G. B. Tiepolo at Valmarana: Gender Ideology in a Patrician Villa of the Settecento

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The rural villas that proliferated in the Veneto region of northern Italy from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries were domestic spaces that had a public face and role. Designed to reinforce and reflect the wealth, position, achievement, learning, and magnanimity of their high-ranking or patrician owners, they also represented, through their spatial arrangement and decoration, an ideal of gender and class relations in a well-tuned cosmos. Many early decorative cycles in the villas included scenes involving the agricultural life cycle, thereby showcasing the procreative side of the rural life ideal. The country villa was also often shown in such cycles as the setting for domestic life, leisurely pursuits, and civilized recreation and interchange between the sexes, implicitly advancing the concept of the household as a microcosm or reflection of cosmic harmony related to the cycles of nature.

By contrast, at the so-called palazzina of the Villa Valmarana ai Nani on the outskirts of Vicenza (Fig. 1), site of an ambitious program of wall decorations carried out by Giambattista Tiepolo in about 1757, there is an abrupt shift to a more artificial set of images that does not deal with these conventional tropes and ideals of villa life. At Valmarana, no domestic imagery appears, and images of the agricultural cycles of rural life are few in number and relegated to the separate space of the foresteria, the guest quarters, where the decorations were painted largely by the younger Giandomenico Tiepolo. In the palazzina itself, members of the household would have lived surrounded, at eye level, by proportionally massive and theatrical renderings of stories drawn from works by four of the major classical and Renaissance epic poets: Homer’s Iliad, Virgil’s Aeneid, Ludovico Ariosto’s Orlando furioso, and Torquato Tasso’s Gerusalemme liberata.

In the art historical literature, the Valmarana cycle is commonly described as taking for its theme “stories of love,” while the clearly gendered bases of its subjects, intentions, production, and reception have never been recognized, let alone contextually probed. Usually cited to explain the thematic choices that structure the cycle—choices now thought to have resulted directly from the influence of Tiepolo’s friend the art broker, librettist, and connoisseur Conte Francesco Algarotti—are traditions in literary criticism that compared the ancient and the modern poets, the patron’s fondness for the opera and the popularity of some of these stories in contemporary Venetian theater and opera; the emerging ethos of Neoclassicism in Italy and Europe during this period; and the pressure being brought to bear on Tiepolo, principally by his classically oriented friend Algarotti, to become a “learned painter.”

These explanations, however, beg another and, for me, much larger question by ignoring what is striking about these frescoes for a modern female visitor to the palazzina at Valmarana, and that is the cycle’s thematic unity as regressive gender propaganda. Some of the stories illustrated here, rare in villa decoration but popular in contemporary Venetian theater and opera, had been treated pictorially by Tiepolo elsewhere. But never before had he brought these literary subjects together to form what I will examine here as a coherent sociopolitical as well as iconographic statement. Only at Valmarana are we confronted with a consistent and pervasive cycle of imagery that focuses on women as compliant victims, evil sorceresses, and abandoned temptresses, while their male counterparts are presented as warrior heroes who are carnally tempted but able to overcome temptation for a higher purpose. What does it mean when such imagery is chosen not simply to adorn but overwhelmingly to dominate a domestic interior? I shall propose here that the Valmarana cycle reflected and embodied reactionary social norms and a conservative societal backlash in the middle of the eighteenth century, and that its messages can be fully understood only against the background of changing conditions in the domestic and public lives of both women and men in the Veneto during this era.

The Frescoes

The frescoes of Giambattista Tiepolo at Valmarana, with their emphatically blond tonalities, pastel palette, and light-filled, transparent spaces, are among the most visually seductive works of this artist’s decorative oeuvre. And it may well be in part the “prettiness” of their surface appeal for later viewers that has masked their message, disguising as poetic “stories about love” a programmatic cycle, based on gendered dualities, that extols and promotes the renunciation of romantic and sensual love and the sacrifice of feminized forms of personal gratification for the sake of duty and the preservation of a patriarchal social order.

The themes that permeate and unify the cycle are announced in the entrance hallway that runs the length of the palazzina and in the first of the four rectangular rooms that flank it (Fig. 2), where the classical heroes of Homer’s Iliad are splendidly showcased. In the hallway, treated as though it were the stage of a theater, visitors to the house are confronted with the dramatic portrayal of the arrested sacrifice of Iphigenia, occupying the entire, unbroken right-hand wall (Fig. 3), while on the left-hand wall, the ships of the Greek fleet stand ready, their sails filling with the rising wind. On the ceiling, Diana and Aegolus hover in the sky, the former to stop the sacrifice and the latter to unleash the winds. At the center of the “Sacrifice,” the priest Calchane positions his knife, about to pierce the bared breast of the young woman who leans against the altar, as a servant holds aloft a basin to receive her blood. The action is dramatically halted, however, as—in the words of Algarotti’s libretto Iphigénie en Aulide (1755)—“a noise of arms is heard,” and “everyone turns in that direction” toward the clouds at the upper left, where
cherubs lead from the wings the sacrificial deer that will replace Iphigenia on the altar.8

Indeed, the larger arrangement of Tiepolo’s two Iphigenia frescoes, facing one another across the entrance hall at Valmarana, suggestively echoes the theatrical setting described by Algarotti for this climactic event in act 5, scene 2 of his libretto, where he writes, “the theater represents on one side the Woods and Temple of Diana; on the other, one sees part of the Greek encampment, the port of Aulis, and the fleet.”9 It was on the basis of similar details of setting and action that a case was first made in 1985 by the historian Roberto Guer-rini for Algarotti’s influence on the visual realization of these specific scenes at Valmarana and on the cycle as a whole.10 An even more compelling case for Algarotti’s authorship of the program, as well as an understanding of the special relevance of the Iphigenia episode as its keynote image, may be gleaned from a closer reading of Algarotti’s libretto and a consideration of the ideological message that lies at the heart of its retelling of the patriarchal myth.

In his essay “Saggio sopra l’opera in musica,” where the Iphigenia libretto is offered as a case study, Algarotti explains that he has based his text on plays by Euripides and Jean Racine, putting forward “the same action that was presented by Euripides in the theater of Athens,” but departing from his sources by further simplifying the action and, like the “modern” poet Racine, giving a larger part within the whole to Iphigenia herself.11 As Algarotti constructs his libretto, Iphigenia assumes pivotal prominence in a classical story that encapsulates and reinforces the established hierarchies of the patriarchal social order. Placing duty to state over duty to family, Agamemnon obeys the orders of the gods, and to the pleas and protests—the dissenting voice—of Clytemnestra, he responds: “Madame, it is up to me to dispose of my daughter.”12 As Agamemnon is tested in his allegiance to the will of the gods and the good of the state, Iphigenia is tested in her allegiance to the earthly father, a test she passes in exemplary fashion. She is the dutiful daughter who, for her virtue, is rewarded and taken to live among the gods.

But in passages based in part on Racine, Algarotti’s Iphi-
genia goes much further than a meek and blind acceptance of her fate. She is an articulate and willing spokeswoman for the patriarchy and her place within it, repeatedly proclaiming her willingness to die for the greater good. Unlike Helen of Troy, the aberrant and divisive female “other” of this tale, she is a prime example to all women of “other” striving to become “self.”13 Thus, she begs Agamemnon not to blame himself and asks Clytemnestra not to mourn her but rather to “cherish my father and your husband,” because “it is despite himself and for the good of Greece that he relinquishes me.” Honoring the larger plan of the gods, she declares: “I will live forever as the happy liberator of Greece.”14 To the protests and rising anger of Achilles, she responds: “Let me die, my lord. . . . You can reach Troy only at the price of my blood. . . . If I have not been able to live as the companion of Achilles, I hope that your name and mine will be forever joined, and that my death will be the source of your glory.”15 And as she is led to the altar in the final scene, she declares to Agamemnon: “Here I am, ready, oh my father. I sacrifice myself willingly for your glory and for Greece. . . . Let no one place his hands on me: I will present my own breast. Lead me as a willing victim, victorious over Ilion and fatal to the Phrygians.”16

The theme thus stressed throughout Algarotti’s libretto is the virtue of female submission to patriarchal authority. This, too, was clearly the message meant to be highlighted by Tiepolo’s pictorial treatment of the story for those who lived
with the frescoes as they started each day. For as residents in
the palazzina descended from the private quarters above to
the public rooms below, they would have seen, inescapably
framed by the doorway at the end of the narrow hall that
leads from the staircase to the main entrance hallway, the
central image of Iphigenia, with Calcante’s dagger poised
above her bared breast (Fig. 4).

