Challenging Women's Agency and Activism in Early Modernity

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6. Why Political Theory is Women’s Work

How Moderata Fonte Reclaimed Liberty for Women inside and outside Marriage

Caroline Castiglione

Abstract

Why is the status of being female frequently dangerous and all too often fatal? This old problem is a concern today as it was during the early modern period. The Venetian author Moderata Fonte (1555–1592) located specific dangers to women in the institution of matrimony. In her posthumously published dialogue, *The Worth of Women* (1600), she articulated her critique of its risks to women by turning to the realm of political ideas, especially to the concept of women’s liberty. Women were, according to Fonte, free before marriage and women remained free in the marital state. Their neglect, abuse, or murder were illegitimate, as were husbands’ claim to superiority and usurpation of women’s freedom to protest or to exit marriage as they might deem necessary.

Keywords: women; liberty; historical feminism; Renaissance Venice; marriage; misogyny

Why is the status of being female frequently dangerous and all too often fatal? This old problem is still very much with us today, as determined activists have recently made clear. From the Ni Una Menos protests in Argentina to the outpouring of international support for the #MeToo movement, the risks of being female are now recognized to transcend national boundaries and undermine celebratory narratives of progress for women.¹ Even in

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¹ See Uki Goñi, ‘Argentina’s Women Joined Across South America’. ‘MeToo’, was a phrase coined originally by Tarana Burke in her work with women and girls of color.

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societies where women have earned considerable success, misogyny and femicide move in lockstep with their advance.²

Attention to these issues emerged long ago in the early modern debates on women and society, the *querelle des femmes*, whose prescient authors analyzed the twin problems of sexism and misogyny.³ Both prejudices vexed the Venetian writer Moderata Fonte (1555–1592), author of the dialogue *The Worth of Women*, published posthumously in 1600. She critiqued the sexist paradigms that deemed women inferior to men. Women who broke with expected norms endured even worse criticism and ran greater risk. The noose of social expectations was especially tight for married women, even well behaved ones, according to Fonte. For these reasons she dedicated a considerable portion of the dialogue to the particular and sometimes deadly bargain that was matrimony.

Fonte was scarcely alone in her interest in husband–wife relations, a favorite topic in the proliferating advice literature on domestic life. Spousal dynamics also came increasingly under the scrutiny of marital courts in both Catholic and Protestant Europe, where tribunals adjudicated marital disputes, more often than not, at the request of the wife.⁴ *The Worth of Women*’s attention to matrimony demonstrates that Fonte was well aware of such developments and their influence on marriage in the sixteenth century. Yet she remained skeptical of their perspectives. She took issue with many of the notions about women and marriage in contemporary conduct literature for women and advice manuals on the family. She briefly but firmly rejected the Church’s assertion that matrimony was an indissoluble state.

To articulate new possibilities, Fonte shifted her revision of marriage to the realm of political ideas, especially to the concept of women’s liberty, a political turn that merits closer scrutiny than it has hitherto received.⁵

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³ I follow the distinction between misogyny and sexism gaining ground in contemporary scholarship. Ibid., pp. 78–80.
⁵ The treatment of her political views is briefly addressed in the growing scholarship on Fonte. Cox analyzes Fonte’s originality in the women’s positive discussion of the single life in the dialogue, and situates this outcome in the context of the dowry inflation of the sixteenth century. Cox has briefly recognized the ‘textured treatment’ of marriage in Fonte in *Prodigious Muse*, pp. 248–249. Malprezzi Price points out some connections between Venice and its politics in Fonte’s work (*Moderata Fonte*, pp. 85–98); Ross suggests that Fonte posited ‘a discourse of “rights”’ though this is not examined in any detail (*Birth*, pp. 279–285); Martelli situates Fonte in the larger social history of Venice, including women’s *donnesca libertà*, with a focus on its sociability (*Polifonie*, pp. 397–406); McKenna examines the garden as a space to combat patriarchy (*Women*, pp. 74–77).
Fonte’s recourse to liberty is critical to her thought. If women possessed equal liberty to men, then men’s claims to superiority were an illusion and the restrictions imposed upon women’s liberty a usurpation of their rights. Women were, according to Fonte, free before marriage and remained free to exit the marital state. Their neglect, abuse, or murder was therefore illegitimate, and their exit from matrimones where they were at risk entirely justified. To assess the significance of Fonte’s emphasis on liberty, we must briefly survey her critique of femicide and the shortcomings of sixteenth-century interventions to improve domestic life for women. Fonte’s insights on such failures led her along the path to political thought—a maneuver that allowed her to reclaim women’s liberty both outside and inside the marital state, a powerful if unfinished project in the work of Fonte and in the world today.

