“Specchio delle rare e virtuose donne” : The Role of the Female Interlocutor in Sixteenth-Century Dialogues on Love

by

Deana Basile

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Ph.D.
Graduate Department of Italian Studies
University of Toronto

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Abstract

Title: "Specchio delle rare e virtuose donne": The Role of the Female Interlocutor in Sixteenth-Century Dialogues on Love
Author: Deana Basile
Degree: Ph.D, Department of Italian Studies, University of Toronto
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According to some scholars, the middle years of the sixteenth century represent a period of "feminism" within the Italian literary tradition. This is a remarkable assertion that has yet to be fully investigated. Focusing on a group of "minor" texts of the period, specifically dialogues on love, this dissertation traces a particular character, the female interlocutor engaged in discussions on love. The principal dialogues analyzed in this study are by Leone Ebreo, Sperone Speroni, Tullia d'Aragona, Giuseppe Betussi, Marcantonio Piccolomini, and Girolamo Bargagli. All of these works are documentary in nature and therefore serve as reflections of social phenomena. Thus the female interlocutor can be approached, not just as an interesting literary figure, but also as the reflection of an historical figure.

Much critical attention has been focused on the more famous dialogues of the period, Pietro Bembo's *Gli Asolani* and Baldassare Castiglione's *Il libro del cortegiano*, and on the generally passive nature of the female interlocutors in these works. In contrast, the minor dialogues on love have only rarely been the object of study. Within a particular category of love dialogues, however, intellectually engaged female characters are portrayed. By tracing the emergence of a female voice and the use of a genre that was uniquely capable of presenting that voice, namely, dialogue, this study is an attempt to shed light on the role that women played in an intellectual and cultural environment.
steeped in Neoplatonic theories of love. The ways in which the female literary figure transcends conventional restrictions governing women’s behavior are discussed, as are the limitations within which the figure is depicted.

Furthermore, drawing from recent studies on dialogue by Virginia Cox, Olga Zorzi Pugliese, Francesco Tateo, and Nuccio Ordine, I examine the presentation of female characters while recognizing the unique hermeneutical demands of the genre. The methodologies of these critics and their innovative approach to Renaissance dialogues aid in understanding the success of this genre in the period, and therefore provide the critical tools for an investigation of the female interlocutor.
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Preface

The idea for my dissertation grew out of an interest in the philosophical ideas that underlie much of the literary and artistic production in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Marsilio Ficino’s consolidation of Neoplatonic concepts, especially in his *El libro dell’amore*, had a great effect on the cultural milieu of Renaissance Italy. One of the most fascinating aspects of the popularized Neoplatonic theory, as scholars have commonly acknowledged, is its theoretical exaltation of women. Nevertheless, Renaissance Neoplatonism generally left women in a secondary position, positing them as beings who revealed esoteric beauty and virtue for the good of their male contemplators, but who themselves lacked any meaningful involvement in the quest for spiritual enlightenment. In an attempt to shed light on this paradox, I sought out literary works that addressed the role of women in the spiritual and contemplative phenomenon called Neoplatonic love.

My search led me first to the dialogue *Della infinità d’amore* written by Tullia d’Aragona. Penned by a woman, the text augured well for discerning the part played by women in Neoplatonic theory. Although the dialogical form rendered it less useful as a clear exposition of Neoplatonic love, that same genre permitted instead a dynamic illustration of the interaction between the two characters who themselves represent the two figures central to the theory, that is, the lover and the beloved. As I began to investigate other dialogues of the same period, it became evident that more could be gleaned from observing and analyzing the figures depicted in these works than from
seeking a treatise-like exposition of women's role, or from tracing the precepts governing the female role as found in a variety of treatises.

In investigating such dialogues, I found that the ones that featured female interlocutors who contributed in a significant manner to the discourses on love were not the famous dialogues by Pietro Bembo and Baldassare Castiglione, but rather the "minor" works which critics have perhaps considered poor copies of these illustrious dialogues and, therefore, generally overlooked. The "minor" status of these works, as well as their dialogical form, prove to be assets, however. As works that claim to depict real social circles and individuals, they serve, at least in part, as historical documents. Since the authors often wrote them relatively quickly and likely did not engage in the same literary elaboration and meticulous revision as did the authors of the major literary works, the dialogues reflect a more spontaneous working of the theme of love and a less stylized (and perhaps less idealized) portrait of the persons depicted. Moreover, the social settings of these minor dialogues are not as elite as those depicted by Pietro Bembo and Baldassare Castiglione, and therefore, the authors may have felt less pressure to make their works conform to accepted rules of social decorum. This may be one reason why the female interlocutors in these works differ in their characterization and their level of participation in the discussions.

Besides the depiction of a more interesting female figure, these dialogues also feature a surprisingly rich use of imagery and metaphor, as well as an often deft manipulation of the dialogical genre. Thus I do not trace the theories on love expounded in the texts, for these are often formulaic and repetitive. Rather, I analyze the depiction of
the female character, as well as the use of rhetorical devices and imagery that elucidate her role in the dialogues.

The chapters are ordered according to chronology, relying on the date of composition rather than the date of publication when there is a discrepancy. Chapter seven is an exception, as will be explained below. The middle chapters (from three to six) deal with dialogues that are strikingly similar in tone and in structure, while the second and last chapters deal with more unique works that are nevertheless important for outlining the figure of the female interlocutor.

The first chapter is an introduction to the figure whom I call the female intellectual of the sixteenth century. The female figures depicted in these dialogues have much in common with one another and therefore may serve as an aggregate to uncover a particular typological distinction, namely, the female intellectual. It is my contention that the female interlocutors portrayed in the minor love dialogues provide a portrait of women who took part in informal intellectual reunions of the period. The women depicted are not always of the same social class or region; rather, their participation in debates and light philosophical discussions is the commonality. This first chapter provides the background information necessary for outlining this figure, including the following: a brief introduction to love treatises of the Cinquecento; an overview of the most comprehensive critical sources on love dialogues; a discussion of the period in which the figure appears in dialogues; and a synopsis of the the Neoplatonic theory of woman.
The dialogue by Leone Ebreo analyzed in chapter two is unique. It has been necessary, therefore, to provide certain summaries that are not needed in subsequent chapters. For instance, since the author was not Italian, a review of his biography is important, and since the work is primarily a philosophical one, an outline of it is useful. Leone Ebreo's remarkably unique characterization of his female interlocutor is addressed in the chapter, as are the philosophical repercussions of this characterization. Although the framework elements are sparse in comparison to the other dialogues, I argue that the interplay between the framework and the philosophical discussions contributes to the overall message of the author, and especially to the relevance of the female figure.

Chapter three presents two dialogues by Sperone Speroni which include interesting female interlocutors. Both of these dialogues depict discussions in which the respective roles of the men and women, as lover and beloved, are examined and some problems pertaining to these roles are thrown into relief. In this chapter too, I explore the interplay between the characterization of the women and the ideas expounded. Furthermore, the analysis of the roles of the lover and beloved should aid in the exploration of the female figure in the chapters that follow.

Chapter four deals with the first of two dialogues by Giuseppe Betussi. In this work, entitled Raverta, the imagery of mirrors arises through the frequent use of the verb "specchiarsi." The concept of "mirroring" is explored as both a metaphor for reading a dialogue and, more specifically, as a strategy for emulating a model. I argue in this chapter that the female interlocutor is presented as a dynamic exemplum of virtue to be emulated by female readers.
Tullia d’Aragona’s dialogue, treated in chapter five, is the only woman-authored text and, therefore, is particularly important for an understanding of the female intellectual. Writing herself into the text as a primary character, d’Aragona provides a revealing self-portrait. The female interlocutor who represents d’Aragona is quick-witted and well-versed in philosophical terminology. In fact, the dialogue is lively and wanders from philosophical themes to flirtatious exchanges between the characters. By tracing the imagery of games that is present in the text and is reinforced through the playful quality of the exchanges, it becomes clear that the female character’s assertions are double-voiced and that d’Aragona’s ideas about the role of women in Neoplatonic love are unique.

Giuseppe Betussi’s second dialogue, Leonora, analyzed in chapter six, is the only work that presents the female interlocutor as the “teacher” of philosophical concepts regarding love. Regarding the female interlocutor, I analyze the imagery of the pathway as a metaphor for women’s informal education through discussions. I also trace Betussi’s use of philosophical and theoretical concepts. The description of love and dialogue as a circular space is compared to the Ficinian notion of the pursuit of love as a circular quest, as well as to Speroni’s discussion of a similar theme with regard to his theory of dialogue. Thus, this dialogue is a particularly rich source for mining information on the way in which Neoplatonic philosophy and dialogical form interact in this period.

The last chapter delineates a figure who was involved in the social traditions in the city of Siena, the dama di veglia. Although she is a unique figure because of the high level of interaction she had with the local academy, she bears the same traits as the
women in the previous dialogues, that is, she is actively involved in discussions on love
and beauty. The importance of game-playing within the social tradition of the *veglia*, or
soirée, underscores the informal and recreational setting within which the intellectual
woman of this period is always circumscribed. In order to investigate the women’s role
in the *veglia*, information is drawn from a variety of sources including orations, treatises,
and, of course, dialogues. Thus, this chapter is placed last because, with the use of a
variety of sources, it does not fit neatly into the chronological ordering.

Literary critics have often considered documentary dialogues of this period as
reflections of social phenomena. Given the fact that an active female interlocutor is
depicted in not just one or two, but at least seven, dialogues of this period, the figure
depicted can be approached, not just as an interesting literary character, but also as the
reflection of an historical figure. By focusing my criticism on dialogues in which a
female interlocutor figures prominently, I hope to shed new light on the role that women
played in an intellectual and cultural environment steeped in Neoplatonic theories of love.
Chapter One
Toward a Clearer Typology of the Intellectual Woman of the Cinquecento

The aim of this study is to explore a specific literary figure of sixteenth-century Italy: the female intellectual. This particular typology has yet to be adequately outlined. The figure of the female intellectual that this study focuses on is based on the model of the erudite woman that appears in a number of dialogues on love published between 1535 and 1572. Although the importance of the role of interlocutors in general has been dealt with by many critics, they have not singled out gender as a specific criterion for the analysis and classification of speakers.

The female interlocutors to be traced in this study are remarkable because their primary characteristic is an interest in, and knowledge of, intellectual matters. It must be noted at the outset, however, that this is a very specific figure that emerges within a restricted set of circumstances. From a wider perspective, a heterogeneous corpus of sixteenth-century works regarding women in general exists. Among the myriad sources, one finds poetry, treatises, orations, and dialogues. The material is vast and the

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1 Giuseppe Zonta’s interest in this field resulted in the important modern editions of dialogues on love and treatises on women which he provided in his Trattati d’amore del Cinquecento (Bari: Laterza, 1912) and his Trattati del Cinquecento sulla donna (Bari: Laterza, 1913). See also his introductory remarks in both works. The seminal article by Conor Fahy was one of the first to address specifically this group of works about women and remains an important source. See Fahy, “Three Early Renaissance Treatises on Women,” Italian Studies XI (1956): 30-55. Other important studies include Ruth Kelso’s Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1956); Francine Daenens’ “Superiore perché inferiore: il paradiso della superiorità della donna in alcuni trattati italiani del Cinquecento,” in Trasgressione tragica e norma domestica: esempi di tipologie femminili dalla letteratura europea, ed. Vanna Gentili (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1983): 11-50; and A. Chemello’s “Donna di Palazzo, moglie, cortigiana: ruoli e funzioni sociali della donna in alcuni trattati del Cinquecento, in La corte e il Cortegian, Vol. 2, ed. Adriano Prosperi (Rome: Bulzoni, 1980): 219-49. For a list of works about and by women written between 1500-1650, see Nel cerchio della luna: Figure di donna in alcuni testi del XVI secolo, ed. Marina Zancan (Venezia: Marsilio, 1983), pp. 237-64. A more recent work by Constance Jordan, Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), addresses such treatises within the larger European context, focusing specifically on France, Italy, and England, and providing valuable references and analysis.
viewpoints expressed on the subject of women are often contradictory, ranging from panegyric raptures to misogynist vituperation. In fact, much of the literary treatment of women, notably in writers such as Ortensio Lando, has been proven paradoxical or ironic in recent scholarship. Nevertheless, the debate about women in this period is a real one and cannot simply be considered a male exercise in rhetoric. The depiction of an intellectual woman in the dialogues studied in the present work can be considered in many ways a departure from previous and contemporaneous treatments of women. While not intended to reconcile the many contradictions within the larger corpus on women, the present study will focus instead on the one particular figure, that is, the female intellectual as depicted in seven dialogues on love. The analysis of these works will serve to highlight the specific characteristics that distinguish this figure as she appears in works of this genre in particular.

I. Love Treatises

In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy, a host of writers focused their attention on the theme of love, grappling with the philosophical and sensual approaches to the

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2 Francine Daenens outlines Lando’s views on women as expressed in his Paradossi. See pp. 18-21. Furthermore, the sincerity of the authors defending women has often been called into question, both by Renaissance writers and some modern critics. For example, in Lodovico Domenichi’s La nobiltà delle donne (Venetia: Giolito, 1549), the defender of women, Lucio, claims not to be like others who defend women only as a rhetorical exercise, and therefore do so falsely: “...quantunque molti inanzi di me n’habbiano ragionato, non però l’habbo trattato, come se vera la credessero; si come io spero di dover fare. Quelli ne scrissero & ragionarono per cagione di trastullo & di diporto, volendo far conoscere al mondo l’acutezza de gli intelletti loro, nel potere copiosamente trattar cosa, al giudicio loro humile & abietta; non altramente che gia si facessero coloro, i quali le lodi della Mosca, della Quaritana, dell’esser Calvo, & della Ingiustitia scissero; & a tempi nostri la peste, gli orinali, & le anguiile.” (54v)

3 According to Daenens, “Solo un giudizio frettoloso può liquidare la polemica intorno alla superiorità delle donne come querelle letteraria ben lontana dalla realtà, documento ‘vuoto’ e convenzionale che ben
subject that they had inherited from classical times. One such work, Mario Equicola’s *Libro de natura d’amore* (1525) provided a survey of the various literary treatments of love from Guittone d’Arezzo (c. 1230-1294) to his own time. While Equicola’s is an encyclopedic work that provides for the most part a retrospective overview of the theme of love, the work that generated a whole new approach, even a new literary genre, was Marsilio Ficino’s *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis de Amore*, written in 1469 and translated by Ficino into the vernacular in 1474.4

Ficino’s commentary, called *El libro dell’amore* in Italian, generated interest in philosophical themes of love and began a literary trend, the love treatise, that took root in the following century.5 As Sears Jayne states,

> The main point made by most literary scholars is that Ficino was responsible for shifting the emphasis in treatises on love from an Aristotelian (and medieval) emphasis on the physiology and psychology of love to a Platonic (and renaissance) emphasis on love as desire for ideal beauty. (3)

Indeed, this work sparked a renewed interest in many Platonic theories laid forth in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. One of the most popular Platonic theories was contained in Socrates’ famous speech on the Diotima ladder of love. In this, the prophetess Diotima explains that the desire for beauty begins with the sight of a beautiful

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4 For a brief synopsis and commentary on the work, see Sears Jayne’s “Introduction” to his English translation of Marsilio Ficino’s work, *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium of Love* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1985): 1-32. Although Ficino’s treatise was not published until 1484 in Latin (and the Italian version not until 1544), Jayne explains that in 1484 “the work had already been circulating for fifteen years in manuscript copies and had established a flourishing life of its own as a pet book of court aristocrats” (19).

5 For a list of the most important love treatises of this tradition, see Jayne, p. 20.
body and then proceeds to an appreciation of all bodily beauty. This is the starting point that leads to the love of beauty in the soul, the love of virtues, and eventually an appreciation of the divine principle infused in all of these things. In this way one can ascend from the love of corporeal beauty to the love of divine ideas. The discussions of the “beloved” and “lover” generally derive from this philosophical system and in the Renaissance the beautiful beloved was represented as a woman and the lover as a man.

Other concepts that enjoyed great popularity in the Renaissance are love’s birth from Poverty and Plenty and the Platonic hermaphrodite. In the first, also from Diotima’s speech, the story of the parentage of love reveals love’s intermediary status as a “daemon” that is somewhere between the opposites of the earthly and divine spheres. In the second theory, posited in Aristophanes’ speech, the search for love is considered to be a quest to find the other half of the divided self.

These and other theories of love were often repeated and at times reworked in the treatises, yet they can by no means be considered the nucleus of these works. In fact, many of the treatises were written in dialogue form and tended to be literary treatments of the subject rather than philosophical ones. Nesca Robb describes the social conditions that fostered the growth of such dialogues and treatises:

Italian society was at this period essentially a society of courts, but of courts where intellectual gifts were valued quite as highly as nobility of birth. There was a large leisureed and cultured class which found two of its principal recreations in light literature and conversation and which must have possessed, if the records that remain of it are true, a high general level of wit and intelligence and an unusual capacity for taking up any subject and discussing it skillfully if not profoundly. (179)

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As products of this educated yet non-scholarly group, the treatises often presented philosophical questions, but emphasized to a greater extent practical concerns regarding love as a human, emotional, and social phenomenon.

II. Love Dialogues and the Female Interlocutor

Pietro Bembo’s *Gli Asolani* (1505) signalled a new direction for love treatises, as it was the first to have a distinctly literary design. The setting of the dialogue is the Asolo castle of Caterina Cornaro, the former queen of Cyprus. Like this work, many other dialogues feature historical figures, including women, within their respective social circles. Thus the documentary nature of these dialogues permits their use as windows into social customs of the period. The dialogues which I shall analyze in this study represent a specific branch of love dialogues, namely, dialogues that depict an environment of erudite conversation in which female interlocutors play a meaningful part in the exchanges, often hosting and conducting the discussions. Sperone Speroni’s *Dialogo d’amore*, Tullia d’Aragona’s *Della infinità d’amore*, and Giuseppe Betussi’s *Raverta* depict the literary salons of the famous courtesans Tullia d’Aragona and Francesca Baffa; Giuseppe Betussi’s *Leonora*, portrays the aristocratic setting of the home of the noblewoman Leonora Falletta; and the dialogues by Marcantonio Piccolomini and Girolamo Bargagli present an elite class of men and women who take part in the social traditions of the Sienese Accademia degli Intronati.

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7 Leone Ebreo’s *Dialoghi d’amore* (1535) is a notable exception. Although the work differs from the others to be studied here, I include it because of its influence on subsequent dialogues. Its unique nature will be addressed in chapter two.
Scholars interested in love dialogues are indebted to Giuseppe Zonta for providing modern editions of some of the 'minor' dialogues on love from the Cinquecento, including three of the texts to be studied in the present work. Besides these three — Tullia d'Aragona's *Della infinità d'amore* and Giuseppe Betussi's *Raverta* and *Leonora* — Zonta also included Bartolomeo Gottifredi's *Specchio d'amore* (1547) and Francesco Sansovino's *Ragionamento d'amore* (1545). The last two are illustrative of a type of love dialogue that is not included in the present study: works that include little or no philosophical content and have more in common with comedies of the period. Mario Pozzi claims that these dialogues follow the tradition of Alessandro Piccolomini's *Raffaella* and represent a comic stream of dialogues. They can, in fact, be considered anti-Neoplatonic or anti-Petrarchan dialogues. The dialogues by Sansovino and Gottifredi depict older interlocutors teaching their young pupils some rather risqué strategies for obtaining love. For example, Sansovino's character Panfilo advises the young Silio to avoid choosing a maiden as his beloved, because of her lack of experience and indiscretion. In fact, the character cites both practical and serious reasons to avoid the unmarried "donzelle":

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8 See his "Introduzione," to the 1975 reprint of Giuseppe Zonta's *Trattati d'amore del Cinquecento* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1975): V-XL. These comments are also reproduced (with some slight modifications) in Pozzi's *Lingua, cultura e società: saggi della letteratura italiana del Cinquecento* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 1989). In this instance, I cite from this more recent work: for the remarks regarding the influence of Piccolomini's *Raffaella* on the dialogues by Sansovino and Gottifredi, see pp. 82-83 and p. 90, respectively.

9 See especially Marcello Aurigemma's "L'Ecatomfìla, la Deifira e la tradizione rinascimentale della scienza d'amore," in *Atti e memorie dell'Arcadia* Ser. II: V (1972): 119-171. Aurigemma links the dialogues by Gottifredi, Sansovino, and Betussi to Piccolomini's *Raffaella*, tracing the Albertian influence in all of these works; see esp. pp 134-6.
Ècci poi questo disavantaggio: che le donzelle non vanno alle commedie, alle feste e a’ luoghi pubblici, ove gli amanti concorrono, ove i giovani fanno conoscere il lor valore, ove Amore altrui presta occasione d’accomodarsi, e di dove mai donna alcuna non si partì senza qualche poco di fiamma. Anzi, discontente e ristrette da voleri e da piaceri e da comandamenti de’ padri, delle madri e de’ fratelli, il più del tempo rinchiusi dimorano nel piccolo circuito delle loro camere... D’altra parte, se tu riguardi i fastidi, i disonori, i discontenti, i pericoli che avengano se per avventura la donzella s’ingravida, per certo tu dirai che l’amor della donzella sia da fuggire. (158)

Such works differ dramatically in their treatment of love from the dialogues by Betussi and d’Aragona.¹⁰

The Sienese dialogues included in this study represent a different environment from those depicted in the dialogues by Speroni, Betussi, and d’Aragona. In the dialogues by the Sienese writers, Piccolomini and Bargagli, the refined atmosphere of the social gatherings of the Intronati Academy provides an amenable setting for women interested in poetry and philosophy. The women involved in philosophical discussions are not courtesans but local noblewomen, often relatives of the Intronati members themselves. Although these women are not depicted as the hosts of the discussions, they do participate in the social traditions of the Academy in a way that allows them unprecedented, although still limited, access to the cultural issues of the day.

Leone Ebreo’s Dialoghi d’amore differs from all of these dialogues because it is principally a philosophical work. While the framework is less elaborate than most other dialogues of the period, the content is vast and includes a fascinating synthesis of

¹⁰ See Mario Pozzi’s “Introduzione,” p. XVII. Pozzi traces the origins of the dialogues of the Zonta collection to Speroni’s Dialogo d’amore and Piccolomini’s Raffaella (p. XXI). I would recognize a further distinction: while the works by Gottifredi and Sansovino are distinctly redolent of Piccolomini’s dialogue, Betussi’s dialogues (as well as d’Aragona’s) are farther removed from this work and closer to the model of Speroni’s Dialogo d’amore.
Neoplatonic ideas and Hebrew thought. This work, I shall argue, exerted a great influence on subsequent dialogues, yet it is also quite different from previous and subsequent treatments of love. The writer and his work are not as closely bound to the Italian literary or philosophical traditions and, therefore, the *Dialoghi d’amore* does not fit as neatly into the tradition of sixteenth-century love treatises. For this reason, in chapter one I shall outline Leone Ebreo’s biography and his work in some detail before analyzing the text.

Thus the dialogues that have been collected for investigation in this study are not homogeneous in quality, setting, or dialogical form. Nevertheless, they merit consideration as a unique class of dialogues that reflect the cultural phenomenon of the erudite woman in the various roles in which she successfully asserted herself and was represented for posterity: as courtesan, Sienese *dama di veglia*, and (less frequently, perhaps) noblewoman. The earliest dialogue studied here was published in 1535 and the last in 1572. The chronological range of the composition of the works, however, was slightly earlier: the first work, Leone Ebreo’s *Dialoghi d’amore*, was written in approximately 1501-2 and the last, Girolamo Bargagli’s *Dialogo de’ giuochi* was probably written in 1563-4. This period, I shall argue, represents a window of opportunity during which the female intellectual experienced a brief moment of success.

All of the women who are represented as interlocutors in these works gained unprecedented access to the public exchange of popular cultural ideas. Furthermore, they were all known as writers, although unfortunately some of the literary output of these
women has been lost. Thus the dialogues in this work elucidate the world of the female intellectual in the middle years of the Cinquecento, providing details that will help us to piece together the face, or faces, of the erudite woman of the sixteenth century.

It should be noted that the role of female characters in dialogues of this period is considered by scholars to be a passive one in which the woman most often serves to reinforce the assertions of the male characters and only rarely expresses any independence of thought. These scholars, however, have limited their analyses to the more famous dialogues of the Cinquecento, namely Pietro Bembo’s *Asolani* and Baldassar Castiglione’s *Il libro del cortegiano*. Regarding the latter, Valeria Finucci’s insightful analysis demonstrates clearly that the female interlocutors of Castiglione’s work do not take part in the theorizing, even in the course of the discussion on the *donna di corte*:

Di questo discorso fatto su di lei, ma non da lei, esclusa dall’enunciazione, la donna è oggetto piuttosto che soggetto, il punto essendo quello di risolvere l’enigma della sua femminilità da parte di chi, da soggetto desiderante, si può porre la domanda. Il compito della donna di palazzo non è quindi di esaminarsi e di offrire la propria riflessione, ma quello di lasciarsi rimuovere dal processo stesso di riflessione in quanto è implicito che la soluzione può stare solo al di fuori del problema. (100)

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11 Some of Francesca Baffa’s poems were published in collections by Lodovico Domenichi and Anton Francesco Doni, as well as in Betussi’s *Dialogo amoroso* (1543). She also likely wrote a prose work that unfortunately has been lost. See my chapter three, p. 127. Leonora Falletta also was known for her literary skills, although most of her work is not extant. See below, p. 163, n. 3. Regarding the Sienese women as authors, see below, p. 195, n. 12.

12 See Finucci’s “La donna di corte: discorso istituzionale e realtà nell *libro del cortegiano* di B. Castiglione,” *Annali d’italianistica* 7 (1989): 88–103. Because of the clear and persuasive discussion of the passive role of the *donna di corte*, this work has been influential on subsequent treatments of women in dialogue.
Regarding Bembo’s *Asolani*, Valerio Vianello\(^\text{13}\) reminds the reader of the importance of the mere presence of female interlocutors, even as mostly silent listeners: “Sensibili alla socializzazione della lirica petrarchesca, gli *Asolani* rivendicano, sia pure più
teoricamente che nella pratica, l’aperta disponibilità verso un pubblico femminile, riprodotto dalle tre protagoniste, trascurate dalla virile tradizione umanistica” (29). Yet, according to Vianello, this theoretical opening to women is built on a system which reduces the women to objects of love and to a mere “pretesto per un discorso letterario” (30).

In observing the female figures depicted in this group of minor dialogues outlined above, one notes some distinct changes. The female character is given a more prominent, sometimes principal, place not only within the social hierarchy depicted in the dialogue, as is the case of the Duchess Elisabetta Gonzaga and the Queen Caterina Cornaro in the works by Castiglione and Bembo, but also within the conversations themselves. Indeed, the intellectual woman traced in this study is represented not only as the object of love, but as a more fully-realized intellectual individual.

III. An Overview of the Criticism

Love dialogues in general have been the object of much critical study. The so-called minor dialogues to be analyzed here have more often been discussed either in a cursory fashion in various studies or within one of the comprehensive studies on the

genre. These foundational secondary sources were written by Michele Rosi, Paolo Lorenzetti, Luigi Tonelli, and Giovanna Wyss-Morigi.

The oldest of these, Michele Rosi’s Saggio sui trattati d’amore del Cinquecento, merits mention only for its outline of the treatises and general (if far from complete) summary of the content of the works. Rosi refers only obliquely to the dialogical nature of a portion of these treatises, noting in the last page of the book the presence of female interlocutors in many of these works. His amazement at the presentation of intellectually engaged women in these dialogues reflects the misogyny of his own day and, more importantly, reveals the radical nature of these characterizations, both in the Cinquecento and in his own era. According to Rosi: 

Però potrà forse far meraviglia che s’immaginino trattate questioni delicatissime dinanzi a donne e da donne, cosa che oggi non parrebbe possibile; ma la meraviglia cesserà pensando qual era l’educazione che allora davasi alle gentildonne, e come, almeno molte fra queste, si potessero paragonare agli uomini per forti pensieri e per fine coltura. (92)

Despite the shortcomings of the book, Rosi succeeds in drawing attention to the documentary character of the works and their potential use as historical documents. In Rosi’s second work, his main concern is with the corrupted morality of the period and

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14 Michele Rosi, Saggio sui trattati d’amore del Cinquecento (Recanati: Rinaldo Simboli, 1889).

15 The citation reflects Jacob Burckhardt’s optimistic account of the social status of the aristocratic woman in this period. See below, p. 24.

16 Rosi explains one aim of the study: “Mi propongo pertanto di studiare una buona parte di quest’opere coll’intento precipuo di vedere quanto esse offrono per la storia dei costumi del tempo in cui furono scritte” (4).

17 Michele Rosi, Scienza d’amore: idealismo e vita pratica nei trattati amorosi del Cinquecento (Milano: L.F. Cogliati, 1904).
the role of women within the family. Like the first study, this one is useful as a source for references and brief descriptions of relatively unknown treatises and dialogues.

The studies by Paolo Lorenzetti\(^{18}\) and Luigi Tonelli\(^{19}\) endure as principal sources for dialogues on love. Lorenzetti provides a greater organization of themes than Rosi, treating love and beauty in separate chapters and providing a clearer exposition of the different treatises. He does not, however, include any commentary on the role of women in sixteenth-century treatises on love.\(^{20}\) Like Rosi, Lorenzetti too notes the importance of these dialogues as windows into sixteenth-century customs and culture: “Così letteratura e vita del secolo si connettono intimamente e s’illustrano a vicenda; e lo studio dei trattati d’amore riceve e dà luce alla storia della cultura e dei costumi del Rinascimento italico” (232). Neither of these works, however, addresses this issue adequately. My study is an attempt to analyze the dialogues not only in terms of philosophical substance, by which criterion most of the dialogues will always seem wanting, but also as mirrors of Renaissance society and of its ideals of virtue and behavior.

Luigi Tonelli examines the theme of love in both lyric and epic poetry, as well as in theatrical and philosophical works. His study, therefore, is much wider in its scope than those by the previous two critics. His section on Renaissance thought provides

\(^{18}\) See Lorenzetti’s *La bellezza e l’amore nei trattati del Cinquecento* (Pisa: Fratelli Nistri, 1917).

\(^{19}\) See Tonelli’s *L’amore nella poesia e nel pensiero del Rinascimento* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1933).

\(^{20}\) According to Lorenzetti “sembra che i due argomenti, su l’amore e su la donna, non siano strettamente uniti; siano anzi distinti nettamente l’uno dall’altro” (6). Although it is true that love is at times treated without any discussion of women, and women are often discussed in relationship to the family and not in terms of love, it is difficult to deny the unique link between women and love in this period, as well as at the beginning of the Italian literary tradition.
useful summaries of the philosophical positions of Ficino and the "Ficinians,"\textsuperscript{21} as well as those of Leone Ebreo. In the chapter entitled "Tra platonismo e petrarchismo,"\textsuperscript{22} he makes an important distinction between the philosophical works that can be called Platonic or Neoplatonic, and literary works that combine Neoplatonic themes with Petrarchan ones.

Giovanna Wyss Morigi de Rohrbach’s *Contributo allo studio del dialogo all’epoca dell’umanesimo e del Rinascimento*\textsuperscript{23} is a less outdated study that provides a useful overview of the genre in Italy. Morigi starts with the classical roots of the genre in Plato, Aristotle, Lucian and Cicero,\textsuperscript{24} proceeds to the rebirth of the genre with Petrarch, traces its enormous popularity among the fifteenth-century humanists, and finally, discusses sixteenth-century dialogues. She singles out two categories of dialogue in this period: "dialoghi insegnativi"\textsuperscript{25} and "dialoghi piacevoli," the didactic and entertaining types. The dialogues to be traced in the present study are rightly placed in the latter category.\textsuperscript{26} Whether the home of a courtesan or an aristocratic social gathering, the

\textsuperscript{21} See pp. 265-279. Those he classifies as "Ficinians" are Girolamo Benivieni, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Francesco Diacceto.

\textsuperscript{22} See pp. 280-298.

\textsuperscript{23} Giovanna Wyss Morigi de Rohrbach, *Contributo allo studio del dialogo all’epoca dell’umanesimo e del rinascimento* (Monza: Artigianelli, 1947).

\textsuperscript{24} See Morigi, pp. 19-25, for a brief overview of the classical precedents of the genre.

\textsuperscript{25} Some pedagogical works that fall under this category are Pietro Bembo’s *Prose della volgar lingua*, Machiavelli’s *Arte della guerra* and *Dialogo sulla lingua*, and Benedetto Varchi’s *Ercolano*.

\textsuperscript{26} The exception is Leone Ebreo’s *Dialoghi d’amore* which, as Rosi has pointed out, is a more philosophical treatment. This work, therefore, stands somewhat apart from other love dialogues of the period. Its differences and the unique way in which it impacted the dialogical production of the Cinquecento will be discussed.
settings in which female interlocutors were depicted were almost always informal and recreational.

One of Morigi’s most important contributions is her discussion of the fourteenth-century works that influenced the dialogical production of the later centuries. Most important for the present study is Morigi’s discussion of Paradiso degli Alberti, attributed to Gherardo da Prato. In this work, men and women of the nobility gather with intellectual figures, doctors, musicians, and even jesters in a sort of gioconda brigata. The work, resonant of Boccaccio’s Decameron, undoubtedly had an important influence on the “dialoghi piacevoli” of the Cinquecento. In Boccaccio’s work, the portrayal of independently-minded women, who were as fully developed as individual characters as their male counterparts, provided an undeniable model for sixteenth-century dialogues. 

Paradiso degli Alberti, according to Morigi, went one step further:

Come nel Decameron, ciascuno dei partecipanti presiede a turno la brigata per dare ordine ai trattenimenti. Anche qui una parte del tempo è impiegata in musica e danze, ma, a differenza del Decameron, le novelle si alternano a discussioni erudite, a cui talvolta pure le donne prendono parte, come quella Madonna Cosa che, avendo saputo sostenere con evidenza e arguzia le sue ragioni contro Messer Alessandro, si merita dal dotto agostiniano Marsili l’elogio di “Ioica.” (32)

Morigi also discusses the tradition of debate among small groups of humanists who gathered informally, such as the one depicted in Leonardo Bruni’s Dialogi ad Petrum Paulum Histrum. These gatherings included only men and lacked the festive quality of the Decameron’s brigata. In fact, the fourteenth-century dialogue, as Morigi states,

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27 For example, regarding the Boccaccian elements in Betussi’s Leonora, see below, p. 120.
si stacca dalla tradizione delle “feste voli brigate”: è rotto il collegamento col Decamerone e col Paradiso degli Alberti. Il dialogo quattrocentesco esclude ogni idea accessoria di giuoco o di passatempo intellettuale: conformemente ai precedenti classici non è ammesso l’intervento delle donne e ciò è un ulteriore aspetto di quel carattere dotto rilevato precedentemente. (102)

Paradiso degli Alberti, according to Morigi, is illustrative of the transition from the culture of joyful gatherings, with storytelling and dancing, to the erudite discussions of the early fifteenth century which reflected a renewed interest in classical sources (32).28 Similar to the Paradiso degli Alberti, the sixteenth-century “dialoghi piacevoli” can be said to represent the confluence of these two formidable influences: the Boccaccian lieta brigata and the humanist erudite circle. One important result of the merging of the two traditions was the new female presence at intellectual reunions.

IV. The Erudite Woman of the Cinquecento

The intellectual woman of this period is linked in a unique way to the vernacular literary dialogue which flourished in the Cinquecento. It is within this literary genre that the intellectual woman emerges as a female interlocutor engaged in discussions on love and beauty. As the female figure in the Italian literary tradition had previously been linked to the theme of love,29 the female intellectual in the sixteenth century is also


29 In Il doppio itinerario della scrittura: la donna nella tradizione letteraria italiana (Torino: Einaudi, 1998), Marina Zancan provides a long-awaited analysis of the role of women in the Italian literary tradition, as both literary figures and writers. Zancan outlines the female figure within the tematica amorosa central to the origins of Italian literature. She postulates that the role of women, specifically within the work of Dante, functions as a “metafora di un procedimento intellettuale.” See pp. 7-31.
presented and in a sense defined within the confines of a discourse on love. Yet in the love dialogues that depict the social and cultural environment of the middle decades of the sixteenth century, the role that women play in the investigation of the topic of love undergoes distinct permutations.

Regarding the outpouring of literature on love in this period, Ruth Kelso has noted that the female, who as beloved should be the true center of any investigation, is instead a very nebulous figure, almost secondary in importance to the group for which the works are most often intended, namely, men. According to Kelso,

> most of the books on love are written for men, and oddly enough almost all completely ignore the woman's part in what might be supposed to be a two-sided business. In these at best the woman is assigned a wholly passive role and the reader has to glean indirectly whatever applies to the lady. (137)

While Kelso's statement is accurate with regard to many treatises and dialogues, the 'minor' love dialogues that I analyze in this work do, in fact, address women in a powerful way. By granting a more significant role to their female interlocutors, authors such as Tullia d'Aragona and Giuseppe Betussi provided models of articulate and learned women, thereby specifically addressing women's role within the contemporary discourse on love.

Any attempt to piece together a model of the female intellectual present in sixteenth-century dialogues must confront not only her emergence within the popular discourse on love, but also the contemporaneous rise in the use of the vernacular for literary and scientific writings. Other parallel phenomena must be considered at least briefly in order to illuminate this typological distinction: first, the body of treatises written about women, including the works on female beauty and the various "defenses of
women”; second, the philosophical treatment of woman according to the popular
Neoplatonic theories of the time; and, finally, the emergence of a closely related figure,
the female poet of the Cinquecento.

V. The Female Intellectual of the Quattrocento

Although, as Mongi has pointed out, women were excluded from the humanist
intellectual gatherings of the fifteenth century, this does not mean, of course, that there
were no female humanists. In recent years, much attention has been paid to women such
as Laura Cereta, Isotta Nogarola, and Cassandra Fedele, who managed to make
themselves known as humanists despite many obstacles. This research has rescued from
obscurity the lives and writings of the intellectual woman of the fifteenth century. These
women had several things in common: they were encouraged at a young age by family
members to pursue studies far beyond the norm for women of the day; they wrote letters,
orations, and poetry (they were not as exclusively dedicated to poetry as women of the
following century); and they were often met with incredulity, and sometimes open
hostility. For example, these women were often shunned after reaching a marriageable

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30 The work that has been most responsible for acquainting modern students of the Renaissance with the voices of these women is Her Immaculate Hand (Binghamton: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1992 - second edition, with revisions), co-edited by Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, Jr. Regarding Laura Cereta see Albert Rabil, Jr.’s Laura Cereta, Quattrocento Humanist (Binghamton: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1981).

31 Cereta’s letters reveal that there were those who were incredulous of her learning and charged her with presenting her father’s work as her own. See especially Rabil’s Laura Cereta, pp. 12-15.

32 See King and Rabil’s “Introduction” to Her Immaculate Hand for an analysis of the patterns in the lives of these humanists, esp. pp. 26-28.
age by a society that was willing to acknowledge them as rare child prodigies, but not as erudite women.33

In contrast, the intellectual woman to be traced in this study engaged with men in frequent exchanges, and not only epistolary ones. The striking difference is that the women of the mid-Cinquecento, through their involvement in high-brow socializing, took part in literary and philosophical conversations with men, thus seeming to defy the restrictions against women speaking in public settings. The women humanists, in contrast, worked in a solitary, almost monastic manner, and therefore their exchanges with men were less likely to include the spoken word. In fact, King and Rabil have pointed out that although Leonardo Bruni, in his De studiis et litteris liber, prescribes for women a limited study of oratory, he specifies that the skills are to be used for letter writing:

Bruni suggests that she study the great orators in order to learn, in her writing, how to express consolation, encouragement, dissuasion or advice, as well as to learn eloquent expression, a large vocabulary, and a free-flowing style. It appears, then, that a woman should study oratory, but with a view to improving her writing skills rather than her public speaking skills, since the latter, in his view, would be inappropriate. (14)

Indeed, the freer interaction which we observe in the Cinquecento seems unthinkable in the Quattrocento: upon marriage the learned woman of the fifteenth century usually had to relinquish her studies or, alternatively, if she remained unmarried, she could continue her intellectual pursuits but was excluded from humanist circles and forced into

33 See the case of Cassandra Fedele described in King and Rabil, “Introduction,” pp. 20-23.
The unmarried intellectual woman was vehemently exhorted to chastity, which meant entering into the religious life.

The pressure either to marry or cloister oneself indicates an environment—no yet shaded with Neoplatonic views of woman—in which eloquent women were seen as dangerous. Almost a century later, the intellectual woman of the dialogue on love exists within an environment informed by Neoplatonic theory which on several levels served to rehabilitate the status of woman, as will be discussed below. While the cultural environment of the sixteenth century seems more amenable to a female presence, it will be argued that this presence emerges only within the realm of social recreation. Thus the intellectual woman of the fifteenth century appears more erudite than her sixteenth-century counterpart, whose learning is often focused on entertainment and diversion and, therefore, can at times appear superficial. Indeed, in the sixteenth century, women and learning seem to meet at the crossroads of conversation and education, as will be argued especially in the chapter on Betussi’s Leonora.

VI. Treatises on Women

In the sixteenth century many voices were raised in a debate about the spiritual and intellectual capacities of women, the questione della donna. Margaret L. King and Albert Rabil, Jr. provide a brief overview of the querelle des femmes, which raised questions such as, “Could a woman be virtuous? Could she perform noteworthy deeds?

34 Two of the most well-known women humanists, the sisters Isotta and Ginevra Nogarola, exemplify the two options: 1. continued study coupled with a life of isolation and chastity or 2. marriage and a consequent renunciation of studies. See King and Rabil, “Introduction,” pp. 16-18.
Was she even, strictly speaking, of the same human species as men?" Although this debate seems to have reached a fevered pitch in the sixteenth century, it had actually begun at least as early as the beginning of the fifteenth century with Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la Cité des Dames*. The pro-woman text that had the greatest influence on the debate in the sixteenth century was perhaps Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim's *De nobilitate et praecellentia sexus foeminei* (1537). This text was often a model that provided various arguments for the superiority of woman, including a revision of the Creation story and of other passages of Scripture, and a response to Aristotelian biology which contended the female part in procreation to be the passive element. While the works studied here cannot be considered defenses of women, they do reflect an intellectual and social milieu informed by the terms of the debate. Within the tradition of the "defense of women," an intellectually and spiritually virtuous woman was present only in theory; by contrast, in the tradition of the love dialogue, she is shown in practice, actually exercising the virtues that had been attributed to her.

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35 See King and Rabil's "Introduction to the Series" of works they edit entitled, "The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe." This valuable series provides scholars with easily accessible, English translations of texts of the early modern period written by women, or specifically addressing issues surrounding women. The introductions to the individual texts are, of course, a valuable starting point for scholarly discussion of these often neglected works. The citation is from the "Introduction to the Series" in d'Aragona's *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 11.


37 One work which represents the convergence of the defense of women and the Italian literary dialogue is Lodovico Domenichi's *La nobiltà delle donne* (1549). Domenichi's work is derivative of Agrippa's defense of women (among other scholars, Rabil notes this in his introduction to the translation of Agrippa's text: see p. 28); yet it is a dialogical re-working of the material. Thus Domenichi's text can demonstrate something about the absorption of the ideas of the *querelle des femmes* within the Italian cultural environment.
Other treatises of the period do not propose to discuss women in theoretical terms, but to deal with more practical matters concerning the daily life of women, such as their education, the importance of a good reputation, the role of the wife, and women’s beauty. Regarding the last category Giangiorgio Trissino’s *I ritratti* (1524), Firenzuola’s *Dialogo della bellezza della donna* (1548), and Luigini’s *Libro della bella donna* (1554) are considered the most important works. Trissino’s treatise presents a “word-portrait” in which one of the interlocutors, Macro, describes a beautiful woman whose identity is to be discovered by the other interlocutor, representing the illustrious Pietro Bembo. Mary Rogers describes the action of the dialogue, as follows:

Macro’s word-portrait of the unknown lady is designed to be identified by Bembo, that well-known connoisseur of feminine beauty, and to aid him certain of her features are likened to those of five other named contemporary ladies. The skill of Petrarch, described as ‘the best of painters’, is also invoked to help the speaker’s eloquence. (49)

In a like manner, Luigini’s treatise is primarily an aesthetic exposition of women’s beauty. According to Antonino Sole, however, although Luigini presents the work as an encomium, he actually proposes a culturally depleted role for women:

la donna perfetta del Luigini, notomizzata nelle sue più minute qualità fisiche e morali, viene depauperata proprio di quel corredo culturale (tranne la musica) che nel libro del Castiglione ne fa un soggetto sociale, per tornare ad essere mero oggetto di piacere e di utilità per l’uomo. (16)

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18 See Rosi, *Scienza d’amore*, pp. 49-70, for an overview of treatises that deal with “questioni generali femminili.”

