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The Comedies of Alessandro Piccolomini: Searching for the Perfect Woman between Loving Initiative and Virtue

Milagro Martín-Clavijo

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Article abstract

In theoretical works such as Orazione, Della institutione, and Raffaella, the Italian writer, scientist, and philogynist Alessandro Piccolomini (1508–78) outlines the characteristics that should make up the perfect woman. In his comedies—Alessandro and L'Amor costante—focusing mainly on the theme of love, Piccolomini presents some of the same ideas, articulating them through his noble and cultured female characters. This article examines Piccolomini's dramatic productions in light of his treatises and other writings on women in order to underline his originality in the creation of these female characters. On the one hand, they are models of virtue and decorum; on the other, they demonstrate an unusual degree of initiative in love. They are conscious of their desires, and they defend their right to choose their lovers. In this way, Piccolomini describes new traits of the perfect woman.

The Comedies of Alessandro Piccolomini: Searching for the Perfect Woman between Loving Initiative and Virtue

MILAGRO MARTÍN-CLAVIJO
Universidad de Salamanca

In theoretical works such as Orazione, Della institutione, *and* Raffaella, *the Italian writer, scientist, and philogynist Alessandro Piccolomini (1508–78) outlines the characteristics that should make up the perfect woman. In his comedies*—Alessandro *and* L'Amor costante—*focusing mainly on the theme of love, Piccolomini presents some of the same ideas, articulating them through his noble and cultured female characters. This article examines Piccolomini's dramatic productions in light of his treatises and other writings on women in order to underline his originality in the creation of these female characters. On the one hand, they are models of virtue and decorum; on the other, they demonstrate an unusual degree of initiative in love. They are conscious of their desires, and they defend their right to choose their lovers. In this way, Piccolomini describes new traits of the perfect woman.*

Dans ses œuvres théoriques et suivant différentes approches – Orazione, Della institutione, *et la* Raffaella – *l'écrivain italien, homme de sciences et philogyne, Alessandro Piccolomini (1508–78) esquisse ce que devraient être les caractéristiques de la femme parfaite. Dans ses comédies* – Alessandro *et* L'Amor costante – *l'auteur présente quelques-unes de ces idées touchant principalement au domaine amoureux et incarnées par des figures féminines d'une grande noblesse d'esprit et cultivées. Cet article se propose d'examiner la production dramatique de Piccolomini à la lumière de ses traités et écrits qui s'intéressent aux femmes afin de mettre en évidence l'originalité de l'auteur quant à la création de ses personnages féminins : d'un côté, il s'agit de modèles de vertu et de dignité, de l'autre, ces femmes font preuve d'une grande initiative en amour, elles sont conscientes de leur désir et défendent avec fermeté leur droit à choisir. Ainsi, ce savant de la Renaissance façonne une figure nouvelle de la femme parfaite.*

Alessandro Piccolomini, the Academy of the Intronati, and the female audience

Alessandro Piccolomini (1508–78) was an important Italian humanist who stood out for his production as an astronomer, philosopher, essayist, poet, and playwright.[1] An active member of the Academy of the Intronati of Siena

1. On the life and production of Alessandro Piccolomini, see Rossi, "Le opere letterarie"; Cerreta, *Alessandro Piccolomini*; Celse-Blanc, "Alessandro Piccolomini"; Guidotti, "Alessandro Piccolomini"; Piéjus, Plaisance, and Residori, *Alessandro Piccolomini*.

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since 1531, he shared with this institution his program of vernacular outreach,[2] his philogyny,[3] and a distinguished taste for paradox and provocation.[4] From 1540 on, Piccolomini continued his philosophical and literary career in Padua, where he played a leading role in the Academy of the Infiammati. In this capacity, he was committed to disseminating scientific and philosophical works, including his *De la sfera del mondo* and *De le stelle fisse*, to a wide audience as well as to translating and commenting on Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*. As a poet, he published the volume *Cento sonetti* in 1549, following the Petrarchan tradition. This intense intellectual activity was accompanied by an ecclesiastical career that culminated in the archiepiscopate of Patras.

In this article, we shall consider in particular Piccolomini's role as a playwright. First, we will consider his writing for the theatre—both individual[5] and collective[6] works—and then his direction of plays and fruitful collaboration with the Academy of the Intronati in Siena and the Academy of the Infiammati in Padua,[7] alongside various interventions in theoretical debates about theatre and theatrical experimentation.[8]

In order to analyze the innovative female figures that Piccolomini presents in his two single-authored comedies, *L'Amor costante* and *Alessandro*, in relation to a non-canonical vision of female perfection in the Renaissance, it is necessary to understand the context in which they were written and performed:

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2. Piccolomini was a translator of classic works such as Virgil's *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid into the vernacular.

3. Among others, see his *Orazione in lode delle donne* and *Dialogo della bella creanza delle donne.*

4. Tomasi, "Alessandro Piccolomini."

5. *L'Amor costante* (1536) and *Alessandro* (1544).

6. *Ortensio* (1560). On collective authorship at the Academy of the Intronati, see Newbigin, "Piccolomini drammaturgo sperimentale," 164–65; Riccò, *La miniera accademica*, 108–16.

7. On the works of collective authorship in the Academy of the Intronati, see Seragnoli, *Il teatro a Siena,* 93–134; Riccò, *La miniera accademica,* 119–64; Vallieri, "Drammaturgie imperiali," 308.

8. In this sense, we should note the idea of the Infiammati staging Speroni's tragedy *Canace* with Angelo Beolco, a project that was never carried out due to the untimely death of Ruzante (Vallieri, "Drammaturgie imperiali," 308). Piccolomini is also the author of an interesting project on the characters of the theatre. In the astronomical treatise *De la sfera del mondo*, he mentions a project to theorize the comic character, in which 500 scenes are outlined with the different types of people that can be portrayed in comedies. On this topic, see Seragnoli, *Il teatro a Siena*, 93–134; Seragnoli, "La struttura del personaggio"; Picquet, "L'Espagnol," 50.

the Academy of the Intronati and the importance of the female audience in Siena during the 1530s and 1540s. Under the name of Stordito, Piccolomini was a member of the Academy of the Intronati in Siena from the 1530s on and soon became a leading intellectual there.[9] In this politically turbulent period in Siena, there was neither a court nor a prince, leaving the Sienese academies a wider margin of intellectual independence and greater freedom to experiment than in other centres of learning.[10] The theatre in Siena during this period was linked principally to two academies, those of the Rozzi and the Intronati, where members' works were conceived, written, and staged. Among the different theatrical genres, the Intronati favoured comedy.[11] Some notable examples are *Gl'ingannati*, *L'Ortensio*, *Gli scambi, Pellegrina*, *Il Fortunio*, and *L'Aurelia*.

In general, the view of academicians in sixteenth-century Italy, as Alexandra Coller well synthesizes, does not manifest a "liberal attitude toward the female sex."[12] However, the Academy of the Intronati of Siena is certainly an exception to the rule,[13] as is evident in much of its production, both collective and individual.[14] In fact, the elite women of Siena participated directly in the activities of the Academy, and the Intronati in turn dedicated a large part of their works to them,[15] considered them their source of inspiration, praised their intelligence, their culture, their virtue, and explicitly put themselves at their service. The particular attention paid by Sienese academicians to their female audience reveals a clear openness to a wider public, from both a social and a cultural point of view, than the limited court elite. In this sense, Riccardo

9. On Piccolomini and his relationship with the Academy of the Intronati, see Tomasi, "L'Accademia degli Intronati."

10. Seragnoli, *Il teatro a Siena*, 85.

11. On the reasons for and consequences of this preference, see Seragnoli, *Il teatro a Siena*, 88–89.

12. Coller, "Sienese Accademia," 223.

13. On this particularity of the Academy of the Intronati, see, among others, Coller, "Sienese Accademia"; Brizio, "Il *Dialogo de' giuochi*"; Seragnoli, *Il teatro a Siena*; Costa, "La réception française"; Piéjus, "Venus bifrons."