Women’s death in Venice

Shortly before going into labor in the first days of November 1592, the Venetian woman who had been born Modesta Pozzo completed her dialogue, *The Worth of Women*. As her belly expanded before her and the pages of her dialogue grew in number on her writing table, she summoned seven fictional women to accompany her on what would be her last intellectual journey. In a voice trained by beloved texts, Fonte wrote women back into the stories that Venetians told about themselves. We know relatively little of Modesta Pozzo, who published under the name Moderata Fonte. We have her published writings, a short but suggestive biographical recollection by a contemporary, and a handful of legal and ecclesiastical records. And we know that she died in childbirth a few days after completing her manuscript.

That she left this testament to the worth of women in dialogue form has contributed to our difficulties in interpreting it, since its seven distinctive female interlocutors often express contradictory positions. Consistent from beginning to end was her praise of Venice, including the achievements of Venice’s famous sons, immortalized, as she noted approvingly, in sculptures and memorials. Fonte did not evade death’s role in the republic, nor could she avoid it in the domestic sphere, dying, as she did, in the line of maternal duty.

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Yet the dialogue took issue with the deaths of women, including those nameless dead, like the two unidentified women whose bodies washed up on the Lido the same year Fonte prepared to enter married life. Fonte protested the losses of such women ‘buried in the oblivion of time’, as she put it: the nameless, monument-less, unavenged women that sixteenth-century historians did not bother to write about, but Fonte did. Why was being female and Venetian so lethal? Why did men kill women and was there anything that could be done about it?

The problem emerges early in The Worth of Women. In search of an organizing purpose for their days together, the women of the dialogue elect Adriana their queen, charging her to give them a unifying purpose for their talk. Adriana proposes, to unanimous acclaim, a lite or debate on the subject of men, with three women taking up the defense of men, and three women arguing against them. The predilections of the anti-men side pushes the dialogue toward an examination of the origins of cruelty, violence, and murder in the family. Such problems are treated on two levels: within the historical and literary context that justified the killing of women, and within the particular locale of sixteenth-century Venetian society. Fonte’s analysis of contemporary Venice will receive more scrutiny here, since it relates most closely to the specific dangers of her contemporaries.

The dialogue ranges freely over the problems that sixteenth-century women might face from birth, due to the lesser value placed upon daughters. In marriage, women did not necessarily face a better future. Some husbands ignored their wives’ sage advice on the management of the household. Other women were more prisoners than wives, locked ‘like animals within four walls’ as a method to guarantee their honor. Spendthrift husbands squandered the family’s fortune on cards, prostitutes, or extravagances that could leave a once well-off family in poverty. Some husbands simply vanished along with the family money for long periods of time. Wives left behind spent their time, ‘counting the hours passing, like the watchman on guard at the Arsenal, and waiting until dawn for their reprobate husbands finally to come home’. The losing gambler was not always a welcome

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8 Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Provveditori e Sopraprovveditori alla Sanità, Atti, 814 [28 May 1582].
10 Fonte (1997), p. 57; Fonte (1988), p. 24. The Queen describes their discussion assignment as an argument (ragionamento). It is compared with lawsuits (liti) by the speaker Helena.
sight, for ‘if by some unlucky chance the [husbands] have lost, it’s the wives
who have to suffer for it, because the scoundrels take out all their anger
on them, poor wretches’, as Cornelia observes. The men whom fortune
failed posed a special risk: having suffered ‘some kind of humiliation
outside the home [...] [such men] come home and try to give vent to their
frustration by taking it out on their wives’. Men who shouted were often
also wife-beaters.

The acknowledgment of such cruelties elicits varied responses on the part
of the women—from shared dismay, to skepticism, to outright denial. Some
speakers highlight examples of good men to challenge the negative critique
of men in general. Even the righteously angry Leonora acknowledges that
she condemns bad men, not good ones. These qualifications might easily
be lost on some readers, due to the sheer quantity of the women’s negative
assessments and the paucity of good men amidst the seemingly endless
supply of scoundrels.

Fonte’s sketches of good-for-nothing men have living counterparts in
the records of the Patriarchal court, a Venetian tribunal that expanded
its activity in the sixteenth century. The court sorted out legitimate from
illegitimate marriages and intervened in abusive marriages, mostly at the
behest of women suffering the consequences of marriages gone bad. The
records of the tribunal contain first-person testimony on domestic abuse
and cases of women forced to marry against their will. Witnessing in the
dialogue and witnessing in the tribunal produced similar and mutually
illuminating texts. Like two halves of a fractured image, reassembled, they
provide for a richer view of the problem. One woman, for instance, testified
about her father to the Patriarchal Court that, ‘He was a man who lived
badly, keeping prostitutes, with little fear of God. He beat my mother and
us without any compassion. He came home full of anger and dirty words
that cannot be said here.’ In the dialogue, the indiscretions of husbands
are similarly linked to men’s easy access to prostitution. The origin of the
trade itself is the behavior of men who ‘trapped, tempted, solicited, and lured
on these women while they still had their honor, leading the most naïve

