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A Voice from the Convent: Arcangela Tarabotti in Tridentine Venice

Zoe Connell

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A Voice from the Convent: Arcangela Tarabotti in Tridentine Venice

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in History from
The College of William and Mary

by

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Introduction

You fool! God's eye observes you, and his righteous hand will punish you forever. Then you will comprehend what punishment your sins deserve, especially the wickedness of forcing women to become nuns. If these women ... were to bite off their fathers' noses to indicate paternal responsibility for all evils and sorrows befallen their daughters ... you wouldn't see a single man without this member missing. They would be mutilated monsters!

-Arcangela Tarabotti¹

In 1617, at the tender age of 13, Arcangela Tarabotti was forced by her family to leave their home and enter the Venetian convent of Sant'Anna. Tarabotti was one of thousands of girls who experienced forced monachization — a practice Tarabotti equated with condemning women to Hell. As an advocate not only of gender equality, but female superiority, Tarabotti fought on behalf of women who suffered under Venice's patriarchal institutions that robbed them of their liberty. A prolific writer with a sharp wit, Tarabotti denounced male hypocrisy and challenged traditional gender constructs, resulting in the wrath of the Church, the Venetian state, and male humanists across Europe. This study aims to examine the intersection between the time and space in which Tarabotti lived and her experiences as expressed through her writings.

The 21st century saw rise to a great influx of scholarship on the Venetian convent, two of the more famous works being Mary Laven's *Virgins of Venice* and Jutta Sperling's *Convents and the Body Politic in Renaissance Venice*. While some scholars focused on convent life in general, historians such as Meredith Kennedy Ray, Lynn Lara Westwater, Elissa B. Weaver, and Letizia Panizza turned to Tarabotti in particular. Study of Tarabotti in the United States has only picked up recently, with most translations of her works having been produced within the past decade, if not the past year. The year 2020 saw a particular increase in publications as by Ray, Westwater,

¹ Arcangela Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, ed. Letizia Panizza (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), Book 1, 75.

and Weaver who introduced new English translations of Tarabotti's *Antisatire* and *Convent Paradise*.² European scholarship of Tarabotti has followed similar trends, with the uptick of study occurring around a decade earlier in the 1980s, but continuing throughout the 21st century. The most important of whom being Mario Infelise and Francesca Medioli.³ The focus of most Italian scholars leans toward Tarabotti's relationship with greater Renaissance Venetian academic realm.

Despite the growing studies of Tarabotti, especially in the Anglophone world, there has been little attention drawn to how Tarabotti's writings changed over time. In this thesis, I intend to rectify this gap in the historiography. More specifically, I will examine the manner in which the contents of her writings — emotions, tone, self-image, and beliefs — evolved as she published her works. My argument unfolds over the course of three chapters. The first chapter serves to contextualize the political, religious, social, and economic challenges Venice and

² Arcangela Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*, ed. Meredith K. Ray, and Lynn Lara Westwater, (Toronto: Iter Press, 2020); Arcangela Tarabotti, *Antisatire in Defense of Women, against Francesco Buoninsegni*, ed. Elissa Weaver (Toronto: Iter Press, 2020). For other publications by Ray see Meredith K. Ray, "Letters and Lace: Arcangela Tarabotti and Convent Culture in Seicento Venice," in *Early Modern Women and Transnational Communities of Letter*, ed. Julie Campbell and Ann Larsen, (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009); Meredith Kennedy Ray. "Letters from the Cloister: Defending the Literary Self in Arcangela Tarabotti's *Lettere Familiari E Di Complimento*," *Italica* 81, no. 1 (2004), 24-43; Meredith K. Ray, "Making the Public Private: Arcangela Tarabotti's *Lettere familiari*," in *Arcangela Tarabotti a Literary Nun in Baroque Venice*, ed. Elissa Weaver, 173-89 (Ravenna: Longo, 2006). For other publications by Weaver see Elissa Weaver, ed. *A Literary Baroque Nun in Venice*, (Ravenna: Longo, 2006); Elissa B. Weaver, ed. *Satira e Antisatira*, (Rome: Salerno, 1989). For other publication by Westwater see Lara Lynn Westwater, "A Cloistered Nun Abroad: Arcangela Tarabotti's International Literary Career," *Intersections Yearbook for Early Modern Studies, Volume 14: Women Writing Back, Writing Women Back: Transnational Perspectives from the Late Middle Ages to the Dawn of the Modern Era*, (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

³ For publication on Tarabotti by Mario Infelise see Mario Infelise, "Books and Politics in Arcangela Tarabotti's Venice," in *Arcangela Tarabotti a Literary Nun in Baroque Venice*, ed. Elissa Weaver, 57-72, (Ravenna: Longo, 2006). For publications by Francesca Medioli see Francesca Medioli, "Alcune lettere autografe di Arcangela Tarabotti: Autocensura e imagine di sé," *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 32.1 (1996):133-41 and 146-55; Francesca Medioli, "Arcangela Tarabotti's Reliability about Herself: Publication and Self-Representation (Together with a Small Collection of Previously Unpublished Letters)," *The Italianist* 23 (2003): 54-101.

Venetian families faced post Council of Trent that enabled, if not encouraged, the continued use of forced monachization. Thus it is important to establish the connection between the Council of Trent, The Venetian State, and general convent life in order to fully conceptualize Tarabotti's own experiences and work.

Chapter two specifically explores Tarabotti's life and writings. In this chapter, I will provide an outline of Tarabotti's life and works, while contending that despite her physical isolation from the secular world, Tarabotti broke through barriers separating male and female, public and private, secular and monastic. It will demonstrate that she was deeply enmeshed within the greater political and literary landscape that shaped 17th century Europe. Tarabotti's political and literary connections were crucial in her publishing efforts.

In the third and final chapter of my thesis, I will evaluate Tarabotti's literary journey in regard to her emotions and views toward men. I argue that Tarabotti experienced various stages in her career as a writer. She first relied heavily on anger and controversy to shame her male readers, sparking backlash from the literary and religious community. She then claimed to have undergone a conversion experience, in her first successfully published work. Moving on from her religiously charged treatises, Tarabotti engaged with new genres of writing and explored various secular topics, while displaying more nuanced and complex emotions. Tarabotti and her works offer rich insights into studies of gender, emotions, politics, and the Venetian literary sphere. The main objective of my honors thesis is to build upon recent literature dedicated to the protofeminist, Venetian nun Arcangela Tarabotti and show the connections between the Venetian experience in the Catholic Reformations, Tarabotti's own life and works, and the literary evolution she underwent throughout her life.

Chapter 1: *Contextualizing Tridentine Venice*

Venice in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had a unique standing among Italian city states—it has long been recognized as one of the most politically stable and religiously independent. This can be attributed to many factors from the founding myth of Venice to its strong mercantile ties throughout the Mediterranean, its political structure, and perhaps most famously, its political and religious rivalry with Rome. Such independence of religious and political thought continued throughout the Reformation and its Catholic counterpart. Despite the efforts of the Council of Trent, which concluded in 1563, to unite Catholics under common practices and beliefs in defense against the onslaught of Protestantism, the Venetian clergy upheld and continued certain practices that were frowned upon by Rome. The reforms brought forth by Trent threatened to bring down one of the main pillars of Venetian aristocracy: the convent.

While Venice would respond kindly towards certain reforms, it turned its nose up at ones that could lead to civil unrest. The convent in Venice was crucial both in maintaining the social hierarchy of Venetian elites and the financial stability of all classes. Fathers would force their daughters into the convent, in a process known as forced monachization, when they feared they would not be able to find a proper marriage match or could not afford the dowry required to marry their daughter off. The Council of Trent directly targeted such practices—condemning both those who participated and the physical practices for their disregard of free will. Forced monachization was so deeply engraved into Venetian societal practices, however, that the cost of following Rome's orders far outweighed the cost of disobedience.

This chapter will provide the context needed to understand the political and cultural landscape in which Arcangela Tarabotti was forced into the convent. The first section will

examine the tumultuous relationship between Venice and Rome leading up to and throughout the Council of Trent. I will explain the precarious state of the Venetian aristocracy at the time and the use of the convent to placate financial worries. The second section will in turn look at the actual decrees of the Council of Trent that would most impact Venetian society. In the third section, I will explain the direct and indirect consequences the Council of Trent had on religious life in Venice. I argue that Venetian political and economic activity throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries contributed to the selective adoption of Tridentine reforms, allowing for the continuation of forced monachization of nuns such as Tarabotti.

Venice and Rome

The political rivalry between Venice and Holy See dates back centuries. Venice's political stability and religious independence remained a threat to the papacy's power throughout the Reformation. Its position outside the Christian hierarchy of Rome and the Holy Roman Empire is embodied in the myth of the peace of 1177.⁴ In the myth, the Venetian doge arranged for a safe haven for Pope Alexander III in the city while he fled from the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick Barbarossa. Venice pledged its support to the pope and won a major naval battle against Barbarossa. When the three — the pope, the emperor, and the doge — sat down after the battle to sign the treaty, the pope and the emperor sat under their respective umbrellas. The pope insisted a third umbrella be brought out so that the three could sit as equals. With this action the doge, the emperor, and the pope emerged as “the three parallel potentates of Christendom.”⁵ Venice was recognized as a protector of Christianity and a patron of Rome. This myth was widely circulated and disseminated throughout the 14th century until it was engrained into

⁴ William James Bouwsma, *Venice and the Defense of Republican Liberty: Renaissance Values in the Age of the Counter Reformation*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 55.

⁵ Bouwsma, 55.

Venetian psyche and political thought that Venice stood apart from the rest of the Christian states and enjoyed a sense of superiority over her counterparts.⁶

Venice's position as an outsider in the Christian hierarchy was expressed both politically and religiously. In regard to political structure, Venice's composite government was exceptionally stable for its time, especially when compared to that of Florence.⁷ While Florence faced political disarray and instability fairly frequently, Venice, seemingly using a combination of republicanism, aristocracy, and monarchy, managed to sustain its stability throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁸ Its political institutions — the Great Council, Senate, and doge— worked in tandem to grant the state a political edge over the Church that others lacked. The Great Council was a Venetian political organ that consisted of over 2,000 councilors depending on the year. These councilors were all male patricians, Venetian noblemen. The main role of the Great Council was the nomination and election of candidates for various judicial, legislative, and executive positions, though there were special committees within the Council that served different purposes.⁹ The Venetian Senate was the main legislative body. It consisted of 300 senators in the year 1500, but only 230 had the right to vote. The Senate was a selective council that was chosen by the Great Council. Senators had a term limit of one year. However, many senators were re-elected year after year to ensure continuity within the governing body. Similar to the Great Council, typically only male patricians served on the Senate.¹⁰ The doge of

⁶ Bouwsma, 56.

⁷ Bouwsma, 52.

⁸ See Frederic Lane, "Medieval Political Ideas and the Venetian Constitution." in *Venice and History: The Collected Papers of Frederic C. Lane* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966).

⁹ Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 64.

¹⁰ Lane, 57.

Venice acted as the chief of state. The doge was not an inherited position, but instead he was elected by members of the Great Council — selected by lot — and served for life.¹¹

Venice's strong governing bodies allowed the state to exert pressure on the Church that otherwise would have been impossible. The state managed to subjugate the Church in almost every way, representing its desire to keep Rome at bay.¹² While Rome exported bishops across most city-states, almost all bishops appointed to Venice were natives, selected by the Senate. The Church's confirmation of the patriarchs, or bishops, was traditionally only a formality. The state, not the Church, oversaw monasteries and convents — a key difference that enabled Venice to dominate its monastic institutions rather than have them be subject to direct control by the Church. In 1501, Venice had issued a rule forbidding any appeals regarding nuns to Rome without permission from the government. In 1521, the state then established a civic magistracy meant to monitor female religious houses.¹³ Members of the clergy were subjected both to taxation and to secular courts. Property owning parishioners were even able to elect their own priests, presenting a parallel with the Senate's ability to elect the patriarch.¹⁴ Such ideas were unheard of elsewhere in the Catholic world where clergymen were rarely required to pay taxes and were immune from secular courts. Additionally, in other states, priests were more commonly tried in ecclesiastical courts by other clergymen. So the Venetian practice of electing local priests was even more radical: priests usually were appointed by the bishop not elected by laypeople. The involvement of laypeople in traditionally ecclesiastical matters was prevalent throughout

¹¹ Lane, 59.

¹² John Martin, *Venice's Hidden Enemies: Italian Heretics in a Renaissance City*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 34. [Henceforth cited as Martin, *Venice's Hidden Enemies*].

¹³ Anne Jacobson Schutte. "Between Venice and Rome: The Dilemma of Involuntary Nuns." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 41, no. 2 (2010), 439.

¹⁴ Martin, *Venice's Hidden Enemies*, 34.

Venice and exemplified the Venetian practice of situating religion in a more secular and practical context.

Such religious independence gave way to a practice of religious liberalism that only made Rome even more uncomfortable. Venice was one of the largest trading cities in Mediterranean. It was poised for the reception of religious dissent spread by Germans, Spaniards, and even the Ottoman Empire. It was not uncommon for Venetians to undergo various spiritual journeys, jumping from faith to faith or church to church, until they found a spirituality that resonated with them.¹⁵ This spirituality was fluid and was not always extreme. Though there are instances of Venetian Protestants and Anabaptists, oftentimes Venetians experienced more modest spiritual transitions — practicing a sort of ecumenical approach. No matter the labels they used, Venetians were very individually driven in their religious practices. Typically, they would conform to the Catholic tradition outwardly, while maintaining their own internal beliefs.

Another important contributing factor to Venice's modest, heterogeneous view of religion was the state's flourishing publishing sector. Venice served as one of the printing capitals of Europe throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Venetian publishing companies were known for printing books that the church would deem heretical and add to their list of prohibited books. Publishers would get around the ban by trading and selling prohibited books from London.¹⁶ It was known that Rome was aware of these heretical practices, and with Protestantism growing rapidly throughout Europe, the pope in 1542 decided to reorganize the Inquisition. It was not until 1547 that Venice and the Holy See reached a compromise and the Inquisition, or a new form of it, was created in Venice. The reason for the delay was that the

¹⁵ John Martin, "Spiritual Journeys and the Fashioning of Religious Identity in Renaissance Venice." *Renaissance Studies* 10, no. 3 (1996), 359-360.

¹⁶ Paul F. Grendler. "The Clandestine Book Trade." In *The Roman Inquisition and the Venetian Press, 1540-1605*, 182-200, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), 199.

Inquisition was not welcomed by the Venetian upper class. They feared that Rome would use the Inquisition and its new presence in Venice to interfere with trade and business, as had been done by the Church in the past. A compromise was reached between the doge and the pope to allow Venetian patricians to participate in the judgement of the local inquisition tribunals.¹⁷ With this, the patricians hoped to keep the Church in check and affirm Venetian sovereignty, once again establishing that the Church was subject to the state in Venice. Rome only continued to grow frustrated with the lack of cooperation from the Venetian government.