14. Alexandra Coller analyzes several of these representative documents: *Orazione* (1536) by Alessandro Piccolomini, *Dialogo* (1538) by Marcoantonio Piccolomini, *Dell'economia* (1555) by Aonio Palerario, and *Dialogo de' giuochi* (1572) by Girolamo Bargagli. See Coller, "Sienese Accademia."

15. It is customary for members of the Academy of the Intronati to dedicate their works to the ladies of Siena. Piccolomini is no exception: he dedicates to Laudomia Forteguerri *De la Sfera del Mondo, De le Stelle fisse*, *Instiluzione di tutta la vita*, and *Orazione in lode delle donne*. Probably this lady had an important role in the composition of *Raffaella*. Costa, "La réception française," 238.

Bruscagli emphasizes that "quel pubblico, sia maschile sia femminile" (this audience, both male and female), less "letterato" (educated) and less "atto ai ragionamenti astratti" (capable of abstract reasoning), justifies the festive and "tonalità mondana delle opere degli accademici" (worldly tone of the works of the academicians).[16] These ladies participated actively in the games of the *veglie* organized by the Intronati; this means that they enjoyed greater autonomy than women usually did, that their opinions on literary and social issues were taken into consideration, and that they were considered to be capable of contributing to such debates. In addition, some of them also participated as writers.

In sum, taking up Elena Brizio's words in reference to the Sienese women that appear in Girolamo Bargagli's *Dialogo de' giuochi*, "they were socially and politically engaged."[17] They were, therefore, also among the spectators of the comedies that the Academy presented each year at Carnival, and these comedies are explicitly addressed to them.[18] Let us take a look, for example, at the prologue to *L'Amor costante*, where the centrality of this female audience for the success of the comedy is confirmed. In exchange, the Intronati offer edifying role models to help educate these women:

> Gentilissime donne, […] questi Intronati son piú vostri che fusser mai e da voi hanno ciò che gli hanno e ogni giorno piú s'aveggono che, senza voi, male potrebben fare e hanno piú di bisogno di voi che di generazione che sia al mondo. Però vi pregan di cuore che li vogliate oggi far favore in questa loro comedia, perché da voi depende il tutto. […] E, per guidardon di questa grazia, se ce la farete, vi ammaestraremo, con la nostra comedia, quanto un amor costante (donde piglia il nome la comedia) abbia sempre buon fine e quanto manifesto error sia abbandonarsi nelle aversitá amo-

16. Quoted in Piéjus, "L'*Orazione*," 530. All translations are my own.

17. Brizio, "Il *Dialogo de' giuochi*."

18. In the prologue to the comedy L'*Ortensio*, a collective work of the Intronati, it is clearly stated: "Intronati debitori di una commedia all'anno" alle donne per farle salire "a maggior grado di fama e d'onore […] per poter più degnamente amare, lodare e celebrare le donne, procurando di continuo con diverse sorti di giuochi, di dispute, di feste e d'altre simili invenzioni di porgere qualche onesto sollazzo a gli animi loro" (The Intronati owe women one play a year, in order to raise them to a higher degree of fame and honour, […] to be able to love, praise, and celebrate women more worthily, continually striving with various classes of games, discussions, parties, and other similar inventions to give honest comfort to their souls). Quoted in Seragnoli, *Il teatro a Siena*, 140.

> rose: perché quel pietosissimo dio che si chiama Amore non abbandona mai chi con fermezza lo serve.[19]
>
> (Dear ladies, […] the Intronati are more yours than ever and have received from you everything they have; and every day they realize that, without you, they would not fare well and that they have need of you more than of any other generation in the world. That is why I beg you with all my heart that you show them favour today in respect to this comedy of theirs, because everything depends on you. […] And, as a reward for your favour, if you grant it to us, we will teach you, with our comedy, how constant love (from which comedy takes its name) always has a good end and how evident is the error of giving up in love's adversity: because that most merciful god who is called Love never abandons those who serve him with conviction.)

In this same work, at the end of the fifth act, the servant Sguazza again addresses the women of Siena, reinforcing what has already been said in the prologue.[20]

The centrality of women in Piccolomini's treatises

Keeping this female audience in Siena well in mind, Piccolomini will, like the other Intronati, focus some of his works on women, on the role they play in society, and on how they relate to the other sex. Moreover, he will openly defend them and praise their virtues. In this regard, there are three works that interest us: *Orazione*, *Della institutione*, and *Raffaella*.

In 1539, Piccolomini published a dialogue entitled *La Raffaella, ovvero Dialogo della bella creanza delle donne*.[21] The interlocutors are two women: Raffaella, who is older and gives advice to a young married woman, Margarita. The intention of the author is clear already in the prologue of the work: his foremost audience is the women of Siena, and he writes this volume to remedy the artificial position of inferiority in which they find themselves and in which they are often doomed to social marginalization and condemned to

19. Piccolomini, *L'Amor costante*, ed. Sanesi, 8.

20. Piccolomini, *L'Amor costante,* 124.

21. On this treaty, see, among others, Plastina, "Politica amorosa"; Costa, "La réception française"; and, fundamentally, Piéjus, "Venus bifrons."

unhappiness because of ignorance. The author teaches them how to behave in society—from how to dress to how to act in social gatherings to how to choose a lover. He applies to women and to the most intimate sphere of their lives the norms of simulation/dissimulation that were so in vogue among aristocratic men of the time, but always with the condition that the honesty and reputation of the woman be preserved. In this way, the Italian intellectual grants women the capacity and passion for love without compromising their integration in society or separating them from the artificial ideal of woman. This work, which was very successful in Siena, was also the subject of controversy. In fact, years later, in the midst of the Counter-Reformation, when Piccolomini wrote *Della institutione*—that is, when he had already consolidated his ecclesiastical career as well as his reputation as a philosopher and writer—he tried to distance himself from the earlier dialogue.[22]

Della institutione di tutta la vita dell'huomo nato nobile, et in città libera (1542) is one of the most important behavioural treatises of the sixteenth century.[23] In 1560, Piccolomini revised it carefully, increased the number of books from ten to twelve, and changed its title to *Institution morale*.[24] In this work, which is dedicated to the son of Laudomia Forteguerri, he deals with the education of the individual, from birth to marriage, and proposes for all nobles of free cities the same values defended by the Academy of the Intronati: this work is about education, but also about "pleasure, civic responsibility, and romantic love."[25] While covering all ages of men, the author devotes a fairly wide space to women, especially in books 9 (about love) and 10 (about marriage) of the first edition.[26] Piccolomini defends marriage and maintains at least the appearance of the more traditional conjugal obligations—the chastity and honesty of women—but also a certain freedom for the love relationships that

22. Some critics have considered that retraction to be insincere and defend the existence a common thread running between the two works. See Plastina, "Politica amorosa," 82; Costa, "La réception française," 240.

