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The Breasts of Vittoria Colonna

Diana Robin

Abigail Brundin has recently speculated that Vittoria Colonna, one of the most important poets of the Italian Renaissance, has received relatively little attention from scholars who study early modern women because of her unappealing image as a “model of secular, pious widowhood.”¹ If that is the case, Kenneth Gouwens’ first English translation and edition of Paolo Giovio’s Latin *Dialogus de viris ac foeminis aetate nostra florentibus* (*Dialogue Concerning Men and Women Flourishing in Our Time*), with its panegyric but at times prurient portrait of Vittoria Colonna, should pump new life into Colonna studies.²

The Varied Productions of Colonna’s Public Persona, 1512-1547

Historians of Italian women writers have recently shown intense interest in the dynamics of cultural transmission and the problem of self-representation in sixteenth-century print culture.³ Scholars have disagreed sharply, for example, on what role Vittoria Colonna played—or if she even took part—in the shaping of her public persona in the printed editions of her work. Giovanna Rabitti has argued that Colonna’s handling of her literary career and public persona was complex, suggesting all the features of a “masterly balancing act between self-promotion, an authentic spirituality and an unusual poetic gift.”⁴ Moreover, as Abigail Brundin has convincingly shown, Colonna’s prominent literary friends from 1525 on—Ariosto, Bembo, and Michelangelo, among them—collaborated with the poet to represent her in print as an icon of the Petrarchan tradition, a chaste and a deeply religious widow, and a powerful proponent of religious reform and exemplar of the new spirituality.⁵ This essay brings to light an unauthorized

¹ Abigail Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics of the Italian Reformation* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008), 36; see x on modern scholars’ reactions to Colonna; on Colonna’s self-fashioning as a nun see 24, 25, 27, 34.

² The first printed edition of Giovio’s *Dialogus de viris ac foeminis aetate nostra florentibus* appeared in *Iovii opera* 9 edited by Ernesto Travi and Mariagrazia Penco (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1984). The first English translation appears in the bilingual edition of the work: *Notable Men and Women of Our Time*, trans. and ed. Kenneth Gouwens (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: I Tatti Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, 2013). My thanks to Ken Gouwens for drawing my attention to the passages on Vittoria Colonna that I analyze here. His essay on “Vittoria Colonna in Paolo Giovio’s Cities of Women” is forthcoming in *Renaissance Quarterly*. (updated 4/11/2013)

³ Diana Robin, *Publishing Women: Salons, the Presses, and the Counter-Reformation in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), esp. 41-78; see in general Virginia Cox, *Women’s Writing in Italy, 1400-1650* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics*, esp. 11-36.

⁴ Giovanna Rabitti, “Lyric Poetry, 1500-1650,” 37, trans. Abigail Brundin, in *A History of Women’s Writing in Italy*, ed. Letizia Panizza and Sharon Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 37-51.

⁵ Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics*, traces the poet’s efforts to manipulate the public’s perception of her: chapter 1 deals with Colonna’s Petrarchism and reform spirituality in the fashioning of her public persona; chapter 2 deals with the influence of her friends Ariosto, Bembo, and Corso in shaping her public image; chapter 3

portrait of Colonna by Paolo Giovio in his unpublished *Dialogus de viris ac foeminis*, placing it in the context of the changing expectations of her readers and the demands of the time.

By the early 1530s, although Colonna had not yet published any of her work, she was widely known as an important literary figure.⁶ In 1512, her circulation in manuscript of her first extant poem, lamenting her husband's departure to go to war, marks the beginning of her self-portrayal as a poet.⁷ The dedication of an edition of Dante to Colonna in 1515 further publicized her as an intellectual of note.⁸ And when Baldessare Castiglione publicly reproached her in the preface to his *Il Cortegiano* (1528) for having allowed friends to transcribe passages from his work without his permission, he not only advertised Colonna as an avatar of literary taste; he also demonstrated the clout her name already had among the literati.

The year 1532, seven years after the death of her husband, marked a breakthrough moment in Colonna's public stature. In the third edition of his *Orlando furioso*, the most popular work of fiction of its time, Lodovico Ariosto eulogized Vittoria Colonna as not only the greatest woman poet of her time, but as a model of chaste widowhood whose poetic purpose was to immortalize her husband:⁹

Quest'una ha non pur sé fatta immortale
col dolce stil di che il miglior non odo;
Ma può qualunque di cui parli o scriva,
Trar del sepolcro, e far ch'eterno viva.

(This one woman has not only made herself immortal with a style, a sweetness I have never heard bettered; but she can draw from the grave and immortalize whomsoever she speaks or writes about. *Canto 37.16*)

S'al fiero Achille invidia de la chiara
Meonia tromba il Macedonico ebbe,
Quanto, invitto Francesco di Pescara,
Maggiore a te, se vivesse or, l'avrebbe;
Che sí casta mogliere, e a te sí cara
Canti l'eterno onor che ti si debbe,
E che per lei sí 'l nome tuo rimbombe,
che da bramar non hai piú chiare trombe.

zeroes in on her friendship with Michelangelo and the print production of her evangelical voice. Virginia Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy, 1400-1650* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008) takes the opposite view: she sees Colonna as having remained "aristocratically aloof" from print throughout her life, "preferring to circulate her poetry instead in manuscript" (75, 81). On the chronology of Colonna's career see also Brundin, ed. and trans., *Vittoria Colonna: Sonnets for Michelangelo* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1-43.

