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Women on top: Coital positions and gender hierarchies in Renaissance Italy

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One of the novellas by the Southern Italian writer Masuccio Salernitano (1410–1475) tells the story of a nobleman's wife who has sex with a dwarf who works as a jester at their court. The couple is caught in the act by a servant, who 'sees them recklessly perform a new dance of characters, and at times, the woman was riding the toad in the Gianetta-style'.¹ In her rage, the servant takes a lance and stabs the woman through the lower back, impaling both her and the man to the bed. This story belongs to the third part of Masuccio's *Novellino*, which has as its explicit goal 'to castigate the depraved nature, evil vices, and malicious tricks of wicked women'. The narrator's most vicious moral rebukes are reserved for tales about upper class women who have sex with the enslaved black men and dwarfs living in their household. Among these tales, this particular one stands out, as the coital position, with the woman on top, is used to enhance the woman's transgression even more.² According to Christian theology, the position we now call 'missionary', with the woman below and the man on top, was the only proper way to have sex. Manuals for confession describe it as 'the woman lies on her back and the man lies on her stomach, making sure to deposit his seed into the proper vessel'. All other positions that deviate from this prescription are sinful – manuals of confession usually mention five of them, listed in order of gravity. The least serious deviation was having sex laterally, after that came the sitting and standing position. Having sex from behind was deemed worst of all, but the woman-on-top position was a close second.³

To a modern reader familiar with gender studies and the history of premodern sexuality, one seemingly self-evident explanation for the apprehension towards the woman-on-top position is its supposed capability of upsetting

¹ The 'Giannetta-style' is mentioned in various lists of sexual positions. According to the anonymous *Dialogo di Maddalena e Giulia*, this position has the man on his back and the woman on top of him. See: Lynn Lawner, *I Modi, the Sixteen Pleasures. An Erotic Album of the Italian Renaissance* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 52.

² Masuccio Salernitano, *Il Novellino*, novella 28.

³ See for instance: Angelo da Chivasso, *Summa Angelica* (Venice, 1487) *Debitum coniugale*; and Sylvester da Prierio Mazzolini, *Silvestrina* (Bologna, 1515) *Debitum coniugale*. See also: Thomas N. Tentler, *Sin and Confession on the Eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 190.

traditional gender roles and hierarchies. This seems a logical hypothesis to explain the anxiety, especially since other elements of sexual intercourse were viewed from an essentially hierarchical perspective as well. A clear double standard that prioritized the needs of men over those of women is reflected in the fact that it was much more accepted for men to take the initiative in sex than it was for women. In conduct literature, women were taught to behave chastely and modestly in order to please their husbands and lovers, in the bedroom as much as elsewhere, and expressing their sexual desire was deemed inappropriate.⁴ The spread of this code of conduct is reflected in other sources as well. Works of literary fiction include female characters who gladly take the initiative, but texts like these also teach that acting resistant is a means of increasing desirability.⁵ Court records show that real-life women frequently took the initiative, but these sources also reflect the same reservations about this division of roles. In a Venetian court case, a man argued that his wife had not been a virgin when she married him, because she took the initiative during sex and instructed him on sexual positions.⁶ Another factor which tempered the egalitarian nature of sex was the prioritization of the sexual pleasure of the male partner. The writers of conduct literature present marriage as a source of male pleasure and relaxation, while works of literary fiction are usually focused on the experience of the male partner as well. Even theological authors could uphold a double standard on some occasions, believing it to be a much graver sin for women to ask for the marital debt during menstruation or pregnancy than for men.⁷

Against this background, the theory that the woman-on-top prohibition was caused by concern about gender inversion seems almost self-evident. And yet, even though it is habitually mentioned in studies of medieval and early modern sexuality, this hypothesis has not been sufficiently supported with relevant source material. Exemplary of the tendency to take the validity of this theory for granted, is the fact that authors often refer to studies which do not directly support it. One such study is Natalie Zemon Davis's essay 'Women on top' in her monograph on society and culture in early modern France. Davis argued that sexual symbolism is a very important means of making statements about social

⁴ For examples in conduct literature, see: Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism. Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 46; Rudolph M. Bell, *How to Do It. Guides to Good Living for Renaissance Italians* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 34. For a rare example of a theological author making the connection between codes of conduct and the unequal nature of the marital debt, see: Dyan Elliot, 'Bernardino of Siena versus the Marriage Debt' in J. Murray and K. Eisenbichler (eds.), *Desire and Discipline. Sex and Sexuality in the Premodern West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 179–80.

⁵ For examples of literary fiction in which this code is suggested: Bartolomeo Gottifredi, *Specchio d'amore*. Edition by Giuseppe Zonta (Bari: Laterza, 1912), 612–13; Pietro Aretino, *Ragionamenti*. Edition by Guido Bonino (Turin: Giulio Einaudi, 1975), 33.

⁶ Ann R. Jones, 'Heterosexuality: A Beast with Many Backs' in B. Talvacchia (ed.), *A Cultural History of Sexuality in the Renaissance* (Oxford: Berg, 2012), 42.

⁷ *Silvestrina*, *Debitum coniugale*; *Summa Pacifica*, 185. Dyan Elliot has found the same argument in works by Thomas Aquinas and Johannes Nider: 'Bernardino da Siena', 172.

experience. The relation of the wife to her husband was useful for expressing the relation of all subordinates to their superiors, and the *topos* of the woman-on-top was therefore a widespread form of cultural play in literature, art and festivity.⁸ While Davis's theory of sexual symbolism is valuable on a more general level, the article does not actually discuss coital positions. Davis used the term 'woman-on-top' in a much broader sense, encompassing transgressive female characters like wives cuckolding their husbands as well as Amazonian warriors.

Other authors who are often cited on this topic are John Noonan, James Brundage and Pierre Payer, all of them specialists in medieval and early modern theology and canon law. As their works have a much wider scope, they only mention the woman-on-top position in passing, but they do make the connection between the anxiety about this position and fears of gender inversion. Noonan stated that the durable rejection of this position was not based on arguments of procreation, but more likely 'reflected a belief in the natural superiority of man to woman'.⁹ Payer likewise remarks that the claim of this position being infertile 'does not explain the particular animus with which it was viewed'. Payer, having studied theological texts from the middle of the twelfth to the middle of the fourteenth century, states that 'a possible source of the horror of this position may also be that it is a reversal of the natural roles of the active male and the passive female', but he says that he is unaware of any source that actually makes this point.¹⁰ Brundage is the most explicit in his statement, arguing that 'intercourse in any position where the woman lay or sat atop the man seemed to canonists "unnatural", since they believed that such a posture reversed the proper order of relationship between the sexes by making the female superior to the male'.¹¹ The works of Noonan, Brundage and Payer are often cited by authors seeking to support the claim that the woman-on-top position was frowned upon for reasons of gender inversion. Their pioneering works, however, do not provide many references to source material discussing the woman-on-top position. Most importantly, none of the references they do provide makes an explicit connection between this position and gender inversion.

