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The Biography of a Perfect Queen Addressed to an Imperfect Lady: The Life of Theodelinda of Bavaria in Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti's *Gynevera de le clare donne*

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Résumé de l'article

Vers 1489–90, pendant sa période au service de la dynastie des Bentivoglio, Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti écrivait la *Gynevera de le clare donne*, un recueil contenant trente-trois vies de femmes exemplaires pour Ginevra Sforza Bentivoglio, femme et conseillère de Jean II. Même si tout au long de son oeuvre Sabadino insistait sur les vertus et la perfection de sa destinataire, des chroniqueurs relataient abondamment la cruauté de Ginevra, sa personnalité vindicative et colérique, ainsi que ses infidélités envers son premier époux. Bien que tous ces traits contrastent clairement avec les comportements des femmes de la *Gynevera*, Sabadino forge la perfection de la première des protagonistes de l'oeuvre, Théodelinde de Bavière, en faisant allusion à une série de caractéristiques qui sont exactement opposées à celles que les chroniques contemporaines attribuaient à Ginevra. Dans cet article, j'étudie la biographie de Théodelinde écrite par Sabadino en tant que paradigme de femme et gouvernante parfaite, en la comparant aux particularités qui, selon les chroniqueurs des XVe et XVIe siècles, ont fait de Ginevra Sforza Bentivoglio une épouse et conseillère imparfaite.

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The Biography of a Perfect Queen Addressed to an Imperfect Lady: The Life of Theodelinda of Bavaria in Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti's *Gynevera de le clare donne**

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*Around 1489–90, during the period of his service for the house of Bentivoglio, Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti wrote the *Gynevera de le clare donne*, a catalogue containing thirty-three lives of exemplary women, for Ginevra Sforza Bentivoglio, Giovanni II's wife and counsellor. Even though throughout his work Sabadino insists on the virtues and perfection of his addressee, chroniclers wrote extensively about Ginevra's cruelty, wrath, and vindictive personality as well as her unfaithfulness towards her first husband. Although all these features clearly contrast with the behaviours of the women included in the *Gynevera*, the perfection of the first of the protagonists of the book, Theodelinda of Bavaria, is constructed by Sabadino through allusion to a series of characteristics exactly opposed to those that the contemporary chroniclers attributed to Ginevra. In this article, I study Sabadino's biography of Theodelinda as a paradigm of perfect woman and ruler, comparing it to the features that, according to fifteenth- and sixteenth-century chroniclers, made Ginevra Sforza Bentivoglio an imperfect wife and counsellor.*

*Vers 1489–90, pendant sa période au service de la dynastie des Bentivoglio, Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti écrivait la *Gynevera de le clare donne*, un recueil contenant trente-trois vies de femmes exemplaires pour Ginevra Sforza Bentivoglio, femme et conseillère de Jean II. Même si tout au long de son œuvre Sabadino insistait sur les vertus et la perfection de sa destinataire, des chroniqueurs relataient abondamment la cruauté de Ginevra, sa personnalité vindicative et colérique, ainsi que ses infidélités envers son premier époux. Bien que tous ces traits contrastent clairement avec les comportements des femmes de la *Gynevera*, Sabadino forge la perfection de la première des protagonistes de l'œuvre, Théodelinde de Bavière, en faisant allusion à une série de caractéristiques qui sont exactement opposées à celles que les chroniques contemporaines attribuaient à Ginevra. Dans cet article, j'étudie la biographie de Théodelinde écrite par Sabadino en tant que paradigme de femme et gouvernante parfaite, en la comparant aux particularités qui, selon les chroniqueurs des xv^e et xvi^e siècles, ont fait de Ginevra Sforza Bentivoglio une épouse et conseillère imparfaite.*

The *Gynevera de le clare donne* in the framework of the Italian Quattrocento

It is well known that, starting from Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*, the genre of the biographical catalogue of exemplary women flourished during the

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Italian Quattrocento.¹ Nevertheless, between these fifteenth-century epigones and Boccaccio's archetype there is frequently a remarkable difference, due to the links that the anthologies of exemplary lives of the Quattrocento often show with the contexts in which they were born and to which they were addressed. Even if some studies connect the configuration of the lives included at the end of the *De mulieribus*—in particular, the section dedicated to Queen Giovanna of Naples—with the author's attempt to find patronage and protection in the Neapolitan kingdom,² in the overall configuration of Boccaccio's work, it does not seem that either the dedication to Andreina Acciaiuoli or the concluding allusion to the Angevin queen were elements that contributed decisively to the choice of the women protagonists or to the way they were characterized.

This independence of the literary work from the context of its reception became somewhat blurred in the fifteenth century, above all because the genre of exemplary literature, apart from having a didactic purpose for the reader and for the addressee, could also serve to praise the latter, describing their superiority and winning favour for the author. Among the examples of this trend, Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti's *Gynevera de le clare donne*, despite its peculiarities, continues to be one of those works on which scholars have focused their attention less frequently.³ Internally, it is divided into thirty-five chapters of which the first is a laudatory dedication to Ginevra Sforza, including a sort of summary of her life—especially from the moment she married Giovanni Bentivoglio onwards. The last chapter consists of an "Instructione de l'opera, che se presenti a la mia excelsa Madonna, dove debbe stare perpetuamente."⁴ Between the two sections, there are thirty-three chapters, each dedicated to the life of a famous and virtuous woman. In the conclusion to each of these thirty-three biographies, Sabadino narrates how a juniper—Ginevra's *senhal*—grows. In this tree, whose trunk is Ginevra herself, the different branches that sprout stand for the thirty-three women who appear as the book's exemplary protagonists.

1. See Zaccaria, "La fortuna"; Kolsky, *Genealogy of Women*, 175–80; and, especially, Kolsky, *Ghost of Boccaccio*.

2. See Rodríguez-Mesa, "Singular decum ytalicum."

3. Among the few studies devoted to the *Gynevera*, see Kolsky, *Ghost of Boccaccio*, 76–99; Fasoli, "Gynevera"; Corfiati, "Molte se può dire"; Hopkins, "Female Biographies"; and the classical works by S. Bernard Chandler, "Renaissance News Correspondent"; "Appunti"; and "La *Gynevera*."

4. Arienti, *Gynevera*, ed. Ricci and Bacchi della Lega, 379. "Instructions for the work to go with my magnificent Lady, where it must eternally remain." All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

A quick glance at the list of the protagonists of the *Gynevera* is enough to realize how frequently women belonging to the Bentivoglio or Sforza families (i.e., those linked to the addressee) appear in its pages. Nor should it be forgotten that the template for the exposition of the lives of the thirty-three women whose virtues Sabadino narrates could in a way find its source—at least as far as the narrative structure is concerned—in the dedication, where the author describes Ginevra's lineage, family, physical appearance, character, and virtues, vindicating her as a sort of first *mulier clara* among his women. In fact, it is not at all strange that among the female characters of the collection one can trace elements that have already appeared as part of the list of Ginevra's virtues in the dedication. Of course, these parallels, far from being accidental, are to be considered as one of the main features of the catalogues of exemplary lives that grew up in fifteenth-century Italy, a moment when courtly literature was reaching its peak. And in any case, along with the praise and celebration—often with a great deal of hypocrisy—implicit in courtly literature, the last years of the Quattrocento and the whole Cinquecento were also a period in which chroniclers were particularly active in giving detailed depictions and descriptions of the Italian society of their day.

This two-sided literary production, distinguished by both subjective courtly works and theoretically more impartial historiographical treatises, was especially intense—and thus conflictual—in Bologna, where the new century arrived with deep political changes spelling the end of the Bentivoglio dynasty's reign, as Giovanni II and Ginevra escaped from the city. This political turning point provoked a profound change in the manner in which the members of the Bentivoglio family were portrayed and remembered by poets and chroniclers. If there was one character whose reputation suffered an especially abrupt change from praise to harsh and offensive criticism, it was Ginevra Sforza—Sabadino's addressee and, according to some authors, the person most responsible for all the problems of the previous decades of the Bentivoglio era in Bologna.

Taking the opposition between Sabadino's description of Ginevra and those of the literary and historiographic witnesses of fifteenth and sixteenth-century Italy as our point of departure, the aim of this article is to analyze the contrasts between the addressee of the *Gynevera* and the protagonist of the first of the biographies of the collection, Theodelinda of Bavaria. The Lombardic queen's life has been chosen mainly for two reasons. On the one hand, all the details Sabadino records—and praises—about her can be applied to Ginevra

too: both ladies were wives, both ladies' first husbands were rulers who died prematurely, both ladies remarried and maintained power after their weddings, and both ladies were also their husbands' counsellors.

