DEFENDING WOMEN, NEGOTIATING MASCULINITY IN EARLY MODERN ITALY*

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ABSTRACT. This article seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the formation of masculinity in early modern Italy, by focusing on literature defending women written by men. The article argues that defence of women emerged as a crucial feature in male self-fashioning and group identity formation in specific environments, such as the courts, the academies, and the Venetian socio-cultural scene of the 1540s and 1550s. By detecting how demarcations of self and other were shaped in the literature under examination, the article suggests that men defending women fashioned themselves both in regard to female ‘otherness’ and against other contemporary male identities. In this process of inclusion and exclusion both gender and social status came into play. Although defence of women initially emerged as a key determinant of elite masculinity, it gradually became the bone of contention among different social groups of men seeking to negotiate, redefine, and appropriate for themselves an idealized form of masculinity.

Men themselves, ourselves, and our honour are insulted by the opinion that women (whom we love, desire, and serve above everything else in the world) are men’s servants and not their ladies.¹

Cristofano Bronzini’s interweaving of male honour and service to women – a common topos in literature defending women in early modern Italy – may seem quite paradoxical within the post-Tridentine Italian environment, where religious and prescriptive literature insistently cautioned male readers that being the head of the family and maintaining moral order within the household had to be essential ideals of a man.² Recent scholarship on early modern masculinities has

¹ Cristofano Bronzini, Della dignita` e nobilita` delle donne (Florence, 1622), Giornata Seconda, p. 16. All translations in this article, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

² Indicatively, see: Francesco Tommasi, Reggimento del padre di famiglia (Florence, 1580); Torquato Tasso, Il padre della famiglia (Venice, 1583); Giuseppe Passi, Dello stato maritale trattato (Venice, 1602); Gio Battista Assandri, Della economia, ovvero disciplina domestica (Cremona, 1616); also see: Daniela Frigo, Il padre di famiglia: governo della casa e governo civile nella tradizione dell ‘economica’ tra cinque e seicento (Rome, 1985).
underlined that male honour was most often identified with paternal authority, that is, a man’s ability to be economically independent and to exert full control over himself and his dependants. Protestant and Catholic reformers’ idealization and reorganization of marriage strengthened these ideals. In Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe, the medieval ideal of love service to women gradually came to be seen as a threat to the moral order of the household, the Christian community, and masculine authority; it even came to be seen as a sign of effeminacy. However, at the same time, historians have noticed that patriarchal manhood, although dominant, was not the only form of acceptable masculinity in early modern Europe. As Alexandra Shepard has suggested, patriarchal manhood was often challenged by alternative or resistant codes of manhood in early modern England. Furthermore, as Sandra Cavallo has argued, patriarchal masculinity had different collocations in each part of Europe; in Italy marriage was not always an essential component of masculine identity in contrast to the Protestant paradigm of Germany and England. Unfortunately, the formation of masculinity in continental Europe remains largely unexplored in comparison to early modern England, which has received increased scholarly attention. It is, therefore, still too early to draw safe comparisons between various and often contesting modes of masculinity in early modern Europe.


This article seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the shaping of masculinity in early modern Italy, by focusing on the so-called debate about women. The term ‘debate about women’, also well known by the French term querelle des femmes, refers to the lively literary controversy concerning female nature which flourished in early modern Europe. From the fifteenth century, besides the stereotypical misogynist discourse, which mostly drew on classical and medieval tradition, new arguments emerged suggesting women’s physiological, intellectual, and moral excellence, or even superiority to men. Scholarship has mainly focused on the stock of arguments favouring women, as they appear in the relevant literature. Furthermore, as most texts defending women had been written by men, scholars have debated whether pro-woman literature expressed a proto-feminist discourse or whether it was just a rhetorical game on male writers’ part.\(^8\)

Recently, Virginia Cox and Sarah Gwyneth Ross, have offered more nuanced approaches to the debate about women by mapping out the linkage between ‘Renaissance feminism’ and the simultaneous increase in women’s participation in the literary world.\(^9\) Ross has investigated the importance that women’s increasing participation alongside men as scholars had on the development of a feminist view encapsulated in the notion of ‘woman as intellect’ in Italy and England, whereas Cox, focusing on the Italian context, has suggested that it was the pro-feminist discourse which paved the way to women’s growing participation in literary culture. Both scholars agree that male intellectuals offered important support to aspirant female writers and significantly forwarded the model of the ‘learned lady’ since it met their own aspirations. Cox has interestingly turned her attention to the construction of male literary identity by arguing that from the fifteenth century onwards the pro-woman stance was deployed rhetorically by intellectuals coming from courtly environments and by humanists and their sixteenth-century vernacular descendants to meet their cultural needs. Male literati’s appeal to the cultural type of the female writer had a discursive value as signifier of departure from scholasticism, as embodiment of regional pride, as emblem of the aristocratic ideal of learning, as symbol of the commitment to the vernacular, and as proxy of innovative intellectual projects. Cox has rightly noticed that

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pro-woman discourse became an essential part of male identity initially in court settings and later diffused.\textsuperscript{10}

However, as this article argues, the emergence of this male identity was a dynamic and complex process, constantly negotiated, which involved the cultural construction of women’s defenders and enemies and the employment of pro-woman discourse as a tool of social and cultural inclusion and exclusion to construct homosocial bonds and affirm power relations. In their defences of women, male writers both crafted themselves in regard to female ‘otherness’ and sought to establish models of hegemony and marginalization among diverse male identities.\textsuperscript{11} By detecting the demarcations of self and other in the debate, I suggest that the process of inclusion and exclusion was based on the interrelation between gender and social rank. Seeking to contextualize literature defending women, the article argues that although defence of and service to women initially emerged as an essential component of elite masculine identity within the court environments, it was quickly appropriated and negotiated by other groups of men seeking to confirm their own masculinity or even to put under question the elite’s monopoly on protecting women as a criterion of civilized manners. The first part of the article discusses the general terms of the debate about women in relation to female and male ‘otherness’, Christian and classical authority, and history. Then, the article geographically focuses on the courts of central and northern Italy, where pro-woman literature first flourished, on the dynamically emerging Venetian publishing industry of the 1540s and 1550s, through which pro-woman literature was ‘popularized’, and on the sixteenth-century Sienese academy and theatre environment known for its favourable stance towards women. The comparative examination of these ‘pro-woman settings’ demonstrates the various ways in which different social groups of men employed the pro-woman ideal to form their identity.

