

On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, *Petrarchismo*, and the Vernacular Style

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Among Pietro Testa's notes on painting, which were unsystematically collected after his death in 1650, is one folio dedicated to "Particolari perfetioni che fanno la donna bellissima" (Figs. 1 and 2).¹ It is devoted, as the heading indicates, to the artist's definitions of those features that render a woman most beautiful. The notes are unusually clear and precise, and in the margin next to the written description of each particular feature Testa drew a small illustrative sketch. The recto of the sheet (Fig. 1) is concerned with qualities of the head and shoulders. Testa required that the hair be long, fine, blonde, and knotted simply. For the brow he made a diagram of two squares, representing its correct wide proportions. In the left square he shows how the brow should curve in an arc towards the top. The eyebrows are to be dark, and they too should curve in perfect arches that taper gently towards the ends. Beautiful eyes are large and prominent, oval in shape, and blue or dark chestnut in color. The ear is soft and rosy, while the cheeks are gleaming white and vermilion, softly curving. The mouth should be on the small side, neither too angular nor too flat, and here Testa is referring to the angle of the meeting of the lips, which he illustrates in profile in an extra diagram. When the mouth opens, only five or six of the upper teeth should be revealed. The teeth are to be even and gleaming white, joined to the gums by a reddish band, and Testa drew six of these regular teeth grimacing in the margin to the left. The chin, which he shows in profile, should not be pointed but round, tinged with vermilion and with a little depression in the middle. The neck, for which Testa gives both a plan and an elevation, must be round, slender, and pure, gleaming white; at its base there should be a small snowy hollow, and as the neck bends little circles should form around it that must be very slightly tinged with red. The shoulders should be squarish, but softly so.

Finally on this side of the sheet Testa shows the back of the neck, which must be rosy and white and not too deeply furrowed by the line of the spine.

The diagrammatic nature of the marginal sketches makes it quite clear that they were not intended to be perfect academic models, nor were they drawn from life. They were brief aids to Testa's understanding, to help him visualize the contents of the notes he was taking—notes that were not his own formulation of the ideal female beauty, but that he made as he read Agnolo Firenzuola's *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne*.² This book, completed in 1542, a century before Testa read it, itself draws upon the visions of many earlier writers, and it is probably the most complete exposition of the beauty of the ideal woman among the multitude of sixteenth-century treatments of the theme, being concerned not only with her perfect features, but also with her colors, proportions, and such elusive qualities as her *vaghezza*, *leggiadria*, and *grazia*.³ The two-part dialogue was elegantly dedicated to the noble and beautiful women of Prato in 1541.

Love, beauty, and style lay very much at the heart of Agnolo Firenzuola's existence. He had withdrawn to the peaceful quiet of Prato to recover from a disease that seems to have been caused by his own amorous excesses, but his literary career had already been firmly established at the court of Clement VII, by whose authority he was freed from his monastic vows in 1526.⁴ In the introduction to his most famous work, the translation or, more accurately, transformation of *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius, Firenzuola traced the close relations between his ancestors and the Medici family, culminating in Clement's appointment of Agnolo's father Bastiano as chancellor to the magistrates of Alessandro, first Duke of the Florentine republic.⁵ Firenzuola shared the passion of many of his contemporaries for linking political commitment to the

¹ The notes are now preserved in the Städtischen Kunstsammlungen in Düsseldorf; for a discussion of their character and provenance, see E. Cropper, "Bound Theory and Blind Practice: Pietro Testa's Notes on Painting and the Liceo della Pittura," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, xxiv, 1971, 262–292. The sheet of notes discussed here appears in the bound volume as fols. 6r and 6v.

² This two-part dialogue, subtitled *Celso*, was edited and first published after Firenzuola's death by L. Scala, in *Prose di M. Agnolo Firenzuola*, Florence, 1548. References below are generally to the edition of B. Bianchi, *Le opere di Agnolo Firenzuola*, Florence, 1848, I, 239–305. The prose works were also edited by G. Guasti, *Le prose di Agnolo Firenzuola*, Florence, 1892; some references are made to the introduction. The most recent edition is by A. Seroni, *Agnolo Firenzuola: Opere*, Florence, 1971. For a bibliography of Firenzuola's works, see A. Seroni, "Bibliografia essenziale delle opere del Firenzuola," *Amor di libro*, v, 1957, fasc. i, 3–9, and fasc. ii, 97–103.

³ The importance of Firenzuola's text was briefly discussed by J. Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, New York, 1959, II, 340–43

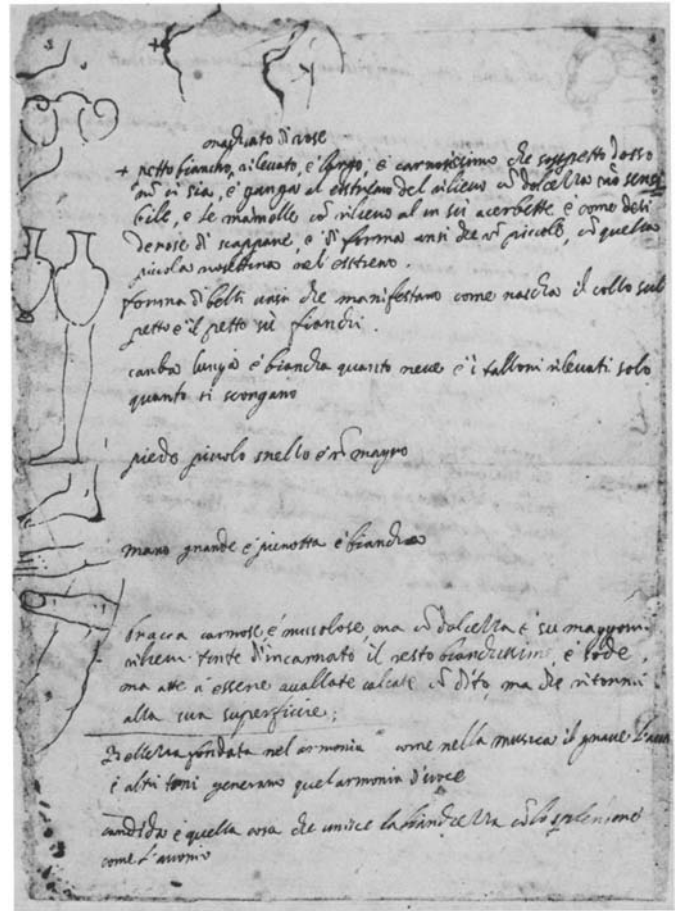
(with a summary of the description). The bibliography of Renaissance works devoted to ideal beauty in a woman is very long, especially as it is so closely bound up with the literature of courtly love and discussions of the relationship between love and beauty. For a good introduction to the literature of beauty in the Renaissance, see J. Houdoy, *La beauté des femmes dans la littérature et dans l'art du XIIe au XVIe siècle*, Paris, 1876; G. Zonta, *Trattati del cinquecento sulla donna*, Bari, 1913; T. F. Crane, *Italian Social Customs of the Sixteenth Century and Their Influence on the Literature of Europe*, New Haven, 1920, 138–141 (with bibliography); P. Lorenzetti, *La bellezza e l'amore nei trattati del cinquecento (Estratto degli Annali della R. Scuola normale superiore di Pisa, xxviii)*, Pisa, 1920; E. Rodocanachi, *La femme italienne avant, pendant, et après la Renaissance*, Paris, 1922, 89–113; H. M. Klein, *Das weibliche 'Portrait' in der Versdichtung der englischen Renaissance: Analyse einer literarischen Konvention*, Munich, 1969. The medieval tradition is treated by R. Renier, *Il tipo estetico della donna nel medio evo*, Ancona, 1885.

⁴ Firenzuola, I, xv–xviii.

⁵ *Dell'asino d'oro*, in Firenzuola, II, 5.



1 From Pietro Testa, notes on painting. Düsseldorf, Kunstmuseum, Budde Nr. 132, fol. 6r, "Particolari perfetioni che fanno la donna bellissima" (photo: Landesbildstelle Rheinland)



2 From Pietro Testa, notes on painting. Düsseldorf, Kunstmuseum, Budde Nr. 132, fol. 6v, "Particolari perfetioni che fanno la donna bellissima" (photo: Landesbildstelle Rheinland)

question of language, and he accordingly translated the extravagant Latin of Apuleius into Tuscan. The story is introduced as *una Tosca favola*; Lucius becomes Agnolo, Thessaly the Kingdom of Naples, and the Painted Porch in Athens the Campo in Siena. In the episode of Cupid and Psyche, Apollo, according to Apuleius an Ionian Greek who chose to address Psyche's father in Latin verse, instead speaks to him in Tuscan.⁶ Firenzuola's own preoccupation with literary style, and in particular the classical Tuscan vernacular

tradition of Petrarch and Boccaccio, was closely connected to the interests of the Florentine court of Clement, and to the work of such other writers as Bembo, Della Casa, and Caro, all of whom prospered during the doomed resurgence of Medici influence in Rome during the 1520's.⁷ Pietro Bembo played an important part in Firenzuola's initial success, for Bembo introduced him to Clement and encouraged him to read to the Pope the first day of his *Ragionamenti d'amore*, a work deeply indebted to his study of Petrarch

⁶ The *Asino d'oro*, like the dialogue on beautiful women, was also published after Firenzuola's death by L. Scala, whose first edition in Venice bears a dedication to Lorenzo Pucci dated 25 May 1549. Guasti, *Le prose di Agnolo Firenzuola*, xv–xviii, dated the work to ca. 1539, but it seems much likelier that it was completed during Firenzuola's years in Rome and A. Seroni, *Agnolo Firenzuola: Opere*, accordingly dates the completion of the work to ca. 1526. J. Shearman, *Mannerism*, London, 1967, 38–39, also suggests a date in the 1520's; his discussion of the work is brief, but places it in a highly significant context as far as the implications of this paper are concerned. Part of the text is also published in *Novellieri del cinquecento (Letteratura italiana: storia e testi*, xxiv, 1), ed. M. Guglielminetti, Verona, 1972, in which an early date is also advocated (p. 67).

⁷ Although Firenzuola's works were published posthumously, as so often happens in the Renaissance they were certainly well known in literary circles during his lifetime. Several of his discourses, for example, were

read at the Accademia Romana dei Vignaiuoli, among the members of which were Berni, Molza, Mauro, Caro, and della Casa, each one of them concerned with conventions of stylistic intricacy, whether in satire, eulogy, or the description of beauty. Firenzuola trained himself to be a stylist through the mastery of models that he could make his own without being bound by them. In addition to his contemporary treatment of the *Golden Ass*, he also wrote a comedy, *I Lucidi*, which is a personal adaptation of the *Menaechni* of Plautus, and in the introduction to the *Dialogo* he states his intention to issue a translation of Horace's *Poetics*, but only "quasi in forma di parafrasi." See Firenzuola, 1, xxi and 244. On Firenzuola see also G. Fattini, *Agnolo Firenzuola e la borghesia letterata del rinascimento*, Cortona, 1907; E. Ciafardini, "Agnolo Firenzuola," *Rivista d'Italia*, xv, 2, 1912, 3–46, and 881–946; and G. Toffanin, *Il Cinquecento (Storia letteraria d'Italia*, vi), Milan, 1929, 224–233.

and of Boccaccio's discussions of love and beauty in the *Filocolo* and the *Decameron*.⁸

It is in the painting that also developed in the context of this self-consciously stylish vernacular literary ambience that we find the most complete realization of the vision of female beauty recorded by Firenzuola in the *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne*. And no painting is more closely related to this vision than Parmigianino's *Madonna of the Long Neck* (Fig. 3), the work of an artist who in his early career was also favored by Clement, and one whose style was particularly praised by Vasari for the same qualities of *venustà*, *leggjadria*, and *grazia* to which Firenzuola devoted so much attention in his consideration of the *maniera* of a beautiful woman.⁹ Parmigianino was commissioned to paint it by Elena Tagliaferri for her family chapel in the Servite church in Parma after he had returned from Rome to his native city.¹⁰ In analyzing the beauty of the Madonna and her companions in the *Madonna of the Long Neck* through the eyes of Agnolo Firenzuola my intention is not to suggest that the painter provided a model for the writer or vice versa. Both Firenzuola and Parmigianino instead drew upon the same vernacular tradition and created ideal types, beautiful monsters composed of every individual perfection. In his dedicatory epistle to the dialogue, addressed *Alle nobili e belle donne pratesi*, Firenzuola wryly asserts that he is writing in the language of common currency rather than following the usage of Petrarch and Boccaccio. Nevertheless, both he and Parmigianino were inspired by a spirit of *Petrarchismo* that had become passionate before either work was created.¹¹ Furthermore, Parmigianino's Madonna is the

most complete portrayal of his ideal of feminine beauty, but there are other works that also realize it: the *Madonna of the Rose*, the maidens in *S. Maria della Steccata*, and the *Antea*, for example. The same ideal is also recognizable in other figures in the *Madonna of the Long Neck*, these both male and female, which suggests an androgynous nature to this kind of beauty that Firenzuola also perceived and that he related to his understanding of Platonic love.¹²

An analysis of Parmigianino's vision of perfection must begin with the Virgin herself. The aspects of her beauty that are most familiar are her elongated proportions, the curving arcs of her body, and her long slender neck, this last having already become by the late seventeenth century the identifying feature that gave the painting its name.¹³ Two important formal analogies within the painting will, however, be considered first—the analogy between the form of the Virgin and the slender-necked oval vase held by the angel to the left, and that between the Virgin and the unfinished column to the right. The analogy between the form of a beautiful antique vase and the shape of an ideally beautiful woman is one that also fascinated Firenzuola, and that he discussed at length in the *discorso secondo* of his dialogue. When Testa read this section of the text a century later he made two drawings of an amphora in the margin of his notes (Fig. 2), and wrote that these represent beautiful vases and show how the neck grows out of the chest, and how the chest rises up from the hips. Firenzuola's original explanation was much more complete, and in the edition of 1548 his views were even illustrated, though crudely (Fig. 4).¹⁴ From

⁸ For the importance of the *Filocolo* to the development of the literature of love in the 16th century, see T. F. Crane, 53–97. Firenzuola also won favor with Clement VII for his part in mounting a Tuscan defense against Giangio Trissino's *Epistola a Clemente VII*, in which the language was defined as Italian and courtly rather than Tuscan or Florentine, and in which Trissino sought to introduce the omega and epsilon into the alphabet. In his introduction to the *Discacciamento delle nuove lettere inutilmente aggiunte nella lingua toscana* Firenzuola attacks Trissino's wish, "Sotto principe Toscano, di spogliare l'antica Toscana del nome di quella lingua, la quale il Petrarca nostra e 'l Boccaccio hanno messa in tanto pregio" (Firenzuola, 1, 309). For a summary of this dispute with references to Rajna's dating of the *Epistola* and Firenzuola's reply to 1524, see V. Vivaldi, *Storia delle controversie linguistiche in Italia da Dante ai nostri giorni*, Catanzaro, 1925, 1, 23–27. For Trissino's part in the argument, see also B. Morsolin, *Giangio Trissino: Monografia di un letterato nel secolo XVI*, Vicenza, 1878, 163–185. Firenzuola himself records that he read both the *Discacciamento* and the first day of the *Ragionamenti* to Clement VII for several hours (see Firenzuola, 1, 243). Aretino, whom he had befriended as a law student in Perugia, also helped introduce him to Clement VII, for which see V. Cian, *Un decennio della vita di M. Pietro Bembo, 1521–1531*, Rome and Florence, 1885, 32, n. 2. In the *Ragionamenti* Firenzuola follows the convention of placing a group of beautiful young men and women in the countryside, questioning each other about love, to examine further the nature of literary invention in relation to tradition and the right of modern poets to find both new modes of writing, not just new subjects, and new words that are sweet, even if not hallowed by tradition. The basic principles of the *Dialogo* concerning beauty, love, and style are already firmly established in this earlier work.

