A Guided Tour of Heaven and Hell: The Otherworldly Journey in Chiara Matraini and Lucrezia Marinella*

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Easy is the descent to Avernus: night and day the door of gloomy Dis stands open; but to recall one’s steps and pass out to the upper air, this is the task, this the toil! Some few, whom kindly Jupiter has loved, or shining worth uplifted to heaven, sons of the gods, have availed. — Virgil, Aeneid, VI.126–31

Shortly after the turn of the seventeenth century, two Italian women writers published books in which female protagonists journeyed through the afterlife and returned to tell the tale. In 1602, Chiara Matraini (1515–1604) published her Dialoghi spirituali, a multifarious text that includes a visionary journey in which the author–narrator is shepherded by a celestial female guide through hell, purgatory, and paradise. In 1605, Lucrezia Marinella (1571 or 1579–1653) released a pastoral romance,

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2 Chiara Matraini, Dialoghi spirituali. . . con una notabile narratìone alla grande Accademia de’ Curiosi, et alcune rime, e sermoni (Venice: Fioravante Prati, 1602).
Arcadia felice, whose narrative ranges beyond the bounds of the conventional bucolic landscape when a prophetess—nymph, guided by her father, descends into the underworld before ascending to the circle of the moon. The former portrays a theological—philosophical instruction in the style of Dante and Boethius; the latter is a more secular imitation, drawing primarily on Virgil and Ariosto. Netherworld journeys were in vogue in Italy around this time, and the two under study here anticipate by only a few years the 1607 staging of Monteverdi’s celebrated Orfeo. Yet, as a rule, women writers participated in neither Christianized nor classical versions of the trend, especially not in the specific, prestigious literary form we find both Matraini and Marinella enacting: that is, an otherworldly pilgrimage in which an enlightened guide leads the hero—protagonist on a quest for wisdom that can be obtained only from the beyond.

This essay examines how Matraini and Marinella, apparently the only Italian women of their time to contend with the descensus ad inferos, engage with their distinguished literary forebears. That both women were bold enough to place themselves in such commanding authorial positions, in texts that appeared at the same time in the publishing capital of Venice, merits examination.

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5 Only in recent years have Matraini’s Dialoghi spirituali and Marinella’s Arcadia felice begun to attract critical attention, though their underworld journeys have received little discussion. For the Dialoghi spirituali, see Janet Levarie Smarr, Joining the Conversation: Dialogues by Renaissance Women (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 81–97; Daniela Marcheschi, Chiara Matraini: Poetessa lucchese e la letteratura delle donne nei nuovi fermenti religiosi del ‘500 (Lucca: Maria Pacini Fazzi Editore, 2008), 85–89; Eleonora Carinci, “Lives of the Virgin Mary by Women Writers in Post-Tridentine Italy”
an assertive and experimental author: notably, the two have recently been described as representing “something of a high point” for Italian women writers’ expression of an authoritative voice. Matraini is most widely recognized for her single-authored Petrarchan canzoniere, her Rime et prose (1555), while Marinella’s protofeminist treatise, Le nobiltà et eccellenze delle donne (1600/1601), has drawn a good amount of attention in early modern feminist studies. Yet both were prolific writers, of texts both secular and spiritual, with careers spanning half a century each. From the beginning, Matraini exhibited a desire to be known as a writer who ventured beyond the well-established boundaries of female-authored Petrarchan poetry, undertaking projects that included martial oration, Latin translation, and moral—philosophical dialogue. Marinella’s contributions included such lofty endeavors as philosophical love poetry and both secular and religious epic, genres so elite and laborious that they discouraged all but the most enterprising writers of either sex. The lifetime output of both authors clearly demonstrates an exceptional desire to occupy more “masculine” literary landscapes.

These two writers are particularly salient examples of the argument, increasingly gaining ground in recent years, that women not only wrote during the post-Tridentine period, but that they in fact began to infiltrate...
new genres. Matraini’s Dialoghi spirituali, a didactic religious text authored by a secular woman, forays into a range of rhetorical dialogic formats. Marinella’s Arcadia felice is the only female-authored pastoral romance after the model of the seminal Arcadia (1502/1504) by Jacopo Sannazaro (c. 1465–1530). Their shared will to chart new territory is strikingly encapsulated in their tackling the exclusively male terrain of epic’s instructive otherworldly journey. Their efforts signal their intent to come into male writers’ most fiercely guarded literary ground, be it philosophical dialogue, pastoral romance, or the most recondite devices of epic both classical and sacred.

Matraini’s and Marinella’s tales provide a case study that will help chart the dimensions, both spiritual and secular, of women’s writing in the Italian Counter-Reformation. Beyond a shared interest in generic experimentation, these two texts are linked by an illuminating set of common themes: namely, an investment in promoting both sagacious female exempla and communities of lettered women. Furthermore, both writers craft journeys in which the female subject’s primary objective is the procuration of knowledge, whether theological, as in the Dialoghi spirituali, or profane, as in Arcadia felice. This shared celebration of women’s right to learn and instruct surges forth despite the fact that the reader would have reason to expect such concepts to be smothered beneath the Pauline injunction against women teaching, in the case of Matraini’s spiritual text, or subjugated to an amorous teleology in Marinella’s pastoral tale. Instead, Matraini and Marinella employ the pre-
viously male-dominated infernal and supernal excursion for the purpose of authorizing women’s didacticism.

