

«IO POSSO FORMAR QUESTA DONNA A MODO MIO»:
MALE SELF-FASHIONING AND THE IMAGERIES
OF PYGMALION AND ZEUXIS IN THE ITALIAN
*QUERELLE DES FEMMES*¹

*«Io posso formar questa donna a modo mio»: auto-modellazione
maschile e le immagini di Pygmalion and Zeuxis nella querelle
des femmes italiana*

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines the Italian *querelle des femmes* through the prism of two well-known legends of the Western tradition, those of Pygmalion and Zeuxis. Paradigmatically capturing the male desire for creativity, the regulation of female body through the male gaze and narcissistic love of the male self, these legends can help us better understand some aspects of the debate about women primarily from the perspective of masculinity. The essay suggests that the *querelle des femmes* was after all a site of male self-fashioning that was articulating through the othering of women and the plebeians, and the strengthening of homosocial bonds among men of the political and intellectual elite. Creativity, companionship, and rivalry became crucial constituents of a male imagery that emerged in tandem with new forms of courtly sociability and the aristocratization of the Italian peninsula.

Keywords: *Querelle des femmes*; Pygmalion; Zeuxis; Baldesar Castiglione; Agnolo Firenzuola.

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RIASSUNTO: Questo articolo tratta della *querelle des femmes* italiana attraverso il prisma di due noti miti della tradizione occidentale, il mito di Pigmalione e quello di Zeusi. Nel testo, questi miti vengono considerati un'espressione paradigmatica del desiderio maschile di creatività, di regolare il corpo femminile tramite il proprio sguardo e dell'amore narcisista del creatore. Questi miti contribuiscono ad illuminare alcuni aspetti del dibattito sulle donne principalmente dalla prospettiva della storia della mascolinità. L'articolo suggerisce che la *querelle des femmes* fosse, in definitiva, un luogo per la costruzione dell'identità maschile attraverso il confronto alienante degli scrittori eruditi con donne e plebei. Inoltre, questo dibattito letterario era un modo per rafforzare legami omosociali tra i membri dell'élite politica e intellettuale. Come il testo dimostra, creatività, spirito di squadra, e rivalità diventarono elementi cruciali di un nuovo immaginario maschile sviluppatosi di pari passo con nuove forme di sociabilità aulica e l'aristocrazia graduale della penisola italiana.

Parole chiave: *Querelle des femmes*; Pigmalione; Zeusi; Baldesar Castiglione; Agnolo Firenzuola.

Pygmalion knew these women all too well;
 Even if he closed his eyes, his instincts told him
 He'd better sleep alone. He took to art,
 Ingenious as he was, and made a creature
 More beautiful than any girl on earth,
 A miracle of ivory in a statue,
 So charming that it made him fall in love. [...]
 Was she alive or not? He could not tell.

(Ovid, 1958: 277-278).

1. MAN AS CREATOR: THE IMAGERIES OF PYGMALION AND ZEUXIS IN THE ITALIAN *QUERELLE DES FEMMES*

The imagery of male creativity has paradigmatically unfolded in the enduring myths of Pygmalion and Zeuxis that have variously haunted Western culture, art, and art theory (Stoichita, 2008; Mansfield, 2007). Both legends bear strong gendered symbolisms that epitomize male control over female body and the shaping of feminine alterity through the male gaze and intellect. The significance of those legends in the Italian *querelle des femmes* remains largely unexplored though. This section examines the employment of this imagery in two influential works of the Italian *querelle des femmes*: Baldesar Castiglione's *Il Libro del Cortegiano* (1528) and Agnolo Firenzuola's *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne* (1548). Both dialogues discursively formulate an ideal femininity in terms either of physical appearance or intellectual integrity and embodied performance, in tandem with new forms of courtly culture and civil decorum. The norms regulating ideal femininity as an embodied virtue are thoroughly organized through the male gaze that on the one hand disciplines and normalizes female body and speech and on the other hand secures this disciplinary and regulatory process as a privilege of the male educated elite.