Political tensions heightened again after the Battle of Lepanto in 1571. The Venetians, as members of the Holy League, were crucial in defeating the Turks in this famous battle. Venice was one of the main suppliers of ships for the battle.¹⁸ Without their contributions it is likely that the Ottomans would have won. Issues ensued after the battle, however, as the Ottomans soon began to reclaim their lost territory and Venice became nervous that it would have to sacrifice territory. Around 1572 it resumed trade with Ottomans in order to cut its losses. Rome was not happy with this decision and in 1573, when the Holy League formed a peace treaty with the Ottomans, Venice was forced to accept losses and give up territory, despite its initial participation.¹⁹

The self-awareness of Venice as a Republic outside the Church's yoke only grew in the face of direct conflicts with Rome. Rome possessed two tools by which the Church was capable of sustaining its "direction of a unified and hierarchically organized society": excommunication — whereby the Church officially excludes a group or individual from the faith, and the interdict — whereby the Church excludes a group or individual from partaking in services or the

¹⁷ Martin, *Venice's Hidden Enemies*, 52.

¹⁸ See Suraiya Faroqhi, Faroqhi, *The Ottoman Empire and the World around It*, Library of Ottoman Studies; v. 7. London; (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004).

¹⁹ See Faroqhi.

sacraments.²⁰ These weapons of the Church, however, had unintentional consequences. In 1509 Pope Julius II announced the interdiction of the Venetian state for occupying papal territory in Romagna, and even more importantly, Paul V enacted another interdict between 1606 and 1607. The latter interdict was the culmination of decades of Venetian economic decline and a rise in the insistence of papal authority on the part of recent popes. Paul V, specifically, believed that it was heresy for lay governments to claim absolute authority over their subjects or to “deny the authority of the Inquisition over laymen.”²¹ Even more so, it was heresy to refuse the pope jurisdiction over temporal things that touched the spirit. Venice, while politically stable, was facing economic decline in light of the advancement of the Atlantic trade. With a weakened Venice, Paul V decided that the time was ripe for Rome to present all of its grievances in an interdict just as Venice elected its new patriarch. Though war loomed between Venice and Rome, it never broke out and the interdict was formally lifted in 1607. Nevertheless, tensions between the two states reached an all-time high. The interdict further incited a general hostility to Rome’s interference in politics, and this hostility remained evident throughout the course of Tarabotti’s life in the convent. Venetian skepticism towards Roman policies created a disregard for certain Tridentine reforms regarding the convent, while the state’s decline forced it to acquiesce to others.

Venetian Aristocracy and the Convent

While political tension between Venice and Rome was high during this time, so too were the social and financial burdens that Venetian patricians faced. Convents, as spiritual and cloistered communities of women, at first glance might seem irrelevant to such worldly and high

²⁰ Bouwsma, 48.

²¹ Bouwsma, 379. While popes in practice believed themselves to be infallible, the Doctrine of Infallibility does not become officially defined until the First Vatican Council in 1869-70.

political concerns, but in reality, they were a central problem. The Venetian convent was a tool that had been used by Venetian society for centuries in order to alleviate the ills that the upper class often faced: purity of the blood, dowry inflation, and the threat of unmarried women.

Marriage was a crucial component in the preservation of purity of blood and status. Marriage amongst the aristocracy was a tool for families to make political or financial connections. As per usual, standards differed for men and women. Venice was an extremely patriarchal society. Women would be incorporated into the men's family, and supposedly would leave their own behind. Their own status and purity was completely dependent upon their husband's, whereas a man would maintain his status regardless of whom he married. This meant that a man could marry up or down in status with relative ease: his family's purity of blood would remain the same. Despite this, men would typically only marry down in status if the bride came from a wealthier family. Women were much more limited in their marriage prospects, and it was harder for them to actually wed. Women could only marry men who were of equal or higher status to them. It was socially unacceptable for them to marry down in class, even if the man came from a wealthy family.

The importance of the convent becomes apparent here. The Venetian convent became a tool for families to deal with unwanted or unmarried daughters, regardless of whether they had a vocation for the church. Forced monachization was alarmingly common. Girls were typically sent to the convent for three reasons: first, if their families could not find them a match; second, if their family could not afford a dowry; and third, if they had a physical disability.

In the first instance, if a family could not find a suitable husband for their daughter, they had no choice but to send her to a convent or risk both the girl's and the family's honor. An unmarried woman in the house only posed a risk, as her chastity would undoubtedly be

questioned. Women were stereotyped as being sexually unstable and irrational.²² Because of this, women required a man to keep them in line. First they were controlled by their fathers, but as they aged, their sexuality would become more apparent. As such, they needed to be married off while still young, typically while they were still teenagers.²³ In regard to the second reason, dowry inflation was extremely common in sixteenth and seventeenth century Venice. The dowry was a daughter's share of her father's patrimony that she received upon her marriage. By signing her marriage contract, she signed away her rights to any other inheritance. The dowry was typically lesser in value than the inheritance received by sons and was managed or controlled by the daughter's husband. A woman only recovered her dowry upon widowhood, and even then it was usually returned to the father's estate, bequeathed to family and friends, or invested in another marriage, though second marriages were fairly unusual.²⁴ Dowries — controlled by parents — served to prevent undesired social mobility and forced women to marry within their social classes.²⁵ They also were used as a form of credit or loans. Men would take out these loans — receive the dowry from the father-in-law — upon marriage and acceptance of their bride, only to pay the loan off once they married off their own daughters and had to supply a dowry.²⁶ The time gap between receiving and paying these loans made them susceptible to inflation. As the required minimum for dowries rose, it became harder and harder for families to afford them.²⁷ The problem only intensified when a family had multiple daughters. While dowries were still

²² Joan Gibson, "The Logic of Chastity: Women, Sex, and the History of Philosophy in the Early Modern Period," *Hypatia* 21, no. 4 (2006): 2.

²³ Gibson, 3.

²⁴ Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Renaissance Venice*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 5.

²⁵ Sperling 5.

²⁶ Sperling, 6.

²⁷ See Julius Kirshner and Anthony Molho, "The Dowry Fund and the Marriage Market in Early Quattrocento Florence." *The Journal of Modern History* 50, no. 3 (1978): 404-38.

required when entering the convent, these “spiritual” dowries (as nuns were considered “brides of Christ”) were significantly less costly. As such, the convent became a depository for families to place daughters they could not afford to dower. If a family had multiple daughters, it was common for them to place the eldest in the convent to both save money and grant them more time to raise money for their younger daughter’s dowry. If a daughter was lame, as the third reason states, fathers would have a difficult time marrying said daughter off and finding a match.²⁸ The convent would accept the daughter and take her for a lesser price than marriage would cost. Such would be the case for Arcangela Tarabotti in 1617, who suffered from physical disabilities that might have hindered her chances of getting married. Her disabilities, when added to the fact that she was the eldest of seven daughters, would have made her a prime candidate for forced monachization.

Whatever the reason for not being able to marry, an unwed daughter posed a risk to the house’s honor. Women were considered to be innately sexual creatures, and their sexuality, regardless of whether or not it was expressed overtly, was a threat to the father and the family. If an unmarried woman was caught corresponding with a man she would bring shame onto the house.²⁹ Just allowing her to leave the home without a chaperone was perilous. The treatment and beliefs about women at the time made it near impossible for women to escape either marriage or the convent. By 1581 around 54% of Venetian patrician women lived in convents, and this number continued to grow into the seventeenth century.³⁰ Between 1591 and 1598,

²⁸ Anne Jacobson Schutte. "Between Venice and Rome: The Dilemma of Involuntary Nuns." *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 41, no. 2 (2010), 420.

²⁹ See Julius Kirshner, *Pursuing Honor While Avoiding Sin: The Monte Delle Doti of Florence*, (Milano: A. Giuffrè, 1978); d. Siena Bernardino, *Saint Bernardine of Siena. Sermons*, ed. Helen Josephine Robins, trans. N. Orlandi (Siena: Tipografia sociale, 1920).

³⁰ Sperling, 18.

around 73% of nuns were patricians.³¹ Women were more likely to become brides of Christ than brides to men, a trend that can be explained by a tightening marriage market. As mentioned earlier, both women and men were strongly encouraged to marry partners of the same social status. While this may be true, women tended to follow such advice more often than men. In the early seventeenth, around 83% of patrician grooms married patrician women; in comparison over 90% of patrician brides married patrician grooms.³² Over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a gender gap formed in the marriage market. Women continued to refuse — or weren't permitted — to marry down, so they could only enter the convent, as it was the only other honorable option. Men, however, began to seek out secret marriages with women of lower class throughout the second half of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century, going against the will of their parents.³³ These marriages were recognized by the Church, as per Tridentine reforms, but were not upheld by the state, and as such, would not be acknowledged in court. The lack of formal recognition by the state and courts meant that any offspring produced in the secret marriage were considered illegitimate.³⁴ Then again, marriage rates within the patriciate class fell dramatically as dowries grew in price, more women entered convents, and more men sought marriages with women of lower classes. With fewer marriages, came fewer legitimate children, and patriciate birth rates similarly dropped.

³¹ Sperling, 27.

³² Sperling, 19.

³³ Sperling, 20.

³⁴ Sperling, 20.

TABLE 1: HOW MANY PATRICIAN WOMEN WERE NUNS?³⁵

	1581	1586	1642
Number of Nuns in Venice	2,508	2,408	2,905
Percentage of nuns who were patricians	73.33	74.28	69.54
Number of patrician nuns	1,839	1,788	2,020
Number of patrician women	3,418	3,577	2,476
Percentage of patrician women who were nuns	53.80	49.98	81.58
Population of Venice	134,871	148,673	120,307

The role of the forced monachization as a tool of the Venetian patriciate continued well into the seventeenth century, despite reaching its peak the first decade of that century. In 1581 there were 3,418 patrician women in Venice, and 1,839 of them were nuns.³⁶ By 1642, out of 2,476 patrician women, 2,020 were nuns. That would make over 80% of patrician women.³⁷ The drop in the number of Venetian patrician women provides further proof of the aforementioned declining birth rate. The convent remained the sole honorable option for women outside of marriage and a place for fathers to deposit unwanted daughters or daughters they could not afford. While the Venetian convent may have been controversial, the nature of life within it would be altered significantly with Tridentine reforms.

The Council of Trent

The Council of Trent, which took place intermittently between 1545 and 1563, was held in response to the challenges, both doctrinally and institutionally, posed by the Protestant Reformation. The Council condemned heresies committed by Protestants and issued key

³⁵ Table indebted to Sperling, 28, with additions on the population of Venice sourced from Gordon Weiner, "The Demographic Effects of the Venetian Plagues of 1575-77 and 1630-31," *Genus* 26, no. 1/2 (1970): 41-57.

³⁶ Sperling, 28.

³⁷ Sperling, 28.

statements and clarifications of the Church's doctrine and teachings, including scripture, the biblical canon, sacred tradition, original sin, justification, salvation, the sacraments, Mass, and the veneration of saints. Its decrees reaffirmed important Catholic dogma that Martin Luther and John Calvin called into question, but it also made key changes both in terms of the attitude and direction of the Church as well as certain Church structures, such as the parish and convent. Perhaps the most important component of Trent was the emphasis it placed on free will in the process of justification.

The outcomes of the Council of Trent were mostly reaffirmations of traditional Church practices and dogma, with a few key distinctions. An important result of the Council of Trent was a new-found emphasis on individual spirituality: the Church was still the ultimate interpreter of Scripture, but one was encouraged more than ever to nurture an individual relationship with God. This is evident in the treatment of free will throughout the various decrees. Trent's reaffirmation and emphasis of man's free will was clear in its description of the justification of the soul, which is discussed in its sixth session. Sinners must first open themselves up to God's grace and freely assent and cooperate with that grace so that God may touch their hearts.³⁸ God's grace offers divine inspiration which man can then reject if he so chooses. The choices God offers are meant to continuously remind us of our own liberty.³⁹ Once man decides to cooperate with divine grace, he comes to the realization that he is a sinner and through God's mercy he can be saved. At this point, preparation for justification is complete and he can be baptized for the remission of sins and the renewal of the inward man. Man only receives justice "according to

³⁸ Henry Joseph Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent / English Translation by H. J. Schroeder*, (Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978), 31.

³⁹ Schroeder, 32.

each one's disposition and cooperation."⁴⁰ Man must work to continue to be justified, however, which entails that he must perform good works and follow the commandments.

According to the Tridentine decrees, the concept of free will is also significant in regard to convents and forced monachization regardless of vocation. Trent declared that it was against the wishes of God to compel "any virgin or widow, or any other woman whatsoever, to enter a monastery against her will."⁴¹ This held true no matter the status or rank of the compeller, be it a cleric or laic. The reason behind this was that if nuns were compelled to enter the convent, they were not exercising their free will. A nun who was forced to take her vows could not be considered a true nun. As such, an unwilling nun was allowed to appeal to Rome to leave the convent. To be sure that a nun was not "forced or enticed, [and knew] what she was doing," superiors were tasked with examining the women or young girls before the "ordinary and once again before the profession."⁴² The "ordinary" refers to a representative of the bishop and "before the profession" is simply before she would take her formal vows. Only if "she [was] found to be pious and free and she has the qualifications required by the rule of that monastery and order... shall [she] be permitted freely to make the profession."⁴³ At any point prior to taking formal vows, the women were allowed to return to secular life at any point if they so desired. They were encouraged to exercise their will by the Church. The act of taking the vows was not meant to be passive, but instead had to be thought through extensively. The Catholic religious vocation required active and willing participation similar to if not more extreme than the process of justification.

⁴⁰ Schroder, 33.

⁴¹ Schroeder, 228.

⁴² Schroeder, 228.

⁴³ Schroeder, 228.

In addition to emphasizing the free will of individuals, the Council of Trent changed the very nature and role of the convent within the community. While convents prior to Tridentine reforms were incorporated into society and the community, the Council of Trent in its 25th session declared that all monastic orders were to be enclosed. Monks could no longer leave the monastery without gaining the permission of their superiors. In an even more extreme reform, nuns now had to remain enclosed within the convent. “No nun shall after her profession be permitted to go out of the monastery, even for a brief period under any pretext... unless approved by the bishop.”⁴⁴ If they did want to leave, they had to get the permission of the bishop. Their superiors could not give them permission. Similarly, no one, regardless of “birth or condition, sex or age,” was allowed to enter a convent without the permission of the bishop, under “penalty of excommunication”.⁴⁵ If a convent refused to adhere to enclosure or people persisted in entering the convent, the Church would “exhort the aid of the secular arm” and call upon Christian princes to “furnish this endeavor.”⁴⁶ With this statement, the Church asked for the help of the secular states and princes in upholding and enforcing the enclosure of nuns, though this support was irregular and varied across states. The Church was especially concerned with convents located far outside the walls of towns and cities. They saw them as more susceptible to both breaking the enclosure and falling prey to rogue men. In addition, the secluded convents were much more difficult to supervise. To fix this, the Church encouraged the relocation of these convents to within or at least closer to towns and cities.⁴⁷

The Council of Trent aimed to reform or reiterate many traditional Catholic ideals and practices. The profound emphasis on free will throughout its declarations contributed to a range

⁴⁴ Schroeder, 220.

⁴⁵ Schroeder, 221.

⁴⁶ Schroeder, 221-222.

⁴⁷ Schroeder, 223.

of reforms from the process of salvation and justification as well as the process in which one became a nun. Though Trent aimed to prevent forced monachization, many scholars and a few nuns, such as Arcangela Tarabotti, have noted that it failed to do so in Venice. Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, forced or “coerced” monachization was so common that it became a popular theme in Venetian literature.⁴⁸ Venetian men could embrace the idea of free will and individuality both in their marriages, as Jutta Sperling proved, and their religious lives, as John Martin has discussed extensively. Yet women remained forcefully enclosed behind convent walls without regard for their vocation.

