

Articoli/4

«*Si dimostra incontra noi crudelissima fiera*»

Animals and the debate about the sexes in Moderata Fonte's *Il merito delle donne*

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Articolo sottoposto a *peer-review*. Ricevuto il 02/04/2015. Accettato il 06/05/2015.

In this paper I seek to analyse animal metaphors and comparisons in Moderata Fonte's *Il merito delle donne* (1600), a women-authored contribution to the early modern debate about the sexes. I would like to argue that Fonte links men with animals to emphasise their cruelty towards women and tries to establish the benevolent relationship between animals of the same species as a normative model for the relationship between the sexes.

Women stand between men and animals¹, but closer to the latter than to the «absolute perfection of men»², according to Giovanni della Casa, author of the well known courtesy book *Galateo overo de' costumi*, in his tract about the «most entertaining question whether one should take a wife». The claim of a hierarchical order of nature was one main line of conflict³ of the *querelle des sexes*⁴, the debate about men and women that took place roughly between 1400

¹With the terms 'animal', 'woman' and 'man', I follow the way these terms are used in my early modern sources – I am aware, however, that the terms have been problematized in modern scholarship.

²«Est enim nostrum inter genus atque pecudum vim omnio mulierum medie atque interiecta natura, sed spatio audquam pari; multo enim proprius ad belluarum ruditatem, quam ad virorum absolutonem perfectionemque accedunt». G. della Casa, *Una questione piacevolissima: se si debbe prendere moglie*; Galateo, Turin 1991, p. 79. For a discussion of this passage in the context of the early modern debate about the sexes: S. Segler-Meißner, *Von der Entdeckung der Selbstbestimmung zur Diskussion über die Stellung der Frau: der Wandel der Geschlechterbeziehungen in der italienischen Renaissance*, in *Frauen in der Frühen Neuzeit. Lebensentwürfe in Kunst und Literatur*, edited by A.-M. Bonnet and B. Schellewald, Cologne 2004, p. 8.

³See G. Bock, *Frauen in der europäischen Geschichte. Vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart*, Munich 2000, pp. 34-5.

⁴Though the term 'querelle des femmes' (debate about women) is used more commonly, I use the more general 'querelle des sexes' (debate about the sexes) to emphasise that the debate was

and 1700 in several European countries⁵. Women were typically thought to be less rational and more subject to their passions than men⁶, a conviction based on Aristotle's biology and its early modern transmission and reception⁷. The most basic differentiation between humans and animals concerns rationality. «Huomo: Animal ragionevole»⁸ is for example how man is defined in the first edition of the *Vocabolario degli accademici della Crusca* from 1612, following the Aristotelian paradigm of humans as the only creatures with language and reason⁹. The traditional view of women as being deficient in precisely the same faculty as animals gave way to a symbolic association between them¹⁰. Animals could be employed to signify 'otherness' and served as markers of difference¹¹. Both animals and women seemed equally in need of domestication¹².

not merely about women, but about men as well. Participating in the debate allowed for male self-fashioning (see for example V. Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade. Masculinity, Paternity, and Castration in the Italian Renaissance*, Durham/London 2003) and men were explicitly discussed – at least in texts like Moderata Fonte's *Il merito delle donne*. In this choice I follow Judith Bösch's argument for a change of terminology: J. Bösch, «Universalmente ogni donna desidera esser omo»: *Weiblichkeitskonstruktionen und Männlichkeitskrise in Castigliones Libro del Cortegiano*, in *Geschlechterstreit am Beginn der europäischen Moderne. Die Querelle des Femmes*, edited by G. Engel et al., Königstein im Taunus 2004.

⁵ For the querelle, see for example P. Benson, *The invention of the Renaissance woman: the challenge of female independence in the literature and thought of Italy and England*, University Park (PA) 1992; C. Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism*, Ithaca, NY 1992. On different ways of interpreting the querelle in modern scholarship see M. Zimmermann, *The Old Quarrel: More Than Just Rhetoric?*, in *The Querelle des Femmes in the Romania. Studies in Honour of Friederike Hassauer*, edited by W. Aichinger et al., Vienna 2003.

