

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



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María Dolores Valencia

Volume 46, numéro 3-4, été-automne 2023

Special issue: La querelle des genres: Paradoxes and Models for the "Perfection" of Women (12th–17th centuries)
Numéro special : La querelle des genres : paradoxes et modèles de la « perfection » féminine (XIIe–XVIIe s.)

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110381ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i3.42660>

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Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Valencia, M. (2023). Ludovico Domenichi's *La donna di corte* (1564) and the Paradoxical Representation of Female Perfection. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 46(3-4), 287–304.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v46i3.42660>

Résumé de l'article

Après avoir traité des vertus féminines et de ce qu'elles ont en commun avec les vertus masculines dans son ouvrage *La nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne* (1549), Ludovico Domenichi s'intéresse dans *La donna di corte* (1564) au comportement amoureux d'un type spécifique de femme : la dame de cour, le pendant harmonieux du courtisan. Dans cet article, j'analyse l'ambiguïté sous-jacente du message de Domenichi. En s'efforçant de défendre la perfection des femmes sans pour autant être hautement critique à l'égard des hommes, Domenichi suggère que l'émancipation impliquée par le rôle public du divertissement de cour est en fait constamment contrôlée par une éducation basée sur la pudicitia et l'honestà. Il n'a pas l'intention de changer ni l'ordre social ni le rôle des femmes.

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Ludovico Domenichi's *La donna di corte* (1564) and the Paradoxical Representation of Female Perfection

MARÍA DOLORES VALENCIA

Universidad de Granada

Having dealt with the womanly virtues and what they share with male virtues in his work La nobiltà delle donne (1549), Ludovico Domenichi focuses in La donna di corte (1564) on the amorous behaviour of a specific type of woman: the palace lady, the harmonious counterpart to the courtier. In this article, I analyze the underlying ambiguity of Domenichi's message. Making an effort to defend the perfection of women without being highly critical of men, Domenichi suggests that the emancipation implied by the public role of court entertainment is in fact constantly controlled through an education based on pudicitia and honestà. He has no intention of changing either the social order or the role of women.

Après avoir traité des vertus féminines et de ce qu'elles ont en commun avec les vertus masculines dans son ouvrage La nobiltà et eccellenza delle donne (1549), Ludovico Domenichi s'intéresse dans La donna di corte (1564) au comportement amoureux d'un type spécifique de femme : la dame de cour, le pendant harmonieux du courtisan. Dans cet article, j'analyse l'ambiguïté sous-jacente du message de Domenichi. En s'efforçant de défendre la perfection des femmes sans pour autant être hautement critique à l'égard des hommes, Domenichi suggère que l'émancipation impliquée par le rôle public du divertissement de cour est en fait constamment contrôlée par une éducation basée sur la pudicitia et l'honestà. Il n'a pas l'intention de changer ni l'ordre social ni le rôle des femmes.

Between the last years of the fifteenth century and the first half of the sixteenth, a rather significant change occurred in the Italian literary scene in regard both to social structures and to culture. The codification of the vernacular and the extensive development of the publishing industry meant that a growing number of people were gaining access to the world of culture. Proud of their heritage, the new groups of intellectuals, in keeping with the ideals of Renaissance culture, decided to organize and present it as a *model*. In the early years of the sixteenth century, when the main trend was to put together aspects of human and cultural reality in harmonious models, the female figure was also put forward as an elevated and well-balanced model. These were the years when the text with the highest literary value and the greatest success—as attested by the number of editions printed over the century—was *Il libro del Cortegiano* by Baldassare Castiglione. Women are a focus of attention throughout the book, but Castiglione also devotes a whole chapter to them, a

third of which is in dialogue form. Here he outlines the figure and functions of the court lady, who stands as a harmonious counterpart to the courtier.¹

In this period, interest in woman, understood as a subject endowed with psychological autonomy that was different from the male model, led to the production of a whole series of works in which ideas of a Neoplatonist and Ficinian ilk, which had been inherited from the Humanism of the fifteenth century, such as *gratia*, *misura*, and *piacevolezza*, attained high theoretical consideration.² Thus, Renaissance culture was able to give free rein to the construction of the figure of the *donna gratiosa* (gracious woman), in which

gradualmente si tralascia la natura umana a favore del dato retorico e stilistico. Ancora una volta il Rinascimento traduce le idee in immagini, vale a dire in allegorie, in emblemi, in simboli. Anche il femminismo culturale cinquecentesco sembra ridursi, pertanto, nell'esibizione imitabile di figure topiche, nell'interazione allegorica delle immagini testuali e visive, nella riproposizione quasi propagandistica di un modello di donna canonicamente libresco piuttosto che concretamente storico.³

The copious production of books that, in the last years of the fifteenth century and throughout the sixteenth century, coalesced around the aforementioned model text, *Il libro del Cortegiano*, is well known. If the discourse on behaviour, whether dialogue or treatise, was focused on themes that defended values of a social or ethical (i.e., extra-literary) nature, the consequence was the absence in that discourse of a specific textual morphology, since by depending on historico-cultural circumstances, authors would opt for whatever was more useful to their respective rhetorical and pedagogical purposes. When, in this time period, the ethics of social life were based on aesthetics, *Il Cortegiano*—the primary document of the new Renaissance