13 Ibid.
15 Fonte (1997), p. 70; Fonte (1988), p. 35. Fonte also recognizes other intergenerational forms
17 Ferraro, Marriage Wars, pp. 8, 169 n.; Hacke, Women, Sex, and Marriage, p. 41.
18 Testimony of Marietta, sister of Camilla Bellotto, offered to the Patriarchal Court, cited in
Ferraro, Marriage Wars, p. 36.
and easygoing of them to fall head-over-heels to their ruin.\footnote{Fonte (1997), p. 88; Fonte (1988), p. 52. Cox observes that Fonte's sympathy for prostitutes was unusual for her class. See Fonte (1997), p. 89 n.} Wives are also powerless to stop their husband's illicit relationships, which sometimes crossed the threshold of the family home:

Such men inflict endless sufferings on their wives, even stripping them of their most treasured things to give them to prostitutes [...] [the husbands] 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 [...] [turning their wives] from mistresses of a household into the prioresses of an orphanage.\footnote{Fonte (1997), p. 69; Fonte (1988), p. 34.}

Assuming that such marriages had been legitimately contracted in the first place—that each person had been eligible to marry and had consented of her or his own free will—the Patriarchal court could not grant an annulment. It could only decree the necessity of a separation of bed and board, a separation that did not allow either party to remarry. The notion of Catholic marriage, reinforced by the Council of Trent in its 1563 decree, was that a legitimate marriage was indissoluble. This meant the choice to enter marriage could pose a lifetime of consequences, including the impossibility of exit, unless it were granted by a tribunal like the Patriarchal court.

Fonte's dialogue, on the other hand, disputes the premise that a woman's flight from an abusive husband needed approval by men:

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 anymore, leave their wicked husbands to avoid a living hell.\footnote{Fonte (1997), p. 65; Fonte (1988), p. 31.}

Fonte insists that ‘many sensible women’ reasonably walked away, without recourse to religious precepts on the indissolubility of legitimate marriage. This feature of the dialogue links Fonte to the ‘coolly secular’ proclivities of her ruling male peers in the late sixteenth century.\footnote{Bouwsma, *Venice and the Defense of Republican Liberty*, p. 184. Fonte's religious beliefs found expression in two intriguing religious poems analyzed by Cox, *Prodigious Muse*, pp. 129–137.} Such observations mark the distance between the conclusions of the dialogue, the decrees of
the Council of the Trent, and the judgments of the Patriarchal court. What other concepts of marriage does Fonte dismiss along the way to advancing her ideas on women's liberty?

**Bodies that are (and are not) one**

Fonte’s interlocutors are intrigued and repulsed by sixteenth-century marriage. They are not alone in their morbid fascination, since contemporary domestic advice literature also frequently addressed what the interlocutor Leonora refers to as the ‘yoke’ of matrimony. The battle-weary widow Leonora and the learned and determinedly single Corinna provide the most memorable lines on the glories of life outside of servitude, another term used to describe the experience of marriage for women. The explosion of treatises on domestic life and women’s conduct literature attempted to normalize the dilemmas in the marriage enterprise, popularizing the indissolubility of marriage in the New Testament or the notion that the institution rendered two individuals ‘one flesh’. This vivid and problematic concept did little to sort out the daily details of married life, matters of intense concern for Fonte’s interlocutors.

One creative attempt to sustain and elaborate the marriage metaphor was offered by the prolific Venetian author Lodovico Dolce, who enthusiastically embraced the ‘one flesh’ argument in his short dialogue, *Della institution delle donne*. The successful work was published in Venice in 1545 and reprinted four times. Key passages in *The Worth of Women* suggest that Fonte was not only familiar with Dolce’s dialogue but that she was writing against his one flesh analogy for the matrimonial state. Such concepts were obstacles to her thinking on women’s equal liberty to men. Thus early in her dialogue these ideas by Dolce had to be defeated so that Fonte could advance an alternate view of the marital state that allowed for women’s liberty.

Dolce’s vernacular dialogue promoted views offered earlier in the sixteenth century by the humanist and educator Juan Luis Vives, whose Latin text *De Institutionae Feminae Christianae* had begun as a treatise for the English royal family. Translations into European vernaculars expanded its

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24 Sanson, ‘Introduction’, in Dolce, *Dialogo* (2015), p. 11. Although I will focus here on the differences between Dolce and Fonte, both authors concurred that women’s learning was remedy rather than cause of female deviance, another parallel that suggests Fonte’s acquaintance with Dolce’s text. Cox, *Women’s Writing in Italy*, p. 196.
influence throughout Catholic and Protestant Europe. Dolce’s translation of Vives’ ideas from Latin to Italian were part plagiarism, part appropriation, and part re-interpretation.25 He transformed the humanist treatise into a dialogue between the pedantic Flaminio and the laconic widow Dorothea, who occasionally interrupted Flaminio’s self-assured declarations to assert or, more rarely, to query him with a bit of understated irony.

