

Letters Familiar and Formal

ARCANGELA TARABOTTI



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Introduction

ARCANGELA TARABOTTI: A LIFE OF LETTERS

A Voice of Protest in Early Modern Venice

The life of the Venetian writer Arcangela Tarabotti, born Elena Casandra (1604–52), was shaped by her early and unwilling entry into the convent of Sant’Anna in Castello, where she professed her vows in 1623 and spent the rest of her life.¹ Confined in this modest convent, which stood at the far end of the city, Tarabotti developed an acute awareness not only of her own marginalized condition but of that of the thousands of other involuntary nuns who populated Venice in the seventeenth century. With an insight all the more astounding for the narrowness of the confines in which she lived, Tarabotti grasped and then exposed through her works (seven of which we still possess) the political, social, and economic forces that stood behind the practice of coerced monachization, the enclosure of women with no religious vocation (see below). Beyond issues concerning the cloister, Tarabotti lay bare the hypocrisies that surrounded women’s subaltern condition: how men deprived women of an education and then judged them to

1. Tarabotti herself wrote that she entered the convent when she was eleven, or in 1615 (see letter 99); the research of Emilio Zanette suggests instead that she entered the convent two years later (*Suor Arcangela monaca del Seicento veneziano* [Rome: Istituto per la Collaborazione Culturale, 1960], 27). Zanette’s biography of Tarabotti, while sometimes paternalistic in its approach, provides essential information for the study of her life. Other important sources include Giuseppe Portigliotti, *Penombre claustrali* (Milan: Fratelli Treves, 1930), and Ginevra Conti Odorisio, *Donna e società nel Seicento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1979). Since the 1990s scholarly interest in Tarabotti has intensified, leading to a number of modern editions of Tarabotti’s works, in English and Italian. See (in order of publication): *L’“Inferno monacale” di Arcangela Tarabotti*, ed. Francesca Medioli (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1990); *Che le donne siano della spezie degli uomini: Difesa della donna* (1651), ed. Letizia Panizza (London: Institute of Romance Studies, 1994); *Satira e Antisatira*, ed. Elissa Weaver (Rome: Salerno, 1998); “Women Are Not Human”: *An Anonymous Treatise and Its Responses*, ed. Theresa Kenney (New York: Crossroad, 1998); *Paternal Tyranny*, ed. and trans. Letizia Panizza (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); *Lettere familiari e di complimento*, ed. Meredith Ray and Lynn Westwater (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 2005); and *La semplicità ingannata*, ed. Simona Bortot (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2007).

2 Introduction

be ignorant, for instance, or expected women (and not themselves) to be chaste and temperate. From her corner of Venice, Tarabotti took up the mantle of all women in their inevitable struggle against the injustices, big and small, of a patriarchal system. Tarabotti proposed (not entirely in jest) that only in the afterlife would the hierarchy be overturned and women finally favored.

Tarabotti's mission of advocating for women and exposing men's perfidy informs all of her works. In most of them Tarabotti offers an impressively synthetic—and necessarily abstract—analysis of gender dynamics. In her *Letters*, by contrast, such analysis gives way to practical application as she seeks to help real women resolve real problems and chastises real men for their reckless ways and their lack of consideration for women. As her theories are applied, they acquire subtlety (not all women are praised, nor are all men villains) and persuasiveness (some men's perfidy really is limitless). The wrongs of coerced monachization take on concrete shape in the person of Tarabotti, who repeatedly refers to herself as a prisoner and complains incessantly of her "constriction of the chest," a condition that is also metaphor for her suffocating confinement.

Also concrete in the *Letters* is Tarabotti's literary life. Whereas in her other works she voices 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. These charges seem to have led Tarabotti to publish her letters in the first place, taking advantage of the pedigreed genre of the letterbook not only to prove her intellectual honesty but to affirm her literary worth. With her *Letters*, Tarabotti offers a flesh-and-blood example of the trials of the female intellectual and, through this very publication, her vindication as an accomplished woman of letters.

Women, Convents, and Society in Seventeenth-Century Venice

Tarabotti's Venice was home to some thirty-nine convents (with many more on the nearby islands) that housed a steadily increasing number of girls and women in the period following the Council of Trent. By the mid-seventeenth century, there were over 2,500 cloistered nuns in

Venice.² As recent scholarship has shown, the reasons for this growing convent population were complex and had little to do with religious vocation. Rather, as the interests of Venice's patrician families intertwined with those of the state, convents provided a convenient solution to a variety of problems. Faced with rising marital dowries, middle- and upper-class families turned to the convent as a harbor for their daughters, one that would protect their honor and the families' reputation while easing their financial burdens. Although convents—like bridegrooms—required a dowry, the fee was generally far lower than that necessary to marry.³ Patrician families may also have preferred their daughters to enter a convent rather than marry “down” in the face of a diminishing pool of suitable bridegrooms, as Jutta Sperling has argued.⁴ In the case of Tarabotti—one of six sisters—it is likely that her family simply did not have the means to supply each daughter with a dowry adequate for marriage; it is also likely that because Tarabotti (as she tells us herself in the *Letters*) had inherited her father's limp, her family considered her less likely than her sisters to find a suitable husband.⁵ The divergent destinies of Venice's

2. At mid-century, there were about 2,500 women in Venetian convents (see Francesca Medioli, “Monache e monacazioni nel Seicento,” one of three essays in Gabriella Zari, Francesca Medioli, and Paola Vismara Chiappa, “De monialibus [secoli XVI–XVIII],” *Rivista di storia e letteratura religiosa* 33, n. 3 [1997], 676–78). Jutta Sperling estimates the number of nuns in Venice at 2,905 in 1642, with about 69 percent of these coming from patrician families, families of a higher social status than Tarabotti's; according to Sperling, in 1642 more than 80 percent of patrician girls were nuns; *Convents and the Body Politic in Late Renaissance Venice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 28, table 2.

