

Female Virtue and the Embodiment of Beauty: Vittoria Colonna in Paolo Giovio's *Notable Men and Women*

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In a dialogue drafted soon after the Sack of Rome (1527), Paolo Giovio details historical views of female dignity and assesses the beauty and talents of over 100 women in contemporary Florence, Genoa, Milan, Naples, and Rome. Unlike most such catalogues, Giovio's seasons praise with explicit acknowledgment of physical, intellectual, and personal shortcomings. Yet it also celebrates Vittoria Colonna, who commissioned the work, as the ideal noblewoman. Giovio is unconventional in applying to this living woman a pattern of graphic physical description that Petrarch, Boccaccio, Bembo, and many others had followed in delineating fictional characters. This strategy exemplifies the latitude of representational possibilities that characterized Italian literature and art of the 1520s and 1530s. The dialogue also eloquently documents a crucial time in Colonna's life when her verse commemoration of her husband coalesced with religious devotion, and when physical beauty could be seen to harmonize with other virtues to form a desirable and inspirational whole.

INTRODUCTION

PAOLO GIOVIO'S (1486–1552) unfinished book, *Notable Men and Women of Our Time*, provides abundant and often-surprising evidence regarding the image, condition, and accomplishments of early Cinquecento Italian noblewomen.¹ Commissioned in 1527 by Vittoria Colonna (1492–1547), it

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¹On the life and writings of Paolo Giovio, see Zimmermann. The first published text of this Latin dialogue appeared in 1984 in the national edition of Giovio's works: Giovio, 1956–, 9:147–321. See now the far more reliable versions in the Latin-Italian edition, Giovio, 2011; and the Latin-English edition, Giovio, 2013.

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comprises three dialogues, the last of which includes a catalogue of over 100 women.² While some of the vignettes call attention to shortcomings, collectively the sketches celebrate their subjects and show how integral they are both to the cultures of particular cities and to the interconnections among courts throughout the peninsula. Giovio frequently voices concern that war and the foreign occupation of Italy may be bringing an end to the social world he commemorates. Moreover, his account of noblewomen in the dialogue is fraught with ambivalence and internal contradictions that threaten to undercut the ideals it celebrates so eloquently. Against this backdrop, the word portrait of Vittoria Colonna stands out vividly. While Giovio's graphic delineation of her body may have pushed the bounds of decorum, his encomium of Colonna also shows with precision and prescience the intellectual, personal, and spiritual qualities that would enable her to become so influential in promoting cultural change.

SETTING, DRAMATIS PERSONAE, AND COMPOSITION

Notable Men and Women is set on the island of Ischia, off the coast of Naples, where Giovio had sought refuge in midsummer of 1527. On 6 May, when troops of Emperor Charles V sacked Rome, Giovio had fled with his patron Clement VII (Giulio de' Medici; r. 1523–34) into the papal fortress, the Castel Sant'Angelo. A month later Clement capitulated, and an Imperial garrison took control of the stronghold, effectively holding the pope for ransom.³ When plague struck in July and Clement's captors required that he reduce the number of his retainers so as to slow its spread, Giovio was among those cast out. After staying briefly at a friend's house in Rome, on 17 July he obtained from the pope a safe conduct that enabled him to travel to Ischia.⁴ As he wrote to his sometime patron, the papal datary Gian Matteo Giberti (1495–1543), rather than "dying here to no purpose," he expected soon to be able to write in tranquility on the island about "this singular catastrophe of Rome."⁵

On Ischia, Giovio found himself in a court superintended by women. Other refugees included Giovanna d'Aragona (1502–75), the wife of Ascanio Colonna

²In dialogue 3 Giovio mentions 101 women by name, only two of whom are not his contemporaries or near contemporaries: Cicero's wife, Terentia, and Cato the Censor's wife, Marcia. While some women receive extended treatment, the names of many appear only in passing with minimal glossing, and others are described but left unnamed.

³For further detail see Hook; Pastor; Gouwens.

⁴On these details and the safe conduct see Zimmermann, 86–87, 315n5.

⁵*Ibid.*, 87. On Giberti, see Prosperì; Tucker.

(Vittoria's brother);⁶ Giovanna's sister Maria, who was married to Alfonso d'Avalos, Marquis del Vasto (1502–46);⁷ and Costanza d'Avalos the Younger (ca. early 1500s–1575), the Duchess of Amalfi.⁸ The foremost authority on the island was the *châtelaine* of its citadel, Costanza d'Avalos the Elder (ca. 1490–1541), who had presided over its court for decades and had for a while served as Vittoria Colonna's guardian.⁹ This gynocentric context provides a key to interpreting a dialogue that might otherwise be mistaken as entirely the province of men.¹⁰

To be sure, the work presents itself as a gift from one man to another. Giovio addresses it to Giberti with the goal of comforting him as he and others were being held hostage by the Imperial troops.¹¹ All three interlocutors are male: Davalus, named for Alfonso d'Avalos; Muscettola, representing the Neapolitan orator and statesman Giovanni Antonio Muscettola; and Iovius, the figure of the author. Giovio claims to write "with that honesty and candor of speech with which d'Avalos and Muscettola and I talked among ourselves," and so the reader is invited into what is portrayed as a private, intimate conversation among men.¹² The first two dialogues survey male leaders in politics and the military and in the republic of letters, respectively: spheres to which Italian women still had limited entrée.

⁶Giovanna d'Aragona, who was the daughter of Castellana de Cardona and Count Ferdinando d'Aragona, Duke of Montalto — an illegitimate son of King Ferdinand I (Ferrante I) of Naples (1423–94; r. 1458–94) — had married Ascanio in 1521. In 1535, following the birth of their son Marcantonio, she would leave Ascanio and go to live in the *castello* on Ischia. Giovanna was renowned for her beauty, and in 1518 Cardinal Bernardo Dovizi (Bibbiena) commissioned Raphael to paint her portrait. See *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* (henceforth *DBI*), 3:694–96.

⁷Maria d'Aragona (after 1503–86) was Giovanna's sister. In 1523 she had married Alfonso d'Avalos, Marquis del Vasto, the namesake of Giovio's interlocutor Davalus. See *DBI*, 3:701–02. On Alfonso, see *ibid.*, 4:612–16.

⁸Costanza d'Avalos the Younger was married to Alfonso Piccolomini, Duke of Amalfi. She was the sister of Alfonso d'Avalos. See *DBI*, 4:622–23.

⁹Costanza d'Avalos the Elder, Duchess of Francavilla. In 1503, following the death of her brother, Ñigo II, Duke of Francavilla, she had heroically directed the defense of Ischia during four months of siege by a French fleet. Thereupon King Ferdinand of Aragon (d. 1516) made her officially the *châtelaine* on Ischia. See *DBI*, 4:621–22.

¹⁰On the dynamics of courtly culture in Naples and on Ischia, see Thérault; Toscano.

¹¹The hostages were taken as collateral for the 400,000 ducats that Clement had agreed to pay the Imperial troops. See Hook, 210; Pastor, 422. In Giovio's initial draft, upon expressing his concern that Giberti has been "given over to the unspeakable cruelty of savage barbarians," he asserts his confidence that the datary's faith will give him the fortitude to "endure with the utmost patience the insults, tortures, chains and, ultimately, even the foulest form of death": Giovio, 2013, 539–41.

¹²Giovio, 2013, 541–43.

Above all, however, this work serves to bolster Giovio's position as a creature of the court of Ischia and especially as a client of Vittoria Colonna. In the first place, he makes it clear that he is writing at her behest.¹³ Moreover, while the initial draft emphasizes the reciprocal affection of his two patrons, it also acknowledges how circumstances have placed Colonna in a dominant position: "You also, Giberti, appear beyond all others to have cultivated her friendship. . . . And now, especially, in this personal calamity of yours, you feel the benefit of her affection toward you and are finding out her marvelous generosity."¹⁴ Giovio portrays himself, too, as a privileged client of Colonna: she has welcomed him to Ischia, he says, "with such love and generosity that the others in the household supposed that I had arrived, not just as a friend or an invaluable dependent, but as some longed-for close relation."¹⁵

While the survey of military commanders in dialogue 1 moves the subject away from Vittoria herself, it praises her obliquely by lauding the prowess of her father, Fabrizio I Colonna (ca. 1450/60–1520), and especially her late husband, Ferdinando Francesco d'Avalos (1489–1525), Marquis of Pescara.¹⁶ In its final sentence, the dialogue explicitly returns the focus to her: still in mourning over the loss of her husband, she has not only kept herself shut away in the citadel, but has "allowed nothing into her grief-stricken mind except for solemn readings and holy sermons."¹⁷ In dialogue 2, which concerns the *questione della lingua* and evaluates the talents of over 150 men of letters,

¹³The reference to the dialogue having been composed at Colonna's urging ("cohortante Vittoria") appears in a passage subsequently deleted from the text. See Giovio, 2013, 540.

¹⁴At *ibid.*, 537, Gouwens reads these lines as having been deleted, with Giberti being deemphasized perhaps as Giovio revised the work in 1529 and/or 1530 for possible dedication to Isabella d'Este. At the dramatic date of the dialogue, Colonna, a longtime correspondent and friend of Giberti, was actively seeking his release from captivity: Prosperi, 82; Tucker, 50, 462. For examples of their correspondence see V. Colonna, 3–23, 42–44, 474–76. The hostages' escape on the night of 29–30 November, which Vittoria's cousin Pompeo Colonna engineered, marks the terminus ad quem of this dialogue's setting.

¹⁵Giovio, 2013, 3–5.

¹⁶On Vittoria's father, Fabrizio I Colonna, see *DBI*, 27:407–12. On Ferdinando Francesco d'Avalos, who had married Vittoria Colonna in 1509, see *DBI*, 4:623–27. In 1528, the very year in which Giovio composed most of *Notable Men and Women*, Vittoria commissioned him to write her late husband's biography. Evidently completed before the death of Alfonso d'Avalos in 1546 (and Vittoria's the following year), the biography appeared in print only in 1549. See Zimmermann, 225, 353n149. For Davalus's encomium of Pescara, see Giovio, 2013, 197–211. It comprises the last words spoken by an interlocutor in the first dialogue.

¹⁷Giovio, 2013, 211. Giberti is absent from the closing frame of dialogue 1, and his name appears only twice in the remainder of the work.

women appear only in passing, and Colonna herself is mentioned but twice in its surviving pages.¹⁸

Dialogue 3, in contrast, places women at the center. The interlocutors recount ancient views on their status and whether they can equal men; they survey over 100 outstanding women of their time; and, as a closing flourish, celebrate Vittoria Colonna as the ideal noblewoman. Each of these components merits separate treatment. While the case for female equality contains elements distinct to Giovio, it adds little to that discussion, which was already highly elaborated in previous decades, as, for example, in the *De Mulieribus* (ca. 1501) of Mario Equicola (ca. 1470–1525).¹⁹ In addition, many of the arguments regarding the dignity of women that appear in the present work are identical to those put forth in Pompeo Colonna's *Defense of Women*, written only a few years before it.²⁰ Giovio's assertions do not approach the claims for women's superiority over men put forward with varying levels of seriousness by Bartolomeo Goggio, Galeazzo Flavio Capella ("Capra"), or Henricus Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim.²¹ His chief contribution to the discussion is that, without listing women over the centuries as Boccaccio and others had done, he traces the influence of ancient ideas and practices upon subsequent legislation and cultural norms regarding the female sex.

¹⁸The sole manuscript of dialogue 2 lacks its opening and closing folios. It begins in mid-sentence with a discussion of Vittoria's cousin, Cardinal Pompeo Colonna (1479–1532), on whom see DBI, 27:407–12. She appears once as patron of the poet Girolamo Britonio and once as having encouraged Giovio to resume work on his *Histories*: Giovio, 2013, 271, 307. On Britonio, see Ballistreri. Three of the remaining references to women concern their alleged preference, alongside the elderly, children, and the uneducated, for the vernacular over Latin: Giovio, 2013, 253, 259, 285. The other four occurrences in dialogue 2 concern: first, Bernardo Accolti having obtained the epithet, "Unico Aretino," "as much from his love affairs with illustrious women as from his celebrity as a poet"; second, women's enjoyment of the *Orlando furioso*; third, Muscettola having spent leisure hours in the company of noblewomen; and, finally, criticism of authors who steal entire poems from others and declaim the verses "not only for noblewomen, but also in porticoes before exacting and very discriminating listeners": *ibid.*, 263, 265, 275, 329.

¹⁹Kolsky, 2005, treats the works concerning the status of women by eight male writers, including Equicola, that span the period 1480–1530. He appears not to have known Giovio's *Notable Men and Women*. On Giovio's acquaintance with Equicola, see Zimmermann, 34–35.

²⁰Pompeo Colonna's *Apologiae Mulierum*, written in the mid-1520s, was dedicated to his cousin Vittoria: see P. Colonna. While its Latinity does not approach the sophistication of Giovio's *Notable Men and Women*, it advances many of the same claims on behalf of women's equality to men, and Giovio may well have assisted Pompeo in its composition. See Minonzio's analysis in Giovio, 2011, 1:cxxi–cxxxiii.

²¹On Goggio's *De Laudibus Mulierum* (Concerning the praises of women; ca. 1487), Capella's *Della eccellenza et dignità delle donne* (On the excellence and dignity of women; 1525, 1526, 1533), and Agrippa's *De Nobilitate et Praecellentia Foemini Sexus* (Declamation on the nobility and preeminence of the female sex; 1529), see Kolsky, 2005, 171–224.

Giovio's extended geographical survey of present-day illustrious women is more original and significant. Insofar as it itemizes particular subjects' blemishes, it breaks free of the bombastic, uncritical adulation that typifies listings of contemporary noblewomen.²² Moreover, Giovio differentiates not only among individuals, but also among their places of residence: using synecdoche, he draws parallels between the distinguishing characteristics of major Italian cities and the qualities of their women. Collectively, these sketches yield an ambiguous image of the condition of female nobility in the early Cinquecento. While the interlocutors take turns advocating for regions with which they identify, their praises are undercut by expressions of concern that the noble houses appear to be losing vitality; some are even nearing extinction. A number of the women celebrated have already died, and others are described as past their prime. Claims for the exceptionality of the noblewomen on Ischia thus sit uneasily alongside the lamentations of decline that recur throughout the dialogue.

A second tension arises with respect to the itemization of parts of women's bodies, a practice long established in a tradition of literary description that Petrarch had influentially adopted. Both when singling out bodily flaws and when praising attractive features, the interlocutors risk taking the part for the whole in a way that could dehumanize, a problem all the more poignant in that they name many of the women they describe. Yet here, the foremost of women are not abandoned as isolated fragments. Instead there follows a reintegration displayed first of all in graceful movement, above all in dance. That outward beauty, in turn, is but one aspect of a harmonic whole that comprises not only physical attractiveness and chastity, but also inborn ability, proper training, good character, and musical and literary accomplishment.

The final six folios of the dialogue return the focus to Vittoria Colonna. Combining the finest qualities that the speakers have attributed to others, she models an ideal femininity for their emulation. This triumphal conclusion, however, fails to provide a way out of the predicament of noblewomen that the dialogue has so eloquently described. Despite Colonna's brilliance, her potential for arresting cultural decline remains at best unclear. Giovio gestures only weakly toward resolution of the problems that plagued Italy in the aftermath of the Sack of Rome and would remain, thwarting his later attempts to bring the work to harmonious completion.

NAPLES BEFORE THE FALL

Like several prominent compositions of the 1520s and 1530s — for example, Castiglione's *Courtier*, Guicciardini's *History of Italy*, and Valeriano's *On the Ill*

²²See, for example, Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti's *Gynevera* and Mario di Leo's *Amor prigioniero*. On the former, see Sabadino degli Arienti; James, 69–95. On the latter, see Ceci and Croce, which includes di Leo's text.

Fortune of Learned Men — Giovio's *Notable Men and Women* offers an idealized portrait of a cultural moment that has passed. Once the interlocutors have settled upon a shaded stretch of beach that looks out upon a chain of islets called the queen's rocks, Davalus reminisces about how, around three decades before, Queen Giovanna IV of Naples (1478/79–1518; r. 1495–96) would escape the summer heat by going to Ischia, taking with her a retinue of young noblewomen, including Sancia d'Aragona, Costanza d'Avalos the Elder, Costanza's sister Isabella, and Angela Castriota.²³ Queen Giovanna had assigned each woman a rock to sculpt and cultivate. They spared no expense in creating elaborate stone sculptures and topiaries, remaking the islets into forms such as an Indian turtle (Sancia), Mount Etna erupting (Costanza), and the Cretan labyrinth (Angela). Under the queen's supervision they had built up the topsoil and imported fruit trees. The orderliness and desirability of this tended fertility was exemplified in trellises that "propped the leaning roses upright so neatly and gracefully that with the leaves of the bushes held back in a straight line, the highest heads of the flowers stuck out so far from each lattice opening that they seemed to be begging to be admired and to be plucked off by the delicate fingers of girls."²⁴ Here the noblewomen enjoyed security from any threat to chastity. On the largest rock, spiraling steps led to a garden on high, "which had been both protected by a wall and fortified by a solid doorway to safeguard the modesty of the maidens."²⁵ Below, where the islets set off a stretch of water, they could swim in private: "elderly women and matrons, who were the girls' chaperones, were posted upon those lookout points of the hills which you see, while serving-men in small boats likewise guarded the side toward the open sea lest insolent eyes espy [the girls] from some vantage point."²⁶

According to Davalus, however, both the topiaries and the house of Aragon have gone into steep decline, leaving virtually no trace of their former cultivation. After the collapse of Aragonese rule, expending money on the landscaping was deemed an unnecessary luxury. Correspondingly, the ruling family itself "has withered away to the very root with no surviving royal progeny to revive it, while

²³Giovanna IV d'Aragona of Naples was queen consort to Ferdinand II (Ferrante II) (1469–96; r. 1495–96). She was daughter of Ferdinand I of Naples and Juana of Aragon (i.e., Giovanna II of Naples, 1454–1517). The date of the scene Davalus recalls is not specified. The reference to Giovanna as "queen" would suggest 1495–96, but Sancia d'Aragona's marriage to Gioffre Borgia, which took place in 1494, is here described as subsequent to the action. Others mentioned are Camilla di Sangro, daughter of Carlo di Sangro, prince of San Severo; a certain "Sista" (identity unknown); and Violantilla Grappini.