I

In the debate about women, masculinity achieved its first meaning in comparison to femininity. Women were treated as a single undifferentiated group which was ‘othered’ in order to sanction the normality of men and their collective authority

\textsuperscript{10} Cox, \textit{Women’s writing in Italy}, pp. 91–9.
\textsuperscript{11} My argument is partly informed by R. W. Connell’s concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’. The idealized masculinity analysed in the article was fashioned by the Italian lay elites in order to maintain their social and cultural authority and marginalize other groups of men. In this sense, it can be taken as hegemonic. However, it can hardly be seen as culturally dominant since it developed along with other dominant modes of masculinity, most notably the patriarchal masculinity largely forwarded by the church after the Council of Trent. Furthermore, the negotiation of the elite masculinity most likely remained within the world of the literate. On the concept of hegemonic masculinity: R. W. Connell, \textit{Masculinities} (Cambridge, 2005; first published in 1995), pp. 67–81. For an interesting analysis of the concept and its employment in historiography: John Tosh, ‘Hegemonic masculinity and the history of gender’, in Stefan Dudink, Karen Hagemann and John Tosh, eds., \textit{Masculinities in politics and war: gendering modern history} (Manchester, 2004), pp. 41–50.
over women. Women were most often presented as helpless victims, whereas authors, or male speakers in dialogues, were figured as women’s most noble protectors. Paradoxically, it was men who, disapproving of the dominant gender discourse, enlightened women on their excellence. In the proem of the Dialogo della bella creanza delle donne, Alessandro Piccolomini informed female readers that he would supply them with ‘many arguments and countless examples’ to silence ‘those ill-natured’ men who, among many lies, argued that the female soul is not capable of profound concepts and witty judgements. Interestingly, Piccolomini hastened to clarify that it was the author himself who spoke behind the main speaker, the elderly and humble-born Raffaella, who was just a dramatis persona, since if she had been a real person it would have been impossible for her to have formulated such ideas – apparently due to her lower social status and female sex. Thus, defence of women emerged as an exclusively male privilege and duty which required higher social and cultural status. This motif was dynamically challenged at the beginning of the seventeenth century by today’s well-known Lucrezia Marinella’s La nobilità et l’eccellenza delle donne (1600) and Moderata Fonte’s Il merito delle donne (1600), the first substantial defences of women written by women in Italy.

Whereas women were not deemed capable of defending themselves, they acted as guarantors of their protectors’ manhood. Women’s recognition of their defenders was indicatively underlined in dialogues, usually placed in court settings and structured around two adversary groups of male speakers discussing women’s nature. Arguments were essentially developed by men, whereas female speakers just encouraged their defenders and expressed their gratitude to them. This pattern was already found in Baldesar Castiglione’s third book of The courtier (1528), one of the first and most influential dialogues on women’s nature. The female speaker, Emilia Pia, asked Magnifico Giuliano to clarify his views in simpler words for women to understand and encouraged him to continue his reasoning in favour of women, so that their enemies fall silent. Magnifico had already argued that ‘a woman lacks a man’s resources when it comes to defending herself’. Similarly, in Lodovico Domenichi’s La nobilità delle donne, Violante Bentivoglia thanked God, exclaiming that she had finally found a man to defend

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12 Alessandro Piccolomini, Dialogo della bella creanza delle donne (n.p., 1540), fos. 2v–3r.
13 For modern translations of Marinella’s and Fonte’s works, see: Lucrezia Marinella, The nobility and excellence of women and the defects and vices of men, ed. and trans. Anne Dunhill (Chicago, IL, and London, 1999); Moderata Fonte, The worth of women: wherein is clearly revealed their nobility and their superiority to men, ed. and trans. Virginia Cox (Chicago, IL, and London, 1997). Marinella’s and Fonte’s works have received extensive scholarly attention to be mentioned here. For a recent account, see: Cox, Women’s writing in Italy.
16 Ibid., p. 211.
Women. Women were present in the discourse just to refine and civilize the conversation, a feature which had its roots in courtly culture. As Castiglione’s speaker, Cesare Gonzaga, argued, ‘there is no Court, however great, that can possess adornment or splendor or gaiety without the presence of women’. Thus in the debate about them, women functioned as mediators accommodating male competition.

However, the male self was not fashioned just in terms of male and female, but distinctions between different modes of masculinity repeatedly came to the forefront. Not all men were as ‘manly’ to support the women’s cause. Real masculinity had to be publicly affirmed through comparison with the subordinate male other, who was the enemy of women. To this aim, authors hastened to present themselves as devout defenders of women, at the same time showing disapproval of women’s enemies. In the same vein, this role was assumed by one or more speakers in dialogues. Through the juxtaposition between women’s defenders and enemies, a writer’s identity was constructed in terms of male solidarity and alliance. Men defending women were primarily figured as a small but enlightened community of like-minded men whose nobility of manners was beyond the grasp of ordinary people. In his dedicatory letter to the Brescian nobleman, Giovan Battista Gavardo, Girolamo Ruscelli claimed that women ‘are loved, revered, and served only by the most real and perfect men’. Ruscelli drew the distinction between ‘us’ (i nostri) and ‘them’ (essi): ‘In wishing to praise women our folks always blame men … the others say that our folks deceive the world through huge fraud.’ Thus, a consolidation of homosocial bonds is being discerned through affiliation to a male group identity, by which men defending women disqualified other men’s manhood.

Despite this oft-repeated motif of comparison between women’s defenders and enemies, rarely did writers identify women’s enemies with contemporary individuals. Interestingly, with the exception of Cristofano Bronzini’s Della dignità e nobilità delle donne which openly attacked Giuseppe Passi for his misogynous I donneschi difetti (1599), only female writers launched direct attacks against

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17 Lodovico Domenichi, La nobilità delle donne (Venice, 1549), fo. 69r.
20 Domenichi, La nobilità, fos. 1r–2v; Sperone Speroni, ‘Dialogo della dignità delle donne’; in idem, Dialoghi (Venice, 1596; first published in 1542), pp. 39–40; Girolamo Ruscelli, Lettura … ove con nuove et chiare ragioni si pruova la somma perfettione delle donne (Venice, 1552), fos. 15r–v; Luigi Dardano, La bella e dotta difesa delle donne in corno e prosa … contra gli accusatori del sesso loro (Venice, 1554), fos. 3r, 7v–11v; Domenico Bruni da Pistoia, Difese delle donne, nella quale si contengano le difese loro, dalle calunnie datagli per gli scrittori, e insieme le lodi di quelle (Florence, 1552), fos. 4r–13v; Thomaso Pellegrini, Discorso del costante accademico occulto in laude delle donne (Venice, 1579), fos. 4r, 21v–22r.
21 Ruscelli, Lettura, sig. 6.
22 Ibid., fo. 15v.
24 Bronzini, Della dignità, Giornata Prima, pp. 30–2.
certain contemporary authors who defamed women. In male-authored works, identifiable contemporary individuals were presented as women’s enemies only when they figured as speakers in dialogues. However, in this case, they were not actually identified with women’s ‘historical’ enemies, but they rather represented enemies as literary personae. In early modern Italian dialogue, speakers who identified with the contemporary political or intellectual elite often functioned as guarantors for the author’s authority, without, however, their arguments being taken at face value; that is as faithful transcriptions of their beliefs. Thus, the Renaissance literary conventions enabled authors to present contemporary figures as women’s enemies without touching their prestige.