3. By this period, convents required a dowry of about 1,000 ducats, a fixed sum established by the Venetian senate. The average dowry for marriage, by contrast, ranged from eight to forty times more, depending on the bride's social class (Medioli, “Monache e monacazioni,” 688).

4. In *Convents and the Body Politic*, Sperling posits a complementary rather than causal relationship between inflated dowries and high rates of coerced monachizations, arguing that the increasing number of nuns was more closely linked to the patriciate's reluctance to surrender its exclusivity through downwardly mobile marriages for its daughters. On the issue of aristocratic matrimony, see also Stanley Chojnacki, *Women and Men in Renaissance Venice: Twelve Essays on Patrician Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

5. Of Tarabotti's five sisters, two married and three remained at home (see Zanette, *Suor Arcangela*, 4). Tarabotti's *Letters* feature two missives to her sisters that reveal great tension in their relationship (see letters 106 and 188).

daughters, set on the path toward marriage or monachization without regard for their own desires, was a source of deep bitterness and anger for Tarabotti, who often returns to this theme in her works. In *Convent Hell*, for example, Tarabotti describes the starkly different conditions of nuns from their more fortunate sisters, the former condemned to a lifetime passed in a rough habit, the latter bedecked in pearls, ribbons, and lace.⁶ Tarabotti's *Paternal Tyranny* launches a forceful attack at fathers for consigning their daughters with no religious vocation to a suffocating life in the cloister.

The economic rationale of the family was mirrored in the political rationale of the Venetian State, which encouraged the placement of girls and women in convents as a means to control the growth of the patriciate.⁷ Tarabotti herself draws this connection in several of her works: in *Convent Hell*, for example, she calls upon families to recognize the economic and political factors driving the enclosure of women who did not have a religious vocation.⁸ Although not all nuns were situated in convents against their will, even influential church figures recognized that convents were becoming less a haven for female spiritual devotion than a repository for the city's unmarried daughters. The statement of the Venetian patriarch, Giovanni Tiepolo, that nuns made "a gift of their own liberty ... not just to God, but to their native land, to the world, and to their closest relatives" stressed

6. *L'“Inferno monacale” di Arcangela Tarabotti*, ed. Medioli, 46.

7. For a discussion of the “civic ideology” that underlay the practice of coerced monachization, see Gabriella Zari, “Monasteri femminili e città (secoli XV–XVIII),” in *Storia d'Italia*, Annali 9, *La chiesa e il potere politico*, ed. Giorgio Chittolini and Giovanni Miccoli (Turin: Einaudi, 1986), 359–429.

8. On coerced monachization, see Francesca Medioli, “The Dimensions of the Cloister: Enclosure, Constraint, and Protection in Seventeenth Century Italy,” in *Time, Space, and Women's Lives in Early Modern Italy*, ed. Anne Jacobson Schutte, Thomas Kuehn, and Silvana Seidel Menchi, 165–80 (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2001), and Medioli, “Monacazioni forzate: Donne ribelle al proprio destino,” *Clio: Trimestrale di studi storici* 30 (1994): 431–54; Mary Laven, “Cast Out and Shut In: The Experience of Nuns in Counter-Reformation Venice,” in *At the Margins: Minority Groups in Premodern Italy*, ed. Stephen J. Milner, 72–93 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Giovanna Paolin, *Lo spazio del silenzio: Monacazioni forzate, clausura e proposte di vita religiosa femminile nell'età moderna* (Pordenone: Biblioteca dell'Immagine, 1996); Sperling, *Convents and the Body Politic*; Zari, “Monasteri femminili e città.”

the familial and civic—not religious—obligation that underlay the entrance of many girls into Venice’s convents.⁹ More generally, Cardinal Giovan Battista de Luca acknowledged the grim effects of the practice of coerced monachization on its victims, describing forced enclosure as a penance of “everlasting imprisonment, which is perhaps the second greatest after capital punishment.”¹⁰ Whereas a century earlier nuns were still permitted to leave the convent to visit with their families or to minister to the poor and sick, the reforms introduced by the Council of Trent included the institution of strict *clausura*, or enclosure, denying nuns even brief exits from the convent after the profession of vows.¹¹ As the reforms took hold, nuns’ lives were increasingly circumscribed and their contacts with the outside world progressively more limited. This shift was reflected in convent architecture, as windows and doors were reduced in size or even bricked in and nuns required to communicate with visitors (who, at least in theory, were to be relatives or others with special permission) across grates and under supervision.¹²

Officially, the church prohibited coerced monachization. Chapter 17 of the Decree on Regulars and Nuns, which dated to 1563, required that applicants, before taking the veil, be examined in order to determine that they took this step of their own will and not

9. Qtd. in Letizia Panizza, “Volume Editor’s Introduction,” in Arcangela Tarabotti, *Paternal Tyranny*, ed. Letizia Panizza (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004), 4, n. 6.

10. Qtd. in Medioli, “The Dimensions of the Cloister,” 169.

11. On enclosure and its effects see, for example, Raimondo Creytens, “La giurisprudenza della Sacra Congregazione del Concilio nella questione della clausura delle monache (1564–1576),” in *La Sacra Congregazione del Concilio, quarto centenario dalla fondazione (1564–1964): Studi e ricerche* (Vatican City: 1964), 563–97; and Creytens, “La riforma dei monasteri femminili dopo i Decreti Tridentini,” in *Il Concilio di Trento e la riforma tridentina: Atti del convegno storico internazionale* (Rome: Herder, 1965), 45–84; Francesca Medioli, “La clausura delle monache nell’amministrazione della congregazione romana sopra i regolari,” in *Il monachesimo femminile in Italia dall’alto Medioevo al secolo XVII a confronto con l’oggi: Atti del VI convegno del Centro Studi Farfensi, Santa Vittoria in Matenano, 21–24 settembre, 1995*, ed. Gabriella Zarri (Nagrine [Verona]: Il Segno dei Gabrielli Editori, 1997), 249–82; Medioli, “Monache e monacazione nel Seicento,” and Zarri, *Monasteri femminili*.