⁶ On Renaissance concepts of femininity and their dependence on Aristotle see I. Maclean, *The Renaissance notion of woman*, Cambridge 1995, pp. 28-46; M.R. Sommerville, *Sex and subjectivity – attitudes to women in early modern society*, London 1995, pp. 8-39; C. Jordan, *Renaissance feminism*, cit., pp. 11-94.

⁷ For our context, the debate whether Aristotle's account of women is biased and sexist or whether it actually represents a coherent philosophical position is irrelevant – throughout history, it did provide «devastating catchphrases» (M.C. Horowitz, *Aristotle and Woman*, in «Journal of the History of Biology» 92 (Autumn) (1976), pp. 183–213, p. 203, a feminist reading of Aristotle) for misogynists. Sabine Föllinger gives a more balanced view: S. Föllinger, *Differenz und Gleichheit*, Stuttgart 1996. On the modern debate about Aristotle's view on women, see R. Mulgan, *Aristotle and the political role of women*, in «History of Political Thought» 152 (1994), pp. 179-202.

⁸ *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, Venice 1612, p. 411.

⁹ Aristoteles, *Politik*, translated and edited by E. Schütrumpf, Hamburg 2012, 1253a.

¹⁰ Several examples can be found in this collection of translations and introductions to early modern male-authored text about women: J.D. Campbell, *In dialogue with the other voice in sixteenth-century Italy. Literary and social contexts for women*, Toronto 2011. Sandra Plastina discusses the symbolic relation between woman and dog: S. Plastina, *Donne e animali: papere, cani e galline*, in «Bruniana & Campanelliana» xvii, 1 (2011), pp. 151-162. For an overview on modern scholarship linking Feminism and Animal Studies: L. Birke, *Intimate Familiarities? Feminism and Human-Animal Studies*, in «Society & Animals» 104 (2002), pp. 429-436.

¹¹ See for example the works of Erica Fudge, who states: «the animal emerged as humanity's others», and that «the animal is always present as a marker of human status» E. Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England*, Ithaca/London 2006, p. 2. Ead., *Perceiving animals. Humans and beasts in early modern English culture*, Basingstoke 2000, p. 31.

¹² This is Juliana Schiesari's terminology. She demonstrates in detail how similar for example Leon Battista Alberti treats the education of animals and women: J. Schiesari, *Beasts and beau-*

However, animal metaphors and comparisons could just as well be used to argue for the opposite position, *against* the superiority of men, as the Venetian women writer Moderata Fonte¹³ did. I would like to argue in this paper that Fonte in her dialogue *Il merito delle donne*¹⁴ on the one hand links men with animals to emphasize their cruelty towards women and on the other hand tries to establish the benevolent relationship between animals of the same species as a normative model for the relationship between the sexes. In the first part of this paper, I will focus on the various types of animal metaphors and comparisons Fonte uses, which in the second part of this paper I will contrast with one rather unusual passage about animals, men and women in Fonte's dialogue. This will shed light on one of Fonte's argumentative strategies and additionally on possible uses of animal images in the *querelle des sexes*.

1. Nature and harmony: animal/men comparisons

The *merito delle donne*, posthumously published in 1600 in Venice, is one of the first extensive female contributions to the early modern debate about the sexes. Seven female protagonists – married and unmarried, young and old, widowed and unwilling to marry¹⁵ – meet in a beautiful, paradise-like garden where men are absent¹⁶. The dialogue is divided into two «giornate» (days). While on the first day, the interlocutors debate the relationship between the sexes and the vices of men, on the second day they focus on a large array of diverse topics, which serve to both educate and entertain. They talk about natural phenomena, food and its nutritional qualities; medicine, astrology, poetry and the like – the discussion forms an almost encyclopaedia-like scope of knowledge¹⁷.

ties: animals, gender, and domestication in the Italian Renaissance, Toronto 2010, p. 54. Recently, she has argued for a continuum linking animals and humans in Italian Humanist thought: Ead., *Rethinking Humanism: Animals and the Analogic Imagination in the Italian Renaissance*, in «Shakespeare Studies» 1 (2013), pp. 54-63.