Actually, in the sixteenth century, when literature defending women was in its heyday, substantial misogynistic works were sporadic. We only find some short satirical poetical compositions, such as Pietro Aretino’s *Capitolo contra le donne* or Giacopo Boero Gorretta’s *I diavoli delle donne*, and popular anonymous works, such as *Historia nova*, which treated of women’s evil nature and their passion for luxury. It was only towards the end of the sixteenth century, when pro-woman literature had begun to wane, that misogynist works such as Giuseppe Passi’s *I donneschi difetti*, Francesco Buoninsegni’s *Del lusso donnesco*, satira menippea (1638), and the Italian translation of the *Disputatio nova contra mulieres, qua probatur eas hominess non esse* (1647) came to light. However, the absence of substantial misogynist works in the sixteenth century does not mean that defenders of women were arguing into a void. Women’s inferiority was the norm in early modern thought and practice, and as such it did not have to be constantly proven. Women’s defenders had to manifest their fresh ideas to construct an identity against the patriarchal discourse which permeated political thought, philosophy, theology, conduct literature, science, popular culture, and social relations. In literature defending women, sporadically, there were comments alluding to social criticism. Girolamo Mutio, the women’s defender in Lodovico Domenichi’s *La nobilita` delle donne*, accused men of having deprived women of every social, political, military, and intellectual role, excluding them from ‘the squares, senate, councils, and schools’. He further denounced male tyranny (tirannia degli uomini) over women underlining that male domination derived, against divine justice and nature, from legislation, custom, women’s exclusion from education and political participation, and their confinement in the


27 *La caccia d’amore del Berni con la riposta del Molza*, et una giuosta da cavalieri erranti, con un capitolo di Pietro Aretino contra le donne, et un altro capitolo, con un sonetto amoroso aggiunti novamente (Venice, 1554); Giacopo Boero Gorretta, *I diavoli delle donne* (Genoa, 1573); *Historia nova*, piacevole la quale tratta delle maliitie delle donne e le pompe che cercano adomarsi (n.p., [1530?]?).
home or convent. Disapproving established practices and dominant notions, women’s defenders constructed their masculinity in terms of progress and novelty.

This was further achieved through defenders’ criticism of the classical and Christian traditions, which had provided the basis for a misogynist rhetoric to become the cornerstone of the legal, religious, political, and medical theories, and social practices in the next centuries. Thus, scriptural doctrines, and especially the Book of Genesis, were often radically reinterpreted to support women’s excellence. Domenico Bruni da Pistoia indicatively stated that his interpretation of the ‘sacred Genesis’ would conform to the truth more than that of other commentators of the past.

Similarly, Cervone, women’s defender in Giovanni Thomagni’s dialogue, pointed out the role of the interpretation of the Scriptures in women’s oppression: ‘and there are also some people who derive authority from the holy religion against women and, based on holy Scriptures, they legitimize women’s subjection.’ The rereading of biblical narratives formed a new stock of arguments favouring women. For instance, Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib indicated female excellence, since living flesh is superior to lifeless clay, the material from which man was created. Woman’s superiority was further substantiated by the superior place of her creation, in Paradise, whereas man was created outside the Garden of Eden. Eve was created last and consequently the most perfect, ‘so deserving she is loved, revered, and obeyed by each creature, and each creature deservingly is subject to her, and obeys her, since she is the queen and the end of all the creatures.’ The tradition that held woman responsible for the original sin was also variously addressed and came under re-examination. Authors underlined that both Adam and Eve were made in the image and likeness of God, which demonstrated their spiritual, intellectual, and physical equality. New Testament narratives also came under consideration. Christ’s male form indicated man’s greater need for atonement whereas it was often noted that God could not have permitted the nobler female sex to suffer on the cross. Finally, the immaculate conception showed women’s ability to procreate without men’s contribution, an interpretation which was interestingly interwoven with examples drawing on non-Christian cultures, such as the Turkish myth of nefesogli.

28 Domenichi, _La nobiltà_, fos. 81v, 117v.
29 Bruni da Pistoia, _Difese delle donne_, fo. 22r.
30 Giovanni David Thomagni, _Dell’eccellentia de l’uomo sopra quella de la donna_ (Venice, 1565), fo. 110v. Despite its title, Thomagni’s dialogue set forth the pro-woman side of the debate as well.
31 _Della nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne, nuovamente dalla lingua francese nella italiana tradotto_ (Venice, 1544), fo. 7r.
32 Nefesogli (spirit-children) were reportedly children that had been conceived without male semen: _Della nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne_, fo. 13v; Domenichi, _La nobiltà_, fo. 99r; Ruscelli, _Lettura_, fo. 18r; on radical readings of the Bible: Hercole Marescotti, _Dell’ eccellenza della donna_ (Fermo, 1589), pp. 70–8, 100–4; Bronzini, _Della dignità_, Giornata Prima, pp. 66–78; Bruni da Pistoia, _Difese delle donne_, fos. 14v–15v, 22r–v, 52v–53v; Domenichi, _La nobiltà_, fos. 8v–9r, 12v–16v, 95v, 109v–107r; Ruscelli, _Lettura_, fos. 14v, 16v–21r, 25v–26r; Dardano, _La bella e dotta difesa_, fos. 31r–36r, 49v–53v, 67r–69r; Francesco Agostino della Chiesa, _Theatro delle donne letterate con un breve discorso della preminenza, e perfettione del sesso donnesco_ (Mondovi, 1620), pp. 8–10; Tomaso Garzoni, _Le vie delle donne illustri della scrittura sacra … et un discorso in fine sopra la nobiltà delle donne_ (Venice, 1588), pp. 161–6.
Many of the new arguments derived from Henricus Cornelius Agrippa von Netttesheim’s rereading of the Book of Genesis in his Declamatio de nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus (1529), which was translated into Italian in 1530 and 1544, and had a great influence on later authors.\textsuperscript{33} However, beyond Agrippa’s influence, the early interest in biblical translations which Italy witnessed must have provided a basis for the pro-woman rereading of the scriptural narrative. Actually the first translation of the Bible from Latin into Italian was made by Nicolò Malerbi as early as 1471. An alternative reading of the Bible is found already in 1487 in De laudibus mulierum by Bartolomeo Goggio which, however, remained unpublished.\textsuperscript{34} In the early sixteenth century several translations came to light, most of them published in Venice, the best known of which by philoprotestant Antonio Brucioli.\textsuperscript{35} Biblical interest was often associated with reformed ideas which circulated in Italy during the first decades of the sixteenth century. Lodovico Domenichi, an important contributor to the debate about women, was condemned to life imprisonment for the publication of Nicodemiana, attributed to Calvin, and Johann Sleidan’s Commentarii, but he was rescued thanks to the intervention of Renata d’Este.\textsuperscript{36}

