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2016

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Female Biographies in Renaissance
and Post-Tridentine Italy

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Italian

by

Sienna Star Hopkins

2016

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Female Biographies in Renaissance and Post-Reformation Italy

by

Sienna Star Hopkins

Doctor of Philosophy in Italian

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Massimo Ciavolella, Chair

This dissertation explores the development of female biography in Renaissance Italy, particularly highlighting the thematic changes the genre experienced as a result of the Counter Reformation, and how the female ideals it portrayed often conflicted with the societal expectations of the *donna illustre*. The first chapters lay the groundwork for this investigation by providing a survey of the biographical genre in Italy and its ancient Greek and Roman influences, then highlighting the cultural attitudes about women as portrayed in *querelle* literature and female conduct manuals of 16th and 17th-century Italy. These communicate the standard of expected behavior for women in the Italian Renaissance, by which the female protagonists of biographies are measured, and the juxtaposition reveals that while the protagonists in the earlier biographies generally conform to the standards of contemporary conduct manuals, those in Post Tridentine

biographies do not. Their protagonists are instead lauded for their fervent, often extreme, religious practices and for their inward search for humility. The investigation thus reveals the genre's shift in focus to be one that moves from the civic to the religious, from the public *donna illustre* to the private *donna umile*. The biographies discussed in this study are: Sabadino degli Arienti's *Gynevera delle clare donne* (1483) and *Vita di Anna Sforza* (1500); Sebastiano Morales' *Vita, et morte della serenissima Maria di Portogallo principessa di Parma, & Piacenza* (1577); Giovanni Petruccini's *Relazione della vita esemplare della Signora Sestilia Sabolini* (1621); Hippolito Porro's *Vita, e morte della sig. Cornelia Lampugnana Ro gentildonna Milanese* (1624); Gregorio Leti's *Vita di Donna Olimpia Maldachini, che gouernò la Chiesa, durante il Ponteficato d'Innocentio X* (1666); and Antonio Lupis' *L'eroina veneta, ouero la vita di Elena Lucretia Cornara Piscopia* (1689). Three of these women's stories have survived history and accounts of their lives and influence can be found in multiple Renaissance texts: Ginevra Sforza is known as a domineering and vindictive tyrant of Bologna; Olimpia Maidaichini as the "popess" who controlled the Vatican during her brother-in-law, Pope Innocent X's reign; and Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia as the first woman ever to earn a doctoral degree. The lives of the other female protagonists, Princess Maria of Parma, Cornelia Lampugnana Ro, and Sestilia Sabolini, have only one historical voice, their biographies.

The dissertation of Sienna Star Hopkins is approved.

Thomas Harrison

Janet Smarr

Massimo Ciavolella, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2016

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my family, and what a wonderful family it is. To my husband, whose support has been immeasurable and unwavering, and who has borne the journey with steadfastness and selfless sacrifice. To my sons, who have kept me grounded in their unconditional love and have filled my life with laughter. To my father, who shared his love for literature by reading me the classics on many a night when he was likely more exhausted than I will ever know, and whose praises have always eclipsed that of any parents past. To my mother, whose exuberant and contagious joy has sustained me, and whose hours spent watching the boys while I worked will never be forgotten. To my brother, whose irony and intellect have always surpassed my own and whose example made me aspire to greater heights. To my grandmother, who both financed a year of my research, and whose pressure to finish further fueled my fire. To them and all my extended family and friends, whose love never depended upon scholarly or worldly success, I am eternally grateful. You have been God's greatest gift in this life.

*Per quanto un albero possa diventare alto,
le sue foglie, cadendo, ritorneranno sempre
alle radici*

*For no matter how tall a tree may grow,
its leaves always fall and return
to its roots.*

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My network of support has been so vast, deep, and varied, that the below acknowledgements only skim the surface. Yet this very truth, that thanking all of those who have helped me along the way is a daunting task, indicates that my life is full of unparalleled gifts and blessings. For that reason alone, I am humbly grateful.

The chair of my committee, Dr. Massimo Ciavolella, has been an instrumental advisor and contributor to my studies, as well as an informative and interesting teacher (nobody can teach *Gli Straccioni* like he does). He was also the original inspiration for my journey into women's studies in Renaissance Italian Literature; he was the first to suggest I explore the *querelle des femmes* as it pertained to Boccaccio's *Corbaccio*, and I have never looked back. Dr. Janet Smarr, who I fortuitously met at a Renaissance conference, and whose work I had already consumed with great interest, has proven to be a formidable proof-reader, critic, and encourager of my work; her keen eye and attention to details (and metaphors) has contributed significantly to this work. Dr. Harrison, with whom I worked as a TA during my first year of graduate school, has been influential in my academic formation, both as a student of theory, as a writer, and as a teacher. I am ever grateful to them for their input and assistance along the way, and, most importantly, for always helping, never hindering. There are those who sometimes place roadblocks in your way without offering counsel or assistance. My committee, in contrast, has helped me clear the road so I can drive speedily to the end. I can only say that I will remember their kindness and will do likewise with my own students.

Special thanks also to Dr. Elissa Tognozzi, who gave me not just a formation and foundation in the art of language instruction while at UCLA (yes, it is, in fact, an art form, full of vibrant possibilities) but who also expected much from her TAs. Her exigencies gave me confidence in the classroom and helped me to fuse my exuberant teaching style with the ever-changing theoretical ideas regarding language instruction. My work in the classroom will forever reflect her influence. Thank you also to UCLA as a whole, whose plethora of fellowships (FLAS, TA-ship, Research Mentorship, and Research Assistanceship) enabled me to fulfill my studies.

To my most illustrious, brilliant, friendly, and supportive colleagues at CSULB both present and past, thank you *ad infinitum*. Clorinda Donato, Enrico Vettore, Daniela Zappador-Guerra, Clara Benali, Tiziana di Virgilio, Aparna Nayak, Violet Gascon, Markus Muller, Manuel Romero, and Alessandro Russo, the positive environment you have created in our amazing *Graziadio* Center has helped me maintain my sanity and my joy throughout this process. To my students, thank you for reminding me why I have chosen this career path. You are the reason I have persevered, and are why I will always love what I do. Thank you for laughing at my jokes, for listening intently when I am fervently expounding upon a topic, and for always seeking to better yourselves, your language, and your writing. I have learned equally from you. *Homines dum docent discunt*.

Acknowledgement must also go to Google Books and archive.org, whose electronic reproduction of Renaissance texts hitherto inaccessible, except in the Special Collections of various American libraries, have been invaluable resources. I began my research before these modern conveniences were available, and spent countless hours

gently handling my Renaissance texts, or pouring over microfiches, but the dawn of the new online archival era has given me the wherewithal to study where and when I please. Thus, not to be forgotten are all the coffee shops (especially the Blue Butterfly Café), who have tolerated my presence from dawn til' dusk, never lamenting my spacious habitation of tables and chairs, instead offering new friendships and a pleasant mobile office.

My sincere thanks to my father who read the entirety of my dissertation in a matter of days and whose positive encouragement and comments gave me renewed energies, and to my husband, whose support in the final months has been so substantial, it would be impossible to mention each aspect in detail. He has been my staunchest advocate, my confidant, and my personal assistant, stepping in to juggle the administrative details of the process and to single-parent while I was in the final throes of completion. In honor of my work on biographies, he deserves his own hagiography. And to my friends (you know who you are) who have sent me un-ending encouraging notes of support throughout the process, thank you. *Amicita vera illuminat.*

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sienna Hopkins has been a lecturer of Italian at the California State University of Long Beach since 2008, teaching both upper and lower division courses. Class title subjects have ranged from Italian Literature to Italian American History, including a wide array of Italian language and grammar courses. She held a position as Visiting Assistant Professor at Pepperdine University from 2013-2014 where she taught upper division Italian courses in cinema and literature. Her formation as an instructor began at UCLA where she taught for 4 years as a TA of the Italian language, cinema, and history, and where she received her masters of Italian in 2004. While a graduate student at UCLA, she received numerous fellowship awards, including a Summer Foreign Language Studies Fellowship in 2004, a Research Mentorship for the 2006 academic year, and a Research Fellowship for the 2009 academic year.

Her field of study is Italian Renaissance literature with an emphasis on biography, the historical novel, theater, and women's studies. She has given papers at conferences such as the Renaissance Society of America (Montreal, 2011) the California Interdisciplinary Consortium of Italian Studies (Stanford, 2009) and Pacific Ancient and Modern Language Association (Portland, 2015), as well as published articles and book reviews in journals such as *Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, *Study Abroad Magazine*, and *Annali d'Italianistica*.

She received her undergraduate degree (magna cum laude) in International Studies at Pepperdine, where she first began her foray into Italian studies, spending a year abroad in Florence, Italy. Here she discovered her penchant for the language and

developed a near-native accent, finding more expression in her newly acquired language than in her own mother tongue. Following graduation she worked in the International Student Office of Pepperdine University where she received the *Faculty & Staff Advisor of the Year Award* for her service with the Pepperdine International Student Club.

Introduction

Neither fully history, nor fully literature, biography is a homeless genre, frequently avoided by scholars because of the strict academic demarcation between the two fields in academia. One chooses to study either literature or history. Biography, however, is both. The waters are therefore murky, and one is tempted to contemplate them from afar, to perhaps enjoy the view, but generally speaking, the idea of jumping in and exploring the depths is viewed with trepidation. The end result is that biography is an understudied genre, which is quite remarkable given the astronomical increase in biographical compositions in the 19th century. Nigel Hamilton, the first to write a history of the genre, notes the “extraordinary renaissance” life-writing experienced in the past two decades and asks why it has been understudied: “Why, then, has so little been written about the nature, history, interdisciplinary pursuit, cross-media expansion, and ethics of biography? Why is there in print no single, accessible introduction to the subject, either for the general reader or the specialist?”¹ He provides no answer to these questions, but again, it is likely because biography lives, as Virginia Woolf so aptly notes, in the “betwixt and the between,” neither history nor literature, neither fiction nor fact.²

Recent survey works that deal with the subject of biographical theory and history, such as Hamilton’s book, or Leon Edel and John Batchelor’s books on literary biography, have contributed greatly to the field, but for our purposes, of exploring female Renaissance Biography, they are too broad and focus the majority of their attention on the modern era and, particularly, when biography reached a new peak in 18th century England.³ A few scholars have delved into biography in the Italian Renaissance, but only one, Vincenzo Caputo, has written a book on the subject, entitled *La Bella Maniera Di*

Scrivere Vita: Biografie Di Uomini D'arme E Di Stato Nel Secondo Cinquecento.⁴ His work investigates both biographical theory and composition in the 16th century, by *letterati* such as Francesco Patrizi, Giovanni Viperano, and Torquato Malaspina.⁵ Other scholars have contributed to the discussion in article form, but very few have written about female Renaissance biography. Beatrice Collina's article, "L'esemplarità delle donne illustri fra umanesimo e controriforma," is the most cohesive treatment of the subject, investigating the theoretical and philosophical differences between the ideas of virtues as represented in both male and female biography in Italy.⁶

The purpose of this dissertation is to fill in the gaps, both on how the biographical genre developed as a whole in Italy, and on how female biographies, in particular those on the *donna illustre*, forged their own path, quite different from their male counterparts. While hagiography is certainly pertinent to this discussion, the biographies selected for this study are of secular women. In chronological order, the texts under discussion in this work are: Sabadino degli Arienti's *Gynevera delle clare donne* (1483)⁷ and *Vita di Anna Sforza* (1500); Sebastiano Morales' *Vita, et morte della serenissima Maria di Portogallo principessa di Parma, & Piacenza* (1577); Giovanni Petruccini's *Relazione della vita esemplare della Signora Sestilia Sabolini* (1621); Hippolito Porro's *Vita, e morte della sig. Cornelia Lampugnana Ro gentildonna Milanese* (1624); Gregorio Leti's⁸ *Vita di Donna Olimpia Maldachini, che gouernò la Chiesa, durante il Ponteficato d'Innocentio X* (1666); and Antonio Lupis' *L'eroina veneta, ouero la vita di Elena Lucretia Cornara Piscopia* (1689). Three of these women have avoided the cloak of invisibility that history generally casts over women in the Renaissance: Ginevra Sforza has been immortalized in history as a domineering and vindictive tyrant of Bologna; Olimpia Maidalchini as the

“popess” who controlled the Vatican during her brother-in-law, Pope Innocent X’s reign; and Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia is known as the first woman ever to earn a doctoral degree. The lives of our other protagonists, The Princess of Parma, Cornelia Lampugnana Ro, and Sestilia Sabolini, have only one historical voice, their biographies. It is my pleasure, therefore, to introduce these women to the 21st century, though the readers, or the women themselves, may not appreciate the introduction. These women did not like the limelight and, as their biographers tell it, regarded the world with disdain, preferring to live a life of spiritual solace and activity. The modern readers may hope that by turning the pages of these women’s lives one might learn who they really were, what drove them, who bothered them, and what made them unique, but that reader will be sorely disappointed. Our study shows that the telling of these women’s lives merely reflects the typology for the ideal female Renaissance woman that their biographers sought to extol. In a sense then, their stories still remain veiled by history.

In order to establish Italian Renaissance biography within a proper historical and literary context, Chapter 1 provides a historical survey of the genre as it developed from ancient Greece and made its way to Italy, calling particular attention to the biographical greats, such as Plutarch and Seutonius, and highlighting Torquato Malaspina’s Renaissance treatise on biography. This type of survey work does not yet exist (to my knowledge) in modern scholarship. Chapter 2 provides a survey of the social and literary issues on women in Renaissance literature, focusing both on treatises that engaged in the *querelle des femmes*, as well as conduct manuals that set forth ideal models of comportment. It relies heavily on previous scholarship on the subject, citing authors such as Conor Fahy, Joan Kelly-Gadol, Gabriella Zarri, and Pamela Benson, to name just a

few. Though the *querelle* has been the subject of much scholarly discussion in the past century, it has generally dealt with individual case studies, or comparisons of selected works. This chapter instead, discusses *querelle* literature within the context of female exemplum literature and conduct manuals, attempting to establish societal trends and also call attention to the paradox inherent in this literature, by which the extolled examples of perfection are too perfect or too extreme, and thus inimitable. An analysis of female conduct manuals also helps establish expected norms of female comportment and how these expectations vary from author to author. Vives' *Education of a Christian Woman* (1538), for example, relegates women to the private sphere, while others, like Nolfi's *Ginipedia, ovvero avvertimenti per donna nobile* (1631), offer women a great deal of social freedom.

Chapters 3 through 5 investigate the development and trends of Renaissance female biography from the 16th to the 17th centuries and reveal the Counter-Reformation's influence upon the genre. Chapter 3 focuses on biographies before the Reformation, specifically those of Sabadino degli Arienti, court *letterato* for the Bentivoglio family. His compendium of female biographies, *Gynevera delle clare donne*, unlike most compendium works, sets forth contemporary women as examples to be followed, representing the shift in Renaissance biography from 1500 onward. The previous centuries had focused primarily on women of the distant past, such as biblical ancient Roman heroines, whereas Renaissance biography increasingly turned its gaze towards women of the present, women whose example could (theoretically) be of more practical import to the female Renaissance women readers. It also demonstrates the change in readership: heretofore the majority of compendium pieces extolling women

were written for a male audience and were not circulated widely, but with the advent of the printing press, more literature began to be written for a female audience, with notably wider circulation.⁹

These biographies offer us a sweeping example of what the *donna illustre* of the early Renaissance was expected to be, and how she was praised for the attributes that were required of her station as a *donna della corte*. These are: her skills of diplomacy, her hospitality, her temperate behavior at public festivities, her intelligence and knowledge of letters, her elaborate dress, and her grace. The overarching theme and purpose of these traits is that her subjects loved her. This work is a perfect departure point, by which our study is able to demonstrate the transformation that biography experienced following its composition, but it is also of interest because it includes a biography of the infamous Ginevra Sforza, reputed tyrant of Bologna. Through detailed textual analysis, it is revealed that despite Arienti's best attempts to write a praiseworthy biography of his patroness, he is unsuccessful, and his disdain for her, though subtle, is still apparent. Finally, this chapter notes the drastic differences between his *Gynevera* and his later biography of Anna Sforza, composed not for a princely patron, but for the nuns of a small convent. It reveals the impact that readership had on biography, and how the author conformed his praise and style to fit his intended readers.

Chapter 4 delves into four 17th-century female biographies, all of which are strikingly different from their 16th-century predecessors, and bear the marked influence of the Counter-Reformation precepts of the Catholic Church. These biographies are analyzed according to their various themes and show how the ideal woman of this period was not a *donna illustre*, but a *donna umile*. Her virtue was assessed by the extremities

with which she attained humility: self mortification, seclusion, lengthy prayer recitations (that often included ecstasies and raptures, even temporary insanity), fasting, lack of sleep, and the observation of communion and confession. The primary focus for these women was not on outward achievements, but on the inward achievement of humility. In this, 17th-century female biography mirrored two trends: the first, the Counter-Reformation's teaching that the woman's place was in the home, and the second, the hagiographical tradition, by which women achieved spiritual perfection during their cloistered existence, an existence that had little access to the outside world. The earliest of the four biographies, Morales' biography of the Princess of Parma (1577), represents the changing of the guards, so to speak, from the biography of the *donna illustre*, to the biography of the *donna umile*. She is praised for *all* the attributes, of *both* the *donna illustre* and *umile*, but she is much less extreme in her religious practices than the women of the subsequent 17th-century biographies. The other protagonists, instead, are praised only for their attainment of inward humility, based entirely on the concept of self-abnegation and mortification, extremes that, as we will see, conflicted with their identities and duties as *donne illustri*.

Chapter 5 represents a much needed break from our immersion into perfectionism by discussing the use of humor in Gregorio Leti's biography of "la papessa," or Olimpia Maidalchini, who was reputed to be both lover and advisor to her brother-in-law, Pope Innocent X. Leti was a convert to Protestantism and therefore writes his biography with pronounced critical satire. His work represents yet another layer of the genre, one that investigates the *rovesciamento* of the fictive process of biography. He toys with this

process all throughout his biography, resulting in a work replete with theatrical and Boccaccian influences, one that is entertaining, but historically unreliable.

Each chapter substantiates the inevitable conclusion that the genre as a whole was unreliable; it did not set forth a truthful account of a woman's life, full of the colors that make up the human spirit. Instead, it portrayed only types: Arienti's work portrays the first type, the *donna della corte*, who is praised for her noble manners and public persona; the biographies in Chapter 4 portray the second type, the *donna umile*, who seeks spiritual perfection through austere religious practices; and Leti's Olympia is the third type, the *donna nera*, who is portrayed as a controlling and avaricious villainess, without a vestige of goodness. These biographers did not follow the Renaissance trends for male biography; they did not heed Malaspina's advice, nor Plutarch's example, that a biographer should represent their protagonists' life with sincerity by including their virtues *and* their vices. They instead conformed their tale to their readership and to the general purpose of their work, which was either to please their dedicatee, or adhere to ecclesiastical pressures. But this is not to say that these works do not still have a historical voice that speaks of the times and of the expectations for women during those times. Even types speak of a reality.

Notes

¹ Hamilton. *Biography: A Brief History*, p. 1.

² Virginia Woolf, *The Death of the Moth: And Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co, 1942) 227.

³ Leon Edel, *Literary Biography*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973); Batchelor. *The Art of Literary Biography*. (Oxford England: Clarendon Press, 1995).

⁴ Napoli: Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 2009. Note also James Weiss' book, *Humanist Biography in Renaissance Italy and Reformation Germany: Friendship and Rhetoric*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company 2010.

⁵ Torquato Malaspina, *Dello scrivere le vite*, (Bergamo: Moretti & Vitali, 1991. Reprint)

⁶ Beatrice Collina, *Donna, disciplina, creanza cristiana dal XV al XVII secolo*, Ed. Gabriella Zarri (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1996) 103-120; Massimo Miglio, "Biografia e raccolte biografiche nel Quattrocento italiano," *Atti della Accademia delle scienze dell'Istituto di Bologna, Classe di scienze morali. Rendiconti*. 63 (1974-1975): 166-193; Roberto Rusconi, "Politica e religione nell'età del Concilio: a proposito di Maria di Portogallo e del ducato di Parma," *D. Maria de Portugal, Princesa de Parma (1565-1577) e o seu tempo*, Porto, Centro Interuniversitário de História da Espiritualidade - Instituto de Cultura Portuguesa: 1999, pp. 229-247; Patricia Fortini Brown, "The Exemplary Life of Giulia Bembo della Torre Vincenzo," in *Philanagnostes: Studi in onore di Marino Zorzi*, ed. Chryssa Maltezos, Peter Schreiner, and Margherita Losacco (Istituto Ellenico di Studi Bizantini e Postbizantini, 2008

⁷ This date is questionable and the composition was likely pre-dated. See Chapter 3 for clarification.

⁸ Gregorio Leti wrote this work under the penname of Abbate Gualdi.

⁹ See Paul Gehl, Paul Gehl, "Libri per donne. Le monache clienti del libraio fiorentino Piero Morosi (1588-1607)," *Donna, Disciplina, Creanza Cristiana Dal Xv Al Xvii Secolo: Studi E Testi a Stampa*. Roma, 1996: 67-80.

Chapter 1

The Development of the Biographical Genre from Ancient Greece and Rome to Renaissance Italy

“History is the witness of the times, light of truth, teacher of life,
life of memory, and announcer of the past”¹
-Cicero

Perhaps no art form has been more neglected as an active participant in the Italian Renaissance than historiography and more specifically, biography. An overlooked protagonist in the intellectual re-birth of the ancient crafts, its elegant re-ushering into the 15th century has been understated and understudied. Most are unaware that ancient Roman schoolmasters did not teach history, nor did medieval Italians study Livy or Plutarch as examples worthy of emulation. In fact, the Middle Ages were profoundly unhistorical; the ancient historians were often ignored, and only a handful of references to Caesar before the fourteenth century can be found.

This all changed with the advent of Humanism, however, and authors such as Petrarch, Valla, Machiavelli, and Guicciardini assisted in history’s coming of age in the first half of the fifteenth century. Practically every discussion of the nature of history from the 1420s onward cited Cicero’s bromide (above) and humanists like Guarino, Vittorino de Feltre, Piccolomini, and Bruni repeatedly endorsed ancient historians such as Plutarch, Livy, Sallust, Tacitus, Curtius, and Caesar for their eloquence and style, oftentimes using them as guides for their own historical compositions.² Inevitably, the genre of life-writing also began to come to the foray of literary experiment, and though political histories were more predominant in the classroom of the young, life-writing

became the preferred form of historical compositions by the Italian humanist instructors themselves.³

Compendium biography in particular rose to the forefront of popularity, and volumes with the ubiquitous title *De Viris Illustribus* were authored by almost every accomplished humanist.⁴ Though less common, the lives of women (often entitled *De mulieribus claris* in the tradition of Boccaccio) were also composed by various Renaissance authors such as Goggio, Equicola, Capra, Agrippa, Sabadino Degli Arienti and Vespasiano de Bisticci. Despite a notable reliance on pre-established Christian modes of praise, these works also depended heavily on the biographical traditions established by their Greek and Roman predecessors. Giving us a clear indication of the reliance upon ancient exempla by biographers during the Renaissance, Vespasiano da Bisticci refers to his Greek predecessors in the proem to his life of Alessandra de Bardi: “Hanno avuto i Greci infinitissimi scrittori in ogni facultà: e nelle loro istorie non solo hanno scritto le istorie loro, che gli hanno iscritto le latine. Plutarco, accuratissimo scrittore di Vite, e d’altre cose, ne fa quarantotto.”⁵ He then goes on to list his Latin predecessors, a list which proves to be quite lengthy (despite his allusion to the contrary): “I latini hanno avuti pochi scrittori abbino scritto Vite come Plutarco. Hanno Svetonio, che scrisse le Vite de’ XII Imperadori, cominciando da Cesare, e seguitando secondo i tempi.”⁶ He then, however, continues by citing Nepos, Emilius Probus, Pliny, Tacitus, and the writers from the crest of the Renaissance such as Petrarch, Boccaccio, (*casi avversi degli nomini illustri*), Lionardo D’Arezzo (who translated Plutarch and wrote his own *Life of Tully*), and Friar Ambrogio (translator of Diogenes Laertius’s *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*). These sources make up the foundations of Renaissance historiography and biography,

and represent the cornerstone for all subsequent life writing during the Renaissance. Before our investigation of the biographies of secular illustrious women can begin, this biographic theory and prevalent style of Renaissance life writing must be explored and understood, and its framework established. The origins, of course, are not surprising. The Greeks, ubiquitous source of most things Renaissance, claim predominance.

For centuries humans have been re-telling life stories as a means to preserve the past. The most common form of life-telling found its impetus in the one enemy no man could defeat: death. The impulse to record the life of a man upon his demise has existed since the beginning of humanity and according to Edna Jenkinson, it is human fatality that “brought the classical world up sharply against its limitations, representing, as it did, the obliteration of achievement and the annihilation of the human personality.”⁷ Thus men of past and present have felt the need to immortalize the memory of lives lived well.

Until the middle of the 6th century B.C., Greek history had been confined to verse, but the “logographoi,” or chroniclers from Ionia, began to recount the traditions of tribes (however crudely) in prose. Its popularity as the principal means for historical accounts increased rapidly, and by 500B.C. such authors as Herodotus and Thucydides began to put pen and prose to paper in a much more stylized fashion. Herodotus, the first great prose artist, has been called the “Father of History,” and was much studied in the Renaissance. With an unending curiosity pertaining to the human condition, his direct discourse is exceptionally lucid and is beautifully incorporated into his text, though for the modern reader with a preconceived sense of historical narrative and proper style (which does *not* generally endorse the use of direct discourse), it is much too lively and personal to be considered a historical text. Thucydides, a younger contemporary of

Herodotus, is seen as Herodotus' opposite in both style and method, and readily shows how different the historical accounts of the day could be, given the personality of the writer. Thucydides was reared and schooled in Athens, the Universal City of the world, in which he was surrounded by an intellectual society of magnificent proportions, which would soon give birth to philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. His rational, philosophical approach, therefore, is readily apparent in his history of the Peloponnesian War, which provides the reader with a causal diagnosis of political events rather than their mere recounting, a method that would be venerated by Renaissance scholars and would influence much of Renaissance historiography. He has been named the "first political thinker of Greece" and the first of the scientific historians, and it is these qualities that most likely contributed to his success in the Renaissance, during which time the historiography of the day was infused with political philosophy and ideology.⁸

Thucydides did not eclipse Herodotus' fame in the Renaissance, however, as both authors were widely circulated during the 15th and 16th centuries. The sheer number of extant books by both authors, printed between 1450 and 1600 in Italy in both Latin and Greek, attest to this fact.⁹ They represented Italy's first exposure to the Greek historical tradition in its many intricacies and deficiencies, and many historians used these Greek "fathers" as a guide for their own historical compositions. Bernardo Giustiniano, a Venetian historian, attempted to follow the style and methodology of Thucydides, his declared model, while Mattia Palmieri (not to be confused with Matteo Palmieri), translated Herodotus' work for his apprenticeship, then used him as a model for composing a still unpublished history entitled *De Bello Italico*. Lorenzo Valla's

translations of both authors, however, were to remain the standard for Renaissance scholars, and assisted further in their dissemination and influence.¹⁰

One may question the importance or pertinence of historiography to biography, but as with all things Renaissance, knowledge of the past and its production of great authors greatly influenced the genre and its sister sub-genres. In testament to this, Torquato Malaspina, in the only Renaissance treatise on biography (*Dello scrivere le vite*), references Thucydides' model when he discusses the use of "orazioni diritte," and its prevalence in ancient historiography. He notes that that oftentimes direct discourse was "per lo più finto," but because such great fathers of history like "Tucidide, vivo e giudizioso istorico" have employed it in their writing, he doesn't dare "ripigliare."¹¹ In fact, it has come to light in recent years that many of Herodotus' statements or assertions dismissed as poetic license were in fact accurate accounts.¹²

Also important to note, in Thucydides' and Herodotus' time biography was still very much intertwined with history, with the exception of the eulogy and encomium, and it was not until 365 B.C. that biography proper began in Greece with the publication of Isocrates' *Evagoras*, which claimed to be the first encomium of a *living* person, the ruling head of Cyprian Salamis.¹³ Though it followed the more traditional schematic of praise it also demonstrated the remote possibilities of the form. What followed was a gradual deepening of the genre: concern for the individual and his or her ethical dilemmas increased, with authors such as Theophrastus, Aristoxenus, and Xenophon all following the peripatetic style by which a man's life was laid out in a thematic rather than chronological context, according to his character traits.¹⁴ It was a method that would be echoed by the great philosophers and orators of Greece and Rome, and which would

become a motif in Renaissance biography¹⁵. This more practical approach, however, would take centuries to develop, and would inevitably have to contend with the epideictic genre as developed by Plato and Aristotle, in which narrative methods of praise and blame restricted character portrayal to rubrics of virtuous behavior, and by which the true man was often masked beneath the formulaic style. Much of this relates back to Plato's rejection of poetics and how, in a surprisingly logical but sweeping denial of citizenship in the *Republic*, he dismisses poets as mere imitators of form, thrice removed from the truth and therefore exempt from his kingdom. He asserts that if the "honeyed muse" of poetry were allowed to enter the Republic, "either in epic or lyric verse," that "not law and the reason of mankind," but "pleasure and pain" would be the rulers of his State. There are only two exceptions to this encompassing exclusion: "hymns to the gods and praises of famous men."¹⁶ How unexpected, despite this systematic denunciation of literature, that biography, most commonly known by modern scholars as the bastard child of literature, remains unscathed in Plato's *Republic*.¹⁷ But Plato's concern was with the exaltation of the soul, with "whether a man is to be good or bad" and "how many and how great are the rewards which justice and the other virtues procure to the soul from gods and men, both in life and after death."¹⁸ As Brian Vickers points out, the encomium fit perfectly into Plato's twin criteria for literature— "Is it true, and does it produce the right effect upon the audience?" — providing that it shows that "the just are happy and the unjust unhappy."¹⁹ According to George Kennedy, truth and effect are one and the same for Plato.²⁰ Whether or not the panegyric had a positive and ennobling influence on the listeners was Plato's primary focus; historical accuracy was not a concern. Such factual indifference can be found in Book II of the *Republic* in which Socrates addresses the

education of the young, for whom myths and fairy tales are stated to be particularly useful, regardless of their fictive element: “For the young person is not able to judge what is allegory and what is not; but he will keep in his mind indelible and unchangeable whatever opinions he receives at that age. Therefore perhaps we must be especially careful that what they hear first are the noblest things told in the best fables for encouraging virtue.”²¹

This relativistic stance regarding non-fiction is made more apparent by Plato’s successor, Aristotle, who was the first to delineate persuasion into three main types: *deliberative*, concerned with politics and future events; *forensic*, devoted to past events; and ceremonial or *epideictic*, focused on the present, “since all men praise or blame in view of the state of things existing at the time.”²² Though Aristotle’s treatment of the epideictic genre is limited and does not reveal its philosophical functions, he is the first to attribute a category to epideictic by identifying it with the substantive concerns of praise and blame²³ and contrasting it with judicial and forensic categories. Prior to Aristotle the epideictic was considered to be the province of those who did not enjoy the right to participate in the Assembly or in the democratic courts, specifically the Sophists, who would speak primarily at festivals or in displays (*epideixeis*) held at local residences.²⁴ According to Lawrence Rosenfield, Aristotle affected a shift in the focus of the epideictic category from the display of the speaker to “the luminosity of noble acts and thoughts.”²⁵ Such ennoblement, however, resulted in a rhetorical exercise that evaded reality, conforming the subject of praise to a set standard of virtues rather than allowing the protagonist’s real character any prominence.

In Book I, Chapter 9 of his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle introduces the epideictic or ceremonial type of persuasion to be the exposition of virtue and vice as a means to “make our hearers take the required view of our own characters.”²⁶ In an attitude that Whitney Oates views to be “verging on immoralism”²⁷ and what Bernard Duffy observes to be casting aside “the importance of reality and truth in favor of appearance and persuasion,”²⁸ he urges the orator to draw a “false inference” if necessary²⁹, to “assert coincidences and accidents to have been intended,”³⁰ and to manipulate his manner of praise to fit the audience: “If the audience esteems a given quality, we must say that our hero has that quality, no matter whether we are addressing Scythians or Spartans or philosophers. *Everything, in fact, that is esteemed we are to represent as noble.*”³¹

Duane Stuart, probably the most frequently cited expert on the history of Greek biography, acknowledges this trend in his third chapter of *Epochs of Greek and Roman Biography*. He argues that the Greek panegyric’s purpose was not authentic history but idealization, by which the writer’s job was to magnify a personality:

Such analysis of character as he indulged in was shaped to this end. The events of his subject’s life were presented with no eye on complete and authentic historicity but in order to achieve idealization. Emphasis on incidents that most redounded to the credit of man, exaggeration, even, of praise-legitimate devices. In short, the statue was to be gilded and endowed with the luster of perfection.³²

Stuart points out that the four cardinal virtues, valor, wisdom, temperance, and justness, were evolving naturally in the moral consciousness of Greece and were systematized into criteria of ethical valuation by the encomiast, who would seek to show that his hero lived according to these virtues: “Modern biography, whatever an author’s prejudices may be for or against his subject, tries to work outward from the man. The ancient encomiast, on the contrary, started with certain presumptions as to the constituents of goodness and

greatness, and strove to make the human subject measure up to these tests.”³³ Thus we are forced to recognize that epideictic traditions in oratory were concerned above all with the displays of virtuous living, not historical accuracy,³⁴ to which Lucian would attest in his *De conscribenda historia*, who writes that the encomiast was ready “to praise and gladden his subject by any and every means,” and would lie if necessary.³⁵

In his *De Oratore*, the Roman orator Cicero continued this trend of compartmentalizing praise according to individual virtues in his rhetorical recommendations for the epideictic genre, stating that “Individual virtues have specific duties and functions, and each virtue is owed its own proper praise. [. . .] Likewise, in the other cases, we must bring his actions into agreement with the nature, meaning, and name of each virtue.”³⁶ Factual integrity, therefore, was *not* a trait of the epideictic vein of speech.

Regardless of its ethical drawbacks, Aristotle’s rhetorical theory became the origin for the *laus* and *vituperatio* element of Renaissance rhetoric, so prominent in the schools of Italy³⁷, in which students were encouraged to argue *in utramque partem* – a commonplace formative exercise which would influence Renaissance consciousness in all literary aspects, most conspicuously in poetry. Averroes, when paraphrasing Aristotle’s *Poetics* begins: “Every poem and all poetic discourse is blame or praise. And this is evident from examination of the poems themselves, which concern matters of will – the honorable or the base.”³⁸

Hayden White, in his book *The Content of the Form*, would attribute much of this relativity to the mythical foundation of history:

The relationship between historiography and literature, is, of course, as tenuous and difficult to define as that between historiography and science.

In part, no doubt, this is because historiography in the West arises against the background of a distinctively literary (or rather ‘fictional’) discourse which itself took shape against the even more archaic discourse of myth. In its origins, historical discourse differentiates itself from literary discourse by virtue of its *subject matter* (‘real’ rather than ‘imaginary’ events) *rather than its form*.³⁹

Historians and biographers of the Renaissance thus had to contend with a narrative past based on mythical precept and a relativistic sense of history, by which contemporary rhetorical practice molded its subject to fit specific virtues. Fortunately, however, Renaissance biography was not solely dependent upon the epideictic style of the great philosophers, but derived much of its technique from the more common style of *encomium* and biographical introductions to Greek texts. Certainly, these had their limitations: the former complying to the time-honored traditions of hero-worship, the latter preferring chronology to character analysis, and both restrained by their brevity. But as Jenkinson notes, *all* types of Greek biography soon won acceptance in Rome. They appealed to the strong native commemorative instinct of Romans and experiments in Latin biography are found from an early date.⁴⁰

Cornelius Nepos, a favorite of Italian Renaissance schoolmasters, is the earliest Latin biographer whose work survives today, and is essential to our discussion for his contribution to the genre. He not only experimented with biography, he was the first biographer to contemplate the genre’s distinction from history, evident in the following passage taken from his introduction to Pelopidas Thebanus’ biography:

Theban Pelopidas is better known to historians than to the general public. I am uncertain how to expound his merits; for *I am afraid that I may appear to be writing history rather than giving an account of his life if I embark upon a systematic account of his achievements*; but if I merely touch on the high spots, I am afraid that to those unacquainted with Greek literature it will not be clear beyond all doubt how great a man he was. So I shall

face up to both these difficulties as best I can, bearing in mind how much my readers can take and how little they know.⁴¹

Here Nepos reveals his perception of biography, or “*vitam eius*” as *distinctive* from history in style and form, though he enlightens us only with the definition of history as a “systematic account of achievements,” and biography as “an account of his life.” One can, however, make one’s deductions as to his views regarding the purpose of biography, which, in contrast to history, would be less “systematic,” and more revelatory of the “high spots” in a man’s life. As a biographer Nepos wrote with a peripatetic aim and, as we see above, became reticent when he was forced to be a mere generator of facts and dates, an unfortunate necessity (in his mind) when writing of a man without a preceding reputation. This distinction between biography and history would prove itself to be a frequent subject of tension between the two genres, and still is today, though it was perhaps the greatest biographer of all-time who pioneered the biographical form into a new dimension of character analysis and made him the perfect candidate for Renaissance humanists; we are speaking, undoubtedly, of the renowned Lucius Mestrius Plutarchus, or Plutarch.

Still one of the most quoted biographers to this day, Plutarch is known to many as the father of biography and has been given the title “Prince of Ancient Biographers” by Boswell.⁴² He is most famous for his work in Greek entitled *Parallel Lives*, in which he juxtaposes in pairs the lives of 23 Greek men with 23 Roman men, in an effort to ascertain their virtues and vices by way of comparison⁴³. These *Lives* were to become the face of classical biography in Renaissance Italy, setting forth the didactic exemplum of a man’s life as moral guide and instructor for other men. They accorded perfectly with the Renaissance revival of Cicero’s *historia magistra vitae*, which viewed learning by

example as far superior to learning by precept or philosophy. As a result, and due to Bruni's translations, Plutarch became one of the most widely-read ancient Greek texts in fifteenth-century Italy and what Marianne Pade calls one of the "Bibles of Western Civilization."⁴⁴ Latin versions of *The Lives* were among the earliest products of humanist translation at the beginning of the 15th century, and before 1460 all 48 lives were extant in Latin translation. The manuscripts following were in the several hundreds.⁴⁵ His approach, more cognizant of the ethical boundaries of history and the importance of citing the accuracy of his sources, counteracted the epideictic trend of historical and narrative modification, creating the modern ideals of Renaissance historiography.

His Italian popularity proved equally important for the study of the biographical genre in Italy by way of his awareness and contemplation of the biographical genre itself.

Like Nepos, he informs us categorically that he is writing *Lives*, not *Histories*:

I am writing the lives of Alexander . . . and Caesar . . . because of the number of their deeds to be treated, I shall make no other preliminary statement than to beg my readers not to criticize me if I do not describe everything or narrate fully any of their celebrated exploits in each case, and if instead I curtail most of these. *For I am writing biography, not history*, and in the most famous deeds there is not always a revelation of virtue or vice, but often a trifling matter like a saying or a joke affords a greater indication of character than battles in which thousands are killed and the greatest armaments and sieges of cities. Accordingly just as painters obtain their likenesses from the face and the expression of the eyes and regard the remaining parts of the body as of little consideration, so it must be permitted me to penetrate to the signs of the soul and through these to represent the life of each, leaving their mighty exploits and struggles as a theme for others.⁴⁶

This statement would be frequently referenced by Renaissance biographers and by Torquato Malaspina in his treatise on biography, and it is Plutarch's attention to anecdotal form that makes him one of the best biographers of all time. Gone are the tendencies of his epideictic predecessors, and absent the laborious requirements of

historical narratives. His biographies, in fact, bear resemblance to those of the modern English biographer, James Boswell, also known for his attention to anecdotes.

Plutarch was also the first ever compiler of female lives. His *Mulierum Virtutes*, an essay dedicated to Clea, a friend and fellow priestess, presents twenty-seven historical or semi-historical accounts of Greek and barbarian women, ranging in time from Bellerophon to the Mithridatic wars.⁴⁷ A cursory search reveals that a new edition of Plutarch's *Moralia* was printed almost every year between 1500 and 1550, and though it is difficult to determine how many of these contained the female lives, in the work *Sulla tradizione manoscritta dei "Moralia" di Plutarco* or in the 1503 edition of *Index operum* it is present, and therefore safe to assume it appeared in the majority of the editions found in Italy.⁴⁸ Not unfamiliar with the cultural and literary traditions surrounding views of women and their place in society, Plutarch's anecdotes on women show him to be a great female advocate, as is evident in the following passage from the *Moralia*:

Regarding the virtues of women, Clea, I do not hold the same opinion as Thucydides. For he declares that the best woman is she about whom there is the least talk among persons outside regarding either censure or commendation, feeling that the name of the good woman, like her person, ought to be shut up indoors and never go out. But to my mind Gorgias appears to display better taste in advising that *not the form but the fame of a woman should be known to many*. Best of all seems the Roman custom, which publicly renders to women, as to men, a fitting commemoration after the end of their life. So when Leontis, that most excellent woman, died, I forthwith had then a long conversation with you, which was not without some share of consolation drawn from philosophy, and now, as you desired, I have also written out for you the remainder of what I would have said on the topic that *man's virtues and woman's virtues are one and the same*.⁴⁹

Not only does Plutarch present a surprisingly egalitarian view of female biography in which virtues are the protagonists and should therefore be represented similarly regardless of the subject's sex, he also gives us an invaluable insight into the opinions

regarding female eulogies and public discussion of a female life. “The Roman custom” to which Plutarch refers can be found in Volume II of his *Lives*, which describes the sacrificial attitude of Roman women on behalf of their *patria* and the resulting decision of the Senate to initiate the practice of public female eulogy:

Now there was a scarcity of gold in the city, and the magistrates knew not whence it could be had. So the women, of their own accord, determined to give the gold ornaments which they wore upon their persons for the offering, and these amounted to eight talents weight. The women were fittingly rewarded by the Senate, which voted that thereafter, when women died, a suitable eulogy should be spoken over them, as over men. For it was not customary before that time, when a woman died, that a public encomium should be pronounced.⁵⁰

A historical landmark of immense proportions, this inclusion of women in eulogistic practice began the process of what then developed into full-fledged female biography in medieval hagiographies.

This initiation represented a shift in the public perception of women and the validity of their life stories, one that stands in stark contrast to the Greek tradition to which Plutarch alludes in the above quotation, and here maintained by Thucydides: “[...] if I must say anything on the subject of female excellence to those of you who will now be in widowhood, it will be all comprised in this brief exhortation. *Great will be your glory in not falling short of your natural character; and greatest will be hers who is least talked of among men whether for good or for bad.*”⁵¹

This quotation is useful to our study in two ways: first, by presenting us with the common celebratory quandary of eulogy by which a man is overly praised upon his death, and second, by demonstrating the public opinion in Greece that women’s lives were better left invisible and not verbalized, whether in life or afterwards.

In fact, in the majority of biographical Latin sources, women are secondary subjects to the major male figures, as in the works of the imperial biographer Suetonius, the second-most influential biographer for humanists in the Renaissance after Plutarch. His first work of biography, entitled *On Illustrious Men*, has been passed down to us only in mutilated form, though his 12 lives of Caesars have all survived. Writing in the wake of his formidable predecessor, Tacitus, Suetonius was aware that the historical events surrounding his characters were well documented and thus abandoned adherence to chronology, rather patterning his lives along an ideological framework similar to that of a panegyric, by dealing with the subject's virtues in succession, each with one or more supporting anecdote. His treatment of women tends to deal in standardized rubrics of ancestry, marriage, birth of children, and suggests that he had a fixed notion of model feminine behavior, valuing women almost exclusively for their roles as wives and mothers. His female characters are changeably represented in order to best fit the narrative of his male protagonists, as in the case of Livia, who is first cast as a good wife in the biography of Augustus, but a bad mother in the *Life of Tiberius*. As Molly Pryzwansky attests, Suetonius used his female protagonists as a means to elucidate certain aspects of their associated men, depending upon the attribute or virtue he was dealing with at the time.⁵²

Nevertheless, Suetonius would become the principle model, along with Jerome, for the ubiquitous *De Viris Illustribus* form. According to Eric Cochrane, Jerome's elaboration of Suetonius' notes on the lives of the philosophers would become the reference for Renaissance scholars when writing biography⁵³, though it must be admitted that the biographies are individually quite brief, therefore offering more structure than

style to the biographical schematic. St. Jerome was a meticulous collector of details and doctrines and his work reads more like an encyclopedia, than a collection of veritable “lives.” Its importance to the study of women, however, would have some import, as it assisted in overcoming the limitation of Livian historiography to the actions of men of state and arms,⁵⁴ and thus opened up the realm of the protagonist in biography to scholars and women.

Diogenes Laertius, who wrote the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* in St. Jerome’s fashion, became one of the more popular ancient writers in the Renaissance.⁵⁵ For the biographers, he was also one of the more instructive. He taught them that the “*private lives* of their subjects were as important as the titles of the books they wrote, that fullness of information and documentation was more important than literary cohesiveness, and that statements of fact should always be backed up by accurate references to the sources.”⁵⁶ This represented a notable breakthrough in the style of the life-writing in contrast with its Platonic and Aristotelian origins, whose rhetorical expositions on the epideictic genre would relegate truth to a subservient status, allowing the formal elements of praise to take the seat of dominance.

The tradition of female humanist biography in Italy, however, developed more slowly and according to patterns of unproductive exemplum, most notably in Boccaccio’s famous *De mulieribus claris*, a foundational text of a genre that would endure for over three centuries, and what became the obligatory reference-point for all Renaissance biographical writings on women. A chronological series of biographies of predominantly classical women where mythical female figures mingle with the more documented female figures of ancient Rome, the *De mulieribus claris* attempts to grant women a place in the

humanist historical movement and usher them into the public space, thereby allowing them to share in the glory of “the humanists’ hall of fame, hitherto exclusively the domain of men.”⁵⁷ Boccaccio shows a modern sense of historical objectivity when he calls “Antiquity” the “lavish dispenser of divinity” and attempts to dispel the mythical aspects of his female characters by assuming that their historical successes had caused the ancients to consider them divine. On the other hand, despite his efforts to use his female protagonists to discuss the roles of women in society and to offer models of exemplary behavior, the very extraordinary nature of his female subjects renders such imitation impossible. As Kolsky notes, “The women of the *De mulieribus claris* contribute to a rethinking of their social role by their being placed in situations alien, or even forbidden, to most contemporary women.”⁵⁸ This “alien” status mutes the emulative possibilities of the text, whose female readers will have difficulty making the jump from the narrative events to life-application. Carolyn G. Heilbrun notes the negative effects such portrayals can have: “Exceptional women are the chief prisoners of nonexceptional women, simultaneously proving that any woman could do it and assuring, in their uniqueness among men, that no other woman will.”⁵⁹

In fact, as Boccaccio himself notes in his preface, the women he praises are deserving only in their ability to renounce their feminine side and act as men would:

If we grant that men deserve praise whenever they perform great deeds with the strength bestowed upon them, how much more should women be extolled – almost all of whom are endowed by nature with soft, frail bodies and sluggish minds – *when they take on a manly spirit*, show remarkable intelligence and bravery, and dare to execute deeds that would be extremely difficult even for men?⁶⁰

Boccaccio’s subversion of female virtue is, without a doubt, a common feature of the *De mulieribus claris*, but he must be credited with at least attempting to insert women into

the biographical tradition previously dominated by men. He writes: "What surprises me is how little attention women have attracted from writers of this genre, and the absence of any work devoted especially to their memory, even though lengthier histories show clearly that some women have performed acts requiring vigor and courage."⁶¹

Boccaccio, preceded only by Plutarch, here acknowledges the capacity for female greatness. We must not, caught up in our anachronistic perspectives of feminism, overlook this important fact. Not all his female subjects were queens or wives of famous men. He highlights also many famous female writers and orators, such as the writer Cornificia: "She was equal in glory to her brother Cornificius, who was a much renowned poet at that time. Not satisfied with excelling in such a splendid art, inspired by the sacred Muses, she rejected the distaff and turned her hands, skilled in the use of the quill, to writing Heliconian verses. With her genius and labor she rose above her sex, and with her splendid work she acquired a perpetual fame."⁶² It can easily be stated that the inclusion of the phrase "she rose above her sex" effectively nullifies any universal statement that women as a whole were equally capable. When reading of her accomplishments women were thereby reminded that, though the heroine had these remarkable abilities (and possibilities), they likely do not. However, Laura Cereta, a Renaissance humanist and feminist, references her in a letter to Bibolo Semproni: "Add also Cornificia, the sister of the poet Cornificius, whose devotion to literature bore such a fruit that she was said to have been nurtured on the milk of the Castalian Muses and who wrote epigrams in which every phrase was graced with Heliconian flowers."⁶³ Cereta, in fact, references also Sappho, Semiramis, Leontium, the poet Sempronia, the orator Hortensia, the writer Proba, and Tulliola, Terentia and Cornelia, "Roman women who

reached the pinnacle of fame for their learning."⁶⁴ The first six can all be found in Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus* and together form a substantive appeal to Semproni, to whom she writes, "All history is full of such examples. My point is that your mouth has grown foul because you keep it sealed so that no arguments can come out of it that might enable you to admit that nature imparts one freedom to all human beings equally—to learn."⁶⁵ Such inclusion offers proof that for some women, Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus* did offer the possibility that such occurrences of female virtue could be possessed by a contemporary woman. In fact Cereta also adds contemporary women to her list: "accompanying them in the shimmering light of silence will be Nicolosa of Bologna, Isotta of Verona, and Cassandra of Venice." Yet the circularity of our argument re-establishes itself in her words, "shimmering light of silence." She believes women equally capable, but acknowledges the silence surrounding this assertion. The possibility of biography to serve as an effective model for emulation, then, reveals a constant ebb and flow of potentiality versus impossibility.

Meanwhile the biographical climate of the Renaissance was placing increasing emphasis upon the active role of the citizen, and as a result, masculine biography flourished whereas secular female biography was almost nonexistent. Biography as a means to educate and guide the active life was the trend of the day. Humanist instructors in Renaissance Italy believed that contemporary education did not offer the moral and intellectual formation needed by social and political elites. They sought to use classical biography as a principal means to fill this gap, with Petrarch as their master and guide.⁶⁶ Politicians like Coluccio Salutati viewed the private, studious life (of which the study of biography was a principal component) to be inseparable from the active public life and

strove to become both statesmen and men of letters in the tradition of Cicero, hoping to use their learning for the service of the city-state. Petrarch placed much emphasis on the ability to couple a life of action with study, seen in a letter to the classical author Marcus Varro, in which he praises Varro for distinguishing himself “in both directions.”⁶⁷

Likewise Leonardo Bruni, Florentine Chancellor from 1427 to 1444, known by many as the first modern historian and embodiment of the “civic humanist”⁶⁸, viewed civic duty and the “contemplative life” to be equally important:

Wisdom, science and understanding nourish the contemplative, but prudence controls every active pursuit. Both kinds of life have their proper kind of esteem and merit. The contemplative life is, to be sure, the more divine and rare, but the active is more excellent with respect to the common good.⁶⁹

Biography’s inherent instructive value represented a way to combine learning with action in a time of “forte saldata fra vita pubblica, privata e letteratura,”⁷⁰ and in the words of Bruni, could pose such examples as worthy of emulation: “Nam cum provecti aetate homines eo sapientiores habeantur, quo plura viderunt in vita, quanto magis historia nobis, si accurate legerimus, habere praestare poterit sapientiam, in qua multarum aetatum facta consiliaque cernuntur, ut et quid sequere et quid vites facilius sumas, excellentiumque virorum *Gloria ad virtutem excitare?*”⁷¹

It comes as no surprise, then, that Bruni took up the torch of his teacher and fellow Plutarch admirer, Salutati, to become the Greek biographer’s greatest advocate, and by default a major proponent and diffuser of the biographical genre upon translating Plutarch’s *Lives*. The original style of his Latin translations made him the most widely read contemporary writer in the 15th century,⁷² and is a principal reason Plutarch became so popular in Renaissance Italy. It brought with it a fertile source for the narration of

virtuous deeds⁷³. What better example to Italy's young men than that of Plutarch's subjects, most of whom were statesmen or military leaders and thus offered, through their tale of human political experimentation, an insight into the failures and successes of the past?⁷⁴ Though Italian humanists still believed Christianity to represent the best guide to human salvation, they advocated studying the lives of the Romans and Greeks as a way of offering a practical approach to examining virtuous deeds and moral conduct that emphasized the "value of virtue, the splendor of justice, the fittingness of honesty, the praiseworthiness of modesty, the glory of courage, and how each of these things is to be considered its own reward."⁷⁵ This sentiment, that virtuous behavior prompted imitation, is ubiquitous in Plutarch's writings, who states in the first chapter of *Pericles* that:

A colour whose brightness and charm refresh and stimulate our sight is beneficial to the eye; similarly, we must apply our understanding to objects which, when contemplated by the mind, give it delight and inspire it to aim at its own proper good. These objects consist of virtuous deeds; when a man has learnt about them he is filled with an eager desire to imitate them.⁷⁶

This conviction was taken up in the Renaissance by Salutati, Bruni, and Petrarch, scholars immersed in the past and the moral instruction it offered. It was the "knowledge of what has been done [in the past]," according to Salutati, that had the most potential for "stirring up princes, teaching peoples, and instructing individuals about what should be done [in the present]."⁷⁷ Salutati's zeal for ancient historiography, in fact, would drive the Renaissance tendency to deny a place to anything medieval in the annals of history, while granting anything "ancient" a position of honor. In a letter to his friend Juan Fernandez de Heredia, Salutati instructs him to buy any manuscript of ancient historiography he can find, but to forget about "the nonsense of the moderns [*modernorum nugas*], and others of the same kind published in the last two centuries."⁷⁸

Furthermore, a rising Renaissance opinion was that *bonae litterae*, or *litterae humaniores*, should demonstrate that true nobility comes not from lineage, but from noble conduct, a remnant concept of the Italian love lyric tradition and an idea found in Plutarch's *De liberis educandis* and in Plutarch's *Moralia*, the latter frequently found in Italian Renaissance school textbooks,⁷⁹ and from which the following passage is taken:

Good birth is a fine thing, but it is an advantage which must be credited to one's ancestors. Wealth is held in esteem, but it is a chattel of fortune, since oftentimes she takes it away from those who possess it, and brings and presents it to those who do not expect it. Besides, great wealth is the very mark for those who aim their shafts at the purse — rascally slaves and blackmailers; and above all, even the vilest may possess it. Repute, moreover, is imposing, but unstable. Beauty is highly prized, but short-lived. Health is a valued possession, but inconstant. Strength is much admired, but it falls an easy prey to disease and old age. And, in general, if anybody prides himself wholly upon the strength of his body, let him know that he is sadly mistaken in judgement. For how small is man's strength compared with the power of other living creatures! I mean, for instance, elephants and bulls and lions. But learning, of all things in this world, is alone immortal and divine. Two elements in man's nature are supreme over all — mind and reason.⁸⁰

Nobility of mind is the fruit of human pursuits according to Plutarch, and it is this nobility that leads a man (or woman) to greatness and virtue, as is likewise found in Bruni: “Thus both in private and in public life, whatever we do excellently and creditably either for the sake of ourselves, our country, or those we hold dearest, it all comes from prudence and the virtues connected with it.”⁸¹

Despite leaning heavily on classical predecessors for general theory and schematic formulas, biographers and historians of the Renaissance thus found themselves in the midst of drastic social changes which led them to infuse their biographies with more political ideology, or, oftentimes, to use the biographical platform as a means for promotion, leading to a plethora of biographies that indirectly, or directly as the case may

be, assisted in the protagonist's courtly aspirations. Massimo Miglio, in his article "Biografia e raccolte biografiche nel quattrocento italiano" observes this transition in biographical production and its effects on the historiographer's credibility:

Si è ormai realizzata la consapevolezza di avere un forte strumento di persuasione per rendere più determinante la loro inserzione nell'ambiente delle corti: un rapporto che iniziato ed accettato sotto tali prospettive si rivelerà presto altrettanto pericoloso negli effetti di ritorno; così che, alla fine, lo scrittore si troverà invischiato e condizionato tanto strettamente da dover dimenticare quelle che Cicerone chiamava le leggi della storia.⁸²

The foundation of epideictic discourse, by which praise is foremost and accuracy is secondary, thus found its way into the new, politically-driven biography. This is not to say that the political reality of the time did nothing to further the biographical genre's development; on the contrary, the unstable political state of cities like Florence enabled a new kind of historical awareness that pushed biography to depict a man as a normal individual with a capacity for creating great societal change. In contrast with Plutarch's presentation of men as born great, the new Florentine biography stressed man as capable of great things, though susceptible to fortune's storms. Alessandro Monteverocchi, the only Italian author to have written an entire book on the subject of Renaissance biography, poses Machiavelli as a prime example of this change in historical consciousness, whose deference to Fortune in the lives of men leads to a negation of the moral standards found in the ancients, and whose analysis of events leads to a more realistic representation of the "contraddittori aspetti psicologici" of the characters, thereby creating a "rottura del modello umanistico."⁸³

It must be noted, however, that Machiavelli does not entirely neglect the traditional concept of exemplarity and advises his prince to "leggere le storie" of the ancients in order to shape his actions accordingly. But his characters, like those of

Giucciardini, become representative of a much more complex reality of “meriti” and “difetti,” whose relationship with the current political situation is tightly wound and inextricable, very unlike the ancient models in which the subject’s virtues become the protagonists of the biography and are therefore everlasting and universally relevant.

The Renaissance, in fact, presented a dual-consciousness of historical perspective as scholars looked to the ancient past for *exempla* worthy of *imitatio* while, rooted in their more recent past of political upheaval, they sought to idealize the “umanesimo civile” and the representative functions of the protagonist. Montevecchi identifies the principle dilemma of this method to be an incongruous crossroads between the classical model of “grandissimi exempli” and the recent “processo storico negativo” that was destroying the country and rendering “vana la virtù individuale.” He asserts that biographies of great Florentine Republican men were rendered sterile in their effective ability to stimulate any sort of imitation, due to the “irreversibilità” and “insostituibilità” of their current political reality.⁸⁴ The biographies, by nature heavily imbued with political circumstances relevant only to a free Florentine republic, thus disavowed future possibility of imitation by the readers no longer under the same government. At first glance his argument seems nullified by the actuality that biographies of the ancients also represented drastically different social and political times, in which the particular actions of the protagonists could likewise never be repeated in quite the same way. But it must be admitted that Renaissance biography is much more charged with contemporary political ideology than are the biographies of Plutarch and Suetonius, whose aims were to focus on the characteristics of the man rather than his part in a greater political development. Ironically, then, Renaissance biography tends to subordinate the individual to the

collective, placing importance on the capacity of the “uomo civile” to effectively bring a positive change to society. The true protagonist of the Renaissance biography is more often the city state than the individual man, to which Machiavelli’s histories will attest, in which the public dimension is the highest function of personality and the private life of a man is almost entirely hidden from view.

Montevecchi’s hypothesis, then, becomes more valid as the political intricacies are revealed. If the city state or the collective whole is the focal point of Florentine biography, then the virtues or admirable deeds of the protagonists become secondary and dependent, thus rendering the protagonist’s virtues incapable of crossing over time. The virtues, rather than remaining on the generic epideictic plane, are overshadowed by specific actions and incidents that make for a more socialized history, but one that does not promote the humanistic agenda of exemplum.

But what of literary biography during the Renaissance? In contrast with political biographies, Renaissance literary biographies or *razos* (short biographies preceding an author's work) had different aims, following quite a different path of intent, generally that of extolling the writer's intellect, his natural propensity and predilection for letters, and his eternal place among the literary greats. Generally speaking authors of these biographies gleaned the majority of their assertions from the author's/protagonist’s work (such as Bruni's obvious use of Dante's *La Vita Nuova* in his biography of Dante), resulting in a work imbued with fictitious leanings, but one that undoubtedly created a renewed interest in the writer's original work. Rather than emphasizing man's civic duty and coaxing him toward an honorable public life in service to his homeland, these literary biographies led their readers inward, toward philosophical contemplations and the perusal

of the author's works, with the exaltation of knowledge as their primary goal. Whereas the civic corpus is the protagonist of Renaissance political biographies, the supreme ruler of Renaissance literary biography is the intellect. One can select from a myriad of quotations to substantiate this claim, but one in particular from Bruni's *Life of Dante* stands in relief: "And enamoured by the sweetness of knowing the truth of the things locked up by Heaven, and finding nothing else in his life more dear, he completely abandoned all the cares of this world, and devoted himself entirely to this; and in order that no part of philosophy should be left unscrutinized by him, he plunged with keen intellect into the profoundest depths of theology."

Female Renaissance biography, were it to be of practical import, could not follow either the literary or civic trends in male biography. Though literary biography was closer to an effective model for women, as it dealt with the contemplative (and private) life, its ideals could only be applied to cloistered women, not women who were charged with a household and a family. The female genre was, however, a necessary countervoice to the genre of female vituperation that was increasingly common to the times, with most Renaissance scholars at least dabbling in the register of misogyny. Leonardo Bruni, in his biography of Dante, engaged in just such an experiment in Dante's life; whilst detailing Dante's suffering from unrequited love, he adds that he did what no philosopher should do: he took a wife, or in Bruni's words, a suspicious animal.

Oh weariness beyond imagining of having to live and hold conversation, and finally grow old and die, with such a suspicious animal! I will make no mention of the extraordinary and pressing cares which must be borne by those who are not used to them, especially in our city – I mean, all those clothes and ornaments, and the rooms crammed with curious superfluities that women convince themselves are necessary to an elegant existence; manservants and maidservants, nurses and chambermaids, and all those gifts and presents that relatives must give to the new brides, to

make them believe that they love them; nor will I make mention of many other things following upon these, which free men never know before.⁸⁵

Such divertissements at women's expense were as ubiquitous in Renaissance literature as were classical references or self-deprecating introductions.⁸⁶

Female biographies, then, represent the contrasting voice to such literary practices, though they perhaps do so to such an extreme that they lose their voice altogether. In fact, the female protagonists represented contrast pointedly with their predecessors, hailed for their virago-like virtues by Plutarch and Boccaccio. Whereas the heroines of Plutarch were honored for their contribution to their homeland and those of Boccaccio for their singular acts of masculine prowess, the rare heroines of Renaissance biography instead follow the Ancient Greek epideictic vein of biography, by which the female's life is portrayed according to a rubric of specific virtues deemed laudable for women of their time. These virtues, which we will explore in depth throughout this work, center around the themes of constancy, chastity, religious fervor, generosity, charity, and reserve.