On the other hand, Theodelinda's position at the beginning of Sabadino's work cannot be considered accidental. As in the *canzonieri* that flourished in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy on the model of Petrarch's *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, the "posizioni Alfa e Omega"⁵ are particularly relevant in collections of exemplary biographies. Since, as previously mentioned, the "omega" position in the *Gynevera* is occupied by an "Instructione de l'opera" that, because of its characteristics, cannot be considered a microtext like the rest of the biographies, my attention will be focused on the text occupying the "alfa" position. Furthermore, coming right after the prologue's praise of Ginevra and description of her life, the information about the addressee is still vivid in the reader's mind when moving on to the chapter devoted to Theodelinda.

Two women with different fame: Ginevra Sforza and Theodolinda of Bavaria

In order to understand the oppositions between the addressee and the main character of the first of the biographies, and to appreciate the extent to which Sabadino manipulates history, it is essential to recall some of the most relevant events in the lives of both Ginevra and Theodolinda.

Ginevra Sforza, illegitimate daughter of Alessandro Sforza, lord of Pesaro, is believed to have been born in Pesaro in 1440. In May 1454, when she was only fourteen years old, she married Sante Bentivoglio, almost fifteen years her elder.⁶ Ginevra had two children with Sante, Costanza and Ercole, although the marriage lasted only nine years, as Sante died before turning forty, in 1463. The following year, only seven months after her husband's death, Ginevra married Giovanni II Bentivoglio, Sante's cousin and heir, to whom she bore sixteen children. Beyond the circumstances that motivated this union—which will be discussed later—the truth is that Ginevra's political power increased considerably with this second marriage. As will be seen, there is much evidence

5. Gorni, *Mettrica*, 194. "Positions alpha and omega."

6. Sante Bentivoglio was de facto lord of Bologna from 1445 until he died in 1463. He was elected to succeed the recently murdered Annibale I, because the latter's son and heir, Giovanni II, was still a child.

to demonstrate that Giovanni not infrequently submitted to his wife's advice. These historical documents also describe the cruel, irascible, and vindictive personality of Ginevra, who, on many occasions, encouraged her children and husband to commit acts that ended in bloodshed. They also emphasize her greed for luxury, which made Sante order the building of a new palace for the family in Bologna.⁷ In view of the woman's influence at the Bentivoglio court, it is not surprising that Sabadino chose her, not only as the addressee but also as the actual inspiration for this work.⁸

As for the main character of the first biography, Theodelinda of Bavaria, she was the daughter of Duke Garibald I and Waldrada and is believed to have been born in Regensburg around 570. In order to strengthen her family alliances, she married Authari, king of the Lombards, although the monarch died after only one year of marriage. Shortly after her first husband passed away, she married Agilulf, Duke of Turin, who became the new king of the Lombards.⁹ Theodelinda's arrival among this people marked the first permanent link between their elite and the Roman Church, since the queen was Christian and had a good relationship with Pope Gregory I. As a consequence of these contacts, during her lifetime the Lombards started to convert to Christianity, and numerous monasteries and churches were built in their lands.¹⁰ She seems to have enjoyed great popularity among her people and, when Agilulf died in 616, she was proclaimed regent until her son, Adaloald, was coronated.

7. Maybe one of the most vivid examples of the hatred harboured by the Bolognese towards the Bentivoglio family and Ginevra was the fact that in 1506, after the exile of the whole dynasty from the city, there was a rebellion in which the so-called Palazzo Bentivoglio was demolished. The palace, which might have been one of the most valuable examples of civil architecture of the Quattrocento in the city, was destroyed by popular fury in the spring of 1507. See Perazzini, "Nuovi documenti"; "Nuovi documenti (2)"; Antonelli and Poli, *Il palazzo dei Bentivoglio*.

8. Sabadino finished this work around 1489–90, after serving Count Andrea Bentivoglio for almost two decades. After the Count died in 1491 and Sabadino lost his protection, he may have conceived the *Gynevera* as an instrument to look for another, better patron.

9. Paul the Deacon narrates this period of Lombardic history in his *History of the Lombards*, especially 3.30 and 3.35. For further information about Theodelinda, see Vannucci, *Teodolinda*; Magnani and Godoy, *Teodolinda*; Bonalumi, *Teodolinda*.

10. This patronage was especially intense in the area of Monza, the Lombard capital in whose cathedral Theodelinda is buried. The link between this city and its former queen has been enduring. One of its most magnificent testimonies is represented by Zavattari's frescoes depicting Theodelinda's life in the so-called Chapel of Theodelinda, also located in the cathedral.

Nine years later, in 625, a conspiracy expelled Adaloald from the throne, and Theodelinda retired to private life. She passed away in Monza in 627 and was buried with royal honours.

The boundaries of a courtly work: Theodelinda and Ginevra according to Sabadino and fifteenth-century chroniclers

As has already been pointed out, Sabadino narrates Theodelinda's life in the very first chapter of the *Gynevera*.¹¹ As to Sabadino's sources in composing this biography, even if he mentions a couple of times that he used the writings of Pope Gregory I, the truth is that a significant amount of the information he provides comes from an almost literal translation of Jacopo Filippo Foresti's *Supplementum chronicarum*, which was published in Venice in 1483.¹²

Thematically, Theodelinda's biography can be divided according to the following scheme, which breaks down the main aspects of Sabadino's narrative and his praise of the Lombardic queen:

1. Identification of her father (9)13
2. Description and virtues (9)
3. First husband: Authari, king of the Lombards
 - a. Marriage and death (9–10)
4. Election of Theodelinda's second husband
 - a. Process of the election: both husband and king (10)
 - b. Agilulf, Duke of Turin, is elected (10–11)

11. If the only edition of Sabadino's work that has been published (Arienti, *Gynevera*, ed. Ricci and Bacchi della Lega) shows Theodelinda's life as the second chapter, it is because the editors—wrongly, in my view—consider the dedication to Ginevra to be the first chapter of the work. Yet the function of this section as a prologue for the whole collection is clear.

12. Even if he mistakenly dated the first publication of Foresti's work in Brescia to 1485, Chandler already considered the possibility that part of Theodelinda's life came either from the "*Supplementum chronicorum* [sic]" (Chandler, "La *Gynevera*," 228), or from an unknown text that could have been the source for both works. Nevertheless, if we take into account the history of the Lombards that Foresti narrates in book 10, it is easy to see that what Sabadino recounts extensively in Theodelinda's biography is only a literal translation of the *Supplementum*. Both texts are so close in terms of vocabulary, grammar, and even structure that it is difficult to entertain the idea of a common source.

13. The pages of Ricci and Bacchi della Lega's edition where the different topics can be found are indicated here in parentheses (Arienti, *Gynevera*).

5. Agilulf, a virtuous but belligerent man (11–12)
6. Pope Gregory I's concerns about war and his letters to Theodelinda (12)
7. Theodelinda talks to and convinces Agilulf to stop the wars (12)
8. Pope Gregory's gratitude (13)
9. Theodelinda's and the Lombards' conversion to Christianity (13)
10. Theodelinda's motherhood: Adaloald's birth (13–14)
11. The Lombards' appreciation for Theodelinda (14–15)
12. Agilulf's death
 - a. Both Theodelinda and Adaloald are proclaimed heirs (15)
 - b. Theodelinda as an exemplary widow (15)
 - c. Theodelinda's generosity (15–16)
13. Theodelinda is fondly remembered after her death (16)

The first pieces of information that Sabadino provides and that serve to situate the biography's protagonist have in most cases to do with the identity of the family to which the exemplary woman belongs. Following the tradition inaugurated by Boccaccio in the *De mulieribus*, this identification was normally effected with reference to the name of the woman's father, to his origin, and to the position inside the aristocratic world that he occupied.¹⁴ Theodelinda's life is no exception to this rule: indeed, Sabadino begins her biography by stating that "Garibaldo, di Bavari illustre Re, ebbe una figliola, che de reale corona molto refuse, nominata Theodolinda."¹⁵ Right after this assertion, Theodelinda's virtues are listed:

[Theodelinda] fu de spectabile forma et bellezza, et de generosità de' costumi clarissima apare: fu savia et de costumi de castitate, de eloquentia et de religione circumspecta, et de molta gratia florente più che de altra regia donna, che a quel tempo se sapebbe.¹⁶

14. For further information about the narrative procedures concerning the introduction of the main characters of every life and about their development in Boccaccio's work, see Müller, *Ein Frauenbuch*, esp. 36–46.

15. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 9. "Garibald, the illustrious King of Bavaria, had a daughter named Theodelinda, whose royal crown shone greatly."

16. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 9. "[Theodelinda] had both beautiful body and face, she was generous and always behaved in an exemplary manner: she was wise, pure, eloquent, and religious; and she had many more virtues than any other noble women of her time."

Both these features also appear in Sabadino's description of his addressee, Ginevra Sforza. Thus, the author underlines the "benignità del tuo magnifico aspetto et virtute"¹⁷ before talking about "Alexandro Sphorza clarissimo principe et de la disciplina militare Imperatore praestante, quanto al presente seculo fusse già mai."¹⁸ Nonetheless, with points 3 and 4 highlighted in the above scheme of the Lombardic queen's biography, we come to a juncture where the information provided for Theodelinda and Ginevra differs, and in a noteworthy way.

As previously mentioned, both women married twice, both women married a ruler, and in both cases their first husbands died unexpectedly. Sabadino highlights Theodelinda's unforeseen widowhood in order to underline the lady's exemplary behaviour, which was such that the Lombards decided to subordinate their election of a new king to Theodelinda's choice of a new husband; in other words, they appreciated the woman so much that they were willing to crown as their king the candidate she chose as her husband:

Stato questi reali sponsi uno anno conjugati, il marito Re Antario moritte. Li Longobardi duci, in affanno vivendo per vedersi del suo Re privati, feceno consiglio de creare uno Re, et non potendose concordare fra loro, per prudente consiglio conclusero che Theodolinda [...],¹⁹ per che era donna de grandissima virtute de animo et de ingegno et de singular regimento de homini, de stati et de regni, e veramente degna che li Longobardi facesono tal iudicio de lei.²⁰

17. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 1. "kindness of your magnificent aspect and virtue." This is just the beginning of a much longer praise dedicated to Ginevra's virtues that carries on for almost the two whole first pages of the work.

18. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 2. "Alessandro Sforza, an illustrious prince and outstanding general in terms of military discipline, such as this century has never known."

19. The end of this sentence and the beginning of the next are not present in Ricci and Bacchi della Lega's edition of the *Gynevera* (Arienti, *Gynevera*, 10). This textual problem has to do with the source on which the editors based their work: the ms. Miniato 46, kept at the Archivio di Stato di Bologna, whose preservation has been quite poor. For further information about the two manuscripts containing the *Gynevera*, see Rodríguez-Mesa "La *Gynevera*," esp. 28–29.

20. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 10. "When the royal couple had been married for one year, king Authari died. The rulers of the Lombards, worried about having no king, decided to elect a new one, but since they were not able to choose a common candidate, they prudently decided that Theodelinda [...] because she

This statement has different and complex implications. Firstly, the Lombards' confidence can be read as confirmation that Theodelinda had indeed been a virtuous queen for her people before Authari's death. But she had to be a perfect wife for her late husband as well, since—let us not forget—the Lombards' decision was to put their future as a people in the hands of a woman who had arrived among them as a foreigner. Hence, by including these words in his biography, Sabadino praises Theodelinda at the same time as both a wife and a ruler. This way of proceeding, which allows the author to transform the loss of a king and a husband into an encomium of the widow's private and public life, could have been an extremely powerful device for furthering the political interests underlying the *Gynevera*. So why did Sabadino not apply it to Ginevra too?

As has already been said, Ginevra married Sante Bentivoglio in 1454, and they were together until the man's death, nine years later. Yet, unlike Sabadino's description of the Lombards' behaviour in respect to Theodelinda, the Bolognese people had a rather negative image of their lord's wife almost since the very moment of their marriage.²¹ In fact, as Corrado Ricci and Alberto Bacchi della Lega point out, "Ginevra non tardò troppo a manifestare un'indole irrequieta ed avida di ricchezze senza misura e di lotte, la quale alla prima ora di timore e di sgomento doveva degenerare in ferocia."²² One of her first and more expensive eccentricities that the Bolognese people were forced to bear was the building of the so-called Palazzo Bentivoglio. It is not only scholars of the late nineteenth²³ and early twentieth centuries²⁴ who have underlined the unpopularity of this decision but also some of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century sources on the history of Bologna, which describe the greatness of this palace. Gaspare Nadi, who took part in the construction of the palace, wrote the following in his famous *Diario bolognese*: "Rechordo del palazzo di Bentivogli chome adì 12 de marzo 1460 se chomenzò a chavare li fondamenti per fare il

was a woman of great virtue and wisdom, who knew how men, states, and kingdoms worked, and she deserved such a judgement on the part of the Lombards."

21. On the wedding and its consequences for Bolognese political life, see Rossi, *Il matrimonio*.

22. Ricci and Bacchi della Lega, *Gynevera*, viii–ix. "Ginevra did not take too long to show a restless nature, greedy for limitless wealth, and bad-tempered behaviour in which fear almost instantly degenerated into ferocity."

23. Ricci and Bacchi della Lega, *Gynevera*, ix.

24. Strano, *Ginevra Sforza*, 25–30.

dito palazzo e adì 24 d'aprile 1460 se chomenzò a murare [...] Mai s'era visto l'eguale."²⁵ And Paolo Giovio described it as a "meraviglioso edificio."²⁶

Beyond the displeasure that the Bolognese may have felt at the construction of the palace and the resulting distrust of Sante's young wife, Sabadino may also have decided not to speak about Ginevra's first marriage because mention of Sante had been virtually banned at the Bolognese court after the wedding between Ginevra and Giovanni.²⁷ In fact, coming back to the comparison between the addressee and the first protagonist of the *Gynevera*, there are serious differences between the second marriages of both Theodelinda and Ginevra. It is true that, after these second weddings, both women preserved the position of rulership that they had held before their first husbands' deaths. However, whereas the Lombardic queen possessed power herself—Agilulf became king only because he married Theodelinda—Ginevra had to be remarried in order to keep power. Yet the main divergences between these weddings have to do with the way in which the Lombard and Bolognese peoples seem to have interpreted these events.

Theodelinda's decision is described as the result of a mature and deep reflection on her own people's needs, without her ever forgetting that the candidate she would choose as a husband would, most importantly, also become the Lombardic king,

Lei ultimamente ponendo in effecto il prudente iudicio facto de lei presso il Castello de Laomello de la città di Pavia dechiarò, et per suo marito et Re de' Longobardi, Aginolfo Duca de' Taurini, homo bellicosissimo et de grandissima virtù, de animo giovane et de forma veramente prestante.²⁸

25. Nadi, *Diario bolognese*, 50–51. "Regarding the Palazzo Bentivoglio, I remember how on 12 March 1460, we started digging to make the foundations. On 24 April 1460, we started building the walls [...]. Never had its equal been seen."

26. Giovio, *Istorie*, 43. "wonderful building."

27. And this happened in spite of the great esteem that Sante had throughout Italy during his lifetime. In fact, as Cherubino Ghirlandacci affirmed, "Era venuto Santi Bentivoglio in grandissima reputazione, non tanto fra li cittadini di Bologna ma anche presso i signori d'Italia, che era una cosa meravigliosa" (It was incredible the good reputation that Sante Bentivoglio had, not only among the citizens of Bologna, but among all the lords throughout Italy). Ghirlandacci, *Della historia di Bologna*, 302.

28. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 10–11. "And proving once more her wise nature, being at the castle of Laomello, in the city of Pavia, she declared that she would take as her husband Agilulf, Duke of Turin. He was a

In opposition to the Lombard queen's generous and even altruist behaviour, the main feature of Ginevra's second marriage that is underlined by the Bolognese chroniclers is the speed with which everything was arranged. Remember that Sante Bentivoglio died on 1 October 1463 and that Ginevra married Giovanni on 2 May 1464; furthermore, in these six months of the lady's widowhood, the new couple had to ask—and to wait for—a papal bull. Hence, the decision to get married had to be made beforehand. As Antonio Francesco Ghiselli states in his extensive *Memorie antiche manuscritte di Bologna*, “Piacendo Ginevra agli occhi di Giovanni et ella altrettanto invaghita di Giovanni, egli la fece dimandare et fu concluso il fatto. Procurò Giovanni la dispensa del Papa, per essere loro affini, la quale havuta, alli 2 di maggio, mercoledì, con grande allegrezza si sposò.”²⁹

Given these circumstances, it is not surprising when most scholars and chroniclers insinuate that “sarà lecito dubitare che una forte passione la conducesse a Giovanni già prima della morte di Sante,”³⁰ or when they openly affirm that Ginevra “non rispettò le convenienze,”³¹ that “Ginevra non fu mai casta,”³² or even that Sante was aware of the affair between his wife and his nephew and for this reason tried to send Giovanni to Naples.³³ Nevertheless,

warlike man of great virtue, with a youthful spirit and an outstanding physique.”