Novelty was again stressed in the criticism of the classical tradition. According to Lodovico Domenichi, ‘having been the most untrustworthy and vainglorious people’, the Greeks, due to ‘ambition, vanity and self-love’, claimed that men are superior to women, who are predestined only to bear children.\textsuperscript{37} Aristotle in particular, whose views on female imperfection and inferiority in procreation, as developed in Physics and Generation of animals, were interwoven with Christian dogma in scholasticism, was often rebutted as ‘in each occasion he has been proved enemy of this most noble sex’.\textsuperscript{38} Domenico Bruni da Pistoia dismissed Aristotle’s views on female deficiency, whereas Cristofano Bronzini ranked ancient historians among women’s enemies (historie de Greci, Latini, e Barbari).\textsuperscript{39} In Domenichi’s dialogue, the speaker Francesco rejected Aristotle’s and Thomas Aquinas’s views on women’s inferiority, declaring that instead of submitting to their authority (autorità), he would build his arguments on reason (per ragioni).\textsuperscript{40} The challenge of authority also featured in Bronzini’s dialogue. When Tolomei...
remarked that it is reckless to disapprove of ‘such an ancient and established author’ as Aristotle, Onorio, women’s defender, argued that profane authors should not be trusted as if they were religious. Instead, according to Onorio, one should know and judge through reason (ragione) since the ability to think ‘has naturally been implanted in the human intellect by nature, not only in the learned ones but also in the mediocre ones and even in the illiterate’. Lack of reason often featured as the main cause of disdain for women. According to Alessandro Piccolomini, it was those who ‘are deprived of the light of the intellect and reason who have yielded to such vileness and filth to asperse women’. Rejection of Aristotle encapsulated the condemnation of the scholastic notion of woman, whereas criticism of antiquity and giving pre-eminence to reason over authority often featured in the early modern querelle des anciens et des moderns.

Furthermore, men defending women often challenged the traditional male-centred history. Having as a source of inspiration Giovanni Boccaccio’s De mulieribus claris (1362), a collection of biographies of famous women, women’s defenders either inserted short biographical accounts of women in their works or they composed full-length biographies of women to celebrate women’s past achievements so as to rebut arguments about female inferiority. According to women’s defenders, history had been male-specific due to women’s enemies’ deliberate distortion of history so as to underestimate women’s vital contribution to civilization. In Le vite delle donne illustri, dedicated to Margarita Estense Gonzaga, duchess of Ferrara, Tommaso Garzoni made known ‘to the world and revealed to the centuries to come’ the honourable deeds of women, which ‘so many importunate tongues’ had concealed because of their ‘hatred and madness’. Similarly, Francesco Agostino della Chiesa claimed that his biographies would demonstrate erudite women’s achievements, which contemporary writers had withheld ‘due to their disdain, hate and envy rather than to some sound reason’. The most thorough pro-woman rereading of history was found in Luigi Dardano’s La bella e dotta difesa delle donne in which fictional and historical female figures appeared before a court to challenge the misogynist discourse by offering alternative versions of the past. Reclaiming women’s past was presented as a

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41 Bronzini, Della dignità, Giornata Prima, p. 117.
42 Piccolomini, Diálogo della bella creanza, fo. 2r.
46 Della Chiesa, Teatro delle donne letterate, p. 2.
47 Dardano, La bella e dotta difesa, fos. 49v–85v.
common endeavour on the defenders’ part to restore women’s reputation and at the same time as a risky task, as men defending women were supposed to be vulnerable to attack due to their courageous revelation, against all authorities, of well-concealed truths. Addressing Margarita Estense Gonzaga, Tommaso Garzoni underlined the risk his defence of women ran:

I know that many people will dislike my undertaking to praise so explicitly your sex, and maybe I will be mocked by their evil tongues with insolent words, because they will think that I directly oppose the authority of many wise men, who have sharply persecuted them [women] in their writings.48

The rereading of history rendered defenders of women the only agents of truth.

II

The first writings on female superiority had been circulating since the fifteenth century within the courtly environments, most likely written under the aegis of powerful women.49 This literature was embedded into the neoplatonic idealization of feminine beauty and love, and the civilized manners of the courtly environment. Written mainly in Latin and remaining in manuscript form, fifteenth-century defences did not have any broader appeal. It was only at the beginning of the sixteenth century that the woman question gradually became a ‘public debate’, due to the growth of print as a primary mode of cultural discourse through which identities were fashioned.50 Seen in this context, the debate about women became a medium through which male status was competitively gauged and negotiated between different social groups of men.

The turning point in the popularization of the debate about women was Baldesar Castiglione’s The courtier, the book of courtly manners par excellence, inspired by the cultural environment of the court of Urbino. The third book of The courtier focused on the ideal court lady but it also included a detailed discussion on female nature at large. The courtier exemplified mixed conversations in a courtly setting and idealized women’s presence in the court, giving them a central but mediatory role in polite sociability.51 The stock of arguments and the structure of

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the dialogue around two adversary male groups deliberating on female nature became the model for subsequent dialogues.

One of the most influential and less studied features of *The courtier* was that the defence of women emerged as a fundamental value of elite masculinity within the art of courtly conduct (*cortegiania*). As one of the speakers, Bernardo Dovizi, claimed, ‘and in this as in everything else the courtier should above all show respect and reverence for women’; and in Magnifico Giuliano’s words, ‘we each and all of us know that it is fitting for the courtier to have the greatest reverence for women … I have known few men of worth who do not love and pay tribute to women.’ In this view, the defence of women along with neoplatonic love became seminal demarcations of difference between the elite and common men. Featuring as a speaker in the fourth book of *The courtier*, Pietro Bembo, one of the major authorities on Renaissance love theory, closely interwove neoplatonic love and elite status: ‘I pray him [Love] so to inspire my thoughts and words that I can teach this excellent courtier of ours how to love in a manner beyond the capacity of the vulgar crowd.’ The contrast between ‘vulgar’ and ‘divine’ love quickly became a common *topos* in Renaissance literature and art, with Titian’s *Sacred and profane love* being the best-known artistic example.

It has long been noticed that *The courtier*, despite its innovative elements, owed a lot to the medieval chivalric tradition, reflecting a combination of the old medieval military ideal and that of the courtier, which was enriched with humanist values such as sociability, refinement, politeness, the art of elegant conversation, and the possession of grace, a quality which may be acquired through study and practice. The conflict between women’s defenders and enemies, often represented as a verbal duel before women’s eyes, also drew a lot on the medieval ‘warrior male’ paradigm as exemplified in the tournaments in which female

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54 Ibid., p. 201.