Two lesser known studies offer a valuable contribution to the topic. One is Roberto Zapperi's *L'uomo incinto*, a study of folklorist tales about male pregnancy which includes a chapter entitled 'above and below' that focuses on the woman-on-top position. Zapperi states that the contradiction between the (physical) sexual position with the woman on top and the (figurative) position

⁸ Natalie Z. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 127–9.

⁹ John T. Noonan, *Contraception. A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists*. 2nd edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 163, 239.

¹⁰ Pierre J. Payer, *The Bridling of Desire. Views of Sex in the Later Middle Ages* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 79 and 220 fn 77.

¹¹ James A. Brundage, 'Sex and canon law' in V. L. Bullough and J. A. Brundage (eds.), *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality* (New York: Garland, 1996), 40. Brundage refers to his pioneering article 'Let Me Count the Ways: Canonists and Theologians Contemplate Coital Positions', *Journal of Medieval History*, 10 (1984).

with the man on top in social relations is so glaring that it is impossible for any historian to miss it.¹² Another study is Clive Hart's and Kay Stevenson's *Heaven and the Flesh* on the imagery of desire, which includes a chapter entitled 'The woman on top: Christ, Endymion, Ganymede'. The authors state that the reprehension about the woman-on-top position seems second only to fear of male homosexuality, and they explain it through anxiety about gender inversion: 'However undesirable other modes of copulation may be, it is the inverted position that most clearly indicates a man's abdication of his God-given dominant role'.¹³ The added value of the studies by Hart and Stevenson and Zapperi is that they provide several source references that draw a connection between coital positions and gender inversion. As broad as their studies are, however, they understandably make use of scattered material, using sources from all over Europe, from classical, to medieval and early modern times.

With this article, I want to bring a more focused case study of this topic to the historiography by analysing the discussion of the woman-on-top position in Italian sources written between c.1350 and 1550. Theological, medical and literary texts are used to support the hypothesis that the woman-on-top prohibition was to an important extent sanctioned by beliefs about gender roles and hierarchies. While there are many sources that allude to this fact, a careful reading also reveals the explicit connection that some authors have drawn between coital positions and gender hierarchies. Through a contextualization of these sources, I want to show that there were various ways in which the 'missionary' position could be defended, ranging from defences of innate male prerogatives to anxiety about female power. The comparison of different types of sources shows that these perceptions were widespread.

Works of literary fiction, which often offer a more liberal perspective on illicit love and sex, share the same reservations about the woman-on-top position as more prescriptive and moralizing sources. Although most literary authors do not explicitly condemn this position, the way they describe it does reflect the same ideas about male rights and male vulnerability. In general, literary fiction seems to confirm the values described in more prescriptive literature rather than challenge them – although a few possible exceptions will be discussed in the final section of this article.

NON-HIERARCHY RELATED EXPLANATIONS OF THE PROHIBITION

Before discussing the gender hierarchy based arguments against the woman-on-top position, I will first provide an overview of the other, non-hierarchy related arguments that were used to defend the prohibition. I will also show

¹² I have used the French translation of Zapperi's book: *L'homme encient: L'homme, la femme et le pouvoir* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1983), 162.

¹³ Clive Hart and Kay Stevenson, *Heaven and the Flesh. Imagery of Desire from the Renaissance to the Rococo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 25–73, esp. 31–6.

that, upon closer inspection, these arguments alone are insufficient to explain societal concern.

The argument that theologians most often used to defend the prohibition of the woman-on-top position is that it could thwart a woman's ability to conceive. This idea dates back to the Persian medical authority Avicenna (c.980–1037) who stated that women may not be able to retain the semen when they are in this position. William Perrault (1190–1271) and Astesanus of Asti (d. 1330) both stated that the semen is not properly emitted and received when the woman is on top, while Albert Magnus (c.1200–1280) claimed that this position turns the woman's uterus upside down so that it loses its contents.¹⁴ In the works of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian theologians, the woman-on-top position was likewise discussed as a possible impediment to conception. Interestingly, however, the probability of it actually impeding conception was contested. According to Angelo da Chivasso (1410–1495), women are generally able to contain the semen when they are on top, and using this position is only a mortal sin if women stand up too quickly after sex, thus losing the sperm.¹⁵ Silvestro Mazzolini Da Prierio (1456/57–1527) disagrees: not even standing up could make a woman lose the sperm inside of her. According to him, women are always able to retain the semen, arguing that they can even do so over long distances, and that they can conceive in baths where men have emitted sperm (basing himself on a famous anecdote by the twelfth-century scholar Averroes), so the woman-on-top position does not impede the conception in any way. He nonetheless considers it to be an act that goes 'against nature' and a possible sign of mortal lust.¹⁶ Girolamo Savonarola (1452–1498) avoids making a decision altogether. He writes that 'some people say that when the woman sits on top, this does not impede the conception', but instead of claiming that this is either true or false, he states that all he knows is that this position is forbidden because it is a sign of mortal lust.¹⁷

According to James Brundage, the context of remarks about deviant coital positions seems to indicate that the writers were not primarily concerned with optimizing procreation, but were rather intent on discouraging behaviour aimed at increasing sexual pleasure. Within the doctrine of sin, many things were only venial sins as long as they were done with the right intention, but became mortal sins if they were solely aimed at pleasure. Having sex on holy days or in holy places, for instance, was only a venial sin if done with the aim of procreation, but a mortal sin if motivated solely by lust. This distinction also applied to coital positions. Albert Magnus had stated that deviating positions are not immediately mortal sins, because with some couples, circumstances such as obesity or infirmity might disallow the conventional 'missionary'

¹⁴ Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 78–9; Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, 192; Noonan, *Contraception*, 239.

¹⁵ *Summa Angelica*, Debitum coniugale.

¹⁶ *Silvestrina*, Debitum coniugale.

