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Dialogic Construction and Interaction in Lodovico Domenichi's La nobiltà delle donne

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Article abstract

Lodovico Domenichi (1515–64), one of the major polymaths of sixteenth-century Italy, is currently enjoying a marked revival in the critical literature. Although he has been studied in the context of his contemporary printing and publishing activities, the dissemination of works in the vernacular, the promotion of women's writings, and the religious crisis of that time, little attention has been devoted to him as a writer. In 1549 Domenichi published a dialogue on and for women, *La nobiltà delle donne* (The nobility of women). This work allowed him to contribute to the advancement of the women's cause in Italy. This article investigates how Domenichi modelled the speakers, facilitated their dialogic interaction, and delivered his defence of women. Finally, it sheds light on the role that the female moderator, Violante Bentivoglia, played during the five-day conversations and how she influenced the intellectual and cultural environment dominated by men.

Dialogic Construction and Interaction in Lodovico Domenichi's *La nobiltà delle donne*

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*Lodovico Domenichi (1515–64), one of the major polymaths of sixteenth-century Italy, is currently enjoying a marked revival in the critical literature. Although he has been studied in the context of his contemporary printing and publishing activities, the dissemination of works in the vernacular, the promotion of women's writings, and the religious crisis of that time, little attention has been devoted to him as a writer. In 1549 Domenichi published a dialogue on and for women, *La nobiltà delle donne* (The nobility of women). This work allowed him to contribute to the advancement of the women's cause in Italy. This article investigates how Domenichi modelled the speakers, facilitated their dialogic interaction, and delivered his defence of women. Finally, it sheds light on the role that the female moderator, Violante Bentivoglia, played during the five-day conversations and how she influenced the intellectual and cultural environment dominated by men.*

*Lodovico Domenichi (1515–1564), un des plus grands humanistes italiens et reçoit actuellement un intérêt renouvelé parmi la littérature critique. Bien que son œuvre ait été étudiée dans le contexte de ses activités simultanées d'impression et d'édition, de la circulation de ses ouvrages en langue vernaculaire, de la promotion des écrits féminins et de la crise religieuse de l'époque, très peu de chercheurs se sont penchés sur son travail d'écrivain. En 1549, Domenichi a publié un dialogue sur les femmes et à leur intention, intitulé *La nobiltà delle donne* (La Noblesse des Femmes). Cet ouvrage lui a permis de faire avancer la cause de femmes en Italie. Cet article explore comment Domenichi a construit ses protagonistes et facilité leur dialogue, tout en présentant sa défense des femmes. Enfin, on y met en lumière le rôle modérateur que tient Violante Bentivoglia pendant ces cinq jours de conversation et comment elle influence un environnement intellectuel et culturel dominé par les hommes.*

The importance of Lodovico Domenichi (1515–64) to the world of letters lies in his role as a translator of ancient literature, editor of literary texts, writer of a wide range of genres (poetry, dialogues, and short literary fragments), and man of culture. Not only did he bring many works, from a range of genres, to the attention of a wider audience during his time, but he also contributed significantly to the promotion and dissemination of works in favour of women. Recognized in his own times as a central figure in Italian letters and in the publishing industry, Domenichi fashioned himself as a defender of women and a staunch promoter of works authored by female writers.

As an aspiring polymath, he was versatile and industrious, two characteristics that stood him well in his work with some of the most renowned printing presses of the moment. Today he is recognized as an erudite polymath who made a significant contribution to the dissemination of culture in the sixteenth century. This achievement was made possible primarily because he was very fortunate to have had the opportunity to collaborate and publish with important publishers, especially Gabriel Giolito de' Ferrari, the Giunta press, Lorenzo Torrentino, and Vincenzo Busdrago.¹ This attests to Domenichi's praiseworthy effort of rendering texts accessible to the erudite public. Throughout his career, he showed himself to be a progressive thinker and a promoter of new and non-conformist concepts. As Francesco Sberlati rightly observes,

[n]ell'opera di Ludovico Domenichi, in cui pur gioca un forte ruolo la componente anticlericale, le conseguenze estreme di questa rivoluzione femminista sono evidenti nell'afflusso di idee vicine all'eterodossia, in particolare là dove le argomentazioni epidittiche sembrano dipendere dall'assimilazione di apporti culturali estratti dai consolidati circuiti che auspicavano una radicale *renovatio* spirituale ed ecclesiastica.²

([...] in Ludovico Domenichi's works, in which the anti-clerical component plays a strong part, the extreme consequences of this feminist revolution are evident in the flow of ideas bordering on heterodoxy, especially where his epideictic arguments seem to depend on the assimilation of cultural contributions taken from well-established circles that promoted a radical spiritual and ecclesiastical renewal.)

One of Domenichi's major contributions to the debate on women was his dialogue *La nobiltà delle donne* (The nobility of women), which is the longest treatise on the defence of women produced in early modern Italy.³ Written

1. Most of Domenichi's publications were with Giolito (over 170). See Claudia Di Filippo Bareggi, *Il mestiere di scrivere: Lavoro intellettuale e mercato librario a Venezia nel Cinquecento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1988), 73.

2. Francesco Sberlati, "Dalla donna di palazzo alla donna di famiglia: Pedagogia e cultura femminile tra Rinascimento e Controriforma," *I Tatti Studies* 7 (1997): 119–74, 135. Here and henceforth, all translations are mine, unless otherwise specified.

