FIGHTING EVE: WOMEN ON THE STAGE IN EARLY MODERN ITALY

NICLA RIVERSO

Abstract: The Catholic revival in the sixteenth century coincides with the opening of the *commedia dell'arte* stage to women, leading to progress for female performers. However, the presence of women in the *commedia dell'arte* immediately shows contradictions and disagreements with the teaching of the Catholic Church. At this time, women were depicted as an emblem of Catholic morality: they were supposed to be devoted mothers and wives and their life was confined within the domestic household. In my paper, I analyze how difficult it was for women to prevail against religious and cultural prejudices and gain respect and recognition as actresses. My aim is to point out how the presence of women on the stage brought about a revolution for women's role in Western culture offering a freedom of expression against traditional moral patterns and giving female performers a chance to demonstrate cleverness and professionalism.

The Catholic revival, which began with the Council of Trent (1545–1563), coincides with the opening of the *commedia dell'arte* stage to women and the end of male-only theatrical culture. In the *commedia dell'arte*, conventional plot lines typically had to do with adultery, jealousy, and love. The spectacle of women publicly playing erotic roles as unfaithful wives and mistresses directly challenged the Church's expectations of female behaviour and decorum. As the Church sought to bring about moral reform, acceptable roles for women were restricted to the domestic sphere, and women were expected to be devoted mothers who were dependent on their husbands. Women who wished to be praiseworthy were to model themselves on the Virgin Mary and to lead modest, pure, and virtuous lives in the name of moral and civic decorum.¹ Those who did not wish to do that had only one alternative: to join a convent and become nuns.

¹ On the promotion of the qualities of the Virgin Mary in order to offer a spiritual and moral code of behaviour for women, see Marina Warner 45–73.

Life was not easy for women who refused to be confined to the home or the convent. To pursue self-actualization and autonomy, they were forced to transgress society's stereotyped and idealized rules. As a result, they were compared to Eve who, according to the Book of Genesis and Christian theologians from Tertullian to Thomas Aquinas, was disobedient, lustful, and responsible for the Fall of mankind. One of the most transgressive choices a woman could make during the sixteenth century was to become an actress, a pursuit thoroughly reviled by ecclesiastic institutions. The presence of women on the stage strengthened the Roman Catholic Church's claim that the *commedia dell'arte* was a pernicious influence, spreading immorality and subversion and inducing those involved with it to lead indecent, scandalous, and vagabond lives.² In 1588, Pope Sixtus V issued an edict forbidding women to perform in public. Although several states lifted the ban a few years later, it lasted in the Papal States until the end of the eighteenth century (Duchartre and Weaver 262).

In earlier centuries men had played both male and female roles on stage, and it was not until the second half of the sixteenth century that women appeared alongside them as professional actors. One of the earliest pieces of evidence of this change is a contract signed in Rome in 1564 detailing the employment of one Lucrezia Senese as an actress in a professional troupe (Taviani and Schino 335). The presence of women on the Italian stage resulted in the historical and cultural blossoming of the *commedia dell'arte* and the uniqueness of the performances made Italian troupes famous. As they performed in countries such as France, Spain, and England, all of which were still deeply entrenched in male-only theatrical culture, their example changed and inspired theatrical productions across Europe (McKendrick 48–49). Actresses performed comedies, tragedies, and pastoral dramas, forms of theatre that instructed as well as entertained. Moreover, “improvisation,” which was one of the greatest innovations in the *commedia dell'arte*, allowed the actresses to show their skills in eloquence—skills that meaningfully exceeded those of the male actors (McGill 65).

² The post-Tridentine Church polemicists regarded professional actresses as a threat to early modern society because the women involved were considered so lecherous that they “[could] ignite an unchaste flame even in the snow” (Zampelli 2, 4). According to Rosalind Kerr, the Church saw a strong threat in the ideological force of the theatrical performances and attempted “to maintain its cultural dominance by accusing the theatre of immoral representations of illicit sexual activities” (*Rise of the Diva* 29).

During this period, the presence of women in the *commedia dell'arte* was quite discreet: for example, women would typically act from within a window built on the stage and situated on an upper level. This allowed them to enjoy a certain privacy even within a public space, avoiding the openness of the *piazza*, or square, that was crowded with men (Tylus 325). This, however, did nothing to assuage the Church's strong opposition to the existence of actresses. As noted above, the roles played by women on stage were diametrically opposed to the model of virtuous femininity preached and promoted by the Church. At the same time that the Roman Catholic Church was imposing rigid sexual rules to quell the carnal desires of the faithful, women on the stage were exposing their bodies, acting out graphic demonstrations of physical passion, and mocking marriage rituals. This mode of living, with its societally disruptive potential, was a clear menace to Christian values. Actresses were seen as the embodiment of carnality, employing their sex appeal to corrupt men's wills.³ In *In actores et spectatores comoediarum nostri temporis paraenesis*, (1621), Father Francesco Maria del Monaco writes:

The honest performances are those in which absolutely no woman appears [...] No woman, I say, because wherever a woman is present, especially if she is very graceful and pretty (as are most of those who act in theatres), there is always a temptation to lust, and she shows her power in corrupting moral customs [...]. (qtd. in Taviani, *La commedia dell'arte* 189)⁴

Del Monaco implies that the male spectators are to be held blameless for their own lustful feelings, which they simply cannot control when faced with the overwhelming power of cleverly manipulated beauty. The women who inspire the feelings are the disruptors, not the men who actually feel the lust.

³ Actresses were seen as women who, instead of trying to redeem themselves by adopting a chaste and submissive life, embraced their human nature entirely: "For the Fathers of the Church after Augustine, woman is the cause of the Fall, the wicked temptress, the accomplice of Satan, and the destroyer of mankind" (Warner 58).

⁴ All translations are mine. "Honesti ludi ii sunt, in quibus nulla omnino mulier [...] Nulla inquam mulier, quia ubique ea sit, praesertim si venustate et gratia polleat (quales ut plurimum eae sunt, quae in Theatris inducuntur), semper libidinis incitamentum et ad mores corruptendos potentissima [...]."