58 Girolamo Mutio, the women’s defender in Lodovico Domenichi’s dialogue, warned his adversary and enemy of women, Pier Francesco Visconte, that he and his comrade, Francesco Grasso, would enter that battle of arguments well armed: ‘Of course, I am not going to stay, as one might say, with my hands tied in this undertaking … and although Signor Francesco is a very worthy and successful champion by his own, I will not consider giving him an injury, if opposing you with the same
spectators played a central but symbolic role, by enticing masculine competition and, at the same time, by confirming male intimacy.59 Both the medieval tournament and the early modern duel were signs of masculine identity which excluded women and children, and ranked some men above others, valorizing specific social groups through chivalric honour and elite status respectively.60 As the medieval service to the lady,61 love in Renaissance neoplatonic thought, as exemplified by Petrarchan lyrics, and philosophical works such as Marsilio Ficino’s *De amore* (1484) and Pietro Bembo’s *Gli Asolani* gave women a central, but mediatory role.62 The neoplatonic idealization of feminine beauty, as a reflection of virtue, rendered women the object of erotic desire and the means for men’s perfection and approach to God. Similarly, in the debate about women, women were at the centre, as the object under examination, but they were denied agency. Speech, such as war and love, remained an elite masculine privilege, whereas women were cast in the role of the spectators in a game which had them as objects.

Defence of women as part of elite masculinity, as exemplified by Castiglione, featured prominently in subsequent authors. In *La nobiltà delle donne*, Lodovico Domenichii claimed that by defending women against the ‘cowardice and ignorance’ of those who ‘slander and insult them’, he would please ‘countless knights and noblemen, most affectionate servants of love and women’.63 Deductions also demonstrated the elite’s profound interest in crafting their image as affectionate defenders of women. Pietro Paolo Porro, a knight of Santi Maurizio and Lazaro, dedicated his work to Carlo Emanuele of Savoia, prince of Piedmont, the future duke of Savoia, who, according to the writer, was a ‘dearest prince and supreme knight’ whose duty was to defend women’s honour.64 Similarly, the publisher Vincenzo Busdragho dedicated Lodovico Domenichii’s collection of women’s poems to Gerardo Spada, a nobleman from Lucca, who ‘had always been an affectionate and indomitable defender of women’s excellence’.65 The association between defence of women and chivalric culture was weapons of truth which I have already in my hands, I will make your situation even worse.’ Domenichii, *La nobiltà*, fos. 6v–7r.


63 Domenichii, *La nobiltà*, sig. 9.

64 Pietro Paolo Porro, *L’eris d’ amore* (Milan, 1575), sig. 2.

duly underlined in Cesare Barbabianca’s dedication of his work to the ‘Heroic Cavaliere’ Horatio Ruino of Capodistria, urging him to protect it from ‘the audacious and unjust who miserably lacerate not only one woman but the whole female nobility and kindness’, since ‘it is the custom of each prestigious knight to defend innocent women on every occasion, either with his sword or spear’.66

The debate about women was employed by the Italian elite to fashion an idealized masculine identity during the gradual establishment of a court society and its request for cultural authority, as princely power replaced the republican city states, aristocratization was under way, and the innate quality of nobility was much debated. During the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries new titles of nobility, which came from non-Italian royal powers, were adopted in many Italian cities to designate certain people as members of an emerging elite. Works such as Giovanni Battista Possevino’s *Dialogo dell’onore* (1553), Girolamo Mutio’s *Il duello* (1550), and *Il gentilhuomo* (1571), Pompeo Rocchi’s *Il gentilhuomo* (1568), and Francesco de’ Vieri’s *Il primo libro della nobilita’* (1574) discussed the kinds, concepts, and origins of nobility and outlined appropriate rules of conduct. Most writers claimed that although noble birth was a fundamental precondition, virtue was also an active process.67 As the nobility of birth, performance of self, and codes of conduct were intertwined, the defence of women became a courtly accomplishment, an assertion of status definition.

The demarcation between ‘defender’ and ‘enemy’ was gradually established in clearer social terms so as to valorize defence of women as a particular feature of the elite’s masculine codes and at the same time marginalize or stigmatize other modes of masculinity. Indicative is Cristofano Bronzini’s identification of women’s defenders and enemies with particular social groups of men:

Emperors and rulers give them [women] priority, the supreme princes and great men give way to them and knights serve and honour them. And all men of quality have never been as pleased and contented as now in that they can pay such an extraordinary honour to the most esteemed women. It is only the vile populace, unworthy men, the mud of the human species, as we could call them, who ignorantly aspire to beat women, by making fools of them, insulting, offending and despising them. And in the houses and courts of princes and most honest men you see them to be always honoured, caressed, serviced and esteemed, while, on the contrary, in the humble and vile houses you do not hear but cries, moans, grumbles, and quarrels … nothing but ignorance and ill-breeding causes such contempt for women.68

Cristofano Bronzini’s aristocratic view was not irrelevant to his association with the Florentine court of the Medici where, in 1615, he was appointed master of ceremonies. The Medici ducal court had begun to set new standards of nobility since the mid-sixteenth century, and the Tuscan urban elite gradually adopted a more courtier-like image.\textsuperscript{69} The identity Bronzini fashioned against other masculine modes allegedly rooted in the lower social groups lent prestige to a certain social elite, to which he also belonged, to ‘men themselves, ourselves and our honour which is attacked by the opinion that women (whom we love, desire and serve above everything else in the world) are men’s servants and not their ladies’.\textsuperscript{70}

Bronzini’s work came to light during the regency of Grand Duchess Christine of Lorraine and her daughter-in-law, Archduchess Maria Maddalena d’Austria, who in 1621, after the death of Cosimo II, and until 1628, when Ferdinando II attained his majority, remained the only rulers of the state. Wishing to legitimate their exercise of government, Maria Maddalena and Christine favoured a broad artistic programme that forwarded female virtue. Paintings, music, theatrical spectacles, and literary production commissioned and sponsored by them were dominated by female protagonists who asserted female virtue, chastity, and ability to exercise power. Furthermore, Christine and Maddalena offered patronage to talented female artists, such as the musician Francesca Caccini, and endowed the city’s female institutions.\textsuperscript{71} By dedicating his work to Maria Maddalena, Bronzini conformed to a long tradition.\textsuperscript{72} The link between pro-woman literature and female patronage was indicatively demonstrated in Girolamo Parabosco’s \textit{I diporti}, in which the speaker, Conte Alessandro Lambertino, argued that the benefit of patronage was among women’s defenders’ main motives.\textsuperscript{73} Undoubtedly, the encouragement of such initiatives or commission of certain works by women shows that the debate about women was not an all-male affair. However, at the same time, through noblewomen’s desire to promote pro-woman discourse, male authors constructed their own identity. Apart from potential practical benefits, such as direct financing or protection, dedicating pro-woman literature to powerful women was also symbolically loaded, it lent prestige to the works, permitted authors to state their support towards women more explicitly, and asserted their association with the elite.


