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Arcangela Tarabotti: Equality Between the Sexes and the Problem of Women's Freedom

Arcangela Tarabotti: Igualdade entre os sexos e o problema da liberdade das mulheres

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RESUMO:

Trata-se de apresentar a discussão acerca da liberdade das mulheres, tal como tratada por Arcangela Tarabotti (1604-1652). Em seu tratado, "*Tirania Paterna*", a filósofa veneziana denuncia a arbitrariedade dos pais ao enviar suas filhas para conventos sem o consentimento delas, privando-as da liberdade sem que tenham cometido crime algum. Tarabotti critica a contradição entre a devoção a Deus e o claustro forçado, ressaltando a importância do livre arbítrio, que, segundo ela, é concedido igualmente a homens e mulheres. Sua obra é uma defesa fervorosa da liberdade, feita em meio a um período que deixava as mulheres à margem de uma longa e profícua discussão filosófica em torno de temas como igualdade e a liberdade política. Para defender a liberdade para as mulheres, ela rejeita a ideia de que o convento seja o único local de devoção a Deus, enxergando-o como uma forma de tirania exercida pelos homens sobre as mulheres, indo contra a vontade divina. A partir disso, pretende-se investigar o problema do livre arbítrio, o tema das paixões e a questão da fragilidade que diz respeito ao corpo das mulheres, de modo a compreender as especificidades das limitações impostas às mulheres, tal como compreendidas por Tarabotti.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Tarabotti, mulheres na filosofia, livre-arbítrio, paixões, liberdade.

ABSTRACT:

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It is a matter of presenting the discussion on women's freedom, as addressed by Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–1652). In her treatise *Tyrannia Paterna*, the Venetian philosopher denounces the arbitrariness of fathers in sending their daughters to convents without their consent, depriving them of freedom without any crime committed. Tarabotti criticizes the contradiction between devotion to God and forced enclosure, emphasizing the importance of free will, which, according to her, is granted equally to men and women. Her work is a fervent defense of freedom, produced in a period that marginalized women from a long and fruitful philosophical debate on topics such as equality and political freedom. To advocate for women's freedom, she rejects the idea that the convent is the only place for devotion to God, viewing it as a form of tyranny exercised by men over women, going against divine will. Based on this, the aim is to investigate the problem of free will, the theme of passions, and the issue of fragility concerning women's bodies, in order to understand the specific limitations imposed on women as perceived by Tarabotti.

KEYWORDS: Tarabotti, women in philosophy, free will, passions, freedom.

Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–1652), a Venetian nun of the early 17th century, confined to a convent around the age of twelve, wields her pen in a way that leads her reader into a long and profound reflection on freedom. Her principal work, *Paternal Tyranny*[2], which began circulating about two years after her death, reveals the vibrancy of a mind that found in writing the possibility of expressing what had been denied to her throughout her life. Imprisoned in a convent cell against her will, Tarabotti draws upon the philosophical foundations she was able to learn from a limited collection – one that nevertheless extended beyond the library of the institution where she resided[3] – to reflect on the freedom of women in her time. Making skillful use of the resources available to her as a nun, the author turns to Christian philosophers, particularly concepts related to God's laws. From these, she seeks to highlight the absurdity of her own condition, akin to that of so many other women who were forcibly enclosed. She does so by exposing the contradictions between the Christian precepts of divine will and the impositions of the men of her time, which strangled women's freedom.

[2] The text is also entitled La Semplicità Ingannatta.

[3] In the introduction to one of Tarabotti's works, Susanna Mantioni states that the cloister did not prevent Tarabotti from establishing relationships with the most emblematic figures of Venice's cultural and political scene. See, in this regard, Mantioni, 2015, p. 9-10. We can assume that this allowed her to access a broader collection than that of her convent.

Among Tarabotti's writings, one letter stands out. In it, the philosopher addresses the *Most Serene Venetian Republic*[4], her homeland, to underscore the principal characteristic of that Republic, its highest value: freedom. According to her, "as far as the remotest corners of the known world, the wings of Fame bear aloft the news of how you, Most Serene Queen, grant unconditional liberty to people dwelling in your beautiful city (...)" (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 37) Freedom, the central theme discussed by Italian humanists since the *Quattrocento*, takes on a new dimension in the nun's writings. The direct reference to the Republic of Venice brings to light the philosopher's sense of exclusion. This discomfort clashes with the very foundations of the classical debate that took shape throughout the Renaissance, which was based on the idea of equality as a prerequisite for the Republic's freedom – a freedom of which her fellow citizens so proudly boasted[5].

Thus, it is necessary to add that, beyond Christian philosophy, the author engages in dialogue with the writings of humanists, and this influence also seems to be reflected in her texts. During the Renaissance, immediately preceding Tarabotti, the debate on freedom presupposed the idea of equality. The latter was conceived in terms of forms of government and the participation of all parts of the republic in the crucial decisions of such a political community, as Machiavelli argued. When considering other aspects that, in one way or another, relate to public affairs, there are striking differences in this debate on equality, especially if we broaden our view to thinkers such as Poggio and Guicciardini, for example[6]. The discourse on freedom[7] arises from a particular understanding of the idea of equality, as it generally assumes freedom among equals. In political terms, this debate, which extended throughout the Renaissance – at least in the texts written by men – excluded women altogether.