12. On convent structure and regulations see, for example, Anne Jacobson Schutte, “The Permeable Cloister?,” in *Arcangela Tarabotti: A Literary Nun in Baroque Venice*, ed. Elissa Weaver (Ravenna: Longo, 2006), 19–36; Zarri, *Monasteri femminili*; and Medioli, “La clausura delle monache.”

by force or undue persuasion.¹³ Yet this provision was impossible to enforce, and the degrees and types of duress to which girls were subjected by their families difficult to detect and regulate.¹⁴ In *Convent Hell*, Tarabotti included professed nuns themselves in her blame for the persistence of coerced monachization, arguing that, like fathers, they knowingly deceived girls into accepting convent life.

Tarabotti's Venice

As unbearable as Tarabotti found the convent, it did afford her the time to dedicate herself to intellectual pursuits. Recent scholarship has shown that convents offered women a space in which to develop their own creative identities, for example through lacework, music, or, as in the case of Tarabotti, writing. Although the conditions of enclosure grew increasingly restrictive after the Council of Trent, nuns continued to contribute to the artistic, intellectual, and economic life of their cities. In Venice, convents also played an important role in the city's rich civic mythology. Central to this were the legend of Saint Mark's visit to the island, where he received a prophesy that his body would remain there, and the story of the ninth-century *translatio* of the saint's body to the city; the presence of the saint's relics in the church of the city's rulers affirmed Venice's exceptionality and also its independence from Rome.¹⁵ As Gabriella Zarri has pointed out, convents also possessed important holy relics from the Orient—including the bodies of Saint Zacharias, father of John the Baptist; Saint Anastasius, patron of Alexandria; and Saint Paul, patron of Constantinople; and important relics from female saints and Christian martyrs—which rendered the convents “direct participants in the symbolic construc-

13. Cf. *Conciliarum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, ed. G. Alberigo et al. (Bologna: Edizioni Dehoniane, 1973, rpt. 1991), 781.

14. As Schutte notes, girls were in most cases unlikely and even unable to go against the expressed wishes of their families or to question a destiny that may have been laid out for them from birth (“The Permeable Cloister?,” 21).

15. Edward Muir notes that “as possessors of the Evangelist's body, the Venetian *duces* modeled their relationship to Mark on that of the popes' to Saint Peter. Just as the popes had inherited the authority of Peter, so had the Venetians inherited that of Mark. The popes were autonomous; therefore so should be the Venetian state” (*Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981], 84).

tion of the city as a new Constantinople and Jerusalem.”¹⁶ That certain convents also hosted important Venetian civic rituals—the doge and Senate attended vespers on Easter, for instance, at the convent of San Zaccaria—suggested, as Zarri notes, a link between the prince’s power and the civic role of the convents.¹⁷ Because of the important role of the convents, the city chafed at the stricter rules imposed on nuns by the Council of Trent and after. The church’s regulations were, however, eventually enacted because Venice’s power in ecclesiastical matters was waning throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.¹⁸

Venice had a long history of tension with Rome. In 1509, the Venetians suffered at Agnadello a humiliating defeat, orchestrated by Pope Julius II, that undermined Venetians’ certainty of their glorious destiny even as it fueled mistrust of the Holy See. For much of the sixteenth century, however, Venice pursued an official policy of neutrality and accord with the church and chose to accept the decisions of the Council of Trent in 1564, the year of their issuance. The church for its part, in order to obtain Venetian support as it faced internal and external tensions, made some concessions to Venice, allowing, for instance, that bishoprics on the Terraferma be assigned to Venetian patrician families, while the Venetian state insisted on a symbolic power over religious matters, even if its real power was largely diminished. The church and state maintained a precarious balance in power in the late sixteenth century, a balance that was ruptured early in the seventeenth with the historic interdict confrontation between the church and the Venetian state. Tensions came to a head at the ascension to the papacy in 1605 of Paul V, who pushed for greater papal powers as Venice sought to curtail them with two laws that asserted the Republic’s power over ecclesiastical property and one that asserted its power

16. Gabriella Zarri, “Venetian Convents and Civic Ritual,” in Weaver, *Arcangela Tarabotti*, 41–42.

17. *Ibid.*, 43.

18. On the issue, see, for example, Gaetano Cozzi, “I rapporti tra stato e chiesa,” in *La chiesa veneta tra Riforma protestante e cattolica*, ed. Giuseppe Gullino (Venice: Edizioni Studium, 1990), 11–36; and Paolo Prodi, “Chiesa e società,” in *Dal Rinascimento al Barocco*, ed. Gaetano Cozzi and Paolo Prodi, *Storia di Venezia*, vol. 6 (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana “Giovanni Treccani,” 1994), 305–39.

to punish ecclesiastics. Early in 1606, the papal nuncio demanded that Venice yield unconditionally; the city—guided by the views of Paolo Sarpi, who counseled against surrender—did not, and by April the pope had excommunicated the Venetians and put their territories under interdict.¹⁹ As the confrontation escalated, each side published propaganda, aimed at a broad European audience, to support their case; Sarpi's arguments against the church earned him excommunication, but also broad support in Europe and in Venice itself.²⁰ A year later a compromise, brokered by France, was reached and the interdict was lifted, but neither the pope nor the city emerged completely victorious.

The interdict struggle contributed to Venice's reputation for liberty, which, however exaggerated, nevertheless was to some degree accurate in describing the unusual freedom of the presses in the city. Indeed, one issue of continuing struggle between Rome and Venice regarded press censorship. In a 1596 agreement, Venice accepted Clement VIII's Index of Forbidden Books while also tightening state censorship and trying to limit inquisitorial interference, but Rome and Venice remained in disagreement in this area over the first half of the seventeenth century.²¹ In the 1630s and 1640s, writers and printers were able, with striking impunity, to issue clandestine works in strident polemic with the Roman Curia and with the Barberini family. The Accademia degli Incogniti, many of whose members had libertine and antipapal leanings and were associated with such inflammatory works, thrived in this climate of freedom. Despite unorthodox attitudes, the group was not one of misfits and rebels. Indeed, the Accademia was the dominant cultural institution in mid-seventeenth-century Venice and represented the literary voice of the ruling class.