19 See Zonta, “Avvertenza generale” to *Trattati del Cinquecento sulla donna*, p. 376.

In the dialogues on love to be studied here, female beauty is not the primary focus; instead, a more general discussion of love usually takes precedence. In fact, one can detect the authors’ awareness of the distinction between love dialogues and the general expositions of ideal beauty. For example, in Betussi’s *Raverta* the character by the same name refuses to discuss the beauty of the body, saying

Non mi date questa impresa, perché male vi saprei dimostrare che si convenga a formare un bel corpo. Altri di questa ne hanno scritto abbastanza: leggete i ritratti del Dressino [Trissino], che vedrete quali proporzioni vi si richiedono. Ché io non voglio starvi a diffinire la cagione perché quegli uomini, e così donne, di picciola statura, quantunque siano ben formati, si chiamino più tosto “formosi” che “belli”; e in che consista la corporale bellezza, essendo questo ufficio di pittore. (11)

In a dialogical defense of women, Domenichi’s *La nobiltà delle donne*, the question of female aesthetics arises, but is soon squelched as too tangential to the general discussion of virtue.\(^{41}\) The female interlocutor, Violante, reprimands her male defender for diverging too long on the subject of beauty:

Di gratia, Signor Francesco, non vogliate di difensore & campion delle Donne diventare dipintore o maestro di misure & di proporzioni: ma piacciavi ritornare alle lodi loro, & ripigliare il filo: che non poco farete a saper ritrovarlo. (29v)

Although Firenzuola’s work deals with female beauty, it stands somewhat apart from those by Trissino and Luigini. In this dialogue five interlocutors (four women and one man) expound a theory of ideal female beauty by creating a composite portrait of a

\(^{41}\) I do not include an analysis of Domenichi’s *La nobiltà delle donne* in the present work because the female interlocutor, who functions as the judge of the debates, has a more passive role recalling that of the Duchess Elisabetta in *Il libro del cortegiano*. The dialogue does, however, reflect the cultural phenomenon of the female-led discussions on love of the mid-Cinquecento. Thus at certain points in my discussion I make reference to Domenichi’s dialogue.
beautiful woman made up of individual parts. Underscoring its difference from other dialogues on beauty, Konrad Eisenbichler and Jacqueline Murray have called attention to Firenzuola's willingness to bring Neoplatonic theory to its logical conclusion with regard to the theoretical status of women. According to Eisenbichler and Murray,\(^\text{42}\)

His [Firenzuola's] evaluation of gender is neither one of female inferiority nor backhanded complementarity. Based on his understanding of the creation story narrated by Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*, he clearly asserts the equality of women and men in every aspect of life. The story, one of the most popular in the Renaissance, asserts that men and women were originally united in one being and therefore possess identical natures; yet few writers were sufficiently courageous or imaginative to push this idea to its logical conclusion and to assert unequivocally the equality of men and women. In concluding so, Firenzuola departed significantly from the standard understanding of the *Symposium* and advanced his own unique interpretation of Neoplatonic philosophy. (xxxiii)

Indeed, Firenzuola's work seems to be indicative of a nascent relaxation of some of the misogynist views of women. Moreover, the interlocutors' ability for self-determination - - in shaping the discourse at hand through their involvement -- reinforces the theoretical vindication of women, as explained by Eisenbichler and Murray. Although the role of teacher is reserved for the male character, Tonia Caterina Riviello points out that one of the female characters in particular, Mona Lampiada, often demonstrates her fore-knowledge of Celso's response to her questions and is likened, in at least one instance, to a Socratic character.\(^\text{43}\) The setting of Firenzuola's dialogue is what sets it apart from the

\(^{42}\) Eisenbichler and Murray provide an introduction and English translation of the text. See this work for bibliographical information on Firenzuola's work.

dialogues on love to be analyzed in the present study. Eisenbichler and Murray explain the milieu as follows:

Firenzualo’s context is neither the glittering circle of a court nor a sophisticated urban elite. Rather his audience and context are at once more bourgeois and more provincial than those of either Castiglione or Della Casa. The interlocutors, neither illustrious nor learned, are the bourgeois inhabitants of Prato... Thus Firenzualo takes the task of popularizing Neoplatonic thought a step further: he leaves the learned humanist circles of the elite and preaches the doctrines of Neoplatonism in the haunts frequented by his primarily middle-class audience. (xxix)

Like the dialogues on love which are the subject of this study, Firenzualo’s work demonstrates the literary dialogue’s unique capacity to reflect an environment which, imbued with Neoplatonic theory, was more amenable to a female voice.

VII. The “Feminism” of the Sixteenth Century and the Figure of the Female Intellectual

That the sixteenth century represents a period of “feminism” in Italy has been asserted by several scholars, yet the origins, manifestations, and limitations of this movement have not been adequately addressed. In his monumental Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, Jacob Burckhardt was one of the first scholars to recognize that the role of women was shifting in this period. His, however, was a rather superficial and optimistic outlook on the status of women in the Renaissance, as is demonstrated by his much-cited pronouncement: “To understand the higher forms of social intercourse at this period we must keep in mind the fact that women stood on a footing of perfect equality

with men” (389). As a cornerstone of Renaissance scholarship, Burckhardt’s work provided an historical perspective of the women of the period that had great influence on subsequent scholars for many years.\textsuperscript{45} Ruth Kelso was one of the first scholars to call Burckhardt’s view on Renaissance women into question, followed by Joan Kelly, and more recently, Maria Ludovica Lenzi.\textsuperscript{46}

Other critics, although less sanguine than Burckhardt, have nevertheless spoken of a sort of “feminism” during this period. For example, Marcello Aurigemma notes the passage in Bembo’s \textit{Asolani} in which the author defends his choice to include women among the interlocutors.\textsuperscript{47} Regarding this passage, Aurigemma states:

Il passo è importante, perché segna all’inizio del Cinquecento la decisa ripresa del femminismo intellettuale già propugnato dal Boccaccio e perseguito per molti anni finché non prevalse il censurato costume della Controriforma. Ma è non meno importante che il Bembo dimostri, anche in questo caso, la consapevolezza del suo coraggio di moralista: “degli oppositori [...] non gli cale,” ma essi evidentemente esistono. Ed egli è deciso a dar l’avvio ad un dibattito di alto livello letterario, dove le donne (appunto per il tema d’amore) possano avere il loro degno posto anche come intellettuali, usufruendo di quella più ampia partecipazione del pubblico che fu la conquista della società rinascimentale. (18-19)

Yet, as has already been noted, the female interlocutors in the \textit{Asolani} serve mainly as passive figures and are denied an intellectual role in the discourses. Nevertheless, Aurigemma notes briefly that there is a sort of “feminism” at work: female characters

\textsuperscript{45} See Joan Kelly’s seminal essay entitled “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” in \textit{Women, History & Theory: the Essays of Joan Kelly} (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984). On p. 20, n. 1 Kelly traces the trajectory of Burckhardt’s assertion in subsequent writers such as Simone de Beauvoir.


\textsuperscript{47} See Marcello Aurigemma, \textit{Lirica, poemi e trattati civili del Cinquecento} (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1979).
who are intelligent and engaged (up to a certain point, in Bembo’s dialogue) appear in works by Boccaccio and later by Bembo and others.

Mario Pozzi⁴⁸ has succinctly outlined a position that will be further explained in the present work. Regarding the Neoplatonic concept of love, he writes:

più che d’una concezione rigorosamente neoplatonica, si deve parlare di uno spiritualismo...La forza di questo spiritualismo consistette innanzi tutto -- come riconobbe il Croce -- “nell’implicita affermazione che l’amore terreno e la vita morale non sono inconciliabili, e che la conciliazione non sia da cercare nella soppressione dell’uno dei due, ma nell’elevamento spirituale.” Per questa via i trattatisti, superando l’antitesi fra materia e spirito propria dell’ascetismo medievale, potevano rivalutare l’amore e la donna, oggetto naturale dell’amore per i letterati se non per i facinari di stretta osservanza. Di qui una sorta di “feminismo,” che era già stato della nostra tradizione letteraria e aveva informato di sé pagine memorabili del Decameron. (XII, emphasis is mine)

Carlo Dionisotti has perhaps shed the most light on this exciting period of literary history, the middle years of the Cinquecento, by discussing the galvanizing effect of the linguistic revolution in Italy in the period prior to the Council of Trent. By the 1540s a greatly expanded literary space was being afforded to the Italian vernacular. The popularity of Petrarch, according to Dionisotti, also reached its zenith at this time. As Dionisotti points out,⁴⁹

Il culto del Petrarca, a chiusura d’un processo di canonizzazione letteraria durato poco meno di un secolo, aveva ormai assunto l’estensione e l’intensità costante di un culto nazionale. Era stato in origine, nelle corti principesche del medio e tardo Quattrocento, un culto aristocratico, a volte appassionato, a volte frivolo. Ora non piú; fra il 1530 e il 1540, dopo che il sistema delle corti era stato in parte travolto e in parte scosso dagli eventi, quel linguaggio lirico era diventato lingua e disciplina comune di

⁴⁸ See his “Introduzione,” pp. V-XL.

tutta la società italiana, tesa nello sforzo di far argine e riparo a tanta rovina: una lingua e disciplina non meno esatta del latino umanistico, ma aperta a un uso di gran lunga più spedito, più frequente e più vario. (233)

What is particularly interesting about this expanded literary society, which permitted to a greater extent the representation of ‘minor’ authors, was the remarkable literary contribution of women. The period in which these writers are most active is roughly 1540 to 1560. The primary literary vehicle for these women is poetry, and the first woman poet to publish was Vittoria Colonna. Dionisotti describes the success of Colonna’s Rime:

La prima, abusiva, raccolta a stampa delle Rime di Vittoria Colonna apparve nel 1538, poveramente e fuori mano, a Parma. Era, salvo errore, la prima raccolta a stampa apparsa in Italia di rime d’una donna, col suo proprio nome, e fu come una scintilla caduta nella paglia. Non meno di quattro edizioni di quelle rime apparvero l’anno dopo, e non meno di quattordici, senza contare le antologie, fra il 1540 e il 1560. (238)

The works of the other principal women poets, Veronica Gambara, Gaspara Stampa, Tullia d’Aragona, Laura Terracina, and Laura Battiferri, were all published from 1547 to 1560. While Dionisotti is referring principally to the literary activity of the poets, the period of greater freedom in literary and intellectual expression he describes also serves to demonstrate the reasons for the emergence of female intellectuals in dialogues of this time.

Indeed the female interlocutors who are represented in dialogues were often known as poets, of whom Tullia d’Aragona, Laudomia Forteguerri, and Francesca Baffa are the most famous. Yet the phenomenon of the intellectual woman involved in discussions with learned men is a separate, if not unrelated, development. The poetry of the period can be considered, like dialogue, a form of literary exchange, most often with
men. The distinct difference, however, between the woman poet and the female interlocutor, is the medium in which this woman asserts her voice. The literary, documentary dialogues are presented as transcriptions of discussions. In both diegetical and mimetic dialogues of this period, the exchanges represent a social event that stood somewhere between debate and conversation. Thus the female interlocutor transgresses another social boundary: just as the poet had crossed the boundary of publication, the female interlocutor enters into the world of direct verbal exchange with men, breaking the silence that women were often encouraged to maintain.

Dionisotti credits the triumph of the vernacular for this period of intense activity for the women writers: “Il fenomeno della rigogliosa letteratura femminile italiana a metà del Cinquecento anzitutto si spiega con l’improvvisa, larghissima apertura linguistica di quegli anni” (239). This is an important part of the picture, but it does not suffice for explaining the new figure in love dialogues. Marina Zancan is another scholar who has observed that the role of the press and the triumph of the vernacular opened the world of literature and learning to women. As she states:

la codificazione del volgare come lingua colta e letteraria e insieme l’ampio sviluppo del mezzo a stampa producono un notevole allargamento della società letteraria. Un numero sempre maggiore di persone, e di persone diverse, può accedere al mondo della cultura...Ad essa e alla editoria in continuo sviluppo accedono ora nuovi soggetti, e tra questi le donne. (788-9)
The Neoplatonic theory of woman was a third factor that helped to create the distinctly open environment for women in this period since it proposed women to be ontologically and intellectually superior beings. Ian MacLean explains:

Marsilio Ficino's attempt to marry Plato and theology leads him to a reconsideration of divine love which conduces greatly to the honour of the female sex, and it is a commonplace that, in the Renaissance, woman was exalted by neoplatonist theories. Love is the vinculum mundi, binding the whole of creation together; earthly love is a step on the ladder of love leading eventually to ecstatic union with the Godhead. When a woman is loved, her lover is loving not only her, but God and himself as well. The perfection of love is in reciprocity; but its origin lies in beauty, which women possess in greater store than men. Physical beauty reflects mental goodness; thus women are better than men. Furthermore, the being least weighed down with earthly matter is the most spiritual, and its soul is more free to escape from the fetters of physical existence; women therefore are more easily to transcend the limitations of this world. (24)

Although this theory caused both positive and negative reverberations for women, as will be discussed, on the whole it gave rise to a reconsideration of women's worth.

Thus, a short-lived window of opportunity opened for the female intellectual of the sixteenth century, who then began to make her shadowy appearance. One can see the synergistic confluence of three forces that combined in the middle years of the Cinquecento to produce an atmosphere in which this period of "feminism" was possible: first, the success of the vernacular which was critical for allowing women a role in the intellectual debate of the day; second, the role of the printing press in the diffusion of texts and bringing knowledge to different levels of society; and third, Neoplatonic theory

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50 MacLean's *The Renaissance Notion of Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) is required reading for an understanding of the philosophical and medical theories that shaped the discourse on women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.
which assigns woman a dignified and noble role. The literary manifestation of this combination of cultural factors, I believe, is the dialogue on love.

The sixteenth-century love dialogue represents a nascent fusion of these three elements because it becomes the first literary vehicle to integrate fully the use of the vernacular with the theme of love, while taking advantage of the new technology to provide an almost immediate product for a new market of readers. In contrast with the humanist dialogue of the Quattrocento,\textsuperscript{51} which was written in Latin as the humanists preferred, the Cinquecento dialogue was written almost exclusively in the vernacular. While the proliferation of Petrarchan canzonieri was, by definition, a rigidly vernacular literary movement linked to the linguistic program set forth in Bembo's \textit{Prose della volgar lingua}, by contrast, the dialogue on love first appears in Latin, but in the sixteenth century it becomes a form that embraces the vernacular.\textsuperscript{52}

The use of the vernacular in Pietro Bembo’s \textit{Asolani} certainly reflects a strategic choice of language and literary form meant to lend prestige to the vernacular and demonstrate its literary adaptability.\textsuperscript{53} Like Castiglione's \textit{Il libro del cortegiano}, the \textit{Asolani} is noteworthy for its literary treatment of Neoplatonic love and for its inclusion of female interlocutors. Another innovation is the use of historical personages who were


\textsuperscript{52} Indeed, Giuseppe Toffanin has a sub-section of his "Il Cinquecento," vol. 6 of the \textit{Storia letteraria d'Italia} (Milano: Villardi, 1965) entitled "Il trattato d'amore è il primo genere letterario che diventa volgare." See pp. 137-9.

\textsuperscript{53} See Vianello, p. 25.
well known contemporaries of the author and would have been recognized by readers.

Virginia Cox⁵⁴ has noted that only in Italy did the documentary dialogue take root in this period. Cox asks the important question: “What is it that a dialogue can do which its closest rival, the treatise, does not?” (4) Cox determines that the principal reason for the popularity of the genre rests in the dialogue’s capacity for self-portraiture. She proposes that the social instability of the period was one of the main causes for the popularity of a literary form uniquely effective as a vehicle for self-identification. Perhaps another reason for the dialogue’s success in this period was its ability to represent women in an innovative way, namely, as protagonists in historically verifiable circles and social situations.

Bembo’s Asolani and Castiglione’s Il libro del cortegiano, therefore, present prototypes of the female intellectual. Despite the fact that the women in these two works display a passive character and for the most part lack in individual initiative and oratorical skills, it is noteworthy that Bembo and Castiglione portray historically verifiable women, contemporaries of the author and recognized by the readers, who have at least a minimal involvement in discussions.

The work which provided the most influential model for the active female interlocutor is Leone Ebreo’s Dialoghi d’amore. Almost all of the dialogues studied

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⁵⁴ Virginia Cox, The Renaissance Dialogue: Literary Dialogue in its Social and Political Contexts, Castiglione to Galileo (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991) is an innovative contribution to the study of dialogue. Cox recognizes the unique aspects of the Italian Renaissance dialogue such as its ability to represent the “process” by which “information or opinion is transmitted to a particular audience, at a particular place and time” (4). She therefore demonstrates the dialogue’s function as a rich storehouse of social and cultural information. While Cox’s work provides an important foundation for the study of dialogue in the Italian Renaissance and sketches an overview, the present work is an attempt to begin to investigate in some detail a particular group of dialogues.
indicate this as a model, either explicitly or implicitly. The main reason for this, as will be demonstrated, is the depiction of a knowledgeable and intellectually active female interlocutor, Sofia. One scholar, John Nelson, recognizes the affinity between Leone Ebreo’s dialogue and the dialogue by Tullia d’Aragona. Regarding d’Aragona’s dialogue, he states:

The origin of this form is to be found in Leone Ebreo’s “Dialoghi d’amore.” The persistent lovers’ quarrel there between Filone and Sofia is the prototype of the amorous caprices of Varchi and Tullia in Tullia’s dialogue. (130)

If the “amorous caprices” of Varchi and Tullia reflect those between Filone and Sofia, it is perhaps because both female interlocutors display remarkable independence of thought, as well as the ability and willingness to challenge their male interlocutors. Yet the interlocutors of the Dialoghi d’amore, Filone and Sofia, are allegorical figures. While all of the other dialogues to be examined in the present study draw from the documentary stream of works, like those by Bembo and Castiglione, by adopting historical personages as interlocutors, they also incorporate a more fully engaged character, distinctly reminiscent of Ebreo’s female character, Sofia. The female interlocutors, often praised in Neoplatonic terms, in a sense remain objects of speculation, yet they are also fictional subjects in their own right. Thus the Neoplatonic ideal of woman so often discussed in theory seems to come alive within the dialogical space that includes an active exemplum of this theory, rendering the popularized philosophy much more pertinent to the everyday life of the elite groups depicted in the dialogues. Indeed, dialogue emerged as a genre with a unique capacity to present women as rational and independent subjects, thereby addressing the issue of women’s place within contemporary intellectual discourse. As a
genre that allows for multi-voiced discourse and even, as Paul de Man has stated, "the celebratory crossing of social barriers," female interlocutors transgress some conventional norms of behavior.

As noted above, the dialogues that present an active female interlocutor are generally written in the vernacular. Women seem to be linked in a particular way to the vernacular language, not only through the practical problem of their traditional exclusion from knowledge of Latin and Greek, but also on a much more fundamental level. Marina Zancan initiates her analysis of the female figure in Italian literature with a discussion of the nexus between women and language in Dante:

Alle origini della letteratura in volgare, la fondazione del laico, scrive Asor Rosa, si basa su due forze generatrici: "la lingua nuova e il nuovo eros": il nesso che Dante aveva individuato nella Vita nuova tra eros, poesia e lingua volgare, stabilendo così, tra i tre termini, "un vincolo originario e generativo," si conferma nel De vulgari eloquentia dove, continua, "Dante stabilisce una relazione profonda tra lingua volgare e natura: la lingua volgare è quella naturale." Dante però, aveva scritto: "dicimus, celeriter actendentes, quod vulgarem locutionem appellamus earn qua infantes assuefiunt ab assistentibus, cum primitus distinguere voces incipiunt; vel, quod brevius dici potest, vulgarem locutionem asserimus, quam sine omni regula nutricem imitantem accipimus." La lingua che, parlando d'amore, dà forma alla nuova poesia è, dunque, la lingua della nutrice. (VIII-IX)

If the language of the nutrice represents the natural language of man, it is also an appropriate vehicle for understanding the other important woman in a man's life, and the object of his "natural" passions, that is, the female beloved. If, as Zancan has stressed, the notion of the correlation between the nutrice and natural language is present from the beginning of the Italian literary tradition, then these same themes resurface in the

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Renaissance as intellectuals debate the importance of the authors of the Trecento. In general terms, both woman and “natural” language, namely the Tuscan vernacular, are rehabilitated in this period.

The imitation and adulation of Petrarch is, of course, a central element in the discussions about women in the Renaissance. The importance of Petrarch as both literary model and ethical-behavioral model has been noted by Antonino Sole:56

L’elegante e aggraziato Petrarca, esempio, sia pur duttile e dinamico, di perfezione letteraria nelle “cose amorose,” esercita dunque sull’intellettuale cortigiano un fascino profondo, non solo retorico-formale e linguistico, com’è stato osservato, ma pure etico-comportamentale, quale amante da indicare a modello: i due piani, il linguistico-stilistico e l’etico-comportamentale, tendono anzi a combaciare, perché senza la finezza e la profondità interiore accresciute dall’amore per Laura, non si sarebbe avuta neppure l’eccellenza letteraria.

The exaltation of Petrarch in the linguistic and behavioral fields perhaps necessitates a corollary rethinking of women as objects of the male lovers’ interior speculation. The privileged space afforded to Laura in Petrarch’s highly influential Canzoniere is an undeniable source for the renewed interest in female figures as objects of speculation and as literary characters. This re-consideration of the female beloved in the Cinquecento, combined with the new female readership, is perhaps one explanation for the appearance of a dynamic female figure within the popular discourse on love.

Similarly, the popularity of Boccaccio in this period, especially of the Decameron, served to provide both linguistic models and models of female behavior.

Boccaccio’s depiction of shrewd and independent-minded female characters is something

that seems to be re-visited in the Cinquecento along with the *Decameron*. Although the female figure in the *Decameron* is quite different from, and indeed at times antithetical to Petrarch's celebration of Laura, both works called to the fore the role of women and exerted a strong influence on the love dialogues of the mid-Cinquecento.

The author to whom the most space is dedicated in this work, Giuseppe Betussi, is a key figure in the promotion of this female figure because he is uniquely involved in all three factors that contributed to a cultural atmosphere that was more conducive to women: as a member of the new professional class of polygraphers, he was intimately involved with the printing industry; as a translator, he took part in the movement that favored the use of the vernacular; and as an author of love dialogues, he wrote about the popular theories of Neoplatonic love. Literary critics, however, have most often denigrated Betussi's work perhaps because of a traditional prejudice against polygraphers. In fact, he has been described as a sycophant and a wily manipulator of weak-minded noblewomen. By tracing Betussi's depiction of female characters and the attitudes he expresses toward women in several of his works, I shall attempt to challenge the disparaging view of this writer.

Besides the function of dialogues as vehicles for conveying information to traditionally excluded groups, dialogues have been noted for their capacity to propose models of behavior. Through the depiction of a female interlocutor, dialogues provide a public stage for the figure, often presenting her as a behavioral model. In their study on

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57 See below, p. 162.
argumentation, Chaim Perelman and Lucie Obrechts-Tyteca propose three modes of persuasion by example. These are: 1. examples that permit a generalization; 2. examples used to illustrate a previously discussed rule; and 3. examples that serve as models to be imitated. The works studied here present the third type of example. This is particularly evident in Betussi's *Raverta*, but it is also implicit in all of the works in which an orchestrated use of praise and portraiture serves to present an ideal model.

The female interlocutor is almost always depicted in a domestic setting. In nearly all of the works in which one finds this figure, the *topos* of the visit provides the principal fictional impetus behind the discussions. In the dialogues by Speroni, Betussi, d'Aragona, and Marcantonio Piccolomini (as well as those by Castiglione, Bembo and Domenichi) the discussions take place in the home of the female interlocutor (or one of them, when more than one woman is present). While the model of the female intellectual appears to reinforce women's traditional restriction to the domestic realm, the exclusion from the public sphere is undermined by the publication and dissemination of the works. Indeed, private discussions including women are publicized and promoted in a public manner, thereby blurring the distinctions between public and private.

Unless they are of particular interest for the purpose of outlining the female interlocutor, the philosophical theories expounded within these works will not be outlined here since this has been done in many of the older studies discussed above. One popular

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philosophical question, however, is of particular interest for the ontological status of the
female beloved, namely, the query “who is more noble, the lover or the beloved?” Ficino
implied that the lover was the nobler of the two. Many of the authors who depicted an
active female interlocutor, however, claimed the superior role for the beloved instead of
the lover, creating an interesting departure from Neoplatonic theory. Leone Ebreo’s
Dialoghi d’amore -- the earliest of the works considered here and the only dialogue that
can be considered a serious philosophical treatment -- is the first work in the Cinquecento
to assert this. In Tullia d’Aragona’s dialogue, this adherence to Leone Ebreo’s theory of
lover and beloved is stated unequivocally by the character Varchi:

Benucci: A questo modo pare che gli amanti siano più nobili e più degni
che gli amati.
Varchi: Già avemo detto che Platone lo concede; ma Filone, e con gran
ragione, per quanto mi paia, tien la opinion contraria. (240)

By aligning themselves with Leone Ebreo, against Marsilio Ficino, on a point that is so
crucial to the female role in Neoplatonic love (the woman is almost always depicted as
the beloved), the authors demonstrate their fidelity to the female model offered in the
Dialoghi d’amore. This assertion of theoretical superiority was not without importance:
in dialogues in which the beloved is considered the spiritual superior, the female
interlocutor is often given a central role in the dialogue.

VIII. The Neoplatonic View of Women

59 Lorenzetti traces this theory in various dialogues, noting that Leone Ebreo, Giuseppe Betussi, Sperone
Speroni and Tullia d’Aragona, among others, all favor the beloved over the lover in this theory. See
Lorenzetti, p. 131, n. 2.
Although Marsilio Ficino seems to have favored the lover over the beloved in his doctrine on love,\(^6^0\) his restatement of Platonic theory nonetheless had a profound effect on the way women were considered in philosophical terms. Ficino’s *El libro dell’amore* is his most comprehensive treatment of love. As stated above, it spawned the Italian *trattato d’amore* by infusing the courtly and Petrarchan traditions of love with Platonic and Neoplatonic themes. One of the most engaging aspects of Ficino’s theory involves the importance of visual phenomena for the perception of incorporeal beauty and goodness. The lover seeking knowledge of divine goodness is always dependent upon the senses of the body as his first step:

Ma perché la cognizione della mente nostra piglia origine da’ sensi, non intenderemo né appetiremo mai la bontà dentro alle cose nascosa, se non fussimo a quella indotti per gl’inditii della esteriore bellezza. (76) (5.1.16-17)

The beauty that attracts the lover is, of course, incorporeal beauty. This is a certain inner virtue of the beloved that evokes a memory of divine beauty: “perché all’animo piace la spetie d’alcuna persona non in quanto ella giace nell’exteriore materia, ma in quanto la imagine di quella pe’ l senso del vedere dall’animo si piglia” (5.3.10).

Ficino’s theory is somewhat diluted in the dialogues studied here, which, rather than constituting true philosophical works, are literary works that employ philosophical themes. Nevertheless, Ficino’s theory bequeaths to the subsequent tradition of love dialogues a rehabilitation of the senses and sensory realm that, as Ficino posits, provides the first impetus toward spiritual transcendence. Ficino’s theory, although it partakes in

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Platonic dualism which views the sensual world as a prison, emphasizes to a far greater extent the intermingling of the spiritual and the material. Erwin Panofsky\(^{61}\) alludes to the popularity of this rehabilitation of the sensory realm within an aristocratic society:

We can easily see how this philosophy was bound to stimulate the imagination of those who, in a period of growing psychological tensions, longed for new forms of expression for the frightening yet fruitful conflicts of the age: conflicts between freedom and coercion, faith and thought, illimited desires and finite consummations. At the same time, however, the praise of a sublime love divorced from 'base impulses, 'yet allowing of an intense delight in visible and tangible beauty, was bound to appeal to the taste of a refined, or would-be refined, society. (44, emphasis is mine)

Panofsky goes on to liken the post-Ficinian love dialogues to popular books on psychoanalysis of our own century. Indeed, knowledge of theories of love were perhaps a pre-requisite for a sort of theatre of high-brow socializing. The popularity of both Petrarchan poetry and Neoplatonism informed the discussions of these groups and provided the theoretical and poetic foundation for a reconsideration of women.

One text which should help to illustrate the philosophical view of woman is Girolamo Ruscelli’s *Lettura ove...si pruova la somma perfettione delle donne* (Venetia: Giovan Griffio, 1552). Here, the author’s aim is to defend women in philosophical terms. Distrusting the efficacy of *exempla*, Ruscelli’s defense recalls various literary sources, including Agrippa of Nettesheim’s *De nobilitate et praecellentia sexus faeminei*. What is most noteworthy, and perhaps most indicative of the view of women in works of this period, is Ruscelli’s clear blending of Petrarchan love with Ficino’s rehabilitation of the sensory realm: Ruscelli acknowledges the sensual aspects of Petrarch’s love for Laura

and grafts onto that a Neoplatonic theory of sensible love as a first step toward contemplation of the divine.

Ruscelli’s work presents woman as a reflection of divine beauty that recalls man to the spiritual contemplation of God. Ruscelli goes even further by emphasizing specifically the vindication of sensual experience with regard to women. The following passage merits citation for the way in which Ruscelli develops his defense and clearly aligns Petrarchan love with Neoplatonic theory:

Et però tornando all’intento primo di questo dubbio, dico che non senza ragione in la dilettation corporale a ricercarsi sommamente nella Donna, come in più nobile & più degnà d’ogn’altra cosa creata, & che non a un senso solo del corpo nostro, ma a tutti insieme unitì & disgiuntì ha da dilettare, com essi dirà piú di sotto; onde piú in essa, che in altra cosa creata, tal diletto corporale si ritruova, non da ciascuno, ma da chi sa degnamente usarla; ma che per colpa del poco sapere, sia da pochissimi usata, o procurato d’usarla a quel fine, & con quell’ordine, che si doverebbe, & al quale Iddio l’ha creata, Anzi la piú parte delle genti del mondo (parlo di quei che lo fanno) attendono solo a volere nell’usar disordinatamente & perversamente i sensi del corpo, farsi piú simili al cavallo & al mulo, i quali non hanno intelletto, che a se stessi, cioè a creature rationali & celesti. La onde per far capace chi n’ha desiderio, intendo di provar’hora brieveissimamente, come i veri huomini, che sanno, & conoscono la vera proprietà, & il vero ordine delle cose, tengono di continuo dilettati & contenti i sentimenti del corpo loro nella bellezza corporal della Donna, con piena, vera, durabile, & sana dilettazione, et non disordinata, inquieta, illecita, & rovinosa, come molti a concorrenza delle bestie. Et questa dilettation corporale ch’io dico, è stata in ogni tempo ben conosciuta & pigliata da molti grandi, saggi, & ancor santi huomini; ma per non dare il santo a i cani, non l’hanno scritta & publicata a gli indegni, & se pure l’hanno voluta accennare, l’han fatto con molta accortezza, & con modi da intendersi solamente da i saggi. Solo il gentilissimo Petrarca, havendo in piu luoghi spiegato al mondo la gran virtù delle Donne nelle bellezze dell’animo, in condurci o indirizzarci alla via del cielo, come disopra habbiam visto, volse far’ ancor fede al mondo della dilettatione, che con l’esempio & col modo di lui, può ciascuno havere dalle bellezze corporali della Donna. (28r-28v, emphasis is mine)
Petrarch was the first author to teach men how to “use” correctly the delight in female beauty and in the pleasure that one (a man) receives from female company. A Neoplatonic reading of Petrarch allows women to be considered a permissible, even sanctified, source of sensible delight for men (breaking with past views of woman as lustful, licentious, and in need of governance). Ascribing a Platonic allegiance to Petrarch was not uncommon. Mario Equicola, in his widely read *Libro de natura d’amore*, claimed that Petrarch “fu dedito alla secta Platonica.”

We can observe this line of thinking through Ruscelli’s systematic defense of women: first, he asserts that God can indeed be known and seen by men (6-7); then he explains how one can perceive God in the world through earthly things (9-11); and only at this point does he begin his praise of women. Although he employs some of the common arguments of the defense tradition, the lynchpin of his case rests in the rehabilitation of the earthly realm.

The theory espoused by Ruscelli was influential in creating an environment in which women could play a larger role within the previously male-restricted business of contemplating love as a transcendental force. As a theory that does not remain in the ether, but rests firmly in the terrestrial world, it served to recall the virtue of the living women of the day, and to underline their intrinsic nobility. The link between the rehabilitation of woman in sensual terms and the rise of the new female intellectual is perhaps demonstrated by the popular innovation of the period, previously noted, which

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62 According to Rosi, this work was presented in no less than 12 Italian editions from 1525 to 1606. See his *Saggio sui trattati d’amore del Cinquecento*, p. 81.

consisted in praising contemporary women (not only the great patronesses, but also other much less renowned figures). Indeed, Ruscelli's work includes a sort of appendix in which 541 women from 36 Italian cities are listed as virtuous models of the woman he describes. This list perhaps served to demonstrate that this divine lady was not a philosophical construct, but could be found in a nearby town. Indeed, the rehabilitation of woman that has been outlined here, and that will be traced in the love dialogues, occurs within a context that includes real historical women as players, and therefore serves to undermine the role of the beloved as a sort of detached icon who served merely as a conduit to transcendental experience.

Nevertheless, a dubious form of exaltation — in which the praise of women seems to exalt them to almost inhuman, unrecognizable form — was an insidious trend in the Neoplatonic theory of the period and seems to have found its way into discussions about women in authors such as Stefano Guazzo and Castiglione. Stefano Guazzo's *La civil conversazione* (1574) was an enormously popular dialogue that proposed an etiquette for social life predicated upon the importance of conversation. Guazzo's presentation of behavioral codes includes precepts that govern the relationships between men and women, whether as husband and wife, or as lover and beloved. Far from being interested in praising women in Neoplatonic terms, Guazzo is more concerned with describing the "mediocrità" which he considered necessary in a good wife. On the subject of women,

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64 Guazzo uses the term "mediocrità" to indicate a certain moderation. For example, it is important that the wife not be too beautiful, for that could cause problems with the inevitable suitors; nor should she be more noble than her husband, because that would threaten his authority over her. See the advice on choosing a wife at the beginning of book three, especially pp. 178-184. I cite from a recent critical edition: Stefano Guazzo, *La civil conversazione*, ed. Amedeo Quondam (Modena: Dini, 1993).
he prefers to discuss the practical matters regarding the relationships between the sexes rather than the divine virtues of the court lady. Many passages on women can easily be called misogynist: for the most part, the highest virtue a woman can aspire to is chastity and silence. Yet Guazzo does make an exception in his brief discussion of the ideal lady of the court. This is evident in the following passage:

Dico adunque che questa signora riesce nelle conversazioni singolare e pellegrina, percioché ella dispone tutte le sue nobili parti a formare una soavissima armonia. E primieramente con l’altezza delle parole s’accordano la suavità della voce e l’onestà de’ concetti, si che gli animi degli ascoltanti, ristretti da questi tre lacci, si senton in un punto commovere e raffrenare. Sono poi così agevoli i ragionamenti, che allora cominciate ad attristarvi quando ella finisce di favellare, e vorreste ch’ella non fosse così mai stanca di dire, come voi non sareste mai sazio d’udire... Insomma è tanto soave che vi pare che parlando taccia, si come all’incontro tacendo parla, e fa col silenzio un’altra armonia... (170-171)

The court lady possesses near mystical powers as her voice, words, and modesty work in orchestration to capture her listeners in a sort of harmonious ecstatic rapture. Moreover, part of the mystery of this woman is her oxymoronic ability to be both silent and speak at the same time.

The idea of a mystic silence was part of the Neoplatonic concern with poetic veils and other devices that might both preserve esoteric knowledge from the uninitiated and reveal it to the few endowed with the ability to understand. The Ferrarese humanist Celio Calcagnini wrote on the concept of hidden mysteries. Edgar Wind explains his views thus:65

By a judicious use of enigmatic words and images it was possible, he [Calcagnini] thought, to combine speech with silence: and that was the language of the mysteries. “All those who are wise in divine matters,”

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wrote Dionysius the Areopagite, "and are interpreters of the mystical revelations prefer incongruous symbols for holy things, so that divine things may not be easily accessible." (12-13)

The use of incongruous symbols for the transmission of cryptic wisdom perhaps illustrates how women, as images of the divine, could have been seen within a Neoplatonic system. As a conduit that leads to divine beauty and knowledge, the beloved is a mysterious and powerful being. She is an earthly creature who manages to express a divine virtue, much as hieroglyphics were thought to express, inexplicably, the supernatural by means of imperfect natural language. Hidden within the sex that had traditionally been considered the weaker of the two, esoteric knowledge took on an unexpected form. The concealed divine beauty was in this way perceptible only to the true lover.

The oxymoronic task of the beloved may perhaps recall the difficult balancing act that Castiglione seems to require of his **donna di corte**: to walk a thin line in her speech between entertaining and overstepping the boundaries of modesty.66 In her discussions with men she must appear to have a ready wit, but not to be any less modest and graceful: "le bisogna tener una certa mediocrità difficile e quasi composta di cose contrarie, e giunger a certi termini a punto, ma non passargli" (212). Similarly, the **donna di corte** must possess enough knowledge to entertain and appreciate male companions, but never express opinions that would imply an independent curiosity or consideration of...

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66 Because of the dialogical nature of the work, ascribing the words of one of the interlocutors to Castiglione himself is risky. Yet, some passages are unique and perhaps permit this. In the cited passage the interlocutor who speaks these words is *il Magnifico*, the character representing Giuliano de' Medici and the pro-woman voice in the text. As the defender of women, this character represents the voice that is most amenable to female concerns. His statements regarding the *mediocrità difficile* that a woman must maintain in her conversation remain unchallenged and, therefore, seem to have the consent of the group.
intellectual matters. Although the context in these passages is not Neoplatonic theory, both the *donna di corte* and the beloved, in strict philosophical terms, are held to near impossible standards: they must embody two antithetical characteristics at once. In Neoplatonic terms, they must be both earthly and divine and, in terms of courtly society, they must be entertaining and lively, yet not seem to break the rule of silence to which the *donna onesta* was held. In Stefano Guazzo’s treatment of the courtly woman these two spheres merge: the courtly woman must perform a mysterious feat by both “speaking and remaining silent.”

Consequently, some writers express a fear of the power allotted to women in a theory purporting them to be mysterious reflections of divinity. Marsilio Ficino acknowledges the power of the beloved and the consequent fear of the lover who is enchanted by this image of divine beauty: “adviene che gli amanti hanno timore e reverentia allo aspecto della persona amata... quel fulgore della divinità risplendente nel corpo bello constrigne gli amanti a maravigliarsi, tremare e venerare dexta persona come una statua di Dio” (2.6.5-6).

Indeed, an expression of the lover’s fear of disempowerment is traceable in many works, although not present in the more pro-woman dialogues to be studied here. The use of the term “servitude” in such passages seems to recall the tradition of courtly love, in which the beloved *domina* is always the social superior of her lover. Here one can observe the cross-pollination between the various traditions of love. The socially

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67 On the rule of silence see Kelso, pp. 50-51 and pp. 100-101.

68 See Ficino, pp. 34-35.
superior *domina* may here be replaced by the ontologically superior Neoplatonic beloved, yet the theme of servitude remains the same.

Indeed Lorenzetti has observed the theme of the fear-inspiring power of the beloved in Mario Equicola’s *Libro de natura d’amore*, contrasting it with Giuseppe Betussi’s treatment of love: “Al consiglio che Equicola esprimeva, di non amar troppo per non esser ritenuto servo dell’amata, si sostitui ben presto il contrario, di amare la propria donna in modo da formare con lei una sola volontà, un solo desiderio, un solo sentimento” (49).

By combining a passionate and emotional love with marriage, the man is in danger of overturning the established domestic hierarchy. A fear of women’s power is also betrayed in Lodovico Domenichi’s *La nobilità delle donne*. Here the misogynist character, Pierfrancesco, explains that women had often been barred from testifying in legal settings because of “a fear that was born among men” that women’s sweet appearance and mellifluous words might weaken the resolve and severity of the judges. (16v) While Neoplatonic theory involved the rehabilitation of physical beauty — with female beauty being the most powerful visual experience — beauty is also revealed as something dangerous to a man’s ability to reason. If unleashed on men in powerful household or civic positions, it could cause them to make errors in judgement.

Marcello Aurigemma has singled out the various manifestations of the fear of love that served perhaps as the premise underlying misogynist attitudes. Citing from Bembo’s treatise, he writes:

Non di rado il discorso di Perottino si allarga e all’amore si ricollegano altre perturbazioni dell’animo (“soverchio disiderare, soverchio rallegrarsi, soverchia tema delle future miserie e nelle presenti dolori”): dall’amore
che "acceca ogni nostra ragione e consiglio" rampollano movimenti irrazionali che giungono a insanguinare il mondo. Sono, tutte queste, premesse ovvie ad atteggiamenti misogini, che affiorano sia sul piano psicologico sia sul piano dei ragionamenti: motivi assai diffusi nei trattati d'amore, dall'Alberti all'Equivcola. Perottino si duole del fatto che gli uomini siano disposti "a riporre ogni [...] bene, ogni onore, ogni libertà tutta nelle mani di una donna." (15)

If, as Pozzi has asserted, the discussion on love in this period reveals a desire to regulate and control the amorous sphere, the theoretical celebration of a powerful beloved -- a bestower of esoteric knowledge -- would naturally frustrate such efforts to contain the effects of love. The sixteenth-century man's confidence in his ability to control this aspect of his life could be disrupted by passions beyond his control, passions which may seem at times to favor the beloved within the scheme of relative power.

Despite the theoretical exaltation to miraculous being conferred on women in the Neoplatonic theory of love and the consequent backlash it may have caused, this ideology of love fueled the various defenses of women and constituted one of the most decisive factors that contributed to the appearance of the intellectual woman in love dialogues of the middle decades of the century. As has been noted, female characters often appeared tethered to the theme of love, and only rarely do we find them free to wander into other subjects. In one anti-Neoplatonic dialogue, Sansovino’s Ragionamento d'amore, women’s restriction to the theme of love is made quite clear. While women are excluded from discussions on war, business, and civic affairs for their lack of understanding, the

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69 See Mario Pozzi, "Introduzione," pp. XI-XII.

70 See Ian MacLean, p. 24.
The topic of love is considered within women’s sphere of knowledge, as the following passage demonstrates:

Panfilo: ...Se noi ragionaremo della guerra, se della mercatanzia, se degli Stati, allora dirò che le donne in queste cose non son di quell’eccellenza e di quella accortezza che lo uomo. Ma, se si farà menzione delle cose d’amore, conchiuderò che elle tutte generalmente se ne intendano, conciosiasaceté la donna è il vero oggetto, il vero albergo di cotale passione. Né per altro è stimata né per altro aiuta cara che per questo effetto; e che sia il vero, mai non si trouva che contento alcuno sia interamente perfetto sanza donna. (160)

Nevertheless, in the love dialogues I analyze in this study the female figures move beyond the role of “il vero oggetto.” A letter by Girolamo Muzio to his friend Fedele Fedeli offers proof of women’s active involvement in discussions about love. In the letter, Muzio provides material for debate by listing a series of questions on love with the corresponding responses. These are passed on to Fedeli for specific use in conversations with women: “Andatevene alle vostre belle donne, che con questa risoluzione di dubbi haverete occasione di intrattenervi buona pezza con esse loro.” The topics proposed are not philosophical in nature but recall the “dubbi” on love of the courtly love tradition. In the dialogues studied here, the hybrid nature of the theme of love is apparent: concrete doubts on love are interspersed with philosophical questions. In fact, the theme of love serves as a conduit which permits the female interlocutor to discuss philosophical subjects.