3. Lodovico Domenichi, *La nobiltà delle donne* (Venice: Gabriel Giolito, 1549).

in 1549, *La nobiltà* examines the role of women in contemporary society, their moral and intellectual integrity, and their place in the context of gender relations. It also encapsulates refutations of misogynist thinking expressed by classical literature, as well as biblical and canonical texts. It thus provides a site for exploring the dynamics of the early modern male and female attitudes towards gender, as well as controversial ideologies of female superiority. This article seeks to analyze how Domenichi modelled the speakers, facilitated their dialogic interaction, and delivered his defence of women. As far as the roles played by women are concerned, Violante Bentivoglia and Faustina Sforza are seen as partners in the conversation, but they are not the only women present at these debates. The author mentions that there are other women who attended the conversations but did not participate in them, an aspect also found in Pietro Bembo's *Gli asolani* (The people of Asolo; 1505) and in Baldassar Castiglione's *Il cortegiano* (The courtier; 1528).⁴ Finally, this article will shed light on the role that Violante played in an intellectual and cultural environment dominated by men and will analyze the ways in which Domenichi portrayed her. It will be suggested that Domenichi transcended conventional restrictions governing women's behaviour in social and courtly conversations of the early modern period.

Domenichi's treatise is set during the five days of celebrations that followed the arrival of Faustina Sforza di Santa Fiora, the new bride of Muzio I Sforza, marquis of Caravaggio, at his palazzo in Milan on 24 October 1546. The discussants gather together for a very festive, convivial, and familial (but also political) event. Festivities are the perfect occasion for a series of conversations on the status of women since they allow for a relaxed atmosphere that is conducive to multifaceted and engaging discussions. They also involve representatives of both sexes, giving the discussions a gender-nuanced approach. In Domenichi's case they are a moment when men and women gather to celebrate a joyous event, the arrival of the new bride at her husband's home. The conversations take place after dinner and conclude late in the evening. Before returning to their rooms at the end of each day the speakers are gently reminded by Violante that they are to resume their discussions the following day.

4. For a list of dialogues that include female speakers, see Virginia Cox's classification in "Note: Italian Dialogues Incorporating Female Speakers," *MLN* 138.1 (2013): 79–83.

In general, speakers in early modern dialogues are not equal partners in the discussions. By its nature, a dialogue presents a conversation among various speakers who are assigned different roles and who voice differing opinions. Discussants are not equally equipped with the same cultural competence, nor are they equally adept at mastering rhetorical skills in order to make their arguments more persuasive. The same dialogic trait is also displayed in Castiglione's *Il cortegiano*. As Olga Pugliese observes, in Castiglione, from the early redactions onward, only a select few of those present speak on each occasion or on each topic, or take part in the discussions at all.⁵

The two speakers in Domenichi's *La nobiltà* who animate the discussion on women are Muzio Giustinopolitano and Pierfrancesco Visconte. Muzio is present in all five books and is either the principal speaker or at least one of the main speakers on each evening. Muzio's words reveal his positive views on women. To support his arguments, he cites examples of famous women from antiquity, Scripture, and his own time, a strategy that was commonly followed by other defenders of women. Domenichi has Muzio deliver witty, persuasive, and sometimes long speeches, but also allows him to share speaking time with the other interlocutors. Muzio's speeches are also a good example of *disputatio perpetua*, or long speeches.

By speaking highly of women, Muzio represents the *pars construens*, the positive and constructive part of the arguments in favour of the nobility of women, while Pierfrancesco Visconte provides the *pars destruens*, or negative and destructive part of the arguments.⁶ Pierfrancesco challenges Muzio's statements, but often his arguments are bereft of logical consistency and seem superficial. At times Pierfrancesco uses inconsistencies in an attempt to build his arguments against women. He states, for example, that men are superior to women by accident or that, while men are the recipients of the Holy Spirit, women are victims of illnesses inflicted by the enemy of humankind ("Et io vi dico, che l'huomo è piu perfetto che Donna, se non quanto all'essenza, almeno

5. Olga Zorzi Pugliese, *Castiglione's "The Book of the Courtier (Il libro del Cortegiano)": A Classic in the Making* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2008), 92.

6. See Sberlati, 132. Sberlati states that Pierfrancesco provides the *pars destruens* of the argumentation when in reality it is Muzio who incessantly praises women and who expounds the positive part of the debate argumentation.

in quanto a gli accidenti”⁷; “si come lo spirito santo entra ne gli huomini, & gli fa Propheti, cosi la malatia del nimico dell’humana generatione passa nelle Donne, subietto piu recipiente & acconcio per lui,” fol. 31^v).

As chief misogynist, Pierfrancesco is constantly questioning other speakers’ views on the female sex. At times he hesitates and tries to avoid answering by saying that he prefers to keep silent so he will not offend anyone (“S’io vi dirò il vero, voi l’havete per male: meglio è dunque tacere,” fol. 4^v). Such statements are immediately countered by Violante who insists that this is an open conversation and all participants should voice their opinions provided that they are supported by valid arguments and are not offensive. Without any hesitation, Pierfrancesco responds with a critique of the notion of woman. The conversation takes a more animated turn when he vehemently asserts that women are imperfect animals and that worthy men do not value them highly (“[e]gualmente tutte sete animali imperfetti, & da farne assai poca stima per queglii huomini, che meritamente sono degni d’essere chiamati huomini”; fol. 4^v). This is a strongly misogynistic assertion that voices the standard Aristotelian theory that women’s bodies are incompletely developed male bodies.⁸ Such a theory implies that women are inferior to men and places them in an inferior position to men (whose bodies are, by definition, fully developed and therefore “perfect”). This Aristotelian theory underpins much of the misogynistic ideology that was prevalent in society until the sixteenth century—a patriarchal society that viewed women as imperfect human beings. For example, one of Castiglione’s discussants in *Il Cortegiano*, Gaspar, speaks disapprovingly of women and bluntly states that only a few worthy men take the female sex seriously (“ben pochi omini di valor si trovano, che generalmente tengan conto alcuno di donne”).⁹

In Domenichi’s text, Pierfrancesco’s critique of women is immediately rebutted not only by the female speaker present in this dialogue, as some readers might have expected, but also by a male speaker, namely Muzio, who reprimands Pierfrancesco for his polemical stance. Muzio states that a true

7. Domenichi, fol. 15^v. Henceforth, references to this text will be incorporated into the main body of the article.

8. In the Aristotelian tradition, women were perceived as “defective males.” Castiglione also has one of his speakers, Ottaviano Fregoso, describe women as “animali imperfetti” and “animali imperfettissimi.” See Baldassare Castiglione, *Il libro del cortegiano*, ed. Ettore Bonora (Milan: Mursia, 1972): 3:217–18.

