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The Paradox of Shape: On the Representation of Women in the Sixteenth Century

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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The Paradox of Shape: On the Representation of Women in the Sixteenth Century

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In the third part of his Dialogus de viris et foeminis aetate nostra florentibus, Paolo Giovio lists over one hundred illustrious women of his time and paints an unusual picture of Italian society. The catalogue is not a review of the virtues or superiority of women but rather an account of the political use of female representations. Women are associated with the political status of a city, and all references to the physicality of women illustrate the paradox of politics itself. The female body is used as a test case to examine the exercise of power and to demonstrate the reasons for different political strategies in different courts before the dramatic Sack of Rome in 1527. Through an analysis of the Dialogus and comparison with other contemporary treatises on female figures, this article highlights the political use of the female shape, described and paradoxically modified, according to government strategy. A salient example is the ambiguous representation of Vittoria Colonna, seen by Paolo Giovio as the model for women in the Renaissance.

Dans la troisième partie de son Dialogus de viris et foeminis aetate nostra florentibus, Paolo Giovio dresse une liste de plus de 100 femmes illustres de son temps et brosse un tableau insolite de la société italienne. Ce catalogue ne passe pas en revue les vertus ou de la supériorité des femmes mais il rend compte de l'usage politique des représentations féminines. Les femmes sont associées au statut politique d'une ville et toutes les références à la dimension physique des femmes illustrent le paradoxe de la politique elle-même. Le corps féminin est utilisé comme terrain d'exploration pour examiner l'exercice du pouvoir et pour démontrer les raisons de diverses stratégies politiques dans différentes cours avant le dramatique sac de Rome en 1527. À travers une analyse du Dialogus et une comparaison avec d'autres traités contemporains portant sur des figures féminines, cet article met en évidence l'usage politique de la forme féminine, décrite et paradoxalement modifiée, en fonction d'une stratégie gouvernementale. En témoigne l'exemple frappant de la représentation ambiguë de Vittoria Colonna, en qui Paolo Giovio voyait le modèle de la femme à la Renaissance.

The paradox of shape

On 17 July 1527, after the savage attack on the city by the Imperial troops, Paolo Giovio was obliged to leave Rome, travelling to Ischia to secure the hospitality and protection of Vittoria Colonna, Marchioness of Pescara. Arriving there at the Marchioness's invitation, the historian from Como started drafting his *Dialogus de viris et foeminis aetate nostra florentibus*, a three-volume

work dedicated to Gian Matteo Giberti and probably completed in 1529.¹ The *Dialogus* tackled crucial issues of Italian Renaissance history in the period of terrible devastation brought about by the Sack of Rome (1527): the military weakness of the Italian states, the crisis of Italian literature, and the precarious equilibrium of the world of the *signorie* when compared to the past. In particular, the third *Dialogus* dwells on female figures, who, as the result of a radical change in society, were called upon to take on roles of power and demonstrate their capacity for governance and patronage at court. It is precisely in this part of his book that Giovio displays his in-depth knowledge of Italian reality and his capacity to derive from factual investigation—intrinsically linked to his historiographic model—profound reflections on the role of these noblewomen.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that the appearance of the *Dialogus* in print suffered certain complications. As is now well known,² Giovio wanted to publish his work in the 1530s, but the drafting of the *Elogia* and their use of the portraits already outlined in *Dialogus* led to the decision to renounce publication. In the eighteenth century, Tiraboschi decided to add the second volume of the *Dialogus* to the *Storia della Letteratura italiana*, while volumes 1 and 3 were only entirely published in the ninth volume of the Edizione Nazionale delle opere di Giovio in 1984.³

The opening of the third dialogue is dedicated to an idealized portrayal of a time long past. The landscape Giovio conjures up is the representation of a vanished world where new coordinates must be found. Hence, he constructs a comparison to a distant time:

So distinguished were these women and their predecessors, as we hear, both in excellence of beauty and parentage and in pre-eminence of elegant and illustrious character, that now we are bound to feel the absence of their like throughout all Italy. For most older men believe that the women in many cities have jettisoned the best adornments of their sex. Overall, they charge, women have lost their capacity for natural charm, a temperate lifestyle, the refinements of modesty, and restraint of tongue and eyes. And if it were right to believe these men, surely it would have to be

1. Franco Minonzio postpones the drafting of the third volume of the *Dialogo* to 1537 (Minonzio, *Dialogo*, xciii, 721, note 397).

2. Minonzio, *Dialogo*, x–xi.

3. Travi, introduction to *Paulii Iovii Opera*, 152–56.

conceded that women have experienced the same harsh treatment of the stars which men have had to endure, as was abundantly demonstrated by our earlier discussion of martial and literary achievements.⁴

For Giovio, the *laudatio temporis acti* is a device serving a broader, more complex reflection, based not merely on a contingent *datum* but on a precise perceptual theory. The historian, indeed, seems to be fully aware of the paradox entailed by a form that cannot be represented statically but that necessitates a change of view, a new outlook on a complex reality. This defect of perception leads to a distorted consideration of the female communities, nostalgically held up as the sign of decline:

But I think these judgments are highly erroneous: for old men scrutinize the women of this era with eyes impaired by age. Feeble now and weakened by physical failings, they can no longer admire what captivates the lively and ardent eyes of youth. Sated with life, they cling solely to memories of far-off pleasures. For images of alluring things, earlier imprinted upon more impressionable senses, still flourish in their minds: they look at what they now see in light of objects that they saw long ago and fervently loved, and do so on the basis of what they found delightful then. This being the case, it's no wonder if they fail to approve of things on which they fix their eyes today—things which we ourselves praise greatly, and indeed accurately—since, with eyes dimmed and the keener senses blunted, they cannot arrive at a refined judgment of most beautiful works of nature.⁵

4. Giovio, *Notable Men and Women*, trans. Gouwens, 343. “Erant eae atque illae superiores, ut audivimus, cum formae atque natalium dignitate, tum elegantissimorum ac illustrium morum praestantia longe clarissimae, ita ut nunc similes tota Italia desiderare debeamus. Nam foeminas multis in urbibus maximam optimarum rerum, quae sexum decerent, iacturam fecisse plerique seniores opinantur, easque in universum, et indolem ingenuae venustatis, et temperiem victus, et pudici cultus mundicias, et linguae atque oculorum pudorem, amisisse praedicant. Quibus si fas esset credere, omnino fatendum foret eandem siderum iniuriam sensisse mulieres quam et viri pertulerint, ut ex bellicis et litterariis operibus superiore disputatione abunde demonstratum fuit.” Giovio, *Dialogo*, ed. Minonzio, 305.