The story of the composition of Matraini’s *Dialoghi spirituali* starts around 1560, when the author wrote to thank a friend, the judge Cesare Coccapani, for his gift of a vernacular translation of Boethius’s *Consolatio Philosophiae*. She already had a Latin edition on hand, she reveals in the letter, which had “served very well” in a new project upon which she was working: the composition of a moral–philosophical dialogue of her own.\(^{11}\) That dialogue was never published, and any manuscript version that may have existed has since been lost. However, as we shall see, traces of it would resurface in her later writing, including the *Dialoghi spirituali*.

At the time of this correspondence, Matraini was already a published author.\(^{12}\) Writing from her native Lucca, she had released her lyric *canzoniere* in 1555, to which she appended two prose treatises: one a defense of her decision to write on love, and the other a discourse on the art of war. That effort was followed a year later by her 1556 translation of an Isocrates oration from Latin to the vernacular. Despite those early purposeful years, however, Matraini would not publish again for more than twenty years, disappearing during the 1560s and 1570s. When she resurfaced, it was with a renewed authorial ethos, publishing predominantly spiritual works for the following two decades. The first of those texts, her *Meditazioni spirituali* of 1581, was the first to reveal signs of the old Boethian dialogue. Matraini also published a meditation on the psalms (1586) and a life of the Virgin Mary (1590). In 1595, an unauthorized new edition of her *Rime* appeared; in 1597, Matraini released another, sanctioned reworking of the collection. As Giovanna Rabitti has noted, that text, the *Lettere*. . .con

\(^{11}\) “Mi servii assai in certo dialogo che io feci.” Chiara Matraini to Cesare Coccapani, n.d. (403), *Lettere e poesie del sig[nor] Cesare Coccapani auditore di Lucca e di donna incerta lucchese*, Biblioteca Statale di Lucca MS ms. 1547. She elaborates on her progress in another undated letter, 410. Punctuation, accents and capitalization have been modernized as needed. All translations of Italian are my own unless otherwise indicated.

\(^{12}\) For full primary and secondary bibliography on Matraini, see the summary provided in Cox, *Prodigious Muse*, 263.
la prima, e seconda parte delle. rime, is so significantly different that it is effectively a new text, given the number of poems that were added, deleted, or edited, not to mention the expansion of the prose section from two pieces to eighteen.\textsuperscript{13} This was the first of Matraini’s texts to be published in Venice, presumably a sign of her increased popularity. In 1602, her next and final publication, the Dialoghi spirituali, would be printed there as well.

Before discussing the guided tour narrative, it will prove helpful to elaborate on the organization of the Dialoghi spirituali as a whole. The text is structurally complex, a sort of didactic–rhetorical digest comprised of prose sections in various forms: a gloss to an amorous sonnet featuring the goddess Diana, with erotic–philosophical language that recalls the tradition of Dante’s Convivio; a theological dialogue, in four parts, between an older woman and a young man; the Boethian–Dantean journey under study here, entitled Narratione di alcune cose notabili and addressed to an unspecified “Academia de i Curiosi”; and a three-part oration upbraiding the same academy members for their attachment to worldly pursuits. This convoluted compendium is bound thematically, as each section features the author’s condemnation of the pursuit of earthly wisdom unenlightened by ardor for the divine. The various segments of the book are furthermore knit together by lyric interludes, short religious poems in a variety of meters that are woven throughout. This mix of prose and poetry further aligns the text’s overall form with the prosimetra of Boethius’s Consolatio and Dante’s Convivio.

Another unifying element is that each segment functions as a set piece designed to foreground the power of female intellectual exemplarity. In the opening sonnet, Matraini adopts the voice of Diana, goddess of the moon, and in the accompanying gloss, she explains that the “fair sun” whose light she reflects represents “the study of human knowledge.”\textsuperscript{14} The four-

\textsuperscript{13} Giovanna Rabitti, introduction to Chiara Matraini, Selected Poetry and Prose, ed. and trans. Elaine Maclachlan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 17. The poems and letters of all three versions are collected in Chiara Matraini, Rime e lettere, ed. Giovanna Rabitti (Bologna: Commissione per i Testi di Lingua, 1989).

\textsuperscript{14} Matraini, Dialoghi spirituali, 8: “a farsi Chiara al suo bel Sole, il qual Sole ella intende per lo studio delle buone scienze.” Note the pun on the author’s first name, Chiara, meaning “bright,” as well as “illustrious” or “famous.”
part dialogue is led by a woman, Teofila (“lover of god,” and apparently intended as a stand-in for the author), who offers moral instruction to a young man, Filocalio (“lover of beauty”). The guide of the Dantean afterlife tour is female, as is the pilgrim–poet narrator. The three-part oration is a harangue in the author’s voice to a presumably male academy. That Teofila, the pilgrim–poet, and the first-person orator are “real” women participating in rhetorical exercise, as opposed to the female allegorical figures occasionally found as interlocutors in dialogue (e.g., Lady Philosophy), is noteworthy. The text also opens with a dedicatory letter to the noblewoman Marfisa d’Este Cibo-Malaspina, closes on a poem to Matraini’s namesake, Saint Clare of Assisi, and includes a number of poems written for the Virgin Mary. In fact, Matraini’s text features almost exclusively female participants—historical and fictional, earthly and sacred—in a singular congregation of feminine instructors and models. From the outset, then, the text is unexpectedly audacious on several levels: as a book of spiritual instruction written by a laywoman; as a female-authored dialogic tour de force; and as a paean to female didacticism.