¹⁷ Girolamo Savonarola, *Confessionale* (Venice, 1543) 32r.

position. They could, however, be a 'sign of mortal concupiscence' if the couple had no 'rational' reason to adjust their position. Several fifteenth- and sixteenth-century authors used Albert's words to argue that it is a mortal sin for people to deviate from the natural position if they have no other reason than increasing their pleasure.¹⁸

A third argument against the woman-on-top position focused on (male) health. According to Roberto Zapperi, there seems to have been a certain appreciation of this position in Classical Antiquity, which can be glanced from Greek epigrams praising it, and the many frescoes of brothel scenes in Pompeii that depict the woman on top. The Greek diviner Artemidorus (second century CE) writes that this position is quite comfortable for the male, because it enables him to experience pleasure without overexerting himself.¹⁹ Medieval and early modern sources, however, show a contrary perspective. Avicenna stated that the woman-on-top position could have serious consequences for male health. The effort of ejaculating upwards could result in a hernia or cause inflammation and ulceration of both the penis and the bladder – risks that are also mentioned in a regiment on health by fourteenth-century physician Magnino of Milan. The Italian physician Michele Savonarola (1385–1468) likewise warns men 'to stay above the woman, and not the other way round', so that they do not exhaust themselves.²⁰ The male discomfort that this position supposedly causes is even reflected in one of the most famous early examples of Renaissance pornography: *I Modi* (1524). This work consists of a collection of engravings by Marcantonio Raimondi, based on drawings by Giulio Romano, which all depict couples having sex in a different position. Satirist Pietro Aretino (1492–1556) accompanied each engraving with a matching sonnet, the *Sonetti Lussuriosi*, in which the couple depicted is narrating the scene. The positions include several sitting, standing and lying variations, and the woman-on-top position is among them as well. Position 14 shows a cart dragged by Cupid, and on it a woman sitting on top of a man, turning her back towards him in a position commonly known as 'reverse cow-girl'. The man is in a crouching position, propping himself up on both arms, and trying to stabilize himself while Cupid is pulling the cart across the room. In the sonnet, the man laments his great discomfort, and states that even a strong beast of burden like a mule would be killed if it had to stay in this position for over an hour.²¹

It is important to note that all three of the arguments mentioned above also apply to other coital positions. These arguments therefore do not seem

¹⁸ Bartholomaeus de Chaimis, *Interrogatorium* (Heidelberg, no date [1485]) 55r; Pacifico da Cerano, *Summa Pacifica* (Venice, 1574) 184; *Confessionale*, 32r; Brundage, 'Let Me Count the Ways'.

¹⁹ Zapperi, *L'homme enceinte*, 163.

²⁰ Noonan, *Contraception*, 239; Danielle Jacquart and Claude Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988), 133.

²¹ Bette Talvacchia, *Taking Positions. On the Erotic in Renaissance Culture* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987), 220–1.

sufficient to explain the great apprehension towards the woman-on-top position. Adopting a lateral, sitting, or standing position could likewise solely be aimed at increasing pleasure. Other positions could likewise be deemed unhealthy: Michele Savonarola for instance warns his readers that the standing position is very exhausting.²² Even the procreation argument applies to other positions: according to Albert Magnus, the sperm will not be deposited close enough to the mouth of the uterus if a couple has sex from behind, and the uterus will lose the semen if they are standing.²³

MALE RIGHT: DIVINELY ORDAINED HIERARCHY

The first defence of the man-on-top position based on arguments of gender hierarchy can be found in a sermon by the Franciscan preacher Bernardino da Feltre (1439-1494). In this sermon, aimed at instructing 'honest, married women', the friar states that the hierarchy between the sexes has been divinely ordained, and that this hierarchy therefore ought to be reflected in the position that people have sex in. 'Woman', he says, 'should have reverence for man, who comes first, and she after him, nor can she sit on top of him [*super-grediatur*], because God has made man from earth, so that in generation he always has to face the earth, and the woman should face Paradise'.²⁴

The divinely ordained gender hierarchy to which Bernardino is referring ultimately derives from the first book of the Old Testament, where it is stated that man was first to be created, and woman was created because man needed a 'helper' (Gen. 2:20). The book of Genesis also justifies woman's subjection to man: after Eve has disobeyed God by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, God orders that she will henceforward be under her husband's rule (Gen. 3:16). These conceptions are repeated and built upon in the New Testament: women should be subject to their husbands, because the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ is the head of the Church (Eph. 5:22-3); women are not allowed to use authority over men, because Adam was first to be formed, not Eve, and because it was woman, not man, who first transgressed God's command (1 Tim. 2:9-15). The conceptualization of gender hierarchies in Christian theology was further supported by Aristotelian philosophy. Clerical and scholastic thought was inspired by Aristotle through the mediation of Thomas Aquinas, who relied on Aristotle in his interpretation of gender relations in Scripture. Aristotle considered the female body as passive and inferior to that of the male, and used this bodily inferiority to sanction woman's subjection to man: it is natural for the man to rule, and the woman to be ruled,

²² Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality*, 133.

²³ Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 245.

²⁴ Bernardino da Feltre, *Sermoni*. Edition by P. C. Varischi da Milano (Milano: Cassa di Risparmio delle Provincie Lombarde e Banca del Monte, 1964) 3 vols. Vol. II, 138.

because the male is the rational, superior element, and the woman is the passionate, inferior element.²⁵

The passage from Bernardino da Feltre's sermon is exceptional, as it draws an explicit connection between the (supposedly hierarchical) order in which Adam and Eve were created and the coital position that couples ought to use. Especially striking is his connection between the material that was used to create the first male body and what all men need to focus on during sex. While the exact way in which Bernardino defends the missionary position is particular, his general argument ties in with the works of other theologians. Thomas Aquinas emphasized the importance of sexual intercourse reflecting divinely (and naturally) ordained hierarchies. In the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas stated that in order to reproduce, all beings require an active and a passive virtue, and in humans, like in all other beings, the male has been given the active virtue and the female the passive. While Aquinas does not draw a connection between active and passive roles and coital positions, James Brundage has argued that he is referring to the woman-on-top position.²⁶ With a few other theological authors, the link between the woman-on-top position and gender role reversal is more explicit. One of them is the Spanish Jesuit Thomas Sanchez (1550–1610), who states in his treatise on marriage that a reversal of coital positions automatically causes a reversal of active and passive roles. 'It is natural for the man to act and for the woman to be passive', he writes, 'and if the man is beneath, he becomes submissive by the very fact of his position, and the woman being above is active; and who cannot see how much nature abhors this mutation?'.²⁷

To emphasize the gravity of this sin, some theologians linked it to the story of the biblical Flood. Romans 1:26–7 states that God sent the Flood as a punishment for increasingly transgressive sexual sins, including men having sex with men, and women 'changing the natural use into that use which is against nature' [*nam feminae eorum inmutaverunt naturalem usum in eum usum qui est contra naturam*]. Although the original text is ambiguous, the twelfth-century French theologian Peter Comestor interpreted this passage as a reference to the woman-on-top position, stating that 'women had become so mad, that they had started to abuse men by mounting them' [*mulieres in vesania versae supergressae viris abutebantur*]. Comestor's account of the Flood was later

²⁵ Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism*, 32–3; Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman. A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 8, 50.

²⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.98.2. James Brundage refers to this passage in 'Let Me Count the Ways', 86–87.

²⁷ Translation by: Jean-Louis Flandrin, 'Contraception, Marriage and Sexual Relations in the Christian West' in R. Forster and O. Ranum (eds.), *Biology of Man in History* (Baltimore, MD 1975), 37–8. See also: Zapperi, *L'homme enceinte*, 171.

repeated by authors like Astesanus of Asti and Thomas Sanchez.²⁸ For these theologians, the woman-on-top position was such a severe defiance of divine commandments that it could provoke God's wrath over the entire community.

MALE RIGHT: BODILY STRENGTH

While Bernardino da Feltre's sermon and the works of other theologians defended the man-on-top position as being divinely ordained, another defence focused on male superiority in bodily strength. In works of literature such as romance epics and novellas, sex is often described as an amorous battle that has victors and losers. The subjection of the losing party is symbolized by the fact that their body lies underneath that of the conqueror. Luigi Pulci's (1432–1484) romance epic *Il Morgante* includes a battle between a group of male, Christian warriors and a group of female, Amazon-like warriors. Several examples of sexual innuendo can be found in Pulci's description of this battle, connecting the martial subjection of these women to their sexual subjection. It is stated that 'there, one by one, the damsels were seized and placed, flat on their backs, upon the ground, where many a door was forced and opened wide, and many a street was run and soon rerun'.²⁹ While this passage implies an act of sexual aggression, the metaphor of battle is often used in more peaceful and consensual sex scenes as well. In the *Orlando Furioso* by Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533), the character Richardet describes his first night with his beloved Fiordispina as a victorious siege, 'leaping *unto* the battlements' and 'thrusting the enemy *beneath* him'.³⁰

While these texts already imply that the man-on-top position is the natural result of superior strength, this argument is made explicit in a collection of novellas by Matteo Bandello (1485–1561). Bandello's plethora of colourful metaphors includes those in which sex is described in terms of combat. In one of his stories, a couple is described as competing in some kind of wrestling match, during which, the narrator states: it 'still befell to the lady to remain at the bottom the most'. Another couple fought in 'an amorous war', and 'as they contended who could most, it still fell to the lady's part, *as the weaker and more delicate*, to find herself at the bottom the most'.³¹ In this passage, the man-on-top position is clearly presented as 'logical' or 'natural' through

²⁸ Tentler, *Sin and Confession*, 192; Zapperi, *L'homme enceinte*, 166; Payer, *Bridling of Desire*, 79; Hart and Stevenson, *Heaven and the Flesh*, 197 fn 29. According to Hart and Stevenson, Peter Comestor wrongfully attributed this scriptural reading to Saint Methodius (260–312), while it was in fact taken from an anonymous early medieval book of revelations.

²⁹ Luigi Pulci, *Il Morgante*, XXII.168: 'E tutte le donzelle hanno spacciate, ch'a una a una in terra le ponevano; e le porte hanno rotte e sgangherate e 'l borgo a saccomanno poi correvano.' English translation by Joseph Tusiani (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998).

³⁰ Matteo Maria Boiardo, *Orlando Furioso*, XXV.68.

³¹ *Novelle*, II.56 and I.47.

arguments of bodily strength: as women are weaker, it makes sense for them to assume the inferior position.

The prohibition against the woman-on-top position is one of the most literal reflections of the social hierarchy between men and women. For this reason, arguments that were used in the general debate about the status of women in society are reflected in the discussion about coital positions as well. Some of the writers of treatises in defence of women tried to explain the causes behind the gendered hierarchy of society as a whole. Their answer to the question why men obtain a superior position within society, matches Bandello's answer to the question why men obtain a (literally) superior position during sex: physical strength. Agostino Strozzi's *Defensio mulierum* (1501), for instance, argues that the sole reason behind the custom of female domesticity is male strength. 'Men being stronger in physical strength and in daring easily restrained the peaceful souls of the women to the objects and ease of family life'.³² In Bernardo Trotto's *Dialoghi del matrimonio e vita vedovile* (1578), the character of the widow Hippolyta makes a similar argument. She states that the relationship between husband and wife, with woman as man's servant, is not natural but circumstantial. The reason why men have been put in charge is not because they are more reasonable, but simply because they are stronger than women.³³

MALE ANXIETY: HEALTH CONCERNS

The previous two texts by Bernardino da Feltre and Matteo Bandello both argue that the male prerogative for being on top was either divinely or naturally ordained. The three remaining sources are different, as their defence of the man-on-top position does not focus on natural rights, but rather on the dangerous consequences of role reversal for the male participant. One aspect of this anxiety had to do with male health, and is reflected in the *Pratica Maior*, a medical compendium by university professor and court physician Michele Savonarola. Savonarola (grandfather to the famous preacher) warns men 'to stay above the woman, and not the other way round', so that they do not exhaust themselves, but also 'to prevent female fluids from falling into the penis'.³⁴ Savonarola's warning, derived from the *Canon* of Avicenna, reflects an anxiety about the female body harming that of the male. The fear about 'female fluids falling into the penis' could be explained in two different ways, both related to hierarchical perceptions.

One cause behind the medical concern about 'female fluids' descending into the male body, could be the perception of the female body as inferior,

³² Pamela Benson, *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman. The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press 1992), 50.

³³ Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism*, 155–6.

