VERONICA FRANCO AND FIRST WAVE FEMINISM:
REACHING FROM THE PAST, BUILDING
TOWARDS THE FUTURE

by

GRETCHEN M. COHENOUR, B.A.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................. ii
ABSTRACT ............................................................... iv

CHAPTERS

I.  INTRODUCTION ................................................... 1
II. VERONICA FRANCO: PROTO-FEMINIST, COURTESAN, WRITER .......... 22
III. FRANCO AND FIRST-WAVE FEMINISTS: COMMON GROUND ............. 70
IV. SUMMARY ........................................................... 99

BIBLIOGRAPHY .......................................................... 103
ABSTRACT

Veronica Franco (1546-1591) was one of the most distinguished courtesans, citizen, and writer of the early modern period. An examination of Franco's works reveals a pointed attempt to defend women's place and advancement in society, thereby establishing an early and vital voice of experience about women from the Italian Renaissance.

This thesis is a recovery project that attempts to show how Franco's profession as a cortigiana onesta, as well as her writings, challenged traditional patriarchal gender constructs. Franco's writings also reflect proto-feminist concepts of equality and liberation of women, concepts more familiarly brought to light by Anglo-American first-wave feminists, like Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

This examination will advance feminist scholars' understanding of the history, meaning, and consequences of early modern feminism. The study will also contribute to a greater understanding of a liberal feminism that extends beyond Anglo-American boundaries that differs from and complements the ways current popular culture understands what Western civilization has coined "feminist."
Veronica Franco was one of the most distinguished, famous courtesans of the early modern period. Franco was born in 1546 in Venice, but by the time she was sixteen, she was a well-trained courtesan.

In studying any courtesan, it is important to distinguish between a courtesan and the common prostitute. By definition, the meretrice was a "prostitute" by modern standards, one who traded in sex alone. The puttana equates more with the vulgar term "whore" by contemporary standards; this term was used to label the lowest working class of prostitutes. A courtesan, however, was derived from cortigiano, referring to males who served at court and, therefore, possessed more splendor and bureaucratic experience. In this thesis, I contend that as a cortigiana onesta (the honest courtesan), Franco redefines patriarchal terms of virtue as rooted in chastity and instead makes them about refined intellect and wit in return for patronage and a place in public life in a man's world. In the case of Franco, the addition of onesta meant "honored" rather than "honest," or privileged, wealthy, and
recognized (3). Franco was highly educated and expected to be familiar with classical languages, know how to play music, and entertain her male audiences with witty, intellectual conversation above all else. Franco established her public persona by her early twenties and began compiling works for publication under the tutelage of her most famous patron and advocate of early modern art, Domenico Venier.

Franco published Poems in Terze Rime in 1575. In her poems, Franco is candid about her profession. She praises her own sexual expertise, promises to satisfy her male audience's desires, and affirms the erotic pleasure that courtesans bring to their clients. In writing in such a blunt manner, she challenges the literary practices adopted by male poets who imitate the idealized clichés of Petrarchan poetry - its praises of a reserved, unattainable woman, rarely represented as speaking in her own voice. Franco also creates a public literary self by offering alternatives to masculine rhetoric, a rhetorical power she consistently took advantage of in order to defend herself and other women against attacks by men.

Following her poems, Franco also published her Lettere familiari a diversi (Familiar Letters to Various People) in
1580, although the letters were most likely assembled with the poetry originally (Poems 9). Like her poetry, Franco uses another literary form to shape a representation of her life for a public audience. The letters have biographical value in that they show Franco in a variety of daily activities including playing music, sitting for a portrait, and hosting a dinner party. The letters are a means for readers to see Franco's private life and how she portrayed her image publicly. Her longer letters are written from the standpoint of a moralist, offering advice to mothers as well as keep male patrician friends. Just as in her poems, Franco adopts a position of public authority in her letters that calls attention to her education, her rhetorical skill, and the solidarity she feels with women.

The situation of Franco and all women poets in the sixteenth century makes particular theoretical demands on current feminist critics. Margaret Rosenthal and Ann Rosalind Jones are the two primary American Franco scholars, and their individual works as well as collaborative texts are vital recovery projects in establishing Franco's life and works in the history of women's writing and feminism. I plan to extend their studies with my own analysis of Franco's poems and letters,
and show how a necessary connection between Franco's feminism and that of late eighteenth and nineteenth century first wave feminists exists. In making a connection between "early" and "later" women writers, scholars can see the similarities as well as the evolution of feminist thought and theory concerning education, sexuality, and agency of women over the centuries. Specifically, Franco's works become repositioned as examples of the evolutionary process that contain essential ideas not only about early modern women's rights, but also forecast feminist thought and theory that was also present in the writings of a more public feminist movement.

In the early modern period, a woman rarely had access to literacy or publishing. Although all Renaissance poets, both men and women alike, shared the expectation that they establish their professional selves in the literary world by imitating the pre-established literary modes, women poets faced an additional problematic gendered set of norms imposed by a patriarchal culture, namely, that discourse and views of women were written and originally established by men. A woman was the silent object of love instead of its open, articulate advocate. Although the early modern period in Europe constantly changed, causing new class
identities along with ideas of true feminine virtue, women were ultimately objects to be observed, controlled, and even criticized. Therefore, in order for women writers like Franco to succeed in society, without being completely ostracized, they had to exercise confidence and aspire to personal and public means that transgressed beyond what patriarchal culture dictated what women were allowed to self-display. Through writing and publishing, women like Franco were able to achieve respect as artists. Moreover, women's voices like Franco's are revolutionary in restrictive cultures; they take the contradictions of a patriarchal culture and, therefore, challenge contemporary readers, especially feminist critics, to see the ways these women used masculine discourse to further their own feminine purposes personally, economically, politically, and publicly.

Early modern women who succeeded in writing and publishing were usually upper-class educated women whose fathers were part of the original humanist movement and actually believed in women's education (even though women were still confined to the domestic domain). Courtesans specifically were expected to have extensive knowledge of the domestic arena in addition to subject areas in which a
courtier received training, such as reading and writing capabilities of classical languages, philosophy, having musical talent in at least one instrument, and more importantly, ability to move socially with these attributes.

Although many courtesans wrote during the Renaissance, Franco actually succeeded in publishing her poetry and letters during her lifetime. The publication of these genres was a feat for anyone, especially for a woman, as both lyric poetry and letter writing were considered "feminine" forms of writing, ones designated as suitable genres for the domestic domain and for private readings only. The more traditional epic, tragedy, philosophy, and theory genres were reserved for "masculine" discourse and shared publicly. Although Franco writes in a "feminine" genre of the time, her words, concepts, and theories concerning her profession, other women in her culture, and women's issues overall are hardly diminished. On the contrary, an analysis of Franco's works reveals a pointed attempt to defend women's place and advancement in society, thereby establishing an early and vital voice of experience about women for women from the Italian Renaissance.
Thus, the purpose of this thesis is two-fold. As a recovery project, it attempts to explore the life and works of Venetian Renaissance poet and courtesan Veronica Franco (1546-1591) and show how her profession and writings challenged traditional patriarchal gender constructs. Additionally, I will consider how Franco's writing reflects proto-feminist concepts of equality and liberation of women, concepts more familiarly brought to light by Anglo-American first-wave feminists, or liberal feminists, like Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman.

By examining Franco's works against both the cultural and historical background in which she lived as well as how modern audiences view her, this study will not only advance feminist scholars' understanding of the history, meaning, and consequences of early modern feminism but also contribute to a greater understanding of a liberal feminism that extends beyond Anglo-American boundaries and that also differs and complements significantly the ways current popular culture understands what Western civilization has coined "feminist." While it is true that organized feminism did not appear until the late 1700s in Britain, it is at best, an incomplete picture of our first-wave
feminist legacy, and it behooves us as feminist scholars to explore the continental contributions to first-wave feminists that have been neglected.

Contemporary scholars are still only at the beginning stages in their attempts to understand early modern literature from a feminist perspective. Based on scholarship and the canon that is taught about Renaissance literature in the last twenty years or so, it should be clear that feminism as a global force of change has been neglected. The Renaissance was one of the more important cruxes in history, and having started in Italy, there is an alarming lack of attention to Italian writers by English-speaking scholars as a whole, but especially women writers. Recovery efforts have instead focused on British and American women authors. Attention to forgotten continental women writers lacks decidedly behind those efforts. This project will help to address this deficiency in its exploration of several of Franco's poems and epistolary letters. Specifically, my thesis will:

- Examine how notions such as "public," "private," "agency," and "exclusion" were being reconfigured
across the various genres in which Franco wrote and how those notions inform first-wave feminism;

- Situate Franco in context of early modern women writers' influences on first-wave feminism;
- Demonstrate how a recuperation of Franco's works and thought contribute to a feminist community and identity that emerged across cultural and territorial boundaries in the early modern period, and how those ideas destabilize modern constructions of belonging, citizenship, and authority.

The primary text for this study is:

I will also be examining several critics such as Laura Stortoni, Margaret King, and several other Italian scholars who have written biographical, historical, and analytical works of Venice, Franco, and her writings.

Reading Franco through feminist, historical, and theoretical lenses enables us to see the ways in which her work anticipates and contributes to first-wave feminism. This recuperation project facilitates the construction of a
more inclusive first-wave feminist legacy, and Franco's role in that portion of first-wave feminism that has been slighted. For instance, Franco's writing shares many first-wave feminist concepts in that (1) she writes in traditionally "feminine" forms for a dominantly male audience and patronage system; (2) her writing frequently focuses on the education of women as vital to maintaining any form of civilized society; (3) her writing, especially letters, address family matters from both a maternal role as well as a marital role; (4) she advocates female choices and autonomy; (5) she challenges binary thinking; and 6) she reflects revolutionary thinking about sexuality and employs erotic images and tactics in her writing to make her points.

Terms Defined

Before venturing further into my thesis, I have chosen to define certain significant terms used throughout the text. These definitions are based on my understandings of women's studies and feminist issues. The following definitions should in no manner be interpreted as the only ways to interpret and study feminist issues:
1. Feminist:

A term broadly applied to those persons and movements which purport to advance the understanding, education, independence, and liberation of women, generally assuming that women collectively and individually matter.

2. Feminist Theory:

An analytical perspective in which the centrality of diverse women's experiences and conceptual positions are utilized.

3. Feminist Methodology:

Methodologies that are constructed and executed by the researcher in order to further understanding, appreciation, diversity, and study of women's lives and issues. The researcher as part of the process helps shape the research as "feminist" and creates "feminist methodology." These methods emanate from feminist thought, theories, and experiences.

4. First-Wave Feminist, or Liberal Feminist:

The persons considered the early feminists in predominantly Britain and America from the late eighteenth century through early twentieth centuries who advocated equality on economic, political, and
social levels for all women. These feminists differ from "second-wave feminists" of the mid to late twentieth century in that liberal feminists advocated women's rights, but primarily within their respective societies and social structures. Women's place in the home was vital, but she should have greater economic independence, advanced education, and larger responsibility in decisions made for her children. Furthermore, unmarried or widowed women should have the same independence and rights as males economically, politically, and professionally.

5. Proto-feminist:

A precursor of first-wave feminist concepts and theory, one whose writings and lived experiences anticipate first-wave feminist concepts and values.

Literature Review

Franco's life and works have received more scholarly attention than during the last two decades previously. Although still largely unrecognized even in comparative literature programs, Franco's works and scholarship are beginning to claim a place in the field of Italian studies and literature. Most work devoted to examining Franco has
been conducted by native Italian scholars; however, as more recent scholarship has been published, its influence is increasingly internationally, with full translations of Franco's works as well as biographies and studies which place Franco in several cultural, historical, and especially gender surveys which frequently overlap.