1. Regarding this work, see Patrizi, “*Il libro*.”

2. Kristeller, “Neoplatonismo e Rinascimento.”

3. Sberlati, “Dalla donna di palazzo,” 120. “gradually human nature is neglected in favour of the rhetorical and stylistic *datum*. Once again, the Renaissance translates ideas into images, or rather into allegories, emblems and symbols. Even Renaissance cultural feminism seems therefore to be reduced to the imitable exhibition of commonplace figures, the allegorical interaction of textual and visual images, and the almost propagandistic presentation of a model of womanhood that is canonically literary rather than factually historical.” All translations are my own.

sensibility towards women—became an example of an aesthetic legitimization of morals.

In order to learn about the role of women in Renaissance society, the testimonies of contemporaries and the vast and impressive number of texts concerning them, which transmit the image of an unattainable female figure laden with values, are essential. Furthermore, as Amedeo Quondam states, we also need to analyze this production from a market perspective, specifically from the perspective of the new cultural policy adopted by publishers such as Gabriele Giolito de' Ferrari, who was aware of the potential of the female public:

Non c'è dubbio che attorno al nuovo ruolo della donna nella società cinquecentesca (il che non vuol dire della donna reale: si tratta pur sempre d'una ideologia del ruolo della donna) si muova la maggior parte della produzione di trattati, sia come testi direttamente orientati a fornire strumenti tecnico-pedagogici per la 'istituzione delle donne' [...], sia come predicazione della loro 'nobiltà' e quindi, con una operazione di astrazione teorica, del primato della 'filosofia d'amore'.⁴

Among these writings, a group stood out whose purpose was to defend women from accusations by misogynous writers, asserting women's intellectual and moral equality with men or proclaiming their superiority. Likewise, there was an abundance of treatises throughout the sixteenth century that set forth models of behaviour that sanctioned certain social roles: shifting from the upper-middle-class woman (to whom the writers refer) as wife and mother to the "donna di palazzo" model theorized by Castiglione, to the "cortigiana," an emblematic female figure that in real life replaces the "donna di palazzo" ideal, and lastly to the prostitute.

After the publication of his important book on female instruction, *La nobiltà delle donne*, republished in 1551 and 1554, Lodovico Domenichi was considered one of the "defenders" of the dignity and intellectual capacity

4. Quondam, "Mercanzia d'onore," 87–88. "There's no doubt that most of the production of treatises revolves around the new role of women in Renaissance society (which does not mean real women: the question is still that of an ideology around the role of women), whether as texts aimed at providing technical-pedagogic tools for the 'istituzione delle donne' [...], or as the preaching of their 'nobiltà,' and therefore, through an operation of theoretical abstraction, of the primacy of the 'filosofia d'amore.'"

of women in the so-called *querelle des femmes*.⁵ This debate had given rise to a contemporary literary and rhetorical genre involving diverse authors and publishers in the production of treatises for and against women.⁶ Later, Domenichi's commitment would culminate in the publishing of the important anthology *Le rime diverse d'alcune nobilissime et virtuosissime donne* at the printing house of Vincenzo Busdraghi in Lucca in 1559. This was considered a "pietra miliare" (milestone) of female Petrarchism⁷ and of poetry collections of the sixteenth century, prior to baroque revisionism. This first compilation of poetic texts written by women from all over Italy, the purpose of which was to show their "nobiltà, et eccellentia," took Domenichi an arduous ten years of work.⁸ He was one of those responsible for the dissemination of culture in the vernacular during the Renaissance and for the consequent fortune of the various printers with whom he collaborated. This was due both to his knowledge of trends in popular taste and the demands of the market and to his linguistic and literary knowledge, which enabled him to know which texts could and should be translated or republished.

Published in 1564, the same year that Domenichi died in Pisa,⁹ *La donna di corte* is a short treatise that has until now been disfavoured by critics.¹⁰ The

5. A complex and multifaceted figure, Lodovico Domenichi (b. 1515 in Piacenza, d. 1564 in Pisa) was a prolific publisher, translator, and historian of the sixteenth century. He worked with the main Italian publishing houses of the period: Giolito in Venice, Giunti and Torrentino in Florence, and Busdraghi in Lucca. For his biography, see D'Alessandro, "Prime ricerche"; Piscini, "Domenichi, Ludovico." On his ample humanist work, see Tedesco, "Lodovico Domenichi."

6. Dionisotti, "La letteratura italiana." On the main books and authors that participated in this debate, see Cox, *Women's Writing*.

