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Girolamo Camerata and the Querelle des Femmes between Discourse and Paradox

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Article abstract

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Girolamo Camerata and the *Querelle des Femmes* between Discourse and Paradox

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In this article, I focus on the rhetoric of the querelle des femmes in the only book by Girolamo Camerata, Trattato dell'honor vero, et del vero dishonore (1567), offering a critical analysis of the chapter entitled "Questione dove si tratta chi più meriti honore o la donna, o l'huomo di M. Girolamo Camerata da Randazzo, Siciliano Dottor dell'Arti" (Question where it is discussed who merits more honour, woman or man, by Girolamo Camerata of Randazo, Sicilian Doctor of Arts). The main aim is to show how Camerata, in line with the prevalent rhetoric of the time and the other authors of the querelle des femmes, relies on androcentric literary codes (rhetoric within the androcentric cultural environment) and socially and culturally prescribed gender roles in order to provide reasons why women should be considered worthier of honour and more perfect than men. His work is an example of how arguments once used in reproach can paradoxically be reversed and serve the opposite aim (e.g., when the humoral theory is invoked to show that women are cold and therefore inferior, and then later to show that they are hot and therefore superior). Similarly, arguments citing bodily weakness as proof of mental inferiority can easily be turned to women's advantage, connecting the body's tenderness with greater mental activity.

Dans cet article, je me concentre sur la rhétorique de la Querelle des femmes dans l'unique livre composé par Girolamo Camerata, Trattato dell'honor vero, et del vero dishonore (1567), et propose une analyse critique du chapitre intitulé « Questione dove si tratta chi più meriti honore o la donna, o l'huomo di M. Girolamo Camerata da Randazzo, Siciliano Dottor dell'Arti » (« Question où l'on discute de qui mérite le plus d'honneur, la femme ou l'homme, par Girolamo Camerata de Randazo, docteur ès arts sicilien »). L'objectif principal est de montrer comment Camerata, dans la lignée de la rhétorique dominante de l'époque et des autres auteurs de la Querelle des femmes, s'appuie sur des codes littéraires androcentriques (soit sur une rhétorique dans un environnement culturel androcentrique) et des rôles de genre socialement et culturellement prescrits, afin de fournir des raisons pour lesquelles les femmes devraient être considérées comme plus dignes d'honneur et plus parfaites que les hommes. Son argumentation est un exemple de la façon dont des preuves utilisées pour discréditer les femmes peuvent ensuite être retournées de manière paradoxale et servir le but opposé (par exemple quand la théorie des humeurs est invoquée pour montrer que les femmes sont froides et donc inférieures, puis ultérieurement pour montrer qu'elles sont chaudes et donc supérieures). De même, les arguments évoquant la faiblesse corporelle comme preuve d'infériorité intellectuelle peuvent facilement être tournés à l'avantage des femmes, reliant la mollesse du corps à une plus grande activité mentale.

Introduction

There are at least three tendencies shared by the texts of the *querelle des femmes*: they reacted to specific attacks (the writer defends his or her ideas

against insult); they vindicated the female sex in general; and they attempted to prove female equality or superiority.¹ In general, the pro-women treatises tried to weaken prevalent ideas regarding the inferiority of womankind, although they were written in accordance with popular rhetorical strategies and within certain socio-cultural contexts. According to some authors, the *querelle des femmes* is considered a literary genre “without thematic significance, little more than an exercise for the display of scholastic or Platonic logic, irony and sarcasm, and parody and paradox.”² On the other hand, the insistence on female superiority, according to Francine Daenens, should be considered a subversive act, and these work should be interpreted as belonging to a certain social context within which and against which they reacted.³

Ideas of womanhood, femininity, and gender in the early modern period were based upon at least five main views inherited from the past. In the first place, there was the influence of Roman law on the position of women in society and within the family. Beyond this, views of women were determined by the Christian tradition based on the Old and New Testaments, by the philosophical works of Plato and Aristotle, and by the theories of Galenic medicine, reiterated in the work of scholastic philosophers. These ideas, which formed the basis for early modern philosophy, peaked in the sixteenth century, when the number of printing houses drastically increased, and when the revival of interest in classical thought in the Italian peninsula was reinforced by many translations of Greek and Latin works. These doctrines not only influenced women’s position within society but also had an important impact on early modern writers when constructing their picture of women in literature.

Both female and male participants in the *querelle des femmes* paradoxically relied on the androcentric doctrines that were simultaneously being used against women. Here I refer to the set of rules or codes made by men that take the male sex and gender as the norm, and which, throughout history, have been used and been taken for granted to represent and to explain women’s inferiority to men. These codes (because they were the only ones available to them at the time) were appropriated and used strategically within the context of socially

1. On *querelle des femmes*, see Zimmermann, “*Querelle des Femmes*”; Bock, *Women in European History*, 1–31; Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism*.

2. Bock, *Women in European History*, 6.

3. See Daenens, “*Superiore perché inferiore*.”

and culturally prescribed gender roles, or, more accurately, within the *gender system*. A *gender system*, as defined by Natalie Zemon Davis, refers to the ways in which societal and political norms based upon gender define what is and is not socially and politically acceptable.⁴ It also refers to the symbolic system that defines what is feminine and what is masculine.