Tridentine Reforms in Venice

Tridentine reforms were not enacted uniformly in Catholic countries. Reforms looked different in Spain than they did in Rome or Genoa. The dissemination of information was uneven across the board and many parishes or priests ignored the declarations altogether. Bishops would often have to step in and take action to force priests and parishes to change their ways. Venice’s clergy was under secular control, however. Bishops could not place Tridentine reforms into practice quite as easily as in other places — it was not within their power to do so. Reforms in Venice were topics of contention due to the nature of foreign relations at the time, as well as the role that convents played in Venetian society.

The enclosure of convents meant a significant change in the role that convents played in Venetian society. Prior to Tridentine reforms in the sixteenth century, convents maintained a symbiotic relationship with the government and city as a whole.⁴⁹ In exchange for being forced into the monastic life, nuns expected to become a part of a self-governing community that

⁴⁸ Sperling, 30.

⁴⁹ Gary M. Radke. "Nuns and Their Art: The Case of San Zaccaria in Renaissance Venice." *Renaissance Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (2001), 432.

existed outside the traditional patriarchal hierarchy.⁵⁰ The nuns of San Zaccaria are a perfect example such an exchange and illuminate the ways the interactions between Venice and the convent changed after Trent. Up until 1595, the nuns of San Zaccaria contributed to the city's fame and glory and were astoundingly self-reliant and autonomous. In 1595, however, the nuns were forcefully enclosed and removed from the church they had resided in for centuries, when the present San Zaccaria was built.⁵¹ Before this shift, nuns controlled the art within the cathedral of San Zaccaria and their involvement with the building itself — from the enlargement of the chancel within the nun's church and the reconstruction of the nave to the creation of new choir stalls.⁵² It was not uncommon for abbesses to dip into their own private funds to provide for the church. For example, in 1437 Abbess Elena Foscari paid for the ceremony to consecrate fifteen virgins as well as to buy a new organ for the church.⁵³ Nuns did use the influence of the abbey and their own families to practice patronage and bestow the church with lavish works of art. For artists, it could be considered an honor to have their work on display in a grand cathedral or church, and served to increase their fame. The more famous the church or the abbey was, the more easily nuns could find artists. Nuns also relied extensively upon the reputations and connections their families had to commission artists and architects. They were not cut off from their families and society when they entered the convent before Tridentine reforms. The nuns' relationship with the city was further solidified in its housing of relics both religious and relating to the city's founding — “the convent was seen as the custodian of civic as well as religious treasures.”⁵⁴ These treasures included the blood of Jesus Christ and the relics of Sts. Nereo,

⁵⁰ Radke, 432.

⁵¹ Radke, 439.

⁵² Radke, 433-34.

⁵³ Radke, 440.

⁵⁴ Radke, 445.

Achilleo, Sabina, and Tarasio.⁵⁵ Such a relationship changed drastically when the church sought to control the convent's autonomy.

In 1595, decades after the conclusion of the Council of Trent, the nuns of San Zaccaria were sealed away within their smaller convent, as the construction of the larger pilgrimage church was completed.⁵⁶ Construction of the new church had begun in 1456, long before the Council of Trent, by the patriarch of Venice. It wasn't until the 1595, however, that the nuns were officially sealed off and forced to move their relics to the pilgrimage church. Though they had dedicated so much of their lives to the cathedral, they could no longer enter its walls. The art they had curated and commissioned no longer could be called their own. The money they had invested in the physical building was also lost. As they were no longer allowed to care for the cathedral, the relics that were stored within could no longer be considered under their care. The convent's duty as custodian of Venice's treasures was revoked, and the symbiotic relationship between the convent and the state was broken.

While much about Venetian convents did change with the council of Trent, many convents fought these changes on an individual level, despite the intentions of the Papacy — mainly in their continuations of convent traditions. This can be seen with the theatrical performances put on by nuns within convents throughout Venice. Throughout the seventeenth century and well after, Venetian convents maintained a strong theatrical tradition that attracted audiences across Venice, despite the recent reforms.⁵⁷ One out of two convents between 1550 and 1750 was cited for theatrical infractions including, but not limited to, “performing in their parlors for outsiders, selecting plays that were more secular than religious, borrowing draperies

⁵⁵ Radke, 444-445.

⁵⁶ Radke, 448.

⁵⁷ Christine Scippa Bhasin. "Prostitutes, Nuns, Actresses: Breaking the Convent Wall in Seventeenth-Century Venice." *Theatre Journal* 66, no. 1 (2014), 19.

and costumes, and acting out of their religious habits and in the costumes and jewels of secular female characters, as well as cross-dressing as secular and religious men.”⁵⁸

The Church may have tried to suppress these performances, but records indicate that it were very unsuccessful. The genres of performances varied from comedies, to romances, to the popular conversion play — typically where a woman converts herself from a fallen woman to a holy one.⁵⁹ One possible reason for the popularity of the conversion theme was the practice of “depositing excess daughters,” who were often reluctant to take up the veil.⁶⁰ While more often than not, actresses in the seventeenth century were associated with prostitutes, the waters became murkier when said actress was a nun.⁶¹ Nuns would use this association to their advantage as an ironic trope when performing. The play *La Clotilde* is a perfect example of such practice. The play about the Christian Clotilde giving up her virginity to the barbarian Clodoveo in order to convert him and his country is much more comical and ironic when performed by a nun than by any other actress.⁶² These performances were occasionally performed in public, but more often than not were performed on the ground of the convent through the gate that separated the convent from the outside world. This gate is similar to an actress’s window where she would put on her performance for the public to see through the glass as was common for the time.⁶³ Through the bars of this gate, nuns found a balance between isolation and public interaction.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Bhasin, 20.

⁵⁹ Bhasin, 21.

⁶⁰ Bhasin, 21.

⁶¹ Bhasin, 21.

⁶² Bhasin, 26.

⁶³ Bhasin, 35.

⁶⁴ Bhasin, 35.

Convents, or “pleasant prisons” as Mary Laven prefers to call them, were paradoxical in nature.⁶⁵ On the one hand, they gave women an honorable option outside of marriage. They could live an honest life safely nestled in the walls of the convent and could learn skills such as reading and writing — gaining access to educational opportunities they may never have been able to outside. On the other hand, their freedom and ability to interact with anyone outside of the convent or without bars between them was severely limited.⁶⁶ Recent literature has suggested that convents were places that created powerful women and provided a reprieve from the constraints of the domestic sphere. Venetian convents and the nuns such as Arcangela Tarabotti trapped within them call these claims into question.

⁶⁵ Mary Laven, *Virgins of Venice: Broken Vows and Cloistered Lives in the Renaissance Convent* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), XXXI.

⁶⁶ Laven, XXXII.

Chapter 2: *Arcangela Tarabotti, The Life and Works of a Protofeminist Nun*

Elena Cassandra Tarabotti, more commonly referred to as Arcangela Tarabotti, was a 17th century Venetian nun, who like many young girls during this time in Venice suffered from coerced monachization. Although her circumstances may not have been unique, Tarabotti was anything but a common nun. Known for her intellect, wit, and even her attractive appearance, Tarabotti was one of Venice's most radical thinkers. An early advocate for equality of the sexes, Tarabotti fought on behalf of women who suffered not only under the despotism of their fathers, but also state-sanctioned tyranny. Through her many works, Tarabotti analyzed and brought to light the hypocrisy of men and their patronizing views of women, bringing upon herself the wrath of the Church, the Venetian state, and male humanists across Europe.

Writing under the pseudonyms Galerana Barcitotti and Galerana Baratotti, Tarabotti's works spread throughout the continent and were published in multiple languages. Her most divisive work, *Paternal Tyranny* — the English translation of *La semplicita ingannata* ("Simplicity deceived") — was first published posthumously in Holland in 1654 and remains one of the most important sources on the female experience during the Catholic Reformation in Venice. It speaks the ordeals of fellow nuns who were forced to say their vows and who were hidden from the outside world, trapped in convent cells. Although it was published posthumously, it likely circulated as a manuscript earlier in her career. Her talents and intellect led her into direct communication with Europe's most brilliant minds and political actors, including Cardinal Jules Mazarin, the Duke of Parma Ferdinando Farnese, and Giovanni Francesco Loredano, to name a few. Much of her correspondence with fellow humanists was in defense of her work, however, as many doubted if she was truly capable of producing such high quality writings. She was even known to write her own pamphlets in direct response to

challenges issued by humanists such as Francesco Buoninsegni. While enclosed behind convent walls, Tarabotti forced her way into the male-dominated humanist world.

In this chapter I will explore the life of Arcangela Tarabotti — her childhood and family, her experiences and thoughts on life in the convent, as well as her work and connections. Although this is a biographical chapter, through this outline of her life, I will demonstrate the significance of her work, wit, and sphere of connections in 17th century Venice. While physically isolated from the world, Tarabotti’s treatises circulated throughout Europe and challenged the essence of the conventional, patriarchal social construct. Tarabotti was an early feminist thinker who fought against male hypocrisy and argued that women were actually superior to men. She challenged the male idea of the unvirtuous woman and proved that women, when given access to education, could possess as many talents and skills as men. In addition to being a display of early feminist thought, Tarabotti’s works demonstrate the interconnectedness and wide-reaching networks that women could maintain despite their isolation.

Early Life and Family

Much of Tarabotti’s early life is shrouded in questions — from the exact status of her family to her education. Despite the numerous gaps in her story, through her various works, scholars have pieced together a relatively clear picture of her life before the convent. Elena Cassandra Tarabotti was born to Stefano and Maria Cadena in 1604.⁶⁷ She was the eldest of six daughters and the second of 11 children total. Her family, though very large, was not especially

⁶⁷ Rosella Lalli, “Tarabotti, Arcangela,” *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, 94(2019): 849-851; and Francesca Medioli, “Tarabotti, Arcangela (1604-1652),” *Encyclopedia.com* (Encyclopedia.com, March 29, 2021), <https://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/tarabotti-arcangela-1604-1652>.

well-off. Most likely they were members of a secondary patriciate class called *cittadini*.⁶⁸ This secondary patriciate class could be likened to an upper-middle class. They were wealthy enough to afford an apartment large enough to house the 13 of them, albeit likely in close quarters. Her father, as described by Tarabotti, “was a man expert in sea matters.”⁶⁹ From this description, he was potentially a ship owner. In her writings, Tarabotti claims that her father was lame and that she inherited her lameness from him, though we do not know the exact ailment either suffered from.⁷⁰ Her inherited disability was likely one source of the anger that she felt toward her father, which would combine later in her life with her eventual coerced monachization. With six daughters, even the wealthiest Venetian family would have struggled struggle to procure a substantial dowry for each one.⁷¹ By placing Tarabotti in the convent, her family could save money for her younger sisters’ dowries and avoid the challenges and difficulties of finding a match for their lame daughter.

Tarabotti’s brothers remain a mystery to a certain degree, but through her letters and other records, we do know the fates of her sisters. Lorenzina and Innocenza Tarabotti were married a few years after Elena entered the convent, which caused great tension in her relationship with them.⁷² Her other three sisters remained unmarried, but did not enter the convent. This was highly unusual for women during this time and especially women of their status. One of the three unmarried sisters, Caterina, studied under the Venetian painter

⁶⁸ Monika Schmitter, ““Virtuous Riches”: The Bricolage of *Cittadini* Identities in Early-Sixteenth-Century Venice,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2004): 908.

⁶⁹ Medioli, “Tarabotti, Arcangela.”

⁷⁰ Arcangela Tarabotti, *Letters Familiar and Formal*, ed. Meredith K. Ray, and Lynn Lara Westwater, (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2012), Letter 106, 158. [Henceforth cited as Tarabotti, *Letters*].

⁷¹ Meredith K. Ray, “Introduction,” in Tarabotti, *Letters*, 3.

⁷² Tarabotti, *Letters*, Letter 158, 231.

Alessandro Varotari, more commonly referred to as il Padovanino.⁷³ After Stefano and Maria passed away, the unwed sisters were left in the care of their five brothers. A few years after Arcangela's death, Caterina entered the convent, not as a nun, but as a pensionaire. Interestingly enough, this convent, Sant'Anna, was the same convent that Arcangela resided in for most of her life. Caterina, like her sister, died in this convent, while her other two unwed sisters lived out the rest of their lives with their brothers.

Tarabotti's family relations significantly influenced her work. Her relationship with her father above all else served as inspiration for *Paternal Tyranny*. His disregard for her education in comparison to her brothers — which was common among Venetian fathers — was a sore spot for Tarabotti, as her education and intellect were questioned to no end by male intellectuals. While she may have been literate, her penmanship was lacking. Convents often taught girls how to read, but rarely taught them how to write. Tarabotti most likely taught herself how to write, hence her less than appealing handwriting.⁷⁴ While she may have possessed terrible handwriting, she still insisted throughout her life on writing all of her own manuscripts. She most likely had the option to dictate her work to another person, but she chose to do so herself, indicating her strong sense of autonomy. She also didn't want to give her critics any additional material that they could find fault with. If she hired someone to write her manuscripts for her, their mocking would be even greater. Although this was the age of the printing press, manuscripts were still important. Prior to being published, works were often passed around in handwritten form. In Tarabotti's case, some of her work remained in manuscript and was never actually printed in her lifetime.

⁷³ Ugo Ruggeri, "ALESSANDRO VAROTARI, DETTO IL PADOVANINO," *Saggi E Memorie Di Storia Dell'arte* 16 (1988): 101.

⁷⁴ Medioli, "Tarabotti, Arcangela."

The Convent

The convent in 17th century Venice was a tool used by Venetian society — especially the upper class — to combat the threat of unmarried women and avoid the hyperinflation of dowries. To have an unmarried woman in a house meant risking the honor of both the girl and, more importantly, the family. The stereotype of the promiscuous and irrational woman was perpetuated throughout Italian society, and men were thought a necessity to keep a woman tame.⁷⁵ If not, her sexual instability would get the better of her. At the same time, dowries were increasing exponentially in price, making it harder and harder for families to afford to marry off all of their daughters.⁷⁶ The convent served as a mechanism for families to avoid expensive marriages and maintain their honor. A family, headed by the father, could choose to place their daughter in the convent as a nun — a position that would bring honor to the house. If a family had more than one daughter, or if a daughter was lame or disfigured in some way, it was especially common for families to turn to convents, regardless of the daughter's wishes. Unfortunately for Archangela Tarabotti, as the eldest of six daughters suffering from lameness, forced monachization was her fate.

Elena Cassandra Tarabotti entered the convent on Sant'Anna in Castello in 1617 at the age of 13 as an *educanda*, or boarder.⁷⁷ In 1620, her father, Stefano Tarabotti, gave the convent 1,000 ducats for her spiritual dowry. She took her spiritual vows that very day. Tarabotti spent the next three years as a novitiate, and only took her solemn vows of poverty, chastity, and

⁷⁵ Joan Gibson, "The Logic of Chastity: Women, Sex, and the History of Philosophy in the Early Modern Period," *Hypatia* 21, no. 4 (2006): 2.

⁷⁶ Jutta Gisela Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Renaissance Venice*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 6.

