

Project Vox Lesson Plan

Querelle des Femmes and Women's Right to Education (50-90 min.)

Grades: 9-12

Suggested Courses: History and English Language Arts courses (including AP)

Note: Topics in this lesson might lead to discussions of contentious issues.

Lesson Description

What is a woman? From the 14th to the 17th century, this question defined a set of intellectual debates across Europe known as the *Querelle des Femmes* or the **Woman Question**. These debates asked: What are the differences between men and women? Differences in nature? Differences in virtue? Differences in intelligence? Differences in worth? Participants in the debate questioned whether women should be allowed in certain spaces like schools, government, and the military.

This lesson plan focuses on arguments made by women philosophers during the 16th century in Venice in defense of their own right to education. As a response to the Protestant Reformation, in the 16th century, the Catholic Church increased the production of religious texts that called for women to stay in the home and be obedient to the Church and their husbands. Our philosophers rejected these doctrines and argued that women are equal to men and deserving of an education.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this activity, students should be able to:

- Investigate arguments made by 16th century philosophers Moderata Fonte and Arcangela Tarabotti regarding women's right to education.
- Evaluate the arguments and explain whether and why they find these arguments convincing.
- Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of Fonte's *The Worth of Women* and Tarabotti's *Paternal Tyranny*.
- Articulate their own position on philosophical questions about the nature of intelligence, virtue, and education.
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases used in two 16th century texts including vocabulary describing the political and social aspects of the texts.

Activity Materials

- **Bell-Ringer Handout:** [Passi's On the Defects of Women](#)
- **Handout 1:** [Fonte's The Worth of Women](#)
- **Handout 2:** [Tarabotti's Paternal Tyranny](#)
- [Slides](#)

Standards

CCSS: (9-10): RH.4, RH.5, RH.6, RH.8, RH. 10, RL.1, RL.2, RL.4, RL.6; **(11-12):** RH.1, RH.2, RH.4, RH. 6, RH.8, RH.10, RL.1, RL.2, RL.4, RL.6

C3: D2.His.1.9-12, D2.His.2.9-12, D2.His.3.9-12, D2.His.4.9-12, D2.His.5.9-12

North Carolina: RI 11-12.1, RI 11-12.2, RI 11-12.4, RI 11-12.5, RI 11-12.6, I.1.1, I1.2, I1.3, I1.4, I1.5, WH.H.1.1, WH.H.1.2, WH.H.1.3

Activity Flow

Section 1: Bell-Ringer (20 min)

Option 1:

1. Distribute the handout: [Bell-Ringer Handout: Passi's On the Defects of Women \(1598\)](#). Explain the following:

The Bell-Ringer handout includes the Table of Contents from an anti-women text of the *Querelle des Femmes* written by Giuseppe Passi entitled *Dei Donneschi Difetti* or *On The Defects of Women* Venice, 1598 [reprint 1618]). The book is a systematic assault on women and their character that runs for 380 dense pages.

2. **Think-Pair-Share:** Instruct students to read The Table of Contents of Giuseppe Passi's *On The Defects of Women* and circle chapter titles that stand out to them. Ask them to consider:

- What surprises you about these chapters?
- Are any of these chapters unsurprising?
- What do these titles tell you about Passi's attitude/concerns regarding women?

Option 2:

1. *Querelle des Femmes* translates directly to 'The Woman Question'. Write on the board: 'The Woman Question.' Ask students to predict what the question(s) might be.

Section 2: Historical Background (10 min)

1. Offer a brief background on the *Querelle des Femmes*. Using [Slides 2-4](#) as an optional reference, share the following information:

Slide 2: The *Querelles des Femmes* or ‘The Woman Question’

The *Querelle des Femmes* refers to debates that took place from the 14th to 17th century across Europe. At the heart of these debates were questions concerning the nature of women. What is a woman? Or, more frequently, participants in the debate asked, what were the differences between men and women? Differences in nature? Differences in virtue? Differences in intelligence? In their worth? In the opportunities they deserved? Participants in the debate questioned whether women should be allowed in certain spaces like schools, government, and the military.

Slide 3: Historical Context: Counter-Reformation

The Protestant Reformation took place across Central and Western Europe. Those who led the Reformation (like Martin Luther) were outraged by the abuse of *indulgences* or payments made to reduce the penance or punishment given to a sinner. In response to these abuses, leaders of the Protestant Reformation rejected the authority of the Pope and various traditions of the Church. Overall, the Protestant Reformation called into question the legitimacy of the Catholic Church.

The Catholic Counter-Reformation was a response to the Protestant Reformation of the early 16th century. Catholic leaders aimed to regain their authority and legitimacy. Catholic leaders fought to implement their religious doctrines in places like Venice. By 1580, there were over 60 religious households in the small city filled with thousands of clergymen, friars, monks, and nuns.

Slide 4: Historical Context: Printing Press

In the 16th century, Venice adopted the printing press. After the success of the Protestant Reformation, Catholic leaders in Venice increased the printing of Catholic texts.