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72 One famous dubbio (that may recall Boccaccio’s Decameron) is “Quale è maggior forza di amore, ó il far l’uomo di savio pazzo, ó di pazzo savio?” (p. 38) Regarding the doubts about love, see Nelson, p. 73. On the courtly love tradition see Roger Boase, The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1977).
IX. Female Characters and the Genre of Dialogue

One must also ask why a female voice emerges specifically within the genre of dialogue. Perhaps perceived limitations regarding the capabilities and proclivities of women influenced the genre in which women figured prominently. Indeed, the pairing of female interlocutors with literary dialogue may stem from some common assumptions about women as thinking subjects and about the epistemological function of dialogue. Prudence Allen has drawn an insightful connection between women and dialogue, claiming that the link rests in the dialogue's use for propagating "opinion" as opposed to "truth." Sperone Speroni, in his theoretical exposition of dialogue, explains the difference between the dialogical path to knowledge and the scientific one. According to Speroni, the dialogical method is one step removed from scientific investigation: the former is not a "scienza demonstrativa," but "di scienza ritratto." He explains:

Quella primiera cognizione, la quale è certa e invariabile, è veramente scienza ed è chiamata dimostrativa, perché è fattura del sillogismo dimostrativo: le condizioni del quale essendo notissime ad ogni giovane studioso, il riferirle è soverchio. Questa scienza dimostrativa è quel buon grano, che è proprio pasto dello intelletto; il qual grano se in campo alcuno si può ricoglier, tale è nel vero l’aristotelico. Delle altre cose non certamente sapute, parte impariamo con sillogismo dialettico, e questo genera opinione. (280, emphasis is mine)

While the first route is based on demonstrable science and syllogism, the second route, dialogue, is based on opinion and enthymeme.


Although Allen does not refer specifically to Speroni, she is tapping into the same epistemological theories, which actually derive from Aristotelian thought:

...By implication women were wise through a practical knowledge of particulars, rather than through a reasoned knowledge of principles. In Aristotle’s philosophy this is considered the wisdom of true opinion rather than the wisdom derived from the correct use of syllogism in demonstration. It is a degenerate form of wisdom because it is not of universals, which are the sole object of scientific knowledge. (102)

Indeed, in dialogues with female characters, women are often depicted as using experience against theory, playing into the stereotype of woman as incapable of syllogistic reason and inclined toward opinion. Of course, anyone lacking in philosophical training might resort to experience in countering philosophical arguments. Women’s relative unpreparedness to enter into philosophical discussions -- which I shall discuss in relation to Tullia d’Aragona’s dialogue -- served as both excuse and rationalization for limiting women’s understanding and mode of argumentation to the realm of “opinion.” By recognizing that a female voice is almost always found in works that have limits in theme and in epistemological authority, I do not mean to discount the integrity of the female literary figure. Rather, any discussion of the figure must begin with an understanding of the parameters within which the presence of women, as both depicted figures and as true historical actors, is to be encountered. That said, one can assert that, despite these limitations, the connection between women and dialogue did allow for an unprecedented representation of the female voice in intellectual discourse.

X. Women and the Academies
Academies provided yet another venue (also sharply limited) for the intellectual women of this period. The male authors involved in depicting this figure often crossed paths at the various academies. The two that included members with a particular propensity for praising the *donna colta* were the Accademia degli Intronati in Siena and the Accademia degli Infiammati in Padova. The presence of the Sienese Alessandro Piccolomini in Padova established an important link between the two groups. In fact, the paths of many of the men who participated in the emerging discourse on the intellectual woman intersect at the Accademia degli Infiammati. Among the *Infiammati* we find Benedetto Varchi, Sperone Speroni, Giuseppe Betussi, and Alessandro Piccolomini. The well-documented promotion of the vernacular in these academies provides a link between the academic movement and women. For example, Alessandro Piccolomini’s numerous translations of Latin texts were often aimed specifically at a female audience and served to remove the linguistic obstacle for women interested in learning. Although I would not argue that the academies in general promoted women’s learning, it is nonetheless evident that their linguistic agenda did serve the interests of women, and members such as Piccolomini were fully aware of this.

In fact, a network of relationships was forged between learned women and writers of dialogues who were often academy members, especially in Siena. For example, many

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75 See Lorenzetti, p. 121.


77 See below, p. 199.
of the same Sienese women’s names appear in more than one dialogue depicting the
cultural milieu surrounding the Accademia degli Intronati. The Sienese noblewoman
Frasia Venturi, for one, is praised in Girolamo Bargagli’s *Dialogo de’ giuochi* \(^{78}\) as an
acute disputant in the *veglie*, or soirees, and also depicted as one of the primary
interlocutors in the unpublished *Dialogo di Girolamo Mandoli Piccolomini*, another work
that features two female interlocutors discussing love in an environment closely linked to
the Intronati Academy. \(^{79}\)

Another of the female interlocutors in the Sienese dialogues, Laudomia
Forteguerri, is also praised in dialogues by Lodovico Domenichi and Giuseppe Betussi. \(^{80}\)
The fact that these authors were not part of the Sienese group, but involved in other

\(^{78}\) See Girolamo Bargagli, *Dialogo de’ giuochi* ed. Patrizia d’Incalci Ermini, introduction by Riccardo

\(^{79}\) The short dialogue exists in manuscript form in the Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati in Siena:
*Miscellanea Benvoglienti*, ms. C.V.27. For this reference I am indebted to Rita Belladonna. See “Gli
Intronati, le donne, Aonio Paleario e Agostino Museo in un dialogo inedito di Marcantonio Piccolomini, Il
Sodo Intronato (1538),” in *Bollettino senese di storia patria* (Siena: Accademia Senese degli Intronati,
1994), p. 62. Alessandro Piccolomini provides further evidence of Venturi’s participation in discussions
with Academy members. In his *De la institutione di tutta la vita de l’huomo nato nobile* (Venetiis:
Hieronymum Scotum, 1542) Piccolomini remarks on a debate between Venturi and Marc’Antonio
Piccolomini. In defense of his contention that the beloved should not be the same as one’s wife,
Piccolomini states: “Molte altre ragioni potrei dire intorno a questo, le quali sentii già allegare al
nobilissimo M. Marcantonio Piccolomini, altrimenti il Sodo Intronato sostenendo questa parte contra la
immortal M. Frasia Venturi” (248r-v).

\(^{80}\) See Domenichi’s *La nobilità delle donne*, p. 248r: “Madonna Laudomia Forteguerri, moglie di M.
Petrucco Petrucci, la quale è così nota al mondo per le sue divine bellezze, & celesti virtù; che io non oso
parlarne. Oltra che il cielo volendola perfettamente far felice, le ha concesso così chiaro scrittore delle sue
lodi, & occultissimo conoscitore delle bellezze sue d’animo & di corpo; che piu non havrebbe saputo
desiderare. Et è questi il Signore Alessandro Piccolomini, il quale io vi ricordo con ogni qualità d’honne &
di rivenenza. benchè questo famoso gentilhuomo bastasse ad illustrare le tenebre del secol nostro, non
dimeno il cielo, che tanto l’è stato de suoi doni cortese; non contento di ciò l’ha fatta dottissima: ch’ella
giudiciousamente scrive rime Thoscane; & con esse il suo proprio, & l’altrui nome all’immortalità
consacrà.” Likewise, Betussi includes Forteguerri in his *Imagini del tempio della signora Giovanna
d’Aragona*. For this reference see Lucia Nadin Bassani’s *Il poligrafo veneto Giuseppe Betussi* (Padova:
Antenori, 1992), p. 82, n. 31.
academies, demonstrates that the network between learned women and academy members extended beyond individual cities. Although the Sienese Academy was somewhat unique in its level of interaction with women, one finds that the men who tended to praise untraditional virtues in women, were quite often involved in the academic world, particularly in the Accademia degli Intronati and the Accademia degli Infiammati.

There is, indeed, a connection between the Sienese circle and the publication of Leone Ebreo’s Dialoghi d’amore, a text which, I have argued, provides the prototype of the female intellectual. The first dated edition of Leone Ebreo’s dialogue appeared in 1535 and was dedicated by Mario Lenzi to the Sienese noblewoman and poet Aurelia Petrucci. Although information on Petrucci is scant, she is mentioned in Bargagli’s Dialogo de’ giuochi (92) as one of the women who were active in the veglie. This is evidence of her involvement in the tradition of the veglia, and may indicate one reason for the popularity of the work among the Sienese women.81

Another example of the complex network of academicians and learned women is Laura Battiferri’s relationship with Benedetto Varchi. Just as Varchi was something of a mentor to Tullia d’Aragona, he also highly esteemed Battiferri, corresponding with her for a period of time and commenting on her poetry.82 Battiferri herself, in fact, had been connected with two prestigious academies, namely, the Intronati Academy and the Accademia degli Assortiti in her hometown of Urbino.83 Although her involvement, like

81 See below, pp. 190-1.
83 See the citation on p. 209, below, that includes a reference to Battiferri’s poems being recited at the Accademia degli Intronati. See also the Enciclopedia biografica e bibliografica italiana, Serie VI, ed. Maria Bandini Buti (Roma: Bernardo Carlo Tosi, 1941), p. 130.
that of many women who were associated with the academies, was undoubtedly peripheral, it nevertheless attests to a growing receptiveness to women within these cultural circles.

An even stronger connection between a learned women and her local academy emerges from an investigation of Tullia d’Aragona’s Florentine literary circle. Among the members of the Accademia Fiorentina who praised d’Aragona in their poems, and were likely part of her group, there are, besides Benedetto Varchi, Antonfrancesco Grazzini (known as il Lasca), Niccolò Martelli, Ugolino Martelli, Simone della Volta, and Benedetto Arrighi. Some illustrious honorary members with less profound roots in the Academy, Simone Porzio (professor of philosophy at Pisa) and Don Pedro de Toledo (son of the Duchess Eleonora de Toledo’s brother, Don Luigi), were also among those who praised d’Aragona and were likely part of her circle.

It is significant that d’Aragona counted among her friends these eight prominent members of the Accademia Fiorentina. Even more revealing is the fact that these men constituted one particular faction of the Academy. This faction is referred to as the Umidi group, because most of its members had taken part in the original Academy, known as the Accademia degli Umidi, which had been subsumed into the Accademia Fiorentina.

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85 I have determined that d’Aragona’s group consisted of the Umidi faction of the Accademia Fiorentina by comparing the list of men who addressed poetry to her, and were likely part of her Florentine circle, with the Umidi group as outlined by Michele Plaisance. See Plaisance’s “Culture et politique à Florence de 1542 à 1551: Lasca et les Humidi aux prises avec l’Académie Florentine,” in Les écrivains et le pouvoir en Italie à l’époque de la Renaissance vol. II (Paris: Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1973), pp. 361-348.
Although Varchi had not been a member of the original Academy, it appears that he was a member of this faction, even at times taking a leadership role in the group. That d’Aragona’s circle consisted of many of the most prominent men of one faction of the Accademia Fiorentina demonstrates a willingness within the group to allow for women, for the most part courtesans, to enter into the cultural debates of the day. Moreover, various contemporaneous sources indicate that d’Aragona’s literary group was known for its discussions on Petrarch, and even for debates about the pre-eminence of the Tuscan vernacular, undoubtedly some of the most important issues faced by the Accademia Fiorentina. Thus, one finds the intersection of themes and people in both groups.

Although these men were certainly not willing to open their academy to women, they certainly do display a greater openness to women’s involvement in informal literary groupings.

Another woman who is depicted as a female interlocutor, Leonora Falletta, may also have been involved within academic circles. According to Lucia Nadin Bassani,

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86 For example, Antonfrancesco Grazzini was known to frequent discussions held in the home of another courtesan in Florence, Maria da Prato. See Rodini, page 15-16, and especially, p. 203, n. 56, for sources confirming the gatherings in Maria da Prato’s home. See also Niccolò Martelli’s letter to Maria da Prato in Dal primo e dal secondo libro delle lettere di Niccolò Martelli, ed. Cartesio Marconcini (Lanciano: Carabba, 1916), pp. 41-43. Among other things, he praises her collection of books which he describes as containing “copia infinita di libri bellissimi antichi et moderni, che di contino si stampano,” p. 42.

87 Lodovico Domenichi describes a debate held at d’Aragona’s house over the influence that the Tuscan and Provencal poets had on Petrarch. See his Facetie motti, et burle (Venetia: 1574) pp. 362-3.


89 She is the primary interlocutor of Giuseppe Betussi’s Leonora.
Falletta likely met Betussi at the prestigious Milanese Accademia Fenicia while the latter was under the patronage of Agosto d’Adda. Falletta, it seems, had been known within the Academy and seems to have had some ties there. Although, without further evidence, it is hard to say exactly what the nature of her involvement was, it seems to be part of a pattern for the female intellectual of the period to have had some connection with her local academy.

Girolamo Bargagli’s *Dialogo de’ giuochi* throws into relief the nature of the cultural environment of the period which permitted the presence of women. In this work, the main interlocutor and “teacher,” Marc’Antonio Piccolomini (referred to as “il Sodo,” which was his academic name), discusses which activities should or should not be given the name “giuoco,” thus providing a great insight into the sixteenth-century view of the interaction of dialogue, game, and women. Echoing Speroni’s theory of dialogue, specifically his description of dialogue as a game, *Il Sodo* identifies the defining aspect of “giuoco” to be the variety introduced by the opposition of opinion: “...né giuoco veramente può dirsi, atteso il non poter ciascuno di quei che stanno a cerchio dire l’un dall’altro diversamente, nella qual varietà la bellezza e la sostanza del giuoco consiste” (70). Remarkably, according to this definition, *Il Sodo* denies that the principal activity in *Il libro del Cortegiano* can be called game, saying:

Come né anche conveniva giuoco chiamare, il formarsi da uno come dovrebbe esser fatto un perfetto cortigiano e le condizioni e le qualità che

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According to the character, what is lacking in Castiglione’s dialogue is a confrontation of opinion. This might seem strange to the modern student of Castiglione, who has learned that difference of opinion is the key to the discussions in the dialogue. *Il Sodo’s* assertion, however, is challenged by another character, *il Frastagliato*, who defends the use of the word “game” in Castiglione’s work on the grounds that the mere right to contradict one another constitutes game (71). *Il Sodo* responds, “E però diciamo più tosto, se pur vogliamo difendere il Castiglione, che nel *Cortigiano* largamente questo nome di giuoco fosse posto per ogn’intertenimento che ragionando si facesse o si proponesse fra donne” (71). The presence of women, according to this interlocutor, suffices for one to call the activity “game,” even when the necessary conflict of opinion is lacking. The presence of women serves to create an informal and almost surreal quality to the discussions. The cultural space from which the figure of the female intellectual emerges, it will be shown, is a place for recreation and diversion, a *locus* detached from the more public venues of debate. This does not negate the historical precedent provided by this new figure, but only indicates her closely maintained exclusion from the more serious affairs of men.

**XI. The Disappearance of the Erudite Woman**

After the 1570s the figure of the intellectual woman seems to fade from the literary scene. One important exception, however, is Moderata Fonte’s *Il merito delle donne* (1600). This work is written in dialogue form and presents not just one or two, but
seven women engaged in a discussion of the status of women and their mistreatment by
men. It is a dialogue that does not deal with the themes of love and beauty, but instead
falls within the tradition of the “defense of women.” Yet the work is somewhat unique to
that tradition. As Virginia Cox explains,92

A degree of caution seems advisable...when assessing The Worth of
Women’s relation to the preceding tradition of defenses of women: there
are fidelities to and departures from, the established conventions of the
genre. Perhaps the best way of gauging Fonte’s distance from the tradition
is to point to the shift in emphasis in her dialogue away from concern with
demonstrating the “nobility and excellence” of women (though this is still
a vital part of her argument) to a concern with the concrete consequences
for women of men’s failure to recognize their worth. (14)

Indeed this work cannot be considered as part of the same category of dialogues studied
here. It demonstrates, as Cox points out, an interest in some of the concrete matters that
concern the daily lives of women, and is therefore an important work for the social
historian as well as for the literary critic. Fonte’s work is also a proto-feminist text.
Although it falls short of providing serious social prescriptions for the subordination of
women, it does express the author’s awareness of and outrage toward the material and
social disadvantages of women. As a work of “protest,”93 Fonte’s work stands
independent of almost all other Italian works of the period94 and thus her interlocutors
cannot be grouped with the intellectual woman of the slightly earlier period.

92 See Virginia Cox, “Introduction,” to The Worth of Women by Moderata Fonte, Ed. and Trans. Virginia

93 In a recent lecture delivered on November 11, 1998 under the aegis of the Centre for Reformation and
Renaissance Studies at Victoria University in the University of Toronto, Albert Rabil, Jr. discussed the
work as one of a number of a woman-authored works of protest written in France, England and Italy in the
late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

94 Another work by a Venetian woman is Lucrezia Marinella's Della nobiltà e eccellenza delle donne
(1600). For an initial comparison of the two works see Cox, “Introduction,” pp. 20-22. The same author
also gives a longer treatment of the two dialogues in “The Single Self: Feminist Thought and the Marriage
Within the tradition of the literary dialogue on love, the intellectual woman actually retreats and is supplanted by a discussion that often restricts women to a traditional male- and family-centric role. Giuseppe Toffanin observes the difference in tenor between the treatises and dialogues of the early and middle parts of the sixteenth century and those from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Regarding this second period of treatises and dialogues, Toffanin recognizes the return to a more conservative view of women:

La vacua trattatistica d’amore vien meno, e non è casuale che il suo tramonto coincida con quello della cortigiana e dei suoi cenacoli. Chi legge, per esempio, di Bernardo Trotto i “Dialoghi del matrimonio e vita vedovile” (Torino, 1578) o un analogo saggio del gesuita Antonio Possevino (1534-1612) o di questo medesimo il “Dialogo dell’onore” (1553) potrà non gradirne l’aria compunta, ma ci trova una concretezza che è umanità. La donna vien considerata nei suoi rapporti col marito, coi figli, con la casa: questa seconda trattatistica femminile attesta certi rapporti nuovi della letteratura con la famiglia [...] La donna dottoressa dispiace: si veda quel che ne dice il Doni nei “Marmi” [...] la dignità della donna sembra consistere in una sempre maggior distinzione del compito suo da quello dell’uomo. (534-5)

Toffanin also remarks on the differences in tone within the work of a single author: “Ludovico Domenichi procede dal dialogo ‘La nobiltà della donna’ (Venezia, 1551) in cinque parti, alla ‘Donna di corte’ (1564) in cui s’esaltano più i costumi che il sapere con un tono di reazione” (535). Indeed, the close chronological proximity between the works which I argue represent an interest in the erudite woman and the works

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95 The “vacuous” works that Toffanin discusses include the dialogues studied here, as well as a host of other sixteenth-century literary dialogues and treatises. See Giuseppe Toffanin, “Il Cinquecento,” vol. 6 of *Storia letteraria d’Italia* (Milano: Villardi, 1950): 531-5.
mentioned by Toffanin as a reaction against the Petrarchan-Neoplatonic exaltation of woman reveals that, even within the period in which the figure of the intellectual woman emerges, conservative voices are already heard. The exclusion of the “donna dottoressa” outlined by Toffanin represents a trend that would quickly bring to a close the brief moment in which the figure had appeared and thrived.

Another indication of the shift in the depiction of women is the use of the term “mirroring” with regard to the activity of women. In the chapter on Betussi’s Raverta, I trace the use of the term as a method for reading the text, in which the female reader is encouraged to observe the model of female virtue provided in the text and hold it up as a mirror to her own image in order to aid her in emulating that model. In other works, however, women are often induced to mirror the wishes and emotions of their husbands. For example, in Orazio Lombardelli’s Dell’uffizio della donna maritata (1585) the male interlocutor indicates that a wife’s duty is to “mirror” faithfully her husband’s emotional state: “Si come dunque uno specchio è cattivo che una imagine allegra fa parer mestre e una dolente dimostra baldanzosa e festevo(le; così non è savia quella donna, che essendo il marito mal contento, si passa ridente, e essendo allegro sta malincolica.” Instead of mirroring (“specchiarsi”) as an aid in identifying oneself with a female model, in texts such as these the women (as wives) are encouraged instead to identify themselves through their husbands, conforming their wishes, desires, and emotions accordingly.

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97 A similar idea is expressed in Erasmus’ Institutio matrimonii christiani (1526). In this text, the reader is told that a woman’s duty is to mirror her husband’s wishes and emotions: “Marriage requires that the
In another work, Alessandro Piccolomini’s *Della institution morale*, wives are exorted to “echo” their husbands’ emotional state and to remain silent until called upon to respond:

La donna adunque ne’ lor consueti solazzi prenda sempre dalla faccia del suo marito o contento, o mestitia: & a guisa di Echo, la qual mai da sé non incomincia a parlare, ma sempre alle proposte voci tutta pronta risponde; rida volentiera al riso del suo marito, & al suo conturbarsi s’attristi. (509r)

There is a similarity in this concept and in the assertion made in *Il libro del cortegiano*:

E perché le parole sotto le quali non è subietto di qualche importanza son vane e puerili, bisogna che la donna di palazzo, oltre al giudicio di conoscere la qualità di colui con cui parla, per internerlo gentilmente, abbia notizia di molte cose; e sappia parlando elegger quelle che sono a proposito della condizion di colui con cui parla e sia cauta in non dir talor non volendo parole che lo offendano. (213-4)

Whereas in Piccolomini the wife’s emotions must be conformed to the husband’s, in Castiglione’s work, the knowledge of the *donna di corte* (and it is, of course, noteworthy that she is encouraged to cultivate learning at all) must be adapted, whenever she is conversing with a man, to the level of intelligence and to the interests of her male companion.

couple share together pleasures, pains, trials, joy and sadness. It is not enough that a wife be virtuous and honest if she doesn’t know how to adjust to the temper of her husband; for one has never said that a mirror is faithful because it is decorated with gold and jewels” (159). Cited by Constance Jordan, see p. 61.


99 Kelso cites this passage and notes that it did not appear in Piccolomini’s earlier work, *Della institutione di tutta la vita de l’huomo...* (1542), which was later published in revised form as *De institution morale*. See Kelso, p. 167, n. 23.

In contrast, in the dialogues that present an active woman, references to mirrors take on Neoplatonic overtones by means of which beauty and virtue are presented as mirrors of the divine. It must be noted, however, that women, as wives, are told to “mirror” or “echo” their husbands’ wishes. On the other hand, the beloved, who stands outside of the daily realities of domestic life, is never required to do such things. In the dialogues in which the female intellectual emerges, although this figure may indeed be a wife (as in the case of Leonora Falletta), that is not the role she is performing in the text. Rather, the figure represents the virtuous beloved, whose beauty and words have the power to enoble and enlighten the lover. The differences in the role of the wife and beloved reveal that, like the courtesan, the Neoplatonic beloved is freed from some of the intellectual strictures concerning women in the family.

Within the corpus of Betussi’s work one can trace the disappearance of this figure and her replacement with more traditional models of female virtue. In his earlier works, Il dialogo amoroso and Il Raverta, the loquacious, inquisitive, and witty courtesan, Baffa, is exalted as the model of virtue. By contrast, in Betussi’s Imagini del tempio della signora Giovanna d’Aragona (1556) the highest praise for women is reserved for chastity. In fact, according to Bassani, the praise of a woman’s corporeal and incorporeal beauty that was indicative of the period gives way completely to the exaltation of spiritual virtue, here defined in a most un-Neoplatonic way as chastity. According to Bassani:

se è vero che le rassegne di belle donne mai avevano voluto scindere il fisico dalle doti dell’animo, pure qui i termini sono totalmente capovolti: l’opera intende fornire un panorama completo di bellezze esclusivamente spirituali proprie di nobildonne, al fine di esporre “tutto il significato delle principali virtù: cioè di grazia, temperanza, liberalità, sapienza, speranza,
magnanimità, ...fama, modestia, onestà, gloria, costanza, umanità, religione, riverenza, umiltà, pudicizia, clemenza”; privilegiando comunque Castità... (82)

The female interlocutors themselves provide further evidence of a different approach to the praise of woman: these figures no longer represent real women of the period, but are instead the allegorical figures, la Verità and la Fama. As ethereal projections of the author, intended to encapsulate their respective virtues in a more abstract way, the characters are divorced from any real function as a model for noblewomen. While Betussi’s earlier interlocutors, Baffa and Leonora, demonstrated their intellectual and verbal virtuosity through their participation in the dialogues, in Imagini del tempio the woman being praised is absent and distant, and the interlocutors, as abstractions, serve principally to elucidate the philosophical or moral speculation of the author.

Regarding Gabriel Giolito’s production of this period, Amedeo Quondam distills and explices essential data in order to demonstrate the cultural shift of the second half of the Cinquecento.101 He demonstrates that between 1555 and 1565 Giolito’s press underwent a profound restructuring of its output: in the earlier part of the century Ariosto, Petrarch, and Boccaccio were the most represented authors; in the latter part of the century, however, three religious writers, Cornelio Musso, Luis de Granada, and Antonio de Guevara, superceded the literary authors. Quondam explains the transition:

Non si fronteggiano, cioè, il campo delle pratiche letterarie (nella loro dimensione anche socievole, secondo gli usi delle classi colte cinquecentesche) e il campo delle pratiche devozionali-liturgiche, quanto piuttosto due momenti profondamente differenziati della vita sociale e

If Petrarch and Boccaccio lose ground in the cultural shift, then it is not surprising that the intellectual woman, a literary figure largely derived from the works of these two authors, does not only retreat, but actually seems to disappear entirely. A more orthodox male- and family-centric model emerges in her place.

Carlo Dionisotti is another critic who argues that the pre-Council of Trent period was a time of relative freedom in the area of book production. He recognizes a profound change in the cultural environment around 1560:

Condizioni di estrema libertà durano nell’industria libraria ben oltre la metà del secolo. La svolta qui, come la storia editoriale del Decameron insegna, è poco prima del 1560. Una correzione, quale quella eseguita sull’opera del Boccaccio dieci anni dopo la chiusura del concilio di Trento, sarebbe stata, non dirò nel 1545, ma ancora nel 1555 impossibile e assurda. (235).

Dionisotti also notes that the period of freedom in publishing coincides with the time of intense activity within the academies. Moreover, he observes that there is a tendency toward the inclusion of “minor” figures within both of these venues. Not surprisingly, in the later years of the century, the academies became increasingly beholden to their local “prince” and were thus forced to relinquish much of their independence.

The vicissitudes in the cultural and political spheres of the age, as outlined by Quondam and Dionisotti, provide a context in which to understand the new female
literary figure who appears briefly in the middle years of the century. Leone Ebreo’s Sofia represents a new type of female figure, namely, one who is intellectually engaged and partially freed from domestic and moral restraints. From that innovative figure, and the subsequent female interlocutor of the literary love dialogue, the new typology can be traced. While documentary dialogues reflect the social customs of the groups depicted in them, many dialogues also provide a platform for this innovative female figure and thus seem to promote the expanded intellectual role for women. Such an unorthodox agenda, however, was quickly brought into line with the overwhelming religious demands of the Council of Trent.

Nonetheless, according to Dionisotti, one ought not attribute the end of the period of “feminism” to a sharp crackdown brought about by the Council of Trent:

Forse qualcuno avrà pensato o penserà a una reazione morale, al concilio per l’appunto e alla Controriforma, a una reclusione quaresimale delle povere donne dopo il carnevale profano del Rinascimento. Questa ipotesi per più motivi non regge. Fra le donne attive a metà del secolo, per lo meno una, Tullia d’Aragona, era stata una famosa cortigiana. Fra il 1560 e il 1580 l’unico notevole contributo femminile alla letteratura italiana porta il nome d’un’altra, non meno famosa e anche più famigerata cortigiana, Veronica Franco. Per contro sulla fine del secolo furono letterariamente attive rispettabilissime donne come Chiara Matraini e Tarquinia Molza. Motivi sociali e morali sempre devono essere tenuti in conto, ma in letteratura anzitutto occorrono motivi letterari. (238-9)

Instead, Dionisotti favors an approach that recognizes the unique literary atmosphere of the earlier period, due mainly to the linguistic revolution that seemed to overturn the old order. As he explains,

Il fenomeno della rigogliosa letteratura femminile italiana a metà del Cinquecento anzitutto si spiega con l’improvvisa, larghissima apertura linguistica di quegli anni. Si erano spalancate le porte di una società letteraria ristretta e gerarchicamente ben differenziata. Condizione sine qua non per esservi ammessi era stata, ancora ai primi del Cinquecento,
Dionisotti's reminder not to fall prey to the facile conclusion is a valid one. He does, however, sidestep the problem of explaining the closure of the period of relative freedom in book production.

Acknowledging the sweeping effects of the Council of Trent, one must also recognize the myriad factors that had created the unique atmosphere in which a significant representation of a female voice was possible. By the end of the century, one of the principal forces behind the creation of an environment more amenable to women had subsided: the Neoplatonic theory of love, and its corollary exaltation of woman, had seemed to run its course. The new atmosphere was less tolerant of works that praised women as "divine." Indicative of this is the increased censure of book production and circulation: in 1565 Gabriel Giolito and his business partners were subjected to a raid of their holdings. On the list of prohibited books seized, one finds not only heterodox religious works by authors such as Erasmus and Pietro Aretino, but also commentaries on Petrarchan sonnets and, most revealingly for our purposes here, Alessandro Piccolomini's oration in praise of women, *La nobiltà delle donne* (1545).

As we have seen, many of the above-cited critics have spoken of a sort of "feminism" which existed in the mid-Cinquecento, mostly with regard to the success of numerous female poets. Any precise advances made by women -- beyond the access to

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102 See the list of books confiscated from Giolito and his associate Giovanni Capello in Salvatore Bongi, *Annali di Gabriel Giolito de' Ferrari*, vol. 1 (Roma: Principali librai, 1890-1895), pp. LXXXV-CIII.
printing and authorship — however, have remained unexplored. The intellectual woman whom I trace in the following chapters is representative of both the gains and the limitations of elite women who sought increased access to intellectual circles. Through the analysis of selected dialogues on love, the present study is an attempt to bring to light the “accesso e afflusso delle donne nei ranghi ufficiali della nuova società letteraria italiana,” that Dionisotti and others have noted, but that has not yet been fully investigated.
Chapter Two
The Presentation of an Unorthodox Female Voice in Leone Ebreo’s Dialoghi d’amore

Before dealing with a particularly important text in the corpus being analyzed here, it is necessary to consider briefly the major events of the author’s life. While such a biographical introduction is not required for the other texts which were produced by mainstream Italian authors, it cannot be dispensed with in the case of a Jewish author born outside of Italy. The writer of the Dialoghi d’amore, Jehudah Abrabanel (sometimes spelled Abarbanel or Abravanel) was born between 1460 and 1465 in Lisbon, Portugal. Known to Christians as Leo Hebraeus or Leone Ebreo, he studied medicine as well as the Hebrew traditions of the Talmud and Kabbalah. His father, Don Isaac Abrabanel, held the esteemed post of treasurer and minister to King Alfonso V of Portugal, whose death, in 1481 caused upheaval in the Abrabanel family. Suspected of conspiracy against the new king, John II, Don Isaac fled to Seville, where his three sons, Jehudah, Joseph, and Samuel, followed.

At the court of Ferdinand the Catholic, Isaac gained respect as an advisor and Jehudah became the personal physician of the royal family. In Spain Jehudah married, had a son, and lived peacefully for eight years. It was there, according to Santino Caramella, that he began to be called Leone.¹ In 1492 the Jews were expelled from Spain. Leone fled to Naples, but tragically was forced to send his son to Portugal to

¹ See Caramella's commentary on the life and work of Leone Ebreo in his “Nota,” pp. 413-46, of the critical edition of the text: Leone Ebreo, Dialoghi d’amore, ed. Santino Caramella (Bari:Laterza, 1929). The name Leone was a common adaptation of the name Judah, taken from Genesis 49, 9, in which Judah is compared to a lion. See Caramella, p. 415. This is the edition I cite from.
avoid forced baptism. The son was eventually captured, baptized and given over to the care of a Dominican convent. Whether he was ever reunited with his son is unknown, but his *Elegia sopra il destino* remains as a testament to his fatherly love.²

Life in Italy appears to have been nomadic for Leone’s family. In Naples Leone was again employed as Court physician, this time to Ferdinand II d’Aragona. Here he lived peacefully for a while and had contacts with Jochanan Alemanno, Elia del Medigo, and, possibly, the latter’s Hebrew student, Pico della Mirandola.³ With the arrival of Charles VIII in Naples in 1495, Leone, having been closely linked with the Aragonese family, was forced to flee. This time he went to Genoa, where it is believed he wrote most of his *Dialoghi d’amore*.

After the return of the Aragonese to Naples, Leone was summoned back to that city in 1501. With the ever-changing tides of power, however, we find him in Venice in 1505 visiting his father, in Ferrara in 1516 with his brother,⁴ and back in Naples again in 1520 as physician to the viceroy. In 1521 Leone protests successfully the imposition of a law requiring Jews to wear a *berretta gialla*.⁵ From this time until the posthumous publication of his *Dialoghi* in 1535 nothing is known of his whereabouts.

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⁴ According to Caramella, in 1516 Leone’s name appears on a list of Jewish residents in Ferrara (p. 422). Perry, on the other hand, claims that he was already back in Naples in 1516. See his “Introduction,” p. 10.

⁵ Regarding this incident, see Caramella, p. 423.
The Dialoghi d'amore consists of three discourses on a variety of questions all regarding love. The author offers neither narrative introduction nor a statement of setting, presenting instead a mimetic dialogue⁶ between the allegorical characters Filone and Sofia. The framework for the philosophical discussions of love is Filone's attempt to court Sofia. The first lines of the Dialoghi reveal not only the subject, love, but also the inherent conflict in this love which is present throughout all three dialogues:

Filone: Il conoscerti, o Sofia, causa in me amore e desiderio.
Sofia: Discordanti mi paiono, o Filone, questi effetti. (5)

Sofia's scepticism of Filone's combined love and desire for her provides the engine that moves the discourse forward. The discussions are lengthy and varied, requiring some outlining in order for one to proceed with a proper analysis of them.

In the first dialogue the terms of the discussion, love and desire, are defined. Sofia declares that love and desire are mutually exclusive: the object of love is that which we possess and the object of desire, instead, is something we lack. Cognition precedes both love and desire, and since one can only know that which exists (either actually or potentially), then the object must have being. Filone disagrees with Sofia's idea of love and desire, stating that they do at times coincide. Filone distinguishes three types of good that are objects of love: that good which is "profittevole," "delettabile," or "onesto." The first two of these, profit and pleasure, have two extremes: cupidity ("cupidità") and negligence ("negligenzia") for profit (14); lust ("lussuria") and excessive abstinence

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⁶ For the famous Platonic distinction between mimesis and diegesis see Plato's Republic (3. 392-4). Regarding the theory of dialogue in the sixteenth century and Sperone Speroni's use of the terms, see Jon R. Snyder, Writing the Scene of Speaking: Theories of Dialogue in the Late Italian Renaissance (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1989), pp. 106-110.
("superflua astinenzia") for pleasure (17). Love of virtue, however, is only negative when it is deficient. Therefore, it should not follow a mean but should be quite extreme or, as the author puts it, "insaziabile e ardente" (24).

Next, Sofia asks Filone to supply some concrete examples for the three categories which have been established. These examples (health, children, husband or wife, power, dominion, rule, honor, fame and friendship) are discussed and accordingly assigned to one of the categories. The next subject is the highest goal of man, the love of God. God is the noblest of lovable objects because he is the origin, means and end of all deeds.

Once the various types of love have been explained and classified, Sofia asks Filone to state what kind of love it is that he holds for her. Filone finds his love difficult to explain, but admits that it aspires to pleasure ("delettabile"). As soon as he does this, he encounters trouble. Sofia, basing her reasoning on his previous arguments, concludes that it would be better to deny his "sfrenato desiderio" (48). In the final exchange of the dialogue, Filone attempts to extricate himself from the contradiction he has unwittingly set up. Sofia claims that the aim of his love is touch, and is therefore not fitting for spiritual love. Filone responds by saying that, while this ("il tatto") is not the end of his love, it does not harm perfect love because "essendo gli animi uniti in spirituale amore, i corpi desiderano godere la possibile unione, acciò che non resti alcuna diversità e l'unione sia in tutto perfetta" (50). Thus, at the end of the first dialogue, Filone is challenged to define his actual love for Sofia by using the philosophical arguments previously postulated. This conflict between theory and practice seems to be the fundamental source of the conflict between the two interlocutors. Dialogue I ends with
both characters expressing the hope that the subject of universal love and the love's genealogy will be taken up at a later time.

In Dialogue II the discussion of love extends beyond a human experience confined to the earthly realm: it is treated instead as a principle governing the whole universe. The dialogue begins with a chance meeting between the interlocutors, in which Sofia reminds Filone of his promise to discuss the origin and genealogy of love. Filone begins the discussion with the "comunità d'amore" since one first comes to know love through what is observed. Both men and animals have five causes of love, he claims, and they are: desire for propagation, love of one's offspring, gratitude, natural love for one's own species, and enduring companionship. In humans, however, the ability to reason can intensify or weaken the effect of these causes. Furthermore, he continues, these five motives extend to inanimate things.

Love, it is stated, is not limited to the sublunar world but encompasses also the celestial bodies. This subject takes up the major portion of Dialogue II. In the theory of cosmic love expounded, the love of the heavens for the earth is described as love between male (heavens) and female (earth). Thus human intercourse is seen as a microcosm of universal creation. Furthermore, human anatomy reflects the cosmos (the seven planets rule over the cosmological body as the seven major organs rule the body and enable reproduction).

The heavenly bodies themselves are said to love one another, and this leads to a discussion of the erotic myths of classical antiquity. To Sofia's claim that the lascivious

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and sometimes adulterous love that poets ascribe to the gods is far removed from the celestial love just described, Filone responds with an important discussion of poetic allegory, explaining why such veils were used and why they were later discarded by Plato and Aristotle. At this point in the treatise, the author turns from poetic allegory to astrology and expounds on the love and hatred between the planets.

The final section of Dialogue II deals with love between superiors and inferiors. There is mutual love between the two, the inferior desiring the perfection it is lacking and the superior desiring to provide that which is missing in the inferior. According to this theory, imperfection in the inferior ("effetto") denotes also imperfection in the superior ("causa").

The dialogue ends with Filone lamenting that love is found everywhere in the universe except in the heart of his beloved, Sofia. They part once again with the promise to continue their discussions at a later time.

Dialogue III is the longest of the three dialogues — longer, in fact, than the first two dialogues combined. Once again a chance meeting occasions the beginning of the dialogue. This time, however, Filone fails to recognize Sofia, claiming to have been so intently rapt in contemplation of the image of her beauty impressed in his mind as not to have seen her. His rapture leads to definitions of intellect and soul, the former being purely spiritual and the latter being partly spiritual and partly corporeal, swaying between body and mind. Filone attempts to discuss the cruel suffering which she causes him, but Sofia finally leads him away from the subject of his passions and asks a five-part question.

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8 Perry notes the boldness of this statement, which would seem to infer that “man’s sin may adversely affect God Himself.” See his “Introduction,” p. 16.
which is the subject of the rest of the dialogue: whether love was born, when, where, of whom, and why?

After the lengthy discussions proceeding from Sofia’s five-part question, like the first two dialogues, the third also concludes with a shift from philosophical argument to a discussion of the relationship between the two protagonists, that is, with a shift from theory to practice. Again Filone wonders at the existence of love in the whole universe, but not in Sofia. There follows a discussion of whose fault it is that love did not take root in her soul. Sofia admits only to desiring intellectual union with Filone, her own intellect being inferior to his and desiring union with it. Corporeal love, she claims, is simply ugly and harmful. The dialogue ends with promises and obligations for the future: Sofia hopes for future fulfillment of Filone’s promise to speak of the effects of human love and he urges Sofia to clear up the debts which have been incurred to her through reason and virtue, that is, her obligation to return his love.

While the ideological content of the work, as outlined above, is original and intriguing, so too is the author’s representation of the female figure. From the point of view of both the discussions and the characters, Leone Ebreo’s dialogue reflects a cultural milieu that was quite separate with respect to the courtly aristocratic environment of *Il libro del cortegiano* and of other such dialogues. As a refugee and a wanderer, Leone Ebreo was not firmly planted within the social fabric of the Italian aristocracy or nobility, and thus his writing reflects a different experience from that implicit in other Italian dialogues. Consequently, Leone does not offer a portrait of the society around him; that is not his intent or concern. Instead, his philosophical interests take complete precedence
in the dialogue that seeks to reveal something about the search for wisdom and about the nature of men and women. The author finds a unique way of grappling with some of the most fundamental questions posed by philosophy in his day, as well as in our own, such as the following: How does one find wisdom? What is the nature of love and desire? How are these forces at work in human relationships?

Leone Ebreo created an extremely popular work that was admired throughout Europe, and was especially influential in the series of “minor” dialogues studied in this dissertation. The popularity of the treatise, I would argue, was based on two elements: the undoubtable philosophical import of the work -- Spinoza was said to have a copy of it in his library -- and the presentation of an unorthodox female interlocutor. An exploration of the relationship between the interlocutors requires an examination of the framework of the dialogue -- an aspect of the work that has until recently been ignored by scholars.

T. Anthony Perry was the first scholar to recognize adequately the need to explore the framework of the dialogue, thereby addressing the literary nature of the work. He denies the rather outdated view that Filone is one and the same with the author, which Santino Caramella had stated explicitly and which seems implicit in some of the older analyses of the work, such as those by Nesca Robb and John Nelson. Instead, Perry

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10 This important new approach is in T. Anthony Perry, Erotic Spirituality: The Integrative Tradition from Leone Ebreo to John Donne (University, Ala.: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1980).

highlights the importance of the character Sofia in the dialogue, since she not only
supplies the doubts and asks questions, but contributes significantly to the overall
message. He gives three reasons to support his claim that the voice of the author lies in
both characters and not solely in one: 1. the name alone, Sofia, or “wisdom,” gives one
cause to take her words very seriously; 2. Filone is at times “lethargic,” with Sofia
providing the driving force behind the continuation of the dialogue (in fact, it is she who
initiates the philosophical dialogue by turning “her suitor’s bold statement of affection
into a terminological problem”); and 3. Filone often transmits the opinion of others, while
it is Sofia who, through her criticisms, urges him to give his own view. In fact, Sofia’s
role is similar to that of Socrates: “In such instances it is Sofia who appears the master --
a Socrates who arouses and requires the personal discovery of truth through criticism.”

Perry provides ample evidence to consider Sofia’s role to be at least as important as
Filone’s in the dialogue.

The fundamental conflict between the two interlocutors emerges at the outset of
the dialogue: Filone desires to speak of his passionate love for Sofia who, instead, insists
that they speak about love in philosophical terms. This conflict is revealed in the
beginning of book I: “Filone: Io vengo, o Sofia, per domandarti rimedio a le mie pene; e
tu mi domandi soluzione dei tuoi dubi” (7). Filone needs “rimedio” for his unsatisfied
desire for Sofia’s love. His quest to earn her love involves resolving her “dubi” by
engaging her in a discussion on love and wisdom. The two interlocutors pull the
discourse in opposing directions, creating rhetorical and thematic tension. Filone pursues

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Sofia's sentimental attachment and Sofia resists, desiring instead philosophical solutions to her doubts. It is within the framework of this courtship that the varied and extensive philosophical discussions on love take place.

