

DONNE NELLA STORIA

31

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DONNE NELLA STORIA



Quante vite, esperienze e profili di donne sono ancora nascoste nelle pieghe della storia? A questa domanda è difficile rispondere. Nonostante la quantità di documenti emersi grazie al pregevole lavoro della storiografia a partire dagli anni Settanta, ancora molto resta nascosto, implicito, non detto, in particolare quando si guarda allo straordinario archivio del vissuto femminile. La collana “Donne nella storia” si propone di dare voce alle vite disperse, recuperando profili biografici misconosciuti, seguendo i labili segni rappresentati talvolta soltanto da sparsi e frammentari indizi, di raccogliere testimonianze preziose per recuperare le tracce che le donne hanno lasciato nel loro esistere nel mondo, e infine di individuare i percorsi, faticosamente conquistati con lacrime e sangue, con straordinaria tenacia e consapevolezza. Ridare vita e colore a immagini sfocate, riportare al nitore le tinte sbiadite si pone come finalità prioritaria della collana, aperta a contributi di taglio interdisciplinare, in un arco cronologico di ampio respiro che sottolinei continuità e fratture, spinte in avanti e pericolosi regressi, successi e delusioni, in linea con le più attuali tendenze di ricerca degli *women's studies*.

Women in History

How many women's lives, experiences, and profiles are still hidden in the folds of history? It is hard to give an answer to this question. Despite the quantity of documents that have surfaces thanks to the valuable work of historians since the 1970s, much is still hidden understood, unsaid, especially when we peer into the extraordinary archive of women's lives. The series “Women in History” aims at giving a voice to these scattered lives, recovering little known biographies, following the faint signs that at times are only scattered and fragmented traces. It will gather priceless witnesses to recover the marks of women's existence in the world. Lastly, it will recover their paths, laboriously followed with tears, blood, and extraordinary perseverance and self-awareness. Giving life and color back to out-of-focus images and making faded colors clear again are main goals of the series, which is open to interdisciplinary work within a wide chronological arch, in order to underscore continuities and ruptures as well as successes and disappointments, in line with the more recent tendencies of research in *women's studies*.

¿Cuántas vidas, experiencias y perfiles de mujeres están todavía escondidos en los recovecos de la historia? A esta pregunta es difícil responder. A pesar de la cantidad de documentos que han surgido gracias al valioso trabajo de la historiografía a partir de los años setenta, todavía permanece mucho oculto, implícito, tácito, en particular cuando se toma en consideración el extraordinario archivo de las vivencias femeninas. La colección “Mujeres en la historia” se propone dar voz a vidas dispersas, recuperando perfiles biográficos ignorados, siguiendo las débiles señales representadas a veces tan sólo por indicios dispersos y fragmentarios, reunir testimonios preciosos para recuperar las huellas que las mujeres han dejado de su existencia en el mundo y, finalmente, individualar los caminos fatigosamente conquistados con lágrimas y sangre, con extraordinaria tenacidad y conciencia. Devolver vida y color a imágenes borrosas, restituir nitidez a colores desteñidos se considera la finalidad prioritaria de la colección, abierta a contribuciones de corte interdisciplinar, en un arco cronológico amplio que evidencia continuidad y fracturas, impulsos hacia delante y peligrosos retrocesos, éxitos y desilusiones, en línea con las tendencias más actuales de investigación de los *women's studies*.

