

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



‘She speaks poniards’: Shakespearean Drama and the Italianate Leading Lady as Verbal Duellist

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‘Every lover is a warrior’ (‘ogni amante è guerrier’): so states the opening thesis line of Ottavio Rinuccini’s elaborate Petrarchan lyric, set to music by Claudio Monteverdi in his *Eighth Book of Madrigals* (1638).¹ Yet what *kind* of warrior is a lover?² A potentially courtly one, rather than a blustering braggart soldier? The love-war nexus is a late medieval/early modern commonplace, elaborated not only by Petrarch and his imitators but also in Tasso’s epic poem *Gerusalemme liberata* via humanist Neo-Platonic excursions on Venus and Mars as well as Italian art works depicting the various triumphs of the goddess.³ Such Renaissance representations transform the courtly love model of chivalric service by setting the divine couple in a classicizing *locus amoenus*, where female-governed harmony prevails: for example, in Paolo Veronese’s painting *Mars and Venus United by Love* (1570), the foreground Cupid playfully uses a sword to block Mars’s tethered and docile-looking steed, while his background twin binds together the god of

¹ From Monteverdi, Claudio, *Ottavo libro di madrigali (Madrigali guerrieri e amorosi)* (Venice: Alessandro Vincenti, 1638), no. 6, 2-3vv.

² I ask a question here, but without question I wish to thank Edel Semple and Ema Vyroubalová—organizers of the seminar on ‘European Women in Early Modern Drama’ for the 2015 European Shakespeare Research Association conference in Worcester, England – and the other members of this seminar, especially Celia Caputi and Oliver Morgan, for their helpful responses to this essay. My thanks also go to the anonymous readers for *EMLS*, for their detailed and constructive comments on an earlier draft.

³ To cite but one example, Petrarch calls his beloved Laura ‘dolce mia guerrera’ (‘my sweet warrior’) in line 1 of Poem 21 of his *Canzoniere*, helping to inspire imitations and transformations of this trope for the next few centuries, among them the doomed love between the Christian knight Tancredi and the Muslim woman warrior Clorinda, in Tasso’s epic (also set to music by Monteverdi).

war and the goddess of love by their lower legs [\[figure 1\]](#).⁴

Numerous variations on this mythic Venus-Mars paradigm would recur from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, one of the most notable, complex, and fascinating – as well as especially pertinent to the current study – being that of Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*.⁵ When, however, a pair of less legendary flesh-and-blood lovers are the subject, with their amorous relations still in a phase of courtship and dynamic process, they often will appear in early modern art, poetry, and theatre as *duellists*, striving for victory in a one-on-one encounter.⁶ While educated elite ladies were advised to use polite rhetoric and decorous euphemism to avoid or at least diffuse the potentially combative energies of female-male conversation, other models were becoming available in sixteenth-century Italy, which gave women space for expressing confrontational wit, bawdiness, and open mockery, even in public. As I will emphasise later in this essay, Shakespeare and his contemporaries could and did emulate the competitive duelling between the sexes staged by early female writers and performers of the ‘commedia dell’arte’. Thus, when Beatrice asks ‘is Signor Mountanto returned from the wars or no?’ (*Much Ado About Nothing*, 1.1.28-9), she is sounding out the same kind of notes played by witty Italian leading ladies, ones that do not follow courtly restraint, decorum, and an aesthetic sublimation of aggression, but rather openly link sex and violence. This linkage resonates in her joke about Benedick’s having ‘set up his bills here in Messina and challenged Cupid at the flight; and my uncle’s fool, reading the challenge, subscribed for Cupid and challenged him at the bird-bolt. I pray you, how many hath he killed and eaten in these wars?’ (1.1.36-40). Appropriating as well as mocking militaristic language, at this point Beatrice exposes the violent masculine attitudes lying just below the surface of the polite courtly manners supposedly attained through the ‘civilizing process’ linked to treatises like Baldessare Castiglione’s: *Libro del cortegiano* (‘Book of the Courtier’, first published in 1528). As Jennifer Feather and Catherine E. Thomas put it, ‘chivalry may become courtship and prowess may be replaced by *sprezzatura*, but these ideals still lead

⁴ Figure 1: Paolo Veronese, ‘Mars and Venus United by Love’, 1570s; oil on canvas. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Reproduction courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art OASC program.

⁵ Among various studies of this crucial aspect of the play, an especially illuminating one remains Janet Adelman’s *The Common Liar: an Essay on ‘Antony and Cleopatra’* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973). Space limitations, along with the ancient Roman setting of the play, prevent extended consideration of *Antony and Cleopatra* in the current essay.

⁶ In his study *The Duel in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 93-7, Victor G. Kiernan explains how the rise of the modern duel was marked by a shift away from ritualistic mounted combat in restricted spaces, toward quickly arranged encounters, on foot, in almost any available outdoor space: the male-female love-duel, I would argue, emerges as a corollary of this process.

to assertions of male dominance.’⁷ Benedick’s hyperbolic complaint against the ‘curst,’ outspoken Beatrice – ‘she speaks poniards, and every words stabs’ – thus bespeaks a widespread cultural consciousness of how a woman’s boldness in entering the public debating arena invited men to recognise but presumably subdue such boldness.