Sofia seems to perform a specific function in the discourse. As Perry has observed, she does often act as the Platonic Socrates, the master who asks questions, and elicits responses that will assist in a personal discovery of truth. In addition, I would suggest that she plays a crucial role within the structure of the dialogue inasmuch as she imposes order upon the philosophical proceedings.

As stated above, Sofia tries to avoid a discussion of Filone's passion. Thus she often pulls him back from his deviations from the philosophical discourse. Filone himself recognizes her tactic: "m'hai disviato dal dirì, come desidero, l’afflizione del mio animo verso di te." (44) Sofia responds: "E di poi che saremo sazi de le cose divine, più puramente potremo parlare de la nostra amicizia umana" (44). Filone is persistent, however, and soon thereafter attempts once again to abandon the discussion of spiritual love in order to return to the subject of his passion (47). Sofia replies by providing an incentive that, on the level of the framework, represents the driving force behind the philosophical discussion: "Voglio prima saper da te di qual sorte d'amore è quel che dici che mi porti" (47). Demanding that he specify the type of love he feels for her, Sofia insists that love be purified through discussion before being put into practice.

Her approach to the discussions consists in a systematic procedure designed to keep Filone from wandering back to the prohibited subject. For example, Filone often provides categories (6) and, when he has completed his discussion of them, Sofia returns
to the same categories and requests that new material be organized accordingly (13).

While Sofia asks questions which keep the discussion moving, she also ensures that each point is thoroughly addressed before continuing. For example, when Filone establishes the four parts of love and desire for honest things, Sofia responds: "Dichiarami ciascuna di queste parti separatamente" (21). Later, to ensure that all parts are clarified thoroughly, she states: "Mi basta. Dichiarami l'altra due parti che restano" (22). Such a systematic and orderly procedure is generally followed in the text, culminating in the third dialogue in which a major part of the discussions stems from a five-part question posed by Sofia.

One might be tempted to believe that Sofia is merely a dupe for the author who wishes to impose a treatise-like orderliness onto the dialogue. However, when understood in conjunction with Filone's desire to meander towards less "divine" subjects, Sofia's methodical approach is revealed as a tactic to keep him from getting lost in what she considers digressive topics. For example, attempting to rationalize his love for her, Filone explains that perfect love is not governed by reason. Sofia expresses amazement that virtuous love could be "sfrenato," like lascivious love. Filone claims that both types of love, the honest and dishonest kinds, suffer from passions (54-5). In this context, he states: "Ti pare, o Sofia, che in tal laberinto si possi guardare a la legge de la ragione e regola de la prudenza?" (55) Filone doubts that reason can guide one safely through love's labyrinth. Accordingly, his love is defined in a Petrarchan fashion as "infirmità," "amarissima dolcezza," and "saporito veleno" (55).
Reason, perhaps, cannot help one who is already caught but, as Sofia demonstrates, it can serve as a guide toward straighter paths. Responding to Filone’s doubt about reason’s power, Sofia states: “Non tante cose, o Filone! ch’io veggo bene che negli amanti piú abbonda la lingua che le passioni” (55). Taken more literally, this line may suggest that, by abandoning the linear and methodical system of proceeding one point at a time and instead rushing into “tante cose,” one risks wandering into the labyrinth. The tension between Sofia’s retreat to the linear path of reason and Filone’s desire to entrap her in love’s labyrinth is clearly stated by Filone in another passage: “Non ti si può resistere, o Sofia: quando penso averti levato tutte le vie del fuggire, tu ne fuggi per nuova strada” (201). Noting in his theory of dialogue these very tendencies toward diversion, Sperone Speroni later employed a discussion of labyrinthine imagery in his *Apolo gia de’ dialogi*, perhaps demonstrating this to be a common element in Renaissance dialogue.  

Besides the labyrinthine imagery, Sofia employs another device, a medical simile, in her attempt to study the philosophy of love systematically. The simile is formulated as follows: “come le piaghe ben aperte e ben vedute si curano meglio, così i dubì, quando son ben divisi e smembrati, piú perfettamente si solveno” (205). Sofia’s lesson that clarity comes about through division and dismemberment implies that it is necessary to break the subject down into its smallest parts. Furthermore, the “piaghe,” or wounds, that need to be cured are very likely “piaghe d’amore.” Sofia is trying to “purify” and cure

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Filone’s love through an almost scholastic method of division. If one divides the labyrinth, fragmenting it into individual paths, it is no longer a trap.

One of the most striking elements of Leone’s Dialoghi is what can be called Filone’s attempt at Neoplatonic seduction. Filone admits that his desire for Sofia “cerca il delebbale” (47). Sofia is amazed that the aim of his love rests in the most material sense, “il tato.” Defending himself, Filone claims that sexual love serves as a natural companion to spiritual love:

...t’ho detto che questo atto non dissolve l’amore perfetto, anzi il vincola più e collega con gli atti corporei amorosi;...essendo gli animi uniti in spirituale amore, i corpi desiderano godere la possibile unione, acciò che non resti alcuna diversità e l’unione sia in tutto perfetta... (50)

Sofia, remaining doubtful, compares this theory to experience which teaches that lovers, after obtaining the desired physical love, often cease loving. Filone responds by identifying two types of love: the first is generated from desire and therefore “depende da vizioso e fragile principio” (51); the second “è quello che di esso è generato il desiderio de la persona amata, e non del desiderio o appetito; anzi, amando prima perfettamente, la forza de l’amore fa desiderare l’unione spirituale e corporale con la persona amata...” (51). According to Filone, it is the sequence of perfect love and desire that is the key to differentiating between the two types of love. Since Filone’s perfect love precedes his physical desire for Sofia, physical union cannot harm perfect love, but can only bring about a closer union. The Neoplatonic concept of the lover uniting with the beloved becomes overtly erotic in Filone’s philosophy in which sexual union is a natural counterpart to intellectual union.
Filone seems to turn the Diotiman ladder upside down: instead of proceeding from a love of beauty in bodies to a love of the abstract beauty of the divine, Filone’s point of departure, he claims, is perfect love; from there he proceeds to physical desire. Filone does not define perfect love, but seems to be speaking in Neoplatonic terms of a contemplative love of divine beauty which is produced, as he states, by the “retta ragione conoscitiva” (52). By reversing the steps of the ladder, however, Filone does not imply a descent, only an enrichment of the perfect love already attained.

Although the term I have used to describe Filone’s attempt, Neoplatonic seduction, seems clearly oxymoronic, the attempt to use philosophy for overtly erotic purposes is presented quite seriously by Filone. Is the reader to believe that Filone is the mouthpiece for the author? Sofia continues to deny Filone her love; thus the framework breaks away from the philosophical reasoning that it encloses, causing an imbalance that should alert the reader that all is not clear. This lack of unity between the literary and philosophical elements demonstrates the ambiguity that is inherent in the dialogue form and that perhaps was deliberately sought by the author.

By now the unorthodox roles of the male and female interlocutors within the framework of the dialogue should be clear: Sofia represents reason (in her desire to impose order and understanding on love, before entering into it), and Filone represents sentimental love (a desire to enter into the unleashed passion of a love which is human, albeit informed by philosophy). Sofia provides the rational harness for Filone’s impassioned pursuit of love. Only together, however, can the two proceed with their investigation. Without Filone, Sofia would be lacking in practical knowledge (Sofia
repeatedly claims that Filone is superior in intellectual virtue and he is presented as the teacher) and in the passion for the pursuit of an understanding of love. Conversely, in the absence of Sofia, Filone would not be inspired to his discussions, nor would he be directed toward an exhaustive and ordered procedure.

Leone's depiction of the relationship between male and female, as described in the foregoing analysis, leads one to deduce that Leone's work undermines the Aristotelian view of the sexes. Aristotle had argued that women were inferior to men and naturally subjected to them, supporting his claims with biological reasons. As his thought often incorporated the use of polarities, so Aristotle conceived of the sexes also in terms of opposites. Aristotle believed woman's primary function to be reproduction; therefore, her role in reproduction was the basis on which she was judged. According to his theory she was limited to providing the 'matter' necessary for reproduction. Instead, the man provided the active element, the seed that was responsible for the form of the new being. Furthermore, Aristotle claimed that providing the seed was tantamount to transmitting the soul to a new life. Consonant with this theory, the father was the one responsible for the mental capacity of the offspring. Thus, for example, the father should reproduce when at the height of his mental capacities, while it is better for the mother to remain mentally idle during gestation because the child's development is dependent only upon her body, not her mind.

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15 My source for Aristotle's view of women is Susan Moller Okin. See esp. p. 83.
Prudence Allen has traced the theories regarding women in early Jewish philosophy and prefaced her discussion with an outline of ancient Greek philosophy. Referring to the definition of male and female in terms of opposites (active vs. passive, form vs. matter, soul vs. body), Allen has termed Aristotle’s theory as one of “sex polarity.” In fact, she traces various thinkers’ views of women, assigning them to the following categories: sex polarity, sex unity, sex neutrality and sex complementarity. Regarding Leone Ebreo, she concludes:

In a significant way the dialogue reveals a rejection of the Aristotelian model of sexual identity. The male Philo represents the model of an individual who has difficulty controlling his emotions, while the female Sophia represents the model of a rational individual who does not give in to emotions. Neither has achieved full self-governance, that is, integration of the emotions with reason, but the perspective from which they approach self-governance is the inversion of the Aristotelian model which had argued that in the female the reason was without authority over the emotions. (105)

The Aristotelian theory of woman was predominant in the Middle Ages and Renaissance and contributed largely to the dispute over such ideas, known as the *questione della donna*. It is clear that Leone Ebreo’s portrayal of a woman who represented reason was in complete dissonance with the Aristotelian theory. Such a characterization of woman places Leone Ebreo closer to the Platonic tradition.

Susan Moller Okin outlines Plato’s view of women, admitting that the prevailing depiction of women in Platonic dialogues is a deprecatory one. Yet, as she demonstrates, Plato does at times introduce revolutionary ideas, in particular the proposal to include

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16 See Prudence Allen’s “Plato, Aristotle, and the Concept of Woman in Early Jewish Philosophy.” Allen notes further that a second approach, sex neutrality, was also derived from Aristotelian philosophy, specifically from the *Organon* and the *Posterior Analytics*. See p. 92.
women among the guardians of his *Republic*. Okin cites Leonardo Bruni's refusal to translate the work in the early fifteenth century as evidence of the disturbing nature of Plato's proposal at that time. According to Okin:

...at a time when few in the West knew Greek, he [Bruni] made the decision in effect to suppress the *Republic* because he knew its suggestion of the "community of wives", as he put it, would be offensive to his Florentine audience. (4)

Okin implies, however, that Bruni's "community of wives" refers to women rulers. Instead, as James Hankins demonstrates clearly, the most commonly criticized aspect of Book V of the *Republic* was Plato's idea to break down the nuclear family and construct a communal family among the guardian class, thereby abolishing all private belongings and groupings; the "community of wives", therefore, refers to the lack of a permanent bond between single men and women. Within this group, each citizen is dedicated to the performance of the duties he or she is best suited for. The suitability of individuals to a particular job, Plato claims, is not predicated upon one's sex. Thus, the entire discussion of the philosopher king is appropriate with regard to both men and women. Indeed Socrates repeats this at the end of Book V:

'And there are female rulers too, Glaucon,' I said. 'Please don't think that what I've been saying doesn't apply equally to any women in the community with the required natural abilities.'

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17 See Okin, Chapter One, entitled "The Greek Tradition of Misogyny".

18 Regarding his decision not to translate the *Republic*, Bruni wrote: "In establishing his ideal state he expressed some opinions utterly abhorrent to our customs and ways of living. He believed, for instance, that all wives should be held in common--one can hardly imagine why--with the result that no one could tell his own children from those of a perfect stranger. He would do away with laws of inheritance and have all things held in common." This translation is James Hankins'. See his dissertation entitled *Latin Translations of Plato in the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1987), p. 41.
‘That’s right,’ he said. ‘Men and women will share everything equally, as we explained.’ (540c)

While Okin’s misleading interpretation of Bruni’s assertion is not central to the present work, it is important to clarify Bruni’s intention in order to trace more accurately the influence of the Republic in sixteenth-century Italy. Although one cannot support the claim that Bruni was referring specifically to Plato’s proposal that women serve beside men as soldiers and philosophers, this radical assertion would very likely have been considered “abhorrent” to Renaissance norms of behavior.

That said, we can try to judge more fairly the force of the controversial book of the Republic. The early fifteenth-century translators of the work were concerned with the heterodox passages, and this preoccupation led to misrepresentations of Plato’s writing.19 When Ficino translated the Platonic corpus, he had no such desire to bowdlerize or expurgate the texts. Although undoubtedly interested in reconciling Platonism with Christianity, Ficino felt no need to excise or rationalize Plato’s heterodox ideas. Instead, his theory of a pia philosophia allowed for a greater degree of freedom in analyzing the texts as he could explain controversial passages in terms of allegorical veils.20 In 1484 the first edition of Ficino’s translation of the Platonic corpus was published.21 As a

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19 Hankins explains Pier Candido Decembrio’s efforts to sanitize Plato’s passages to avoid offending Christian sensibilities. See pp. 88-91.

20 See Hankins, p. 175.

result, the Republic was from that day onward presented in a more faithful manner and it gained a wide circulation.

The idea that women as well as men are capable of taking part in the virtuous pursuit of philosophy, an idea that could have been derived from Plato, is demonstrated in the Dialoghi d’amore. Although there is no direct link between Leone’s text and the ideas about women in Plato’s Republic, one can trace in the Dialoghi a closer adherence to Plato’s radical assertions, as well as a greater distance from the traditional Aristotelian views. Ficino’s translation and the subsequent dissemination of the Republic may have in fact played a role in undermining the Aristotelian view of women.

This is not meant to imply that Ficino himself had any particular interest in the passage on the equality of women. His primary concern was a more faithful and complete rendition of the Platonic corpus. Indeed Ficino himself does not engage in any defense of women. On the contrary, women enter into his philosophy only within the discussion of love. Here, they are not seen as reflections of divine beauty and wisdom since that role is most likely reserved for other men. Nevertheless, in a society that rejected homosexual love, women came to represent the idealized object of beauty and Neoplatonism thereby came to present a theoretical exaltation of women.22

Strictly speaking, Leone Ebreo can be seen neither as a Platonist, nor as a Ficinian. While his Dialoghi d’amore does demonstrate a closer alliance with the Neoplatonic school of thought than with the Aristotelian one, especially with regard to

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22 Leonardo Bruni had also expurgated the passages regarding homosexual love in his translations of Plato’s Phaedrus and Symposium. See Hankins, p. 42.
women, his sources appear diverse. The author was not concerned with the reconciliation of Platonism and Christianity, as was Ficino, but instead he draws from a rich variety of sources, including Hebrew ones. In fact, in the essay, "The Spiritual Eroticism of Leone’s Hermaphrodite," Naomi Yavneh discusses Leone’s Neoplatonism specifically as Jewish Neoplatonism. Yavneh investigates Leone’s version of the myth of the hermaphrodite to prove that he was not merely synthesizing Platonic and Hebraic thought, but subordinating the former to the latter. In the Dialoghi, Filone attributes the fable of the origin of man not to the Greeks, but to Moses, and states that the fable was taken up by Plato, who embellished upon it and made it "una mescolanza inordinata de le cose ebraiche." 

While Yavneh’s analysis of Hebrew elements in the Dialoghi is insightful and original, her discussion of the rehabilitation of sexual love seems somewhat less than convincing. She states: "Physical union is presented as a manifestation and reflection of a higher spiritual union; as such, it is not to be denied, but rather celebrated" (87). To extrapolate from the text that Leone’s intention is to exalt sexual love is to read Filone as author and to regard the framework as merely ornamental, completely discounting the validity of the other interlocutor, Sofia.

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23 Riccardo Scrivano discusses Jewish thought in the Renaissance and the challenge of tracing Hebrew thought and Renaissance culture in the Dialoghi d’amore. As he himself states, his article does not provide the solutions, but provides an introduction and an overview of the scholarship on the subject. See Riccardo Scrivano, "Platonismo, ebraismo e cabbala nel Rinascimento: Leone Ebreo," in Il modello e l’esecuzione: studi rinascimentali e maneristici (Napoli: Liguori, 1993): 113-35.


25 Other critics have also discarded the framework as largely irrelevant. For example, Charles Nelson stresses the philosophical content of the Dialoghi d’amore and discusses the framework of the dialogue as
Yavneh does note some revealing passages in Leone’s theory, however. For example, in his discussion of the Creation story of the Bible, Leone points out the contradiction in the Bible between the first chapter of Genesis (“And God created Adam in his own image;...male and female created he them”) and the second chapter in which God creates Eve from Adam’s rib. Sofia is the one who calls attention to this contradiction. Filone responds: “in effetto egli vuole che sentiamo che si contradice, e che cerchiamo la cagione intenta” (293). Yavneh thereby concludes that

Filone’s explanation of the hidden mystery serves to emphasize the difference between Greek fable and sacred Hebrew text and to stress the superior didactic method of the latter, for whereas Plato’s apparently ordered account is in fact a confusion, any seeming contradiction in the Bible is present specifically to draw the reader’s attention to a puzzle that must be solved. (90-1)

The critic recognizes that the dichotomous elements in the Creation story serve an overriding purpose, namely, to invite the readers to engage themselves in the text by contemplating its conflictual nature. Paradoxically, she fails to recognize this same element of dialectic in Leone’s own work. Indeed, Leone’s explanation of the Creation story can easily be applied to his own Dialoghi. Recognizing the validity of the female voice in the text, we see that there is no clear, one-sided answer; rather, the tension remains. In this way, the framework story serves to deflect some of the philosophical arguments in the text. Sofia rejects Filone’s advances in the frame story and the reader is left to question Filone’s reversal of the Diotiman ladder. While earthly love is certainly not denigrated as it is in the texts by Ficino and others, neither is it exalted. Rather, the

Ornamental: “The love of Filone for Sofia, depicted in the introduction and the digressions, forms an ornamental frame for these dialogues.” See p. 85.
ambiguities of human love are revealed and the voices of both characters are presented, without the triumph of one over the other. What is implied by Leone is the complementarity of the two characters. Just as their names fit together to form the process of philosophy, the characters’ voices also represent complementary forces ruling over the elusive search for knowledge and love.

The conflict between the two levels of narration is perhaps illuminated by Leone’s discussion of the use of allegory to cloak philosophy. Filone explains the use of poetic veils to Sofia, who subsequently asks why they are completely discarded by Aristotle and partly discarded by Plato. Filone explains that Plato did away with one obstacle, that of verse, but he retained the use of ‘fabula’, thereby retaining the preservation of his science (101). Aristotle, on the other hand, discarded both veils and wrote in a scientific style of prose. According to Filone this eventually led to the corruption of philosophy:

Egli non fece male, perché vi remediò con la grandezza del suo ingegno, ma diede bene audacia ad altri non tali di scrivere in prosa sciolta la filosofia, e d’una manifestazione in l’altra venendo in mente inatte [sic] è stato cagione di falsificaria, corromperla e ruinarla. (103)

Although I have argued that one cannot always read Filone as the mouthpiece of the author, in this case the framework does not serve to contradict the content but, rather, to reinforce it: Leone Ebreo, like Plato, preserves the ‘fabula’ in the dialogue, namely, the story of the two would-be lovers. This suggests that Leone’s dialogic form, which permits the use of “fabula” in the frame, is employed to avoid the corruption of his philosophy. As in Plato’s Gorgias, the dialogue form seems to preserve for future readers the sense of the process of philosophical investigation. The allegory provides questions that must be grappled with by each individual in the philosophical endeavor. Leone,
therefore, appears inclined toward an esoteric Neoplatonism in which the reader must hunt for the hidden truth, the seeds of which are scattered throughout the dialogue.

Ambiguity and duality emerge as key themes in the Dialoghi d'amore. Marco Ariani traces dual elements throughout the work, such as the fundamental duality of Leone’s cosmology: “La cosmogonia è dunque un dramma di divisione e unione, frattura e ricomposizione, un sovrapporsi perenne di disgiunzione e attrazione che permane anche, come dynamis feconda, nella sfera della ‘pluralità unificata’” (39). Similarly, Perry notes that a central element of Leone’s thought is “the radical polarization of the entire universe in terms of male and female symbols.” If duality is such a pervasive element of the text, perhaps the lack of unity between framework and content discussed above reveals an overriding unity in the text, for the duality expressed in the philosophical arguments is reflected in the duality of the dialogue form.

Perry points out that antagonistic elements are necessary for dialectic. Instead of transmitting a unified message, these dual and antagonistic elements point to the process which lies in the attempt at unification. An emphasis on process is found on the level of the framework: the reader witnesses neither the beginning of Filone’s love for Sofia, nor the resolution of that love. Instead, the reader observes the unsatisfied process of pursuit.

Francesco Tateo discusses dialogue in terms of a “retorica del contrario,” demonstrating that “al di là del discorso tematico, o meglio in relazione con esso, il

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26 See Erotic Spirituality, p. 15.
27 See Erotic Spirituality, p. 29.
dialogo [è] strutturato in modo da esaltare più che sciogliere la natura controversa del tema."

Regarding the *Dialoghi d'amore*, Tateo compares Leone’s work to Plato’s *Phaedrus*, stating the following:

When Leone Ebreo conceives a dialogue between Filone and Sofia, concentrating on the first name of the philosopher Alessandrino and the symbol of the lover (philion), he sets out to explore this complex relationship between rhetoric in terms of a clash of opinions and desire for truth, philosophy as a search for more than knowledge, and speech as a medium of philosophy and capable of functioning as a deceptive instrument.

Filone, representing both philosopher and lover, seeks wisdom but is well aware of the elusive attempt to capture wisdom in words. He claims that “né per le voci corporali si può esprimere l’intellettuale purità de le cose divine” (43). While the dialogue form cannot encapsulate wisdom itself, it can and does stage the dual pursuit of wisdom and love.

Leone Ebreo’s *Dialoghi d'amore* was much admired in the Renaissance. The work is clearly influential in the subsequent tradition of love dialogues, and it appears to have had an impact on those that feature an active female participant. Leone Ebreo’s reconsideration of women, especially his defense of women’s capacity to engage in philosophical discussions, seems to find fertile ground in many sixteenth-century documentary dialogues. The replacement of an Aristotelian view of “sexual polarity,” so well designated by Prudence Allen, with a less rigidly misogynist view seems to meet with a sympathetic reception in this period.

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The subsequent flourishing of dialogues with a female speaker, while relatively short-lived and restricted, proves that at least some writers of the period were moving towards a re-assessment of the traditional stereotypes asserted about women. There is, of course, a significant difference between the female interlocutor in Leone’s work and in the majority of subsequent love dialogues: Sofia, as an allegorical figure, unlike her later counterparts is lacking in personal identity. As discussed in chapter one, the mid-Cinquecento love dialogues are documentary in nature. Thus they depict very specific social milieus and present characters representing (and named for) contemporaries of the author. In dialogues written prior to the publication of Leone’s Dialoghi, such as Castiglione’s Il libro del cortegiano (1528) and Bembo’s Asolani (1505), the female figure represents an historical personage, but is relegated to a passive role in the dialogue. In the dialogues still to be studied in the present work, written after Leone Ebreo’s Dialoghi, the female interlocutor seems to have taken on the role of co-investigator of philosophical themes, and is therefore presented as a much more dynamic figure.

Leone Ebreo’s female character was, it seems, the object of some scorn. Yet, in general, this does not seem to have detracted from the popularity and respect for the work. It is likely that, as an allegorical figure, the female interlocutor was not seen as a threat to the status quo. Indeed, even in the Renaissance the work was often referred to as “Filone,” indicating a lack of interest in the other character. This may be an example of the resistance to a female voice in philosophical matters. Nonetheless, as I hope to

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29 This is discussed below. See pp. 189-90.

30 Nelson concludes that Leone Ebreo’s work is equal in influence to Ficino’s El libro dell’amore. See p. 102.
demonstrate, the unorthodox female character was part of the reason for the popularity of the work within the tradition of love dialogues. When the framework of the *Dialoghi d’amore* is recognized as a literary expression of meaning in the work, the figure of Sofia is consequently rehabilitated. As an author and thinker, Leone Ebreo was undoubtedly part of a movement, albeit limited and short-lived, that was retreating from traditional misogyny. On the level of his view of women there is no conflict between the framework of the dialogue and the philosophical content: in both components women are, for the most part, viewed as having a different, yet not subordinate role in relation to men.
Born in Padova, Sperone Speroni (1500-1588) started his career at the University of Padova as a lecturer on logic, but was soon drawn to study in Bologna under the illustrious Aristotelian scholar Pietro Pompanazzi. In 1528 Speroni was forced to abandon the study of philosophy and return to his home city to tend to domestic matters, marrying soon thereafter.¹ This is the period in which Speroni claims to have written his youthful dialogues, those dialogues for which he would be called before the Inquisition to defend himself. The Dialogo d’amore² was one of the primary targets of Speroni’s anonymous accuser. This was likely a result of his depiction of the infamous courtesan Tullia d’Aragona as a principal interlocutor. The female interlocutors in that work and in the Dialogo della dignità delle donne are noteworthy for their vocal participation in the dialogues. As we shall see, such a strong female presence in the works likely stems from Speroni’s own concept of dialogue and its epistemological function.

Two references to the collection of Dialogi (which included both of the dialogues of interest here) allow us to determine the date of composition to be somewhere between 1528 and 1536. The first is Speroni’s statement in the Apologia di dialogi, the work written in defense of his dialogues after their denunciation to the Inquisition. Here the


author claims to have written his love dialogues in order to exercise his mind in moments of leisure during the period in which he was employed at the university. This would imply that the works were written at least as early as 1528. The second reference is in a 1537 letter in which Pietro Aretino praises Speroni’s Dialogo d’amore, recounting a recent public reading of it which was held at his own home. This allows us to conjecture its composition to have been between 1528 and 1537. The entire collection of Dialogi was not published until 1542, although it circulated in manuscript form previous to that, as Aretino’s letter suggests.

Tullia d’Aragona was in Venice by 1535, at least seven years after Speroni claims to have begun the dialogue. It is likely, therefore, that d’Aragona’s presence in Venice at this time inspired Speroni to complete and / or revise the work. The publication of a dialogue in which she was presented alongside two other illustrious characters was undoubtedly a boost to her fame, especially in the period before she earned a reputation as a writer in her own right. In a letter to Speroni, Pietro Aretino — although not always a supporter of d’Aragona — indicates his thought on the matter:

Or per uscir di scherzi, la Tullia ha guadagnato un tesoro che per sempre spenderlo mai non iscermarà, e l’impudicizia sua, per si fatto onore, può

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3 Speroni’s four part “Apologia dei dialogi” is in his Opere, vol. 1, pp. 266-425. See pp. 272-3 regarding the period of composition.

4 See Pozzi, Lingua, cultura, società, pp. 75-6.


meritamente essere invidiata e da le più pudiche e da le più fortunate. E ai grandi uomini predetti bastava la gloria de le carte loro: perciò dovevano lasciare quella che gli aggiuncon le vostre a chi ne ha bisogno come ho io, che pur mi pare valer qualche cosa poiché son mentovato da le parole dei vostri studi.

Although the spotlight that Tullia is given may be worth a "treasure," Speroni reminds his friends that the character who represents Tullia is still very much a literary figure of his own creation. In response to Pietro Aretino’s praise of the Dialogo d’amore, he writes:

Dubito adunque, anzi son certo, di esser stato villanamente cortese al Grazia, al Tasso, al Molza, al Valerio, al Molino, al Capello, al Broccardo, alla Tullia e verso di voi e del divin Tiziano prosontuoso in servirmi di cotai nomi ad ornamento delle mie vane sciocechezze e semplici fantasie. Li quali ragionando nel mio dialogo non a llor senno ma al mio, facilmente son fatti simil alle statue e alle teste di che io parlava; alle quali la ingiuria del tempo o di color che da llor luoghi li tramutarono... perciò egli non è possibile che io li abbia ritratti così interi in ogni lor parte e così perfette come loro sono in sé stessi.

The fact that the composition of the dialogue had begun before Tullia’s arrival in Venice would also indicate that Speroni had devised the lovers’ dispute before meeting the famous courtesan. Thus, while portraiture remains a fundamental element of any documentary dialogue, in Speroni’s works it may be subordinate to his primary interest in demonstrating a contrast of opinion and in exploring the dialectical possibilities of the genre, aspects of dialogue which he discusses in his Apologia.

Yet the inclusion of a female interlocutor may be particularly important given the fact that Speroni envisioned a largely female audience for the work:

darò un esempio che sarà scusa delle mie accuse, e lauda ancora di molte nobili gentildonne, le quali leggono volentieri nelli loro ozii signorili or rime or prose amorose, poi ne ragionano onestamente quando hanno

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8 The letter is in Sperone Speroni, Lettere familiari, eds. Maria Rosa Loi and Mario Pozzi, tomo secondo (Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 1994). See letter 1, p. 2.
tempo e non son schive dello ascoltare: ed è certissima verità che quelle, esperte di così fatti ragionamenti, o men di amore si accendono o meglio sfogano le lor fiamme che non fa tale che non le ha lette né udite e non ardisce di ragionarne. (Apologia 292-3)

The passage has a threefold significance: 1. it serves as testament to the target audience of love dialogues and poetry: women; 2. it demonstrates that female readers not only read dialogues, but also discussed them (mirroring the action in the dialogue); and, 3. the actions of reading and discussing were considered salubrious in that they led one to better understand and, therefore, control one’s passions. This last factor was perhaps the most important for Speroni’s accusers and it is entirely possible that Speroni included it for their benefit. Regardless, the dialogues were to be read (at times aloud, as Aretino’s letter indicates) and then discussed, and were therefore meant to provide a stimulus towards debate — a debate in which, at least regarding the theme of love, women took part.

The setting of the Dialogo d’amore is the home of Tullia d’Aragona; present besides Tullia are her lover Bernardo Tasso and their friend Niccolò Grassi, referred to as Grazia in the dialogue. The opening lines of the dialogue reveal that the two lovers had been involved in a disagreement over the nature of their love for one another, when the third interlocutor, Grazia, arrived. Tullia welcomes Grazia as a moderator and judge who “saprà darne il consiglio che non abbiamo da noi” (512). In the ensuing discussions Grazia serves as a teacher who explains that perfect love joins the lovers into one, as a hermaphrodite, so that there is no division between them. Grazia also posits that jealousy represents a distortion of love and both Tullia and Tasso challenge that notion. A debate ensues over whether love is ruled by passions or by reason. In a lengthy diversion in which Tullia narrates a previous discussion between herself and Francesco Maria Molza,
she argues that love must be unbridled by reason, which can only harm it. Grazia counters her argument claiming that reason is necessary to control and refine love. Thus Tullia and Grazia are the two principal debaters. While the character Tasso’s voice is frequently heard, for the greater part of the dialogue his role seems subordinate to those of the two primary disputants.

Although Tullia’s argument may appear tailored to her as a courtesan -- whom one might expect to praise passion over reason -- the character nevertheless asserts an independent and unique voice. For example, in the discussions on love Tullia as well as the other characters often define the role she plays in her relationship with Tasso as an active one, thus revising the usual lover = active, beloved = passive equation. The lovers’ problem is stated at the outset: each feels that the other praises him / her excessively, and will thus be bound to disappoint with the passage of time and the addition of distance.

Tasso states:

Veramente io non m’inganno in amarla, se non come chi è troppo ardito a pigliare una impresa, la quale vinca e avanzi le forze sue. Ma, laudandomi ella oltra il devere, par quasi ch’ella mi colga in isambio e quello ami perfettamente, alla cui idea m’assomiglia. (513)

Tasso’s description of Tullia’s activity indicates that she acts much as the contemplative lover who discerns in the beloved a divine idea that he (or she) praises. Moreover, Tullia not only contemplates Tasso, but is also incited by his presence to “favellare.” She is not, however, depicted as the poet; that is a task for Tasso, it seems. Grazia describes Tullia’s oratory in the following manner: “Beato voi, signor Tasso, e fortunate le vostre muse, delle cui lode donna bella, eloquente, e a voi cara sopra ogni cosa, con grandissimo
affetto arde e sfavilla di favellare” (520). Tullia is inspired by her affection to “favellare,” much as the male poet is inspired to praise his beloved in verse.

By allowing a female voice into the discourse in an active way, love is consequently discussed as a mutual experience, in which each of the two serves as both lover and beloved. For instance, Grazia explains that both Tullia and Varchi fear each other: “io giurerei che ambidue voi temete e paventate l’un l’altro: voi signora Tullia, ammirando il buono vostro Tasso e egli adorando le vostre virtù” (523). Fear of the beloved is a *topos* in the theme of love at this time, as discussed in chapter one. Here the fear is mutual, however, and Tullia implicitly takes on the role of the lover.

Moreover, Tullia claims that the word “amato” is not an implicitly passive word, but instead, according to a higher grammar of love, it is active. She states:

amare non è quello che suona il vocabolo, cioè fare e operare qualche cosa ma è più tosto un certo patir; e l’essere amato è verbo non passivo ma attivo. Ciò dico seguendo le regole del nostro maestro amore, nuovo e maraviglioso grammatico, non di sillabe o di parole, ma di cuori mortali. *E oso dire che, si come el dipintore con colori e coll’arte sua ritagge il sembiante della persona, e lo specchio illustrato dal sole ritagge non solamente il sembiante, ma il movimento dello specchiato; così la cosa che si ama, con lo stile d’amore, nella faccia e nel cuor dello amante sé e ogni sua cosa, così dell’anima come del corpo, va ritragendo.* (546 emphasis is mine)

Tullia dares to make explicit the implied reciprocity of love and postulates specifically the active nature of the roles of the female beloved. Indeed, the character is aware of her daring statement (“oso dire”), yet she continues to describe this action. Using the metaphor of the painter and the canvas, she claims that the beloved, who with the brush of love paints herself in the face and heart of the lover, does have the right to decide if the lover is worthy of that love or not. Indeed, Tullia argues that an inappropriate lover can
be likened to a poorly prepared canvas: "a guisa di tela mal unta, non riceverà intera la
dipintura d’amore o, lei ricevuta, stranamente la diritta in torta tramuterà" (548).

Demonstrating the necessary *topos* of self-deference, Tullia claims that she
herself is perhaps that unsatisfactory canvas, unable to depict the virtuous Tasso as he
truly is. By referring to herself as the canvas, Tullia reverses the roles, thus
demonstrating that Tasso is *her* beloved. This is a pivotal moment in the dialogue that
causes the juxtaposition of the characters to shift, much to the detriment of Tullia.

Tasso’s response to Tullia’s daring statement is an admonishment:

> Signora mia, egli non è vostro officio l’amare, ma l’essere amata, e io più
tosto debbo esser detto il vostro ritratto, che voi il mio. Bene è vero che
voi mi siete così cortese (per non dire prodiga) di voi stessa che, non
contenta di lasciarvi amare da me, (uscendo d’i vostri termini) vi fate
incontra ’l mio amore intanto ch’egli vi par di precorrerlo, non che di
riceverlo. E ei non è così, altramente voi pervertireste la condizione delle
cose. (549)

Tasso expresses resentment not only at Tullia’s usurpation of his male role, but more
importantly at the explicit reference to him as the beloved. Reacting to Tullia’s bold
statement, Tasso launches into a clarification of the sexually exclusive roles.

In a recent article Janet L. Smarr\(^9\) sees Tasso’s rebuke of Tullia as confirmation
of Tullia’s passive role in the dialogue. I would argue, instead, that Speroni does much
more than present a passive female character: he demonstrates her passage from an active
interlocutor to a passive one while revealing the theoretical implications of that shift.

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\(^9\) For a discussion of “deference rituals” in Castiglione’s dialogue, see Wayne Rebhorn, *Courtly
Performances: Masking and Festivity in Castiglione’s “Book of the Courtier”* (Detroit: Wayne State

\(^{10}\) See Janet L. Smarr, “A Dialogue of Dialogues: Tullia d’Aragona and Sperone Speroni,” *Modern
Language Notes* 113 (1998): 204-12.
Indeed, Speroni depicts Tullia’s attempt to assert the interchangeability of the roles of the lover and beloved, and to reformulate the terms in a way that would allow the beloved an active role. While Tullia and the other characters are working under the tacit acceptance of the interchangeability of the roles (in the first and significantly larger portion of the work), her character has an active voice in the dialogue. Once Tullia makes explicit her daring revision and Tasso reprimands her for it, the interlocutor retreats to passivity.

Grazia’s mediation between the two lovers who have come into conflict over this point, however, indicates that things are not always as they appear. Grazia warns both characters:

Però, guardate, signora Tullia, credendo di umiliarvi, che voi non vi esaltiate. E voi, Tasso, considerate un poco meglio se 'l titolo dell’essere amata è maggior laude alla vostra donna che non è quello di amare. (549)

Grazia’s admonishment reveals that both interlocutors may be guilty of dissimulation: Tullia of proclaiming her humility, while staking out an active role for herself, and Tasso of posing as praiser of Tullia’s virtues, yet denying her what is perhaps the more praiseworthy role. Speroni, the master of the dialogue form, infuses his works with such ambiguities, playing constantly with the various possibilities of dialecticism.

Nevertheless, after the rebuke from her beloved, Tullia’s role diminishes drastically. She no longer refutes Grazia and gives up the debate entirely. Moreover, Tasso’s role, previously subordinate to that of Tullia, gains a bit of vigor in the latter part of the dialogue. Here, without the voice of Tullia, the dialogue devolves to monologue, losing its dynamic quality as both characters affirm men’s capacity for love to be greater than women’s. (550)
In her only significant response after Tasso’s reprimand of her as lover, Tullia begins to assert her disagreement with Grazia but then chooses to cede her right to continue the argument:

Però è vano il discorso che voi faceste per consolarme; oltra di questo voi non parlaste della ragione in quel modo che dianzi io diceva, lei essere ribella e micidiale della vita amorosa. La qual ragione... Ma egli è il meglio che, posposto ogni altra materia, torniamo al partir degli innamorati, ove alquanto di tempo rispondendo e parlando ci prometteste di dimorare. (558)

Tullia’s silence on this is significant. It is intentionally underscored by Speroni whose use of punctuation too implies that Tullia almost bites her lip in order to refrain from the activity of “favellare,” for which she has an obvious penchant.

Another work that may help us to discern Speroni’s use of the female interlocutor is his Dialogo della dignità delle donne. The primary interlocutors are Beatrice degli Obizzi, a Ferrarese noblewoman, and a certain Lodovico dei conti di San Bonifacio. The debate is framed within another dialogue between two admirers of Beatrice degli Obizzi, Michele Barozzi and Daniele Barbaro. Daniele appears to be in love with Beatrice and is encouraged by Michele to describe a recent debate that he had witnessed. As the title indicates, the interlocutors debate women’s position in society relative to men.

Reversing the expected roles, Beatrice is depicted as the misogynist character in the dialogue, and il Conte and an unnamed friend praise women as superior to men. The dialogue is intriguing because it seems to demonstrate concisely how Speroni shapes a dialogue that can express various points of view simultaneously, without imputing one or the other. Instead, Speroni uses the dialogue form to explore opposite poles of thought,
not always placing them in clear diametrical opposition, nor revealing one or the other to be the “real” answer.\textsuperscript{11}

To understand the works better, it is helpful to consider Speroni’s ideas on the dialogic genre. His \textit{Apologia dei dialogi} consists in an exposition of his poetics of dialogue and a defense of the dialogues that contained material thought to be injurious to orthodox Catholic doctrine. Speroni’s defense of his works, although at times shaped by the “pressure” exerted by the threat of the Inquisition,\textsuperscript{12} is nevertheless a precious source for his original thought on the genre. Although the four-part disquisition and defense is quite complex — it wanders from topic to topic and is at times self-contradictory — one can use it to gain an understanding of the author’s poetics of dialogue.

While Speroni likens the genre to comedy (334) and to poetry (285), he seems particularly concerned with distancing it from Aristotelian philosophy.\textsuperscript{13} The “cuore”

\textsuperscript{11} Like the \textit{Dialogo d’amore}, this dialogue was also singled out by Speroni’s anonymous accuser. It must be noted that, in his \textit{Apologia}, Speroni tried to defend the passages of this dialogue that were found questionable. (It is of great significance that all of the passages deemed dubious were from the mouth of the feminist). According to Speroni, as author he has greater responsibility for the words of the characters in a diegetical dialogue (“un dialogo riferito”) than in a mimetic one (“imitato o rappresentato”). To exculpate himself, he argues that the narrator of the dialogue had in fact favored Beatrice in the debate and therefore hers (the conservative voice) is the real one, the other being “giuoco e sollazzo” (297). Yet this defense seems a bit too convenient, as well as inconsistent with his general discussion of dialogue. For example, Speroni also states: “perciòché in molte persone e molto varie contentizioni il trovar modo per acquetarle non è leggero e giudicare gl’inquieti no lì fa dotti ma disdegnosi e negli errori ostinati, però l’autore del dialogo, dette e provate le opinioni delle persone introdotte, rade volte sopra esse vuol dar sentenzia finale, ma resta sempre intra due, onde ciascun de’ favellatori possa vantarsi di aver ragione nella vittoria e appagarsi del suo sapere” (275).

\textsuperscript{12} Jon Snyder entitles his chapter on Speroni “Writing Under Pressure” and explains that “The Apologia dei dialoghi is written under the threat of material violence (the “flames” that wait to devour Speroni’s dialogues) exercised by power over language and thought. It is also written under hermeneutical violence; Speroni’s apology is marked throughout by a fear of misreading and misprision in the context of the current Counter-Reformation system of reception and interpretation.” See Snyder, p. 95.

\textsuperscript{13} The difference between the dialogical method of investigation and the Aristotelian one will be discussed in chapter five. See below, pp. 147-8.
and “anima”\(^{14}\) of dialogues, he claims, is the confrontation of opinion that is best rendered by the inclusion of a variety of interlocutors. Speroni describes the activity of the interlocutors as follows:

*non a insegnare maestrevolmente ma sì a contendere s’introducono. Nel qual caso cotai persone introdotte non sono diverse al fucile, conciosia cosa che nel contrasto che elle hanno insieme intorno a qualche materia l’una batta con sue ragioni la opinione dell’altra, non altrimenti in un certo modo che faccia il ferro la pietra o la pietra il ferro.* (283)

The reader will experience not only “diletto,” however, but possibly some greater understanding that may be produced by the friction between the opinions, much like the sparks (“faville”) that fly from the friction between rock and flint.\(^{15}\) If already in possession of a fine mind, the reader may discover some insight through the process of dialogical conflict: “dal diletto della lettura, cioè dal giuoco delle parole argutamente esplicate e bene ornate e distinte, volga la mente allo intendimento che sotto il riso è nascosto” (283-4). Speroni is not concerned with revealing one opinion or the other as the “true” one, but with exploring a mysterious form of knowledge which may be produced by the reader’s engagement of the text, namely, by his or her observation of the conflict of opinion. This is particularly relevant in the *Dialogo d’amore*, in which, as we

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\(^{14}\) According to Speroni, “il contrasto delle persone, perché egli è pieno di novità, è il cuore e l’anima del dialogo.” See *Apologia*, p. 282.

\(^{15}\) Olga Zorzi Pugliese has discussed Speroni’s use of this metaphor in her insightful treatment of Speroni’s *Apologia dei dialogi*. See *Il discorso labirintico del dialogo rinascimentale*, esp. pp. 28-48. Pugliese challenges Jon Snyder’s assertion that “In its very means of representation, dialogue is denied the possibility of articulating any form of knowledge except that which paradoxically consists of playful illusion” (*Writing the Scene of Speaking* 125). Instead, according to Pugliese, Speroni’s use of specific imagery demonstrates, not a lack of epistemological value, but an approach to knowledge which is less systematic and permits a “raffigurazione parziale della verità come viene percepita soggettivamente da un’angolazione individuale” (31). Pugliese’s analysis will prove particularly useful in the chapters on the dialogues by d’Aragona and Betussi. See below, p. 148 and p. 164.
have seen, the reader can gain insight into the roles of the beloved and the lover by observing the conflict between the interlocutors Tullia and Tasso. In the *Dialogo della dignità delle donne*, the “diletto” and the “riso” evoked in the dialogue may provide keys to understanding the dialogue.