This theme—the virtue of female submission to patriarchal
authority—is one of the major leitmotifs of the entire Valmarana cycle, reinforcing the probability that Algarotti played a
major role in its construction. In the first of the adjacent
rectangular rooms at the right of the entrance hallway, scenes
from book 1 of the Iliad are placed within pillared archways,
again evocative of stage settings. The first three frescoes show
Achilles prevented by Athena from killing Agamemnon during
their quarrel over Briseis; Briseis led to Agamemnon (Fig. 5);
and Thetis rising from the sea to comfort Achilles after his
loss of Briseis (Fig. 6). On the fourth wall, painted by Gian-
domenico, Cupid flies onto the scene with his quiver of
arrows, and on the ceiling, Athena sits passively among the
clouds. Briseis Led to Agamemnon is the largest of the Stanza
dell’Iliade frescoes. A scene only barely hinted at in Homer’s
text, it is presumed to have been largely of Tiepolo’s own
invention. In the middle ground, the diminutive Briseis
sinks into her voluminous draperies, appearing to be more
dragged than led by the warriors Talthybius and Eurybates
before Agamemnon, her subservience underscored by the
point of view chosen: we are positioned to look down at her
and slightly up at the men who flank her. The threatening
figures of Agamemnon and his lieutenant tower above us on
the trompe l’oeil stage that mediates real and fictive spaces in
the foreground. Their richly colored garments and gleaming
armor furnish a masculine foil to the pale colors and blond
tonalities that otherwise dominate these frescoes. Agamen-
non, who covered his face and turned away from the impending
sacrifice of his own daughter in the scene that dominates
the hallway at Valmarana, here waits in the foreground for
the delivery of yet another sacrificial female. His sword—a
recurring and meaningful prop in many of these scenes—is
positioned to suggest the erect phallus, signaling the war-
rior’s virility and triumph.

Supervised by the gods and goddesses of the patriarchal
In Orlando furioso, Angelica is the proud, beautiful, and 
virginal princess of Cathay, who refuses and evades the suitors who 
seek to possess her, rejecting even the bravest of knights as unworthy. She is a wandering and elusive figure who serves 
for the male protagonists of this epic as a symbol of the 
unattainable. Yet despite her pride and independence, she 
stands also for the ultimate vulnerability of even the most 
indolent females, for she must depend on male chivalry for 
her very survival. In keeping with this foundational message, 

Tiepolo begins his cycle with the dramatic scene of deliverance, 
long popular with illustrators of Ariosto: the episode in 
in which a pathetic but provocative Angelica, half naked and 
chained to a rock, is saved from a threatening sea monster by 
the noble knight Ruggiero (Fig. 7). Ruggiero will subse-

sequently fall in love with her and she, predictably, will spurn 

But in the three scenes with which Tiepolo concludes this 
part of the cycle, the tables are turned on the uppity Angelica. In her subsequent wanderings she chances on the hand-
some Moorish foot soldier Medoro, lying wounded and un-
conscious in the woods. Moved by compassion, her pride and 
disdain overcome as she herself is wounded by Cupid’s arrow, 
Angelica treats Medoro’s wounds with medicinal herbs, in a 
scene of awakening and conversion that Tiepolo sanctifies 
with traditional echoes of Lamentation and Entombment 
compositions.21 The remainder of their story becomes a pas-
toral idyll. Taken in by a kind shepherd and his wife, Medoro 
is nursed back to health by Angelica and reciprocates her 
passion. They marry and their love flourishes in the tranquil-
ity and repose of this bucolic setting, their happiness in-
scribed on nature as they carve their intertwined names on the 
trunk of a tree (Fig. 8). In Tiepolo’s remarkably spare 
rendition of this enduringly popular scene, the two gaze 
passionately at one another, the passive Medoro reclining 
 languidly on the ground while Angelica, using her left 
hand—perhaps to remind us of her “sinister” origins—ac-
tively carves their names into the tree trunk. This role rever-
sal, unusual in depictions of the scene, where Medoro almost 
invariably does the carving, may have been intended not only 
to heighten the underlying message of the madness of love 
but also to underscore Angelica’s active role in the renunc-
iation of her own earlier autonomy.22 For in the final scene 
(Fig. 9), where the newly married lovers are about to leave 
their peasant hosts, it is Medoro, seated firmly in the center 
of the picture space, who has become the pivotal figure. As 
the barefoot and bare-breasted Angelica grasps his forearm 
gazes at him adoringly, Medoro turns to the peasant 
couple whose stolid presence further naturalizes this scene of 
domestic order and harmony. As for Angelica, Ariosto makes 
she clear. When she returns home to Cathay with Medo-
ro to make him her king, her life of independence van-
ishes and, with it, her pride and her generative role in the 
poem’s narrative. Tamed by love, this formerly rebellious,
highborn woman docilely succumbs to her prescribed role in 
the social order.

Moving across the central hallway, we arrive at the two 
remaining connected rooms, the first based on Virgil’s A-

classical canon, these Homeric scenes revolve around the 
exchange of docile and commodified female subjects. Iphi-
genia, the thoroughly acculturated, submissive heroine, is 
poised for sacrifice to the aims of a patriarchal social and 
political system and can be rescued only by the gods and 
goddesses of that system. Briseis is the passive object of barter 
and exchange between two powerful men, heroes whose 
“terrible and noble anger” seemed to eighteenth-century 
male commentators on this episode of Homer’s poem to be 
its central point and theme.18

In the larger cycle at Valmarana, these “heroines” are 
 juxtaposed against the more problematic women who domi-
nate the other three rooms, Angelica, Queen Dido of 
Carthage, and Armida. These independent women are shown 
here to be susceptible to the power of love, a susceptibility 
through which their disruptive social power and the implicit 
threat they pose to patriarchal order are contained and over-
come. If not subdued by “love,” as in the case of Angelica, 
they are cast as “evil” sorceresses and seductresses, who are 
resisted and abandoned by the male protagonists of these 
epic tales as an ultimate test of their masculine honor and 
heroism and of their civic and religious duty.

From the room of the Iliad, a connecting doorway leads to 
the room of the Orlando furioso, with scenes based on Ario-
sto’s early-sixteenth-century epic poem. Consisting of multi-
ple interrelated love stories, this poem has been read over 
the centuries as a debate over the contemporary role of the 
independent woman in the sixteenth century.19 From the 
complexly intertwined narratives of Ariosto’s lengthy poem, 
first published in 1532, however, it was the romantic adven-
tures of Angelica that consistently captured the pictorial 
imagination of artists from the sixteenth century onward, and 
it was her story that Tiepolo, too, chose to illustrate.20
neid, and the second on Tasso's Gerusalemme liberata. Again juxtaposing a classical with a Renaissance source, the ancient with the modern, the stories told in these two rooms have in common their focus on a hero whose mission is threatened by the love of a foreign or pagan woman, a woman who temporarily distracts him from his duty and who can thus potentially harm the greater civic or Christian good.

In the room of the Aeneid, the narrative begins with Venus’s farewell to her son Aeneas, as he prepares to sail for Carthage. The next and central scene takes place at the court of the enthroned Queen Dido. Dido’s passions are aroused by Cupid, who has taken the identity of Ascanius, Aeneas’s son, as he is being presented to the queen (Fig. 10). In the third scene, Mercury exhorts Aeneas to leave Carthage (Fig. 11); and the fourth wall, painted in monochrome by Gian­domenico, takes us to the forge of Vulcan, where, in the presence of Venus and Cupid, the weapons with which Aeneas will accomplish his mission are being forged.