23. On *Della institutione*, see Fahy, "Love and Marriage"; Pièjus, "L'*Orazione*."

24. This revision was carried out during the period of the Counter-Reformation and therefore gives a central place to morality and spirituality. In this way, marriage now becomes the centre of the woman's life, and she is once again obliged to fulfill her obligations as a wife and a mother, with no possibility of escape. Thus, woman becomes a muse, an object of purely spiritual union. Pièjus, "L'*Orazione*," 544.

25. Zimmerman, "Defeat and Re-playing," 201.

26. On these topics, see Pièjus, "L'*Orazione*," 537–40; Del Fante, "Amore, famiglia e matrimonio."

were so common in Sienese society in the middle of the century (as evident in the *Dialogo de' giuochi*).

Finally, *Orazione in lode delle donne* (1545) is a short speech rooted in the Sienese tradition that Piccolomini probably read before the Academy of the Intronati. Its explicit objective is "rendere un servizio agli Intronati: hanno perduto la via del cielo ed errano come ciechi, dimenticanto che solo l'amore, e dunque le donne, vero pegno dato da Dio agli uomini, ve li possono condurre" (to render a service to the Intronati: they have lost their way to heaven and wander blind, forgetting that only love, and therefore woman, is the true guarantee that God has given to men and that it can lead them there).[27] The author published this speech following the appearance of the Italian version of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's famous treatise, *De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus*. In this way, the Sienese intellectual enters fully into the controversy around women, already widespread in the mid-sixteenth century.

Women are praised in *Orazione*, albeit in an abstract way—that is to say, no examples are provided of female figures that embody virtue. Misogynist theses are turned around, especially those of Aristotelian origin, in such a way that, starting from the natural inferiority of women, one arrives at the conclusion of their superiority. As Carolyn Zimmerman states, "These arguments for the equality and inclusion of women were not a feminization of the group, as has been claimed, but rather a radical reformulation of the gender dynamic of the civic, academic, and cultural worlds."[28]

As we have seen, the interest in the female figure is clear in Piccolomini's other works from the same period as his two comedies. In these treatises, there are representations of women that, at first glance, may seem contradictory but that, as we will see in his comedies, are harmoniously interwoven. The works of the Sienese author present elements that remain unchanged over time and that have much to do with the objectives and priorities of the Academy of the Intronati.

The female figure in Piccolomini's comedies

The three works examined in the previous section cover a period from at least 1539 (the year of the publication of *Raffaella*) to 1545 (the publication

27. Piccolomini, *Orazione*, ed. Pièjus, 546.

28. Zimmerman, "Defeat and Re-playing," 317.

of *Orazione*). Piccolomini's two comedies were also written, performed, and published in those years: *L'Amor costante* was composed in 1536 and *Alessandro* in 1544. They therefore belong to the same period and, as we will see, share many points in common with Piccolomini's theoretical treaties.

L'Amor costante is Piccolomini's first comedy.[29] He wrote it in 1536 at the behest of the Academy of the Intronati to celebrate the arrival of Emperor Charles V in Siena,[30] although it is very likely that it was not ultimately performed on that occasion.[31] The work is divided into five acts and set in a very precise time and space: we are in Pisa (although we are witnessing a continuous exchange between Pisa and Siena) and in moments close to the writing. Piccolomini attaches great importance to the scenography, makes use of a very high number of characters, and shows great linguistic originality.[32] As Nerida Newbigin points out, plots and characters from other comedies of the time, such as Ariosto's *I Suppositi* and *L'Aurelia* and *Prigioni* of the Intronati, are woven into the work.[33]

The story begins a few years before the action: the Castilian nobleman Pedr'Antonio is forced to leave his homeland for political reasons in order to escape death. Before going into exile, he sent his son Ioandoro to the Roman Curia to start an ecclesiastical career and left his daughter Ginevra in the hands of his brother Consalvo. Ginevra falls in love with Ferrante and, faced with her uncle's opposition to the marriage, decides to run away with him and marry secretly. On their sea voyage, they are captured by pirates and separated, and the couple live for many years without news of each other. Eventually, we see Ginevra at the house of Guglielmo (who is none other than her father) in Pisa, where she lives under the name of Lucrezia. For his part, Ferrante is freed by the imperial army in 1535, enlists in the guard on his return to Italy, and passes through this city where he meets Ginevra/Lucrezia. To test how she still feels about him, he enters her home as a servant under the name Lorenzino. At the same time, Ioandoro is also in Pisa under the identity of Messer Giannino. We

29. For a general introduction to this text, see Newbigin, preface to *L'Amor costante*.

30. On the political and cultural project of comedy, see Seragnoli, *Il teatro a Siena*, 46–66; Newbigin, "Piccolomini drammaturgo sperimentale."

31. On the productions of this comedy, see Vallieri, "Drammaturgie imperiali," 296–307.

32. On the multilingualism of *L'Amor costante*, see Picquet, "L'Espagnol," 50.

33. Newbigin, preface to *L'Amor costante*, 12.

now have Ginevra/Lucrezia's brother, father, and husband all in the same place, but all with different identities and a secret to keep.

It is in this context that Piccolomini centres the plot that revolves around two loves: the one of Ferrante/Lorenzino for Ginevra/Lucrezia, and the one of Ioandoro/Giannino for a woman who will later be revealed to be his sister. To close the plot, Consalvo arrives in Pisa with the news of the end of hostilities in Castile. The true identities then come to light, and everything is resolved with a happy ending: Ferrante and Ginevra are back together with the blessing of her father and uncle, and Ioandoro decides to marry Margarita, daughter of the teacher Giucciardo and a young woman who has proven her love and constancy. In fact, this second love story starring Margarita is continually intertwined with the first one. These characters are accompanied in the work by a poet, Messer Ligonio Caraffi, and by a good number of servants and maids, among them Panzana, Sguazza, and Agnoletta.

In this brief presentation of the convoluted plot, we met three female figures that stand out in the play that we will analyze: Ginevra/Lucrezia, Margarita, and Agnoletta.

Piccolomini's second comedy, *Alessandro*, was first performed at the 1544 Carnival in Siena and published a year later.[34] It is a work that received numerous editions and performances during the sixteenth century and that greatly influenced other comedies.[35] Again, as Piccolomini emphasizes in his *Annotationi* on Aristotle's *Poetics*, he composed it for the women of Siena.[36]

The title of the play is certainly misleading because Alessandro is a secondary character, a friend of the protagonist Cornelio, without much of a role in the action. But, as the playwright himself confesses in the 1545 edition, he chose this name to discreetly claim the paternity of the play.[37] Like *L'Amor costante*, it is divided into five acts, and the action takes place in Pisa, a city with strong political connotations in those years. Here Piccolomini also proposes the initial separation of two lovers—Lucrezia and Aloisio—for political reasons. In this case, the separation takes place in Palermo, another city agitated

34. The play was adapted by the English dramatist George Chapman into *May Day* (1611). On Piccolomini's comedy, see the critical edition and the introduction by Florindo Cerreta.

35. Plaisance, "Alessandro (1544)," 187.

36. See Plaisance, "Alessandro (1544)," 171.

37. Plaisance, "Alessandro (1544)," 182.

by different political factions and from which the protagonists have to escape with their lives.[38] Seven years later, the lovers meet again in Pisa under different identities, but this time it is not only a change of name but also a change of gender: Lucrezia will introduce herself as Fortunio, and Aloisio as Lampridia, and they will remain that way until the end of the comedy. On stage, we witness Lucrezia/Fortunio falling in love with Aloisio/Lampridia, apparently succumbing to a homosexual passion.[39] On the other hand, we witness Cornelio's love affair with Lucilla, who is engaged to Lonardo Lanfranchi. The plot intertwines the stories of the two couples in love, who will be surprised alone in their rooms—a situation in which the honesty of the two ladies (Lucrezia/Fortunio and Lucilla) is clearly at stake. Also, here we have secondary plots intertwined with the main ones and featuring the elders Vicenzo, Fabrizio, and Costanzo; Captain Malgidi and his wife Brigida; and the servants Querciuola, Ruzza, Fagiuolo, Angela, and Niccoletta. The play grants us the traditional happy ending with the announcement of the celebration of both couples' weddings and the resolution of the conflicts in Palermo.