7. See Cox, "Declino e caduta," 177.

8. On this important anthology, see Piéjus, "La première anthologie"; Stella, "Il ruolo di Vittoria Colonna."

9. On Domenichi's last years of life, see Bramanti, "Sull'ultimo decennio 'fiorentino.'"

10. In his book, *Memorie per la storia letteraria di Piacenza*, Cristoforo Poggiali says that this work by Domenichi is cited by "Monsignor Fontanini, l'Haym, e parecchi altri scrittori, fra i quali il Crescenzi (*Nob. d'Ital.* Parte I., 221), che la chiama 'donna curiale'" (Monsignor Fontanini, l'Haym, and many other writers, among them Crescenzi [*Nob. d'Ital.* Parte I., p. 221], who calls it "donna curiale") and adds: "Verisimilmente questa è la sola edizione che se n'è fatta; perciò è libro assai raro: in proposito del quale non altra particolarità trovo io notata fra le mie carte, salvo che fu dedicato dall'autore a un certo Signor Domenico Ragnina gentilhuomo ragugeo, con lettera data di Pisa il giorno di S. Pietro dell'anno stesso 1564" (This is probably the only edition that was made; hence it is quite a rare book, regarding which I have no other particularity noted in my papers, except that the author dedicated it to one Signor

work “si ragiona dell'affabilità e honesta creanza da doversi fare per gentildonna d'honore.”¹¹ In it, Domenichi declares, as the title itself indicates, that his aim is to focus only on “la gentildonna, donna di palazzo, e di corte,” since “già molti anni sono scrissi della Nobiltà, et eccellentia delle donne, assai copiosamente ragionai delle virtù delle donne.”¹² This brief work represents the end of one of the main stages of this versatile writer's literary activity, showing both his purposeful backing of female literature and his interest in the social and cultural role of women, as he shifts from an open defence of the female sex (*La nobiltà delle donne*) to a subtle misogyny (*La donna di corte*) that was perhaps caused by the climate of the middle years of the Counter-Reformation. The work is preceded by a letter written in Pisa, dated 24 June 1564, in which he dedicates “il picciol Trattato” (the little Treaty) to his friend Domenico Ragnina¹³ as a token of gratitude.

An analysis of the treatise's content needs to be undertaken with regard to the historical and theoretical context that made it possible. In such an analysis, the fundamental reference point must be *Il Cortegiano*,¹⁴ along with the most significant pedagogic treatises devoted to women's education written between the 1540s and the 1560s, as well as the two aforementioned pieces by Domenichi relating to this central theme. This illustrates how, in such a short

Domenico Ragnina, a gentleman from Ragusa, in a letter from Pisa dated St. Peter's Day, 1564). Poggiali, *Memorie*, 262.

11. Domenichi, *La donna di corte* [hereafter *DC*], 1r. “concerns the affability and honest upbringing to be undertaken by the noble lady.” Among earlier texts with the same pedagogic aim of presenting the honest woman as a model for behaviour are *De institutione foeminae christianae* (1523) by Juan Luis Vives and Lodovico Dolce's *Della istituzione delle donne* (1545). In the absence of a detailed study of the sources and models for *La donna di corte*, it has been observed that it could be a translation or adaptation of the second book of *De re aulica* by Agostino Nifo da Sessa, published in 1534. See Kelso, *Doctrine*; Osborn, “Discourse,” 11.

12. Domenichi, *DC*, 3v. “the gentlewoman, lady of the palace and the court”; “I wrote *La nobiltà et eccellentia delle donne* many years ago now, and widely discussed the virtues of women.”

13. In reality, this is the Italianized name of the Croat, Dinko Ranjina (1536–1607), friend and councillor of Cosimo de' Medici. He was a poet who was a representative in his country of the court Petrarchism popular in Italy. He lived in Messina and Florence, where he probably met Domenichi. In 1563, he published a *Canzoniere* in Croatian. See Borsetto, “Sulle rime.”

14. It is significant that, among his interesting and prolific work as editor and publisher of both classical and modern texts, in 1556 Domenichi prepared a new edition of *Il Cortegiano* for the Venetian printer Giolito. This fact suggests he had thorough knowledge of the work.

period of time, the concepts inherent in the femininity of women underwent substantial changes and even a certain regression, brought about by the religious and social policies of the Council of Trent. If this is the literary scene onto which Domenichi's interest in the subject of women emerges, we cannot overlook his wavering position on religious and political matters. It is clear that in order to produce a reading sensitive to the historical moment, we must avoid anachronistic interpretations arising from our modern sensibilities and be aware of the repressive nature of these manuals. They plainly gave women a dignity and a role that had been unthinkable a few years earlier, and they recognized female merits and capacities. However, it should not be forgotten that "il fine ultimo di questi educatori consisteva nel mantenere il controllo sociale della femminilità tramite un'opera di istruzione preventiva tendente ad evitare l'imporsi di posizioni culturalmente eversive."¹⁵