The Narratione starts with the appearance of an otherworldly guide who strongly encapsulates this last element. Matraini’s narrator describes this counselor as a “marvelous lady” (mirabil donna) who invites the narrator to “follow the flight of my feathers there where I intend to guide you.”15 Once the narrator accepts the invitation, the two depart together, passing in the course of the 24-page tale through hell, purgatory, and paradise. Most of the narration takes place in the underworld. The mountain of purgatory is conceded less than a page, and little more is spent on the ineffable joys of heaven, which Matraini describes as being so great that no earthly science could equal them; she in fact names several of the liberal arts—arithmetic, geometry, rhetoric, logic, and grammar—as being inferior to heaven’s “marvelous learning.”16 Matraini ultimately shows little interest in the surroundings of any of these worlds. There are no interactions between the narrator and the inhabitants of the beyond; only a few

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15 Matraini, Dialoghi spirituali, 77: “Seguita il volo delle mie penne infin là dove io intendo di volerti guidare.”
16 Ibid., 94–95: “mirabile scienza.”
are even named, and almost all of those are biblical figures.\textsuperscript{17} She devotes the majority of lines to the dialogue between her two travelers, as the narrator poses to her guide a series of theological questions, e.g., on original sin and the nature of the trinity. The emphasis throughout is on the narrator’s edification, and the author’s erudition.

Matraini exhibits temerity in her very act of grappling with the likes of Dante and Boethius, a bold imitative endeavor for a woman writing in this period. Other scholars have noted apparent remnants of her lost Boethian dialogue resurfacing in the \textit{Dialoghi spirituali}, excavating the Teofila dialogues most thoroughly.\textsuperscript{18} Matraini’s Boethian imitation is also apparent in the \textit{Narratione}, especially when compared against not only the original Latin, but also the 1551 vernacular translation by Benedetto Varchi (1503–65), which we know Matraini saw, and the 1550 translation by Lodovico Domenichi (1515–64), which she very likely knew.\textsuperscript{19} Echoes of both Dante and Boethius are in fact apparent from the opening sentence. Matraini emulates the first lines of the \textit{Inferno} by commencing in medias res with a pilgrim–narrator who is physically and spiritually lost in a verdant setting.\textsuperscript{20} Echoes of Boethius’s opening can be noted in Matraini’s as well, as when her errant narrator is surprised by the arrival of an unearthly visitor, who possesses a “tremendous voice” and “immense size,” which echo the largeness that Boethius’s narrator first notes of Lady Philosophy, who towers above his head.\textsuperscript{21} There is, however, a notable difference in Matraini’s presentation of a more “correct” narrator than that of either of

\textsuperscript{17} The exception is a sighting of Martin Luther, whom Matraini condemns as one who was opposed to the light of truth (“mentre fuggiva la luce, da lui fuggiva il Sole dell’eterna verità”; ibid., 81). Scholarship by Rabitti, Marcheschi, and Carinci emphasizes the influence of reformist thought on Matraini’s writing; the issue of her religiosity remains, however, “knotty” (Rabitti, introduction, 15).

\textsuperscript{18} Cox, \textit{Women’s Writing}, 114.

\textsuperscript{19} Varchi and Domenichi were among Matraini’s most prestigious literary contacts. She writes of having seen the translation by Varchi, and her desire to see the one by Domenichi: Matraini to Coccapani, \textit{Lettere. . . del sig[nor] Cesare Coccapani}, 403.

\textsuperscript{20} Further Dantesque echoes resonate throughout, e.g., Matraini, \textit{Dialoghi spirituali}, 88: “e caddi come corpo morte cade” (cf. \textit{Inf.} 5.142).

her predecessors. Dante’s pilgrim is fearful and bewildered, unaware of how he has arrived at the starting point of his journey. Matraini paints her narrator as willful and searching, full of desire and hope of obtaining wisdom. She indicates purpose in her movement (“I proceeded”) in contrast with Dante’s pilgrim, who abruptly finds himself in the wood without understanding why he is there. Dante’s dark surroundings convey a sense of moral obscurity or dislocation, whereas Matraini’s gloomy setting is specifically delimited to the intellectual realm: her journey starts not in a wild wood, but rather in the “garden of human learning.” Matraini is keen to limit her malfeasance to the mind, a move that implies both a moral fitness and an intelligence active enough to have strayed from the righteous path.

A similar motif of correction can be discerned in Matraini’s imitation of the Consolatio. Boethius’s narrator is silent until the third prose section of book one. Lady Philosophy posits that this speechlessness must be due to either “shame” or “amazement”: pudor or stupor in the Latin, translated as vergogna and stupore by Varchi, and vergogna and maraviglia by Domenichi. By contrast, Matraini’s eager narrator addresses the “mirabil donna” almost immediately. This she does despite the fact that she too describes herself as being overcome. Notably, however, she excludes any mention of “shame.” Instead, she borrows the second terms from both

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23 Matraini, Dialoghi spirituali, 73: “colma di desiderio, e piena tutta di speranza di raccorre alcun bel frutto, e degno di sapienza.”

24 Ibid., 73: “me n’andava”; Dante, Inf. 1. 2: “mi ritrovai.”

25 Ibid., 73: “vago, e sparioso giardino dell’humane scienze.” The garden setting enhances the Dialoghi spirituali’s unity, linking the Narratione with the dialogues, which take place in Teofila’s garden, a space of intellectual exchange with clear Ciceronian lineage (Smarr, Joining the Conversation, 96).