5. Giovio, *Notable Men and Women*, 343–45. “Verum, uti arbitror, illi plurimum iudicio aberrant obsoletis enim oculis senes: huius aetatis foeminas contuentur, nec iam uti exangues affectique viciis id admirari queunt, quo vividi ac ardentes iuvenum oculi capiuntur, quum unam tantum in hac vitae satietate antiquae voluptatis memoriam retinere videantur. Delectabilium enim rerum imagines, tenerioribus quondam sensibus impressae, adhuc in animis eorum vigent, et conspecta olim flagrantissimeque

“The epistemological argument”⁶ regarding the impaired eyes seems to signpost a turn rooted in the dramatic fracture of 1527, since the cure is immediately identified in the principle of beauty that reached its apex in the intellectual circle around Vittoria Colonna. Giovio starts from the criticism of women but does not limit himself to a mere confutation, instead insisting on the idea that “behaviour is not the fruit of nature, but of culture,”⁷ and that it is culture itself that constitutes the essential foundation of equality between men and women.

The longing for past times, for the beauty and customs of women, becomes de facto a true political issue and a testing ground for an exercise of power that is strictly measured by women’s bodies. The aim of this article is to demonstrate the way in which paradigms of female beauty and virtue, together with the distinct parts of the body, can constitute a test of power and a strategy of governance. Thus, the body, and especially the female body, scrutinized and sometimes modified, becomes a paradoxical representation of a time of political and intellectual crisis.

The search for a shape

The *Dialogus* has its model in the *Apologia mulierum* by Pompeo Colonna,⁸ who in turn borrowed from the third volume of Castiglione’s *Il libro del Cortegiano*, as Mirella Scala points out.⁹ Franco Minonzio hypothesizes a derivation from Galeazzo Flavio Capra’s juvenile treatise, *Dell’eccellenza e dignità delle donne*, published in Rome in 1525 by Francesco Minizio Calvo and inspired by Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa’s *De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminae sexus*.¹⁰ The German philosopher’s treatise had been published for the first time in Antwerp

adamata rerum obiecta, recentibus spectris et persimili iucunditate representant; quo fit ut mirum esse non debeat, si nihil iam earum rerum probent quod hodie conspiciunt, et nos ipsi magnopere et rectissima quidem aestimatione laudamus, quoniam ad subtilitatem pulcherrimarum naturae operum hebetatis luminibus et contusis acutorumque sensuum instrumentis pervenire non possunt.” Giovio, *Dialogo*, 305–6.

6. Minonzio, *Dialogo*, li.

7. Minonzio, *Dialogo*, li.

8. Vecce, “Paolo Giovio e Vittoria Colonna,” 79.

9. Scala, “Encomi e dediche.”

10. Minonzio, *Dialogo*, cxxxiii.

in 1529, but the project dated back to 1509 and its public encomium of princess Margaret of Austria, who was chancellor of the University of Dôle where the young Agrippa was working on a commentary of Johannes Reuchlin's *De verbo mirifico*. The defence of women in the *De nobilitate* seems to take on an almost theological meaning, if understood in a broader sense, as Vittoria Perrone Compagni argues.¹¹ Thus—all ironic or paradoxical readings aside—the treatise takes advantage of its double nature as epideictic text and theological reflection to deal with its starting assumption:¹²

I have undertaken—as bold as I can but not without shame—to treat a topic previously ignored but by no means far from the truth, namely, the nobility and pre-eminence of the female sex. I confess that more than once, within myself, my boldness has struggled with my sense of shame. For on the one hand, I thought it the height of ambition and boldness to seek to enumerate in a discourse the innumerable merits of women, their virtue, and their complete superiority. On the other hand, to accord women pre-eminence over men seemed the height of shame, almost the sign of an emasculated spirit.¹³

The *amplificatio* of the dedication with which the treatise opens is justified at the rhetorical level, to the extent that the work is defined as “trifles of my youth,”¹⁴ when Agrippa addresses Maximillian of Transylvania. However, the author's intent seems to be a critique of the dominant social system, and his defence of women is part of a project to pass judgement on a cultural model. The Neoplatonist references in the work probably reached the Bishop of Como via Galeazzo Capra's *Dell'eccellenza e dignità delle donne*, a treatise that must have been known to Giovio because his friend and fellow citizen, Francesco

11. Perrone Compagni, “L'innocenza di Eva,” 62.

12. Telle, *L'œuvre de Marguerite d'Angoulême*, 46–53; Korkowski, “Agrippa as Ironist.”

13. Agrippa, *Declamation*, trans. Rabil, 41. “Rem hactenus inauditam, sed vero haud absimiliem pro viribus audacter quidem sed non sine pudore aggressus sum foeminei sexus nobilitatem, praecellentia describere. Certauit fateor intra me sapius audacia cum pudore. Nam ut innumeras mulierum laudes, virtutes, summamque praestantiam oratione velle complecti, plenum ambitionis et audaciae putabam, sic foeminas maribus praeferre, tanquam euirati ingenii plenum pudoris videbatur.” Agrippa, *De nobilitate*, ed. Antonioli, Béné, and Sauvage, 48.