In particular, this consciousness pertained to the ideal yet also to the dilemma of a desirable, high-status woman who was meant to practice wit and eloquence but also shyness and obedience, and who might also possess traits beyond male control. Important scholarly studies by Carol Cook, Lynda Boose, Pamela Allen Brown, and others have incisively analyzed the intricate relationship between female volubility and male anxiety about cuckoldry shaping *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Othello* and other Shakespearean marital dramas.⁸ In a contrasting but also complementary way, I will argue that it is equally appropriate to explore the question of how women could be acknowledged and sometimes admired for openly overcoming men in their own arena of social and militaristic competition. I therefore aim to connect tropes of duelling expressed at the verbal level to aspects of actual early modern duelling with swords and daggers (poniards), to propose that ‘virago’ characters like Beatrice and Katherina gain their ambivalent mix of charisma and danger through their acknowledged capacity to deliver the final *coup de grace* to their male partner/adversary. If a binary opposition pertains in this context, it is no longer the post-classical or post-Petrarchan one between ‘Love as War’ or ‘Love as Peace,’ but more precisely between a more male-regulated ‘Conversazione Civile’ (Decorous Conversation) and a more female-endorsing – especially when comedic – ‘Amoroso Contrasto’ (Lover’s Debate). Echoing Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*, a Shakespearean female speaker’s decisive thrust can be given its Italian fencing designation of ‘alla stoccata,’⁹ since the above-named voluble, publicly

⁷ See Jennifer Feather and Catherine E. Thomas (eds.), *Violent Masculinities: Male Aggression in Early Modern Texts and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 5. I wish to thank Ema Vyroubalová and Edel Semple for the reference to this volume.

⁸ See Carol Cook, “‘The Sign and Semblance of Her Honor’: Reading Gender Difference in *Much Ado About Nothing*”, in *Shakespeare and History*, ed. by Deborah Barker and Ivo Kamps (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 75-103; Lynda Boose, ‘Scolding Brides and Bridling Scolds: Taming the Woman’s Unruly Member’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42 (1991), 179-213; Pamela Allen Brown, *Better a Shrew Than a Sheep: Women, Drama, and the Culture of Jest in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Edward A. Snow, ‘Sexual Anxiety and the Male Order of Things in *Othello*’, *ELR* 10 (1980), 384-412; and Michael Neill, “‘Unproper Beds’: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40 (1989), 383-412.

⁹ On Shakespeare’s use of contemporary Italian fencing and duelling manuals, especially in *Romeo and Juliet*, see Joan Ozark Holmer, “‘Draw, if you be Men’: Saviolo’s Significance for *Romeo and Juliet*”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45 (1994), 163-89; and Jill Levenson, “‘Alla stoccado carries it away’: Codes of Violence in *Romeo and Juliet*”, in *Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet: Texts, Contexts, and Interpretation*, ed.

assertive protagonists evoke specific Italian cities – Messina, Padua, Venice – as well as the charismatic stars or ‘dive’ of the late sixteenth century Italian professional stage, such as Vittoria Piisimi and Isabella Andreini. These versatile performers counted their rhetorical virtuosity and aptitude for winning verbal duels among their trademark skills, and would have provided role models for Shakespeare’s bold and eloquent female public speakers, who transcend conventional, decorum-enforcing limits placed on their gender’s voice.¹⁰

This new image of ‘theatrical woman-as-winning-duellist’ also would have appealed to audiences across Europe for its playing variations on prominent, often ambivalent patterns in late fifteenth- to sixteenth-century figurative culture, namely the heroic ‘woman warrior’ model, and the satirical ‘woman on top’ topos. These coterminous fields of reference, seen in such influential chivalric romance characters as Ariosto’s Bradamante and Marfisa, and in satirical engravings like that of Phyllis riding and even whipping Aristotle [\[figure 2\]](#),¹¹ reveal a society preoccupied with the question of aggressive competition between the sexes.¹² The vertically structured courtly love paradigm of the devoted knight serving and suffering for his idealized, sometimes elevated lady gradually yielded to scenarios of direct interaction and confrontation. And even as patriarchal bias presumed a normative, stabilizing surrender of woman to man, strong currents that expressed alternative arrangements – be they equal or at least ‘companionate’ ones, or cynical ‘henpecked husbands’, ‘wives wearing the breeches’ ones, or even back-and-forth, open-ended ones – also shaped the era’s social and cultural scene.

by Jay L. Halio (London: Associated University Presses, 1995), pp. 83-96. See also Paul L. Kottman, ‘Duel’, in *Early Modern Theatricality: Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature*, ed. by Henry S. Turner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 400-22.

¹⁰ Again, see the outstanding work of Pamela Allen Brown, including her ‘The Counterfeit *Innamorata*, or the Diva Vanishes,’ *Shakespeare Yearbook* 10 (1999), 402-26; and ‘Dido, Boy Queen of Carthage’, *Transnational Mobilities in Early Modern Theater*, ed. by Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Press, 2014). Also see: Julie Campbell, “‘Merry, nimble, stirring spirit[s]’: Academic, Salon and Commedia dell’arte Influence on the *Innamorate* in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*”, in *Women Players in England, 1500-1660*, ed. by Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin; Eric Nicholson, ‘Ophelia Sings Like a *Prima Donna Innamorata*: Ophelia’s Mad Scene and the Italian Female Performer’, *Transnational Exchange in Early Modern Theater*, ed. by Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate Press, 2008), pp. 81-98.