The semilegendary figure of Queen Dido of Carthage exemplifies a phenomenon most feared and condemned by patriarchy: a woman who assumes the role and power of a man. From antiquity through the Renaissance, Dido’s identity was the subject of multiple poetic and historical constructions. To the early modern Veneto, she was known principally from her fictional characterization in book 4 of Virgil’s Aeneid as a lustful and unchaste woman of foreign birth and evil ways, driven by Aeneas’s justifiable abandonment to despairing lament, vengeful black magic, and eventual suicide. Also familiar, however, was the historical Queen Dido, who lived long before the era of Aeneas’s voyage to Carthage, a woman recorded in Greek and Roman histories not only as an able governor but also as an emblem of chastity in widowhood, faithful to her dead husband’s memory and prepared to commit suicide rather than marry their mutual enemy. These contradictory constructions of Dido’s identity made their way into Venetian opera seria in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, further subjected there to poetic license by librettists such as Giovanni Francesco Busenello, whose La Didone of 1641 marked the first appearance of Queen Dido as a popular subject on the operatic stage in

5 Tiepolo, Briseis Led to Agamemnon, ca. 1757, fresco. Villa Valmarana, room of the Iliad, palazzina (artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by Scala / Art Resource, NY)
Venice, and Pietro Metastasio, whose Didone abbandonata was first performed in Venice in 1725. Metastasio's libretto, inscribed for the occasion by the writer with a dedicatory sonnet addressed "to the Ladies of Venice," underlines the moral and political connotations of Dido's tragedy. He portrays her as a heroine redeemed by her noble suicide, a stoic compromise between love and duty, and his classically simplified libretto is typical of the transformation of opera seria in eighteenth-century Italy, purged by Enlightenment ideologies of its earlier emphases on female sexuality and libidinous excess.

But even by the more controlled and sexually antiseptic standards of eighteenth-century Venetian opera, Tiepolo’s Dido, unlike her operatic counterparts, is a colorless figure and a peripheral foil. In the single fresco in which she appears (Fig. 10), she is swathed in and overpowered by her regal robes and the draperies that mark her throne, as she sits in the darkened left-hand corner of the space. Turning away from the viewer and toward the fully illuminated male figures who occupy the center of the composition, she gestures toward Ascanius, as does Aeneas, as he makes his presentation. The story that is being told here is clearly not hers. And the powerful lament, which had given a compelling voice in earlier Venetian opera to female heroines such as Medea and Ariadne as well as Dido, is neither heard nor seen in Tiepolo’s visualization of this story, a story that now belongs principally to Aeneas.

Pivotal in that story and central to its interpretation by Tiepolo is the following scene (Fig. 11), in which Mercury appears to Aeneas in a dream, urging him to leave Carthage so that he may dutifully complete the mission entrusted to him by the gods. Gazing down at the conflicted and temporarily disempowered hero, Mercury holds aloft the caduceus, his symbolic attribute, consisting of a wand entwined by two serpents. This was an emblem that signified balanced moral behavior for the Romans, and when surmounted by a winged helmet, it also connoted lofty thoughts. The angle of the caduceus points downward in a direct line to the sword that Aeneas holds clamped ineffectually and symbolically between his thighs, while his helmet lies conspicuously abandoned on the ground before him.

Finally, the inclusion in this room of an incident in Vulcan’s forge, where Aeneas’s weapons are being prepared in the presence of Venus and Cupid, signals that the hero’s distraction from duty will be a temporary one. Here, as in Virgil, Aeneas, whose dalliance with Dido is brief, emerges as a model of moral strength, a hero for whom public duty overrides private passion. His ability to resist the temptation embodied by Dido, the once powerful foreign queen, and to abandon her and sail away from Carthage clears the way for
him to become the heroic founder of Rome and constitutes the central point and the civic and moral lesson of this story. That story and its lessons had special significance and associative value in Venice, where Virgil’s *Aeneid* had long held a central place in the education of young men, imbuing them with a moral philosophy that stressed civic duty and located civic virtue in Aeneas’s abandonment of Dido. In the words of the feminist musicologist Wendy Heller: “For generations of young Venetian men, the Dido episode in book 4 of the *Aeneid* was probably a first schoolboy encounter with the temptation of the Other, whether constructed as a female body or an eastern world.” The Dido episode had long played an important role in the political and social self-definition of the Venetian Republic, which regarded itself as the heir to the Roman Republic and saw in Aeneas’s founding of Rome a symbol for its own birth and in the wars between Rome and Carthage a parallel for its conflicts with the Turks.

The Valmarana cycle ends in the next room with the closely related story of Rinaldo and Armida from Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata* (1575), a poem regarded in Tiepolo’s time as the culmination of the epic tradition in the modern world. In the opening narrative, on the wall facing the entrance to the room, the pagan sorceress Armida comes upon the sleeping Christian knight Rinaldo and is bewitched.
by him (Fig. 12). In Tasso’s epic tale, Armida, the evil enchantress who deploys her powers in order to prevent the Christian conquest of Jerusalem, is not only a danger to the Crusaders’ enterprise but also a threat to authority in general.  

She seduces Rinaldo and spirits him away to her magic garden of love in the Fortunate Isles, wherein is set the second of Tiepolo’s scenes, with the pair looking passionately into each other’s eyes, leaning against one another with legs entwined (Fig. 13). Rinaldo’s helmet, shield, and weapons rest next to him on the ground, abandoned, as he sits transfixed by the enchantress’s gaze. In the background, the warriors Carlo and Ubaldo, sent by the Christian Crusader Goffredo to release Rinaldo from Armida’s spell, approach unobserved and watch the besotted pair voyeuristically from above.

In the next scene, Rinaldo, prodded by the warning words of Ubaldo, is reminded of his Christian mission and awakened from his enchanted state by the sight of his own image, reflected on the surface of his shield (Figs. 14, 15). Far more fragile in this rendering than in previous scenes, Rinaldo has been visibly unmanned by the experience from which he is about to be rescued. The flowers he grasps in both hands have replaced his weapons, and he is further feminized in Tiepolo’s rendering by his suddenly delicate features and pale complexion. The latter have been purposefully juxtaposed with, and present a vivid contrast to, the craggly faces and darker, ruddier complexions of the masculine warriors who have come to awaken Rinaldo from his shameful state (Fig. 15). Color is skilfully deployed here and elsewhere in these frescoes by Tiepolo to make this gendered point. In a fresco cycle permeated by pastel colors and light tonalities, the richer and darker hues that are used to describe the garments, skin tones, and armor of the warrior heroes Carlo and Ubaldo in these scenes and Agamemnon and Achilles in others (Figs. 3, 5, 6) have been deployed to mark their masculinity, to endow them with moral gravitas, and to differentiate them effectively from the feminine values they resist.

The story concludes in the fourth scene, where Rinaldo abandons Armida (Fig. 16). Their impending separation is visually announced by the tree that rises up between them in the background. Still glancing back at Armida, Rinaldo is nevertheless clearly regaining his powers, and he turns to follow Carlo and Ubaldo as they lead him out of Armida’s garden of love. She reaches out for him beseechingly; her mirror, the symbol of her sexual power through the illusory, lies on the ground behind her, now rendered ineffectual. On the ceiling, following Cesare Ripa’s Iconologia and painted by Giandomenico, the victory of Virtue over Vice sums up the message. Although Tiepolo’s narration of the story ends here, well-read visitors to Valmarana would have recalled Armida’s fate, consistent with that of the other women depicted in these rooms. In the last stanzas of Tasso’s poem, the pagan sorceress suddenly converts to Christianity, declares herself to be Rinaldo’s “handmaiden,” and accepts her submissive role with the following words: "Behold your hand-
maiden: dispose of her according to your judgment and your authoritative gesture will be law to her.\textsuperscript{36}

The fresco cycle painted by Giambattista Tiepolo for the palazzina at Valmarana is remarkable for the consistency of its message. Throughout these rooms, the threat of the independent or powerful woman has been contained; male sovereignty and heroic dedication to duty have been reestablished. What, we should now ask, accounts for the popularity of these stories in eighteenth-century Italian theater and opera and their unusually concentrated appearance in this fresco cycle by Tiepolo? And how would members of this household have experienced these proportionally overwhelming images that were meant to surround them on a daily basis?