⁶ Rabitti, "Lyric Poetry," 37; on Colonna's notable renown as a poet before the 1530s see also Virginia Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy, 1400-1650* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2008), 66-67.

⁷ Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna* (2008), 20-23.

⁸ Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 65.

⁹ Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 67, notes that the now-famous encomium to Colonna in the *Orlando furioso* was added to the third edition of the poem by Ariosto, in gratitude for the large pension that Alfonso d'Avalos, Colonna's husband's nephew, gave him in 1531.

(If Alexander envied proud Achilles the glorious clarion of Homer, how much more, were he alive today would he envy you, invincible Francesco of Pescara, that a wife so chaste, so dear to you, should sing the eternal honour due to you, and that she has brought such resonance to your name that you need crave no shriller trumpet. *Canto 37.20*)¹⁰

But it was through Colonna's friendship with Giovio, which dated back to the early 1520s,¹¹ that she began to exchange poems with Pietro Bembo in 1530.¹² He introduced Colonna to the print world by including an exchange of sonnets with her in the 1535 edition of his collected *Delle Rime di M. Pietro Bembo. Seconda Impressione* (Venice: Giovann'Antonio di Nicolini da Sabio). In that volume he described her as the apogee of Petrarchan beauty and chaste piety:¹³

leggiadra membra, avolte in nero panno,
e pensier santi e ragionar celeste.

(Lovely limbs enclosed in black robes,
holy thoughts and divine musings.)¹⁴

Safely carried on through letters and intermediaries, Colonna's relationship with Bembo, that of a noble widow in mourning with the doyen of the literary world in Italy, became one of the celebrated friendships of the era, beneficial to both parties.

During the years 1537-39, Colonna continued to burnish her image as a pious widow in search of the consolation of faith. She traveled, in the company of the reform theologian Bernardino Ochino and his friends, to Lucca, where the presiding bishop Pier Martire Vermigli was leading a reform *cenacolo* that would soon make that city a center for heterodox activism.¹⁵ On that trip Colonna spent at least three weeks in the Este castle in Ferrara. She had daily conversations with the Duchess of Ferrara, Renée de France,¹⁶ who had hosted John Calvin at

¹⁰ Italian text is from Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, ed. Nicola Zingarelli (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1944); English translation from Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, trans. Guido Waldman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974, 1983), 443.

¹¹ T.C. Price Zimmerman, *Paolo Giovio: The Historian and the Crisis of Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 86-7.

¹² See Paolo Vecce, "Paolo Giovio e Vittoria Colonna," *Periodico della Società Storica Comense* 54 (1990): 67-98; Zimmerman, *Paolo Giovio*, 117-18.

¹³ Brundin, 27.

¹⁴ Text from Pietro Bembo, *Prose e rime*, ed. Carlo Dionisotti (Turin: Temporelli, 1966), 612; translation from Brundin, 27.

¹⁵ For the dating of her travels I have relied on Vittoria Colonna, *Carteggio*, ed. Ermanno Ferrero and Giuseppe Müller with a supplement by Domenico Tordi, 2nd ed. (Turin: Loescher, 1892).

¹⁶ On Colonna's stay at Duchess Renée de France's castle in Ferrara, see Robin, *Publishing Women*, 26-28; in assigning dates to events in Colonna's life, see her correspondence: *Carteggio*, ed. E. Ferrero and G. Müller (cited

her court the previous year. Throughout the summer of 1536, Renée had entertained the French theologian as a guest in the ducal palace, where his opus magnum, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, circulated in its first two Latin editions of 1536 and 1539.¹⁷

It was in the fall of 1538, in Rome, that Colonna met Michelangelo Buonarroti, who was then known for his religious fervor and interest in the reform movement.¹⁸ Michelangelo was regarded as the foremost living artist at the time, while Colonna's own visibility and fame were also on the rise. As her friendship with Michelangelo deepened and the two exchanged letters, sonnets, and gifts of drawings, Colonna's poetic involvement in reform theology intensified. Thirteen printed editions of her *Rime* came out between 1538 and her death in 1547, each promulgating Colonna's novel voice in a conflation of Petarchan lyric and evangelical spirituality. Four more sixteenth-century editions would be published after her death. By the time Rinaldo Corso's 1543 edition (Bologna: Phaelli) and Ludovico Dolce's 1546 edition (Venice: Valgrisi) of her *Rime* had come out, Colonna's piety and spirituality had been widely recognized as the chief features of her life and character, although her disdain for and distance from the "vulgarity" of the printing press remained constant features in the public propagation of her literary persona¹⁹—whatever she actually felt about print publication.

Compounding her image of wifely devotion with her growing reputation as the lyric voice of the religious reform movement, Rinaldo Corso published a commentary which dealt solely with her *Rime spirituali* in 1543. Corso's was the first critical analysis of the collected poetry of any living writer—male or female—to come out in the sixteenth century.²⁰ Corso's portrait of Colonna as a model of pious widowhood in his analysis of the *Rime* was wholly consistent with that of her other friends. Brundin sums up the success her promoters had in perpetuating Colonna's public persona as modest, self-effacing, and even ethereal:

It is notable how close [their] portrait [of Vittoria] seems to that of a nun . . . By denying or choosing to ignore all worldly attributes, and to concentrate only on promoting those qualities that allied her with a more ethereal image, the female poet sidestepped any potential accusations of fame-seeking or lack of propriety. Instead, her pious image was seemingly absorbed and accepted whole-heartedly

above); and Alfredo Reumont, *Vittoria Colonna, fede, poesia, nel secolo decimosesto*, trans. G. Müller and E. Ferrero (Turin: Ermanno Loescher, 1889-92).