In *Scholasticae et morales disputationes* (1631), the Jesuit Pedro Hurtado De Mendoza claims that women who perform on the stage are often prostitutes who live in promiscuity with other actors and do not hesitate to display intimate relations with men in front of the audience:

Women are always or almost always shameless. [The actors] cohabit and women do not have separate bedrooms; therefore the men frequently see them dressing, undressing, combing their hair; now in bed, now half-naked, and always busy talking to each other about lascivious things. [...] The women are often prostitutes who ask for money for their services. [...] In the theatre, [the actors] describe the love of the characters that they represent, this love between man and woman becoming burning darts; in the same theatre, [the actors] hug, shake hands, kiss, and touch each other [...]. (qtd. in Taviani, *La commedia dell'arte* 87)⁵

De Mendoza warns that men and women who live together share every moment of the day, even the intimate ones, adopting depraved and immoral customs. De Mendoza explains that the actresses are often prostitutes because only prostitutes could adjust to and accept such a life and such a public display of fervent love towards their male partners on the stage, love so intimate that it could be compared to “burning darts” (*iacula ignea*) that inflame passion and excite the soul to perform acts of transgression.

But De Mendoza also acknowledges that it is not easy to avoid being attracted to the actresses because they are beautiful, elegant, well-dressed, talented dancers and singers who are very skilful in the art of recitation (Taviani, *La commedia dell'arte* 87). The Spanish Jesuit argues that actresses are repositories of a strong power through which they can seduce men, and he explains that these women perform in such a compelling way that they

⁵ “Faeminie autem semper, aut fere semper, impudicae. Contubernium liberum quim faeminae sint in diversis cubilibus separatae: quas viri frequenter vident vestirsi, nudari, comi; iam in lecto, iam seminudas: semper colloquentes lasciva. [...] Faeminae frequenter meretrices, deditae quaestui. [...] In theatro referunt eorum, de quibus est fabula, amores, qui dicti inter virum et faeminam sunt iacula ignea, se in eodem theatro amplexantur, manus prensant, osculantur, atque contrectant [...]”

drag the audience to lust, and [many men] fall madly in love and try to conquer [the women] with gold and silver, spending a lot of money for their maintenance, clothes, and accessories. (qtd. in Taviani, *La commedia dell'arte* 87)⁶

De Mendoza laments that the actresses bewitch men with their acting, singing, and dancing, extracting wealth from them in order to lead a life of luxury. Because of their attractiveness, women are temptresses who lead men astray, disrupt their lives, and empty their coffers

In *Della christiana moderazione del theatro* (1652), the Jesuit Gian Domenico Ottonelli claims that “the appearance of actual women on stage [...] is very dangerous and it is the spiritual ruin for many weak spirits” (qtd. in Taviani, *La commedia dell'arte* 329).⁷ He adds that

[t]hese young females, in order to perform leaps and many wonderful feats, gracefully appear on the stage [...], bending, twisting, and palpitating their bodies with lewd and extravagant gestures and positions, and causing a thousand libidinous thoughts in the minds of weak people; and while they are deforming their bodies, they show an even more deformed mind. (qtd. in Taviani, *La commedia dell'arte* 385)⁸

Ottonelli assumes that men are sexually ignited by seeing women performing athletic exercises on stage. His description focuses on the physical skills of the actresses and on the flexibility of their bodies, which are interpreted as negative abilities and associated with sexual freedom.

⁶ “in libidinem abripiunt spectatores, ut a multis adamentur in sane, qui eas auro et argento oppugnant, qui in earum victum, vestes et supellectiles profusus faciunt sumptus.”

⁷ “[...] la comparsa di vera donna in scena [...] è molto pericolosa di rovina spirituale a molti deboli di spirito.”

⁸ “Queste femminelle per saltare più speditamente e per far molte forze maravigliose leggiadramente compariscono in scena [...] arcando, storcendo e vibrando il corpo con gesti e posture sconcie e stravaganti, cagionano alle menti de’ deboli mille libidinosi pensieri e dimostrano, con render deforme molto il proprio corpo, esser maggiore la deformità dell’animo proprio.”

Moving one's body to the rhythm of music has often been condemned by the Church as an expression of worldly enjoyment that recalls pagan traditions. Beginning in the thirteenth century, the clergy adopted the tradition of writing *exempla* to teach moral behaviour (Arcangeli 30). In these *exempla*, which were supposed to relate true stories, dancing was followed by a divine punishment that could range from a disease to an atmospheric disaster (Arcangeli 32). In many of these *exempla*, young women were the protagonists and represented the sinners; they loved to dance so much that they were willing to reject proper moral behaviour, and they had to give up dancing to save their souls (Arcangeli 35).

In the context of Ottonelli's own time, it is easy to understand how his description of women dancing and performing bends and twists on the stage reinforces the image of woman as a sinful, carnal, and lustful creature who enchants men, mere victims of her temptations. Dancing was seen also as a way for women to express sexual energy. The demonization of female sexual energy was widespread during the Counter-Reformation; women were accused of embodying evil and sexual power, and ecclesiastic institutions propagandized against women who did not adhere to the Christian model of the mother and wife confined to the domestic sphere. For this reason, the charm, beauty, elegance, and sex appeal displayed by women on the stage were harshly condemned, and the actresses were associated with sexual sin.

The Counter-Reformation Church authorities who were interested in imposing a stricter discipline on moral behaviour saw the seductive power of certain women as very dangerous to male spiritual salvation. Their seductiveness was explained as originating through demonic intervention, as was the case with Eve's attempt to harm Adam. This line of reasoning associated actresses with original sin, and clerics claimed that even admiring these women could lead men to spiritual death. Ottonelli explains that, for the male audience,

[l]ooking upon a woman many times is like sucking poison, and if the poison is not revealed immediately, but rather found out over time, it will cause fierce temptation, and perhaps spiritual death. (qtd. in Taviani, *La commedia dell'arte* 390)⁹

⁹ "Il mirar una donna molte volte è un succhiare il veleno; e se il veleno subito non si scopre, scopriassi bensì col tempo, cagionando qualche fierissima tentazione, e forse la morte spirituale."

Spiritual death, or the separation of the soul from God (as inflicted on Adam after he ate the forbidden fruit), is invoked here in order to urge men to protect themselves against female temptations.