Tiepolo's patron, the Vicentine nobleman Giustino Valmarana (1688–1757), bought the existing suburban villa in San Sebastiano on the outskirts of Vicenza in 1720.\textsuperscript{31} The frescoes that cover the walls of the villa and its guesthouse were painted by the Tiepolos in the spring and summer of 1757, a commission that may have resulted from the recommendation of their previous patrons, the Loschi family, who were related to the Valmaranas.\textsuperscript{32} The specific uses of the frescoed rooms in the palazzina are not documented. However, in the country villas of the aristocracy, with their relatively smaller spaces and natural settings, the protocols and etiquettes of life in the urban palaces, with their multiple apartments and reception rooms and their strict distinctions between public and private spaces, were considerably relaxed.\textsuperscript{33} The palazzina at Valmarana, with its four modestly scaled main rooms and central hallway on the entrance level, is unusually small, even by the standards of the typical country villa designed for summertime entertainment in the Veneto. Whether these rooms constituted the public spaces of the villa with the private rooms above, or whether they were used exclusively by Giustino as a private apartment that would have included one or more reception rooms is not known.

What we do know of the circumstances of the Valmarana family and the patron's original commission suggests that at the outset the frescoes and their messages may have been intended primarily for the visual pleasure and moral edification of the male members of this household: the recently widowed Giustino, who commissioned them, and his two, then unmarried, sons. The ways in which the frescoed scenes interact with their architectural settings, both real and simulated, lend support to this conclusion. Because each of the frescoed rooms has two entry doors, the flow of movement is not dictated, and it is largely the narrative sequencing of the frescoes that guides the experience of the viewer, who is encircled by these imposing images and needs only to turn around in these relatively intimate spaces to be in direct confrontation with any one of them. All of the scenes have trompe l'œil architectural frames, painted by the quadroturista Mengozzi Colonna, which illusionistically expand the spaces of the rooms. But in the narratives painted by Giambattista, only the virile male figures are ever permitted to overlap those frames and to dissolve the barrier between the
real and pictorial worlds, becoming actors in both worlds and inviting the active identification of the male viewers whose space they appear to share (Figs. 5, 6).

In each room, as well, there is one fresco that is slightly larger than the others and that presents a key encounter between the male and female protagonists, framed as a turning point in the mission or as a resolution of conflict for the male hero (Figs. 5, 9, 10, 16). But while the encounter with and rejection of the female "other" is pivotal to all of these narratives, resolution usually depends on the intercession of a virile male warrior or god, who urges the errant hero to return to his duty (Figs. 11, 14). Also inviting the identification of male viewers are recurring scenes that give psychological depth and dimension to the male hero as he meditates or struggles to rise above temptation and his own weaker instincts (Figs. 6, 11, 14, 15). In the eyes of male visitors to these rooms, then, the beautiful and compliant damsels in distress (Iphigenia and Briseis) and the unnatural evil and uppity women who receive their just deserts (Angelica, Dido, and Armida) are likely to have been eclipsed by the male protagonists of these epic tales with whom they are clearly being invited to identify: the warrior heroes who overcome and banish carnal temptation in order to fulfill a higher calling and preserve a higher communal or Christian good.

These are cautionary tales, and throughout these rooms, sexual ambiguities that subtly threaten gender stereotypes are skillfully deployed in order to reaffirm more socially accepted codes of gendered appearance and behavior. In one or more of the images in each room, for example, the male heroes are seen reduced to a passive state: pensive or brooding, asleep, wounded, or reclining in sensual and defenseless bliss (Figs. 6, 8, 11–14). Made to appear relatively fragile and delicate in these instances, they present, as we have seen, an effeminate contrast to the virile male warriors who have been dispatched to save them (Fig. 15). Moreover, in a reversal of expected roles and gender cues, they also contrast with the temptresses who have bewitched them, some of whom present surprisingly stocky or muscular body types that indicate or confirm their status as unnatural, viragolike characters. In fact, whatever sensual provocation or satisfaction is offered by the female figures to male viewers either within or beyond the frame is remarkably restrained. Aside from the stock figure of the scantily draped Angelica chained to the rock (Fig. 7) or the occasional exposure of a temptress's breast (Figs. 9, 13, 16), the physical charms of these otherwise amply clothed female figures have been subordinated to the demands of the moralizing narrative (Figs. 5, 10), or they have been masculinized to contrast with the passive fragility of the men whom they have objectified and temporarily come to dominate (Figs. 8, 12).

The lavish attention paid to the decoration of the foresteria at Valmarana suggests that guests of both sexes were entertained or anticipated at Giustino's suburban retreat, and
their access to the frescoed public rooms of the *palazzina* itself, even if only on a limited basis, can be postulated. With its program that models the virtues of adherence to and the dangers of deviation from a gendered hierarchy, the frescoes in the *palazzina* clearly delivered an ethical message that would have resonated with both sexes. And what viewers then saw—as well as what we see today—would surely have been inflected by gendered norms and expectations. As a twenty-first-century Western woman and feminist, when I enter the frescoed rooms of the Villa Valmarana, I feel myself oppressively surrounded by images of women who have been commodified, bartered, victimized, silenced, and abandoned. But how might female visitors to the Villa Valmarana in the eighteenth century have seen these familiar epic tales? As moral exempla and guides? Or behavioral warnings and admonishments? Would they have experienced the pathetic figures of Iphigenia and Briseis as painful and oppressive reminders of their own status, as commodity objects and items of exchange among men? Or would the submissiveness of these “heroines” and their dutiful dedication to the patriarchy have been seen only as a proper and appropriate norm of feminine behavior? Caught in the mechanisms of gendered spectatorship and scopophilic pleasure with which the influential theories of Laura Mulvey have familiarized us, would female viewers, drawn to identify with the male heroes rather than with the evil women who threaten them, have been able to maintain a stable gender identity in this context?34

Under what social circumstances, we must also ask, does imagery that features the suppression of strong women as well as the reclamation of errant men become desirable? The larger but closely related issue of the social and political history of women in general and patrician women in particular in the Veneto region during this era sheds light on these questions of intentionality and reception of the frescoes at Valmarana.

The Valmarana Cycle in Social Context: The Patrician Villa and the Patrician Wife

Despite the emergence in recent decades of a growing body of scholarly literature that has examined issues of marriage, family life, and the changing socioeconomic conditions for women in the Veneto from the sixteenth to the eighteenth
in the eighteenth century. Now, instead, there was a conspicuous and dramatic escalation in marriage treatises that insisted on obedience above all else as a wifely virtue and that urged women to restrict themselves to the home, in an era when—if the female characters displayed in the popular comedies of Carlo Goldoni are to be taken as any guide—they were apparently less and less inclined to do so.

The extent to which women were now challenging the restrictions traditionally placed on them and threatening the assumptions of the patriarchal order is suggested by the volume and the vehemence of the writings that their changing behaviors elicited. Although the exhortation to wifely obedience had appeared before in the marriage manuals, what was unusual in these eighteenth-century treatises, as the historian Luciano Guerci has observed, was a connection drawn between new social phenomena that expanded the access of women of all classes to the public sphere and the perception, widespread among conservative commentators, of a “crisis in obedience” and a confusion of gender roles that threatened the harmony of marriage and the stability of the existing social order. These writings, many of them published in Venice and the Veneto, are catalogued and explicated by Guerci, who sees a dramatic escalation of this position, taken by writers such as Antonfrancesco Bellati, Francesco Beretta, Tommaso Campanari, and Giuseppe Antonio Costantini, in widely read treatises on marriage and female conduct that appeared in Italy during the first two-thirds of the eighteenth century. These writers stressed, with increasing urgency, the natural inferiority and subordination of the female, her moral obligation to submit docilely to the will of her husband, to remain at home, to refrain from public exposure, and to be not only obedient but also chaste, silent, modest, and submissive in every way. Denouncing the new freedoms for women that were being promoted by progressive Enlightenment thinking and by popular foreign publications on female comportment, these eighteenth-century Italian writers issued dire warnings of impending social chaos.