¹⁷ Robin, *Publishing Women*, 27.

¹⁸ Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poets*, 28-30, 67-100; Colonna, *Sonnets for Michelangelo*, esp. 26-39; Pina Ragionieri, ed., *Vittoria Colonna e Michelangelo, Catalogue to the Exhibition at the Casa Buonarroti, Florence 24 May-12 September 2005* (Florence: Mandragora, 2005); Sylvia Ferino-Pagden, ed., *Vittoria Colonna: Dicterin und Muse Michelangelos, Catalogue to the Exhibition at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, 25 February-25 1997* (Vienna: Skira, 1997).

¹⁹ Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 75.

²⁰ This is Brundin's emphatic point in *Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics*, 33: that Corso's analysis of Colonna's *Rime* was "the first published commentary on the collected poetry of a living writer, of either gender." Only later did Corso publish a commentary on the *Rime amorose*, as Monica Bianco has shown in her "Le due redazioni del commento di Rinaldo Corso alle Rime di Vittoria Colonna," *Studi di filologia italiana* 56 (1998), 271-95: a second edition of Corso's commentary containing both the *Rime amorose* and the *Rime spirituali* was published in 1558. An earlier critical analysis, but of just a single sonnet by Laodomia Forteguerra, was published by Alessandro Piccolomini: *Lettura del S. Alessandro Piccolomini Infiammato fatta nell' Accademia degli Infiammati* (Bologna: Bartolomeo Bonardo & Marc'Antonio da Carpi, 1541).

by her reading public, to the extent that sixteenth-century published editions of the sonnets sometimes carried woodcut images of [Colonna] dressed in a plain habit and kneeling before a crucifix in prayer.²¹

Giovio's Contradictory Portrait of Colonna in the Dialogus de viris ac foeminis in aetate nostra florentibus

But a richer and more detailed portrait of Colonna had already been circulating by 1529/30, and it was one that contradicted the image she and her literary friends would subsequently disseminate. This was the portrait Paolo Giovio crafted in the work he wrote at Colonna's request, the *Dialogus de viris ac foeminis aetate nostra florentibus*, while he was her guest on Ischia in 1527-1528. Colonna's invitation to Giovio had come nine months after her relatives and their allies, among Charles V's imperial troops, had entered Rome and sacked the papal city, burning its monuments, its libraries and antiquities, raping its women and confining the Medici pope, Clement VII, to the Castel Sant'Angelo where he was held captive until he was able to pay the ransom demanded by the occupying forces of 400,000 ducats and the surrender of the fortresses around Rome as well as those of Piacenza, Parma, and Modena.²² On Ischia, Giovio played the role of the pope's foreign correspondent, sending him news of the war on the Neapolitan front as well as drafts of his *Dialogus de viris ac foeminis*, a work that mirrored the lives of the pope's enemies and their friends.

The setting of the dialogue is the island of Ischia between the end of September and the beginning of December 1527, when the Sack of Rome was still in full swing. The dialogue has three books. In book 1, the Sack of Rome, the decline of Italy, and military practices in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are discussed. The book ends with a catalogue of the great military commanders of the epoch and finally an encomium of Vittoria Colonna's dead husband Francesco Ferrante d'Avalos. Book 2 features a survey of contemporary Italian authors including both vernacular and Latin writers. The beginning and end of this book are missing. Book 3 is organized as a catalogue of contemporary women. Such catalogues had been popular since Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* (*On famous women*, 1361). Giovio's catalogue, however, represents a new development of the genre. As with Girolamo Ruscelli and Lodovico Domenichi's roster of *clarae mulieres* later in the century,²³ Giovio aligns lists of women with specific cities, producing a kind of directory in which a state's importance as a cultural destination is linked to its fostering of a female elite.²⁴ Among the women Giovio names and describes in the *De viris et foeminis* are: two Siennese women, seventeen Neapolitan women, and twenty-seven Roman women. Vittoria Colonna's name comes up among both the Neapolitan and Roman rosters of women.

At the close of book 3 Giovio presents his ten-page encomium of his hostess (30r-35r). His interlocutors are Vittoria Colonna's nephew Alfonso del Vasto, who was Charles V's leading

²¹ Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics*, 24.

²² Zimmerman, *Paolo Giovio*, 85.

²³ For rosters of distinguished women listed city by city see Girolamo Ruscelli, *Lettura sopra un sonetto alla divina signora marchesa del Vasto* (Venice: Griffio, 1552); and Lodovico Domenichi, *La nobiltà delle donne* (Venice: Giolito, 1549).

²⁴ On literary catalogues of elite women in sixteenth-century Italy see Robin, *Publishing Women*, 51-57; 118-21.

military commander in Italy, and Giovanni Antonio Muscettola, an important Neapolitan lawyer who served Charles V and a member of the Viceroy of Naples's council. The encomium of Colonna begins with a description of her face and body (31r-31v). Giovio extols the splendor of her jewels, her graceful walk, her expert horsemanship, the grace and beauty of her dancing, and her moral character (32r-32v: piety, splendor, prudence, chastity). No woman, Giovio writes, places pearls and gems in her hair more strikingly than she (32r). She adds luster to the house of Colonna with the bed coverings and tapestries she has brought to the marriage and the elegance of the dining room furnishings she has lent to the d'Avalos castle (33r). As a widow, she is a diligent host when she presides over her guests at a feast. She employs a steward who oversees the service of the meals from a beautifully appointed kitchen. Set with gleaming white tablecloths and napkins, the tables are adorned with flowers and verdant leaves. The wines are well chosen, though Vittoria herself abstains from liquor (33r).

