

Elena Tamburini

“COMMEDIA DELL’ARTE” ACTRESSES AND COURTESANS COMIC ACTORS AND “ALL’IMPROVVISO” PAINTERS*

Foreword

The history of theatre has recently acquired a portrait by Paolo Caliari, Il Veronese, that Maria Ines Aliverti identifies as depicting Isabella Andreini: a beautiful lady, complete with a book and lap dog that can arguably be identified as the famous actress.¹ [fig. 1, see the attachment “[Illustrations](#)”²] This identification rests first on the resemblance between her physical traits and those of the other remaining images representing her and, furthermore, on her extremely unusual hairstyle, short and curly and totally unornamented; her posture, elegant and lively at the same time and, finally, her dress, whose “virile” style and other features make it reminiscent of those worn by *meretrici pubbliche* (public whores).³ It is well known that comic actresses have often been compared to prostitutes.

It has been noted that between the fourteenth and fifteenth century, the period in which “Commedia dell’Arte” flourished the most, there was no trace of a figurative myth depicting actresses. The identification of this portrait by Veronese, defensible on multiple grounds, might find opposition precisely for the fact that it constitutes a unique, unprecedented piece. It may be useful, then, to explore the iconographic tradition of courtesans in order to identify the ways their portraits were usually “composed” and sketch possible connections with the world of theatre.

Courtesans in Troupes: New Documents

There was apparently no reason to truly discriminate between male and female portraiture in that, as Giovan Battista Andreini himself clarified – and Aliverti noted – ‘the most ridiculous ramshackle’ of a law in force at the time prohibited comedians of either sex from having their portraits done. Cardinal Paleotti, who was official

* Translated by Angelina Zontine. From E. Tamburini, *Culture ermetiche e commedia dell’arte. Tra Giulio Camillo e Flaminio Scala*, Ariccia (RM), Aracne Editrice, 2016, pp. 85-122.

¹ M. I. Aliverti, ‘An Icon for a New Woman: A Previously Unidentified Portrait of Isabella Andreini by Paolo Veronese’, *Early Theatre*, no. 2 (2008), XI, pp. 158-180. For a recent recognition regarding the actress, see F. Taviani, ‘Bella d’Asia. Torquato Tasso, gli attori e l’immortalità’, *Paragone/Letteratura*, no. 408 (February-April 1984), pp. 3-76.

² www.actingarchives.unior.it/Essays/NewEntries.aspx

³ The resemblance can be seen in particular with the portrait published in A. MacNeill, *Music and Women of the Commedia dell’Arte in the Late Sixteenth Century*, Oxford, University Press, 2003, p. 120.

voice of the Church at the time of the Tridentine Council, was quite clear in his statements regarding this matter.⁴

As the saying goes, however, no sooner was the law passed than a loophole was found. As Giovan Battista Andreini wrote in *La Ferza*:

You see not only do princes, kings and emperors consider these [comedians] worthy of being admired in their real, living images in the theatre, there are many of them who have wanted, for display in galleries and the most rarefied places, to paint their images, in the forms of various deities, as generated by the delicacy of art and the grandness of the place being painted, not only to glory in displaying those places imbued with color by the excellence of the painter, by admirable invention, but to say: that was the loving and erudite Vittoria [Piissimi], that was Orazio [Nobili], the learned and graceful, and so forth.⁵

Unquestionably, with the creation and development of theatre as a profession it also became necessary to establish what the actors, men and women, looked like and to make these images public: indeed, this is the source of that especially close bond between the actors and artists that scholars have often discussed. On the other hand, it must be noted that this issue was particularly complex for actresses specifically, both in view of the moralistic and anthropological implications of the issue of female portraiture and because there appears to be a quite limited body of iconographic documentation about female players: initially, in fact, the only works available portrayed them as part of larger groups of comedians.

Indeed, Renzo Guardenti has noted that

there is no trace [...] of a figurative myth of actresses similar to the literary one: this is somewhat paradoxical, considering the abundance of information about women on stage, and in particular information regarding the so-called heroic period of Commedia dell'Arte.⁶

⁴ 'la più ridicolosa sgangherata'. See M. I. Aliverti, 'Isabella Andreini nelle immagini: indagine sopra alcuni ritratti ipotetici', in *Isabella Andreini. Una letterata in scena (Padova, 20 settembre 2012)*, ed. by C. Manfio, Padova, Il Poligrafo, 2014, p. 135.

⁵ 'Tu vedi non solo che i principi, i re, gli imperadori fanno questi [comici] degni d'esser da loro in teatro rimirati nelle proprie reali e vive imagini; ma molti stati ce ne sono che per galerie e per luoghi più rari hanno volute in pittura imagini loro, in forme di varie deità, come apporta la delicatezza dell'arte, e la grandezza del luogo dipinto, non solo per gloriarsi in mostrando que' luoghi colorati dell'eccellenza del pittore, dell'invenzion mirabile, ma per dir: quella fu l'affettuosa e dotta Vittoria [Piissimi], quegli Orazio [Nobili] il saputo e grazioso, e va discorrendo'. Giovan Battista Andreini, *La Ferza ragionamento secondo contra l'accuse date alla Commedia* (1625). I quote from F. Marotti and G. Romei, *La commedia dell'Arte e la società barocca. La professione del teatro*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1991, p. 521. An example of this phenomenon is the famous *lunetta a fresco* by Bernardo Poccetti in Chiostrò Maggiore of the Florentine church of SS. Annunziata, where the most popular family of sixteenth century Italian theatre staged in a sacred place *Episodi della vita dei sette fondatori dei Servi: il Beato Sostegno alla corte di Francia* (1607-08). See also S. Ferrone, *Attori mercanti corsari. La commedia dell'arte in Europa tra Cinque e Seicento*, Torino, Einaudi, 1993, pp. 247-253, figg. 23-27.

⁶ 'non c'è traccia [...] di un mito figurativo delle attrici analogo a quello letterario: il che in certa misura è paradossale, se consideriamo l'abbondanza di informazioni sulle donne in scena, ed in particolare per il cosiddetto periodo eroico della Commedia dell'Arte'. R. Guardenti, 'Attrici in effigie', *Culture Teatrali*, no. 10 (*L'Arte dei comici. Omaggio a Isabella Andreini nel quarto centenario della morte 1604-2004*, ed. by G. Guccini), 2004, p. 57.

And yet a more thorough investigation might reveal that, even before the first companies were formed, there was a specifically female iconographic tradition precisely in the sense indicated by Giovan Battista Andreini. This tradition did not involve actresses, however; rather, it featured the female performers that Burckard, papal master of ceremonies at the beginning of the century, labeled *meretrices honestae*.⁷ In addition to enjoying elevated social status, these women commanded a wide range of the most appealing instruments of culture, including poetry, music, dance and improvisation; according to Ferdinando Taviani's well-known hypothesis, a number of these performers ended up joining companies of players, probably as a result of the papal prohibitions that had become increasingly inescapable in the Tridentine Council period.⁸ Their presence produced a quantum leap in terms of culture, or rather a certain type of culture, and even morality, or rather a certain type of morality. As Taviani has observed:

It would be perhaps too schematic to posit that, due to the crisis of their profession, women well-versed in conversation and song [...] poured into the theatre. However, we can at least argue that from a certain point in time onward the position of the great actresses in the cultural landscape replaced that of the *meretrices honestae*; they inherited the latter's culture and art of making themselves into public figures.⁹

In fact, a number of documents indicate the existence of a direct connection between the two figures: the first is found in a famous repertoire of the time, *La Piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo* (1585). The author, Tommaso Garzoni, dedicated a number of extraordinary pages to courtesans and their masterful artifice, accompanied by a description of the sophisticated and expensive goods they surrounded themselves with as well as harsh condemnations that reveal his badly-concealed admiration. The courtesan, he accuses,

sometimes feigns injury to herself to prompt a visit, pretends to be in pain to be consoled, shows herself shy to be caressed; shows herself reluctant to be craved;

⁷ In his *Liber Notarum* (1498) Johannes Burckard, master of ceremonies at the Pope's court, notes, *quaedam cortegiana, hoc est meretrix honesta*: it seems the first time that the word *cortegiana* is used to indicate a prostitute, while the term would have its origin, as is evident from what follows, in court society. It is also the first time that the expression *meretrix honesta* is documented, an expression that he uses again later and in which the term *honesta* does not have quite the same meaning that 'honest' has today; rather it meant 'worthy of respect', a treat of those who enjoy social recognition: this recognition is proved by the fact that Burckard himself recorded the participation and the quite explicit performances of 50 *honestae* courtesans at the papal feast in October 31, 1501 (see F. Cruciani, *Teatro nel Rinascimento. Roma 1450-1550*, Roma, Bulzoni, 1983, pp. 272-273).

⁸ The courtesans (who produced a considerable source of income for the papal treasury) came to face the first real difficulties in Rome only after the sack (1527): the disaster, immediately interpreted by everyone as a divine punishment, brought about an increased thirst for morality. After 1550 many measures were implemented against prostitution: in 1566, Pius VI managed to expel from the State of the Church the most famous courtesans; however, his move was altogether unsuccessful because, in the end, the pope had to confine them to a specific neighborhood, Hortaccio, located between Piazza di Spagna and Piazza del Popolo. This model was taken up in all the other cities, in conjunction with the Tridentine Council.