29. Ghiselli, *Memorie*, vol. 10, fol. 17v. “Since Giovanni Bentivoglio liked Ginevra and she also liked him, he proposed to her and everything was set up. Giovanni requested the papal bull because they were relatives, and as soon as it arrived, on Wednesday, 2 May, they got married with great joy.”

30. Ricci and Bacchi della Lega, *Gynevera*, x–xi. “it is legitimate to wonder whether a powerful passion might have lead her [Ginevra] to Giovanni before Sante's death.”

31. Ghirlandacci, *Della historia di Bologna*, 332. “didn't respect the decorum.” Giovio has a peculiar view of these facts, describing Ginevra as a kind of inheritance that Sante left to Giovanni after his death: “così avvenne che Santi, havendo per alquanti anni prudentissimamente governata la Republica, et acquistata la gratia de' Citadini al suo allievo [Giovanni], venne à morte, et gli lasciò M. Ginevra, sua moglie che si maritasse con lui” (Hence, after having wisely ruled the city for several years and obtained his subjects' favour for his heir [Giovanni], Sante passed away, and left him Ginevra, his wife, so that he could marry her). Giovio, *Gli elogi*, 388–89.

32. Bolognini, *Diario*, fol. 151r. “Ginevra was never faithful”

33. Here, once more, is Ghirlandacci's opinion: “Pensò Santi di mandare Giovanni a Napoli, sotto pretesto di volerlo mandare alla corte di Re Fernando a ciò che si facesse pratico nelle cose del mondo, et imparasse le cose della milizia, et il modo di reggere li stati, ma il primiero animo di Santi, nel vero, era per levarselo davanti agli occhi, a che la memoria sua in oblivio ne andasse presso li cittadini, et anche per ischivare il pericolo in che vedeva incorrere Giovanni, sendo egli alquanto invaghito di

leaving aside these testimonies, the truth is that the wedding between Giovanni and Ginevra was also atypical in the way it was celebrated: possibly due to the rumours about how little time had elapsed since Sante passed away, the nuptials were celebrated perfunctorily and had nothing in common with the luxury and splendour of Ginevra's first wedding.³⁴ In my view, these facts explain the reasons why Sabadino is reluctant to say a single word about his addressee's first marriage, even if some of the female examples of virtue he includes in his work share with Ginevra the fact that they were remarried widows.

But the events concerning the second marriage are just the beginning of a series of topics on which Theodelinda's biography contrasts starkly with what we know, thanks to the chroniclers, about Ginevra's life. Right after describing how wisely the Lombardic queen chose Agilulf as her second husband, Sabadino describes—and praises, as seen in items 4 and following of the scheme above—the Duke of Turin's courage in war. But what initially seems to be evidence of the man's bravery soon turns into a sign of a serious defect. Agilulf shows himself to be an excessively belligerent ruler who spreads war and destruction everywhere his army goes, from Bergamo to Rome, passing through Verona, Pavia, Parma, Cremona, and Mantua. His bellicosity reaches such an extent that “ogni loco questo immanissimo tormentava con ferro, foco et sangue, in modo che chi potea, fugiva cum le famiglie credendo havere salute ad l'aspre montagne.”³⁵

To face this situation, Pope Gregory I decided to write a letter to Theodelinda, “cognoscendola per eccellente fama donna de grandissima bontade et virtute,”³⁶ asking the queen to intercede with her husband in order to

Ginevra sua donna, et non manco lei di lui” (Sante decided to send Giovanni to Naples with the excuse of sending him to King Ferrante's court so that he could learn the things of the world, of the army, and how to reign over kingdoms. Nonetheless, Sante's real purpose was sending him far away, so that the citizens would forget him, but also because he saw the danger of the love Giovanni felt towards Ginevra—Sante's wife—and Ginevra towards him). Ghirlandacci, *Della historia di Bologna*, 334.

34. As Titina Strano asserts, on the basis of several chronicles describing the ceremony, “le molte allegrezze si limita[ro]no, stavolta, alla gioia di pochi intimi e nessun corteo, nessuna grande festa, d[i]ede alla cerimonia la sua nota trionfale” (The joy was just shared with a few close guests and, this time, there was no parade or party that could confer a triumphal tone to the ceremony). Strano, *Ginevra Sforza*, 35.

35. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 12. “this cruel man tortured every place with iron, fire, and blood, so that everyone who could ran away with their families, believing that they would find a refuge in the mountain wilderness.”

36. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 12. “as he had heard about her fame as a woman of great kindness and virtue.”

restore peace. After the pope's petition, Theodelinda, being a "religiosissima Regina, [...] refrenò l'aspro furore de Aginolfo, et de' Longobardi destrugitori de Italia bella."³⁷ Sabadino tells how her mediation won her Gregory the Great's gratitude. With this statement, he enhances the Lombard queen's position: the reader already knew that she was supposed to have been an exemplary ruler even before Authari's death, but, thanks to this description, the author creates the necessary context for such knowledge. Theodelinda interferes with her husband's decisions as a king only with the purpose of guaranteeing the peace sought by the pope, but which he had not personally been able to restore.

Whereas Theodelinda emerges as an example of kindness and a mediator to restore and protect peace, many sources can be found insisting on the existence of the very opposite qualities in Ginevra. In fact, the most frequent attributes for which Ginevra has been remembered through the centuries have to do with her violent and vindictive nature. Not only did these character traits not help to resolve the political problems that afflicted Bologna during her lifetime, but they contributed to some of the bloodiest conflicts that the city saw in the fifteenth century.

Among all the political crises that Giovanni II had to face during his reign over Bologna, two episodes in which Ginevra seems to have played a decisive role are often mentioned in chronicles of the period. The first one, the so-called Malvezzi's conspiracy, took place in the autumn of 1488 and aimed to depose Giovanni as ruler of Bologna by killing him, Ginevra, and their sons and daughters so that the Malvezzi family could occupy the leading positions of the city. The Malvezzis were not alone in this plot but in fact counted on the support of other important families in Bologna. And beyond the Bolognese borders, they had already negotiated with Lorenzo the Magnificent. On 27 November 1488, when the plotters were about to implement their plans, the

37. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 12. "very religious queen, [...] she stopped the wild fury that had invaded both Agilulf and the Lombards and was destroying beautiful Italy." The way Sabadino opposes the "aspro furore" of the Lombards and "Italia bella" is interesting, as it recalls the frequent contrast in classical and medieval literature between barbarian rudeness—especially in the peoples living beyond the *limes germanicus*—and the perfection of Latin—mainly Italian—civilization. This cliché, which goes back to Lucan's *Farsalia* (1.254–56), can also be traced in Petrarch's *canzone* "Italia mia" (*Rvf* 128, 33–35, 40, 43, 66, 75), *Triumph of Fame* (1.28, 109–10), and in Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories* (1.3) among many other works. For further information about this idea, see Cian, "Il 'latin sangue gentile'"; De Stefano, "I tedeschi"; Monteverdi, "La 'tedesca rabbia'"; Rodríguez-Mesa, "Dos alusiones"; "Los pueblos germánicos."

conspiracy was discovered and they were sent to prison. In consequence, Giovanni Malvezzi, the leader of the conspiracy, was hanged the very next day, and some members of the families involved were tortured and killed, as Ginevra ordered.

The second serious crisis took place in 1501, when Cesare Borgia was threatening Bologna and rumours reached Ginevra that Giacomo Bargellini and some members of the Marescotti family³⁸ secretly supported il Valentino. As Cherubino Ghirlandacci says, the lady became “feroce et crudele”³⁹ when she heard this news and, knowing where Agamennone and Galeazzo Marescotti were at that moment, called for her son Ermes and persuaded him to go and kill them. After this, a massacre of all the members of the suspect families was triggered in Bologna. The chroniclers agree on the fact that “fu lei [Ginevra] che sguinzagliò i figli e i partigiani, come cani affamati di preda, contro i Malvezzi colpevoli d’una congiura non riuscita; fu lei che eccitò Ermes all’eccidio dei Marescotti, inconscio lo stesso Giovanni,” and, as a consequence, “fu lei infine che allontanò tutti gli animi dei Bolognesi dalla sua casa.”⁴⁰

This event must not only be considered a turning point for Ginevra’s historical reputation but also for Giovanni’s, whose image among the Italian courts was seriously damaged as soon as news concerning the massacre spread.⁴¹ From this moment onwards, Ginevra often appears depicted as a bloodthirsty

38. Some of the scholars who have studied this conspiracy have underlined the gravity of Bargellini and the Marescotti family’s treason, since they were extremely close to the Bentivoglio family. In fact, the Marescotti had been one of the Bolognese families more faithful to Giovanni II, and Galeazzo Marescotti, father of the two main conspirators—Agamennone and Galeazzo—and who was more than ninety years old when the plot took place, had bravely fought on behalf of Annibale Bentivoglio, Giovanni II’s father. For further information about the links between the conspirators and the Bentivoglio court, see Strano, *Ginevra Sforza*, 136–40; Guidicini, *Cose notabili*, 175–78; Sezanne, *Giovanni II*; Sorbelli, *I Bentivoglio*, 90–95.

