Weaver, Elissa B. *Arcangela Tarabotti: A Literary Nun in Baroque Venice*. Ravenna: Longo, 2006. Pp. 236. ISBN 88-8063-492-5. €22

In recent years, ample scholarly attention has been devoted to the intersection of women's religious vocation and the lay community in early modern Italy. Women's imposed religious devotion was determined in many cases by the inheritance system. It was common practice for young women to join convents in the seventeenth century, but this was not necessarily an expression of their religious beliefs, but rather a strategic and economic decision taken in most cases by parents or guardians to secure an attractive dowry for a particular daughter and to render her more attractive financially to a potential future husband. In her writings, Elena Cassandra Tarabotti (1604-52) made her voice heard in spite of many layers of patriarchal voices and vehemently argued for broadening women's educational opportunities. The Benedictine nun, who acted as a staunch defender of women, decried their impossibility to openly express their concerns with regard to forced monachization in her work *Inferno monacale* (*Convent Hell*), a treatise that she could not publish during her life time. In fact, it appeared in a modern edition by Francesca Medioli in 1990. Nonetheless, her works should be read as a process of struggle and literary accommodation to social realities and textual culture, rather than a tragic story of individual suffering.

This book is the first collection of essays dedicated exclusively to Arcangela Tarabotti. It also represents an important and valuable work of scholarship, which is an important step in the direction of understanding the world inside the convent's walls in seventeenth-century Venice. The twelve essays in this volume were originally presented at a conference held in 1997 at the University of Chicago. The conference and this publication were intended to celebrate the literary achievements of Tarabotti in her pioneering works, *Paradiso monacale* (*Convent Paradise*), 1643, *Antisatira* (*Antisatire*), 1644, *Che le donne siano della spetie degli uomini* (*Women Are Not Human*), 1651, and *Semplicità ingannata* (*Innocence Betrayed*), originally entitled *Tirannia paterna* (*Paternal Tyranny*), 1654. Her epistolary writings, *Lettere familiari e di complimento* (*Letters, Personal and Public*), 1650 are also instrumental in contextualizing and historicizing women's role in early modern Venetian convents.

The aim of this book is twofold: a definition of the Venetian context of the seventeenth century (the first four essays) and an analysis of the life and writings of Arcangela Tarabotti (the remaining eight essays). The volume opens with an introduction by the editor, Elissa B. Weaver, and concludes with a detailed bibliography that focuses primarily on seventeenth-century Venice. Weaver provides a brief overview of the Benedictine nun's writings and surveys the scholarly research published in this book. The introduction alone provides a fine entry into the modern scholarly debate on Tarabotti. There are also a series of illustrations of the convent church of Sant'Anna di Castello and of paintings that depict religious scenes. This book is particularly important because there are relatively few studies with respect to a close reading of the Venetian nun's texts, a lacuna that the authors of

these studies have undertaken to fill.

In the opening essay, *The Permeable Cloister*, Anne Jacobson Schutte examines the early modern nuns' relationship with the secular world; more precisely, she focuses specifically on women's isolation and its inevitable consequences on their behavioural and intellectual development. In the debate over whether the application of the Tridentine female enclosure decrees was a status sought by nuns to enhance their cultural power or, on the contrary, it was disempowering, Schutte does not side with the scholars who argue that convents were safe havens where women could lead a peaceful life, study, and produce valuable literary work. Her judgment falls on the side of disempowerment and she argues that despite the fact that nuns did not have family responsibilities, they did not necessarily find solace within the confinement of the post-Tridentine convents. The essayist's goal is to present hidden realities and outward behaviour in ways that highlight the distinction between what is often said about early modern women and what the evidence tells us. In conclusion, the scholar asserts that nuns employed every possible subterfuge to avoid a cloistered life of prayer, all in the hope of trespassing strict rules and regulations imposed by the convent's rigid organizational structures.