²⁴Giovio, 2013, 337.

²⁵Ibid., 339. This establishes an interplay of fertility and chastity that runs throughout the dialogue.

²⁶Ibid., 341.

many young women, now made destitute by misfortune, have been passing their lives in obscurity.²⁷ Here he mentions three widows prominent in the lineage: Isabella del Balzo (1465–1533), the second wife of Federico I of Naples (d. 1504); Beatrice d'Aragona (1457–1508), widowed by Matthias I of Hungary (d. 1490); and Isabella d'Aragona (1470–1524), who had been married to Gian Galeazzo Sforza, Duke of Milan (d. 1494).²⁸ After Naples was lost to the French, they had fled to Ischia where, “in deep mourning, they not only lost the desire to see [the rocks]; they didn't even set foot outside the citadel.”²⁹

Davalus avers that these women, along with their predecessors, were so illustrious in beauty, parentage, and character “that now we are bound to feel the absence of their like throughout all Italy.”³⁰ Yet all three interlocutors defend the women of their own time against any accusation of inferiority vis-à-vis their predecessors. Some elderly men, Davalus notes, believe that the younger generations of women do not measure up, but they err because their aged eyes unfairly compare memories of youthful sights with what their dim vision now can perceive. Iovius advances the view that present-day women in fact surpass earlier ones and points in particular to those on the island: for, what virtues, he asks obligingly, “could be found in any part of Italy either nobler in distinction of lineage, more beautiful in appearance, more polished in the graciousness of erudite thought, or purer in morals and religion, than these heroines of ours, guarded by the fortress high above us?”³¹ This prompts Muscettola to propose that they spend the day discussing the excellence of

²⁷Ibid., 341–43.

²⁸Isabella del Balzo's brother, Federico del Balzo (d. 1483), had been married to Costanza d'Avalos the Elder (*DBI*, 62:623–25). Beatrice d'Aragona, a daughter of Ferdinand I of Naples and Isabella of Taranto, had married Matthias Corvinus in 1476. Following his death she married his successor, Ladislaus Jagiellon (d. 1516), but in 1500 Pope Alexander VI declared their marriage invalid, and soon she returned to Italy. Isabella d'Aragona, daughter of Alfonso II of Naples, had married Gian Galeazzo Sforza in 1488. Of the three women, only Isabella had a child (Bona Sforza). On Isabella, see *DBI*, 62:609–15; and especially Giovio's portrayal of her in his *Elogia*: Giovio, 1956–, 8:421–22. Giovio's Davalus also mentions that his Aunt Costanza (i.e., “the Elder,” widowed in 1483) had lost her brothers Alfonso and Rodrigo in the fighting against the French: Giovio, 2013, 343.

²⁹Giovio, 2013, 343. This passage recalls the description of Vittoria Colonna at the end of dialogue 1: “having imposed constant mourning upon herself owing to her grief at the loss of her illustrious husband, [she] was not only keeping herself from the public light but, enclosed in darkened bedchambers, allowed nothing into her grief-stricken mind except for solemn readings and holy sermons”: *ibid.*, 211. On Colonna as a widow operating in a male domain, see Hoeges, 184.

³⁰Giovio, 2013, 343.

³¹Ibid., 345–47.

women, surveying all the cities of Italy. But before the itinerary begins, Gioivo has his eponymous interlocutor provide historical and cultural context.

THE STATUS AND CAPABILITIES OF WOMEN

In advocating for women's equality to men, Iovius finds a philosophical foundation in Socrates, who taught that women should be regarded with kindness and honor. He believed that they would be equal to men in military training and responsibilities once their weaker natures had been fortified by vigorous exercise and inspired by manly examples.³² Ultimately Athens condemned him, but because he was immortalized in literature he was able to instruct not only the Greek, but other nations, with the result that "the laws both of his contemporaries and of subsequent generations have been marvelously enriched, and their city-states ennobled."³³

Iovius claims that Socrates's recommendations concerning women are now regarded more favorably in the East than in the Western successors to ancient Greece and Rome. Among the Ottoman Turks, female equestrians and archers fight alongside the men, shouldering heavy armor and sharing equally in the dangers of combat. He points to the account, in his *Histories*, of the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514, following which the victorious sultan Selim I (1470–1520) delivered a eulogy over the slain women and had them buried, an honor not accorded to the corpses of the men.³⁴ Thus recent evidence, albeit from outside Europe, has borne out Socrates's positive evaluation of women's capacity for military prowess. Gioivo conveniently attributes only to Plato, not to Socrates, those parts of *The Republic* in which women are treated contemptuously, being prostituted "to the lustfulness of all men, like lowly slaves who were designed by nature only for the sole purpose of bearing children and for satisfying men's sexual appetite and for serving them."³⁵ Meanwhile, he holds Aristotle accountable for advocating that women be banned from public life and confined to child rearing and to provisioning the household. Socrates has survived, however, through the writings of both Plato and Aristotle and, as represented by Gioivo's interlocutors, provides underpinnings for advocating the equality of the sexes.

³²Ibid., 359.

³³Ibid. On women's equality and military training, see Plato, 1941, 144–55 (*Republic* 4.445b–5.457b). Since Socrates was hardly enamored of women, Gioivo suggests, his views on their potential for equaling men should carry all the more weight. Gioivo does not specify how women actually were treated in fifth-century BCE Athens.

³⁴Gioivo, 2013, 361. In this battle, which took place in Azerbaijan in August 1514, Selim's troops soundly defeated those of Shah Ismail I (the Wise) of Persia. See Imber, 45.

³⁵Gioivo, 2013, 357.

The ancient Romans treated women no better than had the Greeks, preventing them from holding public office on the grounds of their feeble disposition and reasoning. Muscettola focuses upon affronts to women's honor. The Senate had passed severe censorial laws that "diminished and frustrated even their moderate desires."³⁶ Far worse, however, was a decree regarding divorce that "wrenched away the dignity of the entire sex."³⁷ Even a wife who was upright and fecund could be driven out of the household on the basis of distrust, a feeling of satiety, or her husband's desire for a new object of lust. On occasion, this could redound to the husband's dishonor, as for example happened to Cicero when his discarded wife Terentia savaged his reputation. Overwhelmingly, however, women were humiliated by men.³⁸

This account of the denigration of ancient Roman women differs markedly from Agrippa von Nettesheim's celebration of their achievements in his *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex*.³⁹ In addition, Giovio passes over in silence the extensive biblical and theological evidence regarding women's status that Agrippa interpreted so provocatively. In one key respect, however, their arguments correspond closely: women have lacked not men's native abilities, but instead their opportunities. Giovio's interlocutors agree that women's lowly condition has resulted not from a lack of talent or strength but instead from being scorned, oppressed, and constrained to devote themselves to humble responsibilities. If elevated to the status of men, they would at once aspire to manly glory. While men would rather hold power over them than make them equal sharers in a life of dignity, women have the same sinews, entrails, and consciousness that they do, the same tools for understanding, and their souls are no less divinely infused. They are therefore capable of the full exercise of reason — "if, that is, they should be educated from the cradle not for the production of woven fabrics or of embroidery colored by the needle, but with a view to their acquiring the best arts and extraordinary virtues."⁴⁰

Muscettola names six contemporary European women who have demonstrated precisely the aptitude for governing and military leadership that the female sex was

³⁶Ibid., 363.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid., 363–65: Giovio notes the example of Cato the Younger: "like an extremely unprincipled pimp, he handed over his wife Marcia, a woman of estimable reputation, to the lust of another man on condition that he might reclaim her once she had at last been made more fertile and was much more experienced sexually."

³⁹See the comments of Albert Rabil in Agrippa von Nettesheim, 14. Although Agrippa did not publish the declamation until 1529, he had delivered a version of it two decades earlier at the University of Dôle: *ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁰Giovio, 2013, 369. He notes, too, that men's preference for holding power over women shows ingratitude, inasmuch as they are indebted to women for their own birth and rearing.

supposed to lack. Isabella of Castile (1451–1504) shared with her husband, Ferdinand of Aragon (1452–1516), the difficulties, dangers, and victories of the war over Granada. For two decades Margaret of Austria (1480–1530) effectively governed and pacified the seditious peoples of the Low Countries on behalf of the Habsburgs.⁴¹ Following the French loss in the Battle of Pavia (1525), in which troops under the command of the Marquis of Pescara captured King Francis I (r. 1515–47), Louise of Savoy (1480–1530) maintained and protected the realm while she set about ransoming her son.⁴² Her daughter, Marguerite de Navarre (1492–1549), undertook a dangerous mission to the emperor in Spain to petition for Francis's release. María Pacheco of Toledo, the wife of Juan Lopez de Padilla, a leader in the revolt of the Comuneros against Charles V, also demonstrated virtue and ferocity.⁴³ After her husband's execution, she led the Toledan resistance, delivering inspiring speeches and performing brave deeds. Finally, Muscettola invokes Vittoria Colonna, to whom Pope Clement had entrusted the seditious city of Benevento while her husband was away. So effective was she that "the entire populace, deeply moved by the moderation of her highly authoritative and absolutely incorruptible character, gave thanks to the pontiff through ambassadors because at the most critical moment, through this woman, better than any male governor, he had saved the city just as it was collapsing."⁴⁴

Even in these exceptional cases, however, men have held primary authority, the women acting either on their behalf or in their stead. Nor is that subordination likely to change anytime soon: in Italy's lowly condition, says Davalus, attempts to improve women's status would cause destructive confusion, inasmuch as "the general fortune of this age has so crushed the laws and battered down morals that all things human and divine, damaged and now plainly going to ruin, appear about to collapse in a short space of time."⁴⁵

⁴¹Margaret governed the Low Countries from 1507 to 1515 (for her father, Emperor Maximilian I) and again from 1519 to 1530 (under Charles V).

⁴²Louise served as regent in Francis's stead from the loss at Pavia (25 February 1525) until he returned from captivity in Spain (17 March 1526).

⁴³María Pacheco y Mendoza, whose brother was the famous humanist Diego Hurtado de Mendoza, led the final, unsuccessful resistance of Toledo against Charles V's forces (May 1521–February 1522). Gioivo's praise of her runs counter to Habsburg-dominated historiography, in which she appears as a ruinous, treacherous antitype of feminine excellence, and specifically as a counterexample to Isabella of Castile. See Pastore.

⁴⁴Gioivo, 2013, 373. For reference to Clement VII's letter of gratitude to her for this achievement, see Gioivo, 2011, 2:672n70. These examples of virtuous females demonstrating military prowess may serve to counter the memory of the dissolute Assyrian queen Semiramis, whose debaucheries Boccaccio had made canonical in his *Famous Women*: Boccaccio, 2001, 16–25. Thanks to Sarah Ross for this suggestion.

⁴⁵Gioivo, 2013, 375.

Instead of considering strategies for change, then, the interlocutors will praise women for the virtues that ennoble them despite their oppression. Beyond standing out in beauty and in refinement of intellect and character, notable women must stem from a venerable line. Cultivation of literature can render them admirable. If they are also chaste, “their majesty transcends their human form and they are completely divine.”⁴⁶

The current political situation has taken a heavy toll upon the condition of noblewomen in Milan, which has been occupied in turn by France and by Spain. The French led the way toward unsustainable expenditure on sumptuary excesses, introducing extravagance in food, drink, and especially clothing: “They added silk and purple at intervals to the hems of dresses, cut up gold and silver fabric for the sake of elegance, and finally taught them to regard all precious materials as mere playthings.”⁴⁷ More seriously, at late-night dances by torchlight, they dared to kiss the ladies, a practice routine in French culture, whereas “we Italians esteem kisses in such a way that when someone has kissed a lady, even on the very tips of the lips, we judge her to be halfway ruined and her resistance overcome.”⁴⁸ The Spaniards in turn made the French look tame. Among other indulgences, they lined their clothes with sable and scented their gloves with Indian perfumes.⁴⁹ Salacious and skilled in seduction, they made their way into many women’s beds. Of course, not all of these women were blameless. Depravity, lasciviousness, or large sums of cash won over some. Others fell because they envied the favor enjoyed by their peers. Most poignantly, still others had to tender sexual favors in order to avoid financial ruin: should a lady resist, troops would be sent to destroy her estate. Some Italian

⁴⁶Ibid., 377. Should a woman who lacks high birth, comeliness, and cultural refinements remain chaste, she is sufficiently noble; conversely, should a woman of good lineage, appearance, and intellect have her chastity called into question, her merits count for nothing. Compare the discussions of chastity in Castiglione, 2002, esp. 192 (*Courtier* 3:56); Pizan, 160–62; Vives, 1:53–65.

⁴⁷Giovio, 2013, 381.

⁴⁸Ibid. On torchlight dances, see Jones, 1986; and McGinnis, 188–89, who notes the use of torches in a dance in 1491. Juan Luís Vives, in his *De Institutione Feminae Christianae* (Education of the christian woman; 1523), railed against “this new type of dancing that we have, uncontrolled, audacious, arousing the passions, full of unchaste touches and kisses”: Vives, 2:151. Later in the century, Annibale Pocaterra would similarly point to how differing semiotics of kissing could cause misunderstanding: “In France it is no shame for a woman to be kissed. In Italy, the same woman (in this case, a really foolish one) would be exposed as a negative example”: Pocaterra, 125, translated in Nordera, 327. Ibid., 326, confirms that in the later decades of the sixteenth century, “in France the kiss remained a standard choreographic gesture.”

⁴⁹Giovio, 2013, 383. On the preciousness of sable furs (which were viewed as having an aphrodisiac effect) and their importation from the distant North, see Cardano, 413. On the range of recipes for perfuming gloves, see Welch, 261.

men, worn out by oppression, “ransomed their plundered possessions with the nocturnal activities of their wives. And no home was safe from the greed of foreign soldiers unless a matron, by friendship with some well-known prefect or tribune, depended on his lust as surety.”⁵⁰ Here Iovius intervenes to suggest that, in order to forget their miseries, they should proceed to their survey.

Although Giovio does not significantly advance the arguments of other humanists on behalf of women’s equality, he does offer a fresh perspective by focusing upon the dynamics by which women have been subjugated, situating that oppression in cultural context and noting its chronological and geographical relativity. His analysis does not approach the radical (if paradoxical) assertion of women’s superiority in Agrippa’s *Declamation*. Nonetheless, it does show a nuanced grasp of the historical contingencies that are keeping women down.⁵¹ He is most original in analyzing why women’s status is unlikely to improve in the present political environment: a pessimistic view that recurs frequently in the survey of Italian noblewomen and that threatens to erode the foundations of the encomium of Vittoria Colonna with which the dialogue ends.

PAOLO GIOVIO’S CITIES OF LADIES

The epic catalogue of women flourishing over the past few decades begins inauspiciously with Milan: grief over losses suffered by the city’s nobility casts a pall over the discussion. Iovius recalls wistfully the women he had met when he was studying there over thirty years earlier, including Damigella Trivulzio, Ippolita Sforza, Daria Pusterla, and Chiara Visconti.⁵² Trivulzio, he says, had stood out for her exceptional beauty, noble lineage, and tested chastity,

⁵⁰Giovio, 2013, 383. The extravagance fostered by foreigners had contributed to Milan’s impoverishment, which was rendered more hopeless under the oppressive governorship of the Spanish captain Antonio de Leyva (1480–1536): *ibid.*, 383–85. On de Leyva’s activities in Lombardy, see Setton, 3:261, 283n61, 285–86. On his financial straits in Milan, see Pastor, 448.

⁵¹On Agrippa, see *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, 1:24–26; and Albert Rabil’s introduction in Agrippa von Nettesheim, 3–37, with discussion of Agrippa’s use of paradox at 30–33.

⁵²Giovio, 2013, 387. Zimmermann, 6, dates that sojourn to some point within the years 1501–06. A reference to being a guest in “Bergonzio’s house” suggests that Giovio was in Milan at least by 1504, the year of Bergonzio Botta’s death. See *DBI*, 13:362–64. Damigella Trivulzio was the sister of Cardinal Agostino Trivulzio. Ippolita Sforza, who had married Alessandro Bentivoglio of Bologna, was a patron of the writer of *novelle*, Matteo Bandello. See Cox, 2008, 41, 284n67; Ronchini; Olivieri, esp. 6–11. Chiara Visconti, a daughter of Galeazzo di Guido Visconti, had married Pietro Pusterla. See Becker, 4:967. Maulde-La-Clavière, 223, describes Chiara’s dazzling appearance, adorned in silver embroideries and ropes of pearls, at a court ball in France in 1518. According to Guicciardini, 3:1529, she was famous both for her physical beauty and for Prospero Colonna’s love for her.

which in turn were complemented by her learning in Latin and Greek literature. By now, Iovius surmises, they must all have gone into decline. At this point Davalus, on the verge of tears, interjects to report that Visconti has just died.

