greek legend, were priestesses who dwelt in shrines and were consulted for their enigmatic prophecies. One, the Eritrean Sibyl, makes an appearance at the end of Fonte's *Le Feste*, published in 1582.

68. Judith is the only biblical heroine included in Fonte's list of famous women. The story of her deception and beheading of the enemy general Holofernes (told in the

Cyrus,[69] or Cleopatra's undaunted soul,[70] or the greatness of Semiramis,[71] of whom the poet says:

> *Ch'una treccia raccolta, e l'altra sparsa*
> *Corse alla Babilonica rovina.*
>
> With one tress bound and the other loose,
> She raced to the destruction of Babylon.

Or think of the wars and the prowess of Zenobia,[72] or that great episode of the women of Aquileia, during the war against Maximinus, when, faced by dire necessity, they cut off their hair and gave it to their men to make bowstrings with which to defend themselves. And the women of Carthage and Rome did the same thing on other occasions.[73] And then there are the women of Sparta, who, when their men went to war, used to lace on their shields with the words, 'with

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Apocryphal books of the Old Testament) was an immensely popular subject for Renaissance writers and artists.

69. Tomiris or Tamiris was a legendary warrior queen of the Massagete, who fought against Cyrus, King of Persia, to avenge his murder of her son. After defeating him in battle, as the legend goes, she plunged Cyrus's severed head into a bucket of blood "to slake his thirst."

70. Cleopatra (69–30 BC) is the famous last queen of Egypt, the ally and lover of Mark Antony. In speaking of her "undaunted soul," Fonte may have in mind the celebrated episode of her suicide after Antony's defeat by Octavian.

71. Semiramis was a perhaps legendary warrior queen of Assyria, of the thirteenth century BC: a successful military leader, best remembered, however, for her sexual excesses. The lines quoted here, from Petrarch's *Triumph of Fame* (lines 104–5), recall a famous anecdote associated with her: that being informed about an invasion while halfway through having her hair dressed, she raced off to war with half her hair up and the rest flowing over her shoulders (Boccaccio cites the episode in his *On Famous Women* as striking evidence of how miraculously Semiramis succeeded in transcending the natural vanity of her sex).

72. Zenobia, the last individual figure mentioned here, was another warrior queen, this time a historical figure: she was Queen of Palmyra from 266 to 273 AD and fought against the Romans. Chaste and learned as well as warriorlike, and eventually defeated and reduced to genteel retirement in Rome, she proved a more congenial figure to Renaissance defenders of women than the bloodthirsty Tomiris or the lustful Semiramis, appearing, for example, as a speaker in Sir Thomas Elyot's *Defense of Good Women* (1540).

73. The story of the sacrifice of the women of Aquileia (328 AD) derives from the Roman historian Julius Capitolinus, as does the account of the similar sacrifice of the women of Rome during the Gaulish siege of 390 BC. The source for the parallel Carthaginian episode is Lucius Annaeus Florus (I, 31). From this point in the list of examples of women's courage, as in her listing of learned women, Fonte appears to be following a source deriving from Capra (see Capra 1988, 83–84).

them or in them,' meaning that they must return either victoriously alive or gloriously dead; and in this way, they inspired them to prefer victory or death to cowardly flight.[74] And then there are the Roman women whose great love of their country and desire to free it from the Gauls led them freely to give up all their riches and ornaments and give them to the nation—an action which prompted the Senate to give them the right to ride in chariots. It was the men of Rome who started a war by carrying off the Sabine women and it was the women who then restored the peace. And the part played by Coriolanus's mother, in persuading her son to give up his ill will toward his country, is no less famous.[75] The past—and the present[76]—hold countless other examples of magnanimity and patriotism among women: far too many to list them all now.

"But if another good reason to love people is because of the love they show us, then what can we say about the love women have displayed toward their male relatives? What about that story of Cimon's daughter who, when her imprisoned father was dying of starvation, kept him alive for a long time by surreptitiously feeding him on her visits with her own milk?[77] And what shall we say of Erigone who,

74. The proverbial austerity and patriotism of Spartan women, mentioned below in the text, is recorded in Plutarch's *Sayings of Spartan Women*, from which the exhortation cited by Fonte derives (Plutarch 1927–69, 3: 465 [241, 16]); see also *MSD*, 2, 7, Foreign Examples, 2).

75. Of these last Roman examples, the episode of the women of Rome giving up their jewelry to help defend the state against the Gauls (in 390 BC) is told by Diodorus Siculus (14, 116, 9). The story of the abduction of the Sabine women by the men of Rome forms part of the legendary prehistory of the city recounted by Livy in the first book of his history: see especially 1, 13, 1–4, where the story is told of their courageous intervention to make peace in the battle between their enraged menfolk and their Roman abductors. The story (also legendary) of Gnaeus Marcius Coriolanus being persuaded out of his plan to attack Rome by his mother Veturia (or Volumnia) is recounted by Livy and Valerius Maximus (Hallett 1984, 41).