But the temptations of actresses could take men beyond a metaphorical, spiritual death and put them in danger of a corporeal one as well: because the actresses were associated to prostitutes, they could spread contagious diseases, like syphilis (also called “the French disease”), which could cause pain and death. The presence of this deadly disease, contracted through sexual intercourse, confirmed the belief that God was expressing his displeasure by punishing licentiousness (Siena 18). This motif was used largely by ecclesiastic institutions to reinforce the opinion that there was a strong connection between sex and sin, and when actresses encouraged licentious behaviour in men, the men were punished for their weakness. Moreover, the post-Tridentine Church was trying to revitalize the sacrament of Holy Matrimony by criminalizing premarital sexual behaviour, discouraging extramarital relationships, and promoting more stringent moral customs. In his five-volume moralizing treatise, Ottonelli defends the marriage ritual, opposes any mockery and obscenity with respect to the nuptial sacrament, rejects all transgressions performed on the stage, and accuses actresses of being prostitutes. Ottonelli claims:

When they represent the marriage contract, these comediennes frequently act as prostitutes, as they publicly demonstrate how a woman whom a young man will later make his wife will cover him in kisses, and even do worse things with him. But in representing these impurities, [...] women are more brazen than the most brazen prostitute. (qtd. in Taviani, *La commedia dell'arte* 398)¹⁰

In a setting where the Roman Catholic Church was attempting to strengthen moral behaviours and inculcate rigorous and severe morality in the Catholic countries, women who performed on stage found many obstacles in the way of making their names known and gaining esteem and respect. Unfortunately, as we have noted, the conventional plot lines of the *commedia dell'arte* did not help them

¹⁰ “Queste comiche, rappresentando il trattato d’un matrimonio, si mostrano meretrici molte volte, poichè fanno vedere in publico come un giovane ottiene baci ed altre cose peggiori da una donna, la quale poi riceve per moglie. Ma nel rappresentare quelle prime impurità [...] dico che la donna è più sfacciata d’una sfacciatissima meretrice.”

in their quest for respectability. Most of the comedies were clearly written to mock women and their supposed inability to remain chaste and pure.¹¹ The *commedia dell'arte* exploits women by using them as an erotic attraction.¹² For example, one need only think about the female characters depicted in Ariosto's *Suppositi*, or Machiavelli's *Mandragola*, in which women's lives and thoughts are portrayed as revolving around love, seduction, sexual promiscuity, desire, and infidelity.

How, then, could actresses such as Isabella Andreini, Vincenza Armani, and Vittoria Piissini make respectable names for themselves in a profession inherently disrespectful of their sex and in a culture utterly dominated by the Church's opposition to and defamation of their chosen path? Women who decided to dedicate their lives to the performing arts were aware of the biases and prejudices weighing against them. By looking at some of their achievements, we can see how they strove to establish themselves as cultured and literate. They demonstrated that they were not only talented actresses, but also skilful playwrights, poets, and musicians. Literacy became the means by which they dissociated themselves from the roles that they played on the stage. As they were considered cultured women, they gained higher positions in society and were able to create a new model of what it meant to be an actress. These efforts were particularly admirable as most of these women came from the lower classes, since only women from the lower echelons of society were allowed to perform; noblewomen who were able to afford a more formal education were absolutely prohibited from performing on stage because of the damage it would do to the family honour.

Scholars Ferdinando Taviani and Mirella Schino, who focus their studies on the development of the *commedia dell'arte*, wonder how educated and literate women came to appear on the stage. They conclude that the first actresses were "honest courtesans"¹³ who had learned the manner of poetic declamation and oratory, as well as how to move, sing, speak, and act in front of the nobility. Although this might be true of Donna Lucrezia Senese, it is not a credible description of actresses such as Isabella Andreini, who joined the Gelosi troupe when she was just 14 years old, married the comedian Francesco Andreini two years later, and spent

¹¹ See Andrews 11–31.

¹² On actresses as sexual attractions and sexualized commodities in the *commedia dell'arte*, see Kerr ("Performing Female Identities" 181–97).

¹³ The term "honest courtesan" (*cortegiana onesta*) originally referred to a female courtier, but later, during the sixteenth century, was used to indicate a well-educated, worldly, and independent woman of loose morals who was trained to dance and sing as well.

the rest of her life with him. Moreover, in one of her letters, Andreini explains that her humanist education was the result of “un ardentissimo desiderio di sapere” (“an ardent thirst for knowledge”) combined with “quel talento che Iddio e la Natura mi diedero” (“with the intellectual gift that God and Nature gave to me”) (Isabella Andreini qtd. in MacNeil, *Music and Women* 293). What was impressive about actresses like Andreini is that they used their own intellects to become accomplished literary women, a feat all the more difficult to achieve as education was considered the prerogative of men and not of women. The fact that these actresses achieved widespread recognition for their knowledge and education gave them a masculine power that allowed them to be considered the equals of their male colleagues who were also writers and poets.¹⁴

Unfortunately, in the *commedia dell'arte*, because the actresses' skills, expertise, and versatility were best shown through improvisation, their compositions were typically oral rather than written. Moreover, the actresses' personal papers and writings were rarely saved or edited; there were, however, a few exceptions. One is the case of Andreini, who published her pastoral drama *La Mirtilla* and the *Rime*, and whose husband, son, and colleagues preserved her memory and legacy by producing written tributes to her and publishing her letters and some of her dialogues.

Andreini is the best representative of the changes that women brought about in the early modern age.¹⁵ She was extremely talented in the performing arts and was clever, learned, eloquent, beautiful, and at the same time very modest. She was pious and virtuous, maintaining irreproachable conduct throughout her life. She performed love scenes with Francesco on stage, but her love for her husband went beyond fiction: she was a faithful and devoted wife and she and Francesco raised seven children.¹⁶ Four of their daughters entered the convent and one son went to a monastery.¹⁷

¹⁴ See Puteanus' statement on Isabella's virtues in MacNeil (*Music and Women* 94).

¹⁵ In 1601, Isabella had been made a member of the *Accademia degli Intenti*. She was praised by contemporaries such as Tasso, Marino, and Chiabrera.