39. Ghirlandacci, *Della historia di Bologna*, 338. “furious and cruel.”

40. Ricci and Bacchi della Lega, *Gynevera*, 15. “It was she [Ginevra] who spurred her sons and supporters, as starving hounds, against the Malvezzi, who were guilty of a failed conspiracy. It was she—Giovanni being unaware of it—who instigated Ermes to kill the Marescotti,” and, as a consequence, “it was finally she who dispelled the Bolognese people from her family.”

41. In the first half of the 1480s, Giovanni was one of the most reputed rulers of Italy. As a matter of fact, it was widely accepted that “ogni giorno cresce[va] Giovanni in reputazione appresso ai principi” (everyday, Giovanni’s reputation among princes increased). Paolo Giovio, *Gli elogi*, 395.

woman, being “violenta, superba et crudelissima”⁴² just some of the adjectives frequently applied to her. However, along with the chronicles that condemn Ginevra’s propensity to bloodshed, the historian Nicolò Scadinari laments the damage sustained by important artworks, some of which were lost forever as a result of the revenge, and underlines the fact that the destruction happened because of Ginevra’s decision, female vengeance being typically much crueler:

Perirono le pitture meravigliose miseramente assieme con la più bella casa di pietra cotta che si trovasse fra Christiani, che mezza Bologna la pianse, et se li Marescotti eran mal veduti a una mano, adesso ogni huomo gli vorrebbe vedere distrutti. Che, in verità è stata una gran compassione a vedere; ché sono vendette femminili che le pietre et la calcina non hanno colpa alcuna et era un grand’honore a questa terra havere un simile hedificio che non veniva forestiero che non lo volesse vedere.⁴³

Coming back to the lady’s cruelty, Nadi includes in his *Diario* two episodes that can prove Ginevra’s irascible and vindictive behaviour. The first took place on 14 July 1498, when “Madona Genevara [...] fo burssà una femena avea nome Zentile moiera di ser Alisandro di Zinieri in piazza viva avea fato più e più mali e specialmente in chassa del signiore messer Zoane di Bentivogli,”⁴⁴ and the second happened only three months later, which Nadi recounts as follows: “Rechordo chome adì 23 de otovere 1498 m.^a Zanevara dona del signiore messer Zoane di Bentivoli fè apichare uno pelachan a nome Piero de... da Brissigela perché avea morto uno amigo de la dita m.^a”⁴⁵ These two anecdotes—which are

42. Ghirlandacci, *Della historia di Bologna*, 341. “violent, arrogant, and extremely cruel.”

43. Bertolotti, *Artisti bolognesi*, 89. “Wonderful paintings disappeared tragically, together with the most beautiful adobe house to be found among Christians, and half of the Bolognese people cried because of it. And, if everybody had disliked the Marescotti family before, at that moment everybody wanted to destroy them. It was extremely sad indeed to see it, since there are female revenges for which stones and paint are in no way guilty. It was a great honour for this city to have such a building, and every single foreigner who visited the city wanted to see it.”

44. Nadi, *Diario bolognese*, 238. “Lady Ginevra had a woman burned alive, whose name was Gentile and who was Alisandro di Zimieri’s wife, because she had hurt the Bentivoglio family.”

45. Nadi, *Diario bolognese*, 246. “I remember how, on 23 October 1498, Lady Ginevra, Lord Giovanni Bentivoglio’s wife, had a furrier hung, whose name was Piero de... from Brisighella because he had killed a friend of Lady Ginevra’s.”

by no means isolated examples of the lady's reputation—show how Ginevra's image in chronicles and non-courtly writings changes noticeably after the Malvezzi conspiracy and its outcome. Until 1488, the main faults attributed to her were linked to her presumed infidelity towards Sante and her obsession for luxury and wealth, but the violence triggered in Bologna after the unsuccessful plot transformed Ginevra further into a paradigm of cruelty. As can be seen in some of the chronicles and historiographical works cited here, this conception endured long after her death.

Taking this fact into account, it is not surprising that Sabadino, who is supposed to have finished the *Gynevera* around 1489–90—that is to say, at the peak of Ginevra's bloodthirsty revenge—does not focus on her peaceful, merciful, or equable behaviour among the virtues that he praises. On the contrary, when dealing with the second marriage, the author prefers to maintain a cautious and discreet silence, alluding only vaguely to general traits such as the previously mentioned—"benignità del tuo magnifico aspetto et virtute"⁴⁶—or her "optime conditioni,"⁴⁷ "consigliare prudente," and "pietate."⁴⁸ He provides no specific examples of these virtues and in no way elaborates on them, even though this silence contrasts significantly with the detailed description of Theodelinda's actions, described immediately after Ginevra's life.

According to the *Gynevera*, Theodelinda's mediation and pacification of the conflicts provoked by her husband won her the pope's gratitude, which manifested in a very peculiar gift (see points 8–9 of the scheme above):

El prefato Sanctissimo Gregorio non poco consolato et per fare cosa grata a Theodolinda felicissima Regina et benemerita de' tanta sua opera, dignissima de' laude, a lei inscripse el libro de' Dialoghi li quali grati li furono, sì per la eccellenzia de essi, et sì per la immortalità del dono.⁴⁹

46. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 1. "the kindness of your magnificent aspect and virtues."

47. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 2. "great nature."

48. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 7. "prudent advice," and "pity."

49. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 13. "The very Holy Gregory felt extremely relieved and, in order to make a gift to Theodelinda—happy and proud for what she had obtained—the pope dedicated her his book of Dialogues, which she liked indeed, both for the excellence of the dialogues themselves and for the immortality of such a present."

In Sabadino's narration, two relevant features of the Lombard queen derive from this present. On the one hand, the explicit mention of what "li quali grati li furono [...] per la eccellenzia de essi" makes clear that the character the author is developing has—among many other virtues—a certain degree of inquisitiveness.⁵⁰ However, on the other hand, the delight Theodelinda finds in literature soon turns into spiritual wisdom for her and her people when her reading of Gregory's work causes her conversion—and, later, the conversion of her husband and all the Lombards—to the "christiana religione"⁵¹ in such a profound way that "la vita et costumi di quale converse al virtuoso operare."⁵²

50. The interest for reading or for culture in general is frequently praised in the protagonists of the *Gynevera*. In most cases, Sabadino celebrates his women's eloquence, conceiving this virtue as the skill to use language in order to solve conflicts; this can be seen also in Theodelinda's biography, when the author claims that the queen "refrenoe cum molta destreza li fieri Longobardi meglio cum parole" (adeptly and with words persuaded the cruel Lombards). Arienti, *Gynevera*, 15. At any rate, those cases in which the author narrates the delight that some of his characters feel when dealing with literature are not infrequent. One of the best examples of this phenomenon is the following excerpt, included in chapter 11 of Giovanna Bentivoglio's biography: "Fu molto studiosa et vaga ne l'opera de Dante, in quella del Petrarca et del Bocacio, cibandose cum piacere de la loro dolce lira et eloquentia, et accomodatamente in li suoi quoloquii quisti poeti sapea alegare cum qualche versetto de la Sacra Scriptura, quantuncha non sapesse latino, che era una prestantia audirla" (She was a very educated woman who deeply knew Dante's, Petrarch's, and Boccaccio's works, with whose poetry she was fed. She was also able to quote them in her conversations, as well as some passages of the Bible—even if she did not know Latin—to such an extent that listening to her was a joy). Arienti, *Gynevera*, 116.

51. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 13. "Christian religion." As previously mentioned, Theodelinda was already a Christian when she married Authari, even if Sabadino states—as his source does, see note 52 below—that the conversion was a consequence of reading Pope Gregory's work.

52. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 13. "she turned their lives and customs into virtue." Regarding this statement, Stephen Kolsky affirms that "(mis)reading the *Dialogues* of Gregory the Great, Theodelinda converts her husband to Christianity, and his conversion marks the end of the Longobards' aggression in Italy." Kolsky, *Ghost of Boccaccio*, 88. However, the source Sabadino uses for this passage is not the pope's *Dialogues* (as the author himself claims) but Foresti's *Supplementum chronicarum*, and more specifically, book 10, where Foresti states, "Cuius quidem virtutibus commotus beatus Gregorius eidem dyalogorum libros composuit atque misit, cuius lectione ipsa mota Agilulphi animum ad religionem et pacem cum omnibus Longobardis convertit et mores vitamque eorum mirabiliter composuit" (Being moved by her virtues, the blessed Gregory composed and sent to her the books of his *Dialogues*. When she read them, she herself was moved and converted both Agilulf and all the Lombards to religion and peace, wondrously setting in order their way of life). Foresti, *Supplementum chronicarum*, fol. 154v. Before Kolsky, Chandler had already hypothesized that Foresti's work might have been one of the sources for the *Gynevera*. See Chandler, "La *Gynevera*," 228.

With this passage, Sabadino thus describes the queen as a learned woman, insisting on her religiosity.

Returning to Ginevra, however, not a single allusion to the lady's interest in culture of any kind has been found in the texts belonging to or concerning the time she was married to Giovanni II. What is even more remarkable is that neither Sabadino nor any of the chronicles that have been consulted describe Ginevra as a religious person, nor do they mention her relationship with religion. Insofar as the *Gynevera* is concerned, this might be one of the most significant silences in the work, especially if we take into account the insistence with which religious faith is praised in some of the women whose lives are narrated. By contrast with the biographies' tendency towards detailed descriptions of their protagonists' virtues, Sabadino makes only one direct mention to his addressee's "religione,"⁵³ which, once more, remains indeterminate and vague.

In my view, Sabadino's silence and ambivalence regarding both Ginevra's eloquence—understood as the practical realization of intellectual curiosity—and her faith could be related, once more, to events that were taking place while he was composing the *Gynevera*. It would have been an exaggeration, and even inappropriate, to attribute virtues of diplomacy and peaceful conflict-resolution to a woman whose cruelty was known all over Italy.

The difference in the way motherhood is tackled by Sabadino in both Theodelinda's biography and Ginevra's encomium is also remarkable. As far as the Lombard queen is concerned (see point 10 of the scheme above), the *Gynevera*, by underlining the chronological coincidence of Theodelinda's pregnancy with the Lombard's conversion to Christianity, seems to indicate that the former was a direct consequence of both the latter and of her prayers to Saint John the Baptist:

Non havendo lei figliolo maschio, pregoe el glorioso Joanne Baptista suo devoto, che intercedesse presso l'alta Maiestà divina, lei havesse uno figliolo [...] habitando essa a Modoezia, che ora Monza diciamo, ad congruo tempo hebbe uno bellissimo figliolo a cui posse nome Adoaldo.⁵⁴

53. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 7. Apart from this passage, the only allusion to the heavenly world in the description of Ginevra's life in the prologue is a summary reference to the lady's five children, who passed away during childhood or infancy, and who Sabadino says will safeguard her salvation (Arienti, *Gynevera*, 4).

54. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 13–14. "Since she had no son, she prayed to John the Baptist to intercede with God so that she could have one [...]. When she was living in Modoezia—which we know now as

The contrast between this description of motherhood as something intimately linked to religiosity, as a sacred gift—maybe comparable to Gregory’s dedication of the *Dialogues*⁵⁵—and Sabadino’s treatment of Ginevra’s sons and daughters is striking. More than a third of the prologue to the *Gynevera* is devoted to the description and celebration of Ginevra’s progeny. The author commences his review of her descendants stating, “Hai anchora havuto de tanto marito [Giovanni], gloriosa Madonna, angelica sobole de sexdeci figliuoli,”⁵⁶ and immediately goes on to list the names of the sixteen sons and daughters. In spite of the detailed enumeration of the lady’s offspring, not a single word is said about those two children—a son and a daughter—to whom Ginevra gave birth during her first marriage to Sante.⁵⁷

It is also true that Ginevra’s behaviour with respect to these children cannot be described as either exemplary or maternal. Scarce information has survived about Costanza, the first-born, and almost everything we know about her derives from documents dealing with the life of her husband, Antonio Maria Pico della Mirandola, Count of Concordia.⁵⁸ By contrast, Ercole had a certain fame in fifteenth-century Italy as a brave *condottiere*.⁵⁹ Ghirlandacci

Monza—and after the appropriate time had elapsed, she gave birth to a beautiful son, to whom she gave the name Adaloald.” Sabadino narrates this just after telling how Theodelinda convinced Agilulf to return to the Church all the possessions he and the Lombards had stolen.

55. The two gifts Theodelinda receives in her biography—the pope’s dedication and her son—have substantial consequences for her life and her people: thanks to the dedication, they all convert (and, according to Sabadino, become virtuous); thanks to Adaloald’s birth, the future of their kingdom seems to be granted.

56. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 4. “From such a great husband [Giovanni] you have had, glorious lady, a heavenly progeny formed by sixteen children.”

57. This is a further proof of the *damnatio memoriae* to which Sante was condemned after his death and, above all, after Ginevra married Giovanni.

58. Costanza was born in 1458 and died in 1491. She married Antonio Maria Pico della Mirandola, Count of Concordia, in 1473. They had one son, who died while still a child, and two daughters, Violante and Ginevra. For further information, see Litta, *Famiglie celebri*; Ceretti, “Il conte Antonmaria Pico.”

59. Ercole was born in 1459 and died in 1507. During his life, he spent time in the service of Lorenzo the Magnificent, the city of Siena, and Pope Alexander VI, among others. In 1491 he married Barbara Torelli. Much of our information about him derives from his friendship with Machiavelli. Apart from the letters they sent to each other, the Florentine writer talks about Ercole in some of his works. See Machiavelli, *Il Principe*, 251; *Arte della guerra*, 98; *Lettere*, 144–46; *Legazioni e commissarie*, 1:239, 2:847, 857, 888, 984. For further information, see Nardi, *Istorie*.

says of him that his father sent him “a Fiorenza a farlo nutrire alli Medici.”⁶⁰ Being Sante’s first and only son, he might have been forced to remain in Florence after his father’s death, especially when his mother decided to marry Giovanni. Apart from Ghirlandacci’s report, we know almost nothing about Ercole’s relationship with his family, Bologna, or his mother. In any case, an indication that this relation might not have been the warmest is the fact that, in 1487, he was invited to the wedding of his half-brother Annibale to Lucrezia d’Este, on which occasion Giovanni Bentivoglio felt the need to grant him a military honours, “a dimostrazione ufficiale della cordialità dei loro rapporti.”⁶¹ It must be kept in mind that, presumably in the same period, the Malvezzi were negotiating with Lorenzo the Magnificent—whom Ercole served and who would provide Florentine support for the conspiracy of the following year. Taking all this information into account, Sabadino’s silence about this topic is again easy to understand, even while the chasm widens between Ginevra and the other exemplary women whose lives are narrated in the *Gynevera*.

The last of Sabadino’s assertions about Theodelinda to which I wish to direct attention, for the contrast they pose with the historical depiction of Ginevra, are the Lombards’ appreciation of their queen and the way in which she was remembered after her death—that is to say, points 11 and 13 of the scheme presented above. The decision to analyze both matters at once comes from the close relationship between them. It is obvious that, in the case of both ladies, there was no noticeable change between the reputations that they seem to have had in the last years of their lives and the features of their personalities and characters that were emphasized after they passed away.

About the first of the issues—that is, about the opinion their peoples had regarding both ladies during their lifetimes—numerous examples have already been mentioned. Yet, as far as Theodelinda is concerned, it is true that the author of the *Gynevera* insists particularly on all the virtues possessed by her in the last part of her biography.⁶² It is in this section that a crucial moment in the Lombard queen’s life is described: Agilulf’s death. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the death of a king is always a turning point for his political community, Sabadino does not elaborate much on this event, and it is only used as a narrative device to emphasize the Lombards’ love for their queen:

60. Ghirlandacci, *Della historia di Bologna*, 180. “to Florence so that the Medici could rear him.”

61. De Caro, “Bentivoglio, Ercole.” “to formally prove that they had a cordial relationship.”

62. See, particularly, Arienti, *Gynevera*, 15–16.

[Theodelinda] visse sempre in grandissimo amore et reputatione del marito et de li Longobardi, li quali amavano più lei che'l Re, per le optime conditione, idonee a regere tutto il mondo non che'l stato, avea, se così è lecito a dire. Morto che fu il Re Aginolfo suo marito, Adoaldo figliolo, et Lei restarono heredi del regno cum grande favore de' Longobardi, a ciò che ella lucesse et splendesse de reali honori.⁶³

This excerpt synthesizes all the elements of Sabadino's praise for Theodelinda and contrasts with all the points the chroniclers condemn in Ginevra. As we have already seen, the latter neither respected nor remained faithful to Sante, and the Bolognese loved her no more than either of her husbands. On the contrary, her presence itself by Giovanni's side is one of the causes frequently cited for the Bentivoglios' decline and fall.