76. A striking feature of Fonte's listing of celebrated women, and one that differentiates it from many other such lists in Renaissance defenses of women, is its near-exclusive classical bias: no recent or contemporary examples are cited, and only one medieval one, which Fonte may well have remembered as classical, in any case. It should be noted, however, that the seventeenth-century defender of women Cristoforo Bronzini claimed in a work of 1625 (it is unclear on what evidence) that Fonte had intended to include in the work "some Trophies of past and present women," presumably left unfinished at her death (Bronzini 1625, 117).

77. This story, which became a popular subject in art, as an allegory of charity, is told by Valerius Maximus in his chapter on filial devotion (*MSD*, 5, 4, Foreign Examples, 1). The name of the father given there, however, is Mycon, rather than Cimon (the daughter's name is Pero). The confusion of names, found in many Renaissance—and some modern—sources is probably due to the fact that the name Cimon occurs in the

after searching long for her father, was finally alerted to the truth by her faithful dog, who dragged her over with its teeth to where his dead body lay? She was driven to despair by her grief and hanged herself on the tree under which his body was buried.[78] And what do you say to the daughters of Oedipus, King of Thebes—what patience they showed, what filial piety, in looking after their blind father in his misery, without ever leaving him, come what might?[79] And the filial devotion of Mestra is remarkable, as well: Mestra who let herself be sold many times by the famished Erysichthon and then, fleeing from the men who had bought her, returned spontaneously to her father so he could buy food for himself.[80] But think, by contrast, how cruel it was of a father to barter his daughter for his own needs."

"Oh, come on," said Helena. "He was forced into it by necessity: it wasn't any lack of affection on his part. And when his life was at stake, it wasn't such a terrible thing for him to take advantage of her filial piety and obligation in order to save his life."

"Well, many fathers wouldn't have done the same for their daughters, if *they* were dying," Cornelia retorted. "Many fathers who could have given their daughters a new life by marrying them to the men they loved have preferred to see them die of love."

"Don't make me laugh," said Lucretia. "I'd much rather be dying of love than of hunger, like Erysichthon!"

"So should I!" said Helena.

"Let's drop the subject," Cornelia continued. "Death is death, all

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following anecdote (De Ceueleneer 1919, 182n).

78. Erigone, in Greek myth, was the daughter of Icarius, the first mortal to receive the gift of wine from Dionysius: an unenviable honor, since he was later murdered by some shepherds, whom he had unintentionally intoxicated and who suspected him of poisoning them. After her pitiful suicide, described here, Erigone was transformed into the constellation Virgo.

79. The daughters of Oedipus, the ill-fated king of Thebes, were Antigone and Ismene. After her father's self-blinding, Antigone accompanied him on his wanderings until his death at Colonus.

80. The bizarre myth alluded to here is told at length by Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 8, 738–878), who is hardly more sympathetic to the male protagonist of the story than Leonora is here. Erysichthon shows disrespect to the goddess Ceres and, in punishment, is afflicted by a ravening and insatiable hunger. Having sold all his goods to buy food, he sells his daughter Mestra as a slave, but she appeals to Neptune (who has previously seduced her) and he, taking pity on her, endows her with the gift of metamorphosis, which allows her to escape her new master. On her return to her father, he sells her again and again, under different human and animal forms, until finally, driven mad with hunger, he devours himself.

the same. But what about those fathers who have killed their daughters without mercy just because they were in love?"

"Are you saying that a father should put up with that kind of shame, in his own home?" asked Lucretia.

"No, I'm not saying that," replied Cornelia. "But the father should see to it, in some discreet way, that the lovers do not have the opportunity to meet (which is the prudent way to manage things, without causing scandal and setting everyone gossiping about one's private business). He should do everything in his power to dissuade his daughter from the affair, sending her away, threatening her—trying everything, in fact, short of the horrendous last resort of killing her. Because, apart from the inhumanity of such a course, it doesn't even remove her stain; on the contrary, it almost certainly results in the damnation of her soul, which is the gravest thing of all."

"The pagans didn't have too many scruples on that count," said Corinna. "Because when Pontius found that his daughter had been led astray by her tutor, he killed her without a second thought.[81] And Blandemo, Zeuxis's son, did the same. And I don't know whether Verginius deserved praise or blame for the fact that his first thought was not to kill the decemvir Claudius or himself but to slaughter his innocent daughter with his own hands."[82]

"So you're suggesting," said Lucretia, "that men in such cases should let reason be their guide, rather than passion."

"Yes," said Corinna. "And that they should follow the laws of nature: that is, treat others in the manner they would like others to treat them."

"You had such a lot to say in praise of women's devotion to their families," said Lucretia. "But what about the way in which Tullia

81. The figure in question is Pontius Aufidianus, a Roman knight. Valerius Maximus in his chapter on chastity (*MSD*, 6, 1, 3), praises him for his strength of character and resolve. I have not been able to identify the other figure mentioned here. It should be noted that Roman law in the Imperial age condoned the killing of an adulterous daughter by her father, with the proviso that he must have discovered her in the act and killed her lover at the same time (Treggiari 1991, 282–83).