14. Agrippa, *Declamation*, 40. “pueritiae meae nugis.” Agrippa, *De nobilitate*, 48.

Minizio Calvo, had published both *De romanis piscibus* and the treatise on *Moschovia* in 1524 and 1525, respectively. The Milanese printing house had, as a matter of fact, become a meeting place for the literati and intellectuals linked to the court of Pope Clement VII and a space where the discourse on women spread.¹⁵ As secretary to Francesco II Sforza, and being close to Giovanni Andrea Alciato, Capra frequented the same Milanese milieu as Giovio. Besides a variety of fifteenth-century sources, he used writings by Erasmus, such as the *Encomium matrimonii* and the *Institutio christiani matrimonii*, which would later be reprised in the *Anthropologia*, a dialogue in three volumes on the nature of man and woman and on the human condition, printed in Venice by Aldo Manuzio's heirs in 1533.¹⁶

Giovio had certainly had the opportunity to read, either in its entirety or in part, *Il libro del Cortegiano*, which had been inspired by Vittoria Colonna and sent to her by the author. Castiglione complains in one letter about the Marchioness not having kept her promise to avoid circulating his book before its publication:

Signora Vittoria della Colonna, marchioness of Pescara, to whom I had already given a copy of the book, had, contrary to her promise, caused a large part of it to be transcribed, I could not but feel a certain annoyance, fearing the considerable mischief that can arise in such cases. Nevertheless, I trusted that the wisdom and prudence of that lady (whose virtue I have always held in veneration as something divine) would avail to prevent any wrong from befalling me for having obeyed her commands.¹⁷

It is thus reasonable to believe that Giovio had the chance to read the treatise directly while in Ischia, and not second-hand in Pompeo Colonna's *Apologia mulierum*. On the other hand, we can see an affinity, even in their inspiration, between Giovio's treatise and the *Cortegiano*—particularly if we take into

15. See Doglio, introduction to *Della eccellenza*, 15.

16. D'Ascia, "Galeazzo Flavio Capella."

17. Castiglione, *Book of the Courtier*, trans. Singleton, 3. "La signora Vittoria dalla Colonna, marchesa di Pescara, alla quale io già feci copia del libro, contra la promessa sua ne avea fatto transcrivere una gran parte, non potei non sentirne qualche fastidio, dubitandomi di molti inconvenienti, che in simili casi possono occorrere; nientedimeno mi confidai che l'ingegno e prudenzia di quella Signora (la virtù della quale io sempre ho tenuto in venerazione come cosa divina) bastasse a rimediare che pregiudicio alcuno non mi venisse dall'aver obedito a' suoi comandamenti." Castiglione, *Il libro del Cortegiano*, ed. Cian, 2.

account the implicit dedication of both to Vittoria Colonna. Castiglione, in his letter written from Madrid on 21 March 1525, on the occasion of Fernando Francesco d'Ávalos's victory at Pavia, wrote the following:

Just as you desired someone to write the "Cortegiano," and I, in my eagerness to do your pleasure, understood and felt this without a word or sign from you, and became obedient to your unspoken command, so I am sure that your spirit must know what I feel but cannot say, all the more because your divine genius is able to penetrate farther than other human thought and can attain to the knowledge of things that are hidden from common mortals.¹⁸

On the other hand, Paolo Giovio, in his first *Dialogus*, dedicated to Gian Matteo Giberti, one of the hostages that Clement VII was forced to hand over to the Imperial troops before the payment of the ransom,¹⁹ dwelt on the creative potential of Vittoria Colonna's circle:

[...] cast out of the citadel, I came to Ischia—and to Vittoria Colonna. She is a woman both outstanding in beauty and purity and worthiest by far of the kind of praise normally reserved for men. I was aware that she is endowed with such magnanimity and virtue that she considers nothing finer than to rescue those cast out by shipwreck and by the savage waves of a hostile storm and not allow them to be drowned by any wrong of Fortune and, once they have been saved, kindly and generously to restore them to health, especially those who have derived some commendation and praise from the excellent study of literature.²⁰

18. Castiglione, *Perfect Courtier*, trans. Cartwright, 268–69. "Che se, avendo Vostra Signoria avuto desiderio, che qualc'uno scrivesse il Cortegiano, senza ch'ella me lo dicesse, o pur'accennasse, l'animo mio, come presago, e proporzionato in qualche parte a servirla così, come essa a comandarmi, lo intese e conobbe, e fu obbedientissimo a questo suo tacito comandamento; non si può se non pensare, che l'animo suo medesimamente debba intendere quello ch'io penso, e non dico; e tanto più chiaramente, quanto che quelli sublimi spiriti dell'ingegno suo divino penetrano più che alcun'altro intendimento umano alla cognizione d'ogni cosa, ancor'alli altri incognita." Castiglione, *Opere volgari e latine*, 293.

19. Zimmermann, *Paolo Giovio*, 85.

20. Giovio, *Notable Men and Women*, 3. "[...] arce eiectus in Aenariam veni ad Victoria Columnnam, foeminam cum forma et pudicitia illustrem, tum omni virili laude longe dignissimam. Sciebam enim illam tanta esse animi magnitudine atque virtute ut nihil praestantius duceret quam naufragio et saevius

Giovio's flight from Rome and his abandonment of the papal court disrupted the value system that he had identified with the courts and society in general. Giberti became the symbol of ruin and foreign subjugation, while literature came as a solace to soothe the suffering of imprisonment. It was only thanks to Vittoria Colonna's exhortations that Giovio was driven to compose his *Dialogus*, which, as Minonzio notes, participates in the long tradition of dramatic historiography represented by Xenophon and Livy and their portrayal of exemplary historical figures.²¹

In particular, Giovio's third *Dialogus*, which he dedicated to contemporary noblewomen, was exceptionally noteworthy, not so much because of the subject treated (already widespread in the humanistic tradition) as because of "its admixture of praise and blame."²² Giovio was certainly supported by the great examples of Boccaccio, with his *De mulieribus claris*, and of the *Livre de la Cité des Dames* by Christine de Pizan, as well as the age-old debate on the presumed physical inferiority of women.²³

In Giovio's work, there is no lack of references to clichés and the early sixteenth-century discourse on women, but what characterizes it most is the author's capacity to display the strong points and the weaknesses of the noblewomen of his times. In this respect, the reuse of Neoplatonic concepts, probably filtered through Capra's works, refers to a measure of beauty as an expression of virtue, or else to a lack of modesty that amounts to a sign of the decadence of the times.