The “pro-women” treatises provided counterarguments to ideas of female inferiority, and thus they implicitly expressed proto-feminist beliefs. Both female and male authors wrote about new questions regarding gender roles, the intellectual and moral equality of men and women, and the female position in the household, providing arguments in defense of female equality or superiority in relation to men. Written polemically in the form of dialogues, treatises, and conduct books, or sometimes presented in the form of oral discussions at universities, academies, courts, and salons, these narratives were popular throughout Europe. The peak of this phenomenon in the Italian context occurred during the sixteenth century, especially around 1580, in the literary academies of the Veneto. Although the debate lasted until the eighteenth century, “after 1630, it seems that the *querelle* in its original form had passed its climax.”⁵ In some cases, these texts were merely translations of a work by Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535). In 1529, Agrippa published, in Latin, the oft-cited *De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus [...]* *declamatione* (*Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex*). This book was translated into French and then Italian and published in 1549 under the title *Della nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne, dalla lingua francese nella italiana tradotto*. It was instrumental in establishing many commonplaces in the rhetoric that would later be used in the defense of women.⁶ However, in the Italian context, one of the most influential conduct books in the sixteenth century was Baldassare Castiglione’s *Il libro del Cortegiano* (1528).

4. Zemon Davis, *Passion for History*, 115.

5. Zimmermann, “*Querelle des Femmes*,” 23.

6. On male contributions to the *querelle des femmes* debate, see the important current project Men for Women: Voces Masculinas en la Querella de las Mujeres (<https://menforwomen.es/es>). Important male writers who contributed to the pro-women side of the *querelle des femmes* debate include Bartolomeo Goggio (1487), Mario Equicola (1501), Galeazzo Flavio Capra (1525), Lodovico Domenichi (1549), Domenico Bruni (1552), Luigi Dardano (1554), and Tommaso Garzoni (1588).

Girolamo Camerata: reception

Among the other treatises authored by men in the context of the *querelle des femmes*, one particularly interesting text appears not to have attracted much scholarly interest so far. It is the only work by the erudite Sicilian “doctor of arts,”⁷ Girolamo Camerata, who was active around 1567 when he published the *Trattato dell’honor vero, et del vero dishonore*. To this day, he remains largely unknown and unnoticed, and his biography still cannot be reconstructed in any detail. What we know is that Camerata was born in Randazzo, in the province of Catania, in Sicily, when it was part of the Spanish Empire. He is mentioned in Antonino Mongitore’s *Bibliotheca Sicula* as “Camerata Randatiensis, Medicus Doctor, et Poeta: eruditione, ac doctrina clarus, floruit anno 1567. Edidit Italice Trattato dell’Honor vero, e del vero Dishonore” (Girolamo Camerata from Randazzo, Doctor and Poet, known for his erudition and doctrine, flourished in 1567. He published the Italian Treatise on True Honour and True Dishonour).⁸ In Vito Amico’s *Dizionario topografico della Sicilia*, published in 1856, Camerata is similarly referred to, among the well-known people of Randazzo, as an excellent philosopher, doctor, and rhetorician.⁹ Among other traces, there is a letter preserved in the State Archive of Florence from Leonardo di Antonio de’ Nobili, the Tuscan ambassador in Spain, to Cosimo I de’ Medici, dated 21 August 1568, which proves that Camerata sent his work to Madrid: “Girolamo Camerata siciliano a passati mesi m’invio più volumi d’un trattato da lui composto del vero honore, et dishonore, acciò ch’io li facessi presentare, a chi egli erano indirizzati con le sue lettere” (Girolamo Camerata, a Sicilian, in the past months sent me several volumes of a treatise composed by him on true honour and dishonour, so that I might present it to those to whom he addressed them in his letters).¹⁰

Camerata’s book was published in Bologna in 1567, in the intellectual context of “the long-running debate on women’s equality that by the end of the sixteenth century had been consuming a steady stream of ink in Italy and

7. It appears under his name on the cover of the book. In the original language: “dottore dell’Arti.”

8. Mongitore, *Bibliotheca Sicula*, 18. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

9. Amico, *Dizionario topografico della Sicilia*, 415. Although there are no dates, it is clear from the fact that medicine and rhetoric are both mentioned that the entry refers to him.

10. Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Mediceo del Principato, vol. 4902, insert 1, fol. 73.

Europe for over a hundred years.”¹¹ His chapter on the superiority of women was partially rewritten and reused by Maria Gondola di Gozze (born c. 1557) and her husband Nicolò Vito di Gozze (1549–1610),¹² who provide the only trace, so far discovered, of his work’s contemporary reception. Nicolò Vito di Gozze (Nikola Gučetić) was a philosopher, politician, and writer who lived and worked in Dubrovnik.¹³ He wrote in Latin and Italian, mainly publishing his books in Venice at the printing press of Aldus Manutius and Francesco Ziletti.

The only published contribution in Italian to the *querelle des femmes* debate from the eastern shore of the Adriatic¹⁴ is the thirteen-page dedicatory epistle for Nicolò Vito di Gozze’s *Discorsi sopra metheore di Artristotele*, signed by his wife, the noblewoman Maria Gondola (Maria Gundulić). The first edition of the book appeared in 1584, and the dedicatory epistle is signed from Ragusa (Dubrovnik), 15 July 1582. This dedicatory epistle, partially rewritten from two sources, Camerata’s *Trattato dell’honor vero, et del vero dishonore* and Antonio de Guevara’s *Libro di Marco Aurelio*,¹⁵ has attracted significant scholarly interest, mainly because of its principle theme—the defence of women penned by a woman—and the fact that in the second edition of the *Discorsi*, published the following year in 1585, the text of the dedicatory epistle was shortened by one and a half pages.¹⁶ De Guevara’s *Libro di Marco Aurelio* was widely reused in the sixteenth century and later, and more than 200 editions of the book existed all over Europe. It had more translations in Italian (the

11. Cox, “Single Self,” 514.

12. I refer here to the findings of my PhD dissertation and my two articles on Camerata: see Bakić, “Defence from the Margin”; “Girolamo Camerata”; “Il viaggio testuale.”

13. For the catalogue of Gozze’s books in Italian archives and libraries, see the Censimento nazionale delle edizioni italiane del XVI secolo (EDIT16): <https://edit16.iccu.sbn.it/en/web/edit-16>. On Gozze’s life and work, see Schiffler, *Nikola Vitov Gučetić*.