In her essay *Prose Production in Venice in the Early Seicento*, Daria Perocco analyzes the phenomenon of prose writing in seventeenth-century Venice, a very prolific period for the affirmation of a wide array of prose genres, and questions the commonly acknowledged idea that The Serenissima was an ideal city for literary expression. By remaining faithful to the official historiography of the period, the author points out the twilight of the Venetian republic and its further implications in the literary field. She describes in detail the most popular seventeenth-century genres: historiography, novella, and novel. The scholar also makes well-argued references to influential men of letters such as Annibale Campeggi, Girolamo Brusoni, Majolino Bisaccioni, Giovanni Francesco Loredan, and Ferrante Pallavicino of the *Settecento* and their affiliation with the Academy of the Incogniti, founded in 1630 by Loredan. Perocco points out that the Incogniti revisited the canonical form of the *novella* established by Giovanni Boccaccio, but distorted the traditional framing tale scheme. The Academy's literary orientation culminates in 1641 with the publication of an anthology of thirty novellas, the *Novelle amorose* (*Amorous novellas*). The essayist explains that on account of the constant strive to complicate the structural pattern of the narrative, the seventeenth century novella led to the development of a new genre of fiction, the novel, a literary form which places special emphasis on the intricate mechanism of story-telling.

The second and longest portion of the book contains analyses of Tarabotti's writings that are particularly relevant for a discussion of her cultural and literary achievements. These essays foreshadow a surge of scholarly activity on the issue of monachization and its echoes on Tarabotti's writings.

Beatrice Collina's insightful study, *Women in the Gutenberg Galaxy*, seeks to define women writers' relationships with their publishers. The object of her investigation is a particular type of prose writing, the treatise. It is generally admitted that the lyric genre was considered more suitable to female literary creation, and therefore, treatise writing was considered more appropriate for male authorship.

The more one reads treatises authored by women, the more they recognize that female writers had found ways to manoeuvre men's ownership of education and publishing. It is the case of the Benedictine nun, who was well acquainted with the works of Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinella, and who used her ethos so artfully to nuance and problematize the issues debated. Seventeenth-century publishers were fully aware of their readership's taste for novelty and variety and had a great contribution in promoting female-authored works. Collina argues that a close examination of Tarabotti's relationship with her editors reveals the nun's steady preoccupation to ensure that her works are published and that their printed version is complete and accurate, without any printing errors.

A particularly exciting narrative is presented in Lynn Lara Westwater's essay *The Trenchant Pen: Humor in the Lettere of Arcangela Tarabotti*, where the author tackles a less researched, but very original theme, the humour in Tarabotti's writings. The study addresses the apparently slippery methodological issues involved in trying to draw a conclusion from the evidence at hand. Within the boundaries that she sets, her research is both informative and instructive. The scholar is cautious in presenting the evidence and in suggesting possible conclusions. It is a paradigmatic example of how data ought to be handled. To support her arguments Westwater uses as a theoretical background relatively modern theories formulated by Bergson and Freud. Despite extensive use of secondary sources, the author does not merely systematize theoretical studies; rather her arguments are grounded on primary evidence, more specifically, Tarabotti's familiar letters. Although readers might expect to read a study on inward and domestic lives of women in convents, the essay examines how the documentary nature of letter, its psychological content, and its social characteristics express the nun's anxiety about her own powerlessness and desire to control the ways of gaining power over men. The author suggests that Tarabotti's ability to elicit laughter proves how wittingly she uses rhetorical skills to display her diatribes against men. Judging by the examples Westwater presents, this conclusion is rather persuasive.

The articles in this collection not only expand our understanding of Arcangela Tarabotti, but also address the issue of writing, which is paramount in her case. It concerns both the actual description of her life and her religious experiences, and the extent in which her pugnacious disposition and diatribes were expressed in her writings. This well thought out and researched collection makes a welcomed contribution to the debate on the seventeenth-century social, cultural, economic, and religious environment. Furthermore, it invites the readers to view early modern Venice as a site of complex cultural and religious interaction.

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