The most influential source of the Pygmalion legend in late Medieval and Renaissance Europe was Ovidian narrative in *The Metamorphoses* (Book 10). According

to the Roman poet, the Cyprian sculptor Pygmalion, disillusioned with women, carved an ivory female statue that met all his expectations of feminine beauty, and dressed and adorned her like a queen. Enamored with his creation, he begged Venus to bring it to life. The goddess of love listened to his prayers and gave life to the beloved statue that Pygmalion got married with. Male artistic invention and skill as a god-like act that is materialized through the creation – and regulation – of the ideal female body is also exemplified in the Zeuxis legend, the earliest record of which can be found in Cicero's *De inventione* (II.i.3-4). According to the Ciceronian narrative, the famous painter Zeuxis, was commissioned by the citizens of Crotona to decorate the temple of Juno. When he was about to paint an image of beautiful Helen, he asked to see the most beautiful virgins of the town to find a suitable model. In contrast to Pygmalion, Zeuxis' pursuit is to transfer reality from the breathing model to the mute likeness. However, this was an impossible pursuit since no real woman met Zeuxis' standards of female beauty. Therefore, he selected five of the most beautiful virgins and painted a perfect body by combining their diverse parts. The conclusion here is similar to that of the Pygmalion legend: no woman can be perfect but only when created in male imagination.

In the thirteenth century, the imageries of Pygmalion and Zeuxis featured in Guillaume de Lorris' and Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose*, a popular allegorical account of courtly love that triggered Christine de Pizan's criticism and the first *querelle des femmes* in French literature. The Zeuxis legend is briefly treated in chapter nine, but the image of Helen has been replaced by the allegorical figure of Nature. The last chapter of the poem includes a detailed narrative of the Pygmalion legend, enriching the Ovidian tradition. Desire for full control over female body impressively unfolds in the detailed description of the different ways Pygmalion adorns, dresses, and undresses the lifeless and malleable statue:

in robes fashioned with great skill from soft white wool, from scarlet cloth or linsey woolsey, from cloth of green or blue, or rich dark stuff, in colours that were fresh and fine and bright, richly furred with ermine, miniver, and squirrel. Then he would take them off again, to see how well she looked in a robe of silk, sendal, tabby, or other precious stuffs, in indigo, vermilion, yellow, or brown, in samite, diapered fabric or camlet... At other times he would be filled with a desire to take all these off again, and deck her in braids of yellow and red, green and blue, and in lovely fine ribbons of silk and gold, decorated with tiny pearls (De Lorris and De Meun, 1994: 323).

The significance of the Pygmalion scene in the narrative of the *Roman de la Rose* was further underlined in later surviving manuscripts, such as the late fifteenth-century luxurious manuscript known as Ms. Douce 195 (Oxford, Bodleian Library). It was produced by the illuminator Robert Testard for Charles d'Orléans, Comte d'Angoulême, and his wife Louise de Savoy, and included an interesting and unusual sequence of miniatures illustrating the Pygmalion legend (Bleeke, 2010).

The Pygmalion imagery reemerges in Baldesar Castiglione's *Il Libro del Cortegiano* (1528), a dialogue set in the Palace of Urbino that greatly conditioned the dissemination of the *querelle des femmes* in sixteenth-century Italy and beyond. Discussing the virtues of the ideal Court Lady, the third book gives the opportunity for a detailed presentation of diverse views on *women's nature*. The dialogue is triggered by the Duchess of Urbino Elisabetta Gonzaga's request to Magnifico Giuliano to describe his ideal lady («questa vostra donna») (Castiglione, 1965: 214). Although Magnifico's focus is on Court Lady's performance in the court, his desire to portray ideal femininity strongly echoes the imagery of Pygmalion: «dirò di questa donna eccellente come io la vorrei; e formata ch'io l'averò a modo mio, non potento poi averne altra, terrolla come mia a guisa di Pigmaliione [...]. Io posso formar questa donna a modo mio» (Castiglione, 1965: 218-223). The Pygmalion imagery is here infused with Neoplatonic connotations, since the main purpose of the ideal lady is to gain the courtier's love: «perché se la bellezza, i costumi, l'ingegno, la bontà, il sapere, la modestia e tante altre virtuose condizioni che alla donna avemo date, saranno la causa dell'amor del cortegiano verso lei, necessariamente il fin ancora di questo amore sarà virtuoso» (Castiglione, 1965: 285).