Giovio also praises her governing talents (33v). Colonna ruled her father's towns after his death. She was merciful as a governor, yet severe as an arbiter in the administering of justice. She was called upon by family members to participate, manage, and deliberate with them on the most serious matters. Moreover, as the daughter and the granddaughter of two illustrious military men, she was thoroughly knowledgeable in military policy and in the provisioning of troops. And, Giovio adds, she even put up with the numerous and notorious mistresses of her chronically absent husband (33v). Giovio dramatizes Colonna's chaste widowhood, in contrast to her husband's infidelities. Not only does she have two elderly duennas who guard her chastity, but Colonna flagellates the most delicate parts of her body out of sheer determination not to yield to temptation:

Non linteo sed laneo subuculae thorace latera illa mollia circumdat; . . . etiam pudicas corporis partes aculeatis flagris flagellat. (34r)

(On those soft hips of hers she wears the armor of underwear not made of linen but coarse wool; . . . she even beats the private parts of her body with stinging whips.)²⁵

The *De viris ac foeminis* concludes with praises of Colonna's intellectual strengths (35r): her elegant writings, her insatiable desire for learning and study. Philosophers, theologians, and poets praise her erudition, her Tuscan diction, her learned poetry, and her correspondence with the most learned men in Italy and the greatest kings in Europe (35r).

Giovio's portrait of Colonna underlines her absence of hypocrisy. She has neither hidden away her physical beauty nor has she denied herself the luxurious lifestyle to which she was accustomed prior to her widowhood. She relegates the guarding of her chastity to the privacy of her own apartments; she does not fetishize it for public consumption. As a widow she receives those who call upon her and if learned men, writers, and poets are present, she speaks eloquently about amatory feelings and a great range of cultured pleasures. Moreover, she laughs not only at those who feign chastity by showing disgust at certain kinds of humor, but also at those who go to such extremes to appear chaste that they put draperies over works of art that depict naked gods

²⁵ Giovio's Latin text edited by Gouwens; translation mine.

and goddesses cavorting (34v).²⁶

Colonna's Breasts and the Blazon Tradition: Marot to Ariosto

But nothing is more graphic in Giovio's *Dialogus de viris ac foeminis* than his fully frontal verbal portrait of Vittoria Colonna's breasts. In fact, no literary portrait of a woman's breasts is more detailed than Giovio's of Colonna until the time of Firenzuola,²⁷ though his approach to his encomium of Colonna's body is typical for the period in that he appraises her body proceeding downward, from head to toe. Giovio begins with Colonna's dark eyes "clothed in shining ivory," her arched brows, her ebony hair with its gold highlights, her wide forehead, her cheeks blushing and milk-white, her perfect small ears, her regal and delicate nose,²⁸ her upper arms, and her white, soft hands with their fingernails shining and rosy²⁹ (31r-31v). His lengthy passage on Colonna's breasts follows that of her hair and eyes but precedes that of her lips, "fleshy" chin and her neck, suggesting "dignity but not severity" (31v).

Giovio's description of Colonna's breasts foregrounds their hiddenness and suggests, despite the fact that she must have been in her mid-thirties at the time of his writing of the dialogue, the youthfulness of his subject. Her breasts are still hard, though "not yet swelling with milk" ("mamillae turgescences non iam lacte"). And in a passage thick with haptic as well as optic imagery, he evokes the snowy delicacy and birdlike diminutiveness of her breasts, in such a way that arouses desire yet prohibits it. Giovio's image of the "severely punishing bindings" Colonna wears ("castigantibus severe fasciolis") invites the reader to imagine the release of her breasts from the fabric confining them, while warning that "no man except her husband ever touched or saw them" ("nec ullus omnino mortalium praeter virum . . . aut pressit aut inspexit"):

At illa orbiculata ubera, ipso nitenti argento candidiora, quam molliter quam decenter ad anhelitus modulus e castigantibus severe fasciolis resultant et, cubantium palumbularum instar, suavibus intervallis contumescunt! Quae pectori, tam lato ab umeris quam ad ilia reducto, natura sic infixit ut inclusa non appensa esse interiecto illo mollissimo sinu videantur. Ergo non mirum erit si et illas partes absolute formosas esse dixerimus quas pudor occultavit, nec ullus omnino mortalium praeter virum, eo praestanti naturae dono dignissimum, aut pressit aut

²⁶ Elissa Weaver reminds me that this could be a reference to Daniele da Volterra, the artist who put pants on the nudes in Michelangelo's "Last Judgment." He was thereafter known as "Il Braghettone" (Big Pants).