As noted earlier, Margaret Rosenthal is one of more prominent American researchers and scholars devoted to Italian women studies, specifically Franco. Rosenthal's essays and her main book about Franco, *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice* (1992), situate Franco in her cultural, social, and economic worlds. A close examination of the public and private life of Franco is also reflected. Rosenthal's texts assist scholars of early modern literature and gender studies significantly because the biography contrasted with the analyses of some poems and letters reveal how Franco wrote in support of defenseless women, advocated strong convictions about inequality, and used eroticized language in her epistolary verses to reflect the seductive political nature of all poetic contests. It is Franco's insight into the power conflicts between men and women--and her awareness of the threat she
posed to her male contemporaries—that makes her literary works and her dealings with Venetian intellectuals so pertinent today. Therefore, Rosenthal's works are vital and some of the few comprehensive studies that combine biography, history, literary theory, and cultural criticism to reflect one woman's life as an act of self-creation and as a complex response to social forces and cultural conditions.

Rosenthal also purports that close analyses of Franco's poetry reveal how she both reworked an existing love lyric tradition (Petrarchism) to suit her own designs and also appropriate a public rhetoric traditionally denied to Renaissance women (Renaissance Quarterly 230). Specifically, Rosenthal discusses Franco's employment of the tenzone as a genre. The tenzone is the epistolary debate Franco engages in her poems with male poets to expose social differences and underscore literary inequalities. Throughout the tenzone, Franco is both a literary and social critic. In doing so, Rosenthal notes that Franco "manipulates existing poetic traditions to suit her own designs and by transgressing the restrictive boundaries of private domesticity and public silence traditionally prescribed for Renaissance women" (257).
Such a distinction characterizes Franco as a prototype for first-wave feminist thinking that was brought to light almost two centuries after her passing. Rosenthal's argument is useful in claiming how Franco questions the restrictions placed upon her professional activities and the social forces that compelled a cultivation of her literary identity in Venice. These points are also important in reflecting how Franco's female epistolary voice has been defined by those who write it and those who read it, a point also made by first wave feminists like Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Mary Wollstonecraft.

In addition to Rosenthal's studies, Ann Rosalind Jones' works are particularly useful, especially her collaborative project with Rosenthal that produced the first published English translation of Franco's works. Rosenthal and Jones' translation of Franco's works includes the original Italian written by Franco. Although the English translation is a breakthrough for all readers and scholars not fluent in Italian, it should be noted that this translation does not preserve Franco's terze rima rhyme scheme, and several words and phrases may have other direct translations in modern Italian and English that differed from the early modern Italian used by Franco.
Thus, a deeper analysis of language and Franco's structure would require proficiency in Italian. Nonetheless, this first step of English translations no doubt enables a wider audience to take advantage of studying Franco's works in other contexts including how she revised several genres and literary models available to her.

Jones' *The Currency of Eros: Women's Love Lyric in Europe, 1540-1620*, also examines Franco's diction. Expanding on discussion by Jones of Franco's revision of masculine discourse, scholars should also see how cleverly Franco turns the masculine language on itself to expose the discrepancies and contradictions of the dominant male language; Franco then uses those subversions to defend her sex and profession against the very makers of that language. In doing so, as Jones observes, she not only risked social disapproval by writing, but she also had to use her writing to prevent prejudices and judgments while still making her claims.

Although one can hardly separate Franco's status as an elite courtesan from her writings, many of her works downplay her own sexual profession in favor of the intellectual activities for all women, which she ardently defends. Franco frequently denounced the subjugation of
the woman's body for men's pleasure, but privileged a reciprocal sharing of love between the sexes. Georgina Masson wrote about Franco's sexual economy. She provides an in-depth historical look at Franco's life, lovers, children, and works. Masson defines many terms at the beginning of her chapter in *Courtesans of the Italian Renaissance* from Renaissance Italian dialect that would have applied to Veronica as a courtesan, woman, and poet. The chapter devoted to Franco chronologically relates most of the main events of Franco's life from the age of eighteen until her death in 1591. Masson's examination reflects Franco's relationships with other men and women that are featured in her works, establishing her as an influential and public figure in the Venetian Renaissance.

Laura Ann Stortoni's book, *Women Poets of the Italian Renaissance: Courtly Ladies & Courtesans*, provides a more in-depth study of Franco's works. Stortoni's work is actually a compilation of translations of works by several Italian Renaissance women writers, including Veronica Franco, Gaspara Stampa, Vittoria Colonna, and Laura Terracina, to name a few. The translations are from the original text, as is the case with Franco, or from critical editions or modern reprints of works. This source is
useful to contrast with Rosenthal and Jones' translation. The source is an especially useful introduction to the variety and richness of women's poetry from the Italian Renaissance, women who are virtually unknown to readers of English today. The similarities between several published upper class women or courtesans is highlighted in Stortoni's analysis and provides further groundwork in the study for early modern feminist influence of first-wave feminism.

Like Stortoni's text, Petra Wend's book, The Female Voice: Lyrical Expression in the Writings of Five Italian Renaissance Poets, provides an excellent look at how Veronica Franco and other women writers of the Italian Renaissance managed to preserve their identity and originality in a well-defined framework of societal rules and regulations, while also exercising a certain amount of linguistic license. Wend examines the large number of women writers in the sixteenth century and attempts to understand them against the background of educational ideals of the time where female freedom only existed among a small, elite number of aristocratic women, the courtesans, and some nuns. She specifically looks at four other women besides Franco to examine the themes in the
works of the women as well as nature, female symbolism, scholarship, religion, and language as devices that portray individual features about the writers themselves. Ultimately, Wend's explorations of Franco against other women writers allows us to see how those women are representative of a group of female writers as well as representatives of the different extents to which their varied backgrounds influenced their works and forms of expression. Wend's examination is important in establishing groundwork for discussion of Franco's contribution to the evolution of feminist thought stemming from the Renaissance.

Many others have contributed to Franco studies including Sara Adler, Fiora Bassanese, Susan Griffith, Irma Jaffe, Meredith Kennedy Ray, and Margaret King. In "Private Lives and Public Lies: Texts by Courtesans of the Italian Renaissance," Bassanese shows how Franco gains mastery of her environment through her mastery of language, specifically how she reworks the traditional Platonic-Petrarchan model. I will extend this argument and show that in using the dialogue format, Franco corrects the victimization of the Petrarchan lover by using Petrarchan rhetoric to surpass female victimization.
Griffith's book The Book of the Courtesans provides arguably the most in-depth examination of a courtesan's life. In addition to the education and cultivation, courtesans reflected their society's highest standards, regardless of the sexual profession. Griffith's foundation of what constituted the best courtesans is important in arguing that while Franco's works cannot be completely separated from her profession, they are not strictly autobiographical. Franco creates her own literary economics for herself and other women by reworking the traditional early modern literary trends.

Meredith Kennedy Ray and Sara Maria Adler also wrote of Franco's literary economics. Both claim that through publishing, Franco participates in both literature and commerce. She used the imagery of the economic transaction to formulate a literary environment in which to assert her autonomy as a writer and as a woman. As a result, while Franco's works, like those of Wollstonecraft or Hays, distinguished her and awarded her a degree of personal liberty, she was not economically independent of patriarchal culture.

Margaret King and Irma Jaffe both write studies of Renaissance women, their economics, family structure, and
professions. Like Griffith's book which pertains to courtesans, King looks at women more broadly to include women of the church, courtesans, and upper-class women. Jaffe extends these subjects with brief examinations of specific Italian women's works like Franco's. Both books are necessary for grounding feminist assertions about courtesans as creators of public culture.
My thesis should orient general as well as academic readers to the historical conditions and cultural paradigms imposed on Veronica Franco as a woman writer. This chapter discusses Franco as a writer and publisher in the early modern period and how her poems and letters specifically draws attention to women's plight as domestic slaves in the home, as prostitutes, or even unprincipled mothers. Thus, her letters are not merely autobiographical accounts of a courtesan's life, but a voice of concern for Renaissance women in general.

Only in the last two decades have scholars begun to establish thematic and stylistic links between women from different time periods and countries. Furthermore, only recently has some effort been put forth to recover the lives and works of neglected or completely forgotten women from the past. Veronica Franco, Amelia Lanyer, Margaret Cavendish - all these writers were recorded as contributors in some form to the female literary tradition, but those contributions frequently go unrecognized compared to
writers like Christine de Pizan, Louise Labe, or Gaspara
Stampa, all famous early writers who, although are not
included in most English-speaking canons of literature, are
at least recognized for their contributions to the Medieval
and Renaissance woman's desire for equality and recognition
in their patriarchal societies.

Franco's Background

Veronica Franco (1546-91), a writer and citizen of
Venice, offers modern scholars an intriguing view into not
only a courtesan's interaction with the Venetian society,
but also into the patriarchal standards and leading
intellectual thought that formed that hierarchy in Venice
during her time. Born to Francesco Franco and mother Paola
Fracassa, Franco's family was considered part of the
professional class who were members of government
bureaucracy and also members of many social organizations
designed to establish private charities and schools, mostly
benefiting men. Franco's own mother was once an infamous
courtesan, and in the Catalogue of All the Principal and
Most Honored Courtesans of Venice (1565), Paola's name
appeared next to her daughter's as her go-between or the
person to whom the fees for services were paid (Poems 2).
Franco had three brothers with whom she shared education by private tutors (a chance not typically offered to females during this time). Margaret Rosenthal notes that fewer than four percent of Venetian women had any schooling in the 1580s and only ten to twelve percent were literate, in contrast to the thirty percent of men who possessed at least basic literacy (5).

Franco entered into her profession after the failure of her arranged marriage to a much older doctor, Paolo Panizza. Panizza evidently abandoned Franco and kept her dowry, which legally became his upon marriage. Still very young and unable to meet needs financially, Franco became a courtesan and continued her own education by mingling with the learned men, writers, and even artists like Tintoretto who eventually painted the most famous portrait known of Franco. Early in her twenties, Franco had established herself as a poet and was working towards putting together an anthology of her work for publication. The anthology would be about and dedicated to men of the Venetian elite.

The courtesan lived splendidly for the most part. She had to be intellectual, play music, know the language and literatures of Greece and Rome as well as all her contemporaries. She frequented high-powered literary
salons like those conducted by Domenico Venier. Eventually, Franco herself hosted informal literary gatherings at her own home. Patrons were especially important in maintaining a living for Franco. Patrons like Venier were usually elite men of society whose beliefs paralleled that of humanists regarding art and its advancement in society. As a humanist and patron, men like Venier also believed in the cultivation of women's skills as public figures in the arts and politics, but the domestic domain should be the first concern of women. Franco benefited from Venier's patronage and tutelage, especially since he is given credit for assisting her with the publication of her works. When Venier died, Franco lost the majority of her support and was already impoverished from the plague. Although not many documents exist reflecting the last several years of Franco's life, Rosenthal purports Franco most likely died in poverty (a tax record Rosenthal examined revealed Franco resided in the poorest district of Venice at her death) (Poems 5). She was only 45 years of age.

Privately, Franco ran a home filled with her own children (she gave birth to six sons over her life, only three of whom survived, and all sons of famous nobleman),
some of her brothers' children, private tutors, and servants. From her first will in 1564, she began establishing a dowry, should her children ever be daughters. She also left money to her women servants, and she established a charitable fund for poor, unmarried Venetian girls eligible for dowries (3). In her second will in 1570, Franco showed more concern for women by providing dowries for two Venetian girls who were not provided for; she also added the condition that should two prostitutes be found who wish to leave their occupation by either marrying or entering the convent, they would inherit the money. Unfortunately, when the death of Venier occurred and a plague devastating Venice soon followed, Franco and all courtesans were blamed as part of the cause of the plague. Hence, she fled to Verona for two years. During this exile from 1575-77, Franco's vacant home was pillaged. Her losses left her in poverty. The poverty, combined with raising her four nieces and nephews with her own three sons, still did not deter Franco from concerning herself with women and their plight.