Quantas vidas, quantas experiências ficaram ainda escondidas nas pregas da História? É difícil responder a tal pergunta. Não obstante a enorme quantidade de documentos descobertos graças ao valioso trabalho da historiografia a partir dos anos Setenta, ainda muito ficou escondido, implícito, não dito, especialmente quando olharmos para o extraordinário arquivo do vivido feminino. A coletânea “Mulheres na História” propõe-se de dar voz às vidas dispersas, recuperando perfis biográficos quase desconhecidos, seguindo os signos fugazes representados por vezes só por indícios espalhados e fragmentados; de recolher testemunhas preciosas para recuperar os rastros que as mulheres deixaram durante a passagem delas no mundo e finalmente de individualar os percursos conquistados com muito esforço, com lágrimas e sangue, com perseverança e consciência. Dar de novo vida e cor às imagens desfocadas, devolver o esplendor às tintas desbotadas, é o objetivo prioritário desta coletânea aberta à contributos de tipo interdisciplinar, num arco cronológico amplo e que sublinhe continuidade e fracturas, progressos e perigosos regressos, sucessos e desilusões, em linha com as mais actuais tendências de investigação no âmbito dos *women's studies*.

Antonella Cagnolati

Call Her Blessed

Critical essays on women, history and education





Aracne editrice

www.aracneeditrice.it

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Gioacchino Onorati editore S.r.l. – unipersonale

www.gioacchinoonoratieditore.it

info@gioacchinoonoratieditore.it

via Vittorio Veneto, 20

00020 Canterano (RM)

(06) 45551463

ISBN 978-88-255-2364-5

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1st edition: February 2020

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Introduction

Ghosts, memory and history

We all know that the history of women — as a field of serious and rigorous research — has the ultimate aim of bringing to light the lost existential traces of mysterious figures which, at first, appear to our investigative eyes as mere names, almost ethereal, without solid form. However, from the thick fog of the past, slowly but surely fragments of an elusive whole emerge — episodes narrated in the ancient chronicles, or information that can be found in other erudite works, excerpts of biographies that cite, albeit in passing, brief nods in few lines, elements that help us to understand the person that we are laboriously investigating.

The difficulties seem numerous, heterogeneous and sometimes insurmountable; we often find only a guilty silence — wilfully stained with ignominy — for having intentionally buried works worthy of praise by women who should be admired for their knowledge and acumen; we are shocked to discover that ancient masterpieces still remain as manuscripts, lacking an adequate critical edition that befits their originality and beauty and, therefore, with no way to reach a wider audience. We intuit that a considerable quantity of manuscripts, whose titles are barely even mentioned in the repertoires of erudite authors and *savants*, are gathering dust in the archives of libraries, poorly accessible due to either their fragility or the lack of financial resources for their digitalisation.

It is our duty to remember that it was only when researchers, independently or within universities, began in the 1980s to seriously explore women's studies that the investigation became more targeted, and we began to see the emergence of works whose quantity and quality brought about a change in the official historiography, as writings that highlighted the extent and degree of women's serious, dedicated output reached a wider audience. Like busy ants many of us began a long battle made up of providential encounters, unexpected successes and disappointing retreats — a never-ending fight

that has the Utopian aim of reconstructing a past that was written by the victors, those who atavistically wrote down the sweat-soaked papers of human endeavours, intentionally excluding half of the human species.

The adventure seems arduous but decidedly intriguing. Diving into the archives often turns up only faded images from the long passage of time, but it is incumbent upon us to restore flesh and blood to these ghosts, so that we may hear their voices and what they had to say. Long spans of time and inhuman effort may cause us to abandon a particular path, but if the seeds are sown, good fruit will eventually follow.

First and foremost, therefore, we must endeavour to reconstruct our genealogy; the women of today are the product of innumerable other women who fought, cried and rejoiced so that we would have the opportunity to stand alongside them, hearing their heartbreaking accounts, dramatic experiences and unspeakable pain. Indeed, because the majority of women's history has been girdled by pain, humiliation and violence (both real and symbolic), whose blows incited them to seek reward, resilience and revenge. Secondly, discovery is no longer only the first step in research, but also a prelude to reporting, translating, divulging and raising awareness — all that constitutes the duty we should feel towards those who preceded us, those who may live again thanks to their resurrection in the pages of books, conference reports, and exposition to students in the halls of universities throughout the world. Clio, in the guise of the goddess looking down upon us and watching over us, will thank us and be proud!