Tarabotti's work also offers a reflection on the theme of equality. However, unlike the humanists and philosophers of the Renaissance, she directly includes women in her observations, investigating the cultural inequality between the sexes. She employs the conceptual framework of philosophy to do so, provoking a reflection on the fundamental principles of human existence and exposing how women are excluded from the public sphere and regarded as inferior beings, supposedly in need of male guardianship. Her pen guides us through the discrepancy between the Renaissance discourse on freedom and the demands of women regarding the same theme. She makes this explicit when she states, in the same letter to Venice, that "it is fair, however, to dedicate my book to your great senate and its senators, who, by

[4] All translations are our own.

[5] On the originality of Renaissance republicanism, built upon the relationship between freedom and equality, see: Cardoso, 2022.

[6] On the theme of equality in the Italian Renaissance, see: Fontes, 2024.

[7] We investigate the theme of freedom in: Benevenuto, 2021.

imprisoning their young maidens so they chant the Psalter, pray, and do penance in their stead, hope to make you eternal, most beautiful virgin Republic, Queen of the Adriatic" (Tarabotti, 2004, pp. 37-38). This passage, which references Venice, makes clear that the issue raised by the author is not of a private nature, as men of her time generally perceived it. We cannot fail to mention, as Margaret King points out, that women in this period were, to a great extent, treated as possessions, as extensions of men, sometimes even mentioned in documents as property[8]. In this sense, women's demands were confined to the private sphere. In contrast to this broader historical perception, and closer to the ideals of Venetian humanists, Tarabotti advocates in her writings for a specific agenda – one that seems to presuppose the already established debate among thinkers of her time and that mobilizes both the themes of equality and freedom in political terms.

In a way, Tarabotti appropriates the Renaissance debate, which begins with equality to think about freedom, but with a different purpose: namely, to consider specifically the social conditions of women, particularly those that enabled forced enclosure. Indeed, Tarabotti's aspirations concern the enforced enclosure of women, and if we take her arguments to their ultimate consequences, she seems to demand a political or social structure capable of at least fostering a reflection toward equality between the sexes – a reflection that could result in some glimpse of freedom for women. Her argumentative structure divides the theme into distinct aspects, addressing the problem of free will, the theme of passions, and the question of fragility, which inevitably relates to the female body – subjects that constitute the objectives of this inquiry.

THE PLACE OF WOMEN AND THE CHARACTERIZATION OF THE CRIME OF FORCED ENCLOSURE

Tarabotti's starting point is the profound disparity with which the city perceived the sexes. Bearing this in mind, the author opposes all those who, in any way, defend the inferiority of women – including the very constitution of the Republic of Venice[9] – in order to advocate for equality between the sexes and freedom for women. Her claim addresses a chronic and, to her, absurd problem: the forced incarceration of undeniably innocent women. At a time when men faced imprisonment only when they

[8] Margaret King, when addressing the issue of dowries, even mentions documents in which daughters are treated as commodities (King, 1991, p. 33).

[9] It is symptomatic that Tarabotti addresses the Republic of Venice. Polybius' assertion synthesizes the understanding of the form of government at the time. According to him, "the predominant cause of success and its opposite in all matters related to the great government of a people is the form of its constitution, for from it, as from a source, not only all designs and plans are born, but also their very realization." (Polybe, 2003, VI-2, p.69) We address the theme of the best constitution in the republican tradition in: Benevenuto, 2019.

committed crimes, the practice of confining young women in convents against their will was, for Tarabotti, a matter of public concern – a political issue. Her denunciation, in this sense, aims to expose a Republic that permitted, enabled, and legitimized this practice, one that did nothing for its young women.

After accusing her city of allowing young women to be deprived of their freedom, imprisoned in convents against their will, she turns to God to separate forced enclosure from true devotion. In doing so, she reinforces the political nature of her text. According to her,

> you know well, dear and most beloved Lord, that if I were to dedicate this labor of mine to earthly princes, it would be rejected – perhaps prohibited – because of their "reasons of state"; and, deemed prejudicial to men's self-seeking political interests, it would be shunned by everybody else in general. (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 39)

In this passage, Tarabotti demonstrates a clear awareness of the inhospitable context in which her work would be received. The obstacles she faced in publishing her books attest to this, and the work in question, *Paternal Tyranny*, was only published posthumously. *To the Reader*, the philosopher addresses herself with greater delicacy, detail, and caution. She anticipates the reasons why the text might be rejected and preemptively mounts her defense. According to her, "two of the main impertinent remarks you will hear expressed are, first, that I nurture within myself a particular contempt for men; and, second, that I loathe the religious life (...)". (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 40). In the face of such accusations, even if she anticipated them, Tarabotti defends herself: "I condemn men's vices, not man himself; and I condemn enforced religious life, not those women called by the Holy Spirit who voluntarily seclude themselves in convents to serve God." (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 40). By making this assertion, Tarabotti then addresses only the men who committed or, in some way, endorsed the crime of forced enclosure, as can be observed throughout *Paternal Tyranny*.