9. Castiglione, 2:202.

man, one of noble intellect and ideals, should respect and serve women, and then suggests that Pierfrancesco's attitude might be the result of his having been slighted by a woman:

[i]o non posso credere, Signor Pierfrancesco, che voi di così strana opinione siate, quale hora vi havete lasciato uscire di bocca: et piu tosto voglio pensare, che voi per qualche particolare ingiuria, che da alcuna di loro vi sia stata fatta, o per soverchio orgoglio di bella Donna & gentile, che non habbia voluto gradire il vostro amore, così vi siate sdegnato; che si mal giudicio facciate di loro. Et io per quello amore, & riverenza, ch'io porto al valor vostro, prego Iddio, che si crudele openione dell'animo vi tolga. (fols. 4^v–5^r)

(I cannot believe, Signor Pierfrancesco, that you might hold such a strange view as you've just now let out of your mouth: I would rather think that you, on account of some particular offence that some woman had given you or because of some beautiful and gentle woman's excessive pride that led her not to enjoy your love of her, are so irritated that you have such a bad opinion of them. I, for the love and respect that I bear for you, pray God to remove such a cruel opinion from your spirit).

Undaunted, Pierfrancesco continues his lengthy diatribe against women. He admits that some men are, indeed, moved to attack women out of jealousy, out of a delight to slander women for its own sake, or out of the "urge" to continue the misogynist tradition, but he continues to claim that women are inferior to men and the proof of this is that he is not in love (fol. 5^r). It is evident that this is a faulty reason that leads to an outrageous conclusion. Pierfrancesco's explanation is not based on solid argumentation; as a result, he does not receive any support from the other interlocutors nor does he bring them to his point of view: that women ought to play an inferior and sheltered role.

Pierfrancesco formulates his argument on account of the love, or more precisely the lack of love, he has received from women. He defends himself with an ingenious argument and keeps asserting that the only reason why women exist is to offer love to men. At the same time, he contends that love is nothing but a "great folly and perhaps one of the greatest man can fall into" ("gran pazzia & forse una delle maggiori che huom possa fare," fol. 5^v). The idea that love is a

factor in the determination of women's worth is also used by Sperone Speroni in his *Dialogo in lode delle donne* (Dialogue in praise of women; 1542), where the appreciation of women is conditioned by the existence of a love relationship. One of Speroni's speakers, Girello, becomes a devout defender of women after he falls in love with one.¹⁰ In Domenichi's work, Pierfrancesco's view is submitted to close scrutiny. His argument does not seem at all convincing to Francesco Grasso who immediately states that the term "man" ("huomo," fol. 5^v) should be interpreted as meaning "human being," thus, both male and female.

At this point the discussion takes another turn. If women's nobility is to be considered in connection to love, then love itself should be analyzed. Pierfrancesco, as has been established, is not in love and, therefore, he does not deem it necessary to consider women noble. He is content not to be in love and consequently not to fall victim to women's charms. He is convinced that intelligent men can protect themselves against love and thus avoid "the ties of love" ("lacci amorosi," fol. 5^v), as he later describes love. Francesco again rejects Pierfrancesco's argument and insists that intelligent men do fall in love, and more often than others, too ("gli huomini savi assai piu spesso che gli altri incappano nelle reti amorose," fol. 5^v). Pierfrancesco is not convinced by Francesco's argument and insists that love should be defined as "lacci amorosi." He goes on to explain that everything in the universe has a certain purpose, including women (richness to help poor people, force to protect our body, children to resemble us, and women to help men).

Up to now, the conversation had involved only two male speakers, Pierfrancesco and Francesco, but now another male speaker, Muzio, joins the discussion. Francesco and Muzio share a similar view opposed to the misogynistic opinions expressed by Pierfrancesco. Muzio asserts that he does not wish to be considered an enemy of women ("nimico delle femine," fol. 6^v), nor does he feel it necessary to doubt women's nobility. He thus takes a neutral stance that allows him play a balancing role in the conversation. Claiming that he is not yet ready to support or deny the arguments presented by the two current speakers, Muzio invites other speakers to express their opinions.

10. See Androniki Dialeti, "'Defenders' and 'Enemies' of Women in Early Modern Italian Querelle des Femmes: Social and Cultural Categories of Empty Rhetoric," presented at Gender and Power in the New Europe, the 5th European Feminist Research Conference, August 20–24, 2003, Lund University, Sweden, available online, accessed 25 October 2015, http://www.iia.v.nl/epublications/2003/Gender_and_power/5thfeminist/paper_248.pdf, p. 7.

Pierfrancesco's failure to establish a love relationship with a woman leads him to despise all women. His slandering the female sex is thus the result of personal frustrations, which should not, by any means, be part of an intellectual debate on women. He and other men may speak ill of women because they wish to hide their own feelings of inferiority. Deana Basile maintains that in Domenichi's dialogue it is evident that some of the male characters actually fear women's seductive powers: "[a] fear of women's power is also betrayed in Lodovico Domenichi's *Nobiltà*. Here the misogynist character, Pierfrancesco, explains that women had often been barred from testifying in legal settings because [...] women's sweet appearance and mellifluous words might weaken the resolve and serenity of the judges."¹¹ Basile is tapping into an observation commonly made by defenders of women in such dialogues: that is, that men fear women and, therefore, try to suppress women's vocal participation in the public realm. The more secluded women were, the less likely they were to pose any threats and question men's self-proclaimed superiority.