⁹ 'Sarebbe forse troppo schematico pensare che quelle virtuose della conversazione e del canto, a causa della crisi della loro professione [...] si siano riversate nel teatro. Si può però per lo meno affermare che da un certo punto in poi le grandi attrici, nel panorama culturale, si trovano al posto delle *meretrices honestae*, ne ereditano la cultura e l'arte di tradursi in pubbliche figure'. F. Taviani and M. Schino, *Il segreto della commedia dell'arte*, Firenze, La Casa Usher, 1982, p. 336.

pretends to be dead to be grieved. How haughty she is in speaking to others, how skillful she is when she opens her mouth, how attentive she is when she sleeps, and in her sleep she languishes, in her yearning she sighs, and then she laughs, and then weeps, and then sings, and then is upset, and then complains, and then explodes and finally, with flashing eyes, her gaze inflames the choruses of her unhappy and unlucky lovers'.¹⁰

This variety of interpretations and attitudes cannot be found described in any essay of the time dealing with theatre. There is, however, an engraving that in my opinion documents it definitively. Signed by the Flemish artist Julius Goltzius and included in an important universal repertoire of costumes, Jean Jacques Boissard's *Habitus Variarum Orbis Gentium* (1581), it shows a Venetian courtesan positioned between Il Magnifico and a Zanni.¹¹ [fig. 2, see the attachment "[Illustrations](#)"]

The courtesan is portrayed in a posture that could be defined as "theatrical," with a rich costume, flashy headgear and the style of full-face mask with mustache that was typical of the Venetian Carnival; elements that perhaps attest to the success enjoyed by those sexually ambiguous costumes and disguises, which will be discussed in more depth below.¹² A very unambiguous position, granted authority by a caption in approximate but equally unmistakable French *Courtisane Venetiene Maskeer* [*Venitienne masque*], translated also in German as *Venedische Cortisan in masker* and in Latin as *Scoꝛtum Venetum larvatum*, in which *Scoꝛtum*, or rather, *Scortum* means prostitute and thereby confirms once again the unquestionable meaning of the word. It should be noted that in the following illustration another image of the Venetian

¹⁰ 's'inferma talvolta per farsi visitare, s'inginge dolente per farsi consolare, si mostra timidetta per farsi accarezzare; si scopre ritrosa per farsi brammare; si simula morta per farsi sospirare. Con quanta prosopopeia favella con altri, con quanto artificio apre la bocca, con quanta accortezza dorme, e nel dormir languisce, nel vegghiar sospira, e dappoi ride, e dappoi piange, e dappoi canta, e dappoi si turba, e dappoi si querela, e dappoi fulmina, e finalmente con gli occhi balenanti, saetta i cori degli amanti infelici et sfortunati'. Tommaso Garzoni, *La Piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo* (1584, Discorso LXXIII), re-published work, ed. by G. B. Bronzini, 2 vols., Firenze, L. S. Olshki, 1996.

¹¹ This text, similarly to the text by Cesare Vecellio that I address further on, responded to people's curiosity about the different countries of the world, triggered by new geographic discoveries: citing Venetian works alone, there were publications by Enea Vico, *Diversarum gentium nostrae aetatis habitus*, (1558); Ferdinando Bertelli, *Omnium fere gentium oure aetatis habitus* (1563); and especially Pietro Bertelli, which I will address below. This image, reported in M.A. Katritzky, *The Art of commedia: A Study in the Commedia dell'Arte 1560-1620 with special reference to the visual records*, Amsterdam-New York, Rodopi, 2006, tab. 240 (and pp. 208-209), has the advantage of being unmistakable, bearing the inscriptions "Le Magnifico Masque", "Courtisane Venetiene Masker" and "Le Zani Serviteur" with their associated translations, as I already mentioned here. It should be noted that this image is the only in the volume to be signed and dated (1581); this might suggest that it was inserted in a volume of the engravings of another author, namely Boissard, because of its particular interest. J. J. Boissard, *Habitus Variarum Orbis Gentium*, Maecheln, C. Rutz, 1581, tab. [11]. I would like to point out that the quote is from the copy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France of Paris available on the internet.

¹² The mask has a feline air and one wonders whether, at least in terms of its origins, it might have been connected to those feasts for 'killing the cat with the shaved head' (see L. Zorzi, *L'attore, la commedia, il drammaturgo*, Torino, Einaudi, 1990, p. 178, tab. 5) as written in the caption of an image by Giacomo Franco, *Habiti d'huomeni et Donne venetiane con la Processione della Ser.ma Signoria et altri particolari, cioè Trionfi, Feste et Cerimonie publiche della Nobilissima città di Venetia*, [Venice], G. Franco, [1610]. This volume, as Lina Padoan Urban notes, is the second of three volumes dedicated to Venice. In Franco's images the Courtesan, Magnifico and Zanni appear to be an absolutely customary trio, a representative convention that lends additional significance to Goltzius' engraving. See L. Padoan Urban, 'Introduzione', in Giacomo Franco, *Habiti delle Donne Venetiane*, ed. by L. Padoan Urban, Venezia, Centro Internazionale della Grafica, 1990, p. 18.

courtesan, not wearing either the mask or the bizarre hat and assuming a more natural posture but dressed in a very similar fashion, is accompanied by the Latin translation *Aulicum Scoztum Venetum*, another way of defining the high-class courtesan or *meretrix honesta veneta*. In this case the courtesan is not a theatrical character and is depicted in an everyday manner, but the similar costume (also similar to that of the other ladies from Veneto with whom she is grouped) lends credibility to the identification of the two figures. With this illustration the engraver appears intent unveiling the “sphere of silence” so often discussed in the past to explain how documents that should depict the period’s most common customs are often absent from the culture that expresses them and found instead in different cultural spheres, for example depicted by an intrigued foreigner such as Goltzius.¹³ In reality, the Flemish engraver might have been inspired by several beautiful images by (or attributable to) Venetian Giacomo Franco depicting the courtesan accompanied in each instance by a “Commedia dell’Arte” character.¹⁴ [figg. 3-10, see the attachment “[Illustrations](#)”] Although in this case the female figure is not explicitly labeled a ‘courtesan’, there is little doubt of her identity given the illustration depicting her with the famous *braghessa* only courtesans were allowed to wear.¹⁵ These images are more familiar to Venice enthusiasts than theatre scholars and in any case usually associated with the much later work by Francesco Bertelli in which they appeared (*Il Carnevale italiano mascherato ove si veggono in figura varie inventioni di capritii*, [Venezia], F. Bertelli, 1642). They thus never attracted the attention of historians, in part due to the traditional and unfortunate indifference of iconography but also because the work was produced at a time when a certain kind of courtesan was undoubtedly portrayed in a shadowy manner. Indeed, these plates must be dated back to at least 1594, when they first appeared as part of another work by Pietro Bertelli, father of Francesco (*Diversarum nationum habitus, Centum et quattuor iconibus in air incisis*, Padova, A. Alcia [sic] and P. Bertelli, 1594-96, 3 vols.), or 1591, if it is actually true that there is a first edition bearing that date. At least the first of these plates is signed by Giacomo Franco, and the style and mood of the other ones can also be ascribed to him. These particular engravings might also have served as the source of inspiration for Goltzius, if it can be proven that they were in circulation prior to the publication of his works and even Pietro Bertelli’s publication. The courtesan’s public, carnivalesque and theatrical role seems to be confirmed by two other engravings, this time definitely works by Franco: the first shows ‘some courtesans’ running with men and bulls in the traditional *cazza del toro* (bull hunt) on fat Thursday, while the other displays the courtesan in ‘Venetian clothes’ acting out Ariosto’s episode of Olympia and Birinus in which, as Franco writes, the fiction of love found its most beautiful and effective expression.¹⁶ [figg. 11-12, see the attachment “[Illustrations](#)”]

The move to include courtesans in companies explains a number of developments: not only the qualitative and cultural leap at least some of these companies achieved, but also the emergence and growth of a real culture of fiction.

¹³ See M. De Marinis, *Capire il teatro. Lineamenti di una nuova teatrologia*, Firenze, La Casa Usher, 1988.

¹⁴ Pietro Bertelli, *Diversarum nationum habitus. Centum, et quattuor iconibus in aere incisis*, Padova, “apud Alciatum Alcia. et Petrum Bertelli”, 1594-96, II, tab. 65-78: here as well, the courtesan is depicted together with Il Magnifico and a Zanni (but also the Dottore, Burattino, Francatrippa and other character types).

¹⁵ Ibid., tab. 67. Regarding the *braghessa* see note 38.

¹⁶ See Giacomo Franco, *Habiti delle Donne Venetiane*, c. 13.

This culture was fueled by the arts of costuming, make-up and conversation, and courtesans were publicly recognized to have truly mastered these arts; entering the world of theatre, this mastery was expressed as a taste for disguise and attention to jokes and dialogue, especially skillful improvisation and interpretation. It also explains the very existence of actresses in Italy, an absolutely exceptional case in a European theatrical sphere monopolized by male actors that largely explains the immense success of Italian performances.

Female Courtiers and Courtesans

To conduct a more detailed analysis of this iconographic tradition, we must first investigate the new space that women attained and new consideration they enjoyed in court society. Indeed, Baldesar Castiglione raised this very issue in *Cortegiano* (1528). At the outset, opinions were actually quite divided: some considered the female sex to be obscure and unknown, closely associated with material and animal society, an untidy sex par excellence and in any case inferior. These convictions were opposed not so much by those exalting women as such, but by those who hoped for a “court lady”, a wholly intellectual court woman. Given the prevailing prejudices of the time, such a figure was a sort of paradox: a lady who resembled the *cortegiano* or man of court in many respects and yet differed in other respects. A beautiful, chaste and gentle woman; certainly not capable of discussing philosophy like men, but with particular talents that included a mastery of letters (here it is important to recall the extent to which the spread of literacy and explosion of the printing industry with particular reference to vernacularization and vernacular publications and associated enrichment of family libraries fostered a veritable cultural transformation for women) but also music, painting and dance.¹⁷ These were precisely the features that paved the way for the development of ‘recited reasoning’, that is, the move to render conversation theatrical: in Urbino this development took place ‘where the Duchess Elisabetta Gonzaga was usually found’, in the center of a ‘circle’ that gathered spontaneously every night in her private quarters. If the male courtesan was expected to be skilled in weapons, his female counterpart was expected to have the ability to ‘entertain’ with ‘a certain pleasant courtesy’ in some ways indefinable and ‘comprising opposing elements’ that consisted in the ability to listen to ‘somewhat lascivious reasonings’ with ‘a hint of blush and shame’ matched by a ‘temperate gravity of knowledge and goodness’.