\textsuperscript{70} Bronzini, \textit{Della dignità}, Giornata Seconda, p. 16.

\textsuperscript{71} On the dynamics of the Medicean court during the regency of Maria Maddalena and Christine of Lorraine, see: Kelley Harness, \textit{Echoes of women’s voices: music, art, and female patronage in early modern Florence} (Chicago, IL, and London, 2006); Suzanne Cusick, \textit{Francesca Caccini at the Medici court: music and the circulation of power} (Chicago, IL, and London, 2006).

\textsuperscript{72} See the dedication of Giovanni Boccaccio’s \textit{De mulieribus claris} to Andrea Acciaiuoli, countess of Altavilla, Vespasiano da Bisticci’s fifteenth-century \textit{Il libro delle lodi delle donne} to Maria Pierfilippo Pandolfini, Ruscelli’s \textit{Lettura} to Maria d’ Aragona, marchioness of Vasto, Girolamo Borro’s \textit{Ragionamento della perfettione delle donne} (Lucca, 1561) to Isabetta Cibo della Rovere, marchioness of Massa, Garzoni’s \textit{Le vite delle donne illustri} to Margarita Estense Gonzaga, duchess of Ferrara, and Marescoti’s \textit{Dell’eccellenza della donna} to Flavia Peretti Orsina.

As late as the early seventeenth century, the defence of women had become a normative criterion for elite identity in courtly rhetoric, an assertion of status definition promulgated by the Italian elite and its satellite intellectuals so as to disqualify other groups of men from claiming elite masculinity.

III

However, this elite identity did not go uncontested. Already from the 1540s, the ideal of defending women as a crucial cultural criterion of elite masculinity gradually spread beyond the narrow environment of court culture, and intellectuals of lower social status, who were not associated with court life, sought to fashion the identity of the defender of women. The great appeal of Castiglione’s *The courtier*, which ran to around sixty-two Italian editions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, along with Lodovico Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso* and Pietro Bembo’s *Gli Asolani*, contributed to the popularization of the debate about women. This development was mainly witnessed in the Venetian intellectual environment of the 1540s and 1550s. Several works discussing female nature were written by the so-called poligrafi, such as Lodovico Domenichi, Girolamo Parabosco, Ortensio Lando, Girolamo Ruscelli, and Giuseppe Betussi. Although most poligrafi did not come from Venice, they gathered there and set up lively literary communities. Well known for its liberal environment and having under its administration the famous University of Padua, the Republic of Venice was a very important commercial and intellectual centre, where known literati from all over Italy and abroad gathered.

Economic prosperity and a lively intellectual life created the ideal circumstances for the quick development of a successful Venetian publishing industry, especially from the 1530s to the 1560s. Venice offered the best opportunities for individuals who wished to be involved in the new profitable industry. Usually coming from middle or even lower social origins, the poligrafi wrote, annotated, or translated into the vernacular, driven by book market forces and the reading public’s appeals, without enjoying long-term patronage from the nobility.

74 On the immense influence of Castiglione’s *The courtier* in Italy and abroad: Peter Burke, *The fortunes of the courtier: the European reception of Castiglione’s Cortegiano* (Cambridge, 1995). On the diffusion of Castiglione’s, Ariosto’s, and Bembo’s courtly ideal of affirmative and idealizing attitude to women, also see: Cox, *Women’s writing in Italy*, pp. 53–64, 91–9.


Mostly published in small formats, their books were relatively cheap. These professional writers epitomized the development of Venice as a commercial printing centre. At the same time, the intellectual circles of the poligrafi included other prolific but more ‘academic’ writers, such as Alessandro Piccolomini and Sperone Speroni, who were connected with Venetian society through Padua University and the Paduan Academy of the Infiammati, and also played an influential role in the development of the debate in Venice. The appeal of the image of women’s defenders in the Venetian cultural milieu is indicatively highlighted by the example of the publisher, Gabriel Giolito de’ Ferrari. Giolito not only published poligrafi’s works defending women but also fashioned himself with the identity of the defender of women. In his edition of Boccaccio’s L’amorosa Fiammetta he proclaimed his faithful services to women: ‘So, I, who was born to be in the service of every one of you … since the ornament of women does not consist in cruelty or wretchedness and no woman has ever been known as enemy of human activities.”

It would be worth noting that the debate about women exemplified the triumph of the vernacular book and reflected bookmen’s aspirations to appeal to a broad reading public, which now included less-educated male readers and women. In Della eccellenza e dignità delle donne, one of the earliest treatises on female excellence, Galeazzo Flavio Capra underlined that he had written in the vernacular so that everybody would be able to read his work, at least for its novelty. Usually published in small formats, in octavo or duodecimo, books on female excellence were quite cheap. Lodovico Domenichi’s La nobilita` delle donne in octavo cost 1 lira and 10 soldi in 1558. Common references to a female reading public in literature defending women indicate middle- and upper-class women’s interest in pro-woman literature. However, the low level of female literacy certainly imposed limitations on women’s acquaintance with pro-woman literature, which was more accessible to a male reading public of middle and upper social origins. As Paul Grendler has argued for Giolitian titles, ‘craftsmen and laborers could easily buy the less expensive titles … A merchant or professional could afford a library of moderate size, and a patrician could support hundreds or thousands of volumes.” So, common appeals to a female readership also functioned as a

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77 Speroni, ‘Dialogo della dignità’; idem, ‘Dialogo in lode delle donne’, in idem, Dialoghi; Piccolomini, Dialogo della bella creanza; idem, L’orazione in lode delle donne (Venice, 1545).
80 This price comes from the Indice copioso, e particolare, di tutti i libri stampati dalli Gioliti in Venetia fino all’anno 1592 (n.p., n.d.), a catalogue published by Giovanni Paolo Giolito.
81 Dialeti, ‘The publisher Gabriel Giolito de’ Ferrari’.
rhetorical device. Female readers, such as female speakers in dialogues, were there just to refine and validate an ultimately male affair.