¹⁶ Julie D. Campbell points out that Andreini's “public relations campaign focused unceasingly on her marital chastity” (57).

¹⁷ The daughters became nuns at Mantua: Lavinia and Caterina entered the convent of Madri della Cantelma and Osanna and Clarinda entered the Migliaretto convent. Pietro Paolo became a monk at Vallombrosa.

During her career as an actress, Andreini strove to establish a public image of the kind of woman who could be in the public eye but still be accepted by the Catholic Church;¹⁸ her behaviour and even her writing reflect the ideologies and moral values of the Counter-Reformation.¹⁹ For example, in *La Mirtilla*, she celebrates love, marriage, and friendship, pointing out how these three elements intertwine in life.²⁰ In her Christian message, she points out that love and desire exist only “insofar as they are mutually experienced and insofar as the union leads lovers to marriage” (Coller 24). Andreini uses Coridone’s character to express her enthusiasm for a marital union that is based on an exchange of love, trust, and respect that enriches the life of both lovers, each complementing the other.²¹ Coridone claims, “So sweet and dear / is this heaven-given companionship / and so sweet is marital passion, / that it sustains them together” (IV.2.2221–4)²² and later he asserts that “[t]here is no happiness in the world / greater than that of two loving hearts / whom marital love ties and unites” (IV.2.2351–3).²³

In a time when marriage was a matter of legal contracts and arrangements between families, based primarily on wealth, prestige, and power rather than on love, Andreini’s works brought up an important issue in women’s lives: their right to the freedom to choose their own marital partner.²⁴ Her female characters Filli, Mirtilla, and Ardelia are not the submissive, obedient, and passive women of the sixteenth century; rather, they are able to make their own decisions about their

¹⁸ “[...] she managed a careful balance between a public voice and a private image, her literary achievement and theatrical *inamorata* discourse coexisting carefully with her virtuous image as a loyal wife and mother” (Ray 181).

¹⁹ See Coller 17–30.

²⁰ Andreini was not only the author of *La Mirtilla* but also she played the role of Filli on stage; the part of Mirtilla was played by Vittoria Piissimi. Though Mirtilla is the main character, Filli’s character plays a more dramatic and substantial role (See Taviani, *Bella d’Asia* 8).

²¹ “Tanto l’uomo / può viver senza lei, quant’ella puote / senza l’uom sostener sua fragil vita” (“Just as a man / may live without her, so she may / sustain her fragile life without a man” Andreini, *Mirtilla* IV.2.2218–20).

²² “È così dolce e cara / questa dal ciel donata compagnia, / e sì soave è ‘l maritale ardore ch’insieme la mantiene.”

²³ “Dunque non è felicitade al mondo / maggior di quella di due cori amanti / cui marital amor lega e congiunge.”

²⁴ On women and dowries, see Musacchio 177–202.

marital futures with wisdom and intelligence when they pledge eternal union to Igilio, Tirsi, and Uranio, respectively.²⁵ Moreover, in order to challenge the centuries-long image of women as the successors of Eve—debauched, foolish, corrupt, and immoral temptresses—, Andreini depicted Filli, Mirtilla, and Ardelia as women endowed not only with intelligence and cleverness but also with honesty, patience, modesty, piety, compassion, and kindness. It is thanks to the compassion and kindness of Mirtilla and Filli that these women are able to patiently persuade Tirsi and Igilio not to commit suicide, thereby becoming the rescuers of two men who would have lost their lives without the help of the women (Andreini, *Mirtilla* V.3.2780–7, V.6.3004–16).

Chastity is another virtue that Andreini's women possess: Filli, Mirtilla, and Ardelia avoid their suitors and, when they choose their partners, are committed to marrying them before pursuing an intimate relationship. For Andreini, marriage is a vow to help a couple build intimacy and create strong foundations for raising a family. In a time when women were charged with insatiable lust and female honour was discussed primarily in the context of sexual reputation, Andreini introduced her female characters as women who follow morally appropriate behaviour, displaying Christian values on stage.²⁶

Beyond the efforts of Isabella Andreini, there was the emblematic work of her husband Francesco and her son Giovan Battista, who both embraced the literary life in order to dignify their profession and redeem Isabella from malicious attacks and charges of immorality. After Isabella's premature death, Francesco collected his wife's work and published it in *Fragmenti di alcune scritture della Signora Isabella Andreini gelosa e academica intenta* (Fragments of some writings by Isabella Andreini, Gelosa actress and Intenta academician) and in *Lettere* (compositions not based on an actual exchange of correspondence but on literary

²⁵ On the submissive role of wives and daughters in the sixteenth century, see King 1–56.

²⁶ Even though Andreini depicts morally well-behaved women, Lisa Sampson and Virginia Cox note that Andreini's description of her women sometimes is quite sensual. Sampson (121) points out that Ardelia's desire to love a real person is described in a sensual way: when Ardelia declares to Uranio she says "I desire to love a body and no more a shadow" ("amare il corpo voglio, e non più l'ombra" V.5.2906) in contrast with other female pastoral authors like Maddalena Campiglia and Barbara Torelli, who prefer to depict a spiritual instead of physical love, because their social position exposed them to be more vulnerable to critics about the treatment of sexual matter. Cox (101–102) highlights that the language used by Coridone to convince Tirsi to abandon the pleasure of hunting and embark on a love relation with a woman is full of elements that express sensual pleasure and reveal Andreini's nature as an actress.

and theatrical texts) in order to celebrate Isabella's achievements (Taviani, "Bella d'Asia" 11). Giovan Battista dedicated a collection of poetry to his mother entitled *Pianto di Apollo* ("Apollo's Tears," 1606) and wrote *Trattato sopra l'arte comica* (Treatise on the comic art, 1604) and *La Ferza* (The Scourge, 1625) as a response to the antithetical views of the theatre and the condemnation of professional actresses that was spread by the Roman Catholic Church.²⁷ But Giovan Battista did more still with his writing skills and shrewd intellect: he dramatized the myth of Eden and used the character of Eve to redeem the morality of professional actresses.