The concept of the nobility and excellence of women gained legitimacy thanks to these shifts as well as other, much more concealed, developments such as the publication of Cornelio Agrippa’s treatise *De nobilitate et praecellentia foeminei sexus*, probably issued in Venice in 1530, subsequently translated and later referenced by essays with analogous content by Venetians polygraphs and

¹⁷ The leading figures of these operations are well-known: Battista Guarino, Bernardo and Torquato Tasso, Claudio Tolomei, Francesco Molza, Annibale Caro, Sperone Speroni and more generally polygraphs located especially in Venice that enjoyed a more extensive freedom of press, at least in the first half of the sixteenth century. The case of Giovanni Andrea dell’Anguillara is particularly important in that he vernacularized Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, a fundamental text for subsequent theatrical transpositions.

women of letters themselves.¹⁸ As a result, they were finally allowed to enter the official ranks of Italy’s new literary society. Known as a minor phenomenon and investigated only in relation to Petrarch-style female poets (although in reality women also engaged with several other literary genres, especially in the second half of the century),¹⁹ this role of women actually flourished throughout the century: in this case, unique in the history of Italian literature, women “banded together”.²⁰ The majority of these literate women, such as Vittoria Colonna and Veronica Gambara, came from noble and well-educated families. At least three of them, Gaspara Stampa, Tullia d’Aragona and Veronica Franco, were undoubtedly courtesans. They were mainly active in Venice and pursued economic autonomy (obviously thanks to selling themselves, but also to the new “craft of writing”) still reserved to a very restricted minority undeniably made up mainly of men.

Humanistic culture rediscovered the illustrious hetairas of the classical age and the new culture in vernacular privileged knowledge of love – to quote the most significant example, the dialogue *Della infinità d’Amore* by Tullia d’Aragona – to “entertain” and “be entertained”.²¹ It seems that this culture of love, for which the famous book *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (Venezia, 1499) certainly represented an important reference, constituted a sort of alternative to the dominant religion, for many people, not only courtesans. In the first half of the century and especially in Venice, the climate was so free that Francesco Sansovino wrote arguing that monogamy was an arbitrary deformation of natural law because women should be shared.²² For courtesans, this did not always entail unbridled license or the absence of principles. For example, in the words of Veronica Franco, a writer closely associated with Domenico Venier’s Academy: ‘I am so vague and delighted in conversing with those who know how, to have an opportunity to learn more, that if my luck were to allow it, I would do this all my life and spend all my time gently in the academies of

¹⁸ Agrippa’s treatise was translated and published in 1545 in Venice, printed by Gabriel Giolito de’ Ferrari, with the addition of an oration on the same subject by Alessandro Piccolomini. L. Domenichi, *La Nobiltà delle donne* (Venezia, 1549) and L. Dolce, *Dialogo della istituzione delle donne. Secondo li tre stati, che cadono nella vita humana* (1545), likewise published in Venice using the same typography, are also worth citing as are several others, sometimes written by women of letters such as Moderata Fonte and Lucrezia Marinella. Many of these discourses convey a clear awareness that women’s humiliation was the result of male oppression and envy. The so-called *querelle des femmes*, that is, a debate aimed at affirming equality between the sexes, began this way, especially in restive and libertarian environments such as Venetian polygraphs.

¹⁹ For example short poems, pastoral tales, mystical-religious genres and essays, the latter almost always aimed at responding to the misogynist texts that continued to be published until the end of the century.

²⁰ Regarding women of letters, see *Nel cerchio della luna. Figure di donna in alcuni testi del XVI secolo*, ed. by M. Zancan, Venezia, Marsilio, 1983. The first historiography on this topic was published quite early: F. A. Dalla Chiesa, *Theatro delle donne letterate, con un breve discorso della preminenza e perfezione del sesso donnesco*, Mondovì, Gilfandi e Rossi, 1620.

²¹ Reprinted in M. Antes, *Tullia d’Aragona cortigiana e filosofa. Con il testo del dialogo “Della infinità d’Amore”*, Firenze, Polistampa, 2011.

²² See L. Bolzoni, *La stanza della memoria: modelli letterari e iconografici nell’età della stampa*, Torino, Einaudi, 1995, p. 4.

virtuous men'; she even went so far as to advise a young man aspiring to her favors that he ought to grow up and apply himself to study before all else.²³

Courtesans and Models

As later became the custom for comedians (of both sexes), this particular type of prostitute was also portrayed in the guise of an allegory or myth. As Dolce also notes, artists in the classical tradition likewise employed these models, especially for nude subjects.²⁴ At the time they were also used for the very concrete reason that only courtesans claimed the right to “appear”, as evidenced by the disproportionately low number of female portraits – dominated by courtesans or supposed courtesans – compared to male portraits in the repertoire of any painter of the time.²⁵

There is reason to believe Raffaello himself portrayed Saffo in his *Parnaso* using the famous courtesan Imperia as a model.²⁶ According to a reliable novel by Bandello, Imperia, who was trained in the art of poetry by Nicolò Campana, also known as *Strascino*, and ‘composed some pleasing sonnet or madrigal’, was also the object of medals coined and verses written in her honor. At any rate this coming together, presumably taking place between 1506 and 1512, was important in that it gave rise to an original exchange of forms of knowledge and techniques: the actor’s comical rhymes and the refined fiction of the courtesan.²⁷ The term courtesan in this case actually refers to the figure of female courtier as well as that of the whore; if we are to trust the invaluable source provided by Tommaso Garzoni, both figures were expert in the art of dissimulation.²⁸

The fact that Imperia herself committed suicide for love at the age of 31 indicates another aspect of these courtesans, literates who were influenced by Petrarch in ways that went beyond words and who granted their favors not for money but on the basis of real and idealizing leanings. Lucrezia Porzia, also known by the appellation “Roman patrician”, was called *Madrema-non-vole* (my mother would not wish it) because she used this phrase to gently refuse admirers who were not to her liking. As Aretino writes, Lucrezia herself ‘seems

²³ ‘io sono tanto vaga e con tanto mio diletto converso con coloro che sanno, per aver occasione ancora di imparare, che, se la mia fortuna il comportasse, io farei tutta la mia vita e spenderei tutto ‘l mio tempo dolcemente nell’academie degli uomini virtuosi’. Veronica Franco, *Lettere dall’unica edizione del MDLXXX*, introduction and ed. by Benedetto Croce, Napoli, R. Ricciardi, 1949, p. 28 (Lettera XVII).

²⁴ In recommending painters to imitate the most perfect form of Nature, Dolce reminded the example of Apelles and Praxiteles who used the beautiful courtesan Frine to paint their figures of Venus. See L. Dolce, *Dialogo della Pittura Intitolato l’Aretino* (1557) quoted from *Trattati d’arte del Cinquecento fra Manierismo e Controriforma*, ed. by P. Barocchi, Bari, Laterza, 1960-62, I, p. 176.

²⁵ See F. Pedrocchi, ‘Iconografia delle cortigiane di Venezia’, in *Il gioco dell’amore. Le cortigiane di Venezia dal Trecento al Settecento*, (exhibition catalogue, Venezia, 1990), Milano, Berenice, 1990, pp. 87-88.

²⁶ There are no documents to support this hypothesis, but there are many indications: see for instance G. L. Moncalero, *Imperia de Paris nella Roma del Cinquecento e i suoi cantori funebri*, Roma, Palombi, 1962.

²⁷ See C. Valenti, *Comici artigiani. Mestiere e forme dello spettacolo a Siena nella prima metà del Cinquecento*, Modena, F. C. Panini, 1992, in particular p. 49 and pp. 60-64. The passage I quote from Bandello appears in his *Novelle*, III, 42: Bandello erroneously calls him Domenico instead of Nicolò. The name *Strascino* refers to a tool that allowed fisherman to troll, select, toss back into the sea, store, cut and sell their wares: this expression is well suited to this type of man of letters who worked in the theatre.

²⁸ Garzoni also writes about female courtiers’ particular skills with makeup, similar to those of courtesans, which he underlines as well. See Tommaso Garzoni, *La Piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo*, I, p. 646; II, p. 728.

to me a Tullio, and knows by heart all of Petrarch, Boccaccio and infinite and beautiful verses by Virgil, and Horace and Ovid as well as a thousand other authors' and was known for 'a new language' that her visitors were required to share;²⁹ anyone who did not know it or had only an imperfect grasp of it drew her disparaging derision.³⁰ Matteo Bandello likewise did not hide his admiration for this particular type of courtesan: he refers, for example, to Cattarina da San Celso, 'virtuous in playing and singing, [a] beautiful actress with pronounced pronunciation of vulgar verses' and describes one Isabella da Luna who, with her improvised and public mastery of words, met any manner of provocation with a witty rejoinder.³¹

Another example worth citing is Tullia d'Aragona, who was said to be the daughter of Cardinal Luigi. Thanks to her skills as a poet, the Granduca de' Medici granted this famous courtesan an exemption from the obligatory yellow veil required to be worn by all prostitutes; she also founded intellectual circles or Academies in the places where she lived, namely Rome, Venice, Florence and Ferrara. These Academies were attended by leading intellectuals of the time, some of whom cited above, such as Bernardo and Torquato Tasso, Francesco Molza, Claudio Tolomei, Benedetto Varchi, Nicolò Martelli, Girolamo Muzio and Sperone Speroni. She staunchly defended her right to play music, dance and hold masked parties in the face of efforts by the Franciscan Bernardino Ochino to forbid them with moralistic fury. Giulio Camillo wrote verses addressed to her (as well as other literary women) and it was her sitting room that Speroni used as the setting for his *Dialogo d'Amore* (1542), featuring her and Tasso as interlocutors.³²

Tullia herself perhaps modelled for the *Salomé* by the illustrious painter from Brescia Alessandro Bonvicini, known as *Moretto*, a fact that scholars have questioned but which might now regain credibility based on the evidence of new investigations of the painting's features (the scepter invoking her Aragonese royal origins). Furthermore, Tullia's public, courageous defense of dancing might have reverberations in the *Salomé* depicted in this case, apparently in a positive light, as she who 'sacru Ioanis caput saltando obtinuit'

²⁹ 'mi pare un Tullio, e ha tutto il Petrarca e 'l Boccaccio a mente et infiniti e bei versi di Virgilio, e d'Orazio e d'Ovidio e di mille altri autori'. Pietro Aretino, *Ragionamenti*, Bengodi [actually Roma], Barbargria [actually the heirs of A. Blado], 1504, p. 387 (Ragionamento del Zoppino).

