CHAPTER 8

DEBATE ABOUT WOMEN IN TRECENTO FLORENCE

Pamela Benson

Formal defenses of women during the Middle Ages and Renaissance were not uniform throughout Europe. Republican Florentines, reacting to courtly defenses that advanced woman’s capacity to play a political role, advocated improving the practical circumstances of women’s lives but did not provide the grounds for any political reform that might undermine the institution of the family.

In Florence in the Middle Ages, making the case for women in the vernacular meant entering into a debate.¹ Whereas the case against women often stood on its own, as in Boccaccio’s notorious Corbaccio, the case for women always was presented in company with its opposite. Misogynist texts did not attempt to persuade. They presented extremes of accepted notions about women’s minds and bodies, and represented common male anxieties about their own authority and dignity as female attacks on that authority and dignity; theirs was often a comic mode of exaggeration. By contrast, texts that made the case for women attempted to persuade by refuting the case against, which was always either formally present in the text or implied. Seeming to address a court disposed to regard the defendant as guilty until proven innocent, such texts offered alternate ways of reading the evidence about women and attacked the motives of the men who scorned them. This strategy offered opportunities for radical challenges to fundamental beliefs about women and thus to the organization of society based on those beliefs, but these were never realized. Woman
could be proven innocent of the crimes attributed to her by misogynists when the charges themselves were shown to be false, or when her accusers could be proven to be so guilty themselves that their case deserved to be thrown out of court; both strategies only resulted in a reaffirmation of the social status quo.

The fact is that the case for women in the Florentine vernacular shifted from potentially radical to practical and conservative in the course of the fourteenth century. The case first moved from Latin into Florentine in the early days of vernacular literature in two works more or less contemporary with Dante’s *Commedia*. These two early texts present arguments that have the potential to challenge woman’s political inferiority. In both the anonymous *Fiore di virtù* [Flowers of Virtue], a compilation of wisdom about the practice of virtue, and Francesco da Barberino’s *Reggimento e costumi di donna* [The Government and Conduct of Women], an advice book directed to parents and to women themselves, the case for women appears as part of a formal debate about womankind’s essential nature and moral and social capacities. In both, the case for women undermines the notion that women are by nature men’s political inferiors, although neither text is so radical as to argue that society should be made to conform to women’s natural capacities. Despite the wide diffusion of the *Fiore* (the *Reggimento* seems to have circulated in a very narrow circle), no vernacular Florentine authors followed its method of defense. The next author to present a formal case for women, Antonio Pucci, Florentine town crier and prolific author, transformed the defense from a theoretical one about abstract womankind to a practical one concerned in large part with the oppression of women, especially women in late Trecento Florence. His *Libro di varie storie* [Book of Various Narratives, 1362], a commonplace book, and his *Contrasto delle donne* [Dispute about Women], a freestanding debate, do not discover new capacities in women but rather urge the reform of male conduct toward women. After Pucci, no Florentines contributed in Italian to the formal debate about women for another one hundred years.

This move from potentially radical to conservative to silence is surprising because it occurred at a time when the rest of Europe, or at least Latin-language Italian culture and texts in French, especially those associated with Christine de Pizan, seemed to be moving in the other direction. I suggest that the reasons for this contrary current in Florence are, first, political, attributable to Florence’s intensely republican ideology; and, second, literary, for the vernacular moved away from the decorated courtly style frequent early in the century to a more popular style, and Latin saw the advent of humanism.

That women had the potential to participate effectively in social and political life beyond the boundaries of the home was not a view to appeal to