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Women defending women: the querelle des femmes in Speght, Sowernam and Munda (1617).

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..in a hundred years, I thought, reaching my own doorstep, women will have ceased to be the protected sex. Logically they will take part in all the activities and exertions that were once denied them.

- Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ARR: J. Swetnam, 1615, *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women*. In: Henderson, Katherine Usher; McManus, Barbara F., 1985, *Half Humankind - Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640.* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, pp. 190-216.

MOU: R. Speght, 1617, *A Mouzell for Melastomus*. In: B. Kiefer Lewalski (ed.), 1996, *The Polemics and Poems of Rachel Speght*, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 1-27.

EST: E. Sowernam, 1617, *Esther hath Hanged Haman*. In: Henderson, Katherine Usher; McManus, Barbara F., 1985, *Half Humankind - Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640.* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, pp. 217-243.

WOR: C. Munda, 1617, *The Worming of a Mad Dog*. In: Henderson, Katherine Usher; McManus, Barbara F., 1985, *Half Humankind - Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640.* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, pp. 244-263.

INTRODUCTION

In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf said that life is a perpetual struggle that calls for courage, strength and self-confidence; in particular, without self-confidence people are weak and vulnerable. Then, Woolf poses a question: how can people generate self-confidence most quickly? "By thinking that other people are inferior to oneself. By feeling that one has some innate superiority [...] over other people". [1] The answer she gives represents the main issue concerning human relations with 'the other', with what is different from oneself, "it may be wealth, or rank, a straight nose, or the portrait of a grandfather by Romney" [2]. What differentiates people is often what divides them: because people think that difference is something that defines who is better than the others.

This thesis is focused on the most basic difference of all, the one between sexes. The main concern is to show how Renaissance women tried to defend their dignity and honour, not only as women but also as writers, after being repeatedly calumniated and arraigned by misogynist men. The work and the theme of this thesis is linked to the Women Writers Project of the Northeastern University of Boston. It is a long-term research project whose aim is to make early modern women's writings accessible to a wide audience of teachers, students, scholars, and general readers. Specifically, every collaborator can choose a topic (such as text encoding and women's writing analysis) and develop it using the texts provided by the website as well as the advanced research options the website offers.

The University of Padua participates in this project with a specific goal, assessing the presence of the topos of the excellence of women. Through the study of ancient figures and stereotypes, as well as the comparison between classical and modern texts, we want to study women's life and their education during the European Renaissance. In particular, we want to give relevance to the English and the Italian traditions.

Women's history is a very interesting subject, unfortunately neglected for centuries. It is important to study how women's life had changed through the centuries in order to understand their role in modern society. Furthermore, studying women's history is essential not only for the prevention of gender inequality in all public and private institutions, but also for letting women be treated fairly in all contexts of their daily life. Specifically, I

[1] V. Woolf, 2004, *A Room of One's Own*. Penguin: revised edition, p. 40.
[2] Ibid.

studied the differences between the two sexes during the European Renaissance, when women underwent difficulties and injustices based only on prejudice and alleged male superiority. It is unfair how men - as well as the majority of women - have always seen women as their weak and passive counterparts instead of behaving with them as equal and complicit human beings.

In the first chapter I depict women's life during the Renaissance: we realise that the reasons why men wrote misogynistic texts are connected to the structure of society as well as to gender roles; knowing women's conditions makes us understand why women did not immediately reply to those accusations. It was difficult for a woman to rebel and to publicly rebut a man's assertion, and hardly imaginable the thought of confuting rooted religious beliefs. The first chapter highlights the passivity in which women were caged and it shows that women have always endured difficult situations with strength and patience.

The second chapter is devoted to the literary debate about the status and the nature of women: the *querelle des femmes,* which started at the end of the 15th century and continued well beyond the end of the Renaissance. The most important author of the controversy is a woman, the French medieval writer Christine De Pisan; she is the first woman to write a document praising women. Her *Livre de la cité des dames* (1405) inspired the successive female writers and gave women the strength to intervene in the debate. The other female writer presented in this chapter is Jane Anger, whose *Protection for Women* (1589) represents the first early modern response in defense of the female sex. Concerning male authors, I focused on Italian and English writers who have written in favour or against women using similar methods of argumentations and recurrent themes; such as Castiglione and Ariosto for the Italian part, and Gosynhill, More and Elyot for the English one.

The last chapter of the thesis is devoted to the literary analysis of four pamphlets, usually considered among the most effective examples of this early modern controversy. In 1617 three women responded to Joseph Swetnam's, *The Arraignment of the Lewd, Idle, Froward an Unconstant Woman* (1615): Rachel Speght, Ester Sowernam, and Constantia Munda (two pseudonyms). Although early modern writers shared the same argumentative strategies, they developed them in different ways and with different tones. The model of the attack and response pamphlet is perfectly exemplified by this particular case, which is one of the few controversy to be considered concluded. The foul accuses moved by Swetnam were precisely rebuked by Speght, Sowernam and Munda with wittiness and an acute

knowledge of classical and contemporary literary sources. Finally, the three writers had the chance to show people that women can have qualified writing skill, highlighting instead the impropriety of Swetnam's claims.

1. WOMEN LIVING IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

Early Modern English society was a hierarchical entity with many degrees of social ranks. Thus, it is important to define terms and concepts concerning Early Modern society in England and in Europe. Generally, the wealthiest and most educated members of society, from the nobility to the minor gentry, are defined with the term 'élite'. 'Middling' indicates the group of men and women whose relative prosperity differentiated them from about one-third of the population who lived in poverty. The mass and the female population are referred to with the terms 'ordinary' or 'plebeian'; although we refer to the majority as 'labouring' women, the word conveys the wrong message that women of the middling and upper ranks did not work.[1]

In order to better understand the typical structure of the early modern family and its society, it is important to clarify two keywords: patriarchy and feminism. 'Patriarchy' means that fathers ruled, and that their authority remained unchallenged in the domestic sphere, while patriarchy in the political sphere changed during the 17th century. The term can be used in two ways: in the 17th century sense, to characterize a political system in which husbands and fathers dominated their households; in modern analytical terms, to refer to a social system which favors men over women.[2]

Also the term 'feminism' has both an early modern and a 20th century meaning: applied to early modern England, it means that women could lend voice to the injustices suffered by the female sex, also through subversive resistance. Women were subjects of many debates and discourses in early modern Europe; they were categorized through the lenses of medical, scientific, legal and political frameworks. As the boundaries were always shifting, contemporary understandings of women changed throughout the period and in different contexts.[3]

[1] S. Mendelson, P. Crawford, 1998, *Women in Early Modern England*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp. 15-71.
[2] S. Walby, 1990, *Theorizing Patriarchy.* Basil Blackwell Ldt. Oxford, pp. 173-203.
[3] S. Mendelson, P. Crawford, 1998, *Women in Early Modern England*, pp.15-71.

1.1. DUAL CLASSIFICATION

Renaissance Europeans believed that the world was harmoniously organized as a system of dual classification which derived from the Greeks. The main characteristic of this dual thinking was that each element, not only had an opposite, but it also depended on it; among all the dualities, the most obvious was the one opposing man to woman. Thus, men and women were considered two versions of humanity carrying differences that enabled to distinguish one from another; most importantly, the qualities of the former were missing from the latter and vice versa, making them needing each other. [4] As Hickerson states, the dual classification owed its structure to Aristotle's thought, consisting in a system of correlative opposites in which one element is superior to the other. According to Aristotle, the binary female/male represents the basic rubric for all other opposed couples; in addition, the male principle is active, formative and perfect, whereas the female is passive, material and deprived.

Similarly, in medieval and early modern terms, man is the perfect creation of God, while woman is imperfect and has been created in order to provide the physical apparatus for procreation. In addition, the superior/inferior duality organizes the hierarchy of all Christian ideas, such as heaven and hell, good and evil, true and false religion, and eventually Christ and Antichrist. In this context, female sex is associated with all the imperfect halves of the couples: if women were not under the control of men, it could only mean that the world had been turned upside down. The world was in fact turned upside down only in some festivities, such as *charivari*, when the roles between man and woman were inverted.

What supported these beliefs was the Old Testament and in particular the Genesis: Eve was the beginning of all women's issues of imperfection and the episode of the Fall clearly stated man's supremacy in marriage and in the family. Mendelson and Craword argues that "women themselves voiced their conviction that certain gender inequalities could never be challenged because scriptural authority was not open to rational debate". [5] Still, this doctrine tended to have a conservative effect on social habits and relations, even long after the secular debate on gender issues had begun, and it left women's subordination

[4] M. L. Hickerson, 2015, *Religion and Popular Beliefs*. In: K. Raber, *A Cultural History of Women in the Renaissance*. Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 67-92.
[5] S. Mendelson, P. Crawford, 1998, *Women in Early Modern England*, p. 34.

and inferiority as open questions. Nevertheless, with the changing intellectual climate of the late seventeenth century a few writers begin to revaluate the scriptural grounds of women's subordination, distinguishing married women from unmarried ones or from widows.

1.1.2 POPULAR BELIEFS AND STEREOTYPES

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the religious establishment was perhaps the most powerful source of theories about human nature and society: firstly, people listened to religious authorities and then the information was disseminated to the general population. People were influenced, either directly or indirectly, by the ecclesiastical hierarchy; doctrine was formulated by a group of élite men, representing the Established Church. For instance, these men decided the penalties for those who did not attend the religious function or those who were absent from parish church service. [6] Moreover, Church teachings dealt with personal matters too, such as the sexual relationship between husband and wife. Clerics did not only spread notions of theology and morality: they also offered information and opinions on public affairs such as politics and national issues. As a consequence, sermons and homilies "set the terms of reference for popular debates about everything from marital relations to revolutionary politics". [7]

Protestant clerics assured women of their equal spiritual status, grounding their statement on Paul's axiom "in Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, man nor woman".[8] Although according to Paul women were fully capable of salvation, they were not entitled to equal participation in the Church's temporal hierarchy. As a result, women could hope to benefit from the doctrine of equal souls only after death, as the doctrine did not free women from subjection. In other words, men monopolized Church's hierarchy and religious doctrine and spread knowledge concerning gender issues and popular beliefs. In Protestant areas, the subordinate status of women was also probably aggravated by the absence of the Virgin Mary, giving thus a great importance to fatherhood and to Christ's masculine traits.

As Phyllis Mack argues, individual women lived their lives in "a cage of symbols and stereotypes". [9] The stereotypes attributed to women were both positive and negative: they

[6] Mendelson and Crawford, 1998, *Women in Early Modern England.*
[7] Ibid. 78. p. 31.
[8] Galations 3:28. Quoted in: Mendelson and Crawford, 1998.
[9] P. Mack, 1992, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England.* Berkley, p. 18.

could be seen as virtuous maids, wives and widow or negatively depicted as scolds, whores and witches. A woman was defined through her relationship with a man; when she was not subordinated to a man either as a daughter, a wife or a widow, she was disapproved of and criticized. As a consequence, being a wife was the ideal status for a woman because she could fulfill her purpose to become a mother and she remained under the governance of her husband. However, there were negative stereotypes about wives as well; for instance, the idle city dame who was always gossiping and tattling, often believed to have loose morals and to be deceiving with her husband. Finally, the last status of a woman's life was widowhood, as Mendelson and Crawford state. The status of the widow had negative and positive aspects too: on one hand, widowhood could be seen as a desolate status to be commiserated; on the other one, popular culture characterized widows as calculating and sexually voracious.

The most appealing stereotype among early modern popular beliefs concerned witches. Along with the scold and the whore, the witch was considered the most dangerous woman because she challenged patriarchal control: the scold represented the fear of the power of women's tongues; while the whore carried the notion of unbridled sexuality, the witch was the realization of gender reversal. Hickerson [10] analyses the witch's stereotype focusing on the creation of this figure and explaining the reasons why people believed it. The belief that orderly women under male control contributed to social order hinged on the idea that women without a male authority above them were diabolical enemies to civilization who were planning to destroy male control. Thus, witches were armed by the devil not only to fight Christianity, but also to threaten political and social order. Hickerson points out that witch belief is a dramatic example of the implications of ideas about women and their nature associated with the concept of dual classification. As witches were thought to destabilize natural order, they represented the antithesis of Christianity and they had to be fought; in addition, as witches were the devil's servants, they could act according to their natural impulses, completely out of (male) control.

According to the concept of dual classification, women were contraries to men, even deviant men could be cast as bad women; continuing within the dual line of reasoning, women who defied their natural roles could appear as "other" than women, almost men-like beings. For instance, early modern images of witches often explicitly gave masculine traits

[10] M. L. Hickerson, 2015, *Religion and Popular Beliefs*. In: K. Raber, *A Cultural History of Women in the Renaissance*. Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 67-92.

to their bodies, removing femininity and underlining the unnatural connotations of these creatures; the image of the witch was neither wholly female not wholly male. To sum up, on one hand, stereotypes represented the anxiety of men, who feared to be overcome by women and to consequently lose their position of superiority; on the other one, men fabricated popular beliefs that scared women in order to prevent them from undoing their subordinate status.

1.2. FROM GIRL TO WIFE

In this section I will focus on the natural life cycle of women, from their childhood to their adulthood, highlighting the roles women covered both in the family microcosm and in the entire society as well. The ordinary life of women and the early modern popular beliefs I previously analysed, influenced one another and resulted in a particular treatment of womankind.

The female life cycle was not considered as important as men's; people did talk less formally about woman's life and woman's body; when they did talk about it, it was something linked to her sexual status and to her relationship to a man, which obviously mattered the most. "A woman was a virgin, wife, or widow or, alternately, a daughter, wife or mother"[11]: women's life was thought to be univocally voted to their family, especially husbands and fathers, and to bearing and bringing up children; the stages of a woman's life were exclusively connected to men and to what she could do for them.

As for childhood, women used to pray for sons, and midwives were often paid with a higher reward for assisting the birth of a boy; some often wrote letters apologizing for the birth of a daughter. Furthermore, in most orphanages and in foundling homes girls outnumbered boys: poor parents thought that sons were more useful than girls for the sustainment of the family. An interesting exception to this was London, where there were more abandoned boys than girls; mothers used to abandon them because they would have received a better care in the city than in the countryside and, as a consequence, enjoyed a better chance of survival. [12]

[11] M. E. Wisener-Hanks, 2008, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 56.
[12] Ibid.

The early years of children growth were not marked by specific differences between girls and boys; they were all dressed alike and parents did not talk about boys and girls using gender stereotypes [13]. Differences arose when children began training for adult life, at the age of four or five; the distinction became evident among the jobs and tasks that were taught: while girls learnt to spin, sew, cook and care for domestic animals [14], boys learnt reading and received schooling. Literacy was a basic skill for girls too, but the contents and the extension of the female literate education differed from boys': "girls were customarily taught to read printed works but not to write" [15]. Paradoxically, girls were often the parents' favorites: the reputation of a girl - her chastity, obedience and, for the upper classes, her dowry - preserved the honor of their families. Moreover, they were taught to behave better than boys inside a family context as they were more likely to be taught good manners for their future married life.

The difference between a wealthy girl and a poor one was that the former lived under the direct supervision of her family, and that her prolonged status of protection did not make her an independent woman; on the other hand, the latter gained independence from a very early age, as she had to take care of the family and be autonomous. Despite this difference, both wealthy and poor girls served as apprentices in order to have a 'growing-up' experience. For instance, service at court as maids of honor was considered a very important role among noble families; aristocratic daughters acquired skills in housewifery so that they could learn what a proper behavior was. Ideally, service could offer young women a safe haven until the moment of marriage and child-bearing, somehow delaying adulthood.

Traditionally, female service and training have been divided into three categories: craft apprenticeship, service in husbandry, and domestic service. The contract families signed to apprentice a child stated the specific teachings and skills the daughters would acquire as well as a payment for a precise period of time, usually seven or ten years. For instance, a woman hired for a one-year term to perform agrarian and domestic tasks, was given a small annual wage in return, usually paid quarterly. [16] Domestic servants, usually retained for a year, although some maidservants were hired by the week or daily; their duties implied making fires, washing dishes and clothes, taking care of children, running

[13] For example, nowadays a gender stereotype concerns the colors, pink for girls and blue for boys.
[14] Peasant girls learnt agricultural tasks too.
[15] M. E. Wisener-Hanks, 2008, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 90.
[16] A. S. Kussmaul, 1979, *Servants in Husbandry*. Cambridge University Press, part III.

errands, spinning and sewing. Although historians have divided female servants into three categories, the duties were always mixed up: domestic labor overlapped with other kinds of assignment. As a result, the categories' borderlines were blurred and the girls' jobs were continually shifting from one task to another.

The most important step in a woman's life was marriage. It represented a turning point for a girl as it marked the beginning of social adulthood and it was a source of pride for the family; the ideal wife was supposed to show both religious virtues and economic ones, such as industriousness and thrift. Once a girl had a husband, her life was accomplished: she could be a wife and serve her husband, and, most importantly, she could carry out her purpose of giving birth to a child. An unmarried woman suspected to be pregnant represented a problem for the family: she could go to court and attempt to prove there had been a promise of marriage to coerce the man to marry her; if she was a minor, her father could sue the man involved for 'trespass and damages' to his property.

In Renaissance England, "the process for getting married could be complex".[17] A couple wishing to marry had first to obtain the licence to marry and the blessing of the church; the process was slow because they have to wait three weeks after having announced the couple's names and their intent to marry. The choice of a spouse was usually determined by the social and financial situation and the decision was considered far too important to be left to the young people. Particularly among the upper classes, families made complex strategies to organise alliances and to expand family holdings. Except for a few cases, marriage was hardly about love or romance.

Another pragmatic issue concerning marriage was the dowry. Women of all classes were expected to bring to their marriage a dowry - clothing, household items such as the marriage bed and bedding, and cash - whose size varied throughout Europe. The husband could use the dowry, yet he did not have its ownership during his wife's lifetime. Furthermore, it seems that women used to bequeath their dowries to whomever they chose; during the sixteenth century this habit was restricted, and women were supposed to give their properties to male heirs only. [18]

[17] Rasmussen Eric, 2016, *Marriage and Courtship*. Available at: https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/marriage-and-courtship. Last access: 14/09/17

[18] M. E. Wisener-Hanks, 2008, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 79-80.

Since, according to the Bible, woman was made for man, a single woman was considered an anomaly; as Mary Astell remarked, women were "quite terrified with the dreadful name of Old Maid... the scoffs that are thrown on superannuated Virgins"[19]. Women were deemed to be seeing marriage as maturity and the successful accomplishment of a lifetime; it was shameful to be unmarried, without a household to run, children to rear or servants to oversee. There were several classification concerning the matrimonial and occupational status of a single woman: 'unmarried woman' was a woman without a husband; 'never married' referred to dead women who had never married; 'independent woman' was not completely appropriate since a woman always depended on a man (father, brother, husband); finally, 'old maid' implied virginity, although the actual sexual status was never clear. [20]

Women living independently posed both an economical and a moral problem. They did not have a male figure as master and they were not part of a household. As a consequence, laws were passed forbidding single women to move into cities because they should always live in a male-headed households; they could not live with widowed mothers either, there was not a male presence in the house. Since independent women were seen as a danger, they were depicted as 'unnatural', and therefore suspect, for they did not follow the 'natural' vocation for women, marriage.

1.3. WOMEN AND WORK

Once a girl was married, she also became part of the economy, not only of her own house, but of the community too. Female work rhythms, as well as men's, were determined by age and class; an important role for women was also played by their biological and social events, such as marriage, motherhood and widowhood. Male work provided the structure, while female work provided the flexibility, often a repetitive one. Women did not work with the same regularity of men, their labor was discontinuous, badly paid and usually suppressed for some periods of time. Women's work was both marginal and irreplaceable. [21]

[19] M. Astell, 1694, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*.
[20] S. Mendelson, P. Crawford, 1998, *Women in Early Modern England*, pp. 75-108.
[21] M. E. Wisener-Hanks, 2008, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 101-137.

The majority of people living in the countryside produced agricultural products for their own use and for the use of their landlords. Because of the physical differences, the tasks were usually gender-specific, with men using a great deal of strength - cutting grass with a scythe, for instance - and women doing tasks near to the house in order to nurse children too. Rural women took care of animals, prepared daily products, made cloth and did all the cooking; besides, they worked in the fields during harvest times and they transported products to market. With the progress made in agricultural technology, rural work led large numbers of landless workers to drift in search of employment. Workers became beggars and lived in difficult conditions. Some women also migrated to cities, where they were placed in special women's workhouses together with orphans and prostitutes. Women traveling alone were particularly suspect and were seen as dishonorable.

1.3.1. THE CITY AND THE HOUSEHOLD

The city and the household represented the most common places for a girl to work: they offered many job opportunities, and those kinds of female jobs did not require a formal education. The professions we will see in chapter 1.3.2., such as the nurse or the midwife, required instead accurate learning and experience both for men and for women. As Wiesner-Hanks [22] remarks, cities offered a variety of job opportunities, partly because of their gradual increasing industrialisation and urbanisation. First of all, the mining areas represented a chance for all the family; mining operations, which began in the late Middle Ages, implied a higher use of machinery: mining became a professionalised occupation. Furthermore, investors began to hire people to produce wool, linen and cotton thread or cloth; they paid the households or the individuals for their labor and retained ownership of the raw materials. In this case, the production went on in a household and was called 'domestic' or 'cottage' industry, not only because it was not a factory activity, but also because it was the earliest form of mass production.

Throughout Europe, domestic industries often broke down gender divisions: men, women and children worked at the same tasks. Some authors voiced their dissent; they did not like the fact that while spinning, men gossiped with women. Moreover, the reversal of

[22] M. E. Wisener-Hanks, 2008, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe,* pp. 101-137.

roles in a domestic context could lead to a surreal situation for early modern society: as an eighteenth century German observer stated, "men...cook, sweep and milk the cows, in order never to disturb the good diligent wife in her work". [23] Ballads such as *The Woman to the Plow and the Man to The Hen-Roost* mocked this reversal of work roles and implied that such situation had turned the world upside-down.[24] Probably, the lower the status, the more likely it was to find men and women engaging in similar tasks, whereas among higher social levels the divisions were still upheld.

In such preindustrial world, entire households were hired in poor lands where the agriculture rested more or less on subsistence. Furthermore, the growth of proto-industrialization brought labor to become a more important economic commodity than property, and, as a consequence, people married earlier and the parental control over children weakened. The value of a woman as a partner was strongly affected by her labor, rather than her father's occupation or wealth, so that she gained power within the family and the community as well. However, there were some areas of Europe, France for instance, where the proto-industrialization brought employment for women and not for the whole households. In these areas the roles were not shared by both men and women and men's work was paid better than women's. Thus, proto-industrialization did not lead to improvements for women in these areas; even though women were the ones who gave some disposable income to the family, it was the man who decided how to spend the money. [25]

Agriculture and textile industries were two very important activities for female employment; a suitable job for women concerned the crafts and the related skilled, retail and provision trades. [26] The skilled trades are the crafts that became organized by means of guilds; craft guilds, first created in the twelfth and thirteenth century, were the most important production organizations in all Europe. Throughout the early modern period, craft guilds continued to dominate the distribution of many products well until the nineteenth century. In the best case scenario the girls were apprenticed to the guild trades; if married with a member of the organization, marriage conferred upon them the husband's rights and privileges, even if they became widows. Consequently, a woman could continue to control

[23] H. Medick, 1976, "The proto-industrial family economy: The structural function of household and family during the transition from peasant society to industrial capitalism", *Social History I*, p. 312.
[24] *The Woman to the Plow and the Man to the Hen-Roost*, in *Roxburghe Ballads*, ed. W. Chappell and T. Ebsworth, 9 vols. in 8 (London and Hertford, 1866-99), vii, 185-7.
[25] M. E. Wisener-Hanks, 2008, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 101-137.
[26] A. Clark, 1992, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 150-235.

the business she inherited from her husband, and "some skilled trades were chiefly, if not, wholly, in the hands of women".[27] As for the retail trades, women were a branch of the family industry and the employment of selling was adapted to the circumstances of women; among their resources, the retail trades almost took rank with agriculture and spinning. Finally, as Alice Clark affirms, provision trades occupy a special position [28]; the provisioning of their households had always been considered one of the elementary duties of women. Domestic skill such as provisioning could turn out to be useful in trade too. Yet, even though women had acquired important and useful skills, they were employed merely as their husbands' partners.[29]

Except for the masters' widows and some female apprentices, women's ability to work was never officially recognized; they usually depended on their relationship with the guild master rather than their own training. Guilds members thought domestic work was as inferior as the "inferior" women who practiced it. The difference between what was considered a craft or a job and home duties is an important early modern issue: although women were identified with both the household and industrial production, men saw women's work as merely domestic. Women who spun or washed their own homes were not considered workers, while men practicing similar tasks were regarded as craftsmen.[30]

Quoting the Munich council minutes, Wiesner-Hanks says that guilds were seen as "learned art and given to men alone" [31]; the nature of the guilds, that is to gather groups of people working together, was thought to be limited to men only. Although their female partners did much work for the organizations, they never participated to meetings or celebrations. The exclusivity of those male gatherings perfectly reflected the exclusivity of professional education, reserved to men only. Together with education and learning, professional work was a male prerogative: women were considered neither reliable figures nor skilled enough to manage a head position in their work.

[27] A. Clark, 1992, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 151.
[28] Ibid.
[29] This happened for all three classes of industry, not only for provisioning.
[30] These crafts, such as tailor and shoemaker, were not regarded as highly as those who worked in workshops.
[31] Munich city council minutes, 1599, quoted in M. E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Working Women*, p. 129.