She begins this book by directing her reader to the central issue – namely, t*he crime of forced enclosure* – starting with a characterization of those who perpetrate it. The author's initial observations allow us to presume that she limits her accusations to those who imposed confinement on the women who depended on them. Thus, it is necessary to consider that she does not direct her charges at all men, but only at the specific group she previously identified – that is, the men who practice or condone the crime of forced enclosure. Even so, the passage that opens the chapter is so striking that it unsettles the reader. According to her, "men's depravity could not have devised a more heinous crime than the wanton

defiance of God's inviolable decrees. Yet day in and day out, men never cease defying them by deeds dictated by self-interest" (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 43).

The crime denounced by the nun consists of the imprisonment of innocents, further aggravated by the young age and reluctance of the girls. Imprisonment, typically reserved for those who had committed crimes, could not rightfully be imposed upon the innocent. Yet, dragging young girls into convents was a common custom, and forcing them to spend the rest of their lives in small cells was an event deemed socially acceptable in her time. This leads Tarabotti to analyze the specificities of what she considers to be a crime, given that it perverts Christian principles and defames women, as we shall seek to demonstrate below.

THE PROBLEM OF WOMEN'S FREE WILL

Tarabotti's philosophical inquiry aims to highlight the equal freedom of choice between men and women. She draws from Scripture to affirm that free will was granted equally to both sexes, which, for her, implies equal freedom of choice. To Tarabotti, the forced enclosure of girls deprives them of what was bestowed upon them by God and, therefore, stands in opposition to divine law. Her argumentative strategy is to expose the contradictions inherent in the premises that justify the constraint of women's freedom.

The first of these contradictions can be examined through the concept of virginity. To do so, Tarabotti turns to the distinction between voluntary and involuntary acts. As is well known, this distinction, a classic in the history of philosophy, dates back to Aristotle. Aware of the difficulty in countering an argument of such authoritative weight, Tarabotti carefully exposes the contradiction with clarity. In a passage where she refers to God, she states that

> He is indeed well pleased by the voluntary vow of virginity more than all other sacrifices offered up to Him, but at the same time He abhors what is done by force and what is holy only in name—the condition of nuns involuntarily shut up (although altogether innocent) as if they were criminals sentenced to life imprisonment. (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 41)

Among the issues highlighted by Tarabotti, this passage underscores the fundamental importance of the possibility to choose. The imposition of life in a convent reveals an absence of choice. Thus, the central issue is the forced imposition of a life that would be praiseworthy only if it had been freely chosen. In other words, the problem is not the decision to become a nun but rather the coercion of what should be a voluntary choice. Regarding the imposition of convent life or marriage, Margaret

King[10] emphasizes that a woman's will was generally disregarded, with the decision about whether she would enter a convent or marry typically being made by her father or, in his absence, another male family member. Elizabeth Foyster clarifies the relationship between the recognition of male honor and a man's ability to prove that he is honored at home. For her, "men from whatever social status were only held worthy of honour if they could demonstrate control over their wives, children and servants. Hence honour was a concept which was vital to the upholding of male power" (Foyster, 1996, p. 215). Foyster delves deeper into the English context[11] of the seventeenth century, but her work allows us to expand this understanding to the broader European sociocultural context, where men are honored for controlling wives and daughters.

Such a practice, widely accepted by society, is utterly unacceptable to Tarabotti, as she sees it as a criminal act. To expose this crime, she highlights the inconsistency between the laws of God and the laws and customs of her time. Drawing from Thomistic principles, the philosopher articulates the dimensions of the problem posed by this inconsistency. According to her, "among their blameworthy excesses, pride of place must go to enclosing innocent women within convent walls under apparently holy (but really wicked) pretexts". (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 43) The perversion seems to lie particularly in the justification that forcing young women into sainthood would be pleasing to God. What the author demonstrates is that it is neither possible to make them saints by force nor to truly praise God through a compulsory act. This perversion culminates in a crime: depriving young women of their freedom without them having committed any offense. Tarabotti reiterates the specificity of this crime against young girls, as men only experience imprisonment as a punishment for crimes they have actually committed. It is noteworthy that when she refers to what is sacred only in name, she seems to engage – albeit indirectly – with a well-known argument from Cicero's *De Officiis*, which asserts that what truly matters is the reality of a thing, rather than the name assigned to it[12].

By reflecting on this crime from a philosophical perspective, she observes that the forced confinement of women in convents violates their free will. According to her,

> men dare to endanger free will, bestowed on men and women alike by the Divine Majesty; they force women to dwell in life-long prisons, although guilty of no fault other than being born the weaker sex – and consequently more deserving of compassion, assistance, and support, rather than being locked up forever in dungeons. (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 43)

[10] On the lack of women's autonomy regarding marriage and the convent, see King, 1991, p. 81-103. We address this topic in: Benevenuto, 2024.

[11] On the topic of women's freedom in the English context, see: Santos, 2024.

[12] Cicero discusses the theme of appearance throughout Book II of *De Officiis*.

This argument presupposes that both men and women possess free will. Having been equally endowed with it, both have the capacity to make choices. It is by living freely that they can fully exercise their free will. For Tarabotti, it is not for men to make decisions on behalf of women. Thus, the choice of a convent life, marriage, or any other matter concerning a woman's life should be hers alone – otherwise, she is deprived of exercising her free will. Furthermore, there is no justification for the forced confinement of an innocent person. Such an act is perverse and contrary to divine law.

