

*Exhortations to Women and to Others if They Please*, by Lucrezia Marinella. Edited and translated by Laura Benedetti. The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series, 15. Toronto, ON: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies; Iter, 2012. Pp. xi+230. ISBN: 9780772721143; E-ISBN: 9780772721150.

Laura Benedetti's recent English translation of Lucrezia Marinella's 1645 work *Esortazioni alle donne et a gli altri, se a loro saranno a grado* is the fifteenth volume of the series *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*, published by the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies. The third work of Marinella's to be translated and published in this series, this thoughtful and highly readable edition and translation provides English-speaking students and scholars with access to Marinella's last work which, until recently, has not been as well known as her *The Nobility and Excellence of Women*, published in 1600.<sup>1</sup> Benedetti's useful translation of what she states is Marinella's challenging and often-redundant prose shows this seventeenth-century woman's vast learning; careful reading of ancient, medieval, and early modern texts; and insightful comprehension of her society's views of women. Benedetti's detailed and well-researched introduction outlines Marinella's life and her remarkably prolific literary career as well as providing an excellent overview of the text, its contents, and the author's sources. Given that some readers may not know of Marinella, Benedetti also places her in the literary and historical context of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Venetian society that gave rise to many early modern women writers, including Moderata Fonte, Arcangela Tarabotti, and Marinella.

Lucrezia Marinella thrived in this intellectual environment. She came from a well-educated family (her father and one of her brothers were both scientists and writers), was highly educated, and wrote in various literary genres throughout her long life. Her works range from her famous pro-woman treatise, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women*, to epic poetry, a pastoral novel, hagiography, and devotional literature. Marinella wrote the *Exhortations*, a book of advice, late in life, and unlike *The Nobility and Excellence of Women* in which she praises the abilities of women and advises them to go out into the world and educate

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1. The other works by Lucrezia Marinella published in this series are the *Life of the Virgin Mary, Empress of the Universe*, in *Who is Mary? Three Early Modern Women on the Idea of the Virgin Mary*, ed. and trans. Susan Haskins. The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and *The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*, ed. and trans. Anne Dunhill, The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

themselves, she instead tells her readers to remain at home, attend to their families, and avoid knowledge for, as she so bluntly asserts “Let us put knowledge aside; it is hazardous to our health” (60). This revision of her earlier ideas, born out of what Marinella claims is a more mature outlook, may be due to many factors and contains some surprising advice to her fellow women.

The *Exhortations* contains nine chapters, some of which are longer than others, and advises women to seclude themselves from the world and focus their attention on domestic matters, engage in the womanly arts of sewing and weaving, forego education and the study of literature, dress modestly, speak cautiously, live prudently, be in harmony with their husbands, raise intelligent children who will bring honor to the family and the fatherland, and focus not on beauty but on virtue. Marinella concludes that if women follow these *Exhortations* they will always be honored and respected. To support her views, she quotes and paraphrases ancient writers such as Aristotle (whose views are referenced throughout the text) and Plato, medieval writers such as Boethius and Petrarch, and even refers to some early modern writers such as Ariosto and Tasso. Her knowledge of these texts is impressive and, as Benedetti discusses, enables Marinella to establish herself as an expert in this genre of literature.

Marinella refers directly to her earlier work, *The Nobility*, and says that she has reconsidered her previous ideas about why women are secluded and kept within “domestic walls” (49). Due to her now “more mature judgment” she believes that “women’s condition has not been devised or brought about by resentful souls, but rather derives from natural and divine providence and will” (48). Throughout the text Marinella focuses on what she believes are women’s natural and God-given talents, revering the attributes of women such as Penelope and Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, and even the goddess Minerva as praiseworthy ones for real women to possess. For example, Marinella believes that the goddess Minerva was prouder of her embroidery skills, “her womanly art,” than her skills in war (80-81).

To readers familiar only with *The Nobility*, Marinella’s drastic revision may be unexpected. In her introduction, Benedetti offers some possible explanations. This more conservative view of women and their abilities may be Marinella’s response to her disappointment at the “lukewarm reception” of her epic poem *Enrico*, published in 1635, and her general dismay at society’s rejection of learned women (17). She notes that Marinella presents herself as an exceptional woman, one who demonstrates her vast knowledge while advising her female readers to avoid the education she has devoted her life to attaining. Benedetti admits that this more literal reading of the text may seem “hopelessly conservative” and is

more “cautious” than other interpretations (she notes only one other), but she sees Marinella’s work as a pragmatic attempt to instruct women on how to live in a society that rejects their knowledge and intellectual abilities (34). Given Marinella’s own experience with rejection, this reading makes sense, yet this reviewer wonders if other scholars might develop more nuanced interpretations of this text.

Marinella’s use of sources, outspoken prose, and sometimes contradictory perspective on women’s capabilities reflect the complexity of her thought and struggle with society’s expectations of her and of women. Benedetti’s excellent translation retains Marinella’s unique voice and erudition in this complex book of advice. As Benedetti makes clear, the text’s contradictions will challenge any reader wishing to understand Marinella’s motivations, yet it provides a much-needed glimpse into how one woman confronted the problems that well-educated women faced in seventeenth-century Italy.

Benedetti does an admirable job of translating and introducing Marinella, her life, and her work. Some readers may find her interpretation problematic, yet this does not interfere with what is an elegant, readable, and well-documented edition. Having three of Marinella’s works available in English enables scholars and students to engage with this author’s works and allow for a broader interpretation of her contributions to early modern Italian society and literature.

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