Their sequestering from the outside world, especially for the elite women of Italian Renaissance society, is made evident in Vespasiano da Bisticci's biography of Alessandra De' Bardi. Bisticci praises Alessandra's mother for teaching her even to avoid interaction with servants who might bring improper worldly conduct into the home:

In fra gli altri costume le insegnò, che mai colle serve di casa non parlava, se non in presenza della madre; e questo è ottimo documento, acciò che ella non facesse l'animo servile, *e non imparassi i loro costumi*. A questo bisognerebbe avessino cura le donne de' tempi nostri; donde sono nati assai inconvenienti.⁸⁷

When Alessandra *was* able to enter the public arena, she was always accompanied by the 'elder ladies of the house': "Non andava la fanciulla troppo fuori di casa, venuta fu a

casa del marito; e quando andava, sempre accompagnata da donne antiche della casa, non come si fa oggi, senza riguardo ignuno d'andar le giovani accompagnate da servi.”⁸⁸

Bisticci's comments on the current societal mores of the Renaissance do communicate that change was taking place, however, and despite his disdain, he seems to propose that women's access to the public sphere was increasing, slight though it may have been. Apparently the women of Bisticci's day not only spoke with their servants, but when they went out, were accompanied by them, constituting a double exposure to the public space. In Bisticci's eyes, these changes are unseemly, but compared to Boccaccio's heroines, the distance between them and the public arena is still separated by a large chasm. The expectations set upon women were still very clearly private in nature. When Bisticci attempts to defend accusations of misogyny in his proem to Alessandra's life, he also delineates his rules for “oneste” e “ornatissimi costumi”:

E perchè non è cosa che giovi tanto all'un sesso e all'altro, quanto l'esempio, essendo io suto biasimato, benchè a torto, in dire che io abbia biasmato le donne, le quali mai dissi male delle pudiche e delle oneste e d'ornatissimi costumi, e che mettono ogni loro studio nella degna educazione de' figliuoli, così delle femmine come de' maschi, osservando due degne regole date loro da san Pagolo: la prima, che se elle si voglion salvare, che ell'allievin bene i loro figliuoli, e soprattutto con grandissimo timor di Dio; la seconda regola, della quale ell'hanno grandissimo bisogno, è questo, ch'elle imparino e massime in chiesa, a non parlare e io vi aggiungo, e in ogni altro luogo, perchè con questo mezzo del parlare favellano molti mali.⁸⁹

Bisticci sees women mainly as maternal figures whose primary role was the proper education of their children, and who operated predominantly in the private sphere, and, when in the public sphere, were ideally mute. His ideals present a shocking contrast to that of Boccaccio's model heroines who, in almost all cases, operate in the public sphere with little to no regard for the more traditional female roles.

Boccaccio in fact, though often criticized for misogyny, can in no way be accused of maintaining the strict ideas of female space in his *De mulieribus claris* and, in fact, purposely neglects the medieval tradition of Christian narratives of saints or martyrs. In Kolsky's view he "hesitantly proposed a more secular form of stereotyping to enhance the prestige and influence of the new humanist enterprise, placing women on its agenda. He incorporates female biographies into the development of humanism which, by virtue of this singular text, acknowledges that the nascent movement needs to negotiate traditional conceptions of women and begin to formulate its own response in humanistic terms."⁹⁰

While admirable, this secular positioning proves to be an unrealistic possibility for Renaissance women. Their example is rendered inert from the contemporary moral stance because of their paganism and because they trespass into the masculine sphere of society and thereby fail to adhere to the feminine values of contemporary society. In fact, though Boccaccio does make a place for women in the genre of biography, he does so in an attempt to mold the female life into the form of a male life. His work is wholly concerned with the woman as active subject, and according to Kolsky, is the first major work of modern times to exercise such a perspective. The end result is that he does not imbue his heroines with any realistic emulative qualities that might have been transferred to the female Renaissance reader, whose access to public space was limited at best. In truth, Boccaccio's narrative neglects the historical reality of a female existence in Medieval and Renaissance Italy and therefore promotes an ideal but impossible representation of the female sex. His intended readership was male, however, leading one to conclude that his intention was not that of setting forth models for women, but for men. His humanistic

effort, therefore, despite its positive contributions to the *querelle des femmes* debate that would dominate the Renaissance, did not have lasting effects on female biography in the Italian Renaissance.⁹¹ While successful as a humanist historical text, it was unsuccessful as a humanist exemplum.

Authors of female renaissance biographies, in fact, would reject Boccaccio's method entirely by embracing the current societal views which confined women to the private roles of daughter, wife, mother, widow, and devoted daughter of the church. By some this may be seen as a regression for female equality, but they *did* represent protagonists whose emulative function was at least practical and pertinent to the female reader, therefore significantly increasing their efficacy as exemplum texts. As opposed to Boccaccio's text, which was likely intended for an audience of both sexes, much of the female biography in the Renaissance was written exclusively for a female readership, with ideal models for inspiration and emulation its primary purpose. Gabriella Zarri attributes this change in audience to the "imposizione di una disciplina monastica", which although of a "lunga pratica e tradizione," became more widely diffused in the Renaissance due to the productivity of the printing press and the use of Italian instead of Latin, thereby considerably increasing the female readership. As a result, there was a productional rise in "testi specificamente educativi e comportamentali, non più rivolti esclusivamente alla *élites* ecclesiastiche e di corte, ma indirizzati ad un pubblico più ampio."⁹²

Though some of this literature "ebbe di mira l'educazione morale e civile delle donne," Italy did not produce as many practical guides designed specifically for female conduct as did Protestant countries in the second half of the 16th century. Instead,

“modelli di comportamento furono trasmessi alle donne indirettamente tramite la proposizione di vite di sante e di donne illustri e direttamente attraverso regole spirituali rivolte ai singoli stati di vita: verginale, vedovile, e maritale.”⁹³ In contrast to the Renaissance biographies of men, which began to emphasize the individual’s place in collective society, female biography placed importance on women’s potential contribution to the Italian female identity as a whole, serving as a generic moral example of piety and virtue. The urban concept of women with “occhi bassi e capo chino”⁹⁴ thus became the central theme of female serial biographies, which, according to Zarri “assumono una serie di caratteristiche comuni che permettono di considerare come *corpus unico*.”⁹⁵

But what of the individual female Renaissance biography? In many ways, it has escaped scholarly notice because it is so rare in comparison to the other kinds of life-writing, such as the biographical series, eulogies, anecdotes contained within books of history, proems and dedicatory addresses, epistolaries, etc.⁹⁶ Collina acknowledges the universe of feminine biography to be “meno definito e identificabile di quello maschile, e assai più vario, frastagliato, polverizzato, disperse.”⁹⁷ Though uncommon, individual female biographies were composed, and given their uniqueness as the communicator of only one life, the question remains whether or not they prove even more variable and stylized than the biographical series. It is my assertion that their variability depends not upon the unique life of the protagonist, but upon the author and his compositional intentions. The thematic overtones of the biographies say more about the author who is composing the work than the subject of narration, reflecting the web of ideologies,

theories, beliefs, and prejudice that inevitably dominated and often, overpowered, the 'real' events.⁹⁸

In this study, I intend to illustrate that the feminine biographies were operating under a pre-constructed rubric of values pertaining to the female character, resulting in a protagonist devoid of unique personality and constructed according to the many tropes of medieval hagiography. The main focus will be biographies composed within a two-century time span, from 1480 to 1689, and I will investigate how they represented the female life, what central values they extol in epideictic fashion, and how those values varied according to standards of authorship and readership.

Notes

¹ “Historia testis temporum, lux veritatis, magistra vitae, vita memoriae, nuntia vetustatis.” *De Oratore* (Loeb Edition) II 9.36.

² Eugenio Garin. *L’educazione in Europa (1400-1600)*, (Bari: 1957).

³ Gary Ianziti, “A Life in Politics: Leonardo Bruni’s Cicero,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 61, no. 1 (Jan., 2000) 39

⁴ To name a few: Petrarch, Bruni, da Bisticci, Sabadino degli Arienti, Giovanni Colonna, Silvio Piccolomini, Filippo Villani.

⁵ Bisticci, 551.

⁶ Bisticci, 551..

⁷ Edna Jenkinson, “Nepos: An Introduction to Latin Biography,” *Latin Biography*, ed. T A. Dorey, p. 2.

⁸ Whall, *The Greek Reader*, 451

⁹ Any cursory search of worldwide libraries provides results that number in the thousands.

¹⁰ Eric Cochrane, *Historians and historiography in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981) 80, 24, 149.

¹¹ Torquato Malaspina, *Dello scrivere le vite*, ed. Vanni Bramanti. (Bergamo: Moretti e Vitali, 1991). Original composition estimated to be in the 1580s.

¹² Arthur Whall, *The Greek Reader*. (NY: Doubleday, Doran & Co, 1943) 450.

¹³ Encomium is undoubtedly an insufficient term given its biographical elements, but to call it a biography would be even more of a stretch given its reliance upon the encomiastic practice and avoidance of any negative elements in Evagoras’ life.

¹⁴ Theophrastus’ rival whose *Lives of Men* includes the lives of Pythagoral, Socrates, and Plato; Aristotle’s successor who composed his famous *Characters* in 319 B.C

¹⁵ Petrarch's *De rerum memorandorum libri* and Valerius Maximus' *Facta et dicta memorabilia*, were both grouped according to virtues and traits.

¹⁶ Plato, *Great Dialogues of Plato*, ed. W.H.D. Rouse, (NY: Signet Classics, 1999)
Book X

¹⁷ Though the term biography is undoubtedly an anachronistic term in this instance, I employ the word biography in place of the term "life-writing" so as to avoid confusion with sub-genres such as the epistolary or autobiography

¹⁸ Plato, Book X.

¹⁹ Brian Vickers, "Epideictic and Epic in the Renaissance," *New Literary History* 14 (1983) p. 502. Vicker's article is an excellent source for those studying the influence of the epideictic tradition in Renaissance literature and has proven formative for this current study. See also T.C. Burgess, "Epideictic Literature," *University of Chicago Studies in Classical Philology*, 3 (1902).

²⁰ George A. Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963) p. 162.

²¹ Plato, *Great Dialogues of Plato*, Ed. W.H.D. Rouse (New York: Penguin Group, 2008), 200; Book II, 378c-379a.

²² Aristotle, *Works of Aristotle*, ed. W.D. Ross (Oxford: 1924) 35; I,.3.

²³ Bernard K Duffy, "The Platonic Functions of Epideictic Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 16:2 (1983): 79. The most comprehensive source for the discussion of Plato's epideictic moralism.

²⁴ Aristotle, 80.

²⁵ Lawrence Rosenfield, "The Practical Celebration of Epideictic," *Rhetoric in Translation: Studies in the Nature and Uses of Rhetoric*, ed. Eugene E. White (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980), p. 134.

²⁶ Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, (New York: The Modern Library), 2001, 1366a.

²⁷ Whitney J. Oates, "Aristotle and the Problem of Value," *Aristotle: The Classical Heritage of Rhetoric*, ed. Keith Erikson (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1974), pp. 108-9.

²⁸ Duffy, "The Platonic Functions of Epideictic Rhetoric."

²⁹ Aristotle, *The Basic Works*, 1356, 1367b.

³⁰ Aristotle, 1367b. He continues: "Produce a number of good actions, all of the same kind, and people will think that they must have been intended, and that they prove the good qualities of the man who did them."

³¹ Aristotle, 1367b

³² Duane Stuart, *Epochs of Greek and Roman Biography*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1928): 62.

³³ Stuart, 64

³⁴ See also Chapter 1 of Carl Goldstein's *Visual Fact over Verbal Fiction* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

³⁵ Lucian, tr. D. A. Russell, in *Ancient Literary Criticism*, ed. D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom (Oxford, 1972), p 537.

³⁶ Cicero, tr. D. A. Russell, in *Ancient Literary Criticism*, ed. D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom (Oxford, 1972), pp 217 & 345-6.

³⁷ A connection which Brian Vickers aptly notes has not received enough attention by genre studies. See Russell, *Ancient Literary Criticism*, 507.

³⁸ O.B. Hardison, Jr. *The Enduring Monument: A Study of the Idea of Praise in Renaissance Literary Theory and Practice* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1962). Italics mine.

³⁹ Hayden V. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore (Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) 44.

⁴⁰ Jenkinson, *Latin Biography*, 4

⁴¹ Pelopidas Thebanus, magis historicis quam vulgo notus, cuius de virtutibus dubito quem ad modum exponam, *quod vereor, si res explicare, incipiam, ne non vitam eius enarrare, sed historiam videar scribere*; sin tantummodo summas attigero, ne rudibus Graecarum litterarum minus dilucide appareat quantus fuerit ille vir. itaque utrique rei occurram, quantum potuero, et medebor cum satietati tum ignorantiae lectorum (xvi. I.I) Trans. Jenkinson.

⁴² James Boswell, *Boswell's Life of Johnson* (Oxford, 1904) 22. A surprising piece of information to most is that Plutarch is the only contemporary source of biographical information on Cleopatra, found in his biographies of Julius Caesar, Marc Antony, and Octavian. Also of interest, though more commonly known, Shakespeare used Plutarch's "Lives" as a sourcebook for his Roman Plays "Julius Caesar", "Antony and Cleopatra" and "Coriolanus."

⁴³ He also includes four lives, not set for comparison.

⁴⁴ Marianne Pade, *The Reception of Plutarch's Lives in Fifteenth Century Italy*, 25.

⁴⁵ Pade, 15.

⁴⁶ Introduction to the *Life of Alexander*.

⁴⁷ *Moralia*, Vol III, italics mine.

⁴⁸ Antonio Garzya, Giuseppe Giangrande, Mario Manfredini, and Italo Gallo, *Sulla Tradizione Manoscritta Dei "moralia" Di Plutarco: Atti Del Convegno Salernitano Del 4-5 Dicembre 1986*. (Salerno: P. Laveglia, 1988). "*Index operum quae in hoc uolumine continentur : Censorini De die natali liber aure[us] : olim mutilat[us] nunc adiectis quatuor integris capitibus, & innumeris pene clausulis antiquae lectioni restitutus. Neruae Traianiq[ue] & Adriani Caesaris uitae ex Dione in latinum uersae a Georgio Merula. Item Vesaeui montis conflagratio ex eodem*

Merula interpretae. Cebetis Thebani tabula. Plutarchi libellus de differentia inter odium & inuidiam. Basilii oratio de inuidia. Basilii epistola de uita solitaria.”

⁴⁹ Garzya. italics mine.

⁵⁰ Loeb 1914 edition, 115:3

⁵¹ II: 45; italics mine.

⁵² Molly Magnolia Pryzwansky, “Feminine Imperial Ideals in the Caesares of Suetonius” (Diss. 23-Apr-2008, Duke University)

⁵³ 393.

⁵⁴ Cochrane, 394.

⁵⁵ At least 13 different editions of Traversari’s Latin translation were published in the 16th century.

⁵⁶ Cochrane, 394.

⁵⁷ Steven Kolsky, *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio’s De mulieribus claris* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003) 3.

⁵⁸ Kolsky, *Genealogy of Women*, 2.

⁵⁹ *Writing a Woman’s Life* Heilbrun (New York: Ballantine, 1988) 81.

⁶⁰ Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, ed James Hankins (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) 5.

⁶¹ Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, 4.

⁶² Boccaccio, Giovanni, *Concerning Famous Women*, (Rutgers University Press, 1963) 188.

⁶³ Laura Cereta, *Collected Letters of a Renaissance Feminist*, transcribed, translated, and edited by Diana Robin (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997) 77-78.

⁶⁴ Cereta, 77-78

⁶⁵ Cereta, 78.

⁶⁶ See Pade's discussion in Chapter 3 on Coluccio Salutati and Chrysolorus, forefront proponents of the study of Greek literature in Bruni's day, whose circle eventually widened to include Iacopo Angeli da Scarperia, Guarino Veronese, Francesco Barbaro, Leonardo Giustinian, Francesco Filelfo, etc.

⁶⁷ Petarch, *Petrarch's Letters to Classical Authors* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 1910, 69-70. It must be noted, however, that Petrarch criticizes Cicero for the same reasons, admonishing him for taking up the cause of the Roman republic which, regardless of Cicero's involvement, would fall, and which would lead Cicero to an end "unworthy of a philosopher", 2.

⁶⁸ James Hankins (ed.). *History of the Florentine People, Excerpts and 'Editor Introduction'*.

⁶⁹ From *Isagogicon moralis disciplinae* in Baron 1928, 39-40; Bruni, Leonardo, Gordon Griffiths, James Hankins, and David Thompson. *The Humanism of Leonardo Bruni: Selected Texts*. Binghamton, N.Y: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies in conjunction with the Renaissance Society of America, 1987. Print.

⁷⁰ Montevocchi, 8.

⁷¹ L. Bruni, *Historiarum Florentinei populi libri XII*, ed. E. Santini, (Città di Castello: Lapi, 1914) 3.

⁷² For the manuscript diffusion of Bruni's writings see Hankins (1997).

⁷³ Interestingly, Bruni composed his own version of Cicero's life, entitled *Cicero novus*, which would eclipse Plutarch's own version for about a century, his version being printed in the editions of the *Lives* instead of Plutarch's own. See Gary Ianziti, "A Life in Politics: Leonardo Bruni's *Cicero*, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 61.1 (2000), pp. 39-58.

⁷⁴ Among such subjects were Brutus, Cicero, Pompeius, and Alexander.

⁷⁵ Bruni: *Quanti virtus existimari debeat, quantus sit iustitiae splendor, quantum honestatis decus, quanta modestiae laus, quanta fortitudinis Gloria, quantus ipsorum quae supra dicta sunt in esidem ipsis sit fructus.....*” For a stimulating commentary on this passage, see Riccardo Fubini’s article: “Cultura umanistica e tradizione cittadine nella storiografia fiorentina del Quattrocento,” *Atti e memorie dell’Accademia toscana di scienze e lettere ‘La Colombaria’*, n.s. 42, 1991, pp. 71-74.

⁷⁶ This concept can also be found in *Aratus* I, 2-4, and the first chapter of *Amelius Paulus*.

⁷⁷ Eric Cochrane, *Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981) 16.

⁷⁸ *Epistolario*, ed. Francesco Novati (Rome: Forzoni, 1891), no. 11.

⁷⁹ See Robert Black’s *Humanism and Education in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, specifically pages 233, 293, 261, 262, 392, 267, 413, 111, 420, 151, 421, 161, 428.

⁸⁰ *Moralia*, Vol I. Loeb Classical Library edition, 27.

⁸¹ From *Isagogicon moralis disciplinae* in Baron 1928, 39-40; English Translation by J. Hankins in Bruni (ed.) 1987, 282.

⁸² Massimo Miglio, “Biografia e raccolte biografiche nel quattrocento italiano”, *Atti Della Accademia delle Scienze dell’Istituto di Bologna, Rendiconti Vol LXIII, 1974-1975: p. 175*.

“They had now become cognizant that they possessed a strong instrument of persuasion which would enable them to insert themselves into courtly life: a relationship begun and accepted under such prospects consequently reveals itself to be rather dangerous so that in the end the writer will find himself conditioned and enticed into forgetting what Cicero called the rules of history.” My translation. Cicero, *De Oratore*, Book II, 15: “I forgot that I am an old man, and did what I had not even done when I was young: I discussed subjects that depend upon a certain amount of learning.” p. 129.

⁸³ Montevercchi, *Biografia e Storia nel Rinascimento italiano* (Firenze: Gedit Edizioni, 2004), 10, 12.

⁸⁴ Montevercchi, 11.

⁸⁵ 16.

⁸⁶ Most Renaissance works contain an authorial introduction or dedication in which the author deems himself unworthy of his enterprise, but how he hopes his readers will nevertheless appreciate his effort.

⁸⁷ “Amongst other habits she was not suffered to address any servant except in her mother’s presence, and this salutary teaching led her to avoid the servants’ outlook and their habits. It would be well if the women of our time would take similar care, for from this practice many unseemly results ensue.” *Renaissance Princes, Popes, and Prelates; Lives of Illustrious Men of the XVth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) 446.

⁸⁸ “[. . .] when she went out she was always accompanied by the elder ladies of the house, not as is the custom now, when young girls are suffered to go where they please with only the escort of a servant.” Bisticci, 569; 453.

⁸⁹ “I have been unjustly accused of maligning women, but I have never spoken ill of virtuous women who devote themselves to their children and follow the rules given by Saint Paul. The first is that they bring up their children in the fear of God, and the second that they keep quiet in the church, and I would add that they stop talking in other places as well [. . .]” Bisticci, 556; 444.

⁹⁰ Kolsky, *The Genealogy of Women: Studies in Boccaccio’s De mulieribus claris* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2003) 2.

⁹¹ This is not to say that its effects were not felt in other realms of literature, as is easily seen by Christine De’ Pizan’s response work, *Book of the City of Ladies*, which would attempt to re-write his stories and undermine male hierarchies and systems.

⁹² Gabriella Zarri, ed. *Donna disciplina creanza cristiana dal XV al XVII secolo* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura: 1996) 6. “Specifically educational and behavioral texts, no longer intended exclusively for the ecclesiastical and courtly elites, but directed towards a wider public.” My translation.

⁹³ Zarri, 7

⁹⁴ Giovanni Pozzi, “*Occhi bassi*” in E. Marsch and Pozzi ed. *Thematologie des Kleinen. Petits thèmes littéraires* (Fribourg, 1986): p. 162.

⁹⁵ Beatrice Collina, “L’Esemplarità delle donne illustri fra umanesimo e controriforma”, *Donna disciplina creanza cristiana dal XV al XVII secolo* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1996): p.105. “Assume a series of communal characteristics which may be considered an single *corpus*. My translation.

⁹⁶ For a “sintetico inventario” of the vast biographic sub-genres, see Beatrice Collina’s article, 104.

⁹⁷ Collina, 104.

⁹⁸ For Collina’s thoughts on these similar aspects of the biographical series, see p. 105.

Chapter 2

Querelle Literature and Conduct Manuals: Paradoxes and Unearthed Realities

Before embarking upon a journey into Renaissance biographies of women and determining their place in Renaissance literary tradition, it is necessary first to set out a road map of the surrounding discussions concerning women in Renaissance Europe, known to many as the *querelle des femmes*.¹ *Querelle* literature engaged in the contemplation of the female sex and expounded either upon its inferiority, equality, or superiority to men. Much of this body of work was written in response to the misogynist tradition of literature, based upon traditional anti-feminist topoi dating back to Ancient Greece, early Roman writing, and the early ecclesiastical tradition. As Bloch points out in his essay, “Medieval Misogyny”, the “register” of misogyny in the Roman tradition dominates all genres of Renaissance writing, from philosophy to science, and is found in all modes such as letters, sermons, theological tracts, discussions and compilations of canon law.”² The topoi generally invoke the image of woman as prideful, contentious, unfaithful, licentious, lascivious, vain, uncontrollable, insatiable and overly loquacious. The plethora of misogynist sources, therefore, inevitably created a discourse that was primarily derivative in nature, constantly citing its esteemed predecessors.³ Most Renaissance texts hark back to the classical tradition, the most prominent source of course being Aristotle, who had adopted many of his ideas from Hippocrates. According to their theory of conception, the man’s semen gave form to a new human creature, while the female body contributed only matter. In the Aristotelian view, the male sought to

reproduce itself, and the creation of a female was always a mistake, resulting from an imperfect act of generation. Every female born was considered a “defective”, “mutilated” male (as Aristotle’s terminology has variously been translated), or a “monstrosity” of nature.⁴ As an imperfect being, she sought perfection and completion by uniting herself with a man. Hippocrates’ and Aristotle’s theories of the humors were also frequently appropriated, representing the woman as cold and damp, the man as hot and dry, and therefore superior.

Plato, in contrast, was more pro-feminist in his theories, attesting that as both sexes work towards the same end, the ultimate attainment of internal virtue, they are essentially equal.⁵ Torquato Tasso, a Renaissance writer, notes the competing views of Plato and his pupil, Aristotle, in his *Discorso della virtù femminile e donnesca*:

*Crede Platone che l'istessa virtù sia quella della donna e quella dell'uomo, e che s'alcuna differenza è in loro, sia introdotta dall'uso, e non dalla natura; e ne' libri civili vuol che le donne sian partecipi della Republica e degli uffici militari e non meno che gli uomini. [...] Ma Aristotele molto diversamente giudicò, perché egli vuole che il destro e il sinistro sian differenze poste non sol nell'uso, ma dalla natura [. . .] onde nel principio della *Politica* contra Platone conchiude Aristotele che la virtù dell'uomo e della femina non sian le medesima; perciocché la virtù dell'uomo sarà la fortezza, e la virtù della donna la pudicizia. E come piacque a Gorgia, così il silenzio è virtù della donna, come l'eloquenza dell'uomo.⁶*

Further demonstrating the tradition of historical precedence, and the referentially rich quality of the “*querelle*”, Tasso traces the foundations of Aristotle and Plato's opinions on the subject of women to two ancient historians, Plutarch and Thucydides:

*quella donna maggior laude meritasse, la cui laude, e la cui fama tra le mura della casa privata fosser contenute; la qual sentenza addotta da Plutarco nell'operetta, ch'egli scrisse delle *Donne illustri*, ivi è da lui rifiutata; e l'uno e l'altro famosissimo scrittore sovra autorità di più stimato scrittore può la sua autorità appoggiare, perché a Tucidide Aristotele è favorevole, a Plutarcho Platone.⁷*

Plato's more egalitarian writings, however, were not as available or widely known in the Middle Ages as were Aristotle's ideas, which became the principal starting point for medieval scholars, who, seeking authoritative sources for their own misogynistic leanings, themselves became subsequent sources for future advocates against the female cause. *Querelle* writers also gleaned ideas from past satirists, such as Juvenal, a Roman poet, who wrote his *Satires* in the early 2nd century AD. He devotes the sixth chapter to the vituperation of the female sex, a chapter that would become a repeated source for Medieval and Renaissance scholars dealing in the misogynist register.⁸ As a satire, however, its intent and eventual appropriation were not taken very seriously; authors dabbling in the comedic register were usually the ones to take up Juvenal's jibes, thus muddling their misogynistic intent with humor.

Other medieval writers' misogyny was of a more sincere nature, as in the case of St. Jerome, the prominent medieval scholar and translator of the vulgate Bible, who was perceived as quite an authoritative source on many subjects. He had much to say about female inadequacy, continually depicting the worthlessness of a woman's life, describing women as concerned only with their make-up, their hair, their flirtations, always spiteful, quarrelsome, and jealous.⁹ But, as Jane Barr observes, "it must be acknowledged [. . .] that Jerome's attitudes to women accorded, on the whole, with those of earlier Church Fathers. Much of his anti-feminist propaganda was not original. What makes Jerome of supreme importance is that his writings were so widely read, his opinions quoted and repeated incessantly throughout the succeeding centuries."¹⁰

Jerome's views on marriage are of particular importance for the study of Renaissance biography. His emphasis on virginity and criticism of marriage, though

shocking to modern readers, echo the biographical and hagiographic trends. Jerome was in favor of marriage only in that it produced more virgins: "I praise marriage, I approve of wedlock, because they produce virgins for me."¹¹ In a letter to a woman who is contemplating a second marriage, he writes, "You've already learned the miseries of marriage. It's like unwholesome food, and now that you have relieved your heaving stomach of its bile, why should you return to it again like a dog to its vomit?"¹²

Such a collection of literature provoked a massive literary response in the late 1400s. Perhaps the most famous defense was written by a woman herself, Christine de Pizan, whose *Cité des Dames* (c. 1430-1440) preceded and influenced the many defenses to come. Her work, which aims to respond to and refute popular misogynist texts, consists of a series of biographical sketches of famous women throughout history who together form her "City of Ladies." In the opening, however, she narrates how an encounter with another misogynist text, Matheolus' *Lamentations*, gave her pause as she reflected on the massive amount of literature that formed a unified corpus of anti-female diatribe. The numbers were so great, she states "it would take too long to mention their names", but observes that, "it seems they all speak from one and the same mouth."¹³ Although she does recognize the satirical nature of Matheolus' writings, she writes that countless orators, philosophers, and poets of a more serious register had written similarly disdainful remarks against women. Jerome was likely among her list of unnamed offenders.

Pizan's response would become one among the rising genre of treatises to question the female stereotypes, a tradition that eventually was termed the *querelle des femmes*. Her primary source for her biographical sketches in the *City of Ladies* was

Giovanni Bocaccio's *De mulieribus claris* (1360), a work that would be pilfered and plagiarized for the next two centuries, while his misogynist work *Il Corbaccio* did not find a foothold in the new literary milieu, another indicator of the change in direction that would mark Renaissance writings on women.¹⁴

According to Conor Fahy, there were two phases of the Renaissance *querelle*, the first phase during the early years of cinquecento, during which time it had a more “practical import”, a phase he attributes to two particular author's works: Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* and Firenzuola's *Ragionamenti* and *Epistola in lode delle donne*. The second phase, after about 1530, represented a theoretical shift towards the Platonic idea of women's superiority¹⁵. He does not, however, mention Firenzuola's satirical work, *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne* (1541) as an example of the second phase, but it does follow the increasingly Neo-Platonic trend Fahy observes.

At first glance, the subject of Agnolo Firenzuola's *Dialogo*, that of *exterior* female beauty, may seem unrelated to the *querelle des femmes* discussion based primarily upon the *inner* attributes of women and their equality or inequality with men. But it is actually quite unique in its perspective and, according to many scholars such as Burkhardt, Tonelli, and Sapegno, is not only “the most important work of Renaissance pedagogical literature on feminine beauty”, but also “the most reliable evidence of the new aesthetic sensibility, inspired both by Platonism and Petrarchism.”¹⁶ Structured according to the ever-expanding genre of the Renaissance dialogue, the discussion is recounted by a third party, who has “heard” the details from Celso, the main participant in the dialogue. This typical framing and notion of an image of an image, highlights the Platonic influences on his work while likewise calling to mind Boccaccio's framing in

the *Decameron*. The allegorical undertones are dense, and must not be overlooked, nor must the work be considered a mere description of the ideal physical traits of a Renaissance woman. In fact, as Eisenbichler and Murray note in their introduction to the work, the dialogue moves “from a conceptualization of ideal beauty to the actualization of such beauty in a specific beautiful woman.” They point out that through such a process, the participants realize that the product of their creative process, their ideal woman, is merely a *chimera*, existing only in their imaginations.¹⁷ As with the female subjects of Renaissance biography, the ideal can never be actualized. It can, however, serve to bring others to a higher contemplation of God. Firenzuola’s dialogue, in fact, retains the thematic influences of the *Dolce Stil Nuovo*, but attempts to emphasize the female earthly qualities as *reflections* of heavenly perfection, not heaven-sent.¹⁸

Firenzuola makes this aim evident when he gives Celso these important words: “For a *beautiful woman* is the most beautiful object one can admire, and beauty is the greatest gift God bestowed on his human creatures. And so, through her *virtue*, we direct our souls to contemplation, and through contemplation to the desire for heavenly things.¹⁹” Important to observe here, is how her female beauty is equated in Neoplatonic terms with her virtue. If she is beautiful, she is *also* virtuous. Eisenbichler and Murray call Firenzuola an “anomaly” in his assertion of the “equality of women and men in every aspect of life.”²⁰ But they argue that Firenzuola is similar to the majority of Renaissance Neoplatonic philosophers, who concede to women “an equality of nature,” yet continue “to espouse and reinforce the Aristotelian notion of women’s social and spiritual inferiority.”²¹ This is just one example of the paradox inherent to the Renaissance *querelle* literature, by which new ideas are negated by their inefficacy to bring about real

change. Another work with equally strong feminist leanings is Bartolomeo Goggio's understudied work *De laudibus mulierum* (1487).²² Goggio, like Firenzuola, approaches his subject through a Platonic lens, through which he refutes Aristotle's theories of female inferiority with a slew of scientific and theoretical examples, then counters St. Thomas' theory of female passivity (Eve's formation from Adam's rib) by stating that Eve's *transmutatione* was much more miraculous than Adam's, which had its origins in *fango* (mud), whereas her origins were from a much nobler source: man.²³ He proceeds to outline how women were the catalysts for the formation of all good things in history such as literacy, music, agriculture, city states, etc, and his seventh and last chapter of the first book contains a series of biographical sketches.²⁴ Gundersheimer emphasizes that this work was *not* commissioned and is, therefore, representative of Goggio's genuine opinion regarding the female question. If this is true, Goggio is an anomaly even to Firenzuola, and his work – composed 54 years prior to Firenzuola's – represents perhaps the most genuine and thorough defense of women in Renaissance Italy. The tone of this work, however, is constantly changing from parody to comedy to earnest moralizing, perhaps underlying the paradox of intent found in every work related to the *querelle*, and leading some to question its efficacy as a pro-feminist text²⁵.

Some, however, argue that paradoxical or not, its impact is equally significant. Ruth Kelso notes that “lurking satire” has surprisingly little to do with the work's impact on the *querelle* and ideas surrounding women during the Renaissance²⁶. She notes that while exercises in the “serio ludere” abound in Renaissance, most particularly in regard to absurd topics (and to many the *querelle* may have represented the absurd), one must

nevertheless consider the impact of a work on society and its readers, regardless of authorial intent.

Joan Kelly-Gadol is perhaps the pioneer of the female Renaissance paradox theory, though she reaches a different conclusion than Kelso. In her article, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” she purports that women did *not* have a Renaissance, despite the amassing of treatises, orations, and letters dedicated to defending women.²⁷ In another article on Renaissance historiography, she discusses the paradox of courtly love: “The woman, who seems to be elevated to a new height by symbolizing the Ideal, is actually rendered passive and impotent. The sexual expression of love is forbidden to her, and it is even doubtful whether she can love at all.”²⁸ Such paradoxes can be seen in Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris*, whose heroines are lauded not for their feminine traits, but their masculine ones, and it is their possession of such *masculine* traits that render them worthy and deserving of praise. Torquato Tasso likewise presents this inconsistency in his *Discorso della virtù femminile e donnesca*.²⁹ Though his *Discorso* makes room for a public woman whose duties are equal to those of a man, her prescribed virtues are different. After discussing the contrasting theories of Aristotle and Plato, and appearing himself to adhere to the Aristotelian idea of female virtue, he asks:

Ma a chi scriv’io della femminil virtù? non già ad una cittadina o ad una gentildonna privata, nè ad una industriosa madre di famiglia, ma ad una nata di sangue imperiale ed eroico, la qual con le proprie virtù agguaglia le virili virtù di tutti i suoi gloriosi antecessori. Dunque non più la femminil virtù, ma la donnesca si consideri; nè più s’usi il nome di femina, ma quel di donnesco, il qual tanto vale quanto signorile. Onde appresso Dante si legge:

‘Donnescamente disse: vien con nui;’
così signorilmente o imperiosamente.³⁰

The linguistic implications of the term *donnesco* are evident in its masculine vowel ending, and linguistic comparison to the term *signorile*. A woman who is exercising the duties prescribed to men loses her identity as female, assuming a new one: *donnesco*.

The Renaissance concept of female is so intrinsically tied to the societal rubric for female behavior, that anything outside of such constraints is an exception, or takes another name entirely. One must not overlook, however, that Tasso was unique among his contemporaries in attempting to re-categorize the concept of “*donna*”, granting women a reality void of masculine comparison, exclusively their own. “Raro esempio tra i suoi contemporanei, Tasso considera la donna un’entità storica e si propone di mostrare come la virtù eroica, comunemente considerata di stretta pertinenza maschile, si confaccia non tanto a tutte le donne, quanto a coloro che, regine o principesse, rivestano un ruolo di primo piano nel governo di una città o di uno stato.”³¹

Another scholar to observe the paradoxical element of the *querelle* is Francine Daenens, who outlines the paradoxes presented in Sperone Speroni’s “*Dialogo della dignità delle donne*” (1542), paradoxes that reveal both the arguments in favor of women and the inertia with which they are presented: “Elogio e nello stesso tempo critica, sottile e insidioso, il paradosso rinvia sempre un’altra immagine della donna, diversa e non più paradossale. Permette di aggirare ciò che nell’elogio o nella critica è troppo apertamente dichiarato, ma anche di sfidare i luoghi comuni su vizi e virtù femminili sui quali si era costruita una lunga tradizione moralistica.”³² The Conte, the primary advocate of women in the dialogue, presents women according to the tradition of courtly love as the “*signore*” or governors of men’s hearts. Beatrice Obiza, the main female character in this conversation, summarily refutes this idea, reminding the Conte that a woman’s true goal

is the satisfaction of her husband and such servitude is what constitutes her happiness. The female character, then, is the instigator of the paradox, whose preference for the traditional spousal servant role negates the Conte's progressive attitudes.

The prevalence of paradox in pro-feminist literature is by necessity intrinsic, but according to Pamela Benson in her book *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman*, not necessarily ineffective.

Because woman's inferiority to man was assumed, a text that proposed to defend her and praise her excellence or superiority was attempting to defend the indefensible and praise the unpraisable. If, however, the text succeeded in its mission and discovered reasonable topics of defense and praise, then the societal assumption that woman was inferior was undermined. [. . .] Because all absolute and fixed forms are attacked by the mode of paradox, such texts, in their purest form, disrupt the absolute notion of woman's inferiority without dictating a new orthodoxy of superiority, no matter what they claim to do.³³

Readers of the *querelle* tradition are left, therefore, with three cyclical possibilities, possibilities which at any given time may mirror or subvert authorial intent: one of liberality, by which the defenses represent a world brimming with female emancipation; a second of subverted feminism, by which the author and the absurdities of his discourse undermine the eulogistic text, and a third by which the paradox still serves to promote female equality, given the mere existence of the debate in question. As Daenens acknowledges, the reaction of the Catholic Church to such writings would not have been so extreme had the paradox of the *querelle* not altered the female reality in some way:

Se queste tesi fossero state assunte solo per dimostrare bravura retorica non avrebbero certo provocato l'intervento dell'inquisitore, come appare invece nell'atteggiamento censorio di uno degli interlocutori che interrompe un dialogo sulla perfezione delle donne di Nicolò Granucci: "il nostro Padre Inquisitore non vuole di dispute, nè che si scriva di questa materia, se non che la donna sia nel second grado, e n'allega l'autorità di S. Paulo agli Efesi, ove dice: 'O moglie, sarai soggetta al tuo marito, come a signore.'³⁴

The Inquisition's heated pursuit of such texts, then, speaks to the progressive movement of the debate, rather than the apparent inertia of the paradox of the female question.

Another such contributor to this confusing paradox was Henricus Cornelius Agrippa. In 1509 Henricus Cornelius Agrippa penned his *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex*, a work quickly translated into Italian, English, French, and German and whose influences on the *querelle* tradition have been immense. As his translator notes, "His influence throughout the sixteenth century was enormous and continued into the following century, and his text was plagiarized all over Europe."³⁵ Using arguments based upon various historical, theoretical, biblical, and medical precepts, he argues that women have an identical soul to man, "which sexual difference does not at all affect," and that in heaven "they will no longer carry out the functions of their sex, but [...] will be similar to angels."³⁶ Not only does he portray women as equal to men, he argues for their superiority. As opposed to many of the absurd arguments made to support female equality throughout the *querelle*, many of his arguments are surprisingly reasonable and deductive, such as his theory of completion, by which Eve was the last thing created, therefore the most perfect:

That is how, at the time of creation, woman was the last in time of all things created; in the conception of the divine mind, however, she was first of all, as much in prestige as in honor, as was written by the prophet: 'Before the heavens were created, God chose her and chose her first.' Indeed, it is a commonplace among philosophers to say: 'the end is always the first in intention and the last in execution.'³⁷

He also makes an assertion unique to the *querelle* that as mankind was cast out of the garden only after Adam ate the apple, it was his original sin, not Eve's, that doomed mankind, thus instigating the necessity of a male atonement in Jesus Christ: "because we have been condemned on account of the sin of the man and not of the woman, God

wished that this sin be expiated by the sex that had sinned and that atonement come through the same sex that had been deceived in ignorance.”³⁸

Woodbridge and Maclean note, however, that he probably engaged himself in such rhetorical assertions as a form of jest, primarily to amuse his readers rather than persuade them.³⁹ In fact, many of his assertions are based on fallacies, such as his argument that God rested after creating Eve, when any reader of Genesis can refute that claim upon a first read. The unsupported nature of his arguments is most obvious in a section in which he tries to use examples of women in the Bible who destroyed or deceived in some way, as an argument in their favor; an argument thoroughly unsupported and convoluted, which leaves the reader with more questions than conclusions. He himself acknowledges this: “someone may say that such facts do not add to the glory of women but to their censure. Women will respond to that: ‘If it is necessary that, of the two of us, one loses goods or even life, I prefer that you lose rather than to be lost myself.’” How this response offers an explanation or defense for his use of such women as protagonists in his argument is unclear and unconvincing to be sure, but definitely bears the marking of comedic effect. Maclean and Woodbridge would likely assert that this was an intentional reversal. Regardless, many of his arguments are quite reasonable, and the lasting effects of Agrippa’s treaty are evident. His contribution to the *querelle*, therefore, significantly adds to an already burgeoning corpus of works defending women.

There are countless other examples of treatises in defense of women, such as Cornazzano’s *De mulieribus admirandis* (1467), Bisticci’s *Il Libro delle lode e commendazione delle donne* (1480), Goggio’s *De laudibus mulierum* (1487), Strozzi’s

Difensio Mulierum (c.1501), Capella's *Della Eccellenza e dignità della donna* (1525), Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* (1528), and Moderata Fonte's *Il Merito delle donne* (1600).⁴⁰ Such contributions lead one to surmise that the female question was gaining momentum and the female position in society was progressively undergoing change in some form. The paradoxes present in such a debate, as we have seen thus far, by no means negate the reality that the debate itself did represent some form of progress, and, as so aptly stated by Daenens, the texts of the *querelle* at least disrupted the notion of women's inferiority.

Whether or not this had any lasting effect on women's daily lives or somehow improved their social standing is, however, unlikely. Pamela Benson argues in her book that the treatises in defense of women did not conceive a new role for women and did not do anything to further their ushering into the masculine sphere⁴¹. She cites them to be "profeminist" texts rather than "feminist texts" in that they "short-circuit the logical political consequences of their praise" and "they defend their society and their own literary voices *against* new womankind."⁴² Her argument is thoroughly supported in her investigation into the texts, but I find her approach to be an anachronistic one, placing modern standards of female equality onto the Renaissance reality. As Ruth Kelso states, it is the generality of the times, not the intention or actualized influence of a specific text, that speaks to the trends in literary history.⁴³ Though the movement began to lose momentum in the early 1600s, its ideas having become saturated and ubiquitous reproductions, the *querelle* did represent a baby step towards equality for women.

Alessandro Piccolomini's work *Dialogo dove si ragiona della bella creanza delle donne* (1539), belongs to this corpus of *querelle* literature, and plays with the inherent paradox of the tradition. It also directly references the rising genre of female biography,

while poking fun at the increasingly common conduct manuals. Known to many as *La Raffaella*, it is a work that challenges societal prescriptions of female behavior with a great deal of jocularly. It also offers useful insights into the consumption of contemporary female literature during the Renaissance. Some may assert that his *Dialogo* falls into the later category of satirical misogynist works, which came to a halt in the mid 1500s,⁴⁴ but I contend that its continual subversion of the female ideals argues for a new and radical pro-feminist reality.⁴⁵ I will, therefore, provide a brief summary of the work as well as outline how it addresses biography, the nascent dominant genre of the 17th century.

In his later years Piccolomini, in true Boccaccian fashion, denounced his “Raffaella” as too licentious – an ironic age-based opinion, given the theme of the work, that of an older woman cajoling a younger woman to sin while young. The elderly woman Raffaella, maintains it far better to sin and commit various “erroruzzi in gioventù”, than “errar poi in vecchiezza con maggior danno e vergogna, e pentirsi della gioventù passata in vano”.⁴⁶ Piccolomini’s primary source for such a work was Vives’ *Education of a Christian Woman* (1523) by way of which he quite humorously pokes fun at society’s female conventions, conventions that Raffaella maintains are easily overturned or avoided, provided the girl show enough “destrezza” and the ability to “finger con rossere.”⁴⁷ A heavily satirical work, it is also one that grants a very clear picture of the expectations of an Italian Renaissance woman, indirectly. Raffaella tells Margarita that if she has beautiful hands, she should show them every chance she gets; if beautiful legs, to show them while fishing or bird-watching; if she be well endowed, to arrange being seen while bathing, all the while feigning ignorance and, above all,

“honestà”, because “dove non è honestà non s’apprezza ne considera in una Donna alcuna opera virtuosa.”⁴⁸ When Margarita responds that such vanity can be hidden from men, but not from God,⁴⁹ Raffaella emphatically retorts, “Io t’ho già ditto Margarita, e ridico di nuovo, che se fosse possibile sarebbe benissimo fatto appresso Dio non far mai un minimo peccatuzzo, anzi viver come un Romito fra pater nostri, o rosai, e discipline”, but, she continues, it is not possible, and therefore, it is better to sin while young.⁵⁰ This elaboration on the art of secretive rebellion reveals both the societal constraints placed upon women and what behavior was expected of them, as well as the satirical observation that such requirements were unattainable. She asserts, again with ironic alacrity, “sarebbe molto buono, che tu non uscissi quasi mai della camara tua, e che tu andassi brancando vigilie, & quattro tempora, e disprezzassi il tutto, e fuggissi ogni conversatione, ma non confidandoti poterlo fare, ti consiglio, che tu hai, salvando sempre la modestia & honestà tua, da passare tuoi anni giovenili allegramente.”⁵¹ These activities expected of a perfect woman – rarely leaving her room, fasting, fleeing from any conversation, placing everything worldly in disdain, etc. – are all activities Raffaella views to be unrealistic. Thus even in jest, Piccolomini observes the extremities and absurdities of Renaissance rules of conduct placed on women. As a result he gives women an alternative by asserting that while virtue is impossible to realize, it is relatively easy to perform.

Through such discourse Piccolomini acknowledges the construct of the “singularissima,” “unica” noblewoman, and refutes the efficacy of the imitative process by humorously mocking the utter failure that results from attempts at such an impossible endeavor. Raffaella, for example, tells Margarita about the women from Siena who unsuccessfully attempted to emulate and imitate the “donne eccellentissime che sono in

Siena,” noting their humorous but utter failures at doing so. She criticizes one woman in particular who, while trying to mimic the gait of a notably graceful noblewoman, resulted in garnering only laughter from onlookers, and another woman who attempted to copy a noblewoman’s habit of tying her *calze* above the knees, but was so hindered by discomfort during a church service that she untied them, and one happened to fall off and get left behind. Raffaella tells Margherita that she herself picked it up and was repulsed by the smell – it reeked of urine, she said, probably from falling into the bedpan one too many times.⁵² But Raffaella does not place all of the blame upon these vacuous women, reminding her student that “niuna puo esser da ogni parte perfetta.”⁵³ The Renaissance model of exemplum is thus negated and rendered inert by Piccolomini, whose character Raffaella refutes the idea that perfection can be imitated, let alone achieved.

Rather than attain such impossible perfection, Raffaella instead humorously suggests a deceptive approach that allows the woman to behave as she wishes, while maintaining appearances: “In somma ella ha da haver sempre avertentia, che ogni suo minimo passo o parola, o atto sia pieno di quella modestia che tanto si ricerca alle Donne,” and that should she decide to “pigliar” the opportunities suggested by Raffaella, to do so in such a way that “altri non s’accorga ch’ella l’abbia fatto avertitamente [e] con qualche altro finto segno di honestà”⁵⁴

Piccolomini’s dialogue does more than address the Renaissance trend of emulation and imitation, however. It pointedly references the *hagiographic* tradition in Italy, the habit of reading the lives of saints as tools for rendering one’s heart more pure. Following Margarita’s protest that such atrocious behavior cannot be hidden from God, and Raffaella’s remonstrance (I have told you before and will tell you again), Raffaella

concedes that should Margarita really be unmoved by her arguments and still wish to “viver senza commetter mai peccato sin alla morte,” then by all means they should change the topic of conversation to the life of some saint.⁵⁵ Margarita’s response is emphatic: “Nò nò.”⁵⁶ It is a telling response that demonstrates how contemporary women received and viewed the biographical tradition of saintly female imitation and exhortation.

These references to the biographical tradition pervade the humorous timbre of the work: the Renaissance woman faced a very real expectation of perfection, and the lives of saints were used as instructive tools to aid women in their ascension to such a lofty goal. What this work adds to such assertions, is the idea that biographical representations of female perfection were also regarded as extreme, unattainable, and that the lives of saints were perhaps not considered such an enjoyable pastime as we might otherwise have thought. The subtleties lie in the genre of the dialogue, a lighthearted piece intended to provide amusement by poking fun at societal precepts, and possibly voicing criticism of such precepts through the use of humor. I say possibly, because the author follows the typical trend of paradox found in most *querelle* pieces, in that the limited freedom it seems to offer the female reality is quickly negated or sidestepped. This ‘sidestep’ reveals itself in Raffaella’s constant assertion that the woman must take great care never to *appear* to be anything other than the female ideal, and that if she be discovered in her deceptions, she will be unmarriageable or will be a great disappointment to her husband. As a composer of comedies, this emphasis on reversal (appearance vs. reality) was commonplace to Piccolomini, who both addresses and engages in the *querelle* paradox with ease.

Such insistence that seeming is everything becomes more evident as the dialogue continues, when Raffaella speaks of a wife's relationship to her husband, a relationship that, according to her, is dependent upon pretence. She tells Margherita that she should at least pretend to conduct herself as is expected of her, "fingendo di havere desiderio di compiacere il marito suo in tutto quello ch'ella conosca gli sia a grado, e di tenere ogni affetione a lui, alla casa sua, alle sustantie, e facoltà, a i figli, e a ogni cosa sua, e se non lo fa con buon animo, almeno mostri di farlo."⁵⁷ Lest we read this passage too literally, Raffaella concludes that should Margherita do these things, "ella può poi più arditamente spender nelle vesti, però che vedendola il marito cosi utile nel resto e affetionata alla casa, non solo le compra queste voluntieri, ma essorta spese volte a farlo."⁵⁸ The primary goal, then, is not goodness itself, but new clothes!

This interchange takes place after a rather lengthy description of Raffaella's ideal woman, which aligns strikingly with female prescriptions found in most conduct manuals. She should not be lazy like most but get up early, observe everything (and assure that it is in its proper place), command respect from the servants, sew, and never show herself to be against her husband's will. The discussion is so lengthy and so specific in nature that the readers again begin to forget about the comedic paradox at play in the work, but Piccolomini makes sure to remind them of his satirical goal. Immediately after the detailed description of a woman who governs her house well, and the humorous reminder that it is all for material self gain, Raffaella enters into a discussion of how a woman should act in conversation, governed above all by *modestà* and *honestà*. She should not speak too much, nor slander ("il qual mezzo è oggi quasi in tutte le donne"), and should show respect and admiration for those deserving it. But of course, following

this interchange, Raffaella remarks *again*: “l’honore e il biasimo non consiste principalmente nel fare ella una cosa o non la fare, ma nel credersi che la faccia.”⁵⁹ This remark is shortly followed by another: “non consiste, come t’ho ditto nel fare o non fare; che questo importa poco, ma nel credersi.”⁶⁰ The reader thus experiences a continual, almost excessive, subversion of the rules of female conduct.

Margherita asks about the obvious contradictions in Raffaella’s statements: “M’havete ditto poco fa Madonna Raffaella, che il marito e la casa sua ha da esser la prima cosa che una donna ami in questo mondo, e hora pare che vogliate il contrario, cioè che l’amor dell’amante passi ogni cosa,” to which Raffaella responds, yet again calling attention to the pretense of perfection, “con li mariti basta a finger di amarli, e questo gli basta a loro.”⁶¹ And, of course, women must still preserve their honesty: “salvando però sempre in palese la modestia e l’honestà sua, perche oltre che questa cortesia, come t’ho ditto, rifiorisce tutte l’altre virtù d’una donna.”⁶² It seems remarkable that at this point Raffaella should speak of honesty, but of course as Piccolomini has emphasized ad nauseum it is only the “apparenza” of honesty that matters.

In case Piccolomini’s *rovesciamenti* are still in question, Margherita communicates her dismay at Raffaella’s truths, citing the *Accademia degli Intronati* as purporting the opposite: “Hor pur io’ho intesa, & mai l’harei pensato, perche io mi pensava che questo amore havesse ad essere dell’animo, & honesto, che cosi senti dire una sera a una veglia in un giuoco ad un de gli Intronati, che lo chiamano il Garroso, ostinato, che non me ricordo,” to which Raffaella responds: “Quanti errori fanno certi a mettere questi rulli, & questi giardini in aria nel capo alle giovani, & sappi che cotestui si

burlava, e l'intende come io, benche faccia cosi dell'honesto, & che s'empì la bocca d'honestà, che honestà? La cosa va come ti dico, o tu m'hai fede, o no”⁶³.

At this point the Intronati, his intended audience, have of course thoroughly enjoyed the pages that make fun of their society along with the many humorous thematic reversals, such as the treatment of marriage. Raffaella asserts, for example, that arranged marriages are by no means a hindrance to true love because one can always take a lover.⁶⁴ She even suggests that a priest makes an excellent choice of livelihood because he is not married, and thus has greater freedom to engage in amorous affairs. The Dialogue concludes with Raffaella becoming Margherita's *mezzana*, or procuress, and is paid well for her services.

It seems obvious, based on the above quotations, that Piccolomini intended his work to be interpreted in jest, and his advice on marital infidelity to be merely toying with a literary *topos*. Such an observation is supported by his later explanation of the text in his dedication for the *Institutione morale*, written three years after *La Raffaella*: “e insiememente con questa occasione, mi son ritratto di molte cose, che per scherzo scrissi già in un Dialogo de la Bella Creanza de le Donne; fatto da me più per un certo sollazzo, che per altra più grava cagione; come molto miei amici ne pon far fede.”⁶⁵ In chapters eight and nine of Book nine, he retracts not the *Raffaella* in its entirety, but its content that offends the female sex:

e se ben io già intorno a' due anni sono, dissi alcune cose, che par che offoschin la virtù de la donna, e l'amor di quella al marito, in un Dialogo che domandan la Raffaella, o' ver creanza delle donne; ritorno indietro e ritratto tutto quello, che io avessi detto quivi contro l'onestà de le donne, già ditto havessi: poscia che fu fatto da me tal dialogo quasi per ischerzo e per giuoco; siccome alcuna volta si fingono delle novelle e de' casi verisimili più che veri, come fece il Boccaccio sol per dare un certo sollazzo a la mente, che sempre severa e grave non può stare.⁶⁶

This recantation is vague in its assertions, especially given the content of the *Institutione morale* (1542) in which the retraction is found. Based upon its title, the *Institutione Morale*, one might think that this later ethical work is more traditional in style, and similar to most conduct manuals of the time, but this assumption is false given the interesting approach Piccolomini takes toward marital infidelity. Unlike most treatises or conduct manuals, Piccolomini's *Institutione Morale* actually approves of the idea of a "lover", and stresses the importance that the spouse should *not* be the object of love: "Not only is it *not* necessary for us to take our soul mate as a wife, it is more appropriate that she *not* be. It may be for another purpose and from a better law that we love one who is not ordained to us in marriage."⁶⁷

This viewpoint is pointedly different from that of his following works. In his comedies *L'Amor Costante* and *Alessandro*, marriage and love are happily combined,⁶⁸ an approach that returns in a later edition of the *Institutione* (1560):

E' ben vero, che molte volte si vede avvenire, che si disgiungono tra loro tali amori, mentre che quello, che è desiderio di bellezza, si truova tra persone, che non sono consorti, *ma questo adviene fuor di quello, che avvenir dovrebbe* Et poi, che questo disordine occorre per errore, & per colpa de gli huomini; non è mal di sapere ... che se con amor di bellezza, il maritale ancora non fie congiunto; allhora il fine a cotali amanti non ha à passar più oltre.⁶⁹

Evident, therefore, is Piccolomini's personal transformation on moral issues, which leads the reader to reflect on the paradoxical nature of his earlier and more playful work, during which time his ideas on love and marriage were more liberal than his later ideals. It is his later self, in fact, who recants the work and emphasizes its satirical genre. But what of his younger self? At what point did satire begin and earnestness end? Even more importantly, when do they end and begin for the reader? The reception certainly varied

and assuredly contributed to the *querelle* genre, regardless of its playful origins or paradoxical components.

All literary corpuses, however, are surpassed or underwritten by subsequent trends and traditions. The *querelle* tradition, which gradually faded during the Counter-Reformation (in both comedic and serious registers), was followed by a literary backlash in the form of conduct manuals and biographical material, both hagiographic and, more unique to the 17th century, treating the subject of secular female nobility. An interesting case in point is the 1622 republication and complete alteration of Piccolomini's work which, in its "revised" form, conformed to the new conservative approach. In 1622, *Gli Costumi lodevoli che a nobile gentildonne si convengono* by Piccolomini was published. It appears by title and form to be a conduct manual, and for all intents and purposes it is, except that it is almost an identical copy of the moral suggestions from the *Raffaella*. Parsed into various categories of virtues or womanly duties, the content is merely a reproduction of a selection of Madonna Raffaella's words, without the interlocution of the dialogue participants. In fact, the letter to the "donne che leggeranno" is also an exact copy, the only changes being that the word "dialogo" is replaced with "discorso." All aspects of the dialogue format are missing in the content of the work, as well as most references to licentious behavior, but it includes all components of the *Raffaella* that address issues pertaining to the women of the Renaissance, including dress, make-up and its excesses, frequency of bathing, jewelry, daily tasks, etc. That Piccolomini plagiarized himself (or, rather, re-appropriates his work) is unlikely, especially given the publication date of 1622, 45 years after his death. The unfortunate misrepresentation of Piccolomini's text was most likely created by the Venetian editor of the Compendium, Barezzo Barezzi,

whose Letter to the Readers states only that the texts have been “arricchiti da [lui] di pastille ne’ margini, di Somarii, di Tavole, e di molte altre gentilezze. If by “gentilezze” we are to understand that he took the liberty to condense Piccolomini’s dialogue into a conduct manual arranged according to thematic subject matter and lacking two pages of his letter to the readers, to make random name changes (Bianchetta to Lucietta, for example), and leave out any reference to Raffaella whatsoever, then we must surmise that his “gentilezze” lie in his subtractions, not additions to the text as he intimates. Plausibly he knew of Piccolomini’s recantation of his original work, thus granting him the apparent liberty to adjust the subject matter. He omits all vestiges of humor, but does not omit many passages that are critical of women. In this, he does not attempt in any way to adhere to Piccolomini’s desires that the text not offend any of his female readers.⁷⁰

Barezzi’s goal, therefore, was more likely an attempt to make use of a well-known author’s reputation and titillating content as the impetus for a more palatable work, one that would be better received by his readership and that, given the new shift and propensity of literature to expound on ideas of moral rectitude, could avoid the inevitable censorship that would have followed a republication of the *Raffaella*. The two pages he excluded from Piccolomini’s Letter to the Reader, in fact, are the two pages in which Piccolomini encourages his female readers to take a lover without causing any suspicion: “se dall’altro canto, donne mie, voi sarete piene di tanta prudenza, e acortezza, e temperantia, che voi sappiate mantenervi, e godervi l’amante vostro, eletto che ne l’havete, fin che durano gli anni vostri, così nascosamente, che ne l’aria, ne il cielo ne possa suspicare mai, in questo caso dico, e vi giuro, che non potete far cosa di maggior contento, e piu degna di una gentildonna che questa.”⁷¹ The shift in focus from the

theoretical discussions and dialogues of the *querelle*, full of paradox and humor, to the 17th-century conduct manuals, full of sobriety and practicality, is thus evident in the new publication of this text. The only vestige of Raffaella that can be found is in Barezzi's preservation of the following quote: "Hassi da sapere, che l'honore, o il biasimo non consiste principalmente nel fare ella una cosa, o non la fare, ma nel credersi che la faccia, perche l'honore è risposto in altro se nò ne la stimulatione appresso a gli huomini."⁷²

These are of course, the exact words of Madonna Raffaella, though in Barezzi's rendition, they are found under the heading of "Honore." The general "cosa" to which Piccolomini is here referring, remains undefined whereas in the *Raffaella* it is, of course, infidelity. It is immediately after this section on Honor that the work abruptly ends, asserting that parties and festivities are dangerous places because so many eyes, ears, and enemies are present, ready to criticize a woman's reputation.

Most surprising regarding this evident reproduction of a prolifically published text is the apparent ignorance in the scholarly community that it happened at all. I have found only one brief reference by Giuseppe Zonta in his notes on "Scrittori d'Italia; Trattati del cinquecento sulla donna," published in 1913. He states, "Né ha valora alcuno la scelta dei Costumi lodevoli *spiluccati* dal Dialogo del Piccolomini ed editi dal Barezzi in quell volumetto che contiene varie operette intorno alle donne."

Piccolomini's *Raffaella* and questionable republication, however, represent the center point of the pendulum shift to biography and conduct manuals in the later 1500s and early 1600s. The republication outlines, in fact, the basic contents of any Renaissance conduct manual: manner of dress; carriage, hairstyles, hair ornamentation, the use of make-up, cleanliness, the wearing of jewelry, gloves, bonnets, etc.; movement of the

body, how to accentuate one's positive attributes, an analysis of each part of the body, inner virtues such as honesty, modesty, quiet living, goodness, prudence, and piety; as well as basic duties such as the governance of the home, work ethic, interaction with all members of society, manner of speech, etc.⁷³ It is a direct link both to the developing genre of biographies of noblewomen and to the emerging tradition of conduct manuals.

Conduct manuals, in fact, play an essential role in the study of Renaissance biography as they offer very detailed examples of societal expectations for women of the Renaissance, many similar to, and many quite different from the biographical portrayals still extant. In order to establish societal norms for noblewomen of the Renaissance, I will therefore engage in a brief study of conduct manuals and their contribution to female Renaissance history. Like the *querelle* treatises, they do not necessarily contain realistic expectations for Renaissance women, entrenched as they are within the hagiographic tradition, but because their composition is devoid of humor and their intent clear, the reader is free from pondering the cyclical dilemma of the paradoxical issues so prevalent in the *querelle*.

As all authors dealing with the *querelle* will note, the sanctity of marriage and its integral function in Renaissance society led to a need to prescribe female comportment in order to preserve the institution of marriage. Treatises on marriage therefore abounded in the Renaissance with advice for the husband on how to pick a wife and what qualities she should possess.⁷⁴ Among such treatises, Leon Battista Alberti's treatise on *Della Famiglia*, in which the interlocutor Lionardo advises the young Battista how to choose a bride, contains advice on the subject, echoing the traditional stereotypes and admonishments of the times. The sum qualities of such a worthy woman are beauty,

appropriate parentage, riches, and proper conduct. As opposed to men, whose virtue was based upon action and civic responsibility, a woman's virtue was based upon her preservation of the family line and its honor. To illustrate this point, Lionardo quotes Marius, the "illustrious Roman", who said in a speech to his people: "Of women we require purity, of men labor."⁷⁵ The common idea that such a woman was impossible to find is voiced by young Alberti: "You have said, I gather, that one should select a virtuous woman of good parentage, one well dowered and suited to bear a fair number of sons. All these things are very difficult. Do you think one could easily find them all combined in one woman?"⁷⁶ In fact, Alberti's Lionardo expresses his doubts of female chastity and virtue and leaves the poor young man perplexed and skeptical that he will ever find a proper wife.⁷⁷ Written in the 15th century, this work was not published until 1843, but it is at least indicative of societal views towards women.

There are other works, however, that had a much more profound impact on contemporary society, such as Juan Luis Vives' *De Institutione feminae Christianae*, published in Latin in 1523, translated into Italian in 1546. Vives' work enjoyed mass popularity and was regarded as the most authoritative voice on the proper conduct of women throughout the sixteenth century.⁷⁸ Dedicated to Queen Catherine, he writes (as he indicates in a letter to Erasmus) in a "plainer style so that it would be understood by the one for whom I was composing the work."⁷⁹ Whether or not the Queen was happy with his work is unknown, but, as Fantazzi points out, she commissioned Erasmus with a similar work only two years after the completion of Vives', leading one to surmise that it did not meet with her satisfaction.