1.3.2. MEDICINE AND HEALING

As was the case with the occupations of the city and the household, the gap between men and women was evident in medicine too: women received just a basic education without specific medical and scientific studies; once a woman completed her training, she would never be considered as skilled as a male doctor. Still, female figures were an unavoidable and essential presence in health care. In early modern times it was difficult for a woman to establish a work identity. Real professions were common among the middle class, and the majority of professions required an education, which was not always possible. However, competences such as childbirth, health care and teaching children, were deemed to be general female knowledge, especially for middling and upper ranks women, so that women could receive a salary for these tasks.

Focusing on science, lots of women were necessary and absolutely fundamental for medical and health care. Nurses were hired not only in private families: they also cared about poor people affected by plague and mortal illness. Midwifery was a honorable profession that contributed to the progress of early modern medicine. Female-healers were ambiguous and interesting figures who practiced medicine among their friends and poor people. Women across all social classes were involved in nursing, the treatment of the sick, and healing; those who were paid as midwives or physicians had an occupational identity, whereas female medical practitioners were not described as professionals, unlike their male counterparts. The reason of this paradox was focused on the training and experience of a male doctor, opposed to the lower competence attributed to women. As with many other occupations of that time, women "lacked a formal institutional structure to control their practice". [32]

Although in European cities there were many hospitals and charitable institutions, nurses - and women in general - did not take part in their management. The city of London had four charitable hospitals: there is no evidence that women, even women of upper classes, ever managed these institutions. Since nurses had to take care of diseased, and often degraded, poor people, being a nurse meant to be near God; helping people was considered an act of kindness. Still, salaries were lower than the wages earned by a servant. The duties of nurses were not just curing and taking care of sick people: they also oversaw and brought

[32] S. Mendelson, P. Crawford, 1998, *Women in Early Modern England*, p.314.

up children, especially orphans, and they carried out spinning, sewing and mending of sheets or clothes.

There was not any system of instruction on a scientific basis available for women. Not only nurses', but also midwives' practice was empirical.[33] Midwifery provides a perfect example of female occupation in the early modern times; the practitioners possessed skills and a professional identity, however, the occupation was not normally recognized. [34] Male doctors stigmatized midwifery in order to enhance their own status; moreover, some midwives were too poor to purchase the licence and they practiced only among poorer neighbors. The problem with midwifery was that midwives could not control the conditions of their work. They were licenced by ecclesiastical authorities and what bishops wanted were women who fitted the conformity of the Anglican Church; therefore, there was no provision for their formal education.

Before the release of the official certificate, the training of a midwife consisted in a period of apprenticeship in which girls could learn and practice with the supervision of a licenced midwife.[35] The majority of midwives used to write notes and experiences in handbooks, in response to the demand for opportunities for scientific training; one of the most popular of these books is Jane Sharp's *The Midwives Book* (1671). Jane Sharp points out that midwives must be speculative and at the same time practical, then she argues:

> [...] Some perhaps may think, that then it is not proper for women to be of this profession, because they cannot attain so rarely to the knowledge of things as men may, who are bred up in Universities, Schools of Learning, or serve their Apprenticeship for that end and purpose, where anatomy Lectures being frequently read the situation of the parts both of men and women . . . are often made plain to them.[36]

Sharp asserts that unlike men physicians, women can perform this special duty without the necessity of a formal learning. She recognizes the superiority of men Physicians but she firmly believes that "the art of Midwifery chiefly concerns us [women]". Although the schools of Medicine and Anatomy were closed to women, doctors used to teach some

[33] A. Clark, 1992, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 242.
[34] H. Marland, 1994, *The Art of Midwifery: Early Modern Midwives in Europe*. New York: Routledge, pp.9-27.
[35] S. Mendelson, P. Crawford, 1998, *Women in Early Modern England*, pp.301-343.
[36] J. Sharp, 1671, *The Midwives Book*, Book I p. 1.

midwives - the more progressive ones - the science necessary for their art. Nonetheless, the profession was often taken for granted and not regarded as a properly scientific discipline.

The absence of scientific education kept women out of the higher branch of medicine so that most of them were considered healers. The typical treatments of a healer during Medieval and Early Modern times, included bloodletting, herbal remedies and incantations through the power of the spoken word or magic stones.[37] Therefore, women who performed these methods were thought to have a special relationship with God and their actions were often labeled as "white magic". Renowned for her medical knowledge, Hildegard von Bingen, a German nun who lived in the twelfth century, wrote two scientific works: *Physica* (1151), a document of simple medicine and on natural philosophy; *Causae et Curae* (1158), a book on composite medicine. What's more, she undoubtedly drew on oral folk traditions and the healing skills in her community.

However, the possibility for monastic men and women to learn how to heal changed: after 1163 they were forbidden to leave the monastery to study medicine. Later on, things changed again, and in 1422 in Naples, Costanza Calenda became the first women to receive a doctorate in medicine from a university. Being a healer was not always easy: the association between healer and witch - extended also to midwives and physician - brought prejudices against female practitioners and often the ejection from the medical marketplace. Nevertheless, women were crucial to health and healing in the early modern period; it seems that, even though women practitioners were marginalized and demonized, there were a lot of them and they were needed.

There are records of healers activity in journals and recipe books; Margaret Healy gives the example of Lady Grace Mildmay's journal, written between 1570 and 1617. It suggests that Lady Mildmay carried out a wide range of medical activities connected to her charitable duty. Moreover, women married to doctors could learn their husband's work and follow him as assistants, so that they could learn through experience. For instance, women were expected to prepare medicines with the products of the kitchen garden, such as domestic plants, stones and bones; as a result, the traditional healing and medicine-making

[37] H. Parker, 2012, *Women and Medicine*, in *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*. Blackwell Publishing Ldt, p. 122.

roles of women had become aligned with chemistry, the new science, whose epicenter was the woman healer. [38]

1.4. EDUCATION AND LEARNING

Despite all job opportunities women could have during the Early Modern Era, only through education could they become knowledgeable citizens or eventually enter careers as men did. Either in the household or in the city, women did not have the same treatment of men. Education for women had always been weaker: nurses and midwives could not be professional doctors, housewifery was taken for granted, industries did not put women at the same level of men. The English writer Mary Astell (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1666-1731) was very concerned about equal education opportunities for women; she eventually gained the title of first English feminist. In one of her few surviving works, she points out the importance of equal opportunities between genders:

> For since God has given Women as well as Men intelligent Souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them? Since he has not denied to us the Faculty of Thinking, why shou'd we not (at least in gratitude to him) employ our Thoughts on himself their noblest Object, and not unworthily bestow them on Trifles and Gaieties and secular Affairs? [39]

Astell argues that only through education could women become knowledgeable citizens and be professionally independent. Along with other writers of her time, Astell saw education as the fulfillment of one's own life. Anna Maria van Shurman (1607-1678), Astell's contemporary, was a Dutch painter, engraver, poet and scholar, who was known for her exceptional learning and her defense of female education. Schurman focuses on the fact that not only men but also women should aim at the achievement of wisdom; Shurman could not understand "why a young girl in whom we admit a desire for self-improvement should not be encouraged to acquire the best that life afford". [40] The suggestion that formal institutions such as universities or academies should be opened to women was rare; instead,

[38] M. Healy, 2015, *Medicine and Disease*, in: K. Raber, 2015, *A Cultural History of Women in the Renaissance*. Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 93-112.
[39] M. Astell, 1694, *A Serious Proposal for the Ladies.* London.
[40] A. Van Shurman, 1659, *The Learned Maid or Whether a Maid May Be Called a Scholar?*, London, p. 55

women could hire private tutors or learn on their own. Thus, the debate about women's education was an important issue during the early modern period and it was passionately argued by many women who eventually achieved a level of learning similar to men's.

Formal educational opportunities for boys grew steadily during the early modern period. On one hand, with the development of the printing press, written instructional manuals could integrate masters' and tutors' lessons; on the other hand, craftsmen and tradesmen needed their sons to learn reading and writing in order to upgrade their business. Consequently, by the end of the sixteenth century, nearly all male workers, such as painters and goldsmiths, could read. [41] Furthermore, after the Protestant Reformation, in schools it was possible to learn Latin in order to read the Bible individually; the vast majority of these people were men, though.

The teaching of Latin to women was viewed as something impractical and at worst dangerous; women did not become lawyers, professors or government officials, so Latin was not needed; besides, women were supposed to take care of the household and the children. Latin was not required in a woman's life. The issue concerning women and Latin raised questions on women's independence and freedom of expression. For example, a possible application involved the reading of the Bible, but why should a woman read the Bible on her own? The Bible could be read by the father or the husband, while women could just listen. What's more, learning Latin - and learning in general - was depicted as a distraction from the everyday routine of carrying out domestic duties. Although the opponents explained their aversion towards female education with practical examples of everyday life, they recognized that "learning to read and write could radically alter a woman's view of the world and her place in it". [42]

Some women became literate and went beyond basic literacy. Despite opposition and hostility, women succeeded in making plans for their formal institutions of learning; moreover, they covered important roles in patronage and publishing, supporting learned and talented men too. [43]

[41] M. E. Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 141-174.
[42] Ibid. p. 143.
[43] It is important to remind us that only few people, among men and women, were literate in the early modern period. Even the basic literacy was not achieved by the vast majority of them.

1.4.1. BASIC TRAINING: READING AND WRITING

The education of girls was designed to protect and preserve their chastity and virtue. Thus, it was highly recommended to limit their study - Latin and Greek were excluded for instance - as it might expose them to obscene literature and frivolous books. Yet, despite the objections of many Christian and Jewish moralists, several early modern women from middle-class and aristocracy were actually educated, some of them even as extensively as boys. [44] It seemed that some women did not need an institutional education: partly because they were considered highly skilled in a trade, partly because they had worked since childhood. This kind of unwritten education came through oral tradition and training in workshop; apprentices learned from their parents or their masters, and acquired an informal education that lacked structure.

A girl's first teachers were her parents, who used to teach her how to read. When parents could not teach their daughters they sent them to the neighbors; in many towns there were the so-called 'cranny schools', ran by older women who taught children basic reading and the recitation of the Bible. [45] However, these women were barely literate in the majority of the cases, only being able to read but not to write. The authorities, who were responsible for licencing and regulating teachers, endured cranny schools as long as women became too successful; in that case the city council could intervene and limit the teaching only to reading activities.

In Protestant areas, and then in Catholic ones too, learning to read was fundamental for religious and political instruction. Religious authorities encouraged the opening of elementary schools for girls. Nevertheless, the gap between girls and boys did not vanish and only a few girls' schools were opened. Girls were offered little education: they attended an hour a day for one or two years. [46] Along with reading and writing, girls learnt sewing and other domestic skills, which also gave them the possibility to be teachers and enabled the authorities to spend less as women were paid less than men. A potential teacher was chosen for her ability to teach domestic skills, together with her honorable lifestyle.

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[44] Brown Meg Lota and McBride Kary Boyd, 2015, *Education and Work*. In: K. Raber, *A Cultural History of Women in the Renaissance*. Bloomsbury Academic.
[45] H. Brayman Hackel, 2005, *Reading Material in Early Modern England: Print, Gender and Literacy*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 69-137.
[46] M. E. Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 141-174.

Brown and McBride [47] affirm that families often sent their children to convent schools were girls were taught by nuns; such establishments became boarding schools by the late fifteenth century, where girls could live until a marriageable age or until they made vows as nuns. Convents emphasised piety and morals more than academic knowledge; the main method was memorisation, which represented a limit in girls' curricula and general presentation in society.

Girls attended school for a briefer period than boys, which often meant they learned to read but not to write; writing was more expensive because students had to buy material on which to write and parents did not consider girls worth the money. Teaching women to read but not to write was both an economic decision and the result of contemporary notions about the ideal woman. Learning to write would have enabled women to express their own ideas, a possibility seen as both important and threatening. Consequently, although there were women who were technically literate, they could not take up jobs in which writing and figuring were required: as a result, many of them felt discouraged and did not carry on with their learning.

Once a girl had learnt reading, the choice of the kind of books she would read was completely class-specific. During the sixteenth century, the vast majority of the reading material was on religion, from expensive Bibles, small collections of psalms to religious pamphlets or saints' biographies. Women were more likely than men to limit their book ownership to works of devotional nature rather than controversy-oriented religious books. [48] When parents divided books among their children, daughters always received religious books, while sons had other types of books too. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the first books thought specifically for girls started being published; therefore, prayer books and books about virtuous women were considered the most appropriate readings for female readers, as they could learn from biblical examples of chaste and honorable women. Those kinds of books differed from the other religious books both in language and in tone: the sentences were shorter and the tone milder; hell and damnation were rarely mentioned.

Both Snook [49] and Brayman [50] describe the different genres of women's readings, other than the religious ones. First of all, the books addressed to adult women in the

[47] M. L. Brown and K. B. McBride, 2015, *Education and Work*. In: K. Raber, *A Cultural History of Women in the Renaissance*. Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 132-158.
[48] E. Snook, 2006, *Women, Reading, and the Cultural Politics of Early Modern England*. Burlington, VT, Ashgate, pp. 1-21.
[49] Ibid.

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were published in small format so that they were cheap and easily accessible. The contents of female readings all aimed at the proper household's behavior of the woman: there were books on marriage (a sort of guide on how to be a good Christian wife), books of devotion and consolation for pregnant women, especially about gruesome stories of death during childbirth or mothers carrying dead fetuses; cookbooks were much appreciated, some of them written by female writers. The following quotation, from Anna Wecker's 1597 cookbook, exemplifies the nature of this genre: "a delicious new cookbook, not only for the healthy, but also and primarily for those sick with all types of illnesses and infirmities and also pregnant women, newly-delivered mothers and old weak people". [51] As clearly stated by Wecker, cookbooks were addressed specifically to women. Although they were primarily designed for noble, wealthy - and healthy - women, they included not only meal recipes, but also remedies for sick people. Along with cookbooks, literacy reached midwives as well; midwives' manuals were frequently reprinted and translated and they provided a steady market for printing. Moreover, manuals of needlework and other domestic skills spread out, they were a typical gift men used to buy for their wives and daughters. [52]

Literacy was strongly influenced by gender and class distinctions; women were instructed to be chaste, silent and obedient. Male authorities and authors were worried about the effect that reading certain material could have caused. For instance, in 1543 Henry VIII of England issued an act in which he forbade women to read the Bible, except for "noblewomen and gentlewomen [who] might read it privately, but not to others." [53] Moreover, in Thomas Bentley's *Monument of Matrones* (1582), it is possible to find examples of female subservience taken from Paul's letters to the Corinthians, whereas the excerpts about the interdependence of men and women are omitted.[54]

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[50] H. Brayman Hackel, 2005, *Reading Material in Early Modern England: Print, Gender and Literacy*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 69-137.
[51] Quoted in: M. E. Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge University Press, p. 149.
[52] H. Brayman Hackel, 2005, *Reading Material in Early Modern England: Print, Gender and Literacy*, pp. 69-137.
[53] Quoted in: S. Hull, 1982, *Chaste, Silent and Obedient: English Books for Women 1475-1640*. San Marino, CA, Huntington Library: p. xii.
[54] T. Bentley, 1582, *Monument of Matrones*. London.

1.4.2. LEARNED WOMEN

During the early modern period, the spread of Humanism brought important changes in education. According to humanists, an education based on classics was the best preparation for a political career, either for a ruler or for an adviser: people could learn to speak eloquently and make good decisions starting from historical examples. Humanism focused on the common good of society rather than on religion and moral. As Wiesner-Hanks [55] states, the importance humanists gave to education led to questions about whether humanist education was appropriate for women and, most of all, if women were capable of advanced learning at all. As a consequence, debates about whether to give women the possibility to achieve an advanced level of education divided the intellectual world: indeed, the boldest claims derived from male opponents. However, there were some authors who thought women learning should not be limited; most importantly, some claims in favor of female education came from women themselves.

According to Margaret King [56], there were many examples of women who eventually achieved a great level of learning despite the difficulties and the female exclusion from the academies. In Italy, for instance, Isotta Nogarola (1418-66), after being educated in Latin by a tutor, gave public orations demonstrating her knowledge of biblical and classical notions; in her correspondence it is possible to find a list of women she described as "superior to men" [57] in eloquence and virtue.

Another example is Cassandra Fedele (1456-1558), who gave an oration in Latin at the University of Padua in honour of her cousin's graduation. Known as the best female scholar of her time, Fedele kept giving orations specifically focused on the value of learning. Furthermore, she insisted on the importance and benefits of literature in women's life: "Even if the study of literature offers women no rewards or honors, I believe women must nonetheless pursue and embrace such studies alone for the pleasure and enjoyment they contain... I myself intend to pursue immortality through such studies". [58] The middle-

[55] M. E. Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 141-174.
[56] King Margaret L., 1991, *Women of the Renaissance*. University of Chicago Press; 2005, *Humanism, Venice, and Women: Essays on the Italian Renaissance*. Burlington, VT, Ashgate.
[57] Nogarola Isotta, 2004, *Complete Works*. ed. and trans. King Margaret L. and Robin Diana. University of Chicago Press. p. 100.
[58] Fedele Cassandra, 2000, *Letters and Orations*, ed. and trans. Robin Diana, University of Chicago Press. p. 162, 159.

class urban woman Laura Cereta (1469-99) also argued that there were actually many examples of women who had reached success in learning; as a matter of fact, she believed that nature offered the gift of reason to everyone, but in order to achieve knowledge it took a great effort and work:

> An education is neither bequeathed to us as a legacy, nor does some fate or other give it to us as a gift. Virtue is something that we ourselves acquire, nor can those women who become dull-witted through laziness and the sludge of low pleasures ascend to the understanding of difficult things. But for women who believe that study, hard work, and vigilance will bring them sure pleasure, the road to attaining knowledge is broad. [59]

Humanism reached England in the sixteenth century and a small number of women received this kind of education. Among them, the most famous was Margaret Roper, Thomas More's daughter; she wrote orations, poems, letters and treatises using both English and Latin. In 1524 she published the English translation of Erasmus' *A Devout Treatise on the Pater Noster*; the genre of translation was undoubtedly considered the best genre for female writers and was not affected by censure. Initially, the translation was published anonymously, although the people in contact with the More family knew it was Margaret. She eventually gained a public reputation as a pious and loyal woman and an example of virtue. [60] When Roper allowed the publication of her work, Richard Hyrde wrote the introduction, in which he defended women's education. [61]

Along with Roper, other women demonstrated their ability. Yet all that male writers had to say were either comments about their virtue or praises of how they had tried to become like men. Although with humanism learning and literacy seemed to have made a change in women's life, schools were still not open for women; the prerogative of becoming a learned citizen remained a male opportunity and right, whereas for women it was just an exception for the few who had a noble family and a proper education.

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[59] Cereta Laura, 1997, *Collected Letters of a Renaissance Feminist*, ed. and trans. Robin Diana. University of Chicago Press. p. 78.
[60] R. A. Houston, 2001, *Literacy in Early Modern England: Culture and Education 1500-1800*. London and New York. Longman, pp. 43.139.
[61] K. Usher Henderson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half-Humankind*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, pp. 3-39.

1.4.3. COURTS AND PATRONAGE

During the Early Modern Era, upper-class families' daughters used to pass a period of their adolescence at the service of households or courts. The fact that in this period courts were not only sites of politics but also of culture, gave significant opportunities to those daughters. Under the influence of humanists, rulers began to support writers, artists and thinkers to demonstrate their own interest in learning. Therefore, serving at royal courts represented the perfect opportunity for a girl to establish herself in the cultural world.

Patronage proved crucial both to people who wanted to be glorified and enriched, and to artists too, who got paid for their work; women at court took advantage of patronage in order to help female artists to further their career. Although historians state that Renaissance was mostly influenced by male rulers, there are many examples that confirm the importance of female patronage and its influence on the cultural framework. All over Europe, noblewomen hired architects and sculptors to project castles and elaborate tombs for them and their family; abbesses requested the decorations of their convents, orphanages and churches; female rulers hired musicians, portrait artists and philosophers in order to make their courts renowned. [62]

Artists and writers looked for individual capable of providing them "monetary support in return for being depicted as classical figures or pious onlookers in religious scene or in return for having a book dedicated to them". [63] Artists had to find dedicatees who felt flattered enough to provide a financial help; and they had to persuade their patrons to sell the piece of art. For women this process was harder: female artists who addressed their works to women, or who wrote about the female condition, had to choose powerful upper-class women as patrons, "hoping that this would forestall or lessen criticism". [64]

Nevertheless, from 1500 onwards, middle-class women became more significant not only as patrons but also as consumers. The relation between patronage and consumerism is significant in this particular cultural environment: women's role as consumers affected the trends of their contemporary world both in art and in the market business. First of all, they bought books of different subjects, such as music, science and literature; they also paid

[62] C. Lawrence, 1997, *Women and Art in Early Modern Europe: Patrons, Collectors and Connoisseurs*. University Park, Pennsylvania University Press, pp. 154-188.
[63] M. E. Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, p. 168.
[64] Ibid. p. 169.

composers for creating music specifically for them. Moreover, wealthy women were interested in embellishing their private homes following the fashion of courts and palaces. They ordered furniture, paintings, silver table pieces too, jewelry and costly fabrics, giving the opportunity to goldsmiths and silversmith to craft authentic pieces of art.

Was women's patronage different from men's? Usually, female patrons were not rulers themselves: they were the rulers' wives or relatives, lacking complete control on decision-making.[65] Besides the nature of their roles, the differences concerned the choices of which kind of work they decided to support. For instance, according to King Catherine and Harness Kelley [66], there is evidence in Venice and Florence of women's charitable patronage directed towards poorer families in their own neighborhood, while men preferred to support the building of churches and hospitals. Furthermore, women were more likely to support religious works, both in literature and in visual arts.

To sum up, during the early modern period women and men did not enjoy equal opportunities in education and learning; from basic schooling to advanced literacy, the educational system was based on gender and social class distinctions. Even wealthy and virtuous women received a limited training, except for a small cluster of cases. The inequality of opportunities affected women's chances to enrich their culture and to provide patronage; the male-oriented cultural system prevented most women from freely creating literature, music and any other form of expression.

1.5. WOMEN CREATING CULTURE : ARTISTS AND MUSICIANS

In the previous paragraphs I have analyzed women's hard path towards education and learning. The focus of this section is the creation of a female culture, made by the cluster of women who succeeded in learning and established themselves in the world of culture and science. During the Early Modern Era women were often excluded from schools and academies, and female self-promotion was seen as unacceptable. Only male artists and thinkers were celebrated as examples of forcefulness, singularity of purpose, power and

[65] C. King, 1998, *Renaissance Women Patrons: Wives and Widows in Italy c. 1300-1550.* Manchester University Press, pp. 184-212.
[66] K. Harness, 2006, *Echoes of Women's Voices: Music, Art, and Patronage in Early Modern Florence*. Chicago University Press, pp. 13-39.

strength. Women's creations were considered merely works of diligence, observation of a male teacher and industriousness, whereas the creative genius was an exclusively male characteristic.

The gendered culture of art during the Renaissance implied that whenever a woman created a new genre of visual art it would not have been considered a major art but only a minor craft. For instance, in the Middle Ages the art of embroidery was a craft performed both by men and women, then it became typically feminine during the Renaissance. Almost all women of the middle and upper classes learnt embroidery, which was depicted as a representative activity for women. Yet, it was not considered an art but just an accomplishment in a woman's life.

Major arts, such as architecture and sculpture, were restricted to men only. Those women who succeeded in becoming painters were typically daughters of artists themselves: in order to have an artistic career women had to be of a certain social and artistic rank. Moreover, the possibility of success increased if the family did not have sons but only daughters; in this case, it was more likely that the father manifested his interest in the daughter's career and ambitions.

There were restrictions concerning the subjects of paintings too; for example, women were not allowed to study male nudes, which was fundamental for a lot of representations (historical paintings for instance) ; as a consequence, women had to limit their themes to still lifes, interior scenes and small portraits. Besides, there were techniques that women could not perform. For instance, the technique of fresco was considered unbefitting for female painters because they would have to work in public for entire days.

Musical career for women was not so different than a career as an artist; most of the middle and upper classes girls received a musical training but they were to perform only for their families. Being able to play an instrument was considered an accomplishment, similar to the embroidery, that aimed to impression a potential husband. In most of the cases, women were even more musically competent than men, as they studied for years how to play and they also enjoyed being the audience of musical performances. However, in public contexts only men were allowed to play. From the 1550 onwards church officials and nobles had the necessity to hire musicians and composers because music was acquiring new features and elaborate forms. In particular, they specifically needed women voices in order

to have great and varied compositions. Only by the end of the sixteenth century will the number of professional women singers and composers increase. [67]

Like female painters, many female musicians came from musical families; they were trained by their father who helped them publishing their music. Convents also gave an opportunity to women who wanted to study music. Many of the women who undertook the career of singers were often actresses. From the middle of the seventeenth century, women started playing in operas and plays instead of men, who had been assuming female roles for a long time. However, the careers of opera singers and actresses was regarded as dishonorable for a woman; if a woman wanted to undertake such career she often had to become the mistress of a patron who could support her.