Male desire to control female body is amazingly captured in another passage in Castiglione's first book, where Count Ludovico disapproves women's efforts to create an appealing image of themselves that might be deceptive to the male gaze. Here female body is disciplined through satire:

Gran desiderio universalmente tengon tutte le donne di essere e, quando esser non possono, almen di parer belle; però, dove la natura in qualche parte in questo è mancata, esse si sforzano di supplir con l'artificio. Quindi nasce l'acconciarsi la faccia con tanto studio e talor pena, pelarsi le ciglia e la fronte, ed usar tutti que' modi e partire que' fastidi, che voi altre donne credete che agli omini siano molto secreti, e pur tutti si sanno [...] perché questi vostri difetti di che io parlo vi levano la grazia, perché d'altro non nascono che da affettazione, per la qual fate conoscere ad ognuno scopertamente il troppo desiderio vostro d'esser belle [...]. Quanto più poi di tutte piace una, dico, non brutta, che si conosca chiaramente non aver cosa alcuna in su la faccia [...] ma col suo color nativo [...] coi capelli a caso inornati e mal composti e coi gesti semplici e naturali, senza mostrar industria né studio d'esser bella? (Castiglione, 1965: 67-68).

This passage conceptualizes in gender terms the well-known Castiglionic notion of *sprezzatura*. As an art of self-fashioning, *sprezzatura* requires skills that only men – of the elite – can possess. Women's self-fashioning as an artful deceit remains thus incomplete and ambiguous, a potential threat to the male-centered organization of the world. The construction of the female subject remains a male monopoly.

If Castiglione's dialogue codifies the rules that must govern female courtly performance, Agnolo Firenzuola's *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne* prescribes the *regole* on female physical beauty. It is a Neoplatonic dialogue among a young gentleman, Celso, and four noble ladies of Prato. The first part of the dialogue is set in the idyllic

garden of the Abbey of Grignano, then rented by Vannozzo Rocchi, and the second one, some days later, in the house of one of the ladies, Mona Lampiada. The male interlocutor takes the initiative to visualize and normalize female beauty, according to his knowledge and desire, and to explain to women the standards of female beauty. His intellectual authority is legitimized through his skill to set universal rules, compared with women's fragmentary and partial knowledge. Against Lady Selvaggia's claim that beauty is a matter of individual taste («Poco giudicio bisogna in questa cosa: perciò che ciascuno ci ha dentro la sua opinione, e à chi piace la bruna, e à chi la bianca») (Firenzuola, 1552: 8v), Celso privileges an objectification of the female body through a technology of normalization:

quando c'si parla d'una bella, c'si parla d'una che piaccia à ogniuno universalmente, e non particolarmente à questo e à quello [...] ma una bella universalmente [...] sarà forza che piaccia à ogniuno universalmente [...]. Egli è ben vero, che à voler essere bella perfettamente, c'ci bisognano molte cose, in modo che rade se ne trovano, che n'habbiano pur la metà (Firenzuola, 1552: 8v-9r).

As a new Zeuxis, Celso creates an ideal, imaginary woman in every detail using as his primary material the most beautiful body parts of the ladies that accompany him:

e imitando Zeusi, il quale dovendo dipingere la bella Helena a Crotoniati di tutte le loro più eleganti fanciulle, ne elesse cinque, delle quali togliendo da questa la più bella parte, et da quell'altra il simile facendo, ne formò la sua Helena, che riuscì poi così bellissima [...] e così facendo noi, tenderemo se di quattro belle, noi ne possiamo fare una bellissima (Firenzuola, 1552: 11r-v).

The female body is here dismembered and recreated through male imagination into a new hybrid body in a Neoplatonic *photoshop* process. The new creation is compared to an elusive Chimera, a hybrid, and mysterious, mythical creature: «che meglio non potevate dire che dir chimera; percioche così come la chimera si imagina, e non si trova, così quella bella che noi intendiamo dipingere, si imaginerà, e non si troverà» (Firenzuola, 1552: 29v-30r).