¹³ For Fonte's biography, see P. Malpezzi Price, *Moderata Fonte: Women and Life in Sixteenth-Century Venice*, Madison (NJ) 2003, pp. 27-39, and also Daria Martelli's comprehensive work on Moderata Fonte and her time: D. Martelli, *Polifonie: le donne a Venezia nell'età di Moderata Fonte* (seconda metà del secolo XVI), Padua 2011, pp. 501-535.

¹⁴ M. Fonte, *Il merito delle donne: ove chiaramente si scuopre quanto siano elle degne e più perfette de gli uomini*, Mirano 1988.

¹⁵ Fonte uses the term «stato» to describe the different social positions of the seven women: Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 14.

¹⁶ The absence of men as a fundamental condition for a free conversation among women is highlighted in the beginning of the dialogue and continually emphasized. Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 21; Ead., *The Worth of Women*, translated and edited by V. Cox, Chicago 1997, p. 53.

¹⁷ Suzanne Magnanini and Sandra Plastina see the second part of the dialogue in proximity of the «selva»-genre, collections of useful and entertaining knowledge. Meredith K. Ray emphasizes the practical information and sees it in tradition of the «libri di segreti». S. Magnanini, *Una selva luminosa: The Second Day of Moderata Fonte's Il merito delle donne*, in «Modern Philology» 1012 (2003), p. 280, pp. 288-90; S. Plastina, *Filosofe della modernità – il pensiero delle donne dal Rinascimento all'illuminismo*, Rome 2011, p. 53; M.K. Ray, *Prescriptions for Women: Alche-*

Fonte discusses animals primarily in the second half of the dialogue, as parts of the natural world, as food and as «gran meraviglie [...] di natura»¹⁸, great marvels of nature, anecdotal sources of wonder and amusement. Many species are covered: different types of birds¹⁹, fish²⁰, exotic animals²¹ and livestock²². Fonte seems to have used mostly Pliny as a source, but probably other authors as well²³.

One passage is especially interesting for our context. The interlocutors discuss whether there exists a natural enmity between certain animals: cat and mouse, wolf and lamb, fox and chicken; does one hunt the other because of some kind of hatred between them²⁴? No, says speaker Corinna, whose predominant role in the second part of the dialogue is to share her knowledge about the natural world with the group²⁵, their differences are merely due to their «natural instinto» (natural instinct), since nature happened to make one animal food of another²⁶. A few lines prior to this exchange, Corinna had refused to tell the other interlocutors more about animals, because «Plinio ed altri autori ne trattano diffusamente»²⁷ («Pliny and the other authorities on the subject have already discussed these and other animals at length»²⁸). Pliny however, as Virginia Cox pointed out in a footnote in the English translation²⁹, did see different species as being enemies to one another. Cox suggests that this emphasis on the natural instinct may be seen as underlining Fonte's strategy of exposing «the unnatural character of men's ill-treatment of women»³⁰. However, Fonte's and Pliny's animal enmities are different from one another: the passages where Pliny writes about animal enmity usually do not treat species who are food source and

my, Medicine and the Renaissance Querelle des Femmes, in *Women Writing Back / Writing Women Back*, edited by A. Gilleir, A. C. Montoya and S. van Dijk, Leiden/Boston 2010, p. 136.

¹⁸ M. Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 116; Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 190.

¹⁹ Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 83 f; Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 131 f.

²⁰ Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 90 f; Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 141 f.

²¹ Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 105 f; Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 159 f.

²² Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 106 f; Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 160 f.

²³ This assessment follows the commentary work done by Virginia Cox for the English translation of the text and Daniela Hacke for the German translation. M. Fonte, *Das Verdienst der Frauen*, translated and edited by D. Hacke, Munich 2001. For the medieval tradition of bestiaries and its continuation in the Renaissance: S. Cohen, *Animals as disguised symbols in Renaissance art*, Leiden 2008, pp. 1-50.

²⁴ M. Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 112; Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 166.