In *L'Adamo* (1613), which was classified by the author as a *sacra rappresentazione* in order to combine a religious topic with the theatricality so fiercely opposed by the Counter-Reformists, Giovan Battista depicts an Eve who is not the symbol of humankind's misfortunes. She is without the sexual appeal for which she was condemned and is even innocent of destructive intentions towards Adam; she appears only as a gullible woman who has been duped by Lucifer's machinations (Zampelli 12–13). Eve, attracted by the flattering words of the Serpent — "Woman enrapturing of souls / tenderness of hearts / beautiful virgin" (Andreini, *L'Adamo* II.6.1275–7)²⁸—and provoked by him into desiring a freedom that even the wild beasts enjoy, picks the forbidden fruit and eats it (II.6.1421–5).²⁹ But when she realizes her mistake, she feels a terrible pain and grieves, accusing herself of being "as blind as a mole to what was good / and too susceptible to evil" (III.1.1932–3).³⁰

Giovan Battista's Eve is a woman who takes responsibility for her disobedience and does not blame someone else for her mistake, as the biblical Eve does.³¹ Giovan Battista's Eve, when she acknowledges her mistake, is very upset at having been so unwary and falls into despair "the miserable Eve recognizes her mistake, /

²⁷ In *La Ferza*, Giovan Battista Andreini uses the commemoration of the death of his mother, a talented, educated, and honest actress, to glorify the entire category of actors (Rebaudengo 27).

²⁸ "Rapitrice dell'alme / tenerezza dei cori / vergin bella."

²⁹ "Oltraggiandovi ogn'or con simil giogo / la cara libertate, e di signori / farvi servi, anzi in un inferiori / a le selvagge fere / che non volle supporre a legge alcuna." ("Insulting you with such a yoke / deprive you of dear freedom, and from lords / make you servants, even lower / than the wild beasts / which they did not want to be subject to any law" *L'Adamo* II.6.1421–5).

³⁰ "Fui cieca talpa al bene, / Fui troppo occhiuta al male."

³¹ Eve says, "the serpent deceived me, and I ate" (*NIV*, Gen. 3:8–13).

she cries and sighs over it [...] Eve experiences the crying / Eve experiences the pain” (Andreini, *L'Adamo* III.7.2211–2 2223–4);³² at the same time, she learns from her mistakes, becoming judicious and wise, and, as a result, becomes a teacher and a model for her spectators (Zampelli 17). In *L'Adamo*, it is evident that Giovan Battista has imagined a total transformation of the biblical Eve, giving her an alternate identity. The character of Eve loses its value and significance as a weapon used to attack and denigrate actresses, because in this new picture, Eve is not a temptress or a seductive woman but a naïve and vulnerable girl who, after making a mistake, sadly and painfully learns to become a better human being. She becomes very respectful of God's laws, flees the seductions offered by the World, and embraces modesty (Andreini, *L'Adamo* V.5.3803–17; 9.4157–70). In contrast, the real culprits of the Fall of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden are Satan, Beelzebub, and Lucifer.

Giovan Battista dedicated a large part of his work (Andreini, *L'Adamo* I.3–6, II.3–5) to the dialogues among the three demons in order to show their elaborate plot to bring about the downfall of mankind. The demons express their wickedness, perfidy, and jealousy towards Adam and Eve, who become the victims of the demons' thirst for revenge upon God for banishing them from Heaven. Even after Adam and Eve have been expelled from the Garden of Eden, Lucifer, the rival of God in the creation of the world, brings out four monsters from a land mass in order to harm Adam and Eve: the World, the Flesh, Death, and the Demon (IV.3, V.1–2, 4–7). By showing the demons as the true villains of the story, Giovan Battista redeems Eve's character; rather than a culprit sinner, she is an ingenuous and sincere girl who is too weak and frail to confront Lucifer, to understand and alter his plans, and to stand in the fight between God and Lucifer.

For centuries, the story of Eve has been used to restrain women's actions, behaviour, and rights and, in the Counter-Reformation era, it was used particularly to subdue actresses and suppress their talent and skills. In redeeming Eve's character, Giovan Battista weakened the prejudices that associate actresses to the biblical Eve. From this different point of view, the comparison between Eve and the actresses shows its inconsistency because Eve is not the sinful temptress described in the Book of Genesis but a victim who was perceived unfairly to be weak-willed, prone to temptation, evil, untrustworthy, and deceitful. The only thing that bound Eve to the actresses was being discriminated against by a society

³² “Riconosce l'error Eva infelice, / lo piange e lo sospira [...] Eva ha trovato il pianto / Eva ha trovato il duolo.”

that felt authorized to condemn the women's role and actions in the name of Christian morality.

Beyond Isabella and her son Giovan Battista, who stand out for their role in claiming social and cultural dignity for the acting profession, other women and men worked to improve the perception of theatrical actresses. Vincenza Armani is another example of a well-educated, accomplished actress who was able to combine her theatrical and literary skills. Armani was a descendant of the theatrical D'Armano family. In contrast to Andreini, Armani cannot be depicted as pious, modest, or a devoted mother and wife. We do not know very much about her husband or their relationship, nor does it appear that they had any children. What is indisputable, however, is that she was no less a talented actress, dancer, musician, and writer than Andreini. Like Andreini, she was self-taught, learned Latin, and gained a classical education. As in Andreini's case, Armani's fame and reputation were immortalized by her written work and the works written to celebrate her achievements.³³ Her colleague, Adriano Valerini, celebrated her upon her death in the oration *In morte della Divina Signora Vincenza Armani, Comica Eccellentissima*.³⁴ Valerini claimed:

This lady performed, as perhaps you have already heard, in three different styles: in comedy, tragedy, and pastoral. She observed the decorum of each so strictly that the Academy of the Intronati of Siena, where the cultivation of the theatre has flourished, declared several times that this woman was better even in improvisation than the most accomplished authors who expressed themselves in deliberate writing. (qtd. in Taviani and Schino 135)³⁵

³³ After Armani's death, Valerini published some of her poems: "Della divina signora V. A.," "All'Ecc. Sig. Duca di Mantova," "A madonna Lucrezia d'Este," "All'Ecc. Sig. Duca di Ferrara," to name a few. Mantzius says about Armani's work, "Her poems are commended for the warm and natural tone in which they are written. She does not seem to have been infected with the Petrarchism which rendered so many of the sixteenth century lyrics unreadable" (287).