Returning to *La nobiltà*, it is clear that Domenichi downplays Pierfrancesco's argument. The fact that, at times, Pierfrancesco is incapable of formulating clear arguments that challenge women's nobility implies that his arguments cannot be taken at face value. Not surprisingly, none of the other participants in the conversation even attempts to dignify his assertions with a serious answer, which suggests that his interventions are seen as mere calumny and not as powerful arguments. Briefly put, Domenichi does not allow Pierfrancesco to mount a strong attack against women. As the author, he remains in control of the discussions—intervening directly at both argumentative and structural levels in order to undermine any misogynist assertions that might be advanced by his characters.

The discussions, however, are not one-sided. In the quest for truth, the author enlivens the dialogue with dialogic exchanges—some of which are easily anticipated—that cover a wide array of points and arguments. According to Bakhtin, these several points of view expressed by the discussants represent the author's own views on the topic, though "voiced" by several speakers.¹² Unlike the treatise, the dialogue allows the author to voice his opinions in multiple

11. Deana Basile, "*Specchio delle rare e virtuose donne*: The Role of the Female Interlocutor in Sixteenth-Century Dialogues on Love" (PhD Thesis: University of Toronto, 1999), 46n41.

12. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 61–62.

voices. And, in fact, Domenichi does this, shaping the dialogue so as to allow discussants to express their various points of view freely, without imposing one on the other.

The dialogue thus flows with natural ease. The various speakers diligently follow the debates and do not launch into replies that are not pertinent to the occasion or the company. The conversations remain within the limits of civil argumentation and common sense. There is no indication that the speakers are mendacious or are holding back on their views. On the contrary, they constantly intervene in the discussions and share their opinions. Sometimes these interjections are a series of repartees that liven the discussions, or that frame it so that its message is clearer and easier to follow. There are also instances when certain interventions, albeit sincere, are not strongly supported by solid reasoning (e.g., Pierfrancesco does not appreciate women because he is not in love, fols. 4^v–5^r). By allowing for a variety of opinions to be expressed freely, Domenichi allows the debate to be frank and full-fledged, open to alternative views. The smoothly flowing conversation seems natural and, above all, credible.

Part of that natural tone in Domenichi's dialogue is provided by the participation of women in the conversations, a feature that deserves special attention. Virginia Cox has pointed out that "[t]he contribution of women speakers, in almost all mixed dialogues of the period, is reduced to that of regulating, stimulating or commenting on (usually briefly) the 'teachings' of their male interlocutors. This is acceptable conversational behaviour for women; anything more may be frowned on."¹³ The question that arises at this point is how appropriate Cox's statement is with regard to women's contribution to Cinquecento dialogues and to Domenichi's dialogue in particular. This is an interpretative point that the rest of this article now seeks to address.

While the framework of Domenichi's work is similar to that of other dialogues that use both male and female speakers, the content is much larger and includes, along with a vast amount of Aristotelian misogyny, also a synthesis of neoplatonic ideas on love and of theories regarding women. In other dialogues, female speakers do not express, let alone expound on, these ideas; their role is limited to mostly "launching" topics and assessing the male

13. Virginia Cox, "Seen but Not Heard: The Role of Women Speakers in Cinquecento Literary Dialogue," in *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society*, ed. Letizia Panizza (London: Legenda, 2000), 385–400, 391.

interlocutors' arguments. By examining how in Domenichi's dialogue the two female interlocutors, Violante and Faustina, guide the conversation in favour of women, it will become evident that Domenichi envisioned and arranged their roles in a very novel fashion; that is, he sought to carve out respectable positions for female interlocutors in dialogues that were, in many ways, contrary to the constraints under which such female characters operated.

Platonic and Ciceronian dialogues in general normally exclude women or assign a minor role for them as speakers.¹⁴ Domenichi breaks away from this tradition and in his *La nobiltà* includes both men and women as active contributors to the discussions and the expression of ideas. In so doing, Domenichi was suggesting and proposing that women are as capable of taking part in intellectual conversations as men. He thus embraced a "feminist" attitude, which was not at all common among his contemporaries.

Janet Smarr observes that Castiglione's inclusion of female speakers in his *Il cortegiano* meant that the conversations would not be as profound as it would be in the case of dialogic exchanges carried out exclusively by male discussants. She points out that "the female presence [in *Il cortegiano*] signifies the very distance from professional seriousness of their discussion."¹⁵ Like Smarr, Cox concedes that women were not allotted significant roles in dialogic conversations: "[f]emale interlocutors, guaranteed by their sex the right to be decorously ignorant, were much exploited in the vernacular dialogue as stand-ins for an unschooled audience."¹⁶ Along the same lines, Pugliese rightly notes that Castiglione "presents them [women] as mere spectators and assigns to them at most purely ceremonial roles in the conversations."¹⁷ Piero Floriani expresses another opinion and asserts that Castiglione's representation of women in society is carried out in a new fashion:

il valore della presenza femminile nella società viene rappresentato in termini nuovi, non solo come suscitatore di energie virili, ma anche

14. An exception is the female speaker Diotima, who is assigned a leading role in Plato's *Symposium*.

15. Janet Levarie Smarr, *Joining the Conversation: Dialogues by Renaissance Women* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 245.

16. Virginia Cox, *The Renaissance Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 45.

17. Pugliese, 277.

come autonomo modo d'essere di una personalità segnata da connotati generalmente umani.¹⁸

(the value of the female presence in society is represented in a new way, not only as the stimulus for male energies, but also as an autonomous way of being of a personality marked by generally human characteristics.)