14. See Marković, *Pjesnikinje Starog Dubrovnika*; Janeković-Römer, “Marija Gondola Gozze.”

15. Guevara, *Libro di Marco Aurelio*, 61r–62r.

16. There are two main speculative suggestions for why these pages of the text may have been omitted. The first is that the lavish praise of Italians might have been considered inappropriate by the strict government of Dubrovnik. The second is that Gozze, who was elected seven times as the rector in the Ragusan government, might have decided to cut the part where Ragusans are compared with “wolves, bears and tigers.” See Zaninović, *Drugo izdanje djela Nikole Gučetića*; Janeković-Römer, “Marija Gondola Gozze”; Bakić, “Don’t You See.”

first appeared in 1542),¹⁷ and it is known that *Libro di Marco Aurelio* existed in early modern Dubrovnik.¹⁸ Therefore, the fact that this book was reused in Gondola's text is not so surprising. Moreover, it has been proven that a majority of the works by Gondola's husband, which appeared in the second half of the sixteenth century—"a half century of plagiarism"¹⁹—were mainly compilations of the works of other Italian authors. On the other hand, the fact that we find Camerata's words in the only contribution to the *querelle des femmes* signed by woman from the eastern shore of the Adriatic is quite interesting and intriguing, and an important example that might help us to understand how texts and ideas travelled between different geographical and cultural areas in the second half of the sixteenth century.

Maria Gondola's name is found twice in texts belonging to the corpus of sixteenth-century literature from Dubrovnik written in Italian.²⁰ She first appears as one of two female interlocutors in two books of dialogue on love and beauty, *Dialogo della bellezza detto Antos, secondo la mente di Platone* (1581), written by her husband Nicolò Vito di Gozze. Three years later, her name also appeared in print at the end of her dedicatory epistle in the *Discorsi*, as previously mentioned. The dedicatory epistle is entitled "Alla non men bella che virtuosa, e gentil donna, Fiore Zuzzori, in Ragugia" (To a woman no less beautiful than she is virtuous and gentle, Fiore Zuzzori, in Ragusa). In the first place this text pledges and defends Fiore Zuzzori (Cvijeta Zuzorić),²¹ but it also contributes to the discourses on the protection and defence of the female sex in general in the context of *querelle des femmes*. In some parts of the text, Gondola used exactly the same authorities and words as Camerata to prove female superiority. However, in the act of rewriting, Gondola also made some changes to the original text, such as adding certain pronouns and transitional words, and, more importantly, she used inclusive language; for example, where

17. See Westwater, "Humanism Reworked."

18. Konstantin Jireček's catalogue mentions four copies of *Libro di Marco Aurelio*. See Jireček, "Inventar."

19. The subtitle of Paolo Cherchi's book, *Polimatia in riuso: Mezzo secolo di plagio (1539–1589)*.

20. The Slav version of her name is Marija Gundulić. The use of both versions of her name, Italian and Slav, was the result of Roman–Slavic symbiosis and a mark of social distinction.

21. Fiora/e Zuzzori (1552–1648) was born in Dubrovnik and later went to Ancon, where she died at the age of 96. She is considered the first woman poetess from the eastern shore of the Adriatic. Inspiration and muse for many contemporary writers, she is in this dedicatory epistle represented as somebody who with beauty, wisdom, and education provoked envy and was forced to leave her homeland.

in Camerata's text we have "la perfettione del sesso delle Donne" (the perfection of the female sex),²² in Gondola we find "la perfettione del sesso nostro" (the perfection of our sex).²³

Asking questions about what was rewritten, along the lines suggested by Paolo Cherchi,²⁴ opens up new areas of investigation and offers important material for analyzing cross-cultural connections in the early modern period. The fact that Nicolò Vito di Gozze and Maria Gondola reused Camerata's *Trattato* provides us with one more reason to pay special attention to this book and its place within a certain socio-historical and cross-cultural context. Girolamo Camerata was an author whose only book was not so popular, so, by choosing it, the process of rewriting would have appeared less obvious. Moreover, Camerata's work was printed with the approval mark of the Inquisition, therefore it was safer to reuse this book, taking into account the issue of censorship in a post-Tridentine context.

**Girolamo Camerata's *Trattato dell'honor vero, et del vero dishonore*
(Bologna, 1567)**

In his treatise, Camerata discusses topics regarding honour, providing arguments both in favour and against. The text is divided into three books, where questions of who deserves more honour—woman or man, soldier or literate man, artist or lawyer—are followed by answers. The book can be found in many Italian archives and libraries.²⁵

The part of the book entitled "Questione dove si tratta chi più meriti honore o la donna, o l'huomo di M. Girolamo Camerata da Randazzo, Siciliano Dottor dell'Arti" (Question where it is discussed who merits more honour, woman or man, by Girolamo Camerata of Randazo, Sicilian Doctor of Arts) is dedicated to Ana Mendoza de Silva (1540–92), the princess of Eboli and wife of Rui Gomes de Silva (1516–73), the first prince of Eboli, who was twenty-four years her senior. The dedicatory epistle is dated 4 August 1567, from Bologna; according to its opening, the idea of the female sex as inferior to the male is

22. Camerata, *Trattato*, 2v–3r.

23. Gondola, "Alla non men bella che virtuosa," in Gozze, *Discorsi*.

24. See Cherchi, *Polimatia di riuso*.

25. See EDIT16, the Italian bibliographical catalogue of books that appeared in the sixteenth century: <https://edit16.iccu.sbn.it/web/edit-16>. Note that "Camerata" appears as "Cammarata" in this database.

understood purely as a product of men's affections. At the very beginning, Camerata summarizes his main ideas:

Veggio le Donne perfette e perfetti anco gli Huomini nella loro specie tanto, che non si può dire assolutamente, senza qualche distinzione, ch'uno sia più degno dell'altro: è vero che quando ciò si potesse dire, crederei, che le donne dovessero havere qualche più segnalata lode. Il che devria chiudere la bocca à i detrattori loro, et aprirgli gli occhi della ragione.²⁶

(I regard women and men as so perfect in respect to their own kinds that it is not possible to say absolutely that one is worthier than the other. However, if it were possible to say so, then I would believe women to deserve the greater praise. And this should shut the mouths of their detractors and open their eyes to reason.)