³⁴ For further discussion on Valerini's oration, see Henke 96–100.

³⁵ "Recitava questa Signora, come forse udito avete, in tre stili differenti, in Comedia, in Tragedia, et in Pastorale; osservando il decoro di ciascuno tanto drittamente che l'Academia de gli Intronati di Siena, in cui fiorisse il culto delle Scene, disse più volte che questa Donna riusciva meglio assai parlando improvviso, che i più consummati Autori scrivendo pensatamente."

In order to be more incisive and convincing in confronting accusations of actresses' being agents of moral corruption and degeneration, Valerini explains that Armani had likely devoted herself to the theatre in order to help people acknowledge their mistakes and embrace an honest and dignified life:

Madam Vincenza, perhaps in order to purge the corrupt people of their vices, undertook the task to act upon the stage where, by representing the actions of people as in a mirror, and by chastising their corrupts customs and errors, she could incite them to live a praiseworthy life. (Taviani and Schino 134)³⁶

Valerini, who was a playwright and poet with some accomplishment in the vernacular as well as in Latin and Greek, "represents one of the first actors visibly transformed by the new actress, emulating her cultivation of academic and humanistic culture" (Henke 95). Pier Maria Cecchini, Niccolò Barbieri, Flaminio Scala, and Domenico Bruno belong to the same group of actors who ennobled their professions, printing literary works in defence of actors and theatrical representations. In fact, because of their literary efforts, the new generation of actors and actresses of the *commedia dell'arte* diverged significantly from the court buffoons, mountebanks, acrobats, contortionists, story-tellers, and street singers that they were replacing, and this new generation slowly began to claim social and cultural dignity. What was most surprising, however, was that they began to gain even clerical acceptance.

In his sermons, Cardinal Carlo Borromeo, who was archbishop of Milan from 1565 to 1584, doggedly denounced actors because they performed what he deemed "obscenity" in their comedies. He opposed their performances and forbade theatre troupes from performing in Milan for many years. In 1583, however, he became more tolerant and allowed the Gelosi actors to perform onstage once he had reviewed, revised, and approved the plots of their comedies (Taviani, *La commedia dell'arte* 5–6). In *La Supplica*, the pious and sober comedian Barbieri points out that Cardinal Borromeo operated in favour of Valerini in order to help Valerini's troupe receive a licence to play in Milan, provided that the actors showed him their scenes before every day's performance (Taviani and Schino 209–10).

³⁶ "La Signora Vincenza, forse per purgar de' vizii la corrotta gente, si desse al recitar comedie in scena, dove de gli uomini come in uno specchio rappresentando il vivere, e d'essi riprendendo i perditi costumi e gli errori, a vita lodevole gli infiammasse."

Even Cardinal Silvio Antoniano, a friend and close collaborator of Carlo Borromeo's, claimed that acting was useful for educating children. Encouraged by Borromeo, Antoniano wrote a book about the Christian education of children (*De l'Educazione Cristiana de' Figliuoli*. [1583]), in which he explains that

What many religious men usually do, that is, imitating human actions and having them represented by children, is a very useful and enjoyable mode of recreation, particularly for young students. (Antoniano 273)³⁷

Later, he adds that acting "is useful to exercise memory, pronunciation, and action" (Antoniano 274).³⁸ Despite these signs of a change in the Church's anti-theatre stance, women were still seen exclusively as wives and mothers who belonged to the household, not to the stage. Antoniano writes that women should not act in plays, with the exception of some old matrons of exemplary holiness (Antoniano 274).

But the skilled and decorous actresses of the new generation were able to break down prejudices and win the sympathy of some churchmen. For example, Tommaso Garzoni, a Lateran canon, in *La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo* (1585) points out that actresses saved the theatre from indecorous and scurrilous representations of *buffone* comedy. Garzoni praised the new generation of actresses, claiming that they embodied in their virtuosity a compendium of art. Here, he is referring to the noble and refined genre inaugurated by the *commedia dell'arte*, which united the tragic, comic, and pastoral drama without omitting erudition and rhetoric. When he describes Isabella Andreini, he uses the following words:

The gracious Isabella, adornment of the stage, ornament of the theatre, a superb spectacle no less of virtue than of beauty, has also made her profession so illustrious. (Garzoni 320)³⁹

³⁷ "È molto utile e dilettevole maniera di ricreazione particolarmente per i giovinetti studiosi, quelli che molti religiosi costumano di fare, cioè d'imitare alcuna azione umana e di farla rappresentare dai medesimi fanciulli."

³⁸ "[...] se ne ritrae utilità per esercitare la memoria, la pronuncia e l'azione."

³⁹ "La graziosa Isabella, decoro delle scene, ornamento dei teatri, spettacolo superbo non meno di virtù che di bellezza, ha illustrato ancora lei questa professione."

When he talks about Vincenza Armani, he claims that “imitating the eloquence of Cicero, she put the comic art in competition with oratory” (Garzoni 320).⁴⁰ Where he mentions Vittoria Piissini, he writes that she is

a summation of the art, having proportionate gestures, harmonious and concordant movements, majestic and welcome acts, affable and sweet words [...], and in her entire person a perfect decorum that is due to and belongs to a perfect comedienne. (Garzoni 320)⁴¹

In Garzoni’s words, we read a different attitude towards actresses: there is no contempt or disrespect for these women who choose to pursue a career contrary to the teachings of the Counter-Reformation. In contrast, the author praises the actresses’ beauty, gracefulness, and talent together with the decorum and virtue in their personal conduct. The three actresses are depicted as models of femininity, their elegant gestures balanced by the refinement of their speech.

Another churchman fond of the *commedia dell’arte* was Cardinal Alessandro Montalto (the grand-nephew of Pope Sixtus V), who in 1588 invited the Desiosi troupe to Rome to perform some of their comedies. The Desiosi received their licence to perform on the condition that women not be allowed onstage—but even though this rule was observed for public performances, in the private performances staged in his residence of the *Cancelleria* palace, Cardinal Montalto and other spectators enjoyed the presence of actresses such as Diana da Ponti, who played the role of prima donna in the Desiosi troupe and was well known both as an actress and as a poet (D’Ancona 500–501).