¹¹ Figure 2: Johann Sadeler I (after Bartholomeus Spranger), ‘Phyllis and Aristotle’, late 16th century.

¹² Among many valuable works on this subject, see the ‘Women on Top’ chapter by Natalie Zemon Davis, in her volume *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), pp. 124-151; Susan L. Smith, *The Power of Women: a Topos in Medieval Art and Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); and Deanna Shemek, *Ladies Errant: Wayward Women and Social Order in Early Modern Italy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

The early modern ‘civilizing process’, distinguished by the gradual transformation of warriors into courtiers charted by Norbert Elias, received much of its aesthetic disposition from Italian theorists as well as practitioners of refined and well-educated conduct.¹³ Three influential texts – Castiglione’s above-cited *Libro del cortegiano* (1528), followed by Giovanni della Casa’s *Galateo* (1558) and Stefano Guazzo’s *La Civil Conversazione* (1570) – established ideas, terms, and guidelines for courtly behavior which for several centuries would crucially fashion life at places like Urbino, Ferrara, Versailles, Vienna, Whitehall, and Hampton Court. A prevalent objective of these Italian conduct books and their advocates was to sublimate aggression, and channel competition toward pleasingly aesthetic ends. Thus, while Castiglione’s perfect courtier must, like his medieval forbears, strive for expertise in arms, he now must do so with *grace*. This keynote of ‘grazia’ pervades the entire *Libro del cortegiano*, as it does Guazzo’s text, and has an importance equal to ‘sprezzatura,’ the art of concealing art, and carrying out difficult and challenging actions with studied nonchalance. As Wayne Rebhorn, Virginia Cox, Peter Burke, and others have aptly explained, both ‘grazia’ and ‘sprezzatura’ entail subtle theatricality, a readiness to perform and put one’s self on display in such a way as to exalt artistry, while subordinating or at least masking potentially hostile energies.¹⁴ It is already evident that despite their Italian breeding and education, unruly and boisterous characters like Beatrice and Benedick, or Katherina and Petruchio, hardly aspire to follow this norm. The very setting of Castiglione’s dialogue – a chamber of the Urbino palace under the governance of the charmingly witty Emilia Pia and the universally admired Duchess Elisabetta Gonzaga – implies that the masculine profession of arms, required by feudal codes to defend castles and their surrounding estates, is pushed into retreat by the agenda of civility and sociability. The key playing field for attaining these elite culture values, where ethics and aesthetics become inextricably linked, and a performance-oriented approach to individual as well as collective relationships wins the prize, is none other than decorous conversation. ‘Et vengo fra me me medesimo considerando che I piaceri della musica, delle feste, delle giostre, delle commedie, e tutti gli altri giuochi, e spettacoli siano nulla, rispetto alla gioia che si sente nella conversazione de’ gentili spiriti’ (‘when I reflect on the matter, I realize that the pleasures of music, of revels, of jousts, of plays, and of all other sports and shows are nothing compared to the joy which one feels in conversations

¹³ See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, translated by Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon, 1978-82), esp. Vol. I, pp. 77-82.

¹⁴ See Wayne Rebhorn, *Courtly Performances: Masking and Festivity in Castiglione’s ‘Book of the Courtier’* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1978); Virginia Cox, *The Renaissance Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Peter Burke, *The Fortunes of the Courtier* (London: Polity Press, 2013).

among gentle spirits’):¹⁵ thus declares Guazzo, in a key passage of his *La Civil Conversazione* that explicitly establishes the primacy of the art of speaking well.

Indeed, civil society depends upon polite conversation between members of both sexes for its very maintenance and well-being: for Guazzo, ‘conversazione’ is ‘civile’ precisely because it promotes ‘an honest, commendable, and virtuous kind of living in the world’.¹⁶ When gracefully and respectfully applied, conversation thus becomes the joyous end as well as vital means of a refined social milieu which succeeds in channelling its potential hostilities towards constructive, peaceable exchange. In this context, Venus the goddess of suave persuasion subdues Mars the god of violent combat, yet in such a way that neither side presumes dominance over the other. Significantly, Della Casa and Guazzo stress the importance of balance in conversation, strongly advising against the kind of ‘tyranny’ imposed by a speaker who takes more than his fair share of time during a verbal encounter. In some sense recalling the device of stichomythia in classical drama, Guazzo proposes an analogy between good conversation and a tennis match, promoting a sense of ‘correspondence’.¹⁷ A game is being played, then, but without a winner. Crucially, the relational model shifts here, from that of a duel to one of a duet, with the woman and her partner accomplishing a graceful, reciprocally coordinated dance. In this game, moreover, women play variable parts, as they are sometimes expected to be directly engaged in conversation with men, and at others to be silent if attentive listeners, with the possibility of their acting as arbiters and mediators. Castiglione’s ideal ‘*donna di palazzo*’ will be educated in many of the same arts and skills mastered by the ideal ‘*cortegiano*’ – letters, music, painting, dancing, and merry-making – and also will be expected to share his virtues of ‘prudence, magnanimity, temperance, and many others,’ yet with the special goal of cultivating a ‘certain pleasing affability, by which she will graciously hold discourse with every kind of man, through agreeable and honest sayings’.¹⁸ ‘Hold discourse with’ is my own attempt to provide a more early modern rendering of ‘*intratenere*’, which as Amedeo Quondam has noted is the verb Castiglione employs instead of ‘*conversare*’ to distinguish women’s conversation from men’s.