In this work there are several indications that the debaters may be indulging themselves in a rhetorical exercise, designed to delight the others present and to demonstrate their oratorical acumen. This is implied by the following passage which occurs within the frame dialogue:

Michele. Ora non contendiamo qual vera fosse o qual falsa de le già dette conclusioni; ma presupposto che i circunstanti ciascheduno a suo modo, chi per diletto d’altrui, chi per far prova del suo intelletto, qual veramente per vero dir parlassi, vegniamo al fatto del referire. (569)

The entertainment value of the debate includes one character who is called upon to defend women and, as he begins to speak, is described thus: “Il quale, alzato il viso, alquanto per la vergogna del dover dire divenuto vermiglio, con voce quasi tremante...” (575). This is perhaps the only instance in such dialogues of a *male* interlocutor who blushes when he must speak. In another instance of mockery, a minor character named Cardino explains that if il Conte is right in asserting that women can impregnate a man’s soul then it is only reasonable that the man return the favor. The laughter that follows, however, intimates that he may not be referring to the impregnation of her soul.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{16}\) In her otherwise useful study, *Renaissance Feminism*, Constance Jordan seems to misread Speroni’s *Dialogo della dignità delle donne*, not only mistaking the feminist interlocutor Il Conte for one of the frame characters, Daniele, but also overlooking the ludic aspects of Speroni’s work. Jordan relies completely on the defense of women, taking it perhaps a bit too literally and ignoring the unique hermeneutical demands of the genre, such as the need to acknowledge the use of framing techniques. The author also disregards completely the female interlocutor, an unfortunate lapse especially in light of the book’s title.
Yet the playful debate is not one that has the female character as the butt of its joke. Indeed Beatrice, like her male interlocutors, is also involved in the game of sophism. Beatrice argues in favor of the wife’s natural subordination to her husband, which she claims the wife should celebrate. Her argument against women does not stop there, however, and she soon extends the discussion from the role of the wife to natural philosophy, asserting that women were created by God to be inferior creatures. At this point her primary opponent, il Conte, protests. He is not angered because of Beatrice’s assertion that the wife is subordinate to the husband, for that he is willing to accept “per vera prova”; rather, what he finds disturbing is her assertion of female imperfection—something that would render women “unworthy” of men’s love. It is noteworthy that even the “feminist” character is willing to accept, when coerced, the wife’s subordination to her husband. What he is not willing to accept, however, is Beatrice’s denial of the legitimacy of the superior female beloved and, therefore, of the validity of the role of the male lover. It is important to note that il Conte apparently finds no inconsistency in allowing simultaneously for female superiority as beloved and her natural inferiority as wife.

Although il Conte appears to have taken Beatrice’s arguments quite seriously, his friend has not. Indeed the unnamed friend steps in to calm il Conte by shedding some light on Beatrice’s unlikely claim to inferiority:

"Deh, per dio, non partite si tosto" disse al Conte il suo amico "e contentatevi che la signora Beatrice dica e pruovi ciò che le piace della donnesca imperfezione; ch’a tutto quello che ne dirà la sua lingua, gli occhi, il viso e l’ingegno suo, perfetissime e divinissime cose, il contrario mostrando, con sommo nostro piacere, facilmente risponderanno.” (583-4)
As the passage indicates, the unnamed friend recognizes that Beatrice’s grace and *ingegno* serve to undermine her argument. Directly following this revelation we learn that, “Tornò il Conte a sedere e la signora Beatrice sorridendo mostrava pure di volere seguitare” (584). Beatrice’s smile and willingness to continue the discussion confirms the truth of the revelation: Beatrice is aware that her success as debater subverts her argument for female inferiority. If the reader thought, however, that Beatrice would have the last word, s/he was wrong: another character, il Cardinal, puts an end to the discussions and leads the group into “gravi e alti ragionamenti.”

It will perhaps seem apparent by now that the debate is charged with tension between the mutually antagonistic roles of wife and beloved. The feminist character displays this tension when he asserts that it was an offense to love when “quei dolci nomi d’innamorato, derivati d’amore, scioccamente in due strane e odiose parole, *moglie e marito*, di convertire deliberarono” (571). Yet the male characters (both il Conte and others) do make an innovative argument for reconciling the two roles and reclaiming for the wife the superiority that is associated with woman as beloved.17 Although the conflation of the mutually antagonistic female roles seems daring, il Conte’s final acceptance of the inferiority of the wife reveals it to have been merely an exercise in persuasion.

In the end, the only idea that remains clearly espoused is Speroni’s own love of playing with the genre — his pleasure in wandering from one idea to its opposite, not in

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17 Although her brief discussion of the dialogue is somewhat flawed, Jordan does incisively highlight the tension between the theoretical status of lover and wife: “Danielo [Il Conte]... unconventionally and deliberately — assimilates the principal features of the courtly domina to those of the wife” (153).
search of apodictic truth, but in the possibility of bursting upon some insight. Mario Pozzi explains Speroni’s intriguing ideas about knowledge with the following affirmation:

Lo Speroni non solo è ben lontano dal credere che sia possibile distinguere con un taglio netto il bene dal male, il giusto dall’ingiusto, ma sembra addirittura mosso dal bisogno di mostrare l’inconsistenza di molte certezze e luoghi comuni. “Non è cosa qua giuso — egli ebbe a scrivere — né così rea che qualche bene non abbia in sé; però è rea e lodevole, ma non già come rea, ma per quel bene che ella contiene o che ella fa, perché di mal nasce il bene talora. Ha dunque il reo qualche bontà e qualche male è nel buono” (256 Lingua, cultura e società)

It is just this open quality of Speroni’s use of dialogue that permits a female voice to emerge. Although Beatrice, as the female character, is an unlikely proponent of female servitude, as an interlocutor who is both willing and capable of exercising her rhetorical powers in a way that matches her male counterparts, she is fully credible. Nevertheless, as soon as her argument is revealed as a game and trick — something that would seem clearly to indicate the falsity of her stance — the game is cut short by the stern cardinal who, it seems, does not approve of the dialogical “wandering,” nor of Beatrice’s involvement, and is compelled to lead the discussion toward “alti e gravi ragionamenti.”

It is only appropriate that the dialogue end with the voice of the Cardinal, a figure of authority, because this figure represents the style of investigation associated, not with dialogue, but with Aristotelian logic. In the Apologia, Speroni defines dialogue as “ritratto di scienza” against the more arduous Aristotelian logic called “alta e grave filosofia” (285). The end of the dialogical game, and of Beatrice’s speech, is marked by a sudden shift to the more serious philosophical style of discussion. In this way, Speroni
seems to be poking fun at himself, by inserting a character who appears to admonish the author for indulging in the dialogical path to knowledge that he enjoys so much.

Another dialogue that deals with the status of women is Speroni’s *Dialogo della cura famigliare*. In this work, Speroni himself is the narrator who dedicates the work on women’s role in the family to the daughter of Giovanni Comaro and Adriana Moresini, and offers advice as a gift in honor of the girl’s Roman Catholic confirmation. Speroni himself does not claim to be the source of the wisdom, but merely a narrator who recounts a speech given by Pietro Pompanazzi (referred to by the name Peretto) to his betrothed daughter. The work is perhaps most famous for its pithy summation of the wife’s role:

Adunque ne’ consueti sollazzi non inviti la donna né da se scacci il marito; ma a guisa di eco, la quale mai da se non incomincia a parlare, ma sempre mai alla voce proposta tutta pronta risponde, assai volentieri rida al riso; e nelle faccende familiari con egual cura pareggi dello sposo i pensieri. (85)

Although one must be careful, especially with Speroni, not to cite one character’s statement without considering the opposing argument, in the *Dialogo della cura della famiglia* there is no other voice. Peretto’s advice is a narrated speech that allows for no challenges.

If the presentation of loquacious female interlocutors such as Beatrice and Tullia is antithetical to the conservative view of the wife who is to speak only when spoken to,

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19 Cited in Finucci, p. 99.
as expressed in the *Dialogo della cura familiare*, it is perhaps because the dialogues deal with two distinctly different figures: the beloved and the wife. In the case of the courtesan Tullia, the character clearly represents the beloved. Beatrice, however, is undoubtedly a wife and is praised as such. In fact, when she is discussed in her role as wife, regarding the imminent move of Beatrice and her husband to Ferrara, Michele explains the reason for Beatrice’s apparent indifference in this way: “Questo l’adviene per esser moglie, cioè serva del suo marito, al cui volere essa moglie contra ’l proprio piacere è di piacere obligata” (567). Despite the wife’s necessary suppression of her own desires and will, Beatrice does display an independent personality in the dialogue. In understanding this apparent contradiction, one must keep in mind the framework in which the dialogue takes place: it is a narrated dialogue and the narrator, Daniele, reveals himself to be enamoured of Beatrice. As the beloved in Neoplatonic and Petrarchan terms, not as wife, she is exalted for her beauty and intellectual virtues, and it is therefore not anomalous to depict her in a debate.

That the wife and the beloved were two completely separate figures was asserted by Alessandro Piccolomini, as was observed in chapter one. Piccolomini’s passage regarding the wife and lover, however, seems to be lifted entirely from Speroni’s *Dialogo d’amore*. Indeed Piccolomini had been accused by Speroni himself of plagiarizing much of his work in his *De la institutione de l’huomo nato nobile*.20 In fact, one of the main

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arguments of the *Dialogo d’amore*, the one regarding jealousy, may very well have been
the source for a similar passage in Piccolomini’s work.\(^{21}\)

More important for our analysis of Speroni’s work is the distinct similarity
between the passages in each work regarding the beloved. In Speroni’s dialogue the
character Grazia explains the different loves of the man:

> Dunque, che ’l Tasso vi ami e vi disami in un punto, egli è cosa
impossibile; né mai fia vero che di pari ad un fine medesimo egli ami voi e
un’altra donna; ma che egli ami e serva in diverse parti, e l’uno e l’altro di
questi uffici e adempia perfettamente, non è maggior maraviglia che sia
ch’egli ami voi e sia studioso di poesia. (519)

One needs to read the passage closely in order not to miss Grazia’s disclaimer: Grazia
does not say that Tasso cannot love another woman, but that he cannot love her “ad un
fine medesimo.” Although this is stated more explicitly in Piccolomini’s *De la
institutione de l’huomo nato nobile*,\(^ {22}\) even without using the term “wife” Grazia makes
an unambiguous distinction between love and marriage: “conciosia cosa che ad altro fine
e da miglior legge ci sia imposto l’amare, che non si ordinaron le nostre nozze” (519).
Tullia is clearly following a “higher law” in claiming the role of debater and independent
speaker. As we have seen, however, even when protected by that law she is sharply
reminded not to usurp the role of her lover.

Although it may appear that the privileged position of the female beloved
belonged exclusively to the the courtesan in this period — exemplified by interlocutors
such as Tullia d’Aragona and Francesca Baffa who were generally not obligated to

\(^{21}\) Ruth Kelso notes the similarity in the passages (see note 38, p. 299), although she seems to have been
unaware of the letter charging plagiarism.

\(^{22}\) See pp. 247r - 248v.
restrain themselves verbally, nor to "echo" their male interlocutors -- this is perhaps not completely the case. In the *Dialogo della dignità delle donne* and in other dialogues, married noblewomen were depicted, not as wives, but as active interlocutors who were admired by their male counterparts. Courtesans, nonetheless, were unique in their capacity to serve unequivocally as the beloved. Indeed, only the courtesan was completely unencumbered by the strictures governing wives. In contrast, the noblewoman’s ability to act as beloved was not unequivocal. Although she could also enjoy on occasion a position governed by a "higher law," it was only with regard to her extra-marital admirers. Such a role is unthinkable, however, for the young bride in the *Dialogo della cura della famiglia* -- perhaps better called a monologue -- which is completely lacking in any contrast of opinion and, not surprisingly, in a female voice. Apparent contradictions regarding women within the work of Speroni, or any writer of the time, can perhaps be understood within this context.

Speroni seemed to craft his dialogues as dynamic literary vehicles that could serve as both a chronicle of the famous people of a given region, and as a stage for the playful blending of contrasting opinions. In comparison to the dialogues by Castiglione and Bembo, however, Speroni seems more concerned with exploring the flexibility of the genre and its capacity for equivocation and ambiguity. In particular, Speroni’s depiction of female interlocutors provides an occasion for exploring the contrasts in opinion that are central to his conception of dialogue. The dialogues to be analyzed in the chapters that follow were all influenced by Speroni’s innovative use of dialogue and the creative freedom that it permitted. Tullia d’Aragona in particular adopted a certain whimsicality
and unpredictability which may recall Speroni’s dialogue, while Giuseppe Betussi was influenced to a greater extent by Speroni’s original ideas on the genre.
Chapter Four
Giuseppe Betussi's Raverta: Dialogue as a Mirror for the Female Reader

Within the circles of the Venetian print industry there emerged a group of men called polygraphers. These were the literary handymen who provided translations, wrote introductions, edited material, and at times wrote original pieces. Giuseppe Betussi, born in Bassano (Veneto) circa 1512, was a member of this new group of professionals that appeared with the rise of printing. While the work of these men has often been neglected because of a generally negative view of their literary activity, Paul Grendler has called this view into question and proposed a reconsideration of these writers. Grendler notes that the term “poligrafo” most often connoted “a versatile and prolific author in the pejorative sense — an author who wrote much but with little concern for accuracy, truth or plagiarism.”¹ This is part of the reason why Betussi’s dialogues have been relegated to the status of “minor” works and generally ignored. I believe that they are of great interest, however, as documentary dialogues that provide an unexplored window into the middle years of the sixteenth century and, in particular, into popular social customs involving women in this period.

Betussi’s first dialogue, Dialogo amoroso (1543), is often considered the poor cousin of his second dialogue entitled Raverta (1544). Both deal with the theme of love and present the same female interlocutor, Francesca Baffa, who poses questions and demands clarification from her male friends. A third dialogue entitled Leonora (written

in 1552 and published in 1557) is also of interest for the present study because of the centrally placed female character depicted as an active participant in the discussions.

Betussi’s last two dialogues are Imagini del Tempio della Signora Donna Giovanna Aragona (1556) and the Ragionamento sopra il Cathaio (1573). Not only a proponent of literary dialogues, Betussi also worked as a translator, concentrating largely on Italian versions of Boccaccio’s Latin works: in 1545 he published translations of De mulieribus claris and De casibus virorum illustrium, and in 1547 Genealogia deorum. Most characteristic of his literary output is the attention given to the new audiences of readers, often women, who demanded works in the vernacular. Toward the end of his career, however, his focus shifted to writing the history of noble families. Betussi was, it seems, a man with his finger on the pulse of contemporary culture, who responded to the ever-changing demands of elite society. Within such a framework one can trace the trajectory of his literary output.² What is of interest for the present study is the earlier period in which women are not only praised, but are also depicted as active participants in dialogues.

Around 1540 Betussi left Bassano seeking literary glory in the exciting atmosphere of the Serenissima. One of the earliest extant documents regarding Betussi’s activities in Venice at this time indicates that he turned down an office as secretary to a Cardinal because he had formed a romantic attachment to a Venetian courtesan, a certain

² See Lucia Nadin Bassani, p. 80, where, with regard to this final phase in his career, she states the following: “Betussi, sempre alla ricerca di confermare l’acquisita professionalità di interprete alla giornata delle richieste del mercato culturale, sa cogliere, con tempismo addirittura anticipatore, le aspirazioni aristocratiche di una nobiltà che trae le sue origini non da una stirpe di lontana formazione, ma da più recenti spazi commerciali e bancari.” Bassani’s recent monograph on Giuseppe Betussi offers a reconsideration of Betussi’s place in the Renaissance literary tradition.
Catea, whom he celebrated in verse. A free spirit, he was later part of a literary circle based in the home of a more illustrious courtesan, as well as poet, Francesca Baffa. The numerous letters between Betussi and Pietro Aretino indicate that they formed an affectionate friendship and that the older Aretino, who is described as “divinissimo” in Raverta, was something of a mentor to Betussi. Betussi soon found employment in Gabriele Giolito’s printing house and joined the circle of polygoners which included Lodovico Domenichi, Lodovico Dolce, Ortensio Lando, Francesco Sansovino, and Anton Francesco Doni among others. This group found in Venice, at least temporarily, an atmosphere of relative independence where one would be beholden neither to prince nor to ecclesiatic. The theme of love which according to Savino was “di moda ai bohémiens della cerchia aretinesca,” is a common thread which runs through the works of these authors.

His first two dialogues, Dialogo amoroso and Raverta, date from this Venetian period (approximately 1540 to 1545) and seem to have conferred on the young writer a certain fame. During this time Betussi also visited Padova (1542) where he met Sperone

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3 See Zonta’s Note Betussiane, pp. 326-7.

4 See Note Betussiane, pp. 328-9. There has been some debate about whether or not Baffa was a courtesan. This is summed up aptly in Bassani (p.16, n. 25) who concludes, sensibly, that she most likely was. See this same note for the scant bibliography on the life of Baffa.

5 See Bassani, p. 10, n. 5.


Speroni who had him admitted to the Accademia degli Infiammati. Although his Venetian sojourn provided an integral part of Betussi’s cultural formation, it did not allow a sustainable existence and was surprisingly short-lived. By 1545 Betussi had already left Venice and entered into the service of Conte Collaltino Collalto in the nearby Marca Trevigiana, under whose protection he was able to concentrate on his work as a translator. Much later, in 1571, he returned to Padova, only this time under the patronage of Pio Enea Obizzi, in praise of whose family he later wrote his *Ragionamento sopra il Cathaio*. Like many other *poligrafi*, Betussi was not limited to his experience in Venice, but in a sense straddled two worlds; on the one hand he was critical of the pressures of the court, finding refuge briefly in the freer environment of Venice, and, on the other, he was forced to seek the necessary financial support offered by the nobility. According to Bassani, “Betussi sarà sempre più costretto, in assenza di autonomia economica, a riconvertire competenze, a conformarsi di continuo ai gusti di nuovi committenti” (8). Although Betussi was indeed called upon to adapt himself and his literary services to new situations, his interest in praising and writing for contemporary women never wavered.

The dialogue *Raverta* takes place in the home of Francesca Baffa who, we are told at the outset, has been reading and reflecting on Leone Ebreo’s *Dialoghi d’amore* in preparation for an anticipated discussion with Alessandro Campesano. Instead of Campesano, however, Ottaviano Raverta arrives, interrupting her reading. Baffa asks

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9 See Zonta, *Note Betussiane*, p. 326.

10 See Zonta, *Note Betussiane*, p. 333.

11 See *Raverta* pp. 51-52 where Betussi, echoing Aretino, criticizes the court in Rome where “non s’apprezzano se non gli adulatori” and “i poveri virtuosi muoion di fame.”
him to define love but, before the discussion begins, Lodovico Domenichi also arrives on
the scene. Domenichi is requested to serve as a reinforcement for Raverta by taking up
the discussion when the latter gets tired and challenging him when possible because, as
Baffa has stated, "recando sempre alcuna cosa in contrario, talora si viene più facilmente
a ritrovare la verità" (4). The dialogue has two distinct parts: in the first, Raverta
formulates his definition of love, including a discussion of the different types of love
and beauty and of the origin of love; and in the second part a series of questions, posed by
Baffa, are taken up, forming a sort of casuistry of love that was in fashion at the time.
Yet this bi-partite discussion does not produce a rigidly symmetrical structure; dialogue is
used by Betussi as a repository that incorporates many other literary genres. Letters,
 novellas, reports on current events and scandals, poetry, and a sort of who's who in
Venice are all thrown into the literary soup. This aspect is quite new and can seem
quite modern, almost a precursor to our contemporary "multi-media" approach to the
dissemination of information. In fact, Bassani sees Betussi's role as a sort of
"organizzatore culturale" (19, 25, 33) who synthesizes material from a variety of sources
for the "letto re medio," enabling the reader to "trovare legittimazione alle proprie
quotidiane vicende, emotive e sentimentali" (33). As cultural coordinator, Betussi

\[\text{12} \] The definition reached is as follows: "amore è un affetto volontario di partecipare o di essere fatto
partecipe della cosa conosciuta, stimata bella" (8). Unique to Betussi is the use of the term "affetto
volontario" instead of "desiderio." Raverta argues that desire implies as an object something which is not
possessed and therefore uses "affetto volontario" as a more comprehensive term. The source for this
discussion of desire is most likely Leone Ebreo's Dialoghi d'amore, p. 9.

\[\text{13} \] See Nuccio Ordine, "Teoria e 'situazione' del dialogo nel Cinquecento italiano," in Il dialogo filosofico
nel Cinquecento europeo (Milano: Franco Angeli, 1990): 13-33. Ordine provides a useful analysis of the
dialogue as "un genere sfuggente" He writes that in this period the genre "tende a coincidere, insomma,
con uno spazio terreno fertile per coltivare le possibili interferenze con la novella, con la poesia, con la
commedia, con l'epistola" (15).
consolidates philosophical and literary concepts of love for his readers, who are, for the most part, women. Bassani asks the question: “il successo del Raverta non è anche il rilancio di tematiche filosofiche d élite adattate a uso comportamentale di nuovi soggetti locutori, quali le donne?” (6). But in what way is Betussi targeting a female audience, and what, if anything, is he proposing through the adaptation of philosophical themes to a new “female” behavioral model of conversation? The key lies in Betussi’s treatment of the female interlocutor, Baffa.

Like the character Tullia in Tullia d’Aragona’s Della infinità d’amore, Baffa is an active participant in the discussions. She does not explain philosophical concepts and general questions on love, but gives orders, demands clarification and definition, and imposes limits on the discourse. The courtly element of male servitude toward a superior female figure is present but, unlike the Duchessa Elisabetta in Castiglione’s Libro del cortegiano, Baffa is not a silent queen. Whereas in Castiglione’s dialogue the female interlocutor is relieved of the burden of proposing topics,¹⁴ here Baffa does the proposing and hence directs the discourse to serve her own intellectual curiosity. This female figure also differs from the women depicted in Bembo’s Asolani in which the oldest woman present, Berenice, does not propose and direct the discussion, but assigns the choice of the topic of discussion to Gismondo.¹⁵ Moreover, the female characters in the Asolani,

¹⁴ Valeria Finucci points out that “quando è il momento di Costanza Fregoso di offrire il suo argomento, viene imposto alle donne il silenzio dalla stessa duchessa perché visto che ‘madonna Emilia non vole affaticarsi in trovar gioco alcuno, sarebbe pur ragione che l’altrò donne partecipassero di questa commodità, ed esse ancor fussino esente di tal fatica per questa sera’ (1, 7, 39),” p. 95.

as has been noted, serve as listeners not disputants, and for the most part play an ornamental role.\textsuperscript{16}

The Boccaccian elements in both works are apparent: traces of the \textit{feste vo le brigata}, the insertion of \textit{novelle}, at times taken directly from Boccaccio, and, most importantly, the presence of a female interlocutor who reigns as a queen and is served by the other interlocutors. As Peter Burke has stated, “when Bembo inserted three young ladies into his \textit{Asolani}, he was breaking with the Ciceronian precedent he usually recommended and followed and imitating Boccaccio instead.”\textsuperscript{17} The difference is that Betussi’s female character, following more closely the model in the \textit{Decameron}, is a full-fledged interlocutor with a distinct voice. Bembo, in fact, felt the need to defend himself for including female characters at all in intellectual discussions. Indeed, he admits the following: “saranno molti, che mi biasimeranno in ciò, che io alla parte di queste investigazioni le donne chiami, alle quali più si acconverga negli uffici delle donne dimorarsi, che non andare di queste cose cercando.”\textsuperscript{18} Even when limited to a largely ornamental function, female presence in such works required rationalization and defense.

In light of Bembo’s disclaimer, the radical nature of Betussi’s portrayal of an intellectually proficient female character becomes evident. This bold model of female behavior represents a confluence of precedents: besides the Boccaccian model, the more immediate contemporary sources are those offered by Castiglione and Leone Ebreo. In

\textsuperscript{16} See Ordine, “Teoria e ‘situazione’ del dialogo nel Cinquecento italiano,” p. 23.


\textsuperscript{18} See \textit{Gli Asolani}, p. 458.
the first, the use of the female character is tentative at best. As has been noted elsewhere, she is for the most part silent.\textsuperscript{19} A closer model for the female interlocutor is Leone Ebreo’s Sofia in the \textit{Dialoghi d’amore}.\textsuperscript{20} Betussi himself indicates Baffa’s attachment to the \textit{Dialoghi d’amore}: the first thing the reader learns about Baffa is that she had been reflecting on this work in preparation for the discussions. In \textit{Raverta} the two precedents converge: the intellectually able female debater (on the model of Sofia) becomes a historically identifiable contemporary woman who presides over an informal roundtable discussion (on the model of Elisabetta Gonzaga or Emilia Pio).

Interestingly, in the dialogues which include this somewhat radical female presence she is often a courtesan. Tullia d’Aragona is the active interlocutor in both Speroni’s \textit{Dialogo d’amore} and in her own \textit{Della infinità d’amore} and Baffa plays a similar role in Betussi’s \textit{Dialogo amoroso} and his \textit{Raverta}. Drawing largely from Arturo Graf, Adriana Chemello\textsuperscript{21} has noted that:

\begin{quote}
La cortigiana, figura atipica che si trova solo nella prima metà del ’500, e la cui consuetudine di vita fu fatta propria anche da insigni poetesse dell’epoca (Veronica Franco, Gaspara Stampa, ecc.), è quella che più si avvicina all’ideale “donna di palazzo” inanzitutto perché rifiuta il comando alla continenzia, rifiuta l’amore istituzionalizzato del matrimonio e rivendica invece l’amore libero e la libera espressione della propria sessualità. La vita affettiva e sessuale che veniva negata alla donna di palazzo viene invece rivendicata dalla cortigiana, la quale si sceglie gli amanti secondo i propri gusti e le proprie esigenze, dimostrando così,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19} Burke points out that the female interlocutors in Castiglione’s dialogue were edited out of the Polish and Portuguese translations of the work because of the perceived inappropriateness of a female presence in such discussions. See p. 9.

\textsuperscript{20} As an allegorical figure, the depiction of Sofia perhaps met with less resistance than that which Bembo foresaw in connection with his own work. In chapter one I make the case for Leone Ebreo’s Sofia as the primary model for the active female interlocutor. See pp. 31-2.

\textsuperscript{21} See Chemello, p. 128.
rispetto alla consuetudine di vita delle altre donne del proprio tempo, una discreta autonomia ed una notevole libertà di movimento.

If, as Graf posited, the courtesan was able to reappropriate an emotional and sexual role, and therefore sexual autonomy, she is also able to reappropriate, at least in part, a degree of intellectual and literary autonomy. With regard to her marital status and sexuality the courtesan of the early Cinquecento broke the rules which regulated female behavior: she blatantly disregarded the calls to chastity and to complete devotion to the family. For Renaissance women chastity has been seen by modern critics as both an instrument of repression and a means to greater autonomy. In the first view, chastity was imposed upon women in order to ensure the integrity of the patriarchal lineage. Consequently, women were generally kept from public activity, in line with the conception of women as sexually licentious. In the second view, discussed by Margaret L. King, female humanists often entered the religious life in order to gain the freedom to continue their studies. The courtesan of the Cinquecento, of course, stood completely outside of the institution of marriage and, therefore, avoided the imposition of chastity. Perhaps because she was such an anomalous figure, an exception to the rule, she was also allowed to break the rule of silence.

As has been noted, silence and chastity were fused together to form a double-edged litmus-test of a woman’s reputation. Transgressing the first rule implied serious

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22 This view was first asserted by Joan Kelly. See esp. pp. 38 and 42.

doubt as to the second. In his advice for the education of girls in *Della institution della Donna*, Lodovico Dolce clearly reveals the conceptual and moral polarization between female linguistic eloquence and female chastity: "& le parole debbono esser, come s'è detto, poche, & piene di modestia & di prudentia. Nel che m'è di caro, che ella sia tenuta da cattivi anzi poco eloquente, che da buoni poco honesta. & per raccoglier le molte parole in una, bellissima laude della Donna è il silentio" (31r). As the noblewomen of the *Cortigiano* remain silent, almost as proof of their virtue, the courtesans of these dialogues are free to use language, almost as evidence of their status as outsider, as one who is allowed both sexual and linguistic freedom. Thus I would differ with Graf and Chemello’s assertion that the courtesan is, in fact, closer to the ideal *donna di palazzo*. This latter figure, as defined by Castiglione, is supposed to remain marginal and ornamental. Although she should be intelligent and witty, an ideal which is noteworthy in itself, these gifts are not important in themselves, but only as they serve the general convivial atmosphere, since they are subordinated to the purpose of pleasing one’s male companion. For the courtesan, by contrast, at least in these few dialogues, the art of *ragionamento* may perhaps be considered to a greater extent a virtue in itself, perhaps the primary virtue of the women depicted.

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24 Constance Jordan cites Francesco Barbaro as one source that indicated the double-rule of silence and chastity: “Barbaro identifies the expression of sexual desire with speech and makes silence a sign of sexual modesty.” See p. 46.

25 Lodovico Dolce, *Della institution delle donne* (Vinegia: Giolito, 1547).

26 The *donna di palazzo*, according to her defender Il Magnifico, must have in common with the courtier the spiritual virtues (prudence, magnanimity, continence, and temperance). Her speaking, or *ragionamento*, however, must be adapted to the interests of her interlocutor. See my discussion of this in chapter one, pp. 44-5. The standard for a woman’s virtue, it seems, rests in the spiritual traits. See *Il libro del Cortegiano*, p. 216.
Renaissance dialogues, especially Castiglione's, have been noted for their tendency to function as a mirror to society. Not only can dialogue as mirror portray the behavioral and psychological traits of a certain social group, but it can also serve to define that group and to foster a sense of identity. In _Raverti_ the imagery of the mirror is apparent and may provide insight into the purpose of this reflective genre. At the outset of the dialogue Baffa is praised as “specchio delle rare e virtuose donne” (30). It is made clear at the outset, therefore, that this character serves as a model of female behavior. But how does this mirroring work? The verb “specchiarsi” is used in the dialogue in reference to other examples or models of conduct and virtue. For example, regarding the valiant Captain Camillo Caula, the reader is told that “chi brama specchiarsi in un vero folgore di battaglia, si specchi nel coraggioso ed ardito animo suo” (56). Similarly, with regard to the fidelity of Penelope, we are told: “Specchiatevi in questo esempio, e poi parlate” (73); and by contemplating other models of virtue, the readers are told to “specchiatevi” (100, 135).

More than just modelling one’s behavior, _specchiarsi_ seems to imply a key to how the modelling works. As a reflexive verb, it does not suggest merely the inspection of an exterior model, but the internalization of the example provided. It implies a more personal and pro-active investigation of meaning and virtue. “Specchiarsi” is a metaphor for the act of dialogue reading which helps us to understand how the _exempla_ in it are to be contemplated and understood. Taken more literally, the term implies that readers must

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look at the model as if looking into a mirror, comparing one’s own image with the image provided by the model, looking to see where the lines overlap and where there are gaps, thus creating a sort of double exposure of two overlaid images. In addition one can and should mirror actions: while portraiture provides an occasion for more static modelling, mirroring implies a more vital sense of movement and action. This activity does not end with the last page or with the momentary setting aside of the book, but continues as the readers themselves are invited to discuss the topics in groups.

In his *Apologia dei dialogi*, Speroni uses the word *specchio* with regard to reading in a way which conveys the self-reflexive nature of the action. In the first part of his defense, he states: “Son dunque specchi d’innamorati li miei dialogi, nelli quali quantunque volte alcun d’essi [lettori], sua bona sorte, si specchiarà, altre tante del proprio stato accorgendosi non potrà fare che di sé stesso non si vergogni, n’ a scostarsi da passion così indegna arà bisogno di miglior sprone.”29 The prescription for immoral or indecorous behavior is reading a dialogue and, not only imitating the worthy models, but reacting with just shame when the mirror reveals one’s weaknesses. In the third part of the *Apologia* there is another instance of this use of the verb “specchiarsi”, in which unsavory characters, the author claims, can serve as *exempla*, because the reader “specchiandosi, con ogni cura da esser tale si guarderà sempre mai.”30 (308) The models in dialogues are not to be read passively but to be compared to the reader’s own image,

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29 See Speroni’s *Apologia dei dialogi*, p. 715.

30 See Speroni’s *Apologia dei dialogi*, p. 308.
confirming positive traits and bringing negative ones into focus so that they can be modified.

In the enigmatic Third Part of the Apologia, Speroni breaks down his personality into two characters: his conscience and his self as writer, thus creating a dialogue within his treatise. The conscience, in trying to convince the writer to condemn his works once and for all, says: “mira meglio le cose tue nel mio specchio.” Although this is not the place for an analysis of this very complex third book, the phrasing seems to be revealing. Speroni’s pseudo-character seems to be saying “don’t just read my words, but see how they affect your words.” If one looks at one’s own words in the mirror of the interlocutor’s words, they will be refracted; the light which travels from “my mirror” to “your words” will illuminate them in a new way.

The model which is offered for mirroring in Betussi’s Raverta is a model of female learning through dialogue. Baffa wants her male interlocutors to debate and discuss the topics she raises in front of her, “acciochè meglio mi rendesse instrutta” (5). These are the topics, we are told, that she had been contemplating with the assistance of Leone Ebreo’s dialogue. Thus the discussions in Leone Ebreo’s Dialoghi d’amore spill over into the Raverta as Baffa seeks clarification of the former through the present discussion. In fact, Baffa is mirroring the activity of the female character in that work:

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31 See Speroni’s Apologia dei dialogi, p. 328.

32 In the third book of his Apologia dei dialogi Speroni seems to reverse his previous defense and, therefore, to impute himself as author. Regarding this so-called turnaround in the third book, it is possible that, by breaking down his authorial voice into characters, and thus creating a dialogue, Speroni is employing a literary trick: he is indicating in a rather surreptitious way that the third part must be read as a dialogue and, as such, one must use the reader skills which he has described in the first two parts of his work. Such an interpretation would call into question the authority of the voice in the third book.
she is raising questions, collecting information, and demanding clarification. Consequently, there is a “dialogue between dialogues”\textsuperscript{33} that is taking place in \textit{Raverta}, much of which has Baffa at the center as intermediary between, and beneficiary of, both dialogues. Indeed, the present dialogue is a substitute for another scheduled discussion and visit with Alessandro Campesano. The reader learns that Baffa seems to have a string of dialogues with Campesano as the present interlocutors “ripigliando i suoi tralasciati ragionamenti” fulfill the absent Campesano’s promises (debiti).\textsuperscript{34} The present discussions will not replace Baffa’s ongoing dialogue with Campesano, but serve, as she herself states, to help her “intendere alcuna cosa di momento in questa materia per potermi opporre alle sue ragioni” (4). Indeed, Baffa desires to learn so that she can hone her debating skills for a forthcoming dialogue with Campesano.

There are numerous references to other printed dialogues and to previous discussions: Baffa refers to various conversations with learned men (111, 129, 136, 144) and, as we have already observed with regard to Leone Ebreo, to written works too. Furthermore, discussing the proper age of the (male) lover, she refers to the third book of Castiglione’s \textit{Cortigiano} (109), thus citing this as a source of information on women and love. In addition, Domenichi seems to refer to a work written by Baffa herself, a certain \textit{Satira} (75),\textsuperscript{35} which most likely has been lost. Thus Baffa is portrayed in the dialogue,

\textsuperscript{33} The term is used by Carla Forno. See p. 124.

\textsuperscript{34} In the \textit{Dialoghi d’amore} the impetus for discussions are also “debts”, unfulfilled promises of further explanation. The fact that Baffa also refers to her male interlocutor’s promises as “debiti” (61, 200) is further evidence of Leone Ebreo’s influence on Betussi.

not only as a disputant who refers to the written texts of others, but also as an author whose own text is referred to and thus enters into the network of references. The model of female behavior represented by Baffa should by now be clear: women gain access to learning not only through reading, but also through discussing the works with the learned friends in order to cross-check and piece together information.

Indeed, Betussi is demonstrating how one should read a dialogue. For example, Baffa’s reading of Leone Ebreo’s *Dialoghi d’amore* is not referred to as “leggere” but as “ragionare.” For example, Raverta states: “voi ragionavate con qualche bello ed utile libro” (3). Baffa responds with appropriate modesty that she enjoys the book “per quel poco che con l’ingegno mio io posso discorrere” (4). *Ragionare* and *discorrere* with the book implies a more active role on the part of the readers who perhaps are not to accept the authority of the work blindly, but to compare it with their own knowledge and that of their friends. The activity does not stop with the closing of the book because, as Baffa states, “molte volte mi restano dei dubbi e degli argomenti ch’io soglio fare irrisoluti la qual cosa, ragionando co’ pari vostri, non mi può intravenire” (4). Further discussion is the necessary corollary to the reading of a dialogue because doubts and unresolved issues are often left open-ended.

In his *Annotazioni nel libro della Poetica di Aristotele* (1575), Piccolomini discusses a slightly different facet of reading a dialogue, but nevertheless one that also stresses the dynamic quality of the activity:

dico primieramente non esser sicuro il fondamento che costoro fanno, che li ragionamenti delle persone introdotte nei dialoghi abbian da esser composti come se perfettion non possino avere senza salir in palco, anzi son composti come che abbian da esser letti, et tal lettura abbian coloro che gli leggono da immaginarsi d’essere ascoltatori presenti, et non
apparenti, a quelle persone che son introdotte a ragionare... Onde appare primamente non esser sicuramente detto che i soggetti di dialoghi non possin essere cose scientifiche et recondite, ma solamente volgari et accommodate alla moltitudine, perciò che le persone etiamdo fuor del volgo et atte alle scientie, possono, mentre che leggono li dialoghi, immaginarsi d'esser ascoltatrix in quelle camere et in quei quanta si voglia segreti luoghi... dove d'ogni più riposta scientia et arte si può, senza sconvenevolezza alcuna, discorrere et favellare... (32 emphasis is mine)

The readers’ role is not just to read but to “immaginarsi d’essere ascoltatori presenti”. As a genre which is much closer to an oral tradition, dialogue lends itself well to a dynamic type of reading. The reader is not detached from the text but is present at the conversations and thus, in a sense, represents another interlocutor. The text in which the reader is depicted as present and encouraged to “discorrere et favellare” thus invites greater interaction. In fact, the presence of the readers as “altri” is specifically indicated in d’Aragona’s Della infinità d’amore. In Betussi’s work too ironic declarations of privacy are made (49, 143) and, as a result, the reader is addressed as being present in private places, in the “segreti luoghi” as Piccolomini says.

Carla Forno, discussing the role of the reader and explaining the title of her book, states:

Il genere del dialogo è, pertanto, paradigma di una oralità fittizia, da celebrare nella scrittura. Di qui, come si vedrà, il rapporto con la lettura, pretesto e confronto, all’interno dei testi dialogici. Di qui, le ragioni del titolo di questa ricerca: un prestito dal Dialogo dell’Istoria dello Speroni, in cui, a difesa della conversazione, l’uomo che parla, attingendo alla propria conoscenza, all’esperienza e allo studio, è detto, con ammirazione, “libro animato”, perché, come il libro, egli attua una sintesi del sapere, ma una sintesi dinamica, dialettica, aperta allo scambio e al confronto. Quest’uomo, depositario della curiosità, dell’esperienza, della conoscenza e della memoria, impegnato a discutere di argomenti eletti e di minuzie, capace di inebriarsi ineleggendo platonicamente.

36 As Bassani says, “Il rapporto tra oralità e scrittura si fa stretto.” See p. 4.
Through his use of the terms “specchiarsi” and “ragionare” with respect to reading a dialogue, Betussi indeed implies that, as Forno says, the true protagonist is perhaps the reader. In *Raverta*, however, and in other dialogues, the reader is not necessarily male, but likely female. Through the character Baffa, Betussi demonstrates that reading a dialogue produces a sort of synergy between the experience and knowledge of the reader and the ideas expressed in the text.

It is quite likely that dialogues were at times read aloud. In two separate letters, one to Speroni and the other to Lodovico Dolce, Pietro Aretino describes recitations of Speroni’s *Dialogo d’amore* before the Accademia degli Infiammati in Padua. This is consonant with the reading of a letter by Anton Francesco Doni in *Raverta* and indicates the genre’s interactive aspect. Far from solitary reading and contemplation, dialogues can be read aloud and their action mirrored. Thus one does not necessarily gain absolute knowledge from the text, but instead learns how to go about attaining knowledge, much as Plato in the *Gorgias* does not teach philosophy *per se*, but how one goes about pursuing philosophy.

Similarly, Betussi seems to be demonstrating how one may learn to love perfectly: first one must discuss love, and then put it into practice. After he defines love in the traditional Neoplatonic fashion as divine and earthly, he explains that only an elite group is capable of the first and more noble type of love. Discussing earthly love, he states:

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ben si dice Venere e Amor volgare, percioché è quello che segue il vulgo, il quale, si come meno intendente e più rozzo investigatore delle perfette bellezze, più difficilmente le apprende e meno le conosce. E però i più savi son quelli ch’amano meglio e più direttamente. (30)

Raverta then explains how one becomes one of the few savi:

un elevato ingegno, il quale prima abbia fatto discorso nella bellezza, meglio degli altri conosce la sua perfezione. E di qui nasce che, avendo miglior cognizione della bellezza, amerà più perfettamente dell’altro, perché meglio conoscerà quel che gli manca. Imperocché... chi meglio discorre per quello può capacemente conoscere la sua grandezza. (31)

The wise philosophers are not depicted as those who read, study at universities, or engage in solitary contemplation; rather, the only activity mentioned is discussion. What the reader is observing, of course, and witnessing as if present, is just that, namely, a discussion on love. Thus the author provides a model for would-be savi and lay philosophers, as it were; he is modelling how one learns to love correctly and perfectly.

Literature as a mirror that provides exempla is not an uncommon metaphor. In the Asolani Bembo refers to “le lettere e le scritture” that provide knowledge of past events and serve as lessons, “tutte quasi in uno specchio guardando.”38 In Raverta and in other so-called minor dialogues the models provided are mostly aimed at a female audience and seem to fill a void, namely, to meet a certain need for more relevant models of female behavior. Betussi’s work as translator also reveals an interest in praising women and providing models of excellence. For example, his translation of Boccaccio’s De mulieribus claribus includes not only examples from classical times but also an

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38 See Gli Asolani, p. 315.
addendum of contemporary women like Camilla Valente, Veronica Gambara and Vittoria Colonna — women who are praised for their cultural and literary achievements.

Betussi’s publisher Gabriele Giolito was also known to be particularly appreciated by women readers. In the introduction to Domenichi’s Nobiltà delle donne (1549)

Giolito was praised as

mio molto honorato M. Gabriel Giolito de Ferrari, hoggimai conosciuto affettionatissimo, & devoto delle Donne, per tutte le sue costumate attioni, specialmente per procurare ogni di che dalle sue bellissime stampe escano di luce, & nelle mani del mondo le lodi del sesso Donnesco: di che a lui ne vien honor tuttavia, & guiderdone anchora da quelle. (4)

According to Domenichi, Giolito is known for printing works that praise women. He is also named in Betussi’s Raverta, and not only on the title page. At the end of the dialogue, Baffa refers to a conversation with Giolito in which he recounted the story of a friend who, following Giolito’s advice, permitted his lover to marry another man, but then regretted it. This story leads to a question on love that Giolito posed to Baffa and then left unanswered because of the arrival of others. In the final exchanges of the dialogue, Domenichi and Raverta offer opposing solutions to the question and Baffa remains content because this way “avutone le ragioni da amendue, ne potrò poi render certo il buon Giolito, il quale allora si parti senza risoluzione” (145). Why suddenly include the publisher at the end of the dialogue? Or, more to the point, why does Giolito of all people propose the final dubbio, the one which is left unresolved? As the publisher who is “devoto delle Donne,” Giolito is the link between this dubbio and a possible future response in another dialogue — one in which the thread left off here will be picked up,
just as the themes from Leone Ebreo’s *Dialoghi d’amore* are re-proposed in *Raverta*.