Beauty and power: a paradigm of power

The catalogue of 101 women quoted in Giovio's third *Dialogus* bears witness to a specific interest in the female figures of his time. It is not a question, as in other treatises, of establishing the supremacy or the equality of women, but of understanding the rules of society from a novel viewpoint. In this instance, too, Giovio demonstrates his mastery in outlining the profiles and memorably

adversae tempestatis eiectos fluctibus excipere, nec eos ulla fortunae iniuria mergi, pati, ac demum conservatos benigne et liberaliter recreare, et eos quidem, ante alios, qui aliquam ab optimis litterarum studiis commendationem ac laudem meruissent." Giovio, *Dialogo*, 4.

21. Minonzio, *Dialogo*, 472.

22. Kenneth Gouwens, introduction to *Notable Men and Women*, viii.

23. See Doglio, introduction to *Della eccellenza*.

rendering the figures of a large array of women associated ideally with cities' political power. Ischia itself is depicted as a *gynaeceum* dominated by the figure of Vittoria Colonna and composed of Giovanna and Maria D'Aragona and Costanza d'Avalos—Duchess of Amalfi and niece of the Costanza of the same name who had been Chatelaine of Ischia for decades, as well as tutor to Vittoria Colonna herself. The island thus appears as the ideal space where women's beauty counteracts the wreck of the present times and as a stronghold against the dramatic transformation threatening the *libertas Italiae*. The political dimension is perceived in the association of beauty and virtue, which is the preeminent form of the most prosperous centres of power:

For as I've said, in these times which, although miserable, are nonetheless learned, women outstanding in nobility and beauty are gifted with the great light of genius and adorned most splendidly with every elegance of character. And this is unlike our grandmothers and great-grandmothers, who placed all the virtues of female sex just in fertility alone, when they were unrefined in all social interactions, awkward in speech and manners, entirely ignorant of learned writings, and indeed nearly ridiculous at home and in public life on account of an inadequate mind.²⁴

Women are accorded a precise capacity to act within the social space and beyond the confines of the pure creative act that had historically relegated them to household chores. In this sense, Giovio's description adds very little to the debate on the equality of women, which had already been amply discussed, for instance, in Mario Equicola's *De mulieribus*. However, the sign of a profound analysis of the situation of women seems once again to emerge in a contrastive form, and in the form of governments that were, paradoxically, seen as brutal and barbarous. This is the case of Eastern women—in Persia, Media, Syria, and Turkey—honoured as valorous combatants and celebrated even by the ruthless Selim I. The bodies of the female warriors fallen in battle and buried

24. Giovio, *Notable Men and Women*, 347. "Nam, ut dixi, foeminae, nobilitate et pulchritudine praestantes, ab his quamquam miseris, eruditis tamen temporibus, magnum ingenii lumen, magnaue et valde splendida ad omnem morum elegantiam ornamenta recipiunt, secus ac aviae et proaviae nostrae, quae totas muliebris sexus virtute in una tantum foecunditate reponebant, quum essent in omni vitae commercio subagrestes, sermone et moribus ineptae, litterarum penitus rudes, et ab exiguo denique animo domi et foris prope ridiculae." Giovio, *Dialogo*, 308.

with praise and respect, contrasted to the male corpses abandoned to the wild beasts, display Giovio's capacity to represent female valour as a cultural factor.²⁵

Kenneth Gowens has already pointed out that in Giovio's conception "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."²⁶ This is a fact that we find in contemporary treatises—suffice it to mention Agrippa's *De nobilitate*—but which in Giovio assumes an incisive value almost wholly played out in direct representation and exemplary scenes. His pragmatic intent—by no coincidence attributed to the research of historical excavation ("as I've learned from those who were there, and as I've recorded at the appropriate place in my *Historiae*"²⁷)—also implies a specific analysis of the female body. In this sense, the historian leaves aside the general discourse—that of a theological nature, as in Agrippa's case, and of poetical legacy, as in Capra's treatise—to position the condition of women chronologically and historically. The gallery of illustrious women follows a set of geographical coordinates aiming to provide a precise picture of contemporary Italy. It is by no means a disillusioned denigration of present times, as it was for Pierio Valeriano in his *De litteratorum infelicitate*, but rather an awareness of the conditions of life at the Italian courts. The line of demarcation is once again defined by visual elements such as the hexagonal emerald bowl that, according to tradition, the Genoese kept since the storming of Caesarea in 1101. Giovio insists on the similitude of the vessel as a point of comparison for the beauty of women: their image, indeed, even when pure and splendid, must be accompanied by nobility of habits and by modesty, just as the latter, on its own, does not constitute proof of nobility of the soul:

This gem has been fashioned into a hexagonal libation bowl, with little carven handles on either side and a base crowned by the most beautiful rings, and of extraordinarily capacity. Moreover, the whole gem, shining forth marvellously from its gaping lips, has been splendidly polished in-

25. See Giovio, *Notable Men*, 361; Giovio, *Dialogo*, 318.

26. Gouwens, "Female Virtue," 42.

27. Giovio, *Notable Men*, 361. "Constat enim, ut ab iis qui interfuere didicimus, et in *Historiis* suo loco retullimus." Giovio, *Dialogo*, 318.

side and out in such a way that it would appear to exceed the expense of every royal luxury and every mad extravagance of human valuation. But this splendid dish and much admired gem, which alone is commonly believed to exceed in value the means of all men everywhere, for it has been held suspect on account of its sheer size—no one has never seen its like—of the surpassingly precious gem and its beautiful vessel. Nor, thanks to the exorbitant value attached to it, can the suspicion be erased from men's minds that it should be reckoned a fake emerald and an artificial gem.²⁸

