

Handout 2: Tarabotti's *Paternal Tyranny* (1654)

Arcangela Tarabotti was a Venetian philosopher and feminist writer. At the age of eleven, she was forced to live in a convent. *Paternal Tyranny*, critiques parents, like Tarabotti's, who use convents to rid themselves of their unmarried daughters. In this text, Tarabotti emphasizes the injustice of prohibiting women from receiving an education. Tarabotti argues that all women are deserving of education and that men are not intellectually superior to women. Despite her best efforts, including sending copies to France, this provocative text was not published in Tarabotti's lifetime.

Paternal Tyranny

But now I hear their voices resounding in my ears: "Just look at this shameless woman who dares to enter the debating arena and accuse us of ignorance. Is it not the case that women are guilty of massive ignorance, shrouded as they always are in a thousand foolish errors? Is it not the case that we deceive them just as we please?"...

Respond:

1. What is the argument of the "voices resounding" in Tarabotti's ears? What serves as evidence for women's ignorance according to the voices?

In this I do not disagree; I would make a great mistake were I to attribute learning to women when they are so wondrously stripped of it, not through lack of native intelligence but lack of schooling... All philosophers and men of learning have gained their knowledge by studying; nobody was ever born with infused wisdom...

Respond:

2. What is “native intelligence”? What does Tarabotti think about “native intelligence”?

Reflect:

3. What do you think about the nature of intelligence? Are people born with intelligence? Does a person’s intelligence result solely from their education?

Do not scorn the quality of women's intelligence, you malignant and evil-tongued men! Shut up in their rooms, denied access to books and teachers of any learning whatsoever, or any other grounding in letters, they cannot help being inept in making speeches and foolish in giving advice.

Yours is the blame, for in your envy you deprive them of the means to acquire knowledge. As Socrates said in Plato's *Symposium*, women do not lack intellect or a natural disposition to succeed in every understanding and every kind of learning equally to men...

Context: Plato's *Symposium* is a dialogue about the nature of love.

Respond:

4. According to Tarabotti, why do men not allow women to be educated?

So shameless are you that while reproaching women for stupidity you strive with all your power to bring them up and educate them as if they were witless and insensitive. You give them as a governess another woman, also unlettered, who can barely instruct them in the rudiments of reading, to say nothing of anything to do with philosophy, law, and theology. In short, they learn nothing but the ABC, and even this is poorly taught...

unlettered: unable to read or write

governess: a woman who supervises and cares for a child

Respond:

5. What is the problem with giving women “as a governess another woman”?

Respond:

6. Given your answers to the questions above, what is Tarabotti’s main argument? How does she support her argument?

Reflect:

7. Are you convinced by Tarabotti’s arguments? Why or why not?