

Handout 1: Fonte's *The Worth of Women: Wherein Is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Their Superiority to Men* (1600)

Moderata Fonte was a well known Venetian writer. Throughout her life, Fonte wrote romantic and biblical sonnets, ballads, philosophical dialogues, and dramatic plays. Fonte's *The Worth of Women* is a dialogue between seven Venetian women who discuss the abuse women face in light of the widely held belief that women are, by nature, inferior to men. The excerpt below occurs as the women discuss the injustice of prohibiting women from receiving an education.

The Worth of Women

Many men also refuse to allow their women to learn to read and write, on the pretext that learning is the downfall of many women. As though the pursuit of virtue (which is where learning leads) led straight to its contrary, vice! ...For its obvious that an ignorant person is far more liable to fall into err[or] than someone intelligent and well read, and we see from experience that far more unlettered women slide into vice than educated women who have exercised their minds...

pretext: a false reason or motive given to hide the real reason or motive

unlettered: unable to read or write

Respond:

1. What, according to Fonte, do men claim is the reason they believe women should not be educated?

Reflect:

2. What are virtue and vice? Give an example of each.

3. Do you think learning is a path to virtue? Do you think ignorance is a path to vice?

How many illiterate maid servants, how many peasant girls and plebeian women give in to their lovers without putting up much of a fight! And the reason is that they are more gullible than women like us, who have read our cautionary tales and learnt our moral lessons and developed a love for virtue: we may still feel more pricking of the senses, but we know how to discipline our desires, and it's only very rarely that an educated woman allows herself to be carried away by her appetites."

plebeian: common people

Respond:

4. What kind of moral failure or immoral act is Fonte referencing?

5. What does the word "gullible" imply here? What does it tell you about the "lovers" from the previous sentence?

Reflect:

6. Fonte says that women who cannot read cautionary tales cannot learn their moral lessons. Do you learn about moral behavior from reading/seeing examples? List 2-3 examples. Are there other ways you learn about moral behavior?

Respond:

7. What is Fonte's main argument in this passage?

If women are educated, then _____ .

Reflect:

8. Are you convinced by Fonte's arguments? Why or why not?