Midway through the second half of Moderata Fonte’s dialogue on female superiority, *Il merito delle donne*, or *The Worth of Women*, published in 1600, the character Leonora questions why her friends have digressed from their subject and begun debating the medicinal properties of various plants instead – fennel for the eyes, rhubarb for fever, roses for the nerves, cardamom for pregnancy. ‘What have the kinds of things we’ve been talking about got to do with us?’ she asks. ‘Are we doctors, by any chance? Leave it up to them to talk about syrups and poultices [...] it’s absurd for us to be talking about them’.1 Indeed, to this point, the conversation of the seven women featured in Fonte’s polemical work, which she divides into two parts or ‘days’, has focused not on women’s medical knowledge, but rather on exploring the origins of gender inequality in their sixteenth-century society. Gathered together at Leonora’s Venetian palazzo, the women question how men have come to dominate the female sex in virtually every capacity, despite their essential inferiority to women. As the character Corinna (who is often described as a dialogic stand-in for Fonte herself), argues ‘[their] pre-eminence is something they have unjustly arrogated to themselves’.2

Stretching back to Boccaccio’s *On Famous Women* (c. 1360) and Christine de Pizan’s *Book of the City of Ladies* (1405), the querelle des femmes tradition to which Fonte’s text belongs was a lively and constantly

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1. English translations are taken from Moderata Fonte, *The Worth of Women, Wherein it is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Superiority to Men*, ed. and trans. V. Cox (Chicago: 1997 [180]). The Italian text is edited by Adriana Chemello, *Il Merito delle donne, ove chiaramente si scuopre quanto siano elle degne e più perfetti de gli uomini* (Venice: 1988), cf. 125, ‘Che è al caso nostro, di grazia, il discorrer sopra cose tali? Siamo noi medici? Lasciateli parlar loro di sioppi, di empiastri e si fatte pratiche, che è una vergogna che noi ne trattiamo’. Research for this article was supported by a 2008–2009 fellowship from the Penn Humanities Forum at the University of Pennsylvania.

2. Fonte, *The Worth of Women* 59; *Il Merito delle donne* 26, ‘questa preminenza si hanno essi arrogata da loro [...]’
evolving cultural conversation that occupied the attention of writers throughout Europe. Seeking to describe and define the qualities and roles of women, humanist writers and, eventually, a much broader array of vernacular authors, argued variously for and against their intellectual, moral, and civic potential. Fonte’s dialogue, written as the debate reached its peak in Italy, is a fundamental contribution to this discussion, one that has drawn increased attention in recent years with regard to the arguments concerning women’s social inequality to men laid out in the first day\(^3\) [Fig. 1]. By contrast, the second part of the dialogue, in which the women seem to diverge from their topic (as Leonora complains) into a lengthy discussion not only of the medicinal and cosmetic preparation of herbs and plants, but also a review of various natural phenomena as well as a critique of alchemical practice, has received far less scrutiny.\(^4\) Yet the second part of Fonte’s dialogue is no less worthy of consideration than the first. Rather, as this essay argues, Fonte uses the literary platform of the second day to ‘write back’ to existing and emerging traditions of scientific and medical discourse, reappropriating these arenas for women and demonstrating a mastery over them that becomes deeply intertwined with her broader feminist argument about female superiority. Indeed, Fonte’s attention here to exploring the ‘great secrets’ of nature (as they are deliberately described by her character Cornelia\(^5\)) suggests that we situate her discussion of women’s superiority not only within the context of the *querelle des femmes*, but also within the Renaissance tradition of *libri di segreti*, or ‘books of secrets’ – vernacular manuals that sought to describe natural phenomena and offered a wide range of medical and cosmetic recipes for readers’ use. Fonte’s *The Worth of Women* extends a clear response to such works, a defense of women’s ability and right to engage in medical and scientific discourse and practice that expands and enriches the parameters of the debate over women.

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\(^3\) Fonte’s text was published, posthumously, in the same year as Lucrezia Marinella’s *La nobiltà et l’eccellenza delle donne, co’ difetti et mancamenti de gli uomini* (*The Nobility and Excellence of Women and the Defects and Vices of Men*), Giuseppe Passi’s antifeminist text *I donneschi difetti* (*The Defects of Women*, 1599).

\(^4\) With some exceptions; see Kolsky S., “Wells of Knowledge: Moderata Fonte’s *Il Merito delle donne*”, *The Italianist*, 13 (1993) 57–96; see also Cox’s introduction to Fonte’s dialogue 9–10, and, briefly, Chemello xxxix–xli.

\(^5\) Cf. Fonte, *Worth of Women* 147; *Il Merito delle donne* 95.