1.6. WOMEN CREATING CULTURE: WRITERS

"The exploration of the lives and writing of early modern women is a growth industry" [68] ; Demers continues saying that the studies on women writing embrace a interlaced, crisscrossed network of actions and meanings, patterns of development and dissemination. While analysing early modern female writing, one has to remember that this period underwent important historical changes (the advent of the printing press for instance) and a profound transformation of society. There is not a clear division of genres written by women, partly because the majority of works that have been collected were written by men; as we have seen in the previous sections, women's writings were barely taken into consideration and women were hardly seen as professional writers. Nevertheless, Demers has made an accurate description of the most typical genres women used to write and to publish. A major genre for early modern writers was translation. It was seen as the perfect kind of writing for a woman because it consisted in presenting, representing and interpreting in one's own language someone else's text. Thus, the act of translation "could actually be seen to contribute to the obliteration of women from the literary landscape" [69]; as women did not express their own thoughts when translating, they did something useful for all native

[67] T. LaMay (ed.), 2005, *Musical Voices of Early Modern Women: Many Headed Melodies*. Burlington, VT, Ashgate, pp. 63-95.
[68] P. Demers, 2005, *Women's Writing in English: Early Modern England*. University of Toronto Press. p. 4.
[69] Ibid. p. 64.

speakers without raising gender issues. Furthermore, translation was a representative genre for women because it conveyed the quality of patience, chastity and passivity; translators had the chance to confront with other cultures and to interpret not only the writer's language but his culture too. The texts English women used to translate were mainly religious scriptures, sometimes Latin or Greek classics, and French and Italian contemporary works. In some cases, women could achieve a good level of fluency in modern languages other than French: Queen Elizabeth, for instance, had a conversational fluency in Italian and Spanish.

Just like music and art, writing was an activity that could be both public or private. Even though there were many women who kept private diaries and letters, it is difficult to make a sharp division between the two spheres. Letters might refer to political news as well as private matters, and writers were aware of the fact that letters could circulate among a group of people or be copied. Women knew that letters were their only way to express themselves freely and perhaps get the chance to have them circulated. In some cases, private writing was never meant to be private at all: when letters were published women could justify their boldness by saying that the work should have been left private. [70]

"Meditations, testimonials, and prayers, along with diaries and letters, were overlapping modes of expressivity for early modern women" [71]: these kinds of works portrayed everyday occurrences and personal matters in a different way than diaries. Meditations and testimonials conveyed religious intentions, and women could pen their struggles about systems of belief and emotional attachments creating (either intentionally or inadvertently) autobiographical composition. Indeed, religious practice and doctrinal adherence represented a fundamental aspect of Renaissance life, especially of women's life.

An example of a both meditative and testimonial work is Anne Askew's Examinations. Askew (ca. 1521-1546) underwent a series of interrogation concerning her doubtful views on the Eucharist and eventually she was burnt as a heretic. Her Examinations - *The First Examinacyon* (1546) and *The Lattre Examinacyon* (1547) - reported the details of the interrogations and her personal defense, in which she showed a remarkable ability to hold her own and defend herself. Askew's autobiographical work is both a testimony of the

[70] M. E. Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 183-188.
[71] P. Demers, 2005, *Women's Writing in English: Early Modern England*. University of Toronto Press. p. 99.

tortures and the inquiry she suffered and a meditation on the system that held her prisoner for her beliefs.

Moving to a different genre, the first prayer book published by an English woman and addressed to women in Anne Wheathill's *A Handfull of Holesome (though homelie) Herbs* (1584). The forty-nine enumerated prayers illustrates the capacity of Wheathill to provide recipes on food, medicine, scents and flavors to women who could not afford a professional medical help. She also demonstrated to be familiar with the Bible and to be able to make religious parallels and connections between healing and praying.

The majority of women who wrote about nonreligious topics chose poetry as their preferred mode of expression. As Wiesner-Hanks argues, female poets wrote both religious and secular poetry, including moral advice and divine love. Alongside poetry, women also wrote fictional pieces and plays. In Italy, for instance, Beatrice del Sera used to write plays that were performed in convents, with nuns playing all parts; they conveyed a spiritual message and included lay themes as well. Female poetry unfolded women's personal and spiritual development, together with adaptations of male poetry to their own sensitivity.

The creation of a female culture does not only refer to the increasing publications of women's writings but it also conveys the importance of women entering the literary world despite gender divisions and differences. Women writers would eventually acquire the courage to directly respond to men's misogynistic accusations and they would demonstrate their qualities and fine education. More and more, women would speak up in order to defend their own sex until the utmost point of the controversy, the *querelle des femmes*. In chapter 2 the focus will be on the years of the debate on women, when either men and women wrote attacks and defenses against or in favour of womankind. During the querelle, many female writers demonstrated to have the competence of writing elaborate works and managing historical sources as well as religious and artistic ones.

2. THE QUERELLE DES FEMMES

Women have always been a subject of great interest throughout literary history. In particular, both female and male writers have argued about gender issues raising attacks and defenses that had marked all the early modern period. While men were depicted primarily as individuals or as members of a group (such as a profession, a social class, an ethic group), women "have been repeatedly generalized into Woman, that fascinating topic for diatribes or panegyrics". [1] The inequality between the two sexes became the most prominent issue of the early modern debate over gender roles, especially the discussion over women's worth and position in society.

The controversy on women affected more or less all European countries, and the fact that it developed during the Early Modern Era is no coincidence at all; this period represents a landmark partly because women began to write and publish their own defenses, launching a new trend for female writers. In addition, the debate became more understandable to modern readers thanks to the development of education and the spread of literacy. Furthermore, as the defenses were written in the women's vernacular language, they were more accessible than the previous Latin or Greek treatises.

Henderson K., McManus B. F.[2] illustrate the debate starting from an historical panoramic on the inherited tradition of women controversy, and continuing with the individual English cases (which I will analyze in the third chapter). Henderson and MacManus talk about 'half humankind' - with reference to the early modern vision of the female sex - because women were considered a consequence of men, almost a different species. In other words, while the definition of men was applied to human nature in general, women were described differently, suggesting that they were not as human as men.

Joan Kelly argues that despite the great improvements brought by the Renaissance, both economically and socially, women could not completely benefit from those changes [3]. Even in Italy, where the reorganization of society along modern lines, and the possibilities for social and cultural expression made this country the most advanced in Europe, women were affected adversely. Thus, women "experienced a contraction of social and personal

[1] K. Usher Henderson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind - Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640.* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, p.3.
[2] Ibid.
[3] J. Kelly, 1986, *Women, History and Theory*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 19-51.

options that men of their classes either did not, as was the case with the bourgeoisie, or did not experience as markedly, as was the case of nobility" [4]; Kelly wonders whether women did have a Renaissance or whether they just passively lived in that period.

The term *querelle des femmes* indicates the long debate on women that started in the early fifteenth century with Christine de Pisan, and went on until the present age [5]. Of course, early modern women did not name their cause with this term, they rather described themselves as defenders or advocates. According to Kelly, the debate had three main characteristics. First of all, the *querelle* was polemical: all defenses were responses to specific, published attacks against women; in their writings, women took a conscious, dialectical stand in opposition to male defamation and subjection of women. Secondly, women focused on gender, demonstrating not only to be aware of biological, but also of cultural differences between sexes; besides, women directed their ideas against the notions of 'defective sex' that flowed from the misogynous side of the debate. Finally, the main concern of those defenders was to oppose the mistreatment of women and to reject misogynist claims. [6]

To conclude, along with the concept of 'half humankind', the debate on gender unfolded the matter of authority which only men could exert both in the private and in the public sphere. The attacks and defenses were connected to the question of power, which represented one of the main reasons of female discontentment.

2.1. GENDER AND POWER

How to define the link between power and Renaissance women? Holly Hurlburt points out that, then as now, power might be best comprehended politically, or as access or proximity to governance. [7] Despite the fact that women were considered the second sex and they were regarded as unfit to rule, in Renaissance Europe a great number of rulers were actually female. In the vast majority of the countries, well-established traditions of misogyny discouraged female ruling because while femininity was associated with

[4] J. Kelly, 1986, *Women, History and Theory*, University of Chicago Press, p.20.
[5] With the passing of time, the debate acquired the definition of feminism, by which it is defined nowadays.
[6] J. Kelly, 1986, *Women, History and Theory*, University of Chicago Press, p. 66.
[7] H. Hurlburt, 2015, *Power*. In: K. Raber, *A Cultural History of Women in the Renaissance*. Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 160-182.

weakness, masculinity was associated with power and leadership; remarkably, all those beliefs did not exclude women from being sovereigns. Giovanna II of Naples, Isabel of Castile, Mary of Burgundy, Mary Queen of Scots, Mary Tudor, Jeanne D'Albret Queen of Navarre, and Elizabeth Tudor all came to power though direct inheritance rather than marriage, and ruled either alone or with their spouses. [8]

Moreover, two of these reigns, those of Isabel of Castile (who ruled independently even after her marriage to Ferdinand of Aragon) and Elizabeth (who never married), lasted decades and were periods of economic growth, stability, expansion and cultural flowering. Both queens made explicit reference to their powerful fathers; Isabel associated herself with her father Juan II, likewise, Elizabeth is well known for constantly recalling her descent from Henry VIII. Furthermore, both queens used their femininity to suggest the resemblance with the Virgin Mary. This association conveyed the idea of the virtuous woman: Elizabeth never married and was called the Virgin Queen as she embraced chastity; Isabel, who was married instead, encouraged comparisons with the Virgin as a mother whose offspring could redeem the world.

The idea of the powerful woman was thus strictly connected to queens or to the ones who played a political role, not to common women. Except for the group of female sovereigns, in early modern society women did not hold office or participate in formal political institutions. Historians make distinctions between power (the ability to shape political events) and authority (formally recognized and legitimated power); while women hardly had the latter, they did not have the former at all. [9] As Wiesner-Hanks exemplifies, through the arrangement of marriages, women established ties between influential families; through letters and rumors, they shaped opinions; through patronage, they helped or hindered men's political careers. Even though they were clearly part of history, none of those actions led in the early modern period to call for a formal political rights for women.

The husband's authority was a highly respected principle of the Early Modern Era; women and children would not dispute the authority of the husband/father, who was seen as the ruler of the family receiving the authority directly from God. Thus, the household was viewed as a small political unit, with the father at the apex of the hierarchy. Not only were husbands authorities in their households: they enjoyed a position of superiority in religion

[8] H. Hurlburt, 2015, *Power*. In: K. Raber, *A Cultural History of Women in the Renaissance*. Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 160-182.
[9] M. E. Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*, pp. 276-298.

too. Both political and religious communities were formed by men only, while women lived their religious life differently: for them it was not a ritualized civic matter. [10]

"Women's dependence on their husbands was used as a reason not to listen to their demands in the few cases in which women other than queens actually carried out political actions in early modern Europe" [11]; for instance, several times during the English Civil War large groups of women petitioned Parliament to improve trade, to end debt laws and to release revolutionaries from prison. Those petitions, though, were often read with sarcasm and disdain as matters that escaped female understanding. Female petitions that were actually paid attention to were those about the ability to work at certain trade, emphasizing the domestic responsibilities women should have.

Gender was of course a central category in early modern definitions of power. The proper differentiation between men and women served as a basis for both the political system and the functioning of society as a whole. These dichotomized relations between sexes provided a model of authority and subordination, where women were always subject to the male ruler. Whenever a woman stepped outside those precise boundaries, she was considered a threat for all the community and labeled as 'disorderly'. Thus, the notion of disorder was extremely important; it conveyed the meanings of unruliness and unreasonableness, something that went outside the social structure. [12] As we have seen in chapter 1.1.2, women were easily suspected of witchcraft for the specific reason that they were irrational and imperfect. Women were more disorderly than men right from their birth, because they represented men's antithesis, the imperfect part of the creation.

To sum up, among all the parameters that divided early modern society (class, rank, occupation, ethnicity), gender was regarded as the most natural way to arrange hierarchies, from the private context of the family to the public institution of the realm.

[10] M. McKeon, 2005, *The Secret History of Domesticity: Public, Private, and the Division of Knowledge,* Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. xvii-xxiii.
[11] M. E. Wiesner-Hanks, 2008, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe,* p. 285.
[12] Ibid.

2.2. THE TRADITION OF THE DEBATE ABOUT WOMEN

The inherited tradition of the *querelle* goes back to classical antiquity. At the end of the eight century B.C., the Greek poet Hesiod wrote the mythic tale of Pandora, in which he explicitly expressed his misogynistic ideas. According to Hesiod, Pandora was sent to earth by Zeus as a punishment for Prometheus, who had stolen fire from the gods. The poet describes the woman as "a sheer, impossible deception" characterized by "lies, and wheedling words of falsehood, and a treacherous nature". [13] In the myth, Pandora's fault was, first of all, to have loosened diseases, troubles and labor upon the world; most importantly, she was guilty of having given origin to the race of women. Zeus decreed another evil punishment for men: in order to have male children they would have needed women.

Almost a century after Hesiod, Semonides of Amorgos wrote a satiric poem in which he catalogued female faults by comparing them with animals. Although the poem actually contains one good type of woman (compared with the bee), Sermonides immediately echoes Hesiod's condemnation of the female sex describing women as a plague sent by Zeus. Along with Hesiod, Sermonides and other Greek poets (Aristophanes and Aristotle), there are examples of hostility toward women throughout all Greek mythology. Greek thought culminated with the disparagement of marriage, expressed in a treatise written by Theophrastus; among the reasons why men should not marry, the writer states that women are irretrievably flawed creatures. [14]

The misogynistic tradition was less severe in Roman literature, had however its share of insults against wives in comedies and complaints against mistresses. The poet Juvenal built a full-scale attack on women in his Sixth Satire (first century B.C.):

> 'Isn't there a single one worthy of you, in all that vast flock?'
> Let her be lovely, gracious, rich, and fertile; let her exhibit her
> Ancestors' faces round her porticos; be more virginal than the
> Sabine women, with tangled hair, who ended war with Rome;

[13] Hesiod, *Works and Days*, p. 83, 78; translated by Richmond Lattimore. Quoted in: K. Usher Handerson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind*, p. 5.
[14] St. Jerome, *Against Jovinianus*, W.H. Freemantle, trans., in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Catholic Church*. Quoted in: K. Usher Handerson K., B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind*, p. 5.

[...] Who could stand a wife who embodied all of that? [15]

Even if a woman was free of vices - lust, greed, jealousy, cruelty, vanity -, Juvenal would reject her. Thus, thanks to his vehemence, Juvenal's satire provided a convenient source for many later attacks on women.

Writers who did not support misogynistic views found very few examples of women's defenses in classical antiquity. In the tragedies of Euripides it is possible to find many strong and intelligent women; the figure of Medea can be seen as an indictment of men's treatment of women, demonstrating that Euripides had more empathy for women than any other of his contemporaries. Furthermore, Plato gave credit to women in his *Republic*, where he proposes an utopia in which both men and women formed the ruling class; he also envisioned an equal education for female and male guardians and prescribed measures to free women from childbearing. Although Plato showed support for women's condition, he never stated that women were equal to men in the *Republic*, nor in other works, where he showed considerably less sympathy for the female sex.

The Bible was the most influential source for the early modern controversy on women; it represented not only a resourceful text for the attackers but also for the defenders of women in the Renaissance. Both the Old and the New Testament contain many generalizations about wicked and virtuous women. Usually, attackers used Proverbs and Ecclesiastes to denounce quarrelsome wives, whereas they looked at Saint Paul's Letters (Ephesians) for the disparagement of marriage and the subservience of women. [16]

Similarly to the figure of Pandora, the biblical Eve was taken as a reference by misogynist attackers; authors wrote about her role in the expulsion of man from Paradise or her method of creation in order to demonstrate women's inferiority. In particular, they discussed the chronology of creation stressing the fact that Eve - as well as Pandora - was created after man; consequently, she had to be subjected to Adam. Among the theologians who inveighed against women's inferiority, the most venomous statement can be found in Saint Jerome's treatise *Against Jovinianus* (end of fourth century A.D.); Jerome identified women as the incarnation of sexual desire corrupting men's souls. [17]

[15] Juvenal, *The Satires*. Trans. A.S. Kline, 2011. Satire IV, 55-140.
[16] K. Usher Henderson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind*, p.7.
[17] Ibid. pp. 4-10.

2.2.1. CHRISTINE DE PISAN AND *LE LIVRE DE LA CITÉ DES DAMES*

The tradition of the controversy on women began with ancient Latin and Greek poets; we can find works that have been used as basis for early modern misogynistic attacks in the Middle Ages too. The medieval controversy developed a set of conventions and motifs, such as anecdotes, common interpretations, standard arguments, which were invoked by both attackers and defenders. A recurrent trend in medieval writing is the cult of courtly love, which apparently idealized women and presented the female love as an exalting and ennobling passion. With a closer look, though, this code had its negative side too, "as lovers wrote bitter denunciations of women and love along with their poems of praise". [18]

The most important controversy of the Middle Ages started with the attacks against women contained in the chivalric romance *Roman de la Rose*, written in the late thirteenth century by the French poet Jean de Meun. In the second half of his work, Meun penned his "sexual cynicism which took marriage to be an outdated institution" [19] and obtained the response of the French female poet Christine de Pisan in the *Débat sur le Roman de la Rose* (1400-1402). In her response, Pisan opposed Meun's condemnations with a "contrasted idealism which demanded that men profess loyalty to women, and adhere to marriage as a mark of respect for the female sex". [20] Earlier, in 1399, Pisan had tried to defend women from all generalizing condemnations with a letter addressed to the God of Love (*Épistre au Dieu d'Amours*) in which she had attacked Meun for the first time. It is probably this first epistle that initiated the *querelle*, a literary debate that saw its first long formal defense of women in Pisan's *Le livre de la cité des dames* (*The book of the city of Ladies*), 1405. The book begins when three allegorical goddesses - Reason, Rectitude and Justice - tell Christine that she must build a city for honorable women of all types:

> "We have come to vanquish from the world the same problem upon which you have fallen, so that from now on, ladies and valiant women may have a refuge and a defense against the various assailants". [21]

[18] K. Usher Handerson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind*, p. 8.
[19] D. Riley, 1988, *Am I That Name? : Feminism and the Category of 'Women' In History*, London: Macmillian, p.10.
[20] Ibid.
[21] C. De Pisan, *The Book of the city of Ladies.* Trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards, 1982, New York: Persea, p. 10.

Jill Wagner asserts that Pisan constructed her history as both an allegory and a city of ladies for several possible reasons [22]. The author can speak to readers by channeling herself into the main character; moreover, the form of authorial conversation with allegorical figures was a popular didactic medieval convention, and this structure is still accessible. But most importantly, by writing (as the author) and creating (as the heroine), Pisan "emphasizes women's spaces, self-defense, and memory as keys to the creation of women's history and future. All three keys transcend time, just like her monumental city". [23]

At the beginning of the tale, the narrator is sitting in her study, far from the imagined city; the atmosphere suggests the solitude of a monastery, a peaceful place. [24] It is exactly from the writer's study that Lady Reason appears with an important message; thanks to her love of study, Pisan is fit to be the champion for her sex, as well as the architect to design an ideal city for women of good reputation. In order to build the city, the ladies have to reject misogyny, an action metaphorically portrayed by clearing the land. According to Wagner, the fact that the city has to be populated just by women demonstrates that women could define themselves, and their collaboration shows the ability of authentic female friendship.[25] In Pisan's city of ladies there are women of all times: she addresses the residents as "all women who have loved and do love and will love virtue and morality" [26]; despite their differences, virtuous mothers, chaste virgins and self-sacrificing women are all valorous heroines. Furthermore, women can establish smaller personal spaces in the city and keep a community that highlights their similarities as well; in this way Pisan assured a place in which both individuality and sharing were possible.

Pisan creates a city reliant on self-defense, reminding women of their natural ability to defend themselves; Lady Reason informs the narrator of the reason for her arrival and that of Justice and Fortitude:

[22] J. E. Wagner, 2008, *Christine De Pizan's City of Ladies: A Monumental (Re)Construction of, by, and for Women of All Time*. Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality 44, No. 1, pp. 69-80.
[23] Ibid.
[24] J. S. Holderness, 2005, "Castles in the Air? The Prince as Conceptual Artist", in *Healing the Body Politic: The Political Thought of Christine De Pizan*, ed. Karen Green and Constant J. Mews. Turnhout: Brepols.
[25] J. E. Wagner, 2008, *Christine De Pizan's City of Ladies: A Monumental (Re)Construction of, by, and for Women of All Time*. Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality 44, No. 1, pp. 69-80.
[26] Christine De Pisan, *The Book of the city of Ladies*, p. 214.

> It is no wonder then that their jealous enemies, those outrageous villains who have assailed them with various weapons, have been victorious in a war in which women had no defense. [27]

The city defense is a metaphor that indicates the necessity to respond to those misogynistic attacks that have been claiming women's inferiority for centuries. Not only did Christine De Pisan build an ideal city whose defense would be eternal: for the first time, she gave voice to the new literary trend of women self-defense. According to Pisan, it is the female collectivity that will contribute to building a solid and lasting defense; the author is just the 'champion', a symbol of strength and innovation who should be followed by other writers and 'builders'. In the narration it is possible to find examples stories about virtuous and illustrious women ranging from antiquity to Pisan's contemporaries.

Another implication of Pisan's City of Ladies is aiding women in remembering their past to form their future. The author based her women's history on a historical model of material retention, the memory palace, in order to remind her readers of their female predecessors and their virtues. According to Wagner [28], the image of the palace would help women remember which heroine resided in each room, and consequently they would remember all women's history. In this way, the building is made of women, who represent the city itself, the very walls and rooms. The function of the memory palace has a deeper meaning: it helped women study and served the didactic aim of teaching women history and educating them; with Pisan's help, women could memorize, learn and apply moral behavior from commendable historical examples. Therefore, Pisan "does argue eloquently for the education of women, insisting upon their natural capabilities, dignity, and inherent worth".[29]

2.3. THE CONTROVERSY IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

"Early modern misogynous literature, despite its modifications of the medieval tradition, remained as wearisome in its repetitiveness and as obscene in content" [30];

[27] Christine De Pisan, *The Book of the city of Ladies*, p. 214.
[28] J. E. Wagner, 2008, *Christine De Pizan's City of Ladies: A Monumental (Re)Construction of, by, and for Women of All Time*. Medieval Feminist Forum: A Journal of Gender and Sexuality 44, No. 1, pp. 69-80.
[29] K. Usher Handerson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind*, p.10.
[30] J. Kelly, 1986, *Women, History and Theory*. University of Chicago Press, p. 74.

according to Kelly, the *querelle* served as a progressive purpose only for the pro-women side of the controversy as the repetitiveness of the misogynists affected their responses. Thus, the flood of arguments about the subjection of women, their imperfect human nature, and the exclusion from the concept of male scripture, kept repeating themselves; in spite of women's determination on defending themselves, there was not much development. The static quality of the genre, though, does not make the *querelle* a mere literary game. The fact that women repeated themselves instead of advancing their ideas is due to the fact that women lacked "any underlying social movement to carry their thought forward, as well as with repetitiveness to which they were responding" [31]. Women were completely involved in the matter; male defenders mostly wrote for women rulers often resulting suspiciously rhetorical and excessive. Pro-women male writers claimed that women should exercise every public office, from the judicial, to the ecclesiastic and academic one, sounding too persuasive, partly because their concern seemed merely literary.

Although most of those texts explicitly offered a new notion of what a woman was, they shared some reluctance to initiate political reform. Both defenders and attackers used genre, characterization, comedy, contrasting styles and other literary means "to short-circuit the logical political consequences of their praise". [32] In defending women, they defended their society and their own literary voices against new womankind, still remaining the authoritative authors of literary texts and governors of the institutions.

Pamela Joseph Benson offers the interesting notion of the "invention" of the Renaissance Woman, meaning both the Renaissance and the modern signification of the term. Early modern writers thought of invention as the recovery of a notion, the finding of something that had been lost, that is, finding a woman that has always existed, but who has not been recognized yet; in modern terms, the invention is the making of something original and unprecedented. The texts I will examine created an ideal woman suited to their time and place. Thus, "the 'Renaissance Woman' is both a recovery of the old and a construction of the new". [33] The apologetic texts reflected this notion as they created a new ideal of woman starting from historical examples, yet inventing, again, a stereotype which kept women in their cages of passivity and domesticity.

[31] J. Kelly, 1986, *Women, History and Theory*. University of Chicago Press, p.75.
[32] P. Joseph Benson, 1992, *The invention of the Renaissance Woman: the challenge of female independence in the literature and thought of Italy and England.* University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 2.
[33] Ibid.

The texts in defense and praise of womankind have long been considered merely playing games with the topic and the readers partly because of their stylistic and logical pyrotechnics; whenever the texts of the *querelle* succeeded in their mission of affirming women's superiority, they undermined not only the traditional assumption on women, but the structure of society itself. Thanks to their paradoxical nature of praising and defending the indefensible, those texts could change the readers' comfortable certainties. Furthermore, such texts, in their purest form, broke the absolute notion of women's inferiority without imposing a new orthodoxy of superiority. In contrast to Kelly's description of the texts as static and repetitive, Benson thinks that most of the texts did not end with a proper conclusion and left the debate open. [34]

2.3.1. THE CONTROVERSY IN ITALY

Pamela Joseph Benson devotes an entire section to the Italian developments of the *querelle.* [35] It is the main source of the following chapters as it provides a clear description of the works published during the controversy in Italy and it also gives an accurate analysis of the English ones.

The very first Italian defense of women was the *De mulierubus claris* (1361-62) written by Boccaccio. It is considered the foundation text of the pro-women writers and the basis of all the defense texts that were written during the *querelle*. The majority of the texts produced during the controversy were directly or indirectly indebted to Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* as it dared to speak out in favor of womankind. The book describes 106 lives of well-known women, from the antiquity to the Middle Ages; Boccaccio mixed together biographies of good and wicked women, providing examples of morality and virtue. For instance, chaste women such as Penelope and Lucrece appear alongside ruling queens and wicked women like Medea and Flora. Therefore, the book is a collection of exemplary lives that refutes the old view of the woman as inferior and private; it provides examples of heroic women who performed their deeds in spite of their asserted weakness.

[34] P. Joseph Benson, 1992, *The invention of the Renaissance Woman: the challenge of female independence in the literature and thought of Italy and England.* University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, p. 3.
[35] Ibid.