The dialogue will continue.

Amedeo Quondam’s valuable analysis of Gabriel Giolito’s production in this period brings into focus Giolito’s cultural agenda and the market forces that he was, in a sense, harnessing. The sheer volume of his output and the preference for new titles over reprints demonstrates Giolito’s entrepreneurial savvy. This new cultural agenda “significa non più soltanto rispondere ad una domanda già esistente... bensi produrre direttamente il loro stesso consumo, produrre con il libro il suo pubblico e i suoi bisogni materiali, come ogni altra merce.”39 The linguistic agenda of Bembo’s *Prose* and the advent of the printed book merge to produce a new reading public, with new demands and interests. This, of course, includes a class of elite literate women. In fact, as Quondam has shown, the bulk of treatises printed under Gabriel Giolito were aimed at a female audience.

Quondam states:

non c’è dubbio che attorno al nuovo ruolo della donna nella società cinquencentesca... si muova la maggior parte della produzione di trattati, sia come testi direttamente orientati a fornire strumenti tecnico-pedagogici per la “istituzione delle donne”..., sia come predicazione della loro “nobiltà” e quindi, con una operazione di astrazione teorica del primato della “filosofia d’amore”. Tutta questa produzione trattatistico-comportamentale documenta che i rapporti sociali si sono fatti più complessi e più intensi: cercano non soltanto codici e statuti specifici, ma più generalmente uno spazio di definizione culturale40

For the sixteenth-century woman who desired learning such documentary dialogues provided a model that fell within the boundaries of acceptable female behavior.

39 See Quondam, p. 68.

40 See Quondam, p. 88.
Both Betussi and d’Aragona provided models of the female intellectual who reads and learns through discussing the material with learned men. Nonetheless, one must remember that suggesting such a model was somewhat unorthodox. Women were considered particularly susceptible to corruption through the reading of amorous literature. Writers such as Lodovico Dolce considered many works, such as Boccaccio’s Decameron, to be inappropriate, indeed dangerous, reading material for women. In his Della institution delle donne (1547), Dolce prescribes that young women “Nella lingua Volgare fuggano tutti i libri lascivi, come si fuggono le Serpi & altri animali velenosi... Tra quelli, che si debbono fuggire, le Novelle del Boccaccio terranno il primo luogo” (19r).

Perhaps because of such attitudes the models of female learning are presented in these texts within strict boundaries. These can be outlined as follows: 1. the activity of the women must take place within a domestic setting, and 2. the discussions are to be considered strictly recreational. As discussed in chapter one, the topos employed in most of the dialogues with an active female participant is that of the visit. In Raverta the discussions take place in the home of Baffa, a place learned men often visit. In both Speroni’s Dialogo d’amore and d’Aragona’s Della infinità d’amore, the discussions take place in the home of Tullia d’Aragona, another sort of informal academy. In Domenichì’s Nobiltà delle donne the female interlocutor Violante is likewise depicted in her own home. In fact, Violante acknowledges her boldness in allowing herself to speak in the company of such illustrious men, rationalizing that, when in one’s own home, even the most timid of women are brave enough to speak (4).
The second criterion is that the discussions which take place must be presented as strictly informal and for purposes of social amusement. Of course, this goes hand in hand with the first criterion since the non-institutionalized setting of the home lends itself naturally to light and entertaining diversions. The literary form which is adopted is also an expression of the non-professional aspect of the discussions. Through the genre of dialogue, philosophical topics are made to fit into the “female behavioral model,” as Bassani says, thereby precluding an appearance of philosophical or intellectual weightiness. The traditionally and rigorously male activity of intellectual pursuit is adapted to the particular exigencies of being a woman, namely, women’s restriction from traditional places of learning and their general confinement to the home. The intellectual discussions trickle down to the non-threatening domestic realm and are presented in the non-threatening language of entertaining conversation.

In the Asolani Bembo makes evident this unwritten rule of female presence: defending his choice to include women, he explains their presence by stating that they will be praised for their pursuit of letters, as long as it takes place during their moments of otium. The dialogues are meant for fun and for giving pleasure to friends, as Betussi states. Perhaps the preponderance of laughing that goes on in the Libro del cortegiano, particularly in the infrequent interruptions of the female characters, can be understood in light of Bembo’s defense and the importance of otium to rationalize a female presence. Yet by definition the donna di corte of Castiglione’s work is allotted a public role, albeit a limited one, and is seen as contributing to the graceful setting of the court. While the

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41 See Gli Asolani, pp. 458-9. This is noted by Wyss-Morigi, p. 146.
participation of the *donna di corte* is predicated on achieving a pleasing atmosphere and her use of language seems to be subordinated to its function of giving pleasure, in *Raverta* the female’s capacity to reason and discuss is presented as a virtue in itself, one which is not predicated completely on the pleasure of the male companions. Nevertheless, when women are portrayed in such non-courtly settings, especially as active participants, they are most often in their own homes. In *Raverta*, despite the unorthodox capacity of the female interlocutor, the informal / domestic setting is maintained.

When requested to begin the discussion, Raverta responds with these words: “Lo farò; ma con patto, sì come avete detto dianzi che, se il Betussi lo sapesse, lo scriverebbe. Onde, per essere una ciancia, egli e noi, senza speranza di lode alcuna, inciamperemmo in infinito biasimo” (49). Defending himself in the third person Betussi is demonstrating his agility as an author and his manipulation of the flexible genre of dialogue. The character Baffa explains that the readers themselves must be of a certain calibre in order to benefit from the reading of dialogue, thus illuminating the responsibility of those who read dialogues:

> se ben fosse udito d’altri, non n’avete da curare, e dirovvi perché. Se saranno dotti e virtuosi spiriti quegli che tasseranno mai questo nostro ragionamento, più tosto ne gioverà che sia per nuocerne. Ché, conoscendo i nostri errori, un’altra volta gli schiveremo ed apprenderemo le cose utili, lasciando le dannose; di maniera che, se bene si scrivessero e publicassero questi discorsi, avremo da ringraziar loro che s’abbiano degnato leggerli e dirne il loro parere. (49-50)

The reader who is *dotto* can learn from the mistakes incurred in the dialogue and, like the interlocutors themselves, “sidestep” the damaging things (in itself a useful exercise).
Those learned readers are also invited to give their opinion, underlining the previously discussed interactive aspect of dialogue reading.

Betussi’s Raverta, although most often considered his most important work, has for the most part been judged negatively by critics. For instance, Zonta sees the work as indicative of Betussi’s main character flaw: his willingness to pander to either the new and largely unschooled audience of readers in order to sell books, or to the nobility in order to gain patronage. Although he does acknowledge “il grazioso Dialogo amoroso e il dottrinale Raverta, opere che per la varietà delle cognizioni e la vivacità della esposizione, rendon documento del fervido ingegno del nostro [Betussi],” Zonta stresses the utilitarian scope of Betussi’s writing. Speaking of the Aretinian documentary aspect of his work, especially his interest in contemporary women, Zonta states: “E il Betussi, educato alla scuola dell’Aretino e pratico della vita e dei gusti delle corti italiane, furbescamente pensa di trar partito da questa debolezza muliebre e riesce davvero nel suo intento.” (345).

Lorenzetti, adhering to the same view, comments on what he sees as the mercenary aspect of Betussi’s writing:

la novità del Betussi è di aver fatto del trattato d’amore appunto una laudatoria delle donne, d’aver cioè messo in seconda linea la sostanza dei vecchi trattati, da servire semplicemente di cornice all’elogio del sesso debole, ch’era l’obietto principale dell’opera del “bohémien” in un “mezzo” di vita, in un organo di “mestiere” e, anche, di “partito”...È curioso vedere come il trattato si pieghi a quest’ufficio d’adulazione. (257)

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42 See Note Betussiane, p. 332.

43 See Note Betussiane, p. 345.

44 See Lorenzetti, p. 257.
While these authors note the transfer of emphasis from philosophical substance to the framework, they do not examine that framework to see what it can tell us about Betussi's intention. They, therefore, overlook completely the rather radical female model of learning which was being depicted and promoted.

According to these critics, Betussi received material gain for his labors while the women praised received baubles for their vanity. This seems rather simplistic, however, especially in light of the unorthodox characterization of the female figure. Alongside his desire to earn a living, I would assert, one must also recognize the void that Betussi was filling. He was providing documentation of literary circles that had women at their center, thereby recognizing the role of women in intellectual matters. Furthermore, through the metaphor of mirroring and its interplay with dialogue, he was presenting a new model of female behavior. The pioneering aspect of Gabriel Giolito's output, as has been shown by Quondam, demonstrates that such authors were not only trying to make a ducato, but were also accessing and developing a completely untapped market -- something that would imply some risk taking. It seems obvious that if one is going to claim pecuniary interest on behalf of authors, one must also recognize the other side of the coin: reader demand, or at the very least authorial and editorial perception of reader demand. In this case the demand seems to be not only for adulation, for that can be and often has been accomplished in ways which leave the female praised still in the shadows. The figure of Baffa, as well as Tullia and other such interlocutors, demonstrate perhaps the demands of the new readership: to see models of behavior that were not only less
static and rigidly controlled, but that also recognized that women too were involved, if in a minor way, in the realm of the mind.
Chapter Five
Tullia d’Aragona’s *Della infinità d’amore* and the Game of Neoplatonic Love

Achieving fame as both writer and courtesan, Tullia d’Aragona (1510-1556) is one of the relatively few women who are known to have been engaged in the intellectual discourse of Renaissance Italy. Her reputation as a learned woman was publicly sanctioned by an intellectual authority of the time, Sperone Speroni, when he presented her in his *Dialogo d’amore* (1542) as an active and intellectually proficient interlocutor discussing love with two illustrious men of the period, Bernardo Tasso and Niccolò Grassi. She later published her own dialogue *Della infinità d’amore* (1547) and a book of *Rime* (1547) which included not only her own poems, but also those written in praise of her by powerful and well-known men of her time. D’Aragona also wrote an epic poem, *Il Meschino altramente detto il Guerino*, which was published posthumously (1560). Her rich literary production served to legitimize her presence in elite society and to maintain the necessary distance between herself, a *cortigiana onesta*, and the common prostitute, or *meretrice*.¹

Being at once poet and courtesan, intellectual figure and seductress, she was something of a lightening-rod, attracting both lofty praise (as the “the sole and true heir of Tullian eloquence”²) and bitter vituperation (as, among other slights, “the most abject of

¹ For clarification of the terminology used to classify courtesans and prostitutes, see Romano Canosa and Isabella Colonello, *Storia della prostituzione in Italia dal Quattrocento alla fine del Settecento* (Roma: Sapere 2000, 1989), pp. 43-56.

such a contentious figure makes for an insightful subject of study: her biography lends insight into the history of the Renaissance, and into the boundaries of that culture, and her writings offer a rare and precious female perspective on the popular literary and intellectual topics of the day, most notably on the topic of Neoplatonic love. While the polarized views of d’Aragona may imply a bit of myth-building and consequent backlash, fortunately for the modern reader, we do have her own words to ponder and reflect on, enabling us to separate reputation from substance, or at least to observe their interaction. This chapter is intended as a step toward reflection on her Della infinità d’amore. Indeed, with the very recent publication of an English translation of the dialogue, it may soon receive the attention it merits.\\

There is, however, a dark cloud that has loomed over this work and seems to have played a part in precluding any serious study of it: the question of authorship. Benedetto Croce intimated that perhaps one of d’Aragona’s lovers assisted her in writing the dialogue. Since then, according to John Nelson, “the consensus of scholars is that Varchi had a hand in it” (129). The root of this doubt comes in the form of letters in which d’Aragona asks Varchi to “correct and adorn” her poems. Presumably, the doubt

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3 The translation is Georgina Masson’s. For the circumstances of this character attack, see p. 99.


5 Benedetto Croce, Poeti e scrittori del pieno e del tardo Rinascimento (Bari: Laterza, 1945). See pp. 308-9.

6 See Guido Biagi, “Un’etera romana. Tullia d’Aragona,” Rivista critica della letteratura italiana 3,4 (1886): 655-711. See p. 708. Biagi’s research remains the most comprehensive source on d’Aragona. The more recent biographies by Georgina Masson and Rita Casagrande are based on this study as well as two
regarding her ability to produce a complete and polished poem caused some critics to
distrust the authorial integrity of her epic poem, Il Meschino, and of her dialogue.

In a recent article, however, Gloria Allaire reinforces d’Aragon’s status as
independent author arguing effectively that Il Meschino was written in the period before
d’Aragon’s sojourn in Florence, and therefore before her acquaintance with Varchi, thus
precluding the possibility of his authorial interference in that work.7 D’Aragon’s own
words regarding her dialogue, written to Varchi in a farewell letter in which she asks to
be remembered, indicate her sole authorship: “ragionate alle volte col mio dialogo.”8
Furthermore, the unique quality of the dialogue and the numerous testaments to her
intellectual capacity and her active involvement in intellectual circles would also support
the view that she was capable of writing the dialogue on her own. This, of course, does
not bar the possibility that Varchi, or perhaps Girolamo Muzio,9 served as editor, perhaps
making linguistic amendments, as was commonly done. Since no evidence of spurious
authorship has ever been forwarded, and all anecdotal evidence indicates d’Aragon as
author, we may assume as much for the present.10

others: Salvatore Bongi, “Il velo giallo di Tullia d’Aragon,” Rivista critica della letteratura italiana 3,4
(1886): 86-95; and Salvatore Bongi, “Documenti senesi di Tullia d’Aragon,” in Rivista critica della
letteratura italiana 4,6 (1887): 186-8.

7 See Gloria Allaire, “Tullia d’Aragon’s Il Meschino altamente detto il Guerino as Key to a Reappraisal

8 See Biagi, p. 697.

9 Girolamo Muzio was a poet and courtier whom d’Aragon met in Ferrara. He dedicated several works to
her, including his Eclogues, from which much of Tullia’s biography is derived. Regarding d’Aragon’s
relationship with Muzio, see Masson, pp 105-9. Muzio also helped to arrange for the publication of her
dialogue. It is for this reason that critics have often considered him a possible collaborator in the work.
See his “appendice” to Della infinità d’amore, pp. 245-7.

10 The most recent scholar to discuss d’Aragon’s dialogue, Rinaldina Russell, does not address the
problem directly but defers to the judgement of Giuseppe Zonta. In his Trattati d’amore del Cinquecento,
Scholarship on the dialogue is scant and often less than positive. Giuseppe Toffanin, in a sub-chapter of his volume of the *Storia letteraria d’Italia* entitled “Effettiva ignoranza di questo mondo femminile,” not only suggests that d’Aragona was assisted by Varchi, but also claims that the “low quality” of the disputants in the dialogue was not consonant with the “high tone of the dispute” (133). He expresses amazement, and hence doubt, that a writer “of her standing” could be capable of reaching even that “embryo” of truth which, he claims, suffices for many love treatises. It would seem, therefore, that moral presuppositions regarding d’Aragona’s status as courtesan have preempted any serious consideration of the dialogue. The same seems to hold for Nesca Robb who, in her *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance*, also gives a negative assessment of the work based, at least in part, on the author’s status as courtesan: “There is here a frivolity of spirit as remote from the artistic dignity of Bembo as it is from the earnestness of Ficino, and the dialogue recalls more than once the hollowness of the writer’s professions and the gulf that yawned between theory and practice in the society she frequented” (205).

More recently, however, d’Aragona has been rehabilitated as a poet by Fiora Bassanese and Ann Rosalind Jones. Both scholars maintain that through her poetry

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Zonta concludes: “la Tullia, ricostruendo un discorso simile fatto nella sua casa dal Varchi (dispute e discussioni letterarie si tenevano spesso presso di lei) e riminguandolo con acconci argomenti tratti dalle opere dello storico fiorentino, abbia steso il dialogo di sua mano, con quella vivacità e versatilità d’ingegno che le era propria; che quindi abbia consegnato al Varchi, come era suo costume, il testo da correggere e che questi vi abbia introdotto quelle modificazioni, specialmente linguistiche, che credette opportune; e che infine il testo, così racconciato, sia passato tra le mani del Muzio, che tutta la grafia dello scritto coordinò, corresse e diresse per stampa” (360). See Rinaldina Russell, “Introduction,” to *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love*, p. 27, n. 15.

d’Aragona is able to maneuver within the poetic norms in order to bolster her reputation. Moreover, both authors argue that d’Aragona’s poetry recasts mythological references, in order to express a female point of view. In *Della infinità d’amore*, I would assert, a female voice emerges through the portrait of the female beloved, which poses a challenge to the role traditionally allotted to this figure.

In *Della infinità d’amore* the Neoplatonic concept of the female beloved, and perhaps contemporary norms of feminine virtue such as silence, piety and chastity, are modified and, in part, redefined. As Marsilio Ficino’s restatement of Neoplatonic love spread and converged with Petrarchan themes of love, it emerged with some obvious modifications. For example, Platonic love, in which one man recognized the shadow of divine beauty in another man, was modified in accordance with accepted views on love to be, instead, the recognition of divine beauty in a woman. The role of this female beloved, however, remains problematic. This is perhaps because the figure often seems one-dimensional: as a “beloved”, and not “lover”, she is an object, not subject, and in most cases she serves simply as a conduit leading to divine transcendence and does not, herself, have an active role in the spiritual journey. In d’Aragona’s dialogue, Neoplatonic

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13 Regarding Castiglione’s *Il libro del cortegiano*, Valeria Fimucci describes the female character as lacking an active role in the game of self-definition and, therefore, as object of inquiry and desire. See p. 94.
themes emerge through a conversation between the characters Tullia and Varchi, characters based on the courtesan herself and on Benedetto Varchi, the well known intellectual figure and real-life lover of d’Aragona. This fortunate coupling of Neoplatonic themes and historical lovers, I believe, provides the rare opportunity to elucidate the role of the female “beloved” and hence serves as a step toward exploring this figure, not as a static icon, but as subject as well as object.

Both interlocutors are depicted as active participants. In fact, interspersed in their discourse, one finds the underlying imagery of game-playing which serves to elucidate the nature of their verbal exchanges. For example, while discussing whether love is infinite or not Tullia states: “Voi fate sempre a cotesto modo, mostrando che io abbia vinto da prima: poi nell’ultimo rimango perdente” (210). Varchi responds with a proverb: “chi vince da prima perde da sezzo” (210). While the notion of winning and losing may be quite common in debate, the imagery in the dialogue also includes references to specific games: Tullia claims to “tornare a bomba,” or “go back to home-base or safety zone,” leaving Varchi “perdente” (211). Varchi claims that it is a game “dove non perde mai niuno,” leaving the two players, according to Tullia “come la ronfa del Valera” (211), or “at a tie,” in the jargon of a popular sixteenth-century card game.14

Upon finding the use of such terms, the reader may not be surprised: the dialogue itself plays out like a verbal game of tag, with the interlocutors at variously times “catching” each other, as children might say. Discussing whether love is infinite, Tullia states: “Lasciate un poco dire a me, per vedere se sapessi anche io coglier voi...” (208).

14 Salvatore Battaglia, Grande dizionario della lingua italiana (Torino: UTET, 1961), see Vol. V, p. 84.
Then, when she thinks that she has caught him in an inconsistency she states, “Ringraziato sia Dio che ho còlto una volta voi!” Varchi responds: “Dove mi avete còlto? E che ho io confessato?”, and later: “io non veggo dove sia rimasto còlto” (208). Being “còlto”, or “caught”, therefore, implies having fallen into an inconsistent argument, having confessed to something that disproves your point.

In this game of tag, one also finds the imagery of traps and tricks. For example, Tullia asks Varchi to leave aside the “burle” or “pranks” (190). Other such words that occur frequently are “baie,” “baione” (192), “beffe” (200, 205), and “giambo” (206). Furthermore, the character Tullia employs sayings that are quite amusing and colorful, but may also betray a fundamental mistrust of the game. For example, Tullia wants to make sure that Varchi is not trying to “mostrare lucciole per lanterne” (210), or trick her into believing what is not true. She then warns him not to try to “mostrarmi la luna nel pozzo” (210-11), another saying which implies duplicity. Some verbs that are used with the underlying meaning of trickery are: “aggirare” (191), “ingarbugliare” (192), “carrucolare” (209, 295), and “uccellare” (200).

In the case of the verb “uccellare,” the imagery of the hunt is used as the interlocutors try to trap their prey verbally. In one particular passage, arguing that love is not infinite, Tullia recalls having heard that according to philosophers nothing is infinite. If this is true, she reasons, love of course cannot be infinite. Thinking that she has finally stumped Varchi, Tullia says elatedly: “Vi ho saputo anch’io carrucolare questa volta, tanto che non vi è rimaso gretola alcuna da poterne uscire” (209). The figurative meaning
of “carrucolare” is “convincere con inganni,” and the term “gretola” is used as “scappatoia” or “escape.” Tricking him involves cornering him so that he is without “gretola.” Varchi responds, possibly stumpying her: “Dio non è infinito?” (209). Tullia, who has already foreseen this response, says: “Io vi aspettava bene a cotesta callaiuola, ma elle non vi gioverà...” (219). She has avoided the “callaiuola,” the trap that works by blocking out all “callai” or routes of escape.

The term “callaiuola” functions in terms of two metaphors: dialogue as a hunt and dialogue as labyrinth. Alluding to the labyrinthine aspect of dialogue, Tullia states: “Io dubito che voi non cerchiate una via donde uscirvene, e darmi un canto in pagamento” (211). Thus Tullia fears that Varchi will find an escape hatch for himself, yet leave her cornered, with no way out. Thus the metaphors overlap: dialogue is depicted as a hunt, one which takes place within a labyrinthine structure in which the interlocutor must avoid being trapped in a dead-end, that is, in a pathway which in fact a trick.

In his Apologia dei dialogi Speroni describes the Aristotelian method as “scienza demonstrativa” and the dialogic method as “di scienza ritratto” (705). These two

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16 See Battaglia, Vol. VII, p. 36.
18 Russell and Merry have translated “darmi un canto un pagamento” as “pay me with a song.” Although this translation is certainly plausible, in light of the labyrinthine imagery and agonistic elements I would consider a different translation. Indeed, Battaglia defines this phrase as “fuggire” or “scappare alla cheticella” (II, 663). For “dare un canto in pagamento” Battaglia gives “lasciare uno nell’imbroglio” (IV, 35). Relying on this definition, canto does not refer to a song, but to a corner (“angolo”). Thus I would propose a translation of “leave me cornered” which renders to a greater extent the sense of “imbroglio” and of the labyrinthine quality expressed in the first part of the sentence with “cerchiate una via donde uscirvene”.

different routes to knowledge are called, respectively, the “strada utile aristotelica” and
the “sentiero delli dialogi” (694). The use of these two terms in relation to one another
inhrs a subtle difference in method: “strada” indicates a conventional and well-traveled
route as opposed to a “sentiero” which is less-traveled and possibly meandering.
Explaining the latter, and defending his own youthful dialogues from the inquisition,
Speroni often employs the metaphor of “giuoco”. In a recent study on the genre, Olga
Zorzi Pugliese proposes a new interpretation of Speroni’s use of this term. The author
claims that Speroni adopts the word “gioco” in order to reveal an anti-dogmatic and less
rigid approach to knowledge. According to Pugliese, Speroni’s use of the term ‘gioco’
does not imply a lack of seriousness, but refers instead to the flexible character of the
genre which, unlike the Aristotelian method, deviates from linearity and provides a freer
path to wisdom. This path does not proceed directly to its object, but rather wanders, as
in what Speroni calls a “pleasant labyrinth.” 19 This interpretation reveals the importance
of the digressive elements of dialogue. In fact, the “diletto” which Speroni associates
with the dialogical form is not an idle delight: he calls it “quello ozo non ozioso né
dissoluto” (289). The meandering path is what one finds in d’Aragona’s dialogue. When
the reader leaves the well-traveled path of the various doubts regarding love, wandering
into the delightful banter of the lovers, he or she may lose the philosophical thread, but
will perhaps stumble upon other insights.

Marsilio Ficino, in his El libro dell’amore, discusses games in a seemingly
peculiar way. Regarding simple love, in which the beloved does not reciprocate, he

19 See Pugliese, Il discorso labirintico del dialogo rinascimentale, pp. 39-41.
states: “Il semplice amore, qualunque uomo piglia, fa prudente ad antivedere, in
disputare acuto, nel ragionare abbondante, magnanimo nelle cose da fare, faceto nelle
cose giocose, pronto ne’ giuochi; e nelle cose gravi fortissimo...” (76). Love itself, when
not reciprocated, sharpens the lover’s intellectual abilities, rendering him an acute
disputant and a sharp player of games. It is the constant state of pursuing the beloved,
one would assume, which hones these capabilities. Thus Ficino implies that the pursuit
of love is like a game in which competition and sharp acumen are necessary qualities.

Ficino’s definition of unrequited love, it would seem, finds its dramatic
representation in d’Aragona’s dialogue in which acute competition and well-honed
debating skills figure strongly. Although Varchi, as Tullia’s official lover in this period,
was presumably loved in return, being the lover of a famous courtesan meant being
constantly surrounded by other admirers, thus perhaps never being fully assured of the
reciprocation of his feelings. The following passage demonstrates the lovers’ competitive
flare and their efforts to one-up each other, as it were:

Varchi: ...Dico adunque che la equivocazione e lo scambiare i significati
de’ nomi e il non intendere i termini è cagione di molti errori, perché chi
non intende le parole mai non potrà intender le cose...Sappiate che, a
parlare così confusamente ed in generale, come avemo fatto noi, anche
Dio, secondo i filosofi, è infinito.
Tullia:...io dico ciò secondo i peripatetici.
Varchi: Così dico anche io; e, quando dico “filosofi”, intendo
ordinariamente “peripatetici”.
Tullia: Io dico Aristotele.
Varchi: Ed Aristotele dico io.

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20 Johan Huizinga defines game in relation to love, asserting that play refers to acts of flirting and
courtship, the preparation and pursuit of love, rather than the attainment of physical union. See his Homo
Ludens, trans. Corinna von Schendel (Torino: Einaudi, 1967), p. 74. This echoes Ficino’s concept of
unreciprocated love in which unsatisfied desire and pursuit seem to heighten one’s skills and capabilities
in games and dispute. For a discussion of the phenomenon of play within the realm of courtly love, see
Roger Boase, pp. 103-107.
Tullia: Istrabilio.
Varchi: Ed io trasecolo. (211)

Directly following Varchi’s warning about not understanding terms, they seem to engage in a brief misunderstanding over the terms “peripatetici,” “filosofi,” and “Aristotele,” all of which, they finally agree, refer to Aristotelian logic. “Istrabilio” means “I’m amazed.” Presumably, Tullia is amazed because they agreed that they were both speaking about the same thing, Aristotle. Varchi must then prove that he understood her rather uncommon word by coming up with an even more colorful synonym, “trasecolo”. This verbal one-upmanship demonstrates clearly the metaphor of dialogue as competitive game.

Interspersed with such competitive exchanges, one also finds the interlocutors praising one another. The effect of these fluctuations in tone is to underline the non-linear aspect of the dialogue. Furthermore, the flirtatious quality of the exchanges seems to galvanize the discourse in a way that recalls Ficino’s concept of the lover as inspired debater. Thus d’Aragona’s dialogue seems to contain an erotic component in which sensual passion is in a sense harnessed in order to drive an intellectual pursuit.  

Tullia demonstrates at the beginning of the dialogue her mistrust of philosophy when she claims that philosophical reasons are employed for disparaging women, about whom she claims: “voi, per non so che vostre ragioni filosofiche, riputate men degne e

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21 The interaction of sensual and intellectual energy with regard to Platonic dialogues is developed by Gregory Vlastos and discussed further by David M. Halperin. According to Vlastos, in Platonic love the sensual aspect is present but denied consummation. Thus, physical excitement is projected into intellectual energy. I am not claiming that d’Aragona’s dialogue displays the concept of completely denying and sublimating the sensual, but that the flirtatious quality of the exchanges seems to indicate that the sensual passion serves as inspiration to intellectual passion. See Gregory Vlastos, *Platonic Studies* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973); and David M. Halperin, “Plato and Erotic Reciprocity,” *Classical Antiquity* 5 (1986): 60-80.
men perfette degli uomini” (187-8). Furthermore, Tullia admits her fear of philosophy as the fear that she will be tricked into agreeing to something which she does not believe:

Varchi: Voi sète oggi molto sospettosa, oltra la natura e fuori della usanza vostra...Di che avete paura? Che vi fa dubitare a conceder quello che conoscete di non poter negare?
Tullia: Ho paura di quello che mi potrebbe intervenire. Io non so, io. Questi loici ingarbugliano altrui il cervello alla prima, e dicono “sì” e “no”; e vogliono che tu dica “sì” e “no” a loro posta, e mai non cessano infino che la loro stia di sopra o a torto o a ragione... (191-2)

While Tullia is perhaps teasing Varchi the Aristotelian, she is also expressing a fear of philosophical procedure, of being forced into conceding something against her will.

Despite this apprehension, she does on occasion use philosophical language (195), but at other times she claims not to understand it, saying “non intendo a mio modo” (197). In fact, at times she seems to play a role similar to that of Emilia Pio in Il libro del cortegiano. Referring to Castiglione’s dialogue, Virginia Cox explains the problem of adapting technical language to an increasingly wider audience: “A writer whose primary audience was the newly literate public of the courts faced an unprecedented problem of etiquette: how to address an audience composed of educational inferiors but social equals, in a society in which good manners had been elevated to the status of an art.” The solution was to have a character, in this case Emilia Pio, defend the rights of the readers who might not comprehend the specialized vocabulary. According to Cox “female interlocutors, guaranteed by their sex the right to be decorously ignorant, were much exploited in the vernacular dialogue as stand-ins for an unschooled audience.”

Tullia plays a similar role, often calling on experience in opposition to philosophy and asking

22 See Cox, The Renaissance Dialogue. Both citations are from p. 45.
for a clarification of the specialized terminology, as when she says, “Datemi qualche esempio piú basso e piú chiaro” (211).

Nonetheless, Tullia is more than a mere stand-in for the unlearned: she seems to recognize that being unlearned makes one susceptible to trickery and thus more likely to lose the game. For example, when Tullia cannot respond to the philosophical reasoning offered as evidence, she says: “io non posso negar coteste ragioni e sono sforzata a credervi” (212). The only way she can win the game is with the use of reason:

Tullia: Eh, dite, chè, come vi ho detto, sareté valentuomo se mi proverete che Amore non abbia fine!
Varchi: È egli perciò si gran valentigia vincere una donna?
Tullia: Voi non avete a vincere una donna, ma la ragione. (207-8)

Tullia cannot compete simply as a woman (for that, as we have seen, would not be “si gran valentigia”). Instead, what she must emphasize is her use of reason, specifically the sanctioned and regulated reason of Aristotle. Her own views will remain unknown unless she can insert them into the dialogue using the vocabulary of logic. Indeed, she is very conscious of the silence of women and of their exclusion from intellectual matters: when Petrarch’s authority is invoked to prove that women rarely love, she responds, “Ma bisognava che madonna Laura avesse avuto a scrivere ella altrettanto di lui quanto egli scrisse di lei, ed avereste veduto come fosse ita la bisogna” (201). Just as Laura’s voice remains unheard, so Tullia is in danger of suffering a similar fate: by not being versed in the game of philosophical procedure, she is unable to compete and must lose by default.

Varchi demonstrates his philosophical superiority by judging Tullia on her ability to use philosophy. When she uses logic in a traditional manner, she is praised for proceeding “dottissimamente” (195, 202) or “dottrinalmente” (221). Instead, when he
does not approve of her reasoning, Varchi claims that, although she is “sottile”, she has
not reached the “verità” (200, 232). Tullia’s acceptance of philosophical procedure is
always equivocal. While she recognizes the authority of Aristotle, she does not do so *tut
court* but demands an explanation: “La concesso, perché so che è di Aristotele; ma ne
vorrei saper la cagione” (219). Although at times she chooses to trust experience over
philosophy (204), she also revels in the power of logic: “Infino questa loica è la mano di
Dio” (207). Nevertheless, philosophy is at times depicted as an instrument of coercion.
For example, Varchi’s definition of syllogism suggests a logic which can be used as a
trap, thus reinforcing Tullia’s fear of being forced to concede something against her will:
“...ogni volta che mi avete conceduto le due promesse (ché così chiamano i loici la
maggior proposizione e la menore, delle quali si fa il sillogismo), *sète costretta, o
vogliate voi o no, a conceder quello che ne viene*, cioè la conseguenza” (221, emphasis is
mine). The playing field, it seems, is not level: Tullia is involved in a philosophical
discourse but is aware of the fact that her lack of philosophical training puts her at a
distinct disadvantage. She may be sharp and “subtle” in her use of logic, but her
knowledge of Aristotelian logic is not thorough enough to allow her to compete with the
likes of Varchi.

One could say, therefore, that the game involves competing for linguistic and
philosophical mastery, that Tullia is demonstrating her proficiency in the elite language
(Tuscan) and her facility with popular philosophical theories (Neoplatonic love and basic
Aristotelian terminology). Yet she simultaneously reveals herself as an outsider, as
someone who must adapt herself to the rules which regulate such discourse. For
example, when, at the outset of the dialogue, Tullia and Varchi engage in the courtly
*topoi* of mutual praise and self-deprecation, Tullia breaks with that tradition, threatening
to reveal the self-aggrandizement that underlies such vacuous protestations of
inadequacy: “Di grazia, non entrate in coteste scuse pure troppo ordinarie ad un pari
vostro, e serbatevi cotesta modestia ad un altro tempo e con persone che non vi
conoscano; altramente dirò che vi paia esser stato poco lodato e che aspettiate che vi lodi
ancora” (190). Tullia exposes self-disparagement as a veiled attempt to gain praise, yet
does so carefully, cloaking her criticism in praise of Varchi who, she claims, is too
praiseworthy for such games. Varchi, not missing a beat, forgives her needling because
he knows that she has been speaking in order to “mostrare la eloquenza vostra” (190).
Thus both interlocutors, while taking mild jabs at one another, are made to reveal the self-
serving nature of such discourse. D’Aragona’s use of courtly *topoi* are thus double-
voiced, to use the well-worn yet useful Bakhtinian term. Indeed, the imagery of game
and trickery that has been noted also serves to betray a sense of double-voiced discourse.
While the character Tullia uses the philosophical and linguistic language of elite culture,
Tullia d’Aragona the author is simultaneously deflecting it, affirming it through its
adoption, yet negating its absolute value as she exposes its dangers and flaws.

Another important element that emerges from the dialogue form is its “public
relations” function. In 1547 d’Aragona was denounced in Florence for failing to comply
with the sumptuary laws pertaining to prostitutes. Being forced to wear the sign of the
*meretrice*, the yellow veil\(^{23}\), would have been humiliating and devastating to her

\(^{23}\) For the story of the yellow veil, see Masson, pp. 119-121.
reputation. By means of recommendations and her literary accomplishments, however, d’Aragona was granted a waiver: Cosimo de’ Medici’s order was to “fasseli gratia per poetessa,” “pardon her as a poet.” Just as her poetry served to legitimize her presence in elite society, so her dialogue functioned as a recommendation and a testament to her esteemed position in literary circles.

The initial praise of Varchi and of the hostess, Tullia, recalls the courtly decorum of *Il libro del cortigiano*. This setting, however, is not the court of Duke, but the home of a courtesan. Despite the lack of narrative introduction, the reader learns from the dedicatory letter that the dialogue takes place in Tullia’s house: “un ragionamento fatto, sono già più mesi, dentro delle mie case...” (248). The opening words of Varchi include praise for the “luogo,” Tullia’s home:

io temeva di non forse aver, se non guasti del tutto, almeno interrotti in parte i ragionamenti vostri, i quali so che altro che begli non possono essere, e di cose alte, e degni finalmente così di questo luogo, dove sempre si propone qualche materia da disputare non meno utile e grave che gioconda e piacevole. (187, emphasis is mine)

The author lets us know that serious and exciting topics of discussion are common in Tullia’s home. Even beyond the initial praise, the dialogue presents Tullia’s resumé, complete with recommendations from top literary figures of the day:

Varchi: ...Dunque sarò io si ignorante, si vile, si ingrato che non conoscerò, non gusterò, non loderò quella bellezza, quella virtù, quella cortesia, la quale ama, ammira ed onora chiunque la ha mai o veduta per se medesimo o udita raccontar da altrui? Io non mi voglio aguagliare in cosa nuna al vostro e mio dottissimo, leggiadissimo e cortissimo messer Sprone [Sperone Speroni], né al raro ed eccellente valor del nostro signor Muzio; anzi voglio lor ceder, come è di loro merito e di mio debito, in tutto, salvo che in conoscere il pregio vostro, se bene non so né posso lodarlo come hanno fatto essi: de’ quali l’uno in prosa, e l’altro così in diverse maniere di rime, come ancora in prosa, hanno scritto cose tante e tali di voi, “che dureran quanto ’l moto lontano”. (188)
According to Cox, "besides its stated aim of instructing and delighting, literature was called on to perform a variety of 'public relations' functions for its author, ranging from flattery and self-advertisement to sniping and self-defence." It is this "public relations" function, Cox asserts, which may have induced Renaissance courtiers to favor the dialogue form. In Tullia's dialogue, the self-advertising is flagrant. It is not enough for the character Varchi to praise her; he also reminds the reader that she has already been praised immortally in the works of Speroni and Muzio. Anyone who does not recognize her virtue is referred to as "si ignorante, si vile, si ingrato" (188). Although her intellectual abilities are praised, she must also be seen as giving pleasure to those in her company: the "materia" discussed in her home is no less "utile" and "grave" than "gioconda" and "piacevole." Being both a paid companion and a poet, she walks a thin line: her intellectual virtues must not overshadow the pleasure of her company. Yet Tullia is not the only one to benefit from the 'public relations' function of the dialogue: Varchi also is allowed to defend himself against his detractors (205, 218, 231).

The social element intrinsic to a dialogical work allows for the fictional Tullia to be inserted into a society in which she is fully accepted and esteemed. The literary character demonstrates the virtues of the historical figure, while admiring companions, both intra- and extra-textual, voice their approval. Her literary accomplishments and her attempts to elevate her reputation, therefore, are part of her own dialogue with society, which, it seems, was a constant quest for legitimization. As Bassanese has observed,
d'Aragona’s *Rime* are also constructed as a sort of poetic exchange, in which laudatory poems by illustrious men are published alongside her own poems which are addressed, in turn, to her admirers. Thus her poetry is also presented as a sort of dialogue in which she is “both giver and recipient of praise” (*Courtesans* 313).

The public relations motive indicates that the author is very aware of the audience. In fact, it seems that the audience of readers is represented by the silent “altri” who are present, but remain anonymous. Upon entering, Varchi thanks Tullia and “questi altri signori e gentiluomini” (187). The only person in this group who is identified is Benucci, the third interlocutor, and he speaks only at the end of the dialogue. These unidentified “altri” are mentioned occasionally. For example, while urging Varchi to continue speaking, Tullia states: “E non mettete pensiero di questi altri, ché queste sono cose che toccano a tutti generalmente, e ciascuno le ascolta volentieri” (217). Towards the end of the dialogue Varchi, noting the late hour, says: “...dubito si di non tenere a disagio questi gentiluomini, e sì che non ci rimanga tempo di sentir favellare questi altri, che pur non hanno fatto una parola in tutto oggi” (225). Moreover, the interlocutors remark on the ostensible privacy of the discussions. Tullia states: “Noi siamo tra noi, e di qui non ci ha ad uscir cosa che ci si dica” (223). Similarly, Varchi requests the discretion of the present company with regard to his preference for Leone Ebreo’s *Dialoghi d’amore* over Bembo’s *Asolani*, thus indicating privacy: “Ma, di grazia, che non si sappia fuori, che non mi fosse levato addosso qualche romore che mi fossi ridetto o ribellato dal Bembo” (225).
The privacy of the discussions is of course undermined by the acts of writing them down and publishing them. Nevertheless, the reader, present among the silent “altri,” is addressed as a voyeur, one who is privy to private discussions and peeking into the home of a famous courtesan. Lacking the interruptions of authorial comments and introductions, the mimetic dialogical style enhances the reader’s role as voyeur. Thus the author reveals herself to be conscious of the reader’s role and of the ability of the dialogical genre to involve the reader in a more direct way, almost to titillate by rendering the reader present in private conversations, thereby blurring the border between fictional space and reality, as well as that between the private and public domains.

Beyond the use of the dialogical genre to engage the reader, d’Aragona reveals the dialogue form itself, with its potential for flexibility and its intrinsic ability to express competing points of view, as a paradigm for both human love and the ambiguity associated with it, and for the pursuit of knowledge, specifically for a dialectical procedure in which truth remains evasive and enveloped in shadows despite the never-ending pursuit. Regarding this obscure nature of love which is often expressed through contradiction and conflict of opinion, Francesco Tateo proposes the term “retorica del contrario.” Treating principally Bernbo’s Asolani, Tateo demonstrates convincingly “come al di là del discorso tematico, o meglio in relazione con esso, il dialogo sia strutturato in modo da esaltare più che sciogliere la natura controversa del tema” (214).

With regard to the dialogues collected by Giuseppe Zonta in his Trattati d’amore del

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Cinquecento, which includes d’Aragona’s dialogue, Tateo states: “la sostanza retorica
dell’opera bembesca affetta un’aderenza all’arte dialettica che andrà smarrita nei trattati
d’amore” (210). Although the author is referring to a Ciceronian tradition (210) which is
indeed less prevalent in later love dialogues, he seems to imply that these dialogues are
lacking in dialectical elements.

I would argue, instead, that the dialectical quality is not at all lost in d’Aragona’s
dialogue: while one can easily debate the philosophical relevance of the text, what is
striking is the adversarial quality which is nonetheless placed within a system of
procedure by consent. Furthermore, the spirit and liveliness which scholars have often
attributed to the work render the dialogue evocative of a real conversation in which words
seem alive, rather than fixed within a devised rhetorical system. The tension implicit in
the game imagery that has been discussed also serves to underline the dialectical nature of
the work. Thus Tateo’s assertion that the dialogical structure of the Asolani does not blur
contrast but instead seems to magnify the controversial nature of the themes discussed,
can also be applied to d’Aragona’s dialogue, in which the dialogical framework itself
seems to modify the thematic content.

By depicting the female character as an active interlocutor, one of two voyagers
seeking wisdom through discourse, d’Aragona offers a new model of the female beloved,
one who is a co-investigator in the search to understand love. This represents a departure,
not only from the Petrarchan tradition, but from the model of Renaissance dialogue, Il
libro del cortegiano. Bassanese has argued that d’Aragona’s poetry demonstrates only
limited individual expression because the Petrarchan canon was so rigidly regulated as to
deter any possible creative manipulation. The re-emerging and ambiguous genre of
dialogue, by contrast, provided a freer literary space in which a greater degree of
personalized expression is possible. Within this more open literary genre, d’Aragona
presents a female character who functions as speculative subject as well as object. As
stated in chapter one, the female characters in Castiglione’s dialogue are paradoxically
silent, as has been noted by various scholars, most notably by Valeria Finucci (100).
While Castiglione’s treatise certainly served as a model for subsequent dialogues on love,
Leone Ebreo’s Dialoghi d’amore provided the model for the active female interlocutor
and, therefore, cleared the way for documentary dialogues in which female interlocutors
were not limited to a strictly ornamental role, but given an active role in the intellectual
discourse. As in other dialogues, here too unique praise is reserved for Leone Ebreo’s
work (225), thus indicating this work as a model.

In d’Aragona’s dialogue both male and female voices are represented: the pursuit
of love is depicted as an exchange, one in which the silent Laura would indeed have
something to add to the discourse, as Tullia does. As we have seen, however, Tullia is
often less successful when using the tools of Aristotelian logic. A female perspective, it
seems, is less likely to emerge on those well-trodden roads, but can perhaps be discovered


27 See Schiesari’s analysis of Renaissance models of female behavior which restrict women to the role of
“speculative object,” p. 77.