⁹ A. O. Quintavalle, *Il Parmigianino*, Milan, 1948, 182f., n. 75; S. Freedberg, *Parmigianino: His Works in Painting*, Cambridge, Mass., 1950, 89–93 and 186–89. Vasari writes of his treatment of figures, "Poichè diede alle sue figure, oltre quello che si è detto di molti altri, una certa venustà, dolcezza, e leggiadria nell'attitudini, che fu sua propria e particolare. Nelle teste parimente si vede che da infiniti pittori imitata ed osservata, per aver egli dato all'arte un lume di grazia tanto piacevole, che saranno sempre le sue cose tenute in pregio, ed egli da tutti gli studiosi del disegno onorato"

(Vasari-Milanesi, v, 218). Lomazzo also describes Parmigianino as "inventor di leggiadrie," and Dolce adds, "Diede costui certa vaghezza alle cose sue che fanno innamorare chiunque le riguarda," providing an important definition of *vaghezza* for what follows in this paper. For these quotations and other critical assessments, see Quintavalle, 11. For Parmigianino's introduction to Clement VII, see Vasari-Milanesi, v, 222.

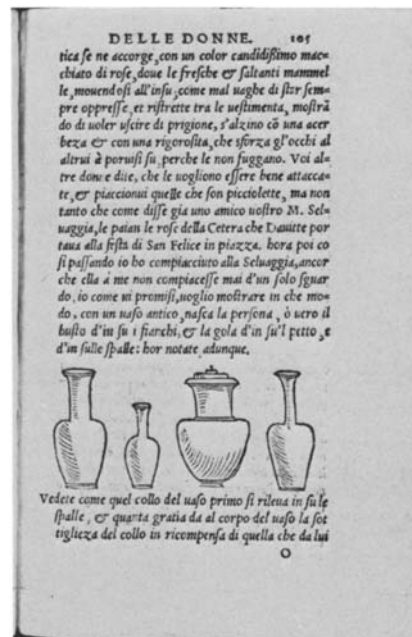
¹⁰ The contract is dated 23 December 1534; it is republished by Quintavalle, 183, n. 86. The painting was left unfinished.

¹¹ Firenzuola, 1, 243f.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1, 253–59. In reply to a question from one of his female listeners about whether he is discussing the beauty of men or women, Firenzuola recounts the story from the *Symposium* of the division of the sexes, and suggests that she look further at some of Pietro Bembo's early poems. But, though he defines beauty in general as both male and female, he goes on to praise in a courtly manner the greater delicacy and sweetness of women. Thus, the Classical Ciceronian opposition and complementary nature of male dignity and female beauty is maintained even by Firenzuola (e.g., *ibid.*, 276), although it does seem that the "feminine" aesthetic discussed below was so dominant in fashionable circles in the 1520's and 1530's that it required no contrast and became universally admired, whether in representations of women or of men.

¹³ The first known reference to this title is in a letter of 1674, for which see U. Davitt-Asmus, "Zur Deutung von Parmigianinos *Madonna dal collo lungo*," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, xxxi, 1968, 305–313 (cf. 305, n. 10). A perceptive formal analysis of the figure of the Virgin is presented by S. Freedberg, 9–11, who relates it to what he defines as the "pictorial matriarchy" in Parmigianino's work; his description is remarkable, especially in discussing the relationship of the waist, breasts, and shoulders, in that he was relying entirely on the evidence of his eyes, at the same time being indifferent to the descriptive tradition to which it itself belongs.

¹⁴ The Testa drawing is bound as fol. 6v in the Düsseldorf ms. For the woodcut, see *Prose di M. Agnolo Firenzuola fiorentino*, Florence, 1548, 105. For a discussion of Testa's interest in this part of the text, see E. Cropper, "Disegno as the Foundation of Art: Some Drawings by Pietro Testa," *Burlington Magazine*, cxvi, 1974, 382–85.



3 Parmigianino,
*Madonna dal Collo
Lungo*. Florence,
Pitti Palace (photo:
Alinari)

4 *Prose di M. Agnolo
Firenzuola Fiorentino*,
Florence, 1548, p. 105

right to left are shown two beautiful and two graceless forms. According to Firenzuola the vase on the far right, with its long neck rising delicately from its shoulders, is like a woman with a long slender neck and wide, graceful shoulders. The next vase has sides that swell out around the sturdy neck, making it appear more slender, and this resembles the ideal, fleshy-hipped woman, who needs no belt to set off her slender midriff. In contrast to the first, the third vase is like a skinny angular woman, whereas the fourth, unlike the second, recalls those over-endowed women who are simply blocked out by a mallet without being finished by the chisel and the rasp.¹⁵

Interest in this aspect of sixteenth-century aesthetics was not limited to contemporaries of Firenzuola like Parmigianino,

nor was it limited in the seventeenth century to Testa, who felt driven to master the intellectual structure of High Renaissance art. He must have been studying Firenzuola's dialogue in the late 1640's, and it was just at this time that his friend Nicolas Poussin was surely drawn to consider the same problems of female beauty.¹⁶ In 1648 Pointel commissioned a work from Poussin, the *Rebecca and Eliezer* now in the Louvre (Fig. 5).¹⁷ Félibien singled this painting out as one the true beauty of which, considered in terms of grace, composition, color, decorum, and the realization of ideal forms, could only be appreciated by the unprejudiced spectator who considers not only the execution but also the intention behind it.¹⁸ In this case the intention was of more than usual importance in the invention of the work, and

¹⁵ Firenzuola, 1, 300–01.

¹⁶ For the connection between Testa's reading of Firenzuola's text and his own drawings of ca. 1644, see E. Cropper, "Disegno," 385.

¹⁷ See A. Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin: A Critical Catalogue*, London, 1966, 10f.

¹⁸ A. Félibien, *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages des plus excellents peintres anciens et modernes avec la vie des architectes*, Trevoux, 1725, repr. Farnborough, 1967, iv, 90–101.



5 Poussin, *Rebecca and Eliezer at the Well*. Paris, Louvre (photo: Clichés des Musées Nationaux)

Félibien was well qualified to give an account of it, for he writes that he was in Rome at the time of the commission.¹⁹ The Abbé Gavot had sent to Cardinal Mazarin a painting by Guido Reni that depicted the Virgin surrounded by young maidens engaged in various tasks.²⁰ This painting of the late 1630's, the so-called *Sewing School* now in the Hermitage, epitomized for Félibien the characteristic grace and sweetness of Guido's style and richly demonstrated the ideal of variety in the airs of the heads and in the draperies of the maidens. It was this that prompted Pointel to ask Poussin to make a similar painting for him, which could only have encouraged the painter's critical fascination with the work of Reni. Pointel specified no subject, only that the work should be filled with young girls who should be beautiful in different ways.²¹

Poussin was not satisfied with the straightforward interior scene whereby the Bolognese artist, according to Malvasia, had

striven to create a simple, pleasant *Albanata*, and in which the beauties are presented for their own sake.²² Instead, Poussin, the painter of classical histories confronting the graceful and sweet style of Reni, made a direct criticism of the *Sewing School*. He chose as his subject the dramatic moment when Eliezer reveals to Rebecca that, by offering him drink and watering his camels, she has fulfilled God's sign and is destined to become the wife of Isaac.²³ According to Félibien, the choice of this dramatic moment allowed Poussin to invest the originally purely formal requirements of the commission with new content, specifically through the focus provided by the main event, the disposition of suitable groups around it, the study of the reactions of the other women (and here Félibien draws attention to the disapproval, or perhaps melancholic jealousy of the woman leaning on her vase to the right, and to the negligence of the distracted girl to the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁰ C. Gnudi and G. C. Cavalli, *Guido Reni*, Florence, 1955, 89–90 and fig. 150; *L'Opera completa di Guido Reni (Classici dell'arte, XLVIII)*, ed. C. Garboli and E. Baccheschi, Milan, 1971, No. 169.

²¹ Félibien, iv, 100: "Ce tableau est considérable par la diversité des airs de tête nobles et gracieux, et par les vêtements agréables, peints de cette belle manière que le Guide possédoit. Le Sieur Pointel l'ayant vû écrivit au Poussin, lui témoigna qu'il l'obligeroit s'il vouloit lui faire un tableau rempli comme celui-là, de plusieurs filles, dans lesquelles on pût remarquer différentes beautés." On Poussin's fascination with Reni, see E. Panofsky, *A Mythological*

Painting by Poussin in the Nationalmuseum Stockholm (Nationalmuseum Skriftserie, v), Stockholm, 1960, 29–35.

²² C. C. Malvasia, *Felsina pittrice: Vite de' pittori bolognese*, Bologna, 1841, 11, 41f. "Le due scuole di femmine, minori del naturale, che radunate assieme s'impiegavano in varii lavori, chi dell'ago, chi del fuso, e chi de' pizzi, non so se per rappresentare una Lucrezia, o un Artemisia, con le sue damigelle; pensiero vago assai, e nel quale disse di voler fare anch'egli un *Albanata*." For the identification of one of these as the Leningrad picture and a discussion of this comment, see Gnudi and Cavalli, 89.

²³ Genesis 24: 1–28.

left who fails to notice that the vase she is filling overflows), and finally, the diminution of light and color under the late afternoon sun.²⁴

These qualities, which are fundamental to Poussin's means for enhancing a noble theme drawn from history, are ornaments to the central intention of this painting, which arose from the competition with Guido in the presentation of beautiful women. Although Félibien describes the reactions of the various maidens whose virtue does not approach the modesty and reserve of the chosen Rebecca, he points at the same time to the just proportions of each of their bodies and to the different airs of their heads, each with its own grace, unadorned and natural.²⁵ Even though the expression of the woman leaning upon her vase to the right of Rebecca betrays her chagrin, she is as beautiful as the most perfect antique statue, and indeed, with the cloth of her *peplos* hanging in graceful folds like the fluting of a column, she recalls one of those beautiful women of Nîmes whom Poussin compared to the stately columns of the Maison Carrée.²⁶ But to see in this figure, or in any other of the maidens presented in the painting as *exempla* of beauty, a simple imitation of the antique is to limit Poussin's vision.²⁷ For, in seeking out his beautiful women, Poussin looked to a wider range of perfections. The jealous woman, for example, is a close relation to Reni's own ideal woman, especially as expressed in his late works of the 1640's, such as the *Girl with a Crown*.²⁸ The girl on the right who rests her arm on the shoulders of her companion, on the other hand, with her golden hair, pink cheeks, rosy smiling lips, and fleshy jawline underscored with an arc of light reflected from her shoulder, mirrors the ideal

of Rubens.²⁹ Her counterpart on the far left-hand side of the painting displays a delicately and perfectly proportioned profile, with her hair ribbons passing under her chin, and she approximates a Raphaellesque ideal of beauty, specifically derived from the figure of St. Catherine in the *Madonna dell'Impannata*.³⁰ In contrast, one of the two women seated farther in the background wears her hair hanging down in ringlets from the crown of her head, in a manner that Bellori recognized as Poussin's depiction of the Egyptian style.³¹

Poussin's fulfillment of this commission to paint variously beautiful maidens by presenting them according to the ideals of different artists, carefully assimilating these into a single work, is fully consonant with his understanding of the individual perfections of individual styles.³² This is also something for which he would have found support in Firenzuola, for, although a large part of the *Dialogo* is devoted to a detailed definition of ideally perfected features, it also implies the possible existence of differing manners of perfection. In forming his ideal woman Firenzuola recognized that he was exercising judgment, which when applied to the discernment of beauty he places in the eye, the instrument of nature, and not in the more reasonable instrument of the *ingegno*.³³ Like the beauty of art, beauty in women is formed from a certain harmony and order among parts, Firenzuola writes; this harmony creates delight in the beholder, and has the power to draw the mind to a desire for heavenly things. But this harmony cannot be adduced in a purely rational manner; a woman can be beautiful because of her just proportions and her perfect individual features (and even in the absence of these), but also because of such all but indefinable

²⁴ Félibien, iv, 106–115.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, iv, 115.

²⁶ For Poussin's remarks, addressed to Chantelou in a letter dated 20 March 1642, see *Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin*, ed. C. Jouanny, *Archives de l'art français*, v, Paris, 1911, 122. On Poussin's treatment of the Greek *peplos*, see A. Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, Washington, 1967, 233–35.

²⁷ LeBrun argued this issue in the Academy debate on the painting in 1668, a discussion recorded by Guillet de Saint-Georges, the historian of the Academy, and published in *Conférences de l'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture*, ed. H. Jouin, Paris, 1883, 87–99. For LeBrun's defense of Poussin's relationship to the antique in reply to the charge of Philippe de Champaigne, "Qu'il s'en étoit toujours fait une étude servile et particulière," see 91f.