Of those who live on unscathed, Davalus singles out two: Ippolita Castiglioni, notable for her beauty, lineage, and natural talent; and Isabella Sforza, famed for both beauty and her cultivated mind.⁵³ These are, however, exceptions. He alludes to two beautiful, well-born, brilliant women who “would need to be celebrated at this point with their actual names, had they not by a loose lifestyle utterly exceeded the bounds of ladylike modesty.”⁵⁴ Another who remains unnamed conceals her sexual indiscretions under the veil of a feigned decency. As for the rest, many who are perfectly fine do not merit inclusion in the current catalogue: “We don’t admire beauties unless they are extremely rare; we recognize no nobility unless it derives from a high, ancient origin; nor do we venerate a reputation for incorruptible chastity unless it is supported by invariable public report. Moreover, we don’t admire talents at all unless certain unusual and constant charms shine forth in them.”⁵⁵ Such exceptional qualities have minimal scope for development or expression in the impoverished, foreign-dominated city.

Venice, by contrast, combines physical beauty, architectural grandeur, wealth, and civic harmony with a salutary remoteness from most of the fighting on the peninsula. Venetian noblewomen, likewise, are beautiful, imposing, rich, harmonious, and sheltered, their honor being safeguarded within the home. Even when taking part in dances at weddings, they do not speak with men who are masked or unknown to them, and they “don’t have the enticements that come from sophisticated conversation.”⁵⁶ In general, according to Iovius, refined literature does not interest them. Instead, they delight in elaborate coiffures and in their bodies, which feature charming faces, tender breasts, and milk-white necks. Strikingly, the only Venetian women the interlocutors praise for their minds are the victims of forced monachization. Accomplished in letters and urbane in wit, they grow indignant at their confinement and rebel. Eager to experience sensual pleasures they have been denied, they use their musical skills to arouse the passions of men who have insinuated their way into their friendship, and receive lovers in their lavish cells.⁵⁷

⁵³Giovio, 2013, 389–91. On Ippolita Castiglioni, see *ibid.*, 700n49; Giovio, 2011, 2:675n94. Isabella Sforza was the daughter of Galeazzo Sforza, who ruled Pesaro until 1512.

⁵⁴Giovio, 2013, 389.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 391.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 395.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 397. While sympathizing with the nuns’ plight, Iovius sees these suitors as a corrupting influence, and he approves the Senate’s issuance of stern decrees to improve moral standards in the convents, which only happened after Venice had suffered serious military defeats: see Giovio, 2011, 2:675n101.

Iovius focuses on the physical charms of four exceptionally beautiful women he saw in Venice around the end of 1522, when he had accompanied Girolamo Adorno there on a diplomatic mission.⁵⁸ The occasion was a wedding banquet in a palazzo of the Trevisan family at which over sixty noblewomen danced. Adorno obtained permission for himself, Giovio, and the other visiting diplomats to adjudicate a beauty pageant of sorts. First, they picked ten women to join them in a further, more elaborate banquet. Then, from those finalists, they selected the top four: Isabella Giustinian, Lucrezia Zorzi, Lucia Barbarigo, and Benedetta Gritti.⁵⁹ Giustinian, who garnered first prize, performed a graceful yet lively dance that displayed her decorous, contained sensuality. A small garland of pearls adorned her swelling, milky-white breasts, and her hair was gathered in a golden net in such a way that some of it slipped teasingly through the wider gaps in the mesh.⁶⁰ Zorzi, whose protruding breasts were “made modest by a broad ribbon of Phrygian workmanship,” showed unsurpassed agility in spinning, turning, and moving in time to the melody of flutes.⁶¹ Barbarigo and Gritti receive only passing attention: the former, for her bright white complexion; the latter, for her dignified bearing and pretty smile. Other Venetian women have charms that appeal to the elite few: Elisabetta Diedo, who is stout and has a thick-set nose, lacks sensuality but has impressive gravity; and Ariadne Pisani, whose looks are indifferent, not only is exceptionally fertile, but also displays an urbane cheerfulness and has a lofty and gentle mind.⁶²

Although Iovius mentions several other women of the Po River valley, including Ippolita Fioramonte of Pavia, Veronica and Isotta Gambarà of Brescia, and Isabella d’Este in Mantua, the next city treated in detail is Genoa.

⁵⁸Giovio had been dispatched by Cardinal Giulio de’ Medici (the future Clement VII) to Genoa to meet with Girolamo Adorno, whose family opposed the rule of the city by the Fregosi. After a diplomatic visit to Ferrara, they arrived in Venice on 2 December 1522: Zimmermann, 49.

⁵⁹Isabella Giustinian was daughter of Girolamo Giustinian (d. 1532) and Agnese Badoer. In 1521 she had married Vittore Grimani, a grandson of Antonio Grimani (doge of Venice, 1521–23). See Volpati, 144. On Lucrezia Zorzi (d. 1531), wife of Marcantonio Venier (Giovio calls her “Lucrezia Venier”), see Giovio, 2011, 2:676n104. Lucia Barbarigo may have been the daughter of either Francesco Barbarigo or Doge Agostino Barbarigo: see Volpati, 146–47. Becker, 2:775, identifies Benedetta Gritti as a daughter of Doge Andrea Gritti.

⁶⁰Giovio, 2013, 399. On gilt netting worn over the hair, see Welch, 256.

⁶¹Giovio, 2013, 401.

⁶²Ibid. Elisabetta Diedo is listed among the Venetian gentlewomen that Paolo Barbo celebrated in verse: see Cicogna, 6:100. Ariadne (Adriana, Andriana) Pisani, daughter of the procurator Alvise Pisani (1467–1528), married Giovanni Cornaro in 1516: see Becker, 2:775.

Here the women are proficient in sarcasm and repartee. Their smooth, youthful-looking faces require little makeup. They dress elegantly and wear perfume. The freedoms that they enjoy, however, have led to moral laxity: even married women are openly ogled and courted, and “out of a certain special sense of ‘fair play’ and indulgence on the part of spouses and kin, they often engage in lovemaking with different partners in a kind of random coupling.”⁶³ Carnal indulgence in Genoa spans the social scale. In winter, women of lesser rank “take up position in open doorways (being occupied ostensibly in stitching together pieces of linen by lamplight), and there they await lovers and suitors.”⁶⁴ Even the slave girls devote holidays to lovemaking. The greatest opportunity for lascivious behavior comes in summer, when ladies sail along the shores and into the open sea to fish: “Then, even the lowest fellows can accuse them of fornication, reproach them for their lusts, and tempt their modesty with obscene proposals — just as in those grape harvests of Naples we see that the wine porters dare to behave in such rude ways, even toward illustrious women — and indeed by a license, so to speak, bought by their tax revenue.”⁶⁵

When Iovius acknowledges the beauty of particular Ligurian noblewomen, he focuses upon moral uprightness, a move perhaps necessitated by what has come before. Thus Caterina Spinola stands out not only in physical attractiveness, but also in modesty, character, tastefulness, and knowledge of Tuscan poetry; and Tomasina Spinola, who was famed for her beauty, is here described only as “dear to her husband and to all on account of a certain unsoiled and uniform purity of body and mind, and on account of her outstanding modesty.”⁶⁶ Even here, however, Giovio sees decline: Teodora Spinola has lost her beautiful physique through bearing many children, and Pellota Grimaldi has died.⁶⁷

⁶³Giovio, 2013, 413.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid., 417. Giovio here refers to a custom in the summer-long Neapolitan festival called the *Spassi di Posillipo*. As the nobility frolicked in small boats along the coast, the grape pickers could hurl insults of all sorts at those of any station. For a late sixteenth-century description, see Brantôme, 659–60; analyzed in Butterworth, 79. For another description, from 1632, see Bouchard, 2:437; analyzed in Marino, 65–66.

⁶⁶Giovio, 2013, 421. This Tomasina Spinola (d. 1541), famed for her beauty, was the daughter of Giorgio Spinola (of the Luccoli branch) and Maria di Antonio Spinola. See Hyde, xv, fig. 3.

⁶⁷Giovio, 2013, 419. These are the only other two Genoese women that Giovio mentions by name. Teodora was the daughter of Cristoforo Spinola (of the San Luca branch of the family). In 1502 she had married Sebastiano Sauli (d. 1536). They had seven sons and one daughter: Hyde, xiv, fig. 2. Pellota Grimaldi, whom Giovio describes as having married a certain Gerolamo Doria, remains obscure. See Giovio, 2011, 2:684n160.

Florence fares better: Iovius wistfully recalls his sojourn there nearly a decade before, when attending his patron, Cardinal Giulio de' Medici.⁶⁸ Back then, he says, more Florentine noblewomen were distinguished in beauty, lineage, and intellect. Through the agency of the cardinal and other notable men, he had been able to meet them at parties and wedding banquets, including in the Rucellai Gardens and at country villas.⁶⁹ The women enjoy moderate freedom, not only being entrusted with managing domestic finances, but also having the opportunity to develop their intellects. Meanwhile, they dress tastefully and decorously. They have razor-sharp minds and speak both eloquently and shrewdly. He cites four who are in their prime: Nera Pucci, Giovanna Tornabuoni, Costanza Alberti, and Caterina di Galeotto de' Medici.⁷⁰ As in the cases of Milan and Genoa, however, those flourishing are counterbalanced by exempla of loss: Clarice de' Medici is seriously ill; and Cassandra Salimbeni, a certain Ludovica Tornabuoni, and Costanza de' Bardi have recently passed away.⁷¹ Iovius laments that Florence now has fewer women of illustrious beauty, family, and intellect than it used to have.

Muscettola advocates for Neapolitan women who, he says, far surpass the Venetians, Ligurians, and Tuscans, constrained as those women are by narrow-minded civic laws that prevent them from developing their talents and intellects. Noblewomen in Naples have been sustained by ample wealth and an illustrious life. Commerce with the distinguished trains their moral virtues, and constant study of literature elevates their minds. Upon hearing Muscettola lavish unspecific praises upon Giovanna d'Aragona, Davalus proposes that they focus upon particular talents, such as dancing elegantly, performing music, and taking part

⁶⁸In May 1519, following the death of his nephew Lorenzo de' Medici, Duke of Urbino, Cardinal Giulio set about reforming the Florentine government. Giovio spent much of the following two years in the cardinal's retinue there.

⁶⁹Iovius mentions attending the wedding of Palla Rucellai, which Cardinal Giulio himself officiated: Giovio, 2013, 425.

⁷⁰Nera Pucci (d. 1547), who had married Alessandro di Gherardo Corsini in 1516, was the niece of Cardinal Lorenzo Pucci (1458–1531): see Becker, 4:797–98; Giovio, 2013, 708n124. This Giovanna Tornabuoni is probably the daughter of Lorenzo Tornabuoni and Giovanna di Tommaso degli Albizi: see Giovio, 2011, 2:691n205; Giovio, 2013, 708n125. Costanza Alberti remains to be identified. Caterina di Galeotto de' Medici had married Fabio di Pandolfo Petrucci (d. 1529): see Giovio, 2013, 708nn127–28; Stephens, 169.

⁷¹Cassandra Bartolini Salimbeni died of plague around the start of October 1527, just a few days after the demise of her husband, Carlo Ginori. See *DBI*, 55:31–32. Ludovica Tornabuoni remains to be identified. Costanza di Agnolo de' Bardi had married Girolamo Guicciardini (1497–1556), a brother of Francesco, in 1524. She died a few days after giving birth to a son, Agnolo, on 27 December 1525. See Starn, 416–17. Clarice di Piero de' Medici (1493–1528), who had married Filippo Strozzi in 1508, died on 3 May 1528, but was already seriously ill the previous fall. See Bullard, 172n84.

in witty dinner conversations. Iovius, however, wants them to highlight qualities that not only delight minds, but also inflame them: “D’Aragona’s sparkling eyes serve to give majestic grandeur to her countenance rather than to entice wantonness. Those coral-red lips, that blond hair streaked with silvery splendor and blown over her ivory neck and snow-white shoulders by the breeze, those quivering breasts never displayed enough for the eyes’ satiety, that regal tallness, and finally that bearing, combining beauty with authority: all these things seize hold of those who watch her, take their breath away and, once fixed in their memory, torture the wretches forever.”⁷² Even those who only see her ungroomed, with hair disheveled, fall for her. She understands that excessive makeup or elaborate attire would only detract from her natural beauty. Iovius compares her to the opal, which looks best when surrounded only by a very simple setting.

Muscettola continues the survey of women then present on Ischia, making clear, however, that he proceeds not in order of excellence, but as they occur to him. Costanza d’Avalos the Younger has a wide and serene brow, twinkling eyes, rosy lips, a milk-white neck, pulsating breasts, and a modest bearing. Gifted with a fine memory and high intelligence, she recites others’ poems verbatim and presents her own. Like Giovanna d’Aragona, she is fertile, and her children are attractive and naturally virtuous. Even though her husband, to whom she is devoted, pursues mistresses, she remains steadfastly pure: when courted by love-struck suitors, she deftly parries their attentions, showing a constancy befitting her name.

Iovius essays the awkward task of passing judgment on Maria d’Aragona in the presence of her husband (Davalus). The “entire demeanor and vitality of her body,” he says, “exudes a singular refinement suited to tormenting men.”⁷³ He describes how she looked when she and her maidservants, dressed as nymphs, danced to the lute in celebration of the Lupercalia. Attired in a purple cloak with a golden strap drawn diagonally across her chest, she became the focus of everyone’s attention when, “with graceful movement of the neck and shoulders, a gentle bending of the body, and an expert leaping from one leg to the other, she performed the dance with varied circling and weaving, in harmony with the most pleasant Moorish music.”⁷⁴ Iovius makes clear that this

⁷²Giovio, 2013, 443. Amid his delineation of d’Aragona’s appearance, Iovius praises in passing both her fertility and how closely her children resemble her.

⁷³Ibid., 449.

⁷⁴Ibid., 451. “Variis gyris atque meandris” has been translated here as “varied circling and weaving” rather than as “various circlings and meanderings.” On “leaps and quick changes of step” as acceptable in the dancing of Quattrocento Florentine women, see Bryce, 1081, 1081n21. The phrase *ad maurisicum modulum* could also be rendered “in the manner of a *moresca*.” The pantomimed, narrative dance that was called a *moresca*, “with its splendour, allegory, and expense, the true expression of the courts,” was, however, usually performed by men: Sparti, 1996, 53. See also Sparti, 2011, 325.

performance was a private one: in public, by contrast, she maintains a decorous seriousness.⁷⁵

In all, Giovio devotes several pages to Neapolitan women and correspondingly to the city's and region's impressive buildings and natural beauty.⁷⁶ In addition to the women on Ischia, he mentions Lucrezia Scaglione, Isabella Gualandi, Isabel de Requesens, and Cassandra Marchese. The last of these, despite being "in the stooped-over condition of old age," remains sufficiently charming that she inspires the poetic talents of her brother, Baldassarre, and of Sannazaro.⁷⁷ Although Giovanna d'Aragona and Costanza d'Avalos the Younger have since surpassed her, says Muscettola, Isabel de Requesens was for a while the most beautiful — a judgment that Giulio Romano and Raphael's sumptuous portrait of her may be seen to corroborate (fig. 1).⁷⁸

When turning to Rome, the interlocutors must confront the Sack. Davalus asks Iovius to speak about "the Roman women who are worthy of the eminence and majesty of that venerable city — if there remain safe and sound any of those women who, before the most grievous of calamities, shone forth with dignity and wealth, as well as with beauty and an unblemished reputation for modesty."⁷⁹ Iovius laments that many, following ancient precedent, did in fact commit suicide so as to preserve their chastity. When Davalus impugns the honor of the surviving noblewomen, Iovius staunchly defends them.⁸⁰ He gives precedence to six households: the Colonna, Orsini,

⁷⁵Giovio, 2013, 451. He also points to her effectiveness when, aged only sixteen years, she governed coastal properties that belonged to her family.

⁷⁶Ibid., 435–71.

⁷⁷Ibid., 471. Lucrezia Scaglione di Aversa, daughter of Giovan Luigi Scaglione and Maria d'Alagno, was present on Ischia in 1528: see Thérault, 334–37, 486n129; Kidwell, 111–29, with notes on 229–34. Isabella Gualandi (b. ca. 1491) was the daughter of Ranieri Gualandi (d. 1492) and Bianca Gallerani. It has been suggested that she was the model for the *Mona Lisa*: Vecce, 1990a. On Isabel de Requesens (1498–1534), widow of the Imperial viceroy Ramón de Cardona (d. 1522), see Thérault, 212, 337–38; Croce, 1894, 55–56; Fritz. On Cassandra Marchese, with emphasis on her friendship with Sannazaro, see Kidwell, 111–29. Giovio discusses Baldassar Marchese in the present dialogue: Giovio, 2013, 269, 675n109.

⁷⁸Giovio, 2013, 455–57. The long-standing belief that this painting depicts Giovanna d'Aragona has been convincingly disproved: see Fritz. Cardinal Bibbiena commissioned the portrait in order to present it as a diplomatic gift to King Francis I of France. On its strongly erotic elements, see Woods-Marsden, 2001, 80–81.

⁷⁹Giovio, 2013, 471.

⁸⁰Thus when Davalus claims that he could easily have purchased sexual favors from them, Iovius counters that the loose women Davalus had come across in Rome must have been courtesans: Giovio, 2013, 475. For another instance of Davalus impugning Roman women's honor and Iovius rebutting him, see *ibid.*, 485–89.