³⁴ Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, 133.

impure or even toxic. This view was backed up by centuries of medical 'science' inspired by classical authorities such as Aristotle, Galen, and Hippocrates, who all considered the female body as naturally inferior to that of the male.³⁵ Although, from the fifteenth century onwards, this conventional view of female inferiority was increasingly challenged by medics,³⁶ many Italian anatomists still described the female body as an underdeveloped male, created from weak and impure semen and due to insufficient heat incapable of perfecting itself.³⁷ Linked to the belief that women are conceived from impure semen is the perception that carrying a female child harms the female body in a way that a male child does not. Pregnant women who have solid, strong and agile bodies, a bright face and a good appetite are believed to be expecting a son. The impure semen that shapes a female child, however, is believed to make a pregnant woman weak and tired, gives her a spotted skin, and could even cover her body in ulcers and pustules.³⁸

The inferior female body was believed capable of harming that of the superior male as well. The *topos* of the poisonous woman who hurts the men who have sex with her was widespread. The malignity of the menses is discussed by classical authors like Aristotle, Pliny and Plutarch, and the purity laws of the Old Testament dictate that it is not allowed to have sex with a woman who is menstruating. Christianity did not completely proscribe sex during menstruation, but in the medieval period, it was nonetheless firmly associated with impurity and disease, as it was believed to generate weak or leprous children.³⁹ This perception of the female body as poisonous and harmful is echoed by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian authors as well. In a letter dedicated to his brother, who was planning on getting married, the southern Italian physician Giovanni Camillo Maffei (fl. 1562–1573) writes that 'as a medic you ought to know that woman is nothing more than a stream of corrupted blood, and an *albergo di pestilenza*'. Another southern Italian medic, Michelangelo Biondo (1500–1565), wrote a misogynous treatise in which he called women a 'putrid swamp' and 'the death of man'.⁴⁰ One of the most repelling images of a woman's vagina can be

³⁵ For an overview of this tradition, see Maclean, *Renaissance Notion*, 31–8.

³⁶ Gianna Pomata, 'Was There a *Querelle des femmes* in Early Modern Medicine?', *Arenal. Revista de Historia de las Mujeres*, 20 (2013), 313–41.

³⁷ Compare Alessandro Achillini's *Annotationes anatomicae*, Niccolò Massa's *Liber introductorius anatomiae*, and Alessandro Benedetti's *Anatomice* (translations by L. R. Lind, Philadelphia, 1975), 49–50, 203–7; as well as Berengario da Carpi's *Isagogae breves* (translation by L. R. Lind, Chicago, 1959), 68, 80; and Michele Savonarola's *Ad mulieres ferrarienses* (edition by Luigi Belloni, Milan 1952), 54–5.

³⁸ Pietro Bairo, *Secreti Medicinali* (Venice, 1585), 195v–196v; *Ad mulieres ferrarienses*, 58–61. Marchioness Isabella d'Este assured her son Ferrante that his pregnant wife would give birth to a son, basing herself on the fact that the pregnancy was going so well. See *Isabella d'Este. Selected Letters*, edited and translated by Deanna Shemek (Toronto: Iter Press, 2017), 576.

³⁹ Maclean, *Renaissance Notion*, 39; Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, 74–76; Valeria Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade. Masculinity, Paternity, and Castration in the Italian Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 96–8.

⁴⁰ Michèle Benaiteau, 'Tracce e spie letterarie di storia delle donne del regno di Napoli tra XV e XVI secolo' in M. Santoro (ed.), *La donna nel rinascimento meridionale* (Pisa: Fabrizio Serra, 2010), 229.

found in Antonio Vignali's (1500–1559) satire *La Cazzaria*, where the character Arsiccio describes the menses as the result of a malignant infected wound, so toxic that it greatly harms anything that it touches.⁴¹ This kind of virulent rhetoric about the repulsiveness of the female body was strongly inspired by antifeminist literary traditions, of which Giovanni Boccaccio's (1313–1375) *Corbaccio* is the most famous example. Boccaccio compares the vagina to a labyrinth and a gaping mouth, himself drawing inspiration from twelfth-century rhetorician Boncampagno da Signa, whose list of metaphors also included 'putrid swamp'.⁴²

A different way to explain the medical concern about 'female fluids' descending into the male body has to do with a fear that was deemed irrational even in early modern times, but was frightening nonetheless – that of the female body penetrating and impregnating that of the male. While discussing Avicenna's warning, Clive Hart and Kay Stevenson argue that this passage expresses more than just physical fears, reflecting a more general anxiety about gender inversion. 'It is the man who must dominate, penetrate, and impregnate' and 'the idea that the woman might ejaculate into the man would reduce him to effeminacy in the most horrifying way'.⁴³ This interpretation of Avicenna's (and Savonarola's) warning is supported by theological sources. The French theologian Peter Paludanus (1275–1342) and the German theologian Johannes Nider (c.1380–1438) both compare men who adopt the inferior position during sex with *succubi*: demons who take on a female form to extract, absorb and steal the semen of men.⁴⁴ A literary example that reflects the anxiety about woman as impregnator can be found in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. In one of the novellas, the foolish Calandrino is tricked by his friends into thinking that he is pregnant, and immediately believes that this is the result of allowing his wife to be on top during sex. He blames his wife, as it is her 'lasciviousness' that caused his unfortunate condition, and expresses his great fright at the idea of having to give birth.⁴⁵ The joke is based on the comical enlargement of a real fear that coital positions could disturb gender roles in a very essential way. By allowing the woman to be on top, man and woman not only switch (traditional) coital positions, but trade their roles in conception as well, as the woman impregnates the man.

MALE ANXIETY: SHAME AND EMASCULATION

Another argument for the prohibition of the woman-on-top position is related to perceptions of masculinity. Coital positions were believed to play a

⁴¹ Antonio Vignali, *La Cazzaria*. Translation by Ian Frederick Moulton (New York: Routledge, 2003), 135–7.

⁴² Penelope R. Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 170.

⁴³ Noonan, *Contraception*, 239; Hart and Stevenson, *Heaven and the Flesh*, 32.

⁴⁴ Zapperi, *L'homme enceinte*, 171; Hart and Stevenson, *Heaven and the Flesh*, 31, 197 fn 22.

⁴⁵ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, IX.3.

part in the construction of a masculine identity, and allowing the woman to be on top could be considered shameful and emasculating.