While identifying this crime as an abuse, Tarabotti also draws upon Christian precepts to defend what we might today call the principle of equity between men and women. Her argument is grounded in the idea that both men and women are endowed with intellect, freedom, and will. In her words:

> What a gross abuse, what an unforgivable error, what a wicked decision, and what sheer audacity is this deed when Divine Providence, after all, has granted free will to His creatures, whether male or female, and bestowed on both sexes intellect, memory, and will! By means of these three faculties they are able to shun avoidable evil and pursue the good of their choice by their own voluntary inclination, not servile fear. (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 44)

This passage illustrates how Tarabotti mobilizes a conceptual repertoire rooted in philosophy to reflect on the theme of women's freedom. Without freedom, voluntary action is impossible, and this is a central point in the author's argument. This freedom, granted by Divine Providence and constituted as free will, is the foundation of human will. Free will cannot be exercised when voluntary action is denied. In this sense, imprisoning women against their will deprives them of acting voluntarily and robs them of the free will granted by Providence. It is, therefore, an abuse – a crime inconceivable in divine order and unsustainable under human law.

The gravity of this crime leads Tarabotti to investigate more closely the specific nature of its victims – women – and the cultural context in which they exist, seeking to understand them better in order to grasp the full dimensions and circumstances of the crime. To do so, she draws upon the Scriptures and her extensive knowledge of biblical texts, acquired over a lifetime as a cloistered nun. Her point of departure is the act of creation, particularly the creation of woman. The first movement of her text in this direction differentiates material creation from eternity. In this regard, Tarabotti invokes Mary, the Mother of God, stating that "she existed from all eternity, the firstborn of all creatures generated by the breath of God Himself". (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 45). Further on, the philosopher explores the

motivations of men in suppressing this reality and ultimately cites the biblical text in support of her argument.

> Mary, a woman like all others, was not obliged to beg for her existence from a man's rib! She was born before time itself as well as before other men who, blinded by ambition to rule the world on their own, pass over this infallible truth in silence: that in the divine mind, woman was created ab eterno. 'I was set up from eternity, and of old before the earth was made. The depths were not as yet, and I was already conceived' [Prv 8:23–24]. (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 45)

Anchored in the Scriptures, Tarabotti identifies men's ambition and perversity as the root of distorted interpretations of biblical passages concerning the creation of woman. Once it is clarified that the reference is to material creation, we can also understand a particular assertion by the author, according to which "woman, the compendium of all perfections, was the last to be created" (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 45). To this idea of woman's perfection, the philosopher contrasts the imperfections of men. To do so, she develops her own interpretation of the Scriptures, always grounded in the biblical text. According to her,

> After the Lord had created the universe and all the animals – as I have just said – it is written, "And God saw all the things that He had made, and they were very good" (Gn 1:31). He then set about shaping the proudest animal of all; but when He had finished, He did not deem His work perfect and so did not recognize it as good. For this reason, Genesis does not add the same words as before; but foreseeing that without woman man would be the compendium of all imperfections, God said after some thought, "It is not good for man to be alone, let us make him a help like unto himself" (Gn 2:18). Thus He willed to bring forth a companion for man, who would enrich him with merits and be the universal glory of the human race. (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 45-46)

The passage leads the reader to reflect on the idea, widespread in her time, that woman was created inferior to man because she was made from him. Up until Tarabotti's time, the common interpretation of this passage often framed women as subordinate helpers – assistants in a position of subjugation rather than equals to men. Tarabotti distances herself from this reading and moves in the opposite direction, interpreting the creation of woman as an opportunity for the refinement of men. As their equal and as the most perfected divine work, she completes the act of creation, also completing the human race, which, until the creation of woman, remained incomplete and imperfect. For the philosopher, "woman gave perfection to man, and not vice versa as certain rather dim-witted preachers would have it". (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 45). The author understands that Divine Creation reaches its

perfection with human beings, beginning with men and culminating with women. Thus, Tarabotti argues to highlight the superiority of woman in God's creation. She concludes by stating that

> God made proud man in the Damascene field; but from one of his ribs He made woman in the Garden of Eden. Even if I were not a woman, I would infer that on account of the quality of the matter from which she was made, and also of the place where she was made, woman is nobler, more refined, stronger, and worthier than man. (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 46-47)

Although the biblical account affirms the similarity between men and women, the debate surrounding the idea of women's inferiority often stems from the raw material God used in the act of creating men and women. This argument assumes that if woman was created from man, she must be inferior to him. Tarabotti challenges this reasoning by closely examining the raw material in question. Since man was created from clay, it is impossible to equate materials such as clay and the human body – in this case, the male body – the latter being far superior to mere earth. Using clay as a base, God created man, manifesting his imperfections. But when He took man as the raw material, He created woman, surpassing all previous creations. From this perspective of creation's raw materials, women are superior to men.