The central female figures that we will study in Piccolomini's *Alessandro* are Lucrezia/Fortunio, Aloisio/Lampridia, Lucilla, and Niccoletta.

Here we are mainly interested in the portrayal of women who display a more active virtue than traditionally appears in the proto-feminist treatises of the sixteenth century, but who nevertheless do not deviate from the ideal of Renaissance women. Such a conception of female characters is probably closer to the women Boccaccio presents in *De mulieribus claris* and to the protagonists of Renaissance tragedy. In fact, as Paola Cosentino well illustrates in his article "Tragiche eroine: Virtù femminili fra poesia drammatica e trattati sul comportamento," the women who appear in Renaissance tragedy are generally endowed with great strength, determination, and extraordinary courage in difficult and extreme situations.[40] These women represent an unusual virtue, ambiguously situated between what is allowed and what is not allowed, but that does not exclude them from consideration as perfect women according to the

38. For more information on the political background of this work, see Plaisance, "Alessandro (1544)," 176–78.

39. In this sense, it is evident that Piccolomini "joue au maximum sur l'ambiguïté des apparences qu'engendre le travestissement." Plaisance, "Alessandro (1544)," 186.

40. Cosentino, "Tragiche eroine," 71.

standards of the time. We will also find this active attitude in the female figures of Piccolomini's comedies.

The perfect woman in Piccolomini's comedies

Virtue and feminine decorum

As Daniele Seragnoli points out, the Intronati share the ideal of social, ethical, and aesthetic perfection typical of Renaissance courts. For them, this model is necessary for achieving a spiritual balance, and they therefore try to practise the utopian social relations characteristically represented in the behavioural treatises of the period.[41] In this practical realization of the ideals of perfection, the female figure receives special attention from the Intronati, who respond to it repeatedly, as has already been mentioned.

Let us start from the idea of feminine perfection that was more common in the Renaissance.[42] Since the protagonists of these two comedies are still single women, their virtue is closely linked to their loving behaviour and is therefore subject to rituals and values that are different for men and women. Very often in literature these values go hand in hand with the codification of courtly love, which in the first half of the sixteenth century reached very high levels of conventionality and rigidity.

Like that of most scholars of the Academy of the Intronati, Alessandro Piccolomini's works both reflect and diffuse this respect for the courtly ideal and the norms that it entails. The city of Siena and its women had likewise adopted these widespread practices in the sixteenth century. In Seragnoli's words, a concept of courtesy as decorum and convenience was therefore put

41. Seragnoli, *Il teatro a Siena*, 85–86.

42. In the third book of Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*, the perfect court lady is described and distinguished by her rank and by her physical and moral qualities. Among these qualities are not only her grace and refined manners but more especially her honesty, accompanied by temperance, magnanimity, continence, constancy, discretion, and prudence. As stated by Marie-Catherine Barbazza and Claudel Roussel in their definition of "lady," this notion of an ideal lady "prend ainsi valeur de programme : au-delà du clivage physiologique des sexes, elle propose un idéal social et appartient de ce fait à la sphère sémantique du savoir-vivre. Associant à une beauté irréprochable une vertu exigeante, une humilité altière." Barbazza and Roussel, "Dame," 197. The imperfect woman will be endowed with the opposite qualities, so that every woman should flee from all immodest, lewd, inconstant, and rough behaviour, which would be regarded negatively by society and result in social marginalization.

into practice: that is, "l'agire adeguato sotto lo sguardo altrui, una disciplina e una regola da imporsi secondo norme di comportamento canoniche, osservare gli avvenimenti dall'interno ed essere osservati quali diretti interpreti" (to act appropriately under the gaze of others, a discipline and a rule that are imposed according to the canonical norms of conduct, to observe events from inside and be observed as direct interpreters).[43] The principle that will unify all these norms is virtue,[44] a very broad term in which various different qualities converge: the *virtù del corpo*, such as tenderness, grace, sensitivity, and physical beauty; the *virtù d'animo*, such as prudence, temperance, constancy, honesty, continence, and chastity;[45] and the *virtù relazionali*, such as discretion, moderation, affability, respect, convenience, grace, *sprezzatura*, and care for one's reputation.[46] If we focus on the theme of love—the central theme of the comedies under consideration—female virtue means, on the one hand, chastity and continence and, on the other, following the ritual of courtly love, thereby encouraging men towards spiritual love through physical beauty.

In *L'Amor costante*, all the young protagonists are considered virtuous women, and indeed the title itself emphasizes their constancy and their fidelity to their loved ones in the face of difficulties. For Ferrante/Lorenzino, Ginevra/Lucrezia remains as she was in the past, a woman who sighed "per amor mio; nondimeno star costantissima in defensione de l'onestá sua, rispondendomi sempre che molto piú presto voleva morir per amarmi che vituperarsi per contentarmi" (for my love; however, very constant when it comes to defending her honesty, always answering me that she would be willing to die for loving me

43. Seragnoli, *Il teatro a Siena*, 184.

44. A definition of virtue in relation to the superiority of one individual over another is expounded by Guido Ruggiero, who recalls that this definition has changed over the centuries, since it implies concrete social practices rooted in specific times and places: "virtù stressed reason, moderation and self-control sliding toward cunning and *furbizia* (cleverness that is slightly immoral, self-serving, yet effective), essentially the values of an urban elite that could be shared widely in an urban environment, where older feudal noble values of direct confrontation, violence, and manly force were increasingly seen as disruptive and dangerous to a civilized existence." Ruggiero, *Renaissance in Italy*, 16.

45. Margaret King points out the importance of chastity for women owing to the fact that it assured them "futuros esposos de su propio linaje, la legitimidad de sus herederos y la reputación de su familia" (future husbands of their own lineage, the legitimacy of their heirs and the reputation of their family). King, *Mujeres renacentistas*, 59–60. Hence the importance of protecting it, where both the women themselves and their families were concerned.

46. Romagnoli, "La donna del Cortegiano," 111.

rather than discredit herself for pleasing me).[47] Pedr'Antonio/Guglielmo also considers her "la donna piú casta; te né amor piú costante" (the most chaste woman; the most constant love), as does Consalvo: "Mai conobbi in persona del mondo tanta costanzia quanta in questa nostra Ginevra" (Never in any person in the world have I known so much constancy as in our Ginevra).[48] She embodies a constant spiritual love that, as we will see, does not exclude desire.