²⁸ Gnudi and Cavalli, fig. 196 and Cat. No. 112, p. 100. A. Blunt, 1967, 230, relates this figure to the *Aldobrandini Wedding* and to figures on ancient sarcophagi, but this generic relationship does not exclude a connection with Guido's figures of women.

²⁹ For example, the figure of St. Domitilla in Rubens's *St. Gregory the Great Surrounded by Other Saints*, now in Grenoble, originally painted for the

Chiesa Nuova; for this see H. Vlieghe, *Saints II (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, VIII)*, London and New York, 1973, 43–50, and fig. 109.

³⁰ *The Complete Paintings of Raphael*, ed. P. de Vecchi, New York, 1966, pl. I and fig. 106, p. 110. Raphael's authorship of this painting has of course been questioned (e.g., by J. Pope-Hennessy, *Raphael*, New York, 1970, 218–220), but this in no way affects Poussin's (rightly) taking it as an example of Raphael's invention.

³¹ See Bellori's identification of a similar hairstyle in his description of the *Moses Striking the Rock* in Leningrad (*Le vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti moderni*, Rome, 1672, 505). The painting is reproduced by Blunt, 1967, pl. 198, and dated by him to 1649 (the year after the *Rebecca and Eliezer*), Cat. No. 23, p. 20f.

³² Poussin's definition of style is reprinted by A. Blunt, 1967, 363f. See also E. Cropper, "Virtue's Wintry Reward: Pietro Testa's Etchings of the Seasons," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, xxxvii, 1974, 276f.

³³ Firenzuola, 251f., "Questo non può venire d'altro che da uno occulto ordine della natura; dove, secondo il mio giudizio, non arriva saetta d'arco d'ingegno umano; ma l'occhio che da essa natura è stato costituito giudice di questa causa, giudicando ch'egli sia così, ci sforza senza appello a starne alla sua sentenza."

qualities as *leggiadria*, *grazia*, *vaghezza*, *venustà*, *aria*, and *maestà*.³⁴ By the seventeenth century such terms had become critical commonplaces to describe not only the beauty of a woman but also that of individual artistic styles. Despite the fact that they are terms as much evocative as descriptive, they are vital to an understanding of the perfections expressed in the style of Poussin or Reni, who was as famous for his *grazia* as Correggio and Barocci were for the *aria* with which they endowed their women. They are terms that cannot be appreciated without a study of their significance in the sixteenth century, both in relation to the direct perception of natural beauty and to the manner in which this beauty is represented by artists like Parmigianino, even though such study is clouded by the fact that the terms all contain, and critically depend upon, a certain element of *non so che*.³⁵

Because of the ultimate elusiveness of beauty Lessing praised Homer for refusing to describe the particular beauty of Helen, whereas he lamented the detailed description of her in the chronicle of Constantinus Manasses, and found fault with Ariosto's far more elevated account of the beauties of the bewitching Alcina.³⁶ For the same reason Firenzuola found himself on much firmer ground when he moved on to the more specific definition of the prescriptive perfection of individual features, for if the whole was elusive, yet the parts lay clear before his eyes.³⁷ It was this part of the discourse that appealed to Testa, and from which he took his notes, and this part also clearly interested Poussin. The jealous, Reni-esque maiden

leaning on her vase in the *Rebecca and Eliezer* has, for example, the honey-blond hair, the dark eyes under perfectly arched, dark brows, the small mouth, and the breasts that struggle against the confines of her dress that Firenzuola required.³⁸ The element in the discourse that seems to have attracted Poussin most, however, lies between these qualitative features and the quantitative beauty of harmonious proportions: it is Firenzuola's analogy between the form of a beautiful woman and that of an antique vase. Given the requirements of the commission, Poussin could choose from many possible subjects. His choice of the theme of Rebecca and Eliezer suggests that he was interested not only in showing different types of beauty, but also in relating the shapes of the women to beautiful antique vases. His maidens are decorously draped, the lines of their bodies concealed, but the vases that are given particular significance in the painting, both through their own antique designs and through their direct relationship to the various women, illustrate Firenzuola's principles most accurately. The slender green vase that the woman in the left background carries on her head recalls the analogy between the long, slender neck and the full shoulders of a beautiful woman (see Fig. 4). Rebecca's own hydria, on the other hand, represents the relationship between full, swelling hips and a strong, narrower torso. The third significant vase, which the Raphael-esque woman on the far left holds on her head, relates to another analogy made by Firenzuola; this vase has elaborate, curving handles, which Firenzuola had compared to the man-

³⁴ These definitions appear in the first part of the *Dialogo* (Firenzuola, I, 272–79). *Leggiadria* springs from a certain carriage of the body that is graceful, modest, and elegant, which makes every movement measured and ordered without being affected. It is governed by a silent law that can be studied in no book, understood only through natural judgment. *Grazia* is particularly associated with Aglaia, one of the Graces (the companions of Venus) who represents *Splendore*, for it is a splendor fired by proportions that are also hidden, defined in no text, but which can bestow upon a woman who may even lack the accepted proportions of beauty the benefits of grace and render her desirable. *Grazia* must remain “un non so che” and Firenzuola recommends that those who still have no comprehension of it should look “negli occhi di quella chiara luce che rischiarà co'bellissimi occhi suoi ogni peregrino ingegno che dello splendor della grazia va cercando,” *ibid.*, 275. The introduction of the concept of the “peregrino ingegno” is significant here in terms of the relationship between beauty and divine love; see R. Klein, “Pensée et symbole à la Renaissance: *Spirito peregrino*,” in *La forme et l'intelligible*, ed. A. Chastel, Paris, 1970, 31–64. *Vaghezza*, to continue, is closely related to this concept, for it turns the mind of the spectator into a wanderer desiring to enjoy the beauty that inspires it. In a beauty of this world *vaghezza*, then, depends on a certain extra spice, an allure tempered by modesty that attracts love. *Venustà*, the feminine counterpart of male dignity, is noble, chaste, and virtuous, springing from celestial rather than terrestrial love. *Aria* implies only a good quality, for “la mal'aria è non avere aria.” It springs from an inner virtue, based upon a healthy spirit, and a clear conscience, free from the disturbances of humor that stain the complexion and cloud the eyes. Finally, *maestà* is a quality of regal gravity of body, carriage, and speech that excites reverence and admiration.

Firenzuola's definitions incorporate much that is traditional from writers such as Petrarch, Boccaccio, and Dante, and they ultimately derive from Classical sources such as Cicero and Catullus, whose isolation of *venustas*, for example, and its qualities (Poem LXXXVI) was notably influential. They are,

however, as elaborated and specific definitions written in the vernacular, an advance in lexicographic precision, and as such are thoroughly cited in the *Vocabolario* of the Accademia della Crusca. Though careful, the definitions remain lighthearted in spirit if compared, for example, to Dante's definition of *leggiadria* in *Rime*, LXXXIII, “Poscia che l'Amor del tutto m'ha lasciato,” which is much more suitable in connection with the beauty of the Virgin here.

³⁵ A quality attributed specifically to *Grazia* by Firenzuola, for which see the preceding footnote.

³⁶ G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. E. Frothingham, New York, 1957, 126–133.

³⁷ An explanation of why these normative details must supplement the qualities of indefinable harmonious proportion and individual perfection is not provided by Firenzuola, except in terms of “uno occulto ordine della natura” that renders a hairy woman ugly, but a bald horse deformed (Firenzuola, I, 251). It is, however, justified by N. Franco in his *Dialogo dove si ragiona delle bellezze*, Venice, 1542, a work closely related to Firenzuola's *Dialogo* and dedicated to Maria d'Avalos, the sister of Giovanna d'Aragona. After pursuing many definitions of beauty, he concludes with the conventional judgment of “quegli che chiamata l'hanno convenienza di parti ben colorate, piena di grata concordia, e di proportione che tira ad amare ogniuno.” When challenged that there are many ugly things proportioned perfectly, according to their own manners, he is forced to lay down specific proportions and features for female beauty, which are the same, though less detailed, as those enumerated by Firenzuola.

³⁸ For the hair, see Firenzuola, I, 283f.; the eyes, 288f.; the mouth, 294f.; the breasts he described on 299f. as follows: “Movendosi all'in su, come mal vaghe di star sempre oppresse e ristrette tra le vestimenta, mostrando di voler uscire di prigione, s'alzino con una acerbezza e con una rigorosità, che sforza gli occhi altrui a porvisi su, perch'elle non fuggano.”

ner in which the arms of a woman should spring from her shoulders, curving in a lively way rather than simply jutting out from her body.³⁹

Looking again at Parmigianino's *Madonna of the Long Neck* with these formal principles to hand, we can see that even though the vase carried by the angel has no handles, yet the arms of the Virgin do swell in a curve from her shoulders, forming handles to her amphora-like body.⁴⁰ The amphora itself relates to Firenzuola's first analogy, the concave arc of the neck complementing the convex oval body, just as the slender neck of the Virgin curves upwards out of the oval form of her body.

What is specifically important in this context is the aesthetic content of the analogy between the ideal female form and the beautiful antique vase, rather than the symbolic inference of the Virgin as vase. In the end the two may well be reconciled, however, in view of the theological interpretation of the Virgin and the vase in the Song of Songs and its commentaries. The vase of balsam in the Song of Songs is the vessel for Grace; when the vase is broken, that is through Christ's Passion foretold by the cross within it, the souls of men will be drawn to love him through the dispensation of Grace. Not only is the vase full of Grace, but so also is the Virgin, who in her immaculate beauty is a worthy bride of Christ.⁴¹

The formal analogy of the vase is one aspect of Firenzuola's description that does not appear to derive directly from Classical or vernacular traditions for expressing the beauties of women, but at the same time it is an analogy to which Parmigianino returned again and again. The maidens in the frescoes in S. Maria della Steccata, commissioned in 1531 and the one part of this disastrous project for which Parmigianino seems to have had any appetite, are directly related to the amphorae that they carry on their heads, and the many drawings made in connection with the project show even more clearly that the ideal form of woman as vase was a major preoccupation

of the artist in the 1530's, and not limited to a single iconographic function as in the case of the *Madonna of the Long Neck*. The precise origin of this ideal of the woman as vase, both in the visual language of Parmigianino and in Firenzuola's text, is not entirely clear, but it is most certainly based in the formal vocabulary of Renaissance classicism. Its most conspicuous example is, of course, the famous water-carrier in the *Fire in the Borgo*.⁴²

Raphael, whose study of the forms of antique vases is explicitly mentioned by Vasari, was working on the *Fire in the Borgo* at the time of his increasing involvement in the study of Vitruvius.⁴³ Vitruvius is the source of the second analogy made in the *Madonna of the Long Neck*, that between the Virgin and the column. A discussion of this problem first may help us to perceive more fully the connection that may have been understood to exist between the woman and the vase. In this case, the analogy is clearly related to the question of proportion. Vitruvius associated the proportions of columns and their formations with human proportions, dividing them into male and female canons—an association followed by Poussin, as noted before, in his comparison of the Corinthian columns of the Maison Carrée to the beautiful women of Nîmes.⁴⁴ Parmigianino never drew the analogy as explicitly as this, and the question is left even more open in the instance of the *Madonna of the Long Neck* since the row of columns was left unfinished by the artist. The incomplete foreground column has neither fluting nor capital, though it does have a base, and it is left ambiguous which of the appropriate female orders Parmigianino wished to suggest. Both the Ionic and the Corinthian orders are characterized by their slenderness and grace, the Corinthian, according to Vitruvius, being even more slender than the Ionic and particularly associated with virgins.⁴⁵ In his preparatory drawings for the painting Parmigianino experimented with many different inventions for the column, both Ionic and Corinthian, but in the finished work

³⁹ Firenzuola, I, 297f., "Al modo delle quali ritornando, diremo, che dal posamento della gola partendosi per gettar fuori le braccia, come lor principio, e come fa un vaso antico, ma di mano di buon maestro, i suoi manichi, debbono alzarsi un poco; dipoi, con una declinazione non repentina, fermare le braccia, e fare un mezzo ritegno allo imbusto delle vesti che non caschino. . . ."

⁴⁰ Compare also here, Freedberg, 10: "The shoulders are molded within the steeply sloping oval outline which confines the upper part of the body, so that their smooth, sharply tapering curve offers no resistance to the fluid progress of the rhythmic contour around the form. The arms continue the shoulder line almost without modification or interruption; their shape is an attenuated repetition of the shape of the legs. The hands suggest the pattern of a slender urn, from which the fingers break into small elongated serpentes."

⁴¹ For the most useful, though not conclusive, discussion of the iconography of the painting see U. Davitt-Asmus, cited in n. 13 above. The connection between the formal analogy of the Virgin and the column, and the concept of the Virgin as the *Columna novae legis* that is only briefly discussed there must be understood in the same context as the connection between the formal and iconographical implications of the analogy between the Virgin and the vase. This problem lies outside the immediate limits of the present discussion, but will be the subject of a future study.

⁴² For documents related to the Steccata project, see Quintavalle, 162–181. For related drawings, see A. E. Popham, *Catalogue of the Drawings of Parmigianino*, New Haven and London, 1971, I, 23–26, and 101–04; III, pls. 309–344. There is, of course, a close relationship between the iconography of the Steccata frescoes and that of the *Madonna of the Long Neck*. For the connection between the Steccata maidens and the water-carrier of the *Fire in the Borgo*, see also Popham, I, 24. These figures are in the tradition of form and flowing movement that so preoccupied Warburg, and that led him to formulate his famous theory of the *pathosformel* in Renaissance art.

⁴³ Vasari-Milanesi, IV, 376. For Raphael's study of Vitruvius, see his letters of 1514 to Marco Fabio Calvo and Castiglione (V. Golzio, *Raffaello nei documenti, nelle testimonianze dei contemporanei e nella letteratura del suo secolo*, Vatican City, 1936, 30f. and 34f.).