³⁰ Lucrezia 'si fa beffe di ognuno che non favella alla usanza: e dice che si ha a dire *balcone* e non *finestra*; *porta* e non *uscio*; *tosto* e non *vaccio*; *viso* e non *faccia*; *cuore* e non *core*' (Lucrezia 'pokes fun at anyone who does not speak in a customary manner: and says that we should say *balcony* instead of window; *door* rather than entrance; *right away* rather than *vaccio*; *visage* rather than face; *heart* rather than *heart*'). Pietro Aretino, *Sei giornate*, ed. by G. Aquilecchia, Bari, Laterza, 1969, p. 82 (seconda giornata).

³¹ 'virtuosa in sonare e cantare, bella recitatrice con castigata pronunzia di versi volgari'. Matteo Bandello, *Novelle*, IV, 8 and II, 51, quoting from G. Padoan, 'Il mondo delle cortigiane nella letteratura rinascimentale', in *Il gioco dell'amore. Le cortigiane di Venezia dal Trecento al Settecento*, pp. 65-66.

³² His verses were also addressed to Veronica Gambarà and Margherita di Navarra. See L. Bolzoni, 'Introduzione', in G. Camillo, *L'idea del teatro con «L'idea dell'eloquenza», il «De transmutatione» e altri testi inediti*, introduction and ed. by L. Bolzoni, Milano, Adelphi, 2015, p. 10. Giulio Camillo was very close to Muzio and other poets from the circle of Tullia d'Aragona, such as Pietro Bembo, Benedetto Varchi and Francesco Maria Molza (see *ibid.*, pp. 222-224 and *passim*).

(according to what is written on the painting).³³ Angela Dal Moro, who was known as *Zaffetta* and was the lover of Aretino, also sat as a model for various painters and perhaps in particular Tiziano's *Amor Sacro e Amor Profano*, impersonating the nude woman, hence sacred love, in approximately 1514-1515.³⁴ Although these references often lack corroborating documentation, the fact that they appear again and again cannot but be considered meaningful. Our prejudices make us reluctant to accept that Amor Sacro might have been interpreted by a courtesan; and yet, as strange as it may appear today, that kind of courtesan seems to have been much more similar to certain noble female poets such as Vittoria Colonna than to common prostitutes. This ambiguity also divides scholars. See for example the so-called *Ritratto di Laura* (1506) by Giorgione: an allegory of marriage or honest courtesan?³⁵

In female portraiture the display of virtues clearly stands out, but the oxymoronic meaning of the symbolic elements is a fundamental part of its appeal.³⁶ Furthermore, although clothing at that time was a system of clearly decipherable signs as well as an indicator of profession and social class, it was not always easy to distinguish such women from ladies of the period.³⁷ In the most important repertoire of period costumes and hairstyles, that is, *Habiti antichi et moderni* by Cesare Vecellio (Venezia, 1590), courtesans appear entirely distinct from “public prostitutes” and similar to aristocratic ladies. Vecellio notes that ‘at times the courtesans resemble married women in terms of their clothes, also wearing rings on their fingers like married women do: and

³³ Regarding the debate surrounding this attribution, see M. Antes, *Tullia d'Aragona cortigiana e filosofa. Con il testo del dialogo “Della infinità d'Amore”*, p. 96, p. 26. The fact that Tullia defends ‘false appearances as well as dance and sound’ is documented in a sonnet directed to Bernardino Ochino, whose passionate sermons supported this ban; it is also expressed in an exchange of sonnets with Antonfrancesco Grazzini called *Lasca*, a burlesque author and playwright (see J. L. Hairston, *The Poems and Letters of Tullia d'Aragona and Others*, Toronto, Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2014, pp. 97-98, pp. 146-147, pp. 258-259).

³⁴ As is well known, this work has been interpreted in many ways over time. Sergio Bertelli associates the two women with the custom of making a double portrait of brides (as nubile and married women), a custom popular since at least the mid-fifteenth century. See S. Bertelli, *Il re, la vergine, la sposa. Eros, maternità e potere nella cultura figurativa europea*, Roma, Donzelli, 2002, p. 95, pp. 104-106.

³⁵ The interpretation of Laura as an allegory of marriage has been repeatedly disproven (see T. Pignatti, *Giorgione*, Milano, Alfieri, 1978, pp. 99-100). After Verhaeyen (E. Verhaeyen, ‘Der Sinngehalt von Giorgiones “Laura”’, *Pantheon*, 1968, p. 220), who interpreted the two bosoms, one covered and the other uncovered, as an expression of the opposition between modesty and voluptuousness, Anderson suggested that it represents the portrait of a courtesan (see J. Anderson, ‘The Giorgionesque Portrait: from likeness to allegory’, in *Giorgione. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi per il 5 centenario della nascita, Castelfranco Veneto, 29-31 maggio 1978*, Venezia, Comitato per le celebrazioni Giorgionesche, 1979, pp. 153-158). In addition, there is Sergio Bertelli’s interpretation according to which this artwork is a wedding portrait (S. Bertelli, *Il re, la vergine, la sposa. Eros, maternità e potere nella cultura figurativa europea*, pp. 65-112).

³⁶ See F. Polignano, ‘Ritratto e sistema simbolico nelle *Dame* di Vittore Carpaccio’, in *Il ritratto e la memoria. Materiali 3*, ed. by A. Gentili, Ph. Morel, C. Cieri Via, Roma, Bulzoni, 1993, pp. 229-251.

³⁷ See M. F. Rosenthal and A. R. Jones, ‘Introduzione: Vecellio e il suo mondo’, in C. Vecellio, *Habiti antichi et moderni. La moda nel Rinascimento. Europa. Asia. Africa. Americhe*, ed. by M. F. Rosenthal and A. R. Jones, Roma, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato, 2010, pp. 15-23.

therefore those without a great deal of experience end up being deceived'.³⁸ The more common type of prostitutes, forced to seek customers on the streets, did not have a truly uniform and meaningful outfit and at times even sought to satisfy the fairly ambiguous tastes of their customers; they did, however, sometimes dress like men with 'loose trousers resembling [those of] men made of sarcenet or other material'.³⁹ At other times, as Veronica Franco writes in one of her letters, they wore their 'breasts fully exposed and outside of [their] gowns'.⁴⁰ Caravaggio later caused a scandal precisely because he used a common prostitute to portray the Virgin Mary or Magdalene.⁴¹

Tintoretto and the "all'improvviso" Painters

Let us return to the honest courtesans, women who had become so famous, admired and conscious of their prestige as to want to have their portraits painted. As Giovan Battista Andreini wrote, they also used to conceal themselves – in a manner of speaking, as they were nude for the most part – under the guise of Leda, Danae,

³⁸ 'alle volte le cortigiane e donne di partito rassembrano nell'habito le maritate, portando anche gli anelli in deto, come le maritate fanno: e perciò chi non è più che pratico ne rimane ingannato'. Furthermore, Vecellio writes: 'Quelle meretrici, che vogliono acquistar credito col mezo della finta honestà, si servono dell'habito vedovile, e et di quello anchora delle maritate: et quelle specialmente, che hanno qualche colore di matrimonio' ('Those whores, who want to acquire credit with counterfeit honesty, make use of the widow's dress, and that of married women, especially those who have some hues of marriage'), that is, those who secured themselves a husband for show (see *ibid.*, pp. 137-138). Both Veronica Franco and Tullia d'Aragona arranged similar marriages to avoid prohibitions and especially to flaunt their necklaces and jewelry without danger.

³⁹ 'braghese come gli huomeni di ormesino e altro'. See the clothing of "public whores" described by Vecellio, which Aliverti refers to when attributing the painting by Veronese: 'le publiche meretrici, che stanno ne' luoghi infami, non sono negl'habiti loro uniformi: perché se bene tutte sono d'un essercitio medesimo, nondimeno l'inequalità della fortuna fa che non tutte vanno pompose ad un modo: hanno, con tutto ciò in uso un habito, che pende più tosto al virile' ('public whores, who attend infamous places, are not all the same in their clothing: for although they all belong to the same group, nevertheless the inequality of their fortune makes it so that not all behave pompously in the same way: they have, with all this in use, a clothing style that tends toward virile', see *ibid.*, pp. 146-147).

⁴⁰ 'il petto spalancato e ch'esce fuor fuor dei panni'. Veronica Franco, *Lettere dall'unica edizione del MDLXXX*, p. 37 (Lettera XXII). The custom of generously tolerating prostitutes in Venice was also due to the fact that sodomy was considered the worst of all vices and female prostitution appeared to be the only means of containing this plague (see G. Tassini, *Veronica Franco celebre poetessa e cortigiana del secolo XVI*, Venezia, Stab. tipo-lit. M. Fontana, 1888, pp. 18-23). At any rate it is quite difficult in this period to identify the boundaries of modesty. The custom of revealing the breasts, for instance, might not really have constituted a discriminating factor in that, at least in Venice, "ladies" and even girls bound for marriage also shared this custom (see the watercolor of the *Gentildonna veneziana* dated 1575 and published in M. F. Rosenthal and A. R. Jones, 'Introduzione', p. 19); and yet, on the basis of this custom many venetian portraits, the majority addressing the theme of Venus, have been attributed to courtesans (see F. Pedrocco, 'Iconografia delle cortigiane di Venezia', pp. 81-93). Furthermore, the theme of Flora created a similarity between actresses and courtesans in that the comic muse was sometimes represented as Flora (see Maria Ines Aliverti, 'Isabella Andreini nelle immagini: indagine sopra alcuni ritratti ipotetici', p. 183).

⁴¹ The *Estasi di Maria Maddalena*, recently rediscovered by Mina Gregori in a private collection, was associated with Caterina Vannini, a prostitute from Siena who later reformed.