However, this conclusion does not lead Tarabotti to propose a reversal of the hierarchy between the sexes. Throughout her text, she consistently reaffirms the principle of equality between men and women. This notion of equality is grounded in the idea of similarity; thus, differences between the sexes are not significant enough to negate their fundamental resemblance. Tarabotti's perception of equality leads her to revisit the biblical passages most commonly used by men of her time to justify women's supposed inferiority. According to her, God "established both sexes as rulers of the world, without discrimination. He did not tell Adam, 'You will rule over woman'. Both male and female were born free, bearing with them, like a precious gift from God, the priceless bounty of free choice". (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 51). For Tarabotti, the Book of Genesis highlights the similarity between men and women, emphasizing freedom as a divine gift granted to both. This implies that she considers men and women to be equals regarding their souls, anticipating a debate that would gain more prominence in the following century. Her thesis asserts that the soul of a woman cannot be inferior to that of a man, and her entire argument is built upon the idea that women, as the most perfect creation, are just as endowed with free will as men.

In this sense, when revisiting the issue of original sin, the author turns her focus to the figure of Adam. "If he alone had the grace of free will and was superior to Eve, she would not have sinned at

all". (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 51). That is, if we assume that women are inferior and therefore lack the autonomy to decide over their own lives, as the men of Tarabotti's time would have it, then Eve could not have sinned. Original sin is the consequence of a choice made by one who exercised her free will, granted by Divine Providence and manifested in the biblical text. For Tarabotti, if Eve had depended on Adam's consent to act, the sin would have been his, not hers.

The realization that the biblical text has been misinterpreted to defame, belittle, and disrespect women leads Tarabotti to attribute the crime of forced enclosure to the cruelty of men. According to the author,

> gazing at the perfections of this great edifice, or into these deep mysteries, I do not find literally or symbolically a hint of a shadow that God wished there to be women enclosed in convents against their wills. These edifices exist because of human—or rather, inhuman—contrivance and nothing else. (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 48)

This scheme identified by Tarabotti serves certain interests, as we shall see later. For now, it is important to highlight the author's tireless investigative work as she examines the Scriptures in search of any statement that might even minimally support the actions of these men. Tarabotti meticulously scrutinizes the nuances of the biblical text, seeking any trace that could justify the necessity of the cloister. She ultimately concludes that there is no evidence of religious vows and, consequently, proves that the forced enclosure of women is an arbitrary imposition by men. As she asserts in *Paternal Tyranny*,

> What we see daily taking place, practiced more than anything else in this corrupt age, I count as an abuse, for nowhere in Genesis and nowhere at all in the length and breadth of Holy Scripture is it recorded even fleetingly by His Divine Majesty that He is served by the closeting of women involuntarily. (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 48-49)

This passage is corroborated by another in which Tarabotti, in the *Letter to the Reader*, explicitly sets forth her objectives.

> My one and only purpose is to show that at no time in the world's history, in no legislation whatsoever promulgated by His Divine Majesty, ancient or modern, does one find a precept that commands, or a document that teaches or exhorts, the sacrifice of virgins to the Lord by enclosing them against their wills. (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 41)

The passages highlight the arbitrariness that defines this crime and lead the reader to reflect on the reasons why men imprison women who have committed no wrongdoing. They reveal an abuse. More than that, they expose the complete absence of any justification for the forced enclosure of women and, for this very reason, establish it as a crime. Her investigation guides the reader toward the circumstances of the crime, the motivations behind the abuse, as we shall see below.

AGAINST THE IDEAL OF FEMALE SUBSERVIENCE: FROM PASSIONS TO THE WOMAN'S BODY

Understanding that men and women are equally capable of choice, that free will was granted to both in equal measure, and that exercising one's will is fundamental to pleasing God is only part of Tarabotti's argumentative construction. Indeed, these realizations are not the sole conclusions born of her efforts. The unfolding of her investigation directly challenges the notion of equal freedom of choice between men and women. Tarabotti seeks to demonstrate that the idea of inferiority, which serves as the foundation for female submission, is a false premise. For her, this misleading characterization of women was promoted by men with vested interests and no commitment to truth. Tarabotti endeavors to develop an understanding of how women were perceived in her time. To her, part of this perception was shaped by the social roles assigned to women. In order to expose this, the author helps us grasp what many men of her time thought about women. Addressing them, she states:

> What arrogant presumption is yours, then, you liars, when you repeat time and again that woman serves man as a help only with respect to reproduction; and that for the rest, she is an imperfect animal meant, fittingly, to live in subjection to him as the unstable, weak, and frail sex. With all your lies in this matter and in others, you contradict the commands of your very Maker and reveal yourself as the devil's offspring. (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 50)

In this passage, she denounces the ideal of female subservience. Le Goff reminds us that, during this period, women were defined by their bodies and, above all, by motherhood[13]. In an effort to demonstrate that women are more than mere bodies destined for childbirth, the author seeks to identify the foundation of the belief in female inferiority, which is characterized by the presumption of women's fragility and inconstancy. Although Tarabotti does not accept the argument of female fragility, she considers it carefully. For her, even if one were to assume this argument as true, forced enclosure would

[13] Le Goff, when presenting his O Homem Medieval, outlines the reasons why women do not appear in his work. For his characterization of women during the period under investigation, see: Le Goff, 1989, p. 21-22.

still not be justified, for fragility is not a crime (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 43). Instead of assisting those who supposedly need help, as would be expected of the God-fearing, the men of her time oppress and abuse those they deem weaker, depriving them of their freedom and imprisoning them in convent cells. Thus, acknowledging women's fragility does not, in any way, justify the crime of forced enclosure. On the contrary, accepting this fragility would, in practical terms, expose an abuse and, in theoretical terms, reveal a contradiction.