Figure 1. Giulio Romano and Raphael. *Dona Isabel de Requesens i Enríquez*, ca. 1518. Paris, Musée du Louvre. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

Savelli, Conti, Cesarini, and Farnese. A second class comprises the lesser nobility, whom Iovius terms “patricians” (“sunt patriciae familiae”). Those in a third group are of either humble origin, foreign blood, or both.

He proceeds in reverse order: “The third class is composed not only of those ancient dregs of Romulus, but also of the foul sewage of Goths and of the foreign peoples which have taken up residence” in the city; “all the excrement of all nations and especially of the cities of Italy have drained into Rome as into a single hull, filled with bilgewater.”⁸¹ Next, and evidently still in the third class, are the prostitutes, some of whom put on a show of nobility. He mocks the pretensions to distinguished lineage, eloquence, and, most risibly, chastity on the part of the famed courtesan Lucrezia da Clarice: upon losing all her possessions in the Sack

⁸¹Ibid., 477, 479.

of Rome, she claimed not to be upset “since she had managed to escape from the hands of the brigands with her female honor intact.”⁸²

Rome’s patrician women lack the opportunities available to those of their rank elsewhere because their men, as mistrustful as they are boorish, allow them neither to study music nor to read amorous literature, and severely punish any moral lapses.⁸³ Iovius mentions fifteen patricians, but only cursorily, on the grounds that their morals and refinement are as nondescript as they are uniform. Next, he names twenty noblewomen, pausing to linger briefly on three: Laura Orsini, whose beauty is now waning; Felice della Rovere, who has also declined in beauty, but who combines skill in governing with uprightness and a refined intellect; and Ortensia Colonna, who excels in singing.⁸⁴ Then he turns to a final notable woman of Roman origin: Vittoria Colonna, upon whom the remainder of the dialogue focuses. She possesses in fully realized form the virtues that other women acquire only partially and combine only imperfectly.

WOMAN AT HER BEST

Davalus and Iovius take turns in elaborating the encomium of Colonna.⁸⁵ She exemplifies perfect balance and harmony among the four chief virtues in terms of which other women have been evaluated: physical beauty and grace, nobility of lineage, civic responsibility, and chastity. Like the four elements in nature, “even if [these virtues] are entirely opposed to one another on account of their disparate capacities, they are nonetheless bound together among themselves admirably

⁸²Ibid. This Lucrezia was nicknamed “Matrema non vole” (“mother doesn’t want [me to]”) because her mother Clarice, a prostitute, did not want her to follow her example. By the 1520s Lucrezia da Clarice was one of the foremost courtesans in Rome. Aretino, in his *Ragionamenti*, ridiculed her for pretending to have expertise on correct Italian style and usage. See Masson, 70–79. After this anecdote, the Sack does not appear in Iovius’s description of Roman women.

⁸³Giovio, 2013, 479–81: “it’s often the case that not only wives who have been caught in the act by angry husbands, but also mothers caught by disloyal sons, and sisters by savage brothers, are most cruelly butchered, since to do them in by poison would not be at all glorious.”

⁸⁴Legally, the father of Laura Orsini (b. 1492) was Orsino Orsini, but many supposed that her biological father was Rodrigo Borgia (Pope Alexander VI). Laura married Nicola Franciotti della Rovere in 1504. See Becker, 3:76; Creighton, 4:71. On Felice Della Rovere (ca. 1483–1536), illegitimate daughter of Pope Julius II, see Murphy. Ortensia Colonna was a daughter of Marcantonio Colonna (d. 1522): see Serio, 110, 114–15, and table 3. On the importance of solo vocal performance as an aspect of the pursuit of universal harmony, see Cummings, 595, who describes it as “the human soul’s most effective technique for achieving communion with its cosmic Platonic prototype.”

⁸⁵Muscettola speaks only once in the midst of this discussion, to add a brief aside.

well in accordance with the mathematical structure of divine reason.”⁸⁶ Whereas Davalus focuses on Colonna’s physical beauty, Iovius explains how she exemplifies the other three virtues, and he attends as well to a fifth quality: her *ingenium* (brilliance), a natural capacity that has been nurtured so that she excels in both learning and writing.

Playing on her Roman origins, he compares her preeminence to the ancient city’s role as *Caput Mundi*: “This one woman prevails over all the others — just as Rome herself, which advanced to such great glory, surpassed in august renown all the individual states of the world.”⁸⁷ He quotes Giberti as having said that all women other than Colonna resemble mosaics: “To those looking from a distance, the figures and human faces of this work of art seem admirable and beautiful; but if you approach the work more closely and examine it more minutely and with focused attention, immediately seams appear to view, and both the enormous gaps and the crowded awkwardness, the almost haphazard workmanship, of the crudely inserted pebbles — all discerned clearly by the eye — shatter one’s entire opinion of the work. So it happens when we observe women more closely.”⁸⁸ Those of noble lineage, Iovius says, often have a haughtiness that makes them look obnoxious and ridiculous. Also, possessing exceptional natural endowments can give rise to insurmountable desires and to an unsound moral character that deforms physical beauty. On the other hand, excessively austere morals can disfigure chastity itself, and inordinate fastidiousness makes chastity not only less illustrious, but even quite despicable. Colonna is far from either extreme. She combines beauty, renown, and brilliance with a decorous modesty.

Having thus established how Colonna’s attributes combine to form a seamless whole, Davalus isolates specific parts. He emphasizes the eyes, hands, and breasts, sites where, “as the poets relate, shameless desires have become accustomed to dwell while they lie in ambush for unfortunate mortals, and from there they let loose the arrows and flames of love.”⁸⁹ Colonna’s eyes are like those of Venus herself. While not playful, they charm like glittering lights and are embellished by thick, feathery lashes. The eyebrows arch slightly and taper gradually. Her hair, which verges on ebony, is daubed with gold, and it flows over her temples so as to adorn her wide forehead. Her cheeks gleam with a modest blush. She has small, perfect ears and a long, regal nose. Her hands are in perfect proportion to her upper arms, and “when she chances to take off her gloves and show them naked,” one sees that they

⁸⁶Giovio, 2013, 507. The four elements in nature are those of Empedocles (earth, water, air, and fire).

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 502–03: “Vincit enim haec una mulier ceteras omnes, sicut Roma ipsa, quae talem ad gloriam tulit, singulas terrarum orbis civitates augusta claritudine superavit.”

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 505.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 509.

are whiter than marble, smoother than ivory, and softer than ermine.⁹⁰ Her fingers, too, carry an erotic charge: they are “so slender and regular in shape that she can slip off her rings whenever she wants to.”⁹¹

Davalus describes Colonna’s breasts with particular vividness. These white orbs “spring back softly and becomingly from their sternly chastising little bindings in time with the musical beat of her breathing and, like little turtledoves sleeping, they swell at sweet intervals. Nature has firmly affixed her breasts to her chest, broad at her shoulders and narrowing to her waist, in such a way that they seem to be framed within it, not made to droop down, and the most delicate cleavage is visible between them. So it will be no wonder if we have depicted as perfectly formed those parts of the body which modesty has hidden; nor has any mortal man ever viewed or caressed them other than her husband, a man extremely deserving of such an extraordinary gift of nature.”⁹² Davalus then sets the breasts in context as one of the three chief physical assets that stir men’s desire: “After her eyes with their widely vibrating rays touch lightly on everyone else’s, then her hands, whether touched or seen, arouse all men to their marrow, and her breasts, swelling now not with milk but with a certain heavenly nectar, soften their hearts.”⁹³

By treating Colonna’s physical attributes at greater length than her other virtues combined, Giovio risks destabilizing the ostensible balance among them, and the inventory of body parts could potentially effect a dehumanizing objectification. The vignette of her bosom, if taken alone, might seem to anticipate moves that Clément Marot (1496?–1544) and his followers would soon make in their *blasons anatomiques*, a series of poems describing particular parts of the female body.⁹⁴ Marot’s first *blason*, known today as *Le beau tétin*

⁹⁰Ibid., 511. Compare the observation of Woods-Marsden, 2007, 59, that Titian, in his portrait of Laura Dianti, “artfully exhibited her elongated fingers to allow poets to equate their texture and tonality to ivory, pearls, and alabaster.”

⁹¹Giovio, 2013, 511. In his dialogue *La Raffaella* (1540), Alessandro Piccolomini urged women to seize every opportunity to don and remove gloves: Piccolomini, 58. On sixteenth-century neo-Petrarchan verse in which hand and glove both carried erotic force, see Mirollo, 138–39. In a 1549 tract on *The Madness of Dancing*, Simeon Zuccolo of Cologna describes a woman’s gradually removing her glove while dancing as a kind of discursive striptease: Zuccolo, 18^{r-v}. On the removal of gloves as a sexually charged action, see Woods-Marsden, 2007, 63; Stallybrass and Jones. On the fabrication and popularity of gloves in the Renaissance, see Welch, 260–62.

⁹²Giovio, 2013, 511.

⁹³Ibid.: “Postquam et ipsi oculi aliena lumina evibratis late radiis perstringunt, et attractatae vel conspectae manus cunctos medullitus inflammant, et mamillae turgescentes non iam lacte sed caelesti quodam nectare corda remolliunt.”

⁹⁴On Marot’s *Le beau tétin* in relation to the Petrarchan tradition, see Vickers, 1997; compare d’Héricault’s discussion of *blasons* in Coquillart, 2:147–60; and Saunders, 111, who concludes that “the direct Italian influence on the French *blasons* overall is slight.”

(1535), portrays in seventeen couplets a breast that, like Colonna's in Giovio's description, is spectacular in its whiteness and swells within the containment of clothing.⁹⁵ Unlike Giovio, however, who mentions but does not dwell upon the dynamics of male desire, Marot makes them his chief focus:

When we see you,
 Many of us have hands
 That itch to touch you, to hold you,
 But we must hold ourselves back
 From approaching you, upon my life!
 For another itch would come of it.⁹⁶

Thus *Le beau tétin* becomes a site for the poet to vaunt his virtuosity and masculinity.⁹⁷ Giovio's account of Colonna's breasts lacks Marot's prurience and mockery.⁹⁸

That said, Giovio's interlocutors do fix their gaze upon breasts with remarkable frequency. Genoese women, says Iovius, had until recently covered their breasts and upper chests inelegantly, with high shifts, but now the nobler sort, sporting long gowns trimmed in the back with purple velvet, wear jeweled necklaces that rest upon naked flesh. Most Florentine women incline toward concealment: they "cover their breasts with linen undergarments that go up to the neck, either on account of modesty or in order to hide their scrawniness by artifice and deception — for those

⁹⁵Colonna's breasts are "whiter than shining silver"; the *Beau tétin* of Marot is "whiter than egg, / . . . of newest white satin," "a little ball of ivory," and "swells and pushes back / your gorget a good two inches": Persels, 21–22.

⁹⁶Ibid., 21, rendering *Le beau tétin*, lines 19–24: "Quand on te voit, il vient à maints / Une envie dedans les mains / De te taster, de te tenir: / Mais il se fault bien contenir / D'en approcher, bon gré ma vie, / Car il viendroit une autre envie."

⁹⁷As Persels, 20, writes, "the nature of these encomia, so conspicuously illustrative of masculine desire, encourages the development of a poetic style peculiar to the representation of that desire, a style which reflects the intentional virility of much sixteenth-century French humanist writing." See also Yandell, 551. For a psychoanalytic reading of the *Beau tétin*, see Kritzman, 101. Unlike Giovio, Marot and his fellow *blasonneurs* intentionally disrupted the conventions of descriptions of beauty by treating body parts out of the usual order and by fixating on one or another of them, and "few attempts are made to recover the body's unity": Vickers, 1997, 8. In ringing his own changes on the description of fragments of Laura's body in the *Canzoniere*, Marot initiated a fad "at once deeply Petrarchan and deeply anti-Petrarchan": *ibid.*, 17. On fragmentation of the female body in Petrarch's *Canzoniere*, see Vickers, 1982a and 1982b; but see also the dissenting position of Braden.

⁹⁸Although Giovio's *effictio* of Colonna has its whimsical aspects, I cannot agree with Robin's reading of it as salacious ridicule: see Robin, 2012, 7–10.

who have the most attractive torsos and breasts are quick and eager to put all that on display, laid bare.”⁹⁹ The Romans have found the mean: their greatest attraction lies in their “half-naked breasts” and in their faces, which “they arrange to give a pleasant mien, neither lustful nor excessively modest but somewhere in between.”¹⁰⁰ The breasts of particular women, however, like those of Colonna, appear exclusively in the context of other physical features. Thus the Roman patrician Porzia Brancia delights by her “radiant hair, well-proportioned breasts, and the exquisite movement of her body in the calmer dances.”¹⁰¹ Giovanna d’Aragona’s perky breasts (“*exsultantes papillae*”) and Costanza the Younger’s quivering ones (“*palpitantibus papillis*”), like Colonna’s, are mentioned amid physical inventories of them.¹⁰²

Giovio’s graphic depiction of Colonna’s body resonates with a nearly contemporaneous image of her on a portrait medal. Most likely struck in commemoration of her husband’s victory at Pavia in 1525, on its reverse it shows Ferdinando Francesco in Renaissance parade armor, while on its obverse it features a half-length portrait of Vittoria (figs. 2, 3).¹⁰³ Colonna’s realistic face has an almost masculine profile, and the nose, in particular, resembles Giovio’s description of it in his dialogue: its length, he says, shows

⁹⁹Giovio, 2013, 429.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 481. When dressed for important ceremonies and wedding banquets, Roman patrician women wear “broad ribbons supporting their breasts,” the ribbons being embroidered and decorated with pearls: *ibid.* Venetian women “all have charming faces, tender breasts, and milk-white necks” (*ibid.*, 395), but only in the descriptions of Giustinian and Zorzi are the breasts of particular Venetians mentioned.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 468–69: “*capilli perlucentes, decentissimae papillae, et in molliore tripudio motus laterum exquisitus.*” On Brancia, see Croce, 1894, 60; Becker, 3:112. Similarly, Giovio describes the breasts of Isabella Giustinian, Lucrezia Zorzi, and Maria d’Aragona only in passing, amid his accounts of their dancing.

¹⁰²On this medal see *Vittoria Colonna: Dichterin und Muse Michelangelos*, 137 (cat. no. I.54); Di Majò, 48; Och, 1993, 29–30; Och, 2002, 155–56, and 164 fig. 11.1a. Och asserts that it portrays Colonna as “the wife of a military hero, evoking the image of an Amazon with her bared breast, and as a poet”: Och, 2002, 156. She does not cite other instances of heroes’ wives being portrayed as Amazons. Her contention that this medal (along with certain others) celebrates Colonna’s status as a poet by invoking Raphael’s depiction of Sappho in *The Parnassus* (*ibid.*, 158) may also be problematic. Leaving aside the iconographical differences in the images, the three “literary references to Colonna on Ischia as Sappho on Parnassus” that Och adduces in support of her interpretation (*ibid.*, 156–57) — taken from works by Ludovico Beccadelli, Girolamo Britonio, and Pietro Gravina — actually either liken Ischia to Parnassus, or Colonna to Sappho, but do not combine the two comparisons.

¹⁰³*Vittoria Colonna: Dichterin und Muse Michelangelos*, cat. no. I.54.



Figure 2. Anon. *Medal of Francesco Ferrante d'Avalos and Vittoria Colonna*, 1525?, reverse, with portrait of D'Avalos. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Münzkabinett, 6922bß. © Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



Figure 3. Anon. *Medal of Francesco Ferrante d'Avalos and Vittoria Colonna*, 1525?, obverse, with image of Colonna. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Münzkabinett, 6922bß. © Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

probity and regal dignity, and its slight bridge, while not depriving her of femininity, could convey a manly aspect (“virilem speciem”).¹⁰⁴ Also like Giovio’s description of Colonna, the medal draws attention to her bosom:

¹⁰⁴Giovio, 2013, 509–11. Compare the omission of descriptions of the nose in Cinquecento neo-Petrarchan poetry, which recalls Petrarch’s having left out Laura’s nose from the fragments of her body that he celebrates in the *Canzoniere*: see Quondam, 291–328. I cannot agree with the claim of De Maio, 25, that Giovio’s masculinizing description of Colonna deprives her of real femininity.



Figure 4. Anon. *Medal of Vittoria Colonna*, post-1525. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Münzkabinett, Wurzbach, 42871 / 1914B. © Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

while Colonna's shift veils her right breast, the left is bare. Such exposure was highly unusual in sixteenth-century portrait medals, a rarity perhaps in part occasioned by the fact that they were designed to be held in the hand.¹⁰⁵ Thus, whereas Giovio's readers might revel in the haptic imagery in his description of Colonna, the privileged few who had access to this medal could literally touch her likeness.¹⁰⁶

Artistic and literary portrayals of the marchesa dating from later in her life are less revealing: medals struck after she was widowed show her in modest attire, with little sense of the body underneath (fig. 4), and subsequent word pictures of her physique do not approach the detail of

¹⁰⁵Ferino-Pagden, 117, notes that in antiquity, only Greek medals had depicted exposed female breasts, usually in portrayals of Artemis. Compare the discussion of eroticized images of Diana (Artemis) in mid-sixteenth-century France in Yandell, 541–42. For another rare image of a nonfictional woman with one bared breast, see the medal *Violante Brasavola, Wife of Giambattista Pigna*: Hill, cat. no. 459; Pollard, cat. no. 528. On sixteenth-century Italian portrait medals in general, see *The Currency of Fame*, 147–200. The curator/editor, Stephen Scher, writes in his introduction that a medal “combines tactile and visual pleasure with mental exercise, as one traces the surface of the relief and appreciates the variations in tone of the metal and the patina, while absorbing the data provided by the images and texts and attempting to unravel the mysteries often contained in the emblems and devices displayed on the reverse”: *ibid.*, 14–15.