⁴⁴ Vitruvius, *De architectura* IV. 1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8. It is worth remembering that the elongated proportions in Mannerist works of art were not necessarily considered to be anti-Classical in the 15th and 16th centuries. For example, D. Barbaro, in his commentary on Vitruvius III. 1 (ed. Venice, 1567), writes, "Gli antichi oltre la proportione attendevano alla gratia per satisfare allo aspetto, et pero facevano i corpi alquanto grandi, le teste picciole, la coscia lunga; nel che era posto la sveltezza: parlo hora de i corpi perfetti. . . ."

he surely intended an Ionic order.⁴⁶ First, this order was associated with Diana, worshipped not only for her beauty and chastity, but also for her support in childbirth and of all life in nature.⁴⁷ Second, and more to the point here, this capital would have provided a formal analogy to the head of the Virgin. According to Vitruvius, just as the proportions of the Ionic order were derived from the perfect proportions of a beautiful woman, so the design of the capital was derived from her equally beautiful head. The volutes of the Ionic capital should curve round like the delicate curls that frame the brow of a woman; thus Parmigianino arranged the curls on either side of the Madonna's forehead in a style that can only be called Ionic, and with a suggestiveness that may have rendered the completion of the capital itself unwelcome.⁴⁸

The question of the analogy between architectural proportions and those of the human figure, either in terms of number or surface, with which Parmigianino and all students of Vitruvius were thoroughly versed, leads back to the formal implications of the vase. Cesariano, in his commentary to Vitruvius of 1521, compares the capitals of columns to the forms of both vases and bells with respect to their symmetry (Fig. 6).⁴⁹ By symmetry he did not mean a simple bilateral identity, but proportion, a quality of eurythmy.⁵⁰ Vitruvius' explanations of the qualities of harmony, eurythmy, and symmetry are by no means easy to understand or to carry into practice—indeed, in his *Rebecca and Eliezer* Poussin was still struggling to realize the indefinable qualities of beauty through an analytic comparison of nature and art in the forms, curves, and silhouettes of both the vases and the women, no less than in the perfect sphere that rests on the rectangular column behind them. Cesariano, in relating the form of a capital to either a

vase or a bell (Fig. 6), was thinking in terms of quite simple proportion, as the small diagram in his illustration of the types of columns and capitals indicates. But this type of proportion or symmetry is also related to an idea in musical harmony, of sound, an idea that appears most clearly in Cesariano's commentary to Book v, where he relates the sounding jars in the Vitruvian theater to bells.⁵¹ These mysterious metallic vases were quite different from the types of earthenware vases introduced by Raphael and Poussin into their paintings, or from the crystal amphora carried by the angel in the *Madonna of the Long Neck*. They surely, however, all represent developments of an idea already firmly established in the quattrocento, and one deserving much greater study, that a vase in its proportions, in the relations of its curves and the ways these are generated one from the other, like a bell, like a Classical order, like a column, and like the human figure itself, is a perfect, harmonious, symmetrical form that, in its attunement to the principles of sound, of cosmic harmony, therefore renders perfect beauty visible.⁵²

But let us now turn away from the question of quantitative beauty to the problem of particular qualitative perfection, from the harmonious structure of the whole to the presentation of individual features, from order and mode to species, and, as I hope to show, from a Classical to a vernacular vision. It is here that the originality of Parmigianino's presentation of exquisite beauty is truly founded, and that Firenzuola's anatomy of beauty is most illuminating. We shall now look more closely at the *Madonna of the Long Neck*, seeing her beauty through the eyes of Agnolo Firenzuola, relating her appearance to that of his ideal woman, following his descriptions of each of her perfect features in turn.

⁴⁶ For the drawings, see Popham, I, 51–52, III, pls. 345–360. Louvre drawing Inv. No. RF577 (*ibid.*, pl. 349, No. 509), for example, clearly shows Corinthian columns, whereas the Ottawa drawing (pl. 347, No. 327) and the copies in the Albertina and Louvre (pl. 346, O.C. 33, and pl. 347, O.C. 25) show Ionic orders. In his experiments with different orders Parmigianino also seems to have been intrigued by the twisted columns of the Temple of Solomon, which he may have intended to use as a reference to the textual source for the iconography in the Song of Songs (for which, see U. Davitt-Asmus, cited in note 13 above). These drawings are illustrated by Popham, pl. 345, No. 661v and pl. 354, No. 454. I would also like to suggest that the Venice drawing (pl. 3, No. 598), which Popham describes as “The Virgin and Child with St. Jerome, St. Francis, and other figures,” and tentatively relates to the Bardi *Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine*, probably should be seen as an early idea for the *Madonna of the Long Neck*. In his discussion of the drawing (I, p. 58), Popham expresses his uncertainty about the relationship of the drawing to the painting, and in his introduction (I, p. 1), he writes: “Though we have drifted far from the Bardi picture as far as subject is concerned, there still remain points of resemblance. There is something similar in the statuesque frontal figure of the Virgin, curiously holding the child on top of a fluted column with a Corinthian capital.” The capital is in fact Ionic, and there is nothing in the iconography that is inconsistent with the *Madonna of the Long Neck*. I am not really sure that if the connection with the *Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine* is removed the drawing has to be dated as early as ca. 1522. It seems that it could fit quite well with studies for the later work, e.g., pl. 346, No. 359, and pl. 345,

No. 363, where Francis and Jerome also appear. Even if, ultimately, the drawing has to be dated earlier it would not be surprising to find Parmigianino returning to an earlier idea from which he could develop a new composition.

⁴⁷ The order was supposed to have originally been invented for a temple of Diana (Vitruvius IV, 1, 7).

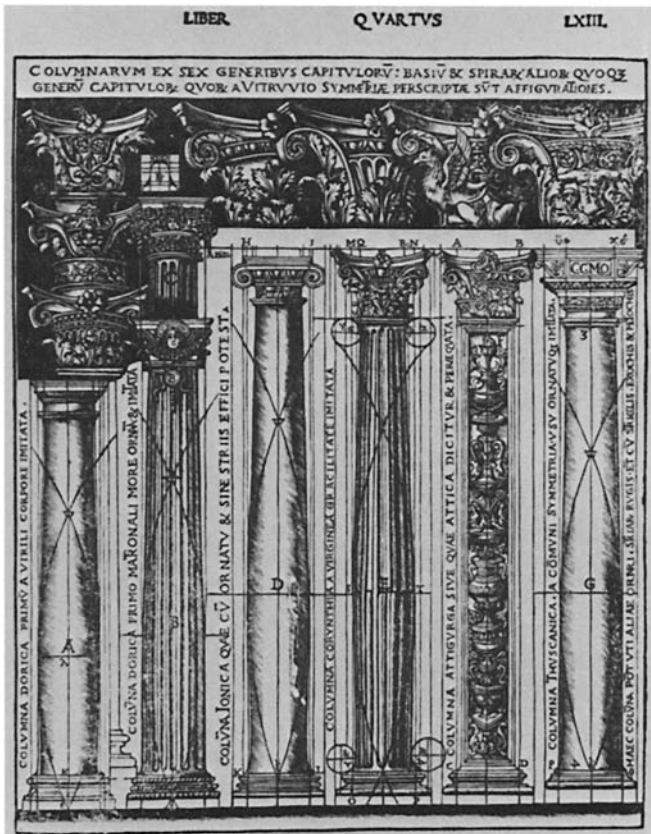
⁴⁸ *Loc. cit.*

⁴⁹ *De L. Vitruvio Pollione de architectura libri dece, traducti de latino in vulgare, affigurati, commentati da C. Caesariano*, Como, 1521, 63.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, III, 1 (p. 48).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵² The analogy between the curves of the vase and those of a capital was also drawn by Giuliano da Sangallo, for example; see Bibl. Vaticana Cod. barb. lat. 4424, fol. 11 (9), reproduced in B. Degenhart, “Dante, Leonardo and Sangallo; Dante-Illustrationen Giuliano da Sangallo in ihrem Verhältnis zu Leonardo da Vinci und zu den Figurenzeichnungen der Sangallo,” *Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte*, VII, 1955, fig. 255. My thanks go to Catherine Soussloff for bringing this to my attention. A. Nifo, *De pulchro et amore*, Rome, 1531, also treated the form of the chest as a series of generated curves: “Thorace pyri eversi formam subeunte sed pressa, cuius videlicet conus ad sectum transversum parvus atque sphericus, basis ad colli radicem longitudine ac planitie excellenti proportione formati collocantur” (quoted in Houdoy, 137).



6 De L. Vitruvio Pollione de architectura libri dece, traducti de latino in vulgare . . . da C. Caesariano, Como, 1521, p. 63

According to Firenzuola, one of the most essential parts of a woman's beauty is her hair.⁵³ The hair must be thick, though fine, long and curly, and it should be blonde, ranging from gold and honey to the color of bright sunshine. The brow of a perfect beauty must be twice as wide as it is high (see, besides Parmigianino's *Madonna of the Long Neck*, Testa's diagram in Fig. 1); it should be gleaming white, gently curving and serene, unmarked by any line. The eyebrows must be dark and fine as silk, perfect arches that taper towards the ends.

⁵³ For Firenzuola's lengthy description, see I, 283–304, of which what follows is a summary.

⁵⁴ Firenzuola's palette is extremely precise, particularly in describing the many kinds of red that he perceived in different parts of a woman's body. At the beginning of the description (*ibid.*, 282–83) he takes the time to mix his colors before painting his woman in words. He mixes from "il biondo, il lionato, il nero, il rosso, il candido, il vermiglio, e lo incarnato." *Biondo* is not very bright, tending rather to a burnished color, but nonetheless similar to gold. It is particularly associated with hair, and here Firenzuola refers his listener to Petrarch. *Lionato* has two characteristics, one yellow, with which he is not concerned, and the other darker, *tanè*, and this he chooses for his palette. *Nero* must be as dark as possible. *Rosso* is the fiery color of coral, rubies, and pomegranates. *Vermiglio* is also a kind of red, but less *aperto*, and is the color of cheeks or wine. *Incarnato*, or *imbalconato*, is either a rosy white or a whitish rose, like the color of *rose imbalconate*, which are so precious that they are displayed on balconies. The difference between *candida*, which unites whiteness with luminosity like ivory, and *bianca*, which, like snow, does not gleam, is defined on p. 252.

⁵⁵ Again, this is not only apparent in the tip of the Virgin's nose, but also

Firenzuola debates the ancient preference for black eyes, states his own for blue, then settles for dark chestnut irises with whites that are large and curving, following Homer's description of Juno. The eyes should be fringed by a modest number of lashes, which should not be too long and neither black nor white. All of these features can be clearly seen in Parmigianino's *Virgin* and in the young girl to her left, who so closely resembles the *Antea*. The ears should be soft, but not flabby, and colored more like pale pink roses or like balas rubies than like true red rubies, except for the channel that runs round the edge, which should be redder and more transparent, like the seed of a pomegranate.⁵⁴ Again, this is true of the Virgin's ears, though seen more easily perhaps in the profile of the angelic being who holds the vase. A beautiful woman's cheeks should rise as if to protect her eyes, and they should become flushed with vermilion as they swell, being otherwise ivory-white, though less gleaming than the brow. The nose, apart from being perfectly proportioned, is to be slightly pointed but not turned up, because this would suggest pride, and the cartilage around the nostrils should be similar in color to the ears, though slightly less fiery.⁵⁵ No artist ever rendered the harmonies of ivory flushed with vermilions thus described more delicately than Parmigianino, and his treatment of the individual forms of the features is equally close to Firenzuola's itemized descriptions. The mouth must be smallish, and neither angular nor flat. The vermilion lips should be fairly equal, neither one projecting over the other, and when seen in profile they should meet at an obtuse angle, more obtuse than the angle where the lower lip meets the curve of the chin.⁵⁶ When the face is seen fully there should be a little swelling around a small division in the center of the lower lip, and a furrow between the upper lip and the nose. A woman's smile, which should be rare and modest, is the crowning perfection of her mouth, a divine effulgence that makes of it a Paradise. Here Firenzuola adds that if the teeth are revealed, something that is rarely represented in Renaissance art and is not seen in the *Madonna's* smile here, only five or six of her even, ivory, upper teeth should be visible—a detail Testa recorded naïvely in his notes. Parmigianino's *Madonna*, however, does have the round chin, flushed with vermilion and with a very small hollow at its center, specified by Firenzuola, and she also

in the rosy-tipped noses of the angelic figures to the left. Firenzuola followed the traditional Vitruvian rules for the proportions of the nose, the length of the nose constituting one-third of the perfectly proportioned face, with the other two-thirds being the distance from the hairline to the space between the eyebrows and the distance from the base of the nose to the bottom of the chin. Firenzuola specifically related this question to the profile, because he felt that without a beautifully proportioned profile a woman could never achieve perfection (*ibid.*, 262–64). Parmigianino always observed the rule that the nose equals one-third of the face, and here this is clearly demonstrated in the face of the Virgin and those of the beautiful girls at her shoulder and the vase-bearing angel. This last figure also demonstrates his fascination with the perfection of beauty in a profile. In the *Madonna and Child with St. Zachary, the Magdalene and the Infant St. John* in the Uffizi (Freedberg, figs. 74–78), the proportions of the Madonna's face are restated in the perfectly proportioned profile of the Magdalene, who is also directly related formally to the vase that she holds.

⁵⁶ This was also always observed by Parmigianino. See, for example, the profile of St. Margaret in the *Madonna with St. Margaret* in Bologna (Freedberg, figs. 71 and 72).

accords with his observation that the chin and neck of a woman will appear even more beautiful if there is a little swelling of extra flesh below the chin itself, a *soggiogaia*, a feature that the more amply endowed women of Rubens possess more extravagantly, and that Poussin imitates in the Rubensian beauty to the right of his *Rebecca and Eliezer*. As for the neck, it must be long and slender, round, and ivory-white. If a woman lowers her head, as the Madonna does, fine lines like little necklaces form in the flesh, all of which is delicately portrayed by Parmigianino. The Virgin also has, as she should, a small hollow at the base of her neck, with no pronounced Adam's apple, and the tendons that support the column of her neck are visible as she turns her head. According to Firenzuola, the shoulders of a beautiful woman are to be soft and ample, her arms springing out and then curving back to restrain her drapery, resembling, as noted earlier, the handles of a vase. The arms themselves are to be fleshy and strong, but soft and resilient too, the hands white and full with curving palms. The fingers should be long and slender by contrast, tapering gently, and with a pronounced space between the index-finger and the thumb; they should be pinkish at the ends.⁵⁷ The fingernails must be clear, neither round nor square, but gently curving, and they must extend beyond the flesh like the blade of a tiny knife. The whole hand of Parmigianino's Virgin as it rests upon her breast is, as Firenzuola would have it, the essence of *morbidezza*, as soft to the touch as fine silk or a wisp of new cotton. Firenzuola gives much attention to the breasts, and requires that they swell outwards and upwards, without a hint of bone beneath, and they should press against a woman's gown, as Parmigianino showed them, as if to escape.