²⁵ Corinna is also discussed as the most likely alter ego for author Fonte herself, see for example: P. Malpezzi Price, *A Woman's Discourse in the Italian Renaissance: Moderata Fonte's Il merito delle donne*, in «Annali d'Italianistica» VII (1989), pp. 165-181, p. 171; A. Chemello, *Gioco e dissimulazione in Moderata Fonte*, in M. Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, Mirano 1988, p. xiv; S.G. Ross, *The birth of feminism: Woman as Intellect in Renaissance Italy and England*, Cambridge (MA) 2009, p. 280. Sharon L. Jansen warns not to take this potential identification too seriously and alludes to the differences between Fonte and her protagonist. S.L. Jansen, *Reading Women's Worlds from Christine de Pizan to Doris Lessing: A Guide to Six Centuries of Women Writers Imagining Rooms of Their Own*, New York 2011, p. 62.

²⁶ M. Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 112; Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 167.

²⁷ Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 111.

²⁸ M. Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 166.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, footnote 97.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

natural prey³¹ to each other, but more or less equally strong enemies of different species. The famous battle of elephant and dragon/snake («draco») is a good example, about which he writes: «What other cause could anybody adduce for such a quarrel save Nature arranging a match between a pair of combatants to provide herself with a show?»³² Pliny and Fonte write about different types of animal enmities. While in this light I am not sure that Fonte's statement against animal enmity is directed at Pliny, it still seems plausible that Fonte's animal passages form arguments for a better relationship between the sexes. We should keep this in mind when looking at other animal passages of Fonte's text.

Several times throughout the dialogue, Fonte links or contrasts men and animals with one another. Women, on the other hand, are rarely compared to animals in her text, and also not in a positive sense: Once, the suffering of a wife with a jealous husband is described as being confined within walls «a guisa di bestie»³³ («like animals»³⁴), once the education of a young wife is implicitly compared to taming an animal³⁵. Concerning men, Fonte uses four different types of comparisons: Men who are metaphorically like certain animals because they mean danger for women, and, secondly, men's behaviour towards women in comparison to the way particular animals behave towards women. Thirdly, Fonte compares the way men treat animals to the way they treat women, and finally, the way animals of the same species treat one another to the relationship between men and women.

Men, the interlocutors agree for example, can be compared to crows, because they mean bad fortune for women³⁶. On the notion that the number of wild animals must surely be greater than the number of domestic animals, interlocutor Leonora takes up the thread and says that there are more of them than one would think, going unrecognised. She asks rhetorically:

[...] quanti leoni, quante tigri, quanti orsi vi sono che non si mettono a conto con gli altri? Anzi che sono più crudeli e terribili³⁷?

How many lions are there, how many tigers, how many bears that we forget to include in the total? How many even more savage and terrifying creatures³⁸?

It is very clear that the metaphor about undetected predators in the house is pointed at men. Interestingly, similar metaphors were in other places

³¹ The German word «Fressfeinde» captures the relationship neatly. For friendship and enmity between animals see Pliny, *Natural History*, Volume III, Libri VIII - XI, translated and edited by H. Rackham, London 1967, book ix, chapter lxxxviii, 185, p. 287, and Id., *Natural History*, Volume III, Libri VIII - XI, cit., book x, chapter xciv, 203, p. 423.

³² «Quam quis aliam tantae discordiae causam attulerit nisi naturam spectaculum sibi ac paria componentem?» Pliny, *Natural History*. Volume III, Libri VIII - XI, cit., book viii, chapter xii, 34, pp. 26-27. Leo Maier kindly pointed this out to me.

³³ M. Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 33.

³⁴ Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 68.

³⁵ Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 37. See also note 12.

³⁶ Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 85; Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 135.

³⁷ Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 104.

³⁸ Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 158.

analogously used to devalue women: In Giovanni Boccaccio's *Corbaccio*, for example³⁹. Fonte takes up this image of men as dangerous animals again with another comparison of men and lions, in which men are not presented *as* lions like in the aforementioned passage, but as *worse than* them when it comes to their respective behaviour towards women. In this respect, the lion in fact is not that bad at all:

Io ho udito dire che'l leone di natura generosa ha sempre risguardo a i più umili e non gli nuoce e che veggendo un uomo ed una donna insieme, più tosto lascia la donna e la vuole con l'uomo, quasi che per natural instinto conosca la nostra umiltà ed innocenza e ci abbia pietà, egli che è fiera terribile ed inumana. Di modo che la fiera fa con noi officio d'uomo e l'uomo, che tante volte ci nuoce a torto, si dimostra incontra noi crudelissima fiera⁴⁰.