82. Verginius is a semilegendary figure, a humble citizen of Rome (fifth century BC) who is said to have killed his daughter Verginia rather than have her succumb to the lust of the decemvir Appius Claudius Crassus Inrigillensis (see Hallett 1984, 119–20). Her death, like that of Lucretia, acquired political connotations for Roman historians, since both prompted uprisings against the political tyranny their seducers represented. Fonte's inclusion of Verginius in this list of cruel fathers is interesting, since most Renaissance sources, taking their cue from Livy and Valerius Maximus, tend to represent his action sympathetically, as necessary and honorable.

behaved toward her father, watching her father's dead body being trampled by horses and saying to those who reproached her that there was nothing so sweet as revenge on one's enemies?"[83]

"That's certainly true," replied Corinna. "But she was a freak of nature, a complete anomaly; and, anyway, as far as we know, she didn't actually have her father killed, even if after his death she was led by her anger into such a shocking act. But that one example is nothing in the face of the devotion women in general show toward their fathers, brothers, sons, husbands, and other relatives. Didn't Erigone, Orestes's sister, die from a broken heart after his death?[84] And how about Cassandra, Hector's sister?[85] And think what Intaphrenes's wife did to save her brother from Darius's hands! Darius had seized her husband, her children, and her brother, and she had persuaded him through her tears and entreaties to release one of the prisoners, whichever she wanted—and she left her husband and children, saving only her brother, saying that she could get another husband and other children, but never another brother, since her parents were already dead.[86] And there are countless others I could mention, if there were time.

"But, looking at the other side, how can we begin to describe the cruelty brothers have shown toward their sisters? I'm not talking about

83. Tullia was the daughter of Servius Tullius, one of the legendary kings of early Rome, and wife of his successor, Tarquin the Proud. After her father was ousted (in a conspiracy to which she was party) and assassinated in the street, Tullia had her charioteer run over his dead body. Her story is told by Livy in the first book of his *History*, and Valerius Maximus gives her pride of place in his chapter on wrongful words and wicked deeds (*MSD*, 9, 11).

84. Erigone was the daughter of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra and thus half sister to Orestes. Legends conflict concerning their relationship: some classical sources have her thirsting for revenge after her parents' murder and committing suicide through frustration when Orestes was acquitted; others have Orestes harboring murderous designs against her, which are foiled by Artemis's intervention; still others present the siblings as marrying and producing a son, Penthilus (Grimal 1986, 150). It seems probable that Fonte's variant of the story results from a contamination between the first and the third of these versions, whether due to her or some intermediate source.

85. Cassandra was the daughter of King Priam of Troy and sister to the Trojan hero Hector. In speaking of her sisterly devotion, Leonora may be thinking of the episode in book 24 of the *Iliad*, in which Cassandra, watching from the rooftops of Troy, is the first to see Priam returning from the Greek camp with Hector's corpse.

86. The anecdote derives from the third books of Herodotus's history. Intaphrenes was a Persian nobleman of the fifth century BC, who, along with Darius and five others, conspired to regain the Persian throne from the usurper Smerdis. After Darius had assumed the throne, he threw his former companion into prison under suspicion of treachery, but was sufficiently moved by the grief of Intaphrenes' wife to grant her the dubious privilege described here.

their appropriating their sisters' worldly goods (that, for them, amounts to a positive act of courtesy); I'm talking about the many brothers who have gone so far as wretchedly killing their sisters. What do you say to Ptolemy, who killed his sister Eurydice (who was also his wife) in order to take a harlot as his lover?[87] Or Cambyses, who also killed a sister he had taken as his wife, just because she was weeping over the death of another brother whom he had had killed?[88] Not to mention the pitiful case of the sister of the Horatii, who was mourning the death of her husband, one of the Curiatii killed by her brothers, when these same brothers, in their anger, cruelly murdered their sister as well.[89] And what a cruel trick it was that Ptolemy Ceraunus played on his sister Arsinoë! He pretended to marry her, swore undying fidelity to her—and then killed her children and seized the kingdom from her.[90] I'm just listing these few examples of famous and prominent individuals, because historians do not record the countless examples of humbler folk, but you can imagine that cases like these happen every day and remain buried in the oblivion of time.

"And then, what shall we say of the love mothers show for their sons? Rutilia was happy to leave behind the comforts of her homeland to follow her son when he was banished, saying that she would prefer to suffer a long exile than to be without him.[91] And the strength of Tomiris's love for her son is shown by the great revenge she later took

87. This may be Ptolemy I of Egypt (d. 283 BC), who repudiated (but did not kill) his wife Eurydice for a young widow (hardly a "harlot"), Berenice, who then became his queen (Macurdy 1932, 102–3).

88. Cambyses, king of Egypt and son of Cyrus the Great, was notorious for his tyranny and excesses. The source for this anecdote is Herodotus, 3, 32.