Boccaccio's work was somehow an anomaly in its time because of the importance it attributed to women and partly because it gave examples of women who demonstrated to possess skill in areas considered exclusively male. It took almost a century before another defense of women was published. In 1467, Antonio Cornazzano wrote *De mulieribus admirandis,* followed by Vespasiano da Bisticci's *Il Libro delle lode e commendazione delle donne* (1480) and Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti's *Gynevera de le clare donne* (1483). These works were all dedicated to female patrons and they all included only praiseworthy women. Among the three of them, Sabadino's work stands out for its diversity: "like Boccaccio's text, it celebrates women for their accomplishments in male fields endeavor, but without the extraordinary woman theory". [36] Along with Sabadino, other authors embraced the new ideal of womanhood, for instance, Antonio Strozzi and Bartolomeo Goggio developed and defended the theoretical ideal of Sabadino by incorporating the biographies of famous women within a larger structure of praise and defense.

In the sixteenth century, the topic of the defense became more and more common and even less known authors published apologetic works. Among the famous writers who took the side of women there was Baldesar Castiglione, who devoted a large part of his *Cortegiano* to women. *Il Libro del Cortegiano* was published in 1528. This Renaissance dialogue incorporates various genres such as drama, conversation, philosophy and essay. It is often considered the definitive account of Renaissance life as well as one of the most important Renaissance works of the Italian Renaissance. In the book there are a series of fictional dialogues between the Duke of Urbino and the courtiers; the themes they discuss concern the quality of the ideal courtier but also the nature of nobility, humor, love and women.

The book deals with the issue of women only in Book III, after a brief introduction in the previous book. The matter is presented as incidental, whereas the real subject of the book is the courtier and not the palace lady, as many of the interlocutors repeat throughout the book. According to Kelly, Castiglione's description of the lady of the court made the difference in sex roles quite clear: on one hand, the Renaissance lady appeared as the equivalent of the courtier, sharing the same virtues and education; on the other one, she needed culture in order to charm others rather than to develop themselves. [37]

[36] P. Joseph Benson, 1992, *The invention of the Renaissance Woman: the challenge of female independence in the literature and thought of Italy and England*, p.33.
[37] J. Kelly, 1986, *Women, History and Theory*. University of Chicago Press, p. 86.

> [...] a quella che vive in corte parmi convenirsi sopra ogni altra cosa una certa affabilità piacevole, per la quale sappia gentilmente intertenere ogni sorte d'omo con ragionamenti grati ed onesti. [38]
>
> (Trans.: in a Lady who lives at court a certain pleasing affability is becoming above all else, whereby she will be able to entertain graciously and honestly every kind of man. [39])

As Castiglione's idea of femininity was centered on charm, courtly women were not meant to practice activities such as riding and handling weapons because those male activities were considered inappropriate for female courtiers. Kelly argues that the stereotypes between men and women were in fact stressed by the author.

If a woman followed Castiglione's advice she could eventually gain great influence over a ruler as well as financial benefits and political offices for the male members of her family. The book set the problems of female independence in both literary and social contexts becoming the main document of the Italian Renaissance controversy about women. The ideal woman depicted by Castiglione is not politically or socially independent; "she voluntarily submits to limited public liberty in order to retain control of her virtue and to forward the interests of court society". [40] This does not mean that autonomous women did not exist in the book: they are presented in the examples of virtuous women rather than ideal women; the courtiers tend to repress the palace lady instead of bringing her forward, making her decline any opportunity for independent action. Kelly and Benson argue that *Il Cortegiano* does not celebrate the independent woman, nor does it try to create a social role for her, in fact, it "uses literary means to contain her within an already existing social role".[41]

One of the main reasons why the independent woman is a problematic figure in Castiglione's work is that the fictional world of the book was completely different from the reality in which readers lived. Moreover, while praising her, Castiglione used a variety of strategies to contain the autonomous lady; women could potentially destroy the balanced society by refusing to accommodate themselves to the community's definition of their role.

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[38] B. Castiglione, *Il Libro del Cortegiano*. By Preti Giulio, 1965. Letteratura italiana Einaudi, Torino, p. 219.
[39] B. Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Singleton Charles S., 1959, New York: Doubleday, p.207.
[40] P. Joseph Benson, 1992, *The invention of the Renaissance Woman: the challenge of female independence in the literature and thought of Italy and England*, p. 74.
[41] Ibid.

In the book, women suspend their authority and follow the instructions of male courtier in order to acquire knowledge and culture to please them. Apparently, Castiglione's work is a praise of the palace lady: it is a powerful defense of the author's own society against the dangerous force of the independent woman who might break the boundaries between the court and the real world of politics, and as such must be contained.

As Hurlburt remarks, the most important female figure in the *Courtier* is the Duchess Elisabetta Gonzaga, wife to the Duke of Urbino [42]. Although the debate is shaped by male courtiers, the Duchess often directs the proceedings, especially at night, when his husband is sleeping. According to Castiglione, her regal power derives from her virtue, which consists of the qualities of both a prince and a mother. She is considered an example because she has "fortezza d'animo" (strength of spirit), a typical male characteristic. Elisabetta represents the balance between maternal qualities and masculine severity. Nevertheless, Elisabetta is praised partly because she "exhibits her benignity primarily by being silent and not exercising her authority" [43]; besides, the few times that she speaks it is only to refuse to charge or to refuse to exercise authority. She is not an independent woman: she provides the perfect example of cooperative womanhood.

Castiglione created a new notion of woman, who chooses not to speak or to carry authority even when she has the opportunity to do it. The author did not make men the cause of women's silence and obedience: he represented the female counterpart as willing to make that choice; men were exculpated from responsibility for women's powerlessness. Although Castiglione did not depict men as women's repressors, women had to be what men made them. Going back to the idea of the palace lady, the apparent autonomy given to women by the *Courtier* fades when we learn that she needs not to speak or write documents by her hand; palace ladies are given a fictitious official public role because they are actually "left in the position of adjuncts who do not shape the image of the times that will remain for posterity". [44]

Il Libro del Cortegiano established male sovereignty as a limit on women's freedom that was never to be questioned; Castiglione repeatedly asserted that women have the same capacity to achieve success as men, but in the exemplary lives he reported the most virtuous

[42] H. Hurlburt, 2015, *Power*. In: K. Raber, *A Cultural History of Women in the Renaissance*. Bloomsbury Academic, pp. 160-182.
[43] P. Joseph Benson, 1992, *The invention of the Renaissance Woman: the challenge of female independence in the literature and thought of Italy and England*, p. 77.
[44] Ibid. p. 81.

woman is always the passive, obedient, silent one. The author wants to get the favor of women by praising them and at the same time he always reminds the readers that gender boundaries must be respected. Together with other Italian defenders of women, Castiglione shows that the separate, but apparently - and potentially - equal, system between sexes is necessary for the construction of a court culture that even in its mythical creation does not support gender equality.

In his *Orlando Furioso* Ariosto also gave a defense and encomium of womankind. It was unusual for epic poems and chivalry romances to talk about women or to pair them with battles and knights; in addition, throughout the whole poem, Ariosto tries to replace the romance conception of love and sexual relations with a model of woman created on the notions developed by the defenders of womankind.

In canto XXVIII, Ariosto presents - through the point of view of the Arles innkeeper - a misogynistic story from which the author himself keeps the distance, pointing out instead his devotion for women:

> Ch'io v'ami, oltre mia lingua che l'ha espresso,
> che mai non fu di celebrarvi avara
> n'ho fatto mille prove; e v'ho dimostro
> ch'io son, ne potrei essere se non vostro. [45]

The innkeeper tells Rodomonte a story in order to comfort him from his love disillusionment with Doralice, who has chosen another lover. The innkeeper, together with Rodomonte, attacks women by demonstrating that the best response to female infidelity is to shrug off and accept it.

According to Annalisa Izzo, Ariosto wants to highlight the fact that he disagrees with the misogynistic notions that would follow, to such an extent that he will make one of the characters affirm that the story narrated by the Arles innkeeper is not true. On one hand, the author claims his absolute devotion towards women; on the other one, Ariosto devotes a great part of his poem to an antifeminist tale [46]. Izzo considers women's sexual freedom and desire as one of the main issues discussed in the *Orlando Furioso*; this matter often ends with a contradictory delusion condemning the entire female sex. Ariosto's swinging between

[45] L. Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*. Ed. Segre C., 1964, Milano, Mondadori, XXVIII 2 5-8.
[46] A. Izzo, 2012, *Misoginia e Filoginia nell' Orlando Furioso,* p. 1-2.

the exaltation and praising of womankind, and the resentment towards them, makes the poem a fundamental one for the *querelle des femmes*.

The issue is raised as a proper Renaissance dispute, but in a eight-century filthy tavern; as it occurred in Castiglione's *Courtier*, the interlocutors (the innkeeper and the customers in this case) discuss about womankind without reaching a final conclusion. Canto XXIV opens with another praise of women, then another misogynist declaration and eventually, in canto XXX, a brand new repentance [47]:

> Ben spero donne in vostra cortesia
> aver da voi perdon, poi che io vel chieggio.
> Voi scusarete che per frenesia
> vinto da l'aspra passion, vaneggio.
> Date colpa alla nimica mia
> che mi fa star, ch'io non potrei star peggio. [48]

Izzo states that the *querelle des femmes* in Ariosto's poem does not develop progressively: it consists of a series of ups and downs that reflects the structure of the humanistic dialectic; the argument alternates different points of view without proposing a conclusive statement, as the author makes the reader analyze each specific case and eventually create his own opinion. Canto XXVIII represents the controversy on women both in its contents and in its stylistic structure: on one hand, Ariosto develops issues such as female desire and men's temptation in contradiction with the condemnation of women and the rejection of gender equality; on the other one, the oscillating advancement of the poem suggests the incapacity of the author to come up with a definitive theory or at least with a clear choice of which side, pro-women or against them.

The participation of Ariosto's poem in the defense tradition was recognized by his contemporaries. Several authors who wrote in praise and defense of women often quoted the proto-feminism that characterizes the *Orlando Furioso* in order to increase the power of their own arguments in favor of womankind. Some critics claim that Ariosto had been borrowing "elements of the defense tradition for his own purposes rather than [...] working

[47] A. Izzo, 2012, *Misoginia e Filoginia nell' Orlando Furioso,* p. 3.
[48] L. Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*. Ed. Segre C., 1964, Milano, Mondadori, XXX 3 1-6.

in the tradition himself" [49]. According to Benson, "the *Orlando Furioso* attempted to reform the reader's misogynist notion of woman or confirm his philogyny by demonstrating the excellence of womankind by means of historical examples and logic. The poem is an active participant in the controversy" [50]. Ariosto created very different characters with vary opinions about women and staged a debate by arguing on both sides of the issue. Although it sways between exaltation and attack, Ariosto's praise of women represents an important defense work of the *querelle* and has inspired both male and female authors who would continue the tradition.

2.3.2. THE CONTROVERSY IN ENGLAND

The tradition of the debate in England starts from the Middle Ages, when Geoffrey Chaucer wrote on both sides of the issue with irony and wit. *The Legend of Good Women* can be considered Chaucer's formal defense of women, a dream-vision in which Cupid and Alcestis chide the writer for translating the *Roman de la Rose* and writing the tale of the faithless Cressida in *Troilus and Cryseide*. According to Cupid and Alcestis, Cressida is the reason why men have lost trust in women; Chaucer is required to write the stories of good women who were true in loving and of the false men who betrayed them seducing others. Thanks to his work, the heresy against love could be atoned: "although Chaucer apparently planned to write nineteen or twenty such legends, mostly of mythological women, he broke off after only nine tales". [51]

In the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer voted some of his tales to the theme of marriage and women. Some prologues and tales, such as the ones of the Wife of Bath, Clerk, Merchant and Franklin, deal with many of the misogynistic charges of earlier literature as well as with a few defenses. The Wife of Bath's tale unfolds the topic of the disobedient wife who strives to rule her husband; in the Clerk's tale, the patient Griselda represents the impossibly obedient and long-suffering wife.

[49] P. Joseph Benson, 1992, *The invention of the Renaissance Woman: the challenge of female independence in the literature and thought of Italy and England*, p. 93.
[50] P. Joseph Benson, 1992, *The invention of the Renaissance Woman: the challenge of female independence in the literature and thought of Italy and England*, p. 93.
[51] K. Usher Handerson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind*, p. 10.

After Chaucer, the number of treatises about women came to include, for instance, Chaucer's disciple, John Lydgate, wrote both attacks and defenses. According to Henderson-McManus, during the Renaissance, the popular controversy about the nature of women changed for several reasons. First of all, thanks to the rise of print, the number of attacks and defenses increased, together with the interest for such reading material among the middle-class. Furthermore, as formal treatises on women became less aristocratic and courtly, more people could read it, even the less educated ones. Finally, although the attacks always outnumbered the defenses, with their increase the defenses began to rise too. [52]

The native English works on women controversy did not challenge the traditional valuation of women, nor did they engage in a serious analysis of women's social and political role. Instead, they were conservative works that reinforced the traditional stereotype of gender roles with pro-women satire and sentimental portraits of women. Through the satire and the sentimental declarations, the defense male writers were actually defending the old beliefs rather than building a new social structure. Their texts cannot be considered true pro-women works because they celebrated the ideal of the chaste and obedient women instead of the independent one: "they defend against her threat by denying that women either have the capacity for independent action or desire it". [53]

There is an exception, though: Robert Vaughan's *A Dyalogue Defensive for Women, Agaynst Malycyous Detractours*, written in 1542. Vaughan narrates a debate between birds in which the discussion is focused on humanist topics such as the equality of body, soul, reason, and will; however, the dialogue stops short of raising doubts about the conventional role of women. The purpose of the book, as the title suggests, was to replace the negative notion of woman, that previous texts had established, with a new positive notion. Among the issues discussed in Vaughan's work, there is the matter of education: not only does the Falcon (the bird who stands for women) praise the writing of contemporary English women: he also suggests that if education were reformed, women would have no need to appeal to male authors.

The documents which began the early modern English "pamphlet war" [54] were *The Schoolhouse of Women* and *Mulierum Paen*. Both pamphlets have controversial dating,

[52] K. Usher Handerson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind*, p. 11.
[53] P. Joseph Benson, 1992, *The invention of the Renaissance Woman: the challenge of female independence in the literature and thought of Italy and England*, p. 206.
[54] Usher Handerson , McManus use this term to indicate the *querelle* in England.

while the *Schoolhouse* has controversial autorship too; it seems that Edward Gosynhill, who had written the *Paen*, claimed autorship of the *Schoolhouse* as they contained reference to each other. Henderson and McManus describe the *Schoolhouse* as a long and comprehensive attack on women that reiterates the standard examples and arguments against women with a humorous spirit. It enjoyed an immense popularity and it ran through four editions between 1541 and 1572. On the contrary, the *Mulierum Paen*, written to refute the *Schoolhouse*, had a much more serious and sober tone.

Among his contemporaries, Gosynhill was the most sophisticated in form and in the evidence he cited. He opened the *Mulierum Paen* with an imitation of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*. The poet is visited in a dream by an assembly of women; Venus reproaches him for having attacked women and asks him to record her speech in favor of the female part. The use of the dream-vision form and the feminine voice of the goddess amplified the ambiguity of the narrative; having written on both sides of the question, the author undermined the truthfulness of the whole work. Furthermore, Venus' speech is characterized by an excessive pro-women standpoint: she describes the pain of childbirth in detail; she depicts women childcare as a self-sacrifice; she represents women as helpless creatures. Eventually, she makes a list of women famous for their chastity portraying them as both virtuous and victims of their husbands.

Gosynhill emphasized women's grace and heroism as a consequence of their passivity which could raise them to extraordinary roles. The author's approach towards the matter is even more conservative than Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*: rather than celebrating women's deeds under the influence of God, he emphasized female virtues as something that attracts God's grace to them. Moreover, Gosynhill contrasted women with immoral Old Testament men while comparing them with New Testament virtuous women: he both highlighted women's incapacity for independent or public action and demonstrated women's ability to excel in conventional virtue.

An interesting passage of the text shows an unusual representation of the Renaissance manor lady and her actual responsibilities:

> Estates commonly where I go
> Trust their wives to overlook
> Baker, brewer, butler, and cook,
> With other all; man meddleth no whit

Because the woman had quicker wit.

My lady must receive and pay,
And every men in his office control,
And to each cause give "yea" and "nay",
Bargain and buy, and set all sole
By indenture other by court-roll;
My lady must order thus all thing,
Or small shall be the man's winning. [55]

The first thing to notice in this excerpt is the fact that, although the speech is dictated by Venus, the author is clearly speaking in his own voice. What the lady does is impressive: she oversees the men who manage the business and she demonstrates to have the capacity for a larger social and political role. The example shows women in a good light without any other declaration on gender boundaries or women's capability.

Unlike Gosynhill, "timing and temperance were not strong suits for John Knox, the Calvinistic Scot whose *The First Blast of the Trumpet against regiment of Women* (1588) appeared in the year of Elizabeth's accession". [56] Knox invoked the Bible, Aristotle, Augustine, Ambrose, and Basil to corroborate the belief that all women were created to serve and to be subjected and to argue that men were superior as they were born to command and to rule. Moreover, Knox stated that a female ruler is an offence to nature.

A delayed response to Gosynhill came from Edward More's *The Defence of Women* (1560). According to Benson (1992), More's definition of woman is the same as Gosynhill's, as well as his evidence and form, which are even less sophisticated. Apparently, More's strategy was to counter the entertaining antifeminist stories of the *Schoolhouse* with satire against men. However, despite the title, his work was not a proper pro-women declaration; his main argument was that women are often blamed for men's faults, and he proved his thesis by analyzing historical and modern situations of men's real faults. More's strategy did not support the dignity of women and did not disclose for them "the possibility of being

[55] Transcription of E. Gosynhill, *Mulierum Paen*, in K. Usher Henderson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind*, p. 169.
[56] P. Demers, 2005, *Women's Writing in English - Early Modern England*. University of Toronto Press, p.39.

compared with men on equal grounds". [57] More cited the condemnation of Eve as evidence of men's tendency to blame women for faults committed by men. Eve need not to be blamed: she made a terrible mistake because of her feebleness. As women lacked of strength and wit, they should not be charged with responsibility, whereas men should know whether to control them and prevent any faults:

> But Adam beyng ruler of see, and eke of lande,
> That Eue to hym was subiect it may well now be skand,
> And [Adam] hauyng strenght [*sic*] sufficient, wanting nowght but grace,
> So wolde offend our sauyour Christ to lese that ioyfull place,
> .....
> And yet men wyll transpose the faute to seely Eue,
> But no man, that the trouth doth rede, wyl them I thynk beleue;
> Wherfore I trust I haue declared here at large,
> That fawth commytted by the mand are layde to womens charge. [58]

More's conclusions are that women are not responsible for their own actions: as a consequence, women are naturally subject to men because of their weakness. Similarly to Eve, women entirely lack autonomy and independence; consequently, if readers accepted More's assertion and stopped blaming Eve, the author would be freed of any belief he might have had in women's intelligence. However, this does not mean he is praising women, nor that he is supporting gender equality.

The rest of More's work consists of a series of stories strung together to describe the theme that women are blamed for men's faults: "the result is a satire that contrasts male selfishness and vanity with female generosity; its appeal lies in the skill (or lack of it) with which the examples of good women are presented, not in the strength of the argument". [59] More's defense served as a reproach to men; from the very beginning, the reader is led to reproach Adam as well as all the other men whose fault was to let their wives be

[57] P. Joseph Benson, 1992, *The invention of the Renaissance Woman: the challenge of female independence in the literature and thought of Italy and England*, p. 217.
[58] E. More, *Defense of Women. Select Pieces of Early Popular Poetry.* Vol. 2. Ed. Edward Vernon Utterson. London, 1817. 95-140. Lines 63-72.
[59] P. Joseph Benson, 1992, *The invention of the Renaissance Woman: the challenge of female independence in the literature and thought of Italy and England*, p. 218.

autonomous. The satire against men worked to encourage men to resume their authority rather than to encourage a change in women's condition.

According to Jordan [60], Thomas Elyot's *Defence of Good Women* established a system of virtues that could exist for both sexes; women could participate in virtue equally with men and, consequently, educated women could govern nations and living moral lives as educated men did. In order to demonstrate his assertions, Elyot created a fictional character, Queen Zenobia of Palmyra, who successfully governed herself and her nation. Demers states that Elyot's work "launched the Tudor diatribes by delineating praise as conformity to humanist ideals" [61] ; the dialogue's interlocutors are Caninius, who thinks that women are imperfect, and Candidus, who makes Caninius reason on women's excellence. When Queen Zenobia joins the discussion, she completely wins Caninius over.

The *Defense of Good Women* is both a dialogue and a defense. It represents the literary and philosophical masterpiece of the English humanist controversy. Elyot argued on themes that had never been discussed in England before. The only two scenes of the dialogue present very important issues: in the first part, the topic are the equal ethical capacities of sexes, it ends with the assumption that women can rule as men; in the second part, the Queen Zenobia, after having been taken as a prisoner, discusses the importance of a humanist education in her success as a queen, wife, and political prisoner as well.

The dialogue can be interpreted as a "justification of the education of women on the grounds that it will improve their performance in all roles they may be called on play". [62] The readers would not have been potential conspirators; in fact, they would have been Elyot's fellow humanists or general audience. Thus, the former would have been capable of understanding the use of Plato and Aristotle while the latter could have been moved to accept the extension of education to women without considering it a moral and political chaos. Elyot proved that women were capable of the political virtue of justice as they were naturally gifted with the virtues that compose it. To support his theory, the author mentioned Plato's notion according to which the sexes do the same things and must be considered within the same category. For instance, in proving that men and women shared the same

[60] C. Jordan, 1983, *Feminism and the Humanists: The Case of Sir Thomas Elyot's Defence of Good Women.* Renaissance Quarterly, Vol. 36, No. 2, pp. 181-201. University of Chicago Press on behalf of the Renaissance Society of America.
[61] P. Demers, 2005, *Women's Writing in English - Early Modern England*. University of Toronto Press, p.37.
[62] P. Joseph Benson, 1992, *The invention of the Renaissance Woman: the challenge of female independence in the literature and thought of Italy and England*, p. 184.

virtues and the same skill, Elyot covered the domestic area too, talking about a kind of work that had always been denigrated.

> And so ye have concluded that women, which are prudent in keeping, be more excellent than men in reason, which be onely strong and valiant in getting. And where excellency is, there is most perfection. Wherefore a woman is not a creature unperfect, but as it seemeth is more perfect than men. [63]

In the excerpt, the two interlocutors, Caninius and Candidus, are discussing women's capacity to rule, judge and reason. In particular, Candidus led Caninius to admit that if reason made women successful in the home, it could make her successful outside home too. The discussion ends with the refutation of Aristotle's belief on women's inferiority; the statement of Candidus is the exact opposite, he argues that women are superior. Paradoxically, Elyot's *Defense* pushed the argument to an extreme - women's superiority - which is not completely clear; he stated that both men and women are equal but then he contradicted his own assertion by arguing that one sex is better than the other. As a result, the author was actually making gender differences: "women are soft and, if we are willing to accept the paradox, intelligent; men are tough, and again, admitting the force of the paradox, not so smart". [64] Probably, Elyot achieved this paradox because he was trying to praise women's domestic abilities in order to elevate their reason on the same level as men's.

The radical nature of the dialogue lies in the fact that Elyot demonstrated that women could have safely performed male roles if needed; he objected to the very treatment of women as a class that must have been excluded from public offices and authority in general. Although Elyot's defense showed real faith in women's abilities, it remained a theoretical argument without any practical application. The author's great vision of humanist education extended to women did not serve the propagandistic purposes of queens and rulers. On the contrary, this daring *Defense* did not have any influence on the controversy about women in the succeeding years.

[63] T. Elyot, *The Defence of Good Women. Vives and the Renaissance Education of Women*. Ed. Foster Watson. New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1912, p. 230.
[64] P. Joseph Benson, 1992, *The invention of the Renaissance Woman: the challenge of female independence in the literature and thought of Italy and England*, p. 192.

2.4. WOMEN'S REACTION

Although in the sixteenth century the secular woman scholar was a new character, female scholars "crafted an effective persona that mitigated the danger inherent in their novelty" [65]. What was central in this figure was the fact that women used kinship to sustain their authorship, strengthening their status as writers with their families connections, especially with their learned male relatives. English humanist women had a clear sense of their own status as scholars and writers; however, none of the most famous female humanists, such as Margaret Roper or Mary Basset (her daughter), wrote against misogyny, nor did they celebrate their female predecessors and contemporaries. Ross states that these learned women engaged with learned men in finding the right words to express spiritual truth, but they did not participate in the controversy.

The contribution of those women scholars in the period 1400-1580 "was to create a viable space for the female voice in literary society". [66] Despite men's cultural hegemony, women humanists made the educated woman a popular figure who could do the same literary work as men. Thus, by 1600 the European *querelle des femmes* had hosted two hundred years of controversy, in which women's voices were included. On one hand, women who participated in the controversy took force and courage from women humanists; on the other one, they saw humanists as figures to admire and to follow, an inspiration for their arguments about female capability. Women humanists' work represented "a canon of women writers who laid the foundation upon which successive generations of learned women would build". [67]

From the beginning of the Renaissance to the close of the seventeenth century, generations of learned women came out of intellectual families; those women eventually became conscious writers "who prompted literary society to think about the equality of sexes in matters of the mind". [68] The *querelle des femmes* was not created by male writers only: intellectual women intervened as well, using their status in order to revitalize the controversy. The women writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth century penned sharp responses to misogynistic accusations with the intent of dismantling gender categories.

[65] Ross Sarah Gwyneth, 2009, *The Birth of Feminism. Woman as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England.* Harvard University Press. p. 160.
[66] Ibid. p. 188.
[67] Ibid. p. 189.
[68] Ibid. p. 276.