In this same comedy, the servant Agnoletta makes a portrait of Messer Giannino's wife Margarita: "bella, nobile, giovene di sedici anni, gentile, liberale, costumata, morbida, bianca, soda, dilicata, pastosa, bella persona, buon fiato, appetitosa" (beautiful, noble, a young girl of sixteen, kind, generous, educated, soft, white, firm, delicate, tender, a charming person, good breath, appetizing).[49] Here we find the canonical characteristics of Petrarchism (beautiful, kind, educated), but also others that, without coming into conflict with the former, normally do not appear in the portrait of a high-ranking woman, since they belong to the erotic sphere and tend to reveal another aspect of the young woman's personality (analyzed in detail below). Fundamentally, Margarita is considered virtuous because of her constancy in love. At the end of the fifth act, the servant Agnoletta points her out as a valid example for all women: "Imparate, donne, da costei a esser costanti nei pensier vostri; e non dubitate, poi. Imparate voi, amanti, a non abbandonarvi nelle miserie e soffrir le passioni per fin che venghino le prosperitá" (Learn, women, from her to be constant in your thoughts; and do not hesitate. Learn, lovers, not to abandon yourselves to adversity and to suffer passions until more prosperous times come).[50]

In *Alessandro*, Vicenzo praises Lucilla in the same way: "E io ti giuro, che non vidi mai donna così devota, così saggia, e ben risoluta, com'è costei. […] Se tu conoscessi ben l'animo di questa giovine, tu stupiresti" (And I swear to you that I have never seen a woman so pious, so wise, and so determined as she. […] If you knew well the nature of this young woman, you would be amazed).[51] Cornelio also continues with this sort of praise: "Lucilla è la più saggia, la più casta, e la più integra donna, ch'io vedessi mai" (Lucilla is the wisest, the most

47. Piccolomini, *L'Amor costante*, 43–44.

48. Piccolomini, *L'Amor costante*, 112, 113.

49. Piccolomini, *L'Amor costante*, 27.

50. Piccolomini, *L'Amor costante*, 120–21.

51. Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 15–16.

chaste, the most upright woman that I have ever seen).[52] As we see here, all the young lovers shine for their canonical virtue, for their honest behaviour, and always within the limits of decorum.

Female initiative and loving freedom

In this brief presentation of the main female figures of Alessandro Piccolomini's comedies, we can see the sublimation to which they are subjected by these educated male characters. Although it is true that the debate around platonic love dominates in the treatises of the first half of the sixteenth century, this perspective completely leaves out the other side of love—the physical, the carnal—in short, a more hedonistic conception of love, which did not often appear in popular literature or, as we shall see, in the theatre.[53] The Renaissance shows us this other side of love and reveals a society open to other themes, such as sensuality and female eroticism.[54] In this way, pleasure is perceived as something positive, a necessary condition for a happy and harmonious life, and not as an evil or an obstacle to the life of virtue. The goal lies in rationalizing that pleasure; in this way, pleasure is incorporated into life, especially in the sphere of love, but without ever necessitating an uncompromising defense of *voluptas*. The Academy of the Intronati defended the importance of pleasure as something inherent in the human being and essential to achieving happiness and a harmonious and balanced life. In this respect, its members participated in the recovery of Epicurean philosophy. Importance is thus accorded to the body, and desire has its own space—provided that it be natural, moderate, and non-transgressive.

52. Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 81.

53. Renaissance hedonism is considered an important element in the process of the renewal of the individual and society. The importance of Epicureanism and its revaluation in various humanistic circles is confirmed from the fourteenth century by a clear attempt to reconcile hedonism with Christianity. On the basis of certain elements of Epicurean philosophy, some humanists address the subject of pleasure and happiness, although it is true this perspective departs from the hegemonic currents of thought. On the importance of these theories for the Italian humanists, see Vilar, "Concepciones del placer."

54. Perugini, "*Canone inverso*," 45. Piccolomini himself reveals this in his volume *Cento sonetti* (1549), where he follows the canon of Petrarchan poetry but also includes compositions belonging to a different tradition, where the pleasures of less spiritual love are sung and hedonism is emphasized. On *Cento sonetti,* see Refini, "*Le gioconde favole*."

In sixteenth-century Italian theatre, it is not uncommon to find female figures who are strong, determined, and willful—women of action, far removed from the stereotypes presented by high literature. Laura Giannetti Ruggiero analyzes the transgressive female characters who appear in *La Calandria del Bibbiena* (Fulvia and Santilla) and in *La Veniexiana* (Valeria and Angela), concluding that comedy actively contributes

> alla costruzione ideologica di quel discorso intorno all'identità femminile, che la società rinascimentale andava componendo sul piano dei trattati e dei dialoghi moralistici. Rappresentando il fare di personaggi femminili devianti dalla norma domestica di castità, passività e obbedienza, la commedia implicitamente ne riconosce l'esistenza nella pratica sociale.[55]
>
> (to the ideological construction of that discourse around female identity that Renaissance society developed through moralistic treatises and dialogues. By depicting the actions of female characters that deviate from the domestic norm of chastity, passivity, and obedience, the comedy implicitly acknowledges their existence in social practice.)

This is the case of some female characters in Piccolomini's comedies, although they never go as far as transgression. As pointed out by the servant Nicoletta to Lucrezia/Fortunio in *Alessandro*, there is in reality more than one type of women: they have "di varie voglie, e di vari cervelli" (different desires and talents). It is not possible to pigeonhole women into a single restrictive model. Some "son pronte e ardite, che apertamente richieggono quasi gli amanti loro" (are determined and brave and seek their lovers almost openly). Others have fun just having men continuously at their feet, without giving them anything in return. Others again are not so direct, but they find a discreet way to "godere e mantener l'onor loro" (enjoy and keep their honor).[56] Shortly before, in a conversation between the servant Niccoletta and Aloisio/Lamprinia, the playwright insists on the same idea: "Ci son tante delle altre; e quelle, che voi

55. Giannetti Ruggiero, "*Feminae ludentes*," 66. Coller shares this opinion, affirming that the Academy of the Intronati's "positive exploration of a female subjectivity that is not bound by the traditional patriarchal imperatives of 'silence,' 'obedience,' and 'passivity,' is significant and worthy of note." Coller, "Sienese Accademia," 236.

56. Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 36–37.

stimate che manco lo facciano, son quelle che, più savie delle altre, più lo fanno, e lo san tener segreto, se non se ne vantano come certe pazzarelle" (There are many others; and those that you think do not do it are the ones who, being smarter than the rest, do it the most, and know how to keep it a secret, but they do not brag about it like some foolish women).[57] This is the reality of women, while idealized norms are no more than a façade, as the author already affirmed in his dialogue *Raffaella*.

So, while according to the model of courtly and Neoplatonic love, women do not have desires in the erotic sphere, real women, by contrast, who are not stereotyped or reduced to a utopian model, do have desires and, moreover, are aware of these carnal impulses. The point of *Alessandro* is probably to bring out this other, less well-known face of Renaissance woman, the one most incompatible with the predominantly academic and therefore mostly abstract culture of the time. In this sense, the women of Siena—the privileged recipients of Piccolomini's comedies—were very used to the game. As Girolamo Bargagli points out in *Dialogo de' giuochi*, they participated in numerous plays that did not exactly correspond to the feminine ideal and in which, as Marie-Françoise Piéjus emphasizes, erotic elements clearly predominate.[58] For all these reasons, Piccolomini's works present the figure of woman as much more complex and more realistic, although without ever infringing upon the standards of decorum.[59] Similarly, they enrich their treatment of the theme of love by approaching it from different perspectives. In this way, in Piccolomini's comedies—as in all the comedies of the Intronati in general—idealism and hedonism coexist without much conflict, and this is equally true in the case of upper-class couples. This innovative aspect was already a recurring element in Piccolomini's literary production at the time: in the dialogue *Raffaella*, the eponymous protagonist, who, although ruined, belongs to the ruling class of Siena, advises Margarita, a young, rich, and cultured woman, on how to find and enjoy love despite being married. It matters little whether one considers the work a manual for female adultery or a philogynous treatise to help women escape the suffocation of the daily restrictions imposed on them by social norms. Piccolomini defends

57. Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 21.