Even in destitution, Franco wrote to women, one famous letter in particular, about how mothers should avoid placing or encouraging their daughters to be in her
profession. She offered what she could to these women so their daughters' "virtues" could remain safe and they could properly marry or enter the convent. Franco further appealed to the Venetian council (1577) that they establish a home for women who, because they were already married, or mothers, were ineligible for the shelters already in place which accepted only unmarried, non-mothers and required a vow of chastity from its inhabitants (Poems 5).

Although a tremendous success throughout her life at marketing her accomplishments as well as sexual expertise among her male audiences, one characteristic that really distinguishes Franco as a courtesan is that she marketed not only her own skills, but also the need for "women," in the plural sense, to be able to seek education and equality in many aspects among their male counterparts of society; furthermore, if this could not be provided, then she argued that men must make other arrangements to address the concerns of women, as previously noted. She addresses the situation of women generally in her profession as well as the situation of women in a patriarchal patrician society. No doubt having the ear of one of the most influential men in society for a long while was definitely a favorable
situation for Franco and allowed her to flourish as a woman, courtesan, writer, and above all, proto-feminist.

Franco and Writing in the Early Modern Period

With her mostly self-education, Franco produced poems that drew from familiar literary sources with mythology including Dante, Ovid, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, as was the custom for most poets of the early modern period. Like many of her male contemporaries, most of Franco's poems are dedicatory. Thus, her works seek support through patronage, as was the fairly common situation for any professional poets of the early modern period. The patronage system was an early step in the professionalization of literature, but its economic momentum received social and intellectual force by claiming to reflect classical models and ideals. The classical Latin tradition saw the poetry of praise as a means of sustaining social and cultural values. Renaissance poets, especially Franco, invoked that tradition and used it to valorize her own role as a definer of, as well as a speaker for, women.

Franco acknowledges social distance in her writing in drawing attention to herself as a woman and writer; she
bridges the distance by practicing humility, thereby receiving the grace of excellence. This is precisely what Franco does in her dedicatory verse, though her status as a woman and courtesan complicated her stance. For instance, in her dedication of her terze rima to the Duke of Mantua and Monferrato, she wrote:

My eagerness to express the virtuous through unattainable desire to do so overcame my hesitation to the extent that I could not refrain from assuring you of it through the weak evidence of these few poems in terza rima, which I dedicate to you - not because they have any relation to the extraordinary merit of your great talents, for these cannot be a subject for my inept style - but so that by offering a slight taste of my lowly muse to your wise judgment, I may demonstrate my limited talent in this sample and so have a good excuse for not daring to raise my speech to the sky of your immeasurable valor. (Poems 47)

In this quote particularly, some critics have interpreted Franco's declaration of humility to her male audience as a sign of weakness; however, it was not uncommon for male poets, especially those under the patronage system, to exercise the same rhetoric. Instead of an admittance of weakness, Franco is actually claiming a special identity with her dedicatees that allows their dignity and high birth to assert the dignity and merit of all women. By collapsing her unworthiness as a woman into the general unworthiness all poets must acknowledge in
their dedication to the high born, she renders the idea of
gender as something just as inconsequential as her male
contemporaries' coincidence of birth.

Franco already had the additional burden of needing to
imitate male predecessors, thus the evolving of a distinct
individual feminine voice was difficult. Petrarchism was
the language of the male establishment and thus a language
in many ways unknown to women who were not extremely
educated. As Sara Adler emphasizes, males were the
cultural authorities who made all rules and set the trends.
Moreover, their model was a male poet whose love for a
woman articulates his own soul-searching while his beloved
remains a silent, passive creature (215). Furthermore, in
the case of women, Fiora Bassanese adds, "they were obliged
to adopt a male voice and reproduce masculine experiences
of love and reality while retaining the semblance of
feminine modesty and tone" (303). Franco, nonetheless,
manages to break through her obligation to imitate and
create a personal, female voice of experience separate from
her masculine culture. In placing herself as both a giver
and receiver of praise in her terze rima, Franco suggests
alternative ways of loving, living, and communicating. In
filling both roles, Franco establishes a voice for the
silent, passive women Petrarch presents. Moreover, her intellect that is reflected deems her worthy of praise and patronage as both a professional and a woman.

In writing to her male patrons, Franco's subjects and rhetoric are frequently vague in that there is a lack of concrete details that would help the reader base and recognize specific contexts in several letters and poems. Moreover, some of Franco's works are lengthy, usually marked with more contempt of self, adversely, an over-abundance of flattery to her addressee that may have not been necessary. While not all her writing excels by any standards, these various qualities allow for interesting and multiple readings of Franco's works. Franco's unique writing style also illustrates the distinction that gender plays no role in determining worthiness of patronage that Franco frequently draws male attention to in her writing.

Franco's Poems

Established in upwardly mobile social groups and living in such an open city as Renaissance Venice, Franco subverts the male-authored rhetoric of her time to show the flawed gender assumptions inherent in that rhetoric. In doing so, Franco: (1) uses masculine discourses in order to
launch counterattacks on men whom she views as enemies to all women; (2) She redirects the aims of traditional Petrarchan conventions; (3) Equally important, Franco's profession as a courtesan required that she address explicitly sexual language expected from her readers, many of who were also clients. Bassanese points out that Franco ultimately posits in her poems an ethical system based solely on individual worth, genius, and spirit (313). After all, as Franco wrote in Capitolo 24, "virtue does not reside in physical strength / but in the vigor of the soul and mind" (Poems 11.61-62). Franco establishes such human qualities, setting aside the belief that only respectability, propriety, and chastity are desirable in women. Franco advocates that pleasure is very much a part of worthy love, as can be inferred from her multiple references of devotion to Venus throughout her poetry. Also, Franco's works demonstrate how a relatively privileged feminine subject, although always already caught up in the politics of gender ideology and a patriarchal culture, could nonetheless be somewhat mobile within her society. In reading Franco as a woman who excelled (although only as far as a woman in the early modern period might), in spite of her repressive society, allows us to
see how she negotiated her subordinate status to men's social power and masculine norms of language. She challenges the notion that only men can write about passion or about women and how they represented themselves in society. She relies heavily on her epistolary debate form to lend credibility to herself as a woman and writer, contrasted with her male audiences and respondents. In including both her own letters written to recipients as well as those she received, Franco sets up a dramatic literary environment that allows her to present many voices including one of opposition to patriarchal standards and defender against male attacks on women's intellect as well as a voice of authority in matters related to women's education and economic status in Venetian society.

In analyzing Franco's poems, it is important that we note her frequent use of epistolary narrative and debate forms. For instance, the epistolary debate Franco engages in with an anonymous male author (later identified as Maffio Venier, the nephew of Franco's most famous patron Domenico Venier) in Capitolo 16 exposes social differences as well as literary inequalities in the writings of the two authors. The exchange of words in this poem constitutes what is known as a poetic tenzone (Renaissance 230). As
Margaret Rosenthal notes in her article, Veronica Franco's Terze Rime: The Venetian Courtesan's Defense," the tenzone was not always a love poem, but it addressed a specific and pre-established theme. It also functioned as literary satire or poetic debate (230). In the case of Venier's exchanges with Franco, the tenzone functioned as a foundation for personal attacks and malicious abuse by Venier. Franco's choice of the tenzone is particularly agreeable to a courtesan poet who by her occupation and situation as a woman was frequently called upon to defend herself against powerful opposition by a patriarchal culture. Furthermore, many of Franco's uses of the tenzone genre perform a vital foundation for the re-reading of the nature behind Petrarchan conventions and their arrogance because the verse ultimately calls attention to the spurious nature of the popular Petrarchan image of women. Women were coy, and relentless in causing lovers pains silent, not the pursuer of, much less active in, love. Therefore, Franco's defensive and critical stance in many of her poems that employ the tenzone reflect her connection and awareness of social and literary contexts in which her works as a courtesan were produced; this also exemplifies the power struggle so inherent in the tenzone as a genre.
Arguably, this can be considered one of the most effective proto-feminist strategies Franco's writing reflects.

In Capitolo 16, Franco exposes and counterattacks one man's (most likely Maffio Venier) hostility towards Franco herself as well as women in general. She claims that her arsenal of languages matches her opponent's, thereby establishing herself not as a victim, but as a warrior for women. Franco's relationship with Maffio was one of reciprocated abhorrence. Most likely threatened and envious of Franco's talent as a writer, Maffio frequently attacked Franco for being a "mere whore" and nothing more. While no documentation exists that reflect he was a client of Franco's, the likelihood he was not probably accounts for many of his personal attacks on Franco as a woman and courtesan. In battling Maffio's hateful words, Franco adopts a vocabulary that is much like verbal dueling, but in this poem, she advocates war against her oppressor. Unlike many of her other poems, she does not make erotic puns. Rather, she uses her skill as a writer as her primary weapon against her attacker. She begins her counterattack by drawing attention to the opening of his sonnet, "Veronica, ver unica puttana" [Veronica, a veritably unique whore], and instead of taking Venier's
insult in "unica," Franco turns the insult into a compliment. She writes, "'Verily unique,' among other things, you called me, / alluding to Veronica, my name" (Poems ll.139-140), asserting that Venier has indeed not put forth any insults as he had so skillfully thought he had done. Franco even drives this point to Venier by stating that according to her dictionary,

I fail to see how one can properly call something 'unique' in a critical sense, by way of condemnation [...]
"Unique" is used in praise and esteem by those who know; and whoever speaks otherwise digresses from the true meaning of words. (ll.142-156)

Here, Franco points out the contradiction in meaning of language Maffio had obviously intended to be a cruel insult and, therefore, she is also inadvertently commenting on his own inept writing style.

Franco further attacks Venier's writing and hostility by pointing out:

Either your purpose was not to defame me, or you were, unaware, lying when you said it [...] but without any offense from me, you simply wrote what came into your head, wishing to perhaps please somebody else-though a man in fact insults himself, not me, by slandering me without cause. (ll.160-168)
Franco attacks Maffio’s notion of writing insults simply to insult another professional. She points out in this quote how Maffio is not only unable to offend her as he planned, but that his insults are only reflective of his inferior writing skills to her own, a rather bold move for an early modern woman writing to the nephew of her main patron.