Queen Elizabeth I had never taken a clear side, she has always stayed neutral. In her famous speech at Tilbury, before the attack of the Armada, she enunciated the paradox of her being at the head of the government without taking neither side of the controversy:

> I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a king. . . [R]ather than any dishonor shall grow by me, I myself will take up arms, I myself will be your general, judge, and rewarder of every one of your virtues in the field.[69]

The Queen was saying that she had the spirit of a man, clearly asserting that women are weak and incapable of authoritative actions. She was considered an exception by women's attackers, who did not direct their misogynistic ideas at the sovereign but to common women. Most importantly, what both the queen and male writers used to highlight was the presence of male virtues in female rulers, depriving them of the very woman nature and degrading women qualities; thus, according to misogynists, what made possible for some women to rule was their innate manly spirit.

2.4.1. JANE ANGER'S PROTECTION FOR WOMEN

The first woman to enter the early modern English fray was Jane Anger, who published in 1589 *Jane Anger her Protection for Women to defend them against the Scandalous Reportes of a late Surfeiting Lover, and all like Venerians that complaine so to bee overcloyed with womens kindnesse*; the text was written in response to a now-lost text. At the beginning of the text, the writer addressed her defense to all women:

> Fie on the falsehood of men, whose minds goe oft a madding, and whose tongues can not so soone bee wagging, but straight they fal a railing. Was there ever any so abused, so slaundered, so railed upon, or so wickedly handled undeservedly, as are we women?
> [...] And herein I conjure all you to aide and assist me in defence of my willingnes, which shall make me rest at your commaundes. Fare you well. [70]

[69] Quoted in: P. Joseph Benson, 1992, *The invention of the Renaissance Woman: the challenge of female independence in the literature and thought of Italy and England*, p. 233.
[70] J. Anger, 1589, *Jane Anger her Protection for Women.*

Anger defines men's tongue as unruly and unnatural, then she focuses the attention on women's unfair sufferings. Furthermore, the author summons all readers and women to help each other in creating defenses and argumentations on women's side. As Demers states, "with spirit and precision, she [Anger] attacks the defaming etymologies which attribute weakness, softness, incompleteness, or deformity to womankind". [71] Anger goes on cataloguing how the "true meaning" [72] of women gets mocked and misinterpreted by men; for instance, she mentions all the clichés about women's pride of appearance, laziness, and dependency. Anger's protection of women turned out to be an indictment of men.

The work of Jane Anger has been generally accepted as a pioneer of feminist ideas because of its female authorship: Anger spoke to women advising them on the damaging temperament of men. However, there are no irrefutable proofs of Anger's female gender even though the majority of the scholars believe she was a woman because of her style and ideas.

The most interesting feature of the text is its structure as a protection for women, meant to teach women how to protect themselves from men; it teaches self-defense rather than self-esteem or independent action. The likely aim of the author was to tell women what men's perceptions of them were like. Benson argues that, stylistically, Anger's *Protection* shares more with the genre of antifeminist satire than with humanist defense. It is a sort of dramatic monologue spoken by an angry woman, "just as much of *Mulierum Paen* is spoken in the voice of Venus, and just as antifeminist pieces, such as the *Schoolhouse*, are spoken in the persona of an angry man". [73]

The man described by Anger is a quite cold-hearted one. He defames women because he does not have anything else to write about. Anger states that men write misogynistic works because they know that women will not respond:

> Doubtles the weaknesse of our wits, and our honest bashfulnesse, by reason wherof they suppose that there is not one amongst us who can, or dare reprooue their slanders and false reproaches : their slanderous tongues are so short, and the time wherin they have lauished

[71] P. Demers, 2005, *Women's Writing in English - Early Modern England*. University of Toronto Press, p. 40.
[72] J. Anger, 1589, *Jane Anger her Protection for Women.*
[73] P. Joseph Benson, 1992, *The invention of the Renaissance Woman: the challenge of female independence in the literature and thought of Italy and England*, p. 224.

> out their words freely, hath been so long, that they know we cannot catch hold of them to pull them out, and they think we wil not write to reprooue their lying lips. [74]

In the excerpt, the author mentions the fact that men control literature and record history, while women do not have such a power. In fact, they have to accept what men decide to write. Although the author never mentions any female writer, she has the power to criticize men's words and assertions about women.

As Anger highlighted at the beginning of her work, her *Protection* is not an encomium of womankind. Rather, it is a defense of women against men; the writer warns her readers to beware praises of women as they are suspiciously excessive. Moreover, she urges women to be skeptical towards those pro-women texts which are flattery and designed to entrap women into the conventional passive situation. For instance, writers such as Gosynhill, who wrote on both sides of the debate, undermined their own position.

Anger's cynical interpretation of the controversy may well be accurate: none of male pro-women writers removed the discussion of womankind from the context of love and domesticity; none of them changed their description of women from the traditional conservative way; and "none used his voice to persuade women to take up their pens and speak" [75].

2.4.2. MODELS AND ARGUMENTS

By the end of the sixteenth century there were many women writers in Italy publishing their treatises, orations, letters, dialogues and poetry under their own names. English women seemed to be less bold than their Italian counterparts in daring to write things different from translations and handbooks on family life. The level of education and literacy was increasing and women started taking active part into the *querelle.* As it has been illustrated in chapter 2.4, with the beginning of the seventeenth century, women in both Italy and England brought a great contribution to the female cause.

[74] J. Anger, 1589, *Jane Anger her Protection for Women.*
[75] P. Joseph Benson, 1992, *The invention of the Renaissance Woman: the challenge of female independence in the literature and thought of Italy and England*, p. 230.

Writers such as Moderata Fonte, Lucrezia Marinella, Mary Beale and Batshua Makin, focused upon women's social roles, exploring ways to create conscious women. As Ross points out, the keyword of seventeenth-century feminism [76] is 'equality'; critiques of sexual inequality and proposals for rectifying women's inferiority were themes frequently argued by both Italian and English women writers by the 1650s. The egalitarian argument had been already mentioned in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, yet it was in the seventeenth century that it became a predominant topic in the gender discourse. Writers discussed about the intellectual and spiritual equality of the sexes and the provisional formulation of the equality of spouses within the institution of marriage.

Along with the concept of marriage equality, seventeenth-century women writers insisted upon theoretical equality and began to write in refutation of social inequality. After 1600, women offered several different frameworks for secular communities of women; in Italy, Moderata Fonte proposed an informal society of friends; Lucrezia Marinella and Anna Maria van Schurman created a textual community of women based on mutual reference; Batshua Makin founded a humanist girls' schools: "whatever their particular plans, these women drafted the first blueprints for institutions to house what Laura Cereta had long before termed the 'Republic of Women'". [77]

It appears that in all female defenses the issue of marriage was always central. For a woman, being married meant to be subject to the husband and consequently lose any authority. The fact that women were kept away from governance and command was justified as a natural rule; this issue came up frequently in women's writings. Lucrezia Marinella protested against the supposed nature of women who were kept away from "arms and letters" [78]; she maintained that if a girl and a boy received the same education in letters and arms, not only would there not be any difference, but the girl could become even more instructed than the boy. [79] It was not possible, though, to do such an experimentation; what Marinella and her contemporaries could actually do was showing by historical examples women's worth. Thus, there are works listing illustrious women's lives and telling biblical and historical examples of women's capacities, without practical experimentations.

[76] I do not think the most appropriate word is 'feminism'; I prefer to call those women pro-women writers, or women defenders. Ross (2009) though, often describes them, or the movement in general, as feminists/feminism.
[77] S. G. Ross Sarah, 2009, *The Birth of Feminism. Woman as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England.* Harvard University Press, p. 278.
[78] J. Kelly, 1986, *Women, History and Theory*. University of Chicago Press, p. 84.
[79] L. Marinella, 1600, *La nobiltà delle donne*. Quoted in: Kelly Joan, 1986, *Women, History and Theory*. University of Chicago Press, p. 84.

Women's supporters developed other methods to fight back their opponents: on one hand, men's attacks emphasized the incapacity of women to rule and be the head of an institution; on the other one, women used martial ability and government of women of the past to make their point. As a result, women demonstrated their thesis with real examples from the past, such as the Spartans (who consulted with their women on both public and private matters) or the Germans of Tacitus (whose women used to rule the community). The *querelle* was largely about the lack of authority and the deprivation of power in women's lives. Tales of Amazonian figures and matriarchy structures of society were told in order to prevent from fading the figure of the independent woman, which had been long considered the maker of culture and civilization.

Concerning the matter of authority and governance, one of the late Renaissance women who took part in the debate, Mary Tattlewell [80], came up with a contemporary example. In *The Women's Sharpe Revenge* (1640), Tattlewell wrote about the armed Long Meg of Westminster who earned King Henry's praise for the fight she showed at the Battle of Boulogne (1544). Despite its light and humorous tone, Tattlewell's pamphlet included important matters such as the protest against the double standard in gender behavior and women's lack of education.

Despite their fervent considerations, female women's supporters belonged to a literate culture that cannot be considered - and was not meant to be - social action. Joan Kelly argues that the history of the *querelle* resembles to that of early socialism; both were responsive of the new European society, to its possibilities and abuses. However, theorists such as Pisan, More, Marinella, and Astell had few or no connections with social change, which erupted and eventually had been suppressed.[81] The *querelle* was carried on by female members of the literate class, either from high ranks or servants of the upper classes, who discussed women's issues without any active proposals. Female women supporters were daughters and wives in revolt against their fathers and husbands and, most importantly, in search of a system that could have stopped men from forbidding women to enter every sector of the society with an unequal position.

[80] The name is a pseudonym.
[81] J. Kelly, 1986, *Women, History and Theory*. University of Chicago Press, pp. 67-68.

3. THE CONTROVERSY: STUDY OF A CASE

This chapter is devoted to the analysis of three defense pamphlets written by Rachel Speght, Ester Sowernam, and Constantia Munda, in response to the misogynist attack of Joseph Swetnam. I have chosen this particular quarrel for various reasons: first of all, Swetnam's *The Arraignment of the Lewd, Idle, Froward and Unconstant Woman* (ARR) developed almost all the themes concerning men's assertion of women's inferiority; secondly, the pamphlet provoked the responses of three women who refuted Swetnam's convictions with accurate and sharp examples; finally, it is arguably one of the most significant case of *querelle des femmes* that has occurred in Renaissance England because it is complete - from attack to defense - and concluded. By means of this case I want to suggest that early modern women did know how to defend themselves and how to master religious and historical knowledge, despite the difficult path they had to follow in order to have an education.

Although the three defense pamphlets are stylistically different, they share many contents as well as some methods of argumentation. In particular, Speght, Sowernam and Munda share three key words that are quite representative of this fray: blasphemy, experience, and revenge. The main concept developed by the three writers is connected to the word 'blasphemy'; all three of them believe that Swetnam's worst fault is to have insulted God, that is committing blasphemy, because he has inveighed against women, who are God's creation. In Speght, Sowernam and Munda there often recurs the word 'experience' with reference to Swetnam's negative experience with women and to women themselves. Sowernam insists on this word when comparing her life with other women's: experience becomes an essential characteristic for a successful and qualified defender. Finally, the word that links the purpose of all three women is 'revenge'; it stands for the anger and the disappointment of women that lead them to writing those sharp responses.

The themes and key words which combine Speght, Sowernam and Munda appear in the previous work of Jane Anger and influence later texts too. Jane Anger had already discussed the importance of women's experience both in learning and in life; she had also mentioned the sin of blasphemy in reference to misogynist writers, demonstrating to be the pioneer of this genre. After Swetnam's fray, an anonymous play entitled *Swetnam, the Woman-hater, Arraigned by Women* (1620) was published; it is the peak of the 1617 quarrel

and it uses as a subplot the comic embarrassment of Swetnam, called Misogynos, at the ends of women. [1]

3.1. SWETNAM'S ARRAIGNMENT

Under the pseudonym Thomas Tell-Troth, in 1615 Joseph Swetnam (? - 1621) published the founding pamphlet of this controversy, *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women*. Swetnam's work was such a prominent text that it ran through ten editions by 1637 and provoked not only three defenses but also the play *Swetnam, the Woman-hater, Arraigned by Women*. He was a pamphleteer and a fencing master, best known for his claims on women's inferiority and for a treatise on the art of fencing. [2]

In *The Arraignment*, the author describes his view of the woman, whom he depicts as sinful, deceiving and worthless; he warns men about the dangers of womankind. In order to validate his claims, Swetnam cites personal experiences along with biblical and historical examples of women. Generally, the tone of the document is comical and it includes a series of jokes mocking women that nowadays we might call sexist. The treatise is divided into three main chapters: the first one is devoted to the idle and lazy nature of women and it demonstrates how women's pride defies husbands; the second chapter, through a series of biblical and historical examples, shows how evil women have always overcome men; finally, the third chapter offers a remedy against love and gives advice to those men who wants to marry.

In the introduction, Swetnam addresses his male audience and describes his work as a frivolous document. He repeatedly talks about his book as a product of his idleness:

> Musing with myself, being idle, and having little ease to pass the time withal, and I begin in a great choler against some women. (ARR, p.190)

[1] K. U. Henderson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind - Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640.* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, p. 17.
[2] P. Demers, 2005, *Women's Writing in English - Early Modern England*. University of Toronto Press, p. 41.

According to the author, readers should take this pamphlet as a pastime: he wants to be his readers' entertainer. Swetnam's relation with his audience was originally thought to be based on an exchange of pleasure.

Afterwards, he gives his first opinion on womankind, considered something harmful and venomous ("vermin"). He explains the nature of his disdain towards women as the consequent grudge of his travels and his betrayed affections:

> Indeed, I must confess I have been a Traveler this thirty and odds years, and many travelers live in disdain of women. The reason is for that their affections are so poisoned with the heinous evils of unconstant women which they happen to be acquainted with in their travels; for it doth so cloy their stomachs that they censure hardly of women ever afterwards. (ARR, p. 190)

Right from this introduction, the author declares that he thinks women are evil, inconstant and poisonous. Not only does he give voice to his own emotions; he also asserts that every traveler feels the same towards women.

Several passages of *The Arraignment* seem to anticipate a reply from women: "I know I shall be bitten because I touch many, [...] I wish you to conceal it with silence, lest in starting up to find fault you prove yourselves guilty of these monstrous accusations" (ARR, p. 191). Critics have read these remarks in different ways; some of them think Swetnam attempted to forestall a reply, others read them as pieces of advertisement for a debate which Swetnam hoped would follow. [3] Swetnam also predicts the tendency of those responses: he uses the term 'bite' which conveys the idea of a polemic and fierce position that his counterparts would eventually assume.

Both Kelly [4] and Brant Purkiss [5] point out that although Swetnam wrote many historical quotations and gave many biblical examples in support of women's unworthiness, his work is absolutely inaccurate and all the examples he provided are inexact. In short, to use Brant Purkiss's words, Swetnam's *Arraignment* is "an intertextual *bricolage* of considerable subversive power" [6]. At some points, the amount of citations makes the text self-contradictory and difficult to read because it does not clarify the discourse of woman-

[3] C. Brant, D. Purkiss, 1992, *Women, Texts and Histories 1575-1760*. Routledge: London and New York, p.86.
[4] J. Kelly, 1986, *Women, History and Theory*. University of Chicago Press, p. 78.
[5] C. Brant, D. Purkiss, 1992, *Women, Texts and Histories 1575-1760*. Routledge: London and New York, p.73.
[6] Ibid.

hatred nor the actual reasons of women's subordination; Swetnam's attempt at proving his thesis against women is based on the dominance of stories that are nothing but oppressive material. Many scholars have therefore argued that Swetnam was an incoherent and mediocre writer with a scarce knowledge of the Bible.

For instance, one of the first religious examples he unfolds in chapter I is a reversed exegesis of the traditional text:

> Moses describeth a woman thus: "At the first beginning," saith he, "a woman was made to be a helper unto man." And so they are indeed, for she helpeth to spend and consume that which man painfully getteth. (ARR, p. 193)

The Biblical notion of woman as a helper is duly cited throughout the whole text; the traditional interpretation places the entire womankind in an economically subordinate position: while the husband has to obtain money and goods, the wife has to take care of him. However, in the excerpt, Swetnam gives a different connotation to women as he reverses the figure of the helpful wife into a woman who enacts her own desires by defying his husband's. As a result, the biblical example acquires a carnivalesque tone and loses his credibility.

Drawing heavily upon biblical stories and totally distorting them, Swetnam mingles the attack against women with irony; probably, he writes completely inaccurate sentences with the aim of fomenting a female response and continuing the game of attack and defense. The possibility of Swetnam misinterpreting the Scripture on purpose is definitely in line with Renaissance rhetoric; the arraigner wants to take his accusations to the extreme because he does not actually believe that women are inferior to men. Paradoxically, he could be saying that women are in fact excellent creatures. Although the text is extremely misogynist, its message could be the exact opposite of what it superficially appears to claim, through the inveighing against women, Swetnam is controversially praising them.

The pamphlet continues with another clear statement that highlights the author's position on women:

> He also saith that they were made of the rib of a man, and that their froward nature showth; for a rib is a crooked thing good for nothing else, and women are crooked by nature, for a small occasion will cause them to be angry. (ARR, p.193)

In this passage Swetnam is reversing Moses' interpretation; thus, he describes the woman as crooked, a wicked and imperfect being who has no purpose. In addition, as he states at the beginning of the *Arraignment*, women easily get angry and that's what makes the author - and men in general - despise womankind the most. Again, Swetnam is both polemical and comical: he does not respect women, neither does he depict them as men's equals; he also highlights the fact that women are 'crooked' and useless, explicitly exaggerating his assertions. Swetnam's intent is not only a mere attack against womankind but also a rhetorical exercise conveying the message of woman's excellence.

Swetnam uses a metaphorical language to strengthen the idea of the dangerous and untamable woman. He drafts a list of ferocious beasts who simply pale if compared to an angry woman:

> The Lion being bitten with hunger, the Bear being robbed of her young ones, the Viper being trod on, all these are nothing so terrible as the fury of a woman. A Buck may be enclosed in a Park; a bridle rules a horse; a Wolf may be tied; a Tiger may be tamed; but a froward woman will never be tamed. [...] if a woman hold an opinion, no man can draw her from it. (ARR, p. 194)

The metaphors employed in this excerpt suggest once again the controversial nature of *The Arraignment*. The author is aware of the fact that savage beasts such as tigers and wolves are not comparable to women; not only he wants to strike the reader's sensitivity with strong images, and to provoke a female response that pursues his rhetorical game.

Throughout the text it is possible to notice the obsession Swetnam has concerning money and social hierarchy, which he keeps strictly related to women. The theme of the wife who spends money is recurrent in Swetnam's work as is the description of the woman like a commodity or a costly jewel. Not only is the author concerned about women spending money: he also develops the topic of the household economy. He satirizes the fact that the woman of a household spend money despite the fact that she does not produce it. Although the idea of economically unproductive women was already common among moralists, Swetnam emphasizes it by making women "the leakage into the market of goods that ought

to be stored" [7]. In other words, according to Swetnam, the woman is a cause of waste not only because she does not contribute to the productivity of the household, but partly because she represents the main consumption of resources. What's more, Swetnam blames women for spending money only for their own desires and leisure, without thinking of their family; they spend money because they are vacuous: "The pride of a woman is like the dropsy, for as drink increaseth the drought of the one, even so money enlargeth the pride of the other" (ARR, p.196).

The woman he depicts is a devilish creature with no mercy; she is simultaneously a source of pleasure and displeasure to man as she causes him delight, yet she deceives him. In short, according to Swetnam, the desire for a woman is both ruinous and insatiable; despite all evil women can carry, men keep entertaining women and enjoying their company. Swetnam thus quotes Solomon's words: he "saith that women are like unto wine, for that they will make men drunk with their devices" (ARR, p. 194). Indeed, Swetnam recurs to authoritative sources and metaphorical language in order to deliver his discourse against women.

In order to demonstrate that women weaken and deceive men, the author cites numerous metaphors and examples that criticise whores and lewd women. He recalls that harlots take away men's strength and the beauty of the body as well; he also states that they dim the eyesight, cause fever, and shorten life. As he did before, Swetnam creates analogies and metaphors related to nature:

> They are like Eagles which will always fly where the carrion is. They will play horse-leech to suck away thy wealth, but in the winter of thy misery she will fly away from thee not unlike the swallow, which in the summer harboreth herself under the eves of an house and against winter flieth away, leaving nothing but dirt behind her. (ARR, p. 202)

As proof of this, Swetnam lists stories about real or legendary ancient courtesans. He gives some biblical examples: firstly, there is Solomon, he forsook God because he lusted after many women; the second example is Prince David, whose love of women brought the displeasure of his God; then, Samson, "for every lock of his head was the strength of another man; yet by a woman he was overcome" (ARR, p.198); Job's wife made him blaspheme against God and she eventually cursed him. Swetnam also talks about some

[7] C. Brant, D. Purkiss, 1992, *Women, Texts and Histories 1575-1760*. Routledge: London and New York, p.74.

mythical figures: Agamemnon was sentenced to death by his own wife, after she committed adultery[8]; another legendary example is Hercules, who was accidentally poisoned by his wife; the last example is the episode of Ulysses binding himself to the mast of the ship in order to resist to Sirens, who "would have enticed him into the sea if he had not so done" (ARR, p. 199).

It is no coincidence that Swetnam chose exemplary and illustrious men to support his theory of the damaging woman; from Solomon to Ulysses, Swetnam's men are all kings, princes and heroes who would have been invincible and wise, had they not been deceived by women. Women's evil can overcome even the best men. Examples and anecdotes are mostly employed by Swetnam as an appeal to authoritative sources.

Swetnam's language is full of analogies, metaphors and quotations: he is concerned to make emphatic and entertaining assertions while he seemed not to care about inaccuracies. He often quotes passages out of context or attributes some expressions to the wrong source: for instance, he calls women "necessary evils" claiming this reference to be taken from the Bible in fact it comes from Euripides' *Medea*. Swetnam relies most heavily on argument by analogy, one of the most significant example is remark on love and marriage:

> It is impossible to fall amongst stones and not to be hurt, or amongst thorns and not be pricked, or amongst nettles and not be strung. A man cannot carry fire in his bosom and not burn his clothing; no more can a man live in love but it is a life as wearisome as hell, and he that marrieth a wife matcheth himself unto many troubles. (ARR, p. 206)

According to Swetnam, love is the inevitable condemnation of men to misery and sorrow and it brings nothing but troubles. Despite the apparent somber tone, the employment of the analogy conveys an ironic connotation to the whole passage: Swetnam is mocking people who are in love instead of sympathizing with them.

Chapter two opens with the example of Solomon, who "loved so many women that he quite forgot his God" (ARR, p. 200). Swetnam's accusation is quite harsh: women can make men forget God; they are evil to such an extent that they are far from God's grace and, consequently, they can make men swerve apart from salvation. At the end of his assertion, the author states:

[8] Swetnam does not mention the fact that Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife, avenged her daughter Iphigenia who had been sacrificed by him.

> Men, I say, may live without women, but women cannot live without men: for Venus, whose beauty was excellent fair, yet when she needed men's help, she took Vulcan, a clubfooted smith. (ARR, p. 200).

Classical mythology incongruously depicts the goddess of love as married to Vulcan, the blacksmith of the gods. With this example the author wants to demonstrate that women cannot stay without men and they always stand desperately in need of them; therefore, even a goddess like Venus, who should be almighty, wanted a man and she had to settle for the simplest one.

The narration continues with another polemic topic, women's sexual openness and availability. According to Swetnam, women can be easily obtained because they offer pleasures that can be exchanged for money. He asserts that women circulate freely among men. As Brant and Purkiss argue, this claim is the antithesis of the social stability supposedly produced by the marketing of women in marriage[9]; in fact, women's circulation is not regulated by ownership but is inherently transitory:

> And yet women are easily wooed and soon won, got with an apple and lost with the paring. Young wits are soon corrupted; women's bright beauty breeds curious thoughts; and golden gifts easily overcome wantons' desires. (ARR, p.204)

The exchange of women's body for money is not a sign of male wealth; rather, it is a sign of the dissolution of class and wealth boundaries. Swetnam is valuing women only for the pleasure they can offer, without any rank or wealth distinction; all women offer the same pleasure. Therefore, marriage represents a threat for men who wants to exchange women freely because it marks the end of the pleasures of bachelorhood.

Swetnam depicts women as devilish and corrupted creatures; when talking about them he always uses nouns and adjectives related to the semantic area of darkness, evil and sin. The author's attacks are directly addressed to female readers with the clear aim of raising a fray. The vocabulary employed by the arraigner is descriptive and connected to strong visual images. He is more concerned with the immediate effect of his illustrations rather than with the coherence of his accusations. For instance, he refers to women as “earthly

[9] C. Brant, D. Purkiss, 1992, *Women, Texts and Histories 1575-1760*. Routledge: London and New York, p. 76.

Serpents" who corrupt men with "black sin" (ARR, p. 204); the Serpent is indeed a symbol standing for the Devil, and by giving them an earthly connotation, Swetnam claims that woman is a sort of emissary of the devil himself. Men should "be washed and cleansed from this foul leprosy of nature" (ARR, p. 204). Not only are women sinful and evil creatures; they are also associated to illness and pestilence as well (leprosy represents both a dangerous plague and a symbol for contaminated and outcast groups of people).