For Tarabotti, accepting this notion of fragility as imposed by the writings of men – including many philosophers – is not an option. This is especially true because the primary accusations concerning women's weakness pertain to moral, rational, and social dimensions. In this regard, Tarabotti firmly rejects the charge of weakness. According to her,

> they also practice continually vilifying them, accusing them of "frailty" and calling them infirm, weak, and fickle in all they do. Whence it is that a Latin poet once sang with all the usual malice of his sex, 'Woman: forever a variable and fickle thing!' Many others, contradicting such falsity, have truly confessed the instability of their own sex. (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 55)

The poet mentioned by the author in this passage is Virgil, cited by a legion of writers, including Giuseppe Passi, whose words Tarabotti reproduces in the excerpt above. This statement highlights how criticism of women shifts from physical and bodily aspects to moral weakness. In this sense, the passage allows us to perceive that the argument of women's fragility is significant precisely because it pertains to inconstancy and fickleness. Above all, it presupposes female inferiority in both rational and moral capacities. For Tarabotti, the argument of fragility – and consequently, of female inferiority – does not hold up from a philosophical perspective. Neither in regard to the female body nor in moral aspects or any matter related to rationality. The author dedicates herself to demonstrating the similarity between the sexes, rejecting any possibility of inferiority. There are two main areas of investigation to support this claim: one concerns morality, and the other, the body.

The first, related to moral aspects, touches on the human duality between passions and reason. To demonstrate women's virtue, Tarabotti argues against a long-standing tradition that portrays women as more susceptible to passions than men. In the classical philosophical tradition, dating back to Plato, women were considered less capable of being guided by reason and more prone to the instability of emotions than men. It is, of course, no easy task to challenge such a deeply ingrained ideological construct within philosophical tradition. Tarabotti appeals to the inherent contradiction in forcing supposedly

inconstant women into enclosure and lifelong vows that demand precisely unwavering constancy and virtue.

> And just how, if you please, can these extreme opposites be matched together: natural fickleness and an immutable state of life, shifting sense of purpose and firm commitment, inconstancy of mind and a fixed dwelling place in a convent? And that not through their own choice but through another's determination, imposed on those bodies and souls that you say have inconstancy as their proper attribute. How is it, you cruel men—I am tempted to say butchers—can assign dwellings to women, and confined ones at that, which they may never change? (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 57)

Tarabotti reflects that marriage could be annulled under a "plausible justification," and penalties for crimes could be reviewed, but the vows of a novice are irrevocable, regardless of the age at which they were made (meaning even if made by children), and are for life. The philosopher uses the example of nuns enclosed against their will to affirm the capacity for virtue in women. If women were truly fickle, as tradition reiterates, they could not maintain such constancy in a vow as permanent as that of the nuns. She further adds that women possess such virtue that, even when they take this vow against their will, they are able to persevere and uphold it. For Tarabotti, strength is righteousness; it is precisely the ability to control impulses, acting according to sound reason. With this in mind, she criticizes the men of her time.

> Swaggering is not the same as strength; one needs to resist, to persevere, and to remain constant in Christian fortitude. How can it be that you can boast of such a virtue when you are nothing but inconstant? You have mistakenly attributed fortitude to yourselves, you liars. For those who destroy humankind with arms cannot be called strong; but, those who fill the world with children and good works just as we do can be. (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 48)

The passage identifies a contradiction in the assertion of women's fragility and the compulsory vow of chastity. Now, if one begins with the premise that women can remain chaste even without having chosen the convent life, it presupposes that women are capable of restraining their impulses, their desires, and persevering in the fulfillment of the chastity vow they made, even if forced, deceived, or misled by the men of their families. Would men be capable of doing the same? Tarabotti seems to align with the arguments made by men themselves, who perceive male sexual appetite as more difficult to control. This supposed difficulty is often used to justify infidelity in marriage, for example. However, this appetite is not the only impulse marked by inconsistency, as history is filled with wars and bloodshed, much of it in

vain, due to the male difficulty in acting with righteousness, reason, and maintaining constancy. Bravado and a thirst for violence characterize those who attribute their moral failures to women, as women have repeatedly appeared in the writings of philosophers throughout history as inconsistent and less rational than men, and therefore more subject to the variability of passions.

The passage also raises the other relevant point about the supposed weakness of women – the body. How could a body capable of generating another human being be weak? How could a body capable of carrying a child be considered inferior? Maternity can be understood as an undeniable feminine strength. In this sense, strength and fragility are characteristics that can be attributed to the female body, and the more immediate fragility imposed by pregnancy, for instance, ultimately reveals the strength to bring forth a human being. Tarabotti's argument counters what she perceives as contradictions accepted without questioning, highlighting them and inevitably prompting her reader to reflect more carefully on the female nature. These inquiries lead the author to think of women beyond the body. Her investigation reiterates the strength of character in women, who, although socially seen as bodies that bear children, are also, because of this, strong. From a moral standpoint, they are capable of perseverance and, for instance, upholding a vow of chastity, as we have seen.