In a further bold move, Franco then defends all prostitutes against Maffio’s attacks, noting that he means to either imply she is not actually a prostitute, or that "among them some merit praise" (1.180). This defense of prostitutes in particular parallels that of her defense of women in general in another part of the same poem. She criticizes Maffio for his lack of chivalry and "protection" of women, a man’s role. Although to some critics this may be an acceptance on Franco’s part about women needing men’s protection as the weaker sex, she surprises readers when she demands that Maffio accept that women, especially when forced to confront their male oppressors, can and will take up arms to defend themselves. Thus, she states, "And to prove to you that I speak the truth, / among so many women I will act first, / setting an example for them all to follow" (11.73-75).
Strategically, Franco moves from an individual claim to a more active feminist application to women as a group. She reflects on her personal experience as proof that women in general are no less agile than men in warfare, and, indeed, in verbal combat. In her declaration of war with Maffio, Franco writes:

So make ready now your paper and ink and tell me, this time, without further delay which weapons I must wield in combat with you. You will have nowhere to run from me for I am prepared for any test of skill and I wait impatiently to start the fight. (11. 193-198)

She insists that women's equality to men in this matter is determined by training, not biological characteristics. Franco rejects the notion that gender constructs should be determined by men, which is in and of itself also not a unified category. She notes that women enjoy the same opportunities as men and, therefore, show similar attributes when discussing sex: When we women, too, have weapons and training, / we will be able to prove to all men / that we have hands and feet and hearts like yours" (11.64-66). She emphasizes this claim, insisting that men vary in physical and mental strength, and that their diversity proves that there is no necessary connection between the two: "some men who are delicate are
also strong, / and some, though coarse and rough, are cowards" (11.68-69). Ultimately, Franco points out that it is patriarchal philosophy that prevents women from exploring their capabilities. That is, if they were not kept ignorant of their potential, they would reveal it in successful encounters with men: "women so far haven't seen this [the need for weapons and training] is true; / for if they'd ever resolved to do it, / they'd have been able to fight you to the death" (ll.70-72). Franco's attempt at pointing out the flaws of patriarchal culture's view of women is a decidedly proto-feminist position that anticipates the central tenet of first-wave feminism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Franco completes her defense of women in Capitolo 16 by announcing herself as the ultimate defender of women; she is the first to speak out against Venier in this case, the obvious common enemy to women, but she also contends that others will now follow in her footsteps:

Among so many women, I will be the first to act,
setting an example for all of them to follow
On you, who are so savage to us all,
I turn, with whatever weapon you choose,
with the hope and will to throw you to the ground.
And I undertake to defend all women
against you, who despise them so
that rightly I'm not alone to protest. (ll.74-81)
Franco shifts the emphasis from herself as warrior to that of all women as potential fighters in combat, ending with: "I will show you how much the female sex / excels your own. Arm yourself however you please / and take heed for your survival" (11.94-95). Franco aims to educate her oppressor by pointing out the ignorance and flaws in his logic that the females are the weaker and evil sex. Instead, she insinuates that in attacking women who cannot defend themselves, or who appear they cannot, he is merely making the false assumption he has an easy target with females. In "wounding" others with his words, he shall be unprepared for the battle he seeks out with those he views as weak.

As Ann Rosalind Jones points out, "Franco's defense of women in this poem threatens several axioms about gender difference. Christine de Pizan had argued that women were mentally more agile than men because they had to be" (196). Franco takes this idea one step further in asserting that women may exceed men in physical agility as well. Additionally, she emphasizes that courage is not unique to men; rather, valor exists in all and even varies more in women. She questions conventional causal connections
between physical and mental strengths. Masculine claims to superiority have caused women to underestimate of their own power to a great degree and, consequently, that has prevented them from using their esteemed mental and physical capabilities.

In Capitolo 16, as well as most of Franco's works, she establishes herself as a woman of no exceptional qualities, but rather one able to exemplify to other women how she shares their situation. She assumes the traditionally masculine role of chivalrous defender of women by battling Maffio Venier as their common enemy, as well as by openly rejecting the patriarchal oppositions of sixteenth-century gender ideology. Simultaneously, she represents herself as a sexually active woman, but without guilt, and claiming more virtues than man's misogyny would allow for women during her time. Her claim of equality with men, like her adoption of the role of a leader of women, tears down the barriers between private and public spheres, especially the assignment of chastity to women and courage to men. Although not as fierce in her defense of women, the "battlefield" is a common backdrop for Franco's defenses in many of her Capitoli.
Capitolo 24 is on the finer examples of Franco's "battlefield" and war against men. In Capitolo 24, Franco's aim is to help an angry lover make peace with a fellow courtesan who he wishes to harm as a result of not having her love solely. Franco directly addresses the fact that the male lover attempted to slash the face of the unknown courtesan, an act frequently committed by those angry, and usually jealous, clients who wished to end the livelihoods of courtesans through permanent scarring of their beauty. Jones notes that these type of attacks were common and violent enough to produce the term "dare la sfregia" [to give the scar] (Eros 197). Thus, in addressing this angry lover, Franco takes special care to establish what proper behavior between the sexes should be. As opposed to her tone in Capitolo 16, Franco's tone here is far more gentle and persuasive, trying to assure the angry lover that he need be noble, righteous, and chivalrous so as to make peace, not war, with the courtesan and all her kind. Her persuasion focuses on observable social courtesies such as men's gratitude for women's admiration and wisdom by adorning them richly or removing their hats as a sign of respect when a woman passes. After a few gentle remarks of this nature, Franco turns her words
and advice to a more serious tone and pedagogical nature to the angry lover. She points out how he has the responsibility to be the chivalrous one about the situation, especially since women are the "unfortunate sex, always led about / by cruel fortune, because you [women] are always / subjected and without freedom!" (Poems 11.55-57). She further points out that women's virtues are what holds the social fabric together and are, therefore, more deserving of admiration and protection which men do not freely give:

If we are not as strong as men, like men we have a mind and intellect. And virtue does not lie in bodily strength but in the vigor of the soul and mind, through which all things come to be known; and I am certain that in this respect women lack nothing, but, rather, have given more than one sign of being greater than men. But if you think us inferior to you, perhaps it's because in modesty and wisdom we are more adept and better than you. (11.59-69)

One of the most important aspects about Franco's words here and as the poem progresses is that she acknowledges and wishes to remind this man and general society how men are the beneficiaries, not lords and masters, of feminine intellect and patience. In the male celebration of dominance over women, Franco claims that "insolence is the mark of the madman" (1.73) and that in thinking they have
accomplished victory in some battle of the sexes, men fail to recognize women's innate active roles to create peace and equality within a society; thus, if women are submissive, it is because they strive for those goals, not because they have been beaten in war:

And woman, to avoid pursuing wrongdoing, adapts and endures being a vassal.
Yet if, as far as reason's concerned, she wanted to show what she is worth, she'd not only be man's equal but surpass him by far
But human offspring would cease to exist if woman, determined to prevail in the duel, were as harsh and cruel as man deserves
To not ruin the world, which our species makes so beautiful, woman is silent and submits to tyrannical, wicked man, who then so enjoys having power to rule, as those do most who know the least. (11.80-92)

Franco emphasizes that it is exactly the flexibility and tolerance of women that their attackers frequently lack that establishes intellectual and definitely moral superiority in these situations. She gently reproaches the lover, drawing upon the behavior of reasoned men to enforce her point that "civilized" men revere women and, therefore, suggests that he at least follow the example of his own sex in this regard. In contrast to Capitolo 16 where the framework of her rhetoric formed around physical and mental strengths of both sexes, in Capitolo 24, she advocates
rules of courtesy that all courtesans depend upon. In this manner, Franco cleverly impels the lover to pursue the obvious choice to repent and make peace. As a result, Franco is also challenging her male audience to prove he is the rational, sincere human that all men claimed to be.

In responding to her own lovers, Franco's similarly challenges them to demonstrate that they are more than a lover on the page - that sincerity of action matches articulation. This is not an uncanny assumption on Franco's part since most male poets wrote mainly to demonstrate their competence as writers in a more "courtly" display of love instead of actually revealing true, private feelings. As a result of Franco's suspicions about lovers' rhetoric, her own ironic treatment of them in her works can be viewed as a critique of the clichés inherent in early modern masculine discourse. Capitolo 8 is a fine example of this point. The poem responds to a man who has declared his love utilizing the traditional Petrarchan conventions of the time. Franco announces in similar Petrarchan language that she loves someone else. A lengthy explanation on Franco's part follows whereby she tells her suitor that she loves someone who loves someone else, much like the situation in which her pursuer currently finds
himself. Turning from the pains expressed in familiar Petrarchan trends, Franco comically rejects her suitor's advances. She states:

Perhaps, too, you disdain another woman conquered by love for you, and leave any intention of pleasing her far behind; and since you are cold and ungrateful to her, Love, in his just wisdom, decides that another woman should scorn and torment you. (11. 70-75)

Franco more or less points out that the pains of love and "sea of all our tears" (80) are undercut by Love's laughter just as she, as a courtesan and writer, clearly sees through the pronouncements of anguished lovers. Ann Jones makes an important observation about Franco's diction in this instance: "Franco's poems suggest that she wants an end to the power relations whereby the discourses of seduction, like the cash that pays for it, belong to men alone" (Eros 188). Hence, in Franco's responses to lovers' advances, she not only mimics the languages of courtship, but also challenges these lovers to prove that their texts have some foundation beyond verbal decorum.

Similarly, in Capitolo 13, Franco comically, yet forcefully, challenges a lover whereby she establishes her bed as the battleground:
Here before me now stands the bed
where I took you in my arms, and which still
preserves the imprint of our bodies, breast to breast.
In it I find now neither joy nor sleep,
but only weeping, by night and by day,
which transforms me into a river of tears.
But this very place, which once was
the cherished shelter of my joys,
where I now live alone, in torment and grief,
choose this as a battleground, so that the news
of your betrayal will reach no other place
but die here with you, cruel, faithless man.
(Poems 11.34-45)

Franco breaks down the boundaries between private and public communication. She does this by challenging this lover to a duel, taking special care to call attention to her grasp of dueling terminology, to which the first thirty lines of the poem are devoted. In those lines, Franco coyly pretends she is unsure of how to battle, but her skill in writing and jargon throughout the poem prove that she is actually in complete control. She displays her private sexual skills as well as her public, professional verbal skills. She demands that her opponent "come here, and full of most wicked desire, / braced stiff for your sinister task, / bring with daring hand a piercing blade" (11.46-48) and that "all armor be stripped from your naked breast" (1.52) so that they may battle and "die" together. She writes, "To take revenge for your unfair attack, / I'd
fall upon you, and in daring combat, as you too caught fire defending yourself, / I would die with you, felled by the same blow" (11.82-85). These lines not only allude to the ambiguous Renaissance orgasm myth regarding males, but also express Franco's desire for her own separate "death" in this sense.

When Franco wrote Capitolo 13, she produced it under the assumption that Marco Venier, also Domenico Venier's nephew as well as one of Franco's closest lovers and friends, was her opponent. However, after a response from Marco, it can be inferred he had not been the author of the letter to which Franco's Capitolo 13 responded. This can be inferred from Marco's response upon receiving Franco's poem: "I do not see how on my side / I have offended you, unless my extreme love / has made me deserve pain from you" (11.67-69). In his lengthy response, he writes much like the same fashion as Franco's erotic challenge:

Here I am, returning to you unarmed, and to end my lament by some route or another, I bow down, humble, at your feet; if nothing else pleases you, take up in your hand the cutting sword of your disdain and let it fall, indignant, on me. Strike your blows, one after the other, while not one stroke misses the mark and you have your target not far from you; one quick effort will fell these limbs to the ground,
torn and cut off through the pain of love, not girded at all to do battle in warfare. And even if I could, I do not wish to, but I choose to die in front of you instead, before I seek shelter in self-defense. (11.124-138)

In challenging her interlocutor verbally as well as erotically, Franco adopts an erotically charged poetic voice. Her skill in handling and responding to erotic overtones is an act of personal validation within a social and cultural context. Having control of an art, especially one for which women were not considered to have personal desire or proper understanding, she places herself into a personally chosen mode of being, allowing her greater liberty to define herself and not be coined a whore or goddess, but poet. Thus, Franco firmly declares herself as a skilled warrior with her pen as her sword in addition to the battleground being her bed if necessary. Her frank eroticism in Capitolo 13 reflects a proto-feminist notion of wit and sexual agency that several first-wave feminists also advocate.

Franco's Letters

Franco used her Lettere Familieri primarily to promote herself and establish her flourishing literary reputation that was dependant on the approval and support of her male
audience. Thus, she begins her familiar letters with a highly overwrought dedication to Luigi d'Este, the Cardinal of Ferrara. This dedication is immediately followed with another dedication and two sonnets to King Henri III of France who spent a night with Franco in 1574 during his journey to accept his crown. This event was most likely not widely known until Franco published her memoirs of the encounter in her letters. By including a dedication and sonnets to a cardinal and a king, Franco cleverly elevates her own status in the eyes of Venice.

