In 1650, the strictly cloistered Venetian nun Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–1652) sent a letter to the French chargé d'affaires at Venice, Louis Matharel, along with an unnamed work which she asked him to help publish in France. With this letter, published soon thereafter, Tarabotti makes one of her last public references – oblique but unmistakable – to a work she had been seeking to put to press for at least the better part of a decade: her *Tirannia paterna* (Paternal Tyranny), in which the nun makes her most powerful case against the forced enclosure in convents of girls who lacked a religious vocation. Compelling girls to enter the convent was, as Tarabotti often said, a form of imprisonment. Nuns – willing or not – were forbidden after the profession of vows from leaving the convent and tightly restricted within it, forced to communicate even with relatives across the convent grate. Tarabotti herself was a victim of a coerced vocation; the socially expedient practice, rife in seventeenth-century Venice, helped patrician and citizen families to maintain wealth and prestige. Tarabotti entered the Sant’Anna convent – in an insalubrious spot on the outskirts of Venice – at the age of thirteen, and though she professed and was consecrated 

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as a nun, she never resigned herself to the perpetual enclosure that her religious life imposed. She made it her life’s work to protest this injustice.

She undertook this task as a young woman by composing *Paternal Tyranny*. The work revealed the economic and political forces that stood behind the practice of forced monachization and attacked the secular and religious powers that allowed such a wrong. Tarabotti originally prefaced the *Tyranny* with a sarcastic dedication to the Venetian Republic that called the tract ‘a gift that well suits a Republic that practices the abuse of forcing more young girls to take the veil than anywhere else in the world’ and inveighed against the Republic for ‘degrading, deceiving, and denying liberty to its own young girls and women’. She eventually eliminated this dedication, instead dedicating it to God. Tarabotti sought until the end of her life to put the work to press, but the text’s unabashedly polemic stance thwarted its publication. Repeatedly frustrated in her attempts to see the work printed, Tarabotti sought throughout the 1640s to publish it further and further from Venice, eventually seeking, through several different schemes, to bring it to press in France. The work was only published posthumously, and in Holland and Venice rather than France.

By the time of this posthumous publication, Tarabotti’s literary reputation had already been secured by the five works she put to press in her lifetime, which unequivocally asserted female superiority and decried men’s mistreatment of women. Her published works were: *Paradiso monacale* (Convent Paradise, 1643), a celebration of the joys of the convent for nuns with a vocation; *Antisatira* (Antisatire, 1644), a controversial defense of women’s right to luxury; *Lettere familiari e di complimento* (Letters, 1650), a 256-letter collection which attests to the nun’s wide-ranging literary network, provides her most systematic attempt to shape her literary reputation, and shows her advocacy for

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3 An essential point of reference on Tarabotti is the biography by Zanette, *Suor Arcangela*, as are the modern editions of Tarabotti’s works, cited in note 7. See also the recent volume of essays edited by Weaver E., *Arcangela Tarabotti: A Literary Nun in Baroque Venice* (Ravenna: 2006).


6 The dedication of the *Tyranny* to the Republic has survived since it was included at the beginning of the extant manuscript of *Convent Hell*. 