On the same issue, Valeria Finucci observes that

[a]l cortigiano viene conferito il compito di parlare, di istituire. Alla donna viene dato il potere [...] di foggare un ordine esterno al discorso, di presiedere cioè alla trasmissione del testo che è prodotto nel contesto di varie discussioni.¹⁹

(the courtier is given the duty of speaking, of instructing. The woman is given the power [...] to display an order external to the discussion, to preside over the transmission of the text that is produced in the context of various discussions.)

Even if scholars express differing views on women's role and participation in the dialogue, they unanimously acknowledge that women do play a role in Castiglione's dialogue, though whether it is more or less significant is still open to discussion.

In Domenichi's work, an awareness of women's gender identity is central to the representation of female speakers. Such centrality can be detected at several textual levels and entails a variety of relationships among the male and female speakers and their intended audience. Some sixteenth-century authors suggested that women need men to speak on their behalf because they do not possess either the learning or the rhetorical skills required to effectively present and defend themselves. This male appropriation of the female voice raises some questions. Are women really incapable of formulating a convincing argument and of articulating it in a persuasive fashion? It is instrumental to analyze how male speakers defend women and how they construct women's identity; or,

18. Piero Floriani, *Bembo e Castiglione: Studi sul classicismo del Cinquecento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1976), 150.

19. Valeria Finucci, "La donna di corte: discorso istituzionale e realtà ne 'Il libro del cortegiano' di B. Castiglione," *Annali d'italianistica* 7 (1989): 88–103, 92.

in other words, how men consciously engage in gender identity through the rhetorical strategies they employ in dialogues they have authored.

Cox explains why sixteenth-century writers were in general hesitant to ascribe a leading role to women. While women's syntax and vocabulary could be easily "adjusted," the same did not hold true for their cultural and literary background. According to Cox, women "could hardly be accredited with a detailed knowledge of, say, Aristotelian philosophical terminology."²⁰ If this lack of formal classical instruction was the only impediment to women's inclusion in conversations, it would be useful to examine to what extent male speakers themselves exhibit a sound understanding of Aristotelian philosophical terminology.

Smarr's observation that "women found in the dialogue a way to join the cultural conversation"²¹ can be extended to *La nobiltà* as well. As in other works by previous writers, such as Bembo's *Gli asolani* or Castiglione's *Il cortegiano*, Domenichi gives his female interlocutor, Violante, the role of mediator, clearly following Bembo's or Castiglione's model. At the same time, however, Domenichi distanced himself from the practice of contemporary writers who relegated such female characters to a secondary role and deprived them of a contributing voice. More specifically, he challenged and expanded the female interlocutors' role by having them express views and engage in the debate. In his dialogue, women are not obliged to enter timidly in the public sphere; in diametric contrast, they enter confidently as active and astute interlocutors, not as simple spectators or mere moderators.

Another writer who chose a woman as a protagonist in his work is Sperone Speroni. Tullia d'Aragona (ca. 1510–56), a famous contemporary courtesan, plays a leading role in his *Dialogo d'amore* (Dialogue on love; 1542). Although Speroni's choice is original for sixteenth-century literature on love, it is by no means random. On the contrary, it was a well-considered decision because d'Aragona was an educated woman with some significant expertise in the literary field.²² She composed poetry in the Petrarchan style and a dialogue on love, *Dialogo dell'infinità d'amore* (Dialogue on the infinity of love; 1549).

20. Cox, "Seen but Not Heard," 387.

21. Smarr, 251.

22. Robert Buranello, "From Locus Amoenus to the Locus Ambiguus: Sperone Speroni and the Setting of Renaissance Dialogue" (PhD Thesis, University of Toronto, 1999), 164–65.

In Domenichi's *La nobiltà*, rather than being relegated to a minor position and consequently having a secondary role in the dialogue, the female moderator, Violante, opens and leads the discussion. Such a leading role was traditionally assigned to male speakers. If Castiglione's and Bembo's works are innovative in the sense that they include women in their dialogues, mid-sixteenth-century writers such as Niccolò Franco (*Dialogo delle bellezze* [Dialogue of the beauties], 1542) and Giuseppe Betussi (*La Leonora, ragionamento sopra la vera bellezza* [Leonora, reasoning on the true beauty], 1557) advanced these practices and, as Cox suggests, gave their aristocratic female speakers "assertive and free-spoken personae."²³

In Domenichi's dialogic frame, Violante served not only as a mediator of conversations but also as a hostess who summoned a group of educated people, mostly men, and asked them to openly express their views on the female sex. Following Emilia Pio's example in Castiglione's *Il cortegiano*, Violante proposes the argument. Violante and Emilia can be viewed as women in charge of the conversation. Ian Maclean's description of Emilia's role during the discussion can be applied to Violante as well. Maclean correctly observes that the court lady depicted by Castiglione has

all the accomplishments required to sustain conversation in a civilized company; her very position in such society runs counter to the strictures applied to her as a moral, domestic and intellectual being. The *taciturnitas* for which the domestic woman is praised is abandoned; her private exclusive relationship to a dominating husband is replaced by a public, promiscuous, social rôle in which, by comparison, she is the dominant partner; she is splendidly arrayed, in spite of moralists' warnings about the feminine weakness for vanity, ornament, extravagance and luxury.²⁴

Undoubtedly, by including a woman, Castiglione broke away from literary texts that considered only men as worthy speakers. At the same time, however, his Emilia does not contribute any ideas to the dialogue, not even when the conversation is about women. Pugliese accurately observes that Castiglione's

23. Cox, "Seen but Not Heard," 391.

24. Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman: Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 64.

donna di palazzo is “[m]erely ornamental in the court environment, she perfects and adorns the art of courtiership and is instrumental with respect to the courtier, who is motivated by her to carry out worthy deeds and to seek his own self-improvement.”²⁵ Emilia, who is in fact a *donna di palazzo*, fits this description—she has a clearly defined role to play in the conversations, but it is strictly ornamental. As Pugliese mentions, Emilia contributes only indirectly. She helps the courtier better himself and become a more sophisticated speaker. Consequently, Emilia is merely an assistant who helps a male speaker express his views and construct himself.