It is important to note that the conclusions reached by the author regarding female nature are directed toward the idea of equality between the sexes. Throughout her writings, Tarabotti frequently revisits the argument borrowed from the Holy Scriptures that assumes the similarity between men and women. According to her, "man's foolishness is nonetheless so great that he would attribute to himself alone all the graces, favors, and privileges dispensed by divine goodness equally and impartially to one sex as much as to the other." (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 49) The passage reveals, at once, the similarity between men and women and the discrepancy between this realization and the more everyday perception of the sexes. This perception understands woman through her inferiority in relation to men. The author insists on the contradictions of this supposed inferiority.

> The same men who accuse women of instability and levity should not therefore oblige them to perpetual vows, for I do not think that one can find a greater madness than wishing a spirit born free to bind herself by an irrevocable decision, yet that is precisely what men contrive. (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 56)

It is important to highlight that, in this historical period, the decision to marry or become a nun did not lie with the woman, but rather with her father or the man responsible for her. In the case of families wealthy enough to make such a choice, this decision aligned with the social interests of the family,

as defined by the patriarch, and was detached from the woman's own will[14]. By revealing the contradictions in the submission of women, which arise from the unequal relationship culturally constructed between the sexes, Tarabotti brings her reader closer to a perspective that leans toward greater equality. For her, equality between the sexes forms the foundation for the women's freedom. Thus, assuming the premise of similarity between the sexes, it makes no sense to annul the will of women and subject them to the will of the man of the family. As she puts it, "it is male foolhardiness that grants itself the right to violate women's free wills and then regale them with unjust invectives against their "fickleness" and "inconstancy". (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 56) Such a violation of freedom is inconceivable because, for her, there is nothing that can justify it except fallacies.

Tarabotti further clarifies to her reader that the crime of incarcerating women is not incidental. It does not occur due to ignorance or accident. It serves the interests of those who practice it, and for her, it is this interest that worsens the crime committed by those who know the Christian precepts. With this in mind, the author seeks to highlight the inconsistency of this behavior in light of Christian principles, identifying some of its contradictions. According to her, "the most Catholic and spiritual of them – or rather the most hypocritical – consider it their right to offer up young creatures to God in unlawful sacrifice for the sake of preserving their own advantages". (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 43-44) In this passage, the author makes it clear that there are advantages in the forced incarceration of girls. What might these be?

Margaret King seeks to understand this issue through dowries. According to her, the convent would be an alternative to paying a dowry, which could lower the family's social standing in a given societal configuration. It is, in this sense, a convenient arrangement for the men of the family, who preferred to maintain a higher social position at the expense of the submission of the women they controlled to conditions that seemed most convenient for them. Thus, following the premise of the inferiority of women, men would be exploiting the fragility of women to abuse them. In this specific case, fathers would be taking advantage of their daughters' fragility to rid themselves of them by locking them in a cell. Such a solution was, in fact, well accepted from a social and cultural standpoint[15]. However, for the author, it reveals a perversion, as it perpetuates a misguided perception of women. As we have seen, according to her, Divine Providence equally distributed free will between men and women. Therefore, both are capable of deciding on their own lives. In this sense, simply being a man does not place anyone

[14] Silvia Federici investigates the treatment of women and their relationship with the transition from feudalism to capitalism. For more on the topic, see Federici, 2017.

[15] Silvia Federici investigates the relationship between the imposition of women's subservience and the way capitalism became consolidated. For more on the topic, see: Federici, 2019.

in the position of arbitrating for a woman. In the words of Tarabotti: "if she is similar to you, O proud one, she is not inferior. If she has been given to you as your help, she ought not serve you like a slave (...)" (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 50).

In this way, it is possible to consider that the abuse occurs because it serves the interests of men. Women are neither inferior, nor is forced incarceration suggested by the Scriptures. But for the patriarchs, using women as pieces to be moved according to their interests is a viable abuse, invisible from the standpoint of customs and privileges to which the patriarchs are unwilling to renounce. In this sense, the author directs the problem to the social sphere. Despite women being viewed as the property of men, and therefore the relationships between men and women within a family concerning the private realm, Tarabotti innovates by identifying that there should be a limit to these relationships. A limit capable of preventing abuses. She knows that this problem cannot be solved solely by women and makes an appeal to put an end to the crime of forced incarceration:

> (...) why do you cruel men wish to sentence women irrevocably and unjustly to perpetual imprisonment, tied down by indelible sacraments with the knots of oaths made on sacred altar stones under pain of ecclesiastical censure and excommunication? At this point one needs the voices of all Catholic and secular writers, of moderns and ancients, and of believers and heretics to join with mine in describing fully men's profound madness. (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 56)