In the last chapter, the author focuses on "a remedy against love, also many reasons not to be hasty in choice of a Wife" (ARR, p. 206). He also gives some piece of advice to men who have already got married or are going to be. Swetnam suggests to avoid marriage because it would bring nothing but misery and sorrow; in addition, he warns men that even good wives could be quickly spoilt:

> Roses inadvisely gathered prickles our fingers; Bees ungently handled stings our faces. And yet one is pleasant and the other is profitable. (ARR, p. 206)

Swetnam uses two metaphors in order to clarify his assertions. First, he compares the beauty of women to roses and their industriousness to bees. Swetnam had previously stated that women are necessary evils: they are needed for procreation and pleasure in spite of their devilish nature. Now, he warns men that the beautiful appearance of those women often hides a wicked spirit, just as roses and bees conceal their thorns and stings. The author believes that it is impossible to find both beauty and goodness in a woman: she would always reveal a spoiled and evil nature. Thus, a good wife can be easily spoiled, a fair wife must be continuously watched, a rich wife must be pampered and a poor one must be maintained; a woman always has one ill quality that overthrows the good one.

Although Swetnam's advice is to avoid marriage, he dedicates the last part of this chapter to help men find the right woman to marry. He maintains that beauty and richness are disastrous without virtue; he also recommends to scrutinize the girl's parents. According to Swetnam, the best time to marry is the age of twenty five; most importantly, a man must marry "a young woman of tender years" because she "is flexible and bending, obedient, and subject to do anything according to the will and pleasure of her husband" (ARR, p. 210). The author thinks a widow, or a girl in her twenties, have already been framed by their previous husbands, or by other male figures; they would be hardly conditioned by the new husband, who would have to make them "unlearn" (ARR, p. 210) their previous habits.

Swetnam also relates several stories of virtuous women. The Virgin Mary is considered the Queen of all womankind and the mother of bliss; Sarah, Abraham's wife, and Susanna are mentioned as examples of subservience and obedience; Lucrece is depicted as the most loyal and chaste woman. When talking about Susanna, the author does not stick to his source; the Old Testament Apocrypha mentions nothing about Susanna "creeping on her knees to please her husband" (ARR, p. 211). Nevertheless, Swetnam provides these examples as a message to all men who are going to marry: if a man is fortunate enough to find such a good wife, he should not desire to change her. [10]

He concludes with a list of limits and restrictions a good woman should respect. First of all, she should stay away from women of ill repute, then, she should not encourage other man to approach her by keeping a chaste and sober behavior. Swetnam's claims go even further:

> Being home, he findeth content sitting smiling in every corner of his house to give him a kind and hearty welcome home, and she receiveth him with the best and greatest joy that she can. (ARR, p. 212)

The woman's existence is completely directed to the husband's peaceful living. Swetnam mentions Saint Paul as his source on women's subjection and subservience. The vast majority of misogynist texts quote Saint Paul as a legitimate source of their claims. What they usually mention is the first part of the text, when the apostle states that women should submit themselves to their husbands in everything as they do to the Lord. However, the text goes on by saying that husbands have to respect their wives too, yet Swetnam does not hint at that part. [11] The author wants to give a proper justification for his misogynist ideas: he uses the Bible in order to demonstrate he has motive. Women are depicted as barely human beings, naturally submitted and inferior to men, who are the perfect beings, directly shaped from God.

The utmost part of the whole pamphlet occurs at the end of the third chapter, when the author gives his ultimate description of woman:

[10] K. U. Henderson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind - Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640.* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, p. 211-212.
[11] Ephesians, 5:22-33.

> Amongst all creatures that God hath created, there is none more subject to misery than a woman, especially those that are fruitful to bear children, but they have scarce a month's rest in a whole year, but are continually overcome with pain, sorrow, and fear. As indeed the danger of childbearing must needs be a great terror to a woman, which are counted but weak vessels in respect of men, and yet it is supposed that there is no disease that a man endureth that is one half so grievous or painful as childbearing is to a woman. (ARR, p. 213)

What is probably the most important feature that defines a woman is turned into weakness and sorrow; childbearing is viewed as a soft spot that condemns women to "misery" and to a life of sorrow and pain. Swetnam's declaration is very serious, women are nothing but "vessels" with the purpose of assuring men an offspring, there is no other point to their existence. What's more, childbearing is considered degrading and low for a man, who is superior and cannot endure such pain. What has long been considered the strength of women is completely reversed in this excerpt: not only giving life is depicted as another disadvantage of being woman, it also represents another reason for women's inferiority.

According to Swetnam, the only possible value of a woman is the pleasure she can offer to men but even pleasure can turn into polluting disease and waste. He converts pregnancy to a miserable condition of woman and he treats men's counterparts as inferior beings who have very few purposes in their lives. The text is extremely misogynist: it expresses a cynic and deceitful view about women that had been embraced by many early modern men.

The *querelle des femmes* represents an important step in the struggle for women's rights; the three women who rebutted Swetnam's ideas succeeded in the demolition of his weakly-based claims. Thanks to the vicious accusations of Swetnam, some women writers finally found the courage to formally confute a man's claim.

3.2. RACHEL SPEGHT, *A MOUZELL FOR MELASTOMUS*

Rachel Speght was a well-educated young woman of the London middle-class. She was the first English woman who published works revealing her real identity, without any pseudonyms or male names. As for most of early modern women writers, there is scarce

biographical information on Speght. She was born round 1597: her father, James Speght, was a Calvinist minister and rector of two London churches. Rachel Speght gained the name of first female polemicist and critic of contemporary gender ideology for her defense pamphlet *A Mouzell for Melastomus* (MOU), published in 1617. She also published a long poetic meditation on death in 1621, *Mortalities Memorandum*, and an allegorical dream-vision poem, *A Dream*, which unfolds the theme of female education. [12]

Speght's tract "breaks the mold" [13] of the previous *querelle*'s rhetoric: she rejects the formulaic gestures of the quarrel, such as citing authorities who praised women or overstating claims for female superiority. While the first defenses of women (Christine de Pisan and Jane Anger) provided positive images of female warriors, rulers, and scholars to expose women subjugation, the Jacobean treatise of the *querelle* offered a new challenge for misogynist stereotypes. Speght, together with Sowernam and Munda, contributed to the formal polemic controversy over women providing rhetorical works in which they expressed not only their involvement but also their ideological convictions. Speght's pamphlet claims and displays knowledge of Latin and a good training in logic and rhetoric too. She received a humanist education and she studied classical and Christian tradition; she cited a wide range of learned authorities in her works.

Two years after Swetnam's *Arraignment* publication, the same bookseller published Speght's *A Mouzell for Melastomus*. As the title clearly states, the work was meant to be a muzzle for black mouths (English for the Latin 'melastomus'), a sharp response to the vicious accusations on women's inferiority. The title explicitly states the writer's intent:

> A Mouzell for Melastomus, the cynicall bayter of, and foule mouthed Barker against Evahs sex. Or an Apologeticall Answere to that Irreligious and Illiterate Pamphlet made by *Io. Sw.* and by him Intitulated, *The Arraignment of Women*. (MOU, p.1)

Speght depicts Swetnam as a cynic man who wrote a pamphlet that is both irreligious and illiterate; lately, she will confute all Swetnam's claims, even those who were apparently supported by religion. In her treatise, the author undertakes to reinterpret biblical texts in order to demolish Swetnam's ideology and, at the same time, she develops her own

[12] B. Kiefer Lewalski (ed.), 1996, *The Polemics and Poems of Rachel Speght*. Oxford University Press, New York, p. xi.
[13] Ibid. p. xxi.

argument. Speght makes an explicit reference to Joseph Swetnam (*Io. Sw.*) making clear from the very beginning whom her work is against, and who the main addressee is as well. She refers to women as 'Evahs sex', the oppressed gender in a patriarchal society, and she declares to be the defender of "all vertuous Ladies Honourable or Worshipfull, and to all other of Hevahs sex fearing God" (MOU, p. 3).

Costantia Munda defined Swetnam's place in the emergent popular literature as a low one. She stigmatised *The Arraignment* as a dissolute pamphlet and she detached her own defense pamphlet from this supposed low print culture. Similarly, in *Mortalities Memorandum*'s dedication to her godmother, Speght talks about "populous times" referring to Swetnam's writing; echoing Munda, Speght wants to apologize for intervening in a controversy governed by the marketplace. [14] Swetnam's class and readership became the basis for displaying him as a vulgar and low man who seduces low people with his "illiterate" pamphlet. Speght's assertions made her a scandal and opened her to the criticism she actually feared; by affirming that her writing was part of the low market culture, she likened her readers to the illiterate ones of Swetnam.

A Mouzell for Melastomus has a great deal in common with *Mortalities Memorandum*: they are both defenses in which Speght demonstrates her knowledge of religious notions and humanist culture. What's interesting of *Mortalities Memorandum* is that Speght critically addresses both Sowernam and Munda: the author addresses Sowernam as critically as she addressed Swetnam in the *Mouzell*. She does not demonstrate to have any sense of solidarity towards another women's defender: instead, she seems to feel the competition and to defend her reputation. As Speght stigmatised her competitors, she "makes apparent the economic stakes in the production of responses to Swetnam" [15]; women involved in the debate were not completely devoted to the defense of womankind, as they were also engaged in a jostling game among each other. According to Brant and Purkiss, what Speght declared at the beginning of the *Mortalities* turned out to be true: playing the debate game, women ended up in a literary marketplace dominated by the "illiterate". [16]

At the beginning of her argument, Speght states that "the scandals and defamations" of *The Arraignment* had incited her to pen a response to the unjust insults towards the female sex. The author does not want those misogynist works to remain unanswered; she fears that

[14] C. Brant, D. Purkiss, 1992, *Women, Texts and Histories 1575-1760*. Routledge: London and New York, p. 91.
[15] Ibid. p. 92.
[16] Ibid.

"the vulgar ignorant" who might read *The Arraignment* might think that all the infamies are truths not to be infringed: that is why she has to contrast and refute all Swetnam's assertions. Speght does not want women to feel disgraced and shameful because of what *The Arraignment* conveys:

> A third reason why I have adventured to fling this stone at vaunting *Goliah* is, to comfort the mindes of all Hevahs sex, both rich and poore, learned and unlearned, with this Antidote, that if the feare of God reside in their hearts, maugre all adversaries, they are highly esteemed and accounted of in the eies of their gracious Redeemer, so that they need to feare the darts of envy or obtrectators. (MOU, p. 4).

She does not want to protect women, as Jane Anger did, nor to write an allegorical narration in support of women as De Pisan did: she wants to answer a specific misogynistic pamphlet using the proper structure of rhetorical defense and expressing her contrastive ideology. She compares herself to the biblical figure of David who defeated the giant Goliah, represented by Swetnam; the comparison exemplifies the fact that, though apparently weaker than Swetnam, she will prove to be wiser than him.

The writer thinks that Swetnam not only went beyond humanity but also beyond Christianity. He committed blasphemy for misinterpreting the Scripture; he insulted women, the work of God, "which in his great love he perfected for the comfort of man" (MOU, p. 8); finally, he is responsible for all those people who will hold his words for true and do not have the means to acknowledge they are wrong. Speght gives an effective answer by refuting every charge Swetnam moved against women. She presents herself as religious, learned, truthful and justifiably angry - yet self-controlled - in defending women and God, their Creator. She also remarks Swetnam's lack of logic and coherence:

> In your Title Leafe, you arraigne none but lewd, idle, froward and unconstant women, but in the Sequele (through defect of memorie as it seemeth) forgetting that you had made a distinction of good from badde, condemning all in generall, you advise men to beware of, and not to match with any of these six sorts of women, *viz. Good* and *Badde, Faire* and *Foule, Rich* and *Poor.* (MOU, p. 9)

Speght depicts Swetnam recollection as defective: he declared to arraign just bad women while lately in the texts he spoke against good women too. Speght does not limit herself to undermining Swetnam's work: she gives several proofs of his ineptitude. She points out that the attacker promised to commend virtuous women but he ended up warning men to stay away from all women. Sowernam and Munda will focus on Swetnam's incoherence too, providing examples from the text. They make evident the fact that Swetnam, as all misogynist writers, was not concerned with accuracy: antifeminist writers used doubtful sources, frequently quoted out of context. [17]

The structure devised by Speght allows her to attack him on particular points (as the contradictions just exposed, the readership, and the genre itself), sometimes offering a trenchant invective against the arraigner's logic and style. However, Speght restricts the invective to her prefatory matter and poems and to a small tract of the document: in the *Mouzell* she actually ignores Swetnam, probably on purpose, in order to mount a serious and coherent critique of gender ideology. The defense offers an extended examination of the Creation-Fall story from the Genesis and other biblical texts, giving less importance to *The Arraignment* and engaging worthier antagonists (such as the ministers or commentators who devalue and subjugate women with scriptural basis). [18] Although she apparently ignores Swetnam, throughout the text "Speght mounts an effective answer to Swetnam by creating a persona who is the living refutation of Swetnam's charges against women". [19]

Speght starts the body of the pamphlet with a statement from the Proverbs 18.22: "He that findeth a wife, findeth a good thing, and receiveth favour of the Lord" (MOU, p. 12). The author wants to demonstrate that what Swetnam claimed in his pamphlet is inaccurate as he has misinterpreted the Scripture. On the contrary, she offers a series of quotations and explanation taken from the Old Testament in which women are considered treasures for men. She does not mention Swetnam's contradictory arguments, as she did in the introduction; she affirms the moral and spiritual equality of women, thereby eliminating any essential ground for women's subordination to men.

Although Swetnam is accused by Speght to reinterpret the Bible, she offers her personal reading of the Scripture too:

[17] K. U. Henderson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind - Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640.* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, p. 33.
[18] B. Kiefer Lewalski (ed.), 1996, *The Polemics and Poems of Rachel Speght*. Oxford University Press, New York, p. xxii.
[19] Ibid.

> To avoid that solitarie condition that hee was then in, having none to commerce or converse withall but dumbe creatures, it seemes good unto the Lord, [...] to forme an helpe meete for him. Adam for this cause being cast into a heavy sleep, God extracting a rib from his side, thereof made, or built, Woman; shewing thereby, that man was as an unperfect building afore woman was made. (MOU, p. 12).

The fact that a woman could publicly examine the Bible is nearly a carnivalesque travesty of hierarchy. Speght is participating to the polemic with the same spirit of Swetnam: paradoxically, they want to praise their sex and mock it as well. As for Sowernam and Munda, Speght's pamphlet sounds exaggerated as it emphasizes the playful rhetoric of the whole controversy.

Speght rhetorical strategy, as well as Sowernam's and Munda's, employs argument by examples: their validity is assumed by way of the biblical origin of the stories they narrate. Moreover, Speght always reminds the reader that she is answering to misogynist attacks that are based on inaccurate examples; the word "answer" is repeated several times throughout the text exactly because she is reinterpreting what attackers have wrongly claimed. For instance, she writes "to the first of these objections I answere" (MOU, p. 14) at the beginning of each point she is going to refute. The objections go on until the fourth objection. Like her adversary, Speght appeals to classical (Aristotle) and later authorities (famous bishops and Church's ministers) to better validate her assertions and partly because she wants to show her humanist education.

Although she is virtually ignoring the real cause for her defense (Swetnam), she often comes up with words and expressions taken from *The Arraignment*, such as the epithet "weaker vessels" (MOU, p. 14): Swetnam uses this expression when talking about childbirth, while Speght is objecting to the belief that women are Satan's creation, empty and weak vessels of temptation. However, calling women "weaker vessels" was common in marriage sermons too; Speght is not denouncing just Swetnam but a whole institution. Speght does not mention Swetnam's name as much as Sowernam and Munda do; her language is more modest as she employs a style which is similar to an essay rather than to a passionate answer. By contrast, her two contemporaries' texts are characterized by invective, anger and fervour, always highlighting the arraigner's faults.

In her fourth objection, Speght discusses the principle of natural female inferiority; constantly reiterated in contemporary marriage homilies, the obedience of the wife towards the husband was justified "because he is better" [20]. According to the homily, the wife must acknowledge her inferiorities and behave as an inferior being, while the husband represents the God of the family. By contrast, Speght makes an exegesis that removes every sanction for the husband's authority from women.

> I will proceede toward the period of my intended taske, which is, to decipher the excellency of women: of whose Creation I will, for orders sake observe; First, the efficient cause, which was God; Secondly, the materiall cause, or that whereof shee was made; Thirdly, the formall cause, or fashion, and proportion of her feature; Fourthly and lastly, the finall cause, the end or purpose for which she was made. (MOU, p. 17)

The opening of her argument clearly states that women are excellent creatures; according to the author, gender hierarchy is a social institution sanctioned in the Bible to protect women's physical weakness. Speght grounds women's excellence on the Genesis story of woman as God's gift to man, as well as in Aristotle's four causes [21] : the efficient cause of women is God himself, as he has created them; the material cause, that would be Adam's rib, is a more perfect matter than the dust from which Adam was made; the formal cause shapes both man and woman after the image of God. Speght omits the traditional supposition about women's cold humors or imperfect bodies; the final cause of woman is to glorify God and represent a good counsel and companion to her husband:

> For as God gave man a lofty countenance, that hee might looke up toward Heaven, so did he likewise give unto woman. And as the temperature of man body is excellent, so is womans. [...] And (that more is) in the Image of God were they both created. (MOU, p. 19)

She emphasizes her claims about women's excellence by hollowing out those biblical texts that offered a damaging significance for women. For instance, Speght tells the story of the Fall revealing that Eve had good intentions while Adam was in greater guilt; similarly,

[20] *A Homilie of the State of Matrimonie*, in *The Second Tome of Homilies*, 1595, London. Quoted in: B. Kiefer Lewalski (ed.), 1996, *The Polemics and Poems of Rachel Speght*. Oxford University Press, New York, p. xxiv.
[21] In Aristotle's *Physics* the efficient cause is the agent by whom or by which something is made; the material cause is the matter of which it is made; the formal cause is the pattern of the thing made; the final cause is the end or purpose for which it is made. (*Physics*, 2.3, 194b16-195b30).

Solomon's statement that he had not found a good woman among a thousand is re-interpreted as a guilty association with his thousand pagan concubines. [22] Speght analyses every biblical reference previously quoted by misogynist writers in order to rebut women's imperfection and evilness. She builds her argument wisely, demonstrating to be a skilled humanist writer. Again, the paradox of the superiority of women gives an ironic connotation to the passage. Speght is interpreting the Bible to support her thesis, which is the proper antithesis of Swetnam's: while the former stands for the superiority of women, the latter supports men's superiority.

One of the most radical claims concerns the parable of the talents: Speght infers that "no power externall or internall ought woman to keep idle, but to imploy it in some service of God" (MOU, p. 20). The parable conveys the message that some female talents require employment beyond the domestic sphere. In addition, she challenges Swetnam's formula on marital duties that separated the spheres between man and woman by citing examples from nature:

> Nature hath taught senseless creatures to helpe one another; as the Male Pigeon, when his Hen is weary with sitting on her eggs, and comes off from them, supplies her place, that in her absence they may receive no harm, [...]. Of small Birds the Cocke alwaies helpes his Hen to build her nest; and while she sits upon her egges, he flies abroad to get meat for her. (MOU, pp. 20-21).

As animals share all the offices and duties of life, man and woman should do the same. Speght often celebrates marriage as the happiest moment in life: she believes man and woman are equal creatures who have to share an equal life in perfect harmony. God has created woman in order to give to man a mate, neither a subordinate nor a "weaker vessel". She eventually concludes with a warning: men who "presume to speake and exclaime against Woman" are ungrateful and guilty of ingratitude toward God; those men invite God's revenge for inveighing against his best creation, "woman I meane, whom God hath made equall with themselves in dignity, both temporally and eternally" (MOU, p. 26).

Despite the competition among women defenders, Speght's argument is highly related to the pressure she felt to defend both her sex and her class. She was concerned to defend

[22] B. Kiefer Lewalski (ed.), 1996, *The Polemics and Poems of Rachel Speght*. Oxford University Press, New York, p. xxv.

the place assigned to women by men and to negotiate a position for women to speak and defend themselves. Speght contrasts Swetnam by abducting the very authority he deprives women of: she does not accept the claims on women's inferiority in silence, as Swetnam dictated to all women, but she directs her tract to the arraigner himself. Speght employs the rhetoric of blasphemy and defamation: from the very beginning, she calls Swetnam a "devil" and his pamphlet an "unlearned religious provocation"; she mixes these two tactics in order to emphasise that blasphemy is considered the very defamation of God.

A Mouzell for Melastomus' rhetoric partially reflects Sowernam's pamphlet as they both develop the theme of blasphemy; however, while Speght appeals to Biblical authority in order to defend female honour and reputation, Sowernam prosecutes Swetnam and all mankind personally. The fact that Speght appeals to biblical authority seems to be strategically necessary; although God does not need to be defended, the author defends him as the creator of woman. As a result, she upholds the women's cause without being publicly shamed, exactly because she is defending God's creation and, consequently, God himself. Moreover, she can draw attention to those aspects of *The Arraignment* that lack authoritative social norms and, at the same time, she can threaten them.

3.3. ESTER SOWERNAM, *ESTHER HATH HANGED HAMAN*

Ester Sowernam is a pseudonym for an English author who took part in the 1617 *querelle des femmes*. The name is a reference to the biblical figure of Esther, from the Old Testament, while the surname is clearly in opposition to Swetnam's (Swet-nam as in 'sweet'; Sower-nam as in 'sour'). [23] The pseudonym suggests that the attack and the answers of this controversy are scornful, at the same time, they are mere rhetorical exercise. Sowernam wants to oppose Swetnam's 'sweetness' and be his antithesis, the sour part of the contest.

Sowernam, together with Munda, was not satisfied with Speght's defense to the extent that she criticised her contemporary's "slenderness" of answer. In her defense Sowernam styles herself cunningly as "neither a Maid, Wife nor Widdowe, yet really all, and therefore experienced to defend all", distinguishing herself from Speght's youth. Actually, she may be indicating that she had been a maid, a wife, and a widow but that she objects to the

[23] P. Demers, 2005, *Women's Writing in English -Early Modern England*. University of Toronto Press, p. 42.

categorization of women according to their relationship with men. Certainly, she is dismissing Swetnam's description of "unmarried wantons" as "neither maidens, widows, nor wives". [24] Most importantly, Sowernam higlights the fact that, as she is "really all" maid, wife and widow, she is enough "experienced" to defend all women. Sowernam represents the voice of social and sexual experience, the same conscious voice that threatens Swetnam's male pleasures.

Sowernam enters the fray with strategic linguistic manoeuvres; she entitles her pamphlet *Ester hath hang'd Haman: or An Answer to a lewd Pamphlet, entituled The Arraignment of Women with the arraignment of lewd, idle, froward, and unconstant men, and Husbands*, 1617 (EST). On one hand, she inverts Swetnam's surname; on the other one, she plays with the title and her own name, Esther. In the Bible Haman, the chief minister of the Persian king Ahasuerus, plotted to destroy the Jews residing in Persia; Esther, Haman's wife, revealed his treachery and caused him to be hanged. [25] Like Swetnam, Sowernam speaks from the ambivalent position of female knowledge: she puts into circulation the figure of a woman who knows the masculine world delineated by Swetnam. Such a representation of femininity carries its subversive charge, regardless of the question of authorship. [26]

Throughout the text, Sowernam frequently makes reference to Speght's work. She describes her contemporary as "the Maid" stressing that she is "a Minister's daughter" (EST, p. 219). Speght's father was indeed a schoolmaster, hence Sowernam's assertion that a minister's daughter lacks the experience Sowernam seems to possess. She criticises Speght by saying that she is way more experienced and skilled:

> Upon this news I stayed my pen, being as glad to be eased of my intended labor as I did expect some fitting performance of what was undertaken. [...] I did observe that whereas the Maid doth many times excuse her tenderness of years, I found it to be true in the slenderness of her answer. [...] So that whereas I expected to be eased of what I began, I do now find myself double charged, as well to make a reply to the one, as to add supply to the other. (EST, p. 219)

[24] K. U. Henderson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind - Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640.* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, p. 218.
[25] Ibid.
[26] C. Brant, D. Purkiss, 1992, *Women, Texts and Histories 1575-1760*. Routledge: London and New York, p. 85.

Not only does Sowernam state that Speght was not experienced enough to write such a defense: she also finds that Speght's work cannot contribute to help women's cause at all.

The word 'experience' appears in Speght and in Munda as well. While Speght uses this term to define an event that has affected someone's behaviour (when talking about Solomon's negative experience with women for instance); in Sowernam and Munda, 'experience' is more connected to the idea of knowledge, skill and long-term learning. Sowernam believes that Speght cannot have such an experience because she is young (she could not have had many life experiences) and partly because she is the daughter of a schoolmaster; consequently, she is a protected woman of a certain religious rank. Brant and Purkiss sustain that Sowernam's problematic 'experience' seems to reflect upon Swetnam's "reiteration of the rapacity of widows expressing itself in the desire of young men, and the unruliness of the apprentices themselves" [27], reinforcing the impression that Sowernam is not speaking with propriety. Sowernam speaking from the position of the knowing and experienced woman places her within Swetnam's stereotype of the threatening woman who provides male pleasure and then destroys men.

By contrast, Sowernam's quotations and arguments are not always in line with her speaking position. The text is divided into two main sections: a defense of women which deploys the rhetoric of citation, and a personal attack on Swetnam as the symbol of the exploitation of women by the male sex. In the first part of the text Sowernam cites from the women's defense written by Agrippa, *A treatise of the Nobilitie and Excellencye of Womankynde* (1542), a text which argues for female superiority. Linda Woodbridge affirms that Agrippa's writing is "suspiciously rhetorical" [28] for its claims on women's superiority; Agrippa deploys the power of rhetoric to prove the case that women are superior to men. However, he undermines his own claims as he demonstrates to be concerned on the regulation and control of men by staging a debate on women. Because of the exploitation of the women's cause in order to ascertain gender relations, it is odd that Sowernam often reproduces Agrippa's arguments. For example, she mentions the creation of Adam and Eve, echoing the *Nobilitie and Excellencye of Womankynde*: Eve was made of Adam's purest substance, hence she is superior; like Agrippa, Sowernam takes her assertions to the extreme.