What many do not know is that Lodovico Dolce's *Dialogo della Institutione della donna* is a loose translation of Vives' work, modified into dialogue form. Helena Sanson notes that many consider it to be a plagiarized work, but in her opinion, "Si tratta, in realtà, di una riscrittura non pedissequa del *De Institutione*, che godette di un buon successo editoriale con quattro edizioni a distanza di pochi anni: fu infatti, ristampata, corretta, e ampliata nel 1547, e successivamente nel 1553, 1559, e 1560."⁸⁰ Dolce's work would later be published under the title *Ammaestramenti pregiatissimi che appartengono alla educatione honorevole, e virtuosa vita virginale, maritale, e vedovile* (1622) and in this publication, was converted back into a conduct manual by none other than Barezzi Barezzi, the Venetian printer who took so many liberties with Piccolomini's dialogue. Dolce's *Dialogo della institution delle donne* (1545), like Vives', is divided into three books according to marital state. The most recent edition of Vives by Charles Fantazzi, however, which does elaborate on the translations of his work, does not mention Dolce. Though the omission or lack of knowledge regarding his source does seem to be a result of neglect by the translator, others could equally argue that terming Dolce's reproduction as a "loose" translation, or "riscrittura peddissequa" is, in itself, a very loose observation. Dolce makes significant changes to his source text, and does so as he sees fit, switching anecdotes at will and removing a large part of Vives' entertaining digressions and vituperations against women and customs, while adding his own philosophical emphasis on pertinent subjects⁸¹. Vives' chapter 6, "On Virginity," is a prime example. Dolce uses his own material for this section, making perhaps his most interesting and pertinent claim for our investigations into biographies. In this chapter, Vives gives a history of chastity; why it has been praised, the tradition of its importance,

and a slew of questions about the silliness or stupidity of women. In one paragraph about girls who lose their virginity to foreign soldiers, he asks questions such as, “What will be the sorrow of her relatives when they sense that they are all dishonored because of the base conduct of one girl? What will be their grief? What tears will be shed by parents and those who nurtured her? Are these the joys with which you repay them in return for all their anxieties and labors? Is this the reward for your upbringing?”⁸² He outlines how chastity is the primary virtue of a woman, and if found lacking in her, leaves her with nothing: “in femina questa vale per ogni altra eccellentia.”⁸³ He later states that without chastity she is neither woman nor alive: “chi si lascia di suo honor privare, Ne Donna è più, ne viva.” This statement is not new, nor unique, but what is unique to Dolce is his explanation as to why this virtue is more important for women than men. He is one of the only authors in the *querelle* debate to acknowledge the incongruity of the call to chastity for women alone, and who actually attempts to justify it. He does so by first noting a common anecdote that appears in many *querelle* writings, in which a girl is assassinated by her brothers for being pregnant out of wedlock. Dolce elaborates on why such extreme actions are pardonable and even necessary, given the importance of female chastity as the predominant and necessary virtue of the female sex, in contrast to the male sex, whose societal and professional requirements are far more numerous:

Perciò che all'huomo sono insieme necessarie molte cose: come sarebbe a dire prudentia, eloquentia, peritia di governar Repubblica, ingegno, memoria, arte ed industria di regger la vita, giustitia, liberalità, magnanimità, ed altre parti, le quali sarebbe troppo lungo a raccontar tutte. Di queste se alcuna gli manca, non è da esser ripreso: pure, che alcune vene habbia. Ma nella Donna non si ricerca o profonda eloquentia, o sottile ingegno, o esquisita prudentia, o arte de vivere, o amministration di Repubblica, o Giustitia, o altro, fuori che la Castità. La quale in lei non si trovando, è come se mancassero all'huomo tutte le sopradette virtù.⁸⁴

A man, therefore, has many necessary virtues by which he governs, leads, and works in the public arena. A woman, on the other hand, has no need of such qualities; she needs only chastity, upon which the patriarchal system is based. Countless *querelle* authors note that if female chastity is in question, so therefore is the lineage of her children, thereby causing the family line to be placed under a veil of suspicion. Chastity is, then, the primary focus of all conduct manuals.

The influence of Dolce's text, despite its plagiaristic origins, was immense, attested to by the number of copies printed in 1622⁸⁵. It is a conduct manual "par excellence" in that it addresses every aspect of life, from maintaining cleanliness habits, to treatment of a husband, to adornment, to public behavior and beyond. It will be a primary text of comparison in the chapters that follow, and will help demonstrate how biographies differed from or followed the prescribed behavior outlined by Dolce.⁸⁶

The majority of the *querelle* literature on women from the Middle Ages and Renaissance does not serve as a historical representation of the female reality. The misogynists and the defenders dealt primarily in generalities and platitudes. For the most part, the misogynists purport that women are physically weaker, inconstant and more prone to licentious behavior than men, less active in the civic sphere, do not give semen or essence of life to their offspring, and are petty, vain, and indiscreet. The defenders address all of these issues in a similar manner, by quoting the ancient philosophers and using their rhetoric to refute the claims against women. Some more courageous authors like Goggio use more modern and practical thought in their arguments, but for the most part the *querelle* becomes itself a monumental corpus by which the stereotypes are refuted with examples of women who defy those stereotypes, women who were entirely

inimitable. The Virgin Mary is the final defender, representing the divine confirmation of the equality, or as is sometimes argued, superiority of women.

A few conduct manuals, however, escaped the ebb and flow of literary action and reaction.⁸⁷ Written with specific and practical purposes, one in particular offers more realistic glimpses into the lives of Renaissance women, detailing what was expected from them on a daily basis, in addition to the more general requirements of chastity and purity: *Ginipedia Overo Avvertimenti Civili per Donna Nobile* (1631). Composed by Vincenzo Nolfi, a nobleman from Fano, the *Ginipedia* was written for his future wife, whose upbringing in a convent necessitated a thorough education in the social world outside the convent. Rather than detailing the expected life of a saintly woman, the *Ginipedia* is much more concerned with demonstrations of nobility than it is with demonstrations of female submission, and whereas most conduct manuals were composed for a larger audience, this work has an audience of one.⁸⁸ Gone are the ideals of perfection, of private space for women, of religious devotion, and the expectation that a woman somehow embody the virtues of every ancient woman praised in all of Renaissance literature, or live her life as if in a cloister. His focus is purely self-motivated. He wants to train his wife in the way of the Roman nobility in order that she bring honor to his house and family name. This unique perspective contributes much to the genre of the conduct manual, offering a realistic interpretation of what was expected of noblewomen in the Renaissance, devoid of philosophical musings regarding the virtue of the female sex.

Whereas the majority of conduct manuals were composed with religious devotion, and with numerous biblical references, Nolfi never quotes the Bible. He even tells Ippolita that discussions of faith are not fitting to the female sex: "Non cercherete mai

quindi voler investigare i divini misterii della nostra fede, o disputar di quelli, poiche ciò non conviene a vostro stato.”⁸⁹ His reasons for denying her the possibility of discussing matters related to Christian faith do not necessary pertain only to her, however, but perhaps to himself as well. He quotes from Ariosto a passage on the saintly clothes of "faith", clothes which will become "brutta" with the smallest speck or stain, and which should remain within the jurisdiction of the "saggie scuole della Theologia."

For Nolfi, church is projected as merely a social space within whose boundaries the behavior of women should be more circumspect. He does write that recited prayers (*orazioni*) are the armor of the female sex, but the chapter dedicated to attending church is much more concerned with behavior appropriate to and demonstrative of her social status, than with any religious devotion. This is not to say that his expectations for Ippolita are diminished; they are quite numerous but with a different emphasis on the female ideal. Leaving religion aside to be pondered by theologians, Nolfi addresses more secular themes in his manual, such as aspects of daily life, appropriate topics of conversation within any given scenario (and he gives many scenarios), dress, beauty, dancing, drinking, table manners, and various duties of daily life such as the governance of her house, visiting the sick, receiving guests, etc. His instructions and allusions to tradition leave the modern reader reeling – from the use of manicotti (506) to the symbolism and idealization of the chin (312), to the order in which a woman should enter into a carriage (153), Nolfi seems to address every possible component, social, historical, and theoretical.

As opposed to most Renaissance conduct manuals, Nolfi grants his future wife many allowances. Manuals such as Pietro Belmonte's *Institutione della sposa*, for

example, place intense restrictions on public appearances, as Helena Sanson notes:

"Questa modestia fra le mura di casa e in casa d'altri doveva essere ancora più fermamente adottata fuori dalla dimora domestica. Laudomia deve uscire raramente e comunque non da sola: è un momento per il quale sembra quasi doversi preparare per una battaglia in cui affrontare un nemico."⁹⁰ Nolfi's wife, in contrast, is allowed, actually encouraged, to attend public festivities such as masquerade balls, provided she avoid the more colorful (smelly, hot and smoky) spots which are not "convenevoli alla conditione di ben nate Dame."⁹¹ Should she dress up, she should choose a beautiful costume, not a "maschera schifa, ò di brutta figura", as such attire is not fitting for a noblewoman.⁹²

Dancing is encouraged, so that she may enjoy some freedom: "goder così quella libertà, che il tempo, il luogo, e l'occasione vi concede, havendo però del continuo avanti gli occhi quella modestia honestà, che dee sempre accompagnare ogni Gentildonna ben costumata."⁹³ This concept of freedom (libertà) is not one we find in other conduct manuals (including those directed toward the nobility). It is a provisional one, bound by the "conditione" of a noble woman, and confined to the activities of dances and carnivals. Its mere presence, however, leads one to question whether or not the more severe restrictions placed upon women in the other more widely read conduct manuals were truly the universal expectations of most noble women.

His wife is also expected to possess a great amount of intelligence and wit, despite his frequent references to the inferiority of the female intellect.⁹⁴ She is expected to be well-educated and knowledgeable in all literary and artistic subjects, though many limitations of her mental faculties are presumed, such as inferior knowledge of the sciences, and apparently, charades: "come vi ho detto, & ultimamente si e' posto

in'prattica quello di rappresentar una favola, ovvero Historia nota solamente co i cenni, senza mai far parola, ma' questo richiede intelletti elevati, e troppo fastidioso riuscirebbe a gl'ingegni delle Dame.”⁹⁵ He even mentions academy nights, where academic discussions took place, specifically planned to include female participation. He of course intimates that the information presented and discussed is simplified according to female limitations, but the participation by women in these events is notable.⁹⁶

Among the other qualities he references are *purità, gravità, gratia, affabilità, allegrezza, taciturnità* and, on occasion, *sobrietà, fecondità, pietà, honestà, pudicitia, modestà, and leggierezza*.⁹⁷ Her behavior, therefore, was expected to be varied depending on the occasion. The most enlightening section of Nolfi's manual, however, is his section dedicated to Laudomia's future participation in salon games; he describes each game in minute detail, prescribing his wife's possible responses in any given instance of each game. In fact, Nolfi dedicates almost a quarter of his work (132/597 pages) to how his future wife should engage in salon games such as the Gioco dell'Oroscopo, the Gioco dell'Oracolo, the Gioco delle Trasmutationi, the Gioco dell'Amore, and the Gioco delle Arti.⁹⁸ Interspersed throughout and following each game's instructions, Nolfi addresses the concept, common to all games, of giving "i pegni" in which a participant would be forced to give the master of ceremonies a personal item, usually of their choice. The symbolism of such an act was prodigious, as made evident by Nolfi's detailed description of the various pegni that could be offered and what they would represent, both for the giver and the receiver. A woman should give, for example, items such as gloves, fans, ribbons, rings, flowers, fans, and the like – items therefore viewed to possess noble attributes, as opposed to barrettes or hankerchiefs,

which were too close to the less clean parts of the body and therefore, more profane "pare che porti sempre seco qualche schifezza."⁹⁹ The master of ceremonies also had the choice to ask a question instead of requesting a "pegno": "e queste consistono o' nel rispondere a qualche quesito, ovvero nell'eseguire qualche comandamento, e quindi si suol dire, a chi ha da riscuotere il pegno, volete, che io vi domandi, o che io vi comandi?"¹⁰⁰ If Laudomia should be issuing a command, she should be careful not to offend the person to whom the command is directed: "Intorno al comandare, due cose dovrete principalmente avvertire, l'una di non importare mai cosa, che voi stimiate non doversi far volentieri, l'altra, che il vostro comandamento, non solo giunga grato a chi dee eseguirlo, ma dilettevole anche a tutti della veggia."¹⁰¹ Decorum was always of tantamount importance in the playing of such games; telling someone to run around the room shouting the song of the chimney sweeper, or asking someone to kiss the ground were not considered noble commands: "Deesi anche la persona guardare da certi comandamento, che sono fuori de' termini del trattar nobile, e che tendono molto del plebaico, e del vile, nel cui errore cadono bene spesso alcune poco esperte, le quali havendo da imporre qualche penitenza, comanderanno, che per la stanza si vada gridando il verso dello spazzacammino, che si baci la terra,..."¹⁰² He reiterates that Laudomia should take great care not to offend or embarrass as many women were wont to do: "nelle penitenze non si dee comandare, ne' domandar mai cosa, che possa risultare in occulta, o' palese offesa di chi che sia, ne' che possa generar rossore in alcuno, che si trovi presente, e percio' io non ho saputo lodar punto quella sorte di penitenza, che suol esser tanto comune tra di voi Donne."¹⁰³

Nolfi offers countless examples of the discussions that occur while playing games, and takes great care to make sure that Ippolita be well prepared to engage in such activity, and be knowledgeable of every subject in order to discuss it in detail.¹⁰⁴ He poses sample questions that might be directed to her, such as in the game of "Vestir Amore", "why is love always depicted naked?," and details the myriad of responses that would be acceptable to such a question, such as "that it makes love appear more innocent", "that it shows his courage", "that he is ready to swim in the ocean if need arises, instead of flitting around in the air", and so on. These examples cover three pages and are among his more simple explanations of possible responses in any given game.¹⁰⁵

It is clear by such thorough treatments of salon games, that women were viewed to be very capable of engaging in intellectual conversations and likewise expected to have a very thorough background of training in all subjects. The minute attention to detail that Nolfi employs while describing salon games and all the possible directions they may take, also reveals to what degree these games contributed to or detracted from the public opinion of a woman. It was in the act of playing these games that a woman demonstrated her intelligence, her nobility, her restraint, her patience, her joviality - in more sweeping terms, her social graces.

Nolfi intimates that these social graces were not common among the female elite; he takes great pains to remind Ippolita to avoid behaving like the other women in society. He often gives examples of what not to do, rather than of what to do, a narrative habit that is perhaps indicative of the lack of decorum among the female nobility, and which alludes to the possibility that behavior as advocated by conduct manuals and biographies of the time was not as common as the modern reader might think. But his admonitions

nowhere attain the excessive limitations placed upon women in most conduct manuals or biographies. Ippolita is encouraged to attend public festivities, even carnivals. The rules of decorum placed upon Ippolita during such occasions are therefore more bound by her female "conditione," a condition that necessitates honorable female comportment. If she wears a mask, it should be beautiful. When attending public festivities, she should avoid lowly places. If she is dressed as a peasant girl, she should not imitate peasant behavior. She is even given permission to dance, with an acknowledgment by Nolfi that she too should be permitted a little freedom.¹⁰⁶ These allowances are surprising, as such activity is abhorred by almost all other authors of conduct manuals and biographies.

This is the primary difference between Nolfi and his contemporaries; whereas the female subjects of most conduct manuals are bound to moral perfection, Nolfi's future wife is bound only by her "conditione", one that allows her certain freedoms:

"nell'andare, e nel parlare non conviene esser dissimile dalla propria conditione, e' ben vero, che nel modo del ballare, e in quel tratto, che esclude il sussego debito alla nascita, e allo stato, non mi dispiace, che siano da voi imitate, per godere così quella libertà, che il tempo, il luogo e l'occasione vi concede."¹⁰⁷

Nolfi uses this word "conditione" quite frequently, and noticeably with the same frequency that other authors of biographies and conduct manuals use the ubiquitous term "modestà." Whereas modestà is a more binding term, indicating universally circumscribed behavior, dictated by specific actions and comportment of a female at all times, Nolfi's "conditione" instead, is a more fluid term, one that adapts to each occasion as long as the behavior remains appropriate to her social status. His work, then, offers what no other conduct manual from the Renaissance does: a prescriptive freedom and in-

depth instructions for each social situation including an indication of the freedom allowed during such an occasion.

As is the case with most Renaissance conduct manuals, Nolfi includes a list of famous women who have excelled in various fields such as poetry, war, art, literature, and theology. But he avoids, for the most part, the topos of female exception, whereby the woman and her talents are represented as a deviation from the norm. In fact, in the premise to his rather short list of illustrious and accomplished women, he argues in Platonic fashion for the equality of the female soul and intellect, citing the societal limitations and educational constraints placed upon women as the impediment to female accomplishment. He observes that females are more given to domestic duties, but also observes with alacrity that should females be educated in public duties and affairs, they would be just as likely to succeed and make notable progress in any field:

Stimano alcuni, che gli esercitii proprii delle Donne siano gli aghi, i fusi, e il governo della Casa, e in ciò' veramente non s'ingannano punto, ma non perciò vengono già loro così strettamente limitate quest'opere dalla Natura, che elle non habbiano perfettione tale nell'animo, e attitudine nel corpo da potere con eguale, o' poco minore virtù de gli huomini trattare, e soprastare anche all'opere virili, e di supremo affare, poscia che ha l'anima loro da Dio ricevute l'istesse dispositioni, e i medesimi habiti, che quelle de gli huomini, e perciò sono elleno così atte la perfetta felicità' humana acquistare, che nell'operare dell'animo secondo la virtù consiste, come sono gli huomini stessi più saggi; E se ciò per l'ordinario non apparisce, accade perche esse per la propria modestia, e per l'istituzione de' loro parenti, solo a gli ufficii domestici, e familiari vengono applicate, e disposte, e in quei soli s'allevano, e si nudriscono; Che se a reggere, e governare le Città' in pace, a comandare, e condurre gli eserciti in guerra, a Filosofare, e poetare ne gli agi delle Scuole attendessero, chi negar vorrebbe, che non notabili progressi, eccellente, e gloriosa riuscita non facessero?¹⁰⁸

After more than 500 pages of instruction regarding the behavior conducive to a woman of her rank in society, such an affirmation presents us yet again with the paradox of the

female question. Its impact on modern scholarship is immense. Nolfi's words tempt one to question the research of seasoned scholars such as Joan Kelly-Gadol, and to respond to her famous question with an adamant, "Yes! Women did have a Renaissance – elite women, that is." Such a manual also calls into question the legitimacy of Renaissance biographies as true participants in historical writing, whose female protagonists are never praised for their behavior in public, rather for their desire to eschew public encounters and focus instead on the spiritual aspects of womanhood. Such a manual tells us, in contrast, that women of the elite *were*, in fact, expected to be participants in their social circles, and that their participation was scrutinized severely.

By the mid 1600s, biographies of noblewomen were taking the printing press by storm, putting the female sex in a place of venerated submission. This new genre did not participate in the *querelle*; it refuted it entirely. Nowhere are women represented as equal, let alone superior; their female role is presented according to the author's didactic purposes, intended to persuade the female reader to adopt similar traditional female qualities. The increase in female biographies presents a reactive response to the *querelle*, leaving behind the philosophical and academic considerations of female value and virtue in comparison with that of men, appealing rather to a wider female audience seeking a more simplistic idealization of what a Renaissance woman should be.

Male authorship, especially authorship by clergy, created its own paradox for biographies; rather than recording the life of a woman and the intricacies of a woman's life behind closed doors, biographies represented a fleeting glimpse into the female world, through the filtered windows of the Catholic church and the masculine gaze. The biographies do not explore traditional female roles of wife and mother, for example; these

aspects are largely neglected by the authors, many of them clergymen who were much more versed in the hagiographic genre. Thus the pendulum swings from the paradoxical nature of the *querelle*, to the opposite extreme, whereby female idealization conformed to a masculine and ecclesiastical perspective. As biographies were on the whole composed by an ecclesiastic or even the noblewoman's confessor, they are therefore dense with spiritual precepts for women, precepts that are devoid of any attempt to change the traditional role for women, but rather seek to solidify her place in the home, and as a spiritual column of strength serving to unify the family in Godly accord. From a modern perspective, one sees only women's relegation to the private spheres and the condemnation of any activity that would or could lead to their personal pleasure or leisure. Yet these biographies extol their protagonists to great heights, praising women for their faithfulness to the higher cause and the preservation of their families. They neither represent nor support any of the female sympathizers who assert equality as a thing to be grasped, nor do they give weight to the misogynistic literature, in which the female sex is denied any positive qualities. The biographies, in fact, render the *querelle* inert, emphasizing the positive attributes of the female sex as long as she maintains her proper position in society and in her family. The protagonists of Renaissance biographies are faithful, tireless promoters of the Catholic faith, obsequious orators of daily devotions and prayers, self sacrificing, self-abusing (at times), void of vanity or pomp, and seeking in all things to better the position of their family within both society's and God's eyes. For so doing, they are venerated and praised on levels equal to their sisters of the cloth, and even to the angels. The ensuing biographical investigation will seek to elucidate this

aspect of female biography and demonstrate how, for women, the Post-Tridentine influences supersede the instructional potential of the genre.

Notes

¹ For thorough treatments of this issue, see Ruth Kelso's still relevant *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance; Women in Italy, 1350-1650*, Rogers, Tinagli eds; and Pamela Benson's *The Invention of the Renaissance Woman: The Challenge of Female Independence in the Literature and Thought of Italy and England*, (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992). probably the most in depth analysis of the *querelle* to date.

² R.H. Bloch, "Medieval Misogyny," *Representations*. 20 (1987: 1-24) p. 1. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (New York, 1963), part 1, qu. 92; part 3, qu. 32

³ Aquinas, 6.

⁴ Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* 2.3 737a27-28 (Barnes, 1.1144). See Margaret King's Introduction to the *Other Voice* series, which succinctly describes both Aristotle's views concerning women, as well as the misogynist tradition as a whole.

⁵ *Republic*, 5.

⁶ www.liberliber.it/mediateca/libri/t/tasso/discorso_della_virtu_etc/pdf/discor_p.pdf.

Italics mine. Trans: Plato believes that the virtue of a man and of a woman, is the same virtue, and that if any difference exists, it is brought about by cultural practices, not by nature; he also desires women to be participants in affairs of the Republic and the military, just as men are. [. . .] But Aristotle was of a very different mind, because he believed left and right to be different not only because of cultural practices, but because of nature [. . .] for in the beginning of *Politica* Aristotle concludes, in contrast to Plato, that male virtue and female virtue are not the same, because male virtue is strength, whereas female virtue is purity. And as Gorgia preferred, silence is a female virtue as eloquence is a male virtue." Trans. Mine

⁷ "the opinion that the woman who is contained within the walls of the home is given higher praise, is one both cited and refuted by Plutarch in his work on the Illustrious Women; and

the esteemed writer can place his faith and lean on the ideas of famous past writers, because Thucydides gives preference to Aristotle, Plato to Plutarch.” Translation mine.

⁸ Boccaccio’s *Corbaccio*, for example, follows Juvenal’s denunciation of the use of make-up, the assertion of female as inconstant, and her licentious behavior. See Juvenal, *Satire* 6, 66, lines 95-99

⁹ Jane Barr, “The Influence of Saint Jerome on Medieval Attitudes to Women”, *After Eve*, Ed. Janet Martin Soskice (Collins Marshall Pickering, 1990). Reproduced with permissions at: www.womenpriests.org/theology/barr.asp.

¹⁰ Barr. www.womenpriests.org/theology/barr.asp.

¹¹ Jerome, Letter XXII. To Eustochium. 30.
www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.XXII.html.

¹² Barr. www.womenpriests.org/theology/barr.asp.

¹³ Christine de Pizan. *The Book of the City of Ladies*. (New York: Persea Books, 1998) 3-4. See also *Christine de Pizan. The book of the city of ladies*; translated and with an introduction and notes by Rosalind Brown-Grant (Penguin classics). London: Penguin, 1999. (xxxix, 283 p.) Rosalind Brown-Grant’s introduction provides an informative summary of the medieval attitudes toward women and discusses the use of her sources. See also, *Women and Writing in Early Europe: A Sourcebook By Caro Larrington*.

¹⁴ Boccaccio’s true intent behind the *Corbaccio* is still being debated among scholars, but I am of the opinion that his work represents an encyclopedic practice in the art of misogynist literature. Regardless of the author’s intent, however, the work purports a plethora of negative stereotypes regarding women and therefore belongs to the corpus of medieval misogynist texts.

¹⁵ Fahy, “Three Early Renaissance Treatises on Women,” *Italian Studies* 11 (1956:30-55) p. 31.

¹⁶ Luigi Tonelli, *L'amore nella poesia e nei trattati del rinascimento* (Florence: G.C. Sansoni, 1933) 298. "Il tratatello dell'elegantissimo abate fiorentino rimane, dunque, la più importante opera della precettistica rinascimentale, riguardante la bellezza muliebre; e anche la più sicura testimonianza del nuovo tipo estetico, ispirate bensì dal platonismo e dal petrarchismo." Translation mine.

¹⁷ Agnolo Firenzuola. Konrad Eisenbichler, and Jacqueline Murray, Ed. & Trans. *On the Beauty of Women*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992) xx.

¹⁸ Agnolo Firenzuola. Konrad Eisenbichler, and Jacqueline Murray xxiii.

¹⁹ Agnolo Firenzuola. Konrad Eisenbichler, and Jacqueline Murray 11. Italics mine.

²⁰ based upon the creation story narrated by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*.

²¹ Agnolo Firenzuola. Konrad Eisenbichler, and Jacqueline Murray, xxxii

²² The title is in Latin whereas the work itself is composed in Italian.

²³ See *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 92, a. I.

²⁴ For a detailed summary of Goggio's work, see Werner L. Gundersheimer, "Bartolommeo Goggio: A Feminist in Renaissance Ferrara." *Renaissance Quarterly* 33.2 (1980): pp. 175-200.

²⁵ See Gundersheimer's article, which promotes Goggio's genuine motives, based upon the assertion that the work was not commissioned, p. 184. Eisenbichler and Murray however, counter this opinion, noting that though the work was not commissioned, it is dedicated to his employer, Eleonora d'Aragona, and therefore calls to question his veritable intent.

²⁶ Kelso, 322.

²⁷ Kelly, Joan. *Women, History & Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

²⁸ Kelly-Gadol, “Women in the Renaissance and Renaissance historiography,” *Conceptual Frameworks for Studying Women’s History* (Bronxville, N.Y.: Sarah Lawrence College, 1976) 6.

²⁹ Torquato Tasso, *Prose filosofiche*, 2 vols. (Florence: Alceide Parenti, 1847), 2:371. Beatrice Collina refers to Tasso as perhaps the only author to formulate a theory of the *donna illustre*, a theory which supports the exceptional ideal for women of power.

³⁰ Tasso, 5.

³¹ Zarri, 106.

³² “Both a praise and a criticism, the subtle and insidious paradox always returns another image of woman, one without paradox. It allows the circumvention of what is declared too openly in the praise or the criticism, but also to challenge the commonplace perceptions of feminine virtue and vice upon which the long moralistic tradition has been based.” Translation mine. Francine Daenens, “Superiore perchè inferiore: il paradosso della superiorità della donna in alcuni trattati italiani del Cinquecento,” *Trasgressione tragica e norma domestica. Esempari di tipologie femminili dalla letteratura Europea*, ed. Vanna, pp. 11–49: pp. 21-22.

³³ Benson, 3.

³⁴ Daenens, 15: “If these texts had been undertaken merely to demonstrate rhetorical bravado, they certainly wouldn’t have provoke the intervention of the inquisitor, as instead is evident in the censory attitude of one of the speakers who interrupts Nicolò Granucci’s dialogue on the perfection of women by saying, “our father the Inquisitor does not watch such a subject being discussed or written about, unless it assigns women a secondary place, and abides by the authority of St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, where he says “Wives, submit to your husbands as to God.” Trans Mine.

³⁵ Rabil, 3.

³⁶ Ibid, 43. See Mark 12:25, and parallels: Matt. 22:30 and Luke 20:35-36

³⁷ Ibid, 48. Rabil notes that this is Rodriguez's primary argument for the superiority of women, and is most likely Agrippa's immediate source.

³⁸ Rabil, 63.

³⁹ Ian Maclean, *Renaissance Notion, The Renaissance Notion of Woman: A Study in the Fortunes of Scholasticism and Medical Science in European Intellectual Life* (Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press, 1980) 56; Linda Woodbridge, *Women and The English Renaissance*, 40. Woodbridge also comments on the paradoxical nature of his work.

⁴⁰ Moderata Fonte, Ed. & Trans., Virginia Cox. *The Worth of Women: Wherein Is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Their Superiority to Men*. (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1997). Print. Fonte's work admittedly has a much smaller publication than the other works listed, but the dialogue form contains many of the *topoi* present in other *querelle* authors of the time, and the author is a woman herself.

⁴¹ Benson. Benson's work is the most prominent and thoroughly researched book on the Italian *querelle* debate, and presents many thought provoking and well-researched insights into the *querelle* movement, or perhaps what she would call "inertia."

⁴² Benson, 2. Italics mine.

⁴³ For more on the presence of paradox in Renaissance literature, see Rosalie A. Cole, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton, 1966).

⁴⁴ The last of which was Giovanni Battista Modio's *Il convito ovvero il peso della moglie* (1554).

⁴⁵ Ruth Kelso notes this subversion as well: "If Piccolomini's intention was satiric, as some defenders claim, it might as well not have been, both in consideration of the typical character of its matter and of its later acceptance as a portrait of the ideal" (307).

⁴⁶ Alessandro Piccolomini, *Dialogo Dove Si Ragiona Della Bella Creanza Delle Donne* (Londra: S. Harding, 1750) 46. "little errors of youth" / "erring in old age with greater damage and shame, and to regret the youth that has passed in vain." Translation mine.

⁴⁷ Piccolomini, 46 & 45. Vives is not mentioned previously due to its composition in English, but it must be noted that it was translated into Italian in 1546 and 1561. Its popularity did not come close to that of Agrippa, or of its subsequent re-adaptations, or plagiarizations, as it were.

⁴⁸ Piccolomini, 44-45. "If she has not honesty, neither will any of her actions be appreciated or recognized as virtuous." Translation mine.

⁴⁹ "Se ben si tien coperta a gli huomini questa vanità, a Dio non si potrà già nascondere", 46.

⁵⁰ Piccolomini, 47. "I've told you before and will tell you again, that if it were possible, if would be wonderful to never commit the smallest of sins against God, instead, to live like a hermit amongst "our Fathers", and rosaries, and disciplines" Translation mine.

⁵¹ Piccolomini, 47. "It would be very good if you rarely left your room, if you kept vigils and observed the four days for fasting, looked down on everything, and fled every conversation, but not trusting yourself to be capable of such a task, I recommend that you enjoy your youthful years, while always preserving your [appearance of] modesty and purity" Translation mine.

⁵² "et era una cintura che puzzava d'urina valentemente, che penso che piu d'una volta fosse caduta dal capezzale nela conchetta." Ibid, 42. Translation mine.

⁵³ Piccolomini, 43. "Nobody can be perfect in every way." Raffaella's examples of such unsuccessful attempts are both ribald and comical, and are worthy of a casual and enjoyable perusing. Translation mine.

⁵⁴ Piccolomini, 45. "Therefore she should always be cautious that her every step or word, or act is full of that modesty that is so sought after in women" / "take advantage" / "others do not

realize that she did it purposefully [and] with some other feigned sign of purity.” Translation mine.

⁵⁵ Piccolomini, 47. “live without ever committing a sin until death” / “sarà buono ch’io ti parli in quel cambio della vita di qualche santo”: “it will be good to change the subject and speak of the life of some saint” Translation mine.

⁵⁶ Piccolomini, 47

⁵⁷ Piccolomini, p. 48. Pretending to desire her husband’s satisfaction, to care for him as best she knows how, his home, his duties and basic needs, and to his children, in everything she does, and if she cannot do it with her full heart, to at least pretend to do so. (Translation Mine)

⁵⁸ 4 Piccolomini, 49-51: “She can then purchase many more clothes, because as the husband witnesses her practicality and attentions to the rest of the home, he not only happily buys her clothing, but he frequently urges her to do so.” Translation Mine

⁵⁹ Piccolomini. “honor and blame do not consist in doing one thing or not doing another, but in making others believe that she does them. Translation Mine

⁶⁰ “it depends not on what she does or does not do, as I’ve already told you, but in making others believe thus.” Translation Mine

⁶¹ Piccolomini, 66. “You told me a short while ago that the husband and the home should be the first thing a woman should love in this world and now it appears that you desire the opposite, that is, that love for the lover should surpass everything.” / When it comes to husbands, it is sufficient to pretend to love them, and this is also sufficient for them.” Translation mine.

⁶² Piccolomini ,75. “reserving, however, in plain sight her modesty and purity, because as I told you, these outshine all other female virtues.” Translation mine.

⁶³ Piccolomini ,80; L’ostinato was the Prince of Salerno, Ferrante Sanseverino, 1507-1568 “Now I understand, and I would never have thought so on mine, because I thought love came from the soul and should be pure, at least that is what I heard one evening at a gathering for

one of the Intronati's games, by one who they call Garroso the obstinant, as I recall. What mistakes they make by inserting these ideas into the heads of the young, and you should know that he was joking, and take it from me, even though he acted with honesty and espoused honesty, what honesty did he really have? This is show it is: either believe me or don't."

⁶⁴ Piccolomini ,81

⁶⁵ Piccolomini ,*Istitutione Morale*, (Venetia: G. Ziletti, 1560) Ch 9, book 10.

⁶⁶ Piccolomini, p. IX.

⁶⁷ Piccolomini ,*Istitutione Morale*, 219. "Non solo non è necessario, che noi debbiam tor per moglie l'amata donna; anzi è cosa convenevole, che non si tolglia. Conciò sia che ad altro fine, e da miglior legge, impostoci, sia l'amare, che non si ordinaron le nostre nozze." Translation mine.

⁶⁸ Newbigin, L' *Alessandro* di Alessandro Piccolomini, 7. "il Piccolomini insiste nelle commedie sul matrimonio come conseguenza inevitabile dell'amore onesto."

⁶⁹ It is certainly true that it often happens that such loves become separated, while the other love, the love of beauty can often be found among those who are not husband and wife, but this occurs outside the boundaries of decency. And then, it is important to know that this mess only occurs out of error, because of the fault of men. . . that if marriage is not joined with the love of beauty, then such lovers should not pass beyond this love.

⁷⁰ Alessandro Piccolomini. *Gli Costumi Lodevoli Che a Nobile Gentildonne Si Convengono* (Venetia: appresso B. Barezzi, 1622). Barezzi includes many of the satirical anecdotes on the absurdity of a particular woman's gait, attire, etc, and preserves the references to women as "scempie."

⁷¹ Piccolomini, *Gli Costumi*, 9-10. "If, on the other hand, my ladies, you are in possession of such prudence, perspicacity, and temperance, as to keep and enjoy your lover (whom you have chosen) in such a way that no one in heaven or on earth will ever suspect you, as long as you

live, in this case, I tell you and promise you, that you cannot do anything more enjoyable and more worthy of a noblewoman, than this.” Translation mine.

⁷² Piccolomini, *Gli Costumi*, 262

⁷³ In Italian: Vestire; Foggio; Vesti; Portatura; Colori; Commodo; Ornamento di Testa; e di Faccia; Mani; Nettezza di Corpo; Conciatura di Testa; Scuffia; Ricci; Camicia; Gioie; e Collane; Guanti; Movimenti; Scegliere il Meglio (for viewing); Mani; Petto; Gamba; e Braccia; Accorta Honestà e Modestia; Governo di Casa; Dapocaggine; Vigilanza; Viver Quieto; Lavorare ; Illegibile; Conversatione; con Modestia, e honestà; Parlare; Fama; Prudenza; Benignità; Honore.

⁷⁴ For example: *La cura famigliare* (1542) di Sperone Speroni, scritto per la giovane Cornelia Cornaro; o *Uffizi della donna maritata* (1583) di Orazio Lombardelli.

⁷⁵ See Rita Belladonna, “Sperone Speroni and Alessandro Piccolomini on Justification” and p. 115-118 of Alberti.

⁷⁶ Alberti, 120.

⁷⁷ Alberti, 120.

⁷⁸ Fantazzi, 3.

⁷⁹ Vives, 14.

⁸⁰ Helena Sanson. *Donne, Precettistica E Lingua Nell'italia Del Cinquecento: Un Contributo Alla Storia Del Pensiero Linguistico* (Firenze: Accademia della Crusca, 2007) 17.

⁸¹ In Book three, on Widowhood, for example, Dolce omits Vives’ rather long but humorous depiction of the various women who either mourned their husbands too much or too little, replacing it with his own discourse on the comparative qualities of the virginal, married, and widowed state.

⁸² Vives, 83.

⁸³ Dolce, 34.

⁸⁴ Such an addition to Vives' text demonstrates that while a translation of *some* of Vives, this is also a work of original creation. Trans: "Many things are necessary for a man: prudence, eloquence, ability to govern a Republic, intelligence, memory, diligence and creativity in making a living, justice, liberality, magnanimity, and so on, it being impossible to list them all. If any of these qualities are found missing in him, he is not to be reprimanded as long as he has some of them. But in a woman qualities such as profound eloquence, refined intelligence, exquisite prudence, manner of living, running a Republic, executing justice, or any others, are not necessary; only Chastity. If this virtue not be present in a woman, it is as if all the above mentioned virtues are lacking in a man."

⁸⁵ Fantazzi notes the Italian translation of Vives by Pietro Lauro of Modena in 1546, but this edition's influence in publication is not comparable to that of Dolce's. See p 32 of Fantazzi's introduction.

⁸⁶ I will only reference Vives if and when he provides examples that are not found in Dolce.

⁸⁷ Such as Annibal Guasco's *Ragionamenti per sua figlia* (1586). I recommend Peggy Osborn's modern critical edition: *Discourse to Lady Lavinia, His Daughter: Concerning the Manner in Which She Should Conduct Herself When Going to Court As Lady-in-Waiting to the Most Serene Infanta, Lady Caterina, Duchess of Savoy*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁸⁸ Vincenzo Nolfi. *Ginipedia, Ò Vero Auuertimenti Ciuili Per Donna Nobile*. (Heredi di Gio. Guerigli: Venetia, 1631). He does, however, in his final chapter, make a comment that if his work should fall into the hands of others, his readers should be forgiving, and cognizant of his intended audience, his wife. Another conduct manual intentionally written for one person, is Pietro Belmonte's *Institutione della sposa*.

⁸⁹ Nolfi, 172.

⁹⁰ *Inst.*, p. 30.

⁹¹ Nolfi, 563.

⁹² Nolfi, 564.

⁹³ Nolfi, 564.

⁹⁴ Nolfi, 70, 481, 232, 123.

⁹⁵ Nolfi, 509, 480.

⁹⁶ Nolfi, 552.

⁹⁷ Nolfi, 147, 147, 222, 222, 180, 379, 177, 171, 392, 393, 206, respectively.

⁹⁸ Nolfi, 412, 420-424, 424-432, 432-441, 441-446, respectively.

⁹⁹ Nolfi, 448. Many women went long periods without washing their hair, which could explain why accouterments relating to the head were less appreciated.

¹⁰⁰ “which consists of responding to some question, or even obeying a command, and therefore, it is often said to who is required to give a “pegno”, “would you like me to ask you or command you?” Translation Mine

¹⁰¹ Nolfi, 449. When commanding, there are two things you principally need to be careful of, one is to never issue a command that will not be followed willingly, the other, that your command is not only pleasing to who has to follow it, but enjoyable to all those at the party” Translation Mine

¹⁰² Nolfi, 451.

¹⁰³ Nolfi, 452. You should not command nor request anything that could result in offending someone either secretly or openly, nor anything that would make anyone present blush, and thus I cannot praise the types of *penitenze* that so commonly occur among you women. Trans mine.

¹⁰⁴ Nolfi, 470.

¹⁰⁵ Nolfi, 460-462. His discussions of how to respond to whether painting or sculpture is more admirable or which profession is nobler, for example, are much more complex in their prescribed responses. See Nolfi, 473-477, 472-480, respectively.

¹⁰⁶ Nolfi, 564.

¹⁰⁷ Nolfi, 564. When speaking and walking, your actions should not be unfitting your social position. Dancing, if done in such a way as is fitting your superior birth and social standing, will not displease me, so that you may also engage in such activities, in order to enjoy such freedom that the time, the place, and the occasion allows.

¹⁰⁸ Nolfi, 572-573. Some maintain that the duties proper to a woman are the needle and thread and governance of the home, and in such belief they are not deceived, but they are not therefore strictly limited to these activities by Nature, as if they do not possess such perfection of the soul, and disposition of the body to be able to perform and excel in works of masculine nature with equal or only slightly lesser ability than men. Since woman has received a soul with the same disposition and the same habits as men, she is thus able to acquire perfect human happiness, which consists in the soul working according to virtue as well as the wisest men. And if she does not ordinarily show this, it is only because of her modesty, or as a result of the formation given her by her parents, who raised her and educated her only for domestic and family affairs. For who is to say that if they were to rule and govern cities, to command and lead armies in war, to philosophize, to write and study poetry leisurely in the great schools of old, she would not make notable progress, and have excellent and glorious success?

Chapter 3

Sabadino degli Arienti's *Gynevera delle clare donne* and *Vita di Anna Sforza*: Courtly Ideals and Veiled Admonishment

The majority of Italian female biographies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were written by clerics of the Catholic Church, intent on displaying lives worthy of imitation by their female readers. There were a few exceptions to this standard of authorship, however, such as the biographical works by Sabadino degli Arienti, court secretary to the Bentivoglio family, and *La Vita di Donna Olimpia Maidalchini* (1666) by Gregori Leti, satirist writer and publisher. Arienti, author of *Gynevera delle Clare Donne* (1493) and *La Vita di Anna Sforza* (1500) was employed by both the Bentivoglio and Este courts as a secretary and *letterato*, thus his works embrace the Signoria construct and emphasize the prestige of the family, whereas Leti's work is full of humorous criticism of both the Catholic church and Olimpia Maidalchini, sister-in-law to the pope (known as "la papessa"). As a result of the authors' professions, their biographies do not fit thematically into the body of female biographical work because their primary concern was not with exemplum. These works serve, instead, as bookends to the rest of the female biographies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which adhere to the traditional standards of didactic life writing. Thus the first focus of our journey into female biography in the 16th and 17th centuries, is an exception to the norm.

Sabadino degli Arienti was a prolific writer and correspondent with many prestigious families, but the bulk of his service was to the Bentivoglio court in Bologna, where he served from his youth until the family was ousted from the city in 1506, at which point he took up service in the prestigious Este court, with Isabella D'Este as his

main benefactor.¹ Arienti's *Vita di Anna Sforza* (1500) is one of the first female biographies in Renaissance Italy, only one of a few that, before the 1600s, deal with the life of one secular woman. Compendia of brief biographies and other life writing, such as eulogies and hagiographies, were much more commonly published.

A decade before this, Sabadino wrote *Gynevera delle clare donne*, a compendium of female biographies. This genre was made famous by Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris*, which was then imitated repeatedly throughout the following centuries. But Arienti's *Gynevera delle clare donne* is unique and deserves its place in our study because Arienti's vocation as a court letterato greatly alters his intention for the work, which therefore deviates considerably from the standard of exemplum literature. Analyzing these deviations as well as the principal themes of the *Gynevera* will also help us to better identify the recurrence of such ideas in his *Vita di Anna Sforza* that might not otherwise be as apparent.

Unlike most female compendium works that treated female subjects of ancient Greece and Rome, Arienti's *Gynevera delle clare donne* focuses on women of the recent past, even including a biography of his own wife. Sharon Jansen asserts that the title of the work gives the indication that it is a response to Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris*, as the Greek noun, "gyne", means "woman," and the Latin adjective *vera* means "true."² Jansen therefore interprets Arienti's work to be a challenge to Boccaccio's virile heroines of the past, instead praising *contemporary* and *real* women as his subjects, who retain their female qualities as they rule. In fact, twenty-six of Arienti's thirty-two biographies are of women from the fifteenth-century, many of whom at one point served as regents in their husband's absences. Though Jansen may be not be incorrect in her assertion, close

studies of his two works reveal, more than a challenge to his predecessor, an attempt to set forth a female ideal within the Signoria construct, for which contemporary (and real) women were a necessary subject choice. But the *Gynevera* also presents the reader with a major dilemma: it begins with a dedication to and biography of a woman who was *not* an ideal example to her contemporaries, and who was blamed for her family's entire demise: Ginevra Sforza, whose name seems especially evoked by the book's title. In fact, in the first printed edition of the *Gynevera* (1888), 300 years after the original manuscripts were drafted, the editor Corrado Ricci prefaces the work with what is essentially a counter-biography of Ginevra. This brief life sketch details her perfidious nature and inclination to dominance, and contributes to the growing representation of Ginevra as a villainous tyrant.

This study will attempt to demonstrate that though the Bentivoglio family had not yet met its ruin at the time of composition, Arienti was nevertheless aware of Ginevra's shortcomings (those so well documented by Ricci) and therefore imbeds within his text a constant allusion to them while simultaneously setting forth an image of the ideal Signoria. We will then place Arienti's *Vita di Anna Sforza* into its proper context, as a biography that bridges the gap between hagiography and female biography, but that will be forever set apart from its counterparts because of the political agenda of its author, an agenda made so clear in the *Gynevera*.

The Bentivoglio family ruled Bologna from 1401 to 1506, during which time the city experienced peace and prosperity; the university was in ascent, and unrivaled architecture was erected around the city. Ginevra Sforza Bentivoglio, wife of the most powerful ruler in the family, Giovanni Bentivoglio, was known during these peaceful

years of her family's dominance as the "dama" of Bologna. But as her husband persisted in his attempts to circumvent the traditional oligarchic structure of diplomacy long cultivated by the Bentivoglio branches, she and her husband would eventually become known as tyrants rather than Signori. Ginevra was reputed by some to be an avaricious and cruel manipulator of power with a proclivity for lavishness, by others an intelligent, generous, and reserved woman, well versed in diplomacy. The true reality of her life and person is nebulous, however, largely due to these varying accounts and the skewed perspectives of those who provided such accounts.³

The *Gynevera delle clare donne* is a compendium of female biographies originally penned in 1488 for Ginevra and her court, which includes a biography in her honor that seems, at first glance, to be quite complimentary.⁴ But for those aware of her reputation in history, and certainly those who first read Corrado Ricci's preface to the first printed edition of the work (1888), so full of invectives against Ginevra, Arienti's following dedicatory biography seems only forced affectation. In his preface Corrado Ricci's brief life sketch villainizes her to such a degree that any of the laudatory attributes found in Sabadino's following biography are rendered inert; and because his edition of *Gynevera delle clare donne* is still the only printed edition available, any modern reader who chooses to read Sabadino's work is by necessity first faced with Ricci's scathing preface.

A summary of Ricci's derision is necessary at this point, because by reading his description of Ginevra, we begin to understand many aspects of the *Gynevera* that we otherwise might not. Ricci states that Arienti's praises of Ginevra "fanno temere assai della sua sincerità", and that while he was writing her praises, Ginevra "s'abbandonava

alle più spietate crudeltà!”⁵ Ricci thus makes the point that Sabadino’s work is full of empty acclamation, an assertion for which he provides ample historical support, detailing for instance Ginevra’s lavish nuptial festivities, which apparently incurred great criticism by the *bolognese* people, despite the fact that she was only 12 years of age, and therefore was perhaps innocent of the judgement bestowed upon her. These festivities were so excessive, the church of San Petronio closed its doors to the procession, which was then forced to hold the ceremony in another church. A contemporary account of the wedding festivities attests to this fact, noting that that several buildings were destroyed in order to widen the streets for the procession.⁶ Ricci then asserts that the young bride soon showed herself to be anything but the ideal Renaissance woman: “non tardò troppo a manifestare un’indole irrequieta, ed avida di ricchezze senza misura e di lotte, la quale alla prima ora di timore e di sgomento doveva degenerare in ferocia.”⁷

Ginevra and Giovanni would have many children, as evidenced in Lorenzo Costa’s 1488 fresco of the family in San Giacomo Maggiore, a painting Ricci references in his preface (see appendix A). The work was commissioned, according to Ricci, as a “ringraziamento per aver scampato il pericolo della congiura ordita dalla famiglia Malvezzi,” a conspiracy that initiated many subsequent years of civic unrest, more conspiracies, and the family’s eventual ousting by Cesare Borgia and Pope Julius II. While describing the painting, Ricci observes that Giovanni “ha un volto poco esprimente, che ben ritrae l’indole sua senza energia”, while Ginevra’s portrait instead reveals “la risolutezza e [. . .] la tristezza dell’anima sua.”⁸ Of her 11 children he says, “sono tutti volti brutti e antipatici col naso rincagnato, con le manescelle pronunciatissime e le labbra troppo curve.”⁹ Ricci, like many Bolognese, believed her

children were an extension of her evil nature, noting that as the years went by, “s’accorse del malcontento che serpeggiava fra il popolo, e temette le congiure dei nemici, ruppe il freno alla sua ira sanguinaria e superstiziosa, e spinse gli stessi suoi figli a vendetta perfidissime.”¹⁰ Ginevra’s daughter Francesca, in fact, was believed to have poisoned her husband, Galeotto Manfredi of Faenza, in May of 1488, only 4 months prior to the completion of the painting. History tells us that Giovanni had to go personally to Faenza in order to pacify Francesca’s subjects, who were so incensed they imprisoned him for a brief period.¹¹ Atrocities carried out by Ginevra’s sons can also be found in contemporary historical accounts, her sons Annibale and Ermetes receiving the majority of blame.¹²

In Ricci’s invective against Ginevra, he cites many contemporary historians and poets who documented her power, control, and tactics of revenge, such as Paolo Giovio, Cherubino Ghirardacci, and a Bolognese diarist, Gaspare Nadi. While Giovio emphasized her pride and vindictive nature, noting that she was prone to ordering violent acts of revenge, Ghirardacci highlighted her influence over her husband, who would later blame her for the fall of the Bentivoglio family. Nadi merely recounted the facts as they occurred, such as the wedding festivities, and occasional public hangings or burnings; he writes that she ordered the execution of a woman said to have harmed the Bentivoglio family (and who was consequently burned at the stake), and later mentions a commoner who was hanged for killing one of Ginevra’s friends. Ricci uses this as confirmational support that Ginevra eschewed justice in the pursuit of vengeance. He writes, “Per tal modo Ginevra si sostituiva al magistrato della giustizia. Voleva; e ciò ch’essa voleva, Giovanni era costretto a permettere.”¹³ That public hangings and burnings took place is

not uncommon to Renaissance Bologna, but the root of Ricci's displeasure lies in the lack of judicial involvement by the city's magistrates, as neither victim received a trial. It is these actions that reveal why Pope Alexander VI would eventually label Giovanni a "tiranno" and would, years later, run them out of Bologna.¹⁴

In an attempt to solidify his readers' opinion of Ginevra, Ricci concludes his account of Ginevra by reminding his readers not to be swayed by the biography that follows because other historical accounts confirm his own: "Ma perché la sua parola non acquisti un po' di fede allorchè dipinge Ginevra, restano in compenso altri scritti, i quali provano come il ritratto che abbiám fatto di lei non sia per nulla esagerato."¹⁵ We must not forget, nor does Ricci let us forget, that Arienti was a letterato of the Bentivoglio court. In an obvious effort to encourage the reader to read Ginevra's biography with suspicion, he states, "Non c'è che dire: Sabadino conosceva perfettamente l'arte del cortigiano!"¹⁶ Later, while recounting the end of the Bentivoglio era, he adds: "Così finì la gloria di Ginevra e della casa bentivolesca. Che cosa pensasse di tutto ciò Sabadino degli Arienti non sappiamo. Egli si trovava già a Ferrara ad adulare nuovi padroni e nuovi protettori."¹⁷

Reading Arienti's brief 8-page biography of Ginevra following this preface thus proves to be both amusing, daunting, and confusing. One searches for Ricci's Ginevra behind every false note of adulation; obvious gaps appear in the lack of details or anecdotes, and in the seemingly obvious diversions from her character. The readers cannot, despite their best intentions, undo the image created in their minds of a Ginevra whose cruelty eventually caused her family's ruin and the dismantling of the palace she had so carefully planned and constructed.¹⁸ Arienti's original and intended readers, of

course, would not have been subject to Ricci's influence; nonetheless, an investigation into the style and lexicon employed by Arienti in Ginevra's biography demonstrates that Arienti's biography does in fact resound with false notes when compared with the 33 biographies that follow, and that allusions to her less-than-exemplary character are evident *even* to those who have not first read Ricci's introduction.

Arienti begins his biography of Ginevra by outlining the purpose of the work, which is to exalt the memory of famous women and their deeds, as well as to glorify the female sex. The first indication that Arienti is less than enthused about extolling his protagonist is in his choice of words when doing so. In his biography of and to Ginevra, he tells her that women past and present "gridano: Gynevera, Gynevera, tuo odorifero nome." These women do not sing her name, nor praise it, they cry out. Nor do they use a common adjective for her name, such as *dolce*, *glorioso*, *splendido*, or *onorabile*, rather *odorifero*, an adjective with both positive and negative connotations. Arienti then writes that Ginevra was created in Heaven, which first created her with chaste beauty full of singular grace, prudence and gentility of manner: "prima li Cieli te hano creata de caste beleze piene di gratia singulare, prudente et costumate." The adverb "prima" here subtly implies a "dopo"- again, one cannot help but wonder if Arienti is alluding to the fact that though she was first created so, she turned out to be anything but, as time went on. Thus far, however, these indicators would likely not be noticeable to a reader who had not first been met with Ricci's counter-protagonist.

But our second point, that Ginevra's praise lacks any solid content, is more discernable. Arienti spends the majority of her biography describing her family members, most notably the military exploits of her father and husband. This section, which

continues for an entire page, creates a sizeable digression from the biographical subject before her praise has even begun. The next three pages are filled with brief descriptions of her children, including their birth order and other cursory information such as whom they married, where they lived, etc. Ginevra's biography, in fact, is marked with a pointed avoidance of any factual or anecdotal content relating to her own life as the "dama" of Bologna. She is lauded merely for her familial connections and the actions of her relatives. Her admirable traits are almost left out in the literary cold; even when Arienti does begin to praise her, which he does on the second-to-last page of her biography, he does so quickly, using encomiastic platitudes, devoid of specific references or events. He uses empty and ubiquitous adjectives such as "costumata," or "prudente," and descriptive nouns both generic and mundane such as "virtute," "magnifico aspetto," "mansuetudine," "gratia," "affabilita," and "pietate." He does not offer specific actions that would demonstrate these qualities as he does with the praise of Ginevra's father and husband, which is direct, factual, and penned with very much less artistic flair.¹⁹

The only act for which Ginevra eventually receives any acclaim is that she had many children. It is apparently the one thing she physically *did* that Arienti deems worthy of mentioning and it must be reiterated that she *was* quite remarkable in this. She bore 16 children to her 2nd husband, Giovanni Bentivoglio. Considering that she married her second husband in 1464, when she was 24, and that she was only 43 at the time of Arienti's biography, one deduces that she gave birth to a child every year and a half over the span of 20 years, a result of her "fecundo ventre."²⁰ She lost 5 of these children, a loss that, according to Arienti, strengthens her ties to heaven: "O quanto questo a ti sia celeste et divina gratia, per che tu puoi dire havere già' la dextra mano nel regno del cielo!"²¹

Her heavenly ties, therefore, are not actually a result of her own merit. His comment is, in effect, another creative device that indirectly praises the subject, while pointedly avoiding any concrete praise of her own actions, demonstrating either the apparent lack of knowledge of Ginevra's character, or, on the other hand, a deep knowledge of her character and, therefore, an affirmation that she was devoid of laudable traits.

There also exists an underlying sense of irony in what little praise there is of Ginevra. The only paragraph during which Arienti expounds on Ginevra's virtues is rife with possible hidden meanings. It is plausibly ironic, for example, that Arienti praises Ginevra for her prudent advice, when she was infamous for being nefarious in her political proddings of her husband, counseling him to carry out bloody vendettas against families who planned uprisings. It is ironic that he praises her for her discreet pomp, when she was known for her proclivity to amass clothing and jewelry and to show it off whenever possible. It is ironic that he acknowledges her regal presence, because of the inferred reference to the government that was slowly developing the characteristics of a monarchy more than an oligarchy. It is also ironic, that Arienti says Ginevra's virtue is in no way inferior to the ineffable virtues of her husband; as his virtues were very much being called into question at the time by many Bolognese families, and most certainly by the papacy, this irony is quite palpable.²²

The concept of exemplum, generally dominant in Renaissance biography, is mentioned only once in Arienti's biography of Ginevra and when it is, the syntax is confusing and distracts the reader. While explaining why women would want to model their behavior after her, he employs a grammatical inversion of subjects: he turns his

focus from Ginevra's example to the future female readers and women in general, who often indulge in vanities, resulting in their loss of honor:

Che debbo io dunque fare, essendo de tante tue excellentie infiammato, se non afaticare la mano et l'ingegno in cosa gentile, per gratificare la tua benigna mente a tua aeterna laude in exemplo de qualuncha donna vorà conseguire honore, lassando de artificiare li visi loro la continua cura del vano et lascivo spechio, molte volte inquinatore del buon nome, che così facendo, nel termine de sua vita, cum benigna fama lassarano il mortal velo et andarano fra li beati spiriti de le famose donne ad fruire quella sempiterna patria, dove è gaudio senza fine?²³

Not only do the Latin influences of this sentence blend poorly with the Italian, the focus of the sentence is not why Ginevra should be praised, rather behavior women in general should avoid: pastimes of vanity such as spending time in front of the mirror and putting on makeup. This question would seem quite fitting to the biography had Ginevra been praised for her own avoidance of these activities, but she was not, because she (according to contemporary accounts) did not avoid them herself. Contemporary documentations and diaries of the time instead emphasize the pomp and excesses both of the Bentivoglio court and of Ginevra and her retinue of ladies in waiting.²⁴ Arienti's awkward syntax therefore allows him to make the point that these activities should be avoided, without directly criticizing Ginevra for her engagement in such activities, serving, therefore, as a nudge of remonstrance.

There is one persistent doubt, however, that challenges the assertion that Arienti's biography of Ginevra is full of empty praise, and that is the nature and length of the individual life sketches within the compendium. Ginevra's biography is only 8 pages long and certainly begs the questions of whether or not such a lackluster depiction of her virtues and talents is merely due to the brevity of the biography. This necessitates, therefore, a comparison of her biography to the 33 (also brief) that follow, in an effort to

determine whether or not such vague praise is common to Arienti as a writer, or whether it is unique to Ginevra's life sketch. Four biographies in particular, those of Theodolinda de' Bavari, Maria de Fois, Genevera Nogarola, and Francesca de Bentivoglio (Arienti's wife), bear investigation given various aspects of their lives that coincide with Ginevra's. Also deserving attention are the four biographies of Ginevra's close relatives: Battista Sforza, her sister; Bianca Maria Visconti, with whom she lived from the age of 7 until her marriage at 12; Caterina Visconti, Bianca Maria's grandmother; and Zanna (Giovanna) Bentivoglio, daughter of the first Bentivoglio Signore. These biographies display Arienti's true facility with the encomiastic genre, one that reveals characters imbued with a richer and more detailed fabric of exemplary behavior than his account of Ginevra. But we also find in them subtle remonstrations of his dedicatee, allusions to Arienti's unfavorable treatment by the Bentivoglio family as a court letterato, and a detailed depiction of his ideal 'first lady,' or 'prima cittadina.' In fact, though Arienti's work does not follow the Renaissance model of female life writing, which incites readers of the biography to emulate the protagonist, it does still hold steadfastly to the didactic nature of the genre. Arienti represents, through the cumulation of many ruling ladies' lives, an ideal to be followed, to which Ginevra was not adhering. This ideal advocates the following strengths: gracious hospitality, intelligent diplomacy in speech and letters, the ability to quell discord, and to elicit public affection through active service to the citizens, the valiant and virile defense of cities when threatened, and support of and love for their husbands.

Arienti's biography of Theodolinda, Queen of the Lombards, is significant because it directly follows that of Ginevra and is, therefore, set in juxtaposition to it (see

appendix B). Theodolinda was a woman in power like Ginevra, who, upon the death of her husband, assisted in fostering the pacification between her people and the surrounding areas and is even credited with converting the Lombards to Christianity. Arienti affirms that she reigned "cum parole" and "prudente iudicio", restraining proud and valiant dukes and many Longobards with more success than kings past who had used arms and harsh methods. The inferred contrast here is strikingly evident, countering Ginevra's reputed imprudent influence over her husband Giovanni, and her eschewing of normal judicial proceedings in favor of swifter capital punishments. Not only is Theodolinda decorated with illustrious attributes such as beauty, eloquence, chastity, grace, etc, these nouns are enhanced with adjectives notably superlative in nature such as "clarissima," "grandissima," "singular," "religiosissima" and "veramente," superlatives all conspicuously absent in Ginevra's biography.

Theodolinda's biography likewise contains a great quantity of active verbs supporting her superior skills as a ruling woman. Theodolinda converted her husband, pacified the warring populations, erected various churches (such as the monastery of Monza), repaired cities and castles ravaged by war, gave all her jewels and possessions to the church (including the crown pictured in appendix B), and, finally, was loved by the Longobards even more than they loved her husband. As a result of her many virtues, it was said that she could have ruled "tutto il mondo non che 'l stato." At this point, any reader, astute or obtuse, should notice a difference between the two biographies. Both are only eight pages long, but Theodolinda's is dense with activity, superlative praise, and very little mention of her descendents or husband, in contrast to Ginevra's biography,

which contains a plethora of familial digressions, strikingly little biographical information and only the shallowest of praise.

But another biography begs comparison to Ginevra's. It is the 18th biography in the compilation, and is especially noteworthy because it is the biography of a woman who shares Ginevra's given name: Genevera Nogarola, a Renaissance humanist who wrote letters and poetry in Latin. She is most often eclipsed in history by her sister, but in Arienti's work, Genevera Nogarola's biography precedes her sister's and is equal in length.²⁵ He begins her biography with only a cursory nod to her family, followed quickly by the affirmation that her virtues were a light to her parents, "A li quali genitori questa figlia Genevera per sue virtute fulse molto lume, et a lei gratiosa et eterna fama." In direct opposition to this concept, Ginevra Sforza does not bring honor to her family, rather her family brings honor to her - *they* are her "gharlands of Jupiter" and "cumulo de divinio thesauro", not the other way around.²⁶

Arienti describes Nogarola as affable, beautiful, wise, eloquent, devout, graceful, and generous - all admittedly generic adjectives of praise, but they are both more frequent in Nogarola's biography and endowed with more narrative specificity as he delves into the specifics of why she was considered to be worthy of these attributes, highlighting above all her reknown as a gracious hostess: "et sopra l'altre excellentie de virtute fu molto affabile in recogerere altrui: che mai in quilli tempi fo cognosciuta donna in simili acti et maniere tanto benigna."²⁷ Gynevera, in contrast, was most certainly not known for this. We know that Arienti attended many public festivities at the Bentivoglio house, yet he never mentions her hospitality in his writings. Other contemporary accounts indicate that if not proud and haughty, she was at least reserved and taciturn.