89. In Roman legend, Horatia was killed by her sole surviving brother (not brothers, as Fonte states here) after she had publicly mourned for her fiancé, one of the three enemy champions whom her brothers had killed in a six-man combat intended to settle the dispute between Rome and Alba (Livy, 1, 24–26). Roman historians tend to present the sororicide in a positive light, stressing Horatia's father's public vindication of his son (Hallett 1984, 114–15).

90. The figure referred to here is Arsinoë II Philadelphos (c. 316–270 AD), who became queen of Egypt by her third marriage, to her brother, Ptolemy II. The Ptolemy Ceraunus of the text was her second husband and a half brother. The story of Ceraunus's treachery and Arsinoë's children's death is recounted with great pathos by Justin in his epitome of Pompeius Trogus, 24, 1–3 (though it should perhaps be noted, as a counterbalance, that Arsinoë was not a stranger to this kind of treachery herself, having been implicated in the death of her first husband's son [see Burstein 1982]).

91. Rutilia was the mother of Gaius Aurelius Cotta, who was exiled in 91 BC but returned with Sulla in 82 and was consul in 75. Seneca praises her courage and maternal devotion in his consolatory letter to his mother Helvia (16, 7).

on Cyrus. Agrippina's love for Nero, as well, can hardly be denied, for, when she heard from the oracle that her son would be emperor, but would kill his mother, she said, 'Let him kill me, then, as long as he becomes emperor'—and he fulfilled the prophecy.[92] And Nero was not alone in this cruelty, for we also read of Antipater that he killed his mother and others of his family.[93] Aristobulus, son of Hyrcanus, killed his mother;[94] and Alcmaeon,[95] and Orestes."[96]

"Oh, come on!" Lucretia interjected. "Orestes acted quite rightly—she was a shameless woman."

"I'm not saying he was in the wrong," said Corinna, "but I can assure you that men are swayed more by their natural irascibility and cruelty than by any real zeal for honor, because if the latter were their real motive, then they would first make sure not to do anything

92. Nero's mother was Agrippina the Younger (15–59 AD), daughter of Germanicus and wife of (among others) Claudius. In murdering her, Nero was rather following in her footsteps, since she herself had murdered at least one husband. The anecdote recounted here derives from Tacitus.

93. Antipater (d. 294 BC) was the son of Cassander, king of Macedonia and Thessalonica, sister of Alexander the Great. After the deaths, in close succession, of his father and elder brother, he fought for the succession with another brother, Alexander, killing his mother in the course of this feud on the suspicion that she favored his brother.

94. The story of Aristobulus I, King of Judea (d. 103 BC), resembles that of Antipater in the previous example, in that both killed their mothers in the course of a struggle for the throne. Aristobulus achieved power after his father's death by imprisoning all his brothers except one, whom he later killed; when his mother challenged his authority, he imprisoned her too and left her to starve to death in a dungeon. The source is Josephus in his *Jewish Antiquities*, 13, 302, though it is likely that Fonte drew her knowledge of this, and perhaps others of her more obscure historical anecdotes from her friend and biographer, Giovanni Niccolò Doglioni, who is likely, at the time of her composition of *The Worth of Women*, to have been engaged on research for his *Compendio historico universale*, published in Venice in 1594 (see, for example, on Aristobolus, Doglioni 1594, 91–92).

95. With this example, Corinna moves on to less sure moral ground (as earlier, with the example of Agrippina). Alcmaeon was the elder son of the soothsayer Amphiaraus, who was driven to the war against Thebes against his will by his scheming wife, Eriphyle, who had allowed herself to be bribed by the gift of Harmonia's divinely crafted necklace. Eriphyle was later corrupted again into inducing her son to lead a second expedition against Thebes, but on his return, he slew her, honoring a request of his dead father.

96. The story of Orestes' murder of his mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus in revenge for their murder of his father, Agamemnon, the victor of Troy, is one of the most famous of Greek myths. As Lucretia is quick to point out in the text, the example is a rather equivocal one; in fact, after being hounded by the Furies, Orestes was ultimately acquitted of his crime in Athens.

dishonorable themselves and then worry about punishing others. And if you want proof, what had those other poor mothers been guilty of? Yet their sons were still not ashamed to kill them, just as other men are guilty of other excesses; but men rely on their sheer shamelessness to disguise their faults, whereas women's faults are magnified by the shame they feel.

"But all that we have been talking about is nothing to the heart-wrenching love that wives feel for their husbands. Think of Evadne, who after Capaneus's death threw herself into the flames and ended her life on the funeral pyre where her husband's dead body was burning.[97] And who was it who saved the life of Admetus, King of Thessalia, who was stricken by a grave infirmity and heard from the oracle that he could recover only if another died in his place? Did his brothers step forward to save him? His friends, perhaps? His servants? No one did, except his dear and faithful wife Alcestis.[98] And what shall I say of Hypsicratea, who followed Mithridates into the fierce wars posing as his serving man?[99] And Pantheus's wife did the same, as did Cleombrotus's and Lentulus's.[100] Panthea, on the death of her husband, whom she had urged to go to the wars, felt that she had been the cause of his death and, in her great misery and wretchedness, put an end to her own life.[101] Artemisia, when her husband

97. Capaneus was one of the seven legendary Greek kings whose assault on the city of Thebes is described in Statius's *Thebaid*; he died during the attack, struck down by a thunderbolt after defying Jupiter. Evadne's suicide after her husband's death is recounted at *Thebaid*, 12, 800–802.