Venus and even the chaste Diana.⁴² This represented a way of claiming a different dimension of beauty, no longer through divine love as according to the dominant NeoPlatonic conception but, as Tullia d'Aragona argued, a tool for spiritual elevation that derived its logic and motivations from a doctrine of Love entailing no further specification or even, as Veronica Franco clearly expressed, a good to be enjoyed with pure earthly impulses.⁴³ Examples of these impersonations include *Leda e il cigno* and *Danae* by Tintoretto, in which Franco herself embodies the mythical figure with erotic overtones. [fig. 13, see the attachment "[Illustrations](#)"] In both cases she is depicted in a richly draped alcove as she welcomes Jupiter, in the first piece in the guise of a swan, in the second in the form of a golden coin. The themes probably conceal a real occurrence, that is, the relationship the courtesan had with the king of France Henry III during a sumptuous Venetian visit.⁴⁴ Indeed, after a passionate (and surely adequately rewarded) night with the king, as if to underline the non-subordinate but somehow equal relationship between them, the courtesan gave the sovereign a miniature with her portrait: 'The image of me made with enamel and color he took when departing with a grateful, open heart'.⁴⁵

For the purposes of this research, it may be worth remembering that both Leda and Danae appear in the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*: two of the four triumphal carriages that Polifilo saw during his journey towards the fountain of Venus are named after them (the other two are named after Europa and Semele).⁴⁶ Although Tintoretto was aware of the issues and, above all, iconography of this famous volume, he emphasized the anecdotal and erotic in his interpretation of the myth. In both of these works it is easy to identify the elements that, according to the actor and playwright Andrea Calmo, qualified high-class courtesans: they are skillfully combed and jeweled, served by a maid and accompanied by a lap dog.⁴⁷ As seen in the great iconographic repertoire of the time, these elements reveal these high-class courtesans' desire to take on the attributes and customs of ladies and their demand that they share in the same elevated dignity and ideals, even that of

⁴² E. Filippi, 'Le donne di Tintoretto', in *Jacopo Tintoretto nel quarto centenario della morte, Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi Venezia, 24-26 Novembre 1994*, ed. by P. Rossi and L. Puppi, Venezia, Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia, 1994, p. 171, no. 60. In relation to Diana, see the engraving by Giacomo Franco depicting a 'very famous lady [the word suggests a prostitute] in the metaphorical guise of Diana, the goddess of the hunt' ('famosissima Signora [la parola indica una meretrice] sotto metaforica trasmutazione di Diana, dea delle caccie', Giacomo Franco, *Habiti delle Donne Venetiane*, c. 19).

⁴³ 'Granted from heaven is female beauty/so that she could be happy on earth/she knows kindness from every man' ('Data è dal Ciel la femminil bellezza,/ Perch'ella sia felicitate in terra/ Di qualunque uom conosce gentilezza...'). Veronica Franco, "*Terze Rime*" e sonetti, Lanciano, Carabba, 1912, p. 72 (XVI).

⁴⁴ The image of the king visiting the courtesan is also connected to Jupiter in the first of the two sonnets included in the first letter that Franco wrote for the occasion. See Veronica Franco, *Lettere dall'unica edizione del MDLXXX*, p. 8. The king's arrival in Venice, marked by highly interesting festive and theatrical events, took place in 1574.

⁴⁵ 'l'imagin mia di smalt' e di colore prese al partir con grat'animo aperto'. From the same sonnet quoted in the previous note, which accompanied the delivery of a colored enamel, possibly based on the portrait by Tintoretto that Franco mentions in one of her letters (see no. 63).

⁴⁶ See V. Guazzoni, 'Una reputazione controversa. Leda nell'arte del Cinquecento', in *Tintoretto e la favola di Leda. Per il restauro di due dipinti degli Uffizi*, Soresina, Rossi, 1994, p. 81 and following. Obviously see also *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, ed. by M. Ariani and M. Gabriele, 2 vols., Milano, Adelphi, 1998.

⁴⁷ See V. Rossi, *Le Lettere di messer Andrea Calmo*, Torino, E. Loescher, 1888, pp. 305-307 (IV, no. 24).

fidelity.⁴⁸ It is worth focusing on pearls: courtesans in particular were forbidden to wear them, but they circumvented this ban any time they were able and indeed made a point of being portrayed with this ornamentation around their necks; as a matter of fact, pearls adorn almost all of the images referenced here, from those of public prostitutes to the medal coined for the death of Isabella Andreini: this element therefore constitutes not only tangible evidence of nobility and wealth, but also of a life lived outside the limits imposed on ordinary people.⁴⁹

Tintoretto's artworks are particularly significant for a number of reasons: not only did he most likely train with Carpaccio, a painter who was notoriously sensitive to the world of theatre, and not only did he used to observe 'less successful painters who painted the stalls for painters in Piazza San Marco, to learn their craft' in order to learn about craftsmanship, but he was also a friend of the above-mentioned artist Calmo, the two sharing many grounds of affinity.⁵⁰ In one of his letters directed to Calmo, he notes 'the gestures, manners, frontal views, side views' of his figures, observing that the artist's 'flour' went perfectly with his own *levao* (yeast), meaning that Calmo's habit of sketching characters with natural caricature and simple dialect was in exceptional harmony with the style of the Venetian painter, the brushstrokes 'full of spirit and readiness' – to borrow Sansovino's description – for which Vasari, more inclined to appreciate Tiziano, criticized him.⁵¹ According to the Florentine writer, Tintoretto was 'the most dreadful brain ever found in the world of painting [...] who worked randomly and without drawing' leaving 'sketches as if they were finished', 'almost demonstrating that this art is foolishness', pointing out the 'new and capricious inventions and strange whims of his intellect'.⁵² These phrases reveal not only the apparent lack of rigorous construction involved in creating these works from their drawings, but also the 'commedia dell'arte

⁴⁸ The small dog, according to Ripa, suggests loyalty to her loved ones and Alciati (1531) includes it in his emblem LXI, *In fidem uxoriam*. See S. Bertelli, *Il re, la vergine, la sposa. Eros, maternità e potere nella cultura figurativa europea*, pp. 87-88. The idea of loyalty was indeed shared by more respectable courtesans and here it might represent, as some scholars have noted, a commitment of loyalty to the French king. A large long-faced dog is instead associated with melancholy, as in Dürer's famous engraving *Melencolia I* and others that refer to this theme, such as Fetti's *Malinconia*.

⁴⁹ See *Decreto del Magistrato alle Pompe, Pompe Capitolare Primo. 12 Novembre 1578*, published in G. Tassini, *Veronica Franco celebre poetessa e cortigiana del secolo XVI*, p. 124. The ban specifically targeted 'pearls or other things resembling pearls [...] on every part of the person' ('perle, ovvero altre cose che imitasse esse perle [...] in ogni parte della persona sua'). These laws perhaps were an exact copy of those prohibiting jewels, dating to 1562.

⁵⁰ 'pittori di minor fortuna, che dipingevano alla piazza di San Marco le banche per dipintori, per apprendere i modi loro'. G. Ridolfi, *Le Maraviglie dell'Arte*, Venezia, G. B. Sgava, 1648, II, p. 15.

⁵¹ 'i gesti, maniere, maiestae, i scurci, perfili...'. V. Rossi, *Le Lettere di messer Andrea Calmo*, pp. 132-133 (II, no. 30). Tintoretto was not only the son of a dyer like Calmo, he also frescoed the Scuola Grande of San Marco when Calmo was part of the Capitolo (see R. Krischel, 'Jacopo Tintoretto: una biografia da rintracciare', in *Jacopo Tintoretto nel quarto centenario della morte*, pp. 65-69). For a discussion of the various aspects of Tintoretto's interest in theatre see E. Weddingen, 'Nuovi percorsi di avvicinamento a Jacopo Tintoretto. Venere, Vulcano e Marte: l'inquisizione dell'informatica' and S. Marinelli, 'Aspetti della teatralità nell'opera di Jacopo Tintoretto', *ibid.*, pp. 155-161 and pp. 263-266 respectively, as well as P. L. De Vecchi, 'Tintoretto: strutture e tempi narrativi in immagini profane e favolose', in *Tintoretto e la favola di Leda. Per il restauro di due dipinti degli Uffizi*, pp. 9-51.

⁵² 'il più terribile cervello che abbia avuto mai la pittura [...] che ha lavorato a caso e senza disegno'; 'le bozze per finite', 'quasi mostrando che quest'arte è una baia'; 'le nuove e capricciose invenzioni e strani ghiribizzi del suo intelletto'. Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1568*, ed. by R. Bettarini, commentary by P. Barocchi, Firenze, Studio per Edizioni Scelte, 1984, V, pp. 468-469.

flavour’ scholars explicitly evoked in relation to many of them.⁵³ [fig. 14, see the attachment “[Illustrations](#)”]

Perhaps those “whims” Vasari mentioned are the controversial source of the title given to another work by Calmo, *Cherebizzi* (1559); in any case, Vasari’s aggressive tones were probably successful in triggering other noteworthy instances of support. Tintoretto, in fact, had other important supporters: one was Aretino, with whom Tintoretto shared an anti-rhetorical poetics and for whom he painted a series of fairy-tales on the latter’s bedroom ceiling. Aretino loved his ‘beautiful’ but especially ‘ready and lively [figures], with ready and charming manners’;⁵⁴ another was Alvisè Cornaro, the organizer of an unforgettable theatre season in Padua;⁵⁵ and finally Jacopo Sansovino, the ‘very close friend’ of the artist.⁵⁶ These names were synonymous with heterodox openness, figures who appreciated Tintoretto precisely as a bizarre free spirit, someone who took delight in violating the rules of art.

It was not only Venetians who admired Tintoretto, however. The Veronese actor Adriano Valerini expressed all his fervent admiration in his sonnet, celebrating Tintoretto as the ultimate imitator of Nature and even as a creator of life, while at the same time highlighting the most dignifying of qualities, naturally in the painter’s defense: ‘only alone such a sweet Face, and charming scorn / gentle acts, and every delicate ambiguity ... / [...] You alone with the breath of life each paper to breathe’.⁵⁷ The Milanese art theorist Giovan Paolo Lomazzo, who paid special attention to characters’ attitudes and expressive gestures in relation to each one’s different personality, thus found himself in complete harmony with Tintoretto: ‘Such great fury and lively motions / you depict your figures in different acts’.⁵⁸ A goodly number of literate-artists gathered in the Accademia Lombarda della Val di Blenio exalted in their poetic compositions the painters “all’improvviso” who worked with “frenzy” directly on the canvas, without preparatory drawings. Chief among these were Paolo Camillo Landriani and Aurelio Luini.⁵⁹

⁵³ See F. Fracassi, tables about ‘Venere, Vulcano e Marte’ and about ‘Danae’, in *Tintoretto* (exhibition catalogue), ed. by V. Sgarbi, Milano, Skira, 2012, p. 144, p. 150.