The Educated Woman in Eighteenth-Century Italy

At the root of this escalating “crisis in obedience” and the conservative strategies launched to contain it was the overriding issue of education for women, which became ever more hotly contested as Enlightenment philosophies from France made inroads into Italian culture and society. Throughout the eighteenth century, but particularly from the 1730s to the 1780s, polemical debates escalated—no longer, as in previous centuries, over whether women were naturally endowed with a capacity for education and higher learning but over whether they should be allowed to pursue academic degrees, which areas of study might be most suitable for them, and whether such activity would ultimately weaken or strengthen conjugal relations, the family, and society as a whole. Common to both sides of these debates was an aversion to and fear of women who might use their erudition and knowledge to assert their independence or challenge the submissive and subordinate position that “nature” had assigned them in the social order in general and in marriage in particular.

Such debates arose in the eighteenth century in uneasy response to the dramatic increase in the numbers of women who could and did read and also as a result of the changing nature of the materials they chose to read. Devotional books, previously recommended for the moral edification of female readers, were rapidly replaced in the eighteenth century by chivalric poetry and novels (for which women comprised the major audience), as well as tracts on philosophy and sci-
ence, many now written for and addressed specifically to female readers.\textsuperscript{58}

Perhaps the best-known example of the latter genre, ironically enough, is Il Newtonianismo per le dame, ovvero dialoghi sopra la luce e i colori by Tiepolo’s friend and mentor Francesco Algarotti, a book that, in its original form, was neither intended nor recommended for female readers. In keeping with established conventions of philosophic discourse, the protagonist of Algarotti’s dialogues is a woman. But the author makes it clear that this discursive device is to be understood as a metaphor for the male readership to which his book is actually addressed.\textsuperscript{59} First published in 1737, Algarotti’s book was translated into English two years later by the British writer Elizabeth Carter as Newtonianism for Women. In her translation—in many ways a feminist appropriation and transformation of Algarotti’s text—Carter modified or omitted much of Algarotti’s erotic language and the sexually suggestive representations of the female body that underpinned many of his scientific examples aimed at male readers. Her alterations to Algarotti’s text increased the serious and scientific tenor of the book and led to its popularity among and effectiveness for female audiences. It was those alterations, too, that masked for English-speaking readers Algarotti’s misogynist tone and his mocking and dismissive attitude toward the small but growing (and apparently threatening) audience of learned Italian women whom he purported here, as a decorative conceit, to address.\textsuperscript{50}

The eighteenth century saw a marked increase in intellectual and educational opportunities for women as liberal Enlightenment philosophies and French culture infiltrated Italy, but nowhere were these opportunities as dramatic and as far-reaching as in Venice, a city that had a long-standing tradition of literary debate over the virtues and vices of women, debates in which powerful female voices had been raised.\textsuperscript{56} Misogynist tracts such as Giuseppe Passi’s I donneschi difetti (1599), a frequently reprinted recitation and condemnation of the faults of women, had elicited learned and protofeminist responses from Venetian women writers Lucrezia Marinella (1571–1653) and Moderata Fonte (1555–1592). In her La nobilità et l’eccellenza delle donne co’ difetti et mancan­menti de gli huomini (1600), Marinella skillfully turned the tables on Passi, challenging traditional views about the biological and moral imperfections of women that go back to Aristotle and citing exemplary women who exhibited traditionally male as well as female virtues. Among these was Dido, whose story, as told anachronistically by Virgil and Passi, she rejected.\textsuperscript{57} A few years earlier, Fonte, in Il meritò delle donne (1592, published posthumously in 1600), had staged a conversation among seven Venetian noblewomen, using these multiple female voices to reverse and discredit traditional male views about women and to argue for their superiority. Later in the seventeenth century, the Venetian nun Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–1652) wrote the powerful polemical tracts La tirannia paterna and L’inferno monacale. Herself a victim of the social practice of forced commitment of young women to the cloister, Tarabotti issued a scathing condemnation of such “patriarchal tyranny” as it was habitually practiced in the Venetian territories at the level of both the family and the state.\textsuperscript{58}

While the work of Fonte, Marinella, and Tarabotti had been known and acknowledged in the seventeenth century, as women writers in Venice they had nevertheless been regarded as rare and exceptional. Just a century later, though, Venice found itself at the center of a major revival of interest in the larger history of women writers and their contributions to literary culture. This act of historical recovery was spear-
headed by the editorial and scholarly projects of Luisa Bergalli (Venice, 1703–1779). A prolific writer, translator, poet, playwright, and librettist as well as scholar and critic, Bergalli had a reputation for learning that made her one of the most visible representatives of female culture in eighteenth-century Venice. In her Composimenti poetici delle più illustri matrici d’ogni secolo (Poetic Compositions of the Most Famous Women Poets of Every Century), published in two volumes in Venice in 1726, she gathered the works of some 250 female poets from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries and presented them as documentary proof of women’s intellectual ability and literary achievement throughout history. This literal and symbolic reinstatement of women in the world of letters was followed in 1750 by the publication in Venice of Bergalli’s L’almanacco sacro e profano...in difesa delle donne (A Sacred and Secular Almanac... in Defense of Women). The almanac used the traditional framework of a calendar, dedicating each of its 365 days to a female saint. But each day also featured, as a focus for admiration, the biography of an illustrious woman. In her selection, Bergalli emphasized women of learning and culture from ancient Greece to the present, including female artists, scholars, and writers. To understand the revelatory impact that Bergalli’s Almanac would have had in mid-eighteenth-century Venice, we might liken it to a recent feminist monument, Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party, and its effects on an emerging women’s movement in the United States in the 1970s. For as an act of recovery and recuperation that countered the erasure of women and their accomplishments in a patriarchal society, the Almanac displayed a potentially staggering power to influence and shape contemporary women’s sense of cultural identity and empowerment.

Also in eighteenth-century Venice, professional journalism emerged as a new career opportunity for Italian women of the middle classes. The most prominent practitioner, and a supporter of books by and about women, was Elisabetta Caminer Turra (born in Venice, 1751, died in Vicenza, 1796), who began writing for her father’s Giornale Enciclopedico in 1768 and assumed editorship in 1777. In Vicenza, with her husband, she set up a printing shop and published the Nuovo Giornale Enciclopedico (1782–89). These journals featured book reviews and letters on literary and scientific subjects, and through her editorial influence, they played an important role in transmitting Enlightenment culture to Italy. Her sister-in-law, Giosetta Cornoldi Caminer, was the editor of La Donna Galante ed Erudita (The Genteel and Learned Woman), which appeared in Venice from 1786 to 1788. Modeled on the British Female Spectator (published in Venice as La Spettatrice in 1752), it dealt informatively with such topics as fashion, beauty, health, marriage, family life, and children’s education; unlike earlier “ladies’ magazines” aimed at a now recognizable and steadily growing female readership in the eighteenth century, it was the first of its kind to be written and produced by women for women, from a female point of view.51

Even the socially more restricted women of the upper classes and the patriciate, who wrote but were reluctant to publish their poetry, novels, and travel diaries, could avail themselves of unprecedented opportunities for engagement with learning and literate society in eighteenth-century Venice and the Veneto through the institution of the salon. Modeled on the French example, these gatherings provided socially sanctioned access to cultural and intellectual life at the highest level for women of the upper classes, who, as hostesses, facilitated conversation and intellectual exchange among innovotive thinkers and literary talents of their era. This important cultural tradition in Venice, initiated by such women as Caterina Dolfin Tron and Cecilia Zen Tron, was carried on later in the century by the celebrated Venetian salonnieres, Giustina Renier Michiel and Isabella Teotichi Albrizzi.63 Called “the Venetian Madame de Staël” by Lord Byron, Albrizzi was known for gatherings where it was said that on a single evening “at least twenty different languages, Oriental and European, and six Italian dialects” could be heard.64

In eighteenth-century Venice, then, women who sought cultural agency and self-determination through learning and writing still faced opposition but had reason for optimism and could find broad support for their aspirations in the public arena of popular culture. A further measure of that support may be taken by the debate over Goldoni’s comedy Dona di Garbo (The Clever Woman), produced in Venice in 1743. As the historian Adriana Chemello reports, conservative reviewers criticized the play’s protagonist for being “unnatural, and being made to appear too learned in too many fields,” provoking from Goldoni a defense of his protagonist and the female mind in general over “the whole arrogant male sex.”65