Readers' expectations of Franco's letters have undergone revision because Franco does not focus on her own amorous accounts or details of specific love affairs in her familiar letters. Instead, the majority of Franco's letters address private affairs of others, mostly male conversationalists with whom she frequently interacted like Domenico Venier, Marco Venier, and other anonymous patrons and lovers. In addressing these men and their issues, she often provides moral, social, and ethical advice deemed proper for their social status, showing a great awareness on Franco's part about social classes and traditional norms associated with such in the early modern period. Furthermore, Franco reminds her male audience that she is
every bit as capable of distinguishing another's intellectual merit and virtue. In doing so, she displays resistance to the passive role her patriarchal culture assigned her, a role denied to even the most educated women with regards to participation in political and civic domains where important decisions were made for all Venetian citizens. Women, however, were not considered "citizens" in the same manner as men and, therefore, were taught not to concern themselves with matters outside the domestic domain.

Although allowed to mingle with social elite and concern themselves with matters of state, courtesans were still not considered voices of authority. Margaret Rosenthal notes that Franco provides a vital publicizing of a private self that contrasts with popular early modern male representations of courtesans as mainly deceitful and base creatures (Honest 117). Therefore, Franco's letters confound differences between a private and public voice; she publishes her private thoughts and feelings in two very important genres of the time, and in doing so, she presents both the values and views she has for her own professional class as well as women's general concerns of the period. Similarly, liberal feminists later employ the same strategy.
of blurring the boundaries between gendered spaces to emphasize the need for greater attention and appreciation of women's skills beyond the home.

Letters in the early modern period is a genre in which few women (or men) had published, and Franco used her epistolary discourse to expose her private thoughts and feelings in public literary spaces. As Gabriel Niccoli notes, "By carrying on strategies of myth-making, as exemplified by the mere publishing of her epistolary narrative, our woman writer, in her Lettere, wishes to access the social politics and power which would enable her to deconstruct the concept of literary genre as being inevitably linked to gender" (131). Although a good point, Niccoli, along with several other critics, choose to apply this notion to Franco's individual life as a courtesan, neglecting the notion that Franco is also establishing a voice of concern for Renaissance women in general through her writings. As mentioned before, although one can hardly separate Franco's life as a courtesan from her works, her works do not only stem from her personal experiences as though they are to be analyzed as isolated incidents of experience that are not also making larger points about early modern women's issues.
One letter particularly emphasizes Franco's voice of personal experience combined with drawing attention to an amoral mother who wishes for her daughter to become a courtesan like Franco. Unlike her poetry and many of her familiar letters, Letter 22 includes direct, clear rhetoric as she addresses a mother who wishes to make her daughter a courtesan. Unlike her other letters in which she speaks of social harmony and acknowledges the male gaze of women as sexual second-class citizens, Letter 22 exposes the double meaning operating in Franco's works that uncover the hypocrisy behind a patrician culture which advocates individual freedom to many citizens, but denies personal freedom to others. As Rosenthal points out, Franco suggests that social inequalities are camouflaged by idealizing civic codes that are blind to an individual's needs (Honest 127). These views are exposed in Letter 22 as Franco writes to a fellow woman, describing the difficulties that a poor woman faces when deciding the future of her daughters.

The letter indicts women's lack of necessary freedom, especially economic, as the hindrance for making better judgment and choices. Franco indicates that gender inferiority, complicated further by moral positions placed
upon women which reduces their dignity, personal freedoms, and individual reasoning capabilities, prescribe the social norms rendering women slaves. Indeed, Franco inadvertently states that the worst condition for a woman to find herself in is as an object of man's desires without the ability to exercise her own choice as a human being. Consequently, Franco depicts the need for social change to help disadvantaged women. She writes to the mother:

You know how many times I have begged and warned you to protect her virginity; and since this world is so dangerous and frail and the homes of poor mothers are not immune from the temptations of lusty youth, I showed you how you can shelter her from danger and assist her in settling her life decently and in such a way that you will be able to marry her honestly. (Poems 38)

The "sheltering" to which Franco refers is the Casa delle Zitelle, a charitable institution that was founded to assist impoverished, unmarried girls to prevent the loss of their chastity and, in turn, their prospects of good marriage. Franco obviously took care to advise others of the dreadful life that could ensue when a woman makes her life the giving of her body to others for the sole purpose of avoiding poverty. Moreover, in this case, Franco strongly urges and even reprimands the mother about placing her daughter in such a treacherous path by attempting to
appeal to the woman's moral scruples. Franco denounces the greed involved in the decision and blames the mother for whatever outcomes may occur: "Pay attention to what people say, and in matters crucial to life on earth and to the soul's salvation, don't follow examples set by others. Don't allow the flesh of your wretched daughter not only to be cut into pieces and sold but you yourself to become her butcher" (39). The repercussions Franco makes clear in this statement also implies that she is aware of her own situation as a courtesan, and she is condemning the double standards of the Venetian social practices that cause women, in the absence of a male guardian or companion, to be forced to partake in lifestyles and choices they would normally attempt to avoid. This entrapment or idea of enslavement to the double bind of male protection is a resource for exploitation that later liberal feminists also vehemently rejected in their writings.

Along with the sexual politics she rebukes, Franco also attempts to dissuade this mother from her decision by implying religious damnation. Rosenthal purports that this rhetorical strategy may be a way for Franco to exonerate herself in offering assistance to those who find themselves
in the same situation she was as a young girl when her own mother introduced her to the courtesan lifestyle (Honest 129). This interpretation is plausible since Franco addresses the issue in terms of experiential knowledge:

I wanted to be sure to write you these lines, urging you again to beware of what you're doing and not to slaughter in one stroke your soul and your reputation, along with your daughter's[...] What wealth, what luxuries, what delights can outweigh this? Believe me, among all the world's calamities, this is the worst. And if to worldly concerns you add those of the soul, what greater doom and certainty of damnation could there be? (Poems 39)

Franco emphasizes that the mother "build her hopes on what she has inside her and on what she might be able to make of herself" (39). Concerned about the mother's choice, Franco makes it clear that even when a young woman did not have a fair chance at a good marriage, her mother must look at other significant, devoted qualities inherent in her daughter as a means of securing any other form of lifestyle than that of the courtesan's. This advice solidifies Franco's recognition of her own professional status as well as reflect her contemplations about similar situations to be avoided for other women if at all possible.
Consequently, Franco's final means of appeal to this anonymous mother can be seen in the context of a shared maternity. She claims that even under the most optimistic circumstances of success, if her daughter enters the profession, the mother runs a high risk of losing her daughter due to the emotional strain and recognition by the daughter of the mother's exploitation of her for mere financial gain. Franco states:

It won't be long, perhaps, before your daughter herself, recognizing the great harm you've done her, will flee from you more than anyone else does - all the more because, as her mother, you should have helped her and you'll have exploited and ruined her instead. And this may be only the beginning of your torment. May Our Lord save you from your obvious intention to ruin and corrupt what you created from your own flesh and blood. (40)

In this regard, men were definitely not the only enemy of women, but women, as Franco so clearly shows here, were adversaries unto themselves, a recognition we come to see in first-wave feminism two hundred years later.

Letter 22 is by no means Franco's only published concern for young women at risk. As referenced in Letter 22, charitable institutions existed in the early modern period to assist in the prevention of the loss of young women's honor. However, while these institutions benefited some, there was no assistance for young girls who married
and were abandoned by their husbands (who of course also owned the girl's dowry once married) or for those whose "honor" had been wrenched from them due to rape and/or slander by others. Indeed, Franco herself married extremely young, and although no details are provided, her husband left, taking her dowry rightfully received by marriage, leaving Franco with no choice but to return to her mother and enter the courtesan profession. Thus, charitable institutions, while beneficial to some, still did nothing to end the injustices suffered by many women, especially the underprivileged. Franco, therefore, decided to write a petition in 1577 to the Venetian government, requesting the foundation of a home for women who, already married or having children, were ineligible for the benefits offered by the Casa delle Zitelle or the convent.

Franco's petition, a portion of which is reprinted by Rosenthal in The Honest Courtesan, goes to great length to address women's needs and shows how Franco considers the reasons why they might choose to continue living a life other than what the charitable institutions could offer. She writes:

There are many women who, having led a dishonest life because of poverty, sensuality, or other reasons, are sometimes touched by the Spirit of his Divine Majesty,
and thinking of the miserable end to which this path most often leads them with regard to both body and soul, would easily change their wicked ways if they had some reputable place to repair to, and support themselves and their children, because it is impossible for them to join the Citelle or even the Convertite, since they have mothers or children or husbands, or other obligations. (Honest 131)

Ultimately, the institution was founded by several noblewomen, not Franco herself, and ironically, she had to partake of the benefits of this home herself at some point. According to Rosenthal's research and Franco's original documents, one of Franco's petitions requests five hundred ducats annually for herself and heirs. Franco's petition emphasized that she was impoverished from the plague. Additionally, following her brother's death, Franco cared for her four nieces and nephews in addition to her own children (132). Such impoverished circumstances were frequent for unmarried women. Like Letter 22, Franco uses straightforward language in her petition to expose the social inequalities women faced. Like the letter's warning the mother of her potentially disastrous decision, Franco's petition emphasizes the harsh realities of the emotional, physical, and economic demands society could impose on women.
Franco wrote to several other women in her familiar letters, including those of the upper-class. In Letter 16 for instance, Franco congratulates a noblewoman on the birth of her son. She emphasizes the joy in the child being male and how that reflects well upon his mother and family: "Now you have borne such a beautiful baby boy, which delights me as much as the difficulties of your pregnancy saddened me, all the more since they're no sooner felt than forgotten, and joy increases hand in hand with the life of the child, who, as he grows in beauty, will doubtless grow as well in kindness and strength" (Poems 32). While Franco is no doubt genuinely congratulating the mother, she emphasizes the fact that because the child is male, he will be able to accomplish great deeds and will "shine like a celestial sun on earth" due to the fact that he is the "offshoot of a stock that can't degenerate or produce any less than perfect [...] his eternal beauty flourishing and growing [...] these predict his successful attainment of goodness" (33). Franco's words are a direct reflection of the social status placed on gender differences, males being the only first class citizens, with citizenship being defined by biological sex. Thus, opportunities infinitum are the male child's, and Franco is
most likely not just congratulating a fellow mother, but is also overly rejoicing in the fact the child is male. While it appears that Franco's rejoicing is a sign of her concession and "acceptance" of her place as a woman and second-class citizen, one should not overlook the underlying duplicitous meanings and irony Franco bestows throughout her works. Arguably, Franco is most likely exposing the gender bias of her society with hyperbolic praise for the male child.

These duplicitous meanings are widespread throughout Franco's letters and can most clearly be seen in the ones addressed to her male conversationalists and patrons. While Franco may appear to be acknowledging weaknesses in her sex or sound obsequious in nature to her male addressees, one must remember that Franco's audience was predominantly male, and it was through patronage of those males that Franco survived. Therefore, she could hardly be expected to be as direct with her traditional audience as she was with the mother in Letter 22, for instance. Moreover, we should perhaps not hastily conclude Franco's concessions are a recognition, much less agreement on her part, of the social strictures placed on women. In Letter 4, for instance, Franco offers consolation and advice to a
male friend who seems to have fallen into difficult times economically. Franco begins her letter by acknowledging her consolation as the least of what she can offer since the addressee had on "several occasions" so kindly advised her in hours of need. The letter reflects not only duties as friend, but in consoling this friend, she also reminds him that at least he is of better stock than she: "For though He could have made you be born from the filthiest and lowest species of all the beasts, He gave you birth in the most perfect species (humankind) and of that species He gave you the male sex and not, as to me, the female one" (29). Thus, he is still not as poorly off as he could be.