Varchi and Domenichi, describing herself as being overwhelmed by both stupore and maraviglia. These feelings of “amazement” and “marvel” fuel the narrator’s courage to initiate their dialogue, which she does by praising the Lady in poetic language. Matraini’s narrator then begs to known her visitor’s identity. She receives no satisfying answer, as the angelic creature responds simply that she is “the one whom you desired to find.” The guide’s winged state implies an allegorical figure such as Fame; Lady Philosophy and Beatrice are also suggested. For our purposes, however, the importance lies more in what the lady’s enigmatic response tells us about the narrator, for her assertion reveals that it was the narrator’s will that catalyzed the visit. Boethius and Dante provide their protagonists no such agency. Lady Philosophy arrives due to her own desire to reclaim her lost follower, and Virgil reveals that he arrives at the behest of Beatrice, Lucy, and the Virgin Mary. Matraini goes one further, linking her narrator with her celestial visitor etymologically, given that the former’s state of maraviglia has been produced by the arrival of the “marvelous lady” (“mirabil donna”). The result is that Matraini presents a narrator who shows less weakness and more will than those of Dante and Boethius, and whose actions reveal a desire to thrive spiritually and to defend her right to speak.

Matraini does not limit her gendered emendations to her protagonist. At one point, over an infernal vista, the narrator finds herself contemplating the fall of humankind. There she describes humanity’s postlapsarian state as having transpired not at the hand of Eve, or even Adam and his consort together, but rather “by his doing.” Matraini purposefully excludes mention of Eve in this section, denying by omission the commonplace that Adam’s companion had been the true source of blame for man’s downfall. She repeats this gesture of elision a few pages later, elaborating

27 Matraini, Dialoghi spirituali, 74.
28 Ibid., 74: “Oh lady, or goddess, or whoever you may be, bearing as you do true likeness to a heavenly creature” (“O donna, o dea, o chiunque tu ti sia, che pur di creatura celeste ne apporti vera sembianza”). The language recalls Petrarch’s popular sonnet 157 and the beloved’s ambiguous resemblance to “mortal donna o diva.”
29 Ibid., 74: “Io son colei, la qual pur poco innanzi. . . mi desideravi trovare.”
30 The “three blessed women” (“tre donne benedette”) of Inf. 2.124.
31 Matraini, Dialoghi spirituali, 78: “per causa di lui.”
on the events of the earthly paradise across two pages in which all of her terms point to Adam as the guilty party: “Adam enjoyed the paradise of delights with his fair and beloved companion, until he fell from his just state because of his ungratefulness and disobedience; but oh, how brief was that good, and how sudden its loss, and how quick its flight, because he let himself be deceived by that ancient serpent.” Matraini’s version is an express rewriting of the Dantean source text, which is explicit on Eve’s culpability: for though earth and heaven were obedient, she could not be, and man’s exile happened “because of her who believed the serpent.” Matraini echoes the *Divine Comedy*’s condemnation of Eve but redirects it onto Adam. Her subtle rewriting is much closer to the interpretation put forward by the Venetian Moderata Fonte in her protofeminist dialogue, *Il merito delle donne* (1588), in which the interlocutor Corinna places the blame on Adam, explaining that Eve’s intentions were good, as she was “desirous of knowledge of good and evil.” Fonte’s and Matraini’s texts are united on the points of Eve’s exoneration and women’s right to learning.

The journey of the *Narratione* concludes with the narrator’s completion of the Dantean and Boethian authorial cycle. The tour having ended, the celestial teacher is poised to fly heavenward whence she came. But for Matraini’s narrator, the ending of the tale is just the beginning. Like Dante and Boethius before her, she must now tell her story, in writing, for the good of humankind, claiming for herself the right to learn as well as teach. In announcing her intention, she leaves her readers with a final brazen gesture. Dante’s pilgrim had justified his own act of writing by putting the

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32 Ibid., 85: “Si godeva Adamo con la sua bella, e amata compagnia nel paradiso delle delitie, innanzi che egli cadesse dallo stato della giustitita per colpa della sua tanta ingratitudine, e disobiedienza; ma o quanto fu breve quel bene, e quanto subita fu la sua dipartenza, e come veloce la sua fugacità; però che lasciatosi ingannare dall’antico serpente.”


command to do so in the mouth of Beatrice. In Matraini’s version, there is no such directive from her divine guide. Rather it is Matraini’s narrator, while contemplating her guide’s words of farewell, who authorizes herself: “The more I considered these things, the more it seemed to me, most noble and wise readers, that for the common good of all, I had to narrate them.”

It was common for female authors of spiritual texts in this period to mitigate what might be presumed as impropriety by attributing their talent to God. Yet Matraini makes no such equivocations here. Indeed, looking back over the text, the reader is struck by the self-authorization of this “converted” Matraini, whose voice clearly comes through that of the angelic chaperone’s exhortation at the outset of the journey to “follow the flight of my penne” — a clear pun on both the lady’s wings and the author’s pen. By the conclusion, the historical Matraini has taken over as both author and spiritual guide, extending the passage of marvel from “mirabil donna” to narrator, and onward from writer to reader.