⁵⁷ For this see also the fingers of the angel who holds the vase.

⁵⁸ Firenzuola, I, pp. 271–72, describes how the eyes of the viewer are lowered, as if through fear, after drinking in the beauty of other parts of the body, and he encourages his listeners to reveal their feet from time to time, learning from the Romans who gave them as much attention as the face.

⁵⁹ As expressed by Mona Selvaggio at the end of the *Dialogo* (Firenzuola, I, 304): "Or sì mi pare che questa vostra dipintura stia come quelle che son di mano di buon maestro; e per dirne il vero, ella è riuscita una cosa bellissima, e tale, che se io fossi uom, com'io son donna, e' sarebbe forza che come un nuovo Pigmaliione io me ne innamorassi."

⁶⁰ Agostino Nifo (1473–1538/45) was also a protégé of Bembo and a favorite of Leo X, for whom he wrote *Tractatus de immortalitate animae contra Pomponatium*, Venice, 1518, which helped him out of the danger into which his Averroism had led him. For Nifo, see G. Tiraboschi, *Storia della letteratura italiana*, Modena, 1741, VII, II, 432–36, where it is rightly stated that the *De pulchro et amore* and *De re aulica*, "Non sono le più honeste cose del mondo; perciocchè in esse il Nifo si scuopre pazzamente perduto nell'amor delle donne." The *De pulchro et amore*, Rome, 1531, dedicated to Giovanna d'Aragona, 3 November 1529, indeed provides a very outspoken appreciation of the beauty of the princess. Guided by his Averroist distaste for the Platonic view that earthly beauty is merely a shadow, Nifo wrote here an aesthetic theory compounded of a strange mixture of Aristotle, eroticism, and courtly love. The justification for his insistence that true, objective beauty does exist in this world was based on his memory of Giovanna, the daughter of Ferdinand of Aragon, the pearl of all Italy, a perfect beauty who could have provided Zeuxis with a single model for all the conventional attributes of beauty that are gathered together in his description of her. The famous portrait by Raphael and Giulio Romano is, like Nifo's description, a set piece that required neither the presence nor even the

The most beautiful female leg is long and slender; the shins should not be bony, but oval and fleshy. Finally, the foot is as important as the face, for we turn our eyes from one to the other in awe.⁵⁸ The most perfect foot is slender and smallish, but not thin, as white as alabaster, and, like the Virgin's, with a highly arched instep. Firenzuola ends his description by suggesting that, after he had painted such a picture, even his female listeners were transformed into Pygmalion.⁵⁹

These are some of the particular features that Firenzuola's beautiful chimera and Parmigianino's exquisite Madonna have in common, and they are many. Firenzuola, not without irony, professed to find each part in one or another of the women of Prato who encouraged him to fashion his goddess. But they must have known in their minds, if not in their hearts, that he was indulging in elegant flattery, for there is little in Firenzuola's description that they would not have known already, and the simple lineaments of beauty observed by both Firenzuola and Parmigianino are by no means remarkable in themselves. They had, for example, been defined at length by Agostino Nifo in his *De pulchro et amore*, a hymn to the renowned beauty of Giovanna d'Aragona, whose features Raphael had also immortalized according to this convention, at once rendering the question of whether he drew her from life irrelevant and providing an important model for Parmigianino.⁶⁰ These features were common enough to be described by a Venetian prostitute, suffering from the *mal francese*, as those of her lost beauty.⁶¹ They were summarized by Paolo Pino in the *Dialogo di pittura*, by Niccolò Franco in his *Dialogo dove si ragiona delle bellezze*, and by Federico Luigini

memory of the sitter. For a discussion of the relationship between Raphael's portrait and Nifo's description, see J.-D. Passavant, *Raphael d'Urbain et son père Giovanni Santi*, Paris, 1860, II, 265–69. For a discussion of Nifo's text, see J. Houdoy, 93–98 and 141–182; R. de Maulde le Clavière, *The Women of the Renaissance: A Study of Feminism*, trans. G. H. Ely, New York and London, 1900, 152, 331–333, and *passim*. For the beauty of Giovanna d'Aragona, see p. 407, where the author briefly refers to her deification by the Accademia degli Dabbiosi and the temple of poems created in her honor. This was edited by G. Ruscelli, *Tempio alla divina signora donna Giovanna d'Aragona fabbricato da tutti i più gentili spiriti et in tutto le lingue principali del mondo*, Venice, 1558. Giovanna's sister, Maria d'Avalos, was considered to be equally beautiful and was originally to have been included in the temple, but an argument was found against this based upon the opposition to Marcellus's plan to build a temple to both Virtue and Honor. Niccolò Franco's *Dialogo dove si ragiona delle bellezze*, heavily dependent on Nifo and closely related to Firenzuola's text, is, as noted before, dedicated to Maria d'Avalos, and Franco includes the two sisters, together with Giulia Gonzaga, Maria Loredan, and Bianca Galerata among the many contemporary women who are the equals of Laura, Beatrice, Faustina, Lesbia, Corinna, and all the celebrated beauties of the past.

⁶¹ See *El vanto della cortegiana ferrarese qual narra la bellezza sua. Con il lamento per esser redutta in la carretta per el mal francese et l'ammonitorio che fa alle altre donne. Seguita l'epigramma con el purgatorio delle cortigiane*, ed. G. B. Verini, Venice, 1532. The description appears in *Il vanto*, which is republished by A. Graf, *Attraverso il cinquecento*, Turin, 1916, 351–354, esp. p. 352. Graf attributed *Il vanto* and *Il lamento* to Giambattista Verini himself, though with some hesitation. It should be noted, in relation to what follows below, that the prostitute is led to describe her smile thus: "La mia bocchina dolce è una chiave/Ch'apre le borse e fa chiamar mercede,/E rallegra chi fussi in doglia prave."

in *Il libro della bella donna*.⁶² They became so popular that they formed the basis for a simple parlor game published by Ringhieri in 1551.⁶³

In short, the ideal woman created by Firenzuola was not only beautiful in his judgment, but also a universally accepted beauty and well bred, from an old family. Some of her carefully defined features can be related to descriptions of Classical beauties: Luigini, for example, (who cites many more authorities than Firenzuola, while the five speakers in his polylogue create yet another version of Zeuxis' goddess) finds sources for her individual features in Virgil, Horace, and Ovid. But this type of detailed presentation of the individual perfections of women does not derive immediately from Classical sources—in Lessing's eyes Homer and Virgil were virtuous in not attempting to describe the respective beauties of Helen and Dido, leaving these to the reader's imagination—although it does depend indirectly upon the *ekphrastic* tradition of Byzantine Greek rhetoric. Most directly, it stems from the vernacular poetic tradition, which had become the object of intense study by 1530; the focus of this study was Petrarch. Federigo Luigini traces as much and more of his ideal beauty to Petrarch, Bembo, Ariosto, Equicola, and the like as to the Latin writers, even though he is often reduced to extracting only a single word from Petrarch's hymns to Laura. The courtesan who lost her beauty was surely one

of those who never went abroad without her *Petrarchino* in hand, inspired by the same fashion, though with much less seriousness of purpose as that which led the poetess Laura Battiferri to have Bronzino portray her holding just such a book.⁶⁴ Even the parlor game was played by the simple rote learning of parts of the body, described with an accompanying line from Petrarch.

We too might play this game, and, with Petrarch in hand, track down the qualities of the image of the beautiful woman as did Luigini. But this would be to indulge in the kind of plagiarizing *Petrarchismo* that was parodied by Berni, Aretino, and even Firenzuola himself, and to ignore the true mastery of the poet's style and meaning that was achieved by Parmigianino and, though less profoundly, by Firenzuola.⁶⁵ To characterize the hand of the Madonna through the words of Firenzuola, for example, is a formulaic game compared to what Petrarch said of the hand of his ideal love in the sonnet, "O bella man, che mi dstringi'l core."⁶⁶ The single adjectives *candida*, *vermiglia*, *bianco*, sprinkled everywhere throughout the sonnets, can indeed be isolated, but when considering the colors of this beautiful painted woman it is better to ask:

Onde tolse Amor l'oro e di qual vena
per far due trecce bionde? e 'n quali spine
colse le rose, e 'n qual spiaggia le brine
tenere e fresche, e diè lor polso e lena?

Servi d'Amor, palese fo che queste
Son le bellezze della donna mia.

For similar earlier examples in Catalan and Provençal, see Renier, 53, n. 1. In Aretino's opinion the preciousness of *Petrarchismo* was associated with an obsession with fiddling delicacy and excessive ornamentation in art. He attacked this fashion for stylishness in a letter to Ludovico Dolce, writing, "Che onor si fanno i colori vaghi che si consumano in dipingere frascariuole senza disegno? La lor gloria sta ne i tratti con che gli distende Michelagnolo, il quale ha messo in tanto travaglio la natura e l'arte che non sanno se gli sono maestre o discepolo. Altro ci vole, per esser buon dipintore, che contrafar bene un velluto e una fibbia da cintura!—Il fatto sta ne i bambocci— disse Giovanni da Udine ad alcuni che stupivano de le grottesche mirabili di sua mano ne la loggia di Leone e ne la vigna di Clemente. E per dirvelo, il Petrarca e il Boccaccio sono imitati da chi esprime i concetti suoi con la dolcezza e con la leggiadria con cui dolcemente e leggiadramente essi andarano esprimendo i loro, e non da chi gli sacheggia, non pur dei 'quinci' dei 'quindi' e dei 'soventi' e degli 'snelli,' ma dei versi intieri. . . . O turba errante, io ti dico e ridico che la poesia è un ghiribizzo de la natura ne le sue allegrezze, il qual si sta nel furor proprio, e mancandone, il cantar poetico diventa un cimbalo senza sonagli e un campanil senza campane." This is cited from *Texte zum Antipetrarkismus*, 7. To an admirer of the heroic style of Michelangelo, often associated with that of Dante, the kind of ornamented style discussed here in relation to Parmigianino and *Petrarchismo* would clearly be unsympathetic.

For a stylist like Firenzuola it was natural both to adopt a style and to mock it, for example, *Canzone*, iv, "Nella morte d'una civetta," II, 422–25. In "Sopra le bellezze della sua innamorata" (pp. 398–401) he takes up the theme of the beautiful woman in order to parody it:

La testa sua pare un pan di sapone,
E quei suo'occhiolin due fusaiuoli,
Dipinti a olio, e tinti col carbone.
Manichi son le ciglia di paiuoli:
Il naso è come quel del mio mortaio:
La bocca ha come i popon cotignuoli.

Niccolo Franco also mocked the tradition of which he was a master. The *Dialogo* is prefaced with Juvenal's famous line, "Difficile est satyrem non scribere." See also Robert Burton's witty parody in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. London, 1932, iii, 79–85.

⁶⁶ *Le rime*, cxcix.

⁶² Paolo Pino, *Dialogo di pittura*, Venice, 1548 (ed. P. Barocchi in *Trattati d'arte del cinquecento*, Bari, 1960, I, 102–03); F. Luigini, *Il libro della donna*, Venice, 1554 (ed. G. Zonta, in *Trattati del cinquecento sulla donna*, Bari, 1913, 229–253).

⁶³ *Cento giuochi liberali et d'ingegno ritrovato da M. Innocentio Ringhieri*, Bologna, ed. 1580, 127ff. For a discussion of this and other similar humorless games, see T. F. Crane, 284–291.

⁶⁴ A. Graf, 29, records that in Venice Lucrezia Squarcia particularly wished to be seen thus. Graf's important essay evokes the fashion for Petrarch with great vividness, and is essential for an understanding of this sophisticated phenomenon. He also draws attention to the fact that the *Petrarchino*, a small, elegant volume of the *Canzoniere*, was carried by men as well as women (p. 13). This habit was mocked by Aretino, *Sei giornate: Ragionamento della Nanna e della Antonia*, Venice, 1534, ed. G. Aquilecchia, Bari, 1962, *Terza giornata*, 94–95. See also G. Toffanin, *Il cinquecento (Storia letteraria di Italia)*, vi, Milan, 1929, 122–148, "Petrarchismo e trattati d'amore." For Bronzino's portrait of Laura Battiferri, see A. Emiliani, *Il Bronzino*, Milan, 1950, pl. 91. There are many other portraits of this type, for example, Andrea del Sarto's portrait of Maria del Berrettaio, subtitled *La fanciulla col Petrarchino*.

⁶⁵ An excellent, brief anthology of anti-*Petrarchismo* from English, Spanish, French, German, and Italian literature, with a good introductory bibliography, has been edited by J. Hösl (Texte zum Antipetrarkismus, in the series *Sammlung romanischer Übungstexte*, LV, Tübingen, 1970). Francesco Berni's *Sonnetto alla sua donna* is the most direct satirical treatment of the tradition discussed here and will stand as a paradigm:

Chiome d'argento fino, irte e attorte
Senz'arte intorno ad un bel viso d'oro;
Fronte crespa, u'mirando io mi scoloro,
Dove spunta i suoi strali Amor e Morte;
Occhi di perle vaghi, luci torte
Da ogni obietto diseguale a loro;
Ciglia di neve, e quelle, ond'io m'accoro,
Dita e man dolcemente grosse e corte;
Labra di latte, bocca ampia celeste;
Denti d'ebeno rari e pellegrini;
Inaudita ineffabile armonia;
Costumi altèri e gravi: a voi, divini

Onde le perle in ch'ei frange, et affrena
dolci parole, oneste e pellegrine?
onde tante bellezze, e sì divine
di quella fronte più che 'l ciel serena?