[27] C. Brant, D. Purkiss, 1992, *Women, Texts and Histories 1575-1760*. Routledge: London and New York, p. 87.
[28] L. Woodbridge, 1984, *Women and the English Renaissance*, Brighton, Harvester, p 38.

Sowernam's strategy is answering to Swetnam's attacks by replicating his very approach. She inverts religious and literary texts on women's subordination in order to repudiate all misogynists, Swetnam above all. Her method is rather playful; Sowernam's position represents disorder, while her words mark a clear inversion from the orthodox moralists' position:

> So, if Woman received her crookedness from the rib and consequently from the Man, how doth man excel in crookedness, who hath more of those crooked ribs! See how this vain, furious, and idle Author [Swetnam] furnisheth woman with an Argument against himself and others of his Sex. (EST, p. 222)

Not only does Sowernam strategically convert Swetnam's words: she also ends up depicting Swetnam's own claims as incoherent. She carries on with this approach for each claim taken from the Bible in *The Arraignment*; as previously done by Speght, Sowernam accuses Swetnam of blasphemy because he prosecuted all women in general "under the cloak and color of lewd, idle, and froward women" (EST, p. 223). According to Sowernam, the arraigner has generalized one female stereotype and has insulted God's creation.

As for Speght and Munda, the first argument concerns the Creation. Sowernam states that since woman has been created to be the man's mate, she is commanded to obey to his husband; "Obedience is better than Sacrifice, for nothing is more acceptable before God than to obey" (EST, p. 225), consequently, women are more bound to God than to men. The conclusions Sowernam draws are rigorous and sometimes carnivalesque; like the other defenders and the misogynists, she assumes validity of her assertions, creating axioms that often result in absurdity. Nevertheless, Henderson and McManus show that Sowernam builds perfectly logical examples biblically based demonstrating her ability to organize a well-structured discourse. [29]

Rhetorically speaking, Sowernam's discourse is more precise and more plotted than Swetnam's (or Speght's and Munda's). In the opening epistle she concisely exposes the overall organization and purpose of her treatise, pointing out the reason why she decided to write it, Swetnam's attack, of course:

[29] K. U. Henderson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind - Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640.* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, p. 39.

> There happened a mention of a Pamphlet entitled *The Arraignment of Women*, which I was desirous to see. The next day a Gentleman brought me the Book, which when I had superficially run over, I found the discourse as far off from performing what the Title promised as I found it scandalous and blasphemous. For where the Author pretended to write against lewd, idle, and unconstant women, he doth most impudently rage and rail generally against all the whole sex of women. (EST, p. 219)

She continues by illustrating her principal modes of argument: "defending upon direct proof", reporting "examples,... authorities, customs, and daily experience". Unlike Speght, Sowernam employs invective; she makes always specific reference to her adversary by mentioning his name several times and always reporting his pamphlet's lines.

At the end of chapter II, Sowernam seizes on a specific error made by Swetnam to refute his arraignment against women, the moment when he calls women "necessary evils"[30] and he says that God himself gave them this epithet.

> If he had cited Euripides for his Author, he had ad some color, for that profane Poet in *Medea* useth these speeches [...]. Thus a Pagan writeth profanely, but for a Christian to say that God calleth women "necessary evils" is most intolerable and shameful to be written and published. (EST, p. 226)

By highlighting this error, Sowernam wants to show that Swetnam does not boast a proper education on the sources he had been citing so far; consequently, his claims are false and inaccurate. Not only Sowernam, but other defenders had pointed out this specific passage of Swetnam's pamphlet. Criticism of style was a concrete mode of response during the Renaissance, as it assessed how properly a writer could present a harmonious thoughts. [31]

In chapter III, Sowernam proposes again the listing of illustrious women (as frequently done before by De Pisan and others pro women writers); she cites seventeen examples of Old Testament women who showed courage in aiding and preserving men. In particular, she talks about Sarah, Rebecca, Judith, Esther, Susanna, and the mother of the Macchabees. To support her references, she identifies the book and chapter of the Bible in which each woman appear. In Sowernam's text there are all the essential strategies to build a

[30] J. Swetnam, 1615, *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women*, K. Usher Henderson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind*, p. 191.
[31] K. U. Henderson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind - Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640.* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, p. 37.

defense, including the listing, which had not been employed by Speght instead. To solidly ground her pamphlet and to result convincing, Sowernam provides the reader with examples of excellent women as well, structuring her work with all the persuasive techniques she knows.

Throughout the text, Sowernam proves to be a daring writer, for instance, when she makes her praise of woman, she gets the chance to show her wittiness. The author declares that she has the "proof of the worthiness" (EST, p. 227) of the female sex; the first reason she gives is that woman was the last work of Creation, then she adds, "(I dare not say 'the best')" (EST, p. 227). By putting her claim into brackets, Sowernam pretends to give little importance to these words; at the same time, she manifests her true - and daring - thought about woman purporting a false modesty. Instead of conferring little importance to the statement, Sowernam highlights it on purpose. She continues the praise by summarizing all previous examples:

> She was created out of the chosen and best refined substance; she was created in a more worthy country; [...] the first promise of salvation was made to a woman; [...] her first name, Eve, doth presage the nature and disposition of all women, not only in respect of their bearing, but further for the life and delight of heart and soul to all mankind. (EST, p. 227)

Together with Speght and Munda, Sowernam always repeats the reasons why Swetnam and the other misogynist writers are wrong; she illustrates the worth of women through the analysis of religious and historical figures and through the refutation of Swetnam's ideas. She concludes this first moralistic part of the pamphlet with the recapitulation of the previous chapters; then, she starts a new part, determined to "solace" herself "with a little liberty" (EST, p. 227). She declares to have respectfully written the first part in order to better express her thoughts on Swetnam and his accuses in the second part.

She begins the new chapter drawing upon Roman and Greek mythology for her examples; she cites Bellona as the inventor of the sword and armor, Ceres ad the inventor of agriculture, the nine Muses as inventors of the liberal arts and sciences, Carmenta as the inventor of the alphabet, and Diana as the inventor of hunting. She praises classical tradition because it gave importance to women and "valued [women] at highest estimate". However, she overstates her case, for women were generally considered inferior to men in classical

antiquity; although there were female divinities or female traditional figures, they were connected to folklore rather than to reality.

The list of illustrious women eventually presents contemporary figures, from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, such as queens and valorous noble women. Among them, Sowernam lingers on Queen Elizabeth I:

> And I may name no more (since in one only were comprised all the qualities and endowments that could make a person eminent), Elizabeth our late Sovereign, not only the glory of our Sex, but a pattern for the best men to imitate, of whom I will say no more but that while she lived, she was the mirror of the world, so then known to be, and so still remembered, and ever will be. (EST, p. 230-231).

According to Brant and Purkiss, who define the praise of the queen extravagant, the praise could be a cover for a political critique: the long speech on queen Elizabeth may reflect upon the perceived dissolution of moral and sexual boundaries at the court of James I; Elizabeth is praised for her public virtues also as part of the demonstration of women's superiority to men. [32] However, it is impossible to confer the sole motivation of politic references to Sowernam's pamphlet; the figure of Elizabeth I was praised and admired by the vast majority of women - and men too - not only as the queen, but also as an authoritative and strong figure to look up to, the perfect example for Sowernam's purpose.

Sowernam puts queen Elizabeth at the end of the list of sovereigns to remark her importance and her superiority. She concludes the argument by saying that women are not better than men; then, she contradicts herself adding that men are "not so wise" (EST, p. 231) because they should treat women as their "betters". According to Swetnam, the vehemence of men in obtaining the love of women demonstrates that they think women are better than they themselves are. As Aristotle claimed, everything, by nature, seeks the good, and it is nature that makes men pursuit women. However, men love to just say that women are only apparently, not truly, good. This paradox is essential in Sowernam's text as it shows the incoherence and the impropriety of misogynistic claims and highlights her assertions in favour of women.

In the following chapters Sowernam offers a mock indictment of Swetnam. She briefly repeats many of her charges against the arraigner. She maintains that Swetnam

[32] C. Brant, D. Purkiss, 1992, *Women, Texts and Histories 1575-1760*. Routledge: London and New York, p. 85.

pleaded not guilty, but as Conscience confronted him, he confided in the mercy of the judges rather than trying to go on with the trial. The mock jury is mostly of female gender; it is up to Sowernam herself to deliver a speech that unfolds the wrongs done by Swetnam to women: "The answer to all objections which are material made against women". Thanks to this parody, Sowernam can state again all the accuses she moved against Swetnam, this time in a more fictional way; she builds a mock trial in which she gives voice to her adversary as well, getting the chance to criticise him once more.

> You all see he will not put himself upon trial. If we should let it so pass, our silence might implead us for guilty; [...] I will at this present examine all the objections which are most material which our adversary hath vomited out against woman, and not only what he hath objected but what other authors of more import than Joseph Swetnam have charged upon women. (EST, p. 235)

Here, Sowernam argues that it is necessary to put Swetnam upon trial, otherwise his claims would be believed. To sound more credible, Sowernam uses words connected to the juridical language, such as plead, guilty, examine, objection, and charge. Like a lawyer, she will carefully analyse not only Swetnam's, but also other author's assertions against woman, in order to give justice to the offended part and to punish her adversaries.

An interesting rhetorical strategy that recurs throughout the mock trial is the presence of a question at the beginning of an argument. When talking about women's power to seduce, Sowernam begins with this question: "Is holiness, wisdom, and strength so slightly seated in your Masculine gender as to be stained, blemished, and subdued by women?" (EST, p. 237). Sowernam deals with Swetnam's charge that women are seductress, luring men to ruin: Sowernam depicts women as holy, wise and strong, thus, not to be blamed for men's sins; rather, Swetnam thinks that through their very beauty women can ruin men. Sowernam opposes her adversary's claim with the assertion that beauty cannot cause harm; therefore, women's beauty cannot be a direct cause of men's ruin. Actually, men are tempted because of their wanton nature; when a men sees a beautiful woman, he should "rather glorify God in so beautiful a work than infect his soul with so lascivious a thought" (EST, p. 238). Sowernam turns Swetnam's arguments back against him by demonstrating her reasoning power.

Brant and Purkiss discuss the issue of women's seduction arguing that Sowernam denounces male location of sexuality in women by writing as someone who knows male sexuality. [33] The writer acts like a knowledgeable guide to the textual tricks of seducers:

> He [Swetnam] saith, "Women tempt, allure, and provoke men". How rare a thing is it for women to prostitute and offer themselves? How common a practice is it for men to seek and solicit women to lewdness? What charge do they spare? [...] They hire Panders; they write letters; they seal them with damnations and execrations to assure them of love, when the end proves but lust. (EST, p. 241)

In this excerpt Sowernam echoes the speeches of Jacobean female figures, who theatrically displayed the voice of sexuality in order to criticise sexuality from a moral position. However, Brant and Purkiss remark that "on stage that moral position was always outside the woman herself, who remained a locus of sexual corruption even as she voiced a repudiation of it". [34] Thus, in the text Sowernam can voice morality because of her experience, yet she cannot embody it. While Swetnam blames women for tempting and making men sin, Sowernam points out that men choose - and want - to be seduced by women, consequently, the blame is especially on them.

The last argument Sowernam unfolds concerns the innocence of women, previously accused by Swetnam of being the ruin of men. She rebuts Swetnam's examples of women who overthrew men; for instance, she defends Helen, considered the cause of Troy's burning, because it was Paris who solicited her; also, she defends Judith, depicted as irreligious and profane by Swetnam. According to Sowernam, "there was never a woman ever noted for so shameless, so brutish, so beastly a scold" (EST, p. 242) as Swetnam proved to be in writing his pamphlet. Not only does she accuse him of falsity and incoherence by rebuking all his claims; she also points out the scurrility and the impudence of the arraigner's style.

Sowernam concludes her defense with a piece of advice: she warns all women to beware of men's dishonesty - even their consorts' - and prevent them from charging "our [female] sex hereafter with those sins of which you yourselves [men] were the first procurers" (EST, p. 242). Besides attacking Swetnam and all misogynists, Sowernam's

[33] C. Brant, D. Purkiss, 1992, *Women, Texts and Histories 1575-1760*. Routledge: London and New York, p. 89.
[34] Ibid.

purpose is to school women on all the religious and historical reasons why they should not be treated as inferior to men, nor be condemned to subjugation.

Moreover, the writer specifies the difference between herself and Swetnam: the arraigner is a "railing scold" who "rageth upon passionate fury without bringing a cause or proof" (EST, p. 242); Sowernam defines herself an "honest accuser" as she has brought direct proof for what she has alleged. Eventually, the final sentence of the mock trial presents Swetnam charged with blasphemy, impudence, scurrility and foolery. At the end of the text, Sowernam promises a further response to Swetnam; apparently, she never published it.

3.4. CONSTANTIA MUNDA, *THE WORMING OF A MAD DOG*

As for Ester Sowernam, there is not any biographical information on this writer. We do not even know her real name. Constantia Munda is clearly a pseudonym. It probably conveys the meaning of its Latin-origin name: prudence, constancy (as the Latin word constantia) and pure, elegant (as the Latin word munda) are the self description of the writer's attitude. The pseudonym also contradicts Swetnam's attack on women as 'unconstant'. [35] As Sowernam did with her surname, Munda plays linguistic tricks with her name that suggest the ironic connotation of the controversy. Once again, the response to Swetnam's pamphlet is at the same time serious and comic: by contrasting the arraigner's theory on women's inconstancy, Munda is playing the rhetoric game and also stating women's worth.

In 1617 Munda published her response to Swetnam, *The Worming of a Mad Dog; or, A Sop for Cerberus, the Jailor of Hell,* with the following subtitle: *No Confutation but a sharp Redargution [36] of the baiter of Women by Constantia Munda: "dux femina facti"* (WOR). From the very title it is possible to notice that Munda's pamphlet, compared to Speght's and Sowernam's, has a different tone. Munda replies with an impassionate invective to Swetnam, depicting him as a dangerous animal. Swetnam is an ill dog who has grown intestinal parasites (worms); Munda writes the pamphlet as a sop, an offer to make the mad dog recover. Moreover, she addresses him as Cerberus, the three-headed dog who

[35] P. Demers, 2005, *Women's Writing in English - Early Modern England*. University of Toronto Press, p. 42-43.
[36] Reproof.

guarded the entrance to the underworld in Greek mythology. [37] Therefore, the metaphor would be the following: Swetnam is not only a mad dog, but also a devilish creature to whom the writer offers something to cease his choler; *The Arraignment* is the product of choler and rage while *The Worming of a Mad Dog* is a necessary work to reproach all the vicious and inaccurate claims Swetnam has written.

Munda states that her pamphlet is not a confutation; in fact, it is a disapproval of Swetnam's *Arraignment*. She does not want to present her work as an antithesis of her adversary's condemnation of women: she rather wants to express her sharply reproach. The last part of the subtitle presents a Latin sentence meaning "a woman was leader of the exploit"; it is a quotation from Vergil's *Aeneid* I v.364 concerning queen Dido. [38] Obviously, the Phoenician queen is an example of courage and leadership to look up to; Munda chooses this particular sentence because it embodies her alleged role of leader and defender of the subjugated sex ('the exploit').

At the beginning of the invective, Munda dedicates a poem to her mother and another one to Swetnam himself. Munda praises her mother for having endured the pain of childbirth and for having given her life; she implicitly contrasts what Swetnam wrote about childbearing, seen as a sign of female weakness as well as a clear condemnation to misery for all women. She dedicates the pamphlet to her mother as a token for what she gave her and as a symbol of her admiration for all women and mothers. Munda affirms she "had gone forward had not *Esther hanged Haman* before" (WOR, p. 246) as to state that her work, which is also the last one of this particular quarrel, is the most complete. Finally, Munda confers her mother the role of supervisor and patron of the pamphlet:

> Although this be a toy scarce worth your view,
> Yet deign to read it, and accept it in lieu
> Of greater duty, for your gracious look
> Is a sufficient Patron to my book. (WOR, p. 246)

It seems that Munda thinks that the fray she is taking part to is a low argument, not worth her mother's attention.

[37] K. U. Henderson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind - Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640.* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, p. 245.
[38] Ibid.

The second poem is filled with invective, Munda castigates Swetnam's "barren-idle-dunghill brain" for attacking women with false claims, "with bald and ribald lines patched out of English writers" (WOR, p. 246). Although the element of reproof exists both in Speght and in Sowernam, it is "meanderingly developed in Constantia Munda's 'sharpe redargution'". [39] The abundance of Latin, Greek and Italian citations does not conceal the colloquial vigour of the invective. Munda reproaches Swetnam's muse, "so fledged in sin, / so cokered up in mischief" (WOR, p. 246); in retaliation for Swetnam's wickedly inveighing against women, Munda resorts excerpts from Euripides, Virgil, Horace, Juvenal, and the Bible, as well as references to pustules and scatology. Then, Munda vows that she, and all women, will not stop defending themselves nor accusing Swetnam of blasphemy. [40]

She also remarks that the world's greatest writers have praised and glorified the importance and the merits of womankind. She describes women as "the crown, the perfection, and the means of all men's being" and she closes the poem with a piece of advice: men should cease inveighing against women because all these slanders can only make women stronger. Munda's advice is in fact a warning: according to her, the bitterness of misogynistic pamphlets had been increasing women's disappointment, and the numerous responses of her contemporaries represent the result of a despicable fray, begun by the anti-women part.

Once entered in the body of the text, Munda's first addressee is the printing press, accused of having become too much compliant:

> And Printing, that was invented to be the storehouse of famous wits, the treasure of Divine literature, the pandect [41] and maintainer of all Sciences, is become the receptacle of every dissolute Pamphlet, the nursery and hospital of every spurious and penurious brat which proceeds from base phrenetical [42] brainsick babblers. (WOR, p. 247)

The language employed by Munda is clearly more colloquial than her two contemporaries'. She uses scurrilous words and common expressions to describe the alleged impostors of literature, who do not deserve to be considered worthy enough to be published. By contrast, Munda uses a higher language in order to oppose to those "brainsick babblers" the "famous

[39] P. Demers, 2005, *Women's Writing in English - Early Modern England*. University of Toronto Press, p. 42.
[40] Ibid. p. 43.
[41] Digest.
[42] Frienzied.

wits" of literature and science, who instead should represent the only treasures of the printing press. The fact that Munda describes the press as the hospital and nursery of those misogynistic texts, suggests that she considers them as low works that lack propriety and accuracy; they need to be 'cured' and restored instead of being published. It seems that Munda considers those pamphlets epidemic elements that could put the press, together with all literature, at risk of contamination.

According to Brant and Purkiss, the low printing included also the invectives which participated in the very culture Munda stigmatized. Many pamphlets and tales often distinguishes themselves from so-called 'low' literature; yet, paradoxically, they affirmed participation in its competitive commercial economy. [43] By trying to improve their stories in order to dissociate themselves from their 'illiterate' rivals, those writers actually entered the world they disapproved of. Accordingly, Munda detaches her writing from the public theatre in which she believed the worst kind of femininity was displayed, "while she repeatedly makes use of 'low' sexual and scatological discourse". [44]

The invective against low and illiterate printing culture goes on with a quotation from the Latin poet Horace:

> When the "scribimus indocti" must be the motto of everyone that fools himself in Print, 'tis ridiculous; but when "scribimus insani" should be the signature of every page, 'tis lamentable. (WOR, pp. 247-248.)

The first quotation [45] ("we, the untrained, write") refers to Horace's comment concerning the fact that everyone in Rome thought himself to be a writer. The second quotation is Munda's personal addition to Horace's thought: she means "we, the insane, write". Munda believes that many writers are illiterate and unqualified; they fool themselves because they are determined to write and they think to spread their qualified works among people. Moreover, she depicts them as insane, a shame for every page of the books they published. Munda does not conceal her true feelings behind a formal, proper speech: she expresses herself with a varied vocabulary, sometimes low and sometimes, as in this case, enriched with classical

[43] C. Brant, D. Purkiss, 1992, *Women, Texts and Histories 1575-1760*. Routledge: London and New York, p. 91.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Horace, *Epistles* 2.1.117. Quoted in: K. U. Henderson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind - Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, p. 247.

notions. The result is a biting invective that keeps a high register despite the aggressiveness of its claims.

The lines that follows are literally filled with Italian and Latin quotations whose allegorical meaning is the condemnation of misogynist writers for their false assertions. She defines them as "savage and uncouth monsters" and "blindfold bayards" [46], whose writing is compared to "scribbling pens" (WOR, p. 248). By mixing up literary quotations with a shameless invective, Munda displays her linguistic abilities as well as her solid classical education. According to Henderson and McManus, Munda's display of learning is "neither pretentious nor stultifying" [47]: she integrates her knowledge into the fabric of the pamphlet demonstrating that women deserve a liberal education.

Munda's strategy to mix up archaic quotations with the invective is the main characteristic of *The Worming of a Mad Dog* and the result is pretty effective:

> Though feminine modesty hath confined our rarest and ripest wits to silence, we acknowledge it our great ornament; but when necessity compels us, 'tis as great a fault and folly "loquenda tacere, ut contra gravis est culpa tacenda loqui" being too much provoked by arraignments, baitings, and rancorous impeachments of the reputation of our whole sex. (WOR, p. 249)

Munda inserts a Latin sentence in her discourse with absolute ease: it seems that she is naturally mixing Latin with English. Munda thinks that women had transformed their passive and silent status into an advantage and a strong point. She asserts that whenever a woman is provoked, she should cease to be silent and speak; as the Latin sentence says ("loquenda tacere, ut contra gravis est culpa tacenda loqui"), it is wrong to keep silent about things that should be spoken, as it is a serious fault to speak about things that should be kept silent. This claim is referred both to women and men: while women do not make blunders about inappropriate things, men usually overspeak, resulting in blasphemy and misogyny. To give more credit to her speech, Munda adds an ancient Greek quotation, with the same meaning of the Latin one: to speak that which is fitting is better than to keep silent. The classical quotations' technique displays the strong effort Munda makes in order to sound more credible and qualified than her adversaries.

[46] Ignorant fools.
[47] K. U. Henderson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind - Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640.* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, p. 36.

Munda does not list examples of illustrious women to support her cause; instead, she provides the reader with positive and negative male examples. The worst examples are Gelon, king of Syracus, (who refused to help the Greeks against the Persians unless they gave him the supreme command) and Nero, described as the matricidal Roman emperor. In particular, as Swetnam attacked his own mother in *The Arraignment*, he is compared to the Roman emperor:

> Is there no reverence to be given to your mother because you are weaned from her teat and nevermore shall be fed with her pap? [...] If she had crammed gravel down thy throat when she gave thee suck or exposed thee to the mercy of the wild beasts in the wildrness when she fed thee with the pap, thou couldst not have shown thyself more ungrateful than thou hast in belching out thy nefarious contempt of thy mother's sex". (WOR, p. 254)

Swetnam's attack to his mother had particularly moved Munda's sensitivity to the extent that she throws upon him serious accusations. The most significant word is 'ungrateful'; Swetnam does not respect his own mother, the one that gave him life and has "fed [him] with her pap". As a result, he cannot respect other women exactly because he does not demonstrate any gratitude to the most important one. Munda does not restrain herself at all: she uses scurrilous words connected to the nurture of a child, such as teat, pap, suck and belch, in order to better display her disappointment towards Swetnam, and her anger as well.

Previously in the text, Munda gives Swetnam an example of a man who respected his mother and wife: Coriolanus, the legendary leader of the early Roman Republic, laid siege to Rome when he was banished from the city, relenting only after the pleas of his mother and wife. [48] Then, she turns to the arraigner and she blames him for not having spared "the mother that brought forth such an untoward whelp into the world thyself" (WOR, p. 250). As she states at the beginning of the pamphlet, Munda is not writing a confutation of Swetnam's thesis; in fact, *The Worming of Mad Dog* is a reproach: thus, she has to provide good models and illustrious examples to Swetnam in order to make him - and all men - understand the seriousness of his accusations.

Munda makes several references to Speght and Sowernam. She first mentions them as Swetnam's "she-adversaries" (WOR, p. 251); Munda thinks that her contemporaries did not

[48] K. U. Henderson, B. F. McManus, 1985, *Half Humankind - Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540-1640.* University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, p. 250.

dare to confront Swetnam properly, whereas she is ready to talk with him "in cold blood". Apparently, Munda believes that both Speght and Sowernam did not choose the right method to answer Swetnam's attacks, that is, a direct invective lacking modesty and good manners:

> I write not in hope of reclaiming thee from thy profligate absurdities [...] You see, your black, grinning mouth hath been muzzled by a modest and powerful hand who hath judiciously betrayed and wisely laid open your singular ignorance, couched under incredible impudence; [...] 'tis a doubt whether she hath showed more modesty or gravity, more learning or prudence in the religious confutation of your indecent railings. (WOR, pp. 253-254)

Of course, Munda is talking about Speght, later addressed as "the first Champion of our sex" (WOR, p. 254); the reference is clear as Munda also paraphrases the title of Speght's work *A Muzzle for Melastomus* (black mouth). Although Munda does not inveigh against Speght as much as Sowernam did, she asserts that the first response to Swetnam was too plain and modest. The mere confutation of Swetnam's "indecent railings" is not enough: Munda believes that it is necessary to reproach - not rebut - the arraigner straightforwardly, using an aggressive language and popular language.