In 1605, three years after the appearance of Matraini’s Dialoghi spirituali, Marinella published her Arcadia felice. While Matraini’s text marks the end of a literary career, Marinella’s is the work of a writer in the early

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36 Matraini, *Dialoghi spirituali,* 96: “Le quali cose fra me stessa più volte considerando, m’è parso nobilissimi e saggi lettori, per comune salute di ciascuno, doverlevi narrare.”
37 It is certainly possible that Marinella knew Matraini’s *Dialoghi spirituali.* In examining Marinella’s *Arcadia felice,* I have been unable to establish any reliable echoes of Matraini’s text, at least, not any that could not be attributed more plausibly to a shared source, such as Dante’s *Commedia.* However, Matraini’s book was published in Marinella’s Venice, and there was some intersection in the two writers’ subject matter: for example, by this time, both had published hagiographies of the Virgin Mary. Their strongest link was that they had both been invited by the intellectual Ascanio Persio (1554–1610) to contribute verses for a pair of lyric anthologies on the Madonna di San Luca, a miraculous icon in the possession of a convent in Bologna. Given that Matraini was one of only a handful of women asked to contribute to the first collection, which appeared in 1601, it seems likely that Marinella, asked in 1602 to provide verse for a second volume, would have known of the older writer. On the San Luca collection, see Danielle Callegari and Shannon McHugh, “‘Se fossimo tante meretrici’: The Rhetoric of Resistance in Diodata Malvasia’s Convent Narrative,” *Italian Studies* 66, no. 1 (2011): 35–37.
stages of what would become a vocation of similar duration and prolificacy. Marinella was born in Venice, and by the time she produced Arcadia felice, though she was only in her twenties, she was already something of a writing prodigy, having previously published five original works. Despite periods of inactivity, she would continue to publish more or less continuously until her death in 1653. Le nobiltà et eccellenze delle donne, the polemic entry into the early modern querelle des femmes for which Marinella is now best known, is actually anomalous within the overall context of her literary output, as most of her other texts were religious in nature: stylistically ambitious hagiographies of Saint Columba, Saint Francis, the Virgin Mary, and Saint Catherine; a lyric collection of Rime sacre (1603); and a Christian epic, L’Enrico, overo Bisanzio acquistato (1635), composed in the style of the Gerusalemme liberata of Torquato Tasso (1544–95). Arcadia felice is thus one of her few forays into secular literature (the others being a philosophical poetic allegory, the Amore innamorato, et impazzato of 1618, and a late return to prose treatise, the Essortationi alle donne of 1645).

Marinella’s pastoral Arcadia felice unites prose with verse interludes to foreground the activities of poetic shepherds occupied less with the negotium of herding sheep than with the otium of singing poetry and carving it into trees. It bears noting that Marinella’s genre choice was unusual within the broader field of Italian women’s writing. Though Isabella Andreini (1562–1604) and other Italian women had written pastoral dramas for the stage in the style of Tasso’s Aminta (1581) and the Pastor fido (1590) of Giambattista Guarini (1538–1612), Marinella is the only one to have tackled the pastoral romance. As the text’s modern editor, Françoise Lavocat, has noted, Marinella’s blending of other genres (chivalric romance is the primary one, though eclogue, epic, comedy, and the picaresque crop up as well) further distinguishes the text: such eclecticism aligns it more closely with Italian pastoral drama, or with European pastoral romance produced outside the peninsula, but not with Italian pastoral romance, which tended

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38 For an overview of Marinella’s life and output, see Kolsky, “Career,” as well as Cox, Prodigious Muse, 263, with full primary and secondary bibliography.
to stick closely to the gold standard of Sannazaro’s *Arcadia*. Thus it is difficult to find direct comparisons for Marinella’s *sui generis* effort.

The fairly static plot of *Arcadia felice*, which is divided into four books, revolves around the arrival in Arcady of a visitor unexpected by pastoral standards: the third-century Roman emperor Diocletian (244–311), who has abandoned the political landscape of the *caput mundi* for more idyllic climes. In the fourth book, Diocletian and his company (a generically ragtag group composed of a Roman senator, a captive Indian prince, and a handful of shepherds) depart in search of the mystical realm of Erato, an enchantress known for her gift of prophecy. When they arrive at Erato’s mountaintop palace, a nymph by the name of Armilla greets them and presents them to the sought-after prophetess. Erato foretells each man’s future, then retires within the depths of her castle, not to return in person for the remainder of the romance. At this point, Armilla offers to lead the men up to Erato’s marvelous garden at the mountain’s summit.

It is during this ascent that Armilla (whose name, perhaps not coincidentally, is a close anagram for “Marinella”) narrates the story of Erato’s subterranean and supernal journeys. Armilla describes how Erato arrived at the underworld with her father as guide: “The wise *vates* (as she recounted to me in daylight’s leisurely hours), with the help of Ciberione, saw Proserpina’s wood.” The account that follows is primarily comprised of an infernal catalog of the expected pagan gods and monsters, concluding with Erato’s vision of the frightful majesty of Pluto. At this point, the chthonian narrative comes to an abrupt conclusion, and the story swiftly rises to the circle of the moon. The narrative of the moon is notably shorter, limited to but a few lines recounting how Erato viewed the trappings of several goddesses, and a setting not only lunar but pastoral: “There she saw the cymbals and the golden bow of Jove’s chaste daughter Diana, the

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39 Lavocat, introduction, vii–ix, xli–li. The primary examples she lists of this “contaminated” European style are Jorge de Montemayor’s *Siete libros de la Diana* (1559), Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia* (1590), and Honoré d’Urfé’s *Astrée* (1607–10).

40 Armilla’s name may also stem from that of Amarilli, the lead female character and love interest of the titular “faithful shepherd” in Guarini’s *Pastor fido*.

41 Marinella, *Arcadia felice*, 166–67: “Vide la savia Vate (per quanto ella nelle oziose ore del giorno mi ha raccontato) con l’aiuto di Ciberione la selva di Proserpina.”
resonant drums of the great mother Cybele, and the sacred blazing of Ceres. There she saw numerous citizens, populated castles, pleasing woods, and lovely hillocks, and she heard the crowned shepherds singing sweet songs, while their white flocks fed on grasses and flowers.” The narrator abruptly concludes that Armilla, “recounting these things, and a thousand others” (“di queste e mille altre cose ragionando”), brought the group to the mountain’s summit.