Da quali angeli mosse, e di qual spera
quel celeste cantar che mi disface
sì che n'avanza omai da disfar poco?

Di qual sol nacque l'alma luce altera
di que' belli occhi, ond'io ò guerra, e pace
che mi cuocono il cor in ghiaccio e 'n foco?⁶⁷

Petrarch in fact never addressed himself to the simple enumeration of Laura's features, even though the experts of the sixteenth century succeeded in finding most of them in his poems, with the exception of her nose, which, to their great dismay, Petrarch seems to have ignored.⁶⁸ Even those features that he did worship had been worshipped before his day. It was rather his style that made him the authority to be acknowledged in sixteenth-century recipes for beauty, which often found their true ingredients elsewhere. Similarly, Firenzuola and Parmigianino did not simply extract details from Petrarch to form mechanical dolls, but were more concerned with the larger question of his style and purpose. They were both, furthermore, aware that this tradition of beauty was based on more than a single poet. To understand this, and to understand how Madonna Laura could be transformed into the Madonna herself, we must consider the tradition of Petrarch, of Petrarch and his sources, and the fascinating problem of how the conventional description of the beautiful woman became so closely identified with a lyric poet who never painted her complete portrait.

The immediate source for this kind of description in the Renaissance lies in the tradition of vernacular epic rather than

the lyric proper, and beyond that in the rhetorical amplification of *descriptio*, particularly the *effictio*, which is to say, the description of physical qualities in the ornate style.⁶⁹ This type of panegyric was developed in late antique epideictic, a good example being Sidonius Apollinaris' letter describing the Emperor Theodoric.⁷⁰ Here, after the required statement that God and Nature had joined together to make him perfect, each feature of the Emperor is described from the head downwards, in an order that came later to be interpreted as following the order of Creation.⁷¹ This form of description was later used by Alain de Lille to describe Nature herself in the *Complaint of Nature*, and also to describe the beauty of Prudence in the *Anticlaudianus*; the image of woman so carefully described by Parmigianino, and reduced to a platitude by the poor prostitute and in the parlor game, is a lovely survivor of the panegyric to these beautiful women.⁷²

The ornate, decorated style, to which the *effictio* belongs, was especially popular in late medieval poetics, notably in the work of writers like Matthew of Vendôme, who considered description to be the first object of poetry.⁷³ Both he and Geoffrey of Vinsauf gave examples of this type of amplification, not only explaining how to describe people and places, but also giving examples that are particularly concerned with the description of beautiful women.⁷⁴ No literary genre had a greater need for beautiful women than did the Romance, and the same woman who was the subject of the panegyric of late medieval Latin poetics becomes the *donzella svelta, gracile, ridente*, decked out in all her colors, who unerringly makes her way into Italy through descriptions in vernacular romances by writers like Adam de la Halle, a *trouvère* who flourished both in Flanders and in Italy. She might be the Queen of Ireland, Florence, or Blancheflore, but she appears always in the same blonde, ivory and vermilion, succulent form.⁷⁵

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, ccxx.

⁶⁸ L. Gandini, *Letzione . . . sopra un dubbio, come il Petrarca non lodasse Laura espressamente dal naso*, ed. Venice, 1581. This kind of obsession was mocked by A. F. Doni in *La Zucca*, for which see A. Graf, 27.

⁶⁹ *Ad Herrenium*, iv, xlix, 63. "Effictio est cum exprimitur atque effingitur verbis corporis cuiuspiam forma quoad satis sit ad intelligendum. . . . Notatio est cum alicuius natura certis describitur signis quae, sicuti notae quae, naturae sunt adtributa." This kind of description became increasingly important among the techniques of the New Sophistic for purely panegyric purposes, for which see E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, ed. New York, 1953, 68f. For a discussion of *descriptio* as a form of amplification in the Middle Ages, see E. Faral, *Les arts poétiques du XIIIe et du XIVe siècle*, Paris, 1924, 75–81.

⁷⁰ Sidonius, *Letters*, 1, 2. Sidonius also provided the model for the opposite sort of description, the *vituperatio*, in his description of Gnatho (*Letters*, III, 13).

⁷¹ For the combination of God and Nature, see E. Curtius, 181f. For the order of the description, which is not ancient but which became highly systematized in medieval poetics based on the evidence of texts thought to be ancient, see E. Faral, 79–81.

⁷² P. L., ccx, *Liber de planctu naturae*, 282A–87; *Anticlaudianus*, 1, vii.

⁷³ E. Faral, 75f. The text of the *Ars versificatoria* is published on pp. 106–93. Faral estimates that the work was completed before 1175 (p. 3).

⁷⁴ *Ars versificatoria*, 56–57. Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria nova* is also published by Faral, who dates it ca. 1208–1213. The very full description of a woman appears there as an example of amplification (Faral, 214–16). A shorter description appears in the *Documentum de arte versificandi* as an

example of amplification through the *descriptio pulchritudinis* (Faral, 271f.). For Geoffrey of Vinsauf, see *Documentum de modo et arte dictandi et versificandi*, trans. and intro. R. P. Parr, Milwaukee, 1968, and the translation of the *Poetria nova* by J. J. Murphy, *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts*, Berkeley, 1971, 54f. On the *descriptio pulchritudinis*, see also P. Dronke, "Tradition and Innovation in Mediaeval Western Colour Imagery," *Eranos Yearbook*, xli, 1972, 58.

⁷⁵ For the use of the panegyric in the writings of the *trouvères*, see R. Dragonetti, *La technique poétique des trouvères dans la chanson courtoise: Contribution à l'étude de la rhétorique médiévale*, Bruges, 1960, 248–72. Dragonetti stresses here the importance of style as a means of conveying emotion in the description of the beloved. If the beauty of Parmigianino's Madonna is seen in this context, the sense of abstraction in the work that has perplexed critics disappears (see, e.g., Freedberg, 85). Dragonetti writes (p. 271), "L'objet célébré par le poète courtois est donc d'un autre ordre que celui de l'abstraction, ou de l'expérience amoureuse comme telle. Il s'agit d'un thème poétique dont la beauté est tout entière dans le style et dont le pouvoir de suggestions dépend par conséquent, de l'art avec lequel le trouvère combine, harmonise, et fait chanter les hyperboles. Et que chantent ces hyperboles? sinon que la femme peut devenir songe de paradis chaque fois qu'elle apparaît au poète chargée de cette idéalité allusive qui exalte l'âme et transfigure le monde." On Adam de la Halle (d. ca. 1288), see Dragonetti, 338–47 and 653; J. Houdoy, 51–56 (a translation of his description of his mistress into French), and 125–28 (for the original Latin). For the very close relationship between the descriptions of beautiful women in the romances of Provence, Flanders, Germany, and Portugal, see Renier, 1–142. For references to descriptions of women in Ogier, *Durmart le Galois*, *Florence de Rome*, *Erec et Enide*, the *Romans de Troie*, and the *Romans de Cesar*, see P. Rajna, *Le fonti dell'Orlando furioso*, Florence, 1900, 183.

The particular order of the panegyric is, of course, one thing, the content and the colors chosen another. In terms both of the form and chosen content that were to become almost canonical, the most influential and complete assimilation of this type of description into Italian epic was accomplished in the poetry of Petrarch's contemporary, Boccaccio. He employed it to sing the praises of Emilia in the *Teseida*, as she goes to her wedding in the Temple of Venus, and it deserves to be quoted in full:

Era la giovinetta di persona
grande e ischietta convenevolmente,
e se il ver l'antichità ragiona,
ella era candidissima e piacente;
e i suoi crin sotto ad una corona
lunghe e assai, e d'oro veramente
si sarian detti, e'l suo aspetto umile,
e il suo moto onesto e signorile.

Dico che i suoi crini parean d'oro,
non con treccia ristretti, ma soluti
e pettinati sì, che infra loro
non n'era un torto, e cadean sostenuti
sopra li candidi omeri, né fôro
prima né poi sì be' giammai veduti;
né altro sopra quelli ella portava
ch'una corona ch'assai si stimava.

La fronte sua era ampia e spaziosa,
e bianca e piana e molto delicata
sotto la quale in volta tortuosa,
quasi di mezzo cerchio terminata,
eran due ciglia, più che altra cosa
nerissime e sottil, tra le qua' lata
bianchezza si vedea, lor dividendo,
né 'l debito passavan, sé stendendo.

Di sotto a queste eran gli occhi lucenti
e più che stella scintillanti assai;
egli eran gravi e lunghi e ben sedenti,
e brun quant'altri che ne fosser mai;
e oltre a questo egli eran sì potenti
d'ascosa forza, che alcun giammai
non gli mirò né fu da lor mirato,
ch'amore in sé non sentisse svegliato.

Io ritraggo di lor poveramente,
dico a rispetto della lor bellezza,
e lasciogli a chiunque d'amor sente
che immaginando vegga lor chiarezza;
ma sotto ad essi non troppo eminente
né poco ancora e di bella lunghezza
il naso si vedea affilatetto
qual si voleva a l'angelico aspetto.

Le guance sue non eran tumerose
né magre fuor di debita misura,

anzi eran delicate e graziose,
bianche e vermiglie, non d'altra mistura
che intra' gigli le vermiglie rose;
e questa non dipinta, ma natura
gliel'avea data, il cui color mostrava
perciò che 'n ciò più non le bisognava.

Ella aveva la bocca piccioletta,
tutta ridente e bella da basciare,
e era più che grana vermiglietta
con le labbra sottili, e nel parlare
a chi l'udia pareva un angioletta;
e' denti suoi si potean somigliare
a bianche perle, spessi e ordinati
e piccolini, ben proporzionati.

E oltre a questo, il mento piccolino
e tondo quale al viso si chiedea;
nel mezzo ad esso aveva un forellino
che più vezzosa assai ne la facea;
e era vermiglietto un pocolino,
di che assai più bella ne pareva;
quinci la gola candida e cerchiata
non di soperchio e bella e delicata.

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

Eran le braccia sue grosse e distese,
lunghe le mani, e le dita sottili,
articulate bene a tutte prese,
ancor d'anella vote signorili;
e, brevemente, in tutto quel paese
altra non fu che cotanto gentili
l'avesse come lei, ch'era in cintura
sotile e schietta con degna misura.

Nell'anche grossa e tutta ben formata,
e il piè piccolin'; qual poi si fosse
la parte agli occhi del corpo celata,
colui sel seppe poi cui ella cosse
avanti con amor lunga fiata;
imagino io ch'a dirlo le mie posse
non basterieno avendol' io veduta:
tal d'ogni ben doveva esser compiuta!⁷⁶

This particular panegyric became an indispensable tool for the description of feminine perfection in the epics that followed. Emilia became Antea—an important name for Parmigianino—in the *Morgante* of Pulci. Ariosto transformed her into the enchanting Alcina.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ *Teseida*, xii, 53–63, quoted from G. Boccaccio, *Opere in versi*, ed. P. G. Ricci (*La letteratura italiana, storia e testi*, ix), Milan, 1965, 412–15.

⁷⁷ *Morgante*, xv, 98–104. *Orlando furioso*, vii, 9–16. The convention is also

used by Ariosto, though less suggestively, to describe the beauty of Olimpia (*Orlando furioso*, xi, 65–71). Rajna, 183, rightly suggests that Ariosto was drawing immediately upon the *Teseida*, *Morgante*, and particularly the description of Simonetta in the *Giostra*, rather than upon the French tradition.

It is fitting that so perfect an example of the panegyric to the beautiful woman should be found within an epic romance that, for all Boccaccio's appeal to the judgment of antiquity, owes so much to the tradition of the *trouvères* and *cantari*, rather than in the lyric poems of Petrarch, Dante, or the *Stil Novo*.⁷⁸ But the two genres are nonetheless closely related through their subject matter, specifically the question of love and its source in beauty that is the legacy of the Platonic tradition. The most important center for the development of this Platonic tradition, and for its humanist elaboration within the context both of the classics and the vernacular, was of course the court of Lorenzo de' Medici, himself deeply affected not only by the Platonic idealism of Ficino, but also by the lighthearted romance of Luigi Pulci, and by the Petrarchan lyricism of Politian.⁷⁹ Again the allusive lyric style contrasts with the more detailed panegyric of the epic. The *beltà*, *leggidria*, and *gentilezza* of the lovely nymph Simonetta in the *Stanze* are presented through suggestion rather than through definition, and it is her manner that is emphasized, her humble pride, delicate and graceful step, her serenity, and especially her joyful smile. If she carried attributes she might be Thalia, Minerva, or Diana, but as she sits, surrounded by all the gifts of Nature, she is a vision of all the qualities of beauty imaginable.⁸⁰ On the other hand, Politian's friend, Luigi Pulci, in his good-humored epic *Morgante*, not only stresses the enchanting manner of his lovely Antea, including her smile, but also adds a complete enumeration of her beautiful features, in conformity with the romance epic tradition (and indeed this part of the *Morgante* is a nostalgic recreation of the popular *cantorino Orlando*).⁸¹

Both the *Stanze* of Politian and the *Morgante* of Pulci repre-

sent very considerable achievements in the development of ornate vernacular styles of epic and lyric poetry. They do not yet reveal, however, the careful archaeological investigation of these styles and their vocabulary that was to be undertaken in the early sixteenth century by writers like Ariosto and Bembo, and that had become a thoroughly self-conscious fashion by the time of Parmigianino and Firenzuola. If we look at the figure of Flora in Botticelli's *Primavera*, for example (whom Warburg sought to identify both with the natural beauty Simonetta Vespucci and with the nymph Simonetta of the *Stanze*), with this kind of rhetorical ornament and the *Madonna of the Long Neck* in mind, her appearance is surely more closely related to the evocative style of Politian than it is to the detailed anatomy of beauty that Parmigianino and Firenzuola were to attempt (Fig. 7).⁸² She is indeed as Politian described Simonetta, gleaming white, and her hair is curly and golden.⁸³ Botticelli observed several other details of the tradition, for he was not, of course, entirely dependent upon one poet for guidance in imagining his ideal of beauty. Her cheeks are pink and white, her neck long, white, and graceful, her brow wide, with dark, arched eyebrows, and there is a little cleft in her chin; her arms are gracefully curving. There is, in short, enough that is conventional about her beauty, as there is also in portraits that have been considered to represent Simonetta Vespucci herself, to remove her from the world of individual perfection. At the same time, we are not led to concentrate on the perfect quality of each individual feature, its correct form and subtly varied color, or to see her as a work of art rather than of nature, as we do the ornate and beautiful women of Parmigianino.