⁵⁴ ‘pronte e vive, in pronte e belle attitudini’. See *Lettere sull’arte di Pietro Aretino*, commented by F. Pertile, ed. by E. Camesasca, Milano, Edizioni del Milione, 1957, II, pp. 52-53 (Letter CCXI sent to Tintoretto from Venice in February 1545).

⁵⁵ See L. Zorzi, *L’attore, la commedia, il drammaturgo*, Torino, Einaudi, 1990.

⁵⁶ He also portrayed Cornaro and Sansovino. See P. Rossi, *Jacopo Tintoretto. I ritratti*, Milano, Electa, 1990, figg. 108, 23, 136, 137.

⁵⁷ ‘Tu solo il dolce viso, e i cari sdegni/ gli atti soavi, e ogni vaghezza snella.../[...] Tu sol col fiato della vita insegna/ a respirar le carte’. A. Valerini, *La Celeste Galeria di Minerva*, Firenze, Edifir, 2011, p. 62.

⁵⁸ ‘Così gran furia e sì vivaci moti/ pingi le tue figure in diversi atti...’. Giovan Paolo Lomazzo, *Rime divise in sette libri*, Milano, P. G. Pontio, 1587, p. 111.

⁵⁹ In relation to these painters, see the entries of *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* (from now DBI), Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 1960-, compiled respectively by P. Marani and M. Mander. A sonnet was also addressed to the painter Paolo Camillo Landriani, celebrating his capacity to paint “all’improvviso”; and another to Aurelio Luini, who painted “fiercely” (Giovan Paolo Lomazzo, *Rabisch*, critical text, commentary and translation by D. Isella, Torino, Einaudi, 1993, pp. 150-152). It is possible to observe some coherence with the Neoplatonic doctrines they supported. Numerous other painters are mentioned in the *Rabisch*. One in particular I might mention is Gaudenzio Ferrari, an artist inspired by popular themes, author of the *Sacro Monte di Varallo*, Rosso Fiorentino who is worth noting for his anti-naturalistic approach and another is *Pordenone*, the greatest Friulian painter of the time, celebrated for his speed of execution.

Comedians and artists, therefore, displayed a significantly coherent approach that can be understood in relation to improvisation: one example of this approach might be seen in the elimination of preparatory drawings by Florentine artists, who took on the practice that had been considered the prerogative (albeit contested) of Venetian artists of painting directly with color. The work of these painters could be seen as the direct work of Nature without the involvement of Art, an approach that was also in keeping with the poetics of Arcadia, which at the time represented a sort of original myth for the culture of the Venetian and related schools.⁶⁰ Tintoretto's brushstrokes, as has been written, could thus 'be transfigured into the matter of the spirit'.⁶¹

And yet there is more. Ridolfi also wrote that Tintoretto:

invented [...] bizarre clothing whims and witty mottoes for the representation of the comedies, which were staged in Venice [...], inventing [...] a number of curiosities that amazed the spectators so that they were praised as unique, so that everyone sought him out on similar occasions. In his youth he amused himself playing the lute and other bizarre instruments he had invented, avoiding in every detail that which would be common.⁶²

He was thus an actor in his own right: when Marco Boschini described Tintoretto in his writings as a new Columbus who had discovered a New World by imitating Nature and as 'a good man, who defeated warriors of every age: he lands blows and strikes, and the harder he strikes them, the more he wounds them', the character of the Capitano (Captain) immediately comes to mind.⁶³ As the relevant documentation is not available, suffice to note Tintoretto's undisputed skills as a writer of burlesque text and designer of costumes for Venetian comedies.

All of these activities and acquaintances, however, gave rise to an exceptionally lively wealth of attitudes and actions, particularly as far as women were concerned: think for instance of the woman depicted on the left hand-side of his *Miracolo dello schiavo* who, even while shielding her little boy with her own body, leans forward 'to see the action, so ready and lively, that appears to be real life'.⁶⁴

Veronica Franco, who had a privileged relationship with the artist, also specifically appreciated his ability to grant the appearance of real life to his

⁶⁰ See R. Wittkower, *Giorgione e l'Arcadia*, in *Idea e immagine. Studi sul Rinascimento italiano*, Einaudi, Torino, 1992 (first edition 1978), pp. 300-321.

⁶¹ 'trasfigurarsi in materia dello spirito'. D. Rosand, 'Tintoretto e gli spiriti nel pennello', in *Jacopo Tintoretto nel quarto centenario della morte*, p. 133. Rosand reminds us that Paolo Pino formulated the theory of the ideal painter in his *Dialogo di pittura* in 1548: this theory combined Michelangelo's drawing style with Tiziano's color.

⁶² G. Ridolfi, *Le Maraviglie dell'Arte*, II, p. 69. Il Krischel, by identifying 'a particularly obvious closeness [...] in the linguistic spirit that characterizes both the inscriptions of the paintings and the figurative play of words by Tintoretto and the comedies and the letters by Calmo', came to hypothesize that Tintoretto staged Calmo's comedies ('una comunanza particolarmente evidente [...] nello spirito linguistico che caratterizza sia le iscrizioni dei quadri e i giochi di parole figurativi del Tintoretto che le commedie e le lettere del Calmo', R. Krischel, 'Jacopo Tintoretto: una biografia da rintracciare', pp. 65-66). It should be noted, however, that Ridolfi does not write about scripts created by the artist: his words would rather point to the activity of jester.

⁶³ 'un bravo, Che atterrisse /tuti i Guerrier de tute le etae: el tira colpi, el destende stocae, / E più che l'urta in duro, e più el ferisse'. M. Boschini, *La carta del navigar pitoresco*, ed. by A. Pallucchini, Venezia-Roma, Fondazione G. Cini, 1966, p. 247, p. 227.

⁶⁴ 'per vedere l'attione, così pronta e vivace, che viva rasmembra'. G. Ridolfi, *Le Maraviglie dell'Arte*, II, p. 22.

work; in her opinion, Tintoretto was more successful at this than the best actors on stage. According to Franco, Tintoretto aimed at imitating and even surpassing nature

not only in the things that can be imitable, such as creating nude or dressed figures, granting them shadows, profiles, features, muscles, movements, actions, poses, details and arrangements in accordance with nature, but succeeding so well in expressing the effects of the soul, that I do not believe Roscio was able to act so skillfully on stage

So much so that ‘when I saw my portrait, the work of your divine hand, I was long unable to conclude whether it was a painting or a ghost’.⁶⁵

The Portrait of Veronica Franco

As the preceding pages clearly show, honest courtesans not only interpreted myths and allegories, but, especially in Venice, they were also in the habit of sitting for personal portraits. In light of this it might be argued that it was through courtesans that the portrait gradually become more “private”.

The portrait believed to depict Veronica Franco, hosted at the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts, constitutes an important work of portraiture by Jacopo Tintoretto (or rather, by his son Domenico or his school).⁶⁶ [fig. 15, see the attachment “[Illustrations](#)”] Particularly interesting elements include her short, curly hair, with a hairline that descends to a slight point in the center of her forehead: this same hairstyle appears in the portrait by Veronese, thought to depict Isabella, as if to indicate a common thread linking honest courtesans and actresses. Vecellio noted that courtesans ‘wear their hair in curls’ and the engraver Giacomo Franco depicted the image of one of these courtesans in the act of having her hair dressed by a maid.⁶⁷ The Council of Ten’s specific decree, dated 1480, according to which ‘they could not wear hair on their faces at a length that covered half their faces [...] and [were required] to wear virile clothes’ was probably one of the many prohibitions courtesans circumvented.⁶⁸ Another decree concerned the pearl necklace, which indeed can be seen adorning this portrait; furthermore, the figure also wears a chain of precious metal across her chest, an attribute that sometimes appears in

⁶⁵ ‘non solo nelle cose in cui ella è imitabile, come nel formar figure nude o vestite, dandole ombre, profili, fattezze, muscoli, movimenti, atti, posture, pieghe e disposizioni a quella conformi, ma si fattamente esprimendo ancora gli effetti dell’animo, che non credo gli sapesse così fingere Roscio in scena’; ‘quando ho veduto il mio ritratto, opera della vostra divina mano, io sono stata un pezzo in forse se ei fosse pittura o pur fantasima...’. Veronica Franco, *Lettere dall’unica edizione del MDLXXX*, pp. 34-35 (Letter XXI).

⁶⁶ P. Rossi, *Jacopo Tintoretto. I ritratti*, p. 76, fig. 234; L. Lawner, *Lives of the Courtesans: Portraits of the Renaissance*, New York, Rizzoli International, 1988, p. 58, p. 205. This portrait was too hastily identified as the portrait by Tintoretto that Franco wrote about in the letter quoted in the previous note. Paola Rossi, moreover, attributes it to Jacopo’s son Domenico because of the sensual, poignant expression that is a characteristic of Domenico Tintoretto in particular. It would obviously have to be a posthumous portrait, perhaps inspired by the engraving mentioned in no. 68. Rossi does not give a precise date, only associating it with a *Maddalena* by Domenico dating to 1586.

⁶⁷ Giacomo Franco, *Le Cortigiane si fanno conciare a diversi modi la testa*, in *Habiti d’huomeni venetiani 1610*, Venezia, Ongania, 1878, tab. VII.

⁶⁸ ‘non portassero i capelli sul viso tagliati corti in guisa di coprire metà della faccia [...] e di portare vesti virili’. G. Tassini, *Veronica Franco celebre poetessa e cortigiana del secolo XVI*, p. 18.

representations of Venus.⁶⁹ The hairstyle in the portrait on display in Worcester as well as the pearl necklace can also be found in an engraved medallion dating to 1576, the only unquestionably authentic image of Veronica; even her facial features are echoed precisely in the medallion.⁷⁰ [fig. 16, see the attachment “[Illustrations](#)”] The poetess is portrayed when she was only 23 years old, precisely in order to exalt her nobility: an all-encompassing nobility, not only of character, but also in a heraldic sense, with an air of great endeavor, a blazing torch with the motto “*Agitata crescit*” and a coat of arms with three stars in a strip accompanied by three small mountains. The medallion thus reminded viewers that the Franco family belonged to the class of Venice’s “native citizens” – a sort of middle level between the nobles and commoners.⁷¹ Another example that comes to mind is the Andreini medallions featuring coats of arms, which had the same purpose of dignifying figures otherwise discredited by their involvement in the theatre.