In line with the rhetorical conventions of the dedicatory epistle, and using the *topos* of the moral *exemplum*, Camerata explains that he decided to dedicate his work to Ana Mendosa de Silva because

essendo in lei tutte quelle più rare virtù, che possino adornare una Prencipessa, et che possino descrivere la perfezione del sesso delle Donne. La mi farà dunque gratia d'accettarla insieme con l'animo mio prontissimo di servirla, et leggendola, supplire con la bellezza del suo ingegno suo a quanto io sarò mancato.²⁷

(you possess all those most rare virtues that can adorn a Princess, and which may define the perfection of the female sex. You will therefore do me a favour by accepting these words together with my soul, always ready to be at your service, and, in reading them, by filling in with the beauty of your intellect whatever gaps I have left.)

In the period from 1557 to her husband's death in 1573, Ana Mendosa de Silva bore ten children.²⁸ Camerata chose a powerful dedicatee, and by praising

26. Camerata, *Trattato*, 2v.

27. Camerata, *Trattato*, 2v.

28. She was blind in one eye, which, according to some of her portraits, she covered with a patch. Later, in 1578, she was accused of complicity in the murder of Juan de Escobedo, a secretary to John of

her female virtues, he paradoxically praises socially and culturally prescribed gender roles.

Main arguments

The dialectical form of the treatise, which gives the two sides of each question, makes it close to the dialogue, which was the most popular form of prose treatise in Renaissance Italy. When writing about gender relations, Camerata uses rhetoric similar to that of his contemporaries, presenting women to the male eye, as was common at the time and most visibly so in Castiglione's *Il libro del Cortegiano*. He supports his claim that women should be considered worthier of honour, more perfect, nobler, and more excellent than men by citing authorities popular in the early modern period such as Galen, Aristotle, and Plato, but above all the Book of Genesis and Roman law. The reasons why one sex should be considered superior/inferior to the other are opposed by counterarguments, followed by a detailed elaboration of both sets of arguments.²⁹ These reasons can be used as an example of how the same authority was used paradoxically to prove both female superiority and inferiority, and as an example of both misogynist and anti-misogynist views.

Camerata's first reason for female superiority alludes to the Book of Genesis. Using the rhetorical device of parenthesis, "come si legge nel Genesi" (as we read in the Genesis), he argues for woman's superiority over man, "sendo egli composto di fango, et ella di carne" (he being made from clay, and she from flesh).³⁰ According to him, the proof of female excellence should be sought in the fact that women are made from flesh and men from mud, and that consequently the soul "opera più eccellentemente nella donna sendo il soggetto più degno" (functions more excellently in woman, the subject being more worthy).³¹ In Genesis 2:23 we read: "And Adam said: 'This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman because she was taken out of

Austria, and was imprisoned for thirteen years, until the end of her life. On her life, see Dadson, "Ana de Mendoza."

29. The book is divided into five parts, all of them consisting of ten arguments: "In Favour of Women," "In Favour of Men," "Discussion," "Answers to the Reasons in Favour of Women," and "Answers to the Reasons in Favour of Men."

30. Camerata, *Trattato*, 18r.

31. Camerata, *Trattato*, 4v.

Man.”” Man is created in God’s image and woman is created from man’s rib; Camerata goes further, specifying that Eve was “fatta d’una delle coste sinistre dell’huomo, che richiudono il cuore; per dimostrare come era cosa giusta, che fosse all’huomo cara, sendo composta di materia prossima al cuor suo” (made of one of the left ribs of man, which enclose the heart; to demonstrate as it was right, that she was dear to man, being composed of material close to his heart).³² The fact that woman is made of the material close to man’s heart proves that it is only right for her to be dear to him. The counterargument provided by Camerata in favour of male superiority is based on the sequence of creation: “Ma l’huomo fu creato prima, adunque fu principalmente inteso, e per conseguente più perfetto” (The man was created earlier, and therefore he was the main intention and consequently more perfect).³³ This offered proof that *she* who comes second is inferior to *he* who comes first.

In expounding the second reason for female superiority, Camerata refers to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, arguing that people’s nobility is strictly connected with their place of birth: one born in the city is nobler than one born in a village, for example. Because woman is made after man and introduced directly into paradise (the Garden of Eden), she should be considered as more valuable, “essendo ella creata nel Paradiso terrestre, et l’Huomo nel campo Damasceno” (she being created in the Earthly Paradise, and Man on the plain of Damascus).³⁴ Camerata also parenthetically invokes the authority of the theologians: “come dicono i Dottori della scrittura sacra” (as it is said by the Doctors of Sacral Scripture).³⁵

Etymology was one of the typical rhetorical strategies used in the medieval and early modern periods to defend the truth. It was employed by both attackers and defenders of the female sex, sometimes becoming the motive for certain arguments; *verba* (words) and *res* (things) were considered inseparable, and names were taken as explanations of their own meaning. Etymology as a rhetorical strategy was strictly connected with ethos. Camerata bases one of his argument on the etymological connection between the noun *donna* and the Latin verb *dominor* (to rule, to dominate):

32. Camerata, *Trattato*, 4r.

33. Camerata, *Trattato*, 20r.

34. Camerata, *Trattato*, 5v–5r, 18r.

35. Camerata, *Trattato*, 5v.

È ella chiamata in Spagna DAMMA et in Italia DONNA, il che non significa altro che SIGNORA: et riguardando signora come relativo a una cosa, che sia serva, chiara cosa è, che non riguarda sé stessa; che così il dire signora di sé stessa sarebbe un dire, “Signora di nulla.”³⁶

(And she is called DAMMA in Spain and DONNA in Italy, which means no more than SIGNORA; and considering that *signora* is relative to a thing with the status of a servant, it is clear that a *signora* is not so relative to herself; for thus to call her *signora* of herself would be to say “*signora* of nothing.”)