It is, rather, Flora's manner that impresses, as does that of

⁷⁸ For the relationship between Boccaccio and the *cantari*, see V. Branca, *Il cantare trecentesco et il Boccaccio del Filostrato e del Teseida (Studi di lettere, storia, e filosofia pubblicati dalla R. Scuole Normale Superiore di Pisa)*, ix), Florence, 1936. For the description of Emilia, see p. 57. Boccaccio could also employ the basic convention in a more allusive, lyrical style, as, e.g., in Sonnet III, "Candide, perle orientali, e amore." See V. Crescini, *Contributi agli studi sul Boccaccio*, Turin, 1887, esp. 169f. and 111f., for other examples; the book has an excellent discussion of the significance of love and beauty in Boccaccio's works.

⁷⁹ For a good general summary of relations between Lorenzo, Politian, and Pulci and Ficino, see the essay by D. de Robertis in *Il quattrocento e Ariosto (Storia della letteratura italiana)*, III, ed. E. Cecchi and N. Sapegno), Milan, 1966, 459–566 (with full bibliography); and see V. Rossi, *Il quattrocento (Storia letteraria d'Italia)*, v), Milan, 1933, 310–407.

⁸⁰ A. Poliziano, *L'Elegantissime stanze incominciate per la Giostra di Giuliano di Piero de' Medici*, I, 43–55 (ed. P. Serassi, Bassano, 1824, 12–15).

⁸¹ *Morgante*, xv, 98–104. For the history of the work, begun in 1461 at the request of Lorenzo's mother, Lucrezia Tornabuoni, and its relationship to the *Orlando*, see the edition of F. Agno (*La letteratura italiana, storia e testi*, xvii), Milan, 1955, xv–xxviii and 1117–19). The text of *Orlando* is published by J. Hübscher, "Orlando: Die Vorlage zu Pulcis *Morgante*," *Ausgaben*

und Abhandlungen aus dem Gebiete der romanischen Philologie, LX, 1886, 1–262. G. Getto, *Studio sul Morgante (Biblioteca di "Lettere Italiane," VII)*, Florence, 1967, 71, points to the nature of this description as a set piece and its connection with Ariosto and Firenzuola. But it is not really just to argue, as this critic does, that it is the reference to Classical goddesses that renders Antea doll-like. This particular part of the description can indeed be related directly to Classical models, particularly to Lucian's *Essays in Portraiture*, itself a model of late antique rhetoric. As we have seen, however, the whole portrait of Antea is conventional, rather than being a foreign intrusion in Pulci's text, and the description in the *Orlando*, which does not have the references to goddesses, is just as complete. Pulci wittily draws attention to his own learning by setting off the description of Antea with an equally thorough one of her horse in the verses that follow.

⁸² See A. Warburg, *Sandro Botticelli's 'Geburt der Venus' und 'Frühling'*, Leipzig, 1893, reprinted with additions in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Leipzig, 1932, I, 5–68 and 307–28. Needless to say, I am not here advocating the old theory that sought to identify the figures in the *Primavera* literally with various members of the Medici court, and in particular with Simonetta and Giuliano; quite the contrary, I mean rather to describe the model of ideal beauty against which the women of both nature and art were measured.

⁸³ Poliziano, I, 43 (p. 12).



7 Botticelli, *Primavera* (detail). Florence, Uffizi (photo: Alinari)

8 Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*. Paris, Louvre (photo: Clichés des Musées Nationaux)



Politian's Simonetta in the *Stanze*, and not the delineation of individually perfect features in the manner of Pulci's treatment of Antea in the *Morgante*. Flora treads lightly on the grass, her dress fluttering in the breeze, and, above all, she smiles.⁸⁴ Firenzuola was to follow the imagery of both Dante and Petrarch in his contention that the smile of a beautiful woman is a revelation of grace, capable of transforming this world, that makes of her mouth a Paradise.⁸⁵ Both Politian and Pulci expressed the same idea in their poetic considera-

tions of the power of beauty, and its smile, in the world of courtly love. Pulci, in gently mocking hyperbole, asserted that Antea's smile could open not one but six Paradises, while Politian more simply claimed that the smile of Simonetta was so beautiful and sweet, "che ben parve s'aprissi un paradiso."⁸⁶ Flora's smile is a special one, for it is among the very few in Renaissance painting that is wide enough to cause the lips to part and reveal the small, regular, pearly white teeth of rhetorical description. It is tempting to think

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 46 (p. 12), wherein her manner is described:

Con lei sen'va Onestate umile e piana,
Che d'ogni chiuso cor volge la chiave:
Con lei va Gentilezza in vista umana,
E da lei impara il dolce andar soave,
Non può mirarle in viso alma villana,
Se pria di suo fallir doglia non ave.
Tanti cuori Amor piglia, fere e ancide,
Quanto ella o dolce parla, o dolce ride.

⁸⁵ Firenzuola (1, pp. 268–69) suggests that if a smile is used modestly, and not too often, "fa diventare la bocca un paradiso." The smile is "uno splendore dell'anima." The matter-of-fact way in which he recommends smiling and even a particular way in which to open and close the mouth and move the eyes, "Un atto che apre anzi spalanca il paradiso delle delizie e allaga d'una incomprendibile dolcezza il cuore di chi lo mira disiosamente" (*ibid.*, 295), represents a considerable secularization and degeneration of the courtly ideal, and is one example of how Firenzuola's approach truly belongs to a less ideal world than that of Parmigianino and Petrarch. Compare, for example, *Rime*, ccxcii, 5–8: "Le cresse chiome d'or puro lucente/e'l lampeggiar de l'angelico riso/che solean fare in terra un paradiso,/poca

polvere son, che nulla sente." Dante writes of the "mirabile riso" of his love (*Vita nuova*, XXI). For the definition of the smile as "una corruscazione de la dilettazone de l'anima, cioè un lume apparente di fuori secondo sta dentro . . ." see *Convivio*, III, 8, where Dante also writes of the need for moderation and slight movement of the face in smiling, providing an important model for Firenzuola. On the need for total unselfish surrender to the *dolce riso*, see the discussion of Cavalcanti's "Io non pensava che lo cor giammai," in P. Dronke, *Mediaeval Latin and the Rise of European Love-Lyric*, Oxford, 1968, I, 151.

⁸⁶ *Morgante*, xv, 102:

Avea certi atti dolci e certi risi,
certi soavi e leggiadri costumi
da fare spalancar sei paradisi
e correr sù pe'monti all'erta i fiumi;
da fare innamorar cento Narcisi,
non che Giosepe per lei si consumi;
parea ne'passi e l'abito Rachele;
le sue parole eran zucchero e mèle.

For Politian, see *Stanze*, I, 50.

that Firenzuola had this very image of Flora in mind when he assembled his definitions, for the mouth he describes is hers, revealing only five or six of the upper teeth, with a specificity not found elsewhere.⁸⁷ If this were so, it would be only one of a number of examples of the way in which the very thorough investigations of the problem of beauty in the sixteenth century greatly depended on the development of theories of Platonic and courtly love at the Medici court.⁸⁸ Be that as it may, Flora's smile, which openly expresses the state of inner joy, denotive literally of a state of grace that will lead the loving beholder to Paradise, is most surely an important step towards the suggestive effulgence of the spirit that marks the beautiful face of the Mona Lisa (Fig. 8), the work of an artist who was also deeply indebted to the legacy of Petrarch, Luigi Pulci, and the Ficinian revival of the theories of Platonic love.⁸⁹ The smile of the Mona Lisa makes her divine, as Vasari says in his famous description of her, which otherwise is an awed acknowledgment of nature and art jointly perfected. Vasari's description shows how very much she lives in the tradition of Renaissance beauty, and it shows too how Leonardo's realization of that evolving ideal of womanly perfection, whereby the beauty of art and the beauty of nature are indistinguishable one from the other, occupies a mid-point between the graceful manner of Botticelli's Flora and this consummate artificiality of Parmigianino's Madonna:

Nella qual testa chi voleva vedere quanto l'arte potesse imitar la natura, agevolmente si poteva comprendere; perchè quivi erano contraffatte tutte le minuzie che si possono con sottigliezza dipignere. Avvengachè gli occhi avevano que'lustri e quelle acquitrine che di continuo si veggono nel vivo, ed intorno a essi erano tutti que'rossigni lividi e i peli, che non senza grandissima sottigliezza si possono fare. Le ciglia, per avervi fatto il modo del nascere i peli nella carne, dove più folti, e dove più radi, e girare secondo

i pori della carne, non potevano essere più naturali. Il naso, con tutte quelle belle aperture rossette e tenere, si vedeva essere vivo. La bocca, con quella sua sfeditura, con le sue fini unite dal rosso della bocca, con l'incarnazione del viso, che non colori, ma carne pareva veramente. Nella fontanella della gola chi intentissimamente la guardava, vedeva battere i polsi . . . ed in questo di Lionardo vi era un ghigno tanto piacevole, che era cosa più divina che umana a vederlo. . .⁹⁰

Two important problems remain, however. Despite the fact that the work of Ficino, especially his *Platonic Theology on the Immortality of Souls* and his *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, gave a new dignity to the literature of love, it did not make it popular, for the fashion of courtly love in the sixteenth century was instead closely associated with the vernacular tradition, and most particularly with Petrarch.⁹¹ In addition, despite her epic origins, the beautiful creature who lies at the heart of this fashion was also firmly associated with the vernacular work of the same lyric poet. The history of *Petrarchismo*, which is closely intertwined with *Provençalismo*, is long and complicated, and it must suffice here to mention the name of Firenzuola's sponsor, Pietro Bembo, who established in his early work, the *Asolani*, that conciliation of vernacular and humanist traditions that is at the core of speculation concerning love and beauty in the sixteenth century.⁹² This conciliation was largely achieved through the elevation of Petrarch, both in the *Asolani* and in the *Prose della lingua volgare*, as the model for a classical vernacular style.

It is not that Bembo was unable to find other vernacular poets to aid him in his courteous praise of women, their beauty, and their role as sources of love. Though he criticised Dante he admired him greatly, and it was Dante after all who had asserted that it would be *malagevole* to address a lady in

⁸⁷ Firenzuola (1, p. 294). According to Firenzuola this rule is particularly important in a woman who is neither smiling nor speaking, but he implies that it is generally true whenever she opens her mouth.

⁸⁸ Firenzuola, for example, cites *La nencia da Barberino* when discussing the small depression in the chin (1, p. 297). This intriguing work, parodied by Pulci, is ascribed to Lorenzo himself, and Firenzuola treats it with suitable arch respect, adding "Ecco che anche i contadini, che son ripieni d'un buon giudizio naturale, conoscono anch'eglino la perfezione della bellezza." For *La nencia*, see D. de Robertis, *Il quattrocento e l'Ariosto*, 493f. and V. Rossi, *Il quattrocento*, 338f.

⁸⁹ For Leonardo's possession of Ficino's *Platonic Theology on the Immortality of Souls* and Pulci's *Morgante*, see V. P. Zubov, *Leonardo da Vinci*, trans. D. H. Kraus, Cambridge, Mass., 1968, 5 and 42. For Leonardo's own list of books, which includes these two works, see J. P. Richter, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, London, 1883, II, 442–45.

⁹⁰ Vasari-Milanesi, IV, 39–40.

⁹¹ See C. Dionisotti, *Prose e rime di Pietro Bembo*, Turin, 1966, 17–19, and T. F. Crane, 100–08.

⁹² *Gli Asolani*, inspired by Lucrezia Borgia, was probably composed between 1497 and 1502 and was published in Venice in 1505 (Dionisotti, 19). For an introduction to the subject of *Petrarchismo*, see L. Baldacci, *Il Petrarchismo italiano nel cinquecento*, Milan and Naples, 1957; G. Toffanin, *Il cinquecento*, 122–148. On Bembo, see the introduction and critical bibliography by Dionisotti; Toffanin's fundamental study, 84–103; and V. Cian, *Un decennio della vita di M. Pietro Bembo: 1521–1531*, Rome and Florence, 1885. For the significance of Provence, see also S. Debenedetti, *Gli studi provençali in Italia nel cinquecento*, Turin, 1911. Bembo's own serious study of Provençal literature probably began around 1512, though much of the spirit of the poetry was thoroughly familiar to him through the poetry of the *Dolce Stil Novo*. Bembo himself uses the traditional description of the beautiful woman in *Gli Asolani*, Bk. II.