⁷⁷ Tarabotti claims to have entered the convent at the age of 11, but convent records show she was 13. It is possible that she was educated at the convent for two years before she formally entered.

obedience in 1623.⁷⁸ It is important to note the delay in her vows. Usually, novices profess their vows only one year after entering the convent. During this probationary period of one year, women could decide whether they possessed religious vocation. If they felt no vocation, they could choose to leave the convent thereby avoiding the cloister. In Venice, however, familial pressure often left women with little to no choice in the matter. This unusual gap between her vows was potentially due to Tarabotti's active resistance against monachization. However, she never openly claimed this was the case. It is also possible that the delay was due to poor health, which she suffered from throughout her life. In any case, after she professed her solemn vows in 1623, she remained confined to the convent until her death in 1652. As per the decrees of the Council of Trent, nuns had to remain cloistered within the convent walls, and were not allowed to leave for any reason. Tarabotti was no exception to this rule.

Tarabotti's life within the convent was physically and spiritually tumultuous. She was seriously ill on and off during the course of her life, but her first few years as a nun were especially harsh. This illness may or may not have been tuberculosis — she suffered from a tightness in her chest and also died fairly young in comparison to other nuns. During these first few years, relatively isolated from the rest of the nuns due to her illness, Tarabotti struggled with her spirituality. She had “neither the excellence of religion, nor the obligation of a real nun.”⁷⁹ While she greatly respected nuns with true vocation, she could not find such vocation within herself. She could not recognize “the worth of religion nor the duty of a true nun.”⁸⁰ She only disdained God's “harsh judgement.”⁸¹ She simply went through the motions expected of her as a

⁷⁸ Medioli, “Tarabotti, Arcangela.”

⁷⁹ Arcangela Tarabotti “Soliloquy to God,” in *Convent Paradise*, ed. Meredith K. Ray, and Lynn Lara Westwater, (Toronto: Iter Press, 2020), 81. [Henceforth cited as Tarabotti, “Soliloquy to God.”]

⁸⁰ Tarabotti, “Soloquy to God,” 81.

⁸¹ Tarabotti, “Soliloquy to God,” 81.

nun, while retreating mentally. Her act was enough to satisfy church authorities, however, and there were no records of any convent scandals or infractions that involved her. Father Angelico Aprosio described her as an ordinary if not elegant nun who followed the practices typical of Venetian nuns. This description implies that her struggle was internal and she complied externally with the church. It should be noted that she struggled to find friends within the convent in part due to her “frank and impassioned way of speaking.”⁸²

At Sant’Anna Tarabotti eventually claimed to have undergone a conversion in her religiosity. While at first she was vain, prideful, and failed to see God as any more than a “God of vengeance,” after falling ill, she recognized Him as a merciful God.⁸³ She described her conversion process as follows: “When I was living in sin you could have caught me red-handed like a thief and thrown me into the chasms of hell, but you preferred — oh true Savior of my soul — to suspend the bolts of your wrath and instead warn me with illness and suffering that gave me a clear sign of your love.”⁸⁴ She recounted her newfound love for God in her *Soliloquy to God*, which served as the introduction to her *Convent Paradise*. In her soliloquy, Tarabotti promised God “that the only aim of [her] pen is to serve [Him] devoutly,” but also asked that God help her so that “those reading this discourse will not be scandalized by human frailty but rather enlightened by your mercy.”⁸⁵ Tarabotti portrayed herself as a woman dedicated to God and God’s work, implying that her own more scandalous treatises had been approved by God. It was only because men are prone to “scandals and rumors” that they were taken aback by her views.

⁸² Tarabotti, *Letters*, Letter 59, 112.

⁸³ Tarabotti, “Soliloquy to God,” 81.

⁸⁴ Tarabotti, “Soliloquy to God,” 81.

⁸⁵ Tarabotti, “Soliloquy to God,” 81.

Her vocational troubles are best displayed in her three works, *Convent Paradise*, *Paternal Tyranny*, and *Inferno monacale*.⁸⁶ According to Tarabotti, the convent could be paradise for those who entered willingly with the proper calling, but for those without vocation, she equated monastic life with hell. In her section of *Paternal Tyranny* dedicated to the “merits of a freely chosen religious life,” Tarabotti summarized the arguments she would eventually make in the last of her three books on the monastic life, *Paradiso monacale*, or *Convent Paradise*. A nun who willingly entered the convent “deserve[d] to enjoy the virginal crown in Heaven” and Tarabotti felt great “envy of the religious life of true nuns.”⁸⁷ Convents were not terrible places for those who entered willingly, only for those who preferred the life of the layperson. But for those without the vocation toward religious life and the inability to resist monachization, the convent was simply an inferno. Tarabotti explained that unwilling young girls would inevitably feel “smothered, overwhelmed by despair at not finding some spiritual escape from the intricate labyrinth enclosing them.”⁸⁸ Shut off from the rest of the world, forced to dress, act, sleep, and pray in very particular fashions, nuns experienced very few freedoms and could not celebrate their individuality as God intended. Forced vows deprived nuns of their liberty and damned them to hell.⁸⁹

This then leads to two questions: were reluctant nuns true nuns? And who then was responsible for these atrocities toward women and against God? To answer the first question, Tarabotti did not believe that nuns forced into religious life were true nuns. She referred to herself as a layperson and could not understand why it was possible for marital vows to be

⁸⁶ For information on the publication dates and order of these Tarabotti works, see pg. 38.

⁸⁷ Arcangela Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, ed. Letizia Panizza (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), Book 1, 64. [Henceforth cited as Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*.]

⁸⁸ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 67.

⁸⁹ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 81.

dissolved but not their religious counterparts.⁹⁰ Vows that were not made willingly could only be considered false vows, and false vows were never God's will.⁹¹ As a result of such selfishness, these women were forced to “experience a short Hell in this life as a prelude to the eternal Hell they are doomed to endure on account of [this] cruelty.”⁹²

In regard to the second question, fathers, society, and paternal tyranny of all forms were responsible for the damnation of their own souls as well as those of their daughters. More interesting was the role Tarabotti claimed the religious superiors held in this process. “Political expediency, . . . the father of all error, contaminate[d] even these supreme ministers” and it was those ministers who granted their approval for such women to become nuns.⁹³ Religious superiors, leaders of the church, overlooked and bought into forced monachization for their own political agendas, both for economic benefits — such as the dowries the convents or religious leaders received — as well as the political connections they gained with the families by accepting their daughters. Paternal tyranny corrupted and damaged both secular and religious life, and all those who participated, according to Tarabotti, deserved the title of “infernal.”⁹⁴

Works

Despite her lack of formal education, Tarabotti published six works in prose and composed at least an additional six works, of which four have been lost: she was a prolific writer. Tarabotti used her lack of education as a defense to further her points on educating women. She used her own work to encapsulate the latent talents women could possess if only they were formally educated. Any mistakes that she made, especially in her Latin citations, she

⁹⁰ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 65, 60.

⁹¹ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 3, 129-131.

⁹² Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 65.

⁹³ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 2, 92.

⁹⁴ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 65.

attributed not to herself, but her nonexistent training. With her pen as her weapon, Tarabotti attacked the hypocritical nature of men and used the scripture she was forced to learn against the powerful men and society that sought to trap her.

Furthermore, Tarabotti's writing allowed her to metaphorically escape from Sant'Anna's confines, and provided a distraction from her physical and social isolation. With only a pen and paper, she could communicate with the outside world and express even her most controversial opinions, whereas the convent restricted her daily life to monotony and orthodoxy. Within the convent, Tarabotti had to maintain the image of a proper nun and could not openly tout her views. Through her writing, she could be as rebellious as she wanted to be. While it is safe to say that Tarabotti's reputation spread across Venice and Europe, it is unclear what impact her work had on Sant'Anna. Aside from a few gifts sent by her higher up connections in honor of Sant'Anna after she completed *Convent Paradise*, there are few records or sources that comment in Tarabotti's influence on Sant'Anna.

TABLE 2 – THE WRITINGS OF ARCANGELA TARABOTTI⁹⁵

2a - Chronology

Title	Appr. date of writing	Date of publication
<i>Tirannia paterna</i>	before 1643	Circulated in manuscript; publ. 1654
<i>Inferno monacale</i>	before 1643	Circulated in manuscript; publ. 1990
<i>Paradiso monacale</i>	before 1643	1643
<i>Antisatira</i>	1640-1644	1644
<i>Lettere familiari e di complimento</i>	1642?-1650	1650
<i>Che le donne siano delle specie...</i>	1647-1651	1651
<i>La semplicità ingannata</i>	1647-1652	1654 (posth.); revision of <i>Tirannia paterna</i>

2b – Translation of titles

Italian	English
<i>Tirannia paterna</i>	<i>Paternal Tyranny</i>
<i>Inferno monacale</i>	<i>The Convent as Hell</i>
<i>Paradiso monacale</i>	<i>The Convent as Paradise</i>
<i>Antisatira</i>	<i>Antisatire</i>
<i>Lettere familiari e di complimento</i>	<i>Letters Familiar and Formal</i>
<i>Che le donne siano delle specie degli uomini, difesa delle donne</i>	<i>That Women Are of the Same Species as Men, a Defense of Women</i>
<i>La semplicità ingannata</i>	<i>Simplicity Deceived</i>

2c – Unpublished works

<i>Tirannia paterna</i>
<i>Inferno monacale</i> (published 1990)
<i>Purgatorio delle mal maritate</i> (lost)
<i>Le contemplazioni dell'anima amante</i> (lost)
<i>La via lastricata per andar al Cielo</i> (lost)

⁹⁵ Tables indebted to Wendy Heller, "«O DELLE DONNE MISERABIL SESSO»: TARABOTTI, OTTAVIA, AND L'INCORONAZIONE DI POPPEA," *Il Saggiatore Musicale* 7, no. 1 (2000): 10.

Tarabotti's most famous — and first written — work was published posthumously under the name *Simplicity Deceived*. More commonly known as *Paternal Tyranny*, it challenged patriarchal hierarchies within the domain of the family and the convent through claims of individuality, equality, and possession of free will. *Paternal Tyranny* first circulated in manuscript form, as Tarabotti was unable to get it published. A decade later, in approximately 1650, Tarabotti edited *Paternal Tyranny* and changed the title to *Simplicity Deceived* — the name it was published under. In *Paternal Tyranny*, Tarabotti uses emotionally and religiously charged rhetoric to condemn the paternal crime of suppressing a daughter's choices within the domestic sphere.

Before assessing Tarabotti's opinions on the relationship between fathers and daughters, it is important to address her views on free will. She believed that both men and women possessed free will equally and that “any attempt to remove free will from a woman is a direct contravention of the Almighty's decision.”⁹⁶ Following her logic, she believed the patriarchal structure of the family unit went against God's desires. A father's complete control over his daughters, regardless of their will, was an act against God.

With this in mind, she viewed fathers as cruel and unjust overseers of women — both their wives and daughters. They are naught but “tyrants from Hell, monsters of nature, Christians in name, and devils in deeds.”⁹⁷ Fathers throw their innocent, unwilling daughters into convents — as Tarabotti's father had done — force marriages upon them, and lie outright to them. Using empty rhetoric, fathers hide their true intentions and desires, sending their daughters far off because they claim to be “so besotted with [said daughters],” or bestowing generous dowries

⁹⁶ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 49.

⁹⁷ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 59.

upon them while never ensuring their happiness.⁹⁸ These acts would often go against the interest of their daughters, especially if they didn't want to marry the man their family chose or didn't want to be sent away. Nonetheless, fathers would marry them off while claiming to do so out of love. By doing so, a father acts in his own interest — he successfully rids himself of a mouth to feed and a threat to his honor, while establishing connections with another family. Fathers act against their daughters' interest with flattering words of love.

Such hypocrisy was astounding in Tarabotti's eyes, especially in regard to forced monachization. Fathers would claim that putting daughters in convents was for their own good, but in truth they were more interested in “shoving them out of the house with the least damage to [their] purse.”⁹⁹ The convent was only a tool for them to use in order to save money on their daughters' dowries. While preaching piety, she points out that men “waste [their] live[s] in licentiousness.”¹⁰⁰ Men can act as they want, but daughters must remain chaste, “bow their heads at every insult, and when struck on one cheek, promptly turn the other.”¹⁰¹

Tarabotti identified two rules that fathers should abide by if they want to be true Christians. The first is to treat sons and daughters fairly. Tarabotti was a firm believer in the equality of the sexes, and even went so far as to claim that women are superior to men in most regards. A whole section of her treatise is dedicated to the “superiority of woman in God's creation, her fortitude, and male weakness.”¹⁰² Following this belief, it is clear that she felt daughters were too often mistreated or treated unfairly when compared to their male siblings. She claimed that brothers fall under the same category of tyrants as their fathers, for the apple

⁹⁸ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 73.

⁹⁹ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 2, 87.

¹⁰⁰ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 2, 86.

¹⁰¹ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 2, 86.

¹⁰² Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 46.

does not fall far from the tree. The father teaches his sons morals and how to control women. Eventually the son, when asked what will become of his sisters, replies “They’ll become nuns because I want to become rich.”¹⁰³ Moral degradation and hypocrisy is passed down and grows with each generation. The second rule Tarabotti argued in favor of is for fathers to allow their daughters to explore their talents and desires. She justified this with the claim that “God did not grant one and the same will, one and the same desire... to each and every woman.”¹⁰⁴ Each individual was created according to God’s desires and thus their individuality, talents, and desires should be celebrated.

Tarabotti then pushed her argument about equality even further by contending that women are in fact superior to men in most regards, using the Bible and religious authorities to prove her point. Tarabotti explored female superiority on the basis of beauty, point of origin in the Bible, and the male tendency to confuse violence with strength. She claimed that the Lord granted women beauty so as to “make the whole world rejoice in her splendor.”¹⁰⁵ It should be pointed out that no one could rejoice in Tarabotti’s or any other nun’s splendor while the women were cloistered in the convent. While other male Venetian humanists feared the beauty of women for its ability to lead men astray, Tarabotti argued that this was God’s intention and the natural order of the world. God “ordained that [woman] would have the power to dominate and subdue the fiercest, wildest hearts to willing service by virtue of her glance.”¹⁰⁶ Men were meant to succumb to female beauty. If such was not the case, God would not have made women beautiful. Tarabotti then turned to creation myth and the origins of man and woman to build on her argument. While God made men in the Damascene field, he made woman “from one of

¹⁰³ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 74.

¹⁰⁴ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 67.

¹⁰⁵ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 46.

¹⁰⁶ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 46.

[man's] ribs in the Garden of Eden."¹⁰⁷ Woman, according to Tarabotti, is "nobler, more refined, stronger, and worthier than man" as men were formed from the "earth's dust — is there anything less solid?"¹⁰⁸ The hard bone of a rib holds more strength and the Garden of Eden was far nobler a place than the Damascene field. In addition, men's strength lies solely in their habit of "[waging] war among [themselves], killing one another like wild beasts."¹⁰⁹ At the same time, they "do not have the power to resist a caress or a tear or a flutter of the eyes."¹¹⁰ Women give birth to men, "bear [them] in their wombs, bring [them] into the world, nourish [them] with their milk, and teach [them]."¹¹¹ While men "destroy humankind," women grant life. This is true strength in Tarabotti's view.¹¹²

Tarabotti's next work, *Inferno monacale*, is similar in many regards. This treatise, also published posthumously, focuses on similar themes, but is not a direct address to the patriarchy. In this *Inferno*, Tarabotti described the stark differences between the fortunes of women who were married off, versus those who were enclosed. While one woman may be "condemned to a lifetime passed in a rough habit, others [might be] bedecked in pearls, ribbons and lace."¹¹³ Tarabotti also considered the economic and political incentives families faced to enclose their daughters without religious vocation. She called upon families to recognize the more materialistic purposes for leaving their daughters in convents and to admit to the hypocrisy behind their actions.¹¹⁴ In *Inferno*, Tarabotti included professional nuns in her blame and

¹⁰⁷ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 46.