The “Marriage Wars” in Eighteenth-Century Venice

The fears of conservative critics, who complained of a “crisis of obedience” in marriage and who saw in the “clever woman” the antithesis of the sposa obbediente and a threat to the stability of marriage and the social order, may have been well founded. In the century following recognition of free will in marriage by the Council of Trent in 1563, women who had suffered the indignities of forced marriage, abandonment, or abuse by their husbands had increasingly sought to alter their marital status by bringing their cases before a remarkably liberal ecclesiastical court. This was a trend so widespread and potentially transformative in the culture that it has been dubbed “the marriage wars” by one recent scholar, Joanne Ferraro, who has studied the history of marital litigation in Venice from 1563 to 1650.66 The eighteenth century saw an even greater escalation in such proceedings for divorce and legal separation, brought by women of all classes, but spreading late in the century to women of the patrician class, who previously had had little opportunity for altering marriages that involved issues of elite lineage and estate management.67

Although case histories of marital litigation in Venice and the Veneto indicate a progressive disruption of domestic structures and values at all social levels during the eighteenth century, most notable in this regard was the breakdown of marital customs crucial to the interests of the Venetian patriciate. Among practices designed to preserve the patrimony and purity of the upper and ruling classes that had begun to decline or were under serious threat was the custom—protested by Tarabotti more than a century earlier—of forced monachization, whereby women not wealthy enough to be sought after by men of their own rank had been sent to
teenth century may be inferred from Tiepolo’s earlier work in this genre, specifically, the two Vicentine villas he decorated prior to the Valmarana commission. For the central hall of honor in the Villa Loschi at Biron di Monteviale in 1734, he painted the allegorical scene *Matrimonial Harmony* (Fig. 18). Drawn from Ripa’s *Iconologia*, it extols the role of marriage and family in perpetuating a noble lineage and is accompanied in the great hall by three other allegories that feature virtues traditionally associated with both noble wives and noble families. This moralistic and didactic cycle was designed to celebrate the triumph of the traditional virtues as well as the lineage and aspirations of the patron, Nicolò Loschi. Marriage is still visualized here as essential to the aspirations of a noble landowner, but the subject of feminine rule within the home, featured at Maser as an exalted and powerful role entrusted to the noble wife by Nature and God, is no longer a major theme.

A more significant shift in emphasis appears a few years later in Tiepolo’s frescoes for the Villa Cordellina Lombardi at Montecchio Maggiore, a villa built about 1740 on the agricultural estate of the Venetian lawyer Carlo Cordellina Molin and his family. Preparations for Tiepolo’s frescoes were under way by October 1743 (documented in a letter to his friend Algarotti, whose influence here may now be presumed) and were probably completed in the spring of 1744.

The underlying Enlightenment theme of the cycle, embodied in *Triumph of Virtue and Nobility over Ignorance* on the ceiling of the great hall, alludes to the patron’s expertise in international law and is thought to have been furnished either by Algarotti, who is recorded as a frequent guest of the Cordellinas, or by the patron himself. Featured on the walls are two of the most famous classical examples of male sexual restraint, the “continence” of Scipio and Alexander (Figs. 19, 20). These “continences” were exercised out of respect for the rule of law and in the face of carnal temptation: Alexander the Great’s continence in refraining from taking advantage of the wife and daughters of Darius, king of Persia, after defeating him in 331 BCE, and the similar restraint shown by the Roman general Scipio Africanus, who conquered New Carthage in Spain in 210 BCE and followed Roman law by returning a princess, held hostage by the Carthaginians, to her fiancé. In both scenes, the women are dressed in sixteenth-century Venetian finery. And in *The Continence of Alexander*, following Veronese’s painting of the same subject, Alexander, who had restrained his baser instincts by refusing to gaze on his foe’s beautiful sister, is shown granting freedom to the family of the vanquished Darius.

Although these themes were not unknown in earlier villa decoration, the revival at this particular moment of classical
stories that celebrated not only clemency and the rule of law but also sexual self-restraint for men is noteworthy. For as vehicles that might impress on young men their duty in an era when clandestine affairs increasingly threatened the dynastic certainties of arranged and restricted marriage among the upper and patrician classes in the Veneto, these classical stories, displayed at the Villa Cordellina, sent a clearly relevant message. Their message to women, however, and the assumptions they foster concerning women’s rightful place and role are more ambiguously expressed. That the women in these stories are in fact the bartered spoils of war, wholly dependent on the generosity and moral virtue of their captors, is obscured by the visual prominence and dignity with which Tiepolo has endowed them. The beautiful hostage princess in the Scipio fresco is a calm and stately figure on whom all eyes focus as she gazes with remarkable self-possession at her captor (Fig. 19). And central in the foreground space of the Alexander fresco is the mother of Darius, a figure who radiates dignity and grace as well as pathos, and whose brilliant blue garments command the immediate visual attention of the viewer as she pleads for her family (Figs. 20, 21).

This move at the Loschi and Cordellina villas to imagery that enshrined the interrelated classical values of patriarchal authority and female dependency was developed further and in a far more original form by Tiepolo at Valmarana, its spirit guided in this case most certainly by Algarotti as well as by the specific interests of the owner and patron. Concentrating on stories drawn from classical sources and Renaissance epic poetry, stories of bartered, commodified, or abandoned women and warrior males who overcome carnal temptation for a higher civic or religious purpose, the cycle, as we have seen, is remarkably consistent in its message. In these stories, far more clearly than at the Villa Cordellina, women are shown to be pawns in matters of state, familial custom, and family fortune, and their abandonment is justified when men must be free to establish or preserve a dynastic lineage. Displayed on the walls at Valmarana, in other words, are stories that reinforce traditional patterns of family relationship in the Veneto, patterns that were being increasingly contested in the eighteenth century by educated and non-educated women alike from all walks of life. This larger socioeconomic context provides a useful framework for answering some of the questions regarding intentionality and reception of the Valmarana frescoes that were raised earlier in this study. To shed further light on the specific conditions that structured their commission and execution, we turn now
to an examination of the Valmarana family and household, whose domestic and marital patterns were typical of patrician marriage patterns in the Veneto.

The Valmarana Family and the Commission

In her study of the Vicentine patrons of the Tiepolos, Rita Menegozzo provides a useful history of the Valmaranos family, which, by the eighteenth century, had acquired power and influence in Venice as well as Vicenza. The family tree suggests that the problems and tensions resulting from the practices of restricted marriage and forced cloisteration were not unknown to them. In a family of four surviving sons and six daughters, Giustino Valmarana was the only son to marry and carry on the line. Among his own children, four daughters and two sons died in childhood and one surviving daughter took holy orders and became an abbess. Of the two sons who lived to survive their father, Antonio Cristoforo and Gaetano, only the latter married and carried on the line.

Archival accounts first cited by the scholar Lionello Puppi portray Giustino as a successful businessman who specialized in tax and real estate investment. In the 1750s, however, perhaps in response to the recent deaths of his wife and his devoted brother Leonoro (d. 1748) and concerns about the behavior of his own two sons, he withdrew from public life in Vicenza and spent more time in his suburban villa at San Sebastiano, where his desire to create an idyllic retreat—in the words of Puppi, "an oasis of detachment and serenity"—may have led to his patronage of the Tiepolos. His concerns about his sons, one might further propose, may also have been reflected in the hortatory message of the fresco cycle that he commissioned.

On the basis of this cycle, it has long been assumed that Giustino Valmarana's personal interests were directed toward literature, poetry, and the theater. He is known to have taken a particular interest in the opera and to have been active in the circle of the Accademia and the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza. And the librettos produced by the opera industry in the Veneto during the eighteenth century, as reflections of gender ideologies that reinforce early modern views about what constituted male and female virtue, share much in common with the point of view that is displayed on the walls of the palazzina. Popular in these operas were classical stories in which heroines who betray their families for love are punished with abandonment (Dido and Aeneas, Ariadne and Theseus, Medea and Jason). These self-assertive classical heroines, who failed to conform to accepted norms of behavior for women—chastity, silence, and obedience—had been a source of universal if ambivalent appeal to seventeenth-century operagoers. But in the librettos of the eighteenth century, they were moralized and silenced, deprived of their idiosyncratic and heartrending laments, as Enlightenment-driven reform of Italian opera placed new emphasis on moral instruction and focused far less on female sensuality than its seventeenth-century predecessor. Taking as her thesis the progressive silencing of the female voice in Venetian opera, the musicologist Wendy Heller has cogently observed that in the eighteenth century, "castrati became more celebrated than female singers, presenting one solution to the problem of female vocality in opera."