98. The story of the self-sacrifice of Alcestis, daughter of Pelias, king of Iolcus, is recounted most famously by Euripides in the tragedy of that name.

99. The devotion of Hypsicratea, the wife (or, in other sources, a concubine) of Mithridates VI, King of Pontus (120–63 BC), is described in admiring tones by Valerius Maximus in his chapter on conjugal love (*MSD*, 4, 6, Foreign Examples, 2).

100. The wife of Pantheus, a general of Cleomenes III, King of Sparta (third century BC), was executed by her husband's political enemies after his death (Plutarch, *Life of Cleomenes*, 38). Plutarch praises her courage and tells, in a pathetic aside, how, as a young bride, she had been forbidden by her parents to accompany her husband to Egypt, but had procured herself a horse and some money and run away to join him. The story of Cleombrotus's wife, Chilonis, derives from the same source (*Life of Cleomenes*, 17–18): the daughter of an earlier king of Sparta, Leonidas, she successfully pleaded for her husband's life when he had been condemned for usurping her father's kingdom and insisted on accompanying him into exile, despite her father's pleas that she stay. The third figure mentioned here, Sulpicia (first century BC), disobeyed her mother's orders and disguised herself as a man to follow her exiled husband Lentulus Cruscellion into exile in Sicily. Her story is included by Valerius Maximus among his examples of faithful wives (*MSD*, 6, 7, 3).

101. The story of Panthea, the beautiful and loyal wife of Cyrus's general Abradatas, is

died, took his ashes and wept so copiously that his remains were mixed with the water of her tears; and she sipped the mixture until she had drunk all his ashes and at the same moment her life failed.[102] Oenone, whom Paris had abandoned for Helen, on seeing her husband dead, shortly afterward died of grief.[103] And what of Porcia, Brutus's wife, who, after her husband's death, was deprived of any instruments with which she might injure herself, yet still managed to kill herself by swallowing burning coals?[104] And Julia, Pompey's wife, on seeing his clothes drenched in blood and fearing for his life, was so affected that she miscarried and died immediately afterward.[105] I shall not repeat the stories of Laodomia, Polyxena, and others, who did not wish to survive their husbands' deaths;[106] as well as those of the countless wives who were their husbands' companions in their

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told in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*. The account of her suicide (an event so moving that three eunuchs in her entourage were impelled to follow suit) can be found at book 7, 3, 15.

102. Artemisia was the Queen of Caria in Asia Minor (d. 350 BC), famed for her devotion to the memory of her dead husband, Mausulus, to whom she erected a celebrated monumental tomb, the Mausoleum. Fonte's mention of her suicide is perplexing, but it may be a result of her misremembering the detail relayed by Valerius Maximus (*MSD*, 4, 6, Foreign Example, 1), that Artemisia drank her husband's ashes in order to convert herself into a "living tomb."

103. Oenone, in Greek mythology, was a river nymph and Paris's lover before he fell in love with Helen. Wounded at Troy, Paris called on Oenone, who was famed for her knowledge of herbal medicine, for help. Having initially rejected his plea, she relented and went in search of him, only to find him dead, whereupon she killed herself by throwing herself on his funeral pyre.

104. Porcia was the daughter of Cato the Younger and the wife of Marcus Junius Brutus, Julius Caesar's assassin. Her "virile" and uncompromising courage was testified, besides this story of her suicide (queried by Plutarch), by the famous anecdote of her wounding herself to demonstrate to her husband during the conspiracy against Caesar that she was worthy of being let into his confidence (see Hallett 1984, 57–58).

105. Julia was the daughter of Julius Caesar and Cornelia, daughter of the consul Cinna. She was married to Pompey in 59 BC and died in childbirth five years later. The story of her miscarriage and death in horror at the false report that her husband was dead is included by Valerius Maximus among his examples of conjugal devotion (*MSD*, 4, 6), along with that of Porcia's suicide.