¹⁰⁶On haptic (or tactile) imagery in Giovio's *effictio* of Colonna, see Robin, 2012, 7–8.



Figure 5. Raphael. *Justice*, 1519–20. Vatican City, Musei Vaticani, Sala di Costantino. © Scala / Art Resource, NY.

Giovio's.¹⁰⁷ In their conceptual vocabularies, both artifacts from the 1520s befit the time of their creation. Just a few years before, Raphael had displayed Justice in asymmetrical drapery that fell from the left shoulder,

¹⁰⁷This image, it has been asserted, is the most authentic portrait of Colonna that we have: *Vittoria Colonna: Dichterin und Muse Michelangelos*, 142 and cat. no. I.57; Hirst, 117n119. Her image on another medal, in contrast, would be nearly as revealing as the one from 1525: see Hill, cat. no. 485; Ferino-Pagden, 117, illus. 9; Pollard, cat. no. 565. Och, 1993, 30n11, notes that Hill had dated it to “hardly earlier than the seventeenth century,” but asserts based upon her reading of its iconography that it antedates Pescara’s death in 1525. Pollard assigns it simply to the sixteenth century. I incline to follow Ferino-Pagden, 117, who dates it to the late sixteenth century. Colonna’s breasts are here covered by her shift, but their sharp profile is conspicuous. They may in fact have drawn special attention from those who have held the medal: according to Pollard, cat. no. 565, “only a small amount of wear is apparent, on the subject’s breasts.”



Figure 6. Anon. *Medal of Francesco Ferrante d'Avalos*, 1525?, obverse. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Münzkabinett, 474bß. © Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

leaving the right breast exposed — a model that others would imitate in depicting female allegorical figures (fig. 5).¹⁰⁸ Notably, a second medal of Pescara, also probably cast after the Battle of Pavia, has on its reverse an allegorical image of Victory holding laurel wreaths in both hands (figs. 6, 7).¹⁰⁹ Like Raphael's Justice, this anonymous Victory is draped diagonally from the shoulder in such a way that one breast is exposed. This may provide a key to the meaning of the partially clad image of Colonna in the first medal: playing on her name (Vittoria/Victoria/Victory), that portrait transfers the imagery of the allegorical figure onto her.¹¹⁰ Giovio's description of her, too, exemplifies an established mode of delineating the female body, one that in fact proliferated in early Cinquecento literature. It is in that context that one can best appreciate what makes his word picture of Colonna distinctive.

¹⁰⁸In these images, the ideal and the real combine in ways that may defy modern conceptions of generic categories and of decorum: see D'Elia, 2011. I follow *ibid.*, 66, in attributing the image of Justice in the Sala di Costantino to Raphael rather than to Giulio Romano.

¹⁰⁹*Vittoria Colonna: Dichterin und Muse Michelangelos*, cat. no. I.27.

¹¹⁰Giovio, too, plays on Victory/Victoria: "Those heroines of old, glorying in their gifts human and divine, who rightly cannot abide equals, admit to themselves and to all that she is so superior that, they say, she is most worthy not only of the fateful name 'Vittoria' — her well-omened baptismal name — but also of the epithet 'the unique, best, and greatest'": Giovio, 2013, 503–05.



Figure 7. Anon. *Medal of Francesco Ferrante d'Avalos*, 1525?, reverse, with allegory of Victory. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Münzkabinett, 474bß. © Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

DESCENDING CATALOGUES OF FEMALE BEAUTY

The systematic itemization of a woman's physical charms had been established in literature for centuries before Giovio wrote.¹¹¹ A typical descending catalogue might include golden hair, a smooth forehead, arched eyebrows, resplendent eyes, a straight nose, white cheeks tinged with rose, a small mouth with coral-red lips and evenly spaced white teeth, a long neck, small and firm breasts, long arms, tapering fingers, slender legs, and delicate feet.¹¹² A detailed pattern of this sort appears, for example, in Petrarch's description of Sophonisba in his *Africa*: her exposed breasts throb as she breathes, and her elongated hands lead to fingers that taper down to ivory nails.¹¹³ Giovio's

¹¹¹On the medieval background of the tradition, see Houdoy; Ferrante; and Faral, 75–81, who also points to a classical antecedent in the letters of Sidonius Apollinaris.

¹¹²On the conventions of descending catalogues of beauty, or *effictiones*, in Renaissance Italy, see especially G. Pozzi; Quondam; Cropper, 1976. *Ibid.*, 386, glosses the *effictio* as “the description of physical qualities in the ornate style,” and at 386n69 cites its definition in the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 386 (*Rhet. Her.* 4.63). See also Anderson, 281; M. Pozzi; and Curtius, 69, on “delineation.” Faral, 80, notes that a complete portrait would consist of both physical and moral descriptions, with the physical following far stricter rules of presentation than does the moral.

¹¹³Petrarch, 1926, 102–03 (*Africa* 5:20–59); for the English translation, see Petrarch, 1977, 83–85. Among Trecento *effictiones* in Italian, see, for example, Boccaccio, 1965, 412–15 (*Teseida* 12:53–63); and Boccaccio, 1963, 33–37 (*Ameto* 9:13–29).

Colonna exemplifies this mode of description, which enjoyed special prominence in the early Cinquecento.¹¹⁴

He surely knew his friend Pietro Bembo's vernacular dialogue *Gli Asolani* (1505).¹¹⁵ In discussing the pleasures a man takes in seeing his beloved, Bembo's Gismondo surveys the ideal female form, from the top of the head down to the chest. The imagined woman's hair, like Colonna's, is parted in the middle and falls alongside the temples. The "glad expanse" of the beloved's calm forehead "reveals unerring honesty," and large black eyes "mingle gravity with native charm," shining "like two lovely stars on their ecstatic course." Her cheeks are milky white, "save that in their more vivid coloring they sometimes vie with morning roses."¹¹⁶ A small mouth and reddish lips inspire an urge to kiss them. Finally, not only do her breasts elicit desire, but their partial covering stimulates the male viewer to imagine what lies concealed: "while he commends that portion of her snowy bosom which he sees, the unseen part wins even warmer praise; for his sharp eye discerns and measures it, thanks to the courteous dress whose subtle cloth, in spite of custom, does not always hide the beauty of those breasts, but often yielding to their shape, reveals it."¹¹⁷ At this moment the other interlocutors gaze at Sabinetta, the youngest of the three women, whose bosom they think he is describing, "since that lovely girl, who for her youth as well as for the heat was clothed in the lightest of materials, revealed two round, firm, unripe little breasts beneath her clinging robe."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴On the complex levels of meaning in Cinquecento descriptions of women, see M. Pozzi, 28–40; and especially G. Pozzi, who highlights the consequences of selectivity in the conventional pattern of descriptions, which he terms a "fixed catalogue of favored anatomical parts" ("un catalogo fisso delle parti anatomiche privilegiate": *ibid.*, 5). For a dated but still useful study of the place of beauty in Renaissance writings about women, see Kelso, 136–209.

¹¹⁵Bembo, 1954. He dedicated the dialogue to Lucrezia Borgia.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, 117.

¹¹⁷Bembo, 1515, 75^{r-v}: "Oltre accio quella parte del candidissimo petto riguardando & lodando, che alla vista è palese; l'altra, che sta ricoperta, loda molto piu anchora maggiormente con acuto sguardo mirandola & giudicandola merce del vestimento cortese: il quale non toglie perciò sempre a riguardanti la vaghezza de dolci pomi; che risistenti al morbido drappo sogliono ben spesso della lor forma dar fede a mal grado dell'usanza, che gli nasconde."

¹¹⁸Bembo, 1954, 117. The interlocutor, Madame Berenice, who superintends the discussion, chides Gismondo, saying that the lover he describes is "certainly a bold, observant peeper who searches the very bosoms which we hide. I'd rather not have him inspect me quite so close"; but Gismondo is allowed the last word: "Madame, you conceal the advantage you derive from it . . . for if I were to speak further, I would say that lovers go everywhere by means of their eyes and that from what openly appears they easily behold what is hidden; so, though you hide yourselves from other men as much as you will and can, my fair ladies, you neither can nor ought to hide yourselves from lovers": *ibid.*, 117–18.

Agnolo Firenzuola's (1493–1543) *On the Beauty of Women*, completed in 1541, offers a similar anatomization of female attractiveness.¹¹⁹ The second of its two books consists largely of the interlocutor Celso's praise of the perfect physique of Selvaggia. Amid his head-to-toe survey, he describes how her "fresh and lively breasts, heaving as though ill at ease at being constantly oppressed and confined by the garments, showing they want to escape from their prison, rise up so resolutely and vigorously that they force the viewer's eyes to rest firmly upon them, and thereby thwart their escape."¹²⁰ Firenzuola's inventory of this idealized woman's attributes is far more detailed than Giovio's *effictio* of Colonna and focuses exclusively upon her outward appearance. Celso leaves to the other interlocutors, and only on another, unspecified occasion, the task of giving Selvaggia "that fine air which emanates from the well-proportioned union of [her] members," a "deliberate gait," and the grace of "cheerful, witty, honest, and elegant speech."¹²¹ "Intelligence and the other gifts and virtues of the soul are not our business," he says, "because I have tried to paint the beauty of the body, not that of the soul."¹²² Inasmuch as the interlocutor Selvaggia is based on a particular woman, Selvaggia Rocchi of Prato, a twenty-first-century reader might suppose that this physical description violated decorum. Yet Firenzuola appears not to have seen it that way: he dedicated the dialogue to Vanozzo Rocchi, father of the real-life Selvaggia. What is more, he even wrote a madrigal that celebrates her breasts.¹²³

Nor were such inventories always limited to works of fiction, however thinly veiled. Soon after Giovio wrote his dialogue on women, the Aristotelian philosopher

¹¹⁹On this dialogue and the decorum of beauty, see Cropper, 1976; Rogers, 1998; and especially Eisenbichler and Murray's introduction in Firenzuola, 1992, xiii–xli. Miles, 8, notes that "while a modern viewer may associate an image of a woman with an exposed breast with the soft pornography that covers our newsstands, a medieval viewer was likely to associate the sight of an uncovered breast with an everyday scene in the home or marketplace in which a child was being nursed." That said, in the context of these *effictiones*, straight male desire for an eroticized breast is surely the primary significance.

¹²⁰Firenzuola, 1992, 63. On the theory of sight as occurring when one's "visual ray" touches upon an object, and the implications of this theory for the sighting of the female breast, see Miles, 8–9. Cropper, 1976, 380, discusses the ideal of "breasts that struggle against the confines of [a woman's] dress," which she identifies in Poussin as well.

¹²¹Firenzuola, 1992, 63.

¹²²*Ibid.*, 68.

¹²³Eisenbichler and Murray note that "Firenzuola paid homage to his friend Vanozzo Rocchi by contextualizing his dialogues on the beauty of women in a setting and with characters drawn from Vanozzo's family": Firenzuola, 1992, xxii. It is highly likely that the description of Selvaggia's breasts is not intended to disparage. The poem, to which Celso refers in the dialogue, is Madrigal 18, in which the poet expresses his desire to touch her pulsating breasts: Firenzuola, 1864, 2:229–30.

Agostino Nifo (ca. 1470–1538), who also took part in the Ischian literary sodality, described Giovanna d’Aragona in similarly graphic terms. His Latin treatise *On Beauty and Love*, completed in 1529 and dedicated to d’Aragona herself, makes her the paragon of beauty.¹²⁴ Although his style and vocabulary differ from Giovio’s, the descending catalogue of a woman’s beauties is in the same tradition.¹²⁵ Thus, after attending to her long, white neck, Nifo lowers his gaze to the chest, where her “round breasts, harmonious in their fitting dimensions, smelling most sweet, give off a scent very like peaches.”¹²⁶ Her hands, the backs of which are white as snow, have a tint of ivory on the palms, and her plump, rounded fingers are elongated, ending in delicate nails. Nifo observes that his subject’s belly, like her chest, is becoming (“decens”), as are the parts of her sides that correspond to the “concealed places” (“secretoria”). She also has ample and well-rounded hips, perfectly proportioned legs, and small feet with flawless toes. D’Aragona’s beauty and symmetry, he says, are such that it is not too much to say that she merits a place among the goddesses.¹²⁷

Some later writers have taken this passage as utterly indecorous. In 1604, for example, Louis Guyon went so far as to speculate that Nifo, being a doctor, was here violating professional ethics in describing the naked body of a patient with whom he had become enamored.¹²⁸ Jean-Pierre Nicéron (1685–1738) criticized the license that Nifo had

¹²⁴Nifo completed the *De Pulchro et Amore* at his villa, Niphanus, in 1529. See Mahoney, 100; Nifo, 1641. Zimmermann, 320–21n71, suggests that Nifo’s description of Giovanna d’Aragona may have “carried Giovio’s evocation of physical beauty to extremes.” Nifo’s focus on the beauty of d’Aragona begins in book 1, chapter 5: Nifo, 1641, 7–11.

¹²⁵In his eulogium of Nifo, Giovio criticized him for writing “with rude and disordered prolixity, as was then the custom, suitable for crass and unabashedly barbarian ears; for philosophers of his generation eschewed the faculty of writing Latin correctly, as if it were the enemy of good learning, and particularly of philosophy”: translation in Zimmermann, 15; for the Latin see Giovio, 1956–, 8:115. In dialogue 1 of *Notable Men and Women*, Giovio does write approvingly of Nifo’s critique of astrologers: see Giovio, 2013, 45, referring to Nifo, 1520.

¹²⁶Nifo, 1641, 9: “Mamillae rotundae, decenti mensura correspondentes, suavissimo fragrantis odore, persicis pomis persimiles, redolent.” The trope of breasts being like fruit, which does not occur in Giovio’s *effictio* of Colonna, does appear in another work from the 1520s: see the likening of breasts to the golden apples in the garden of the Hesperides, in Capella, 19^v. On accounts of women that go further, not only comparing elements of the female anatomy to succulent fruit but expressing the desire to taste it, see Fernandez and Miggiani, 18.

¹²⁷Nifo, 1641, 9–10.

¹²⁸Pierre Bayle cites Louis Guyon’s *Diverses leçons*, and then proceeds to discredit Guyon’s opinion: Nifo was not, notes Bayle, a practicing physician, let alone personal doctor to Giovanna d’Aragona. See Bayle, 1:279nC. Regarding Bayle’s entry on Nifo and its relevance to *On Beauty and Love*, see especially the comments of Laurence Boulègue in Nifo, 2003, 1:xv–xvi. Maulde-La-Clavière, 209, errs in attributing Guyon’s interpretation to Bayle himself.

taken, and Girolamo Tiraboschi (1731–94) commented upon the work’s eccentricities (“stranezze”).¹²⁹ Regarding Nifo’s assertion that d’Aragona physically embodies beauty itself, the historian Benedetto Croce wrote dismissively that the philosopher had “sustained in the most crass and unequivocal way that beauty is nothing other than that which in our times is usually called ‘sex-appeal.’”¹³⁰ Yet like Giovio’s top-down description of Colonna’s body, so too Nifo’s of d’Aragona admits to being read not as bizarre but as integral to a portrait of female perfection. Like Giovio, Nifo treats *forma* (physical beauty) as but part of what constitutes the ideal.¹³¹

In his penultimate chapter, dedicated to celebrating those women who have been most highly praised for surpassing beauty, Nifo emphasizes that such beauty must be complemented by chastity.¹³² Starting with Ariadne, he lists dozens of ancient figures both imagined and historical, and then skips forward chronologically to name but two of his contemporaries: Giovanna d’Aragona and Vittoria Colonna.¹³³ He notes that the latter maintains a decorous chastity, safeguarding her body from all who are desperately burning with love for her.¹³⁴ The chapter closes with praise of d’Aragona as most fortunate (“felicissima”), inasmuch as there can be nothing more blessed than to strive fiercely against enemies and to triumph over them.¹³⁵

¹²⁹Nifo, 2003, 1:xvi. Tiraboschi, 7:425.

¹³⁰Croce, 1947, 57: “In questo demerito . . . è dunque il merito del trattato del Nifo, nell’aver sostenuto nel modo più crasso e inequivoco che il bello non è altro che ciò che ai nostri giorni si suol designare come *sex-appeal*.” For a more sympathetic assessment, see Mahoney. For a less sophisticated effort to ground desire for the female body in philosophy, see Capella, 19^v.

¹³¹For other Cinquecento tracts that define beauty comprehensively, see Crane, 138–41.

¹³²Nifo, 1641, 146–53: chapter 70, entitled “*Exempla mulierum, quae ob excellentiam formae celeberrima fama clarae fuerunt*” (“Instances of Women Who Have Been Distinguished by the Greatest Renown on Account of Their Excellent Beauty”).

¹³³Others he mentions include Antigone, Helen of Troy, Jocasta, Catullus’s Lesbia, and, improbably, Cleopatra.

¹³⁴Nifo, 1641, 152–53. The mention of Colonna alongside d’Aragona at this point, which awkwardly diverts attention from the latter, may be owed to Nifo’s pursuit of the patronage of both: in September of 1530 he would dedicate to Colonna his tract *De Vera Vivendi Libertate* (On the truly free life): Nifo, 1535, 3–35; the dedicatory letter is on *ibid.*, 2. See also De Maio, 23.

¹³⁵Nifo, 1641, 153.