A similar silencing of the genuine female voice can be found, too, in the Valmarana frescoes, where Tiepolo was no doubt guided in his thematic choices by his friend Algarotti, the misogynist author of Newtonianism for Women who frequented the salons of the Vicentine aristocracy. In his essay "Saggio sopra l'opera in musica" (1755), Algarotti, himself a
classicismizing librettist, as we have seen, had strongly recommended the classical and Renaissance epic poets as sources for contemporary libretti and had emphasized, in particular, Ariosto and Tasso—the very combination that would be used at Valmarana.85

Whatever role Giustino himself may have played in crafting the framework for Tiepolo’s cycle and whatever his view might have been of its message, we cannot know. He did not live long with the results of his commission, which was nearing completion when he died in the villa at San Sebastiano on June 20, 1757.86 Perhaps fearing, as family legend now has it, that Giustino’s sons would not honor their father’s arrangements to embellish the villa, Tiepolo is said to have immediately returned to Venice when he learned of Giustino’s death. But Giustino, perhaps sharing the same fear, had fortuitously provided a bequest for the completion of the frescoes.87 The property at San Sebastiano nevertheless fell into disuse and decay for several decades following Giustino’s death, as his two surviving sons preferred to reside at the family’s urban palace in San Faustino.

Early local chroniclers do not paint an attractive picture of Giustino’s sons. Antonio Cristoforo was described as a reclusive hunchback and hypochondriac, a man who was ashamed of his infirmity and who lived a withdrawn and isolated life. His brother, Gaetano (1727–1794), was said to be prone to “superstitions, prejudices, and eccentric behavior.” Antonio died in 1771, and the following year, on January 15, 1772, Gaetano, now the sole heir, married Elena Garzadori, a member of the local aristocracy, to carry on the family line.88 In 1773 (three years after the death of Giambattista), Gaetano commissioned Giandomenico Tiepolo to decorate his urban palace in San Faustino with frescoes of the stories of Hercules. This tough masculine hero, so beloved of the late Roman emperors, also served as a civic emblem in Vicenza for the Accademia and the Teatro Olimpico, on whose proscenium arch his stories were emblazoned.89

Gaetano’s wife, on the other hand, turned her attention to the suburban property, which she restored sometime prior to 1785 and appropriated as a site for her renowned salons. The local historian Giovanni Da Schio (1798–1868), author of an unpublished history of notable Vicentine families, characterized the couple, their activities, and their relationship in the following terms:

Gaetano was a cultivated but cautious man. He always kept near him a priest who absolved him of his sins. He left everything he owned to pious works in order to punish his wife, whom he had nevertheless permitted to live in regal luxury. . . . He died suddenly in 1794. His wife, Elena Garzadori di Giulio, stayed in casa Valmarana and in the delights of S. Bastiano, which she made sparkle in Vicenza with the finest society from Venice. She brought together gatherings of philosophers; famous men were received by her.90

In 1785, to mark the restoration of the property at San Sebastiano, a family friend, Giovanni Antonio Brochi, wrote a poetic description of the beauties of the villa and its pastoral surroundings, likening it to the famous summer villas of the ancient Romans and prefacing his little book with a dedicatory verse addressed to his patron, the salomière Elena.91

Valmarana in a Changing World

Such evidence indicates that Elena Garzadori was an active and influential figure in an era when educated women were gaining some prominence, even if grudgingly, for their intellectual work and their contributions to the cultural life of Vicenza. We may remember that in 1772, the Venetian journalist Elisabetta Caminer Turra, who had called on a genealogy of illustrious women to support her unprecedented career as a writer in the public arena, moved with her husband to Vicenza, where she became director of her father’s Giornale Enciclopedico (1777) and published its Enlightenment-driven successor, the Nuovo Giornale Enciclopedico, until 1789. She, too, held a famous salon, and she established a theatrical school in Vicenza for which she translated several French plays for production in Italian.92 Despite their shared intellectual interests, however, there is no evidence that Elena Garzadori and Elisabetta Caminer Turra knew or had any contact with one another, and given their class differences, it is unlikely that they would have been acquainted.93 But privileges of class aside, what both might have experienced as educated and culturally influential women in the provincial and conservative city of Vicenza in this era is suggested in letters by Caminer Turra written soon after her arrival in her new home. Noting that Vicenza did not furnish as welcoming a setting for the work of a woman of letters as had her native and more cosmopolitan city of Venice, Caminer Turra char-
acterized her move as a "shift from a free, relaxed, and good city to a silly, malicious one full of prejudices." Apparently finding acceptance here far more difficult, she wrote, "I keep very much to myself, and I forget that I am in the beautiful and delightful but lazy and stolid Vicenza, whose very kind but deep down evil inhabitants would render it hateful to me if I paid much attention to them."94

There is a delicious irony, then, in the fact that Valmarana, with its frescoed rooms painted in the 1750s for the visual pleasure and moral edification of the reclusive Giustino and his two errant sons, Gaetano and Antonio Cristoforo, would have become a retreat a few decades later for Gaetano's wife, the salonnière Elena, who saved and restored the neglected property and appropriated it for her own purposes. For, like her contemporary Caminer Turra, Elena was a woman who would have been the worst nightmare of the social conservatives whose reactionary fears had underpinned the classical message of the fresco cycle in the palazzina, scenes in which the threat of the independent woman had been contained and male sovereignty reestablished.

By the time Elena took over the property, where she entertained learned men in a pastoral setting, tastes had changed in ways that would have helped to accommodate her own very different and independent gaze. In 1786, the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe became the first foreign visitor to record his responses to the frescoes so long hidden from public view, famously characterizing those by Giambattista in the manor house as the "sublime style" and those by Giandomenico in the guesthouse as the "natural style," and expressing his preference for the latter.95 A similar shift in taste is signaled by Brocchi, who had contributed the first Italian description of the frescoes one year earlier. With the exception of the Iphigenia fresco, whose evocative qualities moved him ("I grieve and shed bitter tears over the fate of the beautiful Iphigenia," he writes, and then describes his relief as Diana comes to her rescue),96 Brocchi dealt summarily with the other frescoes in the palazzina, barely mentioning their subjects. He moved on, with increased vigor, to consider the greater cultural variety of frescoed scenes in the foresteria, dwelling, for example, on the Far Eastern exoticism of the scenes in the Stanza Cinesi (Fig. 22). Without distinguishing between Giambattista and Giandomenico, he praised the playful illusionism of the scenes here and the artists' ability to transport the viewer to faraway and culturally diverse places.97

As we have seen, the fresco cycle painted by Giambattista for the palazzina in the 1750s served as the gendered expression of a conservative sociopolitical ideal and a reiteration of phallocentric culture and authoritarian values at a moment of crisis when that culture and those values were increasingly at risk and under siege. This new reading of the frescoes builds on a central tenet of feminist art historical analysis, which seeks to recover the historical agency of women and to uncover how strategies for suppressing that agency have left their tracks in the agendas of mainstream patriarchal culture.98 It also builds on, and effectively exemplifies, the postcolonial analysis of power, which has replaced the dominant-and-repressed model with theories, such as those of Homi Bhabha, that postulate agency on the part of the dominated, who present the threat of resistance to a power that seeks to maintain itself anxiously and with unconscious fears for its own preservation and survival.99

From these perspectives, the move in eighteenth-century villa decoration to imagery that showcased patriarchal power and its corollary, female dependency, suggests a need to shore up a system that increasingly faced subversive challenges. And there are indeed large social shifts and discontents reflected in the differences we have observed here between the frescoes at Valmarana and their sixteenth-century predecessors at Maser. In the Veneto of the eighteenth century, radically increased opportunities for women at all social levels to take control of their own lives and to participate in the public sphere set in motion cultural resistance to their agency, a phenomenon that provides the background and helps to account for the retrograde message of the Valmarana cycle. A societal reality of women out of control...
and perceived increasingly as a threat to patriarchal structures produced a fantasy and a reiteration based on classical authority of precisely such control.