As an alternative to Quondam’s conclusion, however, I would contend that this distinction keeps the ‘*donna di palazzo*’ in a marginal or subaltern position. Close consideration shows that Castiglione’s ideal court lady – and to a lesser extent Guazzo’s more

¹⁵ Stefano Guazzo, *La civil’ conversazione*, ed. by Amedeo Quondam, 2 vols., (Rome: Bulzoni, 2010), I, p. 21 (as elsewhere, the translation is my own).

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 22.

¹⁷ See Cox, p. 41.

¹⁸ Baldessare Castiglione, *Il libro del Cortegiano*, ed. by Amedeo Quondam (Milan: Garzanti, 1981), p. 266.

democratic one – is encouraged to maintain a liminal as well as shiftingly double status, betwixt and between conventionally opposite qualities, including active and passive ones. She would do well to become something of a moral as well as behavioural acrobat, for as Castiglione goes on to urge, ‘she needs to practice a certain difficult equilibrium [*‘una certa mediocrità difficile’*], composed almost of contrary things’: for example, while always showing herself to be modest, honest, and ‘opposed to all vulgarity,’ she still ought to ‘distinguish all her actions with a vivacity of wit,’ and be ready to accept and blush only slightly at ‘lascivious talk.’ The daunting challenge for the ‘*donna di palazzo*’ is thus to ‘intratenere’ in a way that does encompass the verb’s modern sense of giving pleasurable ‘entertainment,’ but at the same time to express an ‘abundance of prudence and honesty,’ always with ‘supreme grace’.¹⁹ Given prejudices about women’s susceptibility to enjoying sensual pleasures, encouraging them to ‘entertain’ others in a public setting could bring risks and potential contradictions.

To entertain, then, or more suggestively to offer entertainment according to the word’s multiple meanings, marks the way a ‘woman of the palace’ is advised to interact with others, and especially men. As in English, the Italian ‘intratenere’ could signify to receive, or give welcome, as well as to give pleasure and diversion: the ‘sprezzatura’ here is to be graceful, welcoming, entertaining and witty, without either presuming to dominate men or at least assume their prerogatives, nor to convey a sense of being shameless, lewd, and immodest. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, the cousins Hero and Beatrice represent contrasting and sometimes unjustly embattled responses to this dilemma. The former’s quiet reserve, at least in mixed company, makes her vulnerable to accusations of ‘seeming,’ while the latter’s ‘shrewd’ volubility provokes the label of ‘too curst’. Amidst the repartee duels that enliven *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio – who deliberately plays a kind of Anti-Courtier – jests that ‘thou [Katherina] with mildness *entertain*’st thy wooers’ [my italics]. In fact, he makes this ironic quip at the climax of a speech that echoes some of the guidelines for female conversation found in the Italian conduct-books:

I find you passing gentle.

’Twas told me you were rough and coy and sullen,
And now I find report a very liar,
For thou art pleasant, gamesome, passing courteous,
But slow in speech, yet sweet as spring-time flowers.
Thou canst not frown, thou canst not look askance,
Nor bite the lip, as angry wenches will,
Nor hast thou pleasure to be cross in talk (2.1.245-52).

¹⁹ Castiglione, pp. 266 and 269.

To culminate this catalog of Katherina's perfect balance of decorous restraint ('slow in speech') and flirtatious good manners ('pleasant, gamesome, passing courteous'), Petruchio accentuates her mild entertainment of suitors, especially through conversation: 'with *gentle conference*, soft and affable'. Playing his own role of satirical, counter-intuitive comedian to the hilt, the mercenary, swaggering soldier of marital fortune thus characterizes his bride-to-be as one who does accomplish Castiglione's mission impossible for the court lady: a great entertainer, yes, but also a paragon of female modesty, amiability, and compliance. If not necessarily subordinate nor subaltern – though the ridiculously ironic Petruchio, in a parody of masculinist regimes, will make her seem so – Katherina of Padua is here appointed the status of virtuous Italianate lady, skilled at expressing grace and affability. At the same time, and as early twenty-first century theatrical productions have sometimes explored, Petruchio's hilarious anti-courtly routine offers Katherina a chance to play the jesting comedian along with him, and even out-duel him at his own fast-talking, irreverent game.²⁰

A refined and well-educated conversationalist, but one who knows just when – nearly all of the time – and how – with natural, artful artlessness – to yield the protagonist role to the man: such is the ideal of the well-bred and desirable young lady that Castiglione's complex four-part dialogue exported to England and other European countries.²¹ The drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries is so replete with expressions of this ideal that it is hardly necessary to press the point. In *Othello*, the much-admired and much-courted Desdemona is both the paragon and victim of such constructions of elite, educated femininity, as shown by her graceful 'beguiling' of 'the thing I am by seeming otherwise', in her conversation with the courtly, flattering Cassio and the bawdy, detracting Iago, in Act Two, scene one of the play. Suffice it here to quote Othello's recognition of Desdemona's sociable merits:

'Tis not to make me jealous
To say my wife is fair, feeds well, loves company,
Is free of speech, sings, plays, and dances well –
Where virtue is, these are more virtuous' (3.3.186-9).