Within the span of these few pages, Marinella presents her reader with references to a number of prior voyages by classical and Christian auctores, almost none of which were standard sources of imitation for women writers of the period. Marinella’s infernal account primarily follows as its model the underworld passage of Book VI of the Aeneid. Dante’s presence is felt in the very nature of the tour guided by a fatherly figure, as well as the description of “lost people” (“perdute genti”), which reiterates the “perduta gente” etched into the Inferno’s famous gate. Marinella’s listing of Tityus, Ixion, Tantalus, and Belides reiterates Ovid’s inventories from the descents of Juno and Orpheus. As for Marinella’s lunar landscape, its bucolic environment is intriguingly an imitation of the one seen by the paladin Astolfo in the chivalric romance Orlando furioso (1532) by Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533). There the knight marvels at how the moon resembles the earth with its “other plains, other valleys, other mountains, which have their own cities, their own castles. . . and there are vast and solitary

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42 Ibid., 168–69: “Quivi vide i ciembali, il dorato arco della casta figliuola di Giove, i risonanti timpani della gran madre Berecintia, e le sacre facelle di Cerere; quivi vide ampie cittadi, popolati castelli, amene selve, vaghe collinette, ed udi gli incoronati pastori cantar suavi versi, mentre che per l’erbette e pe’ fiori pascevano bianche gregge.”

43 Ibid., 169.

44 Marinella borrows from the Aeneid its monstrous inventory and its description of Charon as blossoming with old age; Lavocat notes this in Marinella, Arcadia felice, 167 nn. 696–97.

45 Ibid., 167. Cf. Dante, Inf. 3.1–9. Erato also spies a Minos wrapping his tail in spiral to indicate his judgment, which hearkens back to Dante’s version of the devilish judge at Inf. 5.4–6.

46 Ovid, Metamorphoses, 4.457–63 and 10.41–44, respectively; Lavocat notes the former at 168 n. 702.
woods, where nymphs forever hunt their beasts.” Of this catalog of poetic precedents, only Ovid and Ariosto could possibly be cited as typical source texts for female authors, though they were mostly mining these for tales of amorous transformations and chases, not the otherworldly voyages to which Marinella alludes.

Marinella’s literary acrobatics are mirrored within the narrative in the activities of Erato and her companions. As the nymph Armilla reveals, she is one of several who live with the enchantress in her alpine palace, and theirs is an all-female community dedicated to the intellectual pursuits of astronomy, meteorology, and poetry. They pursue these activities in the lofty garden from which Armilla narrates Erato’s otherworldly journeys, a setting through which Marinella subtly underscores the nymphs’ intellectual activities. The garden strongly suggests Dante’s earthly paradise, located atop Mount Purgatory, with its heavenly foliage, “perpetual spring” (“perpetua primavera”), and telltale mountaintop coordinates. The resemblance is reinforced by its textual proximity to Erato’s infernal and celestial journey, by its being the site from which those tales are narrated: so while Erato may not travel to purgatory, the realm is present via allusion within her mountain and garden. That Marinella’s green space is a version of the earthly paradise is reinforced by a comparison with the Orlando furioso, as Astolfo’s flight to the moon is preceded by his visit to Eden. Presided over by St. John, the oasis is located upon a towering peak and dominated by a shining palace, much like Erato’s own.

Marinella calls on these eminent models in order to lend authority to her own space, for Dante’s and Ariosto’s Edenic gardens are associated with poetry and prophecy, the very activities that dominate Erato’s realm. Dante’s Purgatorio is the canticle of poetry, the one in which he interacts with myriad poets and comments most directly upon his own poetic practice; it is also the canticle in which he undergoes several prophetic

47 Ludovico Ariosto, Orlando furioso, ed. Lanfranco Caretti (Turin: Einaudi, 2005), 1041–42 (34.72): “altri piani, altre valli, altre montagne, / c’han le cittadi, hanno i castelli suoi / [. . .] / e vi sono ample e solitarie selve, / ove le ninfe ognor cacciano belve.”
49 Ariosto, Orlando furioso, 34.51–52.
dreams. Ariosto’s earthly paradise is inhabited by Elias, the Old Testament prophet, and St. John, author of the Gospel: together, the two represent second sight and writing. Essentially, Erato’s Edenic, poetic community is a secular and female mirror of Ariosto’s. Moreover, the first sight that greets Diocletian’s band upon their entrance is one that invokes another poetic landscape. The capstone of Marinella’s paradisiac stage setting is a fountain topped by a sculpture of Apollo, citern and plectrum in hand, and crowned with “Daphne’s bough.”

The fount suggests the spring of Hippocrene, and the reference marks Parnassus, the domain of poetic inspiration itself, as another territory on the map of Marinella’s intellectual land-grab on behalf of her band of women intellectuals.

The greatest example of Marinella’s commitment to female didactic practice is Erato herself. Armilla refers to her as “vates,” a powerful term from Latin meaning both “prophet” and “poet.” Her name, Erato, further suggests her writerly capacity, as it is the same as that of the muse of lyric poetry. Marinella calls her “she who had Apollo in her breast” and likens the prophetess to Virgil’s Cumaean sibyl through verbal echoes of the *Aeneid*.