Agilulf's death is Sabadino's excuse for praising a new aspect in the queen's life: her behaviour as a widow.⁶⁴ As one would expect, the period of Theodelinda's widowhood is also exemplary, and the queen goes on mediating conflicts peacefully:

Nel stato viduile [visse] cum tanta honestate, castimonia et splendore reale de clementia, de iustitia et de liberalitate, che la beningna gratia da lei aquisita nel principio del suo advento in Italia, cum augumento de quella, per tal forma se conservò, che regette et refrenoe cum molta destreza li fieri et valorosi Duci et molti Longobardi meglio cum parole, che facesseno de loro li preteriti Re cum l'arme et asperitate.⁶⁵

63. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 14–15. "During her life, [Theodelinda] was always loved and respected by both her husband and the Lombards, and the latter loved her more than the king for her great virtues, suited not only for ruling over her kingdom, but indeed over the whole world, if one is permitted to say so. Once King Agilulf, her husband, was dead, her son Adaloald and she remained heirs of the kingdom, enjoying great favour from the Lombards, so that she always shone brightly with royal honours."

64. Widows—especially chaste ones—are one of the most prototypically exemplary characters in collections of female biographies. For further information, see Müller, *Ein Frauenbuch*, 154–60; Mirrer, *Upon My Husband's Death*; Carlson and Weisl, *Construction of Widowhood*; Cavallo and Warmer, *Widowhood*; Clark Walter, *Profession of Widowhood*.

65. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 15. "As a widow, she lived with such honesty, chastity, and regal splendour in her clemency, justice, and magnanimity, that the favourable reputation that she had acquired when she arrived in Italy maintained the same form and grew. For she adeptly restrained and subdued many proud

She orders the construction of monasteries:

Fece fare uno celebre monastero in honore del divo Colombano in Bubio, et altri monasteri, ornati de cose opportune al culto divino, che sarebbeno bastati a li molti templi edificati per la serenissima et sanctissima Regina Helena generatrice de lo Imperatore Constantino.⁶⁶

And she helps the cities of her kingdom:

Concesse Theodolinda anchora doni et grazie et dignitate a li Italici populi, et non solamente a li Templi et a lochi pii fece doni grandi in nome del Re suo figliolo, ma ancora per più celebre sua memoria instrauroe citate et castelle disolate per le passate guerre.⁶⁷

With these premises, it is obvious that Theodelinda “passò de questa vita cum inclyta fama,” and the Lombards buried her “cum grandissima pietate, singulti, pianti et sospiri et funerale honore et pompa come a corpo de tanta Regina convenia.”⁶⁸

Ginevra's last years and the memory of her that remained in Bologna have nothing in common with the situation of the Lombard queen. In 1505, those members of the Malvezzi and Marescotti families who had survived the massacres resulting from the conspiracies led by their relatives convinced Pope Julius II to force Giovanni to leave Bologna. Giovanni—aware that his army was not strong enough to fight against the enemy—fled the city by night on 2

and brave generals and many Lombards, and she did so with words instead of with arms and conflicts, like the previous kings had tended to do.”

66. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 15. “She ordered the building of a famous monastery to honour Saint Columbanus in Bobbio, and of other monasteries with so many ornaments suited for religious cult that they would have been enough for all the temples erected by the most holy Queen Helen, mother of the Emperor Constantine.”

67. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 15–16. “Theodelinda gave additional gifts, rights, and privileges to Italic people, and not only did she make gifts to churches and sacred places on behalf of her son, but also, to make her memory even greater, she restored cities and castles which had been destroyed by the past wars.”

68. Arienti, *Gynevera*, 16. “passed away with an illustrious fame,” “with great sorrow, sighs, and crying, and with funeral honour and pomp, as appropriate for the body of such a queen.”

November 1506⁶⁹ and headed to Milan, where he was imprisoned, judged, and, finally, declared innocent.⁷⁰ Ginevra decided not to follow her husband, staying in Parma as a guest of the Pallavicino family. The pope, perhaps influenced by the lady's reputation—especially among the Bolognese people who had greeted him so enthusiastically in their city—judged that Parma was too close to Bologna and that Ginevra had not executed his order of moving away from the city. He therefore excommunicated her.

Exiled from Bologna and excommunicated from the Church, Ginevra spent her last days sad and alone, being blamed for the fall of the Bentivoglio dynasty not only by her people but also by her own husband. Indeed, one of the most valuable and reliable documents from this last period that has survived is the farewell letter that Giovanni sent her, aggrieved and furious that his palace had been sacked and was being demolished. In this epistle, the man's regret for having followed his wife's advice results in grief, desperation, and anger:

Sogliono dire i savi huomini di questo mondo che la persona prudente tutte le cose sue fa col consiglio degli huomini savi et che non habbino il cuore circondato da varie passioni affinché il bramato fine possa conseguire: ma l'animo appassionato che fugge i consigli dei prudenti in tutto quello che fa, lo fa in proprio danno et vergogna, perché condotta dagli appetiti appassionati, operando trabocca nella voragine di ogni pericolo. Così è accaduto a te, o incauta Ginevra, che sprezzando i consigli degli huomini et seguitando la tua propria passione, te et altri con essi te hai facti cadere nel trabocco ogni male. Ecco che per tua cagione sono stato gran tempo in questa prigione et ora conduco anche mia vita non al tucto libera et colma di affanni et di cordoglio [...]. Ma quello che è peggio et che insino al vivo cuore mi apporta maggior dolore è che il nostro palazzo in Bologna quasi del tutto è per terra. Et pure di questi mali sei tu, donna,

69. Nine days later, Julius II himself arrived in Bologna and was acclaimed by the people. It was then that the previously mentioned destruction of Palazzo Bentivoglio began. For further information about this last period of Giovanni Bentivoglio's rule in Bologna, see Immediato, "L'iconografia"; Duranti, *Carteggio di Gerardo Cerruti*, esp. 1–60. Giovanni seems not to have been aware that he would never return to Bologna. In fact, he sent an ambassador to the pope asking to be restored as ruler of the city in exchange for "ogni ubbidienza e sodisfatione" (complete obedience and submission). Ghirlandacci, *Della historia di Bologna*, 362.

70. Giovanni died in Milan on 16 February 1508.

principale cagione, questi sono i fructi dei tuoi consigli et delle tue proprie passioni. Datti pace al meglio che puoi. Addio. Giovanni.⁷¹

Ghirlandacci, in what is clearly a fictional embellishment, relates in his chronicle that, right after reading Giovanni's letter, Ginevra "con ambedue mani stringendosi le tempie senza formulare parola alchuna, sendo vicino il letto, con la faccia in giù gettatavisi sopra, di subito rese lo spirito al suo Iddio."⁷² Nonetheless, and in spite of the pathos the chronicler tries to add to the lady's death, the truth is that "per quella sua [the pope's] intradicione non fu sepolita in sacris."⁷³ That is to say, Ginevra's funeral was diametrically opposed to how Sabadino describes Theodelinda's burial.

But the negative impression left by Ginevra in Bologna was as severe as her husband's last words. As a matter of fact, Ricci and Bacchi della Lega include in the prologue to their edition of the *Gynevera* some poems "che circolava[no]

71. Quoted in Strano, *Ginevra Sforza*, 247–48. "The wise men of this world are wont to say that a cautious person does everything with the advice of wise people, of people whose hearts are not inflamed by passions and who are not blinded by reaching their goals. But the passionate soul that does not respect prudent people's advice does so to its own detriment and shame, because it is led by burning appetites and falls in the abyss of danger. This is what has happened to you, O incautious Ginevra, who have despised men's advice and followed only your passions so that you—and others together with you—have fallen in disgrace. See how it is your fault that I have spent a long time in this prison and that I now lead a life completely deprived of liberty and full of grief and suffering [...]. But what causes the greatest sorrow to my heart is knowing that our palace in Bologna is almost demolished. And you, woman, are the principal cause of these evils too, they are the fruit of your advice and of your passions. Give yourself peace as best you can. Farewell. Giovanni."