This perception of the woman-on-top position is reflected in works of literature, and two examples can be found in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*. One of them is a story about an abbot who has sex with a girl who has been smuggled into the monastery by a monk. Although of a mind to send the girl away, the abbot is overcome by lust at the sight of her, and convinces her to have sex with him as well. As he is overweight, he places the girl on top of him [*non sopra il petto di lei salì ma lei sopra il suo petto pose*] so that he does not oppress her. During the act, the monk has spied on the couple, and when the abbot later sets out to scold the monk for his disobedience, the monk uses a witty reply to make clear that he has seen the abbot commit the same fault. This *pronta risposta* is based on the deviant coital position that he has seen the abbot use, which makes the transgression of his superior even worse than his own. He says that he has not been a member of the order for very long, and that the abbot 'had not yet shown him that monks are supposed to support women just as they support fasts and vigils' [*e voi ancora non m'avavate mostrato che' monaci si debban far dalle femine premiere come da' digiuni e dalle vigilie*]. But now that the abbot 'has shown him how this is done', he promises 'never to sin that way again, but on the contrary, I will always do exactly what I have seen you doing.' Having been exposed by the monk, the abbot feels ashamed and contrite, and refrains from punishing the monk. While both have broken their chastity vows, the abbot's transgression is aggravated by his choice of coital positions.⁴⁶

Another example is Boccaccio's story about the man who believes he is pregnant. The reactions of the different characters to Calandrino's tirade, in which he reveals the deviant coital position that he and his wife use, all reflect the shamefulness of this behaviour. His wife Tessa blushes and silently flees the room, while his 'friends' can barely contain their laughter, and the doctor, who is in on the prank, presses the 'patient' to be more wise [*savio*] in the future, and make sure that he does not get caught up in this kind of foolishness [*sciocchezze*] again. The most revealing, however, is Calandrino's own reaction, whose tirade following his 'diagnosis' reveals two different emotions. One of them is anger at his wife, whom he blames for his condition because she always wants to be on top, even after he has warned her that this could be dangerous. Another is remorse, as he states that in truth he only has himself to blame, as he should never have allowed her to climb on top of him in the first place [*avvegna che egli mi stea molto bene, ché io non la doveva mai lasciar salir di sopra*].⁴⁷

⁴⁶ *Decameron*, I.4. The English translation of the monk's *pronta risposta* is by Wayne Rebhorn (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013).

⁴⁷ *Decameron*, IX.3.

The perception of the woman-on-top position as shameful is also reflected in works of art. As we have seen before, Position 14 of the collection of engravings and sonnets called *I Modi* shows the woman on top of the man in a 'reverse cowgirl' position, while the couple is on a cart, pulled across the room by Cupid. According to Bette Talvacchia, the fact that this is the only scene that includes a mythological figure, thus removing the action to the realm of fiction, combined with the fact that this is the only sonnet with a monologue instead of a dialogue, shows that 'apparently the theme of the woman on top was volatile enough to encourage a distancing representation, even within a series that is blatant in every other aspect'.⁴⁸ Aretino seems to be making fun of the man for allowing himself to be put in this position – even having him state that this uncomfortable position is making him fart loudly [*tanto co'l cul soffio e grido*]. Position 14 also calls to mind the *topos* of Phyllis riding Aristotle, which was a recurring literary motif, as well as a popular theme for paintings, manuscript margins, and household objects. According to this story, Aristotle admonished his pupil Alexander for paying too much attention to a beautiful woman named Phyllis. Phyllis then took her revenge by persuading the philosopher to get down on all fours and carry her around the garden, saddled and bridled like a horse, while the spectators that witnessed his humiliation laughed at him. As Natalie Zemon Davis has shown, this is a powerful metaphor of youth overthrowing age and sexual desire surmounting reason, as well as of the female dominating the male.⁴⁹

The art works and stories mentioned above already imply that the woman-on-top position was considered shameful and emasculating. An explicit explanation for why this was thought to be the case, however, can be found in a work by the Florentine poet Antonio Pucci (1310–1388). Pucci's *Il contrasto delle donne* is a poetic dialogue in which two male characters debate the vices and virtues of women. Gina Psaki has shown that this text, although focused on women, can also be used to reconstruct the implicit and explicit models of masculinity that Pucci has laid out. One of these masculinity codes is that 'a real man' asserts his authority by making women obey him. To sustain his own dominance, and the woman's submission, he should always make sure to be on top during sex. It is said that 'a man who is a man imposes obedience, / nor does he let his [woman] climb above him/on top of him' [*Ma l'uom ch'è uomo pur si fa ubbidire, / Nè la sua lascia sopra sè salire*].⁵⁰

Obedience to parents, husbands or guardians was considered the most important code of conduct for women in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, as is clear from the study of the large body of conduct literature that was

⁴⁸ Talvacchia, *Taking Positions*, 121.

⁴⁹ Davis, *Society and Culture*, 135–6.

⁵⁰ Translation by Gina Psaki: 'Misogyny, Philogyny, Masculinities. Antonio Pucci's *Il Contrasto delle donne*' in A. M. Rasmussen and J. C. Straubhaar (eds.), *Rivabrous Masculinities* (Paris: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 118 and 129 fn 34.

produced. From the advent of printing in the late fifteenth century, a great amount of conduct literature in the vernacular was published with a female audience in mind, including household guides and confessionals, as well as vernacular plays, poems, and hagiographies.⁵¹ These works offer a high degree of homogeneity, as their core values always include obedience, submission, modesty, and chastity.⁵² One of the most popular works of conduct literature in Renaissance Italy was Franciscan friar Cherubino da Spoleto's (1414–1484) *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, which was often given to young brides.⁵³ The book is consciously egalitarian in its outset, as it sets out to prescribe the things that a wife owes her husband as well as the things a husband owes his wife. This emphasis on marital equity notwithstanding, a clear hierarchy between the partners is nonetheless evident. Following Scriptural authority, Cherubino states that the husband is the head of the wife and all other members of the body are there to serve the head. A wife should be careful not to do anything that might displease her husband, respond reverently to him and obey him, while a husband is encouraged to keep his wife under close watch and correct and punish her if she does something sinful.⁵⁴ This same emphasis on marital hierarchy can be found in conduct literature written by secular authors. Works of humanist writers such as Francesco Barbaro's *De re uxoria* (1416), Leon Battista Alberti's *Libri della famiglia* (1441), Giovanni Pontano's *De oboedientia* (1490) and Lodovico Dolce's *Dialogo della istituzione delle donne* (1545) all insist on the importance of a wife's obedience and docility.⁵⁵

Men were encouraged to make women obey them, and if they allowed their wife to be on top during sex, they were neither asserting their 'natural' authority nor fulfilling the task that society required of them. This also becomes clear from Calandrino's reaction in Boccaccio's story. The remorse and anger that the 'pregnant' man experiences, encourage him to make two resolutions that are both aimed at taking back control and forcing his wife back into submission. First of all, he threatens to punish his wife by beating her and breaking every bone in her body. Secondly, he promises to make sure that she is never allowed this kind of freedom in the future. Calandrino vows that if he escapes his predicament, he will never again let his wife sit on top, even if she

⁵¹ Gabriella Zarri, 'Christian Good Manners. Spiritual and Monastic Rules in the Quattro- and Cinquecento' in L. Penizza (ed.), *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society* (Oxford: University of Oxford European Humanities Research Centre, 2000).