58. Piéjus, "L'*Orazione*," 532.

59. On the question of whether the Intronati follow the principles of courtly love or their opposite, and on the extension and distortion of the ideals and norms disseminated by Castiglione, see Seragnoli, *Il teatro a Siena*, 194.

the right of women to love with all their senses, including sexual desire, and considers it necessary for their well-being and their happiness. For this reason, in both his comedies we find extensive speeches in defense of the philosophy expressed in the Epicurean maxim *carpe diem*.

In *Alessandro*, the servant Nicoletta[60] tries to convince her young lady Aloisio/Lamprinia of this: "E perché son fatte le bellezze? Per lasciarle consumare alla polvere e ai ragnatelli, ah? […] Pensate a quel che sarete e non a quel che siete" (And what are beauties for? To let dust and cobwebs consume them? […] Think about what you will be and not what you are).[61] In *L'Amor costante*, the servant Agnoletta tries to convince her young lady Margarita in the same terms, to which she, like Rafaella, adds her own experience: "Questo giovane e questo bello passa presto e non ritorna. […] Io pruovo per me: che, se ben non so' per anco da gittare a' cani, […] ho a pregar sempre il compagno, dove ch'allora ero la pregata io" (This handsome young man will come by soon and will not return. […] For my part, I know well that although I am not yet to be thrown to the dogs, […] I am now the one who must beg my partner, whereas before he begged me).[62]

Female Desire

An aspect worth highlighting in both comedies by Piccolomini, and one that unites all the female protagonists, both maids and ladies, is the women's physical desire for the men they love.[63] In this sense, Michel Plaisance, in his analysis of *Alessandro*, underlines

60. In Piccolomini's works, a clear parallelism can be seen between different characters, sometimes easily recognizable because they share the same name or because they mention characters from other works. This is the case, for instance, when Nicoletta speaks explicitly about Raffaella, who was her teacher and who is so good that her art is known even through books (Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 35). If we take into account that these works were first performed in Siena, it is evident that the audience was aware of this parallel and drew the appropriate conclusions.

61. Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 20–21.

62. Piccolomini, *L'Amor costante*, 28.

63. Erasmus of Rotterdam considers that sexual desires and inclinations are inherent in man and should guide love and marriage; in works such as *In Praise of Marriage*, he also defends the need to choose one's partner freely and out of love. In the colloquy *A Lover and Maiden*, the two young protagonists talk openly about their inclinations and their desires, as do the protagonists of Piccolomini's plays. This is a positive view of desire on the part of both men and women, as long as it leads to marriage and

> une aristocratisation plus poussée des rapports entre amoureux, comme on le voit bien avec le couple Lucilla-Cornelio. Cet évitement de la sexualité explicite et concrète que l'on observe dans la comédie lorsqu'il s'agit de personnages non subalternes est compensé […] par un jeu subtilement très audacieux autour de la thématique sexuelle.[64]

This is an innovative element, since for ladies, free sexual choice was very limited; in fact, as Margaret King states, young women

> tenían que someterse a las estrategias que garantizaran la supervivencia económica y social de la familia, a costa de su autonomía y estatus. Estaban obligadas a abjurar, en términos modernos, a dos "derechos": el derecho a la propiedad paternal más allá del límite de la dote y el derecho a la elección sexual libre. Los padres les escogían los maridos y negociaban los convenios de propiedad sin su participación.[65]
>
> (had to submit to strategies that would guarantee the economic and social survival of the family, at the expense of their autonomy and status. They were forced to abjure, in modern terms, two "rights": the right to parental property beyond the limit of dowry and the right to free sexual choice. Parents chose their husbands for them and negotiated property agreements without their participation.)

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is disclosed within bounds set by decency. Both Erasmus and Piccolomini actively participate in the debate on the practice of love in the Renaissance. Isabel Morant analyzes this issue from the perspective of Erasmus's advocacy for the non-problematization of desire and sensuality and for "una sociedad en progreso, mejor ordenada y civilizada y, sin embargo, compuesta por individuos libres, moralmente autorizados a realizar los deseos de la sensualidad y a vivir los placeres que se encuentran en el amor. Al tiempo que debian ser sujetos morales capaces de dar crédito y reconocimiento a las razones de sociedad y autorregularse sin necesidad de coacciones exteriores" (a society in progress, better ordered and civilized and, nevertheless, composed of free individuals, morally authorized to realize the desires of sensuality and to live the pleasures found in love. At the same time, they should be moral subjects capable of giving due credence and recognition to the reasons of society and of regulating themselves without the need for external coercion). Morant, *Discursos*, 37. Evidently, other Renaissance intellectuals, such as Vives, would defend a different position (i.e., the strict control of desires for both men and women).

64. Plaisance, "Alessandro (1544)," 187.

65. King, *Mujeres renacentistas*, 53.

Thus, in the comedies examined here, a change can be perceived in Renaissance society relative to the perception of desire—a change that sees the conception of the sexually passive woman as no longer the only, nor even the predominant, idea in the social reality of Italy during the sixteenth century.[66]

In fact, in both comedies of Piccolomini, and especially in the figure of Lucrezia/Fortunio in *Alessandro*, a discourse on female desire and pleasure predominates, emphasizing a conception of the sexuality of women separate from reproduction, marriage, and honour in the traditional sense.[67] Again, it must be clarified that this desire must always move within the limits of decorum and that it must never damage the reputation of women. A clear example of this balance between decorum and desire can be found in *Alessandro* in the figure of Lucilla, who, once convinced that Cornelio really loves her, writes him a letter openly declaring her love: "Io vi amo fin' da quel giorno, ch'io prima conobbi l'affezione che mi portavate, e ogni dì crescendo in me questa fiamma è venuta tale" (I have loved you since the day I learned of the love you professed for me, and since then the flame has been growing in me).[68] Her writing leaves no room for ambiguity: Lucilla loves Cornelio and burns with an ever-growing flame of desire. The young woman—one who normally falls to her lover—also takes the initiative to set a date at her window, albeit with a gate between the two of them. Lucilla, despite her youth and her inexperience in love, shows her initiative, takes charge of the relationship, and actively helps Cornelio with the ladder so that he can come up to see her. Being aware that there is something more than spiritual affinity between the two of them and that this passion might jeopardize her virtue and chastity, we witness a scene in which spiritual and carnal love hang continually in the balance. On the one hand, there is the theory of courtly love, according to which love is not something dangerous but rather serves to sublimate women. On the other, there is reality: love is not only words and sighs but something in which the body, both the male body and the female body, also participates. When the two lovers meet face to face, their virtue enters into play. In this physical encounter, the Neoplatonic theory of love, triumphant on paper, begins to break down, as illustrated famously in the story of Francesca and Paolo from Dante's *Inferno*.

66. Giannetti, "Ma che potrà succedermi," 105.

67. Giannetti, "Ma che potrà succedermi," 111.

68. Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 28.