By deliberating on female nature, the *poligrafi* seemingly sought to appropriate an elite accomplishment. Protecting and serving women could invest them with the nobility of manners which would rank them above the rest of commoners. According to Lodovico Domenichi, he was born and would forever be women’s servant so as not to imitate ‘the rest of the common people’ (*vulgo*).\(^83\) Girolamo Parabosco and Sperone Speroni also presented ‘foolish common people’ (*vulgo sciocco*) and ‘ignorant common people’ (*volgo ignorante*) respectively as women’s main enemy.\(^84\) The frequent identification of women’s enemies with common people elevated men defending women above the brutish multitude. Moreover, at the same time, these writers sought to boost their image by challenging the elite’s monopoly of civility towards women. Lodovico Domenichi indicatively argued that women’s enemies were also found among those who ‘are considered to be most worthy’.*\(^85\)

Writers of the Venetian environment appropriated the courtly ideal of service to women but they adjusted it to a non-courtly environment. This is substantiated by a closer examination of their dialogues’ settings which often shifted from courts to literary salons usually kept by well-known courtesans, such as Tullia d’Aragona and Francesca Baffa, who also featured in the dialogues as speakers.\(^86\) That Venice remained a republican state may better explain this detachment from courtly culture. In Venice, the cultural role of the literary salons, where the city’s intellectuals gathered, resembled that of the courts. In contrast to traditional masculine institutions, such as universities, literary salons, like courts, were ideal places for mixed conversation. The Venetian patrician Domenico Venier’s salon, in Santa Maria Formosa parish, is well known for such mixed conversations.\(^87\) Similarly, in Girolamo Parabosco’s *I diporti*, set in a villa near Venice, the speaker Girolamo Molino implied that women also attended the conversation. Salons were often kept by women, such as that of Beatrice Pia degli Obizzi in Padua, where ‘learned and virtuous men’ frequented to discuss ‘useful, honest, and pleasant matters’.\(^88\) Sperone Speroni’s *Dialogo della dignità delle donne* was placed in Beatrice’s villa.

Most often courtesans, whose status transcended the strict moral standards, could undertake such intellectual projects. Courtesans, just like the court lady,
were regarded in the light of neoplatonic tradition as the crest of idealization and conceptualization of love, retaining the gifts of courtesy, refinement, beauty, and cultivation.\textsuperscript{89} Courtesans’ guests and clients often came from the social elite. Cornelio Frangipane, a Friulian nobleman and ambassador to Venice, described his visit to Tullia’s salon as follows:

I found myself last month in Venice, sent by the Parlamento as ambassador to the Doge, and I went to entertain at the home of a very gentle woman; there, gentle and learned young men frequented and they spent their time with kind arguments; because she is a very attractive woman, eloquent and equally expert in vernacular and Latin literature, which is not, perhaps, required for a woman.\textsuperscript{90}

Seemingly, courtesan culture was quite central in elite male sociability. Frequenting the same women with elite men, intellectuals of modest origins could gain social prestige.\textsuperscript{91} Through the debate about women, fellow literati in Venice consolidated stronger homosocial bonds by stressing their group identity and marking themselves off from those below. At the same time, by addressing a wider reading public, their works created an imagined male community in which a potential readership of non-noble origins could participate and share some common cultural values with those at the top of the social hierarchy.

IV

The complex interplay between different modes of masculinity is further reflected in a play entitled \textit{Ricorso di villani alle donne}, which was performed during the Carnival in Siena, around 1576. The main characters were peasants, who in public assured the female audience that, although the ‘learned, wise and intelligent’ authors had charged them with condemning women, women’s real enemies were notaries, merchants, procurators, doctors of law, medicine and literature, governors, judges, and vicars, that is, representatives of high culture, driven by their hypocrisy, cruelty, and greed.\textsuperscript{92} The author, Giovanni Battista Binati, also known as Falotico, was a member of the popular theatrical association \textit{Congrega dei Rozzi}, established in Siena in 1531. The dramatists and actors of the \textit{Congrega dei Rozzi} traditionally came from the city’s artisan population. The peasant, often


\textsuperscript{90} Cornelio Frangipane, \textit{Dialogo d’ amore} (Venice, 1588), p. 9. It was written in 1545 but remained unpublished until 1588.


\textsuperscript{92} Falotico de’ Rozzi, \textit{Ricorso di villani alle donne contro a calunniatori, i quali di loro alle donne hanno commesso male … et recitata in Siena ne’ giorni del Carnevale} (Siena, 1576), pp. 6–16.
presented with a satirical but also sympathetic eye, was regularly figured in Rozzi’s rustic comedies, written up in Sienese dialect. Following this tradition, Binati used the Carnival inversion of roles along with the long-established trope of women’s defenders and enemies so as to mock the social and cultural elite of his city. Binati brought into question the elite’s social and masculine hegemony by depriving them of their monopoly on civility towards women.

Indeed, the defence of women had a long tradition in the lively academic environment of Siena. In the neoplatonic discourse of the Academies of the Intronati and the Accesi, women were perceived as the stimulating muses who infused male intellectuals with noble sentiments and ideals, as nobelwomen were supposed to do as sources of inspiration for the courtiers. The members of the academies sought to share in elite masculinity through the idealization of feminine beauty and love, by giving lectures, organizing open activities in which women, usually the nobelwomen of the city, also participated, or even occasionally accepting some well-known female intellectuals as members – the poetess Laura Battiferri was a member of the Intronati, with the name Sgratiata. The proem of the Intronati’s comedy L’Hortensio declared that the establishment of the Academy had originated with women, since the ‘beautiful and prestigious women’ inspired the Intronati’s virtuous deeds. The proem implied that women attended the play as well. Similarly, in his oration before the Academy of the Accesi, Scipion Bargagli claimed that ‘the divine grace and celestial favour that always pours down from the beautiful, lovable and courageous women … always keep the virtuous young men cheerful and fit, and lead them to pleasant and honourable deeds’. In a similar tone, in 1545, in his oration in praise of women before the Academy of the Intronati, the leading member, Alessandro Piccolomini, had claimed that his oration aimed not only at defending women but also at manifesting to the Intronati that only through their love for, and services to, women, they could fulfil themselves.

The Intronati’s open performances often took place during festive occasions, especially during Carnival. The Comedia del sacrificio, presented during the Carnival of 1531, implied the presence of a female audience. Another comedy, Gli Ingannati, suggested the performance of some plays and social events organized by the members of the Academy, before and during the Carnival, for the

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95 L’Hortensio, comedia de gl’accademici intronati di Siena (Venice, 1574), fos. 3v–4r.
96 Scipion Bargagli, Delle lodi dell’Accademie, orazione da lui recitata nell’Accademia degli Accesi in Siena (Florence, 1569), p. 29.
98 Comedia del sacrificio de gli Intronati da Siena celebrato ne’ giochi del Carnovale in Siena, l’anno MDXXXI (Venice, 1559).
amusement of the Sienese noblewomen. Mixed conversation in the Intronati’s social gatherings (known as veglie) was a common practice. However, as Girolamo Bargagli argued in Dialogo de’ giuochi (1573), in these meetings, women ‘should give their opinions in short and sweet statements rather than in long, roundabout orations, leaving it to the men to come up with more arguments, or to their male companions to expand at length about what they [the women] have been saying’. The different roles given to men and women with the latter’s contested access to speech in the Intronati’s meetings were similar to those of a court environment. Modelling themselves on the Italian elite, the intellectuals of the academies often associated with women and employed defence of and service to them to fashion their own civilized masculinity.