I've heard that the lion, that noble beast, always shows sympathy for the most humble creatures and does not harm them: in fact, when a lion comes across a man and a woman together, it tends to leave the woman alone and attack the man as though it sensed our humility and innocence through some natural instinct and took pity on us – ferocious, savage beast though it is. So that the beast behaves toward us as men should, while men, who so often injure us without reason, behave toward us in a manner befitting the most savage of beasts⁴¹.

Leonora here takes up the alleged 'humility' of lions towards women to contrast it with the bad way men treat women. The legend of the compassionate lion might stem from Pliny's *Natural History*⁴², where he explains the lion's behaviour not with the 'innocence' of women, but with a women's pledge to the lion's mercy. This not presented as fact, but as a debatable opinion: «Se ciò è vero, o falso, la vita lo giudichi» («Whether this is true or false, life will tell you»⁴³).

The compassionate behaviour of lions provides a mirror for men's cruelty towards women. That men and women are of the same species for Fonte is source to normative claims about the right behaviour of men towards women, human to human. We find an example for this position in a rhetorical speech

³⁹ See G. Boccaccio, *Opere in versi*, Milano 1965, p. 501. Myrtha de Meo-Ehlert kindly called my attention to this passage.

⁴⁰ Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 104.

⁴¹ Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 158.

⁴² In Ludocivo Domenichi's translation, the passage reads: «Solo il leone fra tutte le fiere e misericordioso inverso chi le prega, non offende chi si getta in terra, e quando Egli usa crudeltà, assalta piu tosto gli huomini, che le donne, e non tocca i bambini, se non quando egli ha gran fame». Plinius Secundus, *Historia naturale di G. Plinio Secondo, tradotta per M. Lodovico Domenichi*, Venice 1580, p. 231. Both Virginia Cox and Daniela Hacke mention this in their notes to the translations. In the modern edition: *Pliny, Natural History*. Volume III, Libri VIII - XI, cit., book viii, chapter xix, 48, pp. 36/37.

⁴³ Plinius Secundus, *Historia naturale di G. Plinio Secondo, tradotta per M. Lodovico Domenichi*, cit., p. 231. The translation is my own. In the modern edition: *Pliny, Natural History*. Volume III, Libri VIII - XI, cit., book viii, chapter xix, 48, pp. 38/39. The figure of the compassionate lion does occur in other sources as well, for example in Giovanni Villani's *Nuova Cronica*, in a passage that is quoted in the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, cit., p. 726. Myrtha de Meo-Ehlert pointed this out to me.

that the perhaps most radical interlocutor, Leonora, directs at men in the name of the female sex in the second part of the text. We will get back to both the character Leonora and her speech later on. She contrasts the relationship man/animal with the relationship between the sexes:

Deh di grazia, se si allevano e fansi le spese a gli animali brutti, a cani, gatti, uccelli e simili, perché non a noi, che siamo nate d'un ventre con voi di quell'istessa carne e sangue che sete voi ancora⁴⁴?

For pity's sake, when you happily pay for and nourish brute animals in your household – dogs, cats, and birds – why are you so unwilling to do the same for us, when we were born from the same womb as you and are of the same flesh and blood⁴⁵?

In treating women cruelly, men show themselves as the cruellest of beasts. Cruelty, Erica Fudge has pointed out for the discourse about animals in early modern England, was seen not as a characteristic of animals, but as specifically human: «By being cruel, humans destroy other humans, but more significantly in this discourse, they destroy their own humanity and descend to the status of the beast»⁴⁶. Fonte's remark that there is no enmity between animals, only instinct, points in the same direction. Animals that belong to the same species do not eat or hurt one another, they care for their young regardless of the offspring's sex, and in this, humans should follow their example.

It is precisely this pledge to the common humanity of the sexes that forms the underlying argument of most animal/men comparisons in the text, different as they may be otherwise. The commonplace that one wolf does not eat another wolf is for example used as an image for men supporting one another⁴⁷. Another example is the story of a «pesce nobilissimo», a most noble fish, who never abandons his conspecifics even in greatest danger. Leonora interrupts:

[...] e che dovrian poi far gli uomini verso di noi? Che siamo una cosa istessa con loro? E pur sempre ci opprimono [...] ⁴⁸.