¹⁰⁸ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 47.

¹⁰⁹ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 47.

¹¹⁰ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 47.

¹¹¹ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 48.

¹¹² Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 48.

¹¹³ Arcangela Tarabotti, *L'Inferno monacale*, ed. Francesca Medioli (Torino: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1990), 46.

¹¹⁴ Ray, "Introduction," in Tarabotti, *Letters*, 4.

chastisement for the continuation of forced monachization, which she briefly mentions in *Paternal Tyranny*. She argued that “like fathers, they knowingly deceived girls into accepting convent life.”¹¹⁵ Professional nuns were aware of the financial and social constructs that forced girls into the convent; many of them faced similar pressures when they first entered. Despite their knowledge and experience, professional nuns continued to accept unwilling novitiates. Convents likely faced pressure from the patriarch to do so, regardless of the Council of Trent’s decrees decrying such actions. Nuns, according to Tarabotti, were complicit in the coerced monachization of young girls.

Despite being written early in her career, *Paternal Tyranny* and *Inferno monacale*, were only published after Tarabotti’s death. Tarabotti eventually succeeded in publishing two works that very were controversial, but to a lesser degree than her initial two — *Che le donne siano della specie degli uomini, difesa delle donne* and *Antisatire: In Defense of Women, against Francesco Buoninsegni*. She was successful in her publications despite the radical nature of these texts. Why could Tarabotti publish *Che le donne* and *Antisatire*, but not *Paternal Tyranny* nor *Inferno monacale*? *Paternal Tyranny* and *Inferno monacale* came too close to challenging classical ecclesiastical traditions, and they were written using much more sarcastic and heated language. Tarabotti was also specifically challenging the Venetian state in these works, which made it near impossible to publish them within Venice.

Che le donne siano della specie degli uomini, difesa delle donne — in English: *That Women Are of the Same Species as Men, a Defense of Women* — was a smaller work, and was actually a response to an anonymously written treatise that denied women souls. Tarabotti may have walked an uncomfortable line between orthodoxy and rebellion, in this piece as she does

¹¹⁵ Ray, “Introduction,” in Tarabotti, *Letters*, 6.

speak out against the Church to a certain extent, but it was only in response to the earlier treatise. As such, *Che le donne* could still be published.

Tarabotti's ability to publish *Antisatire* was a result of similar factors. *Antisatire* was offered as a rebuttal to Francesco Buoninsegni's *Against the Vanities of Women* (1638). Buoninsegni was a Sieneese poet and scholar who, in his work, targeted women's vain nature and other moral faults. Tarabotti offered a defense of women's fashions in addition to her characteristic rebuke of men and their subordination of women. She points to the rising popularity of wigs and other adornments to prove that men are just as vain as women, though she does disapprove of women spending too much time and money on beauty and luxuries.¹¹⁶ Her continuous citations of classical authors matched Buoninsegni's tit for tat, and thereby displayed her knowledge of ancient literature and wit in their exchange of Menippean dialogue.¹¹⁷ This work was not meant to be a direct attack on men, but a defense of women — even if she did denounce men on numerous occasions throughout the piece — and the Menippean satire proved to be in high demand by her contemporaries, resulting in an easier publishing process.

The fine line Tarabotti treaded in *Paternal Tyranny*, *Inferno monacale*, and *Che le donne siano della specie degli uomini, difesa delle donne*, is blurred in *Convent Paradise* as she took a slight step back from her more rebellious views. In this piece, she did not rescind her harsher critiques but rather smoothed them over by showcasing the good that could be found in a convent — so long as the nuns had a true religious vocation. She introduced *Convent Paradise* with her “Soliloquy to God.” In this soliloquy, Tarabotti explained her “conversion” experience and how

¹¹⁶ Arcangela Tarabotti, *Antisatire in Defense of Women, against Francesco Buoninsegni*, ed. Elissa Weaver (Toronto: Iter Press, 2020), 74. [Henceforth cited as Tarabotti, *Antisatire*.]

¹¹⁷ Menippean satire takes its name from the work of the Greek philosopher Menippus who lived in the third century BCE. It was introduced in Latin literature in the first century BCE and was revived by Justus Lipsius (1547-1606) during the Renaissance. See Eugene P. Kirk, *Menippean Satire: An Annotated Catalogue of Texts and Criticism* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1980).

she came to appreciate religion and truly love God. She dedicated all of her work to the Almighty. The rest of the work is devoted to explaining the paradise that can be found in the convent. As Tarabotti stated, “Let it be clear that, just as nuns forced to enter the convent suffer all the torments of hell in this life,¹¹⁸ so do those who choose to enter experience all the sweetness of paradise within themselves ... they enjoy an ecstasy that lifts their souls from earth to heaven.”¹¹⁹ She claimed that nuns “deserve to be called angels when in this mortal life, we live a pure and immaculate life.”¹²⁰ *Convent Paradise*, which continuously praises the merciful God and his adoring nuns, relies almost entirely on quotes from scripture and religious authorities. It was Tarabotti’s least contentious work, and thus the first to be published in 1643. Ultimately, *Convent Paradise* granted her access to the publishing world, and that access would be crucial in her attempts to publish her more consequential works.

Tarabotti’s *Letters Familiar and Formal* was significantly different from her other works, which were mostly treatises. The *Letters* was a collection of epistolary exchanges that Tarabotti had written throughout her time in the convent. These missives included her correspondence with family members, French diplomats, critics of her works, and patrons; they provide a rewarding glimpse into Tarabotti’s otherwise closed-off world. In her other works, Tarabotti presented a more synthetic and abstract analysis of gender dynamics. In her *Letters*, however, Tarabotti went beyond the abstract and offers a practical application of her earlier analysis.¹²¹ These letters illustrate the problems she sought to overcome on a daily basis and grants a glimpse at her direct chastisement of men who dismissed her works and intellect. While in her other works Tarabotti

¹¹⁸ Tarabotti refers to *Inferno monacale*.

¹¹⁹ Arcangela Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*, ed. Meredith K. Ray, and Lynn Lara Westwater, (Toronto: Iter Press, 2020), 117. [Henceforth cited as Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*].

¹²⁰ Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*, 163.

¹²¹ Ray, “Introduction,” in Tarabotti, *Letters*, 2.

voiced “frustration at women’s exclusion from education, such protest crystallizes here in the writer’s own figure as she responds to detractors who accuse her of ignorance and plagiarism.”¹²² Facing these accusations, Tarabotti published her letters as a defense to prove her intellect and affirm her literary worth.

The letters were not chosen at random, nor were they written spontaneously.¹²³ Tarabotti carefully edited each letter submitted to the publisher and took care in selecting each of the 256 she included. With the image of a respectable and intelligent female scholar in mind, she chose the letters that would work best to maintain her persona and not hurt her cause.¹²⁴ Her editorial process gave these letters a literary value that unpublished and untampered epistolary exchanges would not possess. Aside from their literary value, their “transgressive nature,” must be recognized, as epistolary exchange was strongly discouraged for nuns in 17th century Venice.¹²⁵ It was a very large risk for Tarabotti to write one, let alone 256 letters, in her quest to defend herself and her literary capabilities. The Patriarch of Venice Lorenzo Priuli in 1591 established strict regulations and declared that all letters sent or received by nuns were to be examined by the abbess to check both the content and correspondent.¹²⁶ A 1636 decree stated that nuns should only communicate with immediate family members unless given express permission.¹²⁷ In 1644, the Church passed a decree that claimed nuns should not write nor receive any letters at all, even to and from immediate family members. If a nun did not follow these restrictions, she faced

¹²² Ray, “Introduction,” in Tarabotti, *Letters*, 2.

¹²³ Meredith Kennedy Ray. “Letters from the Cloister: Defending the Literary Self in Arcangela Tarabotti’s “Lettere Familiari E Di Complimento,” *Italica* 81, no. 1 (2004), 26. [Henceforth cited as Ray, “Letters from the Cloister”].

¹²⁴ Ray, “Letters from the Cloister,” 26.

¹²⁵ Ray, “Letters from the Cloister,” 26.

¹²⁶ Ray, “Introduction,” in Tarabotti, *Letters*, 20.

¹²⁷ Ray, “Introduction,” in Tarabotti, *Letters*, 20.

confinement to her cell, a restriction of parlor privileges, and exclusion from convent business.¹²⁸ Tarabotti was already known for breaking the rules of the cloister by meeting with male literary associates in the parlor.¹²⁹ The Church feared that nuns, through epistolary exchanges, would be exposed to secular influences from which they were supposed to be protected. These influences could not be controlled or monitored efficiently, so according to the Church's logic it was best to avoid them all together.¹³⁰

Tarabotti had to find a balance between her public persona while fighting for her cause and defending her work to male scholars. These letters, though crucial for the latter two, threatened her virtue. To publish them was to allow her chastity to be questioned. Publishing her letters meant that she was exposing her vast array of communications with men and women alike. Such communication between the sexes was discouraged, especially for a nun like Tarabotti. It could be viewed as untoward behavior for a nun regardless of the content. She had to distance herself from her work in order to avoid such scrutiny.¹³¹ Tarabotti did so by claiming that unnamed friends collected her letters without her consent so as to publish them. By alleging this, she could avoid the label of narcissist as well as separate herself from the publishing process — making her letters seem more authentic and intimate.

Connections

Despite physical enclosure and strict decrees, Arcangela Tarabotti ended up forming an expansive social and professional network across Europe. She successfully transgressed the material boundaries of the convent using her pen and created a web of connections furthering her professional and scholarly goals. In her communications, Tarabotti broke through the walls that

¹²⁸ Ray, "Introduction," in Tarabotti, *Letters*, 20.

¹²⁹ Ray, "Introduction," in Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*, 15.

¹³⁰ Ray, "Introduction," in Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*, 15.

¹³¹ Ray, "Letters from the Cloister," 30-31.

divided male and female, public and private, and even secular and monastic. She was enmeshed within the greater academic and political landscape that shaped 17th century Europe.

During the 17th century, Venice was one of the printing and publishing capitals of Europe. Venetian publishing companies often printed books that were seen as heretical and banned by the church. They would get around the ban by trading and selling books directly from London, which was outside the control of the Church at the time.¹³² During the 16th century and the first few decades of the 17th century, Venice was a hub of free thinking with an open publishing climate.¹³³ At this point in time, Venice could reject the Church's attempts to rein in these publishing schemes, but as Venetian autonomy from Rome diminished during the 1640s, the era of publishing freedom began to close. In 1645, Venice faced an attack on Candia and had to appeal to the Holy See for aid. This gave the Holy See leverage over much of Venice's industries and allowed the Inquisition to further penetrate the publishing sector. In 1648, the tribunal of the Holy Office brought an influential printer to trial, which represented restoration of the Holy See's control over Venetian printing.¹³⁴ Tarabotti published her works right as the very nature of publishing in Venice began to shift.¹³⁵ For this reason, her connection within the literary and printing circles were even more crucial.

Tarabotti's connections were not limited to only the academic world, but also included figures in the political one. Her political connections were impressive to say the very least — including two doges, two future doges, the Duke of Parma, the future Pope Alessandro VIII, the powerful Cardinal Jules Mazarin, as well as Vittoria della Rovere, the Grand Duchess of

¹³² For more on the Venetian publishing sector see Paul F. Grendler. "The Clandestine Book Trade." In *The Roman Inquisition and the Venetian Press, 1540-1605*, 182-200, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), 199.

¹³³ Ray, "Introduction," in Tarabotti, *Letters*, 9.

¹³⁴ Ray, "Introduction," in Tarabotti, *Letters*, 9.

¹³⁵ Ray, "Introduction," in Tarabotti, *Letters*, 9.

Tuscany. Some of these highly placed figures, including the Grand Duchess, provided her with patronage; others may never have responded to her letters. In her letters to the Duke of Parma, Ferdinando Farnese, Tarabotti claims that she lives “under the protective shield of Her Most Serene Highness, the grand duchess of Tuscany” and her numerous letters to della Rovere indicate that they were in fairly regular contact.¹³⁶ In her letter to the Doge Francesco Erizzo, Tarabotti treats the doge as a friend, not only of herself, but of all women.¹³⁷ She offers him a copy of *Convent Paradise* and he maintains their good relationship by later casting a medal in honor of the convent of Sant’Anna. Whereas one might have expected for Tarabotti to have made many political enemies, it is clear that she actually made quite a few friends in high places. Her support in the political realm eased some, but not all, of the struggles and backlash she faced in the academic arena.

Even more numerous than her communications with political actors are her letters to literary figures. These number around 70 or so published letters to both named and unnamed correspondents, with Tarabotti being most closely tied to members of Venice’s Accademia degli Incogniti — the Academy of the Unknowns.¹³⁸ The Incogniti was one of the most powerful literary institutions across Europe at the time. It was a literary society that was at the very center of Venice’s intellectual life with influence that ranged from the political to the philosophical and the literary.¹³⁹ Over the course of the 17th century, it grew and absorbed a vast number of writers from outside of Venice in neighboring cities. A central feature of the Incogniti was their mixture of conservative patriotism and libertinism.¹⁴⁰ The Incogniti were fixated on preserving the glory

¹³⁶ Tarabotti, *Letters*, Letter 17, 71.

¹³⁷ Tarabotti, *Letters*, Letter 1, 51.

¹³⁸ Ray, “Introduction,” in Tarabotti, *Letters*, 23.

¹³⁹ Heller, 14.

¹⁴⁰ Heller, 15.

of their great republic as well as its masculine nature as a male oligarchy that excluded women from participation in public life.¹⁴¹ Despite the suppression of women through Venice's institutions of marriage and church policies, Venice was famous for its sex and pleasure industries, which the Incogniti embraced. Venice had a reputation for being the "playground of Europe" where men could find pleasures of a sexual nature or otherwise while avoiding the watchful gaze of the inquisition.¹⁴² Women in this sense were necessary for satisfying the desires of men, but they also served as a distraction for the patriotism that the Incogniti embodied. Members of the Incogniti often discussed the irreconcilable conflict between the physical desire for women and fascination with their beauty, and skepticism vis-à-vis their virtue.¹⁴³ Tarabotti's patron, Giovanni Francesco Loredano, was one of the most powerful figures in the Venetian publishing world and an important member of the Incogniti. Tarabotti later dedicates her *Lettere* to Loredano, demonstrating their close relationship. Nonetheless, Loredano's most famous works include his essay *In Censure of Women*, where he argues that women, though beautiful, cause men to forget themselves and become their own enemy.¹⁴⁴

Tarabotti's relationship with the Incogniti was complex at the very least. Their relationship was based on a combination of mutual dependency, respect and admiration, curiosity, and antagonism.¹⁴⁵ Tarabotti had no choice but to recognize their largely anti-female discourse but relied on their power for access to the literary world. She first circulated her manuscripts among the Incogniti and through them established her reputation.¹⁴⁶ She remained dependent on their support to publish her works. She also relied on them for access to

¹⁴¹ Heller, 15.

¹⁴² Heller, 16.

¹⁴³ Heller, 17.

¹⁴⁴ Heller, 18.

¹⁴⁵ Heller, 18.