What the three defenders have in common is that all of them focus on Swetnam's incoherence and linguistic inaccuracies in order to build their cause against him. Munda starts her discourse writing that "grant one absurdity; a thousand follow" (WOR, p. 251), with reference to all the mistakes Swetnam committed in his treatise. She attacks simultaneously Swetnam's style, physical appearance, personality, intelligence, and motives:

> ...the crabbedness of your style, the unsavory periods of your broken-winded sentences, persuade your body to be of the same temper as your mind. Your ill-favored countenance, your wayward conditions, your peevish and pettish nature is such that none of our sex with whom you have obtained some partial conference could ever brook your dogged frumpard[49] frowardness: upon which malcontented desperation you hung out your flag of defiance against the whole world as a prodigious monstrous rebel against nature. (WOR, p. 253).

[49] Scoffing.

Munda states that Swetnam's "broken-winded sentences" reflects his own broken and corrupted soul, as if his wicked body influences his writing. Not only does Munda want to denounce Swetnam's illiteracy and evil spirit: she wants to turn Swetnam's accusations against him. Munda mentions the "frowardness" Swetnam attributed to women, but this time she refers to the writer himself. She depicts the arraigner as a monster whose attack against womankind stands for a rebellion against nature. Among her contemporaries, Munda is indeed the one who employs the invective most effectively.

Although Swetnam's slippery arguments give the defenders little to remark, they do seize upon specific errors to refute or elements of style to satirize. Munda often echoes both Sowernam's and Speght's caveats only more emphatically; for instance, she devotes several pages to the stylistic critique of *The Arraignment*, mocking Swetnam's contradictory metaphors and rhymes:

> Sometimes your doggerel rhymes make me smile, [...] I stand not to descant on your plain-song, but surely if you can make ballads no better, you must be fain to give over that profession; for your Muse is wonderfully defective in the bandoleers. [...] Sometimes you make me burst out with laughter when I see your contradictions of yourselves. (WOR, pp. 256-257).

Munda discusses more about Swetnam's style than about his ideology. She points out Swetnam's logical inconsistencies; at the same time, she uses common sense (when she says that she laughs at Swetnam's claims, for example) in order to make *The Arraignment*'s thesis collapse; her explicit language conveys spontaneity and truthfulness to the whole text.

Munda concludes with the transcription of "some verses that a Gentleman wrote to such an one", that is Joseph Swetnam. By the end of the poem, Munda describes the fate she thinks Swetnam deserves. She expresses again her contempt concerning Swetnam's ignorance with epithets conveying rudeness and viciousness, such as "rude quill" and "mercenary". Eventually, Munda gives her ultimate wish to her adversary. She displays Swetnam's terrible future: he will be laughed at for his ignorance, and he will helplessly "pine and die" (WOR, p. 263) without any solace.

CONCLUSION

My main concern was to demonstrate the influence that all the misogynistic attacks had not only on women's reputation but also on women's life throughout history. Specifically, I analysed the European Renaissance because women had the opportunity to finally speak for their sex and prove their worth as men's equals and as qualified writers.

The controversy's inherited tradition showed that women have been praised and criticised from ancient history to early modern times. Although the methods of argumentation, as well as the contents of the texts, changed, ancient writings share the same fluctuating shift from praising women to arraigning female nature. It demonstrates that the debate was mostly built as a rhetorical game in which the writers who praised women brought their assertions to exaggeration. By contrast, the first women who wrote in defense of their sex, such as De Pisan and Anger, assumed an important leading role for the successive writers; thanks to those pioneering texts, the early modern *querelle* became a popular and widespread genre.

The case of Swetnam against Speght, Sowernam, and Munda represents the most effective example of the whole early modern women debate. Swetnam gathered all the typical accusations against women quoting authoritative sources, such as the Bible, in order to give more credibility to his work; he used a language full of analogies and metaphors with the aim of making his ideas about women more striking. Swetnam's *Arraignment* brought the reaction of a cluster of women writers who pointed out the author's inaccuracies resorting to his very methods. Speght, Sowernam, and Munda employed different linguistic strategies and different languages; they published their responses in the same year, strengthening the texts' impact on the audience. Apparently, the three writers formed a united group with the same purpose; although Sowernam and Munda often hinted at Speght's scarce intent, their writings succeeded partly because of the unity they convey.

The ideas expressed in early modern misogynistic texts have been often repeated in contemporary literary masterpieces as a despicable way to see and to talk about women. Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) depicts a near future governed by a totalitarian regime in which the few fertile women left in the country - the handmaids - are given to powerful families in order to procreate heirs. The regime considers women as empty vessels with no rights and no liberty of choice: women cannot be the head

of any institution, and even the wives of the most important Commanders have little freedom. [1] Atwood's novel reminds us of the importance of gender equality as well as the fair treatment every person should have, either man or woman. The female responses I analysed represent women's effort to erase the unfair image of woman men had created. Yet, they did not fulfill their desire for equality.

The enslaved fertile women of *The Handmaid's Tale*'s live as prisoners, dressed all alike; they do not have any right, and are uniformed to a canon. Similarly, early modern women were depicted as 'empty vessels' naturally inferior to men; they were uniformed to the model of the silent, passive and obedient wife. However, at some point, handmaids manifest the first signs of rebellion and disagreement, which not only frighten the institutions, but also make women bond with each other and gain strength. Accordingly, after many misogynistic attacks that categorized the female sex as inferior to male's, women started writing and engendered a pamphlet war. The 'army' of women writers did not try to show superiority over men; they wanted equality; most of all, they wanted to stop being slandered. The fact that women writers defending women appeared to be a uniform group sharing the same purpose and the same ideas, made their texts a sort of literary rebellion towards the misogynous tradition.

The effectiveness of Speght's, Sowernam's and Munda's pamphlets lies on the fact that they wrote logical and appropriate defenses, expressing their ideology and thoughts. Yet, they maintained the sarcastic tone of Swetnam's *Arraignment* giving the text a paradoxical connotation that not only let readers reflect upon women's condition, but also let them entertain and enjoy the reading.

[1] M. Atwood, 1985, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Vintage, London.

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SUMMARY IN ITALIAN

DONNE IN DIFESA DI DONNE: LA *QUERELLE DES FEMMES* IN SPEGHT, SOWERNAM E MUNDA (1617).

Questo lavoro nasce da una collaborazione con un progetto dell'Università di Boston (Northeastern), il Women Writers Project. Questo progetto si pone come obiettivo rendere accessibile online a professori, ricercatori e studenti un vasto corpus di opere scritte da artiste donne, partendo dal XV fino al XIX secolo. Come partecipante, l'Università di Padova si pone l'obiettivo di dimostrare l'eccellenza della donna scrittrice nel periodo rinascimentale (1580-1620 circa) dando particolare rilievo alla letteratura inglese e italiana. La ricerca, che sviluppa varie tematiche di partecipante in partecipante, si basa principalmente sull'analisi letteraria di testi rinascimentali e sulla comparazione di questi con fonti antiche e contemporanee.

Il tema che ho deciso di approfondire riguarda il dibattito rinascimentale sulla donna, *querelle des femmes*, dando voce ad autori maschili e femminili e analizzando un caso particolare sorto tra il 1615 e il 1617. Ciò che ho voluto sottolineare durante la mia indagine é la capacità di alcune autrici di superare gli stereotipi attribuiti alle donne e riuscire a redigere un documento pertinente e ben strutturato. In particolare, ho notato una sorta di gioco retorico tra coloro che sostengono l'inferiorità della donna e coloro che invece difendono il genere femminile: spesso, il dibattito assume connotazioni paradossali in quanto presenta idee e concetti palesemente esagerati e controversi.

La tesi é suddivisa in tre capitoli: nel primo capitolo viene descritta la vita che le donne conducevano durante il Rinascimento, il secondo capitolo presenta le caratteristiche della *querelle des femmes* (il dibattito sulla natura della donna), nel terzo capitolo viene presentata l'analisi di quattro documenti simbolo di questo periodo.

1. LA QUOTIDIANITÁ DELLA DONNA NELL'EUROPA RINASCIMENTALE

Durante il periodo rinascimentale, in Europa era diffusa la credenza secondo cui il mondo era organizzato in un sistema di opposti. Secondo questa classificazione, teorizzata da Aristotele, ogni elemento presente in natura dipende dal suo opposto, di conseguenza,

l'uomo e la donna vengono considerati due versioni della stessa specie le cui caratteristiche li differenziano nettamente, e, allo stesso tempo, li rendono l'uno necessario all'altra. Secondo Aristotele, l'elemento binario uomo/donna rappresenta la base per tutti gli altri opposti; l'uomo é considerato il principio attivo mentre la donna quello passivo.

Nel corso del XVI secolo, la teoria aristotelica secondo cui l'uomo é un essere perfetto, dunque superiore alla donna, veniva rafforzata dai testi cristiani dell'Antico Testamento; in particolare, il racconto della Genesi presentava Eva come l'origine di tutti i mali nonché la causa dell'imperfezione della donna. Nonostante queste credenze, ormai radicate nel pensiero della società rinascimentale, il clima intellettuale del XVII secolo portò alcuni scrittori a rivalutare i concetti espressi dalla Bibbia senza però ottenere risultati così rivoluzionari da migliorare il rapporto impari tra i sessi.

La vita di una donna era finalizzata principalmente alla creazione e alla cura della famiglia, fin dall'infanzia alle bambine veniva data un'educazione diversa rispetto ai coetanei maschi: mentre i bambini imparavano a leggere e ricevevano un'istruzione, le bambine si impegnavano in mansioni quali il cucito, la cura degli animali domestici e la cucina. La divisione dei compiti si faceva sempre più evidente con il passare degli anni fino ad arrivare all'età adulta, momento in cui per una donna l'obiettivo principale non doveva essere il lavoro bensì il matrimonio. Il matrimonio non era solo la realizzazione della vita di una donna ma rappresentava uno strumento per costruire alleanze tra famiglie: la donna era vista come un possedimento, prima del padre, poi del marito, una donna indipendente era infatti malvista e spesso additata come strega.

La casa e la famiglia non erano sempre le uniche occupazioni delle donne: i settori in cui vi erano molte donne erano il settore tessile e quello medico. Tuttavia, non venivano considerate alla pari con i colleghi uomini; per esempio, le ostetriche non ricevevano alcuna istruzione scientifica, imparavano il loro mestiere seguendo altre ostetriche e facendo esperienza sul campo. Inoltre, la loro professione non era considerata minimamente al pari di quella dei medici, era invece considerata una dote innata che tutte le donne erano in grado di migliorare con la sola esperienza e osservazione. L'istruzione non era considerata fondamentale per la vita di una donna nemmeno qualora quest'ultima svolgesse professioni in ambito scientifico-sanitario.

Una ragazza veniva educata dai genitori, dai vicini e da signore anziane che insegnavano loro la lettura e la recitazione della Bibbia. La maggior parte delle ragazze di

classi povere sapevano leggere ma non scrivere, mentre le ragazze di classi più abbienti ricevevano un'educazione più completa ma comunque più scarsa rispetto a quella dei ragazzi. Una volta imparato a leggere, le tipiche letture femminili erano limitate a testi religiosi e biografie di santi o di donne esemplari. Di conseguenza, le donne che riuscivano ad affermarsi come scrittrici rispecchiavano la natura dei testi che potevano leggere: la maggior parte delle autrici si dedicava alla traduzione di testi religiosi, a volte classici latini e greci o lavori contemporanei francesi e italiani. Molte donne scrivevano diari e lettere in cui si sentivano più libere di manifestare le proprie idee e i propri pensieri, altre scrivevano testi meditativi o testimonianze di esperienze vissute in prima persona. La creazione di una cultura femminile, anche se limitata, rappresenta un importante cambiamento non solo per le donne ma anche per il panorama letterario rinascimentale. Queste prime autrici saranno la spinta fondamentale per le donne che successivamente risponderanno agli attacchi misogini maschili e che si batteranno per difendere tutto il genere femminile.

2. LA *QUERELLE DES FEMMES*

Il termine francese *querelle des femmes* indica il periodo compreso tra la fine del XV e l'età moderna in cui si sono dibattuti la natura e il ruolo della donna. Hanno contribuito al dibattito scrittori e scrittrici di tutta Europa, chi contro e chi a favore della superiorità dell'uomo sulla donna. All'intero di questo capitolo mi sono occupata dell'analisi di alcuni testi rinascimentali significativi per la *querelle* scritti da autori italiani e inglesi.

Prima di entrare in merito ai trattati cinquecenteschi, mi sono soffermata sulla tradizione delle opere riguardanti le donne che può essere individuata fin dalla mitologia greca. Esiodo descrive il personaggio di Pandora, responsabile di aver portato i mali sulla terra, come un essere ingannevole e maligno che porta l'uomo alla perdizione. Allo stesso modo, il poeta latino Giovenale si scaglia contro il genere femminile descritto come corrotto e pieno di vizi. La prima voce femminile ad intervenire nella controversia é Christine De Pisan, autrice francese del tardo Medioevo. Nella sua opera allegorica, *Le livre de la cité des dames* (*La città delle dame*, 1405), De Pisan crea una realtà governata dalle donne elogiandone le capacità e la natura, senza però fare riferimento o confutare possibili documenti misogini. Il metodo della scrittrice francese consiste nel redigere una lista di

esempi illustri di donne in modo da far comprendere alle donne l'importanza della loro storia ma anche del loro ruolo presente.

La prima difesa a favore delle donne pubblicata in Italia é l'opera scritta da Boccaccio, *De mulieribus claris* (1361-62), considerata l'opera principale per tutta la tradizione di difesa del genere femminile. Il testo di Boccaccio presenta 106 biografie di donne famose, dall'antichità fino al Medioevo, considerate esempi di moralità e di virtù. Vi sono dunque donne illustri quali Penelope e Lucrezia, ma anche donne ambigue, seppur coraggiose e forti, come Medea e Flora: il libro é un rifiuto alla visione tradizionale della donna come inferiore all'uomo, anzi, ne dimostra la sua forza.

Nel XVI secolo invece, Baldassarre Castiglione dedica la terza parte de *Il Libro del Cortegiano* alla questione femminile; secondo Castiglione la donna di corte deve essere istruita al solo scopo di saper intrattenere gli uomini, così dicendo, l'autore non sta affatto appoggiando l'educazione delle donne, sta invece rafforzando l'idea più diffusa della superiorità maschile. In altre parole, *Il Libro del Cortegiano* pone la sovranità maschile come un limite alla libertà della donna, la quale non potrà mai essere all'altezza dell'uomo né tantomeno condividerne privilegi e indipendenza. Il nuovo modello di donna offerto da Castiglione é una donna istruita, ma non allo stesso livello dell'uomo, obbediente, silenziosa e passiva, l'esatto opposto del suo compagno.

L'ultimo autore italiano che ho analizzato é Ludovico Ariosto, in particolare, il suo romanzo cavalleresco *Orlando Furioso*, opera in cui Ariosto redige un encomio della donna all'interno di un dialogo tra i personaggi della storia. Inscenando un dialogo contro le donne, Ariosto vuole dimostrare la sua posizione che invece si dissocia dalla misoginia dei suoi stessi personaggi. Tuttavia, le dichiarazioni presenti nei dialoghi fanno sì che la posizione di Ariosto non sia del tutto chiara ma che oscilli tra la tradizionale credenza sull'inferiorità della donna e la difesa della dignità di quest'ultima. Nonostante l'ambiguità di Ariosto, egli é considerato uno degli autori principali nel panorama della *querelle* cinquecentesca italiana ed europea; il suo elogio é stato il modello di autori a lui successivi per molto tempo, se non un simbolo della retorica rinascimentale.

Per quanto riguarda la tradizione della *querelle* inglese, il primo documento a trattare la questione della donna é *The Legend of Good Women* di Chaucer, opera visionaria in cui il poeta racconta la storia di Troilo e Cressida. Nella sua celebre opera *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer tocca nuovamente l'argomento in più racconti: vi é il tema della moglie

disobbediente che si impone sul marito ma anche quello della moglie obbediente e sottomessa. Successivamente, molti autori seguono i passi di Chaucer rappresentando la controversia sulla donna sia con attacchi che con difese.

Alla fine del XVI secolo, Edward Gosynhill scrive un'opera ispirata alla storia di Troilo e Cressida, il *Mulierum Paen*. L'autore sottolinea come la grazia e l'eroismo della donna siano mere conseguenze della sua passività e obbedienza, appoggia quindi le teorie boccaccesche secondo cui la donna di palazzo deve comunque rispettare la sua posizione di dipendenza e inferiorità rispetto all'uomo. Viene però scritta una risposta a Gosynhill da parte di Edward More, *The Defense of Women*: nonostante il testo di More dovrebbe essere una difesa per le donne (come si intuisce dal titolo), egli sembra ripetere le ragioni di Gosynhill ma in maniera diversa. More attribuisce all'uomo tutte le colpe che solitamente vengono attribuite alle donne, realizzando però un discorso alquanto inverosimile e forzato. Il risultato infatti é la dimostrazione che la donna deve dipendere da un uomo per evitare di compiere errori in quanto priva di capacità di giudizio.

Inizialmente, la *querelle des femmes* rappresenta un susseguirsi di opere scritte da autori uomini sulle donne, ed é proprio durante il Rinascimento che cominciano ad essere pubblicate le prime risposte scritte da donne. L'autrice inglese Jane Anger scrive nel 1589 una Protezione per le donne in cui si scaglia contro la misoginia dei suoi contemporanei; Anger definisce gli attacchi verso le donne innaturali e ingiusti per poi confutare le accuse misogine più frequenti. L'opera di Jane Anger é considerata il testo pioniere di tutte le risposte femminili che saranno sempre più diffuse da questo momento in poi. L'uomo descritto da Anger scrive contro le donne perché non ha altre tematiche da sviluppare, sa di poter sferrare attacchi misogini perché nessuna donna avrà il coraggio di rispondere; proprio per questo motivo l'autrice decide di creare una difesa per le donne, con la speranza di fomentare ulteriori risposte e mettere a tacere le ciniche accuse maschili.

3. IL CASO SWETNAM

La *querelle* rinascimentale presenta molti casi in cui delle donne rispondono pubblicamente ad un documento misogino specifico. Il caso più significativo é quello sorto in seguito alla pubblicazione del trattato di Joseph Swetnam, *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* (1615). In questo documento Swetnam illustra la sua

visione della donna, descritta come inutile, ingannevole e peccaminosa; l'autore si preoccupa inoltre di avvertire i lettori a non sposarsi poiché la donna porta soltanto miseria e dolore. Le accuse di Swetnam sono basate su interpretazioni, spesso forzate, della Bibbia e di opere della tradizione latina e greca; non solo Swetnam accusa le donne di essere la rovina di tutti gli uomini, egli le considera esseri deboli e destinati alla sofferenza.

La caratteristica principale di Swetnam é il suo continuo citare fonti religiose e antiche per legittimare il contenuto del suo discorso, tuttavia, spesso le sue citazioni sono fuori luogo o addirittura erronee. L'errore più dibattuto di Swetnam é proprio l'aver attribuito a Dio le parole "necessary evil" (male necessario) come descrizione della donna, quando invece questo epiteto appartiene alla *Medea* di Euripide. Questi frequenti errori saranno fondamentali per i documenti scritti in risposta a quello di Swetnam: le autrici Speght, Sowenam e Munda, infatti, confuteranno le dichiarazioni di Swetnam puntando soprattutto sulle sue imprecisioni e rendendolo illetterato agli occhi dei lettori.

Lo stile si Swetnam é caratterizzato dall'uso di metafore e analogie allo scopo di rendere le sue ragioni efficaci e ben definite nella mente del lettore. In particolare, paragona spesso le donne a belve feroci, come tigri e lupi, o a elementi naturali belli ma pericolosi, come ad esempio le rose e le loro spine. Per comprovare le sue metafore, Swetnam propone spesso liste di donne leggendarie che hanno portato l'uomo alla disperazione: ad esempio, fanno parte di questa categoria la madre di Giobbe, le donne di Solomone, ma anche la moglie di Agamennone e di Ercole.

Il linguaggio rispecchia quello di un'accusa formale, Swetnam si rivolge spesso alle donne con offese pesanti; la gravità delle parole di Swetnam fa spesso pensare che il suo intento non sia davvero misogino, bensì l'autore potrebbe voler dire l'esatto contrario di ciò che si legge superficialmente: egli, cioè, implicitamente afferma che la donna non è inferiore all'uomo, o, addirittura, sostiene che sia la donna ad essere superiore. I toni di Swetnam sono talmente accesi da risultare ironici: l'autore è consapevole di istigare la reazione femminile, dare origine ad un botta e risposta fatto di esercizi retorici e paradossi è esattamente ciò che vuole far scaturire.

Rachel Speght, giovane scrittrice proveniente da una famiglia della classe media londinese, nel 1617 pubblica *A Mouzell for Melastomus*, la prima risposta femminile al trattato di Swetnam. Speght dimostra subito di avere un approccio diverso rispetto ai modelli di De Pisan e Anger: si discosta dallo stile tipico della *querelle*, fatto di esempi ed

elenchi di donne illustri, per creare una retorica che non solo sia in grado di confutare le teorie misogine ma che permetta di esprimere la propria ideologia. Già dal titolo, Speght esprime il suo giudizio su Swetnam, egli é una 'bocca nera' (dal latino 'melastomus'), un uomo cinico e calunniatore; lo accusa inoltre di essere illetterato e blasfemo.

Rispetto alle altre due risposte che saranno indirizzate al testo di Swetnam, cioè quelle di Ester Sowernam e Constantia Munda, il pamphlet di Rachel Speght mantiene un tono modesto e una struttura saggistica tradizionale. Nell'introduzione del documento, l'autrice anticipa ciò di cui parlerà nel corpo del testo dichiarando la ragione principale per cui ha cominciato a scrivere, difendere il genere femminile. La struttura del documento permette a Speght di attaccare il suo avversario facendo riferimento a punti precisi di *The Arraignment*, come le contraddizioni che ne emergono, i suoi lettori e il genere stesso del documento. Non mancano nemmeno in *A Mouzell for Melastomus* i riferimenti biblici che a volte Speght adatta al suo discorso; tuttavia, reinterpretare i testi religiosi era impensabile per una donna, motivo per cui anche questo pamphlet, come quello di Swetnam, potrebbe avere una connotazione ironica, nonché potrebbe trattarsi di un gioco retorico tra parti.

La seconda risposta, *Ester Hath Hanged Haman* (1617), é quella di Ester Sowernam, pseudonimo di un'autrice di cui non si hanno notizie biografiche. Il cognome Sowernam é in netta opposizione a Swetnam in quanto 'sower' si riferisce alla parola inglese 'sour' che significa 'acido', mentre 'sweet', presente in Swetnam, significa 'dolce'. L'intento comico é evidente, Sowernam intende costruire un testo ricco di giochi linguistici in opposizione alle accuse di Swetnam. L'autrice nomina la sua contemporanea Speght più volte, definendola prima non abbastanza esperta per intraprendere una difesa di questo tipo, poi troppo modesta e poco chiara in ciò che vuole esprimere. Al contrario, Sowernam esprime in maniera più esplicita i suoi pensieri riguardo Swetnam, usando un linguaggio diretto e richiamando spesso l'attenzione dell'avversario, il quale viene accusato di essere incoerente e illetterato.

Come da lei anticipato all'inizio del testo, la strategia argomentativa di Sowernam si basa sulla difesa del genere femminile legittimata da prove dirette e attraverso esempi, tradizioni ed esperienze personali, mentre i toni sono sempre molto controllati, anche nei punti in cui l'invettiva contro Swetnam é esplicita. Sowernam riprende le analogie e le metafore create da Swetnam e le porta ad una conclusione che le rende illogiche e

inverosimili: la sua tecnica retorica é ben strutturata e studiata, risultando efficace e convincente.

L'ultimo testo analizzato é la risposta di Constantia Munda, *The Worming of a Mad Dog* (1617), altro pseudonimo che nasconde un'identità sconosciuta. A differenza delle sue due contemporanee, Munda precisa che la sua risposta non é una confutazione, bensì si tratta di un rimprovero; il linguaggio della scrittrice é infatti il più esplicito dei tre, a volte scurrile, una vera e propria manifestazione di biasimo. La tecnica di Munda é basata sull'alternanza di frasi latine ed espressioni colloquiali allo scopo di dimostrare le sue conoscenze e le sue abilità di scrittrice. Anche Munda, come Sowernam, parla di Speght come pioniera di questa controversia ma troppo giovane per riuscire a scrivere un documento di impatto.

Munda si scaglia anche contro la stampa, colpevole di aver pubblicato l'opera di Swetnam in quanto di 'bassa letteratura'. Tuttavia, Munda é consapevole di essere entrata in quella stessa letteratura che lei considera di scarso livello dal momento in cui decise di rispondere a Swetnam. Anche in questo caso, l'intento non é solamente la difesa della dignità femminile ma si tratta di una *querelle* atta a dimostrare le abilità letterarie delle donne e il loro valore.

É interessante come i tre testi di Speght, Sowernam e Munda siano stilisticamente differenti pur mantenendo dei contenuti simili. In particolare, é possibili individuare tre concetti chiave che sono ribaditi da tutte e tre le scrittrici: blasfemia, esperienza e vendetta. Si parla di blasfemia in merito alle accuse mosse da Swetnam, egli infatti insulta le donne, creazione di Dio, e, di conseguenza, si macchia del peccato di blasfemia poiché le sue calunnie si rivolgono anche al creatore del soggetto in discussione. Un altro concetto fondamentale per le tre donne é quello di esperienza, in riferimento all'esperienza negativa che Swetnam ha avuto con le donne e motivo per cui l'autore ha offeso il genere femminile. Infine, vendetta, parola che rappresenta l'intento principale di Speght, Sowernam e Munda: si tratta della rabbia e della delusione di tutte le donne che hanno subito per secoli un trattamento ingiusto.

RINGRAZIAMENTI

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