19. Some of the classic studies of the Interdict include Federico Chabod, *La politica di Paolo Sarpi* (Venice: Istituto per la Collaborazione Culturale, 1962); William J. Bouwsma, *Venice and the Defense of Republican Liberty* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); and Gaetano Cozzi, *Paolo Sarpi tra Venezia e l'Europa* (Turin: Einaudi, 1979).

20. Gaetano Cozzi and Luisa Cozzi, "Paolo Sarpi," in *Storia della cultura veneta: Il Seicento*, vol. 4.2, ed. Girolamo Arnaldi and Manlio Pastore Stocchi (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1983), 19.

21. See Mario Infelise, "Books and Politics in Arcangela Tarabotti's Venice," in Weaver, *Arcangela Tarabotti*, 59. On seventeenth-century censorship in Venice, see also Paolo Ulvioni, "Stampa e censura a Venezia nel Seicento," *Archivio veneto* 104, no. 139 (1975): 45–93.

The success of Arcangela Tarabotti, who was closely linked to Incogniti circles and found within them influential if inconstant support, was indubitably fueled by the open publishing climate in these years, years when she came to prominence as a free-thinking writer whose works challenged church and state alike. But the period of freedom was only temporary. Whereas throughout the 1630s and early 1640s the Republic was able to reject Roman attempts to rein in Venetian publishing—and even expelled in 1643 the Roman nuncio who crusaded against the antipapal works of Ferrante Pallavicino—a changing international landscape eventually diminished Venice’s independence. Indeed, the Republic, in the face of the 1645 attack on Candia, had to appeal for aid and seek rapprochement with the Holy See.²² In this atmosphere of diminished Venetian autonomy, the tribunal of the Holy Office in 1648 brought to trial a printer linked to Incogniti circles, a proceeding that, as Mario Infelise notes, represented a successful effort by the Holy Office to restore control over Venetian printing.²³ If this change weakened the position of the Accademia and many of its members, its effect on Tarabotti is more difficult to discern. It was not this more restrictive atmosphere that inhibited Tarabotti’s ability to publish her most controversial works—her *Convent Hell* and *Paternal Tyranny*, never published in her lifetime; these were, even without Roman interference, unpublishable in her city because of their polemic against the Venetian state. The increasingly strict publishing atmosphere that was taking hold in these years does instead seem to mark Tarabotti’s final published work in 1651, a response to a treatise that denied women had souls. In this response, Tarabotti walks an uncomfortable line between orthodoxy and rebellion. But the 1650 *Letters*, which openly tout Tarabotti’s reading and circulation of prohibited works, her attempts to publish—even by officially forbidden means—her controversial ones, and her disobedience of rules that governed nuns’ lives, do not bear the marks of repression. The *Letters* are in this respect a testament to an era of publishing freedom that was coming to a close.

22. Infelise, “Books and Politics,” 66.

23. On the trial, see *ibid.*, 67–71.

Tarabotti's Life and Works

Despite Tarabotti's 1623 profession of religious vows, hers was a literary not religious vocation, and she used her pen to protest her own involuntary religious confinement and that of others, a protest she coupled with a more general defense of women. Tarabotti never resigned herself to the cloister. In her *Letters*, published two years before her death, she repeatedly depicts her life in the convent as an incarceration and "a hell where no hope of exiting can enter" (letter 163). Only her writing allowed her to escape Sant'Anna's confines and to survive within its walls, where the controversial writer with a "frank and impassioned way of speaking" (letter 59) found few friends. Tarabotti had little formal education and her writings protest women's broad exclusion from study as part of the same patriarchal system that allowed the practice of coerced monachization.²⁴ She describes herself as "a woman who lacks the illumination of art and study necessary to whoever professes letters" (letter 2) and defends herself from those who would criticize her by asking "what sweetness can lie in [the] sayings, what style, what explanations, what figures can be present in the compositions of a woman upon whom grammar or other learning has shed no imaginable light, and who in her spelling has only the dictionary as her guide?" (letter 44). Tarabotti used her lack of formal learning to counter her critics and to excuse errors in her works (particularly with regard to her citations of Latin sources),²⁵ but it was not an impediment to her writing: in her lifetime she published five prose

24. In the *Antisatire*, Tarabotti writes that men "have usurped a great advantage over [women], who rarely can dedicate themselves to the noble task of writing because they are by men's tyranny kept even from learning to read, let alone from the illumination of knowledge and letters" (*Satira e Antisatira*, 73; our translation).

25. Tarabotti was taken to task for errors in the Latin citations in her works. Critics charged that Tarabotti used only the Latin that she heard in the daily recitation of Scripture, a charge she accepts in part in her *Antisatire*: "Let them say ... that I don't write with the proper style and organization (for I confess this myself), and that I use Latin sayings not because I know that language but because I have memorized a great number of these through the daily recitation of the Divine Office" (*Satira e Antisatira*, 75). Yet she also proudly advertised her particular style of writing: "I care little for all this, since I write only according to the rules that my fancy dictates" (76; our translations).

works in addition to her *Letters*, most of them quite controversial,²⁶ and composed at least six others, four of which have been lost.²⁷ Tarabotti probably also wrote verse, an aspect of her writing that has remained unexplored. She seems to claim credit in the *Letters* for certain poems written to mark felicitous events even as she expresses distaste for this sort of “occasional poetry.” Much of the unattributed verse in the *Letters* may be hers and may lack attribution precisely because Tarabotti believed her authorship of it to be obvious. It is often consonant with Tarabotti’s ornate and elaborate style (see below), and there is some later evidence to suggest that Tarabotti was known as a poet.²⁸