Let us take a closer look at the scene on the ladder between Cornelio and Lucilla,[69] not forgetting that there is a history of love and courtship between them. Cornelio has followed all the rituals of courtly love in order to conquer Lucilla, but when Lucilla's surrender finally arrives, her spiritual love leaves more and more space for the carnal; in fact, the young man wants Lucilla to let him enter her room, where "conchiuderemmo qualche cosa di più succhio, che di parole" (we would conclude something more juicy than words).[70] With this intention clearly in mind, Cornelio conducts a conversation with his beloved in which he plays with the rules of courtly love and with the expectations of a meeting that, according to him, has "parole oneste" (honest words) as its sole objective.[71] He urges Lucilla to allow him to enter her room alone, as a way of ensuring that "voi avete fede nella mia fede" (you have faith in my faith) for "chi ama si fida in tutto e per tutto della cosa amata" (whoever loves trusts in everything and for everything in the person they love).[72] The word *onestà* (honesty) is repeated in the dialogue between the two lovers, especially by Cornelio, although sometimes it is presented with a certain ambiguity: "Tra tutte le belle parti, che sono in voi, e che mi hanno accesso dell'amor vostro, è stata la vostra onestà" (Of all the beautiful parts that are in you and that have ignited my love for you, the foremost has been your honesty).[73]

Lucilla knows very well that her reputation and her honour are at stake—"Ad una donna, Cornelio, che sia donna, importa troppo l'onor suo" (A woman, Cornelio, who is a woman, cares too much about her honour)[74]—and that a face to face without the gate in between them means that the body remains without any defense: "Le mani, Cornelio, in questi casi, non obbediscono alla volontà, voi vi fidate troppo di voi stesso" (The hands, Cornelio, in these cases, do not obey the will; you trust yourself too much).[75] She is, therefore, the woman who speaks clearly of the danger of being alone with her lover: words are one thing, but hands, the bodily senses, and physical pleasure are quite another. She is well

69. An analysis of this scene can also be found in Plaisance, "Alessandro (1544)," 184.

70. Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 60.

71. Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 63.

72. Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 64.

73. Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 65.

74. Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 64.

75. Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 65.

aware of this, because she feels in her own flesh the strength of desire and the difficulty of resisting her senses:

> LUCILLA Se vi sentite bastante a questo voi, non mi ci sento fors'io; chi sa, se avendovi io appresso senza impedimento alcuno, non mi saprò ritener di non far cosa, che pentendomene poi, m'affligga sempre il cuore?
> CORNELIO Vi prometto di contrastare all'appetito vostro e al mio.[76]
>
> (LUCILLA You feel strong, but perhaps I am the one who does not feel strong; who knows if, having you so close and without impediment, I will be able to restrain myself from doing something that later I will regret and that will afflict my heart forever?
> CORNELIO I promise you that I will withstand both your appetite and mine.)

Again, in this scene appear words that admit no ambiguity: there is clearly a strong sexual attraction between both the young man and Lucilla. In spite of everything, it is she who will put a stop to this reciprocal desire and to all the attempts to take action to which Cornelio will later confess. The firm will of the woman and Cornelio's desire "d'aver da lei la cosa per amore, e non per forza" (to get it out of love and not by force)[77] will lead them to a promise of marriage, a solution that truly combines spiritual and carnal love.

Another female character of remarkable initiative in matters of love is the young Margarita in *L'Amor costante*. Thoroughly in love with Messer Giannino, she displays unusual perseverance and does not hesitate to use all available means in order to win the young man's heart.[78] With the help of Agnoletta, she sends him gifts and letters and arranges a time for them to see each other alone. She constantly shows a confidence and passion that are uncommon for her age, especially in the face of the firm denial of Giannino, who remains in love (a constant love) with a woman who turns out to be his sister almost until

76. Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 65.

77. Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 81.

78. In the two plays examined here, Piccolimini insists on the fundamental need for constancy in love on the part of the woman: only perseverance and, therefore, the demonstration that this passionate love is neither capricious nor temporary and is based on something more than sexual desire. On this idea of loving passion and marriage in the Renaissance, see Morant, *Discursos*, 245.

the end of the play. Margarita loves only Giannino; her love is faithful, constant, and honest: "Ed io non ne arò mai se non uno. Né pensi mai mio padre che io abbia a esser di altro uomo, se io non son di costui" (And I will never belong to anyone but him. And don't let my father think that I'm going to belong to another man, if not this one).[79] But that does not mean that there is no desire in her. On the contrary, as Margarita herself declares:

> A me bastarebbe che mi vedesse volentieri come io veggo lui, avermelo appresso, baciarmelo, trammenarmelo sola sola io, vagheggiarmelo e godermelo con gli occhi, con le orecchie e con tutti i sensi e, sopra tutto, poter farli palese quanto io l'amo; perché di tutto el mio male son certa che n'è cagione che el non mi crede.[80]
>
> (It would be enough for me if he willingly saw me as I see him, to have him close, to kiss him, to touch him—me and only me—to delight in him and enjoy him with my eyes, my ears, and all my senses, and, above all, to be able to make it clear to him how much I love him; for, considering all my wickedness, I am sure there is reason for him not to believe me.)

As is the case with Lucilla in *Alessandro*, a pure and spiritual love is united with a carnal love—a desire, a physical attraction—that the female subject neither hides nor represses.

We also see Ginevra/Lucrezia show initiative in love in *L'Amor costante*, promising Ferrante/Lorenzino to go even further, given the marriage bond that unites them, and give him "il fiore della sua verginitá" (the flower of her virginity).[81] We then hear about this moment from the servant Lucia, in what is considered to be an unusual event in Renaissance comedies—namely, a bed scene between two young aristocrats:

> Acconcio l'orecchie alla porta e sento ch'egli è Lorenzino e Lucrezia che facevano un fracasso in su quel letto che pareva che lo volessero buttar a terra […]. E parsemi sentire, doppo che fu passata la furia, che si dicevano

79. Piccolomini, *L'Amor costante*, 70.

80. Piccolomini, *L'Amor costante*, 70.

81. Piccolomini, *L'Amor costante*, 48.

> certe paroline e si facevano certe carezzuole da fare allegare i denti a un morto. […] Io non so se l'ha ingravedata; ma imbeccata l'ha, lui.[82]
>
> (I go to the door, and I hear that it is Lorenzino and Lucrezia who were making such a fuss in that bed that it seemed they wanted to throw it to the floor […]. And I seemed to hear, once the fury had passed, that they said a few words and made caresses that would make a dead man's teeth grind. […] I don't know if he has made her pregnant; but what is certain is that he has nailed her.)

But it is certainly the character of Lucrezia/Fortunio in *Alessandro* that takes this erotic desire to the extreme, clearly demonstrating an active female sexuality, with an evident intention of satisfying her desires. As Laura Giannetti states, the passive/active dichotomy of sex and gender is broken here: "Women in comedies could be active and aggressive in their desire and lovemaking, and men could be passive and receptive. […] what begins to emerge from the Renaissance trope of invisibility and impossibility is a rich and complex world of love, pleasure, and heroines seeking to find happiness and fulfilment."[83]

Disguised as a man,[84] Lucrezia/Fortunio falls in love with another woman, Lampridia, without knowing until the end that she is actually a man—and indeed the man with whom she has always been in love, Aloisio. She shows, from the first, a deep feeling for the other woman, in addition to a strong physical attraction for her that leads her initially to desire—"Io avrei pur un gran contento di trovarmi seco, e baciar il volto e 'l petto di sì bella donna" (I would be delighted to be by her side, to kiss that beautiful woman's face and breast)[85]—and later, with the help of the servant, to enter the room of her beloved while she/he is sleeping, hoping to realize her desires. It could be argued that this physical desire, acted on in spite of all the risks that beset her,[86] is in some way facilitated by the fact that a woman disguised as a man acts

82. Piccolomini, *L'Amor costante*, 74–76.

83. Giannetti, "Ma che potrà succedermi," 120–21.

84. On the theme of love between women and disguises in other comedies of the time, see Giannetti, "Ma che potrà succedermi"; "Devianza di gender."

85. Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 39.