At the end of the dialogue, Lady Selvaggia admires Celso's achievement to paint so skillfully an ideal corporal femininity, with connotations once again to the Pygmalion legend:

mi pare che questa vostra dipintura stia come quelle che son di mano di buon maestro: e per dirne il vero ella è riuscita una cosa bellissima, e tale che se io fossi huom com io son donna e sarebbe forza che come un nuovo Pigmalione, io me ne innamorassi. E non crediate che io dica che ella sia bella, per inferir che quelle parti, che le habbiam date noi, ne sien cagione, conciosia cosa che gli ornamenti che le havete fatti voi, e le vesti che voi le havete date con le vostre dimostrazioni (Firenzuola, 1552: 45v-46r).

Women's bodies are voluntarily and fully submitted to male creative genius. Echoing the well-known Aristotelian dualism between male/form and female/matter, Firenzuola's narrative gives form to women's flesh through Celso's intellect.

2. THE BEAUTY AND THE ORATOR

In the *querelle des femmes* literature male creativity is further articulated as a rhetorical performance. In humanist imagery, eloquence signified intellectual and social superiority while speech was exemplified as a sign of human superiority. Drawing on Aristotle and Cicero, humanists such as Pier Paolo Vergerio and Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini had argued that eloquence (*oratio*) is the skill that separates men from beasts and the worthiest of men from the rest (Dialeti, 2019: 211-212). On the other hand, for women rhetorical display was often conceptualized as an act of shame. Silence was held a female virtue both in medieval Christian thought and in many early humanist texts. According to Francesco Barbaro's *De re uxoria* (1415):

So like her arms, so also a woman's words should not be public; for the voice of a woman who speaks out in public should be feared as greatly as the nakedness of her limbs [...]. Thus women should consider they have attained the glory of eloquence, if they have adorned themselves with the splendid ornament of silence (Barbaro, 2015: 106-107).

Did the *querelle des femmes* reproduce or disrupt this dominant discourse on male speech and female silence? Such as Zeuxis' painting and Pygmalion's sculpture, the *querelle des femmes* as a male rhetoric *discovers* and at the same time *invents* the feminine ideal. In this sense, the rhetorical *sculpturing* or *painting* of female excellence is an act that demonstrates after all the virtue of the orator. As Pamela Benson has aptly noted defenses of women «are exercises in paradox: women, like folly, baldness, and the ass, have not traditionally been valued, and the proof that they ought to be is an essay in proving the unprovable» (Benson, 1992: 2-3). In Sperone Speroni's *Dialogo della dignità delle donne*, Michele Barozzi explains that in their dialogue about women «non contendiamo qual vera fosse, ò qual falsa de le già dette conclusioni; ma presupposto che i circostanti, ciascheduno a suo modo, chi per diletto d'altrui, chi per far prova del suo intelletto, qual veramente per vero dire parlasse, vegnamo al fatto del referire» (Speroni, 1558: 34r). In a similar vein, Conte Alessandro Lambertino remarks in Girolamo Parabosco's *I diporti*: «Io faccio come fatte voi tutti, che componete in lode loro [donne] per meglio essercitare il vostro ingegno; il quale tanto maggiore mostrate, quanto piu illustrate, e fate nobile soggetto per se stesso vile, et tenebroso» (Parabosco, 1814: 13).

The invention of feminine ideal is cast as a male privilege. The attitude of the *querelle des femmes* writers towards women's speech is quite ambiguous though. Contrary to civic humanism's homosocial imagery of public space and speech that largely excluded women, courtly culture and rhetoric encouraged mixed conversations and reserved a crucial verbal space for women. Writers themselves often express

embarrassment towards this new gendered verbal decorum. Pietro Bembo's *Gli Asolani* (1505), set in Caterina Cornaro's Court in Asolo, in the Treviso area, is one of the earliest Neoplatonic dialogues that incorporates women as interlocutors. Women's participation in the dialogue aims primarily at encouraging and inspiring male interlocutors or even triggering rivalry among them in a chivalric tradition. The incorporation of women appears as a significant novelty, as the author explains to his readers:

Quantunque io stimo che saranno molti che mi biasimeranno in ciò, che io alla parte di queste investigazioni le donne chiami, alle quali più s'acconvena ne gli uffici delle donne dimorarsi, che andare di queste cose cercando. De' quali tuttavia non mi cale. Perciò che se essi non niegano che alla donne l'animo altresì come a gli uomini sia dato, non so io perché più ad esse che a noi si disdica il cercare che cosa egli sia, che si debba per lui fuggire, che seguitare (Bembo, 1966: 134).

It might be suggested that next to the old ideal of silence a new female decorum emerged that was epitomized in a charming, decent, witty, and reserved conversation. This entanglement between chastity and erudition is ideally formulated in Baldesar Castiglione's third book of *Il Cortegiano*, where female speech is problematized in relation to the courtly performance of femininity.

Ma sopra tutto parmi che nei modi, maniere, parole, gesti e portamenti suoi, debba la donna essere molto dissimile dall'omo [...] alla donna sta ben aver una tenerezza molle e delicata, con maniera in ogni suo movimento di dolcezza femminile, che nell'andar e stare e dir ciò che si voglia sempre la faccia parer donna, senza similitudine alcuna d'omo [...] l'esser di boni costumi, ingenua, prudente, non superba, non invidiosa, non malèdica, non vana, non contenziosa, non inetta [...] dico che a quella che vive in corte parmi convenirsi sopra ogni altra cosa una certa affabilità piacevole, per la quale sappia gentilmente intertenere ogni sorte d'omo con ragionamenti grati ed onesti [...] ma con tal maniera di bontà, che si faccia estimar non men pudica, prudente ed umana, che piacevole, arguta e discreta [...] Non deve tampoco, per mostrar d'esser libera e piacevole, dir parole disoneste, né usar una certa domestichezza intemperata e senza freno (Castiglione, 1965: 217-220).

However, as in the Genesis narrative, in Castiglione's dialogue the Courtier is created first while the Court Lady is made later on to be his ideal companion. In any case, this new female decorum is still restricted by the Paulian dualism between a man who teaches and a woman who learns. In Bembo's and Firenzuola's dialogues women ask their male companions to enlighten them on love and female beauty correspondingly. In Castiglione's dialogue Emilia Pia encourages Magnifico Giuliano to speak in a simpler way so as women to understand him. Magnifico Giuliano has already pointed out that «la donna non ha tante vie da diffendersi dalle false calunnie, come ha l'omo» (Castiglione, 1965: 219).

3. THE *QUERELLE DES FEMMES* AS A SITE OF MALE SELF-FASHIONING

Defense of women initially emerged, along with civility, grace and refinement, as constitutive of elite masculinity in fifteenth-century courts as the Italian peninsula witnessed a process of growing aristocratization. As Magnifico Giuliano remarks in Castiglione's dialogue «ognun di noi conosca che al cortegiano si convien aver grandissima riverenza alle donne [...] anzi, pochi omini di valore ho io mai conosciuti, che non amino ed osservino le donne» (Castiglione, 1965: 209). Chivalric manners, along with courtly love invested with Neoplatonic ideals, became constitutive of Castiglione's *cortegiania* as a site for the production of difference between elite and commoners. Explaining the Neoplatonic division between *amore sacro* and *amore profano* Pietro Bembo observes that the courtier should love in a manner «fuor della consuetudine del profano vulgo» (Castiglione, 1965: 375).