The comparison between the two women is even more conspicuous when Arienti esteems Nogarola for her gratitude toward those who had done her favors. He asserts twice, once towards the beginning of her biography, once towards the end, that she was quick to “rendere honore a quilli, i quali la honoravano,” (168) and “Fu grata e memoranda di ricevuti servitii.” Such assertions not only act as subtle reminders to Ginevra Sforza of her responsibilities to do likewise for Arienti, but possibly also of her neglect in these matters. We know, in fact, that seven years after the composition of the *Gynevera* in 1495, when the Bolognese Senate (the “Sedici”) voted to discontinue Arienti’s stipend, neither Ginevra nor Giovanni came to his defense and he was forced to look elsewhere, specifically Isabella D’Este, for compensation. His subtle proddings in this work would, therefore, eventually prove fruitless for Arienti, or even more likely, were not subtle enough and perhaps caused offense, resulting in his eventual dismissal.

Arienti also places emphasis on what Nogarola was *not*. She was never disdainful – with great love and humility she listened to the poor; and *unlike other indiscreet women*, she did not turn her nose up in disgust at the poor as if she smelled excrement: “*Non facea come fano alcune indiscrete donne, o per viltà de costume, per essere male nutrite, che quando gli altri le salute et fazali honore et reverentia, pare li sia de uno sterco dato per incenso sotto il naso [. . .] overo sono tante altiere de la loro Gloria vana, che non degnano altrui.*”²⁸ Given that Ginevra was known for her haughtiness, it seems quite pointed that here, in a biography about another Ginevra, such an affirmation is made of what not to do. The potential for correlations is too weighty to be ignored.

A similar indirect admonition is found in Arienti’s biography of Maria de Foïs, a woman known for her dedication to her people and for her generosity to the poor. Arienti

recounts how, when she would go riding in the country, she would give generously to those who asked, or, if she had no more to give, she would even have the “povera persona” ride with her until she could obtain appropriate provisions. His acclamation of such generosity is quite emphatic as he both praises her, then observes how so many in power do not do the same: “O virtù pietosa et discrete de costei, quanto sia degna de perpetua laude! Che li piaceri et morbideza del richo stato non la facea oblita del bisogno di subditi, *come fano alcune*, tanto dedite a le voluptate et piaceri, che non curano nè estimano li sinistri altrui, et senza pietade regono li suoi populi!”²⁹ This is yet another instance where he uses the phrase “come fano alcune”, but here Arienti is referring not just to other women in general, but to other women in power, narrowing the playing field of potential comparisons considerably. The inference calls attention to the fact that the “dama” of Bologna may be one of these “other” women who rule without pity.

A reference to famine in the city and generosity of women in response to it is also found in the remarkably unique biography of his own wife, Francesca Bruni. Arienti recounts how, during the worst famine anyone alive could remember, people would cry out in the streets, day and night, for bread. His wife would “chiamare in casa quilli che passavano per la sua contrata, et cibavali de quello poco de pane, che supportava le nostre substantie.” She would also get up at night and would lead the poor “miseri affamati” to the fire because it was winter. She would feed them and let them sleep there, often a surprise to Arienti himself who, upon waking, found strangers in his living room.³⁰ The incongruity with Gynevera is conspicuous as this famine occurred while the city was under Bentivoglio rule, but Arienti makes no references to charitable activities by the

Bentivoglio family whatsoever. His assertion that his own wife gave what *little* food they had to the less fortunate implies firstly, that those in power were not adequately assisting their citizens, and, secondly, that his family was in need of financial support- a support owed them by the Bentivoglios. Thus we have another subtle plea for patronage and an inference to the Bentivoglio family's lack of generosity.

We know that Bologna experienced great famines in Arienti's lifetime, and that, during the famine of 1504, he wrote to Isabella d'Este requesting grain to plant on his property so as to ensure his ability to continue feeding his family, a request Isabella honored as evidenced in his subsequent letters of gratitude.³¹ This letter was written two years before the Bentivoglio family was ousted from the city, so it is quite demonstrative of the Bentivoglio's neglect of their court letterato.

As with many other of his biographies, Arienti compares his wife to great women of the Greek and Roman past (comparisons absent in Ginevra's biography), and spends a good deal of time discussing, as in the biography of Gynevera and Maria, what his wife was *not*, or did not do: she was not vain or pompous and, when praised, gave God the credit because we should "never give ourselves airs for our own works." She rarely spoke, but when she did, she was prudent. She was not interested in going to parties or public events, and was quite chagrined at the lavish vanities of *other women*, often gritting her teeth over such wastefulness. Here again we have an allusion to Ginevra: "spesso la vidi per doglia fremire li denti, in dispretio de *potente avare femine*, le quale haveano posto la loro felicità in li loro ornamenti disordinati et *vane pompe*; per che haverebbero facto cosa che più gratia et Gloria al mondo et a Dio essere munifice et liberale, et di proprii panni spogliarse, vestendone le povere et costumate donne et

donzelle, et li nudi, de quello che li avanza.”³² Unlike *other women*, his wife was willing to give others even her own personal clothes.

In the biographies of Ginevra’s Sforza and Visconti relatives, Arienti’s contrasts to Ginevra’s character become even clearer, as does his ideal image of a ruling lady. His family’s lasting connection to the Bentivoglio family is made very apparent in these biographies and Carolyn James aptly notes that Arienti was inclined to view the “old days” of the Bentivoglio oligarchic regime with nostalgia. She writes that, in his *De civica salute*, Arienti implicitly blames Giovanni II for the political demise of the old partisans, mourns the dissolution of the former Signorial oligarchy, and continually upholds civic harmony to be of tantamount importance. Though he is often credited by Renaissance critics with being a formative participant in the *querelle des femmes*, I would instead argue that when he extols these powerful women, his primary intention is not to engage in the *querelle*, but to further demonstrate his ideal model for the signoria and for the women in control of the signoria, while calling to attention Ginevra’s shortcomings in this regard. His biographies of the Sforza and Bentivoglio women reveal the behavior he considers necessary towards maintaining both the power and prosperity of the signoria and the wellbeing of the subjects, behavior Ginevra would be wise to copy.

Before we engage in analysis of their biographies, however, it will be helpful to give a brief overview of who these women were and how their lives intertwined with Ginevra’s. Caterina Visconti (1361-1404) was the second wife of Gian Galeazzo Visconti, first duke of Milan. Her two sons would become the future dukes of Milan, but not before she acted as regent following her husband’s early death and defeated Facino Cane’s enemy factions. Her eldest son, Gian Maria, was of poor repute and famous for

his voracious dogs who were trained to attack and eat humans; history speculates that this same son imprisoned and poisoned his mother, but Arienti makes no mention of these events in his biography.

Bianca Maria Sforza (1425-1468) was Caterina's granddaughter, and through her marriage to Francesco Sforza (and the lack of Visconti heirs), eventually became the duchess of Milan. Her marriage to Francesco Sforza, 24 years her senior, was reputed by all to be a happy one, and she was involved in many of his civic affairs, including wartime activities. She is most famous for her defense of the city of Cremona, which, in full armor, she defended from the Venetians. Upon the dissolution of the Visconti reign in Milan, she and her husband were eventually invited by the citizens to become duke and duchess of the city. Her reign was marked by public works, strong diplomacy, and even administration of the Duchy, for she served as co-regent when her husband fell ill. Like Caterina Visconti's son Gian Galeazzo, her son Galeazzo was jealous of her power and eventually banished her from the city. Arienti also refrains from mentioning this detail, nor does he address the unlikely rumor that she too, was poisoned by her son. Ginevra Sforza had a personal connection with Bianca Maria – she moved to Bianca Maria's residence at age 7, and remained there until she was 12, though the level of their interaction or depth of their relationship is unknown. What is known, however, is that Bianca Maria provided a humanist education for both girls.

Ginevra's sister, Battista Sforza (1446-1472), is the subject of the third biography with familial pertinence. Battista Sforza was the duchess of Urbino, wife of Federico da Montefeltro, and half-sister of Ginevra (Ginevra was a child of her father's mistress). Similar to Bianca Maria, Battista had a happy marriage, accompanied her husband to the

battlefield, was known for her intelligence, and was involved in the affairs of state. Finally, Giovanna (Zanna) Bentivoglio was the daughter of Giovanni I Bentivoglio, first ruler of Bologna, and sister of Anton Galeazzo, who succeeded his father as “primo cittadino” and was eventually beheaded by the papacy for treason. History does not tell her story; the only version of her life is found in Arienti’s compendium, and it is one that was recounted personally to him by his own father, who served in the family’s employ.

The commonalities shared by these four biographies are almost too many to cite, so we will instead focus on those that highlight the various intentions Arienti had for his work. Firstly, as a supporter of the Signoria construct, and a faithful adherent to the ideals of just governance, Arienti lauds these women for possessing the following essential attributes of a ruling lady: they dressed in accordance with their station (with reserved pomp), were magnanimous with their subjects and were therefore loved by them, were brave and defended their lands when threatened, were merciful with their enemies, and generous to those in their employ. In all four biographies, through Arienti’s emphasis on signorial ideals and affirmations of these female characters’s personal strengths, one glimpses, if not a prominent contrast to Ginevra’s character, at least strong recommendations that she should emulate their actions. Ginevra’s brief biography also pales in comparison to these detail-filled and lengthy accounts. While Caterina’s biography is of more average length (10 pages), Giovanna Bentivoglio’s is 18 pages long, Battista’s 24, and Bianca Maria’s 25. The only biography in the compendium longer than Bianca Maria’s is the hagiographical story of St. Catherine of Bologna.

Arienti places special importance upon these women’s love for their subjects, who in turn loved them with singular devotion. He writes that Battista lived “sempre cum

publica laude” and states repeatedly that Bianca Maria happily and generously gave audiences to her subjects: “fu molto benigna in audientia a li suoi populi, da li quali singularmente fu amata.”³³ Ginevra was instead known for being reserved and inaccessible and, as a result, was viewed by the population with diffidence. Arienti himself only recounts meeting her twice.

Arienti also spends a good deal of time expounding on the spousal relationships of his protagonists, most especially Bianca Maria’s. He repeats almost ad nauseum what a comfort she was to her husband; on page 274 alone, he uses derivations of the word “conforto” 4 times, and her husband’s praise of her is quite pronounced: “Questo fu molto augumento de conforto al conte, laudandose de la prudentia de la donna, non altrimenti facesse il grande re Mitridate de Ipsocratea sua moglie: de la quale prese più conforto et speranza, che non fece nel molto exercito, che continuamente da lei cum smisurato amore et fede era persequito.”³⁴ Battista Sforza’s relationship with her husband is recounted similarly; Arienti writes that she always sought her husband’s advice and never did anything without his approval.³⁵ Ginevra, however, was famous for her rash behavior and for negatively influencing her husband in policy.

In atypical fashion, Arienti does *not* praise modesty in his protagonists as a typical biography of the time would have done, rather extols them for their extravagant fashion, fashion befitting a ruling lady in courtly society. He writes that Bianca Maria dressed “cum tal pompa et magnificentia, che a quili tempi non havea pari”, that Battista “fu in li suoi habiti et vestimenti de magnifica pompa” and that Giovanna “hebbe andare pomposo de grande honestate.”³⁶ Here again Bianca Maria becomes his model, ‘par excellence’, because she maintains restraint; her manner of dress is imbued “cum tanta gratia et

honestate, che da picoli et grandi consequa laude.”³⁷ Battista, instead, had a proclivity for precious gems and extended her desire for pomp to her children and her ladies in waiting: “similmente per suo iocundo dilecto volea che le sue figliuole fussero ornate de varii habiti, de illustre vestimente et di geme [e] havea grandissimo piacere che li suoi citadini et donne loro andasseno ornate de vestimente.”³⁸ She does compensate for this, however, by wearing a ‘cilicio’ under her clothes during her husband’s absence, and upon her deathbed tells her husband that all the pomp of life (jewels included) have been for naught: “Per me tutte le vanità, le pompe, li honori, le glorie, le geme, l’auro et l’argento del mondo sono passate. Oh quanto è sciocho colui che pone speranza in la fragilità de questo mondo! Beato colui, che tutti li suoi pensieri pone in la speranza divina!”³⁹

Recalling Ginevra’s penchant for pompous excesses, begun at her wedding when the church’s doors were closed to her, and continuing throughout her family’s reign in the form of lavish festivities and dress, Arienti’s handling of the subject of extravagance is very carefully managed. Through Bianca Maria’s description he acknowledges the duty of a Duchess to dress her part, but that she should do so with some form of restraint, or spiritual discipline (the *cilicio*), lest she risk sharing in her sister Battista’s regret.

Arienti draws other comparisons between Ginevra and her relatives when discussing their temperament. In fact, the only negative personality defect of both Bianca Maria and Battista was one Ginevra shared: an irascible disposition. As none of the other biographies in discussion contain any hint of criticism, the fact that these women, who lived in such close contact with Ginevra also possessed fiery tempers infers that it was perhaps a family trait. Of Bianca Maria, he writes, “le sue ire et li suoi sdegni furono

sempre cum prudentia temperati, per modo in lei non duravano.”⁴⁰ Battista was likewise “de natura sanguinea” and would, “alcuna volta, per qualche offensione, [adirarsi], ma presto la ira se partiva.”⁴¹ Bianca Maria receives more careful treatment, however, as Arienti quickly follows his acknowledgment of her temper with the affirmation that “In ogni loco, tempo et fortuna, hebbe, come devota christiana, timore de Dio.” Regardless, the only negative quality he assigns his heroines is one Ginevra shared, one that could be viewed by many to be a familial tendency, either learned or inherited.

Arienti’s heroines are also brave and intensely dedicated to their family’s city, defending it at all costs, through arms, assistance to those in battle, or through diplomacy. This occurs first in the story of Giovanna’s life, a life that is quite personal for our author, as Arienti’s father served in the family’s employ during her reign. Arienti recounts how, when the family became embroiled in wars with vying factions, Giovanna called Bolognese citizens to arms, and uses the words “valorosa” and “virile” numerous times to exemplify her strength of spirit. Before one of these battles, Arienti reminds Ginevra that Giovanna personally dressed his father, still a teenager, in military garb for his first battle: “lei cum le proprie mane armò il mio genitore che fu la prima volta prese l’arme per heredità paterna per la facione bentivoglia essendo anchora doloscente: che più volte me disse che mai cognobbe donna de più magnitudine de animo de lei.”⁴² Carolyn James notes that Arienti wrote the *Gynevera* for the purpose of “impressing upon Ginevra Bentivoglio the considerable cost to his father (who, as we have seen was tortured and exiled by the Canetoli) as a result of his support for the Bentivoglio.”⁴³ The above inclusion would seem to support that position. James also observes that this was not very

wise, given the undercurrent of tension between the two branches of the Bentivoglio, which were constantly at odds for power.

Arienti's contrasts to the Bentivoglio family's vendettas are implicit and further demonstrate how dangerous the biographical waters were becoming for Arienti, and how bold his attempts to instruct Ginevra. In what is probably the most evident recrimination of Ginevra in this particular biography, Arienti writes that Giovanna was emboldened by her family's success in battle and wanted to immediately take revenge against her enemies and their friends, so they could never again harm the Bentivoglio family: "ma volea nel primo furore insieme cum molti amici fusse levato la vita a li superati inimici, a ciò non molestasseno mai più li Bentivogli." Her brother Anton Galeazzo, however, was "magnanimo" and restrained her fervor, "dicendo che solo li bastava la gloria de havere vinto." Arienti's biography of Giovanna is thus more than just an allusion to the Bentivoglio vendetta against the Malvezzi and Marescotti families; it is a lesson in mercy for Ginevra, and a remonstrance for her past actions. Bianca Maria was also an exerciser of mercy; Arienti writes that she would visit prisoners frequently, and freed many from death or prison or exile: "Molti homini per clementia de ella furono da la morte liberati. Per opera sua ancora molti nobili et strenui homini furono da lo exilio, de le carcere liberati."⁴⁴ Ginevra, in contrast, was known for sentencing citizens to death without trial.⁴⁵

Arienti's audacity in referencing Ginevra's vindictive tendencies culminates, finally, when he tells of Battista Sforza who, while on her deathbed, turned to her 5-month-old son and told him to be a true prince, not a tyrant: "O figliuolino tanto affectato (osculandolo teneramente) prego io la pietate de Dio, ad consolatione del tuo patre,

lungamente te salvi, cum timore de la sua divina maiestà, a ciò sii vero principe appellato, et non tyranno.” As Ginevra’s husband was accused of tyranny numerous times, by neighboring families and the Pope himself, this reference would have been quite prominent and would certainly have pricked Ginevra’s ears, possibly her conscience. But Arienti is careful and exercises great skill in his task because, while his comparisons hit their intended mark (Ginevra’s contrasting behavior), his use of direct quotation rather than his own words, and instructive nature of his work offers him protection.

It cannot be said, however, that Ginevra was not brave; she would eventually, years after receiving Arienti’s work, demonstrate herself to be steadfast in the face of adversity, much like the women Arienti praises. Instead of arms, however, she would employ diplomacy, or at least attempt to do so. When Cesare Borgia and Pope Alexander VI became enemies of their rule and ordered them out of the city, her whole family fled but she remained, hopeful to procure a meeting with the Pope. He refused, however, and she was eventually forced to leave the city. This staunch bravery could have been a direct result of Arienti’s influence, who set forth quite an array of virile women who likewise faced danger and endured difficult conditions in order to maintain their family’s longevity.

With any ideal Signoria, the citizens should be happy and peace should reign throughout. It is not surprising, then, that the Sforza and Bentivoglio women all possessed a gift for ingratiating themselves with others and bringing harmony to discord, through various diplomatic arts, all while maintaining their feminine reserve. Arienti tells us that Giovanna was remarkable in her letter-writing abilities; through her talents she was able to counsel and bring about many resolutions that benefited her family: “Usava

grandissima arte et calidità significare per lettere al fratello come conviene per pigliare li stati.” He writes twice that she put her female timidity aside in an effort to further her family’s station: “non come timida donna et priva de alteza de animo, scripse de sua propria mano a la Sanctità del Papa non desistesse da l’impresa per molte efficace rasone.” Bianca Maria likewise possessed a talent for peacemaking, although, unlike Giovanna, she did so without casting aside her feminine attributes. Arienti writes that she could “pacific[are] ogni homo”, and that “Hebbe, sopra ogni altra cosa, cura, per consolatione del suo glorioso core, dove era discordia et discensione, pore tranquillità, unione, et pace.”⁴⁶ This last sentence demonstrates Arienti’s emphasis upon promoting peace and unity amidst discord; Bianca Maria held this in highest importance, “above all else.” As peace and prosperity of the Bentivoglio family were beginning to wane during the composition of Arienti’s work and rising factions were forming among other families, Arienti’s continual focus on mercy and effective diplomacy is, therefore, quite plain, and its frequency in the text, as we have noted, is extremely pronounced. Arienti’s praise of these women places Ginevra’s irascible governance in relief, while also hopefully setting forth a model for her to follow in the future.

Arienti uses this technique of contrast in equally conspicuous fashion through his frequent and less-than subtle pleas for patronage. In his biographies of Giovanna, Battista, and Biancha Maria, he makes sure to note their generosity and appreciation for scholars. As is becoming increasingly clear, Bianca Maria is his ideal duchess, whose behavior is more worthy of emulation than any other protagonist in his compendium. It does not surprise, then, that his most fervent plea for patronage is found in her biography. He first writes that she greatly enjoyed the company of courtly scholars: “Pigliava piacere

degl'huomini virtuosi et literati, di quali fu amatrice et fautrice, et de li loro certamente havea dilecto.”⁴⁷ Twelve pages later, his affirmations become more fervent, as he emphasizes her immense generosity, first towards all, then to those who had been in her father's employ. He says she was never ungrateful for gifts (*beneficii*) given to her, and that she liberally bestowed benefices on her own servants, “et similmente a li servitor del patre, quando li erano ricordati.” Arienti had long been a close friend of the Bentivoglio family, both encouraged by Lodovico Bentivoglio as a young student (who allowed him to use his library and befriend his son, Andrea), then given employment by this same Andrea. Here he reminds Ginevra of his long-standing position of secretary within the family, a position that ended with Andrea's death, and resulted in his need to seek monetary compensation for other more literary endeavors. In his comment that Bianca Maria was never ungrateful for the gifts given her, he is quite likely reminding Ginevra of her monetary obligation to him upon completion of his *Gynevera*. As if to insinuate that she should be especially generous in her compensation, Arienti continues by noting Bianca Maria's response to those who criticized her penchant for excessive giving:

Quando altri li dicea, che troppo munificentia et doni usava, respondea, levando le belle et bianche mane, ornate de riche annella, che non potea far tanto, satisfacesse integramente al suo animo, et che molto era meglio così fare, che fare como faceano quilli, che per avaritia ponevano a la fortuna de' dati uno monte de pecunia, la quale perdevano, et poi negavano con blasfeme la deità de Dio; et che *meglio haverebbero facto auxiliare uno egregio ingegno*, overo qualche suo morigerato amico, indigenti de aiuto, che presso Dio ne haveriano conseguito laude, gloria et mercede.⁴⁸

Thus helping those with an “illustrious intellect” is one of the most praiseworthy examples of generosity, and would garnish eternal praise by God himself. The image Arienti creates with this unusually stylistic narration (*levando le belle et bianche mane*) is

quite strong, as is the inference that Ginevra should also be generous with him and those in his position. This aspect is not nearly so potent in his biographies of Battista and Giovanna, but he does say that Battista favored court letterati: “Li huomini literari et docti furono sempre cum amore favoriti da lei, et qualuncha altro virtuoso ingegno, et de varie facultate et exercitii.”⁴⁹ Giovanna likewise was grateful to those in her service: she was “liberale” and “Fu grata sempre in quello che possette di beneficii ricevuti.” She was *not like others* who did not follow through on their words, “come la galina che canta bene et raspa male.”⁵⁰

Battista and Bianca Maria are also lauded for their generosity to women who could not afford to marry. Battista was “liberale in tutto, overo in parte, in maritare povere donzelle” and Bianca Maria was more so:

Alcuna volta, quando a le sue pietose aurechie pervenia, che qualche costumato cittadino fusse oppresso da qualche ira de stelle, o vero da sinistra et scarsa fortuna, overo per altrui peccato impoverito, che avesse figliuole da marito et che maritare non le potesse, le aiutava de dota. Talvolta incognita privatamente andava in casa de qualche persone nobile, che costumate fusseno, che sapea haveano figliuole da marito, li dimandava perchè non le maritava. Rispondeano che non potevano. La liberalissima donna, de core magnanimo et clemente, alhora secundo la paterna conditione de le figliuole le dotava, et cum molta gratia li trovava marito.

Arienti had 8 children, and sought dowries for his daughters from whomever he could, including Isabella D’Este, who eventually gave him 100 gold ducats for his eldest daughter Angelica’s convent dowry.⁵¹ This money was deposited with Ginevra, who also attended Angelica’s procession a year later. How odd that Isabella d’Este provided the dowry for the daughter of a Bolognese scholar, and odder still that the money was deposited with the woman whose family should have been caring for its own with more generosity. Isabella d’Este therefore rescued Arienti on more than one occasion when the

Bentivoglio family was shirking its duties to the courtly scholars (recalling to mind the grain she sent to his family during the famine).

Hidden within Arienti's suggestion that Ginevra should be helping daughters without dowries, is also the assertion that she could be doing it incognito. The sentence before he extols Battista for her generosity with dowries is only three words long: "Fu elemosinatrice oculata."⁵² Bianca Maria, likewise, would go "incognita" to the house of women who needed dowries. That these women performed these activities secretly could be a reference to two possible concepts: the first is the Biblical concept that one should not be ostentatious when serving, rather do so quietly and without vainglory; the second is (admittedly speculative) that Ginevra gave Bentivoglio the excuse that she could not help his daughters because it would set a precedent that she would have to maintain for all. Providing dowries was, in fact, quite a monetary commitment during this time. The average patrician dowry was around 1,000 ducats, but there was also a tendency to inflate this number such that the Venetian senate placed a cap of 1,600 ducats on dowries in 1420. This limitation was not effective and the price shot up so high that in the beginning of the 16th century the ceiling was raised to 3,000 ducats.⁵³ This number would likely not have been nearly so high for a court secretary's daughter, but it would have most certainly been far above the 100 ducats Isabella d'Este provided for his daughter's convent dowry. It would therefore be no small commitment for a noblewoman to aid these women in their marriages, and does give weight to the possibility that Ginevra made it a practice to avoid giving this aid altogether, such was the cost of just one gift, and the likelihood that future aid would inevitably be expected. Regardless, the fact that Arienti places importance on their charitable activities, particularly those of helping

young girls without dowries, draws pointed attention to the fact that his daughters were in need of them and likely did not receive dowries sufficient for marriage so instead joined a convent, for which dowry costs were considerably lower.⁵⁴

In summary, the biographies of Giovanna Bentivoglio, Caterina Visconti, Bianca Maria Sforza, and Battista Sforza, all serve to bolster Arienti's ideals for a reigning lady of a Signoria court, as well as to call attention to Ginevra's deficiencies. His ideal lady loves her subjects; Ginevra is instead recalcitrant and unaccessible. His ideal lady resolves differences with her acute intellect and skillful rhetoric; Ginevra foments conflict. His ideal lady extends mercy and gifts; Ginevra is vindictive and uncharitable. In his biographical treatment of each woman, Arienti navigates the waters of Ginevra's character with alacrity and acuity, demonstrating intrepidity in his attempts to highlight her faults, but always careful to avoid pointing them out directly.

For those still in doubt of the above assertions, a date should help quell any remaining doubt. The date is 1483, the year Arienti attributes to his work, and a date preceding the political dissension and Malvezzi plot that would blemish the Bentivoglio name. Yet according to Arienti's letters of correspondence, he actually took up this work *after* the Malvezzi conspiracy and *after* the public disgrace previously mentioned, of Gynevera's daughter Francesca. The fact that Arienti assigns an earlier date to his work (a date when he had not even begun the work, let alone finished it) is indicative at least of a marked attempt to veil the family troubles, implying he was very aware of them – so aware he thought it better to change the date of his composition entirely, to a more peaceful time in the Bentivoglio reign. In truth, Ginevra's contemporary historians (and those who followed), assign almost all the blame of the Bentivoglio family's ruin to her,

and to her alone.⁵⁵ Their accounts support the assertion that Ginevra was of general ill repute during the last years of the family's power, all emphasizing her pride, violence, and dominance of her husband. Included in many of these accounts is a letter written from Giovanni to Ginevra following the family's ousting from the city and the sad destruction of the Bentivoglio palace. It is a letter rife with anger and blame:

Sogliono dire, i savi huomini di questo mondo che la persona prudente tute le cose sue fa col consiglio degli huomini savi et che non habbino il cuore circondato da varie passioni affinche' (a) il bramato fine possa conseguire: ma l'animo appassionato che fugge i consigli dei prudenti in tutto quello che fa, lo fa in proprio danno et vergogna, perche' (a) condotta dagli appetiti appassionati, operando trabocca nella voragine di ogni pericolo. Così' e' accaduto a te, o incauta Ginevra, che sprezzando i consigli degli huomini et seguitando la tua propria passione, te et altri con essi te hai facti cadere nel trabocco di ogni male. Ecco che per tua cagione sono stato gran tempo in questa prigione et ora conduco anche mia vita non al tutto libera et colma di affanni et di cordoglio et Alessandro in Genova nelle mani del Re si sta della vita in forse, ma gli altri tuoi et miei figlioli come stanno condotti dal tuo poco prudente consiglio? Fuori della propria Patria, banditi dal paese di Ferrara et in disgrazia de tutto il mondo. Ma quello che e' peggio et che insino al vivo cuore mi apporta maggior dolore e' che il nostro palazzo in Bologna quasi del tutto e' per terra. Et pure di questi mali sei tu, donna, principale cagione, questi sono i fructi dei tuoi consigli et delle tue proprie passioni. Datti pace al meglio che puoi.

*Addio! Giovanni.*⁵⁶

This letter speaks of a Ginevra who was entirely at fault for the ruin of her family and their beautiful palace, and a woman whose passions led her to commit evil deeds and incite her sons to commit even more atrocious acts.

History therefore leaves quite an impression of Ginevra Sforza, one that most certainly was increasingly sensationalized with time but that nevertheless maintained a common thread of disdain, disdain that can be found in Arienti's work, who, as history attests, failed in his attempt to counsel her on the proper actions of a Duchess. It would seem she only benefited from Arienti's stories of brave women who defended their

birthright with virility and adurance. She did not, however, follow his cautious counsel of restraint imbued in the tales of his heroines, who were always merciful, obedient to their husbands, generous with their courtly scholars, and who fought for their territories with such efficacy because they were so loved by their people for their generosity and careful custodianship. In fact, had the Bentivoglio family been supported by the Bolognese people, they would have been successful in re-taking the city. But the Bolognese populace actually fought *against* Ginevra's sons in their repeated attempts to regain control.

Arienti's continual descriptions of an ideal female 'first-citizen' are inextricably intertwined, then, with the reality of what Ginevra was not. But in Arienti's biography of Anna Sforza (1500), only his advocacy for a courtly female ideal is found. Though brief (a mere 14 pages), *La Vita di Anna Sforza* is strikingly different from his more polished *Gynevera*. It was composed at the request of an old friend ("benigno" and "istretto"), prior Nicolao Felsineo, and appears to have been written in haste with inattention to form, containing more informal dialect and lacking the stylistic flair of his *Gynevera*. His syntax is more rudimentary (and less clear for the modern reader), while the Bolognese dialect is much more prominent. In fact, in his dedication to the nuns of St. Vito in Ferrara, he excuses himself for his use of dialect, and in the body of the work writes, "Io ho sumpta la pronuncia del mio basso et exile stile come intenderete in la mia Bononiense lingua parlando *familiarmente* ad voi."⁵⁷ The resulting impression is that he completed the work without any presumption of compensation, rather wrote it to please an old friend whose "dolce invito" he could not refuse, and for spiritually didactic purposes (being commissioned by a cleric and dedicated to the nuns).⁵⁸ This biography

is, therefore, quite useful to our previous analysis, because it is a work wholly unaltered by insinuations and self-promotion. Arienti's praise of Anna comes from a sincere attempt to commemorate a life, the life of a woman with whom he had direct contact, as he mentions in his dedication: "et essendomi io molto compiaciuto di una così bella vita cum locasione d'haverla molti anni praticata essendo io al servitio del Prencipe Hercule soo socero et de lo Illustrissimo Alphonso soo marito sin da quando con ella el fece el conubio servendole da Cameriere secondo."⁵⁹

The essential characteristics of a Signorial Duchess remain in Anna's life, but it does not address many of the themes found in the *Gynevera*, such as generosity, mercy, humility, and matrimonial affection. Their absence further supports the assertion that these were emphasized in the *Gynevera* primarily because Ginevra Sforza lacked these qualities. Anna is depicted simply as affable, smart, religious, and, most importantly for a reigning woman, kind to her people: "Nel matrimoniale stato se diportava con tanta felicità et gratia, che ne conseguiva universale benivolentia del Ferrariense populo et de tutto il Ducal Stato."⁶⁰ The importance Arienti places on this is considerable, especially in light of the short length of the biography and his cursory mention of her other attributes. When he describes her affability, intelligence, and spirituality, he does so only briefly, whereas he spends much more time on her interaction and relationship with the general population. He writes that because of her constant service to the court everyone (the young and the old, the poor and the rich) would frequently "run to her" for advice and justice.⁶¹ She also listened intently to those upset by some offence and, with unending patience and wise words, she comforted them.⁶² Those who sought her counsel for justice or assistance never left disappointed or disconsolate.⁶³

Anna did not become pregnant until 7 years into her marriage and, after giving birth to a daughter who only lived a few hours, she shared her daughter's fate, dying of childbirth.⁶⁴ The population's love for her was demonstrated in their grief, a prominent theme of the biography. At her death all members of the curial family cried, screamed, and wrung their hands, lamenting how she was stolen from them at such a young age.⁶⁵ She was humbly clothed at death per her request, and her daughter was placed at her side, in her left arm's embrace. Arienti depicts the scene with stark visuals, saying that such a piteous site had never before been seen, and that she was beautiful in death just as in life, even though her face was frozen in the color of white snow, and that she seemed to be decorated with the sacred veil: "come certo havendo quella Bambina in bracie, cui pareva de suave somno dormire; mai credo tanta pietosa e flebil cosa se vedesse: cosi come ella fue in vita bella era morta anchora, benche fusse piu che neve bianca gelata; ma de più anni et de maggior gravita reverenda pareva per esser ornate de Sacri veli, et vestimenta."

The people flocked to see her body, such that a steady stream of visitors was seen throughout the entire day of her viewing. Again Arienti emphasizes that she was loved by *all*, by stating that men and women, young and old came to see her. The cries of anguish were intense: "Le flebile grida erano grande, et li lamenti et il battere dolente de le mane che facevano le tribulate et le angosciose donne, et le Donzelle de la morta Madonna. Chi diceva oime Madonna, mia cara dove ne vai, come me lassi, chi diceva etc." The lackadaisical syntax of this sentence, and the repeated use of the phrase "chi diceva," highlights the lack of care Arienti employed in this biography. He even concludes the entire biography with the word 'etc.': "O Madonna Anna nostra devota benefattrice, la divina pieta habia de voi mercede etc."⁶⁶

Anna Sforza's biography is not an exemplum work like those that follow in the 16th century. Many aspects of her character, and elements essential to the proper foundation of female virtue, are ignored. Strikingly absent is any allusion to her generosity: though she was kind, Arienti does not discuss her assistance to women in need of dowries or her assistance of courtly scholars. Again, this absence bolsters the point made previously that Arienti included these elements because of ulterior motives and in the hopes of future assistance. Arienti's primary focus for Anna's life, rather than how she could be an ideal model for other women, is how she was an example of a proper ruling lady. She was educated, lighthearted (as with all his courtly ladies, she laughed with alacrity), kind, and, above all, accessible and open to her people; as a result she was greatly loved and revered. This reciprocal love and admiration between the people and their rulers are at the heart of Arienti's ideal Signoria, ideals found in abundance in his *De civica* and *Gynevera*.

Arienti's works demonstrate the integral relationship between authorship and readership in Renaissance biography, a relationship that would influence both the purpose of the work, as well as the themes addressed. But biography in Italy was soon to be influenced by the Counter-Reformation and the vast majority of biographies to follow had a common authorship and readership: they were written by the clergy or for the clergy, and their intended audience was women, not men. We will therefore turn our focus to these biographies and discuss the great leap female biography would take in style, form, and content, in contrast to its pre-Tridentine siblings.

Appendix A. “Madonna in trono”, Lorenzo Costa.



Bottom left: Ginevra's seven daughters, from the left: Camilla, Bianca, Francesca, Violante, Laura, Isotta and Eleonora. Bottom right, Ginevra's 4 sons, from the left: Ermete, Alessandro, Anton Galeazzo, Annibale. Ginevra kneels above her daughters, her husband, Giovanni II above his sons.

Appendix B. Theodolinda Barolini, Queen of the Lombards, 570-628 A.D.



One of Theodolinda's crowns, which she donated to the church in Monza

Epilogue

The primary historians to weave Ginevra's fateful tale, a tale that would continue to germinate into Ricci's eventual biography, are Paolo Giovio (1483-1552) and Cherubino Ghiradacci (1519-1598). A summary of these accounts elucidates just how villainized Ginevra was by her contemporaries, and how this reputation was recorded over the centuries, resulting in Corrado Ricci's disdainful life-sketch. Historical references to Ginevra's villainy begin with Paolo Giovio's work, *Gli elogi, vite brevemente scritte d'huomini illustri di Guerra, antichi et moderni* (1545), in which Ginevra only makes one appearance, but is scathingly described. Giovio says she was a "donna d'anima virile e talmente ingorda di signoreggiare, ch'ella spingeva il marito di sua natura piacevole, piu tosto che in alcuna cosa violento, ad ammazzare & mandare a' confine i Cittadini avversari suoi, & superba insolente sedeva al governo di tutto 'l consiglio: e specialmente quando si scoperse la congiura de Malvezzi ella fu quella che volle che s'usasse contra di loro ogni maniera di crudeltà."⁶⁷ Giovio's compendium of lives is full of unauthenticated content, yet has greatly influenced historians and is cited by many, including Burkhardt in his *Civilization of Renaissance Italy*. Giovio himself admits that his compendium of brief lives was like "a species of historical fresco-painting," and that it is "pleasantly written, with a certain license, for the delight of the gentler spirit."⁶⁸ In fact, this "license" has been the bane of scholars who are unable to verify details in *Gli Elogi* that do not appear anywhere else.⁶⁹ But Giovio's assertions would gain steam over time, as evidenced in Cherubino Ghirardacci's *Della historia di Bologna*, published 51 years after *Gli Elogi*.

Della historia is an extremely lengthy and voluminous work that inflates Giovio's criticisms of Ginevra and her children exponentially.⁷⁰ In Ghirardacci's version of history, Giovanni Bentivoglio was a just and admirable ruler, whose demise was caused by his lascivious children and his perfidious wife. Ghirardacci writes that when Giovanni's sons attempted to return to Bologna against the Pope's decrees, Giovanni denied any involvement, asserting instead, that his sons, in listening to the advice of their mother, had been "incauti" and "poco prudenti."⁷¹ Ghirardacci affirms that Giovanni blamed Ginevra continually during this period: "sempre maledì il consiglio di Ginevra sua consorte, che havesse istigato gli figliuoli a far cosa tale, affermando che esso giammai diede loro consiglio."⁷² Giovanni is found innocent by the Bolognese populace as a result of his continual denials, while the blame is placed on Ginevra and her sons: "Trovato adunque Giovanni innocente di questo fatto, il vicerè mandò le lettere regie al legato et senato di Bologna, et anche scrisse haver trovato Giovanni innocente, a cui oltremodo dispiaceva quanto li suoi filioli havessero fatto, et che questo era tutto consiglio della madre loro."⁷³

Nowhere is his blame of Ginevra so vehement, however, as when Ghirardacci quotes a letter that Giovanni apparently wrote to her after hearing of the destruction of their beautiful palace (which apparently eclipsed that of the Medici palace in Florence).⁷⁴ Giovanni's tone is acerbic and accusatory as he blames her for all the family's ills: "Et pure di questi mali sei tu, donna, principale cagione, questi sono i fructi dei tuoi consigli et delle tue proprie passioni".⁷⁵ In chronicalist style, Ghirardacci writes that upon reading the letter, Ginevra "fu da sì estremo dolore assalita, che con amendue le mani

stringendosi le tempia, senza forma parola alcuna, sendo vicina al letto, con la faccia all'ingiù gettatavisi sopra, di subito rese lo spirito al suo Iddio.”

Ghirardacci continually seeks to absolve Giovanni of any guilt in the Bolognese affairs, and is the primary reason Giovanni is seen in such a positive light by all subsequent historians. Ghirardacci states that Giovanni's many letters attesting to his innocence were read in public (“le sue lettere sono lette pubblicamente e se ne fa gran festa”) and that, for the majority of their reign, the family was well-liked by the Bolognese people.⁷⁶ He recounts that when Giovanni was called into the presence of “re Lodovico” (Ludovico Sforza) to explain his family's actions (who had “abbrugiata la casa de' Caccianemici et morti li Malvezzi et li Marescotti, et che havevano svergognate molte donzelle et levata per forza et per inganno la robba a molti”), Giovanni successfully refutes the multitude of accusations of tyranny against him. He does so by affirming that the 16 (elected governmental officials) were always participants in deciding what actions to take on behalf of the city: “A queste parole soggiunse Giovanni: ‘che non poco si maravigliava di essere chiamato tiranno, perciochè egli non mai fu tiranni nella sua patria, attesoche sempre nel governo haveva havuto seco in compagnia li sedici et con quelli sempre si era consigliato et secondo il parer loro governato.’”

Giovanni does confess that he perhaps looked the other way when noble families did things they shouldn't have (“ho lasciato passare alcune cose senza cercare di spegnerle et mandarle a terra, le quali nel vero havrian meritato gran gastigo”) but maintains that he did his utmost to maintain peace and prosperity in Bologna. Giovanni also repudiates any accusations of his involvement in the familial massacres and the rapes committed during

the attacks, rather insinuating that the fault was due to his sons who had grown up into men who could not quash their appetites:

essendo alcuni de' miei figlioli divenuti potenti, sprezzando i miei consigli, caminarono secondo il loro appetito, quantunque sempre io ne reclamassi, come anche al presente hanno fatto, venendo contro Bologna [. . .] Quanto alle donne poi, io con verità posso et potrò sempre dire non haverne giammai forzata veruna, et se ho fatto alcun peccato, è stato con il suo pieno consentimento; sicchè, monsignor reverendo, ardirò dire essere iniquamente accusato di esser stato tiranno.⁷⁷

In this portion of Ghirardacci's history, it is important to observe that when stating his case to Lodovico Moro, Giovanni remains silent about his wife's involvement in any affairs of state. This absence seems odd, given Giovanni's earlier affirmations made against Ginevra. But we must consider the artistic license Ghirardacci employed here, given the unlikelihood that he possessed word-for-word transcripts of Giovanni's plea. When Ghirardacci writes that Giovanni lamented to *others* that Ginevra had poorly advised him and his sons, he does *not* use direct discourse. Giovanni only accuses Ginevra in direct discourse when he "speaks" to her in his letter. But when Giovanni is standing in a room full of men and is pleading his case, Ghirardacci prefers for Giovanni (his hero of the Bentivoglio family) to make no reference to Ginevra whatsoever. Admitting that his wife had exerted so much influence over him would have appeared to be an admission of weakness on his part and Ghirardacci had chosen a different portrayal for Giovanni. If anything, it demonstrates Ghirardacci's skill as a persuasive historian. If Giovanni had complained to the assembly that it was all Ginevra's fault, imagine what the contemporary reader's response would have been to a man who, in the presence of other men, laid the blame on his wife. Their opinion of him would be immediately skewed; he would be a man lacking respect and without prudence. Concealing

Giovanni's blame for his wife in a letter directly to her, however, Ghirardacci both maintains Giovanni's dignity and further inculpates Ginevra.

Ghirardacci's loose interpretation of events is still the version to which history adheres, lacking any substantial proof to contradict it. Salvatore Muzzi, in his *Annali della città di Bologna dalle sua origine al 1796* (1840), relies heavily on Ghirardacci in his representation of Ginevra, including the letter written to her by Giovanni and also affirming that she died upon reading it.⁷⁸ But her story gains momentum in Muzzi's text. He fervently writes that history, the enemy of oblivion, would not embellish the memory of Ginevra with words such as *love* and *glory*, though she had dominated hearts with beauty and quickness of mind and had *appeared* to be one who would be lauded by history. He instead insists that her name will be written in letters of blood:

Nelle immutabili sue pagine la nemica dell'oblio vergò a note di sangue il nome di Ginevra Bentivoglio, di che che nata a dominare sui cuori per la bellezza delle forme, per la svegliatezza della mente, e sovra un generoso popolo per dignità, per la condiscendenza del consorte, pare che in quel gran libro dovuto avesse lasciare il proprio nome fregiato dalle parole *amore e gloria*.”⁷⁹

Ghirardacci maintains some decorum as a historian, in admitting that Ginevra would not have been recorded in history with such infamy had her family not met its ruin, but Muzzi instead asserts that history has the ability to penetrate to the heart of truth, revealing the true character of individuals with an iron stylus, contradicting the opulent mausoleums and false eulogies: “la storia [. . .] collo stile di ferro imprime a caratteri indelebili ne' suoi volume le azioni de' viventi; e l'iniquo invano si fa schermo di fastoso mausoleo, di mendaci elogi, che la storia smentisce; essa è che all'immortalità consegna i nomi dei giusti e dei grandi, benchè non s'innalzi sovra le loro ceneri cospicua la tomba.”⁸⁰ This prophetic assertion of Muzzi would seem to be accurate in Ginevra's case,

because Arienti's brief biography has not swayed history from its Ghirardaccian perspective of her life, it has rather been subverted, through Ricci's preface, by Ghirardacci's portrayal.

Giovanni Gozzadini's *Memorie per la vita di Giovanni II Bentivoglio* (1839) also assigns all of the blame for the Bentivoglio fall to Ginevra and her children, as evidenced by the following quote describing Ginevra's response to hearing of the conspiracy against her family: "Ginevra il seppe dal consorte, e crudele qual era senza farne motto a Giovanni, certa non l'avria consentito, nel figlio Ermes, ben degno di tal madre, l'ira sua dispietata transfuse, e il fe' ministro di giurata vendetta."⁸¹ Gozzadini calls her son Ermes an "iniquo sicario", his companions "sfrenati giovinastri", and says that all her sons had "sfrenate libidini."⁸² Not surprisingly, Gozzadini relied heavily on Ghirardacci and also includes the letter Giovanni wrote to Ginevra, though in more modernized Italian.⁸³

It is Gozzadini who leads us full circle back to Corrado Ricci, editor of the only printed edition of the *Gynevera*. Lest we forget, it is his mordacious introduction to Ginevra that began our journey into the discovery Sabadino's veiled attempts to call her to account. Ricci depended heavily on Gozzadini and Ghirardacci as his primary sources in his preface and introductory biography of Ginevra. His reliance on Gozzadini is most glaring in his reproduction, in the same order, of two poems about Ginevra (written by Casio and Garzoni) that Gozzadini inserts in his footnotes, reproduced here as found in Gozzadini:⁸⁴

Fra le poesie del Casio si legge a pag. 52 per M. Ginevra Bentivoglio

Genevra Bentivola sforcesca
D'animo altier lasciò a Bussè la spoglia,

Contenta pria morir d'una sol doglia
Che viver semper tra il focile, e l'esca

Ed il Garzoni secondo che ne lasciò l'Alberti Vol. 4 pag. 166, e ripeté il Fantuzzi Vol. 4 pag. 94 scrisse:

In Ginevram Bentivolam Epitaphium
Iam matron potens, se plus quam Foemina poscet,
Impia, avara, tenax, horrida, terribilis.
His jaceo infelix sancto private sepulchro,
Cui nulla Ecclesiae sacra dedere Patres:
Iuniperi mihi nomen erat, sed spina remansit,
Ut fuerat multis aspera, amara mihi:
Cotempsi superos, qui me sprevere Tyranni,
Optima ab exemplo discite quisque meo
Quis neget esse Deos, hominum qui fata rependant?
Quae fuerit vitae preamia, mors docuit.⁸⁵

Since these poems were published for the first time in 1596, neither of the poets could have been influenced by Ghirardacci's historical account of Ginevra, indicating that the Bolognese public did, in fact, view her with general distaste, and that Ghirardacci merely embraced (and embellished) this view of her. The author of the first poem is Girolamo Pandolfi (1467-1533), better known as Il Casio, who was a contemporary poet to the Bentivoglio regime. In 1503 he completed a diplomatic mission to Mantova on Giovanni Bentivoglio's behalf, and would afterwards become a frequent correspondent and friend of Isabella d'Este. The possibility then arises that he and Arienti could have actually met while Arienti was in his service to Isabella d'Este (following the Bentivoglio family's demise). How ironic, that Casio could have been further furnished with material for his satirical poem by none other than the very biographer who sang her praises!

The author of the second poem, most likely Tommaso Garzoni (1549-1589), was born 43 years after the Bentivoglio family's exit from Bologna, but still before Ghirardacci's publication of his *Historia* (1596). The date of this poem, which in Ricci's

terms is “più severo” than Il Casio’s, demonstrates that distaste for Ginevra increased with time, but it also reveals that the entire Bentivoglio family was blamed (father and sons), not only Ginevra. Muzzi confirms that following their demise, many other forms of satires and poems were written decrying Giovanni, not Ginevra: ““non solo così miti canzoni, ma sonetti satirici, madrigali d’obbrobrio e scritti d’ogni guisa dilaceranti l’onore di Giovanni, si leggevano fra i cittadini, che ridevano dello spirito de’ prezzolati poeti, i quali indegnamente trattavano il bersaglio moderatore della patria, quasi fosse stato un Oleggio, un Costa, od un Bozzo, oppressori di popoli.”⁸⁶ Even Ghirardacci affirms that the Bolognese people were not kind to Giovanni Bentivoglio following his escape from the city, and cites verses that were commonly found on Bolognese public walls:

Bentivole, heus tandem mala sors, sed una, sequuta est,
Non bene iam misero, sed male quisque cupit.
Bentivola ecce prius fortuna, Malivola nun est,
Multivolumque cito, Mortivolum faciet.⁸⁷

Following this quote, however, Ghirardacci engages in an emphatic defense of Giovanni Bentivoglio and his Signoria, with Ginevra as his easy scapegoat.⁸⁸

Though Ghirardacci’s viewpoint is the one predominately adapted by history, a more moderate view of Ginevra is found in another account of Bologna’s history, published in the same year as Ghirardacci’s: Pompeo Vizani’s *Bolognese Diece Libri Delle Historie Della Sua Patria* (1596). It is a lesser-known work and is cited very little by posterity, but maintains a healthy dose of objectivity and equilibrium in its approach.⁸⁹ Vizani recounts the events following the family’s exit from Bologna in quick, succinct fashion, placing no blame on parties whatsoever. His first reference to Ginevra is when

she leaves the city and begins to plan a way for the family to return.⁹⁰ He confirms the account that she tried to “persuadere” her husband to gather soldiers and return to Bologna after the Pope’s departure, but Giovanni does not want to accept the “poco sicuro consiglio della mogliera”, so she acts on her own (“la medesima operò”).⁹¹ She raises funds and sends money to her sons Hermes and Annibal, and tells them to gather people for the resistance in Parmigiana and Mantova, but the Pope is informed of their plan and thwarts their efforts at plotting a return. At this point in Vizani’s account, similarities to Ghirardacci’s work (published the same year) are strong. Almost exactly as recounted in Ghirardacci’s work, he tells the story that Giovanni was imprisoned as a result of the attempt to take back the city, then questioned, then pardoned. Following his pardon he is invited to celebrate with friends, but declines the offer with the statement that “già era passato il tempo de’ suoi honori.” When he returns home that evening, he receives the news that his palace had been destroyed and writes the famous letter to his wife. The only difference in Vizani’s account is that he does not quote the letter directly, rather summarizes its contents: “per isfogarsi in parte, ne diede per lettere aviso à Ginevra sua consorte, la quale à Busseto si trovava, & querellolsi di lei, dicendo, ch’egli, & la sua famiglia pativa tanti travagli, perche ella non havendo mai volute credere à consigli del marito, haveva indotti i figliuoli à far cose, per le quali si havevano fatto nimico il popolo di Bologna, & il Pontefice, con tanti altri Prencipi, & Signori.”⁹² He then makes a similar statement that Ginevra died shortly after reading the letter, but in his account she is surrounded by other noblewomen, whereas Ghirardacci makes no mention of what company she was in when her death occurred.

The problem with all of these historical accounts of Ginevra, is that none of them are bolstered by confirmation of those who knew her, nor do they cite specific facts of her perfidious advice, with the exception of Nadi's diary, which does detail that she (not Giovanni) ordered the death of two citizens. They do portray the general public opinion of her, which was anything but positive, but again, the public's flame of dissatisfaction was likely fanned by the Bentivoglio's demise, and unsuccessful attempt to retake the city. As with all history, the truth is concealed by the epideictic tendency of all human stories, present or past, to overly praise the victors, and overly blame the losers. What we can assert, with conviction, is that Arienti, who served her family personally, did not view Ginevra with admiration; rather his work reveals a subtle disdain for her governance.

Notes

¹ Carolyn James, *Giovanni Sabadino Degli Arienti: A Literary Career*, (Firenze: L.S. Olschki, 1996).

² Sharon Janson, *Debating women, politics, and power in early modern Europe*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 74.

³ See the chapter epilogue for the development of historical sources on Ginevra and her husband.

⁴ There are two existing manuscripts of the work, which sank into oblivion until the 1888 reprint by Corrado Ricci, student of Giosuè Carducci. Please note that the date of publication is discussed in the epilogue of this chapter, and was likely not 1488.

⁵ Arienti, *Gynevera*, iv.

⁶ See Ricci's preface for his many citations of contemporary sources.

⁷ Arienti, *Gynevera*, viii.

⁸ Arienti, *Gynevera*, xii.

⁹ Arienti, *Gynevera* xiii.

¹⁰ Arienti, *Gynevera*, xiv.

¹¹ Titina Strano, *Ginevra Bentivoglio E La Fine Di Una Signoria*. (Milano: Treves, 1937) 93.

¹² See epilogue.

¹³ Arienti, *Gynevera*, xv. I have verified these quotes by consulting the original sources.

¹⁴ Though it must also be noted that Pope Alexander VI, father of Cesare Borgia, was known for his persistence expansion of power, for which he ousted many ruling families, not just the Bentivoglio family.

¹⁵ Arienti, *Gynevera*, xvii.

¹⁶ Arienti, *Gynevera*, xxii.

¹⁷ Arienti, *Gynevera*, xvii.

¹⁸ The destruction of the Bentivoglio palace is viewed to be one of the greatest architectural losses ever to occur in Italy. It was described by those who visited it as grandiose, immense and immaculately constructed.

¹⁹ He recounts their military exploits and valor in battle in great detail, for instance.

²⁰ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 7.

²¹ Trans my own: "Oh how divine and celestial a grace to you this is, for you can say that you already have your right hand in the kindgom of paradise!"

²² Corrado Ricci cites many of these sources in his preface, such as Paolo Giovio, Cherubino Ghirardacci, and a contemporary Bolognese diarist, Gaspare Nadi. See epilogue for detailed sources and further analysis.

²³ Translation in collaboration with Clara Benali (without any attempt to improve the readability, for the purpose of further demonstrating the point of our argument): "What should I do, then, since I am inspired by your many excellent qualities, if not engage my hand and my mind in a noble endeavor, to eternally praise you and your gentle mind, as an example to all the women who want to be respectable, forgetting about makeup (and forgetting about) obsessing over the vain and lascivious mirror, many times corrupter of a good name; and in so doing they (will) have left this world with a good reputation and joined the blessed spirits of the famous women, to enjoy that eternal homeland where joy is endless?"

²⁴ See epilogue. Ricci also includes many sources on this.

²⁵ According to Jane Stevenson in her book, *Women Latin Poets: Language, Gender, and Authority, from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century*, of the "27 Italian women Latinists flourishing between 1400 and 1500", she was the only one who did not marry and did not join a cloister (164).

²⁶ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 5.

²⁷ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 166.

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- ²⁸ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 168. Italics mine.
- ²⁹ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 163. Italics mine.
- ³⁰ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 367.
- ³¹ James, Carolyn. 1996. *Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti: a literary career*. (Firenze: L.S. Olschki) 89.
- ³² Ibid, 356, Italics mine.
- ³³ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 276.
- ³⁴ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 274. Also, on page 273: “La savia donna fu molto amata et reverita da le gente”
- ³⁵ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 295
- ³⁶ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 266
- ³⁷ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 266.
- ³⁸ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 298 & 299.
- ³⁹ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 301.
- ⁴⁰ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 265.
- ⁴¹ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 290.
- ⁴² Arienti, *Gynevera*, xxi.
- ⁴³ James, 77.
- ⁴⁴ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 276.
- ⁴⁵ See Gaspare Nadi’s *Diario bolognese*.
- ⁴⁶ Arienti, *Gynevera* 275 & 278.
- ⁴⁷ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 265.
- ⁴⁸ Arienti, *Gynevera* 277, Italics mine.
- ⁴⁹ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 291.

⁵⁰ This proverb is a reversal of what normally is expected, that the hen scratches well, but sings poorly. It was a proverb used to express the concept that behind one's words, there was no action.

⁵¹ James, *Giovanni Sabadino*.

⁵² Arienti, *Gynevera*, 295

⁵³ Stanley Chojnacki, "Dowries and Kinsmen in Early Renaissance Venice," *Women, dowries and agency: Marriage in fifteenth-century Valencia*, ed. Dana Lightfoot, p. 572.

Excessive dowries were not only common to Venice, however, but across all of Italy.

⁵⁴ Chojnacki, 572.

⁵⁵ For a detailed sweep of Ginevra's portrayal in Bolognese history, see this chapter's epilogue.

⁵⁶ For more on this letter, see the epilogue.

⁵⁷ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 6. Italics mine.

⁵⁸ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 6.

⁵⁹ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 5.

⁶⁰ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 10.

⁶¹ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 10-11.

⁶² Arienti, *Gynevera*, 10.

⁶³ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 10.

⁶⁴ It is unclear who died first, but she most certainly died of childbirth.

⁶⁵ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 11.

⁶⁶ Arienti, *Gynevera*, 14.

⁶⁷ Giovio, 389.

⁶⁸ T.C. Price Zimmerman, *Paolo Giovio: The Historian and the Crisis of Sixteenth-Century Italy*, (Chichester: Princeton University Press, 1995) 206.

⁶⁹ Zimmerman, 206.

⁷⁰ Cherubino Ghirardacci was an Augustinian friar and 16th century historian.

⁷¹ Ghirardacci, 373.

⁷² Ghirardacci, 370

⁷³ Ghirardacci, 370.

⁷⁴ Ghirardacci, 374. It is impossible to verify the existence of this letter as very little archival information remains on the Bentivoglio family, largely due to the destruction of the Bentivoglio palace. In fact the Archivio di Stato in Bologna has no Bentivoglio papers at all (Dr. Cecilia Ady, as cited in Cecil H. Clough's article "The Archivio Bentivoglio in Ferrara.", p 1).

⁷⁵ Titina Strano, 247-248.

⁷⁶ Ghirardacci, 373.

⁷⁷ Ghirardacci, 377.

⁷⁸ Ghirardacci, 548.

⁷⁹ Ghirardacci, 549.

⁸⁰ Ghirardacci, 549.

⁸¹ Gozzadini, 123. Ricci also quotes Gozzadini in his preface (p xiii) as observing that Ginevra's face seemed to be depicted in the 7-headed hydra figured in the painting across from her family's painting in S. Giacomo.

⁸² Gozzadini, 123 & 66.

⁸³ Gozzadini, 242-3. It should also be pointed out that the family name, Gozzadini, appears throughout most historical documents detailing the Bentivoglio era. Based upon cursory searches, it appears they were also involved in the plots to end the Bentivoglio reign.

⁸⁴ Gozzadini, 243.

⁸⁵ Gozzadini confirms that these poems were written on parchment paper that date to the 1600s.

⁸⁶ Muzzi, 504.

⁸⁷ Ghirardacci, 354.

⁸⁸ Ghirardacci sets for the Bentivoglio Signoria as an ideal- with Giovanni at its head, then the church Legato and Senato of 16 to act as the checks and balances of power.

⁸⁹ I have found only one reference to Vizani's history, in Niccola Ratti's *Della Famiglia Sforza*, (1794), Volume 2, p 163.

⁹⁰ Guicciardini likewise only mentions Ginevra once, when he writes about the family's exit from Bologna.

⁹¹ Vizani, 469.

⁹² Vizani, 471.

Chapter 4

Female Biography in Renaissance and Post-Tridentine Italy: Typologies and Ideologies

As the Counter-Reformation's influence spread across Italy, the standards for female comportment and appearance became increasingly stringent. Art began to portray female saints and biblical figures with much simpler attire than the previous century, and literary representations of the ideal *donna illustre* were more austere and mystical, increasingly reflecting their hagiographical counterparts.¹ The ubiquitous *De mulieribus claris* volumes, mainly composed by court scholars and polygraphs at the bequest of the nobility, began to be superseded by individual female biographies either written by clerics or commissioned by them. This change, both in ideals and authorship, drastically altered the genre, which began to reflect the new Post-Tridentine ideals of female spiritual behavior, behavior that almost entirely neglected the protagonist's social and familial responsibilities. This transition created a new paradox in the construction of a female life: whereas the compendium pieces of the Renaissance portrayed virile women operating in masculine spheres, who could not be imitated by their female readers due to their unique station in life, biographies of the Counter-Reformative period presented an equally inaccessible model for exemplum based upon spiritual excesses.

The genre's intention, however, was not to display women whose virtues were inimitable. It was, in fact, used as a primary tool of the Counter-Reformation to dictate behavior standards and appropriate models for imitation. Acknowledgement of the genre's potential for soliciting emulation and imitation is found in almost every conduct manual and biographical dedication from the period, including three out of the four

biographies pertinent to our current study. The first, Sebastiano Morale's 1577 biography of Maria D'Avis, the Princess of Parma, engages in a lengthy discussion of the emulative potential of the genre.² His main assertion is that a woman's example can silence those who assert the impossibility of following the church's strict standards, or who maintain that their station in life does not require them to make such sacrifices. As such, he observes the importance of presenting the readers with exemplary subjects of similar age and station who are, in fact, able to live virtuously and maintain the new standards: "dicono le sacre lettere, che l'uno molto efficace sarà in presentarci in faccia altre persone dell'istessa etade, e conditione di vita che noi siamo, che havranno adempito tutte quelle cose delle quali à noi in presente pare di poterci con varij protesti escusare."³ According to Morales, their example entirely refutes any excuses "con le quali noi con vani colori, e tergiversationi pensiamo poterci difendere."⁴

Morales references his literary predecessors by citing many examples from antiquity who adorn many pages with their exemplary living, but emphasizes their inability to act as true exempla, due to the passage of time, and the tendency of the "malitia del cuor nostro" that constantly seeks to shroud our own errors with the excuse that such greatness was achieved only long ago and is now impossible: "però ha voluto quell'alta providentia, se ben questa scusa è molto vana, non essengo egli accettatore ne di tempo, ne di persone, per levarci tutte le difese, produrre continuamente quasi di tempo in tempo, & in diversi luoghi novelle piante cariche de frutti religiosi, e di vera pietà che potessero convertire à se gli occhi d'altri à riguardarle, ammirarle, & imitarle."⁵

In fact, Morales spends the first seven pages of his work on this concept of exclusion from the standards of behavior, indignant that many women believe the

standards do not apply to them. He tells of their “vani protesti”, based mainly on the excuse that because they have been born in illustrious cities of worldly abundance, they are not constrained to live in accordance with Christian principles: “per esser nate in città nobili, e grandi abbondanti di delitie, e lussi, e collocate in famiglie splendide, e magnifiche giudicano non convenirsi alcuni essercitij Christiani.”⁶ He views exemplary literature, therefore, to be of tantamount importance to the lives of all female citizens, especially those of higher status. The social and political aspect of Counter-Reformation literature, by which proponents of the movement sought to regularize behavior and emphasize ecclesiastical obligations of the ruling elite, is made quite evident in these pages of his dedication.⁷

This function of biography is also revealed through Morales’ use of metaphors, which give a visual picture of the exemplum process. Most common, and found frequently throughout his work, is the image of a plant, laden down with fruit, that is able to grow in any garden, and displays itself with rigor and beauty. He also employs the ubiquitous metaphor of the mirror, in which the reader will see the protagonist’s reflection and will then desire to imitate what she sees. Finally, he employs the metaphor of clothing, in which the reader will seek to don the elegant clothes of virtue that the protagonist displays.