At the center of Tarabotti’s works are her assertion of women’s superiority and her denunciation of men’s injustice against them. In her earliest compositions, Tarabotti targets the practice of coerced monachization within the context of women’s more general oppression. In *Paternal Tyranny*—published posthumously under the pseudonym Galerana Baratotti and with the less provocative title *Inno-*

26. The works Tarabotti published in her lifetime were *Convent Paradise* (*Paradiso monacale*), *Antisatire* (*Antisatira*), *That Women Are No Less Human Than Men* (*Che le donne siano della spetie degli uomini*), the *Letters*, and a short memorial work she appended to the *Letters*, entitled the *Tears upon the Death of the Most Illustrious Signora Regina Donati* (*Le lagrime ... per la morte dell’Illustrissima Signora Regina Donati*). On the *Tears*, see below.

27. The two works that survived were Tarabotti’s *Paternal Tyranny* (*Tirannia paterna*), printed shortly after her death as *Innocence Deceived* (*Semplicità ingannata*), and *Convent Hell* (*Inferno monacale*); see below. Beyond these, the *Letters* mention several seemingly devotional works that have not been found: *Contemplations of the Loving Soul* (*Contemplazioni dell’anima amante*), the *Paved Road to Heaven* (*Via lastricata per andare al cielo*), and *Convent Light* (*Luce monacale*); see letter 26. She is credited also with a *Purgatory for Unhappily Married Women* (*Purgatorio delle malmaritate*), mentioned in the presentation to the *Letters*, in letter 73, and in the preface to the *Antisatire*, but which also has been lost.

28. A nineteenth-century anthology attributes a poem to Tarabotti; see *Piccola galleria poetica di donne veneziane*, ed. D. Legrenzi (Mestre: Strennetta per l’anno nuovo, 1852), 17–18. There is certainly evidence of nuns writing poetry; Tarabotti’s own correspondent Guid’Ascania Orsi of Bologna, for example, composed verse (a madrigal of hers is reproduced in Elisabetta Graziosi, “Arcipelago sommerso: Le rime delle monache tra obbedienza e trasgressione,” in *I monasteri femminili come centri di cultura fra Rinascimento e Barocco: Atti del convegno storico internazionale, Bologna, 8–10 dicembre 2000*, ed. Elisabetta Zarrì and Gianna Pomata [Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2005], 171, n. 69). The writing that Tarabotti and Orsi traded likely included their verse, since poetry was in this era an important commodity of intellectual exchange.

*cence Deceived*²⁹—Tarabotti blames fathers and the Venetian state for their betrayal of innocent daughters. Her indictment of the Venetian state—which has led some modern critics to view her as an early political theorist³⁰—rendered the book unpublishable in that city. Though based on personal experience, the work eschews autobiography and concentrates instead on the overarching causes and effects of coerced monachization. Tarabotti warns that the practice results not only in the condemnation and future damnation of the unhappy victims who cannot abide convent life, but also in the eternal punishment of those who forced the girls into the convent against their will.³¹ Tarabotti also protests against coerced monachization in *Convent Hell*, in which she recounts with bitterness how young girls are persuaded by their families and by nuns themselves that convents are heaven on earth, and realize too late that they are instead a hell in which body and mind are forever trapped. Again, Tarabotti predicts eternal punishment for this wrong: God does not look kindly upon the sacrifice of innocents, Tarabotti writes, since “the sacrifice that they make to Him of daughters and other relatives, forcefully imprisoned in an abyss, is too unjust and offends God with its stench.”³² With her assumption of divine support for her ideas despite their clash with state and church

29. Tarabotti, *La semplicità ingannata* (Leiden: G. Sambix [but Elsevier], 1654). The publishing information is false. Zanette suggests that the work was printed before 1654, perhaps as early as 1651, and thus before Tarabotti's 1652 death (*Suor Arcangela*, 439–45). This hypothesis is not followed by other scholars. Letter 58, addressed to Louis Matharel, suggests that Tarabotti herself renamed the work. On the change of title, see Simona Bortot, introduction to *La semplicità ingannata*, ed. Simona Bortot (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2007), 79–80. *Innocence Deceived* was placed on the Index in 1661; see *Index librorum prohibitorum Alexandri XII pontificis maximi* (Rome: Ex typographia Reverendae Camerae Apostolicae, 1664), 145, and Natalia Costa-Zalessow, “Tarabotti's ‘La semplicità ingannata’ and Its Twentieth-Century Interpreters, with Unpublished Documents Regarding Its Condemnation to the Index,” *Italica* 78 (2001): 314–25.

30. See, for example, Stephanie Jed, “Arcangela Tarabotti and Gabriel Naudé: Libraries, Taxonomies and *Ragion di Stato*,” in Weaver, *Arcangela Tarabotti*, 139.

31. On the publication saga of *Paternal Tyranny*, see Lynn Lara Westwater, “A Cloistered Nun Abroad: Arcangela Tarabotti's International Literary Career,” in *Women Writing Back/ Writing Women Back: Transnational Perspectives from the Late Middle Ages to the Dawn of the Modern Era*, ed. Anke Gilleir, Alicia C. Montoya, and Suzan Van Dijk (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 283–308.

32. *Inferno monacale*, 92; our translation.

practice, Tarabotti called for a religiosity free from the hypocrisy of a hierarchy that abused its power.