Domenichi’s Violante is completely different. She is a participant in her own right in the dialogue. Although she does not formulate theories or argue for or against the views under discussion, she does intervene in the debates whenever a speaker needs to have his ideas reinforced. By raising questions or making comments she helps the supporters of women substantiate their opinions and bring them into sharper focus. Although Violante and Emilia share some common traits, such as that of being the mediator of the conversations, their contributions are very different. From a dialogic point of view, Violante contributes in more active ways while Emilia does so more passively. Yet, even if they play two different roles, their contributions are undoubtedly significant.

By bestowing such considerable influence on Violante, Domenichi breaks a pre-established dialogical pattern and makes his work highly original. Although Violante does not propose any topics, she does direct the conversation and controls it, making sure that all speakers express their views in a respectful fashion. At the same time, she also takes every opportunity to express her own point of view on each matter discussed. She is clearly aware of the novelty of her participation in the discussions. On several occasions she tells the guests that her presence in the company of so many worthy men may seem an act of boldness and admits that her lack of philosophical training puts her at a distinct disadvantage; yet she suggests that what she may lack in education she certainly does not lack in intellect.

Io sarò forse, Signori tenuta troppo ardita havendo dato principio a parlare, dove tanti huomini sono valorosi & scientiati: laqual cosa non harei havuto io ardire di fare, quando a cio non m’havessero mosso

25. Pugliese, 276.

alcune forti ragioni. Prima veggendo io starvi cheti, giudicai, che fosse bene farvi animo a romper cosi maninconico silentio: il quale ne alla profession vostra, che huomini eloquenti sete, ne alla occasione, che qui ci ha ragunato; laquale è non meno allegra che honesta, si richiede. (fol. 4^r)

(Perhaps, Gentlemen, I will be thought to be too daring in my having started a discussion when so many valiant and learned men are present: which I would not have dared to do had I not been moved to do so by some strong reasons. First, seeing that you were quiet, I thought that it would be good to encourage you to break such a melancholic silence: which is not appropriate either to your professions, for you are eloquent men, or to the occasion that has gathered us here, which is no less happy than honest.)

Such statements imply that women are as capable of formulating opinions as men, even if they do not always have the means to support their opinions with philosophical theories and knowledge.

Because it was assumed (as Violante indicated) that women did not possess the same level of philosophical and scientific knowledge as men, it was common for authors of early modern dialogues that included both male and female characters to create a sense of verisimilitude by having their speakers use a simpler language that would allow the women present in the room to follow the conversation. Male interlocutors would thus forego sophisticated technical terminology and express their views in a more conversational, vernacular manner. By simplifying the language and including women, men were thus providing a sort of “instruction” for the women present.

The effort to “instruct” women is evident in the role female interlocutors play in these dialogues. Women do not hesitate to ask questions as if seeking explanations and instructions. In Castiglione's *Il cortegiano*, for example, Emilia does not contribute to the discussion except by asking for clarifications.²⁶ Smarr discusses how women benefitted from the discussion carried out by male speakers when she points out that “the dialogue might offer a kind of schooling for women, less formal than male schooling, but with due attention

26. Castiglione, 3:208.

to history, philosophy, rhetoric, and even theology.”²⁷ Violante’s intervention clearly alludes to this practice when she expresses her desire to learn and to widen her cultural horizon. Women can learn a great deal by listening to the conversations of cultivated men. Basile states that by being in the presence of learned men, women created their own classroom.²⁸ In fact, Violante admits her own ignorance when she says:

Et però se io ho usato i privilegi miei dinanzi a tanti giustissimi huomini non sia chi me ne riprenda, anzi mi scusi se le mie parole altro non hanno voluto conchiudere che dar principio al ragionamento nostro; concedendo questo alla ignoranza femminile, laquale scusa ogni errore. (fol. 4^{r-v})

(And so, if I have used my privileges in front of so many rightful men, let no one reproach me; in fact, he should excuse me if my words meant nothing more than to start our conversation, attributing this to feminine ignorance, which excuses every error.)

Violante is not the only speaker who is apologetic about her lack of formal education. Some of the male speakers themselves also admit their ignorance; Filippo, for example, asks why an ignorant man such as himself should engage in debate with two learned men (“io solo & ignorante havrò da disputare con due & tanto letterati huomini?,” fol. 54^r) while Agosto expresses the hope that he might be excused for his ignorance (“spero che’ assai debba scusare la mia ignoranza,” fol. 119^v).

Violante clearly suggests that her relative lack of learning prevents her from advancing “strong arguments” (“forti ragioni,” fol. 4^r). As a result, her desire not to express her opinions overtly can be interpreted as a sign of self-conscious modesty and as a way to avoid being accused of making false or controversial statements just to be polemical. As will be indicated further on, this is simply a rhetorical strategy as she leads the discussion in an exemplary fashion and does not hesitate to intervene in the conversation at the right moment—a clear indication that she not only assumes an active role in the discussion, but can follow it lucidly. Violante lets us believe that women can

27. Smarr, 245.

28. Basile, 184.

admirably conduct a conversation. Although she claims that she would rather listen than intervene since so many worthy men are present (fol. 4^r), she nevertheless, as the conversation progresses, becomes more and more involved in the discussions.