These allusions strengthen Erato’s claim to teaching: Virgil’s prophetess not only foretold Aeneas’s future, but also served as his guide to the underworld, overseeing the instruction that would permit him to achieve his journey and his destiny. Just as Aeneas sought out the sibyl’s guidance, so have Diocletian and his company pursued that of Erato, risking dangers and performing magical rituals in order to hear her soothsaying and witness her marvels. Erato is indeed in a certain sense the voice behind Diocletian’s entire Arcadian adventure, as the reader learns, she having prophesied his arrival. When he does arrive at her palace, she shares with him her knowledge, not only of his own future but also of historical Italy’s, as he sees in a series of portraits illustrating the fortunes of the Mantua

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51 Ibid., 166.
52 E.g., Marinella, *Arcadia felice*, 165: “colei che aveva Febo nel petto.” The imitation of Virgil’s sibyl comes at 163. For example, Marinella echoes Virgil in her description of Erato’s appearance as one possessed (Marinella, *Arcadia felice*, 163; cf. Virgil, V.46–50). Lavocat indicates both instances in the notes.
53 Ibid., 12.
court, to whom the work is dedicated.\textsuperscript{54} Further central to Erato’s identity is her role as teacher of other women. Armilla is able to recount Erato’s otherworldly voyage — effectively, the ways of all the levels of the universe, which Erato learned by following her father through them — because Erato has passed this knowledge down to her own disciples, with whom she also shares the poetic and scientific exercises carried out in the garden.

Notably, Marinella’s fascination with the figure of the sibyl is one that Matraini shared. Matraini’s interest took the shape of an artistic commission she made for her local church. The painting portrays the myth of the Tiburtine sibyl prophesying the birth of Christ to the emperor Augustus. Remarkably, the sibyl’s features suggest Matraini’s own.\textsuperscript{55} Matraini’s and Marinella’s prophetesses are based on a classical figure that was safely feminine, yet capable of sharing knowledge with no less a figure than an emperor, bearing the knowledge and self-assurance to speak to and with authority. In fact, Marinella’s \textit{Arcadia felice} is populated throughout by a small but forceful cast of illustrious women, further aligning it with Matraini’s \textit{Dialoghi spirituali}. Marinella’s book, too, is dedicated to a woman: Leonora Medici Gonzaga, duchess of the court at Mantua. Within the fiction, beyond Erato and Armilla, the reader finds the lyricist Licor, who is chosen to perform for the emperor at the welcome ceremonies, and the cross-dressing athlete Ersilia, who is unmasked during the course of the celebratory games.\textsuperscript{56} Finally, Marinella remarkably provides an Olympus that is composed exclusively of goddesses: Ceres, Cybele, and Diana.\textsuperscript{57} Certainly, another key element linking Marinella’s and Matraini’s texts is the importance allotted the figure of Diana. Matraini, as we saw, opens her \textit{Dialoghi spirituali} with a sonnet expressing her love of knowledge in

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 157–63. The scene is modeled after similar scenes of prophecy and patron praise in Ariosto and Tasso.
\textsuperscript{55} Alessandro Ardenti (completed by Francesco Cellini), \textit{La sibilla cumana} (c. 1545–76), Museo Nazionale di Villa Guinigi, Lucca. For discussion, see Jaffe, \textit{Eyes}, 104–24; on the apparent misattribution as the Cumaean sibyl, see 136 n. 17.
\textsuperscript{56} For further readings of these characters, see Cox, \textit{Prodigious Muse}, 206–9.
\textsuperscript{57} Lavocat points out that Marinella’s vista of Mount Olympus is based partially on a description in Vincenzo Cartari’s \textit{Le imagini degli Dei degli antichi} (1571); see 168 n. 704. Marinella adds Cybele to Cartari’s Ceres and Diana.
terms of the goddess of the moon’s pursuit of light. In Marinella’s Arcady, as Lavocat points out, Diana has superseded Pan, standard divinity of the pastoral realm, as the primary figure of worship.⁵⁸ Venus and Cupid, the ruling gods of pastoral romance, are also set aside. All the priestly figures in the romance are explicitly said to be devotees of the goddess of the hunt; magical sacrifices are made in the name of “triform Diana.” Virginia Cox has suggested that Diana’s triplicate nature in combination with her elevated status may even align her less with a humble female saint, as the reader might expect in orthodox Christian allegory, than with the very Trinitarian Christian God.⁵⁹ Moreover, Marinella’s moon and earth mirror each other in more than their pastoral landscapes, for they present dual communities of governing females, with goddesses above and nymphs below. Of course, in Marinella’s pastoral romance, the central clutch of characters is made up of men. Yet women can engage in all manner of pursuits, from arms to letters, as the poet Licori and the warrior Ersilia neatly demonstrate. In the end, Marinella’s microcosms of powerful women start to look not at all unlike Matraini’s all-female universe. Matraini presents women excelling in rhetoric and theology; Marinella has them engaging in science and doing nothing less than ruling the cosmos, in an apotheosis of women as both students and guides.

A final point that merits discussion is that both of these pilgrimages are accomplished without the involvement of erotic love. There were clear models for a romantic dimension of the descent into hell, in the tales of Dante and Beatrice, Cupid and Psyche, and Orpheus and Eurydice. Matraini rejects any amorous admission into her Narratione, though the reader would not be remiss to predict a sort of male Beatrice, given the text’s heavy reliance on Dante, as well as Matraini’s reputation as a Petrarchan poet (the work published immediately prior to the Dialoghi spirituali had been her aggressively redrafted canzoniere, whose amorous poems are addressed to a deceased beloved). Marinella, too, refuses to