The fulcrum point of the educational proposal of these two works by Domenichi—*La nobiltà delle donne* (1549) and *La donna di corte* (1564)—is the imitation and emulation of a canon of behaviour derived from authoritative texts. As in *Il Cortegiano*, the structure of the narrative in the former work is that of the dialogue. It was organized both in the form of a dispute in which five characters argue about the new concept of Renaissance femininity, giving a clear and impartial presentation of different positions, and in the form of an exposition enriched with speeches from other interlocutors. Similarly, the ideal reader of the work is a well-educated and refined lady, capable of appreciating the most erudite literature and art. Along with its pedagogic or merely didactic aspects, the work's ideological nature in particular stands out, giving voice to extraordinarily modern concepts regarding women and their social function. For example, the text not only accepts equality between the sexes but even asserts women's superiority, with completely original arguments. For the first time in the history of Western culture, in a shift away from Catholic orthodoxy, content from the Bible is used in defence of women. Hence woman, rather than man, is declared to be the ultimate aim of Creation:

Essendo adunque la Donna l'ultima creata, fine e componimento perfettissimo dell'opere di Dio, mi negherete voi ch'ella per la sua somma

15. Sberlati, "Dalla donna di palazzo," 124. "the ultimate aim of these educators consisted in maintaining social control over femininity through work of preventative instruction aimed at avoiding culturally destabilizing behaviours."

eccellenza non sia dignissima sopra tutte l'altre creature? Ché senza lei il mondo già in tutto perfettissimo e in ogni cosa compiuto sarebbe stato imperfetto [...]. Così la donna, mentre si fabbricò il mondo, fra tutte le create cose in quanto al tempo fu l'ultima; e la medesima, per autorità e per dignità, fu la prima nel concetto della mente di Dio.¹⁶

According to Francesco Sberlati, in this work by Domenichi where the anticlerical component also plays an important role,

le conseguenze estreme di questa rivoluzione femminista sono evidenti nell'afflusso di idee vicine all'eterodossia, in particolare là dove le argomentazioni epidittiche sembrano dipendere dall'assimilazione di apporti culturali estratti dai consolidati circuiti che auspicavano una radicale *renovatio* spirituale e ecclesiastica.¹⁷

Regarding his ideas on religious matters, it should be mentioned that Domenichi was always prudent and cautious. Rather than making explicit declarations or taking overly obvious standpoints, he expressed his views through his choice of the printers he worked with. Particularly significant was his intense collaboration with Lorenzo Torrentino, the official court typographer. Torrentino had published texts of the Catholic Reformation and had arrived in Florence with religious interests that were far from orthodox, but he was tolerated under the permissive policy in religious matters adopted by Cosimo de' Medici at the time. Domenichi's vernacular translation of Calvin's

16. Domenichi, *La nobiltà*, 19v–20v. “Therefore, with Woman being the final creation, the most perfect composition and end of God’s work, would you deny that she, with her utmost excellence, is the worthiest above all other creatures? For the world, already quite perfect in every way, and complete in everything, without her would be imperfect [...]. Thus, while the world was built, of all created things woman was the last in regard to time; and she herself, through authority and through dignity, was the first to conceive the mind of God.” This work was not only a convincing manual for behaviour (“book of manners,” “courtesy book,” or “conduct manual”) and *civil conversazione* but also a collection of feminine qualities and virtues, well catalogued with the most authoritative writing styles in the anatomical and psychological description of the Renaissance lady.

17. Sberlati, “Dalla donna di palazzo,” 135. “the extreme consequences of this feminist revolution are evident in the influx of ideas related to heterodoxy, in particular where the epideictic arguments seem to depend on the assimilation of cultural contributions coming from consolidated circles of power that wanted a radical spiritual and ecclesiastical *renovatio*.”

Nicomediana and its publication in 1552 earned him life imprisonment, but he was soon released thanks to the diplomatic intervention of Renée of France and Paolo Giovio, among others.¹⁸

Paradoxically, following the problems that he had run into with the Inquisition in 1552, Domenichi's position at the Medici court was strengthened thanks to his supporters.¹⁹ From then on, he showed an elegant *sprezzatura* in his attitude to the politics of Cosimo de' Medici, who was now stricter in religious and cultural affairs. This helps explain the apparent change in criteria between *La nobiltà delle donne* and *La donna di corte*. Domenichi soon began a productive collaboration with the printer Vincenzo Busdraghi (or Busdrago) in the still independent Republic of Lucca.²⁰ Following the huge success garnered by his anthology of women's poetry, he published the treatise *La donna di corte* five years later. It is interesting to observe that Domenichi now abandoned the dialogic form, replacing its articulate and polyphonic structure with the monotonous style of the discourse, in which only the opinion of the scholar—holder of the ultimate truth—prevails. The new restrictive cultural and ideological outlook was also reflected in the rhetorical form chosen for the literary text.

