



The Worth of Women: Wherein Is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Their Superiority to Men (The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe)

By Moderata (Modesta Pozzo) Fonte

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Gender equality and the responsibility of husbands and fathers: issues that loom large today had currency in Renaissance Venice as well, as evidenced by the publication in 1600 of *The Worth of Women* by Moderata Fonte.

Moderata Fonte was the pseudonym of Modesta Pozzo (1555–92), a Venetian woman who was something of an anomaly. Neither cloistered in a convent nor as liberated from prevailing codes of decorum as a courtesan might be, Pozzo was a respectable, married mother who produced literature in genres that were commonly considered "masculine"—the chivalric romance and the literary dialogue. This work takes the form of the latter, with Fonte creating a conversation among seven Venetian noblewomen. The dialogue explores nearly every aspect of women's experience in both theoretical and practical terms. These women, who differ in age and experience, take as their broad theme men's curious hostility toward women and possible cures for it.

Through this witty and ambitious work, Fonte seeks to elevate women's status to that of men, arguing that women have the same innate abilities as men and, when similarly educated, prove their equals. Through this dialogue, Fonte provides a picture of the private and public lives of Renaissance women, ruminating on their roles in the home, in society, and in the arts.

A fine example of Renaissance vernacular literature, this book is also a testament to the enduring issues that women face, including the attempt to reconcile femininity with ambition.

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Editorial Review

From Kirkus Reviews

Literary proof that when it comes to male-female relationships, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Newly translated by Cox (Italian/Cambridge), *The Worth of Women* was written in late-16th-century Venice by Fonte, a poet who died in childbirth in 1592, at the age of 37. This edition includes a long introduction about various literary conventions and historical facts that, while interesting to scholars and vital to giving a reader the context for the prose that is to come, will scare off the less dedicated reader. That's a shame, for Fonte's is witty writing. She is exceptionally adept at the classic Renaissance convention of the literary dialogue. Using the conceit of seven Venetian noblewomen of varying ages and marital status, gathering in a garden to debate, among other points, men's inferiority to women, Fonte paints a vivid picture of yesteryear, an era whose themes ring true today ("Men are just like unlit lamps," claims one of the seven, "in themselves, they are no good for anything, but, when lit, they can be handy to have around the house"). Infidelity, gambling, and other vices and flaws are just a few of the topics Fonte's women discuss. Beyond the clever bantering and debate, there is also a lovely reminder of the power of language. At one point, one of the women describes the fickleness of young men's love by noting, "Their love is no more than a flash in the pan; their loyalty a laugh in a tavern; their devotion, a day out hunting the hare; their fine appearance, a peacock's tail." Certainly not a book destined for the mainstream. But for scholars, history buffs, and readers who like to mix their contemporary selections with the unusual, *The Worth of Women* is a satisfying sidetrip. -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

Language Notes

Text: English (translation)

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About the Author

Virginia Cox is a lecturer in Italian at the University of Cambridge and a fellow of Christ's College. She is the author of *The Renaissance Dialogue: Literary Dialogue in Its Social and Political Contexts*.

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