²⁷ Elizabeth Cropper's article, "On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo and the Vernacular Style," *Art Bulletin* 58 (1976), 374-94, shows that formulations of ideal beauty in women, and in particular the beauty of the female breast, become a trope in later cinquecento dialogues. Agnolo Firenzuola's dialogue *Delle Bellezze delle donne* (1541) exemplifies the formula: there his chief interlocutor describes the ideal beauty, proceeding feature by feature: eyes, eyebrows, eyelids, nose, mouth and lips, teeth, chin, cheeks, ears, throat, shoulders, and lastly the breasts, to which he devotes the most detailed description, focusing, however, on its nutritive utility rather than on its form: see *Le opere di Agnolo Firenzuola*, ed. Brunone Bianchi (Naples: Francesco Giannini, 1864), 1.228.

²⁸ As opposed to Petrarch's *Rime sparse*, in which Laura's nose is never mentioned: see Amadeo Quondam, *Il naso di Laura: Lingua e poesia lirica nella tradizione del classicismo* (Modena: Panini, 1991).

²⁹ The anonymous reader of this article has commented on Giovio's novel description of Colonna's fingernails (Latin text: "nitidae et rubentes unguiculae," 31v).

inspexit. Postquam et ipsi oculi aliena lumina evibratis late radiis perstringunt, et attriectatae vel conspectae manus cunctos medullitus inflammant et mamillae turgescences non iam lacte sed caelesti quodam nectare corda remolliunt. (Giovio, *DVF*. 3. 31v)

(But those little orb-like breasts, whiter than shining silver itself, spring back softly and properly from their severely punishing little bindings in time with the musical beat of her breathing and, like little turtle-doves sleeping, they swell at sweet intervals. Nature has firmly affixed her breasts to her broad chest, from her shoulders to her ribs, in such a way that they seem to be framed within it, not made to hang down separately, with the most delicate hollow situated between them. Therefore it will be no wonder if those body parts which modesty has hidden we have depicted as absolutely gorgeous; nor has any mortal man ever viewed or caressed them other than her husband, a man extremely deserving of such an extraordinary gift of nature. After her eyes with their vibrating rays proceed to rivet the eyes of all others to her, her hands, once they have been touched and seen, deeply arouse all men and her breasts swelling not yet with milk but with a certain heavenly nectar soften hearts.)³⁰

Giovio's literary painting of Colonna's breasts shares elements of the early sixteenth-century comic French tradition of the *blazon anatomique* in which each feature is described, descending downward from head to toe.³¹ In such blazons, as Nancy Vickers has noted, female body parts were not only described and praised; they were "serenaded—and even urged to respond."³² The French *blazons anatomiques* were modeled on the eight-line Italian lyrics known as *strambotti*, composed by such Neapolitan poets as Cariteo, Tebaldeo, and Serafino,³³ which parodied the Petrarchan praise of parts of the beloved's body. Clément Marot's *Le blazon du tetin* (1535), considered a model of the genre, begins thus:

Tetin refait, plus blanc qu'un oeuf
Tetin de satin blanc tout neuf,
Tetin qui fais honte à la rose,
Tetin plus beau que nulle chose.

(Well formed breast, whiter than an egg, / Breast of brand new white satin, /

³⁰ Giovio, *Dialogus de viris ac foeminis*, text and translation by Gouwens.

³¹ On the anatomical blazon, see David Hillman and Carla Mazzio, *The Body in Parts. Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1997), xiv. On the breast blazons, see Cathy Yandell, "Iconography and Iconoclasm: The Female Breast in French Culture," *French Review* 83.3 (2010): 540-57.

³² Nancy Vickers, "Members Only: Marot's Anatomical Blazons," in *The Body in Parts*, ed. Hillman and Mazzio, 3-21.

³³ On these poets who, relevantly to my theme here, frequented Vittoria Colonna's circle on Ischia see Suzanne Therault, *Un cénacle humaniste de la Renaissance autour de Vittoria Colonna châtelaine d'Ischia* (Florence: Sansoni, 1968).

Breast which puts the rose to shame, / Breast more beautiful than any thing.)³⁴

While somewhat anomalous in the context of his prose encomium of her mind and character, Giovio's extended description of Colonna's breasts is a familiar trope in European art and verse of the period. It is surely directly indebted to Ariosto's depiction of the sorceress Alcina's breasts in *Orlando Furioso*, which are described as being "like two not-yet ripe apples that rise and fall like the sea-swell when a gentle breeze stirs (*combatte*) the ocean":

Bianca nieve è il bel collo e 'l petto latte;
il collo è tondo, il petto colmo e largo:
due pome acerbe, e pur d'avorio fatte,
vengono e van come onda al primo margo,
quando piacevole aura il mar *combatte*.
Non potria l'altre parti veder Argo:
ben si può giudicar che corrisponde
a quel ch'appar di fuor quel che s'asconde. (7.14)

(Snow white was her neck, milky her breast; the neck was round, the breast broad and full. A pair of apples not yet ripe, fashioned in ivory, rose and fell like the sea-swell at times when a gentle breeze stirs [*combatte*] the ocean. Argus himself could not see them entire, but you could easily judge that what lay hidden did not fall short of what was exposed to view).³⁵

Ariosto's description of Alcina also closely resembles Boccaccio's praise of Emilia in book 12 of the *Teseida*, where the heroine's breasts are again compared to lovely apples ("pomi vaghi") which are not yet ripe but hard and engaged in a kind of combat with her constraining clothes ("per durezza avean combattimento / de pomi vaghi per mostranza tondi"):

Pieno era il collo e lungo e ben sedente
sopra gli omeri candidi e ritondi,
non sottil troppo e piano e ben possente
a sostenere gli abbracciar giocondi;
e 'l petto poi un pochetto eminente
de' pomi vaghi per mostranza tondi
che *per durezza avean combattimento*,
sempre pontando in fuor, col vestimento. (12.61)

(Her neck was full and long and well set upon her white and sloping shoulders,

³⁴ Vickers, "Members Only," 15. Text and translation are Vickers'.