106. Laodomia was the young bride of Protesilaus, the first Greek hero to be killed at Troy. One version of her story has her beg the gods to allow her to restore her husband to her for three hours, at the end of which, losing him again to Hades, she killed herself. Polyxena was the daughter of Priam, King of Troy, loved by Achilles and sacrificed on his funeral pyre after his death. The version of her story referred to here, in which she reciprocates Achilles' love and throws herself willingly into the flames, is an obscure one (though it is recorded in some Renaissance editions of Philostratus's *Imagines*); far more commonly, Polyxena's sacrifice is represented as an involuntary act, forced on her by Achilles' Greek comrades after his ghost has requested it in a dream.

travails and exiles, and who remained utterly loyal and devoted to them even at their death, because I know full well that you are as well acquainted with them as I am. And then, finally, there's the example of those Indian women who, after their husband's death (since their custom was for a single husband to have several wives), would fight among themselves to establish which of them had been the favorite, and the winner would happily burn herself to death alongside her husband."[107]

"You haven't mentioned those women in Sparta," said Cornelia, "who, when their husbands were in prison, obtained permission from the enemy to visit their men and then removed their feminine clothes and dressed their men in them, remaining in the prison themselves to be killed as a punishment while they sent their men out of danger."[108]

"And then there were those other women," added Lucretia, "whose city was captured and who obtained permission from the enemy to leave in safety with all the possessions they could carry with them. And, leaving everything else behind them, they carried away their husbands or fathers or children or brothers, leaving their homeland with all their possessions in prey to the enemy.[109] There are countless other examples of our love for our husbands, but it would be superfluous to tell you them all."

"It's men who should be told them," said Leonora.

"Oh, they know them well enough," added Corinna. "They just pretend not to. And then, on the other side, think of how many husbands have treated their wives badly (and still do). It's such a common, everyday occurrence that it's unnecessary to recite examples of it: they're almost all the same. And lovers—well, I scarcely need to tell you about them, for there have been only too many women who have suffered as a result of their love for some man and who have eventually been tricked by him, betrayed and abandoned. But enough

107. The custom in India of wives immolating themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres is reported by Valerius Maximus in his chapter on foreign customs (*MSD*, 2, 6, 14).

108. The story is told by Plutarch in his collection of exempla of female virtue and by Valerius Maximus, in his chapter on conjugal love (*MSD*, 4, 6, Foreign Example, 3).

109. This is the only instance in Fonte's list of a postclassical exemplum, though the vagueness of her reference suggests that she may not have remembered its provenance. The city in question is Weinsberg, near Heilbronn in Germany, besieged by Conrad III shortly after his election as king in 1138. The story was frequently included in lists of exempla of women's courage, though Fonte could also have heard it from Doglioni, who includes it in his *Compendio historico universale* of 1594 (Doglioni 1594, 289–90).

of this—if women deserve to be loved for their chastity, then the case is quite clear, and there's no need for me to say any more than what has already been said about women's constancy. So I shan't go into the thousand examples of chaste women of antiquity, Christian and pagan; nor shall I recall the episodes of Lucretia, Polyxena, Dido, Zenobia, and the German girls,[110] nor all the others historians mention. And if kindness and tenderness are enough to merit love, it is well known that women are incapable of hating anyone, however greatly they have offended them, and that a single good word is enough to make them forget all the abuses they have suffered.

"So I'm not sure, my dear Virginia, what remaining cause men can possibly have for not loving us, for we have every claim on their love. And if I wanted to prove this more clearly, I would need the pen of an angel rather than a mere mortal, for the merits of women are infinite, and the blessings they bring to the other creatures of the world. For the world would be in a sorry state if it were not for women: it would be stripped of all happiness and beauty, and there would be no respite from the miseries of life. And since women are a source of such honor and consolation, the Lord ensures that they are born in greater numbers than men; and for the same reason, when a daughter is born, there should be the most profound rejoicing across the whole family. But, on the contrary, when a father is told that his child is a girl, he is put out and dismayed, and gets angry with his wife.[111] In fact, there are endless husbands who make their wives' lives a misery over this, as though the wives alone were responsible and they had noth-

110. Lucretia, one of the most lastingly famous of Roman heroines, killed herself from shame after being raped by Sextus Tarquinius, thus indirectly prompting the revolt that led to the establishment of the Republic in Rome (Hallett 1984, 112–14). The story of Dido, Queen of Carthage, is best known, of course, in its Virgilian version, in which the widowed queen betrays the memory of her dead husband, Sichaeus, carried away by her passion for Aeneas, and kills herself from grief and shame when the latter abandons her. An alternative (and older) version of the story, however, which enjoyed considerable currency in antiquity and the Renaissance, has Dido as a faithful widow, who kills herself to escape a remarriage that is being forced on her. Zenobia was so devoted to chastity, according to Boccaccio, that she not only remained faithful to her husband's memory after his death, but, even in marriage, consented to sex only for the end of procreation. Valerius Maximus, in his chapter exemplifying chastity (*MSD*, 6, 1, Foreign Example, 3) recounts how the wives of the Germans conquered by Marius (consul in 107, 104–1, and 86 BC) pleaded with the victor to be allowed to join the temple of the Vestals in Rome and killed themselves when refused this request.