[...] what should men not be prepared to do for women? For are we not of the same species as them? And instead they oppress us [...] ⁴⁹.

In the first part of the dialogue, Fonte contrasts the selfless devotion of animals to caring for their young with the disregard of men to provide appropriately for their daughters: Providing them with suitable dowries and entitling them to the compulsory portion of their inheritance. Merely one interlocutor insists that her father did care for her properly, to which protagonist Corinna replies:

⁴⁴ M. Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 133.

⁴⁵ Altered: Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 190.

⁴⁶ E. Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality, and Humanity in Early Modern England*, cit., p. 68.

⁴⁷ M. Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 116; Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 171.

⁴⁸ Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 94.

⁴⁹ Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., pp. 145-146.

[...] uno non fa numero, e poi di ciò non mi maraviglio; maravigliome solamente che si come tutti gli animali irrazionali in genere s'affaticano per allevare i loro figliuoli ed in spezie il pelicano si cava co'l becco il proprio sangue così anco tutta la spezie de gli uomini, ma con via maggior carità, non facci co i propri figliuoli il simile che fé vostro padre con voi⁵⁰.

[...] one swallow does not make a summer. Besides, what you say does not surprise me. What surprises me is rather that men do not all behave as well as your father did, when we consider that irrational beasts, from whom less charity may be expected, work hard to care for their young, and the pelican in particular is prepared to suck its own blood from its breast to nourish its offspring, motivated purely by paternal love⁵¹.

Because of his behaviour the pelican, allegedly nurturing his offspring with his own blood, is a traditional Christian symbol, emblematic for Jesus Christ sacrificing himself for the sake of humanity⁵². This adds another dimension to this context: fathers who do not care for their children not only act against the way members of one species should treat each other but also against Christ's example.

All the animal metaphors and comparisons we have looked at so far serve to support one common underlying narrative: Men act *against nature* when they neglect their daughters and treat women cruelly. Animal comparisons, as can be seen from these examples, are arguments that are based on assumptions about nature, which serve as a source for normative claims about the way humans should live together and treat one another.

However, there is one exceptional passage in Fonte's text that counteracts the usage of animal metaphors and images we analysed so far and that at the same time inverts the way the relationship between men and women is usually described in the dialogue. It is the peculiar story of a dream that is retold as part of the framework plot, which narrates the encounters of the seven speakers. For the second part of my paper, we will turn to an interpretation of this passage.

2. Like cat and mice

The garden in which the interlocutors meet is property of the perhaps most radical of all protagonists, the young widow Leonora, who refuses to marry again⁵³ and acts as a constant reminder of the defects of men⁵⁴. On the second day, upon their arrival at Leonora's place, the host tells the group about «uno strano insogno», a strange dream she had this very morning:

⁵⁰ Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., pp. 28-9.

⁵¹ Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 62.

⁵² Following for example the *Physiologus: [Pseudo] Epiphanius, Sancti Epiphanii ad Physiologum*, Antwerp 1588, p. 31.

⁵³ M. Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 21; Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 53.

⁵⁴ For Leonora as the group's conscience, see S. Kolsky, *Wells of Knowledge. Moderata Fonte's Il merito delle donne*, in «The Italianist», 13 (1993), pp. 57-96, p. 85.

[...] mi pareva (forse, perché iersera ne ragionammo) d'esser alle mani con questi uominacci e che facesse una gran ruina e fatto d'arme, tagliandone molti a pezzi e uccidendoli, di maniera che gli metteva tutti in fuga e in tal rumore, che con grande affanno svegliatami, essendo già il giorno chiaro trovai che tutta questa rimanotta era occorsa tra la mia gattesina ed alcuni valenti soriconi, o topi, come vogliamo dire, delli quali aveva, ella fatto tal macello che tutta la mia camera era di sangue e morti ripiena; e così il mio insogno è rimasto ispianato⁵⁵.