³⁵ The texts are from Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, ed. Nicola Zingarelli (Milan: Ulrico Hoepli, 1944), 55; and Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, trans. Guido Waldman, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 61.

yet it was not too thin, but smooth and well able to bear joyous embraces; and then her bosom was somewhat raised, revealing lovely round breasts that were so firm that they strove to reveal their contours beneath her robe.)³⁶

The likenesses in the texts of all three authors are striking: the smallness, whiteness, hardness and immaturity of the breasts of their female subjects; the pendulum-like movement of the breasts (“vengono e van come onda” in Ariosto; “resultant” in Giovio; “aveano combattimento” in Boccaccio); and lastly, the struggle of their subjects’ breasts to get out of the confining or “punishing” clothing in which they are encased—a struggle which Ariosto compares to the combat between forces in nature, the wind and the sea (“quando piacevole aura il mar combatte”). Nor is it surprising that Giovio imitated Ariosto, whose first edition of the *Orlando furioso* had come out in 1516. The two poets were friends and avid readers of one another’s work. When they went to Mantua to take part in the ceremonies for its elevation to a duchy in 1530, these two already-celebrated writers, Ariosto and Giovio, put on a public show in front of Palazzo Te during which they compared living heroes (namely Vittoria Colonna’s nephew Alfonso d’Avalos and the pope’s cousin Ippolito de’ Medici) to the characters Ruggiero and Zerbino in the *Furioso*.³⁷

But Giovio’s tone, language, and imagery in his description of Colonna’s body differ from Ariosto’s. His Latin imitation of the breasts of Ariosto’s sorceress and Boccaccio’s chaste Emilia parodies his models and suggests a cartoon of them. Giovio exaggerates the language of his models in a riming series of diminutives, formed with the Latin suffixes *-ula* and *-ola*: “orbiculata” (from *orbis*), “fasciolis” (from *fascia*), “modulos” (from *modus*), “palumbularum” (from *palumba*). Giovio sets up a comic, sing-song rhythm in his pairing of participial phrases: “reducto pectori” is echoed by “interiecto sinu”; “inclusa” by “appensa”; and “attrectatae” by “conspectae.” He heightens Boccaccio’s and Ariosto’s descriptions of their ladies’ bodies by packing the text with erotically-charged verbs and participles suggesting swelling, binding, burning, leaping, stiffening, straining, stretching: *resultant*, *inflammant*, *contumescunt*, *perstringunt*, *turgescentes* and by setting up an alteration throughout the passage between swelling and wilting body parts.³⁸

³⁶ The texts are from Giovanni Boccaccio, *Teseida delle Nozze d’Emilia*, ed. Alberto Limentani (Milan: Mondadori, 1992, 2nd ed.), 412; and Boccaccio, *The Book of Theseus*, trans. Bernadette Marie McCoy (New York: Medieval Text Association, 1974), 324.

³⁷ I am grateful to Elissa Weaver for pointing out the likenesses between Giovio’s Colonna and Ariosto’s Alcina.

³⁸ Cf. Agnolo Firenzuola, *Le opere* (Naples: Giannini, 1864), 1.228. In Firenzuola’s dialogue *Delle Bellezze delle donne* (1541) the Italian tradition of the description of the breast as synecdochic for female beauty is extended, this time emphasizing its maternal, utilitarian function: “La latitudine del Petto porge gran maestà a tutta la persona; dove sono le mammelle, come due colline di neve e di rose ripiene, con quelle due coroncine di fini rubinuzzi nella loro cima come cannelluzze del bello e util vaso: il quale oltre alla utilità di stillare il nutrimento a’ piccoli fanciullini, dà un certo splendore con sì nuova vaghezza . . .” (228) See also the English translation in Agnolo Firenzuola, *On the Beauty of Women*, ed. and trans. Konrad Eisenbichler and Jacqueline Murray (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 31: “The breadth of the bosom lends great majesty to the entire body. The breasts are here, like two hills filled with snow and roses, and two little crowns of fine spouts at the top, like drinking straws for that beautiful and useful vessel. Besides their usefulness in distilling nourishment for little babies, the breasts have a certain splendor, with such a novel charm.”

On Colonna's Breasts and Self-Flagellation: Giovio's Modern Critics

Modern critics of Giovio's *Dialogus de viris ac foeminis* have been long on glowing generalizations but short on specifics. Not one of Giovio's modern readers has spoken of his depiction of Vittoria Colonna's self-flagellation in the Ischian *Dialogus*. And not one of them has commented in detail on Giovio's signal description of Colonna's breasts in the dialogue—with the exception of T.C. Price Zimmermann, who praised the entire work as having “so perfectly embod[ied] its moment in time,”³⁹ though he reduced Giovio's avian images of Colonna's breasts and his speculations on who may or may not have touched them to a parenthesis inserted between her “graceful figure and aristocratic bearing” and “the adornments of her mind and the loftiness of her morals.” Carlo Dionisotti defined Giovio's Ischian dialogue as “a documento fondamentale” in the historiography of sixteenth-century Italy.⁴⁰ Virginia Cox has called Giovio's profile of Colonna in the *Dialogus* one of the most important works of the sixteenth century in the manuscript dissemination not only of the poet's fame in Italy but also of her image as the “supreme cultural luminary of her age.”⁴¹ Carlo Vecce has pointed to Giovio's encomium of Colonna in the *De viris ac foeminis* as “the first and perhaps the most beautiful portrait” we have of the poet,⁴² although he—like Dionisotti, Cox, and Brundin—does not refer to Giovio's extended description of Colonna's breasts directly or at length. He notes only that Giovio has characterized her bosom as “so tightly bound that it hardly seems to move.”⁴³