Franco in Letter 4 asserts that virtue lives more in practice than pretense and that her friend is able to do many things to relieve his grief when so many others (especially women) are chained to their fates; hence, he should not be stagnant and mull over his jealousies at others' better fortunes. It is in practicing virtue in the hour of one's depression or disdain that "values surpass the power of reason and prudence" (31). She explains that her consolation comes from her heart and is motivated by her love and respect for his feelings and acts of kindness bestowed upon her when needed. In addressing her friend in
this manner, she implores her friend to live up to values of honesty and justice that he advocates to others. Thus, he needs to practice that virtue which he advises of all his friends when they too realize or desire another's fortunes. Franco's tone is sympathetic, but also firm throughout this letter. Her frequent shifts in tone amongst letters and even within them is another interesting device which reflects the many roles Franco takes upon herself as friend, mother, and of course, defender of women.

As a courtesan and, therefore, a woman in a profession that constantly demanded defense from persecution, it is no surprise that several of Franco's letters are intended for that purpose or to thank others for her defense. In Letter 31, for instance, Franco expresses her gratitude towards a male friend who ardently defended her in her absence at a public function. Franco not only expresses gratitude in such situations, but she also humbles herself before her male patrons, a task she constantly underwent to maintain her status as an intellectual among so many men in Venice. Virtually all of Franco's familiar letters to men are thanking or praising their virtues as skilled thinkers and
artisans to the point of appearing as though she believes in her own inferiority to her audience. However, this mask is precisely what enables her to publish in public venues. Franco is staging yet another effect we will come to see in writings of first-wave feminist.

Letter 41, a short correspondence addressed to one of her patrons (most likely Venier), Franco acknowledges the services her patrons provide and, therefore, her inferior status in comparison, but this act should hardly be construed as the simultaneous acceptance of her inferior status because she was a woman. Courtiers who lived by the same standards as Franco as well as courtesans usually addressed their patrons with equal reverence, reflecting humility in the face of wisdom, and not necessarily sex. Indeed, many noblewomen were primary patrons for courtiers and are the subjects of similar dedications, although most patrons were men. In Letter 41 Franco writes: "I'm sending you this volume of my letters, which I've collected as best as I could, so that you may read it, and by compensating with your wisdom for my imperfections, you'll partly excuse and partly correct my mistakes" (44). Here, Franco notes the needed admittance of inferiority based on her sex, but
more likely she refers to skill in writing. We can arguably assume the latter since Franco goes on to discuss how she appreciates her patron's audience in considering her "trifles" in comparison to his "skill" (44). This, of course, is another example of the mask women writers were forced to don in order to write.

Franco wears her mask even in addressing other male artists, not just her patrons. For example, she addresses the famous painter Jacopo Tintoretto in Letter 21, thanking him for a magnificent portrait he painted of her. She compares his skill to her own as a writer:

Divine nature sees how skillfully you imitate, even surpass her, so much that what you gain in honor through your immortal works is her loss. So she will never dare grant to men of out time the high, bold intelligence required to explain in full the excellence of your art. In this way she hopes to avoid shame, in word and deed, in very age to come. And I, certain not to succeed in such a great enterprise myself, lay down my pen and pray to our blessed Lord for your happiness. (37)

Franco's situation as a woman, writer, and courtesan demanded strength and confidence, to say the least. Consequently, such letters written to address others' magnificence as artists and thinkers should be viewed as clever transpirations by Franco for her own purposes in
reflecting her strong confidence in her works, and not viewed strictly as contradictory signs of weakness.

Letter 6 also exemplifies this notion. Franco addresses a friend who has sent her some sonnets, and she sends two of her own in return. After praising her friend's form, calling his writing "divine" and perfectly imitative of the prominent fathers of rhyme, Franco writes: "I send two sonnets written in the same rhymes as your four. I, too, would have written four, which, though they wouldn't be worth a single one of yours, would at least show that I'm eager to learn" (31). These words are not only praise, but Franco also blatantly calls attention to her own abilities in being able to write, learn, and even match what her recipient so graciously bestows upon her. Humbling her skills in Letter 21, she similarly states in Letter 6, "May your Lordship make up for my lack with your skill, and wherever I may be, I will still be yours" (31). Franco's concession reflects her devotion and respect for her recipient, not necessarily inferiority. Like the liberal feminists, Franco knew how to adopt the linguistic postures required of her society so that the language of her letters and poems challenged those postures.
Franco's letters are more appeals for social response and public recognition than anything. In reflecting modesty, yet cleverly publishing her works as means of achieving public recognition, one can see the political and self-defining strategies in Franco's verses. These strategies serve even more purposes including allowing Franco to be one of the few female voices in defense of women, and as personal defender of her poetic ability. Franco's letters impel us to reevaluate male conclusions that early modern courtesans were temptresses with some education. Rather, courtesans were some of the most highly educated and cultured women in the world during the Renaissance (albeit at a price). By constantly expanding their knowledge, writing, and in Franco's case, publishing, courtesans' writings are women's voices that provide primary material by which the contradictions of patriarchy can be evaluated. Courtesans' lives and works provide a different view of society that was not only unpopular, but also dismissed to a great degree because of their biological sex. The illustrations courtesans' writings provide to modern scholars about their experiences as prostitutes, writers, and citizens provide a vital alternative to the education standards and early modern
women written about by males. Furthermore, writings of courtesans like Franco were, in many ways, proto-feminist treatises which reflected several strategies that were helpful to first-wave feminist demands for equality in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as well will see in the next chapter.
Notes

1The Poems in Terze Rime are dedicated to Duke of Mantua, Guglielmo Gonzaga (1538-87), famous as a protector of musicians (Poems 47). Exactly why Franco chose the Duke as the dedicatee is unknown, but Rosenthal purports it may have been at the behest of Domenico Venier who attempted always to maintain friendly cultural relations with the Mantuan court (Honest 104).

2The word "die" had sexual overtones in the Renaissance; it was used to refer to an orgasm also called the "little death." People thought that sexual activity drained away one's vital forces, shortening one's life.

3Although there is no evidence of any relations or explicit reasons given by Franco for dedicating her publication to D'Este, as Cardinal and patron to many artists and writers during the early modern period, it can be assumed that he was a popular figure and placed first in protocol for dedicatory. Tasso and other famous writers dedicated their first publications to d'Este as well.
Franco's representation of herself in her letters and poems differs significantly from the prescribed conditions imposed on Renaissance women. She casts herself as active defender of women, among other things, instead of the stereotypical passive female. She does not reside only in her home, but she braves the male political and social realms. Although still a victim as a courtesan because she must trade more than intellect for recognition in public spaces, Franco is not passive as was the expectation of early modern women. On the contrary, she is the attacker against those who persecute her and other women. Most important, she is the active voice against patriarchy which demanded that women live up to the roles dictated to them by male-determined custom. For instance, instead of being the coy lover, Franco presents women in control and human instead of as "creatures" or horrible tormentors of men and their "love." She even inadvertently instructs sexual technique-hardly the victim of love in such a role. Lastly, she foregrounds her own identity as a courtesan and
writer by expressing solidarity with the misery of other women, especially those in her profession.

So many roles not only display Franco's personal style, but also her confident intellectual and social capabilities. These roles position Franco as a proto-feminist, as I have argued in the previous. While it is unknown whether Franco was read by prominent Anglo-American first wave feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman, these women's works share similar concepts with feminist ideas Franco advocated. The first wave feminists brought ideas similar to those of Franco to the forefront during one of the earliest women's movement: equality, education, female choice, and sexual and economic autonomy. These concerns reflect the oppressions of patriarchal culture; these writings stand as correctives to patriarchal rule and, in Franco's situation, shape a representation of her life for a contemporary public audience.

Franco, First Wave Feminists, and Sex-based Identity

Franco, like the aforementioned first wave feminists, tries to re-write and anticipate more liberated feminist
subjects. In doing so, all of these women do not merely present feminist readings of sexuality, but they show how gender identity of a feminist subject is constructed through a sexual identity and the way that identity is grounded in what came to be known as male authored "gender" roles for women which, ironically, usually had nothing to do with sex.

"Masculine women" as Franco and most first-wave feminists were considered, were called such because of their resistance to the obedience prevailing culture demanded of them. This nomenclature recalls the ancient Amazon culture (Franco uses the image of the Amazon woman as warrior and on a similar comparison, Wollstonecraft was called an unsexed female by Richard Polwhele for her efforts in fighting for the betterment of women\(^1\)), a culture of women that defied the domesticity defined as woman's natural place as well as chastity as the defining factor for "virtue" in women. These women were considered "hostile" at best, and such representations of these strong-willed women were used as examples in cautioning young women to respect their "natural limits" as defined by patriarchy. Thus, as Margaret King observes, women who chose to advance intrepidly into the male arena of culture
and society also bore the burden of confused or illegitimate sexuality, according to male standards (189).

Like the Amazon, learned women like Franco and later feminists are portrayed (and these women often portray themselves) as some kind of female soldier because they had invaded the masculine realm. For most of these women, their sword was their pen, and in transgressing the limits of female activity, these extraordinary women were distanced from the female "norm," not by themselves, but by their male observers. Re-sexualizing these women as "masculine" was done in order to attempt to explain amazing gifts and talent in creatures considered inferior. Therefore, as King argues, masculinity is exalted and the inferiority of women reasserted (190). These female trespassers were despised and feared, but they were also admired and encouraged (as was the case with Franco's writing), but only because her achievements were considered masculine.

"Manly women" were usually considered not men really, but also not women because they were not hysterical and usually didn't produce children and take on domestic roles to the fullest extent. Franco, however, dutifully married young. After her husband left her, she became a learned
woman, public figure of culture, she mothered six children total (only three of whom survived, all from separate nobleman fathers), cared for and educated her own as well as her brothers' children, and frequently tended to household duties personally. All of these duties she performed while she was a courtesan professionally. Ultimately, this picture reflects that a woman of achievement could never present herself in a manner in which she might gain respect for her various roles and not shake what her culture defines as appropriate sexual roles. Moreover, such a depiction reflects the immense patriarchal flaw that women of achievement could not possess the mind and means necessary to provide for domestic duties and still be independent; reliance on male counterparts had to be figured in somewhere for a woman to maintain being a "woman" culturally. Thus, sex was frequently equated with gender in patriarchal culture, a concept which modern society has still not completely abandoned.

Franco openly defied the dictated virtues of chastity, silence, and obedience. As King notes, women owed the possibility of freedom in their work to the urban context in which they existed and to the fact that their own social identities lay between the usual interstices of class
More importantly, Franco was limited by her social position; in seeking her ambitions, she was still dependent on male patronage and that patronage could turn cold or even brutal. Therefore, in advocating a higher place for women, Franco had to take great care to challenge men in their own public spheres; however, she also had to reassure her audiences that learned women do not intend to learn more than men so much as develop self-worth to the extent their abilities as women allow. Regardless, changes occurred in the self-worth of many learned Renaissance women, even if very little changed for the better of women's social conditions at that particular time. One reason Franco's works are vital as prototypes for first wave feminist thought is that both share roots in the spiritual experience of women across time and varying cultures. That is, Franco's experiences and ideas expressed in her works are ones which many women throughout history have recorded, but not necessarily spoken in opposition about. Franco articulates a feminist consciousness later promoted by first wave feminists who more publicly established the grounds for a better, more independent society for women.
In reading Franco, we can see some of the precursors of the female erotic desire present in the language of her poetry that first-wave feminists also powerfully present as much needed independence in their fictional work and daily lives. For instance, Mary Wollstonecraft's affair with William Godwin was hardly considered "prudent."
Similarly, Mary Hays wrote about Emma Courtney who advocated rights to sex outside of marriage for women. While sexual liberation was not the only key to freedom, these representations of sex and desire contrast with the popular history of women's sexuality - meaning, female desire was hardly related outside of rape, incest, and the ruin that resulted from such. In fact, almost all women who exercised sexual agency in history had their lives and reputations staked on such acts, and the repercussions of their choices were all negative.