The online *Tesoro della Lingua Italiana delle Origini* (TLIO) defines the noun *donna* (woman) as, among other things, a person of the female sex possessing high social status and high moral and intellectual qualities, and also as one who has authority, who dominates, offering such synonyms as “lady” and “patroness.”³⁷ The etymological root of this noun should be looked for in the Latin verb *dominor*—“to dominate”—which is equivalent to the Italian *dominare* and *signoreggiare*, the latter being the etymological root for the word *signora*, “lady.” So the woman is the *domina* (or *dom’na*, becoming *donna* after the reduction of the consonant group), the one who dominates. In the early modern period, this etymological explanation was often used to explain that women dominate men, and that they are superior to men, as in Camerata’s text. Earlier, the appellative *donna* or *dona* was used only before the name of a noble woman.³⁸

The next argument in favour of female superiority is that more honour is given to women by God. This is followed by an argument that recurs very frequently in the *querelle des femmes* literature, namely the Platonic idea that the beauty of the body is clear evidence of the beauty of the soul.

Non credo già che gli Huomini neghino le Donne sopravanzarli di bellezza di corpo perché l’occhio stesso lo dimostra, sendo elle prive di quei peli, che fanno loro parere selvaggi et essendo elle di apparente colore bianco, e rosso.³⁹

36. Camerata, *Trattato*, 5v–6r.

37. TLIO, s.v. “donna.” Accessed 1 June 2023, <http://tlio.ovi.cnr.it/TLIO>.

38. See *Dizionario Etimologico*, s.v. “donna.” Accessed 1 June 2023, <http://www.etimo.it/?term=donna>.

39. Camerata, *Trattato*, 7r–7v.

(I do not believe that men deny that women surpass them in physical beauty, since the eye itself proves as much, women being free of that hair which gives men their wild appearance, and also manifestly white and red in colour.)

Neoplatonism offered a model for love and beauty, widely accepted by Petrarchism. The main ideas of Neoplatonism, rooted in Plato's *Phaedrus*, *Phaedo*, and *Symposium*, were known to early modern writers through the revival of translations from Greek, and especially through the work of Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) and his commentary on the *Symposium*.⁴⁰ Neoplatonic doctrine understands love as desire for beauty. Beauty can be found in three aspects: the beauty of the body, perceived by the eye; the beauty of the voice, perceived by the ear; and the beauty of the soul, which can be perceived only by the mind.⁴¹ Love is strictly connected with goodness,⁴² which represents the splendour of divine beauty. Perfection in a human being could be internal (the goodness of the soul) or external (the beauty of the body). Beauty is not only connected with goodness but also with “utility.”⁴³ As explained by Camerata, that women are more beautiful than men can be easily seen (authority of common sense), so there is no need to mention further authorities. However, Camerata reacts against those women who put on makeup and “si scemano la bellezza loro” (diminish their beauty).⁴⁴

Another argument used in proving female superiority or equality that can likewise be found in Camerata's text is the idea that if women are loved by

40. Marsilio Ficino was a doctor, priest, writer, and philosopher who made the first early modern translation of Plato's works into Latin. He was protected by Cosimo de' Medici, under whose patronage he founded the Florentine Platonic Academy in Careggi, close to Florence. Being a priest, he also tried to combine the ideas of St. Augustine with those of Plato. Apart from his comments on Plato's *Symposium*, better known as *De amore*, his most important and widely read and translated books during the early modern period are *De vita*, *De voluptate*, *De Christiana religione*, and *Theologia Platonica*. He translated the *Symposium* in 1469, and his commentary was published in Florence in 1484. The second edition appeared in Basel in 1561. An Italian translation, also by Ficino, appeared in Florence in 1544, published by Cosimo Bartoli.

41. Ficino, *El libro dell'amore*, ed. Niccoli, 14–16.

42. Ficino, *El libro dell'amore*, 19.

43. See Eco, *Arte e bellezza*, 22–23. He explains scholastic ideas on beauty (*pulchrum*) connected with the ideas of utility (*aptum*).

44. Camerata, *Trattato*, 7v.

men, being the object which made men love, they must then be worthier than them: “Hora se le Donne sono da gli Huomini amate, non saranno elle più degli Huomini perfette?” (Now, if women are loved by men, are not they more perfect than men?).⁴⁵ In literature, the woman was mainly the passive object of love. Women in society did not have the right to choose. The man is the lover, and the woman is the beloved honoured by him. The idea that only through love can perfection be achieved is also present in Camerata’s writings and is clearly inherited from Ficino’s philosophy. In Ruth Kelso’s words,

being loved is nearer perfection. The lover lacking his great desire is an imperfect being, and therefore he seeks union to obtain perfection from his beloved, for abundance is in her perfection of being. Again, the end is more noble than the means. The lover making an idol of his beloved sets all happiness in her and most of all wants to be loved by her. She is the end in love and therefore more noble than he.⁴⁶

According to Camerata, women, being more beautiful in general, are more loved and consequently more perfect than men.

Another reason, according to Camerata, can be found in the law of nature and the fact that women enter puberty and can reproduce earlier than men (girls at twelve years old and boys at fourteen). Nature therefore conducts women towards perfection before men, which means that “può generare un suo simile prima dell’Huomo” (she can generate somebody similar to her before Man),⁴⁷ which means that women are dearer to nature and therefore naturally more perfect than men.