D'Aragona's reaction to Nifo's portrayal of her has remained elusive.¹³⁶ Cardinal Pompeo Colonna, at least, approved: in his prefatory letter to the text he lauds the author as an illustrious interpreter of beauty whose tract displays a nearly divine wisdom.¹³⁷ In his view, Nifo's description of d'Aragona's perfect human beauty guides the reader to contemplate the transcendent: "There is that serenity of forehead and mouth, that whiteness, that brilliance of her eyes and blushing radiance, and finally the pleasing appearance of her entire body, of such charm that even the dead themselves are attracted and enticed toward love, and are drawn toward the contemplation of divine beauty. And what is more, she surpasses others with such great purity and sweetness of character, graciousness, and eloquence that she is rightly judged by all to have been born for displaying virtue and integrity, just as a mirror and the most resplendent star."¹³⁸

Theorizing a positive relationship between earthly and divine beauty was not in itself an innovation: that move had been made in both classical and Judeo-Christian antiquity, for example in Plato's *Symposium* and in interpretations of the Song of Songs.¹³⁹ In the fifteenth century, Marsilio Ficino's commentary on the *Symposium* had provided philosophical underpinnings for the manner in which love of physical beauty, when not a fixation, could prepare the way for contemplating inner beauty and, thereupon, the divine — a position that Castiglione detailed in book 4 of *The Courtier* (1528). Drawing upon the language and imagery of secular love that Petrarch had used, poets contemporary to Castiglione and Gioivo

¹³⁶The modern editor of the text, Laurence Boulègue (Nifo, 2003), and d'Aragona's recent biographer, Chiomenti Vassalli, are silent regarding d'Aragona's reaction to it.

¹³⁷Nifo, 2003, 1:3–5.

¹³⁸Ibid.: "Ea est frontis orisque serenitas, is candor, is oculorum splendor ac rutilans iubar, ea denique totius corporis species grata, venus, ut vel ipsi mortui invitentur allicianturque ad amorem atque ad absoluti pulchri speculationem trahantur; tanta mox sanctitate morumque suavitate, comitate eloquentiaque caeteras antecellit, ut nata omnibus ad virtutem honestatemque comparandam veluti speculum sidusque fulgentissimum merito censeatur." For a close parallel, see Firenzuola, 1992, 11: "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."

¹³⁹Plato, 1925, 172–93 (*Symposium* 201d–207a). In Christian theology the poetry of the Song of Songs was an allegory of Christ's love for the church. It includes two *effictiones*, one proceeding top-down, from head to breasts (4:1–7); the other, from the feet to the hair on the crown of the head (7:1–5).

deployed it to illustrate sacred themes.¹⁴⁰ A similar appropriation of canons of female beauty for religious ends was taking place in painting. For example, in his *Madonna of the Rose* (1530–35) and *Madonna of the Long Neck* (ca. 1534–40), Parmigianino portrayed the Virgin as “the ideally perfect figure of panegyric description and enumeration, with her fine golden hair, dark, arched eyebrows, her pink and ivory face, sweet smile, slender ringed neck, her thrusting breasts, and her long delicate fingers, gently tapering” (figs. 8, 9).¹⁴¹ These images are, in Elizabeth Cropper’s words, the “embodiments of that grace, charm, and desire whose virtue could excite a man’s soul to love God.”¹⁴² Thus for some artists, as for some literati, desire for an idealized female body could serve the very highest of ends.¹⁴³

Christian Petrarchists’ conflation of earthly erotic desire and sacred love in portrayals of the Virgin and of saints was in fact commonplace in the early Cinquecento.¹⁴⁴ Vittoria Colonna and another poet who promoted religious reform, Veronica Gambara, each owned an attractive painting of the Magdalene: Colonna by Titian, and Gambara by Correggio. Colonna’s letters and poems about Mary Magdalene explicitly compare earthly love to spiritual passion: in part on account of her bodily beauty, the saint appears to have symbolized for Colonna a direct experience of the divine.¹⁴⁵ Not everyone was convinced that earthly beauty in the service of spiritual passion was chaste. Thus Pietro Aretino, himself no stranger to subjects either erotic or spiritual, teased Colonna by likening her religious intensity to others’ earthly lusts.¹⁴⁶ Yet he himself freely blended secular and sacred love imagery in flamboyant, arguably blasphemous

¹⁴⁰D’Elia, 2005, 84–85: “Much of the sacred and secular poetry and prose of the period rests on the assumptions that passionate love can be pure and even spiritual and that bodily beauty reflects inner virtue.” Kohl, 133, in analyzing fifteenth-century female portrait busts, sees erotic and sacred elements complementing each other: “Beginning in the quattrocento, the eroticization of sacred love coincides with the sanctification of erotic love. This idea finds expression in the reliquary-like adoration of the beloved.” Moreover, “desire is enflamed by the holy subject, by the image of pious chastity. The boundaries between religious and erotic surrender are shown to be fluid”: *ibid.*, 134.

¹⁴¹Cropper, 1976, 393.

¹⁴²*Ibid.* See also Cropper, 1986; Cropper, 1995.

¹⁴³See Vaccaro, 2001b, on the interplay of the sensual and the religious in Parmigianino’s *Madonna of the Long Neck*. She compares its emphases to those of Petrarchan verses by Andrea Baiardi, the father of two of the artist’s patrons. See also Vaccaro, 2000; Vaccaro, 2001a.

¹⁴⁴See the nuanced analysis of Christian Petrarchism, the tensions within it, and its modern reception in D’Elia, 2005, 84–106, upon which the following sentences draw.

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 88–91.

¹⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 91.



Figure 8. Parmigianino. *Madonna of the Rose*, 1530–35. Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister. © bpk, Berlin / Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister / Hans-Peter Klut / Art Resource, NY.

formulations that tested the limits of the decorous.¹⁴⁷ Within a few decades, sensuality in religious art would become more controversial: for the “new elements of beauty and of its perception were precisely the targets of Counter-Reformation censorship.”¹⁴⁸ For much the same reasons, in 1559 Aretino’s

¹⁴⁷Aretino frequently made scabrous jokes about a supposed Santa Nafissa, patron of prostitutes, who figures large in the discussions in his *Ragionamenti*. See D’Elia, 2005, 94–98; Aretino. In fact, in a pasquinade addressed to Vittoria Colonna (“Pasquino alla Marchesana di Pescara”), he calls her “this Santa Nafissa of Pescara” and explicitly mocks her religious devotions: Marucci, Marzo, and Romano, 1:437.

¹⁴⁸Cropper, 1995, 190. The Church’s censorship of art was not, however, as oppressive or as uniform as has often been supposed: see O’Malley, 2013.



Figure 9. Parmigianino. *Madonna of the Long Neck*, ca. 1534–40. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi. © Scala / Ministero per I Beni e le Attività culturali / Art Resource, NY.

sacred works would earn a place on the Index of Prohibited Books.¹⁴⁹ Earlier in the Cinquecento, however, the blending of secular and sacred love imagery

¹⁴⁹Although Aretino's sacred works were the chief target of censorship, his writings as a whole were condemned. Notable among Aretino's nonreligious erotic writings is the set of sonnets he wrote to accompany Marcantonio Raimondi's engravings (after Giulio Romano's drawings) of sexual positions. The publication in 1524 of the engravings and poems occasioned scandal and even the engraver's imprisonment; but among the elites, behind closed doors, there remained room for a playful eroticism. See Talvacchia, 1999.

had a prominent place in learned discourse. Interestingly, Colonna herself at one point wrote to Aretino praising his religious writings and chastising him for not turning out more of them.¹⁵⁰

Giovio's and Nifo's discussions of beauty intervened in different ways in conversations about the decorum of physical beauty. Whereas Nifo drew in part upon Aristotle to articulate a more positive evaluation of female flesh and desirability than that of Ficino, Giovio did not ground his *effictiones* with philosophical precision.¹⁵¹ Meanwhile, by describing so graphically the physical attributes of nonfictional noblewomen in works written in praise of them, both authors gave new concreteness to conceptions that surely were less troubling in the abstract.¹⁵²

In so doing, they were also exceptional. Gian Giorgio Trissino's influential dialogue on beauty, *I ritratti* (1524), provides a useful counterpoint.¹⁵³ Following the example of the ancient Greek painter Zeuxis, Trissino's interlocutors formulate ideal beauty by combining features from several actual women. A certain Erycina of Vicenza is the model for the composite's hair, forehead, eyelashes, arms, and hands whose fingers taper down to beautiful nails.¹⁵⁴ The chest, appropriated from Clemenzia de' Pazzi of Florence, is mentioned only in passing, in the context of the squared-off shoulders upon which her neck reposes. The lengthy portrait of Isabella d'Este that is central to the dialogue is still more circumspect in its physical detail. Her hair glistens, barely contained in an elaborately worked silken net, and when she smiles one can see between her roseate lips perfectly matched teeth that are white as snow. Trissino does not, however, describe her breasts: he gets no closer than mentioning the pearl necklace that descends on both sides of her chest down to the waist.¹⁵⁵ The discussion then turns quickly to her inner beauties, which include humility, magnanimity, temperance, and erudition.

To date, no evidence has come to light of what Colonna thought of Giovio's *effictio* of her. Since she eagerly solicited drafts of others' work, one

¹⁵⁰D'Elia, 2005, 90–91, 214n34.

¹⁵¹On Nifo's appropriation of Aristotelian elements, see Mahoney; see also Boulègue's introduction and notes in Nifo, 2003.

¹⁵²Even so, one must be wary of perhaps projecting twenty-first-century sensibilities onto the past. On the tendency of scholars to read shock and offense into the responses of medieval and Renaissance Europeans to literature and art, see Caviness; Easton; Talvacchia, 2013, esp. 50.

¹⁵³On Gian Giorgio Trissino (1478–1550), see *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, 6:171–72. For the text itself, with extensive commentary, see Hirdt. On the influence of classical authors, especially Lucian, upon the *Ritratti*, see Beer.

¹⁵⁴See Trissino in Hirdt, 21–22.

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 23–24.

may suppose that she had already read some version of his manuscript while he was on Ischia in 1527–28.¹⁵⁶ He invokes her familiarity with it in a letter of 1534/35 to the Neapolitan humanist Girolamo Scannapoco, in which he recalls her having conversed with Muscettola about how Giovio had portrayed him.¹⁵⁷ Certainly Giovio's graphic description of Colonna's body had a playful subtext. As a discerning reader, she could scarcely have failed to notice how Davalus's male gaze verges on a leer when he rhapsodizes over her breasts. There is no evidence, however, that such passages turned her against Giovio.¹⁵⁸ Already in 1528, she enlisted him to write the biography of her late husband. In a sonnet penned at some point between then and 1533, she would express deep gratitude to Giovio for that promised commemoration of Pescara.¹⁵⁹ In 1530, Giovio would play the crucial role of intermediary in her initial literary exchanges with Pietro Bembo.¹⁶⁰ Although evidence of their interactions thereafter is scanty, it appears that to the end their friendship remained intact.¹⁶¹

In sum, while in places Giovio's *effictio* of Colonna has a ludic quality, it is securely embedded in a long tradition of such descriptions and similar

¹⁵⁶Here one thinks of Colonna's reading and then unauthorized circulation (much to Castiglione's consternation) of the manuscript of *The Courtier*. See Brundin, 22n28.

¹⁵⁷Giovio, 1956–, 1:177–78.

¹⁵⁸By way of comparison, one wonders how Colonna reacted to canto 37 of Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*. As Albert Ascoli has demonstrated, while the canto explicitly celebrates Vittoria Colonna for her literary career, both the logic of its structure and much of its content undercut that praise: "the canto operates through an extraordinarily sophisticated double process whereby women's bodies are defined in relation and subordinated to a male norm, while simultaneously men appropriate to themselves and patriarchy the monstrous imaginative powers that they associate with female corporeality": Ascoli, 59.

¹⁵⁹The sonnet emphasizes Giovio's unique talents as a historian: "his learned muse is now the only one / Which renders our century adorned and famous. / He will preserve for my living Sun his entire light, / Forever, and that rare subject will make / So worthy a history eternal and splendid." See Zimmermann, 101–02, 321n79; translation at 102.

¹⁶⁰On Giovio as intermediary between Colonna and Bembo, see *ibid.*, 117–18; Brundin, 26–27; Vecce, 1990b. In a poem addressed to Giovio in 1538, Bembo would press him to commemorate Vittoria herself: "why do you not turn your style to celebrating this new and sweet marvel on earth, a gentle lady who thirsts not for pearls and purple robes, but only for honor and virtue?" Zimmermann, 118.

¹⁶¹See especially Giovio's preface dedicating the biography of Pescara to her: Giovio, 1549, 283–84. See also the description of Vittoria Colonna's *impresa* (personal device) in his *Dialogo dell'impresse militari e amorose*, composed in 1551, in which he writes of his enduring obligation toward her, which he says he has shown to the world with the biography of her husband: Giovio, 1956–, 9:406.

to those in texts written by some of his contemporaries.¹⁶² Along with Nifo, he is evidently exceptional in presenting a descending catalogue of the physical features of a living woman from whose patronage he hoped to benefit. In both cases, the objectification of bodily fragments might threaten to undercut the celebration of the subject. Moreover, in pausing to describe Vittoria's breasts in such detail, Giovio nearly fixates upon them — something that does not happen in Nifo's briefer scan of Giovanna's body. It is all the more essential, then, that Giovio does not present fragmentation as an end in itself, as Marot would.¹⁶³ Instead, he emphasizes that Colonna's bodily parts comprise a concordant whole, and he frames the encomium with comprehensive images of her. At its outset, he contrasts her wholeness with other women's mosaic-like incompleteness. And, crucially, after scanning her physical attributes, he does not leave them in pieces. Instead, he turns to the dignity and gracefulness of her entire body that one can enjoy when she sets it in motion.

THE ELOQUENCE OF HARMONIOUS MOVEMENT

With her exceptional flexibility and the majesty of her bearing, says Davalus, Colonna stands out from other illustrious women. Nowhere has she displayed bodily eloquence more compellingly than in 1517 in Naples, at the celebration of Bona Sforza's departure for Poland to marry King Sigismund I.¹⁶⁴ In a large yet crowded room, all formed a circle to watch Colonna perform a Hungarian dance, "a type of solo ritual dance accompanied by foreign-style music," which left the other women

¹⁶²For two notable verse *effictiones* from Giovio's time, see Ariosto's descriptions of Alcina and Olimpia, respectively, at Ariosto, 61–62 (*Orlando furioso* 7:10–15); and *ibid.*, 114 (*Orlando furioso* 11:67–69), which ends: "Am I to describe to you those parts, too, which she was so vainly hoping to conceal? Suffice to say that from top to toe she was a very paragon of beauty."

¹⁶³For how Renaissance artists studied anatomical fragments yet could have as their goal the construction of an idealized whole, see Talvacchia, 2011. On the tensions produced in the movement from fragments to whole in physical description, see Yandell, 546.

¹⁶⁴Bona Sforza (1494–1557; queen of Poland, 1518–56) was the daughter of Isabella d'Aragona. See Motta; Cioffari and Werner, 373–418, and esp. 88–96, which draws substantially on Passero, 241–43, for the description of the nuptial festivities in Naples that took place on 21 November 1517. Passero, 250, quoted in Ferino-Pagden, 119, describes the figure Colonna cut when she appeared for the festivities on horseback, lavishly attired, and accompanied by six footmen who were also dressed colorfully.

dumbstruck.¹⁶⁵ Thus Giovio describes her virtuoso performance: “Nothing was more attractive than when, with the most pleasing gestures, she matched all her movements to the rhythms of the dance, whether she was pretending to wave her feathery fan to stir the air or was gathering up her long, flowing sleeves, or when she swept the floor with her wide skirts tracing delicate circles. And step by step, in tune with the rhythms of the flute-player, sometimes raised on tiptoe for a harmonic rest, at other times following a circular path by taking little sideways leaps, and at still other times with whirling motions in curving paths, she was borne along perilously with gliding steps.”¹⁶⁶ Colonna’s body, now reassembled, displays control and harmony even in the performance of highly challenging and seemingly precarious moves.¹⁶⁷

Such a display of virtuosity does not square with the stately formality enjoined by dance masters such as Guglielmo Ebreo da Pesaro.¹⁶⁸ Intended in part to elevate the status of dancing in courtly culture, Ebreo’s manual stressed the discipline that ought to govern one’s movements.¹⁶⁹ Elite women, in particular, had to demonstrate a moderation and self-control that betokened the prudence that is owed to proper education and lineage.¹⁷⁰ Castiglione in *The Courtier* similarly points to the constraints upon female decorum: when beginning to dance a woman should appear shyly reluctant

¹⁶⁵Giovio, 2013, 513. Kürti, 77, refers to Hungarian palace pages performing a “Hungarian solo” dance at the wedding of Matthias Corvinus to Beatrice d’Aragona of Naples in 1474. More generally, performance of different national *balli* could form part of international nuptial celebrations. Thus at the wedding in 1490 of Maximilian I to Bianca Maria Sforza, the bride herself participated in Italian, French, and German dances, and the festivities also included Spanish, Polish, Hungarian, and Turkish dances: Kürti, 68. Nordera, 320, observes that courtiers “frequently adopted the national dancing styles of official foreign guests as a token of respect and hospitality.” On cross-cultural borrowing of dance traditions, see Mullally; Sparti, 2007, 39.

¹⁶⁶Giovio, 2013, 513. On the use of fans as a fashion statement, see Welch, 262–68.

¹⁶⁷The author refers just below to the great and skillful exertions (“tanta ac erudita studia”) in Colonna’s dancing: Giovio, 2013, 512–13.