¹⁴⁶ Heller, 18.

contemporary writings and more controversial publications that were not available in the convent. To the Incogniti, Tarabotti and the idea of a literary nun proved to be a novelty that piqued their curiosity.¹⁴⁷ Her rejection of authority and condemnation of ecclesiastical hypocrisy sparked discourse among members and served as a source of inspiration for their own writing. When Tarabotti expanded her condemnation to the entire Venetian patriarchy and the institutions upon which their society was centered, her initial novelty wore off to a certain extent.¹⁴⁸ Nonetheless, Tarabotti remained civil and friendly with members such as Loredano.

While she may have been friends with certain members of the group, other Incogniti disapproved of Tarabotti's work. Numerous letters to Angelico Aprosio and Girolamo Brusoni demonstrate her immense anger at their rebukes of her writings in their own work. In one letter, addressed anonymously, but most likely intended for Aprosio, Tarabotti compares his efforts to write her to "dogs howling at moon" which she can "only ridicule" as she refused to read anymore of his letters.¹⁴⁹ She only hopes that "God grants [him] what [he] deserves."¹⁵⁰ Her anger in this case is directed at Aprosio because he first befriended her, but later betrayed her trust. Her relationship with Aprosio was nothing less than volatile. Though their relationship began on amicable terms, after Tarabotti published *Antisatira*, their relationship took a turn for the worst. Aprosio wrote a scathing response to *Antisatira* entitled *La maschera scoperta di Filofilo Misonoponero in risposta dell'Antisatira*.¹⁵¹ In his address, Aprosio mocks Tarabotti for

¹⁴⁷ Heller, 20.

¹⁴⁸ Heller, 20.

¹⁴⁹ Tarabotti, *Letters*, Letter 36, 94.

¹⁵⁰ Tarabotti, *Letters*, Letter 36, 94.

¹⁵¹ Full title: *La maschera scoperta di Filofilo Misonoponero in risposta dell' Antisatira D. A. T. scritta contro la Satira menippea del signor Francesco Buoninsegni*. The english translation is *The Uncovered Mask of Filofilo Misonoponero in Response to Antisatira D. A. T. Written in Opposition to Francesco Buoninsegni's Satira menippea*. Filofilo Misonoponero is a made up name using Greek words referencing a hatred of knaves.

her lameness and condemns her work, claiming it was filled with thousands of mistakes.¹⁵²

Tarabotti and her close connections, such as Loredano, prevented Apro시오 from publishing his work. Her ability to prevent an accomplished member of the Incogniti further proves her connections and reputation within the community.

Tarabotti's brother-in-law, Giacomo Pighetti, also acted as an early facilitator between her and the literary world. He put her into communication with a community of French diplomats living in Venice. Pighetti was a Venetian lawyer who had access to the literary community due to his contributions to local publications. Pighetti came into contact with notable literary figures and eventually became a member of the Incogniti, himself. He created numerous opportunities for Tarabotti to publish her works, sometimes, even when she herself was not ready to do so. Out of all her family, Pighetti was the only one whom Tarabotti remained in touch with consistently. Of the 253 letters in her *Lettere*, only two are addressed to her unmarried sisters and there are none to any other family members. In comparison, Tarabotti included seven letters she wrote to Pighetti. It should be acknowledged, however, that she might have had exchanges with her other family members and simply chose not to include them in her epistolary. The *Lettere* was edited by Tarabotti and she only selected specific letters that she thought would best suit the image she wanted to portray to the public.¹⁵³ And writing to sisters about domestic matters would have contravened that image.

Tarabotti's letters openly tout her "reading and circulation of prohibited works, her attempts to publish — even by official means — her controversial ones, and her disobedience toward the rules that governed nuns' lives."¹⁵⁴ Her treatises prove her literary proficiency, her

¹⁵² Heller, 21.

¹⁵³ Ray, "Letters from the Cloister," 26.

¹⁵⁴ Ray, "Introduction," in Tarabotti, *Letters*, 9.

intellect, and her knowledge of contemporary and classical authors, while her letters affirm her ability to overcome her confinement and rebel against the set rules that were meant to control her. Arcangela Tarabotti was by no means a simple nun trapped in a convent. She was a complex woman who valued her autonomy. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, Tarabotti's complexity grew throughout her career, enhancing her critiques and eloquence as she moved throughout various stages in her career.

Chapter 3: *Arcangela Tarabotti's Literary Journey*

Just lower your eyes, you fools, to the nothingness you are, to the ashes from which you came, to the foul feet of your deeds, muddied with vices from swirling swamps! Recognize that you are the sewers of sin! ... You are indeed worse than any dumb animal.¹⁵⁵

-Arcangela Tarabotti

From this passage in Arcangela Tarabotti's "Final Blast Against Misogyny and Its Practitioners" in *Paternal Tyranny*, Tarabotti's anger toward men is almost palpable. Her direct address to the fathers who force their daughters to take the veil and the overarching patriarchal system that enables them to do so reflects the rage brought on through her own forced monachization. She wants her anger to be felt by her audience, and be it through her references to fools or her comparison to animals, she succeeded in making her point known. *Paternal Tyranny*, as this passage would imply, is heavily driven by Tarabotti's anger at the Venetian state, Venetian fathers, and the Venetian church. *Inferno monacale* holds similarly emotionally charged rhetoric, and while more subdued, Tarabotti's later treatises and publications grant insight into her more nuanced and complicated emotional life.

Tarabotti's treatises point to the influence emotions can hold over an individual and their intended audience. Tarabotti may have been the one experiencing her anger and grief that came with her coerced monachization, but she shared those emotions with her readers. Emotions too are an exceptionally consequential part of Tarabotti's writings. They drove Tarabotti to write her infamous *Tyrannia Paterna*, and her subsequent works. They also drove the backlash and harsh criticism she faced from male elites. Many of her male counterparts were obsessed with answering the Woman Question — a debate regarding the virtues and capabilities of women —

¹⁵⁵ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 3, 151.

which was ever-present in literary discussion. While most tried to answer it through faulty logic, portraying women as weak and inferior, Tarabotti, who was personally impacted by this debate, did not shy away from emotionally charged rhetoric to explain her ideas. She was angry at the system which imprisoned her against her will, so she spoke out. Much of her argument relied on sound logic, but her emotions lay beneath her arguments and drove her to act. Her anger and rage resonated with her audience and led to a certain fascination for the literary nun. *Paternal Tyranny*, her most passionate and emotive work, is the one most commonly associated with her name. Her emotions, her fury and wit, was what she was known for and is what continues to intrigue scholars to this day. Her rage compels us to keep reading, and makes it all the more memorable. As such, it is crucial to study the emotions embedded within Tarabotti's writings as well as the influence they held in how Tarabotti shaped herself as a literary figure.

While recent scholarship has acknowledged the emotions embedded within Tarabotti's works, those feelings have not been the subject of analysis. Instead, scholars have been more likely to study the means by which nuns, and Tarabotti specifically, expressed agency within the convent and the permeability of the cloister. Recent articles on Tarabotti have explored her relationship with the opera, lace, and fashion industries, as well as her use of epistolary exchange to center herself in the literary world. With the focus on agency, emotions have been put by the wayside. In regard to Tarabotti's public persona, there are a few scholars, mainly Meredith Kennedy Ray and Francesca Medioli, who have explored and elaborated on the topic, though there are still aspects left undiscussed. In her essay, "Letters from the Cloister: Defending the Literary Self in Arcangela Tarabotti's 'Lettere familiari e di complimento,'" Ray touched on Tarabotti's self-image in her letters, but only to state that Tarabotti used her letters to craft her

identity for the greater public.¹⁵⁶ Medioli had went a bit further in her exploration in her “Alcune lettere autografe di Arcangela Tarabotti: Autocensura e imagine di sé.”¹⁵⁷ They, however, did not go so far as to analyze how she used emotions to bring it to fruition.

Arcangela Tarabotti was forced to take up the veil at the young age of thirteen. She was separated from her family — her mother, father, and ten siblings. Cloistered within the convent, she had little contact with the outside world. What communications she did have, had to be vetted first by a superior. Along with this isolation, Tarabotti suffered from almost perpetual illness that put her on the brink of death on numerous occasion. What effects could such isolation and physical ailments have on a young girl’s emotional world? How could one such as Tarabotti find an outlet for her strong emotions? When young girls entered the convent against their will, “they despair of finding an escape and live dying, if they live at all, tormented by a thousand rages and anxieties — their bodies bound up in religious habits and their souls ready to fall into Hell’s abyss.”¹⁵⁸ This dark mindset Tarabotti describes in the above quote, originates from feelings of anger and betrayal — toward men, family, and the church.

Given Tarabotti’s tragic background, it would be expected for her works to focus solely on anger at the political, religion, and cultural structures that enabled her forced monachization to occur. But such is not the case. Tarabotti’s emotions toward her life in the convent were not all negative. Tarabotti greatly admired and respected other nuns; she viewed women with a true religious vocation as angels on earth.¹⁵⁹ As she progressed down her literary path, the emotions expressed in her works grew more complicated. She explored new genres of writing and used her

¹⁵⁶ See Ray, “Letters from the Cloister.”

¹⁵⁷ Francesca Medioli, “Alcune lettere autografe di Arcangela Tarabotti: Autocensura e imagine di sé,” *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 32.1 (1996):133-41 and 146-55.

¹⁵⁸ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 67.

¹⁵⁹ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 64.

emotions, be they reverence or anger, more purposefully. Rather than attacking entire political institutions, she went after certain individuals and disassociated herself, to a certain extent, from *Paternal Tyranny*.

In this chapter, I will explore Tarabotti's literary journey and the evolution she underwent both pertaining to the emotions she expressed and her views toward men. I argue that in *Paternal Tyranny* and *Inferno Monacale*, Tarabotti relied on anger and controversy to relay her message. She then redeemed herself in the eyes of her readers through *Convent Paradise* as she asserted her religiosity and maintained her moral superiority. After her redemption, Tarabotti was free to move forward in her literary career to publish *Antisatire* and *Lettere* which were more academically inclined than her three earlier religiously charged treatises and expressed more nuanced emotions. I have organized this chapter to go through each of her main works chronologically, grouped corresponding to her stage in her career. The first section will focus on her two earliest treatises, *Paternal Tyranny* and *Inferno monacale*, which displayed her general rage at the political, religious, and cultural systems in place that enabled forced monachization. The second section will analyze her more subdued *Convent Paradise* — her first work to actually be published — in which she purposefully distanced herself from her initial treatises. I will also examine the similarities and differences in her tone and rhetoric in comparison to her first works. The third section will discuss the shift in the targets of Tarabotti's anger and her expression of more intricate emotions that she presented in her *Lettere* and *Antisatire*.

Paternal Tyranny and Inferno monacale

Tarabotti's anger in her first two treatises — *Paternal Tyranny* and *Inferno monacale* — was directed at three main sources, the Venetian state, the Catholic Church, and Venetian families, mainly fathers. It is important to note that her anger was toward institutions and more

generalized cultural practices as opposed to specific individuals. *Paternal Tyranny*, however, should not be confused with *La Semplicità ingannata*. *La Semplicità ingannata* was the revised version of *Tirannia Paterna*, and has been published in English under the name *Paternal Tyranny*, referencing Tarabotti's original work. In *La Semplicità ingannata*, and the English *Paternal Tyranny*, Tarabotti does name specific individuals. Tarabotti kept her critiques in *Paternal Tyranny* and *Inferno monacale* more conceptual and distanced herself from individuals who she wished to attack.

Her rage against the state was made quite evident from her introduction in *Paternal Tyranny*, in which she dedicated the book to “The Most Serene Venetian Republic.”¹⁶⁰ This introduction established a long running trope that prevails across her treatises — the denial of freedom and liberty. The Venetian Republic was known across Europe for its political liberty yet bore down on its women in waves of patriarchal tyranny, Tarabotti would describe. Even foreigners were granted greater liberty than women.¹⁶¹ Venice knowingly deprived its women of liberty granted to outsiders, and “once you have lost liberty, there remains nothing else to lose.”¹⁶² Tarabotti felt as though there was nothing else left for her. In her helplessness and frustration, she found her anger and began her scathing rebuke of the patriarchy, presenting it to the Venetian state, as Tarabotti phrased it, as “a gift that well suits a Republic that practices the abuse of forcing more young girls to take the veil than anywhere else in the world.”¹⁶³

Tarabotti continued throughout her treatises to attack the laws and customs practiced and enforced by the state. Her stark admonishment of the dowry system unveiled Tarabotti's

¹⁶⁰ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, 37.

¹⁶¹ Panizza, “Introduction,” in Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, 16.

¹⁶² Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, 38.

¹⁶³ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, 37.

understanding of the financial and economic constraints that led to the coerced monachization of thousands of patrician girls. Tarabotti states:

If you believe that numerous daughters are prejudicial to reasons of state — since, if they all married, the nobility would increase and families be impoverished by paying out so many dowries — then, without greed for gain, accept the companions God has destined for you. In any case, it would be decent for you to pay out money when taking a wife, just as you do in purchasing slaves, than for them to consume fortunes in purchasing a master.¹⁶⁴

As described in my first chapter, Venice's dowry system had spiraled out of control by the time Arcangela came of age. Dowry inflation led to outrageous sums, which many families could not afford.¹⁶⁵ If every daughter were to be married, most families would go bankrupt. In this passage, Tarabotti compared marriage to slavery, but actually implies that slaves are better off, for they do not have to purchase a master. A bride, however, must purchase her husband, who will possess full control over life. Tarabotti's anger in this instance was on behalf of the women who purchased their masters.

Her anger at the Venetian state continued in her reproach of Venice's education policies for women. Venetian boys were typically educated at home when they were young, then later would go off to study at university, be it in Venice, Padua, Bologna, Paris, or elsewhere. University experiences generally would only apply to the patriciate and cittadini classes, not lower class men. Women, on the other hand, were very rarely educated at home, and as Tarabotti states, "we have never even been granted permission to attend lectures in Venice's state schools."¹⁶⁶ Upper-class girls were often educated in the convent, as was likely the case for Tarabotti, who claimed to have entered the convent at age 11, while records state she entered at

¹⁶⁴ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 2, 95.

¹⁶⁵ Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice*, 16.

¹⁶⁶ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 2, 102.

age 13. Tarabotti's parents most likely placed her in the convent as an "educande" when she was 11, before she officially entered as a novice at 13. The education these girls received was typically minimal, and mostly consisted of domestic skills. In the convent, girls were taught how to read, but rarely to write. The lack of access to proper education infuriated Tarabotti, especially because humanists would often attack women's lack of intelligence.

"Do not scorn the quality of women's intelligence, you malignant and evil-tongued men!... Yours is to blame, for in your envy you deprive them of the means to acquire knowledge... As soon as you catch sight of a woman with pen in hand you start ranting and raving."¹⁶⁷

The men who would deny her an education are the same who would critique her for her lack of knowledge, as she would later experience when publishing her work.

The Church was yet another target of Tarabotti's wrath, which was rooted in the Church's hypocritical stance on women and nuns, be it through their complicity in the forced monachization of girls or the deprivation of nuns' liberty. The Council of Trent forbade the coerced monachization of women, but the Venetian patriarch and his subordinates continued to turn a blind eye to the act. Tarabotti saw this as the Church choosing politics over the souls of thousands of women; "political expediency... the father of all error, contaminates even these supreme ministers, who end up giving their permission for women to become nuns."¹⁶⁸

According to Tarabotti religious superiors, who allowed this to happen, jeopardized the salvation of these women's souls. To enter the convent unwillingly was to be damned first to a living Hell, but then to the eternal Hell.¹⁶⁹ For religious superiors and Venetian rulers alike to allow the process to continue, made her "reel in horror at their insensitivity."¹⁷⁰ Tarabotti struggled with

¹⁶⁷ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 2, 99.