86. "S'io andassi alla morte, non ci andrei con l'animo così travagliato […] Io mi metto a un'impresa, che non me ne può venir cosa che non m'affligga; s'ella mi disdice, la sua crudeltà e ingratitudine

as a man—that is, with greater freedom and initiative, and without risking as much as she would if she were (at the time) presenting as a woman. Lucrezia can behave like a man, use masculine rhetoric not permitted to women, and set free her desire. In any case, once Lucrezia/Fortunio is revealed to be a woman, she will still be the one to take the initiative to marry Aloisio/Lampridia, who, given his education as a woman, is now more silent and passive.

Women who choose whom to love

Already in the dialogue *La Raffaella* (1539), Piccolomini underlined the need for women to also be able to choose whom they love.[87] In this work the interlocutor is Margarita, a married woman, whom Raffaella openly urges to secret adultery, to find a lover of her choice who will give her the happiness that

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m'ucciderà; e s'ella, fatta pietosa de' miei dolori, si lascerà alla fin vincere come molte fanno, che farò io per far cosa che le soddisfaccia? […] Può esser maggior scorno a un giovine innamorato che condursi solo una donna sua e mancarle sul buono?" (If I were to die, I would not do so with such a troubled soul […] I set out on an undertaking from which nothing will result that will not afflict me; if she dismisses me, her cruelty and ingratitude will kill me; and if she, feeling sorry for my sorrows, allows herself to be defeated in the end as many do, then what am I going to do to satisfy her? […] Can there be greater misfortune for a young man in love than to be alone with the woman he loves and to fail her at the best moment?). Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 57–58.

87. A woman's choosing her husband was not common among the upper classes in the Renaissance, when, as Romeo De Maio points out, a regime of coerced marriage prevailed, meaning that "en el léxico conyugal, la elección personal significaba por lo general capricho y deshonor e incluso demencia. […] La patria potestad significaba ante todo que la joven, si expresaba una insuperable repugnancia ante la elección propuesta, incurría en el secuestro domiciliario o en la reclusión en un convento, acompañado de violencia física, a veces mortal" (in the conjugal context, personal choice generally meant caprice and dishonour and even insanity. […] Parental authority meant above all that the young woman, if she expressed an insurmountable repugnance to the proposed choice, incurred house arrest or confinement in a convent, accompanied by physical violence, sometimes mortal). De Maio, *Mujer y Renacimiento*, 101–2. Morant affirms that marrying for love also generally generated mistrust, since marriage was not based on love as a rule. On the other hand, allowing oneself to be carried away by the passion of love meant a real danger: "las seducciones, encubiertas de falsas promesas de matrimonio, las violaciones y los atropellos que podían sufrir las muchachas desprotegidas o aún pese a estar protegidas por los suyos" (the seductions, disguised as false promises of marriage, the rapes and abuses that unprotected girls could suffer, even though they were protected by their parents) as can also be seen in Piccolomini's representation of seducers who seek only profit in marriage. Morant, *Discursos*, 236.

her husband has not given her.[88] However, Piccolomini was not the only one to deal with this issue. Years later, in 1555, Aonio Paleario published his treatise *Dell'economia o vero del governo della casa* in which he also devotes significant space to this topic. In this dialogue, in which, as in *Raffaella*, the interlocutors are all women, it is claimed that parents or legal guardians should consult the bride beforehand and also take into account the daughter's personality when choosing a good husband. Nevertheless, these dialogues are clear exceptions in the panorama of sixteenth-century Italian treatises, where the right of the man to choose (albeit within certain limits) is normally promoted.[89] Actually, what is being debated in the background is whether love and marriage go together or not. In this sense, the defenders of conjugal love sought to reinforce the matrimonial institution by linking it directly with love and by adding to its traditional functions (economic, reputational, or reproductive) feelings and sexual pleasure in marriage. Already in Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano* we find a reconsideration of marriage and how a woman should direct her love towards the man who may become her husband. It is in the woman's decision, in her capacity to choose (although always limited by the norms of decorum and convenience), that the possibility of her happiness in love resides.

In Alessandro Piccolomini's comedies there is a clear defense of marriage as the guarantee of true love—a defense characteristic of so much Petrarchan poetry, and one that Piccolomini will also uphold in *Della institutione*. Therefore, we should not be surprised by the unusual initiative of his female protagonists, which always serves a love directed towards a worthy man and leads to marriage with him. The comedies' conclusions, with the announcement of the young people's weddings, is therefore not only the happy ending required by the comedy genre but also a social imperative, the only way that desire and feminine initiative in love, interpreted as partial transgression of feminine virtue, can be directed towards a socially acceptable and morally required objective. It is within this framework that we should analyze the female protagonists of *Alessandro* and *L'Amor costante*, women endowed with erotic initiative and with both spiritual and carnal desires.

In *L'Amor costante*, a statement about the freedom of women to love appears already in the first pages, in the dialogue between the servant Vergilio

88. On the vindication of the right of women to love in this work, see Piéjus, "L'*Orazione,*" 542.

89. See in this regard the analysis of Alberti's *Della familia* in Coller, "Sienese Accademia."

and Giannino: "le donne, come gli uomini, son libere d'amar chi lor piace senza carico di crudeltá" (Women, like men, are free to love whom they please without any charge of cruelty).[90] In *Alessandro*, we also meet Aloisio/Lampridia, who receives a promise from her father and her uncle Vicenzo to let her decide whom to marry and, if she should choose not to marry, to be able to dispose freely of her dowry.[91] For her part, Lucilla will also oppose a marriage of convenience and will decide to marry Cornelio.

Piccolomini playwright and feminine perfection

The female figures that we have analyzed in Piccolomini's comedies are determined and well aware of the need to take action if they want to achieve love and happiness. They are women who bet on the formula that Raffaella presents to Margarita in the dialogue named after her: not to give up love and the pleasure that it brings, but to pursue love wisely, without compromising one's own reputation. Furthermore, in his comedies, the Sienese academician at no point takes the achievement of the amorous desires of his protagonists to the extreme—adultery in the case of *Raffaella* and the accompanying need to resort to dissimulation. In both *Alessandro* and *L'Amor costante*, decorum is always maintained, not simply faked. In order to preserve that ultimate decorum and to uphold feminine honesty above all else, the final marriage can never be absent.

In his comedies, as well as in some of his treatises, Piccolomini portrays the perfect Renaissance woman, the one who follows all the familiar behavioural norms of honesty, already so well catalogued, and who presents herself to society as the height of the virtue prescribed by courtly and Neoplatonic literature. In this sense, Piccolomini does not deviate from the codes of feminine behaviour prevalent in the sixteenth century. But at the same time, he makes an important contribution to the idealized portrait of woman, endowing her with greater humanity, reality, and happiness. His female protagonists are women who can and know how to love, who choose to whom they will give their love, who fight for their beloved at all costs and for as long as necessary, and who know how to defend themselves, both with words and actions. The constancy and

90. Piccolomini, *L'Amor costante*, 9–10.

91. Piccolomini, *Alessandro*, 15.

fidelity in love that is so emphasized in both plays must always be rewarded with a reciprocal love, not only spiritual but also carnal, that can take refuge in the institution of marriage, where it can be strong and safe from the risk of violating what honour demands.

The idea of feminine perfection that we find in Piccolomini's plays is an example of how the ideal of feminine perfection transmitted over time was not completely rigid during the Renaissance. Rather, within the limits of decorum and modesty, it could take on different nuances and admitted the development of aspects such as feminine desire, even among women of the upper classes.

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