On the whole this figure of a woman certainly appears to be quite different from what can be seen in the portrait of Caterina Sandella, who maintained a relationship with Aretino for several years and also gave birth to his daughter.⁷² [fig. 17, see the attachment “[Illustrations](#)”] Despite the classic background and ancient bust, which in this case would seem to have the function of creating contrast, the woman appears to be a common prostitute: this fact is evidenced not only by her facial features, the deformation of her body and the yellow in her dress – a color associated with prostitutes (and Jewish people) – but above all by the ‘extraordinary vitality and vulgarity of the image’, expressed in a violent pictorial style that might be considered appropriate to the figure being portrayed. The woman’s sideways gaze and powerful positioning in space are other elements that define her character: the viewer almost has the impression of hearing her sing her love songs to attract her customers ‘with little grace and [...] with [a] rough voice’.⁷³

As scholars have pointed out, it is difficult to identify a single critical approach to apply to Tintoretto’s women. Although he may be considered the religious painter par excellence – indeed, Elena Filippi writes that ‘his unique and original key of interpretation must be grasped, whereby not only “deity is present among men” but the helpless and meek – and therefore women first and foremost – constitute the strongest connection, the privileged channel for relating with the divine’. The *Maddalena penitente* is depicted with faith and the senses: it was precisely through feminine figures that ‘the artist proposes – in an impetuous and theatrical as well as persuasive way – a different means of glorifying the sacred, not only as pure contemplation and adoration but essentially as willingness ready to take action’, an

⁶⁹ Such as those by Joseph Heintz, for example. See L. Lawner, *Lives of the Courtesans: Portraits of the Renaissance*, p. 103.

⁷⁰ The medallion does, in fact, explicitly refer to Veronica; it was most likely destined to be the frontispiece for his volume *Terze rime*. See Benedetto Croce, ‘Sulla iconografia di Veronica Franco’, in Veronica Franco, *Lettere dall’unica edizione del MDLXXX*, pp. 79-89.

⁷¹ See A. Zorzi, *Cortigiana veneziana. Veronica Franco e i suoi poeti 1546-1591*, Milano, Camunia, 1986, p. 21.

⁷² P. Rossi, *Jacopo Tintoretto. I ritratti*, p. 33, tab. V, pp. 40-41 and fig. 84.

⁷³ ‘con poca gratia et [...] con la voce roca’. Vecellio attributes these expressions to public prostitutes (C. Vecellio, *Habiti antichi et moderni. La moda nel Rinascimento. Europa. Asia. Africa. Americhe*, p. 147). For example, compare this portrait with *Ritratto di gentildonna*, also by Tintoretto, in which the lady is positioned facing the viewer and her attitude, expression and dress seem especially focused on expressing her social status according to the principles of decorum (P. Rossi, *Jacopo Tintoretto. I ritratti*, figg. 84-85).

active willingness that clearly takes priority over the aesthetics of contemplation. This issue was raised at the theological level by the Reformation itself.⁷⁴

The End of Venetian License

Despite the open hostility of ecclesiastical authorities, the Venetian development of the portrait went hand in hand with the emergence of new crafts and unprecedented opportunities to achieve true economic and personal autonomy, in particular the activities and success of the various courtesans.

This was never as evident as in Venice, where, according to an ironic passage from Giordano Bruno's *Candelaio*,

by the magnanimity and liberality of the Illustrious Republic [...] whores are exempt from any burdain [taxation]; and neither are they subject to the laws of others, even if there are so many of them [...] enough that in a few years, paying a little *gabella* [tax], they could create another Treasury in Venice, perhaps like the first one.⁷⁵

It should be noted that this was not an oversight but rather an intentional taxation policy, as Venice was the only city where even the usual taxes on performances were not applied.⁷⁶ The most noteworthy example of the freedom available in La Serenissima can be seen in the 1535 publication of the anonymous *Tariffa delle puttane, ovvero Ragionamento del forestiere e del gentilhuomo: nel quale si dinota il prezzo e la qualità di tutte le cortigiane di Vinegia, col nome delle ruffiane, et alcune novelle piacevoli da ridere fatte da alcune di queste famose signore a gli suoi amatori* (*Tarif on whores, or reasoning for foreigners and gentlemen: in which the price and quality of all the courtesans of Venice is specified, with the names of their madams and some charming, amusing tales recounted by these ladies to their lovers*).⁷⁷ The myth of the city, a city that the freest spirits had considered and continued to consider a real alternative to Rome, was also accompanied by the myth of a certain type of courtesan, educated and independent, re-asserting her right not only to culture but also to sentiments such as grace, kindness and even virtue.⁷⁸ Painters made a significant contribution to this image: indeed, as has been noted, they spread the image of courtesans capable of ‘an

⁷⁴ ‘va colta la sua singolare e originalissima chiave di lettura per cui non soltanto “la divinità è presente fra gli uomini”, ma le persone indifese e gli ultimi – e dunque in primis le donne - costituiscono il trait d’union più saldo, la via privilegiata del rapporto con il divino?; l’artista propone – in un modo impetuoso e teatrale quanto suadente – una diversa esaltazione del sacro, non già come pura contemplazione e adorazione, bensì essenzialmente come disponibilità pronta all’azione’. E. Filippi, ‘Le donne del Tintoretto’, p. 165, p. 167.

⁷⁵ ‘per magnanimità e liberalità della Illustrissima Repubblica [...] le puttane sono esempte da ogni aggravio[tassa]; e son manco soggette a leggi che gli altri, quantunque ve ne siano tante [...] che basterebbono in pochi anni, pagando un poco di gabella, a far un altro Tesoro in Venezia, forse come l’altro’. Published in Paris in 1582, quoted from G. Padoan, ‘Il mondo delle cortigiane nella letteratura rinascimentale’, p. 63.

⁷⁶ See S. Ferrone, *La Commedia dell’Arte. Attrici e attori italiani in Europa (XVI-XVII secolo)*, Torino, Einaudi, 2014, pp. 148-153.

⁷⁷ Veronica Franco is listed as number 204.

⁷⁸ ‘And although “prostitute” you call me [...] what is good of prostitutes / what is gracious and kind / in me are expressed the meaning of your words? (‘E se ben “meretrice” mi chiamate/ o volete inferir ch’io non vi sono,/ o che ve n’en tra tali di lodate./ Quanto le meretrici hanno di buono/ quanto di grazioso e di gentile,/ esprime in me del parlar vostro il suono...’). Veronica Franco, “*Terze Rime*” e sonetti, p. 75 (XVI).

affability that is responsible for convening each one's human affair' and also 'the sensations of dignified strength, autonomy and lastly freedom, traits that render the courtesans extraordinary and charming female figures'.⁷⁹

Even in Venice, this climate of liberty eventually came to an end. Despite its proud and renowned independence, beginning in 1543 La Serenissima ended up accepting both the dogmatic definitions and disciplinary prescriptions of the Tridentine Council through a series of decrees aimed at restricting the 'great liberty of the press'. On March 18, 1559, the Tribunal of the Inquisition publicly burnt many prohibited volumes, and a new Index approved by Rome was issued in July. On March 15, 1562, the Reformers of the Studio di Padova forbade the publication of any printed work that had not previously been approved by the inquisitor-reviewer. On July 22 of the following year, the Venetian Senate accepted the decisions of the Tridentine Council and increased the penalties for blasphemy, called for the expulsion of Lutherans from the territory of Venice and implemented new restrictions against Jews and prostitutes.⁸⁰

Even the figure of the high-class courtesan of rank gradually lost its sense of "height". Following the Tridentine Council, the Church could not tolerate a violation of its dictates that was so apparent and, above all, so captivating. There were two separate paths, that of honest women and that of prostitutes. The only women who were saved were those who married or entered the convents for reformed prostitutes, although as theatre scholars we might add those who managed to reinvent themselves as actresses, such as courtesans who were blessed with special talents in the arts of entertainment.⁸¹ At any rate, this was more likely to occur outside the State of the Church. The dates support this hypothesis, as women did indeed begin to enter theatrical companies in 1560.⁸²

Even theatre began to face very hard times, however: by decree of the Council of Ten and probably under the influence of local Jesuits and Borromean provisions, in 1581 a ban was issued against comedies that essentially lasted for the following thirty years.⁸³ The climate of repression and subjugation to Rome reached its peak in January 1593 when Giordano Bruno was handed over to the Inquisition.

This marked the end of the hopes that many intellectuals and philosophers had nurtured in Venice's ability to bring about a religious renewal supported and guaranteed by the political leaders of the republic. However, the illusion of Venice's status as "different" continued to persist even during the following century.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ 'un'affabilità che s'incarica di comunicare la vicenda umana di ciascuna'; 'le sensazioni di dignitosa fermezza, di autonomia, di libertà affine, che fanno delle cortigiane figure femminili straordinarie e piene di fascino'. E. Filippi, 'Le donne del Tintoretto', p. 171, no. 60.

⁸⁰ See Scarabello, 'Le "Signore della Repubblica"', in *Il gioco dell'amore. Le cortigiane di Venezia dal Trecento al Settecento*, p. 13 and following.

⁸¹ See M. Antes, *Tullia d'Aragona cortigiana e filosofa. Con il testo del dialogo "Della infinità d'Amore"*, pp. 16-21.

⁸² The date was indicated by Cecchini and then used by the first historian of "all'improvviso" painting, Luigi Riccoboni, in his *Histoire du Théâtre Italien* published around 1730. See R. Tessari, *La Commedia dell'Arte: la Maschera e l'Ombra*, Milano, Mursia, 1981, pp. 19-20.