Latin.⁹³ And among the poets of the *Stil Novo*, for example in Guinizelli's "Al cor gentil ripara sempre Amore," the vernacular expression of the love inspired by a beautiful women is fully formed. Simply to espouse the vernacular or to write about love was not an easy step for Bembo to take and it was one for which he suffered criticism. But more significant was his effort to establish criteria for a classical, literary vernacular style that would enjoy the same respect accorded the ancient styles in which he had served his apprenticeship.⁹⁴ This was the accomplishment of a lifetime of criticism and scholarship, but it was most fully expressed in the *Prose della lingua volgare*, a work begun at the court of Lucrezia Borgia and published in 1525, and that provides an important link between the courtly society of the early cinquecento and the world of Parmigianino and Firenzuola.⁹⁵

The work takes the form of a dialogue between Giuliano de' Medici, who defends a popular vernacular style, Ercole Strozza, champion of the traditional superiority of Latin, Federigo Fregoso, who stresses the importance of Provençal in the gradual evolution of vernacular language and literature, and Bembo's brother Carlo, who takes the position of Pietro. The dialogue reveals Bembo's own questions and doubts, the many arguments through which he had to struggle in order to arrive at a position acceptable first to himself. But one thing becomes clear: once Bembo had decided upon the significance of vernacular literature he had to find for it a model of style that could stand beside Cicero, and that model was Petrarch. His admiration for Petrarch was already evident in *Gli Asolani* and in the edition of Petrarch that Bembo prepared for Aldus Manutius in 1501, but in the *Prose della lingua volgare* he fully justified the adoption of Petrarch as the master of ornate style. Bembo gives due praise to the poets of the *Dolce Stil Novo*, to Dante as a great and magnificent poet, and his choice of vocabulary is heavily indebted to his reading of Boccaccio; but it is Petrarch in whom "all the graces of vernacular poetry are gathered together."⁹⁶ Bembo's main criteria for beautiful style are *gravità*, which comprises honesty, dignity, magnificence, and grandeur, and *piacevolezza*,

which comprises grace, sweetness, delightfulness, *vaghezza*, and levity. For Bembo Dante's wisdom cannot compensate for the fact that his style is often grave without giving pleasure, whereas Cino da Pistoia is delightful but lacking in gravity. Only Petrarch combines both, and is equally a master of decorum and the art of persuasion, which springs from judgment rather than being learned.⁹⁷

In making of Petrarch a vernacular Cicero, Bembo gave a new authority and fashionability to the courtly ideals and to the power of love, of Platonic origin, that Petrarch celebrated, and to the role of the Petrarchan style in addressing beautiful *cortegiane*. Though he disagreed with Castiglione's preference for a *lingua cortegiana*, Bembo himself appears as a central figure in the *Cortegiano*, together with his friend Federigo Fregoso, who in turn represented the importance of the Provençal tradition in Bembo's own dialogue.⁹⁸ He was inspired to the ideal of a pure love by the beauty and honesty of *cortegiane* like Elizabetta Gonzaga, whom he encountered in the courts of Urbino and Ferrara, which has given rise to the saying that Bembo only found love in order to write about it. It is fortunate that he did, for without Bembo's accomplishment in providing such a firm basis for the re-examination of the vernacular tradition of beauty and love minutely described in all their parts it is certainly unthinkable that his friend Raphael would have depicted the *Formarina* as he did (Fig. 9), giving her dark, arched eyebrows, prominent eyes with dark irises, fine lines like necklaces forming rings around her neck, and delicately slender fingers gracefully parted, presenting his mistress to the world as the true mistress of his art, perfect beauty itself.

The passion for courtly ideals expressed in a vernacular mode spread far beyond such refined aspirations, however, and also created a style in which those less honest *cortegiane* who carried their *Petrarchino* on their daily rounds found a mirror of the beauty they hoped to sell. It is no wonder that almost two decades after Raphael painted his muse, Parmigianino, more concerned with art than nature, should have portrayed the professional Roman courtesan Antea as the sister of the

⁹³ *Vita nuova*, xxv. Bembo edited the Aldine edition of Dante, published in 1502, and he possessed manuscripts of his poetry (Cian, 89). His criticisms of Dante's style, however, had far-reaching effects. Giovanni della Casa, for example, another figure close to the court of Clement VII, was to call Petrarch "l'ottima poeta," whereas he said of Dante "e certo io non ti consiglierei che tu lo volessi fare tuo maestro in questa arte dello esser grazioso, con cio sia cosa che egli stressi non fu." This is from *Il galateo*, xxii.

⁹⁴ On the notion of *bello scrivere* and the restriction of Latin style to the models of Cicero and Virgil, with the consequent implications for the vernacular, see Dionisotti, 37–39. Bembo established this concept in his confrontation with G. F. Pico in 1512–13. See C. Grayson, *A Renaissance Controversy: Latin or Italian*, Oxford, 1960. For the relevant texts, see *Le epistole 'De imitatione'*, ed. G. Santangelo, Florence, 1954. See also D. della Terza, "Imi-

tatio: Theory and Practice, the Example of Bembo the Poet," *Yearbook of Italian Studies*, 1971, 119–141. I am grateful to Professor Nancy Dersoff for discussing this material with me.

⁹⁵ The *Prose della lingua volgare* was finished by 1512, but not dedicated to Clement VII until 1524, and published in the following year.

⁹⁶ *Prose nelle quali si ragiona della volgar lingua divise in tre libri*, Venice, 1525, II, xxv–xxi^r.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, xxvii^r–xxxviii^v.

⁹⁸ Dionisotti, 43, suggests that one of the reasons for Bembo's opposition to the *lingua cortegiana* was his familiarity with so many courts in Venice, Florence, Mantua, Ferrara, and Urbino, which led him to be aware of the dangers of a heterogeneous language.



9 Raphael, *La Fornarina*. Rome, Gallerie Nazionale (photo: Alinari)



10 Parmigianino, *Antea*. Naples, Capodimonte (photo: Alinari).

beautiful girl who attends the Virgin in the *Madonna of the Long Neck*, and that both young women are closely related to the Virgin herself (Fig. 10).⁹⁹ This successful woman created her style as did so many of her kind. She took an illustrious name from the *Orlando* and from Pulci's *Morgante*, and with all her artifice strove to acquire the graceful manners of her more aristocratic sisters.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ S. Freedberg, 214–16. For further references and identifications of the subject, see A. O. Quintavalle, 184, n. 91. For the life of Antea, see C. Ricci, "Cortegiane del Rinascimento: Antea," *Illustrazione italiana*, 23 February 1930, 313–15, where the subject of Parmigianino's painting as Antea is traced to G. Barri, *Viaggio pittoresco*, 1671, and thence to the Farnese inventory of 1680. Freedberg's objections to this identification on the grounds that Parmigianino did not paint the portrait in Rome do not take into account the fame of this beautiful woman, nor the conventional presentation of her beauty, which did not require a sitter. The old identification of Antea as Parmigianino's mistress is like so many similar stories that have arisen around the most beautiful women painted by various artists, the most famous example of which is Raphael's *Fornarina*. In the case of Parmigianino it is perhaps not literally true, but it is accurate nonetheless in the more important sense that he represented his ideal beauty, which is to say his art. The *topos* of course is familiar and often repeated that for Renaissance artists their mistress was their art, and statements to this effect were attributed to

But the fashionable *demi-monde* apart, if beauty is really the source of grace, and if the smile of a beautiful woman can truly open the gates of Paradise, then the ultimate source of that grace, and the most efficacious of those smiles, is to be found in the Virgin, the Queen of Heaven, and the most perfect *cortegiana* of all. This is something that both Petrarch and Bembo understood, and which was made explicit by some

Leonardo, Veronese, and Annibale Carracci, among others. For the identification of the fur over Antea's shoulder as a "flea-fur," see M. von Boehm, *Modes and Manners*, trans. J. Joshua, London, 1932, II, 107 and 190.

¹⁰⁰ See A. Graf, *Attraverso il cinquecento*, 239. Aretino, *Sei giornate*, 120, describes how courtesans take children from orphanages to bring them up as daughters whose beauty will blossom as theirs fades, and to name them Giulia, Laura, Lucrezia, Cassandra, Portia, Virginia, Pantasilea, Prudenzia, or Cornelia. The name Antea has a long and complicated history. "Ανθεα" was a cult name for Aphrodite, and was already associated with courtesans by Athenaeus (*Deipnosophistae* XIII. 567 and 586). It was also considered proper for a courtesan to be familiar with the stories of both Greece and the Round Table without distinction; see Graf, 236f., n. 1. Toffanin, *Il cinquecento*, 142, makes a useful distinction between the small group that included Equicola and Bembo that was concerned with lofty "Platonismo Petrarchista" and the world of the *demi-monde* devoted to "Platonismo Petrarchesco."

sixteenth-century writers on feminine beauty, for example by Niccolò Franco in his *Dialogo dove si ragiona delle bellezze*.¹⁰¹ Parmigianino also recognized and explored it fully in his two most suggestive and beautifully ornamented representations of the Virgin, the *Madonna of the Long Neck* (Fig. 3) and the *Madonna of the Rose* (Fig. 11).¹⁰² This last may be the most perfect example of all, even though the form of the beautiful woman is less completely presented. The Virgin is again the ideally perfect figure of panegyric description and enumeration, with her fine golden hair, dark, arched eyebrows, her pink and ivory face, sweet smile, slender ringed neck, her thrusting breasts, and her long delicate fingers, gently tapering. Her son wears coral and presents her with a rose, familiar attributes both of the Virgin and of Venus herself, emblems of beauty and the love that springs from it, which span the distance between earth and heaven. The work was intended for that Venetian connoisseur of beautiful women, Aretino, but Parmigianino gave it instead to Clement VII.¹⁰³ Both painter and Pope were in Bologna, where artists, poets, and diplomats were foregathered for the coronation of Charles V. The poets assembled at the house of the poetess Veronica Gambara, where they took the occasion of the meeting between Pope and Emperor to hold their own spirited debate over the future of the language. Pietro Bembo presided over that dispute, in which he upheld the classical vernacular ornamental style of Petrararch. Agnolo Firenzuola was urged to attend.¹⁰⁴

The beauty of the *Madonna of the Rose* and the *Madonna of the Long Neck* brought Parmigianino his reputation for *grazia*, *vaghezza*, and *leggiadria*, and they are the embodiments of that grace, charm, and desire whose virtue could excite a man's soul to love God. Guido Reni called Parmigianino "la leggiadria penna," and Malvasia in a famous passage identified the ideal of courtly ornamented beauty in his work that led Ludovico Carracci to seek "dal Parmigianino la grazia, osservando le teste delle sue Madonne con quell'occhio socchiuso, piuttosto peccante in grandezza, e caricandovi il polso, donde poscia acquistassero quell'aria sì nobile, e modesta; al che anche conferiva molto il naso più tosto longo, e la bocca picciola."¹⁰⁵ Malvasia even goes so far as to identify particular precedents for Parmigianino's features in Classical sources, the "occhio socchiuso" from Homer's "ox-eyed Juno," for example, and the "bocca picciola" from the panegyric verse of Sidonius Apollinaris.¹⁰⁶ But the important point is that he recognized Parmigianino's women for what they



11 Parmigianino, *Madonna della Rosa*. Dresden, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister

are, the most perfect realizations of the ekphrastic descriptions of beautiful women of the richly ornamented panegyric transformed into the lyric Petrarchan vernacular, Madonnas whose smiles could unlock the very gates of Paradise. They are the refined descendants of the lovely Flora of the *Primavera*, and the fulfillment of the alluring modesty of the *Mona Lisa*.

Such a close affinity between the ornaments of poetry and painting could only exist in a situation where the concept of one, perfect ideal was upheld. Already, by the end of the sixteenth century, the skeptic Montaigne denied that such beauty could be understood in terms of anything but taste,

¹⁰¹ Franco's dialogue concludes with the praise of the Virgin as the most perfect beauty. It is also noteworthy here that Luigini in his dialogue (ed. Zonta, 232) writes that in the time of Petrararch maidens wore their hair loose, but when married they bound it up with pearls and jewels, referring specifically to *Rime*, cxcvi, "L'Aura serena che fra verdi fronde." The Virgin in the *Madonna of the Long Neck* has her hair thus bound.

¹⁰² Freedberg, 181–82, and A. O. Quintavalle, 123f., n. 24. Further evidence, if it is needed, that Parmigianino was involved in the spirit of *Petrarchismo* is provided by his inscription on a drawing for S. Maria della Steccata, published by Ragghianti, "Idee del Parmigianino per la Steccata," *Critica d'arte*, VIII, 1949, 506–09.

¹⁰³ Vasari-Milanesi, v, 227.

¹⁰⁴ For the Congress in Bologna, see G. Giordani, *Della venuta e dimora in Bologna del S. Pontef. Clemente VII per la coronazione di Carlo V Imperatore, celebrata l'anno MDXXX, cronaca con note, documenti ed incisioni*, Bologna, 1842. See also Cian, *Un decennio*, 141–54, and for Trissino's part in the Congress see B. Morsolin, *Giangiorgio Trissino*, 187–97.

¹⁰⁵ C. C. Malvasia, *Felsina pittrice*, ed. Bologna, 1841, II, 55–6.

¹⁰⁶ C. C. Malvasia, *Il claustrò di S. Michele in Bosco di Bologna*, Bologna, 1694, 7, in which he quotes the passage from the *Felsina pittrice* cited in the preceding note, and goes on to footnote his own description in Classical sources.

citing Propertius' statement that "the Belgic complexion of a German lass ill becomes a Roman face."¹⁰⁷ Poussin himself could define beauty in terms of order and mode, which is to say arrangement and proportion, but not in terms of species, which is adornment in line and color.¹⁰⁸ He recognized the possibility that more than one style could exist, and in the *Rebecca and Eliezer*, where he was specifically commissioned to show differing ideals of beauty, he paid homage to those differing ideals and individual styles that he admired. The special closeness between the rhetoric of ornamental style in poetry and painting that characterizes painting of the *maniera* was not long-lived. Though the beautiful woman of the panegyric left her progeny in succeeding centuries she was never more perfectly realized than by Parmigianino. The gradual loss of understanding and appreciation of her history changed her appearance and function, until she was finally attacked and dismissed by Lessing as the supreme example of the fact that "Poetry stammers and eloquence grows dumb, unless art serve as interpreter."¹⁰⁹

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¹⁰⁷ *Essays*, I, lxiii, "Apology for Raimonde de Sebonde," trans. C. Cotton and ed. W. C. Hazlitt, New York, 1894, 472: " 'Tis likely we do not well know what beauty is in nature and in general, since to human and our own beauty we give so many diverse forms, of which were there any natural rule and prescription we should know it in common, as we do the heat of the fire. . . . The Italians fashion beauty gross and massive; the Spaniards, gaunt and slender; and among us, one makes it white, another brown; one soft and delicate, another strong and vigorous; one will have his mistress soft and gentle, another haughty and majestic."

¹⁰⁸ A. Blunt, 1967, 364. For the meaning of arrangement, proportion, and adornment and their source in Bonaventure's *De reductio artium ad theologiam*, see Marsilio Ficino's *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, *University of Missouri Studies*, xix), trans. S. R. Jane, I, Columbia, 1934, 173, n. 22. For Ficino these three categories were again only efficient in structuring the matter of the body, whose beauty could only be completed by "activity, vivacity, and a certain grace shining in the body because of the infusion of its own idea."

¹⁰⁹ *Laocoön*, 135. Lessing here is specifically taking issue with Ludovico Dolce's recommendation of Ariosto's Alcina and the poet's lengthy description of her particular beauties as a model for the painter to follow (*Dialogo della pittura*, Venice, 1557, ed. P. Barocchi, *Trattati d'arte del cinquecento*, Bari, 1960, 172–74).