The image of the bowl, on which there lies a suspicion of falseness, but which has never been closely observed and is acclaimed from the pulpit without the possibility of a thorough examination, symbolizes the contact with reality that Giovio probably infers from the line followed by Pietro Pomponazzi and his mediations of early sixteenth-century Neoplatonism.²⁹ Giovio here reiterates the principle of direct observation, yet without renouncing those gentle effects of refined exemplarity that are offered by the manipulable dimension of *objets d'art*. The preamble on the preciousness of the bowl and the doubts about its authenticity thus introduce the disastrous condition of Milan, where the foreign invasion had brought about an immediate decline of the behaviour of women. The licentiousness of the parties organized by the French and the physical contact of kisses (a kind of foreplay) point to a general attack on the principle of modesty that cannot be lacking from the image of perfect womanhood. Unbridled luxury, libido, and blackmail are the face of a general corruption that is propagated through furtive sexual exchanges, in coaches decorated with sable cloths from the Scythian wilds, which favour illicit and short-lived romantic affairs and the general lasciviousness of Milanese society, itself subjugated by foreigners and trapped in a mechanism of self-destruction.

28. Giovio, *Notable Men and Women*, 377–79. “Ea est in sexangulam pateram, productis utrinque ansulis conformata, fundo pulcherrimis orbiculis coronato, ac eximia capacitate, a patulis item labris mirabiliter tota pollucens, et extra atque intus egregie perpolita, adeo ut omnino Regiae luxuriae sumptum, ac omnem humanae indicaturae insaniam excedere videatur. Sed haec tam praeclara patera, tantaeque admirationis gemma, quae una omnium opes exuperare vulgo putatur, nullis unquam Reipublicae difficultatibus subvenit. Suspecta enim est praetiosissimae gemmae et pulcherrimi vasculi inusitata cunctorum oculis amplitudo, neque deleri ex hominum mentibus propter immensi pretii gravitatem suspicio potest, quin pseudosmaragdus gemmaque factitia reputetur.” Giovio, *Dialogo*, 332.

29. Minonzio, *Dialogo*, cxi, explicitly refers to book 4 of Mario Equicola's *De amore*.

By way of an illustration, Giovio can evoke the devastation of his villa in Como and the tragedy of subjugation—the primary subject matter of the treatise.

Beauty becomes the principle of survival, and what is ugly is synonymous with political and moral decline. This is another reason I think one may find a general reference to the perfection and grace of gardens, seen as the expression of the ideal place where the beauties of Italian noblewomen “bloom.” As Jessica Goethals remarks:

Book Three’s measurement of female bloom is also punctuated by descriptions of Italian gardens: Alfonso II’s marvellous villas that so famously enchanted Charles VIII amidst his 1495 conquest of Naples; the Rucellai gardens in Florence, where Giovio had partaken in the philosophical, political, and poetic discourses; the Queens’ Rocks, a series of islets that under the cultivating hands of Neapolitan noblewomen had bloomed into paradisiacal gardens lush with flowers that now lie “neglected and disfigured” amidst the tribulations of recent years but serve as Book Three’s setting and thus help frame Giovio’s never-quite-answered question of whether Italy is in a permanent decline or remediable lull.³⁰

The *topoi* of the ideal place return to exalt the cleanliness and grace that we find in the description of female figures. Giovanna d’Aragona is thus similar to a precious stone: “D’Aragona seems very much like the opal gem, always prized for its brightness, since there shine forth in her, with a certain incredible brilliance, a flame more glittering than a carbuncle, the translucent luster of a green emerald, and a violet paler than an amethyst.”³¹ The insistence on precious stones does not merely constitute a rhetorical artifice in the juxtaposition of brilliance and female beauty. On the contrary, the reference to gems indicates an actual expertise on the subject of jewellery on the part of Giovio.

In a letter written in Florence on 3 July 1520, Giovio addresses his brother, Benedetto, to clarify his financial situation and explain rumours circulating

30. Goethals, “Flowers of Italian Literature,” 753.

31. Giovio, *Notable Men and Women*, 445. “Ita ut haec Aragonia opalo gemmae simillima videatur, quae in praetiosissima claritate semper fuit, quoniam in ea et carbunculi micantior flamma, et virentis smaragdi nitor ille traslucidus, et amethisina purpura dilutior, incredibili quadam radiorum mixtura pelluceant, sicque eius confusi colores oculos delectent, ut opalis nihil operoso includente auro, nihil substrata bractea prorsus indigeat.” Giovio, *Dialogo*, 388, 390.

about him ("Paolo is rich, since he doesn't spend and has income"³²). Giovio describes the price of life at the Roman court, despite receiving support from the pope and Cardinal Bendinello Sauli; however, he does not neglect his moral and economic debts to his family, who supported him during the years when he was studying. In his letter, he references an emerald, obviously the property of Benedetto, and he states that, while he is unfamiliar with Florentine jewellers, he is close to Caradosso, the famous Roman goldsmith, who was praised by Benvenuto Cellini himself.³³ In the years before the Sack of Rome, Paolo Giovio had led a life of ease at the court of Pope Clement VII, and before that with Leo X. He lived afterwards with Clement VII, who had called him to be part of the papal *familia*, by pontifical appointment.