Dolce’s treatise elaborated the ‘one flesh’ image of marriage, echoing the claims in Christian gospels that after the exchange of marriage vows ‘one single being is formed’.26 Dolce embellished the concept further—marriage renders two separate individuals—‘that amazing Hermaphrodite that cannot be divided in two’.27 That a marriage created a hermaphrodite had not occurred to Vives, but it seemed in Dolce’s mind to capture the implications of the one body metaphor.28 Ostensibly quoting an admirable youth of his acquaintance, Dolce bubbled with enthusiasm for the merits of this twin-sexed creature: ‘one and the same desire and disinclination, one body, one heart, and the same soul’.29 Such a paradigm obliterated the difference between the wills and wishes of one person or the other, an erasure of the woman as a separate person that Fonte likely found troubling.

For Dolce’s marital hermaphrodite did not imply the equality of the two genders, far from it. The physiology of this hybrid creature reinforced men’s so-called superiority, since ‘the husband is the head’ of this ‘single body’.30 The hermaphrodite produced a sexual binary that retained the conventional gender hierarchy. Elsewhere Dolce described the physiology of the hermaphrodite somewhat differently but with the same sexist outcomes, noting that the wife was ‘the body and the husband, the soul’ and since the body is governed by the soul, ‘it is therefore reasonable that [...] the wife would be governed by the husband’.31 Their corporal union confirmed the husband as the one who commanded, leaving the wife with the necessity of obeying, but did she really obey anyone other than herself? Not according to Dolce, who asserted that, ‘This obedience should not be called servitude since [a woman’s] service to her husband is the same as serving herself. And if such obedience merited the name of servitude, it is filled with such tenderness

25 Ibid., pp. 11–23.
26 In the New Testament, Mark 10:9; Matthew 19:6; Dolce, Dialogo (1547), fol. 43r.
27 Dolce, Dialogo (1547), fol. 38r.
28 Ibid.; Vives merely referenced the ‘mystery’ of two becoming one. See his Instruction, p. 88.
29 Dolce, Dialogo (1547), fol. 52v.
30 Ibid., fol. 40v.
31 Ibid., fol. 47r.
and sweetness that render it greater than every liberty.\(^{32}\) The typically bitter metaphor of servitude became instead pleasant and sweet—greater than any liberty the wife might have otherwise enjoyed. In serving the husband, the wife served only herself.

Fonte re-scripted Dolce for her own purposes and reversed his arguments. She reclaimed the one flesh analogy for understanding family relations, but rejected the husband–wife hybrid as its most significant form. Fonte’s explicit attention to Dolce’s metaphor suggests that she likely worked on her dialogue with Dolce’s text near to hand.

Fonte recasts Dolce’s familial hermaphrodite as maternal rather than marital. She elevates in significance the intertwining of mothers’ and children’s bodies, for according to Fonte, children received, ‘their blood, their early nourishment, their upbringing, entirely to [in?] their mothers’ care’.\(^{33}\) Appropriately, it is the interlocutor Cornelia who advances this argument in the dialogue. Like her classical predecessor, Cornelia Africana (c. 195–c. 115 BCE), the mother of the political reformers the Gracchi brothers, Fonte’s Cornelia attests to the preeminence of maternal love. Such an attachment was deeper than the bond between a woman and her husband, which means that a child could hurt a woman more than her husband could, according to the sixteenth-century Cornelia of The Worth of Women.\(^{34}\) A mother’s love remained, regardless of her offspring’s treatment of her, for ‘[a mother] cannot abandon or disown her own flesh [le proprie viscere]’.\(^{35}\) Similarly, the children’s loyalty to their mother should be as great as what she has sacrificed for them: ‘[Children] in return are much indebted to their mothers and should by rights treat them as well as they would their own selves [le persone istesse].’\(^{36}\)

The sixteenth-century Cornelia’s insight is much more than a ventriloquizing of her ancient venerated predecessor. It is one of the very few moments in the dialogue that produces unanimity among the women, suggesting its significance for Fonte. In the dialogue, the comments of an individual interlocutor typically inspire discussion but rarely agreement. Even in this case, the immediate response of the women of the dialogue to Cornelia’s views varies—they continue to debate the relative loyalties of women vis-à-vis men in their lives. However, a riddle and its solution, recited in

\(^{32}\) Ibid., fol. 39r.


\(^{35}\) Ibid.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.
poetry by the learned Corinna, delight her listeners and eventually inspire enthusiastic acceptance.