Even if at the beginning Violante was apologetic about her knowledge and her ability to communicate effectively or eloquently, her attitude does not hinder her message and is based simply on the awareness that she lacks learning and experience. Ironically, it does not prevent her from speaking confidently and clearly. In fact, she does not hesitate to express her point of view whenever the conversation seems to be heading in a wrong direction or when contentious issues arise. She is keen to fulfill her role as moderator of the conversation effectively and to present women in a favourable light. Because of this, she immediately reproaches speakers who speak disapprovingly of women:

Troppo grave ingiuria, credo io contro vostro volere, fatto havete alle Donne, dicendo, che la vergogna e 'l timor della infamia ci faccia vivere honeste, & vincere gli appetiti. Or non era egli meglio, & maggior vostro honore, se voi questo sì generoso atto havete attribuito, come attribuir si debbe, all'amor della virtù, al desiderio della gloria, all'odio del vizio? certo che di questo pregio contra ragione ci havete defraudato. (fol. 68^{r-v})

(I believe you have committed, against your own wishes, too great an injury towards women by saying that shame and fear of infamy oblige us to live honestly and conquer our appetites. Now, would it not have been better and to your greater honour if you had attributed this generous act, as it should be attributed, to our love for virtue, our desire for glory, our hatred of vice? You certainly have defrauded us, against all reason, of this good quality.)

This sort of intervention into, and manipulation of, the discussions separates Violante from her female predecessors in sixteenth-century dialogues. Basile maintains that Violante “has a more passive role [in the dialogue] recalling that of the Duchessa Elisabetta in *Il libro del cortegiano*.”²⁹ A close analysis of Violante's participation in the dialogue suggests the contrary. Her

29. Basile, 22n41.

contributions to the conversation clearly indicate that she takes full advantage of her role as moderator/mediator. She carefully directs the conversation so that it follows closely her intended purpose; she intervenes with quick-witted remarks; at times she even displays a great deal of deftness, incisiveness, and, when necessary, mediation skills. In so doing, Violante foregoes the silent role for which women were normally praised at the time and constructs a speaking role for herself that allows her to voice her opinions and control the development of the conversation. Whenever the conversation digresses and focuses on topics other than women, she immediately reminds the speaker to return to the main topic of the day, as she does when Francesco wanders off topic:

[d]i gratia, Signor Francesco, non vogliate di difensore & campion delle Donne diventare dipintore e maestro di misure & di proportioni: ma piacciavi ritornare alle lodi loro, & ripigliare il filo: che non poco farete a saper ritrovarlo. (fol. 29^v)

(please, Signor Francesco, do not try to turn from being a defender and champion of women into a painter and master of measures and proportions: do return to their praises and pick up the thread [of the conversation] again, for it won't take you much to find it again.)

Violante thus garners the discursive authority available almost exclusively to men in sixteenth-century society. She represents the prototype of the female intellectual who distinguishes herself for individual initiative and for transgressing conventional norms of discussion that traditionally assign authoritative roles to men and not to women. She challenges and invalidates the commonly accepted view that women are expected to be silent and not interfere in the discussions. This innovative characterization of the female interlocutor is of particular importance in assessing Domenichi's use of the female voice(s) in relation to the male one(s).

Unlike Castiglione's Emilia, who is merely a lady-in-waiting among a group of courtiers, Violante is mistress of the house and mother of the groom, so her management of the conversation and of the interlocutors is much more assertive and authoritative. According to Finucci, Emilia's role is to create an

ambience that fosters dialogue³⁰; therefore, she is perceived primarily as an organizer, rather than as a strong and reputable discussant. Her interventions are mostly formal and do not contribute significantly to the discussion nor do they curtail it. Violante, on the other hand, does not hesitate to interrupt the interlocutors, to ask for clearer explanations, or even to question certain statements. In doing so, she achieves a great deal more than she would by simply listening, as Emilia does, to the issues raised by the speakers. As a result, Violante is able to actively create a multi-voiced discussion that becomes ever more intense as it develops.

As moderator, Violante is at times also required to establish and maintain the boundaries of civil conversation. On several occasions, she feels compelled to remind the interlocutors that their interventions are a breach of conversational etiquette: “[e]t chi n’accusa hora, se non la coscienza vostra; laquale v’ha fatto hora, rispondere, senza ch’alcuno vi domandasse” (fol. 52^v; and who is accusing us now, except for your conscience, which made you reply now although no one asked you to do so). At other times, she feels obliged to intervene in the conversation and defend women. Hoping to stump the man who discredits women, she declares: “[n]on crediate però, che le Donne v’habbiano d’havere obbligo, perche le vituperiate; che prendereste errore; credendovi di riportar premio facendo ingiuria altrui” (fol. 51^v; but do not believe that women owe you anything because you revile them, for you would be wrong to think that by offending others you will be awarded). When concepts and views are not clearly explained and their message is obscured by incomprehensible statements or difficult language, she earnestly requests clarity of expression, as she does from Lucio Cotta:

[d]i gratia, Signor Lucio, havendo voi a lodar le Donne siate contento ragionare di maniera, che le donne v’intendano, cio è con parole chiare & convenienti al luogo & alla materia. Percioche questi Signori nostri nimici troppo havrebbono caro che nessuna di noi intendesse ne potesse imparare gli honori, che voi sete per darci, si perche l’odio che naturalmente essi ci portano, non lo comporta; si ancho perche non hanno caro, che noi gli impariamo; per poterci sempre ad ogni voglia loro tenerci basse & abiette. (fols. 55^v–56^r)

30. Finucci, 92.

(please, Signor Lucio, since you need to praise women, be content to speak so that women might understand you, that is, in clear words and suitable to the place and the topic. For these men who are our enemies would dearly like it that none of us [women] should understand you or should learn about the honours that you are about to foster on us, both because of the hatred they bear for us; and because they do not care for us to learn about them so that they might always, every time they please, keep us down and despised.)