The first work that Tarabotti succeeded in publishing, however, if not the first she wrote, was not a condemnation of coerced monachization but a work with a quite different tone: *Convent Paradise*.³³ This celebration of convent life for those with religious vocation was introduced by a *Soliloquy to God* in which Tarabotti declares herself converted to the religious life.³⁴ On the surface, the work seemed to be a retraction of *Convent Hell*, although, as modern critics have noted, Tarabotti never made a general condemnation of the cloister in any of her works, railing only against the abuse of it. Nevertheless, the fact that the title and some of the content were conciliatory rather than inflammatory, in contrast to those of her earlier works, made the *Paradise* easier to publish. The work gained the admiration of the literary establishment, in Venice and beyond, as the numerous encomiastic compositions that accompanied the volume attest. But the praise did not last long: it transformed into polemic when the writer published a second work the next year, her *Antisatire*.³⁵ A stark contrast to *Convent Paradise*, the *Antisatire*, which Tarabotti claimed she wrote at the behest of noblewomen (letter 207), was a witty response to Francesco Buoninsegni's *A Menippean Satire against Female Vanity*,³⁶ which criticized women's fashion excesses. Tarabotti cleverly parried the charges of the Sienese writer while also inserting other issues into the debate, including that of women's education. Despite its light tone, the *Antisatire*, with its emphasis on men's vanity and hypocrisy, was greeted with hostility by some literati. This negative reaction led to attacks on Tarabotti for some errors in *Convent Para-*

33. *Paradiso monacale* (Venice: Oddoni, 1643). A modern edition of the *Paradise* is planned by the editors of this volume, Meredith K. Ray and Lynn Lara Westwater.

34. A translation of the *Soliloquy to God* can be found in the appendix to Panizza, *Paternal Tyranny*, 155–57.

35. *Antisatira* (Venice: Valvasense 1644); modern edition by Weaver (see note 1).

36. *Contro 'l lusso donnesco satira menippea* (Venice: Sarzina, 1638). Buoninsegni's *Satire* was republished at least three times, twice together with Tarabotti's *Antisatire*. These two editions, although distinct, carry the same bibliographic information: Venice: Valvasense, 1644; on the issue, see the textual note in *Satira e Antisatira*, ed. Weaver, 109–12.

*dise*³⁷ and to accusations that she was not the true author of her works: *Convent Paradise* and the *Antisatire* were too different, her critics asserted, to have been issued by the same pen. A furious Tarabotti defended herself against such calumny. She wrote to her brother-in-law Giacomo Pighetti: “Certainly these fellows must have little experience with writing, since they marvel that the style of the *Paradise* should be different from that of the *Antisatire*, whereby they show that they do not know that style must be varied according to the topic” (letter 113). Refusing to be intimidated by her critics, Tarabotti persevered in her own defense and in that of all women, constantly positioning herself at the center of the literary and cultural wars over women’s roles that unfolded in seventeenth-century Venice.³⁸ She continued this fight to the end of her life. Her last work answered a misogynous treatise originally published in Latin, the *Disputatio nova contra mulieres, qua probatur eas homines non esse*, or *New Disputation against Women in Which It Is Proved That They Are Not Human*, translated into Italian in 1647,³⁹ which argued that women had no soul. Tarabotti refutes the

37. Letter 99 details some of these criticisms.

38. The *querelle* on the merits of women had already been raging for centuries, but it took on new life in Venice at the beginning of the seventeenth century. At the end of the sixteenth century, Giuseppe Passi had published *The Defects of Women (I donneschi difetti* [Venice: Iacobo Antonio Somasco, 1599]), a vitriolic attack on women. The next year two works in defense of women were published in the city: Moderata Fonte’s *The Worth of Women (Il merito delle donne* [Venice: presso Domenico Imberti, 1600]) and Lucrezia Marinella’s *The Nobility and Excellence of Women (Le nobiltà et eccellenze delle donne* [Venice: Giovan Battista Ciotti Senese, 1600]); modern editions and translations of both works are published in *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe* series (Fonte, *The Worth of Women: Wherein Is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Their Superiority to Men*, ed. and trans. Virginia Cox [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997]; Marinella, *The Nobility and Excellence of Women, and the Defects and Vices of Men*, ed. and trans. Anne Dunhill [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999]). Marinella’s treatise was composed specifically to respond to Passi’s attack. The debates lasted until mid-century and conditioned the literary environment in which Tarabotti worked. On the issue, see Lynn Lara Westwater, “The Disquieting Voice: Women’s Writing and Antifeminism in Seventeenth-Century Venice,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2003.

39. *Che le donne non siano della spezie degli uomini: Discorso piacevole, tradotto da Orazio Plato romano* [*That Women Are Not of the Same Species as Men: An Entertaining Discussion*] (Lyon: Gasparo Ventura, 1647). The name of the translator is false.

treatise's arguments one by one in *That Women Are of the Same Species as Men*,⁴⁰ published in 1651.

In 1650, however, Tarabotti had published another sort of book, the *Letters*,⁴¹ which still mounted a general defense of women but, more important, aimed to solidify Tarabotti's own literary reputation. Published together with the *Tears*—a memorial work composed in memory of Tarabotti's dear friend Regina Donati in which Tarabotti justifies her bold publication of an epistolary collection—the *Letters* open a window onto her relationships with other writers as well as with a range of diplomats, political figures, friends, and family members. The *Letters* are an invaluable testament not only to Tarabotti's development as an author and to her life in the convent but, most important, to her efforts to construct her public image and to respond to her detractors.

A Note on the Translation

Arcangela Tarabotti's *Lettere familiari e di complimento* brim with impassioned rhetoric and with the intricate structures, imagery, and metaphors typical of the writing of the Baroque period. In our translation of the *Letters*, we strive to maintain the distinctive tone and style of Tarabotti's writing while also making it readable for a modern English-speaking audience. Extensive notes accompany the letters to clarify references that were probably clear to Tarabotti's original addressees and to her contemporary audience but are now obscure. The most detailed notes appear at first mention of people, works, and important episodes in Tarabotti's life. We include no note where it is impossible to understand a reference or to identify a person referred to only by initials. The following points may also facilitate a reading of the translation:

Tarabotti's *Letters* were not arranged in a chronological or thematic order, although sometimes several letters on a similar topic appear in proximity. It is not known who determined the apparently chaotic order of Tarabotti's collection, but since this order may have been deliberate—to make some of the controversial elements of the collection less easily decipherable—and the order was in any case a fundamental part of the volume's presentation, we maintain it in our translation. While we preserve the original organization, our notes clarify the chronological and thematic ties between missives in order to make the *Letters* accessible to all readers.