Corinna’s poem narrates the dilemma of a woman terrorized by enemies with only bitter choices before her:

Oh no, not this.  
In the midst of a mob of enemies  
I see my spouse, my parent, and my son  
And I can drag from danger only one  
Shall I be a better wife, daughter, or mother?  
Do I save the one I love most?  
Or the one I should hold most dear?  
Who can put an end to my uncertain deliberations?  
Between choosing a father over a husband  
Or a son over them both?37

The women debate the poet’s choices: some think the woman should save her husband, ‘since he was one flesh with her [una carne istessa con lei]’, as the gospel metaphor elaborated by Dolce had underscored. Others think the woman is compelled to save her father’s life, ‘since she had herself received life from him’.38 Corinna proposes a resolution in poetic form, drawing upon Cornelia’s previous claims surrounding the maternal bond:

If you are a compassionate mother  
Save your dear son from pitiless enemies  
For to spare the life of your husband or old father  
Would put your own life at risk  
What a mother feels is natural love  
Sympathy is for your father  
Good advice for your husband  
But that love born with your child  
Surpasses the obligations of matrimony  
And the debt owed to your parent.39

37 The translation of Fonte’s poem is my own. See Fonte (1997), 66 for Cox’s translation; Fonte (1988), pp. 31–32.
The women are delighted not merely by the elegance of Corinna's stanzas, but by the persuasiveness of their poetic solution. It inspires unanimous agreement that the mother's life and the child's life were the two lives most intimately intertwined, just as Cornelia argued earlier. Since saving the child's life is the equivalent of saving the mother's own life, mother and child, rather than husband and wife, are one. The poetic rejoinder references and reverses the claims made by Dolce. The rightfulness of this view is reinforced by the eldest among the women, Adriana, whom they elected their Queen at the beginning of the dialogue. Credit is likewise given by the Queen to Cornelia, who ‘has argued so convincingly that our love for our children is greater than any other love’.40

This intimate and enduring conjoining of mother and child would become its own conflation of the woman with the familial against which modern feminism would have to struggle.41 But Fonte used the then new claims of maternal love to undermine the assumption that the tie with her husband was the most significant relationship for a woman. This meant that in contrast to what Dolce believed, husband and wife were not one body and one soul. Even in matrimony the woman remained free to choose the attachment of greatest significance to her. That included prioritizing someone other than the husband, a possibility not encompassed in Dolce's worldview.

Women's liberty inside and outside marriage

Having undermined the hypothetical ‘one flesh’ argument that fused a woman with her husband into one body, Fonte then celebrates the liberty that rightfully belonged to a woman, the liberty that helped to distinguish her person from that of her husband. Fonte is particularly attentive to what we would call negative liberty,42 the liberty she most associates with women before they marry, the liberty of not serving anyone else.43 Two characters, the learned and single Corinna and the articulate widow Leonora, provide

41 Castiglione, ‘Mothers and Children’.
42 The terms negative and positive liberty first gained widespread attention in Isaiah Berlin, Two Concepts of Liberty. Although Quentin Skinner dismisses their difference and their explanatory power, they do help clarify Fonte’s argument, which prefigures social contract theory. Skinner, Liberty before Liberalism, esp. pp. 113–116.
the most striking passages on the glories of life without men. Leonora describes how this ‘beautiful liberty’ allows her to enjoy the happiness of her life outside matrimony.\footnote{Fonte (1997), p. 47; Fonte (1988), p. 17.} In imagining an alternative identity for herself as an ‘Amazon of old’, Leonora notes that the emblem on her shield would be ‘the golden yoke broken through the middle’, a symbol that signifies liberty.\footnote{Fonte (1997), p. 231; Fonte (1988), p. 164.} For marriage was said to be the burden that prohibited women’s ability to do as they wished. Corinna, who refuses to marry, captured her liberty in poetic verse: ‘The heart that dwells in my breast is free: I serve no one, and belong to no one but myself.’\footnote{Fonte (1997), p. 49; Fonte (1988), p. 18.} Corinna further argues that matrimony leads to a loss of liberty, describing such a union as reducing a woman to the status of ‘slave’ or to a person who ‘loses her liberty along with her control over her possessions to the man whom she bought [with her dowry], allowing him to plunder and to use her property at his whim’.\footnote{Fonte (1997), p. 113; Fonte (1988), p. 69.} By contrast, if the dowry were left to the woman for her own purposes, it would allow her to live as a ‘queen’ outside the marital state.\footnote{Fonte (1997), p. 113; Fonte (1988), p. 69.} The reference to a queen has double significance here—it suggests wealth but also the autonomy of the woman who can command herself as well as others.

A statue of a woman who symbolizes liberty itself is present in the fictive garden where the dialogue unfolds. The statue holds the sun as emblem of liberty, underscoring that it is liberty that lights the world and is essential to everything else around it. Liberty illuminates the ‘fine and respected qualities’, that were characteristic of the owner of the garden, Leonora’s aunt, who refused to marry and remained independent. ‘Under the lordship and dominance of a husband perhaps [her aunt] would not have been able to develop [such qualities], Leonora observes.\footnote{Fonte (1997), pp. 54–55; Fonte (1988), p. 22.} These qualifying phrases—the ‘perhaps’ and the conditional verb—do leave open the possibility that even as a wife Leonora’s aunt might have been able to thrive. Such qualifications are easy to miss, however, in the dialogue’s bolder and more frequent exposition of liberty’s gifts as located outside the matrimonial state. Most often
in the dialogue, marriage is critiqued as undermining women’s ability to do freely what they want with themselves and with their possessions, and to enjoy the freedom from restraint on their action typically associated with negative liberty, the best known and more obvious liberty in Fonte’s dialogue. It is as brilliant as the sun, as fundamental to human beings as the beating of their hearts.