The production of literature backing the Counter-Reformation called for Catholic values in the home. The virtuous woman was asked to be chaste, modest, obedient, and complementary to her household and husband.

As an active publication center, however, Venice also produced non-religious and anti-religious texts. Some of these works were written by Venetian women who argued that women were capable and deserving of education. They produced texts outside of and in response to the religious ideals encouraging women to serve as tokens of Catholic morality where they would be judged by their ability to perform as nuns, devout mothers, and/or obedient wives.

Source: [Extending New Narratives](#)

Section 3: Primary Text Engagement (30-60 min)

Select one or both handouts with excerpts from *Querelle des Femmes* authors to examine. Handouts include excerpts paired with questions testing comprehension skills. Handouts also include philosophical questions about the subjects in the excerpts.

Handout 1 (30 min): Fonte's *The Worth of Women: Wherein Is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Their Superiority to Men* (1600)

1. Briefly introduce the philosopher and the text. Using [Slides 5-6](#) as an optional reference, share the following information (3-5 min):

Slide 5: Moderata Fonte (1555-1592)

Modesta Pozzo, known by her pen name, Moderata Fonte, was born in 1555 in Venice. Her parents belonged to an educated and wealthy class. Fonte received an education at the Santa Marta convent until the age of 9 and then continued an informal education with the help of her grandmother's second husband and her brother. She was known as an extremely bright student, writing poetry of her own very early in her childhood. In her twenties, Fonte moved in with her uncle, Giovanni Niccolò Doglioni, who was well connected to Venice's literary circles. He encouraged Fonte to write and helped her to publish. Much of what we know of Fonte comes from Doglioni's *Vita*, a biography written on Fonte's life published in 1600.

Throughout her lifetime, Fonte wrote various romantic and biblical sonnets, ballads, philosophical dialogues, and dramatic plays. Fonte is recognized today as a philosopher and feminist writer. In her work, Fonte argues that women have the right to an education.

Slide 6: *The Worth of Women: Wherein Is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Superiority to Men* (1600)

Fonte's most famous work is a feminist text entitled *The Worth of Women*, published after her death in 1600. *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 title directly attacks a text written by anti-woman author Giuseppe Passi in 1598 entitled *On The Defects of Women*. (This is the text from the optional bell-ringer activity). In response, Fonte argues that all women deserve an education and that education is a path to virtue.

Source: *The Worth of Women: Wherein Is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Superiority to Men*. Edited and Translated by Virginia Cox, The University of Chicago Press, 1997.

2. Divide students into small groups and distribute [Handout 1](#). Instruct groups to read the excerpt and then discuss the questions (10-15 min).

3. Discuss each question as a class (10-15 min). Use the following notes to guide students through discussion:

Handout 1 (Fonte): Suggested Answers and Further Discussion

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

Men claim that women should not be educated because their education leads them to immoral behavior.

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

Note: Reflection questions may receive various kinds of answers.

Virtue refers to that which is morally good or right and vice refers to that which is immoral or wrong. In philosophy, virtue and vice generally refer to habits or dispositions related to moral behavior or feelings. Honesty is a virtue while jealousy is a vice. Students should recognize the relationship between virtue and good moral behavior and vice and immoral behavior using examples from their own life.

Here is an example of how this discussion might go: Students may say that virtues are actions humans perform that benefit other humans and vices are actions humans perform that harm other humans. In response, one might point out that this definition makes virtue and vice relational. One might ask the students, do you think someone can have a virtue or a vice if they are in isolation? This is a philosophical thought experiment meant to help the students see which concepts underlie their definition.

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

Note: Reflection questions may receive various kinds of answers.

Here is an example of how this discussion might go: Students may say that education exposes you to different belief systems and this allows one to choose the best virtues to pursue. On the other hand, students may say that a well-educated person might be immoral. In fact, they may say, the men Fonte is referring to are educated and yet, acting immorally by excluding women from schools. Students may also say that while learning can help lead one to be virtuous, it is not a guarantee. In response, one might ask students how else people become virtuous.

Students may also point out that not all kinds of education may lead someone to virtue/vice. One might prompt the students to describe the kind of education Fonte is referring to. Does Fonte think a physics education could help these women become virtuous? Why or why not?

Here is a thought experiment one can use during this discussion: Imagine a person grows up in a religious cult. They know nothing about the outside world. The cult teaches them that it is immoral to wear the color blue. They believe their whole life that this is the case. Is this how education and virtue/vice works? Do you think the person will ever believe otherwise?

This thought experiment might lead to a discussion of whether people are responsible for their moral/immoral behaviors. If our virtues and vices are a direct result of our education and we do not choose our education, are we responsible for our virtue and vices?

Try to remind the students of the definitions they came up with in the last question. Discuss whether their answer to this question changes or affirms their definitions.

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

Fonte is referencing premarital sex.

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

“Gullible” implies that the women are being tricked into having sex with the men. It tells us the ‘lovers’ are deceiving the women.

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?

Note: Reflection questions may receive various kinds of answers.