¹⁶⁸ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 2, 92.

¹⁶⁹ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 65.

¹⁷⁰ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 60.

the idea that her own salvation, and that of other nuns, was placed at risk. She despised “that such benefit [eternal paradise] is prevented with offenses worthy of eternal death.”¹⁷¹ Regardless of willingness, Tarabotti took issue with the very idea of cloistering. By forcing the nuns to enclose themselves in the convent, Tarabotti thought the Church was “[tying] up the bodies of the freeborn by threats, insults and injuries... [restricting] them forever to one place, [troubling] their souls.”

Those most culpable for imprisoning women, however, were fathers. They were the ones who actively would make the choice to send their daughters away, robbing them of their free will. Her wrath at Venetian fathers is more extreme than what she displayed toward the Church or the state. This is because the source of her anger was a sense of betrayal. Tarabotti felt as though fathers forsook their daughters by placing them in the convent. As she states:

“What merit is there in confining a woman for life inside a dark, gloomy prison, you madmen? None at all. Neither in the sight of God nor of man, because where the will fails to give consent, merit is null and void. The same befalls nuns, betrayed by parents and relatives almost as they lie asleep, one could say, and imprisoned.”¹⁷²

The act of confining women within the convent was pointless in her eyes. They couldn’t contribute anything to society while trapped against their will, and they could not act faithfully to perform their duties — their prayers and hymns were not heartfelt. Instead, this action granted these women insight into their true place in society. Daughters, whom parents couldn’t afford to marry off, were naught but, “impediments in the line of inheritance.”¹⁷³ Though Tarabotti did not outright name her father, and maintains a more generalized approach, it is clear that this idea of

¹⁷¹ Arcangela Tarabotti, *Inferno monacale* (n.p.: n.pub., 2020), Book 3, unpaginated: “che si immenso beneficio vien prevenuto con offese degne d’ eterna morte.” [Henceforth referred to as Tarabotti, *Inferno monacale*.]

¹⁷² Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 71.

¹⁷³ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 2, 90.

betrayal likely stems from her own experiences. She made it clear that it would be better for girls to die on the day that they are born than to be betrayed by their own parents.¹⁷⁴ Such a claim would be hard to make unless Tarabotti, herself, felt as though she would have preferred to die. In *Inferno monacale*, she proclaims, “Woe to you from whom political has taken away the justice of emotions!”¹⁷⁵ Just as her religious superiors did, fathers would prioritize their political and economic goals over their love for their daughters, willingly sacrificing them in the face of materialistic gain. Tarabotti’s rhetoric insulting fathers was so drastically harsh, calling them monsters, tyrants from hell, fools, and animals due in part to her own father’s betrayal. Tarabotti was abandoned by the state and overlooked by the Church, but nothing would hurt more than the betrayal of a parent.

Throughout these two works, Tarabotti maintained a higher moral ground. Her anger was expressed through a sort of preaching rhetoric, as she preached to fathers, the state, and the church of their moral wrongdoings and scolds them for their failings. As if to prove that she occupied the moral high ground, she drew almost all of her arguments not from ancient philosophers or contemporary authors, but from the Bible. Everything stems from God’s wishes. God granted everyone free will, so you must honor it. God gave women beauty, so you should treasure it, not hide it. God created everyone with individual talents, so you should make allowances for them. Her basic arguments follow the same pattern: God did this, so you should do that. Spattered throughout her writings, Tarabotti included little passages to remind her audience that God is watching. She titled sections, “The Heinousness of Fathers’ Crimes, God Sees All,” and “The Bible Shows that God Punishes Sacrifices Made in Bad Faith.” Her

¹⁷⁴ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 59.

¹⁷⁵ Tarabotti, *Inferno monacale*, Book 3: “Guai a voi a cui l’interesse politico ha levato la giustitia de’ sentimenti.”

authority could be compared to a priest lecturing his wayward parish, encouraging them to confess and repent for their sins. Tarabotti's anger is expressed in such a way that it solidifies her position of religious and moral superiority. Her anger is God's anger.

Paradoxically, despite asserting religious authority over her audience, Tarabotti distanced herself from her innately religious status of a nun in *Paternal Tyranny*. Instead, she says, "I can only relate what I have heard or read, since when it comes to the modern condition of religious forced to take vows, I am only able to have an imperfect and shadowy knowledge, as I am a layperson."¹⁷⁶ She identified herself as a layperson because she did not view her vows as proper vows. While she could have chosen to use her status as a nun to substantiate her authority, she instead relied upon her vast biblical knowledge. In doing so, she could maintain her stance that forced nuns were not true nuns, and simultaneously establish her superiority. In *Inferno monacale*, however, Tarabotti did identify herself as a nun. She did so in order to substantiate herself as a guide for her readers, as she gave them a tour through the hell that was the convent.¹⁷⁷ Whereas in *Paternal Tyranny*, Tarabotti denied her historical position as a nun, she accepts and embraces in *Inferno monacale*, for it granted her even more power over her audience as well as increased her reliability.

Convent Paradise

Tarabotti's *Convent Paradise* marked the first shift in her portrayal of emotions. *Convent Paradise* is not defined by anger, but rather respect and admiration for her fellow nuns. Prior to *Convent Paradise*, Tarabotti struggled to publish *Paternal Tyranny* and *Inferno monacale*. She resorted to circulating them in handwritten, manuscript form, and they were only ever published posthumously. Tarabotti's *Convent Paradise* was her first work to circulate in print and was

¹⁷⁶ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 64-65.

¹⁷⁷ Tarabotti, *Inferno monacale*, Book 1: "Come diciam religiose."

received relatively well by Venice's literary community. The exact timeline of when Tarabotti wrote her first three treatises is unclear. All that is known is the order in which they were written — *Paternal Tyranny*, *Inferno monacale*, then *Convent Paradise* — and that all three were written prior to 1643. *Convent Paradise* was then published in 1643. This section aims to identify the changes and continuities in Tarabotti's rhetoric and expressed emotions, as well as the impact these changes had on her audience and success in publishing.

Convent Paradise lacks the overt anger found in *Paternal Tyranny* and *Inferno monacale*. As opposed to focusing on the wrongdoings of men, Tarabotti instead emphasized her respect for her fellow nuns who entered the convent willingly. Tarabotti's main argument was that through their virtues, nuns are transformed into angels on earth — “we shall indeed deserve to be called angels when in this mortal life we live a pure and immaculate life.”¹⁷⁸ As Tarabotti confirmed the serene religiosity of nuns, she then claimed that wherever angels reside could be considered paradise. Therefore, the convent and cloisters are also a type of paradise. The first book of *Convent Paradise* covers the three main virtues the nuns automatically possess upon taking their vows: obedience, poverty, and chastity, in that order. According to Tarabotti, nuns are “paragons on obedience” for they follow the strict rules and set practices of their orders.¹⁷⁹ They have “relinquished all things” and thus are poor.¹⁸⁰ And lastly, through his sacrifice, Jesus, “render[ed] [them] pure and cleansed of every strain of sensuality.”¹⁸¹ Tarabotti's anger was no longer central, and instead she turned to defending the sanctity of herself and her fellow nuns.

In the third book of *Convent Paradise*, Tarabotti returned to the idea of free will within the convent, but in a different manner than she addressed it in *Paternal Tyranny* or *Inferno*

¹⁷⁸ Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*, 163.

¹⁷⁹ Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*, 152.

¹⁸⁰ Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*, 153.

¹⁸¹ Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*, 153.

monacale. Instead of revisiting the male tendency to ignore the will of women and force them into convents, she explored the idea of what an unwilling nun should do once she has entered the cloister. Tarabotti continued to assert that not all nuns desired to become nuns and nor did they all possess the proper vocation, and she implied that if a nun does not possess the vocation, she is not a proper nun. She states that “if the voice is not followed by the heart, it is not doing anything but creating the profusion of words.”¹⁸² If a nun does not truly believe in the hymns or the prayers that she recites, they are only empty words. Interestingly enough, she did not blame the Church, the state, or the patriarchy in general for such emptiness. She actually acknowledged that the guilt belongs in part to the nun. By praying in such a manner, nuns “make themselves guilty of a triple theft, stealing in a certain way honor from God, suffrages from souls, and the salaries and allotments assigned to the churches, monasteries, and pious institutes.”¹⁸³ While this train of thought might sound surprising coming from Tarabotti, it is a continuation of her conversion story that she explained in her “Soliloquy to God” at the very beginning of *Convent Paradise*. Tarabotti initially lumped herself in with this group of nuns proclaiming empty words, but strove to find her vocation and love of God, making herself pious in the process.

Tarabotti’s newfound religiosity lent itself well to her sermon-like delivery of her argument, which was even more profound in *Convent Paradise* than it was in either *Paternal Tyranny* or *Inferno monacale*. Whenever describing the virtues or sanctity of nuns, Tarabotti would use “we” to include herself in the community. Just as she did in *Inferno monacale*, Tarabotti clearly identified herself as a nun, and even more importantly, she identified herself as a nun who was obedient, poor, and chaste. She accepted her vows and at this point, even claimed to have embraced them. In doing so, she placed herself on a higher pedestal than her audience.

¹⁸² Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*, 209.

¹⁸³ Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*, 210.

She elevated herself to an almost untouchable status, so that no one could critique or question her authority. No man could judge her or her work, for she was an angel living in paradise — even if she had entered that paradise unwillingly.

In her address to the reader, Tarabotti insinuated that this treatise was an attempt for her to prove her innocence against claims of “sins against religion,” that had been made after *Paternal Tyranny* and *Inferno monacale*.¹⁸⁴ She actually distanced herself from these two earlier works, claiming that they were stolen out of her hands. In the following lines, she implied that she never intended for the works to be published and had not meant for them to see the light of day, for they would “cause [her] extreme mortification.”¹⁸⁵ This is not to say that she intended to retract her beliefs of female superiority or her anger against Venice’s patriarchal structures. Nor did she believe that her works were impious. Rather, she regretted the many mistakes contained within them due to the short timespan in which she wrote them, and blamed her lack of ability to have properly edited her pieces for their reception as rebellious and controversial.¹⁸⁶ In *Convent Paradise*, Tarabotti distanced herself from her earlier, more controversial works, but did not recant their contents. She stood by the claims she made, while apologizing if they came across as irreligious.

In *Convent Paradise*, Tarabotti used her status to continue to promote female superiority over men, representing an evolution in strategy from her first two treatises. Rather than attacking male cruelty and hypocrisy, Tarabotti hid her anger and distanced herself from her emotions to appeal to her readers. She became a religious figure who still believed in the superiority of women, but used female sanctity to prove her point as opposed to tearing down her opponents.

¹⁸⁴ Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*, 110.

¹⁸⁵ Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*, 113.

¹⁸⁶ Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*, 113.

She used irrefutable logic over emotional arguments, with the below quote being one such example:

“Let masculine arrogance be silent, since if those who founded and regulated monastic orders were men, they learned from Mary, and no one else, the true precepts and rules for religious life. And who will be so bold as to deny this? After the death of her son, she was in a way the first — before Saint Peter — to exercise the role of Pontiff in the Christian Church, because everyone received teachings from her and her superhuman erudition, and learned how to live in accordance with divine will.”¹⁸⁷

If a male critic wanted to claim that men were equally as holy, they would have to deny the significance of the Virgin Mary, thus committing heresy. From there she states that “female saints surpass men of virtue and religion not only qualitatively, in terms of holiness and religiosity in their life, but also quantitatively in their number.” There is no emotionally charged rhetoric, only simple statements that were hard to argue against — though her reasoning and sources for this particular claim are unclear. She did include a few “jabs” or minor insults. For example, at the very beginning of book one, Tarabotti asserts that “God loves all creatures, but in particular Woman, and then Man, even if he does not deserve it.”¹⁸⁸ But these remarks cannot be compared to the sarcasm used in her earlier works.

The lack of direct attacks on the patriarchy, be it men in general or the Church, and emotional rhetoric would have made *Convent Paradise* much easier to publish. It should be remembered that while women certainly read her first two treatises — she sent a copy of *Paternal Tyranny* to the Grand Duchess of Tuscany for example — most of her audience consisted of educated men.¹⁸⁹ *Inferno monacale* and *Paternal Tyranny* were both essentially reprimanding those men and would not have been exactly pleasant to read. On the other hand,

¹⁸⁷ Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*, 123.

¹⁸⁸ Tarabotti, *Convent Paradise*, 115.

¹⁸⁹ Tarabotti, *Letters*, Letter 94, 146-147.

Convent Paradise, while it had overarching feminist themes, would have been more palatable to male readers, and could be published within Venice.

Letters and Antisatire

Published in 1644 and 1650 respectively, Tarabotti's *Antisatire* and *Letters Familiar and Formal* were written with very different objectives in mind than her three treatises. *Antisatire* was written in response to Francesco Buoninsegni's *Against the Vanities of Women*, while Tarabotti's *Letters* were published as a means to prove her literary worth and capabilities. The two represent yet another shift in her emotional rhetoric, but perhaps even more significantly, a change in the direction of her emotions from a more general attack on institutions to individual exchanges, in which she named her specific targets.

Before diving deeper into the nuances of Tarabotti's *Antisatire*, it should be noted that it was written following a completely different style than any of her earlier works — the Menippean satire. By definition, Menippean satires are characterized by attacking intuitions and ideas as opposed to individuals. This may sound antithetical to my previous claim of Tarabotti taking aim at specific men. However, in this case, Tarabotti wrote in response to Buoninsegni and merely followed his own format of Menippean satire. Through her attacks on Buoninsegni, Tarabotti struck at the foundations of the idea that women alone were vain creatures, and their pursuit of fashion was the pinnacle of vanity.

Antisatire was the first publication by Tarabotti in which she targeted a specific individual. Here Tarabotti declared war against Francesco Buoninsegni. She attacked him with insults and sarcastic remarks, referring to him as “mister delirious academician.”¹⁹⁰ Her satirical

¹⁹⁰ Tarabotti, *Antisatire*, 60.

addresses continue throughout the work as she calls him “mister sick dreamer” and “mister censor of women’s dress.”¹⁹¹ Tarabotti openly mocked Buoninsegni as delusional and not in his right mind. She even questioned his trustworthiness as an author, as she articulates, “You belong to the same sex, some of whom, rather than telling the truth and speaking positively, choose to tell lies and to speak, as we say, off kilter.”¹⁹² Although she did not outright call him a liar, she did imply that due to the nature of his sex, he should not always be trusted. Just as Buoninsegni would claim that women are vain because they are women, Tarabotti claims that Buoninsegni is untrustworthy because he is a man. Her argument centered around men’s hypocrisy. While Buoninsegni argued that women often fell victim to their own vain nature, Tarabotti points out that men, just as often as women, “attend assiduously to their hair styles, to makeup, to scents, perfumes, and to all those things condemned in women by our most gentlemanly satirist with such loathing.”¹⁹³ When speaking on silk, Tarabotti asks, “Is it not the case that you men, worms of the earth that you are, wear not only silks but also gold and diamonds with such lasciviousness that it makes the world and Heaven sick?”¹⁹⁴ She compared Buoninsegni and men in general to the very silk worms that Buoninsegni had disparaged in his *Against the Vanities of Women*.