Additionally, Camerata invokes humoral theory and the idea that hotness and dryness in men should be considered more perfect than humidity and coldness in women. He writes:

Onde disse Aristotele, che quelli, i quali sono di carne molle, sono più atti di mente, perciocché l’anima opera secondo l’istrumento di corpo, la complessione del quale quando è molle, cioè humida e calda, ò humida e

45. Camerata, *Trattato*, 8r.

46. Kelso, *Doctrine*, 153.

47. Camerata, *Trattato*, 19r.

fredda, è piu atta à ricevere, che non saria quando fosse di complessione secca calda; o secca e fredda, come quella de gli huomini: da questa dispositione dunque si conclude che le donne sono più perfette de gli huomini.⁴⁸

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

Humoral theory—the theory that there are four humours to be balanced (blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm)—was widely accepted at the time. It was rooted in the belief that the body and mind cannot be separated. In the domain of natural philosophy and medicine, this theory was inherited from Hippocrates, taken up with certain alterations by Aristotle, and later accepted by Galen of Pergamum.⁴⁹ Galen also thought in terms of opposition and explained female inferiority in opposition to male superiority.

Corresponding to the four main elements—earth, water, air, and fire—of which the whole universe (*macrocosmos*) was thought to consist, were the four main elements, or humours, constituting the human body (*microcosmos*). These in turn corresponded to mental states. The element earth thus corresponds to black bile and dryness, which in a person would result in a melancholic character. Similarly, the element of fire is connected with yellow bile, hot and choleric. These characteristics belong primarily to men. On the other hand, air/blood/sanguine/cold and water/phlegm/damp/phlegmatic were more dominant in women. Coldness and dampness as female characteristics were opposed to male hotness and dryness, and this opposition could be applied to any activity, including those of the mind. One of the main arguments given in explanation of female inferiority was that women, being of cold and damp constitution, could therefore not think rationally. The explanation was that God

48. Camerata, *Trattato*, 10r.

49. Aelius (or Claudius) Galenus (c. 129–199 CE), known in English as Galen, was a Hellenistic surgeon and physician and the main influence on medicine and biology until the seventeenth century.

created woman cold and humid because these characteristics were essential for giving birth; God could not, at the same time, give her knowledge, since coldness and humidity contradict it.

Indeed, because of menstruation, women were represented in Hippocratic texts as wetter than men. For the Hippocratic writers, weakness in women was connected with the womb and the nature of female flesh. Due to menstruation, women were not only considered unclean but also a source of possible contamination. However, in antiquity there also existed a theory according to which women were in fact hot, and not cold. Both versions were available to the early modern reader, as Helen King explains:

For Aristotle, whose ideas on this point were historically more influential than those of the Hippocratics, women are cold, too cold to concoct blood into semen. Difficulties arise with this position because, in humoral pathology, blood is hot and wet. If women have more blood than men, surely they should be hotter than men? In the debate given by Plutarch in *Moralia*, a doctor takes up precisely this position in order to argue that women are the hotter sex; this is also the argument used to prove women's hot natures by "Parmenides and others," according to Aristotle, and a related argument appears in the Hippocratic *Diseases of Women* 1.1, which says that "the woman has hotter blood, and because of this she is hotter than the man."⁵⁰

This argument is used by Camerata,⁵¹ who concludes that women are better suited than men to learn every science: "per essere elle più vicine alla temperatura hanno anco senso più temperato; seguita che l'intelletto loro sia ancor più perfetto" (because they are closer to the temperature and they have more temperate sense; from this it comes that their intellect is even more perfect).⁵² Women are, therefore, superior to men in learning letters and in developing the contemplative virtues. According Camerata, a more temperate complexion and relative weakness made women more stable and more apt to understand. Since knowledge comes through the senses, women are in a better

50. King, "Once upon a Text," 30–31.

51. See Camerata, *Trattato*, 18r.

52. Camerata, *Trattato*, 17v.

position to understand the world around them. They are more intelligent and therefore superior.

Accordingly, the female characteristic of tenderness is connected with learning and the nourishment of children, which is one more proof of female aptness for education: “Onde disse Aristotele, che quelli quali sono di carne molle, sono più atti di mente. Ma così è che la complessione dell’Huomo è dura per essere più secca di quella della donna et quella della Donna è più molle” (Wherefore Aristotle said that those who have tender flesh are mentally more active. But things are such that the constitution of Man is hard because it is drier than that of Woman and that of Woman is softer).⁵³ This reason echoes Aristotle and “moles carne aptos ingenio” (soft flesh suited to ingenuity),⁵⁴ meaning that those with a weaker bodily constitution are better suited for mental work. The more tender the flesh, the more apt the mind. However, Camerata manages to invert the meaning, coming to the conclusion that women are not only equal to men but better than them.

The essence of the soul, passive in women and active in men, produces the difference in constitution between the sexes, which in turn produces divergent inclinations: men, being of intemperate constitution, are prone to weapons, while women, being of temperate constitution, are prone to letters. Camerata goes even further, arguing that women are better in everything, even weapons. According to him, if it is said that man is superior to woman, this is because he is suited to arms and military service; but the existence of a goddess with two names, Palade and Minerva, proves the female aptitude for both disciplines. By contrast, there are two gods in the case of men: Mercury in the domain of letters and Mars, the god of war.