28 See my argument that Leone Ebreo’s Sofia served as the model for the female interlocutors in the
dialogues collected here, pp. 31-2. Janet L. Smarr has recently recognized the influence of Leone Ebreo’s
female interlocutor on d’Aragona’s dialogue. Furthermore, according to Smarr, d’Aragona’s Della infinità
d’amore can be considered a direct response to Speroni’s depiction of Tullia in his Dialogo d’amore. She
argues that, in her own dialogue, d’Aragona emphasizes her role as an intellectual, thus revising the
exaltation of passion of reason that had been attributed to her by Speroni. See Smarr, pp. 209-11.
on the less-traveled paths, in the digressions. Here we find doubt being cast on the lofty spiritual aims of Neoplatonic love. Love as a game implies a certain frustration: it goes on *ad infinitum* (as the characters are keen to repeat) and is beset with traps. This tension reflects the conflict inherent in Neoplatonic love, torn as it is between the dual impulses of body and soul. While the impulse toward love is always initiated through sensory experience, the ideal beauty sought rests beyond the sensorial realm. This fundamental conflict is only rarely overcome. By providing a dialogical framework which reinforces the conflictual elements of the theory of Neoplatonic love, d’Aragona calls into question the credibility of a theory of love which can easily seem stagnant, in which the earthly and divine types of love are all too easily categorized and compartmentalized. Instead, her use of the specific labyrinthine and ludic allusions demonstrates that the real-life path toward ideal love is anything but straight and narrow. Indeed, through the use of traps, tricks, and dead-ends, d’Aragona reveals the abyss that lies between theory and practice, between an often facile compartmentalization of love and a practical attempt to gain an understanding of love through dialogue.
Chapter Six
Giuseppe Betussi's *Leonora* and the Intersecting Paths of Conversation and Education

In the Renaissance, the genre of dialogue often served as a literary vehicle for the affirmation of social roles and the presentation of behavioral models. The best-known dialogue of the period, Castiglione's *Il libro del cortegiano*, was seen as a training manual for courtiers, a sort of "grammatica fondamentale della società di corte." Another enormously popular dialogue, Della Casa's *Galateo*, came to be synonymous with rules of social decorum. Developing from its roots in the philosophical dialogue, the sixteenth-century love dialogue underwent a transformation: from a philosophical discussion on the origins of love and beauty, its scope extended to incorporate the presentation of a behavioral model. Such dialogues provided guidelines regarding not only questions of love, but also the more general issues of social exchange and conversation. The so-called "minor" love dialogues, reminiscent of their more famous precursors, not only reflect the adaptation of the philosophical dialogue to a more "courtly" setting, but, as reflections of a somewhat less elite social realm, they perhaps also provide a less conformist model. It is within this literary tradition that Giuseppe Betussi’s *Leonora* (written in 1552, but not published until 1557) will be examined.

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Like Betussi’s earlier dialogues, the *Dialogo amoroso* and the *Raverta, Leonora* features a female protagonist who is based on an historical personage and is depicted as actively engaged in the conversations. In *Leonora*, however, the female character for whom the dialogue is named is not a courtesan, as in the previous two dialogues, but instead a noblewoman named Leonora Ravolta Falletta. She serves not only as the host of the group, but also as the main interlocutor and teacher in the discussion. Whereas in the previously examined dialogues (Betussi’s *Raverta* and d’Aragona’s *Della infinità d’amore*) the conversations take place in the home of the female interlocutor, in *Leonora* the setting of the discussions is outdoors in the area surrounding the home of the principal speaker. Other fundamental differences in *Leonora* include a greater emphasis on the narrative features, and thus a closer link to the Ciceronian model of dialogue, and the presence of many interlocutors who produce multi-voiced exchanges. The subject of the dialogue is once again beauty and love; yet in *Leonora* there is a more pronounced emphasis on spiritual and philosophical themes than in Betussi’s previous dialogues. While the actions of the main interlocutor are obviously an essential part of the behavioral model presented, Betussi uses other features as well in his presentation of the model. Indeed, he deftly crafts the literary and rhetorical elements of the dialogue,

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3 Although little is known of Leonora Falletta, Girolamo Ruscelli gives a description of her in which he indicates that she was also a writer and that indeed he himself hoped to aid her in the publication of her work. Unfortunately, her work, most likely poetry, has probably been lost. Nevertheless, it is important to note that she was known as a writer in her own right. Ruscelli’s description, from his *Lettura ove...si pruova la somma perfettione delle donne*, is as follows: “S. Leonora Falletta, Signora di Melazzo, virtuosissima di costumi, & di lettere, et tale che co i miracolosi componimenti suoi, et massimamente nella bellissima lingua nostra, ha gia posti in pensiero molti fecicissimi ingegni di questa età, et principalmente, per tacer di me stesso, i miei S. CONTILE, et BETUSSI se debbiano essi col nome di si gloriosa sig. honorare gli scritti loro, ó più tosto desiderare et procurare ch’ella faccia lor gratia di perpetuari nell’eternità de’ suoi; De’ quali spero col mandarne tosto in luce alcuni, dare al modo tal saggio, che ben sia per confessar ciascuno, che à questa felicis. spetie Donnesca, della quale hieri et oggi si lungamente s’è ragionato, habbia conceduta Iddio sommo, ogni sorte di perfettione vera. (69v)
fashioning imagery and dialogical structure so as to produce a remarkable female interlocutor with a very specific role in the conversations.

Imagery of the journey in Renaissance dialogues has been interpreted by various scholars as a metaphor for conversation, learning, and for writing itself.\(^4\) According to these interpretations, the pathway or road constitutes, in both the literal and figurative senses, progress from one point to another, and more specifically, the means to that progress. Carla Forno points out that, “il dialogo comporta un ‘movimento’ del pensiero, segna un ‘passaggio’ nell’acquisizione della verità e spesso l’abbandono delle posizioni iniziali, insinuando la continua tentazione della ricerca” (93) She also notes that the proponderance of navigational imagery in Renaissance dialogues is a feature that serves not only to elucidate the role of dialogical inquiry and conversation, but also to represent life itself (93-95). Olga Pugliese has traced the pathway imagery and its meta-literary function in Pietro Bembo’s Asolani, arguing that it evolves to reflect each speaker’s attempt and ability to understand love, thereby revealing the author’s overall vision of the theory of love.\(^5\)

As in the Asolani and other dialogues, the imagery of the pathway in Raverta often refers to the direction of the discussions themselves, as well as to the numerous diversions that pull the interlocutors, and the readers, from one topic to another, as though they were travelling from a main road to a secondary path. Because the conversation is

\(^4\) See especially Virginia Cox, Renaissance Dialogue, pp. 84-98, in which the author analyzes the structure of dialogues as a “winding road” or a “straight and narrow path.”

\(^5\) See Pugliese, Il discorso labirintico nel dialogo rinascimentale, chap. 4.
geared towards imparting knowledge about love and beauty, the pathways refer more specifically to the method or “ways” being taught by Leonora, the teacher of the group. For example, requesting clarification of the theories of love and beauty being expounded, one of the interlocutors asks Leonora “che voi ci mostraste quali siano le vie per le quali possiamo pervenire a tanta eccellenza” (336). When diversions occur, Leonora herself asks for assistance in returning to the “camino” (324) or in finding her way back to the “sentiero del mio ragionamento” (324).

Aside from these standard elements, however, the imagery in Leonora is unique and can teach us something about the behavioral model being presented. Not only is the path metaphor used in reference to learning and imparting wisdom by leading in a certain direction, but it is also a strong element in the narration and setting of the dialogue. Here paths are shown to intersect in one specific area, thus forming a crossroads. The narrator explains that the setting of the dialogues, the town of Melazzo, is a stopping place for travellers: the hills surrounding the castle “sono passaggio a molti viandanti per diversi paesi” (307). Arriving at this common point of passage, various men are depicted as stopping over at Melazzo on their way to other destinations, such as the nearby baths and the city of Savona. In fact, the various interlocutors in the dialogue can be divided into two groups that approach Melazzo from different directions and whose paths intersect on the road. The first group includes Betussi himself (character and narrator) and Anton Galeazzo Bentivoglio who was coming from the direction of Piedmont and passing through Savona when he met Betussi and suggested they stop at Melazzo. The second group is comprised of Bernardo Capello, Annibal Lambertini and Giovan Tomaso Arena
who were all heading for the nearby baths when they too decided to break their journey at Melazzo.

The various travellers stop to restore themselves and to engage in lively discussions led by Leonora, who unlike the men does not journey from her house, but remains at home as host and presumably manager of her household. Leonora refers to a previous visitor, Annibale Caro who, while interrupting his journey from France at Melazzo, taught Leonora what she knows about love and beauty (316). In fact, if Leonora is presented in the dialogue as master of the proceedings, it is because her education has been the fruit of these earlier discussions. It is clear, therefore, that the crossroads implies not only the convergence of various men from different areas, but also the convergence of knowledge and ideas that these men bring along with them and then leave behind for Leonora to appropriate and pass on to the next group. While the travellers benefit from the respite in their journey and from the lively company, Leonora benefits from the opinions they express and the theories they impart.

In the narrative introduction, the description of the geographical setting of Melazzo contains many references that reinforce the imagery of the convergence of paths. The narrator takes some care in explaining the topology of the area: two rivers flow through the valley of Melazzo, running in opposite directions and emptying out into two different seas (Mare di Liguria, e Mare d’Adria). The second river, it seems, is a tributary to another tributary of the River Po and, through this convergence with the other two rivers, it eventually reaches its destination in the Mar d’Adria. Much like the travellers themselves, the rivers flow through the area and carry the fame of the virtuous Leonora in
different directions: “fino per la voce di questi fiumi, per più parti che per una sola del mondo siano diffusi e sparsi gli onori della magnanima Leonora” (308). Thus not only is Leonora the recipient of information and knowledge, but in turn her fame is dispersed throughout Northern Italy. While she remains sedentary, the paths of the men, like those of the rivers themselves, spread knowledge of this “divine” woman in many directions.

The importance of “dialoguing between dialogues” has been noted in the chapter on Betussi’s Raverta. Forno explains that this aspect of dialogues is fundamental to the genre in this period:

Il confronto dialettico non è solo all’interno dei singoli testi, fra le posizioni dei vari interlocutori, ma anche fra testi diversi, collocati lungo direttici di sviluppo coerenti. Cifra costante nella vasta produzione dialogica quattro-cinquecentesca è, infatti, questa dialettica interna al genere, questo dialogo fra dialoghi, secondo prospettive mutevoli. (124)

The imagery of the crossroads may help to illuminate this dialectic between individual dialogues. While a dialogue is being read, it rests in the center of the reader’s attention, yet it is almost never presented as a closed entity, complete in itself. References to other texts, like various paths running to and from the center, abound. For example, a specific reference to a work such as Trissino’s Ritratti, will send the reader in an outward direction toward that other text, while an indirect reference, though lacking formal citation within the text, indicates where the dialogue is informed by another, whether the reader is aware of this or not. Likewise, within a single dialogue the interlocutors often refer to previous discussions, reporting the views and positions of the previous visitors to the present ones.
What is particularly striking in *Leonora* is the female character's role at the center of the crossroads. Much like Francesca Baffa in the *Raverta*, Leonora is also the sedentary recipient of male guests/interlocutors who visit. Moreover, both characters also represent a point of nexus for the various men who visit, because they pass on information obtained from one group or person to the next. Unlike Baffa, however, Leonora also serves as master and source of knowledge as she instructs the men who visit her. Thus while both characters rest at the (immobile) center of the interaction between various discussions, as both recipient and intermediary of knowledge, the character Leonora, as master, is more fully realized as that center. Moreover, in *Leonora* the crossroads is symbolic of the dialogical exchange that is recorded in the text: various interlocutors direct their questions to Leonora, going beyond the binary approach often found in dialogues subsuming it instead into a multi-voiced format by which the questions from the different speakers converge at their target, Leonora. She is the focal point in a circle of men thereby creating a centripetal movement in the conversation.

While female interlocutors are generally depicted in dialogues as making requests, as in the injunction “parlate di modo che siate inteso” (Castiglione 222), in *Leonora* it is the male interlocutors who ask their female counterpart to “dichiarateci un poco meglio” (328), or express the hope that she will “scendere più in basso” (321). Indeed, the relationship between the male and female interlocutors that has been observed in many dialogues is reversed here: the male interlocutors are assigned the task of asking for

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clarification and of demanding further explanation and the female interlocutor responds and explains. A contemporary reader of such dialogues would undoubtedly have noted the reversal of the standard roles.

Giulio Ferroni\(^7\) describes the relationships between interlocutors as relationships based on relative power:

\[\text{Le forme più essenziali e per così dire “originarie” di rapporto dialogico si danno proprio come rapporti di potere: e basta fare l’esempio del dialogo maestro-discente e di quello padrone-servo, in cui si dà gran parte delle forme letterarie e teatrali del dialogo, e che tuttora hanno infiniti riscontri nei nostri dialoghi quotidiani. In questi due rapporti ciascuno dei membri del dialogo si determina, scopre ed afferma la propria identità in riferimento all’altro...} \quad (18)\]

If, as Ferroni has indicated, dialogical relationships are essentially manifestations of the relative power in relationships, the interlocutor Leonora demonstrates a heightened state of intellectual strength in comparison to other female interlocutors in dialogues of the period. Depicted as wise and powerful, she perhaps reflects more faithfully the Neoplatonic ideal of woman. In this theory women often bear a closer semblance to divine beauty and intelligence than men. In *Leonora* this is reflected within the hierarchy of power and intelligence. Far from being unlearned, Leonora is presented as an expert in esoteric knowledge, a new Diotima. Not only is she treated as the leader of the discussions, but she is also referred to as “oracolo” (315, 322).

Yet declaring a woman to be an “oracolo” can be dubious praise since the use of extreme praise can weaken an argument in support of women.\(^8\) The overall argument of

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\(^8\) An argument for female superiority, while seemingly in support of women, can function instead to undermine an argument for parity between the sexes. See Barbara Newman, “Renaissance Feminism and
Leonora, however, is for the equality of men and women. In fact, Leonora implicitly places men and women on equal ontological footing by asserting that the word “uomo” refers to both sexes. Furthermore, an important digression leads to a discussion of the virtue of women, in which Leonora praises women as men’s equals (333-4). The impetus for this feminist digression, the careful reader will note, comes from the “Bassanese,” the character representing Betussi himself. Leonora had been discussing ideal beauty which all humans aspire to, when the Bassanese seemed to invite a defense of the interior beauty of women, asking: “E dove lasciate la donna? La quale, tutto che vestita sia di bellissima spoglia, se nelle bellezze e nelle virtù dell’animo sarà mancante, di poco e di brutissimo vedere giudicherò colui che bella estimerà tale donna” (332). The defense of women, elicited by the Bassanese’s question, is anchored in the existence of an exemplary model of female virtue.

The model who provides evidence of sexual parity is Violante da Gambara Valente, “la quale non vuol sopportare che l’uomo sia più perfetto della donna, e con tante ragioni e con tanti argomenti difende il suo sesso, che molte volte ha fatto restar attonito e confuso più d’un raro intelletto” (333). Betussi stresses Violante’s learning and erudition, as well as her motherhood: “Vedete questa magnanima donna, non meno involta nelle cure famigliari che negli umani studi, felicissimamente aver aggrandito le facoltà, allevato nobilmente i figliuoli e non mai aver lasciato le conversazioni oneste e virtuose, essendo la casa sua un ricetto continuo dei più begli spiriti d’Italia” (334).

Hosting conversations and opening her home to the “belli spiriti d’Italia”, Violante has cultivated humanistic studies and thereby provided for her own education. This does not mean that the virtues of chastity and fidelity have been discarded; they are still mentioned as important virtues (334) though they do, nonetheless, seem subordinate to the virtue of learning which is the main argument for the equality of women.

Leonora emphasizes Violante’s actions as proof of the equality of women and men: “non è ella sola, senz’altra prova, sofficiente nelle azioni a chiarire il mondo del valore della donna? La quale, se non ardirò dire che sia di virtù superiore all’uomini, non confesserò mai che né anco gli sia inferiore” (333). She urges her listeners to look not only at Violante’s arguments (for perhaps they might call her a sophist), but also at her actions. These actions, however, are closely connected to her speech: she “defends her sex” in debate. Thus Leonora encourages those who would judge women by the arguments of Violante, not simply to examine her arguments and to try to refute them, but also to recognize her as educated and capable of engaging men in debate. What is implicit is that one need not prove that Violante won the debate, only that she participated as an equal. This is consonant with Leonora’s assertion that she would neither attempt to claim women to be superior to men, nor concede them to be inferior.

According to Lucia Nadin Bassani, who echoes the commentaries of Zonta and Pozzi, Leonora represents the end of a literary phenomenon in which love dialogues flourished, but also incorporates elements of the new cultural environment. As a transitional piece, therefore, it represents the cultural metamorphosis and the incipient
religious fervor of the Counter-Reformation. Bassani finds the evolution of Betussi’s female protagonists to be indicative of this cultural transformation:

Nulla più emblematico, infine, a segnare quel mutare dei tempi... delle protagoniste femminili dei vari dialoghi: la cortigiana Baffa, impaziente di conoscere e sperimentare ‘come si deve fare ad amare ed essere amato’ ha ceduto il posto all’aristocratica Leonora, sempre attenta, nelle sue teorizzazioni sulla vera bellezza, a ‘parlare...come cristiana’ (79).

Indeed, Leonora may well mark the end of a period, but the text also represents the highpoint of the Neoplatonic exaltation of woman in dialogues with a female interlocutor. The ontologically superior beloved, as mirror of divine beauty, is finally depicted as much more than a mere object of inspiration: her ontological superiority seems to give rise to her intellectual superiority.

Also present in the dialogue, and perhaps linked to the crossroads imagery, is the Neoplatonic theory of circular cosmology. This is a theory that accounts for the hierarchy of beings in the universe, their relative proximity to God, and the capacity to participate in divine beauty and love. It is an important philosophical concept which is briefly touched upon by Betussi, but it is fundamental for an understanding of the matrix in which Betussi fits his ideas on the human pursuit of love and beauty. Explaining the circular cosmology in which God is the immovable center surrounded by four levels of being, Leonora states:

“centro” si deve intendere un punto appresso l’ultimo più interno cerchio indivisibile e stabile, dal quale nascono, derivano e s’estendono molte linee divisibili e mobili, ch’al primo cerchio, a quello più vicino, s’uniscono, il qual circolo viene a girarsi per virtù di quel punto stabile... dirò solo che Iddio è quel centro e quel punto, per essere egli l’immobile e quello che dà il movimento a tutte l’altre cose; onde, per esser unione semplicissima ed atto purissimo, si tramette fra tutte le cose. Ed è necessario, sì come sotto altre parole parmi aver detto, che a questo suo centro prima si leghino le cose create più nobili, non si ritrovando altro
d’incomposto e d’increato che Dio solo; e le più nobili e più vicine a lui sono le menti angeliche, a cui segue poi l’anima, indi i cieli e poi la natura, alquanto più inferiore. Ma, venendo all’anima sola, la dirò più mobile di qual altro cerchio che giri. Percioché, di proprietà sua discorrendo, conosce ed opera co’ corsi del tempo e può avvicinarsi a qualsivoglia grandezza; onde quali sono le operazioni, o belle o ree, tale ella diviene. Così nel bene conferma la sua origine avuta da Dio, come nel male la perde; e questo le aviene per la unione che tiene co’ corpi. E, sì come noi abbiamo due bellezze, cioè la corporale e la spirituale, o vogliamo dire la visiva e le contemplativa, così anco due superiori ce ne restano a contemplar sempre, e delle quali dobbiamo cercare ed ingegnarsi divenir possessori. (346-347)

Most likely, this concept is of Plotinian derivation⁹ and was introduced to Renaissance writers by Marsilio Ficino. According to this theory, every level of being desires to ascend towards God; this desire is called love and the source of attraction is beauty. In chapter II, III of El libro dell’amore, entitled “Come la bellezza è splendore della bontà divina, e come Idio è centro di quattro cerchi”, Ficino writes:

...gli antichi teologi posono la bontà nel centro, e nel cerchio la bellezza: dico certamente la bontà in uno centro e in quattro cerchi la bellezza. Lo unico centro di tutte le cose è Iddio, e’ quattro cerchi che intorno a Dio continuamente si rivolgono sono la mente, l’anima, la natura e la materia.... Ma perché noi Idio chiamiamo centro e quegli altri quattro perché cerchi dichiareremo. El centro è uno punto del cerchio stabile e indivisibile, donde molte linee divisibile e mobile vanno alla loro simile circonferenza. La qual circonferenza, che è divisibile, non altrimenti si volge intorno al centro che uno corporal tondo in un ganghero si faccia. (26)

In both Betussi and Ficino the soul, as one of the circles, is incapable of proceeding directly to union with God, but must instead circle around Him.

The spatial elements of Leonora, revealed through the narration, seem to reflect this cosmology: the group itself is seated in a circle, or “posti come in cerchio” (311).

⁹ See Plotinus’ Enneads (II.2). Ficino translated the Enneads, publishing the work in 1492.
Furthermore, the nature which surrounds them also seems to encircle them: “ci ritirammo in un picciolo prato, tutto attorniato di molti vaghi arbuscelli, che con l’ombre lor grate invitavano a posare ognuno che vi s’appresentava” (311). The trees seem to form an outer circle (corresponding to the natural realm) and the group an inner circle (corresponding to the realm of the soul), thus mirroring the Neoplatonic cosmology of concentric circles. In this manner the spatial elements of the setting reflect the group’s intellectual / spiritual pursuit: the Neoplatonic desire to ascend to God through the contemplation of divine beauty.

The means to this pursuit, as revealed through the dialogue form and through the action which is taking place within the circular space, is discussion. Leonora, as the central interlocutor, seems to occupy the center of these concentric circles. Although Betussi does not state that she is seated at the center of the circle, she is undoubtedly the center of the conversations and represents the point where the numerous male interlocutors’ questions converge. The turning (“girare”) which goes on within the circle may be compared to the conversation, that is, the flowing and returning of questions and answers, which begin with the various male interlocutors sitting at various points of the circumference and reach the master and center of the discussions, Leonora.

The geographical center, Melazzo, is also the stable center of the various meandering paths of the passers through. Leonora herself, in fact, recognizes the link between herself and Melazzo, as she remarks that visiting one means visiting the other. The travellers gain pleasure from both, while both are in turn honored by the presence of such illustrious figures. Leonora states: “Onoratissima compagnia... v’è piaciuto oggi
The travellers come both for the human environment ("per consolazione della grata compagnia") and for the natural environment ("la tranquillità dell’aere") (309). A visit to Melazzo, therefore, affords double pleasure (from nature and the company) and is also a double honor (for both Leonora and the town).

Betussi may have come into contact with these philosophical concepts and their relation to the act of dialogue through Sperone Speroni. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the two had occasion to meet in 1542 at the Accademia degli Infiammati in Padua.  

In his *Apologia dei dialogi* Speroni explains love in terms of circular imagery:

> Perciocchè amore, che non è monstro, benché sia cosa meravigliosa, è sempre pieno di assai contrarii; *e tale è il cerchio nel raggrirarsi.* ed se egli è vero, che sia gran male lo innamorarsi; ciò non li avviene per la natura di quei contrarii, che sono in esso ad un tempo: altrimenti non bona cosa farebbe il cielo; il qual, perciocchè le sue rivolte vanno a finire in sul cominciare, e senza principio comincia a volgersi sempremai, e sempre termina senza fine; male sarebbe se si movesse. quante fiate tu ti confessi, altrettante tu accusi te; ed altrettante tu vinci e perdi il tuo piatto. hai dritto e torto, sai e non sai; e buono essendo e non buono, meritamente in un punto istesso tu puo lodarti e vituperarti. Lascio amore alli tuoi dialogi, e sol del cerchio ragionarò. *Ha dunque il cerchio naturalmente concava e curva la sua linea, che voi chiamate circonferenza; e rivolgendosi intorno al centro sopra i suoi poli va suso e giuso, e tardo e ratto ad un tempo, e tale essendo la sua natura, suole adoprarissi dalli architetti in fare effetti meravigliosi con molta vostra comodità; formando quelli certe lor macchine ingنيose, nella virtù delle quali, per la contrarietà circolare, uno uomo solo di poco forza leva tal sasso sopra una torre, che la posanza di cinquanta altri non alzarebbe pure una spanna. Simil forza è in amore: ma i suoi contrarii son piu in numero di questi altri, e manco noti a chi piu li sente.* (326-7, emphasis is mine)

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While in Ficino the circle has a Plotinian sense of emanation and return from the Good, and therefore reflects a Neoplatonic cosmology, in Speroni what is stressed is the analogy between the circle and the human capacity for love, the relation of love to dialogue, and the polarities that exist within the circle.

In fact, Speroni’s theory of the circle suggests a method of investigation whereby the polarity of opposites produces a sort of energy, much as the varying pressure on the circumference of a circle ("contrarietà circolare") produces rotation and motion. By embracing the polarities that exist within the circle, one may multiply one’s power of understanding, much as those “ingenious machines” increase exponentially the power of a man. Thus regarding the pursuit of love, he seems to suggest that the attempt to wrestle with the ambiguities and polarities that exist, travelling from one pole to the other in an attempt to understand the center, will produce a heightened state of understanding. As explained by both Speroni and Betussi, the concept does remain ambiguous, perhaps as proper treatment for an esoteric subject.

When applied to dialogue, the paradigm emphasizes the polarities between different points of view and the power one attains through the confrontation of these opposites. In fact, Speroni argues elsewhere in the Apologia that the friction between two opposing opinions can produce sparks, just as the contact between flint and iron (283). Indeed Speroni is rather creative in his use of analogy to elucidate his theory of dialogue. Another analogy he draws is that between dialogue and dance: “così l'autor del dialogo

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non va si dentro alla cosa scritta, che possa giunger alla sua essenza; ma le va intorno, quasi ballando” (285).

Pugliese has traced the contiguous metaphors of labyrinth, game, and dance used by Speroni to elucidate the dialogical approach to knowledge, arguing that these images “have in common the idea of relative freedom from restriction and...share a spatial dimension which relates to the basic structure of the dialogical mode, that is, its tendency towards diversion.”12 The “spatial dimension” which Pugliese traces in Speroni’s theory of dialogue is also present in Betussi’s Leonora. The wandering within the circle, expounded by Speroni and present in Leonora, is not only consonant with these metaphors but seems to provide their philosophical basis: just as in the cosmological circle the soul must circle around that unreachable center, in dialogue the author dances around the elusive essence of truth that lies within his subject. Betussi’s awareness and use of this concept demonstrate a certain reflection on the genre, likely learned from Speroni, and prove that he is not nearly as “confused” as some critics have claimed.13

Just as the criticism on Ravera was for the most part negative, so has it been for Leonora. Paradoxically, Lorenzo Savino14 realizes that Betussi is taking advantage of a theoretical view of woman as “arbitra dei più alti destini and ispiratrice di arte e di cultura,” but fails to see that Betussi is actually depicting her as such and portraying an

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13 See Toffanin, p. 142.

unorthodox female voice. Completely intent on the mercenary charges often raised against *poligrafi*, he does not see the novelty in this:

Ma la novità del trattato consiste in ben altro. Educato alla scuola di Pietro Aretino, il nostro “bohémien” aveva fiutato che la donna, arbitra dei più alti destini e ispiratrice di arte e di cultura in quel secolo XVI, era una ottima e facile preda al proprio accattonaggio, il bel pezzo più “sfruttabile” della selvaggina del tempo suo, con le sue debolezze e i suoi ripicchi, con la sua passionale leggerezza e la sua suscettibilità artistica. (255-6)

Savino believes the novelty of Betussi’s dialogue to lie in his ability to take advantage of women’s weakness and “emotional frivolity” (“passionale leggerezza”). This analysis of Betussi’s motives (not to mention the cursory summary of the general character of the female population!) seems a bit cynical. Although the desire and need for patronage was certainly pressing, the passion with which Betussi describes virtuous women betrays the fact that his interest in women was more than merely mercenary.

Luigi Tonelli also faults Betussi with self-interest and sees the praise of woman as merely a vehicle for the advancement of his career: “*la Leonora* ha, per scopo principale, la lode interessata di molte signore d’Italia” (290). By tracing the female character in a number of dialogues, including Betussi’s, I wish to demonstrate the portrayal of such a figure to be the reflection of a cultural phenomenon and not merely a self-serving strategy used by one writer. While the Neoplatonic exaltation of woman is certainly not very strong in Ficino, where the beloved is more likely another male, courtly ideals and contemporary views of sexual roles effect a change in Ficino’s theory and the beloved comes to represent a woman. Petrarch’s Laura becomes the symbol of an ontologically superior woman — though one who is very much corporeal. The existence of documentary dialogues that depict intellectually acute women attests to women’s
participation in popular philosophical discussions. The Neoplatonic theory of women, therefore, did seem to have something of an influence on cultural norms, at least within elite circles. When one studies this figure diachronically in the various dialogues, noting the pattern that emerges, the argument that Betussi’s sole aim is opportunism becomes tenuous.

Furthermore, a glance at Betussi’s addendum to his translation of Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris* will support my argument that Betussi is proposing a model of virtue that pushes the limits of acceptable female behavior. Here Betussi provides brief passages in praise of fifty women, practically all of whom are contemporary figures. It is noteworthy that the praise is most often reserved for women of superior intellectual ability. This does not mean, however, that Betussi has discarded the female virtue of chastity; on the contrary he seems to take for granted that the women praised are modest and chaste. Yet this does not seem to be the primary yardstick for measuring a woman’s virtue. Only seven women out of the fifty are praised exclusively for their chastity. By contrast, sixteen women are exalted primarily for their intellectual gifts and another six are praised partly for their intelligence and partly for their ability as rulers. Six women are lauded as warriors and five are commended exclusively for their ability to rule, along with the above mentioned five who are praised as both rulers and educated women. The emphasis is clearly given to women who are learned. Among those who are singled out

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are the female humanists and the poets: Cassandra Fedele, Isotta Nogarola, Ginevra Nogarola, Veronica Gambara, and Vittoria Colonna.

The women praised are often described as a mysterious “oracolo.” This may imply a woman who is beyond her sex: virtuous not as an individual but as a woman who manages, almost miraculously, to exceed the limitations of her sex. Isabella di Napoli, Damigella Triultia, and Beatrice degli Obizzi are all praised as almost divine sources of wisdom. Despite Betussi’s description of some of these women as miraculous, their intellectual abilities are measured against men’s, not only against those of other women, a pool of normally much less-educated individuals. In fact, in proclaiming Ginevra Nogarola’s virtues, he states:

Nelle lettere non poco fu essercitata anzi molto, per cui fu charissima, & da eccellentissimi, & dottissimi huomini ne fu ammaestrata, di che in molte scienze diede del saper suo non piccolo saggio a i più degni spiriti di quel tempo, & di questo ne fanno fede le epistole sue scritte copiosamente, & piene di dottrina, & sentenze, il cui stile è tenuto grave, puro, & pieno di dolcezza, del quale non una donna, ma ogni studioso spirito se ne potrebbe gloriiare. (168v-169r, emphasis mine)

Beatrice Pia degli Obizzi, who is later praised by Betussi in II Cathaio, is described as the leader of a sort of informal academy. Her portrait is much like that of Leonora in the dialogue that bears her name. Betussi writes of Beatrice Pia degli Obizzi:

Continuamente s’è dilettata di persone honorate & virtuose, & ha cercato di have contezza di loro, altrettanto & più ella all’incontro è stata da ogni spirito degno amata, & riverita, ne fanno chiaro testimonio le molte carte, dove si vede il nome suo havele honorate, & dato non piccola si può dire, che dove ella sempre è stata, ivi si sia seduta l’Accademia d’i veri virtuosi & dotti. Imperoche ordinariamente nella casa sua dove di continuo i degni spiriti concorrono come a novo miracolo di virtù si dispensa il tempo in ragionamenti utili honesti, & dilettavoli. Et partendosi ella di Padova, o di Ferrara dove per lo più è la sua ferma stanza sempre parve che partisse quanta consolatione, & quanta gioia può gustare spirito virtuoso nelle attioni, che degnamente puote essercitare....Come ammaestrata di tutte le
Much like Leonora, Beatrice is for the most part sedentary in her “ferma stanza” (although in reality she has two permanent dwellings, in Padua and Ferrara), where virtuous men visit to find consolation and joy in useful and enjoyable conversations. She herself also delights in their company and seems to have cultivated her own informal academy.

Indeed, intellectual women are often depicted as interacting with learned men of the day. Another woman, Battista Duchessa d’Urbino is described similarly:

“amò grandemente gli huomini dotti, & letterati, desiderando sempre o in presenza, o da lontano haver cognitione, & pratica di quelli” (177r). This provides further evidence of women who created their own informal academies and networks of exchange, thus promoting their own education.

Betussi has shown himself to be particularly interested in this new female figure. According to the conventional criticism of the author, as cited above, this interest ostensibly stems from a desire to flatter and coax easily manipulated women into sponsoring the writer. Yet such adulation is clearly anathema to Betussi who repeatedly criticizes such court hangers-on. His criticism of court sycophants has been noted in the previous chapter on Betussi’s Raverta in which he describes the court in Rome as a place “dove la virtù non è stimata, i buoni costumi sono cacciati ed il ben vivere è odiato” (51). Furthermore, Betussi describes the transformation of character which must take place in those who plan to serve in such a court:

vi bisognerrebbe anco di sincero diventar simulatore, di buon tristo, di dotto ignorante e di gentil villano. E, volendovi mantenere in grazia del
clero, vi sarebbe di mistiero far tutto il contrario di ciò che si conviene a un virtuoso vostro pari. Imperocché da loro non sono amati né avuti cari altri che gli apportatori dei propri diletti, non s’appressano se non gli adulatori, non si stimano se non buffoni. (Raverta 51-52)

The same contempt for courtly adulators resonates in the addendum to De mulieribus claris in which women are often praised for their discernment and judgement of character. In fact, five women are praised for this ability to separate the wheat from the chaff in their courts. For example, describing Isabella Queen of Naples, he states:

Dalla corte sua eran cacciati gli huomini ignari, scelerati, & di cattivi costumi, ma prima ripresi, tentando ogni via s’era possibile di fargli cangiar vita, cosa che tutta in contrario si opra per lo più al presente nelle corti, dove non solamente non sono ripresi, né cacciati, ma hanno più honorato grado, & quanto più hanno per padre l’inganno, & per madre la tristitia, tanto più regnano appresso quegli, che punto non sono dissimili di natura alle operationi di questi tali. Ma la Illustré Isabella non solamente gli odiava, né curava, anzi ricercando quelli contrari a questi, dove sapeva che fusse un huomo virtuoso, non riguardando a spesa alcuna mandava per lui, lo accarezzava, & tratteneva, & gli faceva conoscere quanto lo havea grato. (171r)

Ricarda d’Este is another woman who is depicted as a woman of discernment in a sea of dissimulation:

Imperocché nella liberalità non hebbe pari, né era di natura come sono molti gran signori dal tempo nostro, i quali come che habbino nome di liberalissimì nondimeno, a chi dirittamente considera piu tosto se gli conviene il titolo di prodigalità, essendo avezzi per lo piu a premiare i buffoni, i parasiti, & simili altre persone di tal natura, & nelle corti, & alle tavole loro accarezzargli, che i poveri virtuosi: i quai per premio delle virtù o sono ricompensati di speranzevoli parole, o poco graditi, & havuti in pregio. (179v)

These two passages merit citation as evidence of Betussi’s bitter disdain for the “parasites” of the courts. It is of course ironic that Betussi himself has been charged with parasitic tendencies by the critics cited. Yet this view does not seem to square with the
animosity that he expresses toward these opportunists. Instead, if one judges his words at face value, Betussi’s respect for women capable of judging the intelligence and character of courtiers must be acknowledged. Undoubtedly, he considered himself to be one of the worthy few fighting for respect among the hoards of flatterers. It is therefore entirely possible that Betussi was in fact sincere in his praise of virtuous women — an alternative which seems never to have been considered seriously by most of the critics who have studied the polygrapher’s works. The behavioral models provided in his portraits of contemporary women support my contention that Betussi was indeed promoting and depicting intelligence as a new standard of female virtue, at least for the nobility. The final portrait of the addendum, that of Vittoria Colonna, seems to confirm this:

 imperoché nello uso il nome di principesse, & di gran Madonne, quanto maggior gloria accrescerebbono alla nobiltà del sangue, se non a gli essercitii feminili, a i quali le mecaniche, & plebee sono obligate attendesser? ma ne gli studi, nelle virtù, & nelle lettere s’essercitassaro? Quanto sarebbe maggior la dignità? & quanto piu durarebbono i nomi loro nella memoria de i secoli a venire... più sarebbono chiare et eterne per questi meriti, che non credono di risplendere per le corone, & diademi reali. Et senza mendicar gli honor, sarebbono riverite, et apprezzate come Vittoria Colonna degnissima, che havendo messa le penna d’intorno al nome suo, più di altra non scrivia ragione. (232r)

Proposing the cultivation of intellectual virtues over the traditional female tasks is consonant with his depiction of Leonora. Indeed, Betussi’s persistent interest in the female intellectual betrays a sincere attachment and not just a self-serving strategy.

Providing exempla of virtuous women was one method employed by defenders of the female sex. According to Constance Jordan:

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16 The only exception I have found is Carlo Teoli who describes Betussi as “apostolo del sesso domile... caldo e sincero.” See Teoli’s “Proemio,” to Raverta (Milano: Daelli, 1864), p. XIII.
Humanist exemplum history provided feminists with another kind of strategy. Against claims made in the name of natural or divine law, they could represent historical “facts” concerning virtuous women gathered from Plutarch’s *Mulierum virtutes* as well as Livy, Tacitus, and Valerius Maximus. Sixteenth-century writers regarded Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris* as such a source. (34)

Betussi, as the first person to translate Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris* into the vernacular, is clearly part of this movement. Even more striking is his extension from ‘exemplum history’ to contemporary exempla. By holding up contemporary women as exempla Betussi creates a sense that the virtuous woman is not an idealized and distant figure, but a living and breathing individual, and therefore much less elusive as a model of behavior.

In *Leonora*, Betussi uses the genre of dialogue to provide a dynamic model of female behavior. Here the Renaissance model of the intellectual woman is at its apex as Leonora is depicted as a master of the discussions. The erudite woman presented as an exemplum of virtue in the addendum to *De mulieribus claris* is modelled in a mimetic fashion in *Leonora*, thus providing a greater occasion for mirroring by the reader.

Furthermore, the praise of contemporary women dispersed throughout *Leonora* serves as evidence that the model provided is one which could be and indeed, according to the author, was actually attained by many Renaissance women.¹⁷ The imagery of the crossroads provides a model of self-education: by promoting and taking advantage of the frequent presence of learned men, women could form their own classrooms. As a behavioral model, it was highly attainable for noblewomen and therefore much more

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¹⁷ Besides Leonora Falletta, a total of sixteen contemporary women are praised in the dialogue.
relevant for the female readership than, for example, the chronologically and behaviorally
distant Roman models of chastity, such as Lucrezia or Portia. Thus Betussi’s *Leonora*
provides a strong example of the use of the genre of dialogue to reflect a cultural
phenomenon, the self-educated noblewoman, and simultaneously to present that
phenomenon as an ideal yet realizable behavioral model for the aristocratic woman of his
time.
Chapter Seven
The Sienese Dama di Veglia as Portrayed in Dialogues by Marc’Antonio Piccolomini and Girolamo Bargagli

“Senenses sunt aegregia forma, moribus laudatissimis, grueis etiam & sapientiores quam ausim desiderare. Petrarca, Dantis, hac huius farinae scriptoribus, maxime delectantur.”
(Ortensio Landi, Forcianae quaestiones, 11v-12r)

During the Cinquecento the women of Siena were renowned for their intelligence and wit. Testaments of their acuity come from a variety of sources, most notably from dialogues of the period that portray these women engaged in various games or in discussions with the members of the most prestigious academy in Siena, the Accademia degli Intronati. The tradition that flourished within the social circles of the Academy was the veglia, or soiree, in which the women played a vital social role. Thus the woman to be traced in this chapter can be called the dama di veglia. One writer who passed through Siena, the Venetian Celio Malespini,\(^1\) wrote:

le veglie che tuttavia si frequentano in questa antichissima città, sono stimate generalmente da tutti per un bellissimo piacere e trattenimento; massime quelle che si fanno fra gentiluomini e dame di valore, nelle quali quegli che non è che prudente nel considerare le difficili proposizioni, che vi si frappongono, sovente egli ne rimane con non poco rossore nel viso, chè in questi bellissimi giuochi vi si odono e dicono quesiti e propositi meravigliosi, et astuzie et trovati non meno dotti che sottilissimi: essendo in potere così degli uomini, come delle donne, di proporre quello che più gli piace; ma bisogna istar benissimo in cervello, essendo tutte quelle gentildonne rare e divine in simili invenzioni, le quali fanno stupire e meravigliare chiunque elevato in intelletto” (86v)

Malespini’s assertion that Sienese women played an active role in proposing debates and were astute disputants finds confirmation in two dialogues of the period: a short dialogue

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\(^1\) Celio Malespini, Ducento Novelle (Venetia: al Segno dell’Italia, 1609).
by Marc’Antonio Piccolomini and Girolamo Bargagli’s Dialogo de’ giuochi. The two authors of these works were prominent members of the Intronati Academy and their dialogues serve as testament to the cultural life that revolved around the famous academy.

The Intronati Academy was founded in 1525 by six Sienese noblemen. From its inception, the Academy was threatened by the political turmoil that surrounded it. During these periods of unrest the institution faltered and was subsequently resurrected.2 The two dialogues depict two important stages in the life of the Academy: Piccolomini’s dialogue3 presents a period in the early life of the Academy and Bargagii’s dialogue presents a portrait of the period in which the group was being resurrected, after the wars and subsequent installation of Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici.4 Seen as two rare glimpses into the cultural life of the period, the two dialogues, along with other pertinent documentation of the Academy, form a precious mosaic of the cultural environment of sixteenth-century Siena. Although they depict different stages in the life of the Academy, a link (as well as transition) between the two periods is also provided: the author of the first, Marc’Antonio Piccolomini, is the primary interlocutor in the second. Furthermore,

2 One important source on the Academy is Lolita Petracchi Costantini’s L’Accademia degli Intronati e una sua commedia (Siena: Editrice d’arte “la Diana”, 1928): 7-38. The author explains the fluctuations in the activity of the group: “essa ebbe tre risorgimenti: il primo dopo il 1532 nel tempo in cui fu in Siena governatore per conto della Spagna il Duca di Amalfi, il secondo qualche anno dopo la caduta della repubblica, e il terzo nel 1603...” (40).

3 The untitled dialogue, written in 1538, exists in manuscript form and had remained unpublished until recently. A valuable edition of it has been provided by Rita Belladonna who also gives an insightful introduction and analysis of the text. See Rita Belladonna, “Gli Intronati, le donne, Aonio Palæario e Agostino Museo in un dialogo inedito di Marcantonio Piccolomini, il Sodo Intronato (1538),” Bullettino senese di storia patria 99 (1994): 48-90. All of my citations are from this edition.

4 Bargagli’s dialogue was published in 1573, although most likely written in 1563, and depicts the social life of the academy around the year 1560. I cite from the modern edition: Girolamo Bargagli, Dialogo de’ giuochi, ed. Patrizia D’Incalci Ermini, intro. Riccardo Bruscagli (Siena: Accademia Senese degli Intronati, 1982).
in this second dialogue, Piccolomini is portrayed as the older Academy member who will pass on the illustrious traditions to a new generation of Intronati.