There is a notary deed dating precisely from 1525, identified by Anna Esposito among the papers of Marco Antonio Mancini, in which Giovio gifted his brothers Benedetto and Giovanpietro with a substantial number of precious objects:

[...] silver vessels decorated in various ways (basins, jugs, cups, candlesticks, but also chopping boards, forks, spoons, saltcellars, bowls and various candy dishes decorated with the donor's insignia), and about fifteen rings with precious stones, from the most valuable ones such as emeralds, rubies, diamonds (rough or faceted) to hard stones carved in various ways: agate *ligatam in serpente cum uno equo*, onyx of which one stone was decorated with the image of Jupiter, another with that of Mars and a third with the Parca Cloto, *corniola antiqua* with the figure of a splendid lion, a hyacinth zircon with Pallas Athena carved on it, and then a turquoise (a gift from his deceased mother), a cat's eye, a beautiful stone with two inclusions of different colours and finally a gold ring *mirabili artificio fabricatum*.³⁴

32. My translation. "Pavolo è ricco, ch'el non spende e ha entrate." Giovio, *Lettere*, ed. Guido Ferrero, 87.

33. Bernini, "Foppa Caradosso."

34. My translation. "[...] il vasellame d'argento variamente decorato (bacili, boccali, coppe, candelabri, ma anche taglieri, forchette, cucchiaini, saliere, scodelle e diverse confettiere istoriate con le insegne del donatore), quindi una quindicina di anelli con pietre preziose, da quelle di maggior valore come lo smeraldo, il rubino, i diamanti (grezzi o lavorati ad facies) alle pietre dure variamente intagliate: l'agate *ligatam in serpente cum uno equo*, l'onice di cui una pietra era decorata con l'immagine di Giove, un'altra con quella di Marte e una terza con la parca Cloto, la corniola antiqua con la figura di uno splendido

The finding of the notary deed is important for our understanding of Giovio's methodology, closely linked as it was to knowledge of reality and of tangible experience. In this sense, the materiality of the precious stones appears to be the appropriate means for representing female beauties and rendering an iconography of the gallery of illustrious women portrayed in the *Dialogus*. Besides gems and the sumptuous dresses worn by women during the *fêtes*, the female image is subjected to a careful analysis of canonical beauty which, as Minonzio perceived,³⁵ may be traced back, via Capra's treatise, to the concept developed by Agrippa.

The series of rhetorical questions comprising the description of Costanza d'Avalos goes back to the ekphrastic expansion detailing the concept of beauty and the female body:

Who could conceive her beauty fully in thought, or survey it precisely with the eyes, or define it suitably in speech? Although her beauty has been adorned and perfected by an infinite number of visible refinements, nonetheless her extraordinary virtues, innate to her pure soul, render it far more admirable. Indeed, what charms emanate from her wide and serene brow, her dark and twinkling eyes, rosy lips, and pretty white teeth! What longings she carries about in her milk-white neck and quivering breasts, her modest gait, her spare and pleasing speech, and the tender enticements of all her emotions.³⁶

Giovio proposes a description of the women at the Neapolitan court to prepare his final eulogy of Vittoria Colonna and the circle at Ischia. The celebration

leone, uno zircone giacinto con scolpita Pallade Atena, e poi un turchese (dono della defunta madre), un occhio di gatto, una pietra bellissima con due inclusioni di diversi colori e infine un anello d'oro *mirabili artificio fabricatum*." Esposito, "Paolo Giovio," 410.

35. Minonzio, *Dialogo*, cxxviii.

36. Giovio, *Notable Men and Women*, 447. "Igitur quis huius Constantiae sororis tuae, Davale, [...], vel cogitatione perfecte concipere, vel exacte oculis contemplari, vel oratione aptissime poterit diffinire? Qui quum sit ab infinitis atque conspicuis elegantiarum omnium floribus exornatus et absolutus, eum tamen ingenitae candidiori animo virtutes eximiae multo admirabiliorem efficiunt. Quas enim spirat venter, lata et serena fronte, nigris et micantibus oculis, roscis labellis, candidulis dentibus? Quas autem gestat cupides lacteis cervicibus? Et palpitantibus papillis? Verecundo incessu? Sermone rariore blandulo? Et tenerissimis affectionum omnium illecebris?" Giovio, *Dialogo*, 390, 392.

of Costanza d'Avalos and Giovanna D'Aragona seems, as a matter of fact, to respond to a political commitment made under the sign of that *gravitas* already identified by Giovanni Pontano as the distinctive mark of rulers. In a passage on "virile beauty," Pontano's *De principe* (1468) dwells on the necessity of measure:

Who could appreciate curly, shoulder-length hair? Who would not be horrified by a chest-length beard and bulging silks on the neck and arms, even though these are typical habits of certain peoples? For to seek attractiveness by means of grooming is proper to women, while to seek fearsomeness is proper to barbarians; but we must maintain a virile and Italian discipline [...] so that we may know that there are no other people that cultivates gravity with as much effort as we Italians do.³⁷

This was a conception also found in the *Cortegiano* and which surely circulated in the southern courts, where examples of composure and *gravitas* could not be lacking in the education of noblewomen. Giovio vindicates the principle of the equality between men and women in education and in courtly matters following the line of Pompeo Colonna's reflections in his *Apologia mulierum* and in opposition to the opinions expressed by Pontano in the *De obedientia* (1470–72).³⁸

It must, however, be kept in mind that the aim of the historian in his *Dialogus* is not the defence of women, nor even to teach excellence in the management and ruling of courts, although we do glimpse this as a touchstone for the various topics dealt with in the treatise. It is no coincidence that Giovio refers to a northern gentlewoman in order to stage the sensuality that is an integral part of the work. Here the author tells the story of a noblewoman giving orders to servants and mule drivers when preparing to travel to her country estate who is suddenly prey to uncontrollable passion in a casual encounter with a dashing coachman in the narrow confines of a stairwell. The sexual act is consumed under the eyes of a snubbed suitor, and the woman's saucy quip

37. My translation. "Sed quis probet contorsos in anulum capillos et ad humeros usque deiectos? Quis non horreat barbam ad pectus promissam et prominentes in collo aut brachiis setas? Quanquam haec quarundam nationum propria sunt. E cultu enim venustatem quaerere mulierum est, horrorem autem barbarorum; nobis vero et virilis et italica disciplina tenenda est [...] ut sciamus nullam esse nationem, quae tanto studio quanto italici homines gravitati inserviat." Pontano, *De principe liber*, 84.

38. See Cassese, "Giovanna e Maria d'Aragona."

on the “coachman’s moment” announces the lively sensuality of the *Dialogus*.³⁹ It is here that Giovio’s capacity to elaborate an overarching vision of history based on single, memorable events comes into play. The balance between the exaltation of virtue and direct experience of the world brings the narrative to life as if the facts were happening before a spectator’s eyes. All this allows the narration to proceed not by static blocks but by following the tale with personal, direct involvement.