111. Disappointment at the birth of a daughter is, of course, by no means an experience limited to Venice in this period, but there is reason to think that it may have been particularly acute at a time of dramatic inflation in dowries (see Davis 1975, 106–11; Cowan 1986, 148–49).

ing to do with it; and they want nothing to do with their daughters. What malice there is in all this! Men should be delighted at the birth of a daughter, who will grow up meek and quiet and, in many cases, look after them and their households with devotion and love, but instead they long for the birth of males, who, when they grow up, will squander their money and swagger around looking for trouble, in constant danger of getting killed or killing others and being sent into exile—sons who will gamble or marry some unsuitable woman, or who are so eager to be the head of the household and to be free to squander its resources at will that they long for their father's death and cannot wait to see him out from under their feet. These, in the main, are the delights, joys, and pleasures that result from male offspring, as we can see every day from experience. It's completely different with daughters, who give no trouble at all: all their fathers have to do is provide a dowry for them to buy themselves a husband, so they have every reason to be grateful to their daughters, even though in practice the opposite occurs."

"These days," said Leonora. "[. . .]:[112] that's why they say the world belongs to the brash."

"That's not true," said Helena. "Dowries are paid to husbands because when a man marries, he is shouldering a great burden; and men who are not rich could not maintain a household without the subsidy of a dowry."

"You've got it all wrong," Corinna retorted. "On the contrary, the woman when she marries has to take on the expense of children and other worries; she's more in need of acquiring money than giving it away. Because if she were alone, without a husband, she could live like a queen on her dowry (more or less so, of course, according to her social position). But when she takes a husband, especially if he's poor, as is often the case, what exactly does she gain from it, except that instead of being her own mistress and the mistress of her own money, she becomes a slave, and loses her liberty and, along with her liberty, her control over her own property, surrendering all she has to the man who has bought her, and putting everything in his hands—so that he can run through the lot in a week?[113] Look what a good

112. The text is obscure here (*chi dirà* [= *diede*] *da far comandar*) and may be corrupt. The sense may be "it's a seller's market" [for husbands].

113. Corinna's speech interestingly reflects the frustration some women must have felt at a system that made married women the nominal owners of often very large sums of money, without giving them any effective control over this wealth, at least for the duration of their marriage. A woman's dowry, in Venetian law, corresponded to her share

deal marriage is for women! They lose their property, lose themselves, and get nothing in return, except children to trouble them and the rule of a man, who orders them about at his will."

"It would be much better for most of them," said Leonora, "if, instead of taking a husband, they just bought a nice pig for themselves every Carnival, which would fatten them up and keep them in grease rather than keeping them in grief."

"That's enough of that!" said Corinna. "Even if it were just the case that dowries didn't have to be given to men and that men gave dowries to women instead, then marriage would be a little more tolerable. Though they would still be getting the best out of the bargain, because for a very small outlay they would be getting a great return: the treasure of the sweet companionship and true love of a dear wife. And that should be a sufficient dowry for them, since they have so much more than we do, anyway."

"But surely it would not be much of an honor for us to receive a dowry from them," Cornelia said. "Women have too much sense of their dignity ever to deign to be bought by men. And besides, we are like jewels so precious as to be beyond price."

"There's not much that I know," Lucretia said. "But one thing I have always heard people say is: 'If you want to make a man wise, give him a wife.' Which is as much as to say, saddle him with a weight, a burden, a trial, that will take up all his time and interfere with all his pleasures and turn everything sour for him. When a man takes a wife, he can wave farewell to the good times."

"You've got it completely wrong, Lucretia," said Corinna. "Don't try to twist things around. Do you know why people say: 'If you want to give a man wisdom, give him a wife'? It's not at all for the reason you said. On the contrary, it means that when a man takes as his companion a wise, sensible, virtuous, sweet, and loving woman, he must, whether he like it or not, turn his previously wayward and perverse passions onto a better path and return to the fold of reason. He will feel compelled to, as I say, both because of the new love he will

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of her father's inheritance and was something to which she had a legal entitlement (Cowan 1986, 133; Chojnacki 1975, 575). On her marriage, the dowry was paid to her husband, who retained control of it for his lifetime, though he had the right to use only the interest, not the capital, which, on his death, reverted to his widow (Chojnacki, 1988). It is interesting to note in this context that Fonte's own husband appears—most unusually—to have waived his right to control of her dowry during her lifetime (see above, p. 37, n. 19).

naturally feel for his bride and because of the good example of decent and sensible behavior his wife will place before his eyes."

"Imagine a carriage drawn by two horses," said Leonora, "one noble, handsome, well-trained, and docile to the bit, going steadily down the right path; the other moody, restless, fiery, capricious, and given to going astray, always in danger of finishing up in a ditch somewhere with a broken neck, if it were not for the influence of the good horse beside it, pulling it back onto the straight and narrow.[114] And that's the ill service wives perform for their husbands in marriage: they drag them off the path of evil and onto the path of good."

"How blind they are! How misled!" added Cornelia. "Women are sent to them by the heavens as an oracle, a consolation, and a glory (quite an undeserved one); and they act like that cockerel who found a jewel in the dirt and ignored it because he didn't know what to do with it and instead rooted around after some disgusting piece of filth, recognizing his natural diet.[115] If men have no respect for the most excellent creature in the world, then what will they respect? No other created thing is the equal of woman—not even man, as men themselves must needs confess."