As in *Il Cortegiano*, the aim in *La donna di corte* was to shape the perfect palace lady by means of an educational guide covering an extensive set of situations in which women might find themselves in their amorous conversations or *ragionamenti d'amore*. Here we find, first, an appeal to the normative precept of humanist *imitatio*, and then to memory, or *ars memoriae*—in other words, erudition will depend on the capacity of women to remember the examples of the various socio-cultural situations and behaviours that are most appropriate for them.²¹ The fact that these treatises abandon the secular character that had

18. Apparently he was jailed following denunciation by Pietro Manelfi. On this affair and imprisonment, see Cantù, *Gli eretici d'Italia*, 434–35; Tiraboschi, *Storia*, 1008–9.

19. He was given a position at the court of Cosimo de' Medici as official historian in order to write *La storia della guerra di Siena*.

20. On the sizeable production of this printer and his collaboration with Ludovico Domenichi, see Martini, Rossi, and Unfer Verre, *Vincenzo Busdraghi*. The issue of defending women also caused Busdraghi serious problems, as he had to undergo a trial for heresy in 1562 for publishing the treatise *Sopra la perfezione delle donne* (1561) by Girolamo Borro. For more detail, see Adorni Braccesi, "Telifilo Filogenio."

21. See Bolzoni, *La stanza della memoria*.

already been present in Flavio Capella's *Della eccellenza e dignità delle donne* (published in Rome in 1525, three years before Castiglione's book) reveals a slight shift in Domenichi's treatise towards the coercive religious conventions that were once again expected to regulate the social life of women.

As a learned humanist, Domenichi includes numerous references to texts by classical authors, the writings of the Church Fathers, and, to a lesser extent, those of his contemporaries, thus demonstrating his immense erudition. From these texts, he extracts examples and anecdotes to better explain his concepts, to persuade and underline the truth of an argument, but above all as models to follow or reject. He begins his discourse by taking it as read that Plato (in book 5 of the *Republic* and book 7 of the *Laws*) and many other authors besides have given good arguments in favour of the idea that women have the same virtues²² as men and that they can and should exercise the same occupations as men in the city, including occupations in the military, trade, and even the arts. Regarding the feminine virtues, he also states that the question of "et quali, et quante elle sieno, et se gli huomini hanno tutte le virtù communi con le donne"²³ had already been dealt with extensively. This had been done not only by Cardinal Pompeo Colonna, "ornamento, e splendor de' Principi, in quel libro, ch'egli intitolò *Apologia delle donne*: ne credo, che alcuna cosa possa dirsi in favor delle donne, la quale da lui non sia chiaramente trattato,"²⁴ but also by Domenichi himself in 1549, in his book *La nobiltà delle donne*. Now, however, it was a question of demonstrating that not all the virtues of court gentlemen were appropriate for women.

The first argument he uses to this effect is that history has not passed down anything to us on this topic, although we do find testimonies on courtiers, jesters, sycophants, and many others. The cause, according to Domenichi, was that nobody in their right mind would admit that these courtly qualities were appropriate for young women, nor even for women in general, who at the time were considered to be immature. To support his statement, he turns to classical sources such as Xenocrates, who, according to Domenichi, states that

22. *Virtù* being understood as valour, or the demonstration of nobility of spirit and acts.

23. Domenichi, *DC*, 3r. "what and how many they may be, and whether men share all the virtues with women."

24. Domenichi, *DC*, 3r–3v. "ornament and splendour of the princes, in the book that he titled *Apologia delle donne*; nor do I consider that anything can be said in favour of women that he has not already treated with clarity."

“tra la donna, e il fanciullo non è altra differenza; se non questa: che colui che è fanciullo, non è sempre fanciullo, ma con gli anni diviene huomo; ma la donna è fanciullo confermato: e chi è fanciullo, non rimane tuttavia tale, ma talhora si può mutare.”²⁵ Domenichi also quotes Galen, who similarly maintains that “la donna è fanciullo confermato.”²⁶ Naturally, he also reminds us that Aristotle argued that the advice of a woman is weak and vain and that her promises have no value if they are not backed up by the authority and counsel of a man. He concludes that as the young man, due to his immaturity, is not suited for courtly affairs, so “la donna non può intramettersi ne gli exercitii della corte.”²⁷

It is worth recalling that the model of female perfection prescribed by Domenichi in this work, taking as a starting point the identity of the trinity of *nobiltà-bellezza-virtù*, is fundamentally based on the development of the last concept: it is no longer enough for a woman to be beautiful, but she must also be *virtuosa e ben personata* (virtuous and of good appearance). In *Il Cortegiano*, Castiglione continued the trend of reassessing the function of women and, in doing so, ennobling them: “la virtù delle quali,” says Giuliano de’ Medici, “è conseguentemente la dignità, estimo io che non sia punto inferior a quella degli omini.”²⁸ In *La nobiltà delle donne*, visual attractiveness and care of the body acquire decisive importance, as shown by the words with which Domenichi chooses to end the highly detailed description of the parts that make up a woman’s body: “Oltra di ciò nella misura, nell’ordine, nella figura, et nella dispositione di tutto il corpo sommamente in ogni cosa è bellissima. Et in tutto l’ordine delle creature non è spettacolo sì meraviglioso, né miracolo tanto riguardevole.”²⁹ For the Renaissance man, beauty is the fruit of goodness, and the greater beauty of women is because their souls are nobler than those of men.