As a demonstration of what might happen to the rebellious wife or daughter, these stories of female sacrifice and abandonment would have had a clear part to play in the eighteenth century in socializing women to their traditional submissive roles. And in an era when the traditions of restricted marriage were increasingly undermined by the secret marriages of patrician men and by the practice of *cicisbeismo*, when norms of masculinity were under threat and the character of the Italian aristocracy was seen to be in decline, the exemplary tales of male continence and patriarchal authority displayed on the walls of the *palazzina* would have reassured male viewers by heroizing their dedication to duty through the renunciation of the lure of the feminine, while simultaneously sending a clear warning to errant sons who might have wished to evade their patrimonial duty.

At Valmarana, in an iconographic program devised by Algarotti, whose drive to revive the didactic authority of classical antiquity was closely intertwined with these cultural concerns, we see the perpetuation of the classical binary opposition that places women on the side of nature and the irrational and men on the side of rational culture and civilization. Juxtaposing stories from classical and Renaissance epic poetry in which female emotionalism and sensuality are contrasted with and overcome by male resolve, Algarotti designed a program for Valmarana that reinforced the continuity of this classical tradition, privileging it as the embodiment of moral norms that might both justify and reinforce male power and autonomy. In such classical narratives, as Natalie Kampen argues, women’s difference is socially contained, and she links the revival of classical culture both in the Renaissance and in the eighteenth century with the power of its core gender message, designed to “mute” the danger of the female outsider.

The conservative backlash that greeted the assertion of female agency in the Veneto during the eighteenth century took the form, as we have seen, of marriage treatises that emphasized above all else the ideal of the obedient wife—“la sposa obbediente”—an ideal embedded in cultural productions that ranged from operatic libretti to pictorial fresco cycles like that of Tiepolo at Valmarana. In attempting to mute the female voice, these promoted a classical message against a change that could not be entirely blocked or stemmed. That the Valmarana cycle, with its classical scenes of male heroism and female disempowerment, was not only a regressive but also a futile gesture in a time of mounting social change is signaled by the already clearly different voice of the younger Giandomenico Tiepolo, whose frescoes in the *foresteria* and elsewhere (Fig. 23) project a more egalitarian view of a forward-looking and international culture, in which both sexes look outward toward new worlds.

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**Notes**

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2. For example, Veronese’s mid-sixteenth-century frescoes at the Villa Barbaro in Maser, discussed below; or those from the 1560s by Giovanni Antonio Fasolo in the Villa Caldogno and the Villa Campiglia Negri de’ Salvi, showing villa inhabitants of both sexes making music, dancing, and playing games. For illustrations of the latter, see Muraro and Marton, *Venezian Villas*, 26ff., 296ff.


4. In particular, Paolo Beni’s *Comparazione di Omero, Virgilio e Torquato* (1607), whose praise of Tasso as the perfect poet and *Cervantesse liberata* “as the poem capable of absorbing within itself the entire ancient and modern tradition” continued to reverberate in the eighteenth century. Guerrini, “Il Tiepolo e la stanza del Tasso,” 347; also Levey, “Tiepolo’s Treatment of Classical Story,” 303.

5. These issues were considered as an explanatory context for the cycle by Levey in his article of 1957 (“Tiepolo’s Treatment of Classical Story,” 298–317), and in the following half century, they have been expanded on in the literature.


7. Levey notes the recent revival of interest in Homer and the rising tide of Neoclassicism at this time, citing the publication of Johann Joachim Winckelmann’s writings just two years before Tiepolo created the Valmarana frescoes and the appearance in 1757 of the *comè* de Caylus’s *Tableaux tiré de l’Histoire, de l’Odyssée d’Homère et de l’Enide de Virgile*. Levey further suggests that Tiepolo might have had access to a copy of Caylus’s book owned by Consul Joseph Smith in Venice. Levey, “Tiepolo’s Treatment of Classical Story,” 302–3.


12. Ibid., 215.


15. Ibid., 216.

16. Ibid., 221.


19. On “The Debate about Woman in the Orlando Furioso,” see Pamela...


21. As noted by Lee, ibid., 23.

22. The pictorial tradition that preserves the ancient trope of the male lover who inscribes the name of his beloved on trees is traced in depictions of Angelica and Medoro by Lee, ibid., 65, who also notes the role reversal in Tiepolo’s painting.


28. See n. 4 above.

29. For a feminist reading of the text, see Marilyn Migiel, Gender and Genealogy in Tasso’s “Carmen Leonum” (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993).


31. The villa was originally built between 1665 and 1670 for the Vicentine lawyer Giovanni Maria Bertolo. When he died without sons in 1707, the property passed to his daughter Julia, a nun in the Paduan convent of Ognissanti. The church subsequently arranged for its sale to the Vicentine nobleman Giustino Valmarana (of the San Faustino branch of the family). Contested issues of attribution and dating of structures on the property are reviewed by Maria Elisa Avasagna. “Villa Valmarana ai Nani at San Bastiano di Vicenza,” in Tiepolo: The Vicentine Villas, ed. Avasagna, Fernando Rigon, and Remo Schiavo (Milan: Electa, 1990), 59–62.

32. Ibid., 64. The dating of the frescoes was resolved by A. Morassi, “Gibambattista e Giandomenico Tiepolo alla villa Valmarana,” Le Arte 4 (April–May 1941): 19ff. The possible connection between the Valmarana and Loschi commissions was first observed by Lionello Puppi, whose archival work provides the basis for subsequent studies of the Valmarana family. Puppi, “I ‘Nani’ di Villa Valmarana a Vicenza,” Antichità Viva 2 (1968): 34–48.


36. Ibid., 84.


39. See, for example, Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall, Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligencia (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 21ff. In a section entitled “Corning Veronese,” they stress Tiepolo’s “dependence on precedent in art in general and on Veronese in particular.”


41. On the traditional family portrait traits from which this image derives, see Diane Owen Hughes, “Representing the Family: Portraits and Purposes in Early Modern Italy.” Journal of Interdisciplinary History 17 (1986): 7–58.


44. Ibid., 390–91.


49. For example, the publication in Venice in 1763 of L’amico delle fanciulle, edited by Gasparo Gozzi, an Italian translation of the French L’ami des filles (1761) by B.-C. Graillard de Graville, which advocated the participation of noble women in social life. Guerci, La sposa obbediente, 124–25.

50. As some, still admitted extraneous, women were during this period. The most famous examples were the scientist Laura Bassi, member of the faculty at the University of Bologna from 1732 to 1778, and the mathematician Maria Agnesi, who taught there from 1750 to 1799. See Letizia Panizzi and Sharon Wood, eds., A History of Women’s Writing in Italy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6.

51. Guerci, La sposa obbediente, chap. 6, 231–88, esp. 233, 256–57, 252ff. See for example, the debate at the Accademia de’ Ricoveri in Padua in 1723 on the proposition “Whether women should be admitted to the study of the sciences and the fine arts.” Giovanni Antonio Volpi took the negative position and wrote about the detrimental effect that female learning would have on marital harmony and widely obedience (256–57).


53. For examples of these throughout the century, see Guerci, La sposa obbediente, 234 n. 3.


55. On Carter’s unacknowledged and protofeminist manipulations of Algardi’s text and the subsequent success of her translation in promoting greater acceptance of scientific learning for women in England, see Agorni, Translating Italy, 67–89.

56. Heller, Emblesms of Elocution, 39, contends that these literary debates over the nature of women had already come to be regarded in the seventeenth century “as a Venetian phenomenon.”

57. Passi, who had offered Virgil’s Dido as an illustration of female vices such as cruelty, dishonesty, and infidelity, is countered by passim, who takes for her model the pre-Virgilian Dido, whom she praises for her skills in governing and for her accomplishments in the building of Carthage. Heller, Emblesms of Elocution, 95, 327 ff. 37–39.


60. For a modern edition (abridged), see Giuseppina Cornoldi Caminer, La donna galante ed erudita: Giornale diretto al bel sesso, ed. Cesare di Michiel (Venice: Marsilio, 1983).