I. Pioneers of Feminism in Early Modern Europe

A Historical Debate

I.1. Against misogyny

For investigators of feminist writing, early modern Europe is a veritable treasure trove. The trickle of women who began to find their voice and take the plunge into the complex world of the republic of letters gradually increased into a mighty flood as the decades passed. This slow but progressive conquest of the written word encompassed a wide variety of genres and registers, from diaries and spiritual journals to biographies, poetry collections, heroic poems, moral treatises and children's catechisms.

The desire to break down the unspoken barriers between the public and the private world, the daily domesticity and the intimate sphere, is evident in the writings of women who raised their voices above the almost exclusively male choir in a bid to recount their own truths, whether political, theological, philosophical or otherwise.

However, in order to have their opinions heard, to give concrete form to their thoughts and to recount the different experiences of the female universe, a clear and well-defined operation to legitimize such writings would be necessary. It would be essential to leave the reader no doubt as to the validity of the references to whom women entrusted the intentionality of the act of writing, and to overturn those mental and behavioral attitudes that had hitherto stood in their way¹.

The great determination displayed by several female writers as they made the great step of "setting pen to paper"² can be seen as rev-

1. Cf. E. SHOWALTER (Ed.), *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, Pantheon Books, New York 1985.

2. E. CLINTON, *The Countess of Lincolnes Nurserie*, J. Lichfield and J. Short, Oxford 1622, *Preface*, p. 4.

olutionary behavior, a kind of vehement rebellion against the archaic prejudice of feminine silence. The word, in whichever form it was expressed, was strictly prohibited for women via a series of rules that found their *terminus a quo* not to mention their greatest legitimization, in the dramatic confrontation between Eve and the serpent³ in *Genesis* 3, 1–6. From such origins the right of women to be heard was quashed, codified, accepted and transmitted metahistorically via St. Paul's *Letters*⁴.

The construction of a misogynist ideology⁵, to the obvious detriment and demonization of women, was also aided by classical references, which had offered a profusion of such ideas. For example, Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*⁶ traced a firm distinction between the roles and tasks reserved for men and those for women, and both Aristotle's biological ideas in *De Generatione Animalium*⁷, and Hippocrates' physiological theory were also used to add fuel to the fire⁸. In short, a rich and variegated collection of literary works were cited as evidence that women were inferior creatures and devoid of *logos*. If we add to this heterogeneous *corpus* the treatises of the Fathers of the Church⁹, we can discern the progressive erection of apparently insurmountable walls, barricades and fences, an ontological cage that imprisoned women for centuries and led to the crystallization

3. E.H. PAGELS, *Adam, Eve and the Serpent*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1988; P.R. DAVIES, D.J.A. CLINES (Eds.), *The World of Genesis. Persons, Places, Perspectives*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1998.

4. Several passages from St. Paul's *Letters* are set out as strict and prescriptive behavioural codes, particularly for women. See *Cor II*, 3–8; 14, 34–35; *Eph* 5, 21; *Col* 3, 18; *I Tim* 2, 1114; 3, 11; *Tit* 2, 3–5.

5. Cf. U. RANKE-HEINEMANN, *Eunuchen für Das Himmelreich. Kathilische Kirche und Sexualität*, Hoffmann und Campe Verlag, Hamburg 1988, pp. 97–131.

6. Cf. XENOPHON, *Oeconomicus*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1994.

7. ARISTOTLE, *De Generatione Animalium*, 763b–769b.

8. Cf. H. KING, *Hippocrates' Woman. Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece*, Routledge, London–New York 1998; L. DEAN-JONES, *The Cultural Construct of the Female Body in Classical Greek Science*, in S.B. Pomeroy (Ed.), *Women's History and Ancient History*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London 1991, pp. 111–137.