La nona ragione era, che sendo l’arte militare, e le lettere poste nel sesso delle Donne, in modo che ponno essere in una medesima Donna, onde figuravano i Poeti una sola Dea con due nomi, Pallade e Minerva, et essendo l’arte militare, e le lettere poste nel sesso degli Huomini in modo che quello, che è disposto all’una, è indisposto all’altra facoltà onde i medesimi poeti figuravano due Dei diversi, Mercurio e Marte.⁵⁵

53. Camerata, *Trattato*, 10r.

54. On the Aristotelian understanding of gender identity, see Plastina, “Tra mollezza.”

55. Camerata, *Trattato*, 19v.

(The ninth reason was that since the military art and the letters were attributed to the female sex, in such a way that they can be found in the same woman, whereas the Poets consider a single Goddess with two names, Pallas and Minerva, meanwhile in the Male sex the military art and the letters are disposed in such a way that one who is disposed to the one, is indisposed to the other, as the same poets consider two different Gods, Mercury and Mars.)

The defense of women's prowess in arms and letters can be found in the other treatises belonging to the *querelle des femmes*, including in the work of Tommaso Garzoni.⁵⁶

At the end, Camerata refers to the law (supposed to be right and just), which gives offices and magistracies to men and not women. As the offices of the city are divided into two parts, temporal and spiritual, so in all the old scriptures everything connected to the spiritual was reserved for men and forbidden to women. Women could not, for example, become priests, a fact that once again served to prove female inferiority. Camerata mentions that all liberal arts, philosophy, medicine, law, administration, government, "in somma, tutte le facoltà virtuose" (in one word all virtuous faculties)⁵⁷ are in the male domain. However, there are women "quali come stelle sparse per lo cielo illuminano et adornano il sesso loro [...] questa è l'altezza di Madamma Margarita d'Austria" (who, like the stars strewn in the sky, illuminate and adorn their sex [...] such is the greatness of Margaret of Austria).⁵⁸ Hence, in this exceptional case, a female regent using masculine talents proves to be superior to men.

Camerata finishes his narration stating that both women and men are obviously imperfect, yet if a decision must be made, then it is women who have more perfection, and men should "be silent [...] and keep [women] as companions in excellence, and moreover superior in their perfection," as is the custom among the Spanish:

Dunque tacciano coloro che tentano tanto ingiustamente ofuscare con parole biasimevoli l'eccellenza di questo sesso, levandosi dagli occhi il velo

56. See Garzoni, *Le vite delle donne illustri*. The same argument can be found in Gozze's *Dialogo and Discorsi*.

57. Camerata, *Trattato*, 14r.

58. Camerata, *Trattato*, 14r.

della ignoranza, o della malignità, che gli ha fino ad hora celato il vero: et ad imitazione della Giudiciosissima natione SPAGNUOLA diano a loro quegli honori, di che sono degne, et le tengano per compagne nella eccellenza, anzi per superiori in perfettione.⁵⁹

(Therefore, let those who try so unjustly to diminish with blameworthy words the excellence of this sex be silent, and let them remove from their eyes the veil of ignorance or malice, which has veiled so far the truth from them: and by imitating the most Judicious SPANISH nation give them those honours, of which they are worthy, and keep them as companions in excellence, and moreover superior in their perfection.)

Paradoxes

The creation of man and woman, as presented in Genesis, was often interpreted as one more proof of either female inferiority or superiority. In his book, Camerata praises female superiority, stating that since woman was the last to be created by God, she was therefore the end of all God's works. He also adds that being made from human bone, unlike Adam who was made from clay, woman must be nobler and worthier. However, he shows that the same story can be interpreted in the opposite way. Man, who comes first, should be considered worthier than woman. He has more merits; he was convinced by Eve to try the forbidden fruit. Because of this, Eve was castigated, destined not only to give birth in pain but also to be "sottoposta alla volonta dell'huomo, si che egli fosse signor di lei" (subordinated to the will of man, as if he were her master).⁶⁰

Etymology as rhetorical strategy was used mainly to defend the female sex. However, the same strategy was not infrequently used to attack women. As shown by Francine Daenens, the verb *dominare* used in the context of the *querelle des femmes* to prove female superiority represents a paradox of the debate. Daenens claims that this sort of proof is actually a counterargument, for the *dominium* of women is only an imaginary superiority, limited to the noun *donna*.⁶¹ It is worth noting that, in the context of the *querelle des femmes*,

59. Camerata, *Trattato*, 24r.

60. Camerata, *Trattato*, 13r.

61. Daenens, "Superiore perché inferiore."

the word *donna* was used to prove female superiority or equality, and the word *femmina* to stress negative aspects of female nature.⁶²

The Aristotelian model of sexual difference became, from the second half of the thirteenth century, the basis of philosophical thought regarding women, gender, and sex in almost all of Europe. First it was appropriated by medieval scholastics, especially by Thomas Aquinas. From 1495, Aldus Manutius started publishing Aristotle's works in Greek in Venice, and later Aristotle's philosophy was available to the early modern reader in the Latin translation of Leonardo Bruni.⁶³ During the sixteenth century, Aristotelian thought became the basis of many university disciplines including medicine, natural philosophy, law, and theology. Aristotle's view of women, developed predominantly in his *Parts of Animals* and *Politics*, is based on a clear opposition between male and female principles. This view is also known as "gender essentialism," which asserts that the differences between the two sexes are biological and therefore essential: "the upper parts of the body have this pre-eminence over the lower parts; the male over the female; and the right side of the body over the left."⁶⁴ Male characteristics, as well as the male character, are seen as superior to the female. The male principle was associated with greater qualities such as activity and perfection, as opposed to the female principle, which was connected to passivity. The birth of woman, according to Aristotle, was because of a mistake in the act of generation, and during the early modern period his view of woman as a "mutilated" or "defective" man with a monstrous nature was a highly popular argument for female inferiority. To this Camerata provides an answer, stating that the greater number of women in the world than men should suggest that it is men, not women, who have a monstrous nature. In the following, Camerata's words offer a clear example of a rhetorical game:

Si vede poi ancora come senza ragione si dica, che la Donna nasca a caso; percióché quello è a caso, che viene di rado. Ma per lo più (come gli huomini medesimi dicono) nascono le Donne adunque non a caso: anzi nascendo più Donne, che Huomini, si potria retorcere la ragione, e dire,

62. For example, Torquato Tasso in his *Discorso della virtù femminile e donnesca* makes a comparison between an ordinary woman (*femmina*) and a noble woman (*donna*).