Fonte’s discussion of liberty links the dialogue to the most significant word in Renaissance Venetian republican politics. Her liberty has connections to classical republicanism as well as to its specific iteration in sixteenth-century Venice, where ‘liberty meant the rejection of subordination’.⁵⁰ Accordingly, the myth of Venice rested upon the city’s liberty, the notion (if not the reality) that Venice had never been subjected to any foreign nation. Corinna’s enthusiastic determination to remain single is cast in terms of this Renaissance notion of liberty: Venice as Virgin was free, not subject to the commands of any state. The opposite of such liberty is marriage, itself popularly referred to as servitude, a state of subjugation from which it takes God to ‘liberate’ a woman, as the acerbic Leonora observes.⁵¹

The contrast between the bondage of marriage and the liberty of single life has a persuasive clarity, especially when articulated by the happily widowed Leonora. It ignores, however, other contexts also mentioned by Fonte’s speakers that describe limitations on women’s options before the marital state, specifically that fathers sometimes ignore or deprecate daughters; that a fatherless daughter may find that her brothers deny her rights to a dowry; that even an open-minded mother, such as the interlocutor Adriana, might insist that her daughter Virginia must marry, even if the women’s conversation has changed the younger woman’s mind—as she puts it, ‘I’d prefer not to submit myself to any man, when I could be living in peace and liberty alone.’⁵² For some interlocutors, the liberty of a woman’s life before matrimony is clearly contingent upon the woman’s family context—she (like Venice) may not be as free as the allegory suggests.

Fonte brings further nuance to the discussion of liberty after marriage. Marriage could offer a women donneca libertà—a liberty that describes what women are able to do inside marriage that they could not easily do

⁵⁰ Bouwsma, Venice and the Defense of Republican Liberty, p. 11.
outside of it. *Donnesca libertà* can be framed as a form of positive liberty, an opening to action not available otherwise. As is typical in the dialogue, individual speakers voice their skepticism about *donnesca libertà*. The unhappily married Cornelia refers to it as an illusion, embedding it in a discussion of the connections between marriage and martyrdom, making a word play on the closeness of the expressions *marito* and *martirio* in Italian.53

According to Cornelia, women only think that by taking a husband they have acquired for themselves a certain *donnesca libertà*, to pursue ‘some pleasurable activities’, but they can find themselves deluded and ‘held instead like animals confined in four walls’.54

In defense of this purported illusion, the older widow Adriana points out that without entering the marital state, women will never be allowed the same sociability that the conversationalists enjoy—an unmarried woman would lack such possibilities.55 So the liberty of single life may not be greater than the liberty of married life, if the woman can manage to find the right kind of man, a daunting task, described by Cornelia as having about the same possibility of success as buying the winning lottery ticket.56 To put it another way, as Queen Adriana explains, finding such a man can be a considerable research project.57

Should she succeed in that undertaking, a married woman gained positive liberty, liberty that allowed her a sphere of action and autonomy she would not have had if she remained with her parents. Marriage ushered her in to the governing of the affairs of the Venetian household—to tending, guiding, managing, and directing people in that domain. Such individuals might include servants, children, and sometimes her wayward husband, even when, as Cornelia points out, he is throwing away his money and not inclined to accept his wife’s guidance.58 She was also charged with preserving the goods of the household. The word for this role in the dialogue is *governare*, and its overlap with the term for Venetian men’s role in governing the city is worth examining in more detail. Good governing in the household and good governing in the city have many similarities in Fonte’s dialogue.

With this analogy Fonte adds an additional facet to women’s liberty. In Venice, as in the dialogue, liberty embodied what would later be distinguished

54  Ibid.
as rights of political participation. In the late sixteenth century, liberty implied a capacity for rule or for participation in governing associated with the ruling aristocracy and the citizen class who staffed the offices of the republic. Fonte affirms the equal ability of both women and men to govern themselves, or as the interlocutor Leonora summarizes it: ‘all the other creatures recognize us as the rulers of the world, just as much as men, if not more.’ Fonte’s lengthy excursus into the discussion of the natural world signaled the original equality between the sexes, as the literary scholar Virginia Cox has astutely observed. Such equality was founded in their equal ability to govern, recognized in nature, if not always in the realities of Venice where ‘[men] claim (and even actually believe) that the status they have gained through their bullying is theirs by right’.

Fonte draws attention to the resemblance of the wife’s activities in the home to those of men in the governing and administration of the Venetian state. Her convergence of these concepts is not accidental. The ideal of good governing is summarized by Adriana in her willingness to be the Queen of the group: ‘[I] accept the governance and command [reggimento] you have assigned to me, and I promise to maintain justice and to govern you in the manner that faithful subjects deserve.’ Fonte’s use of the word reggimento (‘direction and command’) repeats elsewhere in the dialogue when Leonora describes the women’s tasks in the household, as ‘amministrando il reggimento (sic) della famiglia’.