The catalogue of excellent women becomes a *tableau vivant*, and the concepts of morality and virtue are bound to women’s historical contingency and their present state. Naturally, historical reporting and anecdotes cannot hide a certain degree of manipulation and exploitation of the female body, which is advanced as the symbol of a specific historical period and of a perception of a dramatic decline following a flourishing season of splendour such as that experienced by Giovio at the Roman court.

In the third *Dialogus*, the narrative tension is constructed to exalt the figure of Vittoria Colonna, which stands out against the backdrop of the other one hundred Italian women described in the book. This attention to a single figure is by no means an exception in Giovio’s method because it is precisely through some of these characters, who seem to constitute a chapter in themselves, that the history of a whole era is constructed.

Vittoria Colonna and the ideal shape

The final part of the third *Dialogus* is entirely devoted to the figure of Vittoria Colonna, who represents the shining star in the catalogue of illustrious women. At the beginning, the historian from Como wonders how it might be possible to describe such a woman:

But what fine tools, like those of the highest kind of sculpture, will allow us to render the true likeness, image, and character of our Vittoria Colonna? What choice and suitable colours of eloquence will enable us to relate the likeness of her mind to the special qualities of all her virtues, which belong to her like natural birthmarks? How, indeed, when all her limbs, precisely perfected by nature, match her singular grace, and it appears that

39. Minonzio, *Dialogo*, 430.

in her the very qualities of a most illustrious mind are assembled together with a certain indescribable harmony to complete the appearance of true virtue?⁴⁰

The reference to iconography, and to the construction of an image, is supplied in the allusion to the mosaic that precedes the Marchioness's entrance. Again, visual perception poses a problem, because what seems perfect from afar displays all its defects under closer observation.

Giovio is aware of the political significance of images used in defining the figure of a woman linked to power, and the Marchioness is also subject to careful scrutiny. The complexity of the construction is determined by the combination of details that make the Marchioness the emblem of an epoch. Vittoria Colonna is, in fact, represented on two fronts: she is virile in her capacity for governance,⁴¹ and in her education and her impeccable management of the circle at Ischia, yet she is also sensually described with respect to her shapeliness and the harmony of her movements.⁴²

Her description, on the Petrarchan model and according to the framework set down in the *Apologia mulierum*, proceeds from the top down, and it is her breasts in particular that play an essential role:

But those little orb-like breasts, whiter than shining silver itself, 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 drop 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

40. Giovio, *Notable Men and Women*, 503. "Sed quibus tanquam summae artis sculptoriae, praestantibus instrumentis, huius Victoriae Columnae veram effigiem, habitum, figuram, quibus aptis atque delectis facundiae coloribus, animi similitudinem, ad peculiare virtutum omnium, tanquam naturalium naevorum notas referre poterimus cum in ea cuncti artus a natura definite perfecti ad singularem respondeant decorem, et excelsi animi clarissimae dotes, inenarrabili quodam concentu, in se ipsas ad absolvendam verae virtutis speciem concurrere videantur?" Giovio, *Dialogo*, 438.

41. See Gouwens, "Meanings of Masculinity."

42. Cox, "Exemplary Vittoria Colonna," 487.

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. After her eyes with their widely vibrating rays touch lightly on everyone else's, then her hands, whether touched and seen, arouse all men to their marrow, and her breasts, swelling now not with milk but with a certain heavenly nectar, soften hearts.⁴³

Giovio dwells yet again on the chromatic effect, especially of white, which also has a moral value. Vittoria Colonna is characterized by pity, splendour, prudence, and chastity. The heiress of a great house, she is not destined to be a mother for the furthering of the lineage, but her integrity is underlined by her covered breast, reserved for her spouse's eyes only. However, the very whiteness of the breast allows the reader to imagine the Marchioness's physicality, and the constriction of the bands, paradoxically, displays Colonna's still young and sensual body, a strategy that Giovio adopts to highlight the chastity of the widow and the scourging of the flesh: "On those soft hips of hers she wears the armor of underwear not made of linen but coarse wool; [...] she even beats the private parts of her body with stinging whips."⁴⁴ As noted by Diana Robin, "no literary portrait of a woman's breasts is more detailed than Giovio's of Colonna until the time of Firenzuola, though his approach to his encomium of Colonna's body is typical for the period in that he appraises her body proceeding downward, from head to toe."⁴⁵

The details of his description, like the tesserae of a mosaic proclaiming the Marchioness's eulogy, contribute to the formation of an overview determined

43. Giovio, *Notable Men and Women*, 511. "At illa orbiculata ubera, ipso nitenti argento candidiora, quam molliter quam decenter ad anhellitus modulos e castigantibus severe fasciolis resultant, et cubantium palumbularum instar, suavis intervallis contumescunt. Quae pectori, tam lato ab humeris quam ad ilia reducto, natura sic infixit ut inclusa non appensa esse, interiecto illo mollissimo sinu videantur. Ergo non mirum erit si et illas partes absolute formosas esse dixerimus, quas pudor occultavit, nec ullus omnino mortalium praeter virum, eo praestanti naturae dono dignissimum, aut pressit aut inspexit. 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." Giovio, *Dialogo*, 446.

44. Giovio, *Notable Men and Women*, 525. "Non linteo sed laneo subuculae thorace latera illa mollia circumdat; [...] etiam pudicas corporis partes aculeatis flagris flagellat." Giovio, *Dialogo*, 456.