This appeal to *Catholic and secular writers*, both believers and heretics, to join her against the abusers and in defense of the women who remain victims of injustice seems to still resonate today when we recognize that the lack of equity between men and women is a problem for all, not just for women. Tarabotti, in the first half of the 17th century, had already realized that this is not a cause of women against men; it is a demand for equal rights and, above all, a political cause. The forced incarceration of girls does not occur without the city's permission, facilitation, and even rewarding with prestige those who practice it. And all of this takes place within the most serene Venetian Republic, renowned for its freedom, consequent to equality, made possible by political institutions and the constitution. Equality that excluded women, conceiving them as belonging to a family structure and, therefore, part of a private order. In this private order, known as the family, they were treated as property and, thus, deprived of equality and freedom by principle. In defending equality between men and women, Tarabotti lays down important conceptual foundations to integrate women into public life, even though she knew the impossibility of this occurring in her time. To the women of the future, she dedicates her life, leaving us her works.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Tarabotti mobilizes themes specific to the Renaissance period to discuss forced incarceration. She inherits from the humanists of the preceding centuries the debate about equality and freedom. Part of her inspiration for thinking about women's freedom through equality leads her to oppose the crime of forced incarceration. It is from the Christian tradition that Tarabotti forges her primary philosophical arguments. She largely draws from Christian philosophy (particularly Thomas Aquinas) and the Scriptures to develop her arguments, making frequent references throughout her text to the pagan philosophical tradition. In this way, she establishes her own style of writing, suited to the purposes of her works, even though her writing is marked by the constraints consequent of being a woman thinking and writing in her time.

Indeed, after the centuries in which humanist thinkers discussed equality and freedom from the perspective of active life and the public space[16], Tarabotti, who had no access to the public sphere and for whom the theme of active life was absolutely forbidden, seems to manifest a cultural inheritance of this debate to think about women's freedom. Her starting point is one of the main arguments of the humanists, concerning the idea of equality. However, she shifts the debate and mobilizes the idea of equality in her own way. She uses the concept to forge an idea of equity between men and women, even though she does not use exactly that terminology. It is based on the similarity between the sexes, chiefly relying on biblical text to affirm it, that the author equates the notion of free will in both men and women. Thus, if men and women are equally endowed with free will, they are equally free.

In addition to using the concept of free will to defend equality between the sexes, Tarabotti rejects the idea of female inferiority. Her argumentative construction passes through the theme of divine creation, often used in the writings of her time to impute to women the guilt of original sin. Tarabotti revisits the same biblical passages from the book of Genesis to argue that God imposed a growing order of perfection in His work, placing woman at the top of the creation of living beings. Woman was the last being created by God and, therefore, the most perfect. Made from the most perfect material at that time (Adam's rib), woman completes God's creative work. This does not lead Tarabotti to claim the superiority of women over men but to highlight a similarity between the sexes. Such similarity would prevent the assumption of greater fragility of the female body compared to the male body from making women inferior to men. Tarabotti rejects the argument of the fragility of women, particularly in moral terms,

[16] Not having access to the public space means, in addition to the exclusion from a political space for claiming rights, the exclusion from history. For more on those excluded from history, see also Perrot, 2017.

highlighting firmness of spirit as a feminine attribute, exemplified by the determination of nuns to fulfill their vows.

By dedicating herself to thinking about the theme of passions and rejecting the idea, rooted in the history of philosophy, that women are less rational than men and therefore driven more by passions than by reason, Tarabotti confronts not only the arguments but also the authority of a range of philosophers, among whom we can highlight Aristotle, widely recognized as the main philosophical authority of her time. This construction of the author's text mobilizes consolidated philosophical arguments and directly confronts them. The strategy used is characteristic of philosophy, and yet Tarabotti's writings have been ignored by philosophy. It is important to recognize Arcangela Tarabotti as a philosopher. It is regrettable that she was not acknowledged in her time, but it is even more grievous that she remains invisible to this day.

Finally, it is important to highlight the appeal made by Tarabotti to Catholic and secular writers, believers and heretics alike, when she asks for help in her fight against the crime of forced incarceration, even knowing the difficulties that stood in the way of her request being fulfilled. More difficult than writing about the crime seems to have been surviving the experience of a life in the cloister. Tarabotti, forcibly cloistered since childhood, embarks on this writing task knowing that it could compromise her reputation, as feminine virtues were largely based on modesty and silence. How could she remain silent in the face of this? The need to speak out while simultaneously responding to the expectations of the virtuous woman is evident in her reflections. These last remarks refer to the importance and nobility of the cause that moves a faithful and God-fearing nun to speak out. When addressing the reader, she states:

> You must know that I blush a little at my own audacity in putting pen to paper, lacking as I do all book learning. On the other hand, as a Catholic I am full of good will and long to make plain for the sake of Christianity and the welfare of souls the immense cruelty and treachery of men. I refer to those who out of pure greed and social ambition dedicate innocent babes in the womb to a living Hell — for that is what the cloister means to nuns forced to live there. (Tarabotti, 2004, p. 41)

The absurdity of the crime of forced incarceration sets the tone of indignation in Tarabotti's text. At the same time, the text is also marked by the author's embarrassment, as, being a woman, she should manifest her virtue through silence, not through dismay in the face of injustice. By speaking out, she contradicts the presumption of the virtue of silence. To comply, accept, and remain silent are socially established feminine virtues. Women are expected to embody the virtue of silence, and for a cloistered nun, silence represents the pinnacle of virtue. Tarabotti must navigate this dilemma, for her expression

of outrage, though backed by just reasons, challenges an important virtue expected of women. An equation without a solution. In her pen, the drama of the deprivation of freedom gains voice and guides her work, even appealing for others to assist her. Although this voice remained hidden throughout the author's life, the posthumous publication of *Paternal Tyranny* directs its reader not only to the fact itself but also to the causes, the consequences, and the philosophical arguments surrounding freedom, and inevitably, to the deprivation of freedom experienced by women.

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