9. Unforgettable is the force of the misogynist arguments in *Quaestio* 92 of *Summa Theologiae* by Thomas Aquinas, whose central theme is apparent from the title: *De productione mulieris* (*The creation of woman*): «But God foresaw that the woman would be an occasion of sin to man. Therefore He should not have made woman» (1a, 92, 1, 3). Alongside Aquinas, other notable patristical misogynists were Jerome (*Letters*) and Tertullian (*De cultu feminarum*).

of atavistic stereotypes, which were given a veneer of “truth” by the *summae auctoritates* used as justification.

How did women set about overturning these obstacles? What strategies would enable them to gain a foothold in the world of literature? How would they be able to justify their right to perform the very public act of writing? To answer such questions, we must retrace their steps and analyze how their behavior developed from the first tentative steps to the end of the 17th century, when women had not only found their voice, but were able to make a living from writing professionally, like the great playwright Aphra Behn.

1.2. In the female universe: from Boccaccio to de Pizan

Upon careful analysis, the most striking phenomenon to emerge from women’s writings in the Renaissance is the desire to seek out strategies that would justify their actions, which appeared as a source of destabilization and left the single female author open to criticism.

First, to give the necessary overlay of *antiquitas*, they called upon the “great mothers” of the classical tradition, using female figures, whether real or fantastical, gifted with charisma and well known as illustrious women. These characters, thanks to their undisputed virtues, heroic acts, or sagacity in the art of governance, served as a legitimizing force for the new generations of female writers. They took inspiration from works such as *Concerning Famous Women* by Giovanni Boccaccio, reproducing its structure, and expanding, amending and updating the already long list of noteworthy female figures within it¹⁰. The criteria used by Boccaccio to select these women, the subjects of his narration, should not be overlooked;

10. In the chronology of works by Giovanni Boccaccio, *De mulieribus claris* can be dated to 1361–1362. It contains a dedication to a certain Andrea Acciaiuoli of Florence, Countess of Altavilla, and 106 chapters, each describing the personal and historical experiences and fame of a female character. The work sets out to pay homage to women, offering them the following tribute: «Lest, therefore, such women be cheated of their just due, I had the idea of honoring their glory by assembling in a single volume the biographies of women whose memory is still green. To these I have added some lives from among the many women who are notable for their boldness, intellectual powers, and perseverance, or for their natural endowments, or for fortune’s favor or enmity», G. BOCCACCIO, *Famous Women*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2003, pp. 4–5. The book was an instant success in European culture, as the numerous translations published in England, France, Germany and Spain attest. Cf. S. KOLSKY, *The Genealogy of Women. Studies in Boccaccio’s “De mulieribus claris”*, P. Lang, New York 2003.

these were all “illustrious women” whose exceptional ability to excel, particularly in a field dominated by men, he set out to applaud.

Thus, the *claritas* constituted a specific category aimed to expand the narrative plane to female figures who, by their audacious actions, forcible character, or intelligence and ingeniousness, made themselves famous within their lifetimes, or those who sprang from the imagination of poets and writers but displayed these same characteristics of courage, pride, culture and sharpness, and thereby served as virtuous models for the real world. *Concerning Famous Women* also provided a rich collection of iconic literary portraits that could be exploited in the fight against misogyny and detractors of women’s culture, and the battle for their right to be heard. Indeed, reading and writing were practiced by several illustrious women from ancient times, who were recognized and esteemed for their knowledge. In fact, among the many female figures described by Boccaccio, it is those who became famous by virtue of their learning that stand out most clearly.

Nevertheless, in order for the recruitment of the “great mothers” from the past to be an efficacious ploy, it was not sufficient to merely list these women and their exploits for moral edification. These antecedents would only prove useful to the feminist cause, and be used to illustrate an alternative vision of reality, once the unjust criteria used to categorize women as “naturally” inferior beings had been called into question. Christine de Pizan for example, made an extremely innovative and intelligent appeal against the idea that a woman’s status had been thus since Creation and was therefore rightly thus, in her *City of the Ladies*¹¹. In this work de Pizan put forth a vastly different interpretation of the sociocultural relations at the foundations of every epoch, denouncing the falsity of the misogynist ideals that had colored the theoretical approach to the collocation of women within a perfectly ordered hierarchical society, based on the teachings of Aristotle and Ptolemy, since Eve was made from Adam’s rib. With sharp acumen, she identified several issues that would become extremely current *topoi* in the *querelle des femmes* that would follow. She did not limit herself to pointing out and attempting to refute the idea of masculine superiority, but, instead, to understand