Signs of tolerance from the Roman Catholic Church towards the comedians gradually became even more evident. When in 1614 Pope Paul V promulgated the *Rituale Romanum*, he listed the categories of sinners who were excluded from the sacraments, including prostitutes, concubines, usurers, magicians, witches, and blasphemers; it should be noted that he did not mention actors and actresses (Vicentini 18).

Even though the women who performed were still officially ostracized by the Roman Catholic Church, general opinion was beginning to hold that their

⁴⁰ “[...] imitando la facondia ciceroniana, ha posto l’arte comica in concorrenza con l’oratoria.”

⁴¹ “[...] un compendio dell’arte avendo i gesti proporzionati, i modi armonici e concordi, gli atti maestrevoli e grati, le parole affabili e dolci [...] e in tutta la persona un perfetto decoro, qual spetta e s’appartiene a una perfetta comediente.”

presence in the *commedia dell'arte* was essential and they could not be replaced by men disguised as women, as had been done in the past. Even Ottonelli, who in *Della christiana moderazione del teatro* shows hostility towards the presence of women on the stage, eventually admits the necessity of actresses. Nonetheless, he urges that they remain hidden from the audience, suggesting that a “female voice might be heard off stage without the actress showing herself to the public” (Taviani, *La commedia dell'arte* 395).⁴²

While the attitude of the Roman Catholic Church towards stage actresses was slowly changing, the actresses of the *commedia dell'arte* survived the defamatory propaganda and opposition from churchmen thanks to their secular patronage. Being patronized by aristocracy or royalty offered the troupes the possibility of separating themselves from the *buffoni* and street performers, securing their work, and, to a certain extent, legitimizing their craft.

In Italy, the economic growth of the sixteenth century resulted in a surge of new artistic works. Wealthy families such as the Medici, Gonzaga, and Estensi began a system of patronage that supported artists in the creation of many different forms of art. Theatrical performances became a leisure entertainment in which aristocrats and the upper classes indulged. It became a cultural practice to stage performances in order to commemorate important occasions such as weddings. For example, in 1581, the Gelosi troupe performed in Mantua at the wedding of Vincenzo Gonzaga and Margherita Farnese; in 1589, in Florence, for the nuptial celebrations of the Grand Duke Ferdinando de' Medici and Cristina of Lorraine; and in 1594, in Milan, for the Count of Harò's wedding (D'Ancona 467, 479; MacNeil, *Music and Women* 19). Similarly, in 1608, the Fedeli troupe was engaged to perform for the marriage of Francesco Gonzaga and Margherita of Savoy (Putnam Emerson 12).

Theatrical performances became an expression of the cultural and artistic tastes that the educated aristocracy and upper class embraced as a part of their identity: “The aristocracy had taken drama to its heart, and attached it firmly to the whole system of display which was an essential part of princely politics” (Andrews 223). In other words, the aristocracy and upper class used theatrical representations, as they did with other artistic productions, to display their wealth, taste, and power.

⁴² “[...] al più si facci sentire la femminil voce dentro la scena senza la teatral comparsa a gli spettatori.”

Theatrical troupes moved between different cities, including Florence, Milan, Venice, Genoa, Bologna, and Mantua, and they even went abroad to find patrons and places in which to perform. The theatrical representations became determined by the law of the market: the troupes chose the patron who best financed their plays and who offered the most reliable sponsorship and strongest protection. There is no question that the troupes counted on female theatrical charisma to sell their product and, according to Rosalind Kerr, the displacement of women's bodies played to the fetishistic desires of the audience who felt attracted to the performances (*Rise of the Diva* 13). In 1576, on his way from Warsaw to Paris where he was to be crowned, Henry III saw the Gelosi troupe in Venice. He was so impressed by the brilliant performance of Vittoria Piissini that, the same year, he asked the Italian troupe to stage a performance in Paris (D'Ancona 466–68). In 1577, the Gelosi troupe performed again at Henry III's court, but this time the French Parliament opposed the theatrical representations, contending that they spread corrupted customs among youth. The king took the Italian troupe into his protection and allowed them to perform (D'Ancona 469). When Virginia Ramponi, wife of Giovan Battista Andreini and prima donna of the Fedeli troupe, performed at the wedding festivities of Francesco Gonzaga and Margherita of Savoy (taking the place of Caterina Martinelli, who had died suddenly of smallpox), she earned enormous success for her vocal skills and was invited to and acclaimed in the courts of Paris, Prague, and Vienna (Putnam Emerson 12).

Henry IV and the queen Maria de' Medici invited the Gelosi to perform in France on several occasions: in 1602, they were in Paris; in 1603, they stayed for five months in Fontainebleau, and in 1604, performed from January to April at the Hôtel de Bourgogne in Paris. Maria de' Medici was particularly fond of Isabella Andreini. After Andreini performed with the Gelosi in 1602 in Paris, the queen wrote a letter to her sister Eleonora, Duchess of Mantua, praising Isabella's acting and urging her sister to help the actress, because she gave the greatest satisfaction to the king and herself.⁴³ Andreini was held in high regard by the Medici family, which was very benevolent towards her and her family. She found patronage for two of her daughters within the Medici households:⁴⁴ Lavinia, her oldest daughter, went into service for Eleonora de' Medici, and when Lavinia entered the convent of the *Madri della Contelma*, Eleonora paid the required dowry (MacNeil, *Music*

⁴³ The letter that Maria de' Medici sent to the Duchess of Mantua can be found in Smith 61.