⁵⁸ Lavocat, introduction, xvi–xviii.
introduce an amorous element, which is consistent with her negation of carnal love throughout the entirety of her pastoral romance.\textsuperscript{60} A romantic pairing, if not several of them, was de rigueur in Italy’s thriving tradition of pastoral drama.\textsuperscript{61} Yet Marinella evades this expectation in her romance. Of the various female characters, only one, a shepherdess by the name of Iele, is given even the slightest love story, as she is pursued by one of Diocletian’s shepherd companions; but even that plotline is dropped with Iele’s declared intention to renounce marriage in favor of devotion to Diana.\textsuperscript{62} Such a pronouncement in pastoral theater would have been the beginning of that character’s trajectory, not the end. Both Marinella and Matraini rely on their reader to understand from literary precedent that the purpose of their journeys is purely to gather knowledge, as it had been for Odysseus, Aeneas, and Dante’s pilgrim before them. Neither author desires to write a love-maddened protagonist; their travelers need not be saved by an object of earthly love. The exchange between men and women is instead one of wisdom obtained in the beyond, exemplified by Matraini’s choice to address her \textit{Narratione} to an academy, or Marinella’s to have Erato instruct an emperor. This learning is also passed between women: from the “marvelous lady” to the narrator, from Erato to Armilla, and from each author to her dedicatee. Matraini and Marinella see to it that their female subjects leave aside all amorous callings, embarking on journeys that are undertaken in the name of learning and poetry alone.

Matraini would die shortly after the publication of the \textit{Dialoghi spirituali}; for her, that book and its afterlife journey would serve as the culmination of a life’s works. But Marinella was still in the early stages of her long career, and these protofeminist themes and figures, so dominant in her youthful imagination, would populate her writing for the next several decades, as she continued to rewrite romance and epic with the same kind of variety and invention she showed in the genre hybridization that is the \textit{Arcadia felice}. She would even go on to write another descent

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 199–200.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 200.
\textsuperscript{62} Marinella, \textit{Arcadia felice}, 177–78; Cox, \textit{Prodigious Muse}, 200.
into Dis in her next text, *Amore innamorato, et impazzato* (1618). The secular narrative poem, set within a philosophical–allegorical framework, is a mash-up of Apuleius’s Cupid and Psyche myth and Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso*. It tells the tale of Cupid first falling for a mortal woman named Ersilia, and then slipping into madness over his rejection by her. At one point, Marinella sends the god of love into the underworld in search of his beloved. The pro-woman tone of the journey is set when, on Cupid’s way to Hades, he passes a nymph singing beneath a tree: happy is she who devotes herself to “chaste studies,” the nymph trills, and does not allow herself to burn with the unhappiness of love. In the next canto Love, having descended to Avernus, meets Dido and other famous women damned for lust. The queen calls on her “beloved companions and sisters” (“compagne, e sorelle amate”) to avenge themselves on Love with more force than the Bacchae upon Orpheus; the god’s mother, Venus, even shows up to scourge him with rose bushes. The meeting is a comic and redemptive retelling of the infernal collectives of lascivious women portrayed by Dante and Ariosto. In the end, Love does not win the day. Cupid never conquers Ersilia. The woman, defined in the poem’s allegory as the soul’s rational

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64 Marinella exhibited a sustained interest in the Cupid and Psyche myth, referring to different versions of it in two works just prior to *Arcadia felice*: she mentions the popular narrative poem by Ercole Udine (1581) in *La nobiltà*, and praises Apuleius’s style in the prefatory letter to her hagiography of Mary. Marinella, *La nobiltà et l’eccellenza delle donne*, rev. ed. (Venice: Giovanni Battista Ciotti, 1601), 87–88; *La vita di Maria Vergine* (Venice: Barezzi, 1602). Lavocat reprints the letter in Marinella, *Arcadia felice*, 199–201.

65 Marinella, *Amore innamorato*, 84.

66 Ibid., 103–5.

67 Cox, *Prodigious Muse*, 205; cf. Ariosto, *Orlando*, 349–44, and Dante, *Inf.*, canto 5. The enamored women are further redeemed in terms of Marinella’s allegory, where their infernal wood is labeled the “cogitative” part of the soul (la parte cogitative), and they the thoughts that arise there (Marinella, *Amore innamorato*, 98).
faculty (Cupid, by contrast, is the appetitive capacity), is left to the pursuits of her “solitary intellectual life,” which include hunting in the woods and devotion to Diana. Marinella’s portrayal of Ersilia as a pastoral femme sauvage and the symbol of reason signals her as a literary sister to the intellectual nymphs of Arcadia felice, a character following in the footsteps of Matraini’s pilgrim–narrator and Marinella’s Erato.

Matraini and Marinella’s texts stretched the boundaries of women’s writing in this period. Matraini employs a head-on encounter with the moral–philosophical pilgrimages of Dante and Boethius, by which she forces those authoritative texts to serve her unorthodox ends. Marinella applies a variegated range of classical and vernacular authors and genres, rewriting Ariosto and others into scenes celebrating women’s learning and teaching. Nor would she be the only woman to tackle these genres, as we see with a writer like Margherita Sarrocchi (c. 1560–1618) and her epic La Scanderbeide (1606, expanded in 1623). Matraini and Marinella may together have constituted the height of Italian women’s authoritative writing, but they were not the end point, and there is much still to consider about the proliferation of themes of female didacticism in Italian women’s writing in this period. Undaunted by the lack of a strong female-gendered tradition in epic and romance, Matraini and Marinella both show themselves to be well past concerns of women’s right to publish. Instead, they chart new paths into the beyond, bringing the female quest for knowledge from gloomy depths to the upper air.

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68 Marinella, Amore innamorato, allegory of the poem, page unnumbered: “ragionevole” and “concupiscibile,” respectively.