Service to women as a sign of social and intellectual superiority and civilized manners gradually diffused to a wider public of intellectuals who were involved as writers and readers in the flourishing book market. These imagined communities of male intellectuals were endowed with virtues such as civility, reason and eloquence. Girolamo Ruscelli invents a chivalric community of men when he argues that women «sono amate, riverite, e servite solamente da i piu veri, e piu perfetti huomini» (Ruscelli, 1552: 6). Defense of women as a sign of civilized manners was gradually rhetorically employed even by those who were not of noble origins. Coming from a family of notaries Lodovico Domenichi informs his readers that he was born and would forever be a women's servant contrary to the commoners (*vulgo*) and points out that his book will please «infiniti cavalieri, e huomini gentili, affettionatissimi servi d'amore e delle donne» (Domenichi, 1549: 9, 2r). Similarly Firenzuola remarks in his proem to the noble, beautiful ladies of Prato:

Si che donne mie belle, quando questi maligni, così nostri come miei nemici, dicono che io ho detto mal di voi, rispondete loro audacemente quello ch'io uso di dire tutto il dì, che chi con atti, con parole, con pensieri, usa di fare una minima offesa à una minima donna, ch'egli non è huomo, anzi un'animale non ragionevole, cioè è una bestia (Firenzuola, 1552: 3r).

Also for Girolamo Parabosco and Sperone Speroni it is *vulgo sciocco* (Lando, 1548: 162r) and *volgo ignorante* that despise women (Speroni, 1558: 36r). In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, as courtly culture, under Spanish influence, consolidated in most parts of Italy, gallantry towards women was explicitly articulated in terms of social status. Cristofano Bronzini, master of ceremonies at the Medici court, exemplified this courtly rhetoric, according to which defense of women emerges as a normative constituent of nobility against a plebeian, coarse masculinity:

Gl' imperatori, e regi danno loro la man dritta, i sommi principi la strada, i grandi gli cedano, i cavalieri le servono, e honorano; e tutti gli altri soggetti di qualità, non si trovano giamai così lieti, e contenti, come allora, che posson rendere

qualche straordinario honore alle pregiatissime donne. Solamente la gente vile, gli huomini di poco conto, il fango si può dire, dell'humana spezie è, che ambisce ignorantemente innalzarsi sopra le donne, e contro le donne; burlarsene, ingiuriarle, offenderle, e disprezzarle. E si come nelle case, e corti de' principi, e di ottimati, voi le vedete sempre honorate, accarezzate, servite, e honorate, così al contrario nelle picciole, e vili, non vi sentite se non grida, lamenti, mormorazioni, e querele... nè cosa alcuna genera tanto il disprezzo delle donne, come l'ignoranza, & il cattivo nutrimento (Bronzini, 1622: 6-7).

Pro-woman discourse became an act for the construction of an elite masculinity and the strengthening of homosocial bonds through group identity formation.

4. AS A CONCLUSION

The *querelle des femmes* became a site of male performance that drew on chivalric manners, Neoplatonic spirit and rhetorical creativity. Pygmalion fell in love with the statue he had curved. Nevertheless, it was his narcissistic self-image that was reflected in that statue. From this perspective, the *querelle des femmes* was a discourse on gender, as it constructed both femininities and masculinities. The relational aspect of gender is embedded in the *querelle des femmes*, or to borrow Castiglione's words «così quello non si dee chiamar maschio che non ha la femina, secondo la diffinitione dell'uno e dell'altro» (Castiglione, 1965: 230).

However, at the same time the *querelle des femmes* gave the opportunities for the emergence of new forms of femininity. By promoting the ideal of the *learned lady*, the *querelle des femmes* privileged women's growing participation in Italian intellectual milieux (Cox, 2008; Ross, 2009). According to Virginia Cox, this ideal that was first articulated by courtly humanists was a symbolic departure from scholasticism, a sign of local pride and learning, commitment to the vernacular and intellectual renewal (Cox, 2008: 28-34). The examination of the social and intellectual networks of the *querelle des femmes* in Italy has revealed women's significant contribution as patrons, readers and auditors of lectures and discussions that took place in courts and academies (Dialetti, 2019b: 679-682). The Pygmalion imagery of ideal femininity aimed at giving birth to a statue that would offer pleasure to his creator. However, in late sixteenth and seventeenth century writers such as Lucrezia Marinella, Moderata Fonte and Arcangela Tarabotti with their pro-woman texts set out to disrupt the rhetorical formulation of the *querelle des femmes* as a male performance of gallantry and the long-standing imagery of male creativity as was exemplified in the Pygmalion and Zeuxis legends.

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