¹⁶⁸Ebreo da Pesaro; Sparti, 1996; Sparti, 2007.

¹⁶⁹See, for example, Fermor, 1992, 84; Ebreo da Pesaro, 109. *Ibid.*, 112–15, emphasizes that dance is not in itself an incitement to lust: not only does it “ennoble and refine virtuous and esteemed men, but even the ill-mannered and the base-born become most noble-minded.” On efforts to raise dancing to the level of an art alongside painting and architecture, with similar aspirations to express creative power, see Nevile, 133–36.

¹⁷⁰Fermor, 1992, 78, with somewhat different emphasis.

to do so and then, throughout the dance, she should avoid movements that are “too vigorous and strained.”¹⁷¹

Especially in the presence of perceived inferiors, nobles needed to display a circumscribed decorousness befitting the dancer’s social status.¹⁷² Thus, although in public Castiglione’s ideal male courtier should “maintain a certain dignity,” not attempting “quick movements of foot” or double steps, “in a chamber, as we are now, I think he could be allowed to try this, and [*moresche*] and *branles* as well.”¹⁷³ Court ladies needed to be yet more careful about maintaining decorum. By the Cinquecento, however, the appropriate display of one’s body in elite settings came to center less on restraint than on virtuosity.¹⁷⁴ That such virtuosity was acceptable by Gioivo’s time may be inferred from Bembo’s *Gli Asolani*, in which Gismondo describes the joy of seeing one’s lady dancing in time to instrumental music, “now winning admiration with her stately steps, now charming everyone with her enchanting turns and lithe delays, now with her quicker motions striking the beholder’s

¹⁷¹Castiglione, 1556, 238: “Movimenti troppo gagliardi e sforzati.” In Castiglione, 2002, 154 (*Courtier* 3:8), Singleton renders this as “movements that are too energetic and violent.” In contrast, see *ibid.*, 32–33 (*Courtier* 1:27), where the stiff, affected dancing of a certain Messer Pierpaolo provides a counterexample to the desired display of *sprezzatura* (nonchalance) and *disinvoltura* (ease). See Kolsky, 1998.

¹⁷²This is what Sharon Fermor has termed “behavioral decorum”: that is, “the notion that the movement of a figure, while expressing a particular emotion or intention, should also be in keeping with its age, gender and — most important — its social status”: Fermor, 1992, 78. She also notes the importance of natural movement elaborated by “a gentle turning of the shoulders in opposition to the working foot — a variation of our natural *contrapposto* — and by a rising and falling movement known as *ondeggiare*, whereby the dancer rose slowly on to the toes on making a step, and sank down swiftly at the end”: *ibid.*, 80. Most importantly, the dancer must show *misura*, keeping in time, even in the *ondeggiare*. See also Fermor, 1993; Fermor, 1998.

¹⁷³Castiglione, 2002, 75 (*Courtier* 2:11). On *moresche* (rendered “morris dances” by Singleton) and their popularity in Quattrocento Italy, see the gloss by Barbara Sparti in Ebreo da Pesaro, 223.

¹⁷⁴McGinniss, 151, 159. Castiglione ends book 1 of *The Courtier* with two of the participants in the discussion, Costanza Fregosa and Margherita, dancing gracefully to entertain them all: Castiglione, 2002, 63 (*Courtier*, 1:56). Pontremoli and La Rocca, 176, compare the role that dances played for ladies to the function of jousts for gentlemen: each was an opportunity to demonstrate *virtù* in an appropriate manner. On the “thin line” separating virtuous performance from its opposite, “chaste display” from “blatant exhibitionism,” and order from disorder, see Bryce, 1102; McGowan, 25 and esp. 93: “Despite strict regulation and sequencing of dances, there was space during a court ball for virtuosity and improvisation.” On the display of the person as a principal goal of sixteenth-century dance, and the implications of that fact for its reconstruction, see Tsachor.

eye like some onrushing sun.”¹⁷⁵ Considerable scope for display was surely available at the feast within the Trevisan palace where Giustinian danced with “flexible, smooth, and lively movements of her limbs” and Zorzi showed “great agility” in her “spins, turns, and rhythmic movements,” as well as at the celebration of Sforza’s nuptials where Colonna danced: both events were held indoors and for an audience drawn from the elite.¹⁷⁶

In Giovio’s account, Vittoria Colonna’s dancing is as decorous as it is beautiful. Moreover, not only does he reassemble her body in this scene, he also clothes her in lavish attire that displays magnificence. Her shimmering gown, of cloth of gold woven in a moiré pattern, includes a depiction of a balsam tree inscribed on its trunk, “the soul is like unto this” (“huic animus similis”), an emblem that represents an uncorrupted life.¹⁷⁷ Davalus completes the physical description by noting how Colonna herself puts on the final adornments: no one positions pearls and gems more strikingly. In sum, after being itemized, the parts

¹⁷⁵Bembo, 1954, 119; Bembo, 1515, 76^v. Compare Giovio’s description of Giulia Gonzaga’s ability both to promenade deliberately and to “leap about playfully and swiftly” in accordance with lute music: Giovio, 2013, 461. Compare Pontus de Tyard’s (ca. 1521–1605) verses describing the delight that his mistress takes in stirring his desires through her dancing: Tyard, 152–53, 170–71.

¹⁷⁶In the context of indoor celebrations, women could compete with one another in beauty, grace, and virtuosity in a way that moved beyond traditional constraints: see Gori, 177, 179. (Of course, not all dances performed in elite private settings had such lofty aspirations. For example, at an all-night party that Italian expatriates in Constantinople held to celebrate Carnival in 1524, the dancers were said to be so lascivious as to be able to liquefy marble. See Sanuto, 36:cols. 117–21, at 119.) The desire generated in the male viewer was intensified when the dance was held in a confined space, where proximity magnified the physical impact. Thus Tsachor, 48, notes that while “the most important spatial element would have been the figures (paths), which were formulaic,” those figures “attract less attention than the human radiance in the close proximity of a social setting than in the large halls [today] where ballet is meant to be seen.”

¹⁷⁷Giovio, 2013, 515. Thanks to Jane Bridgeman for glossing on my behalf Giovio’s description of the cloth and its pattern. On the attire of women as portrayed in Italian Renaissance art, see Bridgeman. A variant of this *impresa* (device) appears, with the Colonna column superimposed on the balsam’s trunk, on the reverse of a medal of Colonna reproduced in *Vittoria Colonna: Dichterin und Muse Michelangelos*, cat. no. I.58; and in Och, 2002, 166 (fig. 11.5). In light of Giovio’s description of the *impresa* that he saw on Colonna’s dress in 1517, Och’s reading of the image on the medal as representing “Vittoria’s efforts to stand in for the Colonna in Rome” in the 1530s and 1540s seems unlikely; it certainly does not depict “what may be a laurel tree” (ibid., 158). A different *impresa*, which Giovio himself invented for Vittoria, shows waves breaking on the rocks they assail, thus illustrating her “robust virtue”: see *Dialogo delle imprese militari et amorose* (Dialogue on military and amorous devices), in Giovio, 1956–, 9:373–443, at 9:406.

of her body have been reassembled, the whole being portrayed as set in motion, lavishly clothed and elegantly adorned. And most importantly, Giovio does not end the description there.

A WOMAN IN FULL

Davalus now cedes the floor to Iovius, who details Colonna's abundant possession of the other three chief virtues mentioned earlier: nobility of lineage, civic responsibility, and chastity. These, he says, are far superior to the physical beauty that mainly entices young men. Her magnanimity, personal distinction, prudence, chastity, and piety have enabled her not only to move beyond womanly capacity, but to equal the most widely esteemed and wisest of men. While she actively shuns vice, her lineage has played a key role in enabling her to be virtuous amid the corruption of the times: "This quality, especially, is an ancestral one: her display of unyielding resistance to all cupidity and to all injuries of fortune. To someone enjoying such wealth and freedom, and in a licentious age marked by corrupt morals, it would have been a great accomplishment to refrain from sin, let alone to win renown for the finest virtues."¹⁷⁸

Her civic responsibility shows both in the feminine domain of home economics and in the virile public sphere that includes governance, politics, and warfare. In managing household furnishings and in provisioning and serving food she shows efficiency and prudence: all is elegant, tasteful, and generous, unstinting but never prodigal. Meanwhile, she has been discerning and measured in her administration of territories on behalf of her father and her husband. While generally clement and mild, when necessary she has exacted justice with manlike strictness ("virili severitate").¹⁷⁹ Iovius asks rhetorically, "Who ever exercised judgment more reliably than she about the secret objectives of princes, or more profitably about military discipline, or more clearly about the difficulties of provisioning troops with money and food, or with more foresight concerning the overall outcome of wars?"¹⁸⁰ This, too, attests her lineage, for she learned the art of war as the daughter, granddaughter, wife, and cousin of exceptional commanders.¹⁸¹ Indeed, both her husband and the leaders of the Colonna family have sought her advice on such matters.

Integral to her strict but measured religious observance is a steadfast chastity. In her marriage, she had been faithful to Pescara even as he indulged in

¹⁷⁸Giovio, 2013, 517.

¹⁷⁹Ibid., 520–21; compare *ibid.*, 373.

¹⁸⁰Ibid., 523.

¹⁸¹These influences are, respectively, Fabrizio I Colonna, Federico da Montefeltro, Pescara, and Pompeo Colonna.

extramarital affairs.¹⁸² Bereft of him and in mourning, now she has two elderly virgins blocking access to her, “like two huge and wild mastiffs keeping watch at her feet.”¹⁸³ Amid readings of scripture and religious services, she wears out her back and knees in supplications before statues of saints. She eats just a single scant meal per day, wears a shift made not of linen but of wool, and “even lashes private parts of her body with the stinging blows of a whip, a punishment undeserved.”¹⁸⁴

Significantly, while Giovio emphasizes the austerity of Colonna’s rites of mourning, he does not describe her religious commitment as something newfound. Until recently, scholars have inclined to portray her as a celebrator of earthly love who, following her husband’s death, came to focus upon religious topics. Recent work, however, has substantially overturned that view. Colonna’s writing on sacred subjects and her piety were by no means new after 1525.¹⁸⁵ As Abigail Brundin has observed, the view of Colonna’s poetry as progressing from the amorous to the spiritual, in the manner of Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, is owed largely to Ludovico Dolce’s edited collection that organized them as such.¹⁸⁶ Moreover, already in her earliest amorous poems Colonna witnessed her religious faith through the expression of love for her husband.¹⁸⁷ Finally, she was first

¹⁸²According to Iovius, Vittoria based her acquiescence to his adultery upon his military disposition: “She used to say that it was fair enough for warlike Mars to be held fast by love for frisky Venus, inasmuch as nature had fashioned the two of them to be great and lusty, with excellences of body and mind in equal measure”: Giovio, 2013, 523. Compare Giovio’s account of Costanza d’Avalos the Younger having shown love and affection to her husband, Alfonso Piccolomini, “despite his intemperate obsession with other love affairs”: *ibid.*, 447. On Pescara’s infatuation with Isabel de Requesens, see Di Majo, 24.

¹⁸³Giovio, 2013, 525.

¹⁸⁴*Ibid.* with Latin at 524: “et quod [in]indignum est, etiam pudicas corporis partes aculeatis flagris flagellat.” If the expression “pudicas corporis partes” were meant to refer specifically to the genitals (as it is read in Robin, 2012, 6), one would have expected the term *pudenda*. What seems more logical here is that Giovio is referring to the whipping of those portions of the body that modesty (but not shame) requires one to conceal, such as the shoulders or back (the usual places a flagellant would strike with a “frustra” or “disciplina”). On the tradition and meanings of flagellation in medieval Christianity, see Largarier, 52–57.

¹⁸⁵See, for example, Fragnito, 1997, 228; Ranieri.

¹⁸⁶Brundin, 35.

¹⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 38: “Although every sonnet encapsulates subtle and beautiful shifts and modulations in tone and theme, each one also attempts to point beyond itself to the divine ‘text’ of Christ and our human and insufficient faith in him, so that the individual poems ask clearly to be read as a cumulative exercise, a single opus in praise of a greater work of art, in line with the Christocentric emphasis of reform thought. The early sonnets written in memory of Colonna’s husband d’Avalos can easily be assimilated into this spiritual project, in their awe-inspiring and quasi-divine representation of the poet’s sun, her *sole*, continually pointing beyond himself to Christ.”

exposed to religious reform not by Bernardino Ochino or Juan de Valdés in the years after the Sack of Rome, but in encounters with members of Giovanni Pontano's academy, including Jacopo Sannazaro, long before.¹⁸⁸

Colonna's patronage of religious art was of similarly long standing: it dates back at least to a polyptych that she and Costanza d'Avalos the Elder commissioned, which was executed around 1512–15 for the church of the Poor Clares within the grounds of the *castello* on Ischia.¹⁸⁹ In its central panel the two donors venerate a Madonna in Glory whose right breast is exposed (fig. 10).¹⁹⁰ The theological meaning is clear enough: Mary, who had nursed Christ, is interceding with him on behalf of the souls suffering in purgatorial flames below.¹⁹¹ Colonna herself has individualized features, including an oval face with a long nose and a hint of a double chin, details consistent with the later painting of her that hung in Gioivo's gallery, known today through the copy of it by Cristofano dell'Altissimo, itself an object of imitation (fig. 11).¹⁹² In the altarpiece, the image of Colonna also resembles Gioivo's description of her as a Petrarchan beauty: bedecked in pearls and sumptuously dressed, she has almond eyes, a long columnar neck with the line across the middle that was

¹⁸⁸Brundin, 40; Ranieri, 533–35, 533–34nn6–9; and especially Fragnito, 1997, 229. On Pontano and Sannazaro, see *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, 5:118–20, 394–96.

¹⁸⁹Di Majo, 46–47. The painting is now in the convent of Sant'Agostino on Ischia. The artist remains to be identified definitively. It appears to have been executed in the aftermath of the Spanish defeat in the Battle of Ravenna (1512), in which both Pescara and Alfonso d'Avalos were taken prisoner. At that time, Vittoria Colonna wrote a poem longing for the presence and guidance of them both; see Brundin, 20–21.

¹⁹⁰The polyptych of which this painting is the centerpiece had, on its other panels, images of Saint Louis of Toulouse and Francis of Assisi, and of Saint John the Baptist and Saint Thomas Aquinas. A prominent historian of Southern Italian art of the Cinquecento has observed that the inclusion of Aquinas, a Dominican, on this altarpiece for a Franciscan church helps to confirm the identification of the kneeling patron on the left as Costanza d'Avalos the Elder, inasmuch as Aquinas was patron saint of the d'Avalos family: see Leone de Castris. On smaller panels are depicted Saint Clare of Assisi, Saint Catherine of Alexandria, Saint Lucy, and Mary Magdalene, the last of whom would figure large in Vittoria Colonna's devotions. See *Vittoria Colonna: Dichterin und Muse Michelangelos*, cat. no. I.53.

¹⁹¹One might speculate that the suffering alludes in this case to the imprisonment, following the Battle of Ravenna (1512), of Vittoria's husband, Ferdinando Francesco d'Avalos, and Alfonso d'Avalos. Both were nephews of Costanza the Elder.

¹⁹²Gioivo would proudly display the painting of Vittoria Colonna that he owned when Alfonso d'Avalos (namesake of the interlocutor Davalos), during a visit to Como in 1540, toured his museum. See Gioivo's letter to Carlo Gualteruzzi (24 June 1540) in Gioivo, 1956–, 1:243.



Figure 10. Anon. *Madonna in Glory in between the Donors Costanza d'Avalos and Vittoria Colonna*, sixteenth century. Ischia, Convento di Sant'Antonio. Photograph: Enzo Rando. © Enzo Rando. Permission for access kindly granted by the Convento di Sant'Antonio and by the Soprintendenza per i Beni Architettonici e Paesaggistici e per il Patrimonio Storici, Artistici ed Etnoantropologici per Napoli e Provincia, Naples.



Figure 11. Anon. *Vittoria Colonna*, sixteenth century. Florence, Casa Buonarroti. © Scala / Art Resource, NY.

considered desirable, rosebud lips, and perfectly arched eyebrows.¹⁹³ Thus in the altarpiece, as in the dialogue written over a decade later, the human beauty of Vittoria Colonna could help to inspire the contemplation of divine perfection.

Giovio is at pains not to portray Colonna's devotion as lugubrious. Her austerity is neither insincere nor extravagant. In her piety, she "commits no superstitious, feigned, or foolish action."¹⁹⁴ When not in mourning, she is

¹⁹³Compare Ferino-Pagden, 119, and her further comments in the description of dell'Altissimo's portrait later in the same volume: *Vittoria Colonna: Dichterin und Muse Michelangelos*, cat. no. I.56.

¹⁹⁴Giovio, 2013, 524–26: "nihil superstitiose, nihil simulanter, nihil inepte facit."

neither gloomy nor severe. She both appreciates others' light humor and on occasion contributes her own witticisms. On the other hand, she laughs at women who, making a show of modesty that slips into prudery, "frown ill temperedly and furrow their brows at slightly salacious jokes with a kind of religious boorishness."¹⁹⁵ The extreme example of Giovanna Castriota sets Colonna's decorous modesty in perspective.¹⁹⁶ Preening and ostentatious, Castriota "thought it a sin if she were spoken to flirtatiously, or someone laid a finger on her, or even if she were looked at by hungry eyes."¹⁹⁷ When bathing, she would be disrobed only after her maidservant had been blindfolded and the lights extinguished. Guests at a banquet at her house found that she had censored the dining-room tapestries, which depicted the judgment of Paris, by having covered the three goddesses' thighs and hips with sewn-together tablecloths. Most absurdly, she anxiously asked theologians whether at the Last Judgment, when all stand naked before the tribunal of God, "she herself, as a deserved reward for her well-guarded virginity, might be able to obtain by request from the Virgin Mother of God at least a strip of linen to cover her genitals."¹⁹⁸

Following the mockery of Castriota, Iovius returns the focus to Colonna and in particular to her erudition, which is so impressive that philosophers praise her argumentation, theologians listen enthusiastically to her, and literati admire her as one divinely inspired.¹⁹⁹ Her Tuscan poems display eloquence, erudition, and metrical skill, and her innumerable letters to the most learned and powerful men exhibit not only charm, but also manly decorum ("virile decus").²⁰⁰ Her writings are like the massive fires that Egyptian kings had lit atop pyramids as part of public celebrations: great in

¹⁹⁵Ibid. 527.