11. C. DE PIZAN, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Persea Books, New York 1982. The original manuscript is dated 1404–05, and can be found in the British Library. Cf. M. QUILLIGAN, *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan’s Cité des Dames*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1991.

the origins of this dichotomy: «Si se plaignent les dessudites dames / De plusieurs clers qui sus leur mettent blasmes, / Dittiez en font, rimes, proses et vers / En diffamant leurs meurs par moz divers»¹².

It is clear that in the absence of a female literary tradition to effectively oppose them, the male writers had had the playing field to themselves for a long time. In the *City of the Ladies*, however, de Pizan legitimizes her own attempts to join the game, not only using her knowledge and experience to trace the outlines of a new world, but also clarifying that rather than being due to their presumed “natural” inferiority or biology, women had not thus far been able to play because they had been deprived of the necessary tools, having been educated poorly, restrictively, or not at all.

Girls’ education is a recurring theme in de Pizan’s work, and is presented in the *City of the Ladies* almost as if to emphasize a fundamental priority for all those who aim to bring about a new world order. In the first pages of the book de Pizan lists the women who had made major contributions to civilization and the arts, in an emotional elegy to female erudition, from Cornificia, who «applied herself to letters and enjoyed the sweet pleasure of learning», through Proba, who re-wrote Virgil, the melancholic Sappho, and Carmenta, authoress of the Latin alphabet, to Minerva, Ceres and Isis¹³. Reason, a character who accompanies de Pizan in the initial stages of her journey through the *City* as a sort of guide, argues that if girl children were sent to school and allowed to take advantage of the same education as their male peers, they would learn just as well and appreciate the subtleties of all the arts just like the boys, as an intelligent woman is capable of anything¹⁴.

Although de Pizan is obviously furious at the realization of the unfairness of the limited education reserved for girls, she makes the point that such an attitude not only works to the detriment of the (female) individual, but to society as a whole. Unfortunately,

12. «[Women] complain about many clerks who attribute all sorts of faults to them and who compose works about them in rhyme, prose, and verse, criticizing their conduct in a variety of different ways», C. DE PIZAN, *Epistre au Dieu d’Amours*, in *Oeuvres Poétique de Christine de Pisan*, Didot, Paris 1886, vv. 259–262 (my translation).

13. C. DE PIZAN, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, cit., chap. XXVIII–XXXVI.

14. «My lady, since they have minds skilled in conceptualizing and learning, just like men, why don’t women learn more? She replied: Because, my daughter, the public does not require them to get involved in the affairs which men are commissioned to execute, just as I told you before», Ivi, chap. XXVII, p. 63.

however, these pearls of wisdom fell on largely deaf ears in de Pizan's lifetime. Her words, wise and just though they were, were quickly forgotten, and the irrational injustice of a two-tier education, and indeed society, persisted for centuries after her demise.

1.3. The Renaissance debate in the mirror: the patriarchal point of view

1.3.1. *Juan Luis Vives*

A seismic shift in thinking was brought about by the Renaissance, and the profound reflection that arose as a consequence¹⁵. A notable body of intellectuals, both secular and clerical, began to question the *status quo* due to the very real presence among them at court of "cultured women". Although mainly confined to the nobility, these young women busied themselves writing poetry, translating psalms, and the reading and taking to heart of the virtues of the great biblical heroines Sarah, Rachel and Rebecca, in plain view, creating a trend that soon began to spread among the young women of the aristocracy. Although the influence of these women may not have "contaminated" much of society, there is no doubt that they did set an important precedent, and once again raised the vexing question of how best to educate women.