63. Cox, *Short History*, 38.

64. Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, trans. Peck, 121.

che quello è a caso, che avviene di rado: ma di rado nascono gli Huomini, adunque essi nascono a caso, et sono *mostri di natura*.⁶⁵

(It can be seen how without reason it is said that the Woman is born by chance; because if something happens by chance, it rarely happens. But for the most part (as men themselves say), women are not born by chance: indeed, since were more Women born than Men, one could twist reason, and say, that what happens by chance it rarely occurs: but rarely Men are born, therefore they are born by chance, and they are *monsters by nature*).

In his *Politics*, Aristotle stated: "But the mating of the young is bad for child-bearing; for in all animal species the offspring of the young are more imperfect and likely to produce female children, and small in figure, so that the same thing must necessarily occur in the human race also."⁶⁶ He connected the weakness of the female body with weakness of mind. The virtues of men and women thus were drastically different. The man was eloquent, the woman silent. The man was courageous, the woman timorous. The man used his brain, the woman her sentiments, as "between the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject."⁶⁷ It could be said that Camerata turned the Aristotelian paradigm upside down, as we have seen. He proved female supremacy using the popular argument: the more tender the complexion, the easier for the mind to learn.

In Camerata's treatise, male tyranny is mentioned as the main reason why women remain in a state of abjection. The same reason is present in Agrippa's treatise and in a few other authors of the *querelle des femmes*. However, "those relatively few writers who adopt the tyranny argument in a serious context still tend to hold back from pursuing their argument to any socially subversive conclusion,"⁶⁸ or, in the words of Daenens, they do not question "the logic of the social order."⁶⁹

65. Camerata, *Trattato*, 21; emphasis added.

66. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Rackham, 619.

67. Aristotle, *Politics*, 21.

68. Cox, "Single Self," 518.

69. Quoted in Cox, "Single Self," 518.

Conclusion

As a defender of women, Camerata answered the common charges against them one by one, and his work is an example of how arguments once used in reproach could paradoxically be reversed and serve the opposite aim. The paradox in the context of the *querelle des femmes* mainly aims at reversing received opinion: “since paradox is merely the reversal of opinion, of the doxa, the reader knows that the author seeks only, by his virtuosity, to overcome the difficulty of the initial enterprise imposed by him.”⁷⁰ For example, when he wanted to prove the inferiority of women, he accepted the humoral theory that women are cold, but he accepted the opposite claim, that they are hot, when he wanted to prove their superiority. Furthermore, Camerata shows how using bodily weakness as proof of mental inferiority can easily be turned to women’s advantage with the argument that tenderness of the body is connected with stronger mental activity. The portrayal of Eve in Genesis is used to support the idea of natural female subordination, while the sequence of divine creation is used as an argument to prove female superiority. In this sense, I believe that Camerata’s book represents an important document in women’s history and cultural history in general. The most common paradoxes of the early modern period are presented in one book and follow a precise structure. That might be one of the reasons why his text was reused by Dalmatian writer Nicolò Vito di Gozze and his wife Maria Gondola.

It should be pointed out that regardless of whether the representation of a particular woman is positive or negative, Christian qualities, such as chastity and humility, are always praised in women. That is, in the words of Ruth Kelso, “the suppression and negation of self is urged upon her, even by those that love and admire her most.”⁷¹ According to Daenens, the male authors of the Italian Renaissance, in their defense of the superiority or the inferiority of women, always presented a picture that was in line with the needs and desires of men.⁷²

However, these treatises do represent important evidence of small individual steps taken towards a more equal society. Camerata’s contribution

70. Jean Lafond, “Le Discours de la Servitude volontaire de la Boétie et la rhétorique de la déclamation,” quoted in Larsen, “Paradox,” 764.

71. Kelso, *Doctrine*, 36.

72. Daenens, “Superiore perché inferiore,” 24.

to the *querelle des femmes* debate appeared in a particular context and historical period, and it followed the fashions and the rhetoric of that time; the text is conventional, and it does look like a paradoxical “rhetorical exercise.” In many cases, Camerata does not question the social order and widely accepts the view of authorities. His book was published with the approval mark of the Inquisition (“Con licentia R.Vic. Epis. Et R.T. Inquis.”), a fact that should be taken into consideration when we think about the possibilities for the Sicilian “doctor of arts” to question the social order in an Italian post-Tridentine context. However, when explaining why women might prefer to be men, Camerata refers to the contemporary social order and criticizes it: “si come la Donna desidera l’Huomo, cioè desidera d’essere Uomo; il che avviene perché *lo stato delle Donne è al presente imperfettissimo; sendo sotto la tirannica servitù de gli Huomini*” (as the Woman wants the Man, better to say she wants to become Man; which occurs because *the present female condition is more than imperfect, as they are under the Male tyrannical servitude*).⁷³

On the other hand, if one of the main aims of studying the past is to understand the present and to focus on the traces that early modern texts and events left, then we can say that it is also thanks to the *querelle des femmes* narratives, with all their paradoxes, that five centuries later we can presume what was the exemplary behaviour of the woman within her ethos, how the man has become the norm, and how arguments can paradoxically be reversed and prove/negate the norm. The position of women was defended within the hierarchy of power by a man who had power. But that power is used also to speak about inequalities, many of which are still current today.

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73. Camerata, *Trattato*, 20v; emphasis added.

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