The language echoes Venetian treatises on household management, especially the analogies between women’s attention to the household and a military generals’ oversight of his soldiers. Such texts linked the household and the state—with the former as a microcosm of the latter. Fonte’s dialogue echoes the most egalitarian gender attitudes of those earlier works, since she places at parity the activities of women and men in the production

59 Bouwsma, Venice and the Defense of Republican Liberty, p. 11.
61 Cox, ‘Moderata Fonte and the Worth of Women’, pp. 11–12.
65 Earlier treatises such as that of Paolino the Minorite describe the necessity of men’s rule over wives, children, and servants but also posit an equality between spouses. His fifteenth-century successor, Francesco Barbaro, allowed a greater role for women and noted that ‘women are obliged to maintain that which men have accumulated’, and that the domestic role of women was similar to that of generals over soldiers, an image that Fonte may have absorbed from Barbaro. Romano, Housecraft, pp. 5–6, 11.
of family life. Cornelia’s description of women’s activity in the *reggimento* of the family alerts us to the potential interpretive difficulties for English readers if we translate *governare*, when practiced by women, as merely ‘to look after’ or ‘to tend to’. It certainly has those meanings, but it also contains an element of ‘guiding’ or ‘directing’ of inferiors, including children, servants, and husbands. The woman’s good governing of the household mirrors the good governing of Venice, also ‘governed most wisely’, as Fonte put it. Venice ‘has always found men of good sense and great integrity to regulate and guide its affairs’.\(^{66}\) Women were similarly skilled at these same types of activities, according to Cornelia, because they are ‘guided by their reason and not by their impulsive desires’.\(^{67}\) Her friend Corinna echoes her sentiment, adding that a man who married gained reason due to his exposure to the ‘decent and sensible behavior [*buona practica*] his wife will place before his eyes’.\(^{68}\) Such insights underscore that good governing was not gender specific, but in general was likely to be more characteristic of women than men in *The Worth of Women*, since women ‘acted according to reason rather than appetite’, an attribute that led to better individual behavior and better governing practices.\(^{69}\) Success in homes and in the halls of power required mastery—of things, of people, and of desires.

Cornelia identifies the wife’s activity in the household as ‘the office of the wife, just as it is the husband’s task to bring in the money and deal with the world outside’?\(^{70}\) She notes with pride that in that sphere only women can govern, since men are ‘incapable of getting anything right’.\(^{71}\) Leonora acknowledges that her contemporaries criticize women’s actions in the household by asserting that such women wish to ‘dominate [men]’,\(^{72}\) men who are ostensibly the masters of their houses. She counters such criticism by pointing out that a woman’s goal is to secure the peace of the household.\(^{73}\) A ‘woman, whether she be a wife or a mother or a sister’ was essential to the successful Venetian household.\(^{74}\)

\(^{67}\) Fonte (1997), p. 84; Fonte (1988), p. 47. In her translation Cox attributes this intervention to Corinna. Chemello’s edition follows the original edition of 1600, which identifies this speaker instead as Cornelia. See the Venetian edition of Fonte from 1600, p. 40.
\(^{74}\) Ibid.
The dialogue also recognizes the differences between the hypothetical positive liberty (donnesca libertà) and its realities. Women found their possibility for domestic agency limited by the misbehavior of their husbands, whose negligence, gambling, or whoring undermined the survival of the family itself. This left the wife in precarious and sometimes violent circumstances. It overturned her station. Instead of a wife, she became a guard at the Arsenale, the Venetian industrial shipyard, waiting in vain for the return of her woebegone spouse. Rather than a mother, she became the mistress of an orphanage, tending to the numerous illegitimate children her husband had brought to their domicile. Rather than wives with a minimal subsistence for their needs, they were confined entirely to the home, stripped of finery and of the possibility of socializing—‘nuns in all but habit’ who had believed that on their wedding day to have taken a vow of matrimony, ‘not a vow of poverty’.75

Husbands could thus pose multiple obstacles to wives’ rightful donnesca libertà in the household, including undermining their wives’ opportunity for governing in the domestic sphere. The husband who treated his spouse below her rank as his equal exercised a form of tyranny against which she had the right to complain or to flee. Fonte critiques men’s actions as the abuse (abuso) of women, leading men to excessive control of their wives’ behavior and to verbal abuse.76 She defines abuse as any exercise of authority improper to the status of the governed by those who do the governing. In the case of men, they have achieved their superior status in society ‘through their bullying’ and thus have unfairly usurped the rights of women.77 They are certainly not superiors in the homes where they wrongly tyrannize women, treating them below their station, that is, as less than the equals to men that they are.78