As a courtesan, some of Franco's repercussions were severe, including exile from Venice for some time, being on trial in front of the Spanish Inquisition for witchcraft, and undergoing several laws placed against her body (and all courtesans). These laws included not being able to wear fine clothing and only clothes of certain color to mark her as a woman of her profession so that others would
not mistake her for a noble woman (even while attending church). Ultimately, Franco's sexual agency that her profession afforded her still caused her to be the victim of her choices as well; sex was more a means to an end for Franco, regardless of her ideas of greater sexual agency for women. Professional choices for women were scarce, and the accessibility to all of the choices of living for women were even less viable. By the nineteenth century, women were allowed some education, but patriarchy was almost more stringent about women's roles during the time of first wave feminists than early modern Venice; all of these arguments were based on gender differences. It is precisely from this foundational level that many of Franco's and first-wave feminists arguments' stem.

Ultimately, Franco and first-wave feminists all asserted that women are desexualized because male patriarchy dictates that women are modest and more controlled in their sexual natures or that women have no sexual desires at all. Mary Hays (1760-1843) aptly points out, "mind is of no sex" (qtd. in Mellor 40). Modesty should not be equated with lack of sexual desire. Instead, Hays, like Franco, asserts that women simply know how effectively to manage and control their sexual feelings.
This idea of women lacking such a human value as sexual feeling or desire directly relates to how Franco and first-wave feminists argue what constitutes "rationality" in women as citizens, mothers, wives, and other roles. For example, Mary Wollstonecraft advocates arguments about women defined by their sex. She discusses in her most famous feminist tract, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), that women are first and foremost human, like men, with the same needs and desires:

> From every quarter have I heard exclamations against masculine women, but where are they to be found? . . . if it be against the imitation of manly virtues, or, more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character, and which raises females in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed mankind, all those who view them with a philosophic eye wish with me, that they may every day grow more and more masculine...women are placed on this earth to unfold their faculties. (80-81)

Wollstonecraft here makes one of the most important early feminist arguments here: women = human. She also infers that should anyone make any firm argument in favor of women, too often it is done so by comparing men and women by their differences.

As a result, becoming learned women was thwarted, in part, because they ceased to be women because of their
education, in the eyes of male contemporaries and even other women. Instead, in drawing attention to equality of the sexes by "human" standards, Wollstonecraft as well as Franco are two of the documented early feminists who advocate women's rights based on the fact they are not only deserving of such, but also that by "natural rights" as humans they should have greater rights than what is afforded them. It is precisely this claim of equality that structured feminist arguments pointing out discrepancies in patriarchal definitions of women's roles by sex, especially concerning rights and education. In purporting this claim, feminists reclaim the sexual identity of intelligent woman and transform themselves to standards beyond patriarchal containment.

Abolitionist language was also prevalent and utilized among first-wave feminists to expose the slave-like conditions women's identities were reduced to by patriarchal containment. The image of domestic woman as slave for first-wave feminists was similar to Franco's experiences as a courtesan. While, not ignorant of her situation as a woman and courtesan of the early modern period, Franco openly acknowledges and calls attention to the fact that women are slaves unto men as well as
themselves. In Capitolo 24 she writes, "Unfortunate sex, always led about / by cruel fortune, because you are always / subjected and without freedom!" (Poems 11.55-57). Franco, like Hays and Wollstonecraft, attempts to show her male audience that women are kept in bondage to the desires of man when, actually, women have many greater attributes like "patience" and "reason" they can use to keep the social fabric together; women, "to avoid pursuing wrongdoing, / adapts and endures being a vassal" (ll.80-81).

The language of abolition powerfully surges through many feminist arguments for women's rights and vividly illustrates the oppression so many women experienced and, in many cases, were simply ignorant about. For example, in a wonderful parallel to the Declaration of Independence, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote the Declaration of Sentiments, a feminist document claiming women were entitled to certain natural rights as women and as humans. Regarding education, she specifically wrote, "Resolved, that the women of this country ought to be enlightened in regard to the laws under which they live, that they many no longer publish their degradation by declaring themselves satisfied with their present position, nor their ignorance, by
asserting that they have all the rights they want" (qtd. in Kolmar 65). Like Franco, Stanton demands that women and especially men recognize and even empower women with equal intellectual and social opportunities in life. She grounds her assertions in moral and religious argument, claiming, "Resolved, that woman is man's equal - was intended to be so by the Creator, and the highest good of the race demands that she should be recognized as such" (qtd. in Kolmar 65). Stanton argues for equal education as well as against the idea that men determine how many and to what degree rights should be bestowed upon women - a slave to male-imposed limitations. Rather, Stanton advocates that not only does woman have divine rights equally bestowed upon her, but Stanton's resolutions also infer that women, separately from men, are entitled to such rights. Stanton's arguments are revolutionary, as were Franco's, in the regards that they challenge patriarchal notions, religious assumptions, and advocate women as perfectly capable as separate, independent beings from men. Education was one means that made independence possible.
Franco, First Wave Feminists, and Education

The idea of the minds of men being superior and the lacking of rationality in women is what early feminist arguments like those advanced by Wollstonecraft and Franco for female education attacked. As Wollstonecraft points out in *A Vindication*, human minds are not gendered or sexed, and it is precisely because men sex them and assert the female's mental inferiority, that women become sexual playthings for men and virtue dissolves. Even if a woman is only prepared to be a man's companion, she must have education: "if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop progress of knowledge and virtue; [...] And how can woman be expected to cooperate unless she knows why she ought to be virtuous?" (86). In this quoted, Wollstonecraft exposes the contradiction of the male-determined notion that women do not need education, but they are expected to contribute to the marriage and family through education of their own children and support of the husband. If a woman is not educated herself, how is she supposed to understand, much less excel, at these minimal roles as a wife and mother? Wollstonecraft takes her argument further: "Who made man the exclusive judge, if woman partake with him of the gift
of reason?" (87). Wollstonecraft avidly fought for joint education for men and women. She appeals to the men of her society that logic dictates women should be educated because men would ultimately be the benefactors of that wisdom. She claims that women would not be "masculine women" as men fear: "the word masculine is only a bugbear; there is little reason to fear that women will acquire too much courage or fortitude, for their apparent inferiority with respect to bodily strength must render them in some degree dependent on men in the various relations of life" (85).

Wollstonecraft argues that educating women will not make them surpass male control so much as help establish women as greater assets to society, as further educators, moral guardians, and keepers of social positions that could only benefit society as a whole. Much like Franco’s perception of educated women as assets to society, Wollstonecraft more clearly states the heart of her education argument:

How can woman be expected to cooperate unless she knows why she ought to be virtuous? unless freedom strengthens her reason till she comprehends her duty, and see in what manner it is connected with her real good. If children are to be educated to understand that true principle of patriotism, their mother must be a patriot; and the love of mankind, from which an
orderly train of virtues spring, can only be produced by considering the moral and civil interest of mankind; but the education and situation of woman at present shuts her out from such investigations. (86-7)

In presenting the call to educate women in this regard, Wollstonecraft plays to her male audience the useful proposition of education for all, as well as cleverly points out the flaws of patriarchy, oppositions, and hierarchies.

In presenting the importance of educating both sexes, Franco presents a similar argument against the idea of women's mental inferiority and subservient roles to men that can be seen in Wollstonecraft's previous quotes:

If we are not as strong as men, like men we have a mind and intellect.
And the virtue does not lie in bodily strength but in the vigor of the soul and mind, through which all things come to be known;
and I am certain that in this respect women lack nothing, but rather, have given more than one sign of being greater than men. (Poems Capitolo 24 ll. 59-66)

Franco reproaches her male recipient for his assumption that women have no reason or strength to exercise mental faculties successfully. Like, Wollstonecraft, Franco emphasizes the point that women not only have reasoning capabilities as adept as their male counterparts, but even exceed men in their reasoning, as is demonstrated in this
letter to the man who exhibited irrational behavior that disrupts the social fabric women are expected to maintain (but were not considered as possessing enough reason to exercise sexual, economic, or political agency apart from her husband).

Both Franco and Wollstonecraft boldly illustrate to their male recipients of their works the error of patriarchal thought concerning women's mental capacities. In taking on the humanist discourses of their day, these early feminists integrate the language of social criticism and political theory about women of their times in order to question those discursive assumptions. Additionally, in writing political theory and social criticism from a woman's perspective, both writers violate the conventional gender attribution of knowledge and discourse of their times. They challenge the private-public divisions with their discursive presence in public, intellectual space and domains of pedagogy privileged for male writers.

In addition to Wollstonecraft and Franco, Mary Hays extensively studied testimony of early modern women, especially Queen Elizabeth I, concerning the mental capabilities of women. She argued that in ancient times,
women held high political and decision-making positions that benefited society:

Taking into account the very few women, who have received a suitable education, the numbers who have shone, as sovereigns, legislators, in politics, literature, and in common life are not out of all proportion great? ... if women receive equal advantages of education, there is every reason to suppose, they would equal men in the sublime science of politics; which as it includes the whole art of governing the multitude well in the most liberal sense of the word, requires not only such talents, as the one sex is allowed to possess in common with the other, but includes likewise those, which men are fond of arrogating exclusively to themselves.

(qtd. in Mellor 39)

Hays bases her argument of education for women on the fact that women are not slaves to men. She further emphasizes this point in *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous* (1793):

Of all bondage, mental bondage is surely the most fatal; the absurd despotism which has hitherto, with more than gothic barbarity, enslaved the female mind, the enervating and degrading system of manners by which the understandings of women have been chained down to frivolity and trifles, have increased the general tide of effeminacy and corruption. To conform to the perpetual fluctuation of fashion ... requires almost their whole time and attention, and leaves little leisure for intellectual improvement.

(qtd. in Breen 76)

Franco and Wollstonecraft also use this image of the relationship between men and women when discussing their
reasons for necessitating women's education. Both women use the basis of their education for women arguments to shed light on greater rights such as equality in seeking professions considered "off limits" to women as well as financial independence.

Franco, First-Wave Feminists, Autonomy and Independence

Independence from men would require more than just education; greater professional and financial opportunities also had to be opened for women to acquire economic independence, especially when marriage was not an option. In Franco's case, even though her husband left, she was not able to be remarried (due to several reasons which likely included Catholic doctrine which prohibits remarriage, or Franco's loss of virginity and dowry which were the only resources early modern women were considered to bring into a marriage-Franco had neither after her husband abandoned her), a convent was impossible since she had been married and was no longer a virgin, and there were no other professions women could hold besides domestic duties for other families or becoming a courtesan. More than the housewife, courtesans had to intrigue and appease their
male patrons intellectually, as their income, status, and reputations depended on that more than physical pleasure many times. Courtesans had to take great care to ensure they properly addressed and remained current with patrons' concerns if they wished to continue expressing their views. Similarly, first-wave feminists had to accommodate male audiences in presenting their arguments if they wanted to maintain any independent status. Franco and first-wave feminists had little choice in actually escaping culturally determined female roles and in cultivating their own voices. Women ultimately had to remain subject to the exchange system of which they were a part. One way they chose to work within that system to accomplish greater autonomy for women was to publish, making their cleverly masked voices public.