²⁰ See, for example, the 2003 Royal Shakespeare Company and Shakespeare's Globe productions, respectively directed by Gregory Doran and Phyllida Lloyd, and the comments made by both directors in interviews with them printed in the edition of *The Taming of the Shrew* by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (New York: Modern Library, 2010), pp. 144-156.

²¹ As Peter Burke has shown (pp. 17-23), *Il Cortegiano* was primarily read and understood in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a guide for personal conduct.

His last clause here is all too overdetermined, because this ethical qualification makes an outgoing and talented woman vulnerable to cynical and misogynistic attack, as Iago's words and deeds effectively and tragically demonstrate. Indeed, a few lines later, with Othello rapidly sliding into self-doubt and mistrust, the word 'conversation' makes an appearance, as the Moor ruminates, 'Haply, for I am black / And have not those soft parts of conversation / That chamberers have' (3.3.266-8). The North African outsider's insecurity and feelings of inferiority also involve his conscious awareness that Venetian Desdemona's native cultural habitat is that of the genteel courtly chamber. Subconsciously, he may also hint at the diffuse euphemistic sense of 'conversation' as sexual intercourse, the meaning that a lewd interpreter like Iago would insist upon, turning Guazzo's vehicle for civil virtue into pitch. Herein lies the fragility of the 'mediocrità difficile' and even the 'sprezzatura' proposed for the courtly lady: the reductive prejudice that a lascivious version of Venus, whose sexual appetites cannot be called 'our own', lurks beneath a 'super-subtle' exterior of decorous refinement, can quickly dissolve the harmonious union of the goddess of love and the god of war, and instead enable a destructive scenario of slander, suspicion, abuse, murder, and suicide. A fine line is evident here, between comically or tragically resolving courtship and marriage plots marked by male sexual aggression. Like Benedick, Othello is a man of war, and the play named after him mirrors *Much Ado About Nothing* in having comical, even clownish elements juxtaposed to serious, even fatal ones – with a key difference being that Hero returns from her social and spiritual 'death by slander', while Desdemona succumbs to her real death by strangulation.

To support further analysis of the ultimately non-violent duellists Beatrice and Benedick, reference also can be made to an alternative, anti-courtly Italian literary/dramatic model for verbal and even physical interaction between the sexes. This form, known as early as the thirteenth century as '*il contrasto*', bears a close resemblance to the better known *tenzone*, sharing with the latter the essential structure of two alternating voices, who usually engage in a spirited rhetorical contest. More often than the *tenzone*, however, the interlocutors in a *contrasto* are lovers or potential lovers, and their debate involves amorous intrigue or contention. The style also tends to be comical and realistic, savoring of the banter exchanged on the streets or in the fields, but not inside the halls of a castle or palace. The *contrasto* thus emulates a duel much more closely and pertinently than a 'civil conversation', lending itself more readily to word-play as well as to actual stage adaptation. Fittingly, the most famous of all early 'commedia dell'arte' professional actresses was also an oft-published author of not only poems, letters, and a pastoral play, but also *contrastì*: Isabella Andreini (ca. 1562-1604). Andreini's tour de force stage speciality of 'la Pazzia' became a model for Ophelia, The Gaoler's Daughter of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and other madwomen of early modern theatre, and her 'Amorosi

Contrasti' ('Lovers' Debates') are the close kindred of the 'skirmishes of wit' performed by leading ladies in various Shakespearean comedies. Included in the posthumous collection of *Fragmenti di alcune scritture della Signora Isabella Andreini Comica Gelosa, et Academica Intenta* ('Fragments of various writings of la Signora Isabella Andreini, Member of the Gelosi Acting Company, and of the Intenti Academy'), published in Venice by Isabella's co-star and devoted husband Francesco and their colleague Flaminio Scala in 1617, and reprinted several times during the next decade or more, these thirty-one *contrast*i invariably feature a man and a woman as their speakers, who are almost always engaged in some kind of an amorous relationship.²² These two-person rhetorical bouts serve as comic frames for the discussion of matters of serious contemporary social and intellectual interest. Moreover, the woman is the frequent winner of these debates, which focus on such topics as love and hate, the fever of love, the death of love, marital love, lovers' jealousy, falling out of love, the genres of comedy, tragedy, and epic poetry, and the relative merits of arms and letters. While Isabella, probably with Francesco as co-author and editor, invariably gives *recherché* Greco-Roman names to her interlocutors – Eudoxia and Manlius, Lesbia and Eurymachus, et al. – and goes out of her way to demonstrate her impressive command of Aristotle, Ovid, Dante, Ariosto, and other classical as well as modern poets and philosophers, her dialogues do attest to actual stage practice.²³

Isabella also conveys a stage performer's sensitivity to rhythm and variety, as she often moves from sequences of stichomythia to exchanges of longer speeches, followed by clever flourishes or facetious and sometimes cuttingly mocking barbs and punch-lines, thus using the forceful verbal weapon known in Italian as the 'stoccata'. With bad pun intended, I here use 'verbal weapon' *pointedly*, to emphasize the double sense of 'stoccata,' which receives attention in the widely read fencing manuals of the sixteenth century authors Girolamo Muzio, author of *Il Duello* (Venice, 1550), and Vincenzo Saviolo, a Paduan emigrè to London who taught fencing and translated Muzio's treatise,

²² Together with Pamela Allen Brown and Julie D. Campbell, I am currently working on an English translation of the 'Amorosi contrasti,' to be published by the Arizona State Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. Inevitably, we are indebted to the pioneering work of Louise George Clubb, who demonstrates how Andreini's dialogues furnish models for bantering Shakespearean couples: see her magisterial *Italian Drama in Shakespeare's Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 232-39. I also wish to thank Celia Caputi for her observation that the number of Isabella's *contrast*i may be an oblique rebuking of the 'trentuno' or thirty-one couplings sometimes forced upon prostitutes in early modern Italy.