I dreamed (perhaps because of our conversation yesterday evening) that I was fighting hand to hand with some of those dreadful men and that I was wreaking havoc on them and giving no quarter, hacking them to pieces and massacring so many that they were all put to flight. There was so much noise that I woke up, terrified, to find that it was already day – and then I realized that all this racket had been caused by a battle between my little cat and a troop of valiant mice of which she had made mincemeat, so that my room, when I woke, was full of blood and corpses. So that explained my dream⁵⁶.

The story is presented as a «burla» (joke), to which the other interlocutors react with laughter. Leonora suggests both a reason and a cause for the dream: while its reason may have been the debate of the previous day, in which the women discussed the vices of men, its direct cause was the fight between cat and mice that paralleled and simultaneously enacted the dream. Leonora, who dreamt of defeating a group of men, is matched by the 'little cat' – noticeably the cat is female, «la mia gattesina» – who actually hunted mice, which in turn stand for the «uominacci», a devaluing variant of the term «uomini» (men).

Modern English knows the expression 'cat and mouse game', and so did Renaissance Florentine: «giocare come il gato col topo» which in the *Vocabolario della Crusca* is featured as a phrase based on the habit of cats to play with mice before killing and eating them⁵⁷. Cats, they write, are kept within the house because of their particular enmity with mice, whom they kill. The expression contains notions of playfulness and cruelty, as well as the certainty of the cat's superiority and an imbalance of power: eventually, the cat will kill the mouse.

In dream and reality, the description of the scene depicts blood, slaughter and corpses, and thus indicates a rather wild and violent behaviour of both Leonora towards the *uominacci* in her dream and of the cat towards the mice. It fits with the characterisation of Leonora throughout the dialogue to let her, of all seven speakers, recount this dream – Leonora, whom the group sometimes mocks for being excessively harsh towards men⁵⁸, and who could well be imagined by the reader as favouring a more hands-on approach to the dispute between the

⁵⁵ M. Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 73.

⁵⁶ Slightly altered: Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 119.

⁵⁷ «Quando l'ha preso, e lungamente giucato, se 'l mangia, e hattelo di vita privato». *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, cit., p. 378. As the source for the expression, they specify Piero del Nero's *Libro o Trattato di sacramenti*.

⁵⁸ For example M. Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, cit., pp. 104, 112, 181; Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., pp. 158, 166, 258.

sexes. In fact, in one passage towards the end of the second day, she envisions women to fight men like the amazons did:

Vorrei che fusse quel tempo [...] che vorrei che noi donne tutte si armassimo come quelle antiche Amazzone ed andassimo a combattere contra questi uomini⁵⁹.

I'd like to see us women arming ourselves like those Amazons of old and going into battle against these men⁶⁰.

This image of female ferocity stands in contrast to other passages of the dialogue, where Fonte promotes the useful stereotype of the 'naturally' gentler women. Due to their allegedly colder and moister bodily complexion⁶¹, women can be seen as «più umane e mansuete, meno inclinate ad essequire i nostri desideri che gli uomini»⁶² («*more humane* and gentler than men and less prone to carry out our desires than men»⁶³ [my emphasis]). Fonte asserts men greater ferocity and disorderly appetites, that is: less control of their passions, on the basis of their greater bodily heat compared to women. Hence, it is not surprising that Leonora's amazon fantasy is immediately recaptured by another speaker who says that she, being a «*donna di pace*» («women of peace»), would not accompany Leonora in such an enterprise.

The dream inverts the way Fonte usually describes the relationship between men and women. Men are depicted as having unrightfully usurped supremacy over women, both on the level of society and on the level of home and family. One famous passage from the first part of the dialogue reads like this:

Questa preminenza si hanno essi arrogata da loro, [...] ci vogliono tiranneggiare, usurpando si arrogantemente la signoria, che vogliono avere sopra di noi; e la quale anzi dovremmo noi avere sopra di loro [...]⁶⁴.

This pre-eminence is something they have unjustly arrogated to themselves. [...] they want to tyrannise, [...] usurping the dominion over us, which we should on the contrary have over them⁶⁵.

At great length, the first part of the discourse is devoted to a detailed description of the miseries that male family members can mean for women: jealous husbands, disloyal sons, careless fathers and deceitful lovers, just to name a few. The best chance of changing this situation on the level of society

⁵⁹ Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 163.

⁶⁰ Changed: Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 230.