Thus by addressing a female audience and presenting his comedy in Carnival time, the less-cultured artisan Giovanni Battista Binati followed a long Sienese tradition but to put under question service to women as an exclusive privilege of the more-cultured representatives of the Sienese academies.

V
The debate about women in early modern Italy was a discourse on gender, as it constructed both masculinities as well as femininities. The process of identity formation by which individuals came to identify themselves and be identified by others in the debate reveals gendered power relations both between men and women and between men themselves. Cultural discourses of power were structured around multiple and conflicting gender definitions and social distinctions, as the debate about women functioned both as a field of inclusion by shaping male group identity and as a means of exclusion and differentiation from the other – not only women but also men. In this process, the defence of women initially emerged as a key determinant of elite masculinity in courtly discourse. By claiming for themselves the exclusive privilege of defending women and deliberating on female nature, the social and cultural elite of early modern Italy sought to maintain full control over gender and social order. The identification of the male self remained contestable though, with both social status and gender coming into play. Gradually, individuals not belonging to the social and cultural elite

99 Fahy, ‘Women and Italian cinquecento literary academies’, pp. 441–3. On Intronati’s relations to women, also see: Diana Robin, Publishing women: salons, the presses, and the Counter-Reformation in sixteenth-century Italy (Chicago, II., 2007), pp. 124–59; Alexandra Coller, ‘The Sienese Accademia degli Intronati and its female interlocutors’, The Italianist, 26 (2006), pp. 223–46. Recent scholarship has seen Intronati’s comedies, often featuring self-assured female protagonists, encouraging women’s learning, and supporting female desire or even homoerotism, as an important part of the debate about women. Male sexuality is also interestingly dealt with in some comedies such as in Alessandro Piccolomini’s L’Alessandro: Laura Giannetti, Lelia’s kiss: imagining gender, sex, and marriage in Italian Renaissance comedy (Toronto, 2000).

100 Robin, Publishing women, p. 129.

101 Lectures defending women were commonplace in other Italian academies as well: Pellegrini, Discorso; Cipriano Giambelli, Discorso alla maggioranza dell’uomo e della donna, fatto nell’Accademia de’ Solletici di Tregnì (Treviso, 1589); Barbabianca, L’assonto amoroso.
sought to appropriate love and service towards women so as to claim either a share of elite masculinity or masculine civility without the perquisites of nobility. In this way, defence of women became the bone of contention among different social groups of men seeking to negotiate, redefine, and appropriate for themselves an idealized masculinity.

Male formation through the debate about women seems to have had a dynamic of its own but it was not the only channel for male identification in early modern Italy. Patriarchal masculinity, within the normative male-headed household structure, must have played a major role in the formation of male identity as well, especially after the Council of Trent, when marriage was institutionalized under the dictates of the church. However, unlike patriarchal masculinity in early modern England which has attracted scholarly attention, in Italy it remains largely unexplored. A comparative view of the formation of masculinity within the context of the patriarchal household in the Catholic and Protestant world could offer a better understanding of the relation between marriage and male identity. The idealized masculinity which has been looked at in this article functioned outside the marriage paradigm. Interestingly, in Italy, other forms of masculinity were also performed beyond the marriage model, including clerical masculinity, which followed the late medieval paradigm, and elite adult masculinity which partly had to be channelled outside marriage due to the high celibacy rate in this social order.¹⁰² In a similar vein, for artisans, marriage was not so significant in enhancing their career as it was in other parts of Europe.¹⁰³ Besides, heterosexuality was not a necessary criterion for male identity. Despite the state’s and church’s condemnation of sexual relations between men, such practices did not challenge manliness as long as normative gender roles were maintained.¹⁰⁴ Thus, a wide range of masculine modes existed within and beyond marriage in early modern Italy, and the potential interplay or even tension between them calls for further examination.

The defence of women was one among other modes of elite masculinity but further research on the elites’ masculine codes is required so that a more complete view of their male self-fashioning can emerge. The way elite male identity was related with that of other social groups and its interplay with humanist and post-Tridentine ideals might be a promising line for research. Elite masculine modes such as defence of women gradually diffused and were negotiated by the middle


¹⁰⁴ Rocke, Forbidden friendships; Gallucci, Benvenuto Cellini.
and even lower social strata but this negotiation still remained within the realm of the literate. A lot of research needs to be done on popular forms of masculinity. An interesting example comes from the Venetian **pugni**, mock battles fought among neighbourhood factions of artisans and marginal workers for the control of bridges. In these battles, honour, reputation, violence, and gender notions came into play. The formation of male identity was socially defined but it was also a discourse on power which requires examination on the grounds of social relations.

Masculinity as an analytical category has increasingly informed topics, such as patriarchy or, more recently, witchcraft, which had long been explored from a feminine – and sometimes feminist – perspective. Rethinking these topics from a ‘male’ angle has offered more nuanced approaches to the intersection between power and gender. Such revisions can highlight women’s subjection from a perspective encompassing competition, negotiation, group identity formation, and exclusion practices among men. In this view, the European **querelle des femmes** has also traditionally been seen from a feminine point of view, either as an early form of feminism or as a rhetorical game on the men’s part. Pro-woman literature written by women such as Christine de Pizan, Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, Mary Astell, and Marie de Gournay had its own dynamic and reveals a lot about women’s struggle for agency. However, the vast amount of male-authored texts defending women should not be discarded just on the basis of their ‘insincerity’ or their rhetorical emptiness, since examined from a different angle they can tell a lot about writers’ self-fashioning and male group identity formation in the literary and social environments they represented. A re-examination of the debate about women, under the prism of masculinity, calls for a better contextualization of the literature in question with a more systematic examination of its arguments, agents, and social and literary collocations, and even a comparative examination of the particular features of the debate in different parts of Europe.

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106 Instead of the feminist notion of patriarchy as a system based on male domination and privilege on the one hand and female subjection and victimhood on the other, several scholars have recently proposed that patriarchy caused anxiety among early modern men who often felt unable or did not wish to fulfil their patriarchal duties: Kathleen Brown, *Good wives, nasty wenches and anxious patriarchs: gender, race, and power in colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC, and London, 1996); Shepard, *Meanings of manhood*; Foyster, *Manhood in early modern England*; Fletcher, *Gender, sex and subordination*; Hendrix, ‘Masculinity and patriarchy in Reformation Germany’. On recent interest in witchcraft under the prism of masculinity: Alison Rowlands, ed., *Witchcraft and masculinities in early modern Europe* (Basingstoke, 2009); Rolf Schulte, *Man as witch: male witches in central Europe* (Basingstoke, 2009).