Giovanni Battista Petruccini’s 1621 biography of Sestilia Sabolini, a noblewoman from Siena, likewise uses the metaphor of a plant and emphasizes that exemplary behavior is possible, even among the noblewomen. He dedicates his biography to the nuns of Siena: “accioche vedendo che anco tra le spine del Mondo, possono sorgere fruttifere piante, ripiene di fiori odoriferi di santi, e casti pensieri, e di

dolcissimi frutti di perfette operatione, impariate da una Gentildonna, posta nel Mondo [. . .] e legata di più, con lacci matrimoniali, la vita spiritual, che con l'aiuto Divino, e potete, e dovereste osservare.”⁸ In both of these biographies, we see recurring metaphors of exemplum, but also the opinion that those living in the world do not often abide by proper Catholic standards.

Hippolito Porro's 1624 biography of Cornelia Lampugnana Ro, a Milanese noblewoman, does not assign such pejorative connotations to the lay-world, most notably because Porro is a nobleman himself, and therefore is not operating under the post-Tridentine exigencies of the church.⁹ His emphasis on exemplum literature is therefore more rooted in the classical vein of education that states in Latin, “domestica exempla, & recentia magis movent.”¹⁰ He echoes this sentiment, stating that when “si propongono i fatti heroici”, it is more effective to praise either one's antecedents or the city's more prominent citizens, which inspire one so much more than “qualche impresa lodevole fatta da uno straniero.”¹¹ He continues that one's fame is the strongest shortly after one's death, as is the desire to “uguagliare quella gloria” felt by the “spettatori” of such fame. He therefore deems Cornelia Ro a perfect subject: “Impercioche sendo ella vissuta in questi nostri tempi di così fresca memoria, mi dò a credere, che sia per essere uno stimolo potente alle persone, le quali entrò al petto nutrono qualche poco di desiderio di vera Gloria, e timore d'Iddio all'acquisto della perfettione Religiosa, e Christiana.”¹² We therefore see, in these three biographies, the shifting focus of the genre, from Greek and Roman women of the past, as was common in the early Renaissance compendiums on illustrious women, to women from contemporary society, whose example (theoretically) was more easily imitated.

The last of our four biographies in question, *L'Eroina Veneta, overo la vita di Elena Lucretia Cornara Piscopia (1689)*, is quite unique and set apart from the first three, in that its protagonist is, as evident from the title, a heroine of epic proportions, and its author, Antonio Lupis, a prolific Italian writer, is probably under contract for his work, which is dedicated to Elena Piscopia's sister. His dedication contains no reference to the concept of exemplum because his works seeks to extol the singularity and inimitability of his protagonist, the first female to receive a doctoral degree in Italy, and a woman renowned world-wide for her intellect. He does not use the metaphors of plants or mirrors, but rather of ships, Greek goddesses, and the powerful sun, whose most refined ray belongs to Elena. Phrases like "laureata ne i marmi dell'Eternità", and "splendori della sua Fama" decorate the pages, in direct contrast to the Christian perfection and purity of our other three protagonists. This is not to say that Elena Piscopia's biography bears no resemblance to the three earlier biographies, nor that Elena Piscopia is not praised for the typical attributes of the other protagonists. In fact, many aspects of her biography reflect the others, and demonstrate how prevalent the church's Post-Tridentine influence had become in the genre of biography. Despite the authors' attempts to set forth noblewomen as worthy of imitation, then, it is not their exemplarity as a noblewoman that is emphasized, rather their conformity to saintlike behavior. All four biographies bear pointed resemblance to hagiographies, and the extolled qualities of their protagonists are quite divergent from the prescribed behavior of a *donna illustre* in the conduct manuals of the time.

It is of great pertinence to our study to recall that the authors of conduct manuals discussed in chapter 2, Lodovico Dolce and Vincenzo Nolfi, despite their disagreements

on other matters, both affirm that women should avoid spiritual excesses. Dolce repeatedly mentions the tendencies of women of the time to engage in extreme spiritual practices, and both observes and discourages the use of the *cilicio* (uncomfortable hairshirt generally accompanied by pointed metal objects), praying for long periods of time, fasting, and depriving oneself of sleep. Many of his references to these extremes are quite humorous, as when he describes the women “le quali con lunghe fila di pater nostri in mano, barbottando tra denti, vanno ricercando tutta la casa: & per ogni picciola fistucca, che loro s’incappa tra piedi, interrompono le santé parole, o gridano, o maladicono.”¹³ Nolfi agrees with Dolce’s assessment of religious extremes, writing that his fiancée should be careful not to seem excessively virtuous because people will be suspicious that her affectations of “goodness” are merely concealing her faults: “tutti sanno che le Donne, che affettano di mostrarsi troppo severe, diventano sospette di poca bonta, che sotto quella ritiratezza ricoprir disegnano.”¹⁴

While Dolce maintains women should only go out to hear God’s words and only rarely to public festivities, Nolfi disparages the common tendency of women to seek an excessively secluded life, to the extent that they never even appear at their windows. Such seclusion, he says, makes them seem “selvatiche.” He therefore counsels a more moderate approach, neither appearing too frequently nor too seldom, though when appearing at the window, they should be mindful that it is equivalent to being seen in a public square.¹⁵

The woman’s role in maintaining domestic tranquility is an aspect covered thoroughly by both authors, who assert the importance of treating her servants well, keeping a keen eye on domestic affairs, and making sure the house lacks for nothing.

Dolce spends quite a bit of time on the wife's ideal relationship with her husband, one based upon submission and mutual affection. His ideal wife always agrees with her husband, feels what he feels, serves him diligently when he is sick, is never jealous, lets him have his own secrets, does not hold him to the same rules of chastity, and if her husband beats her (not behavior Dolce endorses), she never makes it public because it would ruin his reputation and he has the potential to change. She should place her governance of the house above even her spiritual commitment, because if God is where peace is found, then her home should be peaceful. Nolfi, in contrast, is silent on these issues.

The disparities between the two authors serve an essential purpose for our study: together they represent the arch of expectations for women in the Renaissance, Dolce leaning to the more conservative, religious approach, Nolfi concerned with maintaining the reputation of the family by properly observing the social (not ecclesiastical) customs of the nobility. In comparison to the biographies of that time, however, we will see that their combined approach is still quite liberal. The women of Renaissance biographies are mainly extolled for their spiritual extremities. They all fast excessively, lose sleep due to their excessive orations, engage in self mortification, eschew vanities to the point that their dress could have been considered unkempt, only go out when attending church, and serve the poor and the sick often through their own personal sacrifices of food or money. Also prevalent in these biographies is a thematic shift of focus from the woman's familial relationships to her spiritual rapport with the clergy. Her role of wife and mother is obfuscated and replaced by her relationship with the church fathers, mainly her confessor.

The influence of the Counter-Reformation is, therefore, strikingly evident in these biographies, but certain aspects of its influence stand out more than most, particularly in the protagonist's observation of Catholic traditions, her obedience to the church fathers, her abhorrence of the outside world, and her pronounced humility and self-deprecation. The dominance of these themes leaves little room for any individual representation of a female life.

Observation of certain spiritual practices was considered of utmost importance to maintaining one's salvation and feeding the spiritual Catholic soul. These involved frequently attending mass, taking confession and communion on a regular basis, serving the sick and the poor, and embracing an attitude of humility and abnegation. These are prominently featured in the four biographies, but one spiritual practice stands out from all others in these biographies: prayer recitations, or *orationi*. All four women had oratories constructed in their homes, where they could seek privacy for their prayer practice, and where the cares of the world could be shut out, and sometimes, spiritual rapture or ecstasy achieved. The women are praised for the frequency and diligence with which they applied themselves to this spiritual practice, with special emphasis on the consolation and rewards they derived from it.

The Princess of Parma went above and beyond the church's expected frequency of orations of three times a day (once in the morning, once in the afternoon, and once in the evening); she added to this frequent little prayers that she would say aloud all day long, and would retreat to her oratory for two to three hours at a time, especially if she was in personal difficulty¹⁶. When she gave alms to hospitals, she ordered "che continuassero nell'oratione delle cinque hore, delle sette, delle nove, delle dodici, delle

trentatre, e delle quaranta hore, à tal che continuamente, hor l'una, hor l'altra stava in oratione, alle quali concorreva buona parte della Citta.”¹⁷ She frequently lost sleep as a result of her orations, and would retreat to her oratory, sometimes for the entire night, unbeknownst to her ladies in waiting.¹⁸

Sestilia Sabolini recited the entire Rosary and the *L'Ufficio della Madonna* every day and towards the end of her life she would spend 7 hours a day in recitations, such that she seemed a statue.¹⁹ She took her rosary to bed every night and would say it while falling asleep (as did the Princess of Parma). Ippolito Porro was hopeful that his biography would contribute to the sainthood of his protagonist, a noblewoman from Milan (it did not), so his investigations into her prayer practice delve even deeper than the other biographers, noting that her immobility for such long periods of time demonstrated the marriage between her soul and God: “Argomento più che evidente dell'estasi nell'orare, e nel contemplare, e che quella divota anima godeva di quella gratia, che gli spirituali sogliono chiamare lo sposalitio dell'anima nostra con Dio.”²⁰

Cornelia Ro even wrote her own orations that her biographer, Porro, includes in the appendix of her biography. He notes that for two years following her husband's death, she dedicated herself to recitations, at one point reciting the entire “ufficio grande”, something her confessor subsequently prohibited her from doing again. She had a particular order and method for her recitations, which he lists in detail in Chapter 10, an entire chapter dedicated to her prayer practice.²¹ Porro asserts that through such practice the “anima s'unisce con Dio”, and that though most are easily distracted while praying, Cornelia easily let her thoughts go (“con facilità lasciava ogni pensiero”) and was able to stay, like Sestilia, as still as a statue.²² Ro also would spend entire nights reciting prayers,

but one anecdote in particular demonstrates her excessive practice: when she visited her brother-in-law Carlo Ro, she would “orare tutto il giorno in Chiesa”, and then, during the cooler hours, when she would take walks through the forest in the company of others, she would “recitava ò il Rosario, ò l’ufficio di nostra Signora.”²³ One cannot help consider how those in her company perceived her diligence, which could easily have been misinterpreted as poor manners or social awkwardness. We know for certain that both Dolce and Nolfi did not view such extremities in a positive light.

Even the biography of the first woman laureate, Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia, the least traditional of all three, emphasizes her prayer habits. She is represented as a formidable practitioner of the discipline of orations, spending an hour a day every morning in her oratory. The author notes that, unlike most women who would begin their day by running straight to the mirror to apply makeup, she would instead apply spiritual “blush” by examining her conscience: “si metteva immediatamente in Oratione, con bellettarsi con i rossori delle sue colpe, accesi cinabrij del pentimento, e minij santificata dall’erubescenza de proprij mancamenti.”²⁴ She would remain in prayer, “solitaria, e racchiusa in un Gabinetto” for an hour, not allowing anybody to enter except “l’occhio del suo amato Giesù.”²⁵ A lover of metaphors and literary embellishment, Porro calls her prayer room a “Nido fedele della sua pietà, e Segretaria celeste de suoi trattati con Dio,” and portrays prayer to be a retreat from the world where Elena would “parlamentare nei remoti congressi delle sue meditationi.”²⁶

The prayer life of these women serves to highlight a concept of double seclusion; not only do they prefer to stay at home, their prayer life and their oratory room constructs yet another wall between them and the world. The further they remove themselves from

the world, the more fervent they are in their prayers, and the more they gain access to the “remoti congressi” of the spiritual world. This seclusion, so reflective of cloistered nuns, is sought by all the female protagonists without regard for self-comfort. Elena completed her orations despite personal illness or bad weather and if, by chance, she were interrupted, she would wake up at midnight to finish her prayers, “per non interrompere questo esercizio spirituale.”²⁷ Waking at midnight was apparently a common practice among devout women, because the very same habit is mentioned in the biography of Cornelia: “tanto in lei s’avanzò il gusto dell’oratione, che di mezza notte levandosi dal letto, consumava il rimanente orando.”²⁸

These practices are not portrayed only as sacrifices, however; the biographers make sure to note that they are often accompanied by sweet rewards, such as visions and joyous raptures.²⁹ Sestilia’s biographer writes that as her practice of orations deepened, she would wake 2-3 hours before daybreak and stay on her bare knees for hours. During this practice, she began to discover the “mirabil frutto che da questo esercizio si raccoglie” and her biographer recounts how her oldest and most astute daughter witnessed her laughing and sometimes crying in the corner of the church after taking communion.³⁰ She would stay there, immobile, for a long while and when her daughter once asked her why she was laughing, she replied, “Figliuola mia io ridevo, e mi rallegro perche vedevo chi desidero.”³¹

Cornelia’s biographer represents this type of joyous vision as the marriage of the soul with Christ, during which she became so consumed, she could not be disturbed by anything or anyone: “Ne quantunque si procurasse con violenza di sturbarla, ò rivocharla dall’oratione, tirandole la veste le compagne, acciò che finisce, s’accorgeva dello sturbo ò

sentiva. Argomento più che evidente dell'estasi nell'orare, e nel contemplare, e quella divota anima godeva di quella grazia, che gli spirituali sogliono chiamare lo sposalitio dell'anima nostra con Dio."³² She received joy not only in prayer, but in all aspects of spiritual observation. Note the prevalence of the word sweet in the following passage on Cornelia's appreciation for the Sacraments of the church:

in qualunque occasione, che le si appresentava di sentir lodi di Dio, ò ne Sermoni, ò nelle Lettioni della scrittura Sacra, ò ragionamenti famigliari, vedevasi subito dileguare di *dolcezza*: mentre assisteva à Divini Ufficij con ogni fervor di spirito, & attentione di mente, accompagnando il salmeggiare de Sacerdoti, non così presto sentiva il *dolce* suono delle Divine lodi, ò del Gloria Patri, ò d'altro, che in lode di Dio ne Salmi si canti, che subito si vedeva *rapita* in profonda contemplatione, e ripiena d'incredibile *dolcezza*.³³

Elena's biographer, ever the lover of metaphors, highlights the heavenly gifts gained from oration, and that Elena was well aware of them: "Sapeva, che l'Oratione ammolisce i Cieli di bronzo, & che apre i diluvij delle superne beneficenze, Cancelleria delle gratie, e potentissimo Incanto nel fermare le minaccie di qualunque turbolenza."³⁴

This pursuit of sweet communion and *incanto*, what Teresa D'Avila called "soavità e delizie" in her autobiography, was commonplace to the Post-Tridentine emphasis on the personal and secluded practice of prayer, but its necessarily private nature would seem to negate its ability to successfully solicit imitation and emulation, as the witness of such experience should have been rare, had the protagonists been practicing in private. In all biographies, therefore, the witnesses generally observe the protagonist unawares. These witnesses are mainly her ladies in waiting, who upon waking at night, pass the oratory and see their mistress engaged in rapturous prayers. Sestilia was the least private with her prayers of this type: not only did she experience sweet raptures in church, but in her own home, even over dinner. The public nature of

these experience did, however, serve the purpose of prompting imitation; her biographer writes that her children first marveled at her behavior, then imitated it. Sestilia's daughter, at seeing her mother's joyous rapture in church, asked her to instruct her on how to "farla innamorare di Giesu", so that she could have a similar encounter and also partake in the "dolcezza" of "visioni."³⁵ This public demonstration of devotion was necessary, in fact, to encourage others to take up a more fervent prayer practice. Elena Piscopia's biographer, Lupis, makes sure to mention that besides reciting secluded prayers in her oratory, she would also repeat orations "alla presenza delle sue Cameriere, *stimandole alla medema devotione*," by which she was able to encourage those in her service to maintain a secluded and religious life ("rassegnata, e religiosa").³⁶ For the more ubiquitous prayers said throughout the day, she would gather all the women of the house to do them with her. She is represented, therefore, as a formidable practitioner of the discipline of private orations, but also a teacher of the practice, and an example to those around her.

Not only do the biographers portray the joy that results from a strong prayer practice, they also affirm the terrestrial rewards that resulted. The Princess of Parma, in fact, was childless for many years of her marriage, but eventually had one daughter and two sons. Morales writes that her orations gave her great consolation and God rewarded her for her diligence, crediting the birth of her two sons as a divine reward for her recitation practice: "questi illustrissimi Signori possono dire d'essere impetrate da Dio, per mezzo dell'oratione di tal Madre."³⁷ Cornelia, whose service to the poor and downtrodden is quite remarkable, said frequent prayers for those she visited, and their healing is often credited to her. The concept that God listens more intently to the prayers

of those who diligently serve him is therefore emphasized frequently throughout all four biographies.

The confessors held strong influence over these women, guiding them towards Christian perfection, particularly through their *orazioni*. Obedience to their confessors' instructions is a prevalent aspect of female Renaissance biography, and a prime demonstration of the Counter-Reformation's influence. The Princess of Parma's biography was written by her confessor himself, and in it he includes her own personal guidelines for spiritual life that she had written in her own hand and kept hidden in her bosom ("accomodata in modo, che si poteva portare nel seno"). These affirmations span ten pages and are furnished verbatim for the reader, in which each of her promises to herself begins by using the future tense. Included in these affirmations is the promise to obey her confessor: "Cercherò d'havere un Confessore, secondo il mio bisogno, e con riverenza l'ubidirò."³⁸ Her confessor later notes that her recognition of the confessor's spiritual authority is a direct result of her adherence to the Catholic faith or, rather, that it is an essential component of the faith in general: "Era questa Signora molto gelosa di conserver la purità della fede catholica in se stessa, e ne gli altri, e di qui veniva, che mai ella volse dire orationi, ò far'alcuna divotione, che le fosse insegnata, se prima non la facesse vedere al Padre Inquisitore."³⁹ The importance of her confessor as spiritual guide is therefore portrayed in a simple syllogism: if one is an adherent of the Catholic faith, then one will seek spiritual instruction from the clergy and will always obey.

The limitations that these confessors often impose on their protagonists' excesses also demonstrate that their practices were by no means expected of all women, nor recommended, further obfuscating the exemplary purpose of each work. Cornelia's

biographer writes that her confessor was constantly restraining her in her excesses, such as her use of the *cilicio*, fasting for long periods of time, and not sleeping. He made her promise, for example, that she would sleep at least 5 hours a night and would eat soup on occasion, in addition to her diet of bread and water. She was often reluctant to obey his commands, worrying that such indulgences would cause her spiritual ascendancy to be slowed, but she always obeyed. When he prohibited her from using her *cilicio*, she obeyed, but cried, and said repeatedly, “torno indietro, torno indietro.”⁴⁰ Yet she always demonstrated complete resignation to his will, which she received and acted upon as if it were an inviolable law: “Non minore fù in questa Signora la virtù dell’ubidienza, ne si vidde già mai, che facesse cosa senza il consiglio del suo Padre spirituale, nelle mani del quale s’era talmente rassegnata, che puntualmente l’ubidi sempre, e del suo volere si fece legge inviolabile in qualunque attione.”⁴¹ Sestilia’s confessor similarly limited her overly frequent attempts to take communion, which escalated in her later life, from once a month to every day: “E se alcuna volta il suo Confessore, per mortificarla, le proibiva la comunione, se ne tornava à casa piangendo.”⁴² When asked by her husband why she was crying, “proróppe in un pianto amarissimo, e disse, Io piango, perche oggi non ho potuto ricevere il mio Giesu.”⁴³

The influence of the Counter-Reformation is therefore evident in both the protagonists’ faithfulness in prayer, their obedience to their confessor, and their ever-increasing extremities. Catholics were under profound scrutiny by the Protestant movement for their lack of spiritual devotion and the Catholic church was criticized for its promotion of works-based salvation, by which one was saved through frequent prayers, communion, confession, and sometimes through the purchase of indulgences.

Protestantism promoted salvation through faith, and rejected the idea that a spiritual intercessor (confessor) was needed to obtain forgiveness for one's sins. The representation of these women, who wholeheartedly submitted to the superiority of their confessors and who profited from their observation of the church's Sacraments, is, in essence, a rebuttal to Protestant ideals.

This strong atmosphere of conflict that was fomenting in Europe as a result of the divergent paths of Christianity is most evident in the Princess of Parma's biography. When the Princess traveled through Protestant lands, such as Germany and Belgium, it is noted that she would arm herself before attending mass, fearing she could be harmed for doing so, and when she was warned that her blatant demonstrations of Catholicism could potentially garner insults and harm, she responded, "ò beata me, s'io fosse martire."⁴⁴ While in Belgium she met a woman with two beautiful children and, as she did not yet have any of her own, begged the woman to let her adopt them so they wouldn't be raised by heretics: "promettendole di tenerli cari, e di haverne cura come madre, [. . .] non potendo patire, che quelli angiolini in apparenza, se ne andassero all'inferno, essendo allevati dalli parenti heretici."⁴⁵ But nowhere is her Catholic fervor so strong as when she refused to meet the Queen of England during her travels to London, despite being advised to do so: "fermandosi l'Armata in un porto d'Inghilterra, parve al Signor Conte di Masfelto Generale di quell'Armata, che Sua Altezza mandasse à visitare la Regine; non lo volse fare per esser' heretica, e benchè le fosse detto, che lo poteva fare, e che vi era l'occasione; non la volse intendere."⁴⁶ Her abhorrence of heretics was so pronounced that the entire ship crew on this voyage pretended to be Catholics, even though many of them were not.⁴⁷ Petruccini also writes that the people of Belgium and Germany

profited from her example: “Per questo ad alcuni pareva, e meritamente, che Dio l’havesse condota in Italia per la Fiandra, e per la Germania, acciòche mostrasse così fatto esempio di virtù, & in tempo, che ne era tanto bisogno in quelle bande.”⁴⁸

Of equal importance to the expansion and preservation of the Catholic faith, the biographies emphasize the protagonists’ responsibility to spiritually instruct others in the Catholic way of life, most importantly their own children. Prior to the Counter-Reformation, the primary responsibility of education fell to the father or male tutor, but Gabriella Zarri notes the shift that occurs in the 16th century, whereby a “‘Christian economy’ was invented in order to moralize the art of maintaining a household” and women became the primary “agents in the enforcing of [spiritual] discipline.”⁴⁹ She quotes from bishop Agostino Valier’s 1575 *Institutione d’ogni stato lodevole delle donne cristiane*, which notes the primacy of the female role in the “management of virtuous living” that represents “not half, as some believe, of the perfection and happiness of homes, cities, republics, kingdoms, and all states of the world, but almost the entirety.”⁵⁰

When the Princess of Parma knew her death was imminent, her confessor overheard her telling her husband to make sure their children were raised “virtuosamente, e nel timor di Dio.”⁵¹ Sestilia’s biographer notes that while she cared little for temporal things, she made every effort to ensure that “ogn’uno di sua Famiglia vivesse col santo timor di Dio. In casa non voleva, che si ragionasse di cose cattive, ò vane, ma sempre di spirito, in modo che non si offendesse mai nè Dio, nè il prossimo.”⁵² This concept, that the instruction of (and discussion of) spiritual matters should usurp all other conversation, is quite commonplace to these biographies, as in the case of Cornelia who, when serving the sick, would only talk about God and refused to talk about anything else: “Ogni sua

industria, e vigilanza poneva, e con ogni più destra maniera procurava, che nella visita de gl'infermi, à quali si trovava presente, d'altro non si ragionasse, che di Dio, della salute, e dell'eterna Gloria, ne permetteva che s'intromettessero ragionamenti del Mondo, come alcuni sogliono il più delle volte fare.”⁵³

Even Elena Piscopia's biography, much more intent upon extolling her for her worldly intelligence, affirms her preference for spiritual philosophy and disdain for the public glory of her own studious pursuits: “Oh quanto più ambiva di argomentare in queste scuole selvaggie, dove non rispondono, che i sordi Echi di una ritirata Innocenza.”⁵⁴ Her biographer frequently intimates that she felt limited by the confines of her sex, not because she could not further pursue her studies, but because she could not more independently pursue her faith: “Se la Sorte la havesse fatta nascere differente dalla conformità del suo Sesso, havrebbe variato altri pensieri nelle deliberationi della Sua Vita, non da pompeggiare ne i Circoli, e negl'affollati garreggiamenti de Virtuosi, mà solitaria, a Romita in un Deserto studiare le Cause dell'eternità, e tenere continue Conclusioni, nel diffinire i progetti della sua salute.”⁵⁵ This shift in educational values is noted by Francesco Sberlati, in his book *Castissima donzella: figure di donna tra letteratura e norma sociale*, who astutely observes that after the Counter-Reformation, women were no longer encouraged to engage in philosophical or literary pursuits as they once were by authors such as Domenichi, Castiglione, and Piccolomini. Instead, citing Dolce's *Istituzione delle donne*, he states that “il libro di Dolce intende allontanare la figura femminile dalla letteratura, dissociando la donna dall'*elite colta*,” and that the predominant reading material of the Post-Tridentine wife becomes “rigorosamente religioso e spirituale.”⁵⁶ We must note, however, that Nolfi's exception to this (recalling

that he counsels his fiancée to be well read in all types of literature) indicates that though such a shift was occurring in literature *written* for women, it was not necessarily the social reality for women of that time.

The representation of Elena's distaste for her worldly studies is therefore quite in keeping with the ecclesiastical expectations of her sex. Her biographer also emphasizes that much of Elena's time was devoted to teaching others to ensure their spiritual rectitude; she frequently met with Jews and attempted to persuade them to join the Catholic faith, and when she failed, she told her family that she would cut her most precious veins if it could result in gaining another soul. She also spent a great deal of time with her neighbor, a German woman who was often ill, and successfully convinced her of her need for confession.⁵⁷

Cornelia Ro's biography provides us with a glimpse of the church's goals for expansion through missionary work. She spent much of her time in pursuit of expanding the Catholic Faith, not just in Milan, but elsewhere. She even discussed the possibility of becoming a missionary to the heretical lands of Switzerland, a brave consideration, for which Porro assigns her viril compliments:

non è da tralasciare in silenzio, quanto infervorata fosse al propagamento della santa Fede, e Religione Catolica. Nudriva in ciò in petto femminile, *maschi, e generosi oltre modo pensieri*, e non solo appagavasi della fatica nell'essercitio d'attender in Milano alla Dottrina Christiana, ma più oltre terminavano i suoi pensieri, e fuori ne paesi de gli Heretici, e Grigioni in particolare si sarebbe volontieri trasferita, quando le fosse stato concesso a sparger il sangue per la Fede, e *insegnare* loro la verità Catolica: In ciò tanto haveva posto il pensiero che s'andò anco imaginando mezzi, co' quali potesse effettuare il desiderio, al che si pensò d'allevare alcune figlie à spese sue ammaestrando in casa propria, acciò che potessero inviarsi ne Grigioni, & ivi con introdursi sotto specie di far lavori pian' piano insinuandosi ne gl'animi, facessero guadagno di qualche anima, ritornandola al grembo della santa Romana Chiesa.⁵⁸

Adoption as a method of faith expansion was not rare. We have already noted how the Princess of Parma wanted to adopt young children to save them from their heretical life, and here we see that Cornelia wanted to adopt young girls so she could send them into the world to spread Catholic teaching.

Though it is unclear whether or not the Princess of Parma actually ended up adopting children, she did ensure the spiritual education of young children in her city, specifically the education of girls. Her biographer writes that young boys were being educated in spiritual matters every Sunday by the priests and that the Princess wanted to make sure that the girls of the city “non rimanessero prive del frutto di così Santa institutione,”⁵⁹ so she ordered the establishment of Parochial schools exclusively for them. She appointed two noblewomen, “di honorata fama, e timorate di Dio” to take charge of their education, taking care to “ammaestrarle nel timore divino, e nelle virtù Christiane.”⁶⁰ She herself would often visit these schools and reward those who excelled in learning and memorization of prayers: “ella medesima hor l’una, hor l’altra Parochia visitava, e tal hora vi assisteva non solo lodando quelle, che meglio imparavano, e recitavano, ma anco premiandole con diversi doni per animarle a fare maggior progresso.”⁶¹ These noblewomen were also required to attend parties, “per conservare l’ordine.”⁶² Spiritual instruction then, was carried out by the mother in the home and by faithful noblewomen in public spaces. It focused primarily upon comportment, oration, and, as we read in Sestilia’s biography, the study of the saints and the commentaries on the Passion of Christ: “Esortava spesso il Marito, & il Figliolo à legger qualche libro spirituale, & in particolare ogni sera la vita del Santo, che veniva il dì seguente: ma si

compiaceva assai di leggere, e sentir leggere libri trattanti della Passione di Nostro Signore.”⁶³

The Princess of Parma also established “un luogo chiamato la Casa delle Vergini,” which was a school for the daughters of ill-reputed mothers (likely prostitutes): “sono figliuole de Madri di mala vita, le quali si salvano dal pericolo, e sono religiosamente ammaestrate nel timore di Dio, e datele delle virtù.”⁶⁴ At the Princess’ death, she called Father Antonio di Parma, the “benefattore” of the house, to her bed, and though it was difficult for her to speak, ensured that he would continue to run the house in perpetuity.⁶⁵ Her example apparently had a great effect on her city, not only on women, but on men as well: “col esempio suo, hà incaminato gran parte delle sue donne à confessarsi, e comunicarsi spesso con riverentia, e divotione, e non solo le sue di corte, mà gran parte di quelle della Città, e similmente molti huomini, i quali essendo da lei adoperati nell’opere pie, si sono con l’esempio suo dati alla vita spiritual, e frequentano i santissimi sacramenti.”⁶⁶

These examples serve to demonstrate that rigorous spiritual education became one of the Catholic church’s primary responses to the Reformation, and that women were given a primary role in carrying this out. The church likewise sought to dispel the Protestant claim that the church had become corrupt and consumed by the love of power and money, through the formation or transformation of monastic groups with more rigid standards of life, such as the Capuchins, Franciscans, and the Benedictines. These groups were dedicated to asceticism, exemplified in their clothing habits, consisting of a rough habit and sandals. They would sometimes go barefoot, and the Capuchins often begged for food, living in make-shift hermitages.⁶⁷ These new and transformed orders became

known for their works of charity, specifically in times of plague. The Capuchins are well known for their efforts in tending to the needs of the plague victims from 1629-1631, oftentimes succumbing to the illness themselves (efforts made famous in Manzoni's *I Promessi Sposi*). They not only served the sick, they established *botteghe di Cristo* where they sold subsidized food, and *monti di pietà*, where they provided interest-free loans. The success of these orders lay in their preaching: "To pry loose donations from the rich, they scourged the conscience of the powerful in sermons. To instill piety in the simple folks, they embarked on extended preaching tours to rural areas."⁶⁸ The public nature of these movements is important for our study, because all our protagonists would have heard such sermons while attending mass.

Inherent to this new way of religious life was the thought that personal sacrifice would bring spiritual gain, and imperative to the success of living such a life was an attitude of profound humility. Adherents to the new Catholic faith therefore embraced a practice of humble sacrifice based upon contempt for the world, self-abasement, and the eschewing of all worldly vanities. The Princess of Parma, Sestilia, Cornelia, and Elena are the embodiment of this new way of living, and are all equally humble and equally disdainful of material possessions, a choice that was inherently in conflict with their station as noblewoman.

The Princess of Parma, in her 10-page list of promises to herself, notes the noblewoman's difficulty of maintaining humility while surrounded by riches and wealth: "Haverò gran cura di acquistare nell'anima mia profondissima humiltà, che è la scala del Cielo, & a me molto necessaria in questo stato mio, attorniato continuamente da tante e così varie occasioni di superbia."⁶⁹ As to disdain for worldly things, she affirms that she

will constantly seek to maintain “gran disprezzo delle cose di questa vita.”⁷⁰ She admitted to her confessor that she had a tendency towards pride and vanity “(Ella si conosceva di natura altiera, & assai inclinata alle vanità, & alla gloria”); so tried to give alms secretly thereby avoiding praise. When she was nearing the final days of her painful illness, a *Padre Inquisitore* came to visit her, “per darli anima,” and praised her for the reforms she had brought about in the city as a result of her good works. His words did not comfort her however; instead, they greatly displeased her: “delle qual parole ella ne mostrò dispiacere intrinsecamente con segni, e parole.”⁷¹

True humility, according to the church, resided in the acknowledgement that the human condition was inherently fallible and tended towards vanity. Saint Bernard of Chiaravalle’s *De gradibus humilitatis et superbiae* (1127) was a primary source of inspiration for the spiritually devout seeking to embrace this concept. St. Bernard identifies three steps of ascension to God: humility, charity and contemplation. He cites the *Regola* of San Benedetto da Norcia, which outlines its own path to humility, broken also into steps, 12 to be exact. These are: constant abstinence from sin and fear of God, abnegation of self-will, obedience to superiors, patient and obedient endurance of hardship, confession of sins, admission and acknowledgment of one’s unworthiness and uselessness, belief in and declaration of one’s inferiority to others, submission to the common monastic rule, being slow to speak, emotional sobriety (abstinence from frequent and light laughter), restraint in speech, and a constant attitude of bodily and spiritual prostration.⁷² St. Benedict wrote, “we descend by self-exaltation and ascend by humility.”⁷³ Thus Christian perfection, based on humility and self abnegation, was attained through a gradual ascent of a metaphorical staircase.

In compliance with these precepts, our protagonists all share an avoidance and even abhorrence of praise. Sestilia's biographer writes, "Se avveniva, che si sentisse lodare, ne pigliava gran fastidio, e subito rispondeva, ch'era un'iniqua, una peccatora, una superba; & haveva pregato tutti di Casa, che non parlassero mai de' fatti suoi, e più tosto ne dicessero male, che bene."⁷⁴ When Cornelia Ro is commended by a noblewoman for her holy works, and for her "divote Orationi", for which, the woman says, God is greatly pleased, Cornelia responds with emphatic dismay: "s'ammareggiò talmente la Sig. Cornelia per questa lode, e tanto dolore ne sentì, che copiose lagrime da gl'occhi versando, hebbe à ripigliare quella Gentildonna in questa maniera. Signora mia, deponete il concetto, che'havete di me di santità, posciache, se bene mi penetraste, mi scorgereste nel vero una nefanda peccatrice, un tizzone dell'inferno."⁷⁵ In her final days, when she was ill in bed and could not speak, a lady "di poco senno senza consideratione" placed a crown on her chest, as many do with a "Corpo santo," and though Cornelia could not speak, the glare she gave this woman was enough, and showed just how displeased she was. The woman was also reprimanded by Cornelia's confessor, who told her that such an act could, by subjecting her to the temptation of pride, cause her to lose "tutto l'acquisto fatto."⁷⁶

Elena Piscopia, who was frequently lauded, even by Pope Innocent XI, for her intellectual abilities, also avoided praise at all costs: "Sfuggiva quelle occasioni, che la potessero ingrandire nella Fama, confessandosi destituta di meriti, & un Verme della Terra."⁷⁷ Lupis calls her a "nemica giurata" of honors and tells an anecdote of a "celebre, & eloquentissimo Oratore dell'Ordine Dominicano" who preached a sermon to 7,000 attendees including Elena.⁷⁸ When he concluded his sermon with an epilogue detailing

Elena's "inesplicabili, e pregiatissime Doti," she was extremely embarrassed and Lupis writes that she wished she could have been buried alive, never again showing her face in the city. She even reproved the priest for his lack of prudence because he had attributed such virtues to a "miserabile Creatura, colma di gravissime imperfettioni."⁷⁹ As a result she did not attend any more of his sermons, "tale fù la confusione, che sentì nella sua modestia; e'l disgusto che n'ebbe nell'antipatia di quei encomiastici attributi," and preferred instead to meditate upon her human deficiencies, the "lordo impasto della sua origine, scavato dal rosso fango del Campo Damasceno," which, Lupis writes, causes man to reflect "continuamente à i rossori della sua creatione, & à i bassi principij della sua polve."⁸⁰

The humility of these four women is not, of course, limited only to their abhorrence of praise, but is present in almost every aspect of their descriptions. St. Bernard is quoted as a source on humility in both the Princess of Parma's biography, and that of Cornelia Ro, and the biographies of all four women follow his precepts.⁸¹ This was especially accomplished by avoiding vanities, as in the case of Sestilia who wore a simple "Zimarra nera, con pochi ornamenti femminili" and washed her face with "acqua semplice," using only a "fazzoletto bagnato con saliva."⁸² Petruccini writes that she went ten years without washing her hair: "dieci anni interi è stata senza mai lavarsi capo: solo il Sabato mattina di buon'ora si pettinava la testa e si acconciava, non toccandosi più fra settimana, se non rarissime volte per necessità."⁸³ She was in the weekly habit of begging forgiveness on her knees, from her husband, children, and even servants, and would perform the most "vile" chores in an effort to attain a greater degree of humility: "Da cinque anni in qua per humiliarsi maggiormente si metteva à fare con le sue Serve

tutti gl'esercitij più vili della Casa, come rigovernare i piatti, spazzare, fare il pane, attignere l'acqua, andare per le legna, & altre cose di più repugnanza."⁸⁴

Attire is represented in these biographies as a great temptation of the world, one that could cause one to descend the ladder of humility, rather than ascend it. Elena Piscopia's biographer calls fashion a gentle poison: "La mollitie degl'Habiti è un gentile veleno, che si intesse alla libertà de costume, & una vaga etticia dell'arte, che con i suoi mortiferi fiati ammorba le menti più sane."⁸⁵ He writes that Elena abhorred makeup ("i minij, e i belletti, i lisci") and that she never allowed perfumed soaps to touch her face. Nor was she charmed by "i bissi, e i ricami, gl'ori, e le gemme," knowing that no other contagion was as capable of promoting profligacy as that of "lo stare sù le gale, e le mode, & invogliarsi di fastosi arnesi, e di delicati lavori."⁸⁶ Because Elena was aware of these temptations, she dressed modestly and did not wear jewelry: "la nostra E R O I N A dispreggiando sì fatti abusi, si contenesse con modesti abbigliamenti, e sfugisse un' vischio cotanto tenace all'impudicitia. Il medesimo aborrimiento professò nell'adonarsi di gioielli."⁸⁷ Lupis writes that these jewels from far away lands (Eritrea, Cambaia, Idaspe, and Scitia) were stones that caused the ruin of great houses, and risked violating any woman's prudence, reversing the true order of what was to be considered important. He then engages in his usual metaphorical musings, affirming that she loved sapphires, but only those whose color contained the reflection of celestial beauty and prompted meditation of such beauty; she loved rubies, but only those tinted with the contemplation of the blood of the cross.⁸⁸

The embracing of more simple attire was not well received by Elena's family, and apparently was a source of conflict in her household. When her mother would "obligarla

ad usare nobili vesti, e pregiatissimi adobbi,” she would strongly protest. She would only wear “habiti di apparenza” and “seta” when constrained to do so by her “Maggiori,” and she always shed many tears when forced to do so.⁸⁹ Lupis follows a lengthy description of the dangers of elegant dressing with an affirmation of Elena’s desire to seek separation from the world, in the hopes of discovering instead the divine pleasures. She would often retreat, he writes, to her secret “Gabinetto” and here would engage in holy contemplations, contemplations which helped her “distaccarsi da i lacci terreni.”⁹⁰ These passages make clear the church’s stance on dress, and the desired behavior of women in response to worldly pressures of beauty: complete avoidance and spiritual retreat. These behaviors, in fact, are represented as essential components for spiritual ascension, which, as we see, created quite a dichotomy of expected behavior for noblewomen.

The difficulties involved for a noblewoman who wished to follow such steps of spiritual ascendancy is also present in the Princess of Parma’s biography, included in her list of personal resolutions, and referencing the very same dilemma experienced by Queen Esther:

Quando mi vestirò, non vi saranno presenti se non le donne necessarie, e con silentio passerò per la mente quelle belle considerationi della Regina Ester, e quelle belle parole, ch’ella diceva, Tu scis necessitate meam Domine, & quòd abbominer signum superbia, et Gloria mea, & detester illud quasi pannum menstruate, & non portem in diebus silentij mei, & nunquàm latata sit ancilla tua, ex quo buc translata sit ancilla tua, ex quo buc translata sum usque in prasente diem, nisi in te Domine Deus.⁹¹

Cornelia Ro’s biographer states that extravagances in dress “sfiguravano i freggi dell’Anima,” and that Cornelia felt similar restraints during her marriage to her husband, going to great lengths to absolve herself of the guilt she felt when forced to attend lavish festivities where proper dress was expected. Her conversion to this more austere way of

life was, in fact, brought about by a remonstrance she received from a *Monaca Capuccina* in response to her lavish dress. Porro writes how on one particular day she went to San Sepolcro, “ben’addobata, come novella Sposa, da Servitori vestiti a liurea accompagnata, conforme al costume della nobiltà, & qualità sua,” when a young *Energumena* approached her, dressed in the Capuchin habit, and rebuked her for her “pompa del cussinone, de’ guanti con riccamo, e delle perle”, telling her to look instead at the image of Jesus, crowned with thorns, and see if he were wearing gloves, if on his neck were gems, and if his feet had “il cuffinone.” She concluded by telling Cornelia that on the Day of Judgment, she would personally judge her for her “pompa, e fasto.”⁹²

This caused Cornelia “tale terrore” that as soon as it was permitted her, she put aside all pomp in her attire (see appendix A). Her mother-in-law and husband were initially resistant to such changes (“non così facilmente vi acconsentissero”), but due to her “destra maniera,” Cornelia was slowly able to convince them of her cause, though she occasionally had to make exceptions to this because of her husband’s position as the Podestà of Tortona. His elevated position necessitated her occasional appearance at public festivities, despite her desires to avoid such pompous places. Her biographer writes, in fact, that her husband commanded her to attend them: “dal commandamento del Marito fù costretta ad accettar l’invito, & andarvi.”⁹³ Porro writes that these festivities were wrought with temptations of the Devil, such that Cornelia would have to arm herself in preparation for his assaults: “Ma prima che vi andasse si preparò, armandosi contra l’insidie del Demonio, che in simili occorrenze sogliono essere gagliarde, & inviluppare anco li più costanti petti.”⁹⁴ Note the similarity in syntax to Lupis’ admonishments against the dangers of dress, a danger he says can “ammorba le

menti più sane.”

Against such pervasive temptations Cornelia “arms” herself with a surprising weapon: garbanzo beans. She places the dry beans in her shoes so that, when forced to dance in such lavish surroundings, she will experience extreme pain. The pain is so severe, in fact, that her actions are discovered when she has an “accidente” while dancing that forces her to “abbandonar il ballo.” She is removed to a bedroom, and when a servant takes off her shoes, the *ceci* are discovered so imbedded in her feet, that extracting them requires the “destra industria di perito Barbiere.”⁹⁵

Vincenzo Nolfi’s conduct manual, a work uninhibited by ecclesiastical influences, and focused solely on his wife’s successful acclimation into noble society, gives a more accurate depiction of what the general expectations of dress were for noblewoman of the time, which were by no means austere and simple. Nolfi provides his fiancée a history of clothing and its traditions, and notes that while the ancient philosophers (not the church) were critical of extravagances (“da alcuni rigorosi Filosofi erano già le pompe delle Donne molto biasimate, chiamandole, non ornamenti, ma bruttezze”), elegant fashion had always been held in high esteem by (almost) all nations. He affirms not only that “il vestir pomposo” is permitted, but that it is recommended, especially on occasions such as weddings, parties, meetings with Princesses or foreign wives.⁹⁶ Nolfi’s concern is instead more focused on her manner of dress being commensurate with the occasion, or maintaining uniformity within the outfit (that an elegant dress of brocade is not accompanied by sleeves that are too simple, for example).⁹⁷ He recommends restraint in her extravagance only so that she may not be perceived as vain, but references both Ruth and Esther as biblical examples that elegant dress is often necessary. Both wore their

“vesti più belle, e gli ornamenti più singolari” when in the presence of their husbands, and this “non solo non è disdicevole, è permesso, e laudabilissimo sempre.”⁹⁸ Whereas the Princess of Parma praises Esther for her distaste of opulence, Nolfi praises her concession to dress extravagantly for her husband.

Nolfi’s fiancée, Ippolita Uffreducci, had been educated in a convent and was likely exposed to the ideals of dress found in our biographies. It is possible, therefore, that he felt it necessary to counter such teachings and assure his future bride that the attire she would be acquiring at her wedding should be seen or worn with not guilt, but pride. In Renaissance Italy, a new bride’s manner of dress was seen as a representation of her husband’s social position, and was a vehicle for exhibiting the wealth and status of her family.⁹⁹ Her choice to simplify her clothing therefore brought with it various social ramifications that had the potential to stain her husband’s reputation, thereby causing him much consternation, as we see in the case of Cornelia Ro.

Gradually coming into focus, in our analysis of these Post-Tridentine biographies, is the inherent conflict between the church’s reformed life of austerity with that of the expected life of a *donna illustre*. Gone are the concessions by biographers like Arienti, who give noblewomen permission to maintain the standards of dress expected of them, and where *pompa* is a positive term rather than a negative one. As Gabriella Zarri aptly notes, the end of the 15th century was characterized by a much closer link “between the writings for the clergy and the laity, both distinct states of life, but united in the same desire for Christian Perfection.”¹⁰⁰

This inherent conflict between the social reality of a noblewoman and the spiritual prescriptions of the Post-Tridentine church is even more prevalent within the context of

three Reformative themes: the emphasis on marriage as an inhibitor to spiritual ascendancy, the public sphere as a contaminator of spiritual principles, and self-deprivation or mortification as a vehicle for spiritual enlightenment. Each of these aspects further highlights the striking paradox that is present when noblewomen are given saint-like attributes, and illustrate how the Counter-Reformation's use of life-writing to promote more stringent and austere ways of living instead creates an inimitable standard that renders the exemplary purpose of the biographies inert.

The first of these themes, marriage as a barrier to spiritual enlightenment, is entrenched in the medieval concept of the superiority of virginity. Due to the church's desire to promote the vow of celibacy taken by nuns and priests alike, literature extolling its praises abounds. St. Jerome was a primary source for such ideas, and wrote that while he did not disdain marriage, the rewards of virginity were exponentially higher than that of marriage: "the reward of virginity is hundredfold; of widowhood, sixtyfold, and of married life, thirtyfold."¹⁰¹ He believed virginity to be natural to a man whereas marriage and sexual relations were the result of the fall. Cherubino da Spoleto, in the introduction to his conduct manual on marriage (*Regola di vita matrimoniale*), both states and agrees with the church's stance on virginity and spiritual ascendancy: that superior perfection was achieved by those "who by divine grace remain immaculate and whole, without violating or contaminating in any way the most precious treasure of virginity".¹⁰²

In like manner, the protagonists of our study oppose marriage, despite the fact that three of them did, in fact, marry. The Princess of Parma "ebbe alcune gagliarde ispirationi d'abbracciare quella religiosa vita" and, after witnessing a wealthy and beautiful woman take her vows in a Franciscan monastery, "si comosse tanto à

straordinario desiderio di consecrarsi à Dio” that she begged her mother to allow her to follow in this woman’s footsteps.¹⁰³ Sestilia also wanted to become a nun and often told her husband the story of how a hot chestnut had exploded into her eyes from the fire, and temporarily blinded her, during which time she prayed she would remain blind so she didn’t have to marry. One can only imagine how the repetitive account of this story affected her poor husband, but this is perhaps an anachronistic assumption, because the biographer would otherwise have left the anecdote out altogether, as our heroines are only ever portrayed as obedient and loving to their husbands. In fact, the idealization of virginity in Post-Tridentine Italy was so prominent that the Princess’ desire to remain in her virginal state, and the pain she experienced “di non essere potuta morire vergine” was likely lauded by her husband.¹⁰⁴ Cornelia, when advising her daughters to choose a cloistered life, even refers to marriage as “le profane nozze,” but nowhere is the preference for virginity as prominent as in the account of Elena Piscopia’s life.

Elena was born into a Venetian family of notable wealth; her father, Gianbattista Cornaro, was for many years the procurator of Venice and therefore controlled the city’s finances. This was one of the most sought after positions in Italy, second only to that of the Doge. To obtain such a position required much wealth, as it was a position gained by open purchase. To do so, Cornaro offered more than 100,000 ducats (the rough contemporary equivalent of between \$500,000 at the low end and \$900,000 dollars at the high end) to procure this position. To say that Elena grew up in an opulent family, then, would be an understatement. Her family possessed many houses and apartments, as well as mills, riverboats, ferries, and bridges, but their palace and library were the crowning jewels of her family’s possessions.¹⁰⁵ Their desire for her life was typical of wealthy

parents: it mainly centered around the potential of contracting a financially and politically beneficial marriage. But Elena, unbeknownst to her parents, had made a vow of chastity at the age of 11.

According to Lupis, when her parents first discovered this, they endeavored to discourage her from her choice, but she eventually convinced them to allow her to enter a convent and pursue the cloistered life. The convent was selected by the casting of lots and Elena ended up in a convent of questionable character, from which she quickly made her exit. Her parents became hopeful at this point that they could once again persuade her to marry, and did so with a valiant and forceful effort: “Adoprarono tutte le finezze dell’ autorità, e delle persuasive, per indurla al Matrimonio. Quello, che si può immaginare l’ arte, ò con le lusinghe, ò con le esortazioni, ò con le premure, ò con il calore degl’ uffici, fù da essi puntualmente adempito, per tirarla al loro disegno.”¹⁰⁶ But Elena became only firmer in her position, or in Lupis’ words, she was a deafened boulder and a sickle that would not bend to the pleas of anyone.¹⁰⁷ She asserted that her marriage had already been contracted with Eternity. Her father endeavored to convince her otherwise, of course: “non mancò il Padre di ribatterle con vigorose ragioni. Le rispose, che il suo Voto verginale fatto in una Età tenera, e senza il suo consentimento, non era di alcuno valore, una promessa di volontà, non celebrate con i requisiti della Chiesa, & un’atto mancante nelle clausole delle sue leggi.”¹⁰⁸ He even went so far as to write to the Pope himself, seeking a special dispensation, which the Pope approved and Elena was absolved of her childhood promise. Her reaction is not surprising in its hagiographic tendencies: she sobs, she sighs, and she cries, repetitively. Then she acts: “Temendo, che in virtù della Bolla non proseguissero i Genitori il trattato di maritarla, mandossi à

chiamare segretamente il P.D. Cornelio Codanini, Abbate di San Giorgio maggiore.”¹⁰⁹

She petitioned this priest with such fervor, in fact, that he agreed, albeit reluctantly, to give her the Benedictine habit to wear hidden under her clothes, and to renew her vows of chastity. The cinematic possibilities for such a clandestine meeting are endless and the narrative here glitters with Elena’s internal fire and resistance in the face of intense paternal pressures.¹¹⁰

Elena finally writes a letter to her father that lasts only one page of the biography, but sizzles with a resolute ardor, tinged with intellect and clarity. Elena states her case plainly and quickly, adding that should the most powerful man of Europe be presented as her betrothed, she would respond with “una assoluta negativa, e con un fermissimo rifiuto.”¹¹¹ She is unyielding to the end. A letter dense with determination, Elena asserts that though many will trample the will of God rather than contradict the will of someone in power, or “un Grande” (her father), she is different: “il mio genio è assai differente da loro. Se il Papa mi hà disciolto dal Voto passato, io l’hò nuovamente rifatto dopo la Dispensa. Amatissimo Padre concedete questa santa libertà à i miei desiderij, e non mi sforzate ad una impresa, in cui ricalcitra la coscienza, e’l genio della mia elezione.”¹¹²

The image being created of Elena here is not one infused with the humility and deference so emphasized by the Church. Thus far Elena shows only resolute defiance in the face of her father’s desires for her future. In the letter she calls him “amatissimo”, while she indirectly accuses him of trampling God’s will for her life. These are dangerous waters for a Renaissance text whose genre’s primary purpose is that of exemplum. Imagine the risks to the patriarchal times if all young girls read such material and began to resist their father’s will. But Elena (or Lupis) takes care to add this final sentence to

her letter: “Del resto viverò sempre de vostri cenni, e morirò irrefragabile holocausta nella devotione della mia riverenza.”¹¹³

Elena’s father reluctantly concedes. Her battle is apparently won, her vow of chastity respected, and the will of her father, unlike her own, has bent to accommodate her wishes. She thus selects a new convent, which in contrast with the Venetian convent, was known for its “osservantissime Dame.” But it is in Lombardia and, according to her parents, too far away. Most likely influenced by her parents, her confessor, Padre Boselli, tells her that her parents would be “trattati dall’angoscia, di non havere un intramezzato respire di poterla vedere una volta la settimana”, and that such a distance could even quicken their death. Her parents were extremely agitated by her desire to move so far away; they were “oppressi”, “tormentati”, and were enduring “lagrimevoli bersagli di inconsolabili affani”, such that they seemed “oggetti funesti di una compassionevole tristezza.”¹¹⁴ They were so upset in fact, that according to Padre Boselli, only death would have spared them further distress. Her confessor convinces her, therefore, that she should stay close to home and that, upon her parent’s death, she could go anywhere she liked.

Elena’s story of paternal pressures and familial resistance demonstrates yet again how the spiritually driven protagonist of the biographies in question is in intense conflict with the societal expectations for women. Despite the fact that in the Renaissance marriage actually represented freedom for many women (whose access to the public sphere increased tremendously), according to Renaissance biography, marriage was a barrier, a lock that prevented women from seeking God with every fiber of their being, and a choice that would render them less pleasing to God. This is made evident in one of

Elena's surviving letters to her confessor, in which she writes that virginity is preferred by God and that, "at the moment of death, the devil doesn't have the power over virgins that he has over everybody else."¹¹⁵ She further asserts that though marriage is considered freedom, she neither asked for such freedom, nor wants it.¹¹⁶

The biographies of our married women, Princess Maria, Sestilia, and Cornelia, further contribute to this concept of marriage as a prohibitor of spiritual development, specifically emphasizing the restraints marriage placed upon their spiritual practices. Cornelia Ro, though she loved her husband and their relationship was one of mutual affection, said that his death was sent by divine providence, because had he stayed alive, she would have gone to hell in a carriage ("andata in carrozza all'inferno").¹¹⁷ Despite the fact that she very sincerely loved him in life, and greatly mourned his passing, his death is represented as a release; Cornelia is "sciolta" from the marital "legame" and free to seek an even more austere life. After his death, in fact, she immediately gives up her carriage (the one that would have apparently transported her to her inevitable infernal demise) and most of her servants, "restringendosi pian piano ad una vita honestissima," eventually wearing only the most "rapezzata" smocks that seemed more like sacks than shirts.¹¹⁸ Her mother and father immediately begin pressuring her to remarry, noting that remaining a young widow would lead to "le sospettioni del Mondo."¹¹⁹ But Cornelia would not have agreed with Sestilia's biographer, who wrote that spiritual pursuits were possible and recommended despite the "lacci matrimoniali," and is steadfast and resolute:

Più d'ogni altra *sforzavasi* la Madre di *persuadergli* il rimaritarsi, mà egli fu impossibile il potere abbattere la somma, e ben *salda costanza* della Sig. Cornelia, la quale vedendosi posta in quella *libertà*, che desiderava di dedicarsi al servizio di Dio, non potè già mai cedere, ò à prieghi, ò a

riprensioni, ò à minaccie, ò ad allettamenti lusinghieri, e dimostrossi d'animo invitto in ciò, non solo con Parenti, ma insieme contra gli feri assalti li quali quell'istesso tempo gli furono mossi da certo Signore di stima.¹²⁰

This poor suitor, who would every evening go to San Sepolcro (where she often went to say her orations) in the hopes of speaking with her, was never even able to “ottenere uno sguardo solo.”¹²¹

The primary barrier imposed by marriage in these biographies is that it did not allow women substantial time for spiritual study or religious practices, and that it did not allow them to make the necessary sacrifices required for spiritual ascendancy. The Princess of Parma, in her list of resolutions, comments that she studied the scriptures with greater zeal *before* marriage, and affirms that she would like to study them more:

“ritornerò allo studio della sacra scrittura, della quale tanto mi diletta *avanti*, che io mi maritassi.”¹²² When her husband was working locally she took communion according to the current standard of frequency (once a month), but when he took a position in Montepulciano for 4 years, she would go more often: “si diede à frequentare più spesso i Sacramenti della Chiesa.”¹²³ Morales also writes that during her husband's absence she was freer to practice mental orations in addition to vocal orations, and would rise early, praying for hours.

Cornelia's marriage is depicted as limiting her ability to serve the poor, one of her most fervent desires: “mentre ancora visse il marito, nel quale stato più *ristretta* l'era la *libertà* di usar con poveri amorevolezza, ardeale nondimeno il petto di pietà verso loro, qual fiamma, anzi qual vampa di carità.”¹²⁴ Not once, but twice, Porro represents the marital limitations (and the eventual freedoms from its restriction) using the simile of fire. He writes that during marriage, Cornelia's spirituality was an ember covered in ash

that, when released from matrimonial bondage, began to glow, then flame, then roar with heat. Porro also uses the metaphor of celebration to elucidate this aspect, writing that carnal nuptials begin like a party, but lead to tears (“il principio è festa, il fine è pianto) whereas spiritual nuptials begin mournfully, but end joyfully (“se il principio è lugubre, lieto è il fine”).¹²⁵

No protagonist feels these limitations quite as strongly as Sestilia Sabolini, however, who often said that “se non fosse stato il rispetto maritale, volentieri si sarebbe spogliata d’ogni commodità.”¹²⁶ She eventually feels so suppressed by her matrimonial commitments that she asks her husband to release her from her commitment to the marriage bed, so she can live not only with purity of soul, but also of body:

Ancor, che fosse maritata, non hebbe mai fine in lei un desiderio veramente grande di viver non solamente coll’animo puro, ma col corpo ancora. Per questo un’anno e mezzo fa in circa avanti morisse, incitata più gagliardamente da questa voglia, essendo d’anni trentatre si gittò a terra inginocchiando dinanzi al marito, e versando molte lagrime, lo pregò, che si contentasse di menar con secò, per l’avvenire, vita casta, dicendo poi che à Dio non è piaciuto, ch’io muoia vergine, che molto il desideravo, almeno vorrei trapassar questo resto di mia vita in castità.¹²⁷

Her husband was initially (and not surprisingly) resistant to her proposal, “dubitando delle sue forze,” to which she responded that as far as she was concerned, she had already made her vow of chastity to God, but that she would submit to his will if he constrained her to. She adds to this one final plea: “ma per l’amor di Dio fatemi questa gratia, perche non vi sarà difficile, se vi risolverete, essendo cosa, che l’hanno fatta altri, per amor di Dio.”¹²⁸ Her husband subsequently seeks the counsel of his confessor, who tells him that such a vow is a holy one, but unadvisable, due to the unlikelihood of maintaining it. He tells him that instead of making a vow, he should merely make his best attempt at

abstention. Sestilia's husband therefore grants her request (with reservations) and from that day forward they sleep in separate rooms, he with his son and she with her daughters, after which she is able to indulge more fully in her mortification practices: "doppo la separatione dal Marito, aggionse molto alla mortification della carne con discipline, disciplinandosi almento tre volte la settimana [. . .] anzi in quest'ultimo si crede, che si disciplinasse ogni notte."¹²⁹ Her husband even attests that during this period he never once had any "pensiero di senso" and revered his wife for her holy proposal.¹³⁰

Thus we have a portrait of four women, each portrayed to have varying levels of resentment to the marital condition. The Princess of Parma, as a result of her marriage, cannot spend the time she would like studying scripture. Sestilia is "lucky" enough that her husband frequently worked and lived elsewhere, during which time she could more fully pursue her spiritual endeavors. She is "lucky" that, after 10 years of marriage, he releases her from her obligation to carnal relations, at which point she becomes almost as free as a widow, able to spend hours a day in prayer. Cornelia was "fortunate" enough to remain a young widow and embraces the freedom of widowhood to such a degree that she renounces all worldly pleasures and begins to dress so deplorably, that the people who pass her in the street taunt her and laugh at her. Elena, in contrast, is able to avoid the strong grasp of conjugal commitment entirely, pursuing instead her earthy studies (with greater preference for the celestial kind), and engaging in frequent self-mortifications and deprivations as a result of her "freedom."

A second factor that makes exemplum difficult for the *donna illustre* readers of these biographies is the repeated concept of the world as contaminator that slowly eats away even the most upright conscience. Though noblewomen were more limited in their

access to public space than men or even women of the lower classes, they were, however, expected to make appearances at public events and accompany their husbands to festivities. Our protagonists, however, cling to the church's teaching that such spaces are full of temptations and depravity. Sestilia's biographer writes that before marriage she avoided any "recreationi publiche" where so much "vanità mondana" abounded, and once married, did not enjoy going out, an activity her biographer calls a sort of vanity: "Era nimica d'ogni sorte di vanità: Fuor che alle Chiese, & altre devotioni, non si dilettaua d'andare à spasso: alla finestra si faceva rarissime volte, e non mai sola; & in quest'ultimi anni non s'affacciava mai per veder cose mundane."¹³¹ Here it is necessary to recall how greatly this praise conflicted with the social standards of nobility, as evident in Nolfi's conduct manual for his fiancée, in which he remonstrates against such excesses and notes that women who never appeared at their windows were considered to be "wild."¹³² He does, however, say that there *are* women who appear there *too often*, and the church is likely countering this habit with Sestilia's extremes.

Echoing this concept of "sin from the window," Elena's biographer shares an anecdote of how, as a little girl, her mother called her over to the window to watch the carnival processions passing in the streets below. Elena "si sforzò di ubbedirla," but repented almost immediately and retreated to her room where she locked herself in and, "con dirrotti sospiri" she cried about the "vanità del Mondo."¹³³ Lupis praises her for such behavior with the following emphatic expression: "Che prodezze di un petto Evangelico!"¹³⁴ He equates her, in her innocent, godly imprisonment, whereby she assails herself with sobs, to a young Teresa D'Avila: "A guisa di una Teresa d'Avila si struggeva nel pianto, e si macerava nelle angoscie."¹³⁵ In her adult life, Elena continued

in this practice, avoiding public events whenever possible, “stimando per una Donna meglio il ritiro” and particularly avoiding theatrical plays, “che fanno piangere l’Anima con le dissolutezze de canti e con la sensualità de Rappresentanti.” Lupis calls them “recitative pestilenze, facili ad ammorbare i più virili candori,” and says Elena preferred to go out only to Confession and church.¹³⁶ True to his metaphorical fashion, Lupis equates Elena’s seclusion to a painting, writing that she was a “quadro di camera, non di piazza.”¹³⁷

The inherent social and familial conflict that results from such “ritiratezza” is evident not only in Cornelia’s story, whose mother obviously wants to share the enjoyment of the festivities with her, but also in Sestilia’s husband’s response to her increased withdrawal from society. Sestilia’s seclusion was so pronounced in church that she offended other noblewomen by not speaking with them.¹³⁸ Her husband tells her of her offense and advises her to be polite and speak with them in church, and that she should “si addomesticasse come l’altre” to which she responds that she will happily oblige him outside of church, but that “dentro non voleva cicalare.” Petruccini praises her for her “ritiratezza,” however, equating it to that of St. Catherine of Siena (whose biography she had, in fact, read), noting that when she was in Church or walking on the streets, she even passed her husband and son unawares: “ci stave cō tanta ritiratezza; & andava con tanta modestia, che più volte è occorso non haver visto nè il Marito, nè il Figliuolo, ancor che gli fussero, ò gli passassero d’appresso.”¹³⁹

In both biographies, the protagonists’ desire for retreat from the world is assigned hagiographic value by comparing them to two saints: Teresa D’Avila and St. Catherine of Siena. The biography of St. Catherine, by her Confessor Raymond of Capua, and the

autobiography of Teresa D'Avila were read with zeal during the Counter-Reformation, as were many other lives of saints. It is no surprise, then, that the biographies of our noblewomen in question reflected their hagiographic counterparts, but this aspect negated the potential efficacy of the biographies to serve as exemplum pieces. In fact, both demonstrate that such saint-like behaviors placed the protagonists in direct conflict with their families, whose social standing required certain standard of dress as well as public interaction.