²³ This fact is indicated by their sometimes being named 'contrast*i* scenici' (debates for the stage), and confirmed by abundant internal theatrical devices, such as asides, cues for tears, fainting fits, and other physical actions.

probably assisted by John Florio, as the second volume of his *Practise* (1595).²⁴ To this day ‘una stoccata’ means both an actual rapier-thrust, and a jeer, taunt, or jibe. Again, Beatrice shows her mastery of this ‘coup de grace’ technique, when she concludes her brief but vivid duologue, *in maschera*, with Benedick by declaring that his own jokes will be ‘not marked or not laughed at,’ and that therefore he ‘the [‘melancholy’] fool will eat no supper that night’ (2.1.143-6). One such piercingly witty thrust concludes Andreini’s *contrasto* on Comedy, when the would-be lover and aspiring playwright Diomede declares that he is ‘hoping to bring to a happy ending this my amorous comedy entitled “Ersilia in Love”’ and the same Ersilia retorts ‘entitle it instead “The Luckless Diomede,” that will be more to the point!’ Like Benedick in the above-cited *Much Ado* masked ball scene, Diomede is left speechless, and thus Ersilia wins this duel.

Along with the cleverness of the stage ‘Prima Donna Innamorata’, Ersilia’s victory also evokes the kind of superior, competitive female wit expressed and validated by another, slightly earlier Italian female author, Veronica Franco. This Venetian courtesan poet, who flourished in the 1560’s and 70’s, employs the terms ‘contrasto’ and ‘contrastar’ at climactic moments in her ‘terza rima’ poems, several of which are purported as being written and spoken by Veronica’s lovers, supporters, or detractors. These ‘capitoli’ thus serve almost as scripts for an ongoing erotic and psychological drama: in short, the actress, poet, and love poetry expert Isabella Andreini could have learned much from Veronica’s ‘contrastar’ approach. Several of Franco’s poems resonate in this context, as they develop word-plays on simultaneous physical and verbal duelling:

Forse nel letto ancor ti seguirei,
e quivi, teco guerriggiando stesa,

in alcun modo non ti cederei:
Per soverchiar la tua sì indegna offesa
ti verrei sopra, e nel contrasto ardita,
scaldandoti ancor tu ne la difesa,
teco morrei d’egual colpo ferita.

Perhaps I would even follow you to bed,
and, stretched out there in skirmishes with
you,

I would yield to you in no way at all:
To take revenge for your unfair attack,
I’d fall upon you, and in daring combat,
as you too caught fire defending yourself,
I would die with you, felled by the same
blow.²⁵

²⁴ On Saviolo and his promotion of ‘la stoccata’, as well as his treatise’s impact on Shakespeare, see the previously cited essays by Joan Ozark Holmer and Jill Levenson.

²⁵ Veronica Franco, ‘Capitolo 13’, (‘A Challenge to a Lover Who Has Offended Her’), ll. 79-85, in *Poems and Selected Letters*, translated and edited by Ann Rosalind Jones and Margaret F. Rosenthal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 136-7.

Often proclaiming her expertise in the bedroom, this female author both dismantles and sometimes overturns the abstract and mystifying conventions of Petrarchan love lyric, at the same time intimating that civil conversation is not the practice to cultivate either. This notion applies in particular to Capitolo 16, in which Franco eloquently defends herself against the brutal, misogynistic, and obscene attacks of Maffio Venier, reaching an ingenious climax when she challenges her opponent,

Apparecchiate pur l'inchostro e 'l foglio, e fatemi saper senz'altro indugio	So make ready now your paper and ink, and tell me, this time, without further delay
quali armi per combatter in man toglio.	Which weapons I must wield in combat with you.
Voi non avrete incontro a me rifugio, ch'a tutte prove sono apparecchiata e impazientemente a l'opra indugio.	You will have nowhere to run from me for I am prepared for any test of skill And I wait impatiently to start the fight. ²⁶

Franco's *virtuosa* pen is not only mightier than her male rival's sword, it *is* her *own* sword, which she confidently handles better than any man.

Likewise with the female contestants of Isabella Andreini's 'lovers' debates', who notwithstanding the conduct-books' advice to practice seemingly modesty, and the Counter-Reformation censorship campaign to 'clean up' women's speech, manage to match or even outdo their male interlocutors in speaking out boldly and using bawdy innuendo unabashedly. For example, puns and word-play on 'parte' ('part', as in body part) and being 'sotto' ('under') or 'sopra' ('on top') occur with some frequency. Again, this is not too surprising, given the sexually frank and provocative behaviour of the 'prime donne innamorate' in several 'commedia dell'arte' scenarios, not only during mad scenes when bawdy-talk and exposing actual breasts were sometimes practiced, but also in such comedies as Flaminio Scala's 'Jealous Old Man', wherein the young wife named Isabella has sex with Orazio while her husband Pantalone guards the door leading to the lovers' room.²⁷ In this case, the Prima Donna's actions speak even more persuasively than her

²⁶ Franco, 'Capitolo 16 ("A Challenge to a Poet Who Has Defamed Her")', ll. 193-8, pp. 170-1.