Students may say that they learn about moral behavior from their parents, social media, movies, books, or friends.

Students should be prompted to think about how this process works. This discussion should highlight other essential features of moral education. For example, one might ask students, after you witness an example of moral behavior, how do you come to hold the belief related to that moral behavior? For example, you read “The Boy Who Cried Wolf.” How does its lesson - that lying is bad - become a part of your own life/morals?

Students may say that they reflect on the action and try to see how it applies to their own life. Students may also say that they learn about moral behavior through their own feelings or intuitions. For example, they might feel bad after lying to their friend, reflect on that feeling, and then learn that they should not lie again. One can push students to think about the roles feeling, reflection, and analogy have in moral education.

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

If women are educated, then __ they are more likely to be virtuous __.

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

Answers will vary.

Handout 2 (30 min): Tarabotti's Paternal Tyranny (1654)

1. Briefly introduce the philosopher and the text. Using Slides 7-8 as an optional reference, share the following information (3-5 min):

Slide 7: Arcangela Tarabotti (1604-1652)

Arcangela Tarabotti is a Venetian philosopher and feminist writer. She was born in 1604 in Castello, a neighborhood of Venice. Tarabotti lived during a time when women had two options: get married or become a nun. Like her father, Tarabotti was born unable to walk. Her condition made her unsuitable for marriage in her father's eyes and at the age of eleven, she was sent to the Benedictine Convent of Sant'Anna. At sixteen, Tarabotti took her first vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and stability.

Tarabotti describes herself as self-taught and criticizes the inadequate education available to her during her time in the convent. Despite never receiving a sufficient education, Tarabotti produced seven works, five of which were published during her lifetime. Tarabotti died in 1652 at the age of forty-eight in Sant'Anna. Tarabotti spent her life arguing against forced monachization: the practice of placing women who do not have religious callings into convents. Tarabotti criticized her insufficient schooling and argued that all women deserve an education.

Slide 8: *Paternal Tyranny* (1654)

One of Tarabotti's earliest works, *Paternal Tyranny*, critiques parents who use convents to rid themselves of their unmarried daughters. In this text, she also 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.

Source: Paternal Tyranny. Edited and translated by Letizia Panizza. The University of Chicago Press, 2004.

2. Divide students into small groups and distribute Handout 2. Instruct groups to read the excerpt and then discuss the questions (10-15 min).
3. Discuss each question as a class (10-15 min.). Use the following notes to guide students through discussion:

Handout 2 (Tarabotti): Suggested Answers and Further Discussion

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?

Women are ignorant and should not enter into debates with men. We (the voices) know women are ignorant because we can trick them easily.

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

‘Native’ intelligence is a kind of intelligence that exists naturally and independent of any education. It is an innate trait. Tarabotti does not believe in ‘native’ intelligence. According to Tarabotti, intelligence is never innate. Instead, all intelligence results from schooling and experience.

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?

Note: Reflection questions may receive various kinds of answers.

Students may say that intelligence is inherent. To support this idea, students might point to prodigies as an example. Students may say it is nurture and argue that even a prodigy, if isolated and left without schooling, could not manifest their intelligence. Students are maybe most likely to say that intelligence results from both nature and nurture. Students may say that intelligence is a result of one’s culture, upbringing, or education.

One might prompt students to think about different kinds of intelligence: social intelligence, creative intelligence, academic intelligence, etc. One might ask students how their opinion on whether or not intelligence is inherent relates to these different kinds of intelligences. For example, one might ask, is creative intelligence more inherent than academic intelligence?

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

Men do not allow women to be educated because they are envious of women. They want to hinder the power of women that will come if women can acquire knowledge.

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

Tarabotti argues that even when a woman does receive an education, she receives her instruction from another uneducated woman. This cycle ensures that all women remain less intelligent than men.

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

Tarabotti’s main argument is that women can be just as intelligent as men if they receive the same level of education. To make this point, Tarabotti first establishes that intelligence is not an intrinsic quality. She argues that all learned men became intelligent only through receiving an education. She discredits men who argue that women are naturally less intelligent by appealing to Plato’s Symposium. She furthers her argument by highlighting the conditions men set in place to ensure women remain uneducated.

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

Answers will vary.

Section 4: Wrap-Up Discussion (10-15 min)

1. *Querelle des Femmes* translates directly to the ‘Woman Question’. Ask students:

What is/are the Woman Question(s) in the passages we have seen today?

The aim of this wrap-up discussion is to emphasize that the *Querelle des Femmes* or the ‘Woman Question’ is not a simple, apolitical, or innocent question. The question being asked in the *Querelle des Femmes* is not simply ‘what is a woman?’, but ‘what rights do women have?’ ‘In what spaces do women belong?’ Are women deserving of education?’ ‘Are women equal to men?’

This wrap-up activity will ask students to identify the hidden questions at stake in the *Querelle des Femmes*. As students provide answers, write each hidden question on the board so students can visualize just how many hidden questions there are in the *Querelle des Femmes*.