Tarabotti did not focus solely on general male hypocrisy, but also took aim at Buoninsegni’s own sanctimony. At this point in time, Buoninsegni worked as a secretary to Leopoldo de’Medici, who governed Siena in the absence of his brother. Buoninsegni’s chastisement of women for their taste in luxuries was ironic, for Leopoldo was well known for his own luxurious possessions. As Tarabotti explains,

¹⁹¹ Tarabotti, *Antisatire*, 63, 66.

¹⁹² Tarabotti, *Antisatire*, 77.

¹⁹³ Tarabotti, *Antisatire*, 66.

¹⁹⁴ Tarabotti, *Antisatire*, 65.

You offer in proof of your opinions that the emissaries of love consider clothing, gold, and jewels to be an excellent way to bring down the bastion of feminine modesty. This is a shameful argument coming from the pen of the secretary of a prince whose splendid merits make the illustrious glory of the Alexanders, Catos, and Caesars seem abhorrent.¹⁹⁵

To attack women for their vanity was humorous coming from a man who worked for an extravagant prince. Tarabotti did not intend to insult the prince by stating such. It appears as though she actually regarded Leopoldo de' Medici highly, as she had initially intended to dedicate *Antisatire* to him. Instead she chose to dedicate it to his sister-in-law, Vittoria della Rovere, the Grand Duchess of Tuscany.¹⁹⁶ If she truly desired to deride the prince, she would have lost powerful political allies. Her remarks were intended instead to emphasize Buoninsegni's hypocrisy on the matter, not to make enemies of the elite.

In spite of Tarabotti's harsh judgement of Buoninsegni and his work, Tarabotti deeply respected him. While she was impassioned, Tarabotti was not angry at the current Buonsinsegni, but rather his past self, who wrote *Against the Vanities of Women*. At the beginning of *Antisatire*, Tarabotti clarifies,

“I must, however, from the very beginning confess that Signor Buoninsegni is an intelligent person who is as modest as he is learned, since bringing this work into the world and recognizing it for the miscarriage that it is, he immediately calls it the delirium of an academician, the dream of a sick man, and the complaint of a husband.”¹⁹⁷

When she calls Buoninsegni “mister delirious academician” and “mister sick dreamer,” she is not referencing the Buoninsegni who has renounced his work, but his past self and all the men who still think like him. *Antisatire* was published six years after Buoninsegni's *Against the Vanities of*

¹⁹⁵ Tarabotti, *Antisatire*, 60-61.

¹⁹⁶ Tarabotti, *Letters*, Letter 254, 283.

¹⁹⁷ Tarabotti, *Antisatire*, 58.

Women, and during that time, Buoninsegni came to the realization that his logic was faulty, and his views of women were oversimplified. Tarabotti was well-aware that Buoninsegni had undergone this evolution, as she admits at the beginning of her piece. There were many traits that Tarabotti admired in Buoninsegni and it led to a mutual respect. She “learned from trustworthy sources to revere [him] as a gentleman and scholar, as unpretentious as [he] is prudent.”¹⁹⁸ She also reveals that she viewed Buoninsegni as different from the men who would “withhold access to the light of learning and literature,” as she explains that she “is not referring here to... Signore Buoninsegni.”¹⁹⁹ Buoninsegni was a talented author and a rightfully revered literary figure. Rather than a complete assault on Buoninsegni’s character, *Antisatire* was an opportunity for Tarabotti to exchange ideas with a famous academician, whom she looked up to. Due to the satirical nature of the work, Tarabotti could exchange blows with Buoninsegni, or more accurately the younger Buoninsegni who did believe in the natural vanity of women. Despite her apparent attacks, in *Antisatire*, Tarabotti makes it clear that she admires him as a man who could recognize his previous mistakes and grow to respect women.

Tarabotti’s respect was not unreciprocated. *Antisatire* may have been provocative toward Buoninsegni in some regards, but, nonetheless, he was actually grateful toward Tarabotti. In a letter to Angelico Aprosio — one of Tarabotti’s slanderers — Buoninsegni states,

I received the nun’s book and immediately, with four gentlemen of the Academy who were present when I received it, I read it straight through and to the supreme pleasure of everyone. We marveled at the great intelligence of that reverend mother. If Your Reverence has the occasion to speak to her, I ask you to give her a most affectionate kiss on the hand for me, thanking her with all my heart for the honor she has given me with her most erudite response. Assure her that not only have I not taken badly her little stings but I have been extremely grateful for them,

¹⁹⁸ Tarabotti, *Antisatire*, 68.

¹⁹⁹ Tarabotti, *Antisatire*, 68.

and if I ever come to Venice, as I hope to soon, I will attest my gratitude to her in person. For now give her my warm greetings.²⁰⁰

Buoninsegni's reception of Tarabotti's work was vastly different from Apro시오's, who thought that the work was "full of absurdities and ... impertinences."²⁰¹ Even before Tarabotti had published *Antisatire*, however, Buoninsegni was delighted at the idea of Tarabotti writing a response to his piece, and thought that it would be an honor. When it was first brought to his attention that Tarabotti would soon be publishing her response, he wrote to Apro시오, "I am infinitely grateful to that reverend mother who has honored me by finding my bagatelles ... worthy of the censure of her exalted wit."²⁰² By bagatelles here, Buoninsegni means trifling thoughts. The relationship between the two, expressed through *Antisatire* and Buoninsegni's letters, prove that Tarabotti could have more complex feelings toward men. Not all were evil tyrants who deserved to rot in hell.

Tarabotti's *Lettere* provides further evidence of the complexity behind her attitude toward men — complexity that was absent from her initial polemics. If Buoninsegni could be an exception to her assertion that men are tyrants, it turned out that there were other figures who could also be exempt. One such person was her patron, Giovanni Francesco Loredano, who had published works against women in his earlier years.²⁰³ Loredano and Tarabotti had a much stronger relationship that she had with Buoninsegni, with whom she never corresponded directly. Her respect for her patron is proven in her letters to Loredano that she had published within her

²⁰⁰ Weaver, "Introduction," in Tarabotti, *Antisatire*, 24.

²⁰¹ Weaver, "Introduction," in Tarabotti, *Antisatire*, 23.

²⁰² Weaver, "Introduction," in Tarabotti, *Antisatire*, 23.

²⁰³ For a full accounting of Loredano's works see: Tiziana Menegatti, *Ex ignoto notus: bibliographia delle opere a stampa del Principe degli Incogniti: Giovan Francesco Loredano* (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2000). Loredano's works displayed a consistent theme of misogyny. Even more importantly for Tarabotti, he organized the translation of an anonymous treatise denying that women possessed souls. This was the treatise that prompted Tarabotti's smaller work *Che le donne siano della specie degli uomini, difesa delle donne* — *That Women Are of the Same Species as Men, a Defense of Women*.

collection. In one such letter, she calls him the “embodiment of courtesy and kindness” and a “miracle of nature and prodigy of knowledge.”²⁰⁴ In another letter she “is blessed by [his] favors.”²⁰⁵ She claims that by “semidivine actions” Loredano removed himself from the ranks of other men.²⁰⁶ Loredano was different from men who would insult her and her work under the guise of praise. He was honest with her — whether he approved or disapproved of her work, he told her the truth. This trait alone was enough to be considered “semidivine” by Tarabotti.

Tarabotti considered Loredano, like Buoninsegni, an exception from the likes of other men. Describing her loyalty to Loredano, she states, “I consecrate with heartfelt devotion all that I am and all that I am worth, and I beg God that, just as His name will be eternal, so will you have never-ending life that the world may always be blessed by your celestial pen.”²⁰⁷ Loredano was someone whom Tarabotti relied on for support and sincerely trusted. Her other letters, such as ones to the Duke of Parma, where she discusses the men who insult her work, show that there were various men across Italy with whom she maintained positive relationships. Despite her very singular argument in *Paternal Tyranny* and *Inferno Monacale* that men are hypocritical tyrants, in her later works and through her personal life, Tarabotti moved past her anger and rage to portray a more complex view of men — one in which she acknowledged that they could grow as individuals and their own views and behaviors could change.

In *Lettere* and *Antisatire*, Tarabotti sought to define and prove her literary and academic talents, as she moved away from treatises built upon religious rhetoric, to more secular works. In doing so, she abandoned her sermon style of writing and emphasis on religious superiority that she possessed in specifically in *Convent Paradise*. In regard to the *Lettere*, there was a fairly

²⁰⁴ Tarabotti, *Letters*, Letter 9, 61-62.

²⁰⁵ Tarabotti, *Letters*, Letter 15, 68.

²⁰⁶ Tarabotti, *Letters*, Letter 15, 70.

²⁰⁷ Tarabotti, *Letters*, Letter 15, 70.

simple reason behind this. Tarabotti was corresponding with the very upper echelons of European society. Be it French diplomats, dukes, duchesses, or future popes, Tarabotti was in no position to lecture her audience as a superior of any sort. Her letters were very humble for the most part, unless she was addressing one of her critics. She consistently used language such as, “it would be an honor to kneel before you,” and “prostrate at your feet I beg for your forgiveness.”²⁰⁸ When addressing those socially and politically above her, Tarabotti assumed an exceptionally humble nature where she would sing praises at the recipients of letters while denigrating herself. The tone of her letters is almost the antithesis of the lofty and judgmental nun seen in *Paternal Tyranny*, *Inferno Monacale*, *Convent Paradise*, and even *Antisatire*. In her private communications, Tarabotti was more demure than in any of her treatises and satires, taking up the attitude of a servant while she sought patronage. In *Antisatire*, Tarabotti maintained her lofty attitude as she dared to critique and lecture Buoninsegni, but her sense of superiority was not derived from a religious standpoint. With *Antisatire*, Tarabotti entered the world of academicians and secular writing.

Tarabotti’s *Lettere* and *Antisatire* made her somewhat of an anomaly. At this point in time, nuns usually chose to write spiritual works or devotional poetry.²⁰⁹ With very spiritual undertones, her first three treatises could loosely be considered a part of the religious literary field not necessarily atypical of nuns, even if *Paternal Tyranny* and *Inferno Monacale* were polemical. On the other hand, her *Antisatire* and *Lettere* solidified her success as a secular writer and academician. With *Antisatire*, by daring to write in response to an established literary figure on a subject other than religion, Tarabotti established herself as a successful academician, whose intellect at the very least matched that of other members of the Incogniti. Her *Lettere*, while

²⁰⁸ Tarabotti, *Letters*, Letters 17 and 24, 75, 81.

²⁰⁹ Ray, “Introduction,” in Tarabotti, *Letters*, 21.

another venture into a new literary genre for Tarabotti, also provided proof of her talent and writing capabilities to those who doubted her ability to write *Paternal Tyranny* and her other works. Her letters to Loredano and other important publishing figures also validated her authorship of her works — in her letters she discussed her actual writing processes and thoughts, while each of her pieces were underway. In *Antisatire* and *Lettere*, Tarabotti entered two new genres of secular writing, very different from her treatises and in doing so, moved forward in her literary career to gain recognition for her work.

Conclusion

Why, like tyrants, do you wish to enslave woman's noble soul by means of barbaric laws? This is too cruel a deprivation of liberty because vows of obedience bind them, made eternal by oaths you force nuns to take, furthermore, so they are no longer in charge of their own lives.²¹⁰

Thrown into a convent as an adolescent, Arcangela Tarabotti had no control over her life. She remained in that convent until the day she died and never possessed the freedom and liberty she so desired. While Tarabotti was not in a unique position — there were thousands of other women similarly trapped — she did possess something that most did not. Tarabotti had a voice, where many others were voiceless. Through her writings on the experiences of women and nuns, Tarabotti gave them voice. These women suffered through comparable experiences to Tarabotti — they felt the same anger, betrayal, despair, and helplessness. Tarabotti advocated to her readers for greater change and equality. She used her wit, intellect, and talents to call attention to injustice, despite the mockery and censorship she knew she would receive.

Scholars in the past have used her first two polemics as sources of early modern feminism and gender dynamics within and outside the convent. Scholars have mostly focused on *Paternal Tyranny*, as it is by far her most memorable work for reasons including her strong rhetoric and sarcastic language. But following close behind in scholarship is her *Lettere* as it bridges the gap between private and public. These letters, in addition to *Antisatire*, also provide insight into Tarabotti's relationship with Italian and European elites, but more interestingly show how she carved out her place among the Incogniti. These topics, which I explored in my thesis, rightly deserve the vast amount of literature scholars have devoted to them. Each work of Tarabotti's is significant in its own right and offers different glimpses into her relationships and

²¹⁰ Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, Book 1, 81.

experiences, as well as greater Venetian convent culture. What scholars have largely missed, however, is a comparison of Tarabotti's writings over time, as they represent different stages in her literary career.

My thesis addressed this gap in scholarship by examining the evolution of Tarabotti's religiosity, beliefs, language, tone, and emotions, chronologically over the course of her five most famous works — *Paternal Tyranny*, *Inferno Monacale*, *Convent Paradise*, *Antisatire*, and her *Lettere*. My argument revealed itself over the course of three chapters, with the crux of it contained in the third chapter. My first chapter laid out the broader Venetian landscape, within which Tarabotti found herself. Riddled with various political, religious, social, and economic challenges at the turn of the 17th century, Venice was in a very precarious position. I examined political tensions between Venice and Rome, the state of the Venetian convent and aristocracy, and the Council of Trent and its implications in Venice — all of which were contributing factors to Tarabotti's forced monachization and that of thousands of Venetian girls.

In my second chapter I established an overview of Tarabotti's life and a brief outline of each of her works. I contended that throughout her life, Tarabotti broke through the walls between public and private — as scholars before me have done —, male and female, and secular and monastic. She took risks in her publications, be it her polemics or epistolary exchanges, and held very little back. Her works were so risky that they bordered on open rebellion, with the exception of *Convent Paradise*. Without the help of her strong network of allies in the publishing and political spheres, she may never have succeeded in publishing any of her writings.

The final chapter of my thesis turned to Tarabotti's literary journey, emphasizing her evolving views of men and increasing complexity of emotions. I argued that Tarabotti's literary career could be broken down into three stages — one defined by anger and controversy, the

second being a conversion experience and redemption arc, and a third where she branched out into more secular genres, establishing herself as an academician. Tarabotti initially broke into the literary scene through her *Paternal Tyranny*, followed shortly by *Inferno Monacale*. These two works were strong polemics against men and forced monachization and sparked strong backlash against her. She then redeemed herself in the eyes of her male readers through *Convent Paradise* where she distanced herself from, but did not contradict, her earlier works and emphasized her own religiosity and that of fellow nuns. With *Antisatire* and *Lettere*, Tarabotti left her religious undertones behind and progressed with more academic works meant to prove her literary capabilities.

I hope this thesis raises interest in further expanding upon the recent literature surrounding Tarabotti. There are still numerous questions about Tarabotti, her life, and her works that need to be explored. One such topic that has been vastly overlooked is Tarabotti's own religiosity. While I studied her literary evolution, her religious journey, which she hinted at in *Convent Paradise*, and her specific religious views, as expressed in many of her works, require further evaluation. Furthermore, there are yet more questions to be raised on how we understand the experiences of women, their agency, and how these women saw themselves within the convent system. Tarabotti offers another window through which to examine these questions.

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