Colonna's Solo Performance of a Hungarian Dance

Near the close of the *Dialogus* Giovio presents a description of Colonna dancing that perfectly encapsulates his carefully observed, rich and many-sided, and yet at the same time seductive portrait of his ideal: a woman who is not only erudite but also physically beautiful, not only educated in the arts but an artist herself. Borrowing a page from his friend Baldassare Castiglione's *Courtier*, where two noblewomen, madonna Margherita and madonna Costanza Fregosa, perform together for the delight of the assembled company an exotic Spanish dance, a *bassa*, Giovio closes his dialogue with an account of how Colonna moved, whirled, leapt, and stepped that night and a description of the brilliant gown she wore. Here, according to Giovio, was Vittoria Colonna in action:

³⁹ Zimmerman, *Giovio*, 89.

⁴⁰ T.C. Price Zimmermann quoting Dionisotti, in “Giovio, Paolo,” *DBI*, 437: “documento fondamentale nella storiografia letteraria d'Italia del cinquecento.”

⁴¹ Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 66. Another key work in the promulgation of Colonna's fame as a writer Cox mentions is Pompeo Colonna's *Apologia mulierum* (1526-29). But as Cox notes, the most important of all works in promoting her reputation as a writer was Ariosto's *Furioso*.

⁴² Carlo Vecce, “Vittoria Colonna und Paolo Giovio,” in *Vittoria Colonna: Dichterin und Muse Michelangelos*, ed. Sylvia Ferino-Pagden, Catalogue to the exhibition at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna 25, February 25—25 May 1997 (Vienna: Skira, 1997), 172-74.

⁴³ *Ibid.*: “die enggeschnürte Brust, die sich beim Atmen kaum merkbar hebt.”

Hungaram enim choream quae est solitarii tripudii genus ad peregrinum sonum ceteris feminis ad id rudibus atque stupentibus voluit aemulari, idque tanta cum venere et dignitate doctius explicavit ut cum sola a nullo deducta iuvene saltaret in amplissimo conclavi et frequenti, totius populi corona etiam ipsa una prae admiratione spectaretur. Nihil enim iucundissimis illis motibus quando omnia revocabat ad numeros venustius fuit, vel cum plumeum flabellum ad ciendas auras dissimulanter agitaret, vel manicas colligeret diffluentes, vel ipsa latiore veste descriptis mollissimis orbibus pavimenta converreret; et ad tibicinis modulos modo gradatim ad armonicam requiem suspensa, modo subsultim circumacta in obliquos meatus, modo convolutim curvatis spatiis incitata, velut labentibus in lubrico vestigiis deferretur. . . . Ea erat aurea ad effigiem crispantis et leviter commoti maris, revolutis colorum luminibus undulata a cinctu ad imam fimbriam, purpureis distincta limbis, quos praetexta emblemata caelato pictoque auro fabrefacta, paribus intervallis exornabant. (Giovio, *DVF*. 3.32r).

(Vittoria wanted to emulate a Hungarian dance, which was a type of solo ritual dance, even though the other women were untrained in it and were dumbstruck at its foreign sound. She danced it expertly with such great beauty and dignity that when she performed it alone with no young man accompanying her in the spacious yet crowded room, everyone formed a circle around her and gazed at her with great admiration. Indeed nothing was more charming than when with the most pleasing gestures she matched all her movements to the rhythms of the dance, whether she was pretending to wave her feathery fan to stir the air or to bring together her long flowing sleeves or when she swept the floor with her wide skirts tracing delicate circles. And step by step in tune with the rhythms of the flute-player, sometimes raised on tiptoe for a harmonic rest, at other times leaping in slanting circles, and at still other times with whirling motions in curving paths she danced—as if she were being borne with gliding steps across a slippery floor. . . . Her gown was gilded in the likeness of a rippling and agitated sea, billowing with rays of colors rolled back from the waistband to the bottommost fringe, decorated with purple borders . . . [and] embroidered with ornamented and painted gold.)⁴⁴

If Giovio's extravagant description of Colonna's breasts, his depiction of her opulent lifestyle on Ischia, and finally his report of her acts of genital self-abuse were not enough to render the *Dialogus de viris ac foeminis* incongruous with the "high priestess of poetry and of conjugal faithfulness" promulgated by Ariosto in his *Orlando furioso* in 1532,⁴⁵ and later by Bembo in his *Rime* in 1535, certainly his suggestive account of Colonna's solo-performance of an exotic dance at a wedding party would have clashed with the public persona bodied forth in Corso's 1543 commentary on her *Rime spirituali* and the Valgrisi edition of her work published

⁴⁴ Texts and translation by Gouwens, *Dialogus de viris ac foeminis*, xxx (pagination forthcoming).