25. Quoted in Domenichi, *DC*, 3v. “between the woman and the boy there is only one difference: that the boy is not always a boy, but over time becomes a man; but woman is permanently a child: and he who is a boy does not always stay as such, but can in time change.”

26. Quoted in Domenichi, *DC*, 3v. “woman is permanently a child.”

27. Domenichi, *DC*, 4r. “women cannot take part in the affairs of court.”

28. Castiglione, *Il Cortegiano*, ed. Barberis, 251. “whose virtue and thus also their dignity I consider to be inferior to that of men in nothing.”

29. Domenichi, *La nobiltà*, 25r. “As well as the aforementioned in the measurement, order, figure, and arrangement of the whole body, in everything she is extremely beautiful. And in the whole order of creatures there is no spectacle so wonderful, nor is there a miracle so worthy of contemplation.”

However, the dignity of women must never endanger the dignity of men, nor should it disrupt the logic of the social order. If it depended only on abstract virtues, on theological reasons relating to Creation or original sin, or on individual merit,

la nobilitazione della donna potrebbe in qualche modo pregiudicare l'ordinamento sociale mettendone in pericolo le gerarchie di cui i rapporti fra i sessi sono parte fondamentale. Sotto la spinta del riconoscimento della dignità femminile ricompare significativamente la disputa sulla nobiltà: la sua proclamata uguaglianza viene verificata sui meccanismi sociali.³⁰

Accepting the link between *virtù* and *nobiltà*,³¹ Domenichi moves on to the “spetie” and tries to show that “le buffonerie, le facetie, e i motti da far ridere, non sono cose convenienti alle donne.”³² Thus, taking as given their mastery of domestic questions, women of the highest social class should practise two fundamental virtues at court: “la pudicitia, la quale è accompagnata dalla temperanza, dalla modestia, dalla continenza, dalla astinenza, et dalla sobrietà,”³³ and “la semplicità, la quale ha sempre in sua compagnia la taciturnità, la verità, et la sincerità. La pudicitia è corrotta dalla lussuria; et la semplicità viene alterata

30. Daenens, “Superiore perché inferior,” 24–25. “the ennoblement of women could in some way jeopardize the social order by endangering the hierarchies of which the relations between the sexes are a fundamental part. Through the drive to recognize female dignity, the polemic about nobility makes a significant reappearance: their proclaimed equality is verified according to social mechanisms.”

31. It should be noted that Domenichi disagrees with Aristotle in not seeing nobility as a hereditary privilege. In his dialogue *Della vera nobiltà* he writes, “la vera nobiltà non nasce che dalle virtù istesse” (true nobility is only born of the virtues themselves). Domenichi, *Della vera nobiltà*, 45. See also Aguzzi Barbagli, “La difesa,” 387–88.

32. Domenichi, *DC*, 4r. “buffoonery, jokes, and wisecracks are not appropriate things for women.”

33. Domenichi, *DC*, 4r. “modesty, which is the handmaid of temperance, humility, moderation, abstinence and sobriety.” Regarding the repressive control exercised over women in society, compelling them to practise *continentia* (continence), *Il Cortegiano* is very explicit: the virtue of *continentia* is the most necessary of all virtues that women must have, particularly the “donna di palazzo,” because it allows her “aver certezza dei figlioli” (to be sure of her children). Castiglione, *Il Cortegiano*, 244. This prescription is not made merely on moral grounds but entails legal and economic interests regarding property and hence estate inheritance. See Chemello, “Donna di palazzo.”

et guasta dalla menzogna, overo simulatione et dissimulatione.”³⁴ In the first part of the treatise, Domenichi discusses the theory that the courtier requires special virtues that are different from those of a woman of the same social rank. One example is *urbanità*, which cannot exist without wit and is praised in men while being condemned in women. Another is *buffoneria*, for, as Aristotle says in book 3 of *Rhetoric*, “la natura della persona ingegnosa, è di saper favellare con urbanità.”³⁵ Given that “le donne non hanno in lor tanta prudenza, ne ingegno che possano essere urbane, ne buffoni,”³⁶ they cannot exercise these virtues at court. In fact, Domenichi observes that although at that moment “appresso la principessa di Spagna ci sono delle donne, le quali danno trattenimento, et passatempo a sua Altezza con buffonerie, e piacevolezze da farla ridere, et già il Signor Prospero Colonna hebbe appresso di se una Margherita, che d’altro non le serviva,” such an occurrence is not impossible “perche si trovano ancho delle donne meretrici, le quali non dovrebbero essere tali. Et io ho dichiarato quel che la donna dovrebbe essere, et non quello ch’ella è in effetto.”³⁷ Hence, aware that the ideal of the honest woman of noble birth is a literary figure that does not correspond with reality, he puts her forward as a model of behaviour.