²⁷ See Flaminio Scala, *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative* (Venice, 1611), partially available in an excellent English translation and edition by Richard Andrews, *The Commedia dell'Arte of Flaminio Scala: a Translation and Analysis of 30 Scenarios* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008), pp. 31-40. The 'lazzo' (stage routine) of the husband guarding the door while his wife enjoys herself with her lover was a popular one throughout Europe, recurring for example in Middleton's *A Mad World, My Masters* (1608), and Cervantes's 'entremes' of 'El viejo celoso' (1615). Scala's scenario, along with 49 others, was published in 1611, just a few years before Isabella's 'Amorosi contrasti' were released, yet both texts are compendia

words, as she physically evades and refutes her impotent husband's would-be assertions of patriarchal dominance and authority.

In a more verbal way, the witty, outspoken leading lady of *Much Ado About Nothing* mocks such assertions by turning the tables on them. To return to her first lines in the play: 'Mountanto' is an Italian fencing term, meaning 'up-thrust,' and combines with the familiar sexual connotations of 'mount' to introduce Beatrice as an extroverted duellist, prepared to meet and perhaps even invent 'challenges'. She also proves her skill at administering the 'stoccata', for when she identifies Benedick's abrupt retreat from their first flight of 'flyting' as 'a jade's trick', she demotes him from his would-be rank as a gallant warrior-lover on horseback to the status of a 'worn-out stallion; hence a surfeit-exhausted man'.²⁸ In their next encounter, at the masked ball, he is thoroughly 'put down' by her, prompting his wounded victim's complaint that because of Beatrice's barbs, 'I stood like a man at a mark, with a whole army shooting at me. She speaks poniards, and every word stabs' (2.1.225-7). For all its edgy hyperbole, Benedick's character portrait accurately identifies his interlocutor's androgynous traits, as encoded by a culture of combat. With her tongue wielding or perhaps even turning into phallic daggers, Beatrice is figured as an assertive Italianate female protagonist, a 'guerriera amorosa' or 'loving woman warrior', scathingly and still punningly critical of courtly manners, who has the credentials to be a duelling man of action herself. Appropriately, she casts herself as a man who would be prominent in the public eye, in a public space: 'O that I were a man! [...] O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace' (4.1.302-5). Not allowing Benedick to get a word in edgewise, she also exclaims:

Princes and counties! Surely a princely testimony, a goodly count! Count Comfit,²⁹ a sweet gallant surely. O that I were a man for his sake! Or that I had any friend would be a man for my sake! But manhood is melted into curtsies, valour into/ compliment, and men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones, too. He is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie and swears it (4.1.313-20).

of material that had been performed for several decades. Thus, rather than being 'impossible sources' in the old-fashioned sense that they would post-date Shakespeare's career, they need to be seen as written syntheses of routines and movable parts, or as Louise George Clubb helpfully terms them, 'theatergrams,' that circulated across Europe and the British Isles during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

²⁸ This is the definition of 'jade' provided by Eric Partridge in *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (New York: Dutton, 1969), p. 128. Again I am indebted to Edel Semple and Ema Vyroubalová for this reference.

²⁹ As Claire McEachern notes, a triple pun on 'a fine excuse for a nobleman; a fine story (account); a likely accusation': followed by a double entendre on 'sweetmeat' and 'conte confect', French for invented tale: see her Arden Shakespeare edition of *Much Ado About Nothing* (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), p. 276.

What sets Beatrice's outburst apart from those of so-called 'scolds', 'shrews', or 'viragos', is the fact that she has just declared her true and passionate love for Benedick: if she speaks cutting swords and daggers here, her words are tempered by soft romantic avowal. This mixture of contrasting tonal and semantic registers also recalls the female speakers of Andreini's *Contrasti*, who sometimes evoke their author's famous versatility by avoiding a 'stoccata', instead offering a truce and sometimes an endearing pledge.³⁰ For their part, Beatrice and Benedick signal their new-found concord by the latter's solemn promise to enact the privileged masculine role the former wishes to play, and challenge his close friend Claudio to an actual, honour-defending duel.