Further compounding the issue is that these women are represented as deciders of their fate, regardless of the wishes of their male familial authority, be it husband or father. Such defiance was not permitted to Renaissance women, either by society or by the clergy, yet both Sestilia and Elena strongly resist the will of their husband and father (respectively). Their biographers, as a result, have to make sure to affirm that they are respectful and obedient wives or daughters and that though their spiritual choices initially are met with consternation and rejection, eventually those choices are accepted and admired by the men in their lives. Sestilia's biographer writes that in spite of the fact that parties gave her a headache, and though she preferred to be secluded at home or at Church, she would attend public events to please her husband: "Com'andava à nozze, banchetti, ò simili ritrovi, alli quali da cinque anni in là andava più per compiacere al Marito, che à se stessa, sempre tornava à casa con grandissimo dolor di testa; dicendo, che in questi ritrovi non haveva un gusto al mondo; e ch'il maggior piacere che potesse havere, era lo starsene ritirata in casa, ò in Chiesa."¹⁴⁰ In fact, Petruccini writes that Sestilia would get physically ill when she went to parties only to recuperate in church: "ne' festini si infermasse, e nelle Chiese ricuperasse la sanità."¹⁴¹ As a result, he writes

that her husband does eventually agree to her pleas for seclusion, realizing that her desires were from God: “il Marito conoscendo che questo era spirito di Dio, le fece la gratia [di] starsene ritirata in Casa.”¹⁴²

To save his protagonist from incurring blame for her behavior, Petruccini makes sure to emphasize that despite her spiritual seclusion, their spousal relationship was one governed by mutual affection. Sestilia is portrayed to be a “grande aiuto” to her husband in domestic matters, and when she was sick, she only allowed her husband to touch her and change her clothes.¹⁴³ She is portrayed as “obbedientissima, e di natura pacifica,” such that her husband said after her death that he had lost the company of not a human, but an angel.¹⁴⁴ As a result, despite his initial reluctance to concede to her spiritual endeavors, he always showed her deference in her spiritual pursuits and showed great admiration for her. The marriages of all three protagonists are represented as harmonious, and the women are portrayed as obedient wives, ready to serve and please their husbands in everything that does not conflict with their spiritual health. Cornelia’s biographer even mentions how her husband was frequently ill with a condition called “mal di formica,” a condition of the skin that made one feel as if ants were crawling all over their body. He tried to hide his condition from her but she discovered it and began caring for him herself, applying the necessary creams and ointments, actions he observes to be “degne di esagerationi.”¹⁴⁵

Despite the frequent reminders, then, that marriage represents an impediment to spiritual growth, the women carry out their wifely duties with obedience, diligence, and patience. Of course, as soon as Sestilia and her husband separate their bedrooms, she began to increase her “mortificazioni,” disciplining herself at least 3 times a week, and

some believed she did it every night.¹⁴⁶ Cornelia's spiritual growth after the death of her husband is compared to St. Bernard and St. Benedict's concept of an ascending staircase, and the steps involved in achieving Christ-like perfection. Her husband's death is constantly represented as the turning point of her spiritual journey, after which she made "gran passi nella perfettione," that eventually became "passi frettolossi", then "passi di Gigantessa," such was her religious fervor in self mortifications and acts of charity.¹⁴⁷

These protagonists' extremism and self-deprivation create yet another conflict with the ideals of the *donna illustre*, whose role as wife and mother were increasingly superseded by their continual bodily mortifications such as fasting and self-harm. This is seen most prominently in the biographies of Sestilia, Cornelia, and Elena. The basic theological ideology promoting such measures is rooted in the Passion of Christ; the biographies emphasize that by sharing in Christ's suffering, the women achieved blessings and closeness to Jesus. This suffering is manifested by the protagonists in the following ways: excessive lamentations in the form of tears and sobs, self deprivations such as lengthy prayers, fasting or losing sleep, self harm such as the use of the *cilicio* or objects for self beating, and increased delirium or rapture, seen to represent more perfect communion with God. These three women exhibit these aspects in varying levels and forms, but they are all eventually limited by their confessors for their excesses, and the readers of their lives cannot help but consider the impact their behavior had on their families.

The Princess of Parma's primary vehicle for spiritual ascension was mainly through her tears and lamentations, born either from her despair about her shortcomings, or from her contemplation of Christ's suffering. Her tendency towards tears and

repentance is so prolific that the eventual image of her life is that of a manic-depressive woman with occasional thoughts of suicide. When she confessed, she did so accompanied by an “abbondantia di lacrime” such that Morales says he had difficulty comforting her; we also know that she confessed every evening and when doing so, wrote down even her most “minimi mancamenti,” which her confessors considered excessive¹⁴⁸. She would require her confessors to reproach her behavior and when she received their reproach, would break down in tears, making it necessary for them to console her instead:

“ordinariament era necessario tornarla a consolare tanto s’affliggeva.”¹⁴⁹ On two separate occasions Morales found her in her chapel in a deplorable state, saying she could no longer live: “la trovai molto afflitta, e particolarmente con tanta oppressione di cuore, che mi disse parole di non poter più vivere.”¹⁵⁰ Her consolation was usually gained through confession, penances, or in the knowledge that she was sharing in Christ’s suffering.

Princess Maria also found comfort in her many relics, which she had continually brought to her bed as she neared the end of her life. It seems there was no end to her collection, and Morales spends a great deal of time describing the various efficacy of each. Of particular consolation to princess Maria was a piece of wood from the cross that she had inherited from her mother, which occasionally leaked Jesus’ blood and brought her physical healing, as well as the cord of St. Francis’ robe that offered her courage in her last days. On one particular occasion she was able to see the swaddling blanket of Christ (“fascie con che fu fasciato Christo quando nacque”) and told her confessor how she had bowed down and kissed it repeatedly, then felt a great urge to take a bite of it and swallow it (“pigliarne un boccone, & inghiottirlo”).¹⁵¹

Sestilia Sabolini's biography was written in 1621, 43 years after the Princess of Parma's biography, during which time the Counter-Reformation had gained momentum. Sestilia's behavior then, not surprisingly, eclipses that of her predecessor, most especially in regard to self-harm and self-deprivation. She would spend hours on her knees, but also fasted 3 days a week and would have fasted more had it been allowed.¹⁵² During her meditations she would often kneel and rise 100 times over in front of an image of Jesus; she was so taken in rapture, that she was seen on various occasions licking the floor. She would go barefoot in winter, disciplined herself at least 3 times a week, and wore a brass belt with 5 rings of iron, as well as a *cilicio* under her dress.¹⁵³ In response to her behavior, her husband was pained, and worried about her care for him and their children: "dolendosi il Marito, che ella non si curava più nè di lui, nè delle Figliuole."¹⁵⁴ She responded, "Come? Io me ne curo, e vi amo; ma s'io mi morissi & andassi in Paradiso pregarei per voi, e Dio vi aiuterebbe più che io non fo io."¹⁵⁵

She never slept on Holy Thursday, and rose two to three hours before dawn every day to say her prayers, and generally slept very little, because her guardian angels would wake her "ogni volta che voleva."¹⁵⁶ Not only did she deprive herself of many comforts, Morales writes that she deprived her daughters also: "lei privava se stessa, e le Figliuole, di molte cose."¹⁵⁷ Her ecstasies, generally lasting for upwards of three hours, generally involved shaking, crying, and sighing, and her meditations were so frequent, it seemed that she was continually engaged in them.¹⁵⁸ Her frequent habit of meditation meant also that she would receive visions and raptures at inopportune moments, such as at the dinner table, and when her husband, noticing her staring at the ceiling would tell her to eat, she could not hear him and did not shift her gaze or move a muscle.¹⁵⁹

Sestilia is therefore portrayed not only to be a woman prone to tears, but also to an excessive religious devotion that obviously compromised her ability to serve her family. Her biographer is aware of this conflict, and addresses it directly: “Potrebbe qualche persona dubbitare, se una Donna come questa, ch’haveva sopra di sè il carico d’una Casa, e Fameglia intera, poiche il Marito occupato nel pubblico reggimento, non poteva attendere al privato, facesse bene à star così del continuo fissa nelle cose spirituali.”¹⁶⁰ In fact, her biographer notes that many people, who did not live in the home and see her abilities, would gossip about this very issue. But he asserts that by God’s grace, she was able to fulfill the roles of both Mary and Martha, such that nobody in the house ever complained.¹⁶¹ The obvious contradiction to her husband’s complaint may have to do with chronology – given her response that she could better serve the family in heaven, it is possible that her mortifications increased as her illness increased, and that he complained only when she continued her mortifications while she was ill. When she was healthy, it would seem she was never lazy, and Petruccini writes that she was able to accomplish in one hour what would take another four hours. He adds that though she was generous in her alms, she was very spendthrift with the household income, and a natural saver. She was, in fact, a great help to her husband, who never had to get involved in household affairs “nè punto , nè poco”, such was her ability to manage the affairs of the home. In fact, “tutto le riusciva bene.”¹⁶²

What a life portrait! Imagine, for a moment, what a dilemma such a life depiction would have created for a noblewoman of that time. Unlike the ubiquitous hagiographies that extolled behavior not required or expected of a *donna di corte*, behavior that, in its very nature, was considered inimitable within the context of a worldly life, this biography

sets forth the image of a noblewoman who was *simultaneously able* to live the life of a saint, wife, and mother. The potential reception of such a biography is to be wondered at, but the implicit ineffectiveness of the biography's exemplum potential is relatively obvious, as are the ramifications of such choices on one's family. Of course, as with all exemplum literature, the readers did not necessarily have to mimic all behavior and could have decided to imitate whatever behavior they chose, as one picks a piece of fruit off a tree. This may be one of the primary reasons for which biographies seem to include all possible virtues, in the hopes that at least a few of the virtues would be emulated. But again, the dominance of the hagiographical component found in these biographies makes most of the extolled behavior inimitable or at least incompatible with normal family life.

Cornelia's life serves as another example of this incompatibility. Though she did not begin to engage in spiritual extremities, or "passi da Gigantessa" until after her husband's death, her children, in fact, were still very much alive and suffered as a result of her newfound spiritual fervor. Her biographer writes that she wore a *cilicio* (hairshirt) with three nails on it, nails that would pierce her on her right and left shoulder, and the third on her chest.¹⁶³ Her confessor at one point told her to desist in her practice of using such a *cilicio*, but she could not control her desires for "rigidezza" so she had another *cilicio* made, which she considered to be less "rigido" than the first. It was a new invention, according to Porro, consisting of a belt with four nails that she would wear around her arm and lumbar area, tightening it by degrees, but her confessor took this *cilicio* away as well, telling her that it would eventually lead to her death. Because he recognized the "gusto" that she experienced during these "macerationi del corpo," he did, however, let her use it at specific times.¹⁶⁴ She loved her *cilicio* the way most women

loved jewelry, and on the days she was allowed to wear it, had a “festosa” and “lieta” countenance the entire day.¹⁶⁵

But the *cilicio* was just one of the ways that she engaged in “austere attioni, penitenze, e mortificationi”; Porro notes that they were so numerous, he could not possibly recount them in chronological fashion. Indeed, her efforts in this regard were endless. She would never, during winter months, sit close to the fire and she only ever ate dry bread and water, though she would occasionally, in obedience to her confessor, eat a little soup.¹⁶⁶ Ever a “nemica de gusti”, she would often first roll her bread in ashes before eating it: “per non sentir compiacimento in quello.”¹⁶⁷ Because of her excesses, she eventually fell ill: “Caddè ella per le grandi mortificationi, discipline, e digiuni, che faceva in una grave infermità.”¹⁶⁸ Her illness (high fever) caused her to experience frequent fits of delirium and her doctors ordered that all her “cose spirituali” be taken away from her, which caused her “incredibile pena.”¹⁶⁹

As a result of her frequent deliriums, she was extremely mistreated by her servants: fatte insolenti le serve malamente l’oltraggiavano.”¹⁷⁰ One in particular would cut her nails past the quick, drawing blood, while others would hit her and pull her hair. When she regained her senses, “hebbe gran gusto d’esse in tal concetto di Pazza.”¹⁷¹ She would sleep on tables, hay, or wool mattresses with only a rough cloak to cover her, but her preferential place to sleep was the floor, where, when exhausted from her orations, she would fall into slumber, exhausted.¹⁷² Her clothing was a mere rough covering that she wore in all seasons, and would not change even when it was stained, which particularly annoyed her relatives.¹⁷³

All of these acts are represented by her biographer as laudable methods by which one could achieve union with Christ. He quotes St. Thomas's idea that by "trascurando la stanza di questo mortal corpo" one could more easily reach true divine contemplation.¹⁷⁴ When a doctor suggested that she should, as the Bible states, treat her body as a temple that should be cared for, she did not listen, insisting that by inflicting pain on her "corpaccio" in an attempt to "soggiogarlo allo spirito," true union with God could be achieved.¹⁷⁵

She increased in these behaviors exponentially following her husband's death and, 6 months after his passing, was an emphatic observer of the above practices. Again, one can only imagine what her young children felt, following the death of their father, about living in such conditions whereby, as a result of their mother's occasional insanity brought about by her sacrifices, the servants no longer respected her and became lazy and rude. Porro even notes that during her moments of insanity, her children were removed from her care: "per l'istessa cagione del concetto, che fosse impazzita, gle fu levata la cura, e governo delle figlie allhora, e la tutela insieme."¹⁷⁶ He does not, however, assign any blame to his protagonist for her inability to care for her children, instead continues to praise her to the skies for her self-deprecations and continual service to the poor and sick of the city.

Elena's story is not much different, except that she is not encumbered with the burdens of husband or children. She too engages in continual mortifications, specifically rigorous fasting that eventually contributes to her death.¹⁷⁷ She embraces the concept of rigid poverty by giving her allowance to the poor, and does anything to suffer in order to further meditate on the passion of Christ.¹⁷⁸ Calling her flesh a wild horse, she frequently

dominates it with “flagelli,” until she appears dead on the floor, and Lupis writes that the testament of her joy in suffering (“soavità del patire”) could have been written in the blood from her wounds.¹⁷⁹ To avoid the temptations of sleep, she even injures her eyes, specifically her pupils: “Si elesse questa tortura visibile, per rimirare più adaggiamente nelle sue notturne contemplazioni I Teatri delle supreme contentezze.”¹⁸⁰

Elena too was often limited by her confessor, who adamantly denied her wish to sleep on the cold floor, because she would often be found the next morning lacking any color at all, and barely conscious. Creative in her obedience, she then asked him if she could at least sleep on wooden planks.¹⁸¹ Whereas Cornelia is called a “nemica de gusti”, Elena is called a “nemica à qualunque riposo” and Lupis writes that she tried to find every way possible to suffer.¹⁸² Thus we see that even Elena, the first woman laureate, is also lauded for her saint-like qualities of self-mortification and flagellation.

These women’s biographies, in short, represented quite the paradox for their contemporary female readers. The roles of friend, mother, and wife are not only subjugated by the protagonists’ extreme practice, they are entirely threatened. Sestilia goes so far as to completely cease any marital relations with her husband, is gossiped about by those in her town, reproved by her husband for her rudeness in church, and reprimanded by him for her inability to care for him and their children. Cornelia’s gradual transformation is not only unwelcome to her husband and mother-in-law, she is occasionally reproved by her husband for her behavior. Following his death, she devotes herself so rigorously to her practices that her children are taken from her. Elena, who remains unmarried at home, causes her parents intense chagrin in her decision to remain unmarried, and then causes them and her confessor much concern and worry for her

health, which is severely compromised by her practices of sleep deprivation and fasting. All four women, in fact, die young.¹⁸³

The striking contrast between these biographies and the conduct manuals of the period, even those strongly influenced by the Counter-Reformation, such as Dolce's, is quite evident. The women portrayed in these biographies do not conform to the societal standards for women, nor even to basic standards for nuns. Their chosen path is one of singularity and isolation. The first question we must pose in regard to this conundrum is "why"? Why did the biographers choose protagonists whose extreme austerities made imitation nearly impossible, and whose austerities were not even supported by the clergy? It cannot be asserted that they were not intended to be exemplary works, because we have already established the authors' hopes that the lives *would* serve as examples to their readers.

Moreover, contemporary male biographies of the time did not follow this typology; in fact, history shows us that from Plutarch forward, men were generally portrayed as whole beings, capable of great faults, but also great things. In Malaspina's Renaissance treatise on biography, the only treatise from the period dedicated solely to the genre of biography, he is emphatic that overly-extolling one's protagonist is a severe defect of any biography that creates distrust in the reader and that even the poets (who have no obligation to truth) know this to be true: "E però i poeti, tutto che non sieno obligati alla verità, non ardiscono fingere gli eroi nel colmo di tutte le virtù per non perdere di credenza."¹⁸⁴ He continues by saying that over-adulation can actually cause the readers to become nauseated: "le lodi, essendo molte volte reputate adulazioni, facciano stomaco al lettore."¹⁸⁵ This is exactly what occurs in the biographies of these

women who are only ever praised, never blamed. True, they are occasionally limited by their confessors for their spiritual excesses, but are simultaneously praised by the biographer for these very same habits. And though we know from many sources that reading hagiographies was considered to be a very positive spiritual pastime – Sestilia advises her husband and sons to read the lives of saints *every night* for their spiritual benefit – it was not considered pleasurable by many.¹⁸⁶ In Piccolomini's dialogue, the young girl's reaction to Raffaella's encouragement to engage in such reading ("no, no!") is indicative that the reception of these works was often, as Malaspina predicted it would be, one of aversion.

The most plausible explanation for such a surprisingly prolific genre is inextricably intertwined with Post-Tridentine precepts. It pertains to the church's restrictions of reading material and to ecclesiastic occupations of either the author or reader. The index of prohibited books grew steadily during the Reformatory period, and other types of Renaissance reading were either on that list or not recommended for female consumption, as many worried it would threaten their *onestà*. Sestilia's biographer notes, in fact, that she never read books that had to do with human love, and had a particular distaste for authors like Petrarch and Ariosto: "Non leggeva mai libri, che trattassero d'amore, & à lei stessa hò sentito dire, che mai haveva letto, nè Petrarca, nè Furioso, se non una ò due volte venti, ò trenta versi; di quà veniva, che tanto le dispiaceva."¹⁸⁷ Her avoidance of Ariosto is perhaps not surprising, but Petrarch's *Canzoniere* was founded on the concept of spiritual conversion and enlightenment, as his earthly love both inspired and led him towards spiritual transformation. That she viewed

his work with similar disdain to Ariosto's demonstrates the stringent standards regarding female reading, standards that rejected the Renaissance ideas of Neoplatonism.

We also know what many of these women *did* read, and that all their study was exclusively spiritual in nature. The Princess of Parma, for example, read spiritual books, especially those that “muovono gli affetti,” such as the books of St. Bonaventure and Luis de Granada.¹⁸⁸ Both Sestilia and Cornelia read the life of St. Catherine, and Elena that of Luigi Gonzaga, after which she couldn't help but imitate him: “non potte far di meno, che ella non si accendesse di un sopraffino desiderio nell'imitarlo.”¹⁸⁹ Elena, whose study occupied the greater part of her day, made sure to study things “che nodrivano un fine sacro, pio, e morale [. . .] per non contaminare con quelle macchie la sua continenza.”¹⁹⁰ In fact, the recommended reading for young women seems to have been prescribed rather for what it did *not* do, than for what it did. The reading choices of these women did *not* threaten their conscience, or contaminate their desire for chastity. These biographies promoted extreme spiritual practices, but they also promoted purity of mind and body, considered to be the foremost virtue of a woman in the Renaissance. Any mother, father, priest, or nun could feel entirely confident, when recommending these works, that the girls or women reading them would not be carried away by amorous whims, and would, if anything, further revere the church and the exemplary men and women devoted to its Sacraments. The works could also encourage young girls whose families were forcing them into convents either for lack of dowry funds or for religious prestige.

It will not surprise that the authors of these texts either are men of the cloth, or dedicate their work to those in service to the church. The works are therefore charged with the purpose of maintaining the moral purity of Catholic congregants, and promoting

the Catholic faith. The Princess of Parma's biography provides a wonderful example of how drastically a biography is influenced by its author, because we have two surviving versions of her life, the first (1578) written by her personal confessor, Sebastiano Morales, and the second (1627) by Ranuccio Pico, court secretary to the Farnese Family in Parma. The differences between the two works directly reflect the occupations of their authors.

Morales' account is, by its very nature, a personal one, as he tells the life of a woman he saw on a daily basis in a spiritual capacity. The overarching purpose of his biography is quite clear: he is intent upon defending the practices of the Catholic faith. He continually references the abhorrence the Princess felt for Protestantism as well as her affection for relics and the comfort and healing they gave her. Prominent too is the theme of consolation, particularly the *consolatione* that the Princess received from her observations of practices specific to the Catholic Church. Essential to this aspect of consolation, however, is the need (or desperation) that precedes it and his princess is, as a result, represented with a fair dose of emotional instability. Morale's story is of a princess who was tormented by her own shortcomings, and whose anxiety could only be relieved through the comfort of Catholic spiritual practices, including the devotion to relics. He writes how she requested frequent remonstrations from her spiritual superiors and would then cry at length during and after their reproaches. Her primary consolations after such moments of despair were communion, the practice of prayer recitation (he cites the prayers she specifically preferred), meditation on the Passion of Christ (calling her suffering an avenue to drink of Christ's *calice*), and confession. He notes her frequent affirmation that she would be the most evil woman in the world if she didn't confess at

least once a month, and how the act of confession was a great consolation to her.¹⁹¹ Her many relics also served this consolatory purpose, and Morales writes about them in detail, such as a thread from the Shroud of Turin, or a bleeding piece of wood from the cross, or the cord of St. Francis' robe.

Prominent too is Morales' emphasis on the theme of death. One can find references to the Princess' painful death on almost every page (with phrases like "nell'infermità" or "'mentre che stava aggravate dal male'"), and the actual account of her death is quite lengthy and detailed. Inherently linked to his tale is, again, how the Catholic practices eased her pain and gave her consolation or peace. He does not focus, like most biographers, on her service to the poor or sick; in fact he does not even mention these aspects of her character until page 35. His first pages are instead primarily about the Catholic church's positive influence in her life and anecdotes about her journeys to heretical lands, during which she demonstrated spiritual fortitude and courage, such as the time when her ship became engulfed in flames, but she would not follow the *maggior d'omo* to safety, insisting upon going back to her cabin for her relics.

Pico's biography is, in contrast, more refined, stylistic, and chronological than Morales' version. Though he cites Morales as his primary source, and his biography is indeed a formalized re-writing and re-organization of Morales' more personal, epistolary form, the changes he makes, by what he includes or omits, and the tone he selects for his work, are entirely reflective of his position as court secretary. As such, his biography bears many resemblances to Sabadino degli Arienti's biographies. Concerned primarily with honoring the Farnese family, Pico portrays Maria as a humble and penitent devotee of the Catholic faith and exemplary princess, not a depressed mess. He does mention that

the priests had to limit her excesses, but does not go into anecdotal detail like Morales, nor does he mention her incessant lamentations about her own imperfections or her reliance upon each individual relic. Instead, he emphasizes her perfection, specifically her Christian perfection, and how she helped influence the Reformation of Parma.

Picos's princess is also generous from the start – even as a child she freed prisoners from debt by selling her own handiwork. She is charitable always, and though she is still overly penitent, she is given an over-arching designation of perfect, both in faith and in rule. He fulfills his court secretary role well by emphasizing her dedication to the people and their appreciation of her. He tells how well she developed the art of peacemaking, and ensured always that justice was administered. He notes that even in her husband and father-in-law's absences from court, nobody knew they were gone, so well did she manage courtly affairs with admirable "affabilità."¹⁹²

The authors' different representations of the princess' demonstrations of gratitude are also quite noticeable and in line with personal motivations. Morales tells how she was always grateful for her relics, once paying a priest twice for a thorn (from Jesus' crown), such was her gratitude for the "gift." Rico instead prefers to emphasize, like Arienti (fellow court *letterato*), that she showed gratitude to those in her service. In both cases, the authors praise the princess for rewarding people who were in their particular professions. The varying perspectives of both bring into focus the ulterior motives of any author when composing a biography, specifically a biography intended to exalt its protagonist and propose the behavior as worthy of imitation. Their hope is obviously that those who read the biography will show equal gratitude to those in their profession, perhaps even to them personally.

Sestilia Sabolini's biography, written by the clergyman Giovambattista Petruccini in 1621, is dedicated to the nuns of a convent in Siena, nuns who likely knew Sestilia personally. It therefore extols Sestilia for qualities that were expected of nuns, specifically praising her *ritiratezza*. Petruccini notes in his dedication that the nuns had been placed under his governance and care by the bishop of Siena, so that he could better direct them in the "via dello spirito," and to help them continually remove their affections for the world from their hearts: "cercar di continuo svellare dal cuor di ciascuna gl'affetti terreni."¹⁹³ His biography, therefore, serves both as an example of how women in the world are capable of adhering to intense religiosity and how the benefits of the cloistered life are even sought by those not restrained by its walls.

Sestilia's biography is therefore dominated by her profound desire for seclusion, Petruccini specifically that when she moved to Siena, close to the monastery of Cappucino nuns, she gave herself completely to a secluded life, and that her preference for seclusion was governed by the principle that God is the only nutrient for the soul, and that the world is in inherent conflict with the "complessione dell'Anime devote."¹⁹⁴ Petruccini therefore molds his version of Sestilia's life to conform to that of his dedicatees, extolling the benefits of a life of *ritiratezza*, away from the distractions of the world. He writes that the "dolce acquisto" of the holy virtues is reached through spiritual exercises such as penitence, humble acts, disdain of one's self, and maintains that witnessing good examples of this behavior especially "pulls one's heart" towards this admirable endeavor.¹⁹⁵ He declares Sestilia's example to be especially representative of these "new spiritual avenues," specifically her devotion to bitter penitences, assiduous orations, abhorrence of the world, denial of self, and spiritual aspirations.¹⁹⁶ Of particular

interest here is his word “nuove”, implying that these spiritual practices (or excesses) either are newsworthy or are new to faith, the city, or the convent itself.

Cornelia’s biography, written in 1624, only three years after Sestilia’s, is the most demonstrative of these new changes taking place inside the monasteries and in the public sphere. It is written by an author of unknown occupation, Hippolito Porro, but is dedicated to the most well known Cardinal of his time, Cardinal Borromeo. Cardinal Federico Borromeo was archbishop of Milan from 1595 until his death in 1631, famous for reforming the discipline of the clergy by turning their focus from worldly pursuits to a life of humility, service, and study. He is perhaps most known in Italian history (and literature) for feeding the hungry during the famine that swept through northern Italy in 1627.¹⁹⁷ Also pertinent to our study, Cardinal Borromeo wrote a biography of St. Catherine, first published in 1618, that had great publication success in Italy.¹⁹⁸ He viewed St. Catherine to be a primary example of the contemplative Christian life, dedicated to the disdain of the world, and intent upon solitary contemplation of God and his creation.¹⁹⁹ Porro thus equates Cornelia to St. Catherine two times in his biography and makes clear his hopes that Cornelia too will one day be sainted: “Ben spero nel Signore, che un giorno si compiacerà, che questa sua serva goda di quel fregio, e di quel titolo di Santa.”²⁰⁰

The biographical waters are even more muddled by two factors regarding the work’s dedicatee: Ippolito Porro’s deceased father and brother (a lawyer and doctor, respectively) had once been in service to the Cardinal, and the Cardinal knew Cornelia personally. Porro writes that his biography is a small gift of remembrance of the service he owes to the Borromeo family (“l’antica servitù, che tengo con L’Illustrissima Casa

Borromea”), presenting us with the possibility that this work was either written in gratitude to the Borromeo family, or written in the hopes of compensation that had previously been bestowed on his father and brother. We also are aware, through numerous accounts in Porro’s biography, that not only did the Cardinal know Cornelia, he admired her. She also had a great respect for him and had various visions of him during her prayer raptures. It is possible then, that he commissioned her biography himself.

Porro calls Cornelia the Cardinal’s “figlia spirituale,” implying a very close relationship (he references at least 5 meetings between the two). When Cornelia asked to be assigned a “Regola,” to help her further advance in her spiritual pursuits, her confessor at first declined, but decided instead to entrust the decision to Cardinal Borromeo, who was a very good judge “in queste cose.”²⁰¹ The Cardinal examined Cornelia on three different occasions (once in his own chapel, once in the Monastery of S. Martha, and once in the monastery of S. Maria) and in all instances she both demonstrated her “fiamma d’amor di Dio” and greatly impressed the Cardinal: restò ammirato delle vivaci, & efficaci parole.”²⁰² Porro also writes that during Cornelia’s final illness, the Cardinal visited her twice and when she heard of his imminent arrival, despite having lost her senses, she regained them and composed herself for such an honor.²⁰³ Finally, Porro writes that during one of her many raptures, she had two visions of Cardinal Borromeo: in the first he was in Pontifical robes standing in a pool of blood while debating doctrine with other scholars, and in the second was holding a bronze communion cup and defending it from 4 “colonelli” (likely Protestant soldiers).²⁰⁴

The personal relationship between the protagonist and dedicatee presents us with the multiplicity of intentions on behalf of the author. Porro is able to ingratiate himself to Cardinal Borromeo firstly by praising Cornelia's way of life, which was commensurate with Cardinal Borromeo's own teaching of revitalization for the church, secondly, by praising the Cardinal himself, and thirdly, by praising somebody who the Cardinal personally held in high esteem, so high, in fact, that he presided over her funeral despite the violation of the tradition that another should have done so.²⁰⁵ Either way, the likelihood that such a work would be well received, and perhaps compensated, is high.

Another reason for which Cardinal Borromeo would have likely been pleased with such a work is present, though not quite so obvious, in Porro's continual references to Cornelia's devotion to the church of San Sepolcro. San Sepolcro was named the seat of the St. Ambrose and St. Carlo oblates (lay persons who adhere to a particular religious order), by Cardinal Borromeo's uncle, St. Carlo Borromeo, and was eventually entrusted to Cardinal Federico Borromeo's care. Cornelia's devotion to this church was quite notable: she went there every day no matter the weather, attended sermons there every Wednesday and Friday, called it her home, suffered when she was away, and finally, requested to be buried there.²⁰⁶ Of her dedication to this church, Porro writes, "*Là dove havendo così ben radicato l'affetto à questa divota Chiesa, deliberò ritornarsene, come detto habbiamo, alla stanza vicina à San Sepolcro, di cui tant'era innamorata, che sempre instò, e dimandò d'esser Oblata, & di viver e morir sotto la lor Regola, & obediènza di Monsignor. Illustriss. Cardinal Arcivescovo Capo di detta Congregatione.*"²⁰⁷ This tells us that she had plans to take up residence there as a Benedictine oblate, under the guidance of Cardinal Borromeo, though her death prevented her from following through

on this commitment. Thus Porro's biography is imbued with many layers of praise that would have been appreciated by its dedicatee.

Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia's biography is the only biography not written by a clergyman, nor dedicated to someone in the church. It was written in 1689 by Antonio Lupis, a prolific writer, and dedicated to Caterina Vendramina, Elena's sister. As such it defies many of the standards of Renaissance female biography, but it does adhere, in striking exactitude, to the hagiographical standards of the era. Like the other female protagonists, Elena was serious as a young girl and did not enjoy the same pleasures as her friends did; she instead showed a tendency towards spiritual contemplations and possessed a natural disdain for the worldly possessions of her family, even chastising her father for his elaborate ceiling décor. She craved the cloistered life, made a vow of virginity at age 11, and eventually became an oblate. Her spiritual ascent was characterized by her frequent self-mortifications and deprivations, and her commitment to prayer mirrored that of our other heroines. She predicted her own death (as did Princess Maria and Cornelia), and after her death the population flocked to see and touch her body, which was still fresh after three days, her face beautiful and serene. The only major hagiographical deviation is that the final pages of her biography contain no testaments of her ascension to heaven, rather reference her eternal scholarly glory with metaphorical gusto: "Ella fece nella conformità del Sole, che quando tramonta, escono incontinente le Stelle nell'adornare la sua Tomba di fiammeggianti honori, e di luminosi trofei. Volsero le Palestre, e le Muse, le Università, e i Collegij, le Accademie, e i Rostrì celebrare il suo Occidente. Ogni oratore si allestì nell'ingrandire i vanni di questa

Pallade. Ciaschedun' Letterato cercò di imprimere il di lei merito, nell'immortalità delle Stampe.”²⁰⁸

Elena's hagiographical account is framed by this rhetoric of grandiosity. The first pages of her biography are full of erudite references to antiquity, the syntax is replete with splendid metaphors, and her family's noble heritage is fervently and elaborately praised. The hagiographical components of her life are, in fact, at constant odds with the author's attempts to praise his protagonist and her family. It is therefore a likely possibility that the biography was commissioned by her sister or father, who, we know, fell frequently prey to his own vanities. Though their palace was one of the oldest and most elegant buildings on the Grand Canal, dating back to the 1200s, and their library was sought out by many scholars of the day as a haven of resources for study, the family name had a tainted reputation, for two reasons. Firstly, Elena's mother was a commoner and secondly, various members of the Cornaro clan had been involved in questionable intrigues regarding illegal promotions, the mishandling of public funds, and mysterious assassinations, leaving quite a stain on the family name.²⁰⁹ The result was that Cornaro's sons, Elena's brothers, were not listed in the “libro d'oro”, a book listing the nobility of Venice. Cornaro eventually petitioned the Doge for this recognition, and in his petition, expanded upon the illustrious Cornaro lineage, including four Venetian Doges, a Queen of Cyprus, and nine Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church. Cornaro's hunger for recognition is notable both in this petition and in his later correspondences about Elena, for whom he incessantly sought public affirmation and acclamation. He even commissioned a statue in her honor following her death.

It is entirely plausible then, that he also commissioned Elena's biography and that Lupis was therefore faced with the challenge of incorporating the theme of Elena's worldly accomplishments and fame into the only existing form for female biography of the time, one greatly influenced by the hagiographic tradition. The inherently dichotomous nature of the two themes likely created quite the conundrum for Lupis who, if he over-emphasized Elena's academic pursuits, would risk disapproval from the church, and, if he understated her intellectual talents, would risk disapproval from her father (or sister). He therefore attempted a veritable mish-mash of the two, embellishing both aspects with literary flourishes and exclamatory remarks that also set his biography apart from the others.

The two elements intermingle surprisingly well, and her saintlike attributes seem quite plausible, given the constant dissension of her parents. Lupis in fact has to make frequent attempts to affirm to his reader that Elena continually resisted their desires for glory and fame. Her resistance and resilience shine brightly through the pages just as the figure of Elena's father blazes forth in his blusters of indignation. In fact, Lupis seems so intent upon casting her father in a negative light, he even uses vivid imagery of the hunter and his prey to further press this point, writing that towards the end of their dispute regarding her reluctance to marry, her father finally admits defeat, realizing that his nets are useless: "tutte le *reti*, che si stendevano per questa *caccia*, si spezzavano al varco, e che sfuggiva di entrarvi la *preda*, si pose l'Animo in quiete, e non cercò di far altri tentativi. Si accorse effettivamente, che l'indurre la Figliuola agli Iminei, era il medemo, che tirare una fiumana in dietro dalla sua corrente, onde determine di non insistere più in questa materiale."²¹⁰

Cornaro's negative portrayal would seem to conflict with our previous point that the biography was written at his bequest. But, imagine for a moment, the conversation that could have taken place between Lupis and her father, Lupis asserting that representing her as desirous of pursuing van glorious honors would not be received well by either the church or by society, her father responding that the solution was easy – to make himself the villain and pursuer of honors. Lupis writes, in fact, that upon admitting defeat regarding her decision not to marry, Cornaro turns his attentions to Elena's scholastic abilities, resolute that this daughter, unwilling to increase the rank of the family through marriage, will bring him glory through her intellect. Whatever the truth, the representation of Elena's father as the driving force behind her scholarly pursuits enables Lupis to better position his protagonist within the hagiographical framework of a humble and devoted spiritual servant.

Cornaro's persistence for family glory, though thwarted by Elena's decision to remain celibate, merely finds another conduit in her intellect. First, he takes it upon himself to employ only the most "isquisitissimi Maestri" and Elena begins to study Humanities, Dialectics, and eventually Philosophy. Her father then endeavors to show her talents to the world during the Sposalizio Del Mare, a traditional celebration of Venetian maritime dominance, during which time Elena's father held a "gara", or debate between Elena and another scholar of philosophy, a debate attended by many of the Venetian elite as well as scholars from all over Europe²¹¹. Both performed so well that those present did not know who was most deserving of the "palma," Elena or her opponent, a Greek philosopher.

Lupis equates Elena's triumphs with the glorious successes of victorious captains, evident in the following citation: "Così la nostra EROINA havendo gloriosamente militato nell'arringo della Virtù, e sofferte così dure vigilie nella Metafisica, volle il Padre, che si addottorasse, e ricevesse nell'Università di Padova le sollemnità della Laurea."²¹² The use of the verb "militare" to ascribe masculinity to Elena's talents is not new to Italian literature. One needs only consider Virgil's Camilla, Ariosto's Bradamante, Torquato Tasso's Clorinda, and the entirety of Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris*, whose heroines are praised for their virility and ability to navigate the public and military spheres reserved for men. The concept of a feminine woman exercising any influence in the public sphere is, however, nonexistent in female Renaissance biography. But it must not go unnoticed that it is because her father wills it – "volle il padre" – not because she wishes it.

In a letter addressed to her father, written 6 years before she receives her doctorate, Elena references an illness from which she has been recovering and reassures her father that she will be able shortly to return to her studies: "With the salubrity of the air, and the diligent care of the physicians, I feel much stronger; therefore, I hope that in the future I may resume my studies and thus rescue the name of our House from extinction and oblivion."²¹³ Later in the biography, when her participation in the various Venetian academies is discussed, Lupis writes, "Had she not been urged by the caring commands of her Father, neither the literary academies nor the Rostra of Rome would have ever listened to her with such admiration."²¹⁴ We also know that Elena did not always respond kindly to these "premurosi comandi" of her father, and, in a passage that perhaps glimmers above all others, Lupis recounts how on one particular day, frustrated

by the pressures of her father, she muttered that as a result of his search for glory, he would one day pay an atrocious price in Purgatory.

Lupis therefore wisely chooses his slant of truth for Elena's life, that of a humble and modest woman desiring only the cloistered life, who is forced into the public sphere by the will of her parents. She regards herself as merely an "alunna dell'Humiltà" rather than a professor, but "per non contrastare ad ogni modo à i replicati, e violenti comandi del Genitore, constrinse il proprio antigenio alle dispositione dell'altrui volere."²¹⁵ She even attempts to hide her awards and personal letters, but her father, with a "segreta destrezza," sneaks them away and conserves them for posterity.

At this point, one may also be considering the possibility that Elena actually embraced her fame and fortune, but because her foray into the hallowed walls of academia could be perceived as presumptuous, Lupis decides to lay all the blame on her father in an attempt to assuage readers' judgement. Though possible, this is unlikely because even in her death, Elena eschewed her fame. She included in her will a request ordering that all of her writings be destroyed. Unfortunately they were, save the select few her father had preserved.

We are, therefore, very lucky to have such a detailed account of the life of a woman whose intelligence was remarkable, and a woman whose doctoral ceremony was flooded with attendees from all over Europe: "apparve la citta di Padova un immenso Teatro di Studenti, e Virtuosi, oltre queglii, che attratti dalla curiosità, si erano partiti da lontani Paesi, per guardare un'attione così prodigiosa, e non mai più occorsa nelle antepassate memorie. Scorrevano per le strade con indicibile stuolo Dame, Religiosi, e Cavaglieri, concorsi da varij confine, che insieme con la Nobiltà Padovana, e della

Dominante formavano il folto spettacolo di una Fiera.”²¹⁶ So many people came that they had to change the location from the University of Padua to the Basilica of St. Justina, and when the time approached for Elena to walk to the front of the church for her oral exams, it was so crowded that she was unable to find enough room even to place her feet as she walked to the front. It is an event that glimmers with narrative truth above all the others: “Si smarri, e le sopravvenne un gelido timore, nel voler entrare nel Duomo, giache non vi era Angolo, o Capella, che non stasse ingombrata da strettissima calca di Spettatori. Durò non ordinaria fatica nel passare la nave del Tempio, piena di innumerabile frequenza, ove appena potea slargare il piede, per inviarsi al luogo assegnato.”²¹⁷

In a genre encumbered by cultural and ecclesiastical pressures and standards, narrative glimmers such as this are rare, but not absent. In fact, their rarity makes them shine all the brighter and though the readers’ task in uncovering them is laborious, requiring the careful sweeping aside of the genre’s doldrums of perfection and saintly expectations, when they find them, they behold them from every angle and recognize their value. Each biography contains one or two of these moments that remain indelibly in the readers’ minds and make traipsing through the generic typologies of perfection worth the journey.

In the Princess of Parma’s biography, such a moment occurs when she is nearing her death and must tell her 8 year-old son that her time is waning. Morales writes that she loved him deeply, and he likewise loved her with tenderness, coming often to her bedside to serve her: “come era solito fare con tanto garbo, e tanta diligenza, che più non si poteva desiderare.”²¹⁸ A few days before her death he brings her food and she tells him

that she needs to speak with him before he goes, and to wait until she is done eating. Morales here uses direct discourse to render the narrative even more alive and poignant. She says, “Ranuccio, ti voglio dire due parole, come haverò finito di mangiare, non ti partire.” Her son is perceptive and Morales writes that her words so penetrated his heart, he understood her meaning immediately and began to cry uncontrollably: “cominciò dirotamente à piangere.” His pain was so tangible that everyone in the room also began to cry, marveling about his ability to perceive her intentions at such a young age: “non vi fu persona nella camera, che non piangesse, e non si meravigliasse dell’acortezza, con la quale egli così presto penetrò quello, che gli volea dire la Madre, ne ci fù mai rimedio per acquietarlo, fin che l’istessa Madre dissimulò e finse, che gli voleva dire quello, che egli doveva mandare à dire al Re di Portugallo per il Conte Emilio, che stava per partire.”²¹⁹ For the first time in her biography, we see a depiction of genuine human love, one unbridled by ecclesiastical tradition or ulterior motives, and imbued with narrative qualities that make the readers feel as if they are also in the room with the mourners, crying along with them. Though the role of mother and child is generally usurped by the role of spiritual penitent and confessor, here it shines brightly and pierces the heart.

Another occasion in which we unearth a narrative spark in Princess Maria’s biography is found in Morales’ description of one of her journeys by sea, during which one of the boats of their fleet strikes their larger ship and is torn in two by the force of the collision. Morales recounts how the people on board the sundered ship began to scream and beg for help, knowing the ship would surely sink among the “onde grandi e spaventevoli.”²²⁰ The princess, at hearing the noise, comes out of her chamber and upon seeing the sight, calls the captain and pleads with him to bring their ship alongside the

sinking ship in order to save those on board. He resists, saying that such an act would surely place her and the others on board her ship in peril, which the helmsmen confirm. But she responds, ever resolute in her faith: “Anzi [. . .] vedrete, che se proverete di salvarli, Iddio per questo ci salverà tutti.”²²¹ She was right, Morales writes, and not only did they obey her wishes, but all aboard the torn ship were saved, except one or two. Morales’ account is brimming with action and visual descriptions, such that the event reads in cinematic fashion, as the reader envisions the people screaming for their lives, and the princess, standing firm among the storm, shouting at the captain to save them, while they shout back that they cannot, to which she responds in epic fashion that God will save them all.

Sestilia’s biography is the shortest of all four, and carries with it very few glimmers, though a pervasive image that remains is that of her daughters and other women in her home, peeking around the corners to see her engaged in her ecstasies or mortifications. These women seem to be the primary source for Petruccini’s work, possibly also her husband, and frequently recount how they spied her in her holy pursuits. They often overheard her speaking with her Jesus doll at length about heaven: “Innamorata di Cristo teneva nel letto un Giesuino lungo mezzo braccio in circa, col quale passava gran tempo in conversazione di Paradiso.”²²² This is the only mention of a doll in any of the biographies and creates quite a picture of youth and of cloistered life. Nuns were often given Jesus dolls upon their entrance to the convent, and would care for them by dressing them and holding them. In a sense, these dolls represent the perpetuity of girlhood that occurred behind the closed walls of a convent, walls that, following the Counter-Reformation, were much more sealed to the outside world.²²³ In fact, given the short

nature of Petruccini's work, and the emphasis on seclusion, it is quite probable that Petruccini composed it for younger (and reluctant) nuns who needed both consolation and confirmation that those in the outside world did not esteem the "freedoms" of marriage. Its pages whisper with youth, in both the images of her daughters catching glimpses of her, but also in her attachment to her doll and rejection of the marriage bed.

Cornelia's biography is rather difficult to assess in terms of narrative moments that stand out in singularity. This is due to the fact that her biography is packed with anecdotes, anecdotes that both stand out because they represent narrative breaks from the ubiquitous representations of hagiographic generalities, but also blend in because they still conform to the saint-like expectations of her character. Probably the most prominent moments are the stories of how she is mistreated by others, and her joy at such mistreatment, but again, these anecdotes are so frequent, they quickly begin to lose their luster. She was, for example, constantly "beffeggiata," when she went out into public, mainly because her style of dress was so deplorable that people did not know she was nobility, also because she constantly prayed while walking the streets.²²⁴ People would therefore cast both insults and objects at her, or would get on their knees in mock prayer. Her family also disdained her behavior, calling her a "Pitocchiara," and her servants disrespected and even beat her. People at church who were waiting in line for confession, would often push her back and yell at her, unaware of her social station.²²⁵ Her confessor rebuked them, but she responded humbly that she had more time than they.²²⁶ In fact, her responses to these frequent criticisms, fall directly within the hagiographic quality of humility – the more she is hurt, the more joy she feels: "quanto maggiori erano gl'affronti, tanto maggiore era il godimento interno."²²⁷ On one occasion however,

towards the beginning of her widowhood, and during which time she was beginning to assume a more austere way of life, she is genuinely hurt by such treatment. Porro recounts how, on a day when Cardinal Borromeo was also present in church, everyone began to stare at her disdainfully, even people she knew: “nobili da lei conosciute.”²²⁸ He says that she “pativa non poco”, and felt “tanta confusione,” and the effect is a narrative moment that stands out, in relief, from the surrounding passages because, for the first time, the reader views her with deep empathy instead of incredulity.²²⁹

There are also some surprising moments, such as when Porro recounts how, when treating the sick, she sometimes licked their wounds. When the patients showed surprise at her actions, she reminded them that St. Catherine was also known to do it.²³⁰ One account even bears with it a certain level of humor, when Cornelia attempts, repeatedly, to send gifts to her confessors (jams, hankkerchiefs, and a religious robe) but they, repeatedly, send them back, asserting that what she herself refuses should not be given to her spiritual fathers.²³¹ The reader cannot help but chuckle at the fact that she is being given a dose of her own medicine, and that her confessors are having a little fun as her expense.

Finally, Porro tells an interesting story of why she so quickly left the *Compagnia de Vergini* that she had entered with her daughters, after so vehemently petitioning for admittance. In fact, it is a necessary story to spare her from reader criticism regarding her speedy exit, criticism, which, based upon the adamance with which she petitioned her confessors to enter the cloistered life, seems to portray a fickle mind. Porro recounts that during her entire stay in the Company, “squamme” (scales) covered her eyes, that would only fall away when she would go on her outings to San Sepolcro. She therefore viewed

it as a confirmation of what her spiritual fathers had been saying to her all along, that it is better to be in the world, so as to better serve the poor.²³² Her biography differs in this aspect from the others: instead of emphasizing the dangers of the world, it praises the work that can be done there. Porro therefore extols her for her “*moderata ritiratezza*” that unencumbers her from “*fastidij domestici*” and “*incontri*,” but also allows her to continue her public service.²³³

We see then, that each biography is capable of presenting the reader with an occasional glimpse of individuality, but that in general, individuality was not considered essential to the female form of the genre. The biographers instead adhere to Aristotle’s principles of epideictic praise, by which ideal virtues become the protagonists of the story. It is these virtues, ones prescribed by the Post-Tridentine church, that take center stage in female Italian Renaissance biography. Instead of presenting the lives of four individual women, in fact, these biographies portray one idealized woman, one who conforms to a standard of conduct and religious fervor being promoted by the Church. As a result, Renaissance female biography does not separate itself from the genre of hagiography. Our protagonists are saints in lay-clothing, whose religious fervor presents itself in many ways: devotion to one’s confessor, self-discipline, adhering to a time-consuming prayer practice, the worship of relics, simplicity (or poverty) in attire, and abhorrence of praise. These attributes, however, were in direct conflict with Renaissance ideals for the *donna illustre* who was expected to manage her household, instruct her children, maintain a social presence, and conform to societal expectations of appearance and dress. Yes, she was expected to possess a spiritual and religious bent, but not one that would prohibit her from fulfilling her familial and social obligations.

What is most striking about the literary trend of biography and hagiography in the Counter-Reformation is that the behavior extolled does not actually conform to the depiction of women of the Bible. Female biblical figures are not portrayed as perfect, rather as deeply human and flawed but who, when it mattered, exhibited bravery and faith. Rahab, for example, was a prostitute who harbored two Israelite spies and helped them escape by climbing down the city walls with a rope.²³⁴ Her family was later spared in honor of her action. Esther, a beautiful princess in the King's harem, is cognizant that when she presents herself to the King without having first been summoned, her impertinence could lead to death. Her actions, however, are rewarded and Mordecai's life is saved. Jael, a Kenite woman, violated the customs of hospitality and one of the ten commandments by beheading Sisera in order to save Israel from King Jabin's troops, yet she is extolled for her courage and faith.²³⁵ In fact, faith, not perfection, is the governing aspect of most biblical heroes and heroines, as seen in Hebrews 11, where Abraham's faith is credited to him as righteousness, despite his many faults.

Likewise, biblical women are not nearly as secluded as these biographical subjects, nor do they abhor public festivities. Even Mary, Jesus' mother, is portrayed with more humanity than the women in our four biographies. She is a concerned mother who chastises her son for running off to the temple when he should have been with his family, and a fun-loving participant in social events, who encourages Jesus to perform his first miracle at a wedding, by changing water to wine (when the good wine had run out). The genre's insistence on a spirituality based upon hostility to one's body then, is one that derives, not from Biblical examples, but from the Post-Tridentine response that emphasized works-based salvation, and sought to increase the church's influence over the

individual lives of women, and, by extension, their families. These female biographies were, in essence, instructional tools intended to remind their female readers to submit to the church and its teachers, to observe its sacraments, and teach others about the faith, both through instruction and example. The paradox created by the inimitable example, then, is one that the female reader of the Renaissance would have solved for herself, either by laughing off the spiritual excesses presented, or by focusing on the basic themes that she could have applied to her life, applying them as she saw fit. Though of course, one additional option was available to her, one that the young woman from *La Raffaella* chooses: complete avoidance of the genre. This would have been a pity, however, because by avoiding the genre entirely, she would therefore have missed the glimmers of life and individuality that resist the genre's conventional confines and shine through the veil of idealized perfection.

Appendix A: Cornelia Ro as depicted in the 1624 printing of Hippolito Porro's *Vita, e Morte della Signora Cornelia Lampugnana Ro, Gentildonna Milanese*.



Notes

¹ Gabriella Zarri and Lucetta Scaraffia, *Women and faith: Catholic religious life in Italy from late antiquity to the present*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999) 159-160.

² Sebastiano de Morales, *Vita et morte della serenissima Prencipessa di Parma & Piacenza*. (Milano: Michel Tini, 1578).

³ Morales, 3.

⁴ Morales, 3.

⁵ Morales, 5.

⁶ Morales, 6-7.

⁷ See also Giuseppe Alberigo, "La riforma dei Principi", *Il Concilio di Trento come crocevia*, p. 161-177.

⁸ Giovanni Battista Petruccini, *Relazione della vita esemplare della Signora Sestilia Sabolini, Ne' Buonaccorsi di Colle di Vald'Elsa: Nella quale, ogni Donna martitata, può felicemente imparare ottimi ammaestramenti morali, e Cristiani, per condursi, con la Divina grazia, alla Tranquillità eterna* (Siena, Stamperia del Bonetti, 1621).

⁹ Ippolito Porro, *Vita, e morte della sig. Cornelia Lampugnana Rò gentildonna milanese di gloriosa memoria in bontà, e virtù christiane : esemplare degno d'esser imitato in tutti e tre gli stati verginale, matrimoniale, e vedouile, come dimostrano le sue pie attioni, & opere marauigliose in vita, e morte : con l'aggiunta d'alcuni suoi esercitij spirituali, & altre oratione*, Per Giouanni Negri, In Pavia, 1624.

¹⁰ Petruccini 4.

¹¹ Petruccini ,4.

¹² Petruccini, 5.

¹³ Dolce, 75 (2nd foglio).

¹⁴ Petruccini, 544-5.

¹⁵ Petruccini, 20.

¹⁶ Morales, 39.

¹⁷ Morales, 48.

¹⁸ Morales, 60.

¹⁹ Petruccini, 8 & 18.

²⁰ Petruccini, 107.

²¹ In summary, it involved 5 steps: 1) reciting the 12 privileges. 2) Asking the sainters (her lawyers) for help. 3) Adoring God. 4) Blessing the Virgin. 5) Reciting the symbol of the Apostles. Porro, 110.

²² Porro, 106-7.

²³ Porro, 108.

²⁴ Porro, 61.

²⁵ Porro, 61.

²⁶ Porro, 62.

²⁷ Porro, 62.

²⁸ Porro, 10.

²⁹ Teresa d'Avila's autobiography spends a great deal of time on her prayer life and her ecstasies and visions. She writes that the joy and sweetness from her prayer life was so great, she began to suspect that she was being deceived by Satan and was not, in fact, communing with God, so sought spiritual confirmation from the clergy (and a spiritual nobleman) that she was in fact on the right path. This is found in Ch. 23, II of her autobiography.

³⁰ Petruccini, 18.

³¹ Petruccini, 19.

³² Porro, 107.

³³ Porro, 107. *Italics mine.*

³⁴ Lupis, 110.

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- ³⁵ Petruccini, 19.
- ³⁶ Lupis, 62.
- ³⁷ Morales, 43.
- ³⁸ Morales, 19.
- ³⁹ Morales, 19.
- ⁴⁰ Porro, 42.
- ⁴¹ Porro, 97.
- ⁴² Petruccini, 18.
- ⁴³ Petruccini, 19.
- ⁴⁴ Petruccini, 31.
- ⁴⁵ Petruccini, 24.
- ⁴⁶ Petruccini, 23.
- ⁴⁷ Petruccini, 31.
- ⁴⁸ Petruccini, 31.
- ⁴⁹ Gabriella Zarri, "Christian Good Manners," *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society*. Ed. Letizia Panizza. (Oxford: European Humanities Research Center, 2000) 76-91: p. 87.
- ⁵⁰ Zarri, 87.
- ⁵¹ Morales, 68.
- ⁵² Petruccini, 13.
- ⁵³ Porro, 63.
- ⁵⁴ Lupis, 90.
- ⁵⁵ Lupis, 89.
- ⁵⁶ Francesco Sberlati, *Castissima Donzella: Figure Di Donna Tra Letteratura E Norma Sociale (secoli Xv - Xvii)* (Bern: Lang, 2007) 138.
- ⁵⁷ Sberlati, 77.

⁵⁸ Porro, 105, Italics mine.

⁵⁹ Ranuccio Pico. *La Principessa Santa, Ouero La Vita Di Santa Elisabetta, Reina Di Portogallo ... Con Un Breve Disegno Della Vita Della Serenissima Infante Donna Maria ... Principessa Di Parma* (Venetia, 1627) 63.

⁶⁰ Pico, 63.

⁶¹ Pico, 63.

⁶² Morales, 50.

⁶³ Petruccini, 23.

⁶⁴ Morales, 46. The Princess had great concern for the female predicament of the Renaissance, by which chastity was essential for their reputation, but where men also felt free to violate that chastity, “cōtro la voglia.” She would order the Governor to summon them and remonstrate them for their actions, ordering them to desist in their practices. Despite only receiving verbal warnings, Morales asserts that she was quiet effective in deterring them from future sins.

⁶⁵ Morales, 47.

⁶⁶ Morales, 35.

⁶⁷ R.P. Hsia. *The World of Catholic Renewal, 1540-1770* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 29.

⁶⁸ Hsia, 30.

⁶⁹ Morales, 13. Note the indirect reference to St. Bernard and St. Benedicts steps of ascension to Christian perfection, all based on humility.

⁷⁰ Morales, 13

⁷¹ Morales, 8.

⁷² Hunter Blair, *The rule of St. Benedict* (Abbey Press, Fort Augustus: Scotland, 1948) 43.

⁷³ Blair, 43.

⁷⁴ Petruccini, 14

⁷⁵ Porro, 86-87.

⁷⁶ Porro, 90.

⁷⁷ Lupis, 88.

⁷⁸ Lupis, 89.

⁷⁹ Lupis, 88.

⁸⁰ Lupis, 89.

⁸¹ Morales (Princess of Parma) 14; Porro (Cornelia Ro) 88.

⁸² Petruccini, 9.

⁸³ Petruccini, 10.

⁸⁴ Petruccini, 14

⁸⁵ Lupis, 15.

⁸⁶ Lupis, 15

⁸⁷ Lupis, 15.

⁸⁸ 16. He continues here, referencing the metaphorical symbolism of a crown of Daisies (for tears) and rubies (desire for divine love). This passage causes some confusion, as the reader wonders whether or not she actually wore these items, or whether the author is just digressing into metaphorical poetics. The question is even more prominent because he follows this page with a discussion of how her mother frequently made her wear noble attire.

⁸⁹ Lupis, 95.

⁹⁰ Lupis, 16.

⁹¹ Morales, 16. Spelling errors present- original text reads: “superbiae et Gloriam meae.” Partial translation of Apocrypha text of Esther, Ch 14, 16: I abhor the sign of my high estate, which is upon mine head in the days wherein I shew myself, and that I abhor it as a menstruous rag, and that I wear it not when I am private by myself.

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- ⁹² Porro, 21-22.
- ⁹³ Porro, 22.
- ⁹⁴ Porro, 22. Italics mine.
- ⁹⁵ Porro, 22.
- ⁹⁶ Nolfi, 79-82.
- ⁹⁷ Nolfi, 83.
- ⁹⁸ Nolfi, 85.
- ⁹⁹ Caroline Murphy, “Il Ciclo della vita femminile: norme comportamentali e pratiche di vita.” *Monaca, moglie, serva cortigiana* (Firenze: Morgana, 2001) 24.
- ¹⁰⁰ Zarri, “Christian Good Manners”, *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society*, ed. Letizia Panizza (Oxford: European Humanities Research Centre, 2000) 82.
- ¹⁰¹ St. Jerome, Letter XXII to Eustochium
- ¹⁰² Zarri, “Christian Good Manners”, 80. Original quote: “le quali mediante la divina grazie si conservano immaculate e integer, non violando nè contaminando per alcuna via il Tesoro preziosissimo della verginità.”
- ¹⁰³ Morales, 30.
- ¹⁰⁴ Morales, 6 (including story of the chestnut)
- ¹⁰⁵ Jane Guernsey, *The Lady Cornaro: Pride and Prodigy of Venice* (Clinton Corners, N.Y: College Avenue Press, 1999) 40.
- ¹⁰⁶ Lupis, 24.
- ¹⁰⁷ Lupis, 25.
- ¹⁰⁸ Lupis, 26.
- ¹⁰⁹ Lupis, 26.

¹¹⁰ Note here the strong contrast to Angela Tarabotti's treatise on *Paternal Tyranny*- Tarabotti laments the tradition of forcing young women into the cloister, whereas Elena resents being forced into marriage.

¹¹¹ Lupis, 27.

¹¹² Lupis, 27.

¹¹³ Lupis, 27.

¹¹⁴ Lupis, 29.

¹¹⁵ Guernsey, 28.

¹¹⁶ Guernsey, 28.

¹¹⁷ Porro, 30.

¹¹⁸ Porro, 33& 102.

¹¹⁹ Porro, 33.

¹²⁰ Porro, 33-34, Italics mine.

¹²¹ Porro, 34, & Morales, 4.

¹²² Morales, 18 (from her list of resolutions that he includes in entirety at the beginning of her biography). See also p. 36- he reiterates this while describing her intellectual prowess and knowledge of scripture, that she was able to study "massime" before marriage.

¹²³ Petruccini, 17.

¹²⁴ Porro, 90. Italics mine.

¹²⁵ Porro, 35.

¹²⁶ Petruccini, 13.

¹²⁷ Petruccini, 15.

¹²⁸ Petruccini, 15.

¹²⁹ Petruccini, 25.

¹³⁰ Petruccini, 16.

¹³¹ Petruccini, 6 & 9.

¹³² Petruccini, 20.

¹³³ Lupis, 17.

¹³⁴ Lupis, 17.

¹³⁵ Lupis, 17.

¹³⁶ Lupis, 65

¹³⁷ Lupis, 66.

¹³⁸ 1 Timothy 2:11-15 and 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 have long been a source of doctrinal discussion regarding women's silence. 1 Timothy refers to the concept of female submission to male teaching, whereas the passage in 1 Corinthians refers to the necessity of women being quiet in church. Its more moderate interpretation is that during the time Paul was writing, chaos and lack of order in church was rampant, and that women were engaging in common banter rather than spiritual discussion.

¹³⁹ Petruccini, 9.

¹⁴⁰ Petruccini, 10.

¹⁴¹ Petruccini, 11.

¹⁴² Petruccini, 10.

¹⁴³ Petruccini, 15 & 24.

¹⁴⁴ Petruccini, 17.

¹⁴⁵ Porro, 24.

¹⁴⁶ Petruccini, 25.

¹⁴⁷ Lupis, 36, 39, & 72. Lupis makes 5 references to her "passi", always equating them with steps toward spiritual perfection.

¹⁴⁸ Petruccini, 32 & 21.

¹⁴⁹ Petruccini, 21.

¹⁵⁰ Petruccini, 44 & 45.

¹⁵¹ She even asks her confessor if such a desire was a sin, but he does not write what his response was to her question. The concept is not a foreign one to Catholicism, which emphasizes the process of transubstantiation during the Eucharist.

¹⁵² Morales, 10 & 12.

¹⁵³ Morales, 21, 25, & 12.

¹⁵⁴ Morales, 25.

¹⁵⁵ Morales, 25.

¹⁵⁶ Morales, 12 & 20.

¹⁵⁷ Morales, 14.

¹⁵⁸ Morales, 18. & 20.

¹⁵⁹ Morales, 20.

¹⁶⁰ Morales, 22.

¹⁶¹ Luke 10:38-42. Jesus arrives at the home of Mary and Martha, two sisters. Martha, who is taking care of all the preparations while Mary sits at Jesus' feet, becomes angry and asks Jesus to tell Mary to help her. He responds that Mary has chosen what is better and "it will not be taken away from her."

¹⁶² Petruccini, 22.