Marc’Antonio Piccolomini’s dialogue includes two female interlocutors who are engaged in a philosophical discussion, thus providing testament to the active role of women in the Academy. The stated aim of the dialogue is to defend women from those who claim that the female sex is not capable of reasoning on serious subjects:

ch’io spero con questo esempio et autorità difender quello che con ragioni ho difeso contra molti fino a ora; i quali, come ciechi del lume dell’intelletto, si pensan che le donne non possan mai né discorrere profondamente, né parlar o intender cosa che divulgatissima non sia; e da questa falsa opinione tirati, hanno spesse volte ripresi quelli che nei libri loro hanno interposto donne a parlar di filosofia od altra scienza; in che quanto s’ingannino forse ch’in un tale esempio lo conosceranno. (59)

The author intends to disabuse those foolish people who see women as incapable of philosophical reasoning and who have criticized authors who depict women in such a way. As has been noted in the chapter on Giuseppe Betussi’s Raverta, Pietro Bembo provided a caveat for having introduced such an intellectual woman in his dialogues, and therefore provides evidence that the depiction of such a character did indeed receive criticism in Italy. Instead in Piccolomini’s dialogue, the presentation of an intellectually proficient woman is defended. Moreover, authors “che nei libri loro hanno interposto donne a parlar di filosofia” are also defended. On this point, one particular author is cited:

Io vi sto a odire con maraviglia, così dottamente et da buona filosofa ragionate; et vorrei certo che ci fussi a sentirvi alcuni di questi maligni, invidiosi et nemici de le donne, che ardiscan di dire che è difficile a credere che le donne possin parlar di filosofia o di cosa buona; et alcuni hanno infin detto, che quell’autore, il qual compose el Filone, è degno di qualche gastigo, perché introduce in quel dialogo a parlare una donna di cose sottilissime e cupe. (73)
The author of the “Filone” is of course Leone Ebreo, whose *Dialoghi d’amore* were often referred to by the name of the male interlocutor, Filone. The female interlocutor, Sofia, was a controversial figure because of the wisdom attributed to her, specifically for her knowledge of philosophy and sciences. I have argued in the previous chapters that Sofia was the interlocutor who served as a model in later dialogues featuring an intellectually active woman. In Piccolomini’s dialogue it is even more clearly so: Madonna Laudomia claims that Madonna Girolama’s intellectual capacity would prove to any of these naysayers that Leone Ebreo was not to be faulted because he was merely depicting an intelligent woman in a faithful manner. Thus the inter-textual aspect of many Renaissance dialogues is here taken to another level: while Leone Ebreo’s Sofia served as a model for the women depicted in Piccolomini’s dialogue, that model was also defended.

The argument in favor of nature’s aim to produce an intelligent woman, and the characterization of Girolama as an intellectually able interlocutor, served to reinforce the legitimacy of presenting such a figure.

Further evidence of the influence of the *Dialoghi d’amore* within the female faction of the Intronati Academy is found in Alessandro Piccolomini’s *De la institutione di tutta la vita de l’huomo*. In the dedication to Laudomia Forteguerri, Piccolomini reveals Forteguerri’s interest in Leone Ebreo’s dialogue:

> Di quanto poi per lettere di miei amici, intendo che desiderareste, che si manifestasse il Quarto Dialogo di Filone e di Sofia, nel qual trattar si debba de gli effetti d’amor, essendosi per quelli innanzi, de la natura sua, del nascimento e comunità ragionato. e che se pur non si trovasse, non vi

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5 Alessandro Piccolomini. *De la institutione di tutta la vita de l’huomo nato nobile e in città libera.* Venetiis: Hieronymum Scotum, 1545.
Forte requested that Piccolomini write a work which would correspond to the fourth book of Leone Ebreo’s *Dialoghi d’amore*, thought to have been missing. This not only demonstrates her knowledge of the book, but an eagerness to read more works of a similar nature. Furthermore, we have seen in previous chapters that Tullia d’Aragona and Francesca Baffa were also shown to have an understanding and interest in the dialogue.

It seems that a common denominator for sixteenth-century women involved in intellectual exchanges with men seems to be knowledge, and perhaps emulation, of the exchanges depicted in the *Dialoghi d’amore*.

Marc’ Antonio Piccolomini’s dialogue also reveals that his elder relative, Alessandro, was known within Sienese circles for a speech in defense of women he delivered at the Intronati Academy. Discussing the many learned Sienese women who by their discussions alone could convince the misogynists of women’s dignity, Madonna Laudomia states: “Uno degl’Intronati sentii l’anno passato, che con molte et vere ragioni parlò in una veglia in favor de le donne, intorno a questa materia” (74). As Belladonna has noted, this is a reference to Alessandro Piccolomini’s *Orazione in lode delle donne*. According to Florindo Cerreta another reference to the same oration, this time in

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6 This passage is cited in longer form by Pozzi in *Lingua, cultura, società*, p. 68, n. 19.

7 Piccolomini, Alessandro. *Orazione in lode delle donne detta in Siena agli Intronati* (Venezia: Giolito, 1545). Also see Belladonna, p. 74, n. 28.
Alessandro Piccolomini’s *Raffaella*, indicates that the oration was presented to the Intronati, in the presence of women, by or before 1538.8

Piccolomini’s oration provides an example of how Neoplatonic theory was used specifically to defend women against traditional misogynist claims.9 His defense, however, emphasizes the role of women as sources of inspiration for men and is completely male-centric in its perspective. Women may indeed have been present at the lecture and undoubtedly, according to the references in the *Raffaella* and in Marc’Antonio Piccolomini’s dialogue, were well aware of its content. Although the oration itself is rather generic and fails to recognize the existence of a woman outside of the role of inspirer of men, the fact that women were directly addressed by Piccolomini and likely present at the oration is noteworthy. Their presence at such lectures perhaps contributed to the creation of an atmosphere in which a virtuous woman was not only theorized with the help of the Neoplatonic lexicon, but also played a part within the group expounding the theory. This passage from speculative object to subject is demonstrated in Marc’Antonio Piccolomini’s dialogue.

The main argument of the text, as stated on the title page, is “Se è da credersi che una donna compiuta in tutte quelle parti cosi del corpo come dell’animo, che si possino

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8 See Florindo Cerreta’s *Alessandro Piccolomini letterato e filosofo senese del Cinquecento* (Siena, Accademia Senese degli Intronati, 1960). This study provides the most comprehensive source to date on the life or Piccolomini. Regarding the *Orazione in lode delle donne*, see p. 16.

desiderare, sia prodotta da la natura a sorte o pensatamente” (59). The conclusion is that
the perfect woman, exemplified by a contemporary of the two principal interlocutors,
Frasia Marza, was formed not by chance but by nature’s design. What Girolama means
by chance, though, is not a haphazard mutation, but a forced deviation from the end
product intended by nature. In explaining how nature produces for a specific end, she
states:

Quanto poi a quel che dite de le piante e degli animali, nei quali le parti si
producano a caso per la necessità de la materia, vi rispondo che a questo
principalmente potete veder quanto v’inganniate, che’ allor diciamo nascer
mostri di natura quando fuor di quel che si conviene alla spezie propria di
quella cosa che è prodotta nasce o si produce alcuna cosa nel mondo, come
si vede nelle piante e negli animali più chiaramente che in altro, per esserci
più note le convenienzie che si deveno alle spezie loro e agli animali
ancora molto più che alle piante; i quali mostri non sono altro se non errori
o peccati de la natura, la quale impedita da molte cause che la possono
impedire, non può ottenere il fin suo disegnato. (67-8)

The author is here referring to the Aristotelian question of the perfection of a being
according to Nature’s design. The Aristotelian theory, later elaborated by Aquinas, was
used to argue that womanhood was the defective result of a process of formation that had
failed to reach its full and proper state of development.10 The dialogue therefore enters
into the popular discussion of the superiority or inferiority of women, that is, the
questione della donna.

Girolama proposes a discussion of these popular philosophical concepts, yet turns
them upside down: nature itself aims to produce an intelligent woman. All women,
therefore, if they were not confronted with impediments arising from involvement in the

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10 Ian MacLean has traced the influence that these theories continued to exert in the Renaissance. See especially chapter two of McLean’s book.
material realm, where instability reigns, not only represent nature’s design, but would be as perfectly created (intelligent and eloquent) as Madonna Frasia. Rather than refute directly the Aristotelian creation theory of woman -- by proving that all women were intended as such and not a mere accident of nature -- Girolama uses the example of Frasia who irrefutably represents the ideal: beautiful in both spirit and body, her primary virtue is that she is able to discuss profound topics. The ideal woman is in existence, according to the argument, and, far from being a mere fluke of nature, she represents the fullest realization of nature’s intent. While it is admitted that women such as Frasia are rare, the author demonstrates that Girolama herself is just as capable as Frasia of discussing philosophical themes, thus implying that she may not be as rare as the modest characters claim.

Furthermore, the reason for the scarcity of such women lies in the impediments to her development. These, according to Girolama, are physical limitations, astrological indisposition, and education. The first two are not generally within human control. The third, of course, is completely dependent upon one’s formative environment. This third impediment is described as: “buoni e mali esempi, dati da chi regge questi tali negli anni de la loro giovinezza” (76). If women are not generally as wise and virtuous as Marsi, it is because they do not have teachers whom they can emulate. Not formal education, but models of behavior (“buoni e mali esempi”) are considered to be the most important aspect of a woman’s formation. This dialogue, like the others studied in this

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11 See Belladonna, p. 54.
work, serves to provide such models for women and, therefore, seems to offer a
prescription for the obstacle posed by a deficient education.

According to the Neoplatonic backdrop of all of the dialogues, virtuous women
are to be contemplated as images reflecting divine beauty and wisdom. This is
specifically stated in Marc’Antonio Piccolomini’s dialogue, but here there is a shifting of
the roles. Speaking to Laudomia, Girolama states:

voi (poniamo questo caso) avete continuamente desiderio di contemplare
presente la bellezza di Madonna Frasia Marzi, come ciascuno altro che la
conosce; ora, se con questa intenzione voi andasse a messa in san
Domenico o in san Giglio et la vedesse, questa vostra azione d’andarvi arà
ottenuto il fine che vio intendevate, cioè di contemplarla. (77)

Laudomia is portrayed as breaking out of the traditional female role and taking on the
male one. Whereas the man is most often depicted as the active “lover,” contemplating
the divine beauty of a woman, here Laudomia is admitted to be part of this intellectual /
spiritual activity. This is of course completely consonant with the aim of the dialogue
which, as the reader is reminded several times, is to refute those people of “poco
giudizio,” the “biasimatori maligni,” who claim that an intelligent woman comes into
being only by mere chance (74, 89).

This is quite different from Alessandro Piccolomini’s Orazione in lode delle
donne, in which women are depicted in the conventional sense as objects of inspiration.
Yet the Sienese women undoubtedly constituted an integral presence within the cultural
milieu in which Piccolomini’s oration took place, participating in discussions and in the
veglie, as will be shown below.12 Indeed, a sharp intellect was a pre-requisite for

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12 The Sienese women were also known as poets. For an overview of their output, see Marie-Francoise
Piejus, “Le poetesses Siennoises entre le jeu et l’écriture,” in Les femmes écrivains en Italie au Moyen Age
participation. One can perhaps conjecture that involvement in discussions, which implied taking on an active role as contemplative individual, perhaps quite naturally led the women to project themselves into the active role of the lover / contemplator. Marc’Antonio Piccolomini’s dialogue is a testament to this.

The argument against the theory that woman is an imperfect being is, however, far from being a philosophically sophisticated refutation of Thomistic eugenics. In place of philosophical argument, concrete proof is provided through the virtuous Marsi who, by her very existence, disproves such a theory. Furthermore, the framework of the dialogue, by means of the identification of the interlocutors as contemporary Sienese women, serves as evidence that this woman is perhaps not so rare as the discussions imply: the two interlocutors are also intellectually proficient and disprove the popular notion that women were incapable of intellectual investigation.

This contrasts with the Aristotelian notion that women were defective beings, and thus intellectually inferior. In Il libro del cortegiano this idea is reflected in the arguments of the interlocutor Pietro Bembo who is depicted in book IV as a sort of master of Neoplatonic philosophy. Even in this supposed Neoplatonic state of rapture, however, Bembo’s arguments are informed by Aristotelian biology. Bembo advised the male lover thus:

in lei ami non meno la bellezza dell’animo che quella del corpo; però tenga cura di non lassarla incorrere in errore alcuno, ma con le ammonizioni e boni ricordi cerchi sempre d’indurla alla modestia, alla

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*et à la Renaissance* (Aix-en-Provence: l'Université de Provence, 1994): 312-32. Piejus also notes the importance of the unique Sienese cultural environment on the poetic composition of the women: “Elle [Virginia Martin] a échappé au cadre un peu étroit de sa ville natale, où les femmes semblent avoir bénéficié d’une intégration à la vie culturelle qui a conditionné le type de poésie pratiqué par elles, et s’est avérée à la fois productrice et réductrice.” See p. 328.
temperanza, alla vera onestà e faccia che in lei non abbian mai loco se non pensieri candidi ed alieni da ogni bruttezza di vici; e così seminando virtù nel giardin di quel bell’animo, raccorrà ancora frutti di bellissimi costumi. (340-1)

Paradoxically, the lover is advised to love the beauty of her soul, but this beauty is dependent on the virtue which is planted there by the lover. According to Aristotle, the male provided the active force in procreation and the woman provided the passive one. This concept was then metonymically transferred to include other spheres of humanity: just as he had provided the active seed in begetting children, the man was also responsible for the active seed which would flower in the woman’s soul.13

In Marc’ Antonio Piccolomini’s dialogue, Aristotelian biology is implicitly refuted. A woman, Laudomia Forteguerri,14 is depicted as the active agent capable of contemplating divine beauty in another woman. Yet the contemplative activity, as it is permitted and even promoted by the men of the Intronati Academy, is naturally dependent upon these same men. This dependence, however, is perhaps presented more as a practical matter than as a matter of natural philosophy. Belladonna explains that “il Piccolomini mette in evidenza l’importanza dell’Accademia come fonte di sapere e di perfezione morale, da cui dipende lo sviluppo intellettuale dell’elite senese e, in particolar modo, delle donne” (52). In fact, there are several references in the dialogue to the

13 Constance Jordan has traces a similar notion in the Institutio matrimonii christiani (1526) in which Erasmus “likens the products of a woman’s mind, if not shaped by masculine instruction, to the menses. Only if her thoughts are ‘fertilized’ by the wit of her husband can she bring forth sound and well-formed ‘children’.” See p. 63.

women’s indebtedness to the Intronati members for their knowledge. For example, Girolama states:

et non pensate che quel ch’io vi dirò sia trovato da me stessa e letto, perché voi sapete, Mad. Laodomia, ch’io non ho studiato; ma et io di questo vi ragionarò secondo che alcuna volta ho sentito parlare e disputare ad alcuni che sanno et a due degl’Intronati particolarmente pochi di sono intorno a materia assai simile a questa nostra d’oggi. (70)

While these references to the Intronati members can very reasonably be considered a public relations strategy by Piccolomini who is engaged in promoting his Academy, it is also significant that the Academy is presented as caring for the education of the local women.  

The Academy members, especially Alessandro Piccolomini, were known for their translations of classical texts. This activity reflects the same desire to disperse knowledge to traditionally excluded groups. Belladonna eloquently links the presence of female interlocutors in the dialogue to the wider cultural movement promoting the vernacular:

Il fatto che i tre personaggi appartengano sia al sesso femminile, sia all’elitesociale e culturalesense del tempo, è indizio dell’influsso che ebbero gli Intronati nell’avanzata del volgare, col risultatante allargamento della cultura a beneficio di chi, come le donne, non era dotato di una solida formazione classica. Come è noto, nel primo Cinquecento Siena si trovò all’avanguardia del movimento per lo sviluppo della cultura volgare, movimento che ebbe tra i suoi risultati quello della formazione di numerose accademie letterarie. (50)

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Clearly, Alessandro Piccolomini’s work in translating classical and scientific texts into the vernacular is part of this movement. Besides his dedication of *De la institutione di tutta la vita* mentioned above, he dedicated other works to Laudomia, including his *De le stelle fisse:*  

Mi è per infìn quà venuto a l’oreccie (Nobilissima e Bellissima Madonna LAUDOMIA) che trovandosi in questa Primavera passata, la S.V. un giorno con altre nobilissime Donne in un giardino à solazzo, & essendo tutte insieme, ne le più calde hore del giorno, quasi in un Coro celeste & angelico ridutte sotto un Lauro in corona; bellissimi & molto dotti e filosofici ragionamenti accader trà voi. Dove doppo che vari et ingegnosi discorsi furon’avuti hor dà questa hor dà quella, cadute finalmente in proposito dele cose Divine, come di cose simili à voi, dopoi che per gran pesa si fu ragionato e dela bellezza e splendore dei corpi celesti, e del maraviglioso ordine, che senza un minimo fallo tra lor del continuo s’osserva, e d’altre cose simili à queste; intesi che la S.V. disse che olra’l dispiacer ch’ella hà sempre havuto, che per esser nata Donna, non le sia stato conceduto di poter donare gli anni suoi, à qualche pregiato studio & honorata Scientia, per questo ciò le dolea più che per altro, ch’ella non havea possuto pascer l’animo suo, de le cose d’Astrologia, à le quali la si sentia più che ad altro inclinata. (emphasis is mine, unnumbered pages, corresponds to lv)  

The incentive for the translation of the astrological treatise, according to the author, is Forteguerri’s desire to enter into the female-restricted sphere of the sciences. Piccolomini obligingly helps her to fulfill her wish. This passage is remarkable, not only because of the insight into Forteguerri it provides, but also for the preceding section describing a
gathering of women devoted to philosophical discussions. This depiction of a class of elite and philosophically-interested women provides further testimony to the figure of the Sienese intellectual noblewoman portrayed in Marc’Antonio Piccolomini’s documentary dialogue.

In fact, because of his efforts to provide access to philosophical and scientific texts to a wider audience, Cerrani has claimed that Piccolomini “non fu innovatore della sostanza, quanto della forma” (VIII). This may be valid on a certain level, but one must also recognize that the shift in the target audience does implicitly effect a shift in the theories being expounded: they are presented as appropriate and practical topics for the new group of readers comprised of women.

The promotion of the vernacular not only as a literary language, but also as a scientific language, provides a clue to the position of women within the intellectual circles of Siena: the dedication of books on science to women reveals the author’s perception that, firstly, women were eager to learn about the sciences and, secondly, that they were intellectually prepared for such study. The promotion of such study among women was certainly unusual and contrasts sharply with most recommendations for the education of women in the Renaissance. A century earlier Leonardo Bruni, while promoting an expanded education for women, strictly excluded the study of rhetoric from the female student’s curriculum because a woman “mai vedrà il foro” (261). The natural sciences were also discarded by Bruni as inappropriate fields of study for a woman.

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Within the Sienese Academy both of these rules were broken. Science was proposed as appropriate for women through Piccolomini’s translations and dedications and oratory was implicitly encouraged as women were involved in informal discussions and, on the rare occasion, invited to address the Academy.

Girolamo Bargagli’s *Dialogo de’ giuochi* was undoubtedly the better known of the two dialogues. The occasion for the narration is the re-opening of the Intronati Academy and the narrator’s declared motive is to pass on the traditions of that Academy that were abruptly interrupted by the outbreak of war. Recalling the nostalgic perspective of *Il libro del corteginiano*, Bargagli presents the work as “quasi un modello dell’usanza del nostro festeggiare, non pure a quei forestieri che non l’hanno veduta mai, ma alli nostri medesimi ancora, che sono stati serbati alla età più tarda” (46). After a period of political upheaval and the consequent decay of social customs, Bargagli’s dialogue bequeaths to the young Sienese their cultural inheritance, the rites and traditions that he reintroduces in order to promote greater social cohesion. The Academy, therefore, through the codification of social rites in dialogue form, can be seen as a source of social reconstruction.

Girolamo’s brother, Scipione Bargagli, wrote an oration in praise of the Academy in which he explains the mandate of its founding members:

> deliberaron costor, di dovere in forma di saldo, e nobile edifìtio, fondare, ed alzare una Congregazione di persone; nella quale ponendo da parte tutti li spinosi, i mordaci, e i dannosi pensieri: e da se tutte scacciando le noiose leggiere vane, e soverchie mondane cure, havessono solo, e fermo

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19 See Maria Ludovica Lenzi, *Donne e Madonne*, p. 78.


The raison d’être of the Academy is twofold: nourishment of the intellect and an escape from mundane concerns. While formal studies, including lectures and the study of classical and contemporary authors, were important, what seems to be evoked most often in the various writings about the Academy is the importance of community and companionship among men interested in the study of liberal arts. The two primary activities that reflect the desire to solidify an erudite circle within the bonds of social and intellectual diversion are: 1. The composition and staging of plays\footnote{For a discussion of the rich theatrical tradition of the Intronati Academy, see Daniele Seragnoli, \textit{Il teatro a Siena nel Cinquecento: \textquotedblleft progetto\textquotedblright \ e \textquotedblleft modello\textquotedblright \ drammaturgico nell’Accademia degli Intronati} (Roma: Bulzoni, 1980).}; and 2. the tradition of the \textit{veglia}.

Scipione Bargagli explains in another work, \textit{Delle lodi dell’academie},\footnote{Scipione Bargagli, \textit{Delle lodi dell’academie} (Fiorenza: Luca Bonetti, 1569).} that men are naturally drawn to sociability:

\begin{quote}
alla gioconda, et honesta conversevol vita; perciòché più grati, et più sicuri divengano gli affari, et le conditioni di quelli: medesimamente coloro, che per questo spazio campo delle lettere s’incommenano, quanto più vanno i pensieri de gli studi loro l’un con l’altro comunicando; et quanto più intorno ad essi con varie, et salde ragioni cupamente discorrendo; tanto più in quelle si confermano; et tanto più certi di quelli, et più risoluti devengono. Et tutto questo a chi fa dubbio alcuno, che dalle academiche congregazioni haver non si possa perfettamente? dove nel medesimo tempo oltre alla rara dolcezza, che ha nella honestissima famigliarità, et dimestichessa de letterati; senton gli animi gentili incomparabil sodisfattione del conseguire il fine de lor maggiori, et più degni desiderii; quali son quelli all’huomo cotanto naturali, et cotanto belli del sapere. (16r)
\end{quote}
The inspiration and model for this fraternity of scholars is undoubtedly Plato's Academy. Scipione also describes the decoration of the Intronati Academy, noting a series of painted lunettes which frame the room. The first of these, placed closest to the entrance, is a painting which depicts Plato's academy:

nella prima delle Lunette... appariva in molto gentil disegno rappresentata l'antichissima, e celebratissima Città d'Atene; e 'l nobile bosco, od amena Selva, là ove s'afferma, nella forma disopra mostrata, haver havuto suo principio quella parte, a cui venne primieramente attribuito il nome, e chiamata fu Accademia. In mezo al quale ramuto, e fonzuto luogo, si discerneva, in degno abito filosofico, figurato il gran Platone. (419)

Rather than being devoted to the study of Platonic thought, as one might suspect, the members of the Intronati Academy seem more interested in recreating the convivial atmosphere of that academy. Following the Platonic model, friendship is seen as the necessary corollary to learning. What is stressed, therefore, is the social aspect of the academy. Love is also held in high esteem, not following the model of Platonic homosexual love, but adhering more closely to the tradition of courtly love. Therefore, the role of women is necessary in completing the ideal social setting.

Imbued with Neoplatonic themes and reflecting the influence of Plato’s Symposium, the Academy described by Scipione sees women as reflections of divine love and beauty:

Si sarà da voi udito ancora, esser non leggiera cagione, ò breve occasione di piantare, e d'allignare Accademie la bellezza, e l'eccellenza dello spirito delle nobili Donne: si come della Platonica tanto famosa, rendono ampia testimonianza, una Aspasia, ed una Diotima specialmente, ed queste ed altre Donne simiglianti, specchio esser possono, e norma del nobilissimo humano amore. (469)
Siena is considered to be particularly fertile ground for the building of a Platonic academy, since the women there are renowned for their beauty and intelligence.

The dialogues reveal the importance of the local women as sources of inspiration for the academy members. In the *Dialogo de’ giuochi*, the interlocutor Marc’Antonio Piccolomini, known by his academic name, *Il Sodo*, recommends that the young Intronati secure two things: “l’una è la protezione di chi governa, l’altra il favore delle donne più principali. Perciò che questi due favori sono la pioggia e il sole de’ vostri ingegni, senza cui, se bene per loro stessi fossero fertilissimi, non produrrebbon però mai frutto di momento” (53). This description is consonant with the role most often allotted to women since the very beginning of the Italian literary tradition: women had served as objects of contemplation, conduits through which male writers could develop and express their spiritual, philosophical and poetic insight. What distinguishes the sixteenth-century dialogues analyzed in the present work is that the act itself of dialogue and social exchange, when extended to include women in a meaningful way, deflects the male-centricity of the speculation and transforms the women depicted from static object or icon into a more dynamic subject.

Indeed, Bargagli’s prescription for gaining the support of the local women involves engaging them in group discourse, thus promoting a more dynamic role for the women. He advises the young Intronati to do as follows:

> far ogni cosa per grandezza e per gloria loro, e quando il conversar e il proceder vostro si vedrà pieno di modestia, d’onestà e di rispetto... E sopra tutto quando vi’ingegnerete nelle feste, ne’ conviti e nelle vegghie di dar

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23 See Marina Zancan, pp. 7-31.
loro qualche gentil sollazzo con bei giuochi, con varie invenzioni e con nuovi intrattenimenti. (53)

Bargagli’s dialogue does not feature a female interlocutor, and therefore, would not seem to meet accurately the criteria that I have chosen for tracing the figure of the female intellectual. Yet the dialogue was written as “quasi un modello” (46) of the Sienese way of having fun: it presents “una gran parte de’ più piacevoli e de’ più ingegnosi giuochi che nelle nostre vegghie io abbia veduto farsi” (46). While it does not present a female voice, it does offer insight into the tradition that permitted, even at times encouraged, the presence of a female voice. One hundred and thirty games are presented, along with definitions and categorizations. The theme of love is a common thread that runs through the collection of games, although it is not a factor in every game. The presence of women is required. The “veglia” — literally “stay-up” — is a form of social recreation: for the men it constitutes a respite from the more serious studies that take place in the daytime. Il Sodo describes the birth of the tradition:

Tal che ora uscendo dello studio e dell’Accademia stanchi [members of the academy], or da’ negozi infastiditi partendosi, se ne andavano, come a tranquillo porto, ad intratenersi con qualcuna di loro [the women]...Ma perché spesso più di quelle donne insieme si ritrovavano, né volevan dare tutto il giorno o tutta la notte al danzare, come in alcuni luoghi si costuma, e dilettandosi di vedere anzi la destrezza dell’ingegno, che la leggiadria della persona; né anche piacendo loro il giuocare a carte, come cosa che tenga sospeso e conturbato l’animo più tosto che lo rallegrì e lo ricrei, di qui è, che oltre a’ ragionamenti o oltre alle rime, sempre a gl’Intronati conveniva pensare a qualche nuovo e dilettvol modo d’intertenerle. Onde a trovar belle e varie invenzioni di giuochi cominciarono.” (58)

One game in particular seems to serve as the prototype of all of these games: il giuoco della Cicirlanda. Il Sodo explains the etymological root of the word: “ghirlanda viene dal verbo antico non usato ghirlare, che significa girare, onde ghirlanda si chiama
quel tessimento di fiori fatto in giro, e ghirlanda ancora quella brigata che si sta in cerchio come alle nostre veggie s'usa di stare” (60-1). The rules are that the group must sit in a circle with one person acting as the initial commander of the game. This leader would call out “O Ghirlanda!” and those sitting in the circle would respond “Che comanda!” They would then take turns issuing commands for games, the role of new commander being assigned to the person who best performed in the previous game. The passage of power from one commander to the next was symbolized by the passing of a mock scepter, a ladle. The practice is described as follows: “...come si è posto fine ad un giuoco, col dare quasi come scettro la mestola ad un altro, del nuovo giuoco re si costituisce” (66). This game, explained at the outset of the discussions (game 3), is called “la reina di tutti gli altri giuochi” (66). As such, it seems to provide the format for most of the game-playing described in the dialogue. The content of the game, that is, what is actually commanded by the monarch, is not described. Thus this game is presented as a sort of skeletal model for the rest of the games in which the various commands will be provided.

A quick wit was the predominant faculty required in the games. Although the women were allowed to participate fully, Il Sodo did deem it necessary to supply the young Intronati with some games that would “affaticar poco le donne” (87-90), recalling Emilia Pio’s request in Il libro del cortegiano. Implicit in this advice is the fact that the women were less culturally prepared for games of wit that included improvisation and impromptu poetic composition. Revealingly, Il Sodo describes a situation in which the ineptitude of the women could pose a problem for the men, namely, the arrival of important visitors, such as the Marchese of Vasto or the Prince of Salerno, whom the
Intronati members were very eager to impress (91). In such cases, it seems, the Introni
ti convened with the noblewomen prior to the veglia in order to devise interesting games
that were to be performed with the illustrious guests. Il Sodo describes the process and
result of their preparation:

Desiring to make a favorable impression on the powerful visitors in Siena, the men
undertook a sort of quick training of the women. Their coaching — while far from being a
disinterested, magnanimous effort to help the women to compensate for their relative lack
of education — did produce positive results: the women learned the improvisational verbal
skills needed for successful participation.

While the activities seem to include a very real consequence for the women —
light training in oratory, poetry, and philosophy — one must not forget that these activities
take place within the realm of play and appear to assume a surreal aspect. In fact,
Girolamo Bargagli’s dialogue takes on the Boccaccian element of the retreat from a world
of social decay. This is even more clearly the case in another work by Girolamo’s

24 Regarding Frasia Venturi, see p. 52, n. 79 of chapter one.
brother, Scipione, entitled *I trattenimenti.* In this work, the role of games as a temporary escape from reality— as the momentary creation of a separate space left undisturbed by the occupation of the city— is quite clear. Games, therefore, also imply a sort of carnivalesque air, a world turned upside down, in which monarchs command with wooden spoons and women rule over men. It is within this separate and fictional space that the female capacity to engage men in debate is presented.

In this way, the game-playing in the dialogue is similar to theater: both take place in a carefully delineated realm (on the stage / within the circle) and both mirror and often mimic real life. According to Seragnoli the Academy itself constitutes a separate environment, "in cui le stesse concezioni di tempo e di spazio si individuano in una dimensione eccezionale e alternativa a quella della Città" (196). The academy itself, it seems, represented a detached and isolated space where members would take on parodic Academic names, such as *Il Sodo* and *Lo Stordito,* and, as Scipione Bargagli explained, escape their mundane concerns. Thus the Academy provided an opportunity for the Sienese men and women to project themselves into a ludic space with a separate and alternative set of rules.

Despite the carnivalesque air of the *veglia,* women were not restricted to the sphere of game-playing, but often took part in the more serious business of the Academy. In fact, women were known to address the Academy on several occasions. Scipione Bargagli cites two women who were considered official members:

Ma passarommi forse in dimenticanza, o con silentio involtò io, che pur in quel tempo venne rinvigorito il numero di questa (per modo di dire)

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accademica greggia, di persone femminili si per natura, ma per senso bene, e per iscienza virili? Di queste fu Creusa Florida Contessa di Pratta in Venetia, di versi, e di prose componitora in Greco, in Latino, e in Toscano idioma. di cui caduto m’è ora di mente il nome Intronatico; come sono alcune dell’altre tali a voi ben note, in degne arti e nobili professioni sentite per altri secoli, e ne’ presenti ancora. Né d’altra qui intendere non voglio io, che di Laura Battiferra Urbinata, meritevole, come bramosa assai d’esser ammoverata fra’ seguaci della pastorale scorta Intronatica nella guisa che mostrò col presentare all’Accademia non poche delle nobili sue Rime, essendo col soprannome d’Aggratiata fra gl’altri accolta e descritta. La quale poco stante raffermò il merito, participando quelle a tutti in pubblica forma. (Descrittione 533)

On another occasion a woman named Vincenza Armani was known to have addressed the Intronati Academy. In the Orazione in morte della divina signora

Vincenza Armani, Adriano Valerini describes Armani as a well-known orator who travelled to various cities in Italy, including Siena, reciting dramatic pieces (some of her own composition) and engaging in lectures and debates. He also implies that she addressed the Intronati Academy in Siena:

questa Signora...in tre stili differenti in Comedia, in Tragedia, in Pastorale, osservando il decoro di ciascuno tanto drittamente che l’Academia de gli Intronati di Siena in cui fiorisse il culto delle Scene, disse più volte che questa Donna riusciva meglio assai parlando improviso, che i più consummati Autori scrivendo pensatamente, nella Comedia era giocosa secondo le occasioni, mordace nel riprendere i vittii, arguta nelle subite risposte mirabile ne i bei discorsi d’amore, e non era alcuno che le potesse stare al paro ogn’un fuggiva di venir con lei a disputa. (147)

This provides further evidence that the Sienese Academy was, at least to the extent of hosting women speakers, amenable to an untraditional female presence in the public domain. The galvanizing force which produced an environment that allowed for a female

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In the mid-Cinquecento, the intellectual atmosphere which was a fundamental part of the founding of the Academy. In fact, the female intellectual in the mid-Cinquecento was most often described in Neoplatonic terms. Not surprisingly, Valerini's description of Armani is wholly Neoplatonic:

While a Neoplatonic exaltation of women was one of the primary factors which created an environment more open to women artists and intellectuals, the same theories also served to rationalize the existence of such an unorthodox woman. Women who demonstrated more "manly" virtues, such as intelligence and eloquence, were understood within the philosophical scheme which exalted them to the state of a simulacrum of divine beauty and wisdom. Yet this same system served to limit sharply their sphere of activity: by defining this woman as the "beloved" whose virtue is to be discerned by the lover, she is implicitly dependent upon the man who is theoretically capable of recognizing this virtue. The beloved ceases to exist as such when she is no longer loved. Notwithstanding this philosophical bind present wherever a woman was praised in Neoplatonic terms, the intellectual woman was at times given a platform and an esteemed place within the Sienese Academy.

This openness to the presence of women that one finds in the Intronati Academy may have spread to the other Sienese academies that emulated their illustrious predecessor. In a collection of documents on these minor academies, one finds...
information on a number of women who were involved with the Accesi Academy. 

Fifteen women are listed with their various pseudonyms, symbols, and mottoes — the signs that indicated membership in an academy. Although it is difficult to gauge the extent to which these women actually participated in the academies, it is noteworthy that they were dubbed as members with names such as “la Saggia,” “l’Intrepida,” and “la Maestosa.” Women were allowed an active, if limited, role; they were always present at the veglie, and permitted on occasion to take part in the more serious business of the academies. It is interesting to note that Sienese women formed the first women’s academy in the early seventeenth century, the Accademia delle Assicurate. The remarkably receptive environment that the Sienese women enjoyed in the academies was quite likely a factor that encouraged them to found their own academy.

The Sienese dialogues can certainly be considered a reflection of the “feminism” of the period which many scholars have mentioned briefly. Yet one must not forget that female involvement in intellectual life was sharply limited to the few elite groups studied (courtesans, courtly circles, Sienese academies). The theme that is present in all of these realms, and that is the principal element of the Sienese veglia, is game-playing.

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27 See G. Tommasi, Memorie delle Accademie di Siena, ms. Y.II.23, Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati di Siena. For this reference, and others, I am indebted to the meticulous research of Antonio Marenduzzo. See his Veglie e trattenimenti senesi nella seconda metà del secolo XVI (Trani: Vecchi editore, 1901). p. 11.


29 See my discussion of this in chapter one, pp. 24-37.
Giovanni Pozzi has described the impetus behind the composition of love dialogues as a desire to regulate the passionate/erotic life. The fact that the investigation of passion is enclosed in the realm of game (and dialogue), however, implies more than social control (for that could be done in a treatise form, eliminating the theatrical and ludic aspects). Instead, the investigation of love through discussion provided a sanctioned venue for social exchanges between the sexes. Here a lofty discussion of love was considered to be appropriate, in contrast with the Boccaccian tradition that was often considered to be ill-suited for women. Indeed, the dialogue perhaps provided the erudite circles with a recreational alternative to sixteenth-century novellas that surely would have been considered indecorous material for public discussion among the elite (men). Furthermore, the classification of divine and earthly loves provided the opportunity for one to preclude any doubt of falling into the second. Male intellectuals were provided with a caveat for their socializing: the veglia was a more comely form of social diversion than the more common parties of dancing and card-playing. Intelligent women, on the other hand, found a space for both learning and recreation that did not threaten their onestà. Thus while the dialogues may reflect an interest in controlling the amorous realm, they also reveal an effort to use the theory of love to the advantage of both men and women.

The freer interaction between the men and women of the Academy is indeed, I would argue, testament to women’s increased access to the realm of public discussion. In

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30 "Ai letterati interessava soprattutto la fenomenologia amorosa... Anche negli scritti più spregiudicati è evidente la volontà di dare norme all’amore, di organizzare nel miglior modo possibile la vita erotica, dominando con la ragione anche questo sentimento apparentemente incontrollabile." See Pozzi “Introduzione,” pp. XI-XII.
fact, the female presence in social / literary circles seems to be one of the principal reasons employed by Jacob Burckhardt in his controversial passage on women in the Renaissance. As cited in chapter one, Burckhardt claimed that “To understand the higher forms of social intercourse at this period we must keep before our minds the fact that women stood on equal footing with men” (389). The two principal reasons offered by Burckhardt as evidence of this are: 1. the Humanist education that for the most part, extended to aristocratic girls the same education offered to their brothers, and 2. the claim that noblewomen, refined both in mind and heart, obtained a fully-realized (independent) individuality and social identity. Vague references to dialogues and treatises (393), as well as direct references to *Il libro del cortegiano*, seem to indicate that the textual basis for his conclusions rests, at least in part, in the tradition of dialogues and treatises of the sixteenth century.31

When Burckhardt’s optimistic assertion is seen in light of the dialogues studied in the present work it can perhaps be better understood and admitted to have at least some basis in the social customs of the period. What he seems to pass over completely, however, is the fact that this social phenomenon is still simply one limited social custom and, moreover, that it is circumscribed within the sphere of social recreation, and very often within the sphere of game, as discussed above. In fact, most documentary dialogues of the period, like Castiglione’s, include to varying degrees elements of play, and are presented as an escape from the trials of everyday reality.

31 Marenduzzo notes this implicitly by linking Burckhardt’s position on the social status of Renaissance women to Girolamo Bargagli’s dialogue and to the standing of women within elite social gatherings (pp. 41-42).
We have seen that the *dama di veglia*, like the courtesan and the noblewoman, has been allowed limited access to an informal place of learning through her involvement in group exchanges with educated men. A dialogue written in 1702 by a member of the Intronati Academy, Cosimo Finetti,\(^3^2\) gives an interesting retrospective discussion of the sixteenth-century *veglia* and the interaction between the Sienese academy members and the local noblewomen. In this dialogue several interlocutors debate the legitimacy of co-ed conversation as it emerged in the tradition of the sixteenth-century *veglia*.

Finetti describes the interaction between the sexes that took place in the *veglie* in this way:

Ciascheduno secondo il proprio talento si procacciava un buon’ capitale di merito per incontrare alle occasioni le approvazioni, e gl’applausi di quelle gentilissime Donzelle: ed esse all’incontro ora dall’esempio, & ora spinte da una generosa emulazione... nella continua Lettura delle Poesie, o delle Istorie istruivano le menti loro. (5v)

The mutual benefits described by Finetti seem accurate: the women present at the discussions emulated the speculative activity of the Intronati members and “educated their own minds.” These women received knowledge, training in oratory, and consequent fame for their learning and wit. The dialogues that reflect women’s activity in informal discussions with men provide the primary testament to this social phenomenon, revealing the nebulous boundaries between conversation and education. The pleasurable exchanges take on a Neoplatonic twist: the Platonic ideal of a sublimated sexual attraction leads to

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\(^3^2\) This dialogue exists in manuscript form in the Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati, Siena: ms. C.IV.4, *Benvoglienti, Miscellanea*. It begins thus: “Dialogo del Sig. Cosimo Finetti intorno all’uso del conversare recitato nell’Accademia dell’ Intronati. Alla presenza delle dame. Il di 22 Febb. 1709.” With perhaps a bit of *campanilismo*, Finetti suggests that the Sienese women were the models who inspired some of the most famous women of the period: “Quante donne rinomate d’Italia ferosi pregio d’essere imitatrici delle nostre! Voglio dire Veronica Gambara, Tullia d’Aragona, Laura Terracini, la Marchesana di Pescara, e molte altre” (4v).
the mutual benefit of the wise lover and the virtuous and beautiful beloved. Sexual attraction is restrained within the limits of onestà, a word that abounds in reference to women's role in the Academy. Men receive inspiration from the beauty of women and women receive intellectual stimulation, depicted as a welcome break from the more common social customs. Present, if unstated, is perhaps a sexual energy produced by the relatively free interaction between the sexes. Indeed, if courtesans such as Tullia d'Aragona found Siena to be less fertile ground for building a literary circle and clientele base, it seems that the main obstacle was the pre-existence of another group of intellectual women. The Sienese tradition of the veglia, as a social outlet for the elite, seemed to preclude the emergence of a similar group around the figure of the courtesan who was in a sense replaced by the dama di veglia.
Conclusion

The female interlocutors that we have observed in the various love dialogues exhibit some common characteristics. First, while they usually are not depicted as the “teachers” in the dialogues, they are, nonetheless, shown to be actively involved in the discussions and usually demonstrate some facility with the lexicon of the popular theories of Neoplatonic love. Indeed, some interlocutors, such as those in the dialogues by d’Aragona, Betussi (especially in Leonora), and Marc’Antonio Piccolomini, possess a remarkable familiarity with philosophical concepts. Moreover, even when the women are clearly in the role of “pupil,” it is nevertheless true that their interest in intellectual and cultural matters is presented as their primary virtue. Thus, despite the frequent exhortations to silence and chastity in treatises of the period, examined by scholars such as Ruth Kelso and Constance Jordan, there exists this smaller corpus of works in which these “virtues” are not exalted. On the contrary, the female interlocutors in these works are almost never silent and, further, they are often not called to chastity. In this way, the characterization of the female interlocutors in these dialogues is revealed as unorthodox and innovative.

As we have seen, however, this figure arises only within a very strict set of circumstances. First, the dialogue form in the “minor” works examined here is the literary vehicle for the representation of this figure. As a genre that generated opinion as opposed to certain truth, and perhaps employed the “female behavioral mode” of conversation, as Bassani has stated, it permitted the inclusion of a female voice. Second, the settings are almost always domestic and invariably recreational, indicating that female
involvement in debates was intended to fill the moments of *otium* for both male and female characters. The underlying ludic imagery, as well as explicit references to games, reinforce the informal and even playful atmosphere of the gatherings. Finally, although the topic of love was perhaps the only subject of discussion considered appropriate for women involved in mixed-sex exchanges, it is through their involvement in discussing this topic that the figures gained access to the related activities of debating, contemplation, and light philosophical investigation. While on the one hand, the female figures at first seem restricted to the one field of expertise, on the other, the topic often provided a passageway to involvement in intellectual matters and activities from which women had traditionally been excluded.

The depiction of female interlocutors as erudite women is not only significant in terms of the literary treatment of women, but also as an indication of practices in which historical women were actually involved. The portrayal of historical personages in their respective social settings provides scholars with a window into sixteenth-century social customs. Although I do not claim that the dialogues are to be considered strict transcriptions of actual conversations, they can nevertheless be indicative of social trends. The appearance of an intellectually engaged female interlocutor in the seven primary dialogues that have been analyzed here confirms that such a figure does not represent merely the whim of one particular author, but perhaps a literary reflection of social practice, even if short-lived.

If my contention that women gained greater access to debate in this brief period is true, then it implies that the Neoplatonic exaltation of women, as a decisive factor within
the *questione della donna*, had some effect on social customs. Indeed, the dialogues indicate that women’s involvement in popular cultural debate, although still undoubtedly limited, nonetheless increased within an intellectual environment informed by the Neoplatonic view of women.
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