These interventions conform more closely to the usual paradigm of rhetorical-allegorical debate in which, traditionally, a male speaker launches topics to be discussed and is questioned by a female interlocutor. Violante's interventions are innovative because they allow us to comprehend more subtly the nuances of authority granted to a female speaker in a dialogue that permits women to have their own voice. Violante is not just a "moderator" who keeps order in the discussions and asks questions at appropriate moments in order to stimulate further discussion, but actually a discussant who intervenes, presents her own opinion, and defends views. As such, she becomes emblematic of a new role for women in Renaissance dialogues, a role that sees them as "contributors" to the search for knowledge and not just as catalysts for men to voice their own (male) views.

Domenichi successfully pinpointed this new role for female interlocutors as active contributors to the discussions. Not only does he include women in his dialogue, but he also assigns them a leading role—a practice that few of his contemporaries would follow. One reason for such reticence might well lie in fear or suspicion of women assuming a public role; another might be an endemic inability to reject long-established misogynist views and values that denounced women's involvement in the public sphere.

But Domenichi does more than assign to Violante an important role in the conversations. In the last book she is joined by her daughter-in-law, Faustina, who, together with her husband, Muzio, now joins the conversations—albeit briefly. The appearance of the young bridal couple and their peers on the last day of their elder's conversations suggests that a *translatio imperii* is taking place from the mother/mother-in-law Violante to the bride/daughter-in-law Faustina. It is a generational change that marks the assumption not only of power but also of responsibilities by the young bridal couple and their peers,

who thus become involved in their elders' more serious matters. Faustina's appearance on the scene may also indicate that future conversations will be led by the young spouse. As she enters into the dialogue, Faustina follows Violante's model and actively engages herself in the conversations. A strong supporter of women, Faustina does not allow anyone to denigrate them, though she does express her low opinion of timid women who dare not speak in the presence of men:

Signor mio, non vogliate fare questa ingiuria alle Donne, ne al giudizio vostro; o se pure vi pare, non vogliate dar titolo di nobili ne di gentili a quelle Donne melense, che non ardiscono ragionare dove huomini sono. (fol. 217^r)

(Dear Sir, do not do such injury to women, nor to your judgment; or, if you so wish, do not grant the title of noble or gentle to those dull-witted women who dare not converse in the presence of men.)

Although the inclusion of female speakers and the space allotted to them in Domenichi's dialogue are indicative of his forward-thinking views, one easily notices that there are very few women who participate actively in the five dialogues of his *La nobiltà*. In fact, the women are far outnumbered by the men (two to twelve). Despite this numerical disproportion, Domenichi's genuine efforts to include women and his refusal to display a condescending attitude towards them should be viewed as commendable when considered within sixteenth-century gendered realities.

What is also commendable is Domenichi's own role as omniscient third-person author, supposedly detached from and not responsible for his speakers' attitudes and opinions. Such a rhetorical strategy allows Domenichi to present his female interlocutors not only as recognizable characters but also as individuals in their own right, with their own opinions, views, and abilities. In so doing, Domenichi validates women's voices and their contributions to the discussion. And this, in turn, allows for the presentation of a debate that is more discursive and more even handed. Although the debate is grounded in the rhetorical technique of praise and blame, Domenichi as author clearly favours speakers who defend women, and uses misogynist interlocutors such

as Pierfrancesco only to reinforce other speakers' strong views in favour of women.

In defending women, Domenichi is also defending them *as women*. Other authors of defences of women normally praised women for their ability to overcome female weaknesses and accomplish masculine deeds. Their *encomia* of women are, at the very least, paradoxical. Domenichi does not follow this practice, but instead praises women for their own characteristics which, he adds, are often superior to those possessed by men. At times, however, Domenichi's defence of women may seem excessively positive, perhaps because *La nobiltà* is a woman-centred text that expressly aims to celebrate women's nobility and excellence. It is, as Sberlati puts it, "una consapevole apertura alla femminilità intesa come categoria spirituale" (a conscious opening to femininity understood as a spiritual category).³¹

Domenichi never resorts to condescension or to sarcasm to deride his interlocutors nor do any of his speakers address other discussants with cutting remarks that mock their interventions and style of argumentation. Nowhere in the dialogue is a speaker personally attacked on the basis of his/her convictions. This is a positive feature of Domenichi's work and helps to make it a balanced, harmonious, and persuasive work.

Domenichi has the merit of giving aristocratic women such as Violante and Faustina assertive and dignified roles in a dialogue that is numerically dominated by men. He demonstrated that women can play a meaningful part in conducting discussions and participating in dialogues. In so doing, he pushed the limits of acceptable female behaviour in a dialogic setting. Violante, for example, is always in charge of the conversations and never hesitates to signal incoherent contributions or to ask speakers to reconsider their stance or even to change their opinions. Although Faustina is present only in the fifth book, she follows Violante's example and actively engages in the dialogue.

By observing and analyzing how female characters are depicted in *La nobiltà*, it is clear that Lodovico Domenichi, as the learned polymath that he was, finely attuned to the changing realities of his times and the interests of the contemporary reading public, was offering something quite new and unique to his readers. His depiction of women engaged in polite conversation presented two examples of women who defy the restrictions against speaking

31. Sberlati, 138.

in public settings placed on them by traditional male society. Domenichi's female interlocutors can, instead, be viewed as examples of female agency, voice, wit, and knowledge to be emulated by all female readers. Although Violante and Faustina do not proffer philosophical concepts or profound views on women's nobility, they do, nonetheless, engage as equals in the debate, demanding clarification, giving orders, and consequently imposing limits on the conversation. They display remarkable independence of thought and, more importantly, challenge their male counterparts. Domenichi may thus be viewed as an innovative contributor to the debate on women in sixteenth-century Italy and as a writer whose erudition and learning served to advance new developments in the gendered dialogue of the times.