Still 'too wise to woo peaceably', these amorous debaters return to their habitual duelling manoeuvres, even denying their more than 'friendly' mutual love until the 'miracle' of their sonneteering hands against their hearts wittily clinches their marital engagement. It is worth noting here that the final verbal exchange between Beatrice and Benedick emulates an extended tennis rally (Guazzo would approve!), as they echo back and forth their 'no more than reason's' and 'They swore that you's'. Theirs is a culminating performance of the trope of 'asteismus', or game of quick-witted, spontaneous wordplay played earlier in their 'scratched face'/'scratching', 'rare parrot-teacher'/'bird of my tongue' quips, and revealingly defined by George Puttenham as 'the merry scoffe', since 'we may terme it the civill jest, because it is a mirth very full of civilitie, and such as the most civill men do use'.³¹ The modes of 'conversazione' and 'contrastare' are made to cohere, thanks to the playfully civil jests of the Italianate Prima Donna Beatrice, whose theatrical entertaining modifies the kind conventionally recommended to the chaste, silent, and obedient Renaissance maiden, or even to the refined and highly educated conversing aristocratic lady. Her harmonious betrothal with Benedick, coinciding with the more somber as well as more problematic second nuptials of Hero and Claudio, is then physically sealed by a celebratory group dance: courtly grace and amity are restored to Messina. Thus the play itself performs a wished-for harmony between its numerous citations and critiques of *The Book of the Courtier* on the one hand, and its scriptings of un-courtly confrontations and verbal combats on the other. In this case, the lovers' duel has in deed as well as in word evolved into a lovers' duet.

³⁰ For instance, the learned medical expert Diotima concludes the 'Lovers' Debate on the Fever of Love' by distilling a remedy for her admirer's overheated passion, 'tempered in such a way that the work will come out perfectly; and with this I kiss your hands' (Andreini, *Fragmenti*, 'Lovers' Debate on the Fever of Love').

³¹ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (first published 1589), edited by Baxter Hathaway (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1970), p. 200. I am grateful to Oliver Morgan for encouraging me to consider the trope of asteismus.

Much Ado About Nothing's final ritual of celebratory dancing (albeit ushered in by Benedick's cuckold joke of 'there is no staff more reverend than one tipped with horn') does not conclude *The Taming of the Shrew*, yet the two plays share Italian settings and Italian theatricality, featuring loquacious, versatile, manly leading ladies who hold their own in public playing spaces. Like Beatrice, Katherine also employs an agile pun on 'jade' to parry Petruchio's thrust in their first 'conversation'. When he declares that 'Women are made to bear, and so are you,' his verbal duelling partner retorts 'No such jade as you, if me you mean' (2.1.200-1). Her fast-paced taunt implies that Petruchio is not man enough to ride her, that he is more of a rhetorical blusterer than a virile athlete. Although he brags of having 'in a pitched battle heard / Loud 'larums, neighing steeds, and trumpets' clang' (1.2.204-5), his Mars-like qualities are ultimately channelled towards a marital arrangement, where he may be as much the tamed as the 'tamer'. For, as one of Petruchio's servants observes about his master and his bride, 'he is more shrew than she'.³²

For their part, Beatrice and Benedick do learn to lay down their self-defensive arms, their 'paper bullets of the brain', and share their own 'very ill', even 'consumptive' vulnerabilities with each other. Still, Venus's taming of Mars in these plays does not bring straightforward pacification, as there lingers an uneasy balance between the violent and amorous aspects of the various marital partners. What finally needs to be recognised is the importance of the *locus* for the Italianate female protagonist's concluding performances and destinies. Katherine paradoxically argues for wifely 'submission' while monopolizing the time and space at a convivial banquet, in the process putting her female rivals and their husbands to shame, while Beatrice gets in the final quip in her last public duel with Benedick – 'partly to save your life, for I was told you were in a consumption' – at a wedding celebration, before her uncle cries 'Peace!', exerting his authority to 'stop her mouth'.³³

³² This perspective on Petruchio's own need to be tamed would be developed by John Fletcher in his far more feminist comedy, and direct response to Shakespeare's play, entitled *The Tamer Tamed, or The Woman's Prize* (1611). See the excellent edition of the play by Celia R. Daileader and Gary Taylor (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

³³ In this respect, I adhere to the original Quarto and Folio assignments of this line to Leonato, rather than to Benedick; the latter choice, with accompanying stage business of a kiss, is the usually preferred one in most modern productions. For related analysis of this and other moments of silence and silencing in the play, see Michael D. Friedman, "'Hush'd on Purpose to Grace Harmony": Wives and Silence in *Much Ado About Nothing*", *Theatre Journal* 42.3 (1990), 350-63.

By contrast, *Othello* ends in a bedroom, a more feminine and Venus-favouring space, but one where jealous, sexually anxious husbands silence their wives, especially when they would dare 'speak as liberal as the north; / Let heaven and men and devils, let them all, / All, all, cry shame against me, yet I'll speak' (5.2.219-21). The uncanny shift here is that the private chamber becomes a public arena, as Gratiano, Lodovico, Montano, Cassio and the other Officers arrive, and witness Iago's murder of sincere, outspoken Emilia, followed by Othello's killing of his remorseful self. No duel nor duet, then, but rather bloody confusion, and a tragically loaded bed. Acting in the festive world of Shakespearean comedy, Katherina and Beatrice are allowed, in distinct yet comparable ways, to exercise their competitive rhetorical skills and sometimes come out on top, and perhaps ultimately achieve reciprocal balance with their witty mates. Not for the first time, nor for the last, the genre of comedy appears to favor the voice and agency of women, as opposed to their suppression in the genre of tragedy. Desdemona and Emilia, however, pay the price, on Venus's island of Cyprus, for their husbands' refusal to let them express themselves freely, or simply speak as they think. Fearing women's charismatic speech as much as their sexual powers, the warrior of tragedy resists conversion into the lover of comedy. The goddess of love, after all, is also the goddess of persuasion, whose human incarnations need to speak as well as move, in order to ensure the mutual bliss of loving partners.