¹⁶³ Porro, 40.

¹⁶⁴ Porro, 41.

¹⁶⁵ Porro, 41.

¹⁶⁶ Porro, 42.

¹⁶⁷ Porro, 42.

¹⁶⁸ Porro, 42.

¹⁶⁹ Porro, 44.

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- ¹⁷⁰ Porro, 44.
- ¹⁷¹ Porro, 44.
- ¹⁷² Porro, 45.
- ¹⁷³ Porro, 47.
- ¹⁷⁴ Porro, 51.
- ¹⁷⁵ Porro, 51.
- ¹⁷⁶ Porro, 44.
- ¹⁷⁷ Lupis, 101.
- ¹⁷⁸ Lupis, 94,95 & 100.
- ¹⁷⁹ Lupis, 99.
- ¹⁸⁰ Lupis, 100.
- ¹⁸¹ Her biographer does now mention how her confessor responds.
- ¹⁸² Lupis, 100.
- ¹⁸³ Cornelia died at 37, Elena and Sestilia at 38, Princess Maria at 39.
- ¹⁸⁴ Torquato Malaspina, *Dello Scrivere Le Vite*. (Bergamo: Moretti & Vitali, 1991) 72.
- ¹⁸⁵ Malaspina, 72.
- ¹⁸⁶ Petruccini, 23.
- ¹⁸⁷ Petruccini, 56.
- ¹⁸⁸ Morales, 36 & 60.
- ¹⁸⁹ Lupis, 21.
- ¹⁹⁰ Lupis, 44 & 45.
- ¹⁹¹ Morales, 34.
- ¹⁹² Rico, 64
- ¹⁹³ Petruccini, 3
- ¹⁹⁴ Petruccini, 10 & 11.

¹⁹⁵ Petruccini, 11

¹⁹⁶ Petruccini, 11.

¹⁹⁷ Manzoni, *I Promessi Sposi*.

¹⁹⁸ *I tre libri della vita di suor Caterina, monaca convertita*.

¹⁹⁹ See also Agostino Valier's dialogue *Philippus sive de laetitia christiana*, in which Cardinal Borromeo is one of the primary interlocutors in the discussion of the source of Christian joy, in which Cardinal Borromeo represents the side that asserts Christian joy to be attained only in disdain for the world and its pleasures, coupled with solitary contemplation of God.

²⁰⁰ Porro, 7, 56, & 73.

²⁰¹ Porro, 143. The Regola she was requesting was most likely in relation to joining the oblates of San Sepolcro.

²⁰² Porro, 60-61.

²⁰³ Porro, 143.

²⁰⁴ Porro, 161.

²⁰⁵ Porro, 155. Cardinal Borromeo never became Pope.

²⁰⁶ Porro, 92, 129, 133, & 155.

²⁰⁷ Porro, 133-134.

²⁰⁸ Lupis, 132.

²⁰⁹ Guernsey, 20.

²¹⁰ Guernsey, 28. Italics mine.

²¹¹ The Sposalizio del Mare was a particularly spectacular festivity that took place during the Festa della Sensa, or Festa dell'Ascenza, during which Venice celebrated both the conquest of the Dalmations and the signing of the Treaty of Venice by Pope Alessandro III and Federico Barbarossa in 1177. The debate was attended by "Sei Porporati dell'Ordine Procuratorio," and

almost all the members of the “Eccellentissimo Collegio” who had suspended all their political obligations to be present at such an event.

²¹² Lupis, 33.

²¹³ Nicola Fusco, *Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia, 1646-1684* (Pittsburgh: United States Committee for the Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia Tercentenary, 197) 30. The letter was originally written in Latin in 1672.

²¹⁴ Lupis, 89.

²¹⁵ Lupis, 33.

²¹⁶ Lupis, 34.

²¹⁷ Lupis, 34.

²¹⁸ Morales, 69.

²¹⁹ Morales, 69.

²²⁰ Morales, 54.

²²¹ Morales, 54.

²²² Petruccini, 25.

²²³ Silvia Evangelisti, *A History of Convent Life*. (Oxford University Press, 2007)156.

²²⁴ Porro, 74.

²²⁵ Porro, 106.

²²⁶ Porro, 89.

²²⁷ Porro, 88.

²²⁸ Porro, 49.

²²⁹ Porro, 49.

²³⁰ Porro, 73

²³¹ Porro, 116.

²³² Porro, 129.

²³³ Porro, 129-130.

²³⁴ Joshua 2

²³⁵ Judges 4: 2

Chapter 5

Serious Reproach and Comedic Play in Gregorio Leti's *La Vita di Donna Olimpia Maidalchini*

Biography, and particularly Renaissance biography, is often tedious in content, with endless lists of family lines, political events, and moralizing tendencies. The use of humor is, therefore, a key element to both Renaissance and Classical male biography, creating narrative space amidst the broader accounts of historical events. Plutarch, the most widely read biographer during the Renaissance, was an avid user of humorous anecdotes in his biographies, and not only employed them as a narrative pause, but also considered them to be one of the key ways a protagonist's character was revealed. Suetonius, a close second to Plutarch in popularity, makes use of direct discourse in the *Life of Julius Caesar* to give breath to his narrative, but also to add a satirical and comedic element as when he cites how the elder Curio called Julius Caesar "every woman's man and every man's woman." The theoretical discussion of humor was also a frequent activity of Renaissance scholars, attested to by the sheer number of manuscripts and books on the subject, with authors such as Bracciolini, Domenichi, Pontano, Castiglione, and Erasmus contributing to the discussion, as well as numerous other minor works.¹ Most of these texts leaned heavily on Cicero's writing on the humorous in *De Oratore*; his theories are prevalent in their discussions and the reappropriation of his jokes even more so.

Humor is, however, completely lacking in most Renaissance biographies treating female subjects, despite the profound theoretical interest in humor at that time. There are

many plausible reasons for this marked absence. Women lived a more private existence, leading to a void of anecdotes or personal accounts by outsiders, and the biographer usually was not close enough to his subject to bridge this gap.² The majority of female biographies composed during the Renaissance were written by authors without a substantial personal connection to their subjects but who had at least heard of their reknown, or were commissioned to write their biographies by others who knew them.³ These authors' intentions were anything but humorous, especially given the female biographical genre, which focused on the exaltation of the female character and her superior moral comportment. As previously discussed, female biographies served as a *modus operandi* for future female readers, and thus principally followed the epideictic genre of praise as set out by Plato and Aristotle, a tradition that pervaded Renaissance life accounts. According to Aristotle, the epideictic's genre's principal goal was moral edification, intended to "make our hearers take the required view of our own characters"⁴ and "to manipulate his manner of praise to fit the audience."⁵ He states: "If the audience esteems a given quality, we must say that our hero has that quality, no matter whether we are addressing Scythians or Spartans or philosophers. *Everything, in fact, that is esteemed we are to represent as noble.*"⁶ Idealization, not authenticity, therefore, was the goal of the ancient encomiasts and panegyrists. Unlike male biographies of the Renaissance, which were freeing themselves from this limited and archaic mode of praise, female biographies greatly adhered to this antiquated system, operating within a rubric of excessive and often fictive praise, demonstrating ad nauseum the virtue and perfection of their female protagonists. As a result, the weighty dominance of the *exemplum* and its potential as *magister vitae*, so valued in the Renaissance, overshadowed the female

protagonist, suffocating any attempt at a real-life portrayal. The comedic element, therefore found little to no place among such narrative constraints.

Anecdotal material, usually the biographer's treasure trove for finding comedic gems to offer the reader some levity, is instead used in these biographies to detail the protagonist's religious fervor, discussing which relic the protagonist bought and why, how often she attended mass and recited her orations, or how she served her community. This reality is due largely to the expectations for females during the Renaissance; a respectable, domestic Renaissance woman was not supposed to be witty or gay – she was to be chaste, reserved, and spiritual. Humor had little place in the recounting of her life, even the more positive, anecdotal type.

It is only with the Post-Reformation Protestant approach to Catholic subjects that satire and a heavy dose of humor come into play. Gregorio Leti's 1665 *Vita di Donna Olimpia* is a prime example of this.⁷ Not surprisingly, it is not a biography that fits within the general rubric of moral exemplum. It does not extol Olimpia's female virtues, rather has a pronounced satirical flair, and follows the Ciceronian comedic objective of pointing out the *dishonorable* qualities of one's adversary, as Seutonius did so well with his treatment of Caesar.⁸⁹ According to Cicero, the use of humor in oration helps not only to win the goodwill of the audience or demonstrate cleverness and refinement in the speaker, it also has the potential to undermine or even destroy one's opponent. Leti does all three with aplomb, especially given the material and subject he had to work with.

Olimpia Maidalchini, known as "la papessa," was sister-in-law and reputed mistress of Pope Innocent X, who reigned from 1644 to 1655. She is most infamous for her later years, during which she supposedly took on many papal duties, including the

acceptance and sale of benevolences, by way of which she was able to amass a personal fortune. Cavalier Giustiniani, Olimpia's contemporary, said of her: "Donna Olimpia Maidalchini is a woman of great spirit, but her sole title to influence is that of a rigid economist. When offices fell vacant at court, nothing was decided without her good pleasure; [. . .] if Episcopal sees were to be conferred, it was to her that the candidates applied; and that which most effectually revolted every upright mind was to see that those were preferred who were most liberal in giving."¹⁰ In short, Olimpia was not well regarded by her contemporaries.

Gregorio Leti, or Abbe Gualdi (his penname), writes such a scathing portrait of Olimpia in his biography that the entire ocean of epideictic blame seems to be at his disposal, and he takes frequent trips to this port of debasement. Leti was a prolific historical writer who, as a convert to Protestantism, railed on the church with such ferocity and frivolity that all his works were eventually placed on the Index Librorum Prohibitorum.¹¹ He was not known for accuracy, and has been subsequently criticized by countless historians; he is not helped by the discoveries that a few of his works were plagiarizations of other works¹². But Leti likewise garnished much success with his reinvention of a genre known for platitudes and repetitious praise. He had a particular penchant for criticizing the Catholic Church, which allowed for a more playful and witty approach to the work, eschewing the normal methods of a Renaissance biographer.

In his introductory paragraph to the biography of Olimpia, Leti acknowledges the current trend in Renaissance biography of setting forth a faultless protagonist for the purpose of emulation and imitation, what he calls "separating the wheat from the chaff." But he also notes that doing so for Olimpia would be a violation of his responsibility to

biographical verisimilitude: “Lo scrivere i vizii senza le virtù d’una persona, che per lo spazio di dieci anni ebbe tanta parte nel governo della Chiesa Catolica, non si potrebbe fare senza acquistare il titolo di eretico; e lo scrivere le virtù senza i vizii sarebbe un toccar l’inchiostro senza imbrattarsi.”¹³ In the very sentence with which Leti denounces current biographical trends of portraying only one side of the story, he uses humor to degrade Olimpia’s character. Quintillian categorized this type of humor as *dicitatus*, or “language of banter, which is a humorous form of attack,” and it is Leti’s primary method of employing humor throughout Olimpia’s biography, a biography that would, in fact, record only her faults and none of her virtues, despite his assertion to the contrary.

Leti is not a “responsible” biographer as he would suggest, but an equal opportunity satirist, dealing out comical denouncements with ubiquity and flair, to all parties, and most especially to his villain and heroine, Olimpia Maidalchini. As a convert from Catholicism to Protestantism, he also targets the church and the clerics as intellectually clumsy or guilty parties who shamefully allowed Olimpia to gain power. He uses all types of humor in doing so, especially the simile, as when he comments on the voting procedure of the papal conclave and how the characters of cardinals, on such occasions, were as cheap as onions in the market.¹⁴ He uses colorful descriptive nouns and adjectives to create humor, as in his description of the Pope who had an inferior brain that only Cardinal Panziccolo could influence: “Questo cardinal Panzirolo era l’unico instromento che faceva ruotare la gran mole del cervello pontificio doppo donna Olimpia.”¹⁵

Leti’s preferred form of humor, however, is the anecdote, thus demonstrating himself to be a veritable heir of Renaissance models for humor, based so firmly upon the

use of *facetiae* (witty remarks), *sententiae* (sayings, sometimes humorous in content), and anecdotes. He also demonstrates a particular fondness for over-exaggeration as in his description of the conclave following Pope Innocent X's death and the divisions between those who supported and opposed Olimpia. He writes: "I cardinali nemici per vederla ruinata avrebbono dato il voto al diavolo, non che ad un cardinal cattivo, pure che fosse stato suo nemico, e gli amici non si fossero curati d'escludere un santo se però avesse mostrato sentimenti contrari a donna Olimpia."¹⁶

However, in the sections of the biography where Olimpia is at her zenith of power, Leti's narrative becomes sober and accusatory. Cicero in fact maintained that humor should never mock the miserable, and likewise should never be used with true villains, because the audience wants them to be "wounded by a weapon more forceful than humor." In his view, "the easiest things to make fun of are those that deserve neither great hatred nor exceptional pity."¹⁷ In keeping with this precept, Leti constructs a mutli-layered work whose register changes from blame to humor according to the influence and dominance of his protagonist in the various stages of her life. This paper will demonstrate this ebb and flow approach, as well as discuss his humor in its various forms and how, as a result of his mish-mash approach, his work dabbles in various genres, such as theater, biography, the chronicle, and the novel. It will also make the claim that, though Leti's style differs drastically from that of his biographical predecessors, the Olimpia he portrays still remains a fixed and flat type, very much like the other women of our study.

Unlike his biographical predecessors, such as Plutarch, Suetonius and Machiavelli, who only implemented humor when it could in some way be attributed to

the words of a first- or second-hand witness, as with anecdotes or quotations, Leti's satirical implementation of humor acts as an authorial intrusion into the text, which makes for a very pleasant read, but undermines his status as a historian. This however, was probably of no concern to Leti, whose other works are rife with similar disdain for the Catholic Church. Leti does understand, however, Cicero's claim that true villains should be wounded by something more powerful than humor, and that to truly denounce the church and reveal all her trespasses, *gravitas* was needed. The biography therefore begins and concludes with humor, whereas in the portions of the work in which Leti seeks to release his most poisonous arrows, humor is infrequent. This technique is in noted contrast to that of Seutonius and Machiavelli. Seutonius, in his biography of Julius Caesar, refrains from the use of comedic elements in his introductory and concluding paragraphs, and Machiavelli resists using it at all during his biography of Castruccio Castracani, preferring the anecdotes of Castracani's life to be listed after his conclusion so as not to compromise his historical text. Leti does the exact opposite, preferring to grab the reader at the outset, promising them entertainment and levity. His choice to do so gives the reader the sense that his narrative is mock-serious and that what awaits them is a lively story that bears the marks of theatrical entertainment. His first lines, in fact, firmly establish the work within the theatrical vein: "Non è mio pensiero di scrivere esattamente la vita di donna Olimpia, che fu un maschio vestito da donna per la città di Roma ed una donna vestita da maschio per la Chiesa Romana."¹⁸ In almost every contemporary comedy, cross-dressing was a key element of all sorts of tricks and misunderstandings. Leti therefore begins his narrative not only by focusing on Olimpia's transcendence of her female role, but also by signaling the comedic tradition.

This framing, which emphasizes the fictional process, becomes even more apparent when he follows the above statement with another that undermines biographical writing itself. He asserts that he cannot write a biography according to the trends of the current age, in which fiction becomes fact:

Troppo cattiva impressione ha ricevuto il nostro secolo dall'operazioni di questa donna, onde, quantunque uno scrittore volesse affaticarsi di scegliere il grano dalla mondiglia, cioè metter da parte il buono e tralasciare il cattivo, già che il secolo presente suol metter la mano a tali funzioni quando si tratta della vita de' grandi, non sarebbe creduto, mentre il mondo ha prima veduto le mondiglie che il grano. Pazzo secolo, sto per dire, che inventasti lo scrivere, se lo scrivere doveva servire nel mondo per far del falso vero e del vero falso! ¹⁹

The reader cannot help but glean from both of these passages the allusion to theatric pretense and literary fabrication, especially evident in the contraposition of such words as “cattivo” and “buono,” and “vero” and “falso.”

For those who have read the dedication preceding the work, this aspect is even more visible. The dedication was likely written by Leti's publisher because it differs so drastically from Leti's biographical style, but is, nevertheless, rife with hilarity and a playful application of misogynist thinking. The author writes that he dedicates his work “alle vostre gentilezze, nobilissime Signore” because he doesn't know “a chi meglio dedicare la vita d'una signora di sì gran fama che al medesimo sesso che n'ha ricevuto l'onore.”²⁰ The implied insult to Leti's female readers, who of course have heard of Olimpia's perfidy, is spirited and provocative in style, and he continues this approach, writing in mock disdain, “Vi sarà permesso, o Signore, d'amar gli ecclesiastici, e particolarmente i confessori, ma non già di scordarvi de' mariti, per amar troppo le robbe de' preti. Se ne trovano di quelle che trattengono molto più con il confessore nel confessionario che con i mariti nel letto.”²¹ This jocular tone of criticism continues

throughout the dedication, as he reminds his female readers that women should never be in charge of public affairs because woman's desire to rule is like the leaves of the olive tree that seem to resist the fire, shrieking all over, but in the end, burn without making a flame.²² In other words, women who rule make a lot of noise (political or otherwise), but do not accomplish much, and eventually fade out of power. This is quite an assertion to make about the readers to whom he is supposedly dedicating his work, though this is of course not a guarantee that he actually intended the work for female readership. Much like Boccaccio in his *Decameron*, Leti's dedication to women could just be part of the fun.

Leti then asserts that a woman's primary talent is in spending money, not accruing it, but if she ever does accrue it, she spends it on clothes, thereby robbing from her children's inheritance. In his final affirmation the author recommends, with a strong dose of irony, that they should learn from Olimpia's example, because she instead stole from the clergymen, who were rich, to give to the poor, her family. In summary, he first playfully cautions his female readers to avoid the pitfalls of Olimpia's life, such as dalliances with priests, or involving themselves in manly affairs, but then tells them that they *should* follow Olimpia's example by stealing, though, unlike her, they should give their spoils to the poor.

This dedication therefore sets the tone of the entire work, and the readers settle back with a smile on their faces, in expectation of the comedy to follow. But its style, both crude and sensational, bears very little resemblance to the actual biography, whose misogynist leanings are more varied in style, and cloaked in Olimpia's blame. I would venture to agree with the assertion that the dedication was written by the publisher,

whose intent was to solicit interest in the work. I would also venture to assert that the note from the publisher, which follows the dedication, was actually written by Leti. It is a brief note, and its primary purpose seems that of imbuing his pseudonym, Abbe Gualdi, with more credibility. The "*publisher*" writes of Gualdi: "Egli amava la verità oltre modo e sarebbe stato forse cardinale s'all'uso della corte di Roma avesse saputo adulare il falso."²³ Again, the reader is faced with the contrasting words of truth and fiction. That the publisher and Leti likely wrote each other's part is yet another indication that the beginning of this biography toys with the reader and makes fun of the biographical genre as a whole.

When Leti criticizes the present age for its awful demonstration of the biographical genre in the first pages of the work, the reversal of themes (truth and fiction, good and bad) becomes even more prevalent. He thus questions himself, saying, "Ma perché biasimo lo scrivere, s'io medesimo pretendo di scrivere?"²⁴ He immediately replies, "Ah che lo scrivere ciò che veggono gli occhi è una virtù naturale, tanto conveniente alla natura che, a farne il contrario, sarebbe uno snaturalizare il mondo dal mondo."²⁵ Excessive here is the use of the word natural- he uses derivations of the word three times, "natura, naturale, snaturalizare," all having to do with the act of writing, and all signaling the reversal that takes place in historical writing. The word "contrario" and the phrase "snaturalizare il mondo dal mondo" further communicate this sense of inversion. Thus, in the first few pages of the work, we have three contrapositions: fact vs fiction, good vs. bad, and natural vs. unnatural. But nowhere is his emphasis on theater so clear as when he affirms that he will only tell what he saw with his own eyes, what the "theater of Rome" put on display for him: "[. . .] ho promesso di non trattar che di quella

sola materia che il teatro di Roma m'ha rappresentato negli occhi per lo spazio di 25 e più anni.”²⁶

The duplicity of Leti's authorship is at its peak here because, though Leti was educated in the church, he was never a clergyman as his penname would indicate, though he did grow up under the care of his uncle who *was* a Catholic bishop.²⁷ After converting to Protestantism in his later life, he lived in Geneva, where Protestantism and its influences were quite strong. Abbe Gualdi supposedly witnessed these events with his own eyes, but that is something Leti could never have done, given his various locations of residence as attested to by his personal letters. Gualdi is, therefore, a fictional narrator who will continually intrude into the text, reminding the reader that he has heard of the events from someone who witnessed them first-hand, or even that he has seen them himself. This framing, then, of inversion and invented authorship is reminiscent of the Boccaccian *cornice* (not to mention the Boccaccian themes of clerical wrongdoings) and imbues the text with a fictional façade while also calling playful attention to the fact that it is doing just that.

The readers, whether or not they are aware of Leti's false penname, at least enter into the text with the hopes of a lighthearted novelistic biography. They might initially be disappointed, however, because Leti begins with Olimpia's younger years and how she showed herself to be controlling from an early age. He recounts a humorless anecdote of how, being pressured to become a nun, Olimpia accused her confessor of molestation, causing him to be sent to prison for many years. He uses this event to foreshadow her future misdeeds: “L'accidente di questo Confessore fu un'indizio chiaro, di quelle persecuzioni, che dovevano ricevere nel Pontificato d'Innocentio, mediante Donna

Olimpia, tanti poveri Religiosi, e Prelati banditi, perseguitati, e maltrattati innocentemente, solo per non haver danari da contribuire a questa Donna, che ambiva tanto l'oro, e l'argento.”²⁸ Leti follows this grim and moralizing story with how Olimpia met her husband and the love that appeared to grow between the two. Here the reader's hopes for a more entertaining read are re-ignited. When introducing the waning of Olimpia's affection towards her husband, Leti calls Olimpia's life a tragi-comedy, again referencing theater: “la prima Scena, che si rappresentò nel Teatro del Popolo Romano, sopra il sogetto della vita di Donna Olimpia, che si può dire una Tragicomedia, [. . .] fu la mancanza dell'amore verso il suo marito.”²⁹ At this point in the biography, following this obvious references to the theatrical, Leti's humor resurfaces.

This portion of the biography contains an abundance of dry wit, such as the comment that Olimpia bestowed compliments liberally because they cost nothing. Leti recounts Olimpia's vices with such aplomb and exaggerations that the readers both laugh and drop their jaws upon reading such extremes. He likewise fills this portion of text with a great number of Pasquinades that circulated in and around the city during the papal conclave and following the eventual election of Olimpia's brother-in-law to the papacy. Pasquino was a famous statue, broken and half missing, found buried in front of a storefront in Piazza Navona in the 15th century, very near Olimpia's pre-papal residence. Upon this statue the Romans would paste or hang their satirical and anti-clerical verses under the cover of night, oftentimes placing the paper directly into his mouth. These verses were then collected and published under Pasquino's name, called Pasquinades.³⁰ Papal dismay at such activity made guarding the statue necessary, which served only to give birth to brother and sister statues throughout the city who would also engage in

conversations with their elder brother Pasquino. Leti's last humorous insertions, before a more lengthy and entrenched serious section of invective against Olimpia, refer to the many Pasquinades about the Pope's election, especially targeting his hatred for the Barbarines who had opposed his election:

*Se sarà fatto Panfilio,
I Barbarini andranno in esilio.*

*(If the Pope will be Pamphile
The Barbarines will be sent into exile)*

*Se sarà Panfilio papa,
Io vi giuro, o Barbarini,
Che la nostra Maldachini
Vi farà del capo rapa.*

*(If Pamphilio will be the pope
I swear to you, o Barbarines
That our Maldachin'
Will make of you a dope)³¹*

Even more humorous were the Pasquinades made in reaction to Pamphilio's election to the papacy, which were often accompanied by drawings. One in particular depicted Pasquino laden down with boots and spurs; the caption is a question from Marforio (one of Pasquino's brother statues), asking him where he is going, to which he responds, "Porto spironi e stivali per li Barbarini, perché se ne vogliono fuggir questa notte di Roma."³² But the final Pasquinian image Leti describes is the most damaging: it depicts Pasquino carrying a washbasin with the papal crown inside, covered by a female veil. When asked where he is going, he responds, "Porto un presente che il papa manda a donna Olimpia."³³

Leti explains that this Pasquinade shows the transference of Pamphilio's power to a woman and that, in the very moment he was named Pope, he began to think immediately of his sister-in-law, telling one of his confidants to take her the news.³⁴

Leti pokes fun at this theatrical reversal of gender roles throughout the biography, perhaps the most amusing example of which is his depiction of a gold medal that was given to the Pope, depicting Olimpia on one side with the papal cap on and with the keys to St. Peter's in her hand, the Pope on the other side wearing a lady's hat, carrying a spindle and spinning distaff in his hands. A reproduction of what the medal looked like is represented in an English translation (1846) of Leti's work:



Leti writes that a Cardinal showed the Pope the medal, not to humiliate him, but because he “*aspirava alla ruina di questa donna competitorice, giocando senza parer di giocare e mostrando di far del bene a chi faceva del male.*”³⁵ This quote again hints at the theatrical nature of the work and Olimpia's life portrayal, in which not everything is what it seems and the world is often upside down.

The prominent theme of female dominance and role reversals creates a complexity of representation that becomes hard to dissect because, throughout the whole biography, Leti both criticizes Olimpia for her femininity while also stripping her of her female identity. He even says that she was disdainful of her own sex: “*più volte confessò,*

che non haveva parole da perder con un sesso del quale non ne conservava altro, che ciò che non poteva rinunciare.”³⁶ The way Leti tells it, Olimpia bore no maternal instincts and was an atrocious mother, neglecting her childrens’ education and caring nothing for her only son, Camillo, who was widely known for his below-average intelligence. She even convinced the Pope to nominate him to the privileged position of Cardinal Nephew, despite the consequences this nomination would have for her family’s perpetuation, her son being the last of the Pamphili heirs: “contentandosi meglio di veder’ estinta la casa Panfilia, che di scemare un poco della sua autorità, che teneva sovra il Pontefice, come credeva che potesse succedere, con il matrimonio del figliuolo.”³⁷

Olimpia’s control over the Pope at this point is firmly rooted in the readers’ minds, but in case they have any doubt, they can expect quotes like the following to decorate the pages: “Ecco lo Stato misero nel quale si ritrovavano i parenti d’Innocentio, mediante l’avidità di Donna Olimpia, la quale haveva levato l’adito a tutti non volendo permettere a chi si sia d’impossessarsi dell’affetto del suo Cognato, che lo tenea quasi come suo schiavo, mentre bisognava che questo ogni cosa facesse per lei, dove che l’altra non faceva per lui, che ciò che piaceva a lei.”³⁸

At the same time, she is assigned another trait quite stereotypical of female invective, jealousy, which Leti highlights in the relationship between her and the Princess Rossano, her daughter-in-law, with whom her son Camillo fell deeply in love and for whom he renounced his Cardinalship after only a few years of service. He claimed that marriage would be preferable to serving in a post for which he was ill-suited. The couple was married but immediately sent away, according to Leti, because of Olimpia’s immense jealousy: “Non s’havrebbe questa Signora tanto scaldato a procurar’ al Prencipe

l'uscita di Roma, con questo poco d'honore, se non le fosse entrato un Martello di gelosia nella testa, che bastava a rodere il cuore d'una Donna che pareva nata per li sospetti, e gelosie.”³⁹

Again Leti references Olimpia's lack of maternal instinct and states that this instance shows how she would “scordare i propri legami naturali del sangue, andandosene altiera dominando, e torcendo il voler Pontifico a suo beneplacito, e volontà”⁴⁰ Despite being sent away, her son received a post as General, but Leti asserts that Olimpia's intention for granting him this post was not to honor her son, but to keep him away from Rome: “Il fine di Donna Olimpia non era d'honorare il suo *Genero*, con il *Generelato*, nè ingrandirlo con il proveccio che da questo gli poteva prevenire, ma solo perche [lo] voleva con questa occasione tener lontano di Roma.”⁴¹ This pun, drawing a comparison between the words “offspring” and “general” emphasizes, yet again, Olimpia's lack of concern for her offspring, and, more to the point, how she commanded them as a general does his soldiers. Leti even avoids using the word daughter or mother when referring to Olimpia and her children. Instead of calling Maria Olimpia's *daughter*, he refers to her as Don Camillo's *sister*. When he starts a new paragraph about her daughter's marriage, he writes: “Delle due sorelle di Don Camillo, la prima fu maritata a Don Andrea Giustiniani.”⁴² This could make narrative sense had Don Camillo been the subject of the preceding sentence or paragraph, but he is not, and this strange reference causes the reader to pause and question whether or not Don Camillo had half sisters or step sisters who are not Olimpia's children, because otherwise Leti would have used the more natural choice of “Olimpia's daughter.”⁴³ Olimpia is therefore stripped of her positive feminine and maternal qualities, while being criticized for the negative female

attributes, such as jealousy and desire for mastery, that she apparently possessed to such high degrees.

The following lengthy citation is just a taste of the mixture of gendered criticism and praise that Leti employs:

Ebbe però questa signora il dominio sopra il genio e persona del papa gran tempo prima, come già ho detto, perché, *essendo ella donna di non mediocre spirito e di buono giudicio, seppe così bene valersi a luogo ed a tempo de' mezzi necessari e bisognevoli per accattivarsi la volontà del cognato*, come quella che antivedeva tutto ciò ch'era per *riuscire*, che non solo governava la persona di questo a suo beneplacito e la casa a suo modo, mentre era vescovo, cardinale e nunzio, ma di più, anco doppo divenuto pontefice, *si seppe così bene mantenere nel possesso delle grazie*, tra il colmo delle grandezze, col tener lontano tutto ciò che non dipendeva da lei, che non poté così facilmente esser crollata, non che scossa, né dalla considerazione dell'inconvenienza di vedere che il supremo capo della Chiesa soggiacesse così volontariamente agli sfrenati *appetiti d'un'ambiziosissima donna*, né dalle voci comuni di tutta la corte perché, sorpresso l'aiuto che solevano avere i pontefici dall'assistenza de' nipoti, di necessità bisognò che il maneggio di tutti i negozii rimanesse in potere della *discrezione di questa donna*, la quale con *scaltro giudicio*, per inchiodare la ruota alla sua fortuna, precipitò tutti su il bel principio del ponteficato, non permettendo l'ingresso alle stanze pontificie che solo a quelli che volevano entrare col mezzo delle sue chiavi. E veramente da chi poteva signoreggiarsi il ponteficato se non da colei che aveva signoreggiato e che signoreggiava la volontà del papa? *Meritò questa signora d'esser lodata* con il titolo di giudiciosa ed accorta anco da quelli che la biasimavano per avara ed empia, ed *è certo che ogni altra donna sarebbe precipitata*, in tante congiunture sinistre, prima di sei mesi, e pure ella regnò per più di sei anni, meritando tanto maggiormente d'esser lodata, quanto che non si trovava in lei altra sorte di virtù che un'esatta *economia donnesca*, con la quale seppe così bene investirsi degli affetti del papa, che non poté fare il meno di darli l'apertura ad ogni sorte di governo, facendosi il tutto lecito, anzi non trovando lecito che il solo suo gusto.⁴⁴

Here again, Olimpia is criticized as having fallen prey to the weakness of her sex, yet is also *set apart* from her sex, as an exception above the rest, as a result of her resilience. She is also praised for taking the vices of her sex to such extremes that she is able to “signoreggiare” with her “*economia donnesca*.” Leti is not intentional in the way he deals

out his blame – when it suits him, he both praises and criticizes her for being a woman, and when it suits him, he praises or blames her for her masculinity. This results in a narrative that is quite a cacophony of ideas and syntax. The first sentence in the above paragraph, for example, lasts for more than a page, and attests to this rhetoric of tirade, which results in a shift of focus from the message to the medium of invective itself. Leti seems to be having a great deal of fun as he writes, and enjoys dusting Olimpia's character with every criticism that comes to mind, whether or not these criticism are inherently contradictory.

The end result is that this form of *vituperio*, which throws blame in a haphazard manner, is not able to offer the reader a concrete vision of Olimpia's personality and individuality. Her character remains a type, a transparent representation of a person, much like other biographies of the time, except, of course, that she becomes the anti-exemplum of our biographical journey. Leti continues in this vein for quite a few pages, repeating the same thematic content while neglecting to offer any specific facts. Any precise image of Olimpia is muddled by the onslaught of criticisms being thrown at her, calling to mind the image of an angry mob throwing rotten fruit at a faceless statue on a stage. The mob does not care what the statue looks like, nor whether it moves or breathes, the fun is in the act of throwing the rotten fruit, or in Leti's case, the blame.

Together with Olimpia's masculine dominance and jealousy, her avarice is another protagonist of her biography. To say that the lines of the biography are rife with references to this would be a gross understatement. In fact, the main focus of Leti's humor is that of placing this aspect of her character in relief. Narrative *facetiae* are found generously dappled throughout, mainly in the form of anecdotes. In one particular section

Leti even lets humor take over entirely, writing one humorous anecdote after another, in ascending quality of jocularly, all shedding light on Olimpia's penchant for making money. In fact, when treating Olimpia's dominance, Leti generally prefers the serious register, but in demonstrating her avarice, he makes ample room for humor, specifically anecdotal in form. For example, Leti tells the story of a man who sent Olimpia a vase made of pottery that she promptly dropped on the floor, saying "Se foss[e] stato d'argento non si sarebbe rotto in questa maniera," to which the servant replied, "Se foss[e] stato d'argento sarebbe stato di V.E., non già del mio padrone."⁴⁵

Leti also tells how Olimpia received so many bribes, it was rumored that she eventually stopped looking at her gifts, assuming that if they were sent by lowly priests they would not be worth enough to keep, and she would systematically send them back without even opening them. Two priests were discussing this fact, one arguing that she still did an inventory of everything, the other maintaining she did not. So the one told the other he should send her his most prized possession, a silver washbowl, and if he were right he would receive it back, unopened. He complied and subsequently lost: "Ma certo il povero canonico restò deluso con la perdita del bacile, perché la buona dama guardò ogni cosa, mandando a dire al signor canonico che aveva inviato il presente che lo ringraziava non poco della sua civiltà, mostrandosi egli molto più cortese degli altri."⁴⁶

This anecdote is immediately followed by another bearing marked Boccaccian influences, based on the premise of trickery and contrivances of two parties. It is the story of a merchant who is instructed by Olimpia to procure him a diamond during his travels. She does so in the hopes that he will instead gift her the diamond, as he is very rich, but offers nonetheless to reimburse him for it, so as to maintain a proper sense of decorum.

He realizes his dilemma and eventually hatches his own scheme. He decides to bring her the diamond as a gift, but to hold onto her letter, which he would then use after her death, as a type of promissory note. When he offers her the diamond as a gift, she asks for her letter to be returned, as it contained her declaration that she would, in fact, pay for it, which of course she is hoping to avoid. He is greatly disappointed at this request and tells her that he has lost it, to which she responds that she would, then, like a receipt confirming that the diamond was a gift! The poor man is therefore outwitted in his own scheme: “La qual cosa non potendo ricusare, ubbidì a’ cenni della donna per non rompere i buoni principi de’ suoi interessi, restando in questa maniera deluso nello stesso tempo che credeva deludere.”⁴⁷ This type of theatrical or novellesque anecdote, in which the deceiver is himself deceived, is quite amusing, and further contributes to the construct of fictive reversal, with which Leti toys throughout the entire biography. But in general his anecdotes are less developed stories that serve merely to add a little flair.

Many of the contemporary humorous attacks made by the citizens of Rome against Olimpia were visual in form, and Leti describes them in detail. Talented sketch artists tried their hand at visual depictions of Olimpia’s avarice, sometimes leading to their imprisonment if they were caught. According to Leti, in fact, the men who crafted the following Pasquinade met with this fate:

fu un’image dipinta sopra tela, di lunghezza di due palmi ed altrettanto larga, nella quale si vedeva un camariere (intendo dipinto) che con una mano batteva un certo prete che voleva entrar dentro la casa di donna Olimpia con una borsa vuota e con l’altra ne introduceva un altro che n’aveva una piena e così grande che difficilmente la poteva portare. Di sotto il prete che aveva in mano la borsa vuota v’era scritto: *Ite, maledicti, in ignem eternum*; e di sotto quello che l’aveva piena: *Venite benedicti Patris mei*; e ne’ piedi del camariere; *Bene veneritis, si portaveritis*. Ma di più curioso v’era dipinta, dalla finestra del palazzo che formava il teatro, la signora donna Olimpia che sporgeva solo la testa fuori, in atto quasi

minaccevole, con il motto di sotto che diceva: Io non ricevo ingrati: perché dunque molestarmi?⁴⁸

Another Pasquino sketch, depicting Olimpia's avarice, uses a pun to emphasize its point:

“Li Romani [. . .] non lasciavano d’inventar pasquinate a pasquinate, onde si finse un giorno (pure in pittura) che Pasquinio domandava a Marforio dov’era la porta di donna Olimpia e questo gli rispondeva Pasquinio caro, è segno che tu non porti niente, perché la porta di donna Olimpia ha un certo segreto, che chi porta la vede e chi non porta non la può trovare.”⁴⁹

Leti's playful style lends itself extremely well to this use of puns, which he employs frequently throughout the biography to demonstrate the absurdity of her power, the disdain others had regarding such power, and Olimpia's perfidy in the management of papal affairs. At the Pope's nearing of death, for example, Leti states that she “gives out benefices with her eyes closed as long as they have their hands open.” In response to Olimpia's recommendation that the Cardinals in the conclave (following Innocent's death) should make Cardinal Medici the head of affairs, he writes their reply: “che ognun di loro aveva capo e piedi da camminare senza cercare ad impresto il capo degli altri.” Or when Cardinal Cherubino (a Cardinal who had connections with Olimpia) is proposed as Pope, the other Cardinals respond, “Io l’escludo perché non voglio che donna Olimpia trovi la sua gloria tra i Cherubini.”⁵⁰ No pun is more obvious, however, than the following pun using the Pope's name, here quoted at length to give the reader a taste of its potency:

La Chiesa non ha l'occasione di lamentarsi di lui *come lui*, ma si lamenta *in lui* di donna Olimpia; s'egli avesse fatto vivere donna Olimpia *in lui* e non lui *in donna Olimpia*, certo che le sue ceneri meritarebbono il sepolcro dell'eternità e non dell'oblivione, dove bisogna seppellirle per non rinovare la memoria della cognata. Egli non fu *innocente*, perché donna

Olimpia fu *Innocenzio*; ma se donna Olimpia fosse stata *innocente*, egli meritarebbe il vero nome *d’Innocenzio*.⁵¹

Such a play on words with Innocent’s and Olimpia’s names was commonplace during his reign. Six months prior to his death, Leti recounts that “alcuni spiriti scapestrati” went around the city and, wherever the Pope’s name was written, changed his name to Olimpia’s: “dove diceva INNOCENTIVS X PONTIFEX MAXIMVS loro fecero OLIMPIA PRIMVS PONTIFEX MAXIMVS,” or just “OLIMPIA PRIMA PAPESSA.”⁵² Following this occurrence, pamphlets began circulating with the words, “Olimpia primus pontifex non maximus.”⁵³ These frequent puns traveled throughout the city in the form of *biglietti* (pamphlets) or Pasquinades, both so ubiquitous during that time that Leti says he cannot quote them all. He says that, “i più scaltri cervelli studiavano notte e giorno satire e pasquinate per dar motivo maggiore al popolo di scandalizzarsi del procedere di questi due personaggi.”⁵⁴

Here Leti admits that people were hard at work in the art of character defamation, yet he accepts these accounts of Olimpia’s life and passes them on to his reader. He does not attempt to consider that the rumors around Rome were not always true, rather fills his biography with every possible negative account of her life. Historians in fact say that the “legenda nera” of Olimpia’s life began with Leti because, despite its sensationalist content, his text actually becomes a primary source for information on Olimpia’s life for future historians and biographers.⁵⁵ This may come as a surprise, given the above description of his haphazard style of comedy and blame. But there is also another side to Leti’s narrative. In many sections of his biography, some quite lengthy, he does not delve into the humorous vein whatsoever, rather recounts with seemingly historical accuracy

the perfidious influence of Olimpia Maidalchini. His text, as a result, maintains a semblance of historical authenticity.

As the biography unfolds, in fact, Leti's humor gives way to an earnest exposition of Olimpia's nefarious dealings. The passages in which Leti truly attempts to demean and degrade Olimpia's character do not contain any trace of humor; his tone is serious and direct. In this, he follows the rhetorical exigencies of Aristotle and Cicero, the first who states that comedy, in dealing mainly with blame, should only do so with actions that are ridiculous and not painful, and the second that villains should be wounded by a weapon more forceful than humor. This recommendation is prevalent in all of the treatises on humor in the Renaissance, yet its premise resides in the natural inclinations of common sense. If true damage is to be inflicted, humor can be counterproductive. Quintillian notes, "The chief difficulty which confronts the orator [when implementing the comedic] lies in the fact that sayings designed to raise a laugh are generally untrue [and] are often deliberately distorted."⁵⁶ In keeping with these premises, the sections of Leti's biography in which he truly seeks to convince his reader of Olimpia's faults are conspicuously devoid of satire or humor. Leti is in earnest when he writes the following lines:

L'avidità de' Barbarini nell'accumular danari, che fu la più grande che vedesse mai Roma, in considerazione di quella d'Innocenzio... (ho errato) di donna Olimpia, era picciola. Tutti i giudici criminalisti venivano fatti secondo la raccomandazione di detta signora, la quale gli dava istruzioni barbare, ma profittevoli alla sua avarizia. Gli raccordava che castigassero la borsa, non il sangue, e bene spesso gli scriveva che mandassero il danaro ricevuto da' rei, perché intendeva d'applicarlo al beneficio de' poveri. [. . .] Altro non si sentiva parlare per Roma che dell'avidità di questa donna e pareva strano ad ognuno, perché nel tempo di tanti altri pontefici, carichi d'una infinità di nipoti, che tutti rubavano, per non dire che procuravano d'arricchirsi, non si vedevano tante estorsioni come nel tempo d'Innocenzio, che ogni cosa si restringeva ad arricchir donna Olimpia.⁵⁷

Nor is Leti implementing even the slightest bit of irony or satire when he makes the following sweeping observation about the reversal of roles in the Papacy:

Le istorie de' secoli passati non ci hanno mai rappresentato né ci rappresentano simili casi, non dico di pontefici, perché questo fu unico, ma parlo d'altri prencipi e monarchi. È vero che alcuno, anco tiranno, s'è dato in preda di qualche donna, alla quale, se ben dava gli affetti del cuore, non dava il scetro della mano. Se gli permetteva l'ingresso nel suo letto, non le concedeva quello del suo consiglio; se in secreto l'adorava, in pubblico la biasimava; se gli faceva dono della sua persona, non le faceva però presente del regno; se voleva che comandasse a lui, la privava che s'ingerisse di comandare a' popoli; [. . .]. Ma Innocenzio tutto al contrario donò a donna Olimpia e gli affetti ed il cuore e la mano e la persona ed il regno senza limiti, senza misura e senza rispetto ed è più che vero che mai alcun re diede tanta autorità alla moglie, che mai alcuna regina vedova e regnante comandò con tanta autorità i suoi consigli con quanta se ne aveva usurpato donna Olimpia e sopra il papa e sopra i consigli e sopra i popoli. Passò tanto oltre l'arrogante dominio di questa donna che volle rompere e che infatti sconquassò tutti gli ordinari divieti de' sagrati consigli e ridusse i decreti de' pontefici passati a tal segno che si dubitava di qualche nuova scisma alla Chiesa. Ben è vero che assai scisma era il vedere una donna divenuta papa ed un papa divenuto donna. Mille esempi si potrebbero qui adurre della non intesa autorità di donna Olimpia, ma sono in vero cose che più tosto inorridiscono le orecchie che consolino l'ingegno. Un solo però ne può restringere molti e sodisfare con la brevità il lettore.⁵⁸

Though Leti jokes about this role reversal in other parts of the biography, here he is sober and adamant. Both of these citations strike a pronounced contrast to his more salacious and witty narrative style. He leaves no room for incredulity. Even more to the point, these paragraphs are framed by a conspicuous absence of humor in the text both leading up to and following the citations. The narrative in these sections is noticeably temperate and, dare I say, historical. The reader of Olimpia's life is thereby led, almost unknowingly, from an amusing carnival of satire that pervades the beginning of the biography, into a somber chamber of truth where her vices are both exposed and condemned.

Leti is systematic and unrelenting in his efforts to persuade the reader of Olimpia's two primary faults, avarice and prepotency. He calls her a "modern

Agrippina,” and when he truly intends to convince the reader of her cunning, jealousy, and robberies of the church, he is succinct and lugubrious.⁵⁹ This section occurs about a quarter of the way through his biography, during which her brother-in-law is about to become Pope and her hold on him begins to tighten. As soon as the conclave concludes, Leti turns his focus to Olimpia, saying: “Se fu grande allegrezza di Donna Olimpia, si lascia considerare à coloro che hanno inteso parlare, della natura ambiziosa di commando, che possedeva questa Donna, e dell’ autorità che teneva sovra lo Spirito del cognate.”⁶⁰ Here Leti appeals to his contemporary readers to listen to the tidal wave of humorous derision they have already heard circulated about her, and apply that knowledge to the information he is about to release with such abundance and gravity, the reader almost drowns under its weight.

For 177 grim pages, Leti rails against Olimpia, detailing her perfidy and greed, but also her powerful influence. The first portion of this section details Olimpia’s feud with the Barbarini family, noting that her first act at court was to ruin the Barbarines. The Barbarini, particularly Cardinal Antonio Barbarini, had opposed the Pope’s election because of Olimpia’s known influence over him. During the conclave, Leti quotes Cardinal Barbarini as saying that “in queste congiunture di tempi non era bene di dar motivo di scandalo agli eretici, i quali senza alcun dubbio, vedendo il papa cedere i suoi arbitrii alla volontà d’una donna, avrebbono preso mille pretesti di lacerare la Chiesa con cento scritture seminate per Roma sotto il nome di Pasquino.”⁶¹

That there existed a feud between the two families is not disputed by history, and Pope Innocent X, upon his election, almost immediately conducted an investigation of the widespread nepotism and misuse of church funds by his Barbarini predecessor, Pope

Urban VIII (Maffeo Barberini). Pasquino's premonitions would eventually become reality as all three Barberini Cardinals were forced into exile and fled to Paris. Leti places the blame for this entirely on Olimpia: "Con tutto ciò [il Papa] s'era risoluto solamente di mortificarlo, ma donna Olimpia l'istigò sempre all'esterminio totale, certa d'appropriare alla sua casa tutte le abazie ed entrate ch'esso cardinale possedeva dentro lo stato ecclesiastico."⁶² Leti continues his barrage by highlighting the more pressing papal affairs that bore the mark of Olimpia's involvement, such as the appointment of Cardinal nephews, marriages, and her overall extortion of church funds. Her avarice is presented in a multi-layered fashion, in which the historical facts and details, void of humor and bolstered by his insistence that his information was provided from first-hand accounts, intermingle and support one another, forming a narrative web of sincerity. This section is tinged with frequent misogynistic references, but here they are not playful or reminiscent of the theatrical element of comedy. For example, he states that after the death of Cardinal Panziccolo (the only man who had any influence over the Pope), "il governo fu femminile e scandaloso,"⁶³ and he bolsters his accusations of avarice with the ubiquitous stereotype of female greed: "Le Donne non pensano ad altro, che a quello che veggono con gli occhi e & a ciò che toccano con le mani."⁶⁴ Olimpia is no exception to her sex and, according to Leti, has "gli sfrenati appetiti d'un'ambitosissima Donna."⁶⁵

Leti paints a picture of this "insatiable appetite" for power in a lengthy description of how Olimpia first attempted to influence the Pope shortly after he assumed power. Of pronounced interest to our study, she used the art of biography, by convincing the Pope to read Pope Alexander VI's life. Pope Alexander VI, Rodrigo Borgia, is of course, a surprising choice. He was a pope infamous for his military pursuits and expansion of the

Catholic Church's territories, not to mention the infamy of his son, Cesare Borgia, who was ruthless in these endeavors. Leti writes, "La prima lezione che diede donna Olimpia al cognato fu barbara (né paia strano se dico lezione, perché un maestro di scola non ha tanta autorità sopra uno scolare quanta n'aveva questa sopra lo spirito del papa), perché lo consigliò a farsi leggere la vita d'Alessandro sesto, che fu uno de' pontefici più barbari che vedessi mai il Vaticano."⁶⁶ Leti asserts that her purpose in doing so was not to induce the Pope to cruelty, but, on the contrary, to keep him pleasant and simple, so as to more easily manipulate him ("maggiormente girare e voltare a suo modo").⁶⁷ Her reasoning then, was to remove all possible scruples he may have had about a woman in political control: "faceva questo per levargli ogni sorte di scropolo e fargli vedere che non era cosa nuova per li pontefici il darsi in preda delle donne."⁶⁸ Leti observes that Olimpia drew particular attention to Pope Alexander's primary mistress, Vanoccia Romana, mother of both Lucrezia and Cesare Borgia, children to whom the Pope wanted to give his entire dominion. He also maintains that Pope Alexander VI's nepotism and violations of the Holy See were entirely due to Vanoccia: "Dicono che detto pontefice non avrebbe commesso tante barbarie se non fossi stato per lo solo fine d'ingrandire i suoi bastardi, né si sarebbe tanto mostrato indulgente verso di questi se Vannoccia, loro madre e sua amica, non gli l'avesse stimolato, alla quale avrebbe dato la vita istessa, non che il papato e la Chiesa, tanto l'amava svisceratamente."⁶⁹ Leti then directly quotes Olimpia's who, when reproving to the Pope, would use Vanoccia as a comparison: "Alessandro sesto faceva più per Vanoccia romana sua concubina che voi per me, che son vostra cognata," or, "Vanoccia romana trovò maggior fortuna con Alessandro suo amico di quella che io trovo con Innocenzio mio cognato."⁷⁰ Thus the misogynist theme continues.

Whenever Leti quotes this type of direct discourse, he generally uses the introduction of “one has heard” or “it has been said that,” relying wholeheartedly on hearsay. But perhaps in acknowledgement that these methods might be considered with suspicion by his readers, Leti makes sure to add a veil of veracity by recollecting various rumors, then drawing his own conclusion about the truth. The most notable occurrence of this is when he discusses Camillo’s resignation from the Cardinalship and his shocking exit from Rome. He notes that rumors abounded as to why Olimpia and the Pope sent the engaged couple away. The first potential reason he gives was that the Pope was angry with his nephew for renouncing his Cardinalship; the second, that by moving away they could preserve the Princess’ inheritance by avoiding all the necessary marital festivities befitting the nephew of the Pope; and the third, that Olimpia Maidalchini was a jealous woman and worried her new daughter-in-law would detract attention from herself. Though Leti apparently maintains objectivity by presenting the reader with all three options, he picks the option that gives more weight to the dominance of Olimpia: the third option. But he also further bolsters the illusion that he is a discerning historian, by saying that the second reason was preposterous and was the type of “low” gossip that circulated in the common houses of commerce: “Questo discorso ebbe origine nelle botteghe de’ mercanti, dove per l’ordinario si fanno sempre giudicii bassi e mercantile.”⁷¹ It is amusing that he rejects their monetary aspirations as vulgar and mercantile, when he himself frequently makes the assertion that this was their primary motivation. But in so doing, he separates himself from the lower gossips, and maintains the readers’ credulity. In this instance however, Leti may have been right about his conclusion. Ignazio Campi, the only biographer of Pope Innocent, who was relatively forgotten by history, attests to a

verifiable feud between Olimpia and the Princess Rossano, as documented by numerous contemporary accounts.⁷²

Despite his technique of discussing public speculation about the papessa's life, Leti still violates most rules of historical objectivity, as in the case of the gossip surrounding the Pope's neglect of his grand-nephews. When sons were born to Don Camillo, Olimpia's son, the Pope did not welcome the family back with open arms, which surprised many, and the gossip wheels around Rome began to turn again.⁷³ Leti asserts with verve that Olimpia was the cause of such avoidance, by convincing the Pope that her son was not actually able to have children:

Persuase il papa che don Camillo suo figliuolo era impotente alla generazione [. . .] onde, quando poi s'intese la nuova della gravidanza della signora principessa e del parto d'un bello maschio, ella prese altre industrie, più diaboliche e maligne. Rese sospetta al papa (la sola memoria di questo fatto mi fa tremar la mano ed inorridire il cuore) la fede coniugale della principessa di Rossano sua nuora e l'indusse a credere che quei figliuoli che faceva erano ben suoi, ma non del marito, che per la sua impotenza non era possibile di generare.⁷⁴

Leti's authorial intrusion into the text with words like "my hands" and "my heart" is nothing new to the biography, but his personal horror is. He generally only implies his disdain through rhetorical questions or exclamatory remarks. Here, however, it is more pointed as he briefly shifts his focus onto his own (Abbe Gualdi's) emotional response. This personal aspect is also seen in the following passage, when he gives weight to the popular view that Olimpia had actually bewitched the Pope, by offering a form of personal speculation. He says that the Pope breathed with her air and that where she commanded he obeyed, so that there were those who said that the Pope had been bewitched, to which he adds, "ed io per me lo credo, poiché, per tralasciare tutti gli altri rispetti e ragioni, come era possibile che un uomo rozzo di faccia e rustico di azzioni si

sottometta tanto all'amore d'una donna, anzi all'ubbidienza di questa femina, senza che qualche cosa diabolica non lo sforzasse?"⁷⁵ By adhering to this belief, Leti indulges the fancies of the masses, who would have been much more likely to believe tales of witchcraft than the readers of today, but the reason he gives for his conviction baffles the modern reader. He asserts, in essence, that men of harsh appearance are so unlikely to submit to women that, if they do, it must be a result of witchcraft. As a biographer he misses the mark and drags his readers with him into the quagmire of hearsay, despite his attempts at maintaining the façade of a historian who weighs all possibilities with caution and temperance before making a conclusion.

As Leti on the one hand feigns objectivity by drawing on public speculations, yet on the other betrays biographical responsibility by inserting his own feelings and beliefs, it is hard to make out how he intended this work to be received. Whereas most biography violates the code of veracity by representing subjects without stain, Leti charges in the opposite direction. He gives credence to most rumors, absurd or otherwise, that demean his protagonist, while discounting sensible speculation as absurd if it frees her from blame. This brazen approach flies in the face of an earlier promise Leti makes, that he prefers to believe good gossip over bad. Early on in his work, in reference to the widespread accusation that Olimpia poisoned her husband, he states, "Per me non ho voluto mai credere ciò, amando meglio nelle cose dubbiose di scegliere il bene che il male, e se la maggior parte non lo credevano, sarà bene di tenersi alle più voci e negar tutto, salvando così la reputazione di questa signora."⁷⁶ By asserting towards the beginning of the biography that he is reluctant to believe all of the bad gossip surrounding Donna Olimpia, he garnishes the readers' trust, all the while entertaining

them with humorous tidbits. The readers, like moths to a flame, are drawn into this authorial façade by way of his jocularly and promises to be objective, until they reach the heart of the biography, at which point he captures their attention with an altogether different style of fervent narration bolstered by incessant and relentless attacks on her character, attacks that are based principally on a combination of contemporary rumors and first-hand accounts that he claims he has either *heard* or *witnessed* personally. In essence, his expositions of the supposed first-hand accounts bewitch his readers and hold sway over their credulity. The biographer of Pope Innocent the X, Ignazio Campi, does not, in contrast, delve in the rhetoric of blame in his work. Regarding Olimpia's avarice he notes that the money she amassed was not unusual and did not exceed those of past papal relatives.⁷⁷

It must be noted that the readers at that time had no reason to doubt the veracity of Leti's biography, because they believed that he *was* Abbot Gualdi, a former member of the Catholic Church, and a man thoroughly engrossed in affairs of the Roman court for 25 years prior to his conversion to Protestantism and, therefore, was privy to many of the happenings during Olimpia's life. This has, however, been established by both Danilo Romei and Franco Barcia to be untrue. Both scholars discuss the improbability, or rather impossibility, of the assertion that he spent 25 years thoroughly engrossed in the affairs of the Roman court, but come to very different conclusions, based mainly upon the two starkly different editions of the biography itself.⁷⁸ The biography was published first in 1666, then again, in a much more amplified form, in 1667. The second edition is 200 pages longer than the first edition, almost double in length. Barcia, based upon a suspicious letter to the readers by Gregorio Leti's brother and the marked difference in

length, believes Leti did not write the original publication, rather plagiarized and embellished it. Romei instead concludes (and I am inclined to agree) that Leti is the author of both editions. He notes that, despite the extreme difference in length, the basic details and story line are the same: “L’innovazione [. . .] muta di poco la sostanza del libro: la quantità reale dell’informazione (i fatti, i dati storici, se così si può dire) resta pressoché invariata.”⁷⁹ This supports the hypothesis that the narrative of the second edition (and our current focus) is full of empty rants, as the verbage in the second edition doubles, without adding any specific factual content.

Romei attributes the authorial disparities in the works to the conflicts that arise between the textual intrusions of the real author, Gregorio Leti (historian and satirist), and his penname, Abbot Gualdi. He notes how the ubiquitous intrusions of the “io narrante” are strikingly more predominant in the 2nd edition and seem to be additions of Gregorio Leti the chronicler, rather than Abbot Gualdi, his penname persona. The two come into conflict with one another, but it is a conflict that is relatively imperceptible to the casual reader, and a conflict that likely did not arouse their suspicion. The reader likely believed the author to be Abbot Gualdi, a trustworthy source of information. His appearances in the text, therefore, bolster the readers’ credulity and serve to give believability to the more intense diatribes against Olimpia’s character. What reason did they have to doubt that he was indeed who he said he was? The majority of biographies written during the Renaissance and Post-Reformation were written by clerics. The only difference is that in this case, the cleric had converted to Protestantism.

Leti also includes letters in his text to reinforce the impression of authenticity. Towards the end of the biography the Pope receives an anonymous letter written by “i

confessori delle cure maggiori della cristianità,” in which they implore him to release himself from Olimpia’s “governo cattivo” of him and the church. They reference the many “mormorii penetranti, che corrono per tutte le piazze” and, in fact, the letter is rife with the words “mormorare,” “mormori” and “mormorazioni” (derivations of the word occur 7 times). It is extremely sensational in content; the active verbs alone that refer to Olimpia demonstrate this – Olimpia commands, lords over, robs, afflicts, sells benefices, even sucks the blood of the populace. Included here is just a small “taste”:

Contra donna Olimpia dall’altra parte si mormora ch’ella rubba senza misura, che fa trasgredire le leggi di Dio senza timore, che afflige gli innocenti prelati senza riguardo, che vende i benefici ecclesiastici a gran prezzo, che succhia il sangue de’ popoli con troppo avidità, che ha riempito il Vaticano e la Chiesa di oggetti ignoranti e cattivi, che non pensa ad altro che ad accumular tesori, che ha introdotta la carestia in Roma a solo fine di vender caro il suo grano tolto da questo e da quello senza paga, che comanda con troppo arroganza i cardinali medesimi, che discaccia dalla Corte o perseguita tutti quelli quali non vogliono dipendere da’ suoi cenni, che s’usurpa un’auttorità maggiore della pontificia istessa, che non conosce altro Dio che il danaro, che manda per governare lo stato ecclesiastico governatori a suo modo, che ha levato via dalle fortezze la maggior parte de’ soldati per metter nella sua borsa la paga assegnata per le guarnigioni, che ha preso molti vasi sagri e gemme preziose dalla sagrestia di San Pietro per applicare il tutto al suo uso e finalmente ch’ella, a guisa d’un’altra maga, ha ammalciato il cuore, chiuse l’orecchie ed accecati gli occhi di V.S. per non poter commiserare lo stato misero nel quale si trova la Chiesa.

The authenticity of the letter, quoted word for word (and lasting seven pages), is suspicious, especially given the lexicon, so similar to Leti’s own style of writing. This list-like format is too reminiscent of our own biographer’s writing to be believed as authentic, nor has it ever been printed as he indicates it eventually was.⁸⁰ It is entirely lacking in the pleasantries and gentilities of letter writing of the time, especially when addressing the Pope himself, and bears Leti’s writing style so acutely that it is at best a second-hand reproduction of popular complaints.⁸¹ But its power and force cannot be

denied. It fans the flame of Leti's fancy, and that of his reader, who is by no means bored, rather fixated upon this imagery of Olimpia and the Pope's reaction to such news of perfidy.

Directly following this letter Leti includes another, luckily much shorter than its predecessor, and much more believable in content. It is a letter supposedly written in response to a priest of the Dominican order, who has invited his friend (by the name of Ignazio Girssi) to Rome. Ignazio Girssi thanks him sincerely for his invitation and replies that he is most desirous to see Rome, but more importantly, to see Donna Olimpia and see for himself whether or not the rumors are true. This letter was apparently "stuffed up" the sleeve of this poor priest and just happened to fall out at the Pope's feet, who was visiting his church, and who therefore picked it up and read it. In the letter, Girssi writes that people going to Rome for the Holy Year were primarily going to see Donna Olimpia: "la maggior parte di quelli che da questa città s'inviano in Roma, non lo fanno tanto per la divozione di guadagnar l'indulgenza, quanto che per la curiosità di veder donna Olimpia, della quale tanto si parla per tutto."⁸² He continues, "non si sa se vi sia in Roma il pontefice, così poco si parla di lui, ma si crede bene che donna Olimpia sia un altro papa, tanto si ciancia della sua autorità. Ma non è bene mormorare nell'anno santo."⁸³ This letter, unlike its predecessor, does bear the markings of a different style, though beyond that its authenticity is just as questionable as the first, and of course we see again the recurring word, "mormorare." The plausibility of this letter actually making it into the Pope's hands by falling out of the priest's sleeve is far-fetched, but Leti's description is quite detailed and makes one feel as if he had the information from a first-hand account. He also volunteers that many debated the reality of this occurrence and some maintained

that the priest had written the letter in a false hand and had purposefully let the letter drop in the Pope's presence.

Both of these letters, authentic or not, are used to demonstrate Leti's main point: that Roman gossip eventually made it to the Pope's ears and he began to turn against Olimpia and eventually ordered her banishment from court. The inclusion of the two letters bears the mark of sensationalism, which is, ironically, exactly the point Leti is trying to make with his description of the Holy Year: that it was a sensational event and everyone's sole purpose was to see Olimpia for themselves. He writes, "Quasi la maggior parte de' pelegriani, e particolarmente le donne, si trattenevano le giornate intiere innanzi il palazzo della signora sudetta, non per altro che per vederla affacciata nelle finestre."⁸⁴ The authenticity of the letters is, then, not important. The reader is convinced that during the Holy Year people flocked to see Olimpia and that all manner of gossip circulated about her. The year represented a veritable crescendo of hate towards Olimpia. Even Campi, a trusted historian with an avid affection for citing his sources, comments that her appearance at the jubilation festivities and opening of the Holy Door enraged the populace.