45. Robin, "Breasts of Vittoria Colonna," 7. The description of the breasts becomes a *topos* from Agnolo Firenzuola's dialogue *Della Bellezza delle donne* (1541).

by Colonna's elegance, by the refined taste in the choice of the court draperies, and above all by her solo dance expressing the gracefulness and the power of a harmonious and at the same time sensual individuality:⁴⁶

Vittoria wanted to emulate a Hungarian dance, which was a type of solo ritual dance, even though the other women were untrained in it and were dumbstruck at its foreign sound. She danced it expertly with such great beauty and dignity that when she performed it alone with no young man accompanying her in the spacious yet crowded room, everyone formed a circle around her and gazed at her with great admiration. Indeed nothing was more charming 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 to bring together 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 leaping in slanting circles, and at still other times with whirling motions in curving paths she danced—as if she were being borne with gliding steps across a slippery floor.⁴⁷

Giovio no doubt leaves to posterity a novel depiction of an outstanding figure of the Italian Renaissance.⁴⁸ Yet such a representation seems to find no confirmation in other descriptions of the Marchioness, be they by Ariosto⁴⁹ or

46. See Michelacci, “Un poco di perfetto balsamo.”

47. Giovio, *Notable Men and Women*, 513. “Hungaram enim choream, quae est solitarii tripudii genus, ad peregrinum sonum ceteris foeminis ad id rudibus atque stupentibus voluit aemulari, idque tanta cum venere et dignitate doctius explicavit, ut cum sola, a nullo deducta iuvene, saltaret in amplissimo conclavi et frequenti totius populi corona, etiam ipsa una prae admiratione spectaretur; nihil enim iucundissimis illis motibus, quando omnia revocabat ad numeros, venustius fuit, vel quum plumeum flabellum ad ciendas auras dissimulanter agigaret, vel manicas colligeret diffuentes, vel ipsa latiore veste descriptis mollissimis orbibus pavimenta converreret, et ad tibicinis modulos, modo gradatim ad harmonicam requiem suspensa, modo subsultim circumacta in obliquos meatus, modo convolutum curvatis spatiis incitata, velut labentibus in lubrico vestigiis deferretur.” Giovio, *Dialogo*, 446, 448.

48. See Dionisotti, *Appunti sul Bembo e su Vittoria Colonna*, 115–40, esp. 119–21; Zimmermann, “Paolo Giovio,” 430–40.

49. Ariosto, *Orlando furioso* 37.18.

Bembo. Such virile⁵⁰ and at the same time feminine⁵¹ perfection appears to be the illusory ideal of an era showing all its contradictions.

Conclusions

The model of harmony and perfection offered in the encomium of the Marchioness of Pescara constitutes a precise political act. Giovio had detailed knowledge of the Italian situation of the 1530s and did not hesitate to outline a figure that stands out at the apex of the one hundred women listed in the third *Dialogus*. The solo dance is, in this sense, the measure of her uniqueness, made of gracefulness and control, of natural elegance and social charm. Giovio's description is also deliberately designed to make this image an example of femininity (her eyes, her hands, her breast) and virtue, according to an ekphrastic procedure. Indeed, he dwells on the irregular features of Vittoria Colonna's face only to stress the Marchioness's "male" qualities, and the overall picture is a sumptuous and inimitable work of art. Her gender fluidity is a sign of her ethical and "authorial persona," as stated by Virginia Cox,⁵² but is mainly used by Giovio as a sign of a specific historical moment.

Kenneth Gouwens has already noted that "*Notable Men and Women* offers little hope for the kind of redemption that Machiavelli described at the end of *The Prince*. On the battlefield men have not behaved as men should, nor are they producing in sufficient number children who could equal or surpass them in that capacity."⁵³ And the same principle applies to the description of the illustrious women in the final part of the *Dialogus*, where Vittoria Colonna is destined to sterility and is far too high a model of a woman. In that sense, she represents the end of a splendid era and the impossibility to have hope for the

50. See, for instance, the beginning of the *Dialogo*: "I came to Ischia and to Vittoria Colonna. She is a woman both outstanding in beauty and purity and worthiest by far of the kind of praise normally reserved for men" (In Aenariam veni ad Victoriam Columnnam, foemina cum forma et pudicitia illustrem, tum omni virili laude longe dignissimam). Giovio, *Notable Men and Women*, 3; Giovio, *Dialogo*, 5.

51. "By these qualities not only has Vittoria raised herself marvelously beyond womanly capacity, but she has equaled the most widely esteemed and wisest men" (Iis enim ipsa Victoria non modo supra muliebrem captum sese mirabiliter extulit, sed cum probatissimis ac sapientissimis viris exaequavit). Giovio, *Notable Men and Women*, 517; Giovio, *Dialogo*, 450.

52. Cox, "Women Writers," 15.

53. Gouwens, "Meanings of Masculinity," 99.

future. On the other hand, the decline of Italian society is measured not only in the *mores* of women, as seen in the case of Milan, but also in the decline of literature and in particular of Latin. Giovio, who could count on the patronage of the Marchioness, identifies in Vittoria Colonna the last bastion of Classical culture, however, even in this case the ideal was destined to take a different direction, with Vittoria's religious devotion expressed in her *Rime spirituali*: "She embodies the ideal of Latin—in its proper relationship to ancient models, in its exhaustive educational background, in its masculinized vitality—even as she wields the vernacular pen."⁵⁴

Court politics, magnificently sketched in Giovio's encomium of Vittoria Colonna, had to confront the inevitable end of a political era. For that matter, the Marchioness held so elevated a place on the social ladder as to be on the same level as Rome: "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."⁵⁵ The unique case of Vittoria Colonna is exemplary: the decline of the eternal city is the same as the Ischia cultural circle and mirrors the Marchioness's own body.

Individuals and towns, political power and moral worth, seem to go hand in hand in outlining a politics measured by the body: like a mosaic—so perfect when gazed upon from afar, so fragile and fragmented when the tesserae composing it are closely examined.

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54. Goethals, "Flowers of Italian Literature," 751. See also Copello, "Ex illo mea."

55. Giovio, *Notable Men*, 502. "Vincit enim haec una mulier ceteras omnes, sicuti Roma ipsa, quae talem ad gloriam tulit singulas terrarum orbis civitates, augusta claritudine superavit." Giovio, *Dialogo*, 438.

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