Publishing, even during Franco's time, was well underway (though not many women published). In publishing her poetry, Franco uses the imagery of economic transactions to formulate a literary environment in which to assert her autonomy as a writer and as a woman. For instance, in several of Franco's Lettere familiari, she establishes what she deems is her honesty and moral superiority in the face of a Venetian tradition that mocked
and accused the courtesan of being beasts of greed and weakness, thus dehumanizing some women. First-wave feminists were also considered "beasts" to an extent, especially since they ceased to become "women" in rejecting patriarchy; they instead became "creatures." While these women could make a meager living off their writing, many published under male pseudonyms, for they faced adversity in publishing as a woman, especially for their first works. Franco was published, but only with great assistance and risk on part of her patrons. Thus, the patron almost always had to be the highest public authority for a courtesan's respective city and culture.

Publishing was also one of the few ways women could assert themselves as citizens and attempt to empower themselves. More importantly, publishing provided, although usually not enough to live on, some level of economic independence. For Franco, publishing allowed a courtesan to enter the public realm to fight unjust treatment of women, a reason why publishing was still a risk and marked as a space not open to most women. Unfortunately, publishing of even the more exceptional women still left no legacy for the ordinary Renaissance woman, or women not of privileged classes. Their
production is notable, however, in sixteenth or nineteenth centuries, considering both were ages so obsessed with the task of labeling and defining the proper role of women. This is why first-wave feminists and Franco argue for greater accessibility to professional opportunities outside the domestic sphere. Mary Hays argues that in order to achieve a truly civilized and as perfect as possible society, women must be allowed an equal share not only in education, but all facets of society including the professions. She states, "Women ought to be considered as the companions and equals, not as the inferiors as the slaves of men. In every station they are entitled to esteem, as well as love, when deserving, and virtuous in the different connections in life" (qtd. in Mellor 41). Hays argues women deserve equal opportunities financially and economically, as equals of men; additionally, a satisfying society cannot exist without such rights for women, even for men because they do not properly serve justice among themselves:

Even if the pretensions of the sexes were finally adjusted, and that equilibrium established, which I have endeavoured to point out as necessary to the peace and satisfaction of both, that perfection of complete happiness is not to be expected. Of this however we are certain, that, if universal justice were to prevail among mankind - in which of course we
include womankind - that we should then be on the high road to happiness, of which we might reasonably hope to taste a competent share in this world, and might safely trust to a good providence for the perfection of it in another. (qtd. in Mellor 41)

Hays advocates economic independence for women if they are expected to contribute on any level to their respective cultures; both sexes must work harmoniously if civilized standards are expected to prevail in current and future society. Equal publishing opportunities is one vital way women could contribute to that civilization.

Wollstonecraft purports similar arguments in favor of economic independence and, arguably, publishing for women. Echoing Franco's ideas about women's economic agency, Wollstonecraft states in A Vindication: "Were it not for mistaken notions of beauty, women would acquire sufficient to enable them to earn their own subsistence, the true definition of independence" (185). Wollstonecraft argued that through education and choice, women and men can live more harmoniously in society:

Let not men in the pride of power use the same arguments that tyrannical kings and venal ministers have used, and fallaciously assert woman ought to be subjected because she has always been so. But, when man, governed by reasonable laws, enjoys his natural freedom, let him despise woman, if she do not share it with him; and, till that glorious period arrive, in
descanting on the folly of the sex, let him not overlook his own. (133)

Here, Wollstonecraft not only defends women's freedom, but also points out the illogical pretensions of many years of patriarchy. She asserts that women have the natural right to hold civil duties and, indeed, must in order to maintain worth in society: "She must not be dependent on her husband's bounty for her subsistence during his life, or support after his death; for how can a being be generous who has nothing of its own? Or virtuous who is not free? [...] take away natural rights, and duties become null" (264).

Wollstonecraft not only attacks lack of availability of more professional options, but also the existing ones for woman as foolish and even lazy. She argues that politics or even reading of history are better than romances which women read as biographies. The pursuit of business should be allowed so that common and legal prostitution could be alleviated. In allowing women to pursue business, women would also not have to marry strictly for support; a more agreeable marriage based on character, love, and respect could occur. Regardless, several avenues would be available to women to exercise
choice as human beings and citizens who must equally contribute to society.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) also wrote a bold tract, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relation Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution* (1898), concerning economic independence of women, albeit from what we would now characterize as a more Marxist perspective. She argues that even domestic duties deserve respect as jobs:

>If the wife is not a business partner, in what way does she earn from her husband the food, clothing, and shelter she receives at his hands? By house service ... Although not producers of wealth, women serve in the final processes of preparation and distribution. Their labor in the household has a genuine economic value. (139)

Gilman explains how without recognizing women's contributions in the home as unpaid labor, society overlooks that men would not be able produce as much wealth; thus women are important economic contributors. If women are not to be allowed in non-domestic professions, then Gilman claims women deserve monetary compensation for their work. Logically, she claims, men profit, but must pay poor wives and mothers to serve in their homes, whereas they could simply pay their wives to accomplish the same
duties they merely oversee; in paying the wives who supervise, the money actually stays within the home and the men do not actually lose anything. Such an exchange would also make the role of women more significant than mere child bearers. While a woman may not make a living necessarily on payment for domestic duties, she understands the purpose of economic exchange, and she will never be independent if she is always property of man and "obliged" to perform services. However, if all women worked for domestic wages, then "all woman working in this way would be reduced to the economic status of the house servant" (141). In Gilman's tract, she attempts to point out the lack of possibilities and probability of women's economic independence (and hence, independence in general). Her writing, while purporting a revolutionary challenge to the traditional family structure, also exposes fallacies in patriarchal thinking that defines women as inferior creatures. Franco works, while not as literal as Gilman's, makes a similar argument about women and economic independence.

Franco uses her works as tools to create public alliances and establish networks of patronage. As Meredith Kennedy Ray observes, the patronage system had indeed
reached a peak in the sixteenth century, when dedicatory letters and prefaces abounded as one of the few avenues by which writers might hope to actually profit from their work and earn a living (304). In Franco's case, she dedicates her volume of letters to Cardinal D'Este, followed by two sonnets and a letter to Henri III of France. Debt was actually a common theme in Franco's works, especially when calculating distance between herself and her audience. That is, Franco attempts to demonstrate "inadequacy" of her literary attempts, and she resorts to economic imagery to relate her endeavors. In the dedication to D'Este, Franco sets up a parallel in which money figures centrally:

> Because anyone, even though Fortune has set her in the lowest place, can honor and glorify almighty God with offerings and prayers in equal proportion to the wealthiest men, richly endowed with all good things; indeed, because people who make the smallest offerings often excel those who build temples . . . so in your divine presence, without hesitation, a person desiring to show you her soul's devotion finds some way or another to prove it in outward deeds, hoping through a small and feeble tribute that nonetheless includes matchless yearning and an enlightened, eager will to surpass the honor of whoever . . . offers far more expensive things out of respect for your most excellent judgment. (Poems 23)

As Ray notes, the "gift" which Franco offers is her book. Thus she acquires an economic as well as artistic value (Ray 304). In presenting the cardinal with her book,
Franco could expect not only to promote her literary product and publicize her link to an important figure, but this was also one way to minimize her "debt" to the cardinal's patronage while maintaining his loyalty. Cleverly, what Franco really offers is her book as a means of exchange instead of her body. In making the offer, Franco manages to find one way to assert control over her voice and public self.

The previous tract by Gilman compares significantly with that of Franco's dedication in that, while Franco's was based on patronage, both works typify women's struggle for economic agency apart from a husband. Both women writer from the perspective of working within their respective patriarchal systems, but must appeal to their male audiences in a manner which depicts greater gain socially and financially to men in allowing women greater agency.

Like Wollstonecraft and Hays, Gilman uses bold language and sarcasm to relate women's plight and the changes that need to ensue. The particular first-wave feminists in this study echo Franco's notions that the allowance of women in public spaces is vital in maintaining a harmonious society, even one where women's predominant
place is in the home. While Franco and first-wave feminists ideas were radical for their respective times and cultures, all of these women succeeded in publishing those ideas during their lifetimes. Thus, it is important to read Franco as a proto-feminist for many liberal feminist concepts which, in turn, laid other vital groundwork in recovering women's voices as testimony to early feminism. The first-wave feminism greatly extended many of Franco's ideas accordingly and continued a legacy of thought and theory about women's education, economic agency, and especially sexual agency which connects with even earlier forms of feminism as well as anticipates later second and even third wave feminism. Thus, these women's writings help form important cruxes in the development and application of feminist thought and theory from the early modern period through contemporary scholarship.
Notes

1Richard Polwhele wrote "The Unsex'd Female" in 1798, one year after Wollstonecraft's death. In the poem, he condemns and satirizes Wollstonecraft's feminist principles she expressed in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. Polwhele's work expresses the author's belief that Wollstonecraft and her associates were anti-Christian revolutionaries who devalued the fabric of society because they valued reason and social refiguration over domestic duty.
CHAPTER IV
SUMMARY

Products of a specific time and attitude, the works of Franco and first-wave feminists do not alter the course of literature, but rather flow with it; posterity is left with writings from these women who valued themselves and their learning, and were fortunate enough to have been appreciated and published by their contemporaries. The recovery of women like Franco, and further study and application of liberal feminist thought and theory, is critical in expanding the ways and through what lenses literature is read and analyzed. Reading Franco and analyzing how she segue-ways into first-wave feminism, which then evolves and is extended in the mid-twentieth century, allows us to recover feminist history and understand some of its roots. This, in turn, allows for greater application of specific notions presented by particular writers whose works are still largely neglected in contemporary literature canons. Additionally, the way we apply the thoughts and theories presented by Franco and first-wave feminists allows for new readings of literature in that direct voices from women throughout history are
provided that expose different, though also strikingly similar, attitudes and experiences about women and our history in literature.

Standing out from the mass of Renaissance women, Franco assembled her own public image. Like Franco, later feminists used their public images to unmask the realities of their private places and to enter public spaces in a society which rarely honored and consistently defamed them. In unmasking those realities, Franco, Gilman, Wollstonecraft, Stanton, and Hays all approach language in their works as though entering a competition with male literary society, on male terms. Franco did in fact refer to this in her Letter 17 as "the theater of public competition by acquiring merit greater than theirs [men]" (Poems 34). The works of these women then become an attempt to correct the powerlessness and passivity that underlie women's positions in society, yet another common goal shared by Franco and the eighteenth and nineteenth century Anglo-American first wave feminists.

By redefining the parameters of the male rhetoric of their times, Franco and first wave feminists also de-center literary traditions that commonly use the women simply as disembodied objects of male praise or criticism. As a
result, the common thread of deconstructing the concept of literary genre as being inevitably linked to gender can be seen in Franco's writings that was then carried on in first-wave feminist works. Thus, the need for recovery of women's direct voices of experience from continental writers like Franco is vital in understanding earlier origins of feminist issues brought to light by what is considered the first public wave of feminism globally.

Franco's life and reputation during her life and after her death are not easy to recover, however. Her works, although published during her lifetime, do not seem to have been widely read due to the small number in print. Franco is not mentioned by any of her female contemporaries in their writings; however, two of her poems were edited in an anthology by Luisa Bergalli in 1726, and M. Tobia published Capitolo 15 in an anthology of women poets in 1850 (Poems 22). Franco was unlikely read by the prominent British and American first-wave feminists, but the themes and imagery so prevalent in first-wave feminist rhetoric are clearly the same in Franco's works. The common bond these women's writings share is key in observing and examining the evolution of feminist thought and theory over the centuries. The many images of woman as domestic slave,
unsexed creatures, or persons unworthy of an education stem from direct voices of experiences—from women, not men writing about women.

In the struggle against patriarchy, gender norms, and oppression from even their own sex, feminist scholars can study the vital similarities in thinking and viewing of women that, in turn, reflect subtle differences over time, but ultimately have the same goal in mind. The greatest goal for Franco, liberal feminists, and all feminist scholars, is the establishing of not just woman's voice in a man's world, but a world of women's voices.


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