We reproduce the *Letters* in their entirety. In order to facilitate their reading, we have modernized paragraph breaks and occasionally sentence structure. The *Letters* usually conclude with a complete salutation, but sometimes end abruptly, a usage we have maintained.

Frequently informal in style, Tarabotti's *Letters* at times display grammatical irregularities. In some cases, we have maintained these in our English translation, since they may reflect uncertainties in the linguistic and cultural preparation of Tarabotti, who had little formal education. They also seem to be characteristic of Tarabotti's impassioned style of reasoning. In the original, Tarabotti makes frequent use of superlatives to address her correspondents, referring to

them repeatedly as, for instance, “Vostra Signoria Illustrissima.” We have maintained these superlatives, where present, in each letter’s opening address where they offer perspective on the relative status of Tarabotti’s various correspondents and her relationship with them. We have, however, eliminated them within the body of the individual letters (preferring “Your Illustrious Lordship,” for instance, to “Your Most Illustrious Lordship”) to avoid weighing down the text.

Tarabotti Italianizes many of the names of her foreign correspondents and of their cities of origin. To maintain this interesting linguistic feature of her *Letters*, we have preserved Tarabotti’s spelling of proper nouns within the body of the *Letters* while providing the standard spelling in our notes (for example, D’Amò/des Hameaux). Similarly, we have maintained Tarabotti’s original spellings of Italian and Venetian proper names, even where these may vary from letter to letter (Loredano/Loredan).

Tarabotti frequently plays on the titles of her works and those of her associates. Since the meaning of certain passages often hinges on such wordplay, we have chosen to translate titles in as literal a manner as possible: the *Inferno monacale*, for instance, becomes *Convent Hell*. In some cases, these titles may be at variance with those under which existing English translations of these works have been published.

Tarabotti includes frequent citations from biblical, philosophical, and literary sources. We provide the original sources for these citations when available, even though it is probable that Tarabotti used one or many general repertories and, for her biblical citations, that she relied on her memory of liturgy and of the breviary. For biblical citations, we refer to the *Biblia Sacra juxta Vulgatam Clementiam: Editio Electronica* (<http://vulsearch.sourceforge.net/html/index.html>), ed. Michael Tweedale et al. (London, 2005). For English translations, we rely on the Douay-Rheims Bible, referenced at <http://www.latin-vulgate.com>.

We retain in the original the Latin citations that Tarabotti includes in the *Letters*, providing their translation in the notes. We make no alterations to them, even if they are erroneous, since Tarabotti speaks frequently in the *Letters* themselves about the criticisms she receives for the errors in her Latin citations (see for example letter 89).

While much of the period poetry included in the *Letters* cannot be attributed with certainty, it is likely that Tarabotti penned at least some of it (on the issue, see also our introduction).

We have largely maintained Tarabotti's often obscure use of abbreviations within the letters, spelling out only those of which we can be certain (e.g., V.S. = *Vostra Signoria* = Your Lordship) or reasonably certain (e.g., *m.* = *marito* = husband [in letter 68]). Except for standard abbreviations, such as V.S., we note the abbreviations that we spell out.

Tarabotti frequently refers to her correspondents or to third parties anonymously, using a title and an initial or an initial alone to refer to them (generally, an *N.*). We maintain this usage (Signor *N.*). Sometimes she uses the same designation within a single letter to speak of different people.

Some of Tarabotti's published letters also exist in manuscript form. After referring the reader to the appropriate sources for a detailed presentation and discussion of the manuscript letters, we subsequently make mention only of those cases in which the comparison between the manuscript and the printed letter is of particular interest.

When citing passages from Tarabotti's other works or those of her contemporaries we have used, where available, published English translations. In all other cases, translations are our own unless otherwise noted.

TO THE MOST SERENE PRINCE OF VENICE
FRANCESCO ERIZZO⁸

Since my lucky stars have happily enriched the labors of my poor intellect by placing them before Your Serenity's eyes, I am moved by devoted respect and reverent desire to record this enormously fortunate day with white chalk, as the ancients would have done.⁹ To reciprocate in some measure the honor that Your Serenity bestowed upon me by deigning to glorify my writing with your gaze, I present to you my *Paradise*. I pray that it be to your liking, if for no other reason than that it is prelude to what awaits you in Heaven after the great accomplishments of a glorious life.

I nevertheless admit that bewilderment and ambivalence accompany my boldness as I present to Your Serenity these compositions which lack every attribute of good writing; but your serene heart, a treasury of all that is great, will receive them with such grace that my fears will become ambition. In publishing my work, I would with great respect have had it fly to seek protection at your feet, but with self-reflection I came to understand that my humble compositions were an offering commensurate to the majesty of a hero like Your Serenity. You who vie with the great Alexander¹⁰ in magnanimity and valor could not receive gifts ill-suited to your immense merit and your generous nature, if the virtue of your heart and the strength of your arms had not granted you a wealth of experience.

8. Francesco Erizzo was doge of Venice from 1631 to 1646. Tarabotti turns to him as a friend and protector of women, offering him a copy of her *Convent Paradise* (thus dating this letter to 1643 or later). Erizzo's good relationship with Tarabotti or at least with the convent of Sant'Anna is suggested by the medal he had cast in honor of the convent during his tenure as doge (see E. Cicogna, *Storia dei dogi di Venezia* [Venice: Giuseppe Grimaldo, 1864], vol. 2).

9. The expression derives from the ancient Roman practice of noting auspicious dates by marking them on a calendar with white chalk.