⁵² Helena Sanson, 'Introduction' in H. Sanson and F. Lucioi (eds.), *Conduct Literature for and about Women in Italy, 1470-1900* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2016), 10.

⁵³ Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 20.

⁵⁴ *Regola della vita matrimoniale*, 10–25.

⁵⁵ Daniela Solfaroli Camillocci, 'L'obbedienza femminile. Tra virtù domestiche e disciplina monastica' in G. Zarri (ed.), *Donna, disciplina, creanza cristiana* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1996), 271; Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism*, 51.

'pines away with desire' [*per certo, se io scampo di questa, ella se ne potrà ben prima morir di voglia*].⁵⁶

MALE ANXIETY: POWER REVERSAL

One final, and perhaps most essential, argument for the prohibition of the woman-on-top position remains. This argument stems from male anxiety about the possibility that coital positions could upset the traditional distribution of power: by occupying a dominant position, women could make men do their bidding. In works of art and literature, women who are on top during sex are portrayed as independent and commanding. This is for instance evident from an analysis of Aretino's sonnets accompanying the postures in *I Modi*. In most of these sonnets, the man and the woman are described as equally enjoying the act. In a few others, the woman does not agree with the position that they are using, but the male voice gets the final say on what is done (Position 2 and 9). Interestingly, the only two cases where the woman is commanding and the man is portrayed as passive and not in control of the situation both feature the woman-on-top position. In Position 10, the man is in a chair, and the woman is sitting on his lap with her back turned to him. The couple disagrees about which orifice to use, and even though the man objects four (!) times against the woman's proposal to have anal sex, she keeps insisting and finally gets her way, as the man states that he will do anything to please her and will do as she commands. In Position 14, the man's subjection to the woman is not only reflected in the subordinate position that he is in, and in his discomfort, but also in his desire to please the woman, feeling the need to offer his apologies because all his wavering about might be an inconvenience for her.

The same perception that women who sit on top are domineering, is also alluded to in a few novellas. The authors of novellas usually focus on the experience of the male character. Metaphors like 'riding a mare' and 'tilting the field' emphasize the relation between the active male and the woman as a passive object, while male (multiple) orgasm is presented as the ultimate goal, such as 'making his cock crow nine times'. The female characters are presented as something that sex is 'done' to, rather than as actual participants. This is also reflected in coital positions, as the man is usually described as pressing the woman down onto the bed or the floor, or lifting up her skirt and having sex with her from behind. There are, however, a few cases in which the focus is on the female character, and the woman is described as climbing on top of the man. In these cases, the authors may have been using the woman-on-top position as a sign of the woman's autonomy and almost 'masculine' agency. One example can be found in a novella by the Florentine writer

⁵⁶ *Decameron*, IX.3.

Agnolo Firenzuola (1494–1543). This novella tells the story of Lavinia, who is (sexually) neglected by her rich old husband. Wanting to satiate her appetite and ‘shake the dust of her fur coat’, she comes up with a solution that is quite unconventional within the context of novellas. While her husband is away on business, Lavinia arranges to have her new servant girl Lucia sleep with her. When they are in bed together, she takes the initiative, embracing and kissing her, and putting her hands ‘there where we distinguish men from women’. At this point, she finds out that the woman is actually a young man, who has disguised himself so that he could get close to her. However, after the gender reversal has been discovered, Lavinia stays in control of the situation, just as she had been before. She confronts her bedfellow, and playfully states that she wants to find out whether he/she is a real human being, and not an evil spirit. She then climbs on top of ‘her’ [*messasela sotto*] and takes her pleasure for six times in a row.⁵⁷ As Laura Giannetti has noted, it is striking that the woman who wanted to play an active role in female same-sex relations, now plays an active role in having sex with a passive man as well.⁵⁸ I believe that the woman-on-top position is used here to show Lavinia’s commanding character as well as her autonomy.

In the previous cases, the women who are on top use the power that comes with this position to make men do their bidding and thereby increase their own sexual pleasure. Another aspect of the male anxiety surrounding the woman-on-top position, however, was that this position not only put women in control on a sexual level, but influenced the distribution of power outside of the bedroom as well. Purely by being on top, independent women could gain (social) power over men. One example of this process can be found in a novella by Matteo Bandello. This novella tells the story of Domicella, whose husband Cocco neglects her because he rather has sex with lower class women and boys. One night, Cocco convinces a male servant to take his place in bed, so that his wife would not notice his absence while he is downstairs having sex with a new servant girl. Domicella, however, believes that this servant is her husband, and as ‘her garden had not been watered’ for over a month, she starts to embrace him to get him in the mood. When the servant pretends to be asleep, she puts her hands on his member, and when he turns his back on her, she still does not give up but climbs on top of him, straddling him (‘placing one leg across the legs of the servant’). When the desperate man punches her in the nose, Domicella discovers that he is not her husband. She then confronts her husband with his misdeeds, threatening to leave him and go live with her family, unless he agrees with a number of demands. In the future, she wants the power to choose all of the servants, so that her husband won’t be led to temptation. She wants separate rooms, and the liberty to go to feasts and to

⁵⁷ Agnolo Firenzuola, *Ragionamenti*, I.2.

⁵⁸ Laura Giannetti, *Lelia’s Kiss. Imagining Gender, Sex, and Marriage in Italian Renaissance Comedy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 88.

church in the company of her parents and neighbours. Because of her new autonomy, Domicella is able to start a secret affair with a handsome young nobleman, with the help of a servant she herself selected.⁵⁹ At the end of the story, the dominant wife has punished the neglecting, promiscuous husband and is rewarded with more power. The fact that she sits on top during sex could be a sign of her autonomous and independent character, as well as a foreshadowing of her future dominance over her husband.