⁸³ The state ultimately ended up governing policies regarding feasts and theatres (previously left up to individuals and Academies such as the Compagnie della Calza). See N. Mangini, *I teatri di Venezia*, Milano, Mursia 1974, pp. 21-25.

⁸⁴ See M. Firpo, *Riforma protestante ed eresie nell'Italia del Cinquecento. Un profilo storico*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1993, pp. 25-28.

Isabella Andreini

It is no coincidence that Tintoretto was celebrated by a certain type of audience in that period, and it was thanks in part to his personal contribution that painters began to alter their goals and, consequently, their relationships with their models: the aim was no longer to portray the courtesan (or actress) in the guise of a mythological character, but primarily to use the actress' skills to portray a certain posture, attitude and feeling. The objective was no longer the fixed allegory or classic myth, but the specific moment of the story and the actress' gestures in interpreting it. The famous example of the painter Domenico Fetti and comedian *Florinda* who was brought in to play Ariadne, Magdalene and Melancholia appears to have been fully in accordance with shift.⁸⁵

Veronese's portrait takes on a new meaning in light of the above. [fig. 1, see the attachment "[Illustrations](#)"] Isabella does not deny her specific attitude as an actress: she expresses it through her relaxed and confident posture and intense gaze, her clothing, which resembles men's fashion in some respects, and especially her hairstyle, highly appropriate for an actress accustomed to acting even *en transvesti* (dressed as a man). And perhaps 'the girl with her hair cut short', an image that may have indicated "weakness or falsehood" in Giulio Camillo's theatre and might thus reference the fiction of the dramatic arts, is related to this unusual hairdo; and yet these traits, as I have demonstrated, also reference the tradition of prostitutes.⁸⁶ However, Isabella's dress is buttoned up to just under her throat, her short hair does not cover her proudly displayed forehead and the book, perhaps the kind of small *Canzoniere* or "petrarchino" that was widespread at that time or perhaps a lesser-known text, suggest that the actress was learned and self-aware. The small dog accompanying her represents an assertion of the ideal of fidelity, an ideal she would seem to scrupulously observe. In fact, as Aliverti notes, the dog is a lively dwarf spaniel, a *papillon*, and I recall that the same small dog appears not only in many portraits of ladies but also in the paintings of *Leda e il cigno*, Tintoretto's *Danae* and Tiziano's *Venere* of Urbino, and therefore accompanying figures who are thought to have been impersonated by courtiers. It also appears in the model image of the "famous courtesan" painted by Giacomo Franco.⁸⁷ [fig. 18, see the attachment "[Illustrations](#)"] Although purely in terms of external appearance Veronese's portrait may appear in line with the new rigor imposed on artists by the Counter-Reformation, in reality it clearly drew on the tradition of portraits of honest courtesans – a tradition that was certainly well known to his contemporaries; besides, it was strictly forbidden to depict actresses as well. The oxymoronic significance of female portraits thus continued uninterrupted through this image as well.

There is more to this matter. Isabella was the first actress who employed a renowned Venetian painter such as Veronese rather than a genre painter; Veronese,

⁸⁵ See S. Ferrone, *Attori mercanti corsari. La commedia dell'arte in Europa tra Cinque e Seicento*, pp. 240-246.

⁸⁶ 'la fanciulla co' capelli tagliati, debilitar cosa o mentire'. Various similarities can also be observed between Isabella's clothing in this portrait and that of the *Aulicum Scoztum Patavinum* in J.J. Boissard, *Habitus Variarum Orbis Gentium*, tab. [14]. [fig. 19, see the attachment "[Illustrations](#)"]

⁸⁷ See Giacomo Franco, *Habiti delle Donne Venetiane*, c. 11.

furthermore, had already been tried by the Inquisition for having taken a number of liberties in depicting the *Ultima Cena*.⁸⁸

Who was this Isabella to have displayed so much determination and courage when she was barely into her twenties (her age when Veronese portrayed her)?⁸⁹

Isabella Andreini came from Padua and was probably the daughter of a Venetian-born man named Paolo Canali.⁹⁰ She was thus educated in two cities that leveled sharp critiques against the censorship imposed by Rome. Furthermore, an interesting hypothesis that might be worth developing is that the surname Canali is an incorrect transcription of Canal, and Isabella was thus a relative or the granddaughter of Paolo Canal (1481-1508), a man of letters from one of the most illustrious and noble Venetian families, closely associated with the university of Padua.⁹¹ Canal was a Latin poet (who had a documented interest in Plautus’s theatre) with extensive knowledge of Greek and Hebrew – something that was relatively common in Venice because it was in keeping with Aldo Manuzio’s cultural program and Giulio Camillo’s circle of friends (including Giambattista Egnazio, Marcantonio Flaminio, Erasmo da Rotterdam and Pietro Bembo). Canal left a number of traces, including some sonnets published under the name “Paolo Canale” in a collection of poems composed by writers with unorthodox tendencies, such as Giulio Camillo himself and a number of the names mentioned above, as well as numerous poetesses and women of letters such as Francesca Bassa, Laodomia Forteguerra, Laura Terracina and Veronica Gambarà.⁹² This hypothesis would explain Isabella’s extraordinary degree of culture and her unusual poetic abilities, as she had been educated at the university of Padua and through the teachings of a Venetian family that boasted a remarkable cultural background in an environment in which poetesses and courtesans of letters were commonly granted space, even if the climate was gradually becoming less generous towards them.

Given this context, Isabella’s audacious plan appears even more important and clearly represents an attempt to defend herself as a woman, intellectual and actress. There is no doubt that she had more in common with the early high-class courtesans than the low-grade actresses who “discredited” theatre. And yet she was different: (perhaps) a lady of noble origins, dedicated to the principles and values of the

⁸⁸ The trial took place in Venice on 18 July 1573. See E. Comba, ‘Paolo Veronese innanzi al tribunale della Santa Inquisizione’, *La Rivista Cristiana*, 1875-III, pp. 97-100. Veronese had in fact added several characters to the scene (‘buffoni, ubbriachi, tedeschi, nani e simili scurrilità’, ‘jesters, drunks, Germans, dwarfs and similar vulgarities’) as well as details not found in the gospel story. The painter defended himself by saying that ‘we painters take liberties, as do poets and fools’ (‘noialtri pittori prendiamo delle licenze, come fanno i poeti ed i matti’) and by citing the example of Michelangelo, who had introduced nudity and non-canonic acts into the Cappella Sistina.

⁸⁹ Art scholars had dated this portrait between 1585 and 1588, the year of the painter’s death, but theatre scholar Maria Ines Aliverti has estimated it to date earlier, between the end of 1583 and the beginning of 1584, when the Gelosi were active on behalf of the Teatro Michiel in Venice. See M. I. Aliverti, ‘Isabella Andreini nelle immagini: indagine sopra alcuni ritratti ipotetici’, pp. 187-188.

⁹⁰ The origins of this hypothesis are not known. It might have been originally put forward by Rasi. See L. Rasi, *I comici italiani*, Firenze, F. Lumachi, 1905, under the heading “Andreini, Isabella”.

⁹¹ M. Barbaro, *Arbori de’ patritii veneti*, manuscript preserved at the Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Misc. Codici, s. I: storia veneta, nn. 17-23 contains a number of genealogical diagrams for the Canal family. These diagrams, which make no mention of female offspring, often feature the name Paul. Other research in the same archive also indicates that the name Isabella was among those used by the family.

⁹² The sonnets of “Paolo Canale” – this is the citation, while in DBI (see this source for the biographical information collected by F. Lepori) it is listed as “Canal, Paolo” – can be found in *Rime diverse di molti eccellentiss. Autori nuovamente raccolte*, Venezia, G. Giolito de’ Ferrari, 1545 (Book I, pp. 138-139; Book II, p. 38).

Counter-Reformation, without which it would have been impossible to create a drawing to elevate theatre. And yet she was also capable of covert and heterogeneous forms of cultural and mental open-mindedness. Veronese faithfully circulated and interpreted the figure that was Isabella, transposing her numerous roles, the woman, the woman of letters, the courtesan and the actress, into a work that conveys his exhaustive admiration of his model.

It is clear that identifying a genealogy from the iconography of actresses to that of courtesans corroborates Taviani's hypothesis that courtesans played a key role in theatrical troupes. It should not be surprising that the subject of Veronese's work – Isabella, an actress – long went unrecognized and has only now been discovered thanks to the talent of a true *connoisseur* of theatre images; this fact must be understood as evidence of comedians' more general failure to elevate their craft to the dignity of "art". Perhaps this "omission" was also due to the subsequent choices made by Isabella, who was the first actress to be portrayed in a real set of engravings (1588, 1594, 1601) that somehow represent her official image.⁹³ These engravings appear to completely disregard the iconographies of courtesans and instead refer exclusively to the tradition of depicting women of letters, who used to accompany their publications with their own images engraved in a frame. Her effort to win free of the poor quality of the early xylographs by turning to a high-quality artist such as the Flemish Raphael I Sadeler (1602) is apparently in keeping with this hypothesis: the gown she chose for this occasion might specifically reference that of Moderata Fonte, a woman of letters, author of the weighty essay *Il merito delle donne Ove chiaramente si scuopre quanto siano elle degne, e più perfette de gli huomini* 1600 (*The Merit of Women, in that it is clear that they are worthy of, and more perfect than men*). At any rate, these images do not feature an actress communicating with her viewers but rather an aloof woman of letters. [figg. 20-21, see the attachment "[Illustrations](#)"]

It was no coincidence that, in opposition to the looming threat of censure, the Andreini family privileged 'portraits in harmony with the claims of professional dignity and the right to artistic fame'.⁹⁴ As I have shown, the features, clothing, postures and expressions they contain are equally valuable. In this case, they are indicators of the fact that upward mobility to a level of greater social consideration appears to have been increasingly impossible in a discipline such as theatre that is so perilously caught up with the body and the senses.

⁹³ These engravings appear in her pastoral fable *Mirtilla* (1588, 1594) and her book *Rime* (1601).

⁹⁴ 'sui ritratti in sintonia con la rivendicazione della dignità professionale e del diritto alla fama artistica'. See M. I. Aliverti, 'Isabella Andreini nelle immagini: indagine sopra alcuni ritratti ipotetici', p. 147.