⁴⁴ The letters in which Isabella thanks the duke and duchess can be found in D'Ancona 490–92.

and Women 48). Isabella and her family were in such good favour with the Medici that they were considered members of the court.⁴⁵ The close bond and relationship that the Andreini family established with their patrons was not exceptional among actors. For example, Tristano Martinelli had Maria de' Medici as the godmother of one of his children and the Grand Duke Ferdinando II as the godfather of another one (Taviani and Schino 281). But Martinelli was not unique:

Many princes and princesses, kings and queens, emperors and empresses, were godparents of the children of the comedians of our time who call them *compare* and *comare* in voice and writing. (Barbieri 41)⁴⁶

As noted above, in order to guarantee financial support for their work, actors needed a patron. Typically, however, they became so dependent on their patrons that they lost their artistic autonomy and could no longer choose how, where, and with and for whom to act.⁴⁷ They were obliged to make changes and adjustments to their plays in order to please their patrons and had to respond to their patrons' requests to move to other towns in order to amuse members of their patrons' family or friends. In a letter from Henry IV to Ferdinando Gonzaga, the king asks Gonzaga to send the actors who performed at the Gonzaga court to Paris, especially Harlequin, who was played by Martinelli:

I wish for this from you, that you remind my sister, the Duchess of Mantua, of the promise made to my wife, to send us the Italian

⁴⁵ In a fresco in the cloister of the Santissima Annunziata in Florence, Isabella and Francesco Andreini, together with their son Giovan Battista, are represented among the Medici courtiers (MacNeil, *Music and Women* 48–49).

⁴⁶ “Molti principi e principesse, re e reine, imperatori e imperatrici, hanno tenuto a battesimo i figliuoli de' comici de' nostri tempi, e gli honorano col chiamarli con nome di compare e comare in voce e in scritto.”

⁴⁷ “Da una parte il principe si comportava nei confronti degli attori come un mecenate alle prese con dei sudditi, un committente assoluto che pensa di poter disporre del singolo buffone senza tener conto della compagnia in cui è inserito” (“On the one hand, the prince behaved towards the actors like a patron dealing with his subjects, a buyer who thinks he can have absolute rights over the individual buffoons without regard for the company to which they belonged” Ferrone 99).

comedians, and I will be very pleased if Harlequin is with them.
(Taviani and Schino 280)⁴⁸

Patrons had a strong influence on the troupe that they supported and were even involved in creating troupes made up of their favourite actors. This sometimes created tension between the actors, because they were occasionally forced to work with colleagues whom they could not stand. For example, in 1589, the Grand Duke Ferdinando de' Medici wanted the Gelosi to perform with two prima donnas at his wedding to Cristina of Lorraine. This was not done easily, as Vittoria Piissini and Isabella Andreini argued over which comedy should be presented:

For this reason the said women nearly came to a quarrel because Vittoria wanted to recite *La cingana* and the other woman wanted to perform her *pazzia* entitled *La pazzia d'Isabella* [...]. However, they agreed that the first to be recited should be *La cingana* and that *La pazzia* would be performed another time. (Pavoni 29–30)⁴⁹

Although the request from the patron for two prima donnas suggests the immeasurable importance that women had in the *commedia dell'arte*, there were nonetheless many obstacles involved in order to organize a play where two famous actresses were to perform. In 1609, when Vincenzo Gonzaga wished to unite the Accesi and Confidenti in one troupe, Pier Maria Cecchini (the Accesi's chief comedian) explained that such a project was unrealizable:

The actors divide themselves into two groups: one sides with this woman, and the other with the other one, not only in their opinions, but with their words, which are spreading through the city and which have sufficient force to increase the differences of opinion that will

⁴⁸ “Io desidero questo, da voi, che ricordiate a mia sorella la duchessa di Mantova la promessa, fatta a mia moglie, di inviarmi i comici italiani, e avrò molto piacere che Arlecchino sia con loro.”

⁴⁹ “Così vennero quasi, che è contesa le dette Donne fra di loro, perché la Vittoria voleva si recitasse *La cingana*, e l'altra voleva si facesse la sua *pazzia*, titolata *La pazzia d'Isabella* [...]. Però s'accordarono in questo, che la prima a' recitarsi fusse *La cingana*, e che un'altra volta si recitasse la *pazzia*.” On Isabella's performance, see MacNeil (“Divine Madness” 195–215).

naturally arise when there are two opposing groups. (Taviani and Schino 418)⁵⁰

The success of the *commedia dell'arte* was largely due to the cleverness of the women who, with their skill and talent, enchanted kings and queens, princes and princesses, dukes and duchesses, earls and countesses, and all those who were able to attend their performances. These women established themselves as professional actresses, gained social and economic freedom, and announced themselves as independent of any man's household. Even though they were of plebeian origin, they rose to the foreground in a way that had been considered unthinkable for non-noble women. They were praised by high-born admirers (even by kings and queens), respected, admired, and held in high regard for their skills, and sometimes they received honours typically reserved for royals or saints.⁵¹

Thanks to the bold and brave women who, with the support and protection of their secular patrons, opposed the churchmen and ecclesiastic institutions, traditional gender roles were examined, exploded, and revolutionized on and off of the stage. Women who for centuries had been culturally and socially constrained abandoned the passive role into which they had been forced. They gained the freedom to express themselves, show their skills, and demonstrate that they were endowed with intelligence. The stereotype of woman as Eve, entirely shaped by the Church, finally began to fade; the idea that women were weak and foolish began to dim, and a vision of skilled actresses, talented singers, gifted musicians, and brilliant poets emerged. The "new" actresses were able to blend theatre and culture together, ennobling themselves and their profession. They created a form of art more complex than others, because theatrical representation includes a variety of skills, from writing scripts to staging plays, from acting to improvising dialogues and monologues, from dancing to singing.

⁵⁰ "I recitanti si spartiscono in due partiti e tengono chi per questa e chi per quell'altra donna, e non solo con il parere, ma con le parole, le quali vanno seminando per la città, che hanno poi la forza d'accrescere quella disunione de' pareri che naturalmente suol nascere nell'essere spettatori di due correnti."

⁵¹ For example, when Isabella Andreini died in Lyon in 1604 as a result of a miscarriage, she was given a state funeral, and a coin with her image was minted in her honour (See Barbieri 40). Similarly, whenever Vincenza Armani arrived in a city in which she was to perform, artillery was fired in her honour and for the joy taken in her arrival, and the most important people of the city wanted to meet her (see Valerini's oration in Taviani and Schino 136).

One of their achievements was to bring cultural change and innovation not only to the plays in which they performed, but also to early modern society. The women of the *commedia dell'arte* contributed to building a new model of heroine: beautiful, talented, and educated. They represented a new ideal of femininity and their impact on society affected everyday life and changed the way women were viewed in the early modern era.

University of Washington

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