Continuing with his reasoning, Domenichi alleges that the court belongs to both the prince and his wife, who should each have their courtiers and ladies-in-waiting, “si come la donna è mezo huomo, così ella può essere anchora mezo cortigiano.”³⁸ He substitutes the male courtly virtue of *urbanità* with *affabilità*,³⁹

34. Domenichi, *DC*, 4r. “honesty, which is always accompanied by discretion, truth and sincerity. Modesty is corrupted by lust; and honesty is disrupted and ruined by lying, or fabrication and dissemblance.”

35. Quoted in Domenichi, *DC*, 4r. “the nature of a person of wit is to know how to speak with courtesy.”

36. Domenichi, *DC*, 4v. “women do not possess sufficient prudence or wit to be either courteous or witty.”

37. Domenichi, *DC*, 4v–5r. “alongside the Princess of Spain there are women who provide entertainment and distraction to her Highness with jests and witticisms to make her laugh, and Signor Prospero Colonna had a certain Margherita in his circle who provided him with this”; “because one also finds prostitutes who are not supposed to be prostitutes. And I have stated what a woman should be, and not what she is in face.”

38. Domenichi, *DC*, 5v. “given that woman is half man, she can also be half courtier.”

39. As well as the virtues pertinent to all women, Castiglione recommended precisely an “affabilità piacevole, per la quale sappia gentilmente intertenere ogni sorte d’uomo con ragionamenti grati e onesti” (pleasant affability, through which she knows how to entertain every kind of man courteously with graceful and honest conversation). Castiglione, *Il Cortegiano*, 262. The desirable qualities for this

which does not corrupt the *pudicitia* or *purità* of women. Women can exercise this quality at court in amorous matters with or without sophistry, but it is hard to carry it out between men and women without arousing “appetito lascivo” (lustful appetite) because virtues do not mix with vices, as St. Jerome, St. Augustine, St. Bernard, and philosophers of great authority all wrote. Therefore, concludes Domenichi, “questi ragionamenti amorosi de’ cortigiani con le fanciulle di corte, a me pare, che in alcun modo non sieno da esser comportati, ma da’ Principi buoni et giusti in tutto vietati,”⁴⁰ as did his own Eleonora di Toledo, Duchess of Florence.⁴¹ Nonetheless, he does not view it as wrong for court women to engage in these conversations with “uomini decrepiti”⁴² or with young men, as long as they do not cross the boundaries of honesty and as long as the ultimate purpose is marriage. However, Domenichi doubts that women are capable of acting in this way (not in vain did St. Augustine recommend that “il parlar con le donne ha da essere breve et rigido”⁴³) because, he asks, “Chi potrà mai sperare tanto ciscospetta osservanza in quel sesso?”⁴⁴

The reason Domenichi gives for writing this work is the teaching appearing in almost all contemporary treatises about the court concerning “certi loro trattenimenti da ruffiani, et meretrici, i quali non sono in alcun modo da esser comportati da’ principi religiosi e honesti.”⁴⁵ However, the worldly

function would be “gentilezza, grazia, discrezione, onestà, modestia, e tutela della buona fama” (courtesy, grace, discretion, honesty, modesty, and guardianship of good reputation). It is interesting to note that the court, the place most highly representative of public relations, also subjects women to severe control of gestures and words, to a studied range of behaviours.

40. Domenichi, *DC*, 8r. “these amorous conversations of courtiers with the young women of the court should not be allowed, it seems to me; indeed, good and just Princes should completely forbid them.”

41. The *exemplum* in this case is not based on characters from the Bible or from classical antiquity but on men and women of Domenichi’s time, as he himself had proposed in his work, *La nobiltà delle donne*. These include Laudomia Forteguerri (1515–55), renowned Italian poet from one of the most powerful families of Siena; his lady, Eleonora di Toledo; and Giuseppe Betussi (1512–73), humanist, man of letters, and multifaceted writer who authored a dialogue on love, *Il Raverta*, and another on beauty, *La Leonora*, and who was known for having translated the Latin works of Boccaccio into Italian.

42. Domenichi, *DC*, 8r. “decrepit old men.”

43. Quoted in Domenichi, *DC*, 8r. “dealings with women must be short and serious.”

44. Domenichi, *DC*, 8r. “Who could expect such restrained behaviour in that sex?”

45. Domenichi, *DC*, 8r. “certain entertainments by ruffians and prostitutes, which must not in any way be permitted by pious and honest princes.”

woman, prepared for the *civil conversazione* that takes place in the rooms of seignorial palaces, must fit the dominant stereotype without appearing eccentric or overdoing the *misura* (measure). Above all, she should not contravene the Tridentine rules. In his examples, Domenichi proposes two ways his should be done: “con piacevolezza e con adulazione.”⁴⁶ The former is suitable for women as long as it is not “simulata, finta, ne immascherata; ma seguirà la purità della natura,”⁴⁷ while flattery must be completely rejected and repressed. The line that separates the palace lady from the traditional image of women is her public role, characterized by the use of pleasant conversation (“ragionamenti grati e onesti”) in the entertainment of guests—which in the space of aristocratic leisure in the court has a primary utility. This is identified as the essential function of noblewomen, equivalent to the use of weapons for the courtier, who nevertheless also shares this function.