What Leti very notably leaves out, however, is an occurrence preceeding the Holy Year and another reason for which the Romans detested Olimpia. In March of 1649, while the body of Santa Francesca Romana was being given a more honorable burial site in Santa Maria Nova, her clavicle was rumored to have been removed surreptitiously and given to Olimpia as a relic for the church in her castle of San Martino. She had apparently been wanting a relic to adorn her church for some time, but not only was her action considered stealing, the nuns at Tor de' Specchi, who should have had the rights to

oversee the burial of their founding Saint, were prevented that right.⁸⁵ The outcry in the city was considerable. With an arsenal of possibilities at his disposal, one must ponder why Leti did not include this particular weapon in either edition of his biography of Olimpia, if the occurrence was common knowledge. Lest we fall into speculation and risk putting on the guise of a biographer, it will be better to draw a likely conclusion: for Leti to mention Olimpia's spirituality, regardless of the fact that it incited her to robbery, would be wholly uncharacteristic of the character of Olimpia that Leti has thus far created. Leti's Olimpia is not remotely chaste or spiritual, and when she engages in charitable activities it is only for show: "Che però fingeva d'andar visitando l'ospitali a solo fine di farsi vedere, se pure non mescolasse il pensiero di farsi stimare pietosa e divota."⁸⁶ That she actually helped the hospital raise a great deal of funds, as Campi asserts,⁸⁷ is put aside, or perhaps is information that never reached Leti's ears because history has shown that slander spreads far and wide while praise reaches only a few. Olimpia was, in fact, closely tied to the Chapel and Hospital of Santa Maria, mainly due to her devotion to Santa Francesca Romana, and she purchased homes, towers, and granaries for the location. In 1653 she received from Pope Innocent X complete control over the church, after which she transformed the location into a "casino belvedere" with incredible gardens and fountains, including the 1652 "Fontana della lumaca" by Bernini.

The readers of Leti's biography, then, know only that Olimpia was hated for her control over the Pope and her avarice. They do not know that she was a lover of art and plays, and a frequent attendee of masses, all aspects attested to by Campi, who quotes many contemporary sources (such as the diary of the historian and playwright, Teodoro Ameyden). Leti's Olimpia is a flat villainess with very few vestiges of humanity, which

makes Leti's forays into the humorous register even more vital to the digestion of his work. Were his work to only deal only in the serious register, the biography would risk being the antithesis of the typical Post-Reformation biography: biographies of the time *only extolled* and praised their subject, while Leti *only criticizes* and demeans his protagonist. Either extremity risks eliciting boredom in the reader, which Leti absolutely must avoid, as his biography is not intended solely for edification (for which boredom may be considered an unfortunate but necessary by-product), but for entertainment and sales. His work reads then, as a chronicle or novel, and as such requires some narrative ingenuity to maintain his readers' interest.

During the 177-page section that is void of humor, Leti exercises this ingenuity by introducing a new character onto the scene. No tale of villainy is complete without a scoundrel sidekick, and in timely fashion Leti introduces the blind Prospero Fagnani, called by Leti an "Heretico delle Religioni," and denounced as being motivated only by capricious desires.⁸⁸ His character here takes the foreground in Leti's narrative, serious in its intent to damage the reputation of its main heroine by damaging also those who were close to her. Leti blames Fagnani for one of Pope Innocent X's most drastic decrees during his time in the papacy, the closure of over 1,513 convents and monasteries. Whereas more reasonable historians, like Campi, attribute the closure of the convents to real concern regarding the licentious behavior of the less established, smaller cloistered religious houses, Leti takes the more inflammatory approach.⁸⁹ He represents Fagnani as a man full of hate, whose only desire is to ruin the lives of the clergy: "La natura di questo uomo era nemica d'i frati, a' danni de' quali tramava dalla mattina a sera tradimenti ed insidie, e non avrebbe mancato per lui d'esternarli tutti; anzi l'odiava a

tal fatto segno che poco curò di dire più volte che Iddio benedetto l'aveva fatto gran grazia de levargli gli occhi per non veder le furbarie de' frati."⁹⁰ Leti asserts that Fagnani was called by many the "flagello dei frati." He also makes the claim that he heard Fagnani ("io medesimo gli intesi dire") talking about the friars one day, saying "Se tutti i frati fossiro santi, io non vorrei ricever la vista da' loro miracoli."⁹¹ Whereas Campi discusses the depravity of said convents and the verifiable concern regarding their conduct, Leti ignores it completely, preferring to set all of the infamy upon Olimpia and her trusty "friend" Fagnani.⁹² Leti says that the only friends she had were those who could give advice about making money, and Fagnani did just that.⁹³ Following this 1650 papal bull (calling for the closure of monasteries with less than 6 monks), 6,238 monasteries were subject to closure. In Leti's account, many remained open only because they appealed to Olimpia with monetary gifts: "Tralasciati dunque tutti gli altri mezi, si diedero i frati a batter le porte della coscienza di donna Olimpia a colpi di borsa, consapevoli già che il vero rimedio di mollificar il cuore di questa signora era il danaro, del quale aveva formato un idolo, innansi al cui conspetto idolatrava mille volte il giorno con false preghiere, benché stanziante al Vaticano."⁹⁴ Here again, Olimpia's avarice is the primary subject, and the character of Fagnani is portrayed to be her henchmen extraordinaire: "Non passava mai giorno che non si facesse portare nella presenza di donna Olimpia, con la quale si tratteneva a lunghe conferenze intorno al modo di accumular danari, servendosi questa signora de' suoi consigli."⁹⁵ With colorful flair, Leti embellishes his narrative even further, stating that Fagnani "even dreamt about it" and would tell Olimpia of his dream schemes the following day.⁹⁶ The result of such a

perfidious character is that Leti's biographic style reads more like a novel or play than a biography.

In this 177 page section of severity, Leti only includes one humorous anecdote: he tells a story of Cardinal San Clemente and Cardinal Pallotta who meet on the street; Cardinal San Clemente asks Cardinal Pallotta where he is going and he responds, "I am going to the convocation of the Cardinals," to which Cardinal San Clemente says, "And I am going to see Donna Olimpia." Cardinal Pallotta then retorts, "Let us go together, then, because we are going to the same place."⁹⁷ This well-placed humor, so in contrast to pages 74-150, serves as the decorative icing on his cake of repugnance.

It is also important to note that Leti's biography is written chronologically, another primary reason for which his use of blame and humor alternates so frequently. Olimpia's power was not constant, rather gained strength in different moments of time, and lost strength in others. Leti prefers to dapple his pages with humor when Olimpia's power was *waning*, which it did in multiple instances during her brother-in-law's reign, so its presence in the text acts like a rising tide, that then dissipates when she regains power. This is most apparent during the center of the text. Following Leti's long section of *vituperio*, humor begins to weave its way back in, successfully reeling the reader back into the web of papal intricacies and common libel, such as the story of a Play in London, an occurrence that greatly angered the Pope. The play was entitled *The Marriage of the Pope* and was performed, it is said, "nella presenza di Cromuele."⁹⁸ Leti's description of the play is worth quoting in entirety:

tra le altre cose rappresentate in diverse scene di scherzo agli Inglesi e di vituperio a' cattolici, una fu che, volendo il papa maritarsi con donna Olimpia e ricusandolo questa, dicendo di non voler per marito un uomo sì brutto e difforme, egli per arrivare al suo intento l'offerse una chiave, che

ricusò come picciol presente, onde, risoluto d'averla per moglie, gli le offerse ambidue. Ma qui è da sapere che mentre il papa l'appresentava una delle chiavi, donna Olimpia lo domandava se quella chiave era dell'inferno o del paradiso; alla cui domanda soggiungendole il papa ch'era del paradiso, donna Olimpia ripigliò: Dunque datemi l'altra perché non voglio che quando voi sarete sazio di me comandiate i diavoli che mi portino via nell'inferno. Così, avendogliele date ambidue, si celebrarono le nozze, chiudendosi l'opera con un ballo di frati e di monache che si rallegravano ancor loro d'aversi un giorno a maritare.⁹⁹

This is just one of many examples of public jest regarding Olimpia that supposedly made their way back to the Pope's ear. Another is a remark made by the Emperor of Sweden, in response to the Papal nuncio's disapproval of the peace treaty signed between Rome and Sweden. The nuncio asserted that Rome should always be on her guard against Protestantism to which the Emperor replied that those in Rome were not that brave, and that the Pope could not sleep without having a lady to hold his head.¹⁰⁰

This brief return of humor does not last long, however, because Cardinal Panziccolo (considered Olimpia's primary adversary), dies and Olimpia regains control, and when Olimpia is in control, Leti does not veer into paths of frivolity. He is instead serious and disgusted and again her avarice takes the stage, as in the following citation:

Ma non si contentava questa signora di dar le leggi ad ogni sorte di politica dello stato, della chiesa e della corte: voleva anco comandar lo spirituale, conforme faceva prima, onde molte volte le congregazioni si convocavano a casa sua inansi di raunarsi ne' luoghi ordinari; ben è vero che non curava d'altro se non di quelle cose che potevano renderle qualche profitto della borsa, lasciando le cose appartenenti alla coscienza alla disposizione delle congregazioni, secondo era la mente del pontefice. Sembrerà cosa incredibile all'orecchie degli uditori lo descrivere la vigilanza che usava questa donna nell'accumular danari.¹⁰¹

She did not maintain this hold for long, however, because her nephew, with whom she was not on close terms, was appointed to the Cardinalship against her will, a decision that apparently caused her much anxiety. It is, therefore, a section where Olimpia's influence

is in decline, so humor returns. When Leti describes the notably young Cardinal (only 18), he engages in subtle displays of exaggeration, describing him as having “una fisionomia pecorina, senza presenza o aspetto d’uomo, inesperto a tutte le cose, ignorante nelle lettere ed inabile per apprenderele, stupido nel discorrere, disgraziato di corpo e di parole ed applicato solo a quei passatempi che sono propri di persone basse ed ordinarie.”¹⁰² He recounts how, when the Pope first met him, he turned to Olimpia and said, “Vi prego, cognata, di non farmilo capitar più inanzi perché è più brutto di me.”¹⁰³ Then Leti adds another Pasquinade about him, made during a time in which Marforio, one of Pasquino’s brother statues, had been hidden away. The Pasquinade, written to Pasquino and intended to console him on the absence of Marforio, says,

Non pianger Pasquino:
compagno ti sarà Maldachino.¹⁰⁴

This quip, as explained by Leti, demonstrates how ridiculous the appointment of one so young to Cardinalship would be, and how the people considered him to be the “Carnival Cardinal”:

E veramente questo cardinale è stato e sarà il carnevale del collegio apostolico, lo scandalo della Chiesa ed il vituperio della corte, non per altro che per la sola memoria di donna Olimpia, che lo volle tale in una età troppo tenera, e ciò per mostrarsi bastevolmente potente a rompere i decreti di tanti pontefici che proibivano diffinitivamente di far cardinale chi si sia prima degli anni venticinque e senza aver servito in qualche cosa la Chiesa.¹⁰⁵

The ebb and flow of humor is also prominent leading up to and following a serious section of his biography during which Leti discusses Olimpia’s foreign policy. It is almost as if Leti overdoses the readers on funny tidbits to prepare them for the politics to follow, when Olimpia’s dominance takes center stage and humor steps into the shadows once more. He therefore fills the section leading up to it with a veritable mountain of

anecdotal revelry including stories that get longer, more elaborate, and more full of banter. He tells a story, for example, of how Olimpia requested gold and silver lace from a Genovese abbot (from Genoa, Italy) who was in her debt; to please her and procure the best lace available, he writes to his brother in Geneva, Switzerland, where the best lace is made. His brother sends him the requested lace in abundance, which greatly pleases Olimpia. As she is admiring the workmanship and variety of the lace (which is so abundant and beautiful she wishes she could have 100 eyes and hands to satiate her avarice), the abbot explains that it came from Geneva, where the best lace is made, whereby Olimpia expresses disappointment that the lace was made in a city of dissenters. The abbot, “che non era de’ più scropolosi,” responds that the majority of the clothing accessories that adorned the ecclesiastical robes had been made by heretics. Then Donna Olimpia, “ch’era meno scropolosa dell’abbate, rise di questo, col portar certi esempi faceti, ma in sostanza conchiuse che gli dispiaceva che i Genevrini fossero rubelli della Chiesa Romana solo per saper così ben lavorar di pizzetti.”¹⁰⁶ The comedic quality of this anecdote is more subtly enhanced by Leti’s reference to Geneva, his own city of residence, which should not be overlooked here, nor the reference to the less than scrupulous “Abbot”. They are additional allusions to his penname, Abbe (Abbot) Gualdi, who we know writes from Geneva. He seems to be telling the reader that he, *also* an Abbot from Geneva, is perhaps *also* lacking in scruples, biographical scruples that is.

But the fun ends abruptly following his anecdotal barrage. In order to give a fuller account of the Pope’s political neutrality, for which he blames Olimpia, Leti delves into humorless detail about the Pope’s lack of involvement in foreign affairs: “Donna Olimpia con tutto ciò travolse il cognato da questi buoni pensieri e l’indusse ad una neutralità

pregiudichevole alla Chiesa, consigliandolo di non voler impoverire (ed aveva ragione di far ciò perché voleva arricchir se stessa) se medesimo per aiutare altri.”¹⁰⁷ Many countries and principalities were greatly perturbed by this indifference, such as France, Spain, Venice, Modena, and Parma. For 40 pages Leti expounds on these issues with not so much as a pun or ironic inference. At this point in the biography, the Pope’s death is imminent and Olimpia begins to worry:

Per venire ora alla conclusione quasi dell’industria di donna Olimpia, dico che quanto più mirava la vicina morte del papa, altrettanto dispiaceva di vedersi sola e priva di quelli appoggi necessari che convenivano ad una persona della sua qualità. Sapeva benissimo di non aver dalla sua parte sostegno alcuno che potesse soccorrerla in qualche accidente d’avversità, che teneva per certo di averne la sua parte, considerate le sue operazioni passate.¹⁰⁸

To circumvent these eventualities, Olimpia contrives a marriage alliance with the Barbarini family, who had hitherto been sworn enemies of the Pamphili family.

Leti addresses the readers’ surprise at such a change in events with a fair amount of authorial intrusion, rhetorical questioning, and sweeping statements such as the following: “Or ecco come sono passate le cose de’ Barbarini con Innocenzio e con donna Olimpia: morti e resuscitati, abassati ed inalzati in modo che non temono la stessa inconstanza della fortuna.”¹⁰⁹ And indeed, the return of the Barbarines marks the end for Cardinal Astalli, the Cardinal Nephew. Leti weaves the tale of how Olimpia and the Barberines both contrived to turn the Pope against him and how he was eventually banished. Here, instead of the sweeping statement he makes above, Leti resorts to irony: “Ognuno sa che in quel paese si riverisce con profonda umiltà il giorno quello istesso che si vorrebbe veder ucciso la notte; gli ossequi, i corteggi, le riverenze, i saluti e le baciamani della corte romana son fatti per gli occhi, non per il cuore.”¹¹⁰ Both assertions,

however, point to his criticism of Romans (and inferred here is the church) and their fickle behavior. In this last section, his judgment of Rome and the church, is quite pronounced. He writes that the ecclesiastic body is “scandalizzato,” and that the prelates in France “non sapevano più che rispondere a quei protestanti che si burlavano della Chiesa Romana divenuta tanto simoniaca.”¹¹¹

Leti’s varied style is also seen in how he deals with the narration of time throughout the work. There are instances where the narration focuses on a particular event with such concentration that passage of time is barely apparent, and others, where he details events with precision and speed, such as when he describes Olimpia’s demise. According to Leti, Olimpia’s decline occurred in the following order: Cardinal Astalli was made Cardinal Patron but in order to do so the Pope had to have him declared his nephew (which he was not); Olimpia and the entire Pamphili family were incensed as a result, but also lost much of their influence; and finally, pressures from the Roman populace built to such a pitch that the Pope felt he must banish her to maintain his authority.¹¹² This section of the narrative is informative and quick and perhaps the most believable of the entire biography. Leti delivers his information succinctly and without his usual touches of judgment or condescension, perhaps because the material speaks for itself, and also because her demise is not the focus of his work, rather her excessive abuses of power.

Much of the information in this particular section could have been delivered with humorous flair, and indeed the content may at first *seem* humorous, but Leti does not imbue this portion of the text with any humorous flights of fancy, despite its potential for humor. For example, when recounting the populace’s vocal attacks on Olimpia, he says

that he (Abbot Gualdi) personally witnessed the day the Pope went out and the crowds surrounded his carriage, crying, “Non più puttane, non più puttane, Santissimo Padre, pane, pane!”¹¹³ The affect of the rhyme, and allusions to the Pope’s relationship has great comedic potential, but he does not indulge that aspect. Likewise, when Leti tells of a mishap Olimpia had in her carriage, he does not point out the potentially amusing quality of what the people shouted at her: “Dacci del pane, madama Olimpia, non di fontane!”¹¹⁴ Instead, he simply explains to the reader why the populace shouted this at her: “La causa perché il popolo domandava del pane e biasimava le fontane era per la rabbia che aveva di vedere spendere tanti danari per fabricare una fontana in piazza Navona, proprio dirimpetto al palazzo fabricato da questa signora. Qual fontana, che costò più di quarantamila doppie, non si fece per accomodar la città, ma per render più maestevole la sua casa.”¹¹⁵ Indeed, Leti could have used an arsenal of humorous Pasquinades regarding Olimpia’s sequestration of church funds for her own aggrandizement here, but he does not. He instead reminds the reader of the truth behind the Romans’ accusations, and of her need for total domination. Following the Pope’s reaction to receiving the previously mentioned gold medal, Leti writes that she was not deterred: “Pure, non sbigottita punto di ciò, adoprando le sue solite stratagemme ed atti donneschi, con li quali dominava il cuore di questo, si diede a consolarlo, per levarli l’occasione di far sopra ciò che l’era arrivato lungo riflesso, temendo che ogni lungo pensiero sia per fabricar la tomba alla sua autorità.”¹¹⁶

The implication here is that Olimpia’s feminine “wiles” and “strategies” had clouded the Pope’s ability to think for himself and he would regain his faculties if distanced from her influence. Leti does not mince words when detailing this form of

feminine power and criticizes the Pope for his lack of resolve. He details how Olimpia would enter and exit the papal quarters “a suo modo,” and the Pope forgot all about the Pasquinades and murmuring: “scordatosi totalmente il papa di tante pasquinate e mormorii girati per l’universo.” But this is not surprising, says Leti, because the Pope had completely forgotten himself and the honor of the church: “ma non è maraviglia che il pontefice si sia scordato delle mormorazioni, se non si ricordava né di se stesso né dell’onore della Chiesa.”¹¹⁷

Apparently Olimpia’s fame was so pronounced that Leti was even concerned she could be recorded in history as a veritable Pope, a blundering of history that had actually occurred with the story of Pope Joan. He spends 40 pages discussing this blunder and addresses the fact that if a myth could have been so maintained that Pope Joan (a papessa) had existed, then most certainly Olimpia could become known over time as another female Pope.¹¹⁸ He therefore takes care to explain how history was incorrect in its assertion that Pope Joan really existed, and is shocked by how many scholars actually attested to this fact, despite historical proof to the contrary. In this instance he assumes both a role of corrective historian and distracted biographer. Such a lengthy digression is not atypical for biography, but it is most certainly not recommended. Malaspina cautions against this in his treatise, noting that Giovio and Ulluo spent much too long on the events surrounded their protagonists’ lives, rather than on their behavior and conduct, which, according to Malaspina, should be the main focus of biography.¹¹⁹ Malaspina names Plutarch as an ideal biographer because he organized his biographies according to the protagonists’ character traits, rather than chronologically. Leti, however, unfolds his biography in a different way, proceeding chronologically, but with considerable

digressions from chronology to elaborate on the only two character traits of Olimpia that he is interested in, her avarice and dominance. The digression on Pope Joan then, is a digression with capital letters, because it does not fit into the story at all, but it does serve the purpose of reminding the people that history can, and does, get things wrong. His intention may not have been to undermine his own work with this inclusion, but the effect is nevertheless present. If historians got it so wrong in Pope Joan's case, isn't it possible that Leti is also getting it wrong? Again the mixture of fiction and fact discussed earlier reappear in this section. But Leti appears to ignore this aspect and ends his digression with humor: "Ritorniamo ora nel nostro cominciato filo di dove siamo partiti. Parliamo della signora donna Olimpia, la quale ci aspetta ingelosita per averci troppo lungamente trattenuti con questa papessa favolosa."¹²⁰

This lighthearted quality of Leti's narrative is something that continually pervades the text. Given its 503-page length, the 177 page section of a more serious nature is by far outnumbered by the other 325 pages, during which the author has more fun. The resulting ebullience makes for a pleasant read, lightening the load of such a lengthy work. His lighthearted narrative style even makes faint appearances in the more serious section of blame, such as when Leti writes about the Pope's final illness. Olimpia moved into the palace, a fact that created a steady stream of gossip: "Insomma non si parlava più in Palazzo che di donna Olimpia: donna Olimpia qua, donna Olimpia là."¹²¹ When Fabio Chigi is elected Pope almost unanimously, the people proclaim in surprise, "*Che stravaganze son queste? I nemici di donna Olimpia vogliono un papa che desiderano i suoi amici ed i suoi amici desiderano un papa che vogliono i suoi nemici?*"¹²² These

instances, and many like them, all serve to imbue the text with a buoyant feel, which, given its voluminous length, is most welcome.

It is also important to note that in the sections during which Olimpia is in power, Leti does not entirely refrain from humor, rather uses it with less frequency. After Olimpia regains control of the palace, for example, trickles of humor are still seen, sometimes brazen in content, but always serving the purpose of revealing her avarice and the Pope's hopeless dependence on her. One example in particular demonstrates Leti's sensational style, and risqué Boccaccian influences. It tells the story of a man who wanted to marry a nun and therefore sought dispensation from Olimpia. He gave her many Spanish doubloons (quite a considerable sum), after which "se ne ritornò al suo paese, dove si sposò con gran solennità, sodisfacendo gli stimoli del suo senso dormendo con una cogina, con una monica, con un'abbadessa e con una vecchia, doppo una spesa sì grande."¹²³ Leti also cites a Pasquinade that became popular as a result of how the women in the family rushed to the Vatican during the Pope's final month, feigning concern: "Ma questo gran concorso di femine si vide solamente un mese prima che morisse il papa, onde Pasquino, vedendo tante donne nel Vaticano contro l'ordinario, prese a dire facetamente a Marforio:

Se tu vuoi fare il ruffiano,
Troverai donne al Vaticano

These occurrences of humor are, however, spaced between more serious jabs to Olimpia's character, which Leti continues to demean until the very end of the biography. He says her simonies amounted to at least a half million scudi, and that they were too many even to list, even though a friend of his did at one point undertake making a list of them. He tells also of her obsessive attention to the Pope in his final days, recounting how

she would sit by his bedside, feed him by hand, and even created a bed curtain behind which she could hide while the Pope engaged in the limited conferences he still had. In short, he details her total dominance of the Pope: “Godeva di tutto ciò donna Olimpia, accendendosi sempre più il suo affetto, servendolo con tutte le viscere del cuore, per poter maggiormente obbligarlo a lasciarsi comandare, non desiderando essa altro che un dominio assoluto ed indipendente.”¹²⁴

The section of the biography where the Pope is nearing death, and Olimpia’s avarice reaches a new pitch, is replete with quick transitions between humor and blame, implemented in the fashion of a fencer, who jabs, then retreats. Leti strikes, then jests. In actuality, however, his jests seem more to be the turning of the sword, already imbedded in his victim. It is as if Leti views his task of convincing the readers to be complete, and what remains is merely to finish the story with embellishments of humor to keep them entertained. Humor occurs 14 times in this 87 page span that remains before Olimpia’s death, approximately once every 5 pages, with a heavy presence of anecdotes, pun, and irony, such as the statement that the Romans kill at night those whom they praise during the day, and the observation that the Barbarines took nepotism to such a degree they “credevano di far principi tutti i loro staffieri.”¹²⁵

Two anecdotes in particular shed light on Olimpia’s excessive simony during the Pope’s final days, during which time “tutti correvano a briglia sciolta per comprar benefici ecclesiastici.” One is about a priest who had wanted to buy a prelature for 5,000 scudi, but Olimpia refuses, telling him she will only accept 8,000. He eventually comes up with 6,000 but she still says it is not enough, until she apparently reaches a greater state of desperation as the Pope is dying, what Leti calls “giorni estremi”:

La stessa donna Olimpia lo mandò a chiamare per vedere se fosse dello stesso umore di prima, trovandolo un poco alieno, protestandosi che una violenta tentazione di carne l'aveva fatto spendere duemila scudi con una donna cattiva. Oh bene, rispose allora donna Olimpia, dunque di seimila vi ne restano quattro: portateli a me per non perderli, che li conserverò per voi e voi sarete prelato per me, per non perdere io questa occasione di darvi la prelatura.¹²⁶

This anecdote is directly followed by another about a priest who, after having bought a benefice for 2,000 scudi, repents of his misdeed and is worried for his salvation, so he implores Olimpia to give him his money back in exchange for the benefice purchased. She responds that the Pope was still living and could pardon his sin, sparing him from the devil's snares. Leti states, with a twinge of irony, "Queste erano le sue ordinarie consolazioni che dava a' simoniaci."¹²⁷ Leti affirms the fact that nobody liked Olimpia, not even her nephew (the one who had been subject to Pasquinades himself). During the papal conclave he opposed her vehemently, which everyone found to be amusing ("tutti ridevano"), and when Olimpia heard of his opposition, she was reputed to have said, "la voce d'asino non giunge in cielo."¹²⁸

The final pages of the biography detail the events following the Pope's death, including the new Pope's determination to call Olimpia to account, and her eventual demise. This 30-page span contains no humorous content because Olimpia's decline and death are quite pathetic. Leti therefore adheres to the principal that one should not kick someone while they are down. He portrays the new Pope, Pope Alexander VII, to be a serious and intelligent man, concerned with freeing the church from scandal. He refuses to meet with Olimpia, saying that she had spent enough time with Popes already, and when Olimpia's son entreats him to stop his investigation into Olimpia because investigating nepotism in the church would subject the church to intense criticism by the

heretics, the Pope responds that “gli eretici si scandalizzano nel veder le colpe impunte, non il male castigato.”¹²⁹ In fact the Pope seems intent upon righting the church, such that he does not allow his relatives into Rome, nor does he give them any power of command. Olimpia is sent away to Viterbo while the Pope prepares her trial and requests an itemized list of all the money she ever received from the church, among other things. The list of his requests, found below, is not found in any other historical document, save those that rely heavily on Leti’s biography.¹³⁰

PRIMO che s’espurgasse di quelllo che le veniva imposto, d’aver venduto un’infinità di benefici ecclesiastici; che, sotto pena d’escomunica riservata al solo pontefice, fossi tenuta di rivelare tutte le simonie commesse in suo tempo, tanto in Roma che fuori, e delle quali essa ne veniva accusata per l’auttrice.

SECONDO, che rendesse conto di tutto il danaro preso dalla dataria senza che alcuno bisogno della Chiesa la costringesse, violentando i ministri con minacce a voler condescendere a’ suoi insaziabili desideri.

TERZO, che facesse veder dov’era andata l’entrata di tanti benefici vacanti, delli quali gli economi confessavano con giuramento d’aver sempre rimesso il danaro nelle sue mani o di quelli che portavano suoi biglietti

QUARTO, che mostrassi in che s’era speso il danaro che per suo ordine, o per lo meno istanza, era stato moderato da’ salari di tanti ministri, che costava d’esser tutto entrato nella sua propria casa.

QUINTO, che dovesse rendere conto di tutto il grano che aveva fatto uscire dallo stato per mandarlo in altri luoghi di suo piacere e particolarmente nel tempo delle rivoluzioni di Mas’Anello in Napoli.

SESTO, che restituisse tante spese superflue fatte per suo capriccio con il danaro della Chiesa tolto da essa.

SETTIMO, che dasse conto di tante imposizioni, taglie, gabelle, dazii ed straordinari posti a sua istanza con tanto danno del popolo, già che gli esattori confessavano d’aver tutto rimesso nelle sue mani.¹³¹

E per ultimo, che sia tenuta di restituir subito tutte le gemme ch'aveva preso da diversi tesori, tanto di chiese dentro e fuori di Roma, come ancora d'alcuni luoghi particolari del Vaticano.¹³²

Olimpia responds to these demands with what Leti calls a “thin” response, asserting that she gave everything she received to the Pope. But Olimpia never has to respond to these demands in detail because the plague breaks out in the cities and eventually makes its way to Viterbo where she dies, alone, without family or even a confessor: “Morì senza alcun’assistenza di confessore (secondo dicono), stimato un castigo divino per castigarla da tante offese ch’ella aveva commesso verso tanti prelati da bene.”¹³³ Her death is of course represented by Leti as divine justice: “il Cielo, che suole invigilare mentre gli uomini dormono, svegliò il suo braccio divino contro questa donna, stimata rea delle colpe d’Innocenzio.”¹³⁴

It is a sober affair and only when Olimpia’s funeral is celebrated and the Pasquinades start again does Leti indulge in the comedic. He recounts a particularly memorable Pasquinade in which Pasquino says he journeyed to Purgatory and saw the Pope trying to get in but being denied entrance because he couldn’t pay the fee. He responds that he has given all his money to Olimpia, but Olimpia is already safely inside Purgatory because she left behind so much money to pay for masses. Her ascension into heaven will, however, be unlikely because all the priests who could say masses for her refuse to do so because they say the money she left actually belonged to them anyway.¹³⁵ Leti also jokes that Pope Alexander VII, having become “a man” since his rise to the papal throne, has since invited all his relatives to stay with him and even took 1 million scudi from Olimpia’s inheritance and gave them to his relations.¹³⁶

Thus Leti concludes his tale with humor, just as it began. He does so by summoning the narratorial vein, with a conclusion that addresses the reader in a fashion

reminiscent of the narrator of a play who addresses the audience (readers) as most comedic plays would do, to announce the end of the play and to ask for applause. Below is an image of the concluding paragraphs, which are featured on the page in a pleasing form: centered, and in decreasing widths: ¹³⁷

Così questa Donna terminò la
sua vita, per andare a godere l'e-
ternità de' Secoli nell'altra, in-
sieme con il suo Cognato Inno-
centio.
Così io termino lo scriuere di
Donna Olimpia, per non tedia-
re con vn lungo discorso di
morti la pazienza de' viui.
Così tu lettore, contentati
d'hauer letto, ciò che io mi
son contentato di
scriuere.
FINE



*Thus this woman ended her
life to spend eternity happily in
the next, together with her
brother-in-law Innocenzio.*

*Thus I end my writing on
Donna Olimpia, to avoid boring
the living with a long discourse
on the dead.*

*Thus you, reader, be happy
to have read what
I have been happy to
write*

These theatrical influences serve to accentuate the notion that the entire work was like a play, intended to entertain with a cast of characters whose types are so fixed, they could be found in a *zibaldone* of the *Commedia dell'arte*. Note also how the last lines, given the spacing and placement, emphasize the words “son contentato di scrivere,”¹³⁸ underscoring the presence of the author and his personal enjoyment of the writing process, thereby reminding the reader of the fictive techniques employed in such a

process. This conclusion almost shouts at the reader, “This is playful fabrication intended for your enjoyment!” It cannot be denied, of course, that Leti’s biography *is* quite enjoyable and entertaining, unlike most other female biographies so devoid of anecdotes, literary inventiveness, and originality. There is intrigue, defamation and, best of all, comedy. It borders on tedium only when Leti seeks to demean Olimpia’s character and thus leaves humor out altogether, but his narrative style, even in these moments, is light and effortless. Barcia calls it a “romanzo” while Romei is inclined to disagree, but does not venture assigning a genre to the work, asserting only that it is “commoda lettura” and is, at least, “verosimile.”¹³⁹ I would add to this discussion that the work is a mingling of all genres; it is a play, a novel, and a biography, all in one.

Despite this confusion of genres, however, many aspects of the biography still bear a marked resemblance to the typical aspects of female biography of the time. There is a surprising number of similarities, such as the common absence of themes like childhood, motherhood, daily life, and friendship. Olimpia’s biography contains only a brief acknowledgment of her childhood and Leti even acknowledges the lack of information on this subject: “Tralasciarò di descrivere la sua nascita [perché] [n]acque prima di me, onde come potrò parlare di ciò che non ho mai veduto.”¹⁴⁰ He completely sidesteps her motherhood, not even mentioning the loss of her first child, and rarely mentioning her children at all, discussing her preference or favoritism of them only once in the entire biography. The only details of any daily life number 4 in total and pertain to the Pope’s meal times, carriage rides, and Olimpia’s appearances at her balcony. Finally, Leti mentions no true friends, save Fagnani, whose friendship (i.e. friendship) was not amicable in nature, rather utilitarian.

Like other female protagonists of biographies, Olimpia is also a flat character, devoid of the particularities that define individuals from other individuals. Though villainized, she is never embodied in the fullness of her humanity, and has no palpable unique personality. Similar to most heroines of biographies during the time period who were strictly one-sided and *only ever* chaste, modest, simple, kind, generous, and spiritual, Olimpia is likewise *only ever* vain, greedy, controlling, and cold. Leti uses a plethora of disdaining adjectives to describe her character, such as *schizzinosa*, *scaltra*, *gelosa*, etc, but even more recurring are the active verbs used to describe her: Olimpia schemed, dissimulated, manipulated, abused, persuaded, dehumanized, convinced, and cajoled; but most importantly she commanded, controlled, and ordered. Leti does not, at any time, seek to present a possible other side to Olimpia, a more human side. According to Ignazio Campi, who sites his sources in detail, Olimpia enjoyed festivities and often held dinner parties and plays at her residence.¹⁴¹ She enjoyed art (especially Bernini's) and accompanied the Pope on various outings both to commission works of art and survey works in process. In fact, much of Leti's criticism of Olimpia could be cast in a positive light with equal efficacy, if one used the Renaissance model of perfected exemplum. This other side of Olimpia *is* present, hovering beneath the viperous accusations so prominent in the text; the positive possibilities of her character abound if Leti's lambastic style is ignored. The following is a brief description of this *other* Olimpia, if a commemorative biography were written about her, using Leti's descriptions minus the back-handed compliments, character defamations and judgments. If Leti had preferred to write an encomiastic biography, Olimpia would have been described thus: Olimpia was frugal; she moderated expenses, made sure wages were not excessive, and

applied the same principles in her own home, keeping a modest table. Olimpia was kind; she bestowed compliments freely, was hospitable to her guests, and served the Pope with fervor. Olimpia was generous: she raised money for the poor, founded hospitals, and embellished Rome with many works of beautiful art. Olimpia was sensible and intelligent: she maintained neutrality in politics, was an acute conversationalist, had a quick wit and sound judgement, and demonstrated fortitude when met with criticism. Olimpia was forgiving: she pardoned the Barbarini family their dissension and extended benefices to undeserving but penitent clerics. Finally, Olimpia was chaste: she avoided most public festivities, remained a widow, and endeavored to close convents of suspicious repute.

The truth of Olimpia's life will always be intangible and unattainable, but given Campi's extensive documentation of contemporary diaries and accounts, we can assert that her story lies somewhere in the middle, and perhaps lies more in line with Leti's account than our own hypothetical proposition of perfection. But the truth is not what we are after. Truth, though a constant aspiration of the genre, is the unloved step-child of Renaissance and Post-Reformation biography, especially when treating the female subject. The representation of a woman in the fullness of her vices and virtues, as Petrarch deemed necessary to male biography, is non-existent in Italian Renaissance female biography.

Leti of course also deviates from the typical female biography in many ways, primarily by throwing open of the floodgates, so to speak, of Olimpia's life. Most women were hidden behind strong iron doors of privacy that prevented most biographies from representing authentic details of an individual. Even Campi acknowledges that much of

Olimpia's life will remain obscure: "queste son cose che rimarran sempre buie e solamente se ne potranno fare più ragionevoli congetture quando solleveremo il velo della vita del palazzo."¹⁴² But Leti's biography is blatantly invasive and probing, allowing his reader to enter the private sphere of Olimpia's life. He intrudes into the text both frequently and unabashedly, demonstrating a particular penchant for speculation. If there was a rumor about Olimpia, Leti talks about it, discusses its plausibility and the potential explanations for such rumors. This seemingly objective speculation gives the work a sense of credibility, a credibility that is lost amidst the sheer number of anecdotes and first hand information Leti supposedly saw and heard. The resulting irony is that his biography, as a result, reads much more like the contemporary hagiographies. These stories of famous female saints are *also* steeped in hearsay, anecdotes, and first-hand accounts, as the authors attempt to bolster the support for their sainthood.

What is surprising then, considering the overtly fictive content and theatrical influence of Leti's biography, is that it has been used as the primary source of historical information on Olimpia Maidalchini's life for the past 350 years. Even Campi, whose work is full of authenticated letters, wills and testaments, and various other documents recorded in the *Atti Simoncelli*, relies on Leti with astounding frequency, despite his assertion that "bisogna andar cauti prima di credere alle affermazioni del Leti, il quale nello stesso tempo dice e disdice."¹⁴³ He even calls Leti malicious: "di questa ed'altre novelle notate dal *maligno* Gualdi o Leti i non terremo gran conto, restringendoci, con giusta bilancia, al certo e al provato nelle cose di sostanza, e, nelle indifferenti, almeno al probabilissimo."¹⁴⁴ But Campi was apparently too tempted to try to fill in the lines of Olimpia's character and borrowed freely from Leti when describing her character.

Almost all of page 10 of Leti's work is found in Campi, who asserts that Olimpia had an acute memory, that she avoided her own sex (Campi even quotes the same proverb Leti quotes here), and that she would not take advice from anyone. In fact, the only way one can determine which portions of Campi's work are well-researched and documented (and many are), is to have prior knowledge of Leti's work so as to compare the two and sift the historical (Campi's other sources) from the fictional (Leti's biography).

Here we return, as all investigations into biography do, to the reality that biography is neither fact nor fiction, but what Virginia Woolf called "something betwixt and between," whereby the biographer, as a result of his necessary adherence to truth, is a craftsman, not an artist: "The novelist is free; the biographer is tied."¹⁴⁵ Thus the author of biography must choose either to center himself sternly between fiction and fact, or to cling wildly to one or the other. Leti is unique, however, in that he evades this choice altogether, instead emphasizing the very conundrum of biography itself and calling attention to the theatrical aspects of verisimilitude. He toys with his narrative, jokes with his readers, and reminds them in less than subtle ways, that, in Shakespeare's famous words,

*All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players.*¹⁴⁶

Notes

¹ Poggio Bracciolini's *Liber Facietiarum*, Lodovico Domenichi's *Pleasantries and Witticisms of Certain Most Excellect Wits and Most Noble Gentleman*, Castiglione treated the subject in his *Cortegiano*, Pontano discussed the humorous qualities of an orator in his *De sermone*, and Erasmus published two of the most monumental collection of adages and apothegms, entitled *Apothegmatum opus* and *Adagia*. I dare not list the more minor works devoted to the subject.

² The genre of hagiography is obviously much different in this respect- the genre relied heavily on first-hand accounts, pertaining mainly to the miracles experienced or performed by the saint in question.

³ The one exception to this is the biography of The Princess of Parma, written by her confessor who knew her quite well.

⁴ Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon, (New York: The Modern Library, 2001) 1366a, Book I, Chapter 9.

⁵ Whitney J. Oates, "Aristotle and the Problem of Value," *Aristotle: The Classical Heritage of Rhetoric*, ed. Keith Erickson (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1974), 108-9.

⁶ Aristotle, 1367 b.

⁷ Leti, Gregorio. *Vita Di Donna Olimpia Maldachini: Che governò la chiesa, durante il ponteficato d'Innocentio X. Doppo L'anno 1644. Sino All'anno 1655*. (Ragvsa: Giulio Giuli, 1667).

⁸ Seutonius' great distate for Caesar reveals itself in his *Lives* through his use of humor.

⁹ Aristotle, II, p. 36.

¹⁰ Williams, George L. *Papal Geneology: The Families and Descendants of the Popes*. (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2004), 110.

¹¹ It is asserted by most that Leti was never an ecclesiastic of the Catholic Church, and that his penname merely served to grant him credibility to his readers when treating catholic subjects. For an in depth discussion of this possibility, see Danilo Romei's *Secolo Settimodecimo* (Lulu, 2013).

¹² Tomaso Tomasi, *Vita del duca Valentino* (Monte Chiaro, 1670), *Lettere italiane di fra Paolo Sarpi* (Verona, 1673).

¹³ Leti, 2. "To write down only the faults and not the virtues of a person who took such part in the government of the Church for the space of 10 years, would subject me to the imputation of a heretic, and as to mentioning her virtues without her vices, it would be to dip my pen in the ink without staining it." Translation mine. Note that the English translation of the work is based upon the shorter and first publication of the work in 1666. I base this chapter on the following, much lengthier version of 1667, so will therefore provide my own translations when necessary, and when they are absent in the English translation.

¹⁴ Leti, 16. In the 1677 Italian version, p. 56: "Non si vendono nel mercato (dirò così) le cipolle a questo e a quello con sì vil prezzo come si fa della vita de' cardinali durante la sede vacante."

¹⁵ Leti, 83. English Translation, p. 22: "The Cardinal Panziccolo was the only one who could put in motion that small mass of matter in the Pope's skull, called brains."

¹⁶ Leti, 442. English Translation, p. 69: "Those who were her enemies would have voted for the devil if he would have stood her enemy; and her friends would have shut out a saint had he declared against her."

¹⁷ Cicero, (May, and Wisse 374) 187.

¹⁸ Leti, 2 English Translation: "It is not exactly my design to write the life of donna Olimpia, who in the streets of Rome was a man dressed as a woman, and in the Roman Church was a woman dressed as a man."

¹⁹ Leti, 125.

²⁰ Leti, 7-8, English Translation: "I wouldn't know whom to dedicate my work of such a famous woman, than to her sex that receives the honor."

²¹ Leti, 7. "It will be permitted to you, oh Madams, to love the ecclesiastics, and particularly the confessors, but not at the cost of forgetting your husbands, as a result of having loved to excess the robes of the priests. There are those who spend more time with the confessor in the confessional than with their husbands in bed." Translation mine.

²² Leti, 10. Trans my own: "mostrano di voler contrastare col fuoco, strepitando da tutte le parti, ed alla fine si bruciano senza far fiamma."

²³ Leti, 16.

²⁴ Leti, 3.

²⁵ Leti, 3..

²⁶ Leti, 4

²⁷ Agostino Cameroni, *Uno scrittore avventuriero del secolo XVII: Gregorio Leti*, 1893 (Milano: Guindai, 1893) 17.

²⁸ Leti, 12-13.

²⁹ Leti, 25.

³⁰ John W. Spaeth, "Martial and the Pasquinade," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*. Vol 70 (1939) 242-255: 243. These verses were later collected and edited in annual volumes (*Carmina Apposita Pasquino*), published by Giacomo Mazzocchi: "At night unseen hands would attach to the mute torso *cartelli*, containing pert and often venomous satire, to be read next morning, digested with gusto, copied, and speedily spread abroad."

³¹ Leti, 65. Translation mine.

³² Leti, 145. "I am bringing spurs and boots to the Barbarines, because they are fleeing from Rome tonight." Translation mine.

³³ Leti, 75. "I am taking a present to Donna Olimpia from the Pope." Translation mine.

³⁴ Leti, 75.

³⁵ Leti, 214. "because he desired the ruin of this competitive woman, who played the game without seeming to play, and pretended to do good while doing evil." Translation mine.

³⁶ Leti, 34. English Trans, p. 10: "She used often to say that she had no words to cast away upon her own sex, from whom nothing was to be learned worth mentioning."

³⁷ Leti, 116-117. English Translation, p. 23: "She appeared to be willing to blot out the very name of her family rather than diminish her authority over the holy see."

³⁸ Leti, 137. "This was the miserable state of the relatives of Pope Innocent, a result of the greediness of Donna Olimpia who had prevented access to everyone, not wanting anyone to obtain the Pope's affection, such that she kept him almost like her slave; while she required him to do everything for her, she did not do anything for him but what pleased her." Translation mine.

³⁹ Leti, 135. "This woman would not have so heatedly sought the Prince's departure from Rome, with so little honor, had a hammer of jealousy not entered her head, enough to erode the heart of a woman who appears to have been born to suspicions and jealousy." Translation my own.

⁴⁰ Leti, 112. English Translation, p 27: "forgetting the bonds of nature and of consanguinity, she would haughtily dominate and manipulate the Pontificate's desires to match her own pleasures and desires."

⁴¹ Leti, 134. "The purpose was not to award the son she had *engendered* with a *generalship*, nor to aggrandize him with the profits that could result from such a position, but merely to keep him away from Rome." Translation and Italics mine.

⁴² Leti, 126. “The first of Don Camillo’s two sisters was married to Don Andrea Giustiniani.”

⁴³ This confusion is so pronounced that it is mistranslated in the English edition of the work, in which Camillo becomes Camilla, another of Olimpia’s daughters!

⁴⁴ Leti, 140-142. Italics mine.

⁴⁵ Leti, 298. “If it had been silver, it wouldn’t have broken so.” / “If it had been silver it would belong to your Excellency, and not to my master.” Translation mine.

⁴⁶ Leti, 300. “of course the poor man was disappointed and lost the washbowl, because the good woman looked at every thing, and sent a letter to the cleric who had sent the present that she thanked him greatly for his kindness, showing himself to be much more courteous than the others.” Translation mine.

⁴⁷ Leti, 305-306. “Not being able to refuse, he obeyed Olimpia’s directions, to avoid falling out of her graces, in this way being deceived in the same way he had himself intended to deceive.” Translation mine.

⁴⁸ Leti, 327. English Translation: “It was a silk painting about two hand-lengths long and rather wide, upon which was painted a servant who was, with one hand punching a priest trying to enter Donna Olimpia’s house with an empty bag, with the other hand ushering in a priest with such a full bag of money, he could barely carry it. Under the priest with the empty bag was written in Latin, “Go, cursed man, to eternal fire,” and under the other with the full bag, “You are welcome, my blessed Father,” and at the feet of the servant was written “You will be honored if you bring [gifts].” But even more curious, upon the window of the place that formed a theater, Donna Olimpia was painted, sticking out her head with an almost threatening air, with a motto underneath her that read, “I don’t receive the ungrateful. Why then are you bothering me?”

⁴⁹ Leti, 328. ““The Romans [. . .] never missed an opportunity to invent pasquinade after pasquinade, and one day one was found (in a picture, no less) in which Pasquino was asking

Marforio where Donna Olimpia's door was, and he responded, My dear Pasquino, this is a sign that you come empty handed, because Donna Olimpia's door has a secret to it, that who brings, sees it, and who doesn't bring, will not see it [note the original *gioco di parole*: "chi porta la vede e chi non porta non la vede." Translation mine.

⁵⁰ Leti, 428, 442, & 450.

⁵¹ Leti, 436. Italics mine.

⁵² Leti, 399.

⁵³ Leti, 400.

⁵⁴ Leti, 397.

⁵⁵ "La leggenda nera d'Olimpia è nata, in particolare, da A. Gualdi". Treccani, *Enciclopedia dei papi*, www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/innocenzo-x)

⁵⁶ J S. Watson. *Quintilian's Institutes of Oratory: Or, Education of an Orator*. London (Bell, 1875), Book VI, 6.

⁵⁷ Leti, 120-121. "The greediness of the Barbarines in amassing money, which was the greatest Rome had ever seen, was small in comparison with that of Innocent . . . (correction) of Donna Olimpia. No criminal judge was appointed by her recommendation to whom she did not give the most barbarous instructions, suited to nothing but her avarice. [...] By her example she reminded the judges to penalize the purse not the flesh and often wrote to them that they should send her the money they received from criminals because she intended to use it to benefit the poor. All through Rome her avarice was being discussed and it seemed strange to everyone that in the times of so many other Popes, many of whom had nephews who robbed the people to provide for themselves, nothing had ever been seen that would bear a comparison with the time of Innocent, when everything was gathered up to enrich Donna Olimpia" Pp.29 &30 of English Translation.

⁵⁸ Leti, 173-176. “No history of ancient times can produce a parallel; I do not speak of a Pope merely, but of any prince or monarch. There have been tyrants who have delivered themselves over to women; but these were affections of the *soul*, not of the *scepter*. If she was admitted into their bed-chambers she was excluded from their council chambers; if they adored her in private, they took not notice of her in public; if they made her a present of their persons, they did not do so of their kingdoms; if they allowed her to rule themselves, they did not allow her to rule the people. But Innocent the X presented Donna Olimpia with not only his hand and his heart, but with his kingdom, his church, and his people. Never was a king known to place so much confidence in his lawful wife; never did Queen Regent exact such universal obedience. She even attempted to annul the decrees of the church, reducing the authority of former Popes by whom they had been made, in so great a degree, that some predicted a schism in the church. [In truth, the real schism was seeing a woman become pope and a pope become woman]. A thousand more examples might be brought forward to prove her imperiousness and audacity, but some would offend the ears more than console the intellect. One alone however can serve in the place of many and gratify the reader with its brevity.” P. 37, English Translation.

⁵⁹ Leti, 149. Agrippina was a Roman Empress who lived in the first century AD and was known for her ruthlessness, dominance, and violence.

⁶⁰ Leti, 70. “Let those surmise, who have heard about Donna Olimpia’s desire to command and the authority that she maintained over her brother-in-law, how great was her joy at hearing the news.” Translation mine.

⁶¹ Leti, 60: “In this particular juncture in time it would not be wise to give the heretics a reason for scandal, who would, seeing a Pope submit his will to a woman, without a doubt take up a thousand protests and spread slander against the church under the name of Pasquino.” Translation mine.

⁶² Leti, 81. English Translation, p. 22: “[Pope Innocent X] hated him for many reasons, and particularly for the opposition made to his election. But he would have been content to mortify him a little. Donna Olimpia, however, pressed for his entire extirpation, that she might get his abbies and other revenues into her own hands.”

⁶³ Leti, 81. English Translation, p. 23: “the government was wholly feminine and scandalous”

⁶⁴ Leti, 83. English Translation, p. 23: “women in general think of nothing but what is immediately before their eyes, and what they can touch with their hands.”

⁶⁵ Leti, 141. “the unrestrained appetite of an ambitious woman.” Translation mine. Note: Cited previously.

⁶⁶ Leti, 89. “The first lesson that Olimpia gave to her brother-in-law was barbarous (nor should it appear strange that I use the word ‘lesson’ because a schoolteacher doesn’t even have as much authority over a pupil as did this woman over the spirit of the Pope), because she advised him to read the life of Alexander VI, one of the most barbarous Popes the Vatican ever witnessed.” Translation mine.

⁶⁷ Leti, 89-90. “on the contrary, she wished him to be pleasant and simple, so as to better manage and manipulate him according to her desire; she did this to banish every scruple of conscience and show him that it was not the first time a Pope had given himself over to a woman’s influence.” Translation mine.

⁶⁸ Leti, 89-90. “on the contrary, she wished him to be pleasant and simple, so as to better manage and manipulate him according to her desire; she did this to banish every scruple of conscience and show him that it was not the first time a Pope had given himself over to a woman’s influence.” Translation mine.

⁶⁹ Leti, 94. “They say that the Pope would not have committed so many atrocious acts had it not been his sole aim to exalt his bastard children, nor would he have been so indulgent

toward them had their mother and his friend, Vanoccia, not inspired him to do so, to whom he would have given his own life, in addition to the Church and the papacy, such was his passionate love for her.” Translation mine.

⁷⁰ Leti, 151. “Alexander IV did more for Vanoccia Romana his concubine, than you do for me, your own sister-in-law”; or: “Vanoccia Romana had better fortune with Alexander her friend than I have with Innocent my brother-in-law.” Translation mine.

⁷¹ Leti, 109.

⁷² *Innocenzo X Pamfili E La Sua Corte: Storia Di Roma Dal 1644 Al 1655*. (Roma: Coi tipi dei Galeati in Imola, 1878). It must be noted, however, that Ignazio’s work is not actually a biography of the Pope, rather of Donna Olimpia, who takes center stage and never leaves.

⁷³ Leti, 171. “stupivano tutti nel veder tanto indurite le viscere del pontefice, non godendo di vedere la propria casa favorita dal cielo al suo nipote, mentre durante l’esilio aveva la principessa moglie di don Camillo partorito due bellissimi figliuoli (che suol esser la maggior felicità de’ pontefici); ad ogni modo non per questo il papa si mosse ad alcuna sorte di compassione col chiamarli di sì lungo esilio.”

⁷⁴ Leti, 171. “She persuaded the Pope that don Camillo her son was sterile [. . .] so when she heard the news of the Princess’s pregnancy and the birth of a son, she endeavored to use more diabolical and evil methods. She made the Pope suspect (even the memory of this fact makes my hands tremble and horrifies my heart) that the Princess Rossano, her daughter-in-law, had broken the marital bonds of trust and that the children were not her son’s.” Trans my own.

⁷⁵ Leti, 171-172. “And I personally believe it, because apart from all the other reasons, would a man of harsh appearance and rough manners subject himself so much to the love of a woman, actually to the obedience of a woman, were diabolical factors not forcing him to?” Translation mine.

⁷⁶ Leti, 31. “I personally have never wanted to believe that, rather preferring to choose the good over the bad, and if the majority did not believe it, it is better to adhere to the voices of many and deny everything else, thereby saving the reputation of this woman.” Trans.my own.

⁷⁷ Leti, 330. “[. . .] certo è che la famiglia fondata da Innocenzo o da donna Olimpia non dette da fare ai successori pontefici quanto, per esempio, i Barbarini d'Urbano VIII.” It should be noted that his biography of Pope Innocent X is actually more of a biography on Olimpia than the Pope, who has been, as Leti feared he would be, forgotten by history, while Olimpia remains.

⁷⁸ Both Barcia and Romei discuss this in detail, and Romei provides a very informative comparative chart of the two editions on page 295 of *Secolo Settimodecimo*.

⁷⁹ Romei, *Secolo Settimodecimo*, 289.

⁸⁰ Romei, 232.

⁸¹ Leti does spend some time debating the origin of the letter: “Si tiene per certo che inventori di questa lettera siano stati tre cardinali de’ più celebri del collegio e da loro medesimi trovato il mezo di farla capitare in tal modo nelle mani del pontefice. Con tutto ciò altri si sono dati a credere che il colpo venisse dalla parte de’ parenti istessi, e voglio dir da’ generi di donna Olimpia.” 233.

⁸² Leti, 237.

⁸³ Leti, 237

⁸⁴ Leti, 249. “Almost all of the pilgrimers, and particularly the women, would spend their entire days in front of the palace of the above-mentioned woman, for no other reason but to see her appear in the window.” Translation mine.

⁸⁵ Campi, 141.

⁸⁶ Campi, 37 & 249

⁸⁷ Campi, 76.

⁸⁸ Leti, 155

⁸⁹ Campi remains silent regarding Fagnani's role in the closures, but historical documents do confirm that he was the presiding lawyer over the passing and enforcement of the law.

Treccani: "Ma il nome di I. X resta legato soprattutto alla grande riforma dei regolari in Italia, il cui principale artefice fu l'insigne canonista Prospero Fagnani, da tre decenni segretario della congregazione del Concilio. Accantonata ogni esitazione di natura diplomatica, questa riforma fu condotta con rapidità e determinazione."

⁹⁰ Leti, 154. "This man's nature was an enemy of all friars; he endeavored to ruin them from evening to night with betrayals and snares and he would not have hesitated in exterminating them all, in fact, he hated them to such an extent that he said more than a few times that God had done him a great service by taking his eyesight, to prevent him from seeing the cunning tricks of the friars." Translation mine.

⁹¹ Leti, 155.

⁹² It is surprising (at first glance) that Leti does not use this closure of convents to reaffirm his anti-Catholic leanings, using it as an example of the deplorable moral state of many religious houses of the time, but of course, taking that approach would also mean he would have to recognize that the church was actually making positive strides to fix these problems, something that would have undermined his argument and, of course, it would have taken away his narrative ammunition against Fagnani, which makes for a much better "story."

⁹³ Leti, 151.

⁹⁴ Leti, 163.

⁹⁵ Leti, 104. "Not a day went by that he wasn't called into the presence of Olimpia, with whom he would engage in long discussions about how to amass money, and who made great use of his advice." Translation mine.

⁹⁶ Leti, "perché anco i suoi sogni erano drizzati a tal officio."

⁹⁷ Leti, 151. “Un giorno il cardinal San Clemente si scontrò per strada col cardinal Pallotta, al quale domandò dove Sua Eminenza se n’andava. Questo con la solita civiltà gli rispose: Me ne vado nella congregazione de’ signori cardinali. Replicò subito il San Clemente: Ed io in quella della signora donna Olimpia. - Andiamo dunque insieme, ripigliò il Pallotta, perché veggo bene che siamo incaminati in una medesima strada.”

⁹⁸ Leti, 252. Campi also references this play, but Leti may have been his primary source.

⁹⁹ Leti, 253. “Among the various humorous theatrical representations of the vicissitudes of the Catholic faith, one in particular was of the Pope who wanted to marry Donna Olimpia, but she refused, saying she didn’t want to such an ugly and deformed man for a husband. So that he could have his desired end, he offered her a key, which she refused as too small a present, whereby, resolute in his desire to have her for a wife, he offered her both. But here we must mention that while the Pope was presenting her with one of the keys, donna Olimpia asked which key was for Hell or Heaven, to which he responded that it was to heaven. Donna Olimpia retorted, “Therefore give me the other one because when you tire of me, I don’t want you to command the devils to take me to Hell.” Thus, having given her both, they celebrated the marriage festivities, and the play was concluded with a dance performed by friars and nuns who congratulated themselves that they too, could one day marry.” Translation mine.

¹⁰⁰ Leti, 254.

¹⁰¹ Leti, 289-290. “But this woman was not content to oversee all the politics and law-making of both the church and court: she also wanted to be in charge over the spiritualities, as she had done before, where many time the congregations had met at her house instead of the usual places; while in truth she cared for nothing save the things that could bring her monetary profit, leaving the things of conscience to the disgression of the congregations, according to the Pope’s desires. Hearing described the vigilance with which this woman accumulated money will seem absurd to the ears of those listening.” Translation mine

¹⁰² Leti, 176. “a sheepish appearance, lacking any manly presence, a novice in all things, ignorant in letters and languages and unable to understand them, stupid in his speech, ungraceful in comportment, and whose vocabulary is fitting only to those pastimes that are common to the lower classes.” Translation mine.

¹⁰³ Leti, 176. “I beg of you, sister, not to bring him into my presence anymore because he is even uglier than me.” Translation mine.

¹⁰⁴ “Take it not so to heart Pasquino, your Companion is Maldachino” Trans my own.

¹⁰⁵ Leti, 178. “And truly this Cardinal, has been and ever will be, the ‘Carnival Cardinal’, the buffoon (*scurra*) of the apostolic college, as well as a scandal to the church as long as he lives, for no other reason than for the memory of Donna Olimpia, who wanted him made Cardinal at such a tender age, and only to show herself powerful enough to break the decrees of so many Popes who had prohibited Cardinalship to anybody under the age of 25 who had not yet served in the church.” Translation mine.

¹⁰⁶ Leti, 310-311. “who was not very scrupulous,” / “who was even less scrupulous than the abbot, laughed at this, citing various other humorous sayings, but substantially concluding that she was sorry the Genevans were rebels of the Roman Catholic Church, merely to learn how to make such beautiful lace.” Translation mine.

¹⁰⁷ Leti, 337.

¹⁰⁸ Leti, 360. “To come now to the conclusion (almost) of Donna Olimpia’s industries, I say that the more she saw the death of the pope approaching, the more she disliked the idea of being alone and without those supports that were so necessary to a person of her station. She knew she had nobody on her side who would support her in the case of adversity, which she certainly knew would come, considering her past involvements.” Translation mine.

¹⁰⁹ Leti, 371.

¹¹⁰ Leti, 377

¹¹¹ Leti, 393 & 433. “did not know how to respond to those protestants who were railing against the Roman Church for its simonies.” Translation mine.

¹¹² Leti, 193-221

¹¹³ Leti, 215: “No more whores, no more whores, give us bread in our stores!” Rough Translation my own, to render the rhyme aspect of the quip.

¹¹⁴ Leti, 218- “Give us bread, Madam Olimpia, not fountains!” Translation mine.

¹¹⁵ Leti, 219. “because they were angry at seeing so much money spent on fountains in piazza Navona, directly in front of Olimpia’s newly built mansion. The fountain, which cost more than 40,000 gold coins was not built to accommodate the city but to increase the grandeur of her residence.” Translation mine.

¹¹⁶ Leti, 220. “She was not frightened at the occurrence, rather adopted her usual female wiles and strategies with which she dominated the heart of this man. She gave herself to consoling him so as to distract him from doing what he had been considering for some time, fearing that every moment he spent in deep thought would lead to the end of her dominance.” Translation mine.

¹¹⁷ Leti, 220.

¹¹⁸ Leti spends a great deal of time addressing the myth of Pope Joan and seems truly concerned that Olimpia’s fame would transcend reality as well. He predicts, quite accurately, that through the course of history, Olimpia would eventually become more famous than Innocent himself. Campi’s biography of Innocent serves as the perfect example of this truth, as it contains more about Olimpia than the Pope. In fact, no biography (in the true sense) has ever been written about Pope Innocent X, in any language.

¹¹⁹ Malaspina, 23.

¹²⁰ Leti, 417.

¹²¹ Leti, 391.

¹²² Leti, 458. “You mean her enemies want who her friends want and her friends want who her enemies want?” Translation mine.

¹²³ Leti, 317-8. “he returned to his town where he was married with great solemnity, while satisfying the desires of his flesh by sleeping with a cousin, a nun, and abbess, and an old lady, after such grand expense.” Translation mine.

¹²⁴ Leti, 395.

¹²⁵ Leti, 377 & 385.

¹²⁶ Leti, 429

¹²⁷ Leti, 430

¹²⁸ Leti, 443. “The voice of an ass doesn’t reach heaven.” Translation mine.

¹²⁹ Leti, 480.

¹³⁰ Campi, for example, who includes numerous papal letters in his notes, does not mention the list.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 483.

¹³² Campi, 482-484

¹³³ Campi, 492-3.

¹³⁴ Leti, 490.

¹³⁵ Leti, 496.

¹³⁶ Campi vehemently denies this assertion by Leti: “Il maligno Leti aggiunge che all’ Alessandro VII parve bene tacere dopo avere percepito un milione, io non credo a tale infamia.” P. 193.

¹³⁷ Leti, 502.

¹³⁸ Leti, 502.

¹³⁹ Romei, 277.

¹⁴⁰ Leti, 4. English Translation, p. 8: I will not spend time describing her childhood and education, [because] she was born before me, and of them I know nothing of my own knowledge.”

¹⁴¹ Campi, 275. “fece recitare nel suo palazzo varie commedie.”

¹⁴² Campi, 84.

¹⁴³ Campi, 12. “one should proceed cautiously before believing Leti’s affirmations, who both assert then refutes at the same time.” Translation mine.

¹⁴⁴ Campi, 12. “But we will not seriously take into account these and other stories recounted by the malicious Gualdi o Leti, rather will constrain ourselves, with equilibrium, to certainties and facts when dealing with substantial matters, and in the less established matters, we will constrain ourselves at least to probabilities.” Italics and Translation mine.

¹⁴⁵ *The Death of the Moth, and other essays*. “The Art of Biography,” I-III.

¹⁴⁶ Shakespeare, *As You Like It*.

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