¹⁹⁶This is Giovanna Castriota Skanderbeg, the daughter of don Ferrante Castriota, Marquis of Civita Sant'Angelo and Count of Spoltone, who died in the battle of Pavia. Her mother, Maria Zandari, had been wet nurse to Giovanna IV d'Aragona. See Giovio, 2011, 2:719–20n389, with further bibliography. Giovanna III d'Aragona, in her testament of 1502, bestowed titles upon Giovanna Castriota in thanks for her attentive and faithful service. In 1513 Castriota founded in Naples a church called dell'Ospedaletto, to which was attached a hospital for the care of indigents of high birth. See Padiglione, 4–5.

¹⁹⁷Giovio, 2013, 527.

¹⁹⁸Ibid., 528–29: "an ipsa ex merito observatae virginitatis saltem linteolum, quo pudenda velarentur, ab Deipara Virgine esset impetratura."

¹⁹⁹Ibid., 533. In structure this passage resembles a description in dialogue 1 of Clement VII's wide-ranging expertise: "So it's no wonder that when he is giving his opinion, architects are silent, builders and metal-casters grow quiet, and water managers marvel with mute indignation at his uniquely capacious mind": *ibid.*, 97.

²⁰⁰Ibid., 532–33.

themselves, they shone forth all the farther for having been set at such a height.²⁰¹ Thus Colonna's brilliance is all the more conspicuous for having been built upon a solid foundation of virtue and nobility. Here ends the dialogue: right after Iovius has articulated this imposing image, with its recognition of Colonna's literary acumen and leadership, the fall of dusk necessitates that the men break off their conversation to return to the fortress of Ischia and to the women who superintend it.

HISTORICAL SPECIFICITY AND CHANGING CONTEXTS

The portrait of Vittoria Colonna with which Giovio closes *Notable Men and Women* might appear at first glance to knit the dialogue's constituent parts into a harmonious whole. Yet he never completed the work to his satisfaction, and not for lack of trying. Publication appeared imminent in early 1530 when Giovio was in Bologna for the festivities that would culminate in Clement VII's crowning of Charles V as Holy Roman emperor on 24 February.²⁰² Since the literati gathered there were debating how best to reform the vernacular language, the moment seemed auspicious for vaunting the literary analysis in dialogue 2. On 8 February Giovio went so far as to request from Isabella d'Este seventy reams of top-quality paper for the purpose of publishing "the luxurious Dialogue, in which that famous house [of Gonzaga] has a distinguished part."²⁰³ But even upon obtaining the paper, he did not publish. Although he returned to work on *Notable Men and Women* repeatedly in the 1530s, it remained unfinished.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Giovio may here be drawing a contrast with a passage in Trissino's *I ritratti* that likens women who are beautiful only on the outside to ancient Egyptian temples whose contents disappointed. See Trissino in Hirdt, 24.

²⁰² While scholars customarily refer to Charles V as Holy Roman emperor for the entire period that began with his election to succeed Maximilian in 1519, technically he remained only emperor-elect until the coronation in 1530.

²⁰³ Zimmermann, 111. The quotation is from Giovio's letter to Giangiacomo Calandra, Isabella's secretary.

²⁰⁴ Ernesto Travi was convinced that Giovio was readying to publish the dialogue in 1535: Giovio, 1956–, 9:150. In Giovio, 2011, 1:xxxix–ci, Minonzio meticulously analyzes evidence for revision. An addendum to the first dialogue initially included a phrase (subsequently deleted) taking notice of the recent demise ("caesum nuper audistis") of Napoleone Orsini, the abbot of Farfa, who in fact did not die until 1533. See Minonzio's discussion of the passage in *ibid.*, 1:xcii–xciii. The latest datable intervention is a reference in dialogue 3 to Giovio's museum on Lake Como, on which construction began only in 1537: Giovio, 2013, 385. See also Minonzio's remarks in Giovio, 2011, 1:cxlvi. On the condition of the manuscripts see *ibid.*, 1:clxxvii–ccviii; Giovio, 2013, 553–54.

Giovio's inability to complete this book resulted in part from other projects taking precedence. Among these were a biography of Pope Leo X, written mostly if not entirely between 1529 and 1534; a commentary on the Turks, probably begun just after he returned to Rome in 1530 and published in 1532; the *Histories*, on which he resumed work by 1533; and the biography of Pescara that Vittoria Colonna herself had commissioned in 1528.²⁰⁵ Later in life, when writing his *Elogia Virorum Illustrium* (Sketches of illustrious men), he would draw passages verbatim from the manuscript of *Notable Men and Women*, now permanently set aside.

The chief reason why the dialogue remained unfinished surely rests with the passing of the political moment that is its setting. Giberti, for whose comfort while a hostage it was initially intended, escaped from captivity on the night of 29–30 November 1527. A week later, Pope Clement VII was liberated from the Castel Sant'Angelo. Major military changes ensued. Initially, French advances gave hope for the formation of a new alliance against Emperor Charles V: in late April of 1528 Odet de Foix, Viscount of Lautrec, laid siege to Spanish-controlled Naples, and the Genoese captain Filippino Doria (then employed by the French) destroyed the Imperial fleet in the Battle of Capo d'Orso.²⁰⁶ In August, however, Lautrec died and the French were forced to retreat from Naples. In September the pope, who had remained neutral for months, entered into negotiations with the emperor that would issue in an alliance concluded at Barcelona on 29 June 1529. These changes necessitated shifts in the perspective taken on the events recounted in the dialogue. Its candid criticisms of Charles V and of Clement VII were hardly suited to the Imperial coronation in Bologna. Indeed, addenda and corrigenda to the manuscripts attest to Giovio's efforts to portray both rulers in the best possible light, but dialogue 1 in particular would have required a complete overhaul to be adapted to the times.

If *Notable Men and Women* was too time bound to be completed, it shared that fate with another prosopographical dialogue, Pierio Valeriano's *De Litteratorum Infelicitate* (On the ill fortune of learned men), which was set in Rome during Lent of 1529.²⁰⁷ Both works emerged from and represented a short-lived political constellation, and both resisted subsequent efforts to reframe their meanings. Julia Gaisser's formulation with respect to Valeriano's text applies equally well to Giovio's: "the literary design of his dialogue was both created and disrupted by real events. Valeriano used a specific historical moment to give his

²⁰⁵On the dates of composition and publication of these works, see Zimmermann, 287 (on the sequence of composition of the *Histories*), 289–90 (a listing of first editions of Giovio's works), and 225 (on the composition of the life of Pescara, which he evidently completed in revised form by 1546).

²⁰⁶Robin, 2007, 8–13, excerpts and analyzes Giovio's widely circulated letter describing the Battle of Capo d'Orso.

²⁰⁷On Valeriano's *De Litteratorum Infelicitate*, see Gaisser, 1999; Gouwens, 143–67; Gaisser, 2008. On the wider context of dialogic writing in Italy in the sixteenth century, see Cox, 1992.

dialogue not only its occasion, but also its structure and meaning. But the moment was brief — hardly a nano-second of historical time. When events changed and the moment was gone, the work lost its relevance and much of its artistic power.”²⁰⁸ As for Valeriano’s dialogue, so too for Giovio’s: the historical specificity of a work written in the aftermath of the Sack of Rome militated against its completion.

Nor were all the changes political: for within a half decade after Giovio began writing the dialogue, many of the youths upon whom its interlocutors had pinned modest hopes for renewal had died.²⁰⁹ More significantly, the synecdoche that the dialogue posits between particular Italian cities and their noblewomen was becoming less meaningful. Milan and Naples remained under Spanish rule; Genoa yielded to Spanish domination in 1528; in the 1530s Florence became a hereditary principate of the Medici family under the aegis of the emperor; and Rome fell increasingly under the control of the papacy, which in turn was often beholden to Spanish interests.²¹⁰ Only Venice retained the political autonomy that Giovio connected so directly with civic culture and thereby with the status of women. Meanwhile, as elites throughout the peninsula intermarried, a pan-Italian ruling class was crystallizing at the expense of regional particularities.²¹¹

One can see a move beyond local identity, too, in the career of Colonna herself: although often in Naples or on Ischia in the early 1530s, thereafter she would spend most of her time elsewhere, including Ferrara, Orvieto, Viterbo, Fondi, and especially Rome, where she became a lay resident in the convent of San Silvestro.²¹²

²⁰⁸Gaisser, 2008, 123.

²⁰⁹Among these were Ranuccio Farnese (d. 1528), Orazio Baglione (d. 1528) and his brothers Braccio and Sforza (both d. 1532), Vespasiano Colonna (d. 1528), and the Roman knight Simone Tebaldi (d. 1529). On Farnese, see Giovio, 2013, 109, 641n157; on Orazio, Braccio, and Sforza Baglione, *ibid.*, 153, 651nn264–65; on Vespasiano Colonna, *ibid.*, 85–87, 636n114; on Tebaldi, *ibid.*, 153, 652n268. Although the death dates of most of the promising young women surveyed remain obscure, one may surmise based upon what is known of lifespan that some of them, too, would have passed away. Two of the older generation, already in decline, who died soon after the dialogue’s setting, are Laura Schioppi, “in whom even now the adornment of beauty shines forth tenaciously, although it has been assailed by the many injuries of bent old age,” and Damigella Trivulzio. On Schioppi, see Giovio, 2013, 409, 703n84; on Trivulzio, see *ibid.*, 387, 698–99n42.

²¹⁰On the mid-Cinquecento popes acting in the manner of secular princes and asserting their temporal power both in Rome and regionally, see Prodi. For the impact of Spanish preponderance upon Rome, see Dandeleit. On Spanish Naples, see Marino.

²¹¹On this development, see Baernstein, 2011.

²¹²On Colonna’s activities on the peninsula and in particular her sponsorship and hosting of literary and religious sodalities in various locales, see Robin, 2007, esp. 41–101. Of course marriage frequently required noblewomen to move, as had happened with Colonna herself, but the acceleration of intermarriage among the nobility within the Italian Peninsula had major consequences for local and regional identities. See Baernstein, 2011.

Both in person and through correspondence she supported the work of religious reformers, including Juan de Valdés and Bernardino Ochino, and she furthered the cause of literati through her example, guidance, and patronage.²¹³ Most famously, she became a close friend of Michelangelo's, with whom she discussed in detail the relationship between art and religion just as he was making original contributions to what has been termed "the reform of art."²¹⁴ Insofar as she assumed an active role in the rapid transformation of culture throughout Italy, Colonna became less identifiable with the arcadian tranquility and disengagement from peninsular affairs of Ischia that Paolo Giovio had portrayed.

So, too, in its discussions of beauty and of religious devotion, the dialogue was moored to the moment it was written. In describing the body of his female patron so graphically, Giovio took a step as bold as it was unusual. It may not have been less decorous, however, than the image of Vittoria Colonna as Victory on the 1525 portrait medal (fig. 3), which similarly blends stock fictive elements with the representation of a flesh-and-blood woman. At the same time, like Nifo's inventory of Giovanna d'Aragona's body, Giovio's *effictio* of Colonna participated in current learned discourse about the decorousness of desirable female beauty in the erotics of religion.²¹⁵ Vittoria's breasts, which Giovio describes in the third Ischian dialogue as filled not with milk but with heavenly nectar, are for him integral parts of her entire beautiful body that, in harmony with her inner beauty, could inspire contemplation of the divine. In widowhood, Colonna would not jettison her belief in the power of earthly beauty as a spur toward the sacred, a fact evident not only in her poetry, but also in her devotional use of a Magdalene by Titian — quite possibly the *Penitent Magdalene* (1530–35) now in the Pitti Palace, in which the saint's hair and arms do not hide her breasts but instead frame them and set them in relief (fig. 12).²¹⁶ The

²¹³On these developments, see Robin, 2007. On the often underestimated importance of women's correspondence, see Baernstein, 2013, with a focus on Vittoria's great-niece Costanza Colonna (ca. 1556–1626).

²¹⁴This turn of phrase belongs to Alexander Nagel. On Colonna and Michelangelo, see Tolnay; Nagel, 1997; Nagel, 2000, esp. 179–85; D'Elia, 2006; Brundin, 67–100; Prodan.

²¹⁵On this discourse, see Cropper, 1976; Cropper, 1995; Talvacchia, 2013; and especially D'Elia, 2005, whose insights have informed the reading of artistic evidence in the present essay.

²¹⁶For the description of the Pitti Magdalene, see D'Elia, 2005, 85, which I follow closely. See also *ibid.*, 88, 213n17; Och, 2001; Graham, 137–40. The painting participated in a wider debate about portraying the prostitute-turned-saint as physically desirable: "the modern question about the decorum of images of Mary Magdalene was already an issue in Titian's time": D'Elia, 2005, 84. See also *ibid.*, 213n5. For a contrasting interpretation, see Goffen. On the relationship of earthly beauty to the sacred in Colonna's writings, see Brundin; D'Elia, 2005, esp. 88–91. On the possibility that Vittoria Colonna had earlier learned by way of Sannazaro about Jacques LeFèvre-d'Étaples's writings on the Magdalene, see Agosti, 77, 81n26; Fragnito, 2005; Fragnito, 1997.



Figure 12. Titian. *Penitent Magdalene*, ca. 1530–35. Florence, Palazzo Pitti. © Alfredo Dagli Orti / Art Resource, NY.

literary and artistic exploration of the erotics of religion did not entirely cease with the indexes of prohibited books or with the Council of Trent.²¹⁷ Strikingly, in the collection of paintings that Cardinal Federico Borromeo (1564–1631) assembled to exemplify decorous Christian art, he included

²¹⁷See Talvacchia, 2013; and especially O'Malley, 2013, 44: "To a degree unknown before . . . controversies swirled in elite circles over what in images was religiously and morally acceptable. In play in the controversies were diverse theological and philosophical assumptions about the senses and, in particular, about the relationship of body and soul, flesh and spirit. On these controversies the Church made no pronouncement." In fact, according to O'Malley, individual religious leaders and theologians "evinced great variety in their attitudes about such matters — and they acted in accordance with those attitudes": *ibid.* Meanwhile, the "new erotics of visual pleasure" that has been identified as distinctive to the early Cinquecento (Cropper, 1976, 162) did not entirely disappear from religious art. See for example O'Malley's discussion of Rubens's *The Holy Family with Saint Anne* (late 1620s), in which the infant Christ touches his mother's bare right breast: O'Malley, 2000, 3–4.

a replica of the Pitti Magdalene.²¹⁸ No longer, however, was there the representational latitude regarding the place of physical beauty in religious devotion that had distinguished the 1520s and 1530s.

CONCLUSION

Notable Men and Women leaves unresolved the critical issues of how Italy could regain political vitality, literary leadership, the fertility of its noble lines, and the preeminence of its chaste noblewomen. Nevertheless, Colonna herself did become a beacon and inspiration to other intellectuals, both men and women, in the vibrant literary and religious cultures of the mid-Cinquecento.²¹⁹ Even at a time when she was enclosed, in mourning, in the *castello* on Ischia, Giovio could see within her the qualities that would later enable her to play such a forceful role in renewal. The third Ischian dialogue has bequeathed to us, as an enduring legacy, its eloquent portrayal of Vittoria Colonna at a distinct time both in the representation of beauty in literature and art, and in her own literary and spiritual development. For a while, writers and painters enjoyed a latitude and openness to ambiguity that allowed them to portray women as idealized, classicized, mythical, and erotically charged, yet, at the same time, real, contemporary, Christian, and chaste. It is precisely the unresolved tensions among these conceptual vocabularies — something that would no longer be so open to exploration a few decades later — that animates these works and gives them much of their aesthetic appeal. Giovio's image of Vittoria Colonna, like the dialogue in which it appears, exemplifies the scope for the blending of representational possibilities that distinguished the time of its composition: a moment when her commemoration of her husband, both in observing religious rituals and in composing verse, coalesced with her faith, and when her Petrarchan physical beauty could be seen to combine with her other virtues to form a harmonious, desirable, and inspirational whole.

²¹⁸In describing his museum, Borromeo wrote of the *Penitent Magdalene* he owned (actually by Titian's workshop) that "what makes this painting particularly admirable is the fact that although the artist depicted her nude he was able to maintain her decency": Borromeo, 179–81. According to Jones, 1993, 75, Borromeo would have viewed this image as "a representation of the purgative stage [of meditative prayer], when the still earthbound, tearful, and distressed exercitant undergoes penance." On the relationship between his homily "On the Magdalene" and the paintings of the saint that he owned, see *ibid.*, 73–76.

²¹⁹On the significance of women, including protégées of Colonna, in mid-Cinquecento Italian culture, see Robin, 2007; Cox, 2008. For a close study of the dynamics by which women intellectuals gained prominence in one locale (Siena), see Eisenbichler.

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