72. Ghirlandacci, *Della historia di Bologna*, 420. "put her hands to her temples without uttering a single word. As the bed was near, she laid on it face down and gave her soul up to God." Andrea Bernardi Novacula states that "Madonna Zenevra, mogliera al dicto M. Zohane Bentivoli, era intravenuta la sua dicta prefata morte l'anno del Signore 1507 a di 8 del mese di mage; concio fusse cosa che ritrovandose lei nel castello di Bosci" (Lady Ginevra, Lord Giovanni Bentivoglio's wife, passed away on 8 May 1507, and this happened while she was staying at the castle of Busseto). Bernardi Novacula, *Cronache forlivesi*, 215. On the contrary, Giovanni Gozzadini affirms that "Ginevra Sforza Bentivoglio venne a morte il 16 maggio 1507" (Ginevra Sforza Bentivoglio died on 16 May 1507). Gozzadini, *Memorie*, 243.

73. Bernardi Novacula, *Cronache forlivesi*, 216. "because of his [the pope's] prohibition, she was not buried in a holy place."

per Bologna dopo la di lei morte.”⁷⁴ The first one, merely descriptive and quite impartial, is Girolamo da Casio’s tetrastich 207:

Ginevera Bentivola sforcesca
D’animo altier lasciò a Bussè la spoglia,
Contenta pria morir di una sol doglia
Che viver semper tra il focile e l’esca.⁷⁵

Giovanni Garzoni was much more severe in his Latin epigram, written as Ginevra’s epitaph:

Iam matrona potens, sed plus quam foemina poscet,
Impia, avara, tenax, horrida, terribilis,
Hic jaceo infelix saneto privata sepulchro,
Cui nulla Ecclesiæ sacra dedere patres:
Juniperi mihi nomen erat, sed spina remansit,
Ut fuerat multis aspera, amara mihi:
Contempsì superos, qui me sprevere Tyranni,
Optima ab exemplo discite quisque meo.
Quis neget esse Deos, hominum qui fata rependant?
Quæ fuerit vitæ præmia, mors docuit.⁷⁶

Finally, Ricci and Bacchi della Lega publish a third, anonymous poem, a sonnet, whose authenticity the editors of the *Gynevera* doubt, but in which the addressee and the tone are clear:

74. Ricci and Bacchi della Lega, *Gynevera*, xix. “that circulated through Bologna after her death.” For the poems, see Ricci and Bacchi della Lega, *Gynevera*, xviii–xix. After Ricci and Bacchi della Lega, Lodovico Frati wrote an article including several poems dealing with the Bentivoglio family (Frati, “I Bentivoglio nella poesia”).

75. Quoted in Ricci and Bacchi della Lega, *Gynevera*, xviii. “Ginevra Bentivoglio Sforza, who had an arrogant spirit, passed away in Busseto. She preferred to die because of a single suffering rather than to go on living forever between the devil and the deep blue sea.”

76. Quoted in Ricci and Bacchi della Lega, *Gynevera*, xviii. “I was a powerful woman, yet, more than a woman need be, evil, avaricious, arrogant, cruel, and terrible. I rest here, wretched and without a consecrated burial, since the Church forbade it: my name was Juniper, but only the prickles remain, which were bitter to many people and bitter, too, for me. I despised the tyrannical Heavens that spurned me, so learn what is most important from my example: who could deny that there are Gods who weigh the fates of men? Death teaches what the reward was for my life.”

Se fui nel mondo carcha d'ogni vizio
 Empia, maligna, avara e scellerata,
 Or son nel Stigio Regno incatenata
 Ove d'ogni fallir porto supplizio.
 Se il corpo in fra l'ortiche ha fatto ospizio,
 Ciò avvien perché d'Ebreia madre son nata.
 Ma più mi duol che l'alma ho tormentata
 Fra mille pene e posta in precipizio.

Voi altri Ebrei lasciate ogni mal fare,
 Pigliate esempio da mia acerba morte
 E come e quale or mi convien purgare.
 E tu, protervo mio consorte,
 Siccome fosti meco a rapinare
 Così t'aspetto in le tartaree porte.⁷⁷

All these testimonies—along with the chronicles already cited—indicate that Ginevra's former subjects felt no nostalgia, sorrow, or grief at her death. Rather, they saw it as the punishment for a life distinguished by cruelty. In fact, it is remarkable how the last two poems seem, like the *Gynevera*, to have an exemplary aim: to show the destiny of arrogant and despotic rulers.

Conclusions

The foregoing discussion has underlined the contrast between the lives and legacies of Theodelinda and Ginevra through an analysis of Sabadino's assertions about both ladies and the testimony of fifteenth and sixteenth-century Bolognese chroniclers who recount the life and political role of Giovanni II's wife. In general terms, this contrast has to do with the paradox that a courtly

77. Quoted in Ricci and Bacchi della Lega, *Gynevera*, xix. "If I lived viciously and I was evil, arrogant, avaricious, and cruel, now I am chained in the Infernal Kingdom, where I suffer for all my faults. If now my body rests among nettles, it is because my mother was a Jew, but what I regret now the most is that I have tortured my soul and put it in danger with a thousand sufferings. You, Jews, give up all evil-doing and learn from my bitter death, and from how I must now purge my sins. And you, arrogant husband, since you stole together with me, I am waiting for you at the Tartarean gates." The parallelisms between this poem and Garzoni's epigram are so deep that the sonnet could have been composed—in Garzoni's time or later—as a mere free translation of the Latin composition.

writer such as Sabadino was forced to confront in order to fulfill the needs of his literary career. It is obvious that the author was aware of the shady aspects of Ginevra's character when writing her praise, and he might also have been aware that the Ginevra Sforza he was celebrating was nothing but the result of a process of fictionalizing historical facts in much the same way as the biographies of his other protagonists. The creation of this parallel world is based on a contradiction that applies to the rest of the lives, and to other catalogues of exemplary biographies too. If such works have the exposition of exemplary lives to be emulated as their main purpose, how can it be possible that they are so frequently addressed to women who are praised entirely for their perfection?

The answer to this question may also lie in a comparison between Boccaccio's *De mulieribus*—and, in general, fourteenth-century works sharing the same aim⁷⁸—and its Quattrocento imitations. Whereas before the arrival and the consolidation of courtly literature, the dedication had the real purpose of teaching the addressee,⁷⁹ in the fifteenth century the addressee seems to be transformed into such a perfect figure that the dedication itself appears as paradoxically useless. Even though the opposition may be more intense in Theodelinda's biography, since it represents the “alpha point” of the whole narrative itinerary, this oxymoron can be observed with a special intensity throughout the *Gynevera*. This character of Sabadino's work has three main aspects. First, the dedication to Ginevra stands as a sort of preliminary biography in which narrative procedures are present that will be developed throughout the work; second, there is no trace of imperfection among the characters that populate Sabadino's pages; and third, the author—who uses numerous historical and documentary sources to build the lives he narrates—is forced to ignore the reality in which he lives in order to conform to the rules of the genre he is practising.

78. Beside many other examples in European literature, the case of Bernat Metge—Catalan humanist and one of the first translators of the story of Griselda (Boccaccio's *Decameron* 10.10 and Petrarch's *De insigne obedientia et fide uxoria*)—is particularly noteworthy. In 1388, Metge transforms the Petrarchan Latin tale into an exemplary narration addressed to Isabel de Guimerà. In his work's dedication he has no problem asserting that “he deliberat de arromansar la dita ystoria e de tremetre leus perquè vos e les altres dones virtuoses prenats eximpli de les coses en ella contengudes” (I have decided to translate this story and to send it to you so that both you and the other virtuous women can learn from the examples included in it). Metge, *Historia de Valter*, ii.

79. The seriousness of this purpose may have been one of the reasons why Boccaccio decided to address his work not to Queen Giovanna, but to Andreina Acciaiuoli.

On the basis of these observations, it is obvious that the excellence and exemplariness Sabadino describes in the *Gynevera* are neither the result of a quest for perfection, nor the consequence of a fight against imperfection, but merely a fictional construction. Nonetheless, it is necessary to analyze how deep the remains of history and reality are buried beneath the mechanisms of this construct. This will not only foster a better understanding of Sabadino's work but will also shed light on the context in which it was composed and on the history of his characters, some of whom are almost forgotten nowadays.⁸⁰ This oblivion contrasts sharply with the abundance of critical studies dealing with court contexts (and their female protagonists) in other areas of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy and proves that the Bolognese court of the Bentivoglio family is still poorly explored in the field of the Italian Renaissance.

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80. The case of the addressee herself is remarkable: apart from the fact that there are no recent studies about Ginevra, it is astounding that the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* does not include her among the historical figures whose lives it relates. This is particularly striking because the dictionary otherwise offers much historical information on many characters linked to Ginevra (for instance, Giovanni II Bentivoglio, Sabadino degli Arienti, Ercole Bentivoglio, Bessarione, Francesco Raibolini, Ercole Roberti, and Annibale Bentivoglio). Ginevra is in fact often mentioned in connection with these names, but in spite of her evident importance, has not yet been given her own entry.

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