10. Alexander the Great, king of Macedonia and conqueror of the Persian empire (356–23 BCE).

You deserve the most noble and opulent scepters and kingdoms and even vaster realms, and not dark ink, poorly formed letters, and flimsy pages. For this reason the most beautiful queen of the Adriatic circled your head with the doge's crown, and by honoring you with the glorious horn that surrounds your temples, Astrea was seen returning to earth from Heaven, and people now flock from the most remote parts of the world to learn how to dispense true and upright justice.¹¹ Your heart is also home to marvelous prudence, insuperable strength, and indisputable temperance; whence, since you are not only the son but the glory of the virgin Adriatic city, refuge of Justice and of all the other virtues that are represented with feminine figures and called with feminine names,¹² I hope that you will not scorn the most humble homage of a woman who can present nothing more fitting to you than a *Paradise*. I beseech you to welcome it, if only to avoid betraying your own nature and jeopardizing the kindness that runs in your most illustrious and serene blood. Your lineage enlightens the world, consoles our native city, and glorifies the Venetian empire, particularly with the successes achieved under your command. Whence, since you grace everyone so generously, you are loved by your subjects, feared by your enemies, and revered by the female sex, whose merit you recognize, not ungratefully, but kindly, just as the greatest and wisest kings in the Holy Scriptures did.

Heartened by your admirable qualities, I ask you to pardon the boldness with which I dare to appear before you with these words, and I pray you not be offended by those sentiments against men that you will see throughout my works. Kneeling before you to kiss your garments, I remain Your Serenity's.

11. Tarabotti describes the doge as the personification of Astrea, goddess of justice. In the civic mythology of Venice the city itself was held to be the incarnation of justice.

12. Venice's complex civic mythology was based upon the identification of the city with the "feminine" virtues. Like a chaste maiden, Venice was characterized as a politically inviolable and incorruptible power. Dating its foundation to the Feast of the Annunciation in 421, the city closely identified itself with the Virgin Mary.

2

TO THE MOST ILLUSTRIOUS SIGNOR COUNT
COMMENDATOR PIETRO PAOLO BISSARI¹³

I return to Your most Illustrious Lordship that sonnet which, containing within itself all Platonic theology, displays on paper the divine nature of your spirit. Only you, who understand so much, are capable of appreciating how much I enjoyed your kind exposition. And because I would like to be able fully to show you my enjoyment of the honors I undeservingly derive from your kindness, I am sending you *Paternal Tyranny*.¹⁴ If the clumsiness of its composition renders the reading of it tiresome, the reverent and respectful awe with which I send it to you will serve as a balance. Should the sting of some of the concepts cause you shock and dismay, let these be removed by my sincere, truthful assertions exempting Your Illustrious Lordship from those men of whom I speak.

As for the rest, I beg you not to show it to just anyone. Knowing the complete imperfection of the work, I must force myself, like a tyrant, to turn it over to Knowledge itself. Do not condemn it should you find it full of errors, for as such, it conforms to the nature of tyrannies. But a woman who lacks the illumination of art and study necessary to whoever professes letters can certainly hope for understanding from Your Most Illustrious Lordship who, being all perfection and kindness, will indulge my failings. Beseeching you thus, I pray you receive every happiness from the loftiest of Lords, and I reaffirm myself Your Most Illustrious Lordship's.

13. Pietro Paolo Bissari (1595–1663), a frequent correspondent and faithful ally of Tarabotti's. Here she sends him a copy of her *Paternal Tyranny* (*Tirannia paterna*; see n. 14 below) with the request that—given its provocative theme—he share it with others judiciously.

14. *La tirannia paterna*, a polemical work by Tarabotti that takes aim at the practice of forced monachization, of which she herself was victim. The work was published posthumously in 1654 as *Innocence Deceived* (*La semplicità ingannata*) under the pseudonym "Galerana Baratotti"; it was placed on the Index of Forbidden Books in 1661.

TO THE MOST ILLUSTRIOUS SIGNORA N. NEGRI¹⁵

That fame which, trumpeted by the cleverest and most distinguished man alive, introduced Your Illustrious Ladyship to me as the glory of and exemplar for the most worthy women of our age, obliges me to consecrate myself to you in pure devotion. I know that I should receive the punishment of Icarus, but if the illustrious count and commendator Bissari was the Dedalus who fashioned the wings of my boldness, I can and must hope for your indulgence and forgiveness.¹⁶ The declarations of such a great gentleman have given me assurance; in fact his guarantees encouraged me to pledge my servitude at the feet of Your Illustrious Ladyship's kindness, thereby beatifying myself in this convent Paradise.

I beseech you not to disdain those offerings that, pouring forth from the depths of my heart, could not be refused even by deities. If I feared disdain as I trust in kindness, I would with humble appeals implore this honorable man to defend me, but I do not know which one of you would prevail, as an Apollo would be pitted against an Athena.¹⁷ I must believe, then, that you, to whom Heaven with great generosity granted all the graces, do not lack mercy, since your quintessence is none other than perfect goodness. Therefore do I boldly, but even more reverently, reveal to the lofty heights of your merit the lowliness of my condition. This may seem excessive disparity, but it is in fact a worthy comparison, since masters are usually contrasted with their servants. So with true heart do I declare myself to Your Illustrious Ladyship, who, as the delight of beauty, the formula of wisdom, and the pride of modesty, makes it clear that her qualities are admirable but not imitable, just as immutable will always be my respect and

15. This *lettera di complimento*, a formal letter, is offered as a sign of Tarabotti's respect and devotion to her correspondent, of whom little is known. She may have been a relative of Vincenzo Negri, a member of the Accademia Olimpica along with Pietro Paolo Bissari, with whom Tarabotti corresponded regularly and whom she mentions here.

16. The mythological hero Dedalus constructed wings of wax in order to flee Minos's maze.

17. Tarabotti imagines a contest between Bissari/Apollo (god of music, poetry, and the sun) and Negri/Athena (goddess of wisdom and patroness of the arts).

reverence. With this, praying to Heaven for bounteous grace for you, I devote myself on bended knee to Your Illustriousness.