⁴⁵ Rabitti, "Lyric Poetry," 37; on the early crystallization of Colonna's image see also Virginia Cox, "Women Writers and the Canon in Sixteenth-Century Italy," 17, in Pamela Jones Benson and Victoria Kirkham, eds., *Strong Voices, Weak History* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 14-31; and Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 65-66.

in 1546, the year before she died.⁴⁶

Historicizing the Representations of Colonna's Persona

For Giovio writing in 1528/9, Vittoria Colonna had clearly been a model of elite *femininitas*: her conduct as a widow had always been unimpeachable, nor had she been a prig. She loved a good time, wonderful clothes, elegant furniture, and the sharing of literary allusions as well as racy stories, even in mixed company. This much we know from the *Dialogus de viris ac foeminis*.

But by 1535, though he had already received a shipment of paper from Isabella d'Este, sent to underwrite the dialogue's publication, Giovio decided against committing his *Dialogus* to print.⁴⁷ There were numerous reasons why the publication of Giovio's *tableaux vivants* of Vittoria Colonna and the d'Avalos family on Ischia would remain unpublished in the sixteenth century. As Zimmermann notes, when the opportunity to publish the dialogue was offered to Giovio in 1530 and again in 1535, he began the revisions only to decide that the work could not be edited to fit the altered political circumstances of Rome in the post-Sack years.⁴⁸ The *Dialogus*—essentially a panegyric devoted to the d'Avalos clan, including Charles V's principal generals, Colonna's husband Ferrante Francesco d'Avalos and his nephew Alfonso d'Avalos—would hardly have gone down well with Giovio's employer, Pope Clement VII, who had so recently been Charles' victim. Moreover, while Giovio's imitations of Ariosto's fictional sorceress Alcina and Boccaccio's Emilia in his portrayal of Colonna would probably have amused and perhaps even flattered her, they were hardly consonant with the public persona she had begun crafting for herself in the early 1530s as a widow devoted to her husband's memory and later as a leader in the *Spirituali* movement.

So Giovio's portrait of Colonna was already dated by the mid-1530s. By then she no longer resided at the imposing d'Avalos castle on Ischia where she had lived in luxury and played the role of chatelaine.⁴⁹ In 1537 she had followed the ascetic Capuchin friar and reform leader Bernardino Ochino to Ferrara, where he addressed a packed audience at the cathedral. Her letters for 1536/7 document her sojourn, as we noted above, in that city, where she spent her evenings as a guest of the Calvinist duchess of Ferrara, Renée de France,⁵⁰ and her reform circle at the Este court. Colonna's husband's nephew, Alfonso d'Avalos, who had also been drawn into the *Spirituali* movement, was staying in the Este palace at the time.⁵¹ In the 1540s, when Colonna became increasingly involved with the *Spirituali* and the radical ideas of Ochino and Juan de Valdés, she traveled to Viterbo where she met with other prominent leaders of the reform movement, principally Cardinal Reginald Pole, Pietro Carnesecchi, and Marcantonio

⁴⁶ It should also be noted that in book 3 of Giovio's *Dialogus de viris ac foeminis* there are too many slanderous descriptions of the very women who would have read the published dialogue for the work to have gone to press.

⁴⁷ Zimmermann, *Paolo Giovio*, 89; Cox, *Women's Writing in Italy*, 66, says that Isabella received a presentation copy of the work from Giovio.

⁴⁸ Zimmermann, *Paolo Giovio*, 89.

⁴⁹ For Colonna's involvement with Pole and Ochino see Robin, *Publishing Women*, esp. 14-18, 25-26, 31-35, 80-81.

⁵⁰ On Renée see Holt N. Parker, ed. and tr., *Olimpia Morata, The Complete Writings of an Italian Heretic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁵¹ The dates of Colonna's stay in Ferrara are documented by G. Patrizi, "Colonna, Vittoria," *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* (Rome: Istituto dell'enciclopedia italiana, 1982) 27: 448-57; see also n. 16 above.

Flaminio. At that time she took lodgings at the convent of Santa Caterina near Viterbo, and later when she returned to Rome, she lived at the convents of San Silvestro and Sant'Anna de Funari.

In sum, Giovio's Ischian idyll, played out in the *Dialogus de viris ac foeminis* and his sumptuous painting of Colonna as an elegant chatelaine, written soon after the Sack of Rome, was anything but a mirror of her life as she lived it in the later 1530s and 1540s as a *Spirituali* leader and a poet whose writings were as resonant of the *Beneficio di Cristo*, the wildly popular manifesto of the reform movement,⁵² as they were of Petrarch.⁵³ Still, Giovio's *Dialogus* has left us a richly detailed montage of the poet's life and surroundings in her mid-thirties, before the fever of the *Spirituali* lay claim to her life and work. The recovery of the all but lost *Dialogus* and its publication in a new Latin edition with an English translation should add leavening to the prim, nun-like images of Colonna that some modern critics have extracted in their readings of her poetry.

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⁵² The *Beneficio*, the most popular evangelical text of the period attributed to Benedetto da Mantova, was probably the work in its published form of Colonna's friend Marcantonio Flaminio. It sold 40,000 copies in Venice alone in the first six years after its original printing. See Robin, *Publishing Women*, 35, 46, 185-6.

⁵³ See Brundin, *Vittoria Colonna and the Spiritual Poetics*, 60-65, on the shared images and themes found in the *Beneficio di Cristo* and Colonna's *Rime*.

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