Such men miss the essential component of marriage because they fail to recognize women’s state of liberty prior to marriage as well as their donnesca libertà within it. By contrast, if a woman marries a man who respects her, who trusts her, and who ‘is not going to interfere with her freedom [lascia la sua libertà] then she takes the yoke on her shoulders of her own free will’.79 This original assent has to be enacted on a daily basis. Men who rule their wives without the recognition of this fact tend to become offensive—they are nagging schoolmasters instead of loving spouses, and in the worst-case

77 Ibid.
scenarios, verbal and physical abusers. In such cases, women who leave their husbands are considered ‘wise’ (savie) in the dialogue, for they flee a domestic ‘hell’ (inferno) that was not part their original marriage agreement.80

Fonte’s turn to politics might at first glance seem to be undermined at the end of the dialogue by the concession of the happy widow Leonora that she might consider the possibility of marrying for a second time.81 Leonora hardly seems like remarriage material. Her unrelenting but likely accurate critique of sixteenth-century men at times unnerves the other women. The young Helena warns that Leonora’s life might be in danger if men ‘knew what you were thinking when they saw you walking past in the street’.82 Leonora openly relates to her friends the dream of killing the ‘bad men’ of the dialogue. She speaks effusively about the beauty of liberty outside of marriage, suggesting that she would rather drown than remarry.83 One of the most articulate critics of men then seems to relent in her views, a reversal that could lead some twenty-first century readers to despair. Her concession might be seen as one of several maneuvers that help render the dialogue’s more radical statements merely hypothetical or establish the dialogue itself as a form of ‘serious play’.84

Yet Leonora’s concession to possibly remarry is hypothetical (‘forse che mi disporrò ad accettare il vostro consiglio’).85 It is one of a several conciliatory gestures on the part of Leonora late in the dialogue. When Virginia expresses concern for Leonora’s safety because of her negative comments about men, Leonora counters that her critique was directed specifically at ‘bad men’ who are under the mistaken notion that ‘they are created to be women’s superiors’.86 This mistaken belief results in their ‘treating women as tyrannically and brutally as they like’.87 Earlier in the dialogue, Leonora spoke directly to men as though she were making closing arguments in a legal case.88 Her reasoning ranges across male–female relationships, noting

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84 On the interpretation of the querelle des femmes as serio ludere—serious play, but play nonetheless—see Chemello, ‘Gioco e dissimulazione in Moderata Fonte’; Martelli, Polifonie, pp. 42–43.
the necessity of improvement in men’s roles as father, brother, husband, or lover. Her intervention recognizes the equality between women and men: ‘we were born with the same substance and qualities as you, and that we were given to you as companions in this life, not as slaves’.89 A better future for women and men necessitates that men also recognize the faults of their behavior and ‘pass sentence against themselves’ since the women themselves have been proven innocent.90 Men should give up their bad behaviors and in return women will ‘[be] submissive that is, as a free choice, out of love for you, not under compulsion’.91 Matrimony rests on mutual engagement by both parties: ‘for if you [men] love us, then we will love you; if you pay us the regard due to a wife, we will pay you that due to a husband—we will even regard you as our masters, not through obligation, but through love’.92

Leonora’s pledge of submission is certainly uncomfortable to our ears. But it is a pledge predicated upon a conditional promise—if you love us, then we love you. All social contracts also entail a submission and a loss of some liberties in order to gain others, as Fonte’s prescient thinking anticipated. In Renaissance marriage, each party sacrificed some of her or his negative liberty. The dialogue clearly demands that men give up some of their freedom to do anything they like, including their illicit, expensive, and immoral activities. They could no longer be completely free in marriage if marriage were to be acceptable to women. As in (later) social contract theory, people surrendered some personal liberty of doing anything they wanted in order to secure civic freedoms unobtainable otherwise. If a marriage were to be a successful one, it had to offer positive liberty to both parties—not just the sacrifice of negative liberties. In Fonte’s model of marriage, both parties were supposed to gain the co-stewardship of a flourishing domestic enterprise as well as companionship and love. On the part of women, it was an arrangement not without its perils, either due to the misbehavior of men, as repeatedly emphasized in the dialogue, or because of the risks of childbearing, as the last days of Modesta Pozzo remind us.

Much in Fonte’s dialogue is purposefully left open to debate: one might disagree about the boundaries between human will and the natural disposition of one’s humors or about the correct treatment of various diseases. Her insistence upon women’s liberty as existing both before and after marriage, and her willingness to confront the rage women felt at its violation, were

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more demanding insights for her readers. Leonora's recognition of her wish to kill in retribution for the harm men have done is a desire her later arguments reject. For while Fonte condemned femicide, she also refused to use murder to address it.93 While our own sense of women's possibilities has thankfully moved far beyond the categories of married or single life that shaped Fonte's approach, her insistence on women's equal liberty is still very much at issue. More rigorously analyzed than she could have ever imagined, it remains in danger, and with it, women and girls across the globe.

Works cited


93 For a rejection of honor killing in Fonte's poetry, see D'Alessandro Behr, *Arms and the Woman*, Chapter 1.


**About the author**