⁶¹ For Fonte, the so-thought cold and moist body complexion of women is not reason for their inferiority, as it is usually interpreted (see note 6): she sees it as having a curbing effect on the passion.

⁶² Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 47.

⁶³ Changed: Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 83.

⁶⁴ Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 26.

⁶⁵ I have changed the English translation to this quote, but it is based on: Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 59. See also Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 104; Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 158.

seems to lie in pledges to men's compassion⁶⁶. While the absence of men is often emphasised during the debate, their reactions to the discussions are nonetheless imagined: «O se gli uomini [...] ci sentissero un poco a far questi ragionamenti [...]»⁶⁷ («[...] if men could have heard what we've been saying [...]»)⁶⁸. In the aforementioned speech that Leonora directs at men in the second day of the dialogue, she asks men to show mercy towards women and to judge her pleading for a fairer relation between the sexes «non come parte interessata, ma come giustissimi giudici»⁶⁹ («not as interested parties, but as the most impartial of judges»⁷⁰).

3. Conclusion

We have seen that the expressive cruelty of Leonora's dream of fighting men, and the corresponding fight of cat and mice might be explained in the choice of character and its place, the dream. Leonora's personality is *different from the other women* and allows aggressiveness – while the other six speakers still comply with the stereotype of women being the naturally gentler sex, Leonora counteracts it. Additionally, the dream could be seen as offering an unproblematic framework for unruly things to happen. We had a look at the way the story of the dream contrasts with how the distribution of power between the sexes is usually described in the dialogue. Finally, it has been shown in the first part of this paper how Fonte employs animal metaphors and comparisons to remind men of the common humanity of both sexes and hence of how 'naturally' benevolent the relationship between the sexes should be. Animal comparisons work with assumptions about nature, and serve as a source for normative claims about the way humans should live together and treat one another.

Ideas about nature constituted one of the major lines of conflict of the Early Modern debate about the sexes. Constance Jordan has identified two «challenges» for defendants of women of the time: The thought of *natural* female inferiority, deriving from the hierarchical order of nature, and of a *natural* division of labour – they both belong to what Jordan calls the concept of «natural law», that was seen as underlying all of God's creation⁷¹. Moderata Fonte, like other writers of her time arguing for the worth of women⁷², counteracted these ideas. She points for example to the legendary rule of the amazons, implicitly

⁶⁶ For this persuasive element, see also J. Levarie Smarr, *Joining the Conversation. Dialogues by Renaissance Women*, Ann Arbor 2005, pp. 226-27.

⁶⁷ M. Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 71.

⁶⁸ Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 116., see also Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., pp. 169-170; M. Fonte, *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 238.

⁶⁹ Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 132.

⁷⁰ Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 190.

⁷¹ C. Jordan, *Renaissance feminism*, cit., p. 66.

⁷² For example Lucrezia Marinella (L. Marinella, *The nobility and excellence of women, and the defects and vices of men*, translated and edited by A. Dunhill, Chicago 1999) and Arcangela Tarabotti (A. Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, translated and edited by L. Panizza, Chicago/London 2004), see also note 5.

proving the possibility of a different division of labour, a different order of society and women's ability to rule and fight⁷³. She emphasises the potential intellectual equality of the sexes and the need of a similar education⁷⁴. She works to destabilise the idea of the naturally inferior women, but still uses notions of nature as sources for arguments and normative claims. We can see this by her use of animal metaphors and comparisons.

The comedic potential of the story about Leonora's dream, however, lies exactly in overturning all these rational arguments, and in being so utterly aggressive. I would like to propose a reading as a fantasy of self-empowerment: Of being of the stronger species, the stronger sex, of behaving not ladylike at all. But since all the interlocutors know it does not work this way, they laugh and get back to their discussion.

⁷³ M. Fonte, *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 163; Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 230. In her other major work, the *Tredici canti del Floridoro*, Fonte demonstrates women's equal potential amongst other things with the female warrior Risamente: Ead., *Floridoro: a chivalric romance*, translated by J. Kisacky, Chicago 2006, Canto 4, 1-5.

⁷⁴ Ead., *Il merito delle donne*, cit., p. 168; Ead., *The Worth of Women*, cit., p. 236.