"And what's more," said Corinna, "women's worth is so great that they are prized even in hell. For it is said that Pythagoras, when he descended to hell, found many souls suffering great torments there who turned out to be those of men who had refused to marry when they were alive.[116] When Menedemus was asked whether it was the act of a wise man to marry, he replied: 'Do I seem like a wise man to you?'; and, when the other replied: 'What are you saying? The wisest of them all!' he replied: 'Well, *I* am married.'[117] And Diogenes said that any man who dared to harm so much as one hair on the head of his wife deserved to be put to death in the cruelest possible man-

114. The imagery here probably derives from the famous allegory of the soul in Plato's *Phaedrus*, 246b and 253c–254e (Plato 1961, 493 and 499–500).

115. The fable of the cock and the jewel is from the beginning of the collection by Aesop, where it serves as a warning to readers incapable of recognizing the value of what is to come.

116. Many strange legends surrounded the life of the sixth-century (BC) Greek philosopher Pythagoras. Fonte may be thinking here of a passage in Diogenes Laertius (*LP*, 8, 21), in which the story is reported that Pythagoras visited Hades and saw, among other damned souls, those of men who had been unfaithful to their wives.

117. Menedemus of Eretria was a Greek philosopher (c. 339–265 BC), known for his pithy and caustic style. This riposte is recorded by Diogenes Laertius (*LP*, 2, 129).

ner.[118] And the elder Cato considered good, loyal husbands to be as deserving of praise as the most eminent senators, while those who beat their wives he judged to be as wicked and impious as men who desecrated temples or other sacred things."[119]

"You're right," said the Queen. "Men are completely wrong when they claim such superiority over us and refuse to recognize our great worth, when ultimately a man without a woman is like a fly without a head. And while we're on the subject, I remember going to the houses of various male relatives and friends of mine, who were unmarried. You'd think you were going into a workhouse: they were so filthy and messy, with everything lying around all over the place, looking less like a gentleman's residence than a rag-and-bone man's shop."

"Just think," said Corinna, "if men could have heard what we've been saying about them, how many much worse things they'd say about us in return. Because men will never put up with being outdone in malice (though it hardly counts as malice on our part to speak the truth)."

"They'd probably write some contemptuous book about women as a reply," said Lucretia.

"Oh, they wouldn't be doing anything they haven't already done a thousand times," said Corinna. "I can tell you, men haven't been sitting around waiting for us to attack them."

"Yes, we can hardly aspire to come up with anything as old and tired as those arguments they keep churning out against us, without a shred of truth in them," said Leonora.

"Oh, as to that," said Corinna, "let them go ahead and keep conjuring up these groundless chimeras and fantasies, which aren't worth the paper they're written on and which I'm certainly not going to bother reading. But that kind of pigheadedness just brings shame on them, not honor, and it's not something to be taken seriously, especially since what's behind it all is obviously just the great envy they feel for women (which is also, as I was saying earlier, the explanation for why they can't bring themselves to love us sincerely)."

"Oh come now!" said Lucretia. "If men are as bad as you've been

118. Diogenes (fourth century BC), was a Greek philosopher and founder of the Cynic sect. I have been unable to trace the source of the comment quoted here by Fonte, which contrasts oddly with the caustic and often misogynist tone of most of his recorded remarks.

119. Like Diogenes, the Roman statesman Marcus Porcius Cato (234–149 BC) was not famed for his positive attitude to women. The remark quoted here is, however, reported by Plutarch in his *Life of Cato the Elder*, 20, 2.

insisting today, then why are we still inclined to love them? What is it that leads us to yield up our hearts to them and offer ourselves to them as willing slaves for life?"

Corinna was on the point of replying to this when the Queen stepped in, and said, "I can tell that you two are launching off on a debate that isn't going to be settled in a hurry. But since I can see that the sun is now leaving us to go and give light to the other hemisphere, I feel we should call it a day and not sit around here in the open air keeping company with the glowworms. And so, as your Queen, I order you to postpone your debate until tomorrow, when Corinna must undertake to answer Lucretia's question and to cover all the ground we have not been able to cover today."

As the Queen spoke, she got to her feet and made as if to stir up and rouse the others, who had been so absorbed in the conversation as to be hardly aware that evening was upon them. There was some discussion about where they should meet the following day, but Leonora said, "What are you saying? We have started our conversation here, and it is here that we must finish it. Indeed, so that we can get off to an early start, I invite you, beg you, and *order* you (if I may) to come around for breakfast tomorrow morning. That way, we'll have more time for talking, and you'll have more time to make the most of my garden, as well, which you've barely had a chance to enjoy today."

And she insisted so much that the others, overcome by her courtesy, all promised to return the following day. And then, after a brief wander in the shade and cool of the trees, they all took leave of one another and set off from Leonora's house, with the intention, as agreed, of returning the following morning to complete their interrupted debate.