The most explicit example of the argument that the woman-on-top position enables women to gain (social) power over men can be found in Pietro Aretino's work of satire *I Ragionamenti*. In this text, the courtesan Nanna teaches her daughter Pippa how to seduce men, please them sexually, and extract as much money and gifts from them as possible. Part of this education is teaching her how to convince a man to allow her to get on top. When Pippa asks her how she will get him to allow that, Nanna says that there are many ways. One strategy is to suddenly become silent, morose and motionless during sex, until the man asks her what is wrong. She must then express her desire carefully and reluctantly, in order to feign modesty, whimpering and sighing, finally mumbling that she would like to 'run a race with a lance in the giannetta style' [*correre una lancia a la giannetta*]. It is very important that she convinces him to allow this, because being on top will help her gain power over men: 'If someone who gets on top of her lover does just a particle of what I shall tell you, she will be able to extract money from shinbones with greater skill than dice and cards steal it from gamblers'.⁶⁰

It is difficult to interpret the meaning of these 'women on top' whose assertive behavior is rewarded. Were these female characters meant to be heroines or anti-examples? In novellas, the line between entertainment and moralizing is not easy to draw, as authors often avoid clear-cut moralizing conclusions. Prologues, epilogues, and the responses of the characters in the frame story can be insightful, but their message can be contradictory as well. In fact, this ironical contradiction of viewpoints may often have been deliberate.⁶¹ Pietro Aretino's *Ragionamenti* is likewise notoriously difficult to interpret. Literary pornography was a critical medium, meant to unmask the hypocritical conventions of society, but whether the primary aim was to moralize or to express libertine convictions, is difficult to determine. In fact, this was already debated during the sixteenth and seventeenth century.⁶² Scholars have cast Pietro

⁵⁹ Bandello, *Novelle*, I.40.

⁶⁰ Aretino, *Ragionamenti*, 167–8.

⁶¹ Manuela Scarci, 'Imitation and Subversion of Models in Agnolo Firenzuola's *Ragionamenti*' in G. Allaire (ed.), *The Italian Novella. A Book of Essays* (New York/London: Routledge, 2003).

⁶² Lynn Hunt, 'Introduction', and Paula Findlen, 'Humanism, Politics and Pornography in Renaissance Italy' in L. Hunt (ed.), *The Invention of Pornography. Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800* (New York: Zone, 1993); Paul F. Grendler, *Critics of the Italian World, 1530–1560* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 8–13, 191.

Aretino as a moralist who wanted to correct behavior through moralizing warnings, as well as an early libertine arguing for greater sexual freedom.⁶³

We also need to keep in mind that these tales could have different effects on their audience, regardless of the author's initial goals. Masuccio Salernitano explicitly introduces his tales about transgressive women as moralist warnings, but not all readers or listeners may have responded to his stories this way. Natalie Zemon Davis has argued that tales of gender inversion could reinforce the hierarchical structure of society as well as undermine it. The use of powerful female characters could show alternatives to traditional codes of conduct, making the unruly option more conceivable to the audience, and perhaps even emboldening a few real women to rebel against societal restraints.⁶⁴ Many of the literary sources discussed above can be 'read against the grain' in this way, disclosing more liberal readings. Giovanni Boccaccio's tale about the girl and the abbot teaches that the woman-on-top position is a way to increase the comfort of the female partner, especially if the male partner is overweight. In Pietro Aretino's fourteenth sonnet and Boccaccio's tale about Calandrino, it is the female character who has chosen this position, thus teaching the audience that it is possible for women to take the initiative and suggesting that being on top improves a woman's sexual experience.

One thing that is clear, regardless of the goals of the author or audience reception, is that the authors of all of these tales chose to reflect on the (direct and indirect) negative consequences for men. In Boccaccio's tales as well as Aretino's sonnets, male shame, dishonor, and discomfort are the main focus of the narrative. The tales by Firenzuola, Bandello and Aretino are more focused on the female experience, but even these stories reflect male anxieties. In Aretino's dialogue, the woman-on-top position is described as a ploy to extract a man's money. In Firenzuola's and Bandello's novellas, the use of this position by the female characters is a reflection of their autonomous pursuit of sexual pleasure, which ultimately turns their husbands into cuckolds.

CONCLUSION

Theological, medical, and literary sources, written by Italian authors between c.1350–1550, all draw connections between coital positions and the fear of gender inversion. Although explicit defences of the prohibition of the woman-on-top position are rare, several can nonetheless be found in sermons, novellas, medical compendia, poetic dialogues, and works of satire. There were various ways to defend the man-on-top position. Bernardino da Feltre's

⁶³ On Aretino as a moralist, e.g. Paul Larivaille, *Pietro Aretino fra Rinascimento e Manierismo* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1980), 332–45. On Aretino as an early libertine, e.g.: Raymond B. Waddington, 'Rewriting the World, Rewriting the Body' in A. F. Kinney (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1500–1600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 287–309.

⁶⁴ Davis, *Society and Culture*, esp. 130–1, 143–5.

sermon and other theological texts focused on the connection between coital positions and the gender hierarchy that had been ordained by God. Another defence of the man-on-top position was based on male superiority in bodily strength, implicitly reflected in the language of sex of romance epics and novellas, and made explicit in Matteo Bandello's *Novelle*. Other arguments that prohibited the woman-on-top position focused on the possible consequences that role reversal may have. The inferior female body may harm that of the superior male, by intoxicating it with its fluids, or even impregnating it, something alluded to in Michele Savonarola's medical compendium, and made explicit in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Allowing women to sit on top, moreover, could reflect badly on a man's reputation, as a real man was supposed to assert his authority by making women obey him, as is alluded to in art and literature, and made explicit in Antonio Pucci's poetic dialogue. Finally, the woman-on-top position was eyed with suspicion, because it not only put women in control on a sexual level, but gave them (social) power over men as well, as is reflected in Pietro Aretino's satire.

The prohibition against the woman-on-top position is one of the most literal reflections of the premodern social hierarchy between men and women. It reflects theological doctrine on gender hierarchies, medical doctrine on female bodily inferiority, and codes of conduct for male as well as female behaviour. The search for explicit defences of this prohibition, and the reconstruction of the rationalization behind it, therefore offers a valuable point of entry for the study of the intellectual debate on the nature and status of women in society as a whole. This article has offered a first step in trying to explain the apprehension towards the woman-on-top position. Further research is required in order to determine whether there were other, more liberal perspectives on this position as well.

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