Domenichi offers Petrarch’s love for Laura as an example of the love the courtier should profess for a lady. That is, a love felt both in life and after her death, a love that never ages and that will carry on into the next life: “Percioche Iddio ottimo, et grandissimo, non riputando che sia premio a bastanza, ciò che si può dare a gli uomini in questo mondo, quelle donne che havranno mantenuto in amore, pudicitia et honestà, fa partecipi dell’età sempiterna, accioch’elle godano seco i beni dell’altra vita.”⁴⁸

Having concluded the theoretical part of his discussion, where he lays out the qualities required of women in amorous contexts, Domenichi devotes the second part to setting out an extended study of cases of brief and respectable conversation. In turn, these form a collection of shrewd and witty maxims, all aimed at promoting the ability of women in conversation within the boundaries of respectability. By way of example of the “affabilità gioconda e arguta” (witty and cheerful affability), he proposes the following:

Havendole io detto una volta [alla signora Ottavia]: dapoi che io, Signora mia, cominciai a amarvi, et servirvi, voi sete fatta bellissima, et lucidissima aurora; et veramente ch’io me ne rallegro molto. Io non poteva,

46. Domenichi, *DC*, 10v. “with pleasantness and with flattery.”

47. Domenichi, *DC*, 10v. “faked, feigned, or disguised; but rather follows the purity of nature.”

48. Domenichi, *DC*, 23r. “Therefore, God the highest and greatest, judging that there was no sufficient reward that could be given to men in this world, makes women who have maintained their modesty and honesty in love participants in eternal life, so that they could enjoy with them the goods of the next life.”

dolcissimamente rispose ella, essendo voi chiaro sole di virtù, et di gloria, riuscire altro che una bellissima aurora.⁴⁹

Domenichi's apparent change of criterion is evident in the different perceptions of the female prototype exhibited by *La nobiltà delle donne*, *Le rime diverse*, and *La donna di corte*. The development of the Counter-Reformation meant that, around the year 1560, many different and antagonistic messages circulated, and, while the Council of Trent was being held, the debate over the social role of women became subject to revision. The model of woman that had been in fashion in texts of the early sixteenth century was now condemned, and other models with a more edifying and didactic nature were put forward, as in *La donna di corte*. The ambiguity present in these texts by Domenichi⁵⁰ is due, among other reasons, to their logical-argumentative structure, characterized by a constant concern to describe femininity in clear counterpoint to masculinity, and to the use of the paradox as a rhetorical form, making it possible to express a range of irreconcilable discourses about women. As Francine Daenes rightly points out,

l'atteggiamento paradossale è comunque un atteggiamento di *dissimulazione*: dice e non dice, sottintende, ironizza, parla per antifrasi, elogi satirici e trasparenti iperboli, rinvia da una tesi alla tesi opposta, che a sua volta rimanda alla prima. Alla domanda: è vero o è falso? si può rispondere che non è vero ma che non è neanche falso. Etimologicamente il paradosso retorico è un discorso che va al di là dell'opinione comune (*para-doxa*), che la contraddice e che rimette in discussione i valori comunemente accettati dal lettore.⁵¹

49. Domenichi, DC, 6v. "Having said to her [signora Ottavia] once: since I, my lady, began to love and serve you, you have become the beautiful shining light of dawn; and in truth I am so glad. Being that you are the clear sun of virtue and glory, she replied with much sweetness, I could not be anything other than a most beautiful dawn."

50. In his treatise on *La nobiltà delle donne*, Domenichi states that although many authors have defended the dignity of women, they have done so only as a rhetorical exercise: "quantunque molti inanzi di me n'habbiano ragionato non però l'hanno trattato come se vera la credessero. Si come io spero di dover fare" (although many before me have reasoned about it, they have not treated it as though they truly believed in it. As I hope to do). Domenichi, *La nobiltà*, 54v.

51. Daenens, "Doxa e paradoxa," 29. "the paradoxical form is in any case a form of *dissimulation*: it says and does not say; it implies, ironizes, speaks through antiphrasis, satirical elogies, and transparent

Given the insistence with which medicine, theology, and moral philosophy declare their inferiority, it becomes paradoxical to state, as most of the treatises of the era do, that women are superior to men. This subtle rhetorical strategy is particularly evident in the treatise that is the subject of this article, *La donna di corte*: Domenichi's affirmation of the necessary diversity of courtly qualities demanded of women compared to men is due, in reality, to their supposed inferiority.

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hyperbole, and shifts from one argument to the opposite argument, and then back to the first. To the question, 'Is it true or false?' one can answer that it is not true but nor is it false. Etymologically, the rhetorical paradox is a form of speech that goes beyond common opinion (*para-doxa*), that contradicts it and calls into question the values commonly accepted by the reader."

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