As the printed word became more commonplace, the number of books that young women had access to, began to increase. It therefore became necessary to select which of these could justifiably be included in a repertoire suitable for the delicate minds of the weaker sex, thereby to prevent inappropriate literature from soiling their thoughts and causing deviant behavior.

The idea of censoring reading material in such a fashion found a lot of illustrious supporters, first and foremost among whom a guiding light in the field of education, Juan Luis Vives¹⁶. The Spanish

15. C. JORDAN, *Renaissance Feminism. Literary Texts and Political Models*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London 1990; M.W. FERGUSON, M. QUILIGAN, N.J. VICKERS (Eds.), *Rewriting the Renaissance. The Discourse of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1986.

16. The humanist Juan Luis Vives (Valencia 1492–Bruges 1540) was a friend of both Thomas More and Erasmus. His copious body of work attests to his lasting dedication to pedagogy and poverty-related social issues.

humanist was called to the English court, at the behest of Catherine of Aragon, to supervise the education of the young Mary Tudor, the only offspring of her marriage to Henry VIII. Vives' experience in this position gave him ample subject matter for his *De Institutione Foeminae Christianae*¹⁷, a collection of the most popular ideas in the field of female education at the time. Rather than aiming to construct a precise female identity, Vives indicated that literature would be suitable for girls if it promoted by example the virtues of chastity, obedience and submission. It is clear to us now that what he was proposing was not, in fact, encouragement of autonomous intellectual development (i.e., education), but a not-so-subtle strategy of brainwashing. Indeed, in the volume I of *De Institutione*, which is entirely dedicated to girls' education, Vives argues that this must be used from an early age *only* as a means of instilling and reinforcing chaste behavior:

And, of course, if we wished to review past ages, we would not find any learned woman who was unchaste. On the contrary, the majority of female vices of this and previous centuries [...] sprang from ignorance, because women did not read or hear tell of those splendid exhortations of the church fathers concerning chastity, solitude, silence, and feminine adornment and attire. If they had merely known about them, it is impossible that things would have progressed to this intolerable degree of insolence. The authority of their teachings would have checked this offensive conduct at its inception and would have prevented its getting out of control.¹⁸

He then devotes an entire chapter¹⁹ to reading, specifying that its only purpose in young females is their moral edification. He adds a carefully selected list of books and topics suitable for creating virtuous young ladies, in order that their minds not be sullied by literature he deemed immoral or inopportune. Vives is so confident that he provides an outline of appropriate reading matter, and firmly recommends authors such as Cicero, Seneca, Augustine and Hieronymus. In addition, he suggests the reading of the Gospels, which should be studied in depth. For ethics and behavior, he finds Plutarch's *Mulierum virtutes* indispensable, unlike all literature written in the

17. J.L. VIVES, *De Institutione Foeminae Christianae*, M. Hillenium, Antverpiae 1524. Quotations from J.L. VIVES, *The Education of a Christian Woman. A Sixteenth Century Manual*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2000.

18. Ivi, Book I, chap. IV, par. 22, p. 65.

19. Ivi, Book I, chap. V (pp. 73-79).

vernacular, which was to be avoided, he said, because it covered inappropriate topics²⁰. His censorship was not merely confined to “lower” forms of literature, it also extended to certain Latin texts that he had considered immoral, and therefore highly unsuitable for young female perusal. Such dangerous works include the passionate but obscene *Metamorphosis* by Ovid, Catullo’s poems, and the epigrams of Tibullus and Propertius. Vives was equally vehement with regard to what he considered to be the ideal models of chastity and purity, in particular the Virgin Mary, a sublime icon of perfection. Other shining *exempla* included the female saints, and women who had set themselves on fire for their shame of having lost their virginity, and therefore, their virtue²¹.

De Institutione Foeminae Christianae was a stone wall foundation of the Renaissance, to segregate male from female education²², the latter being designed merely to grow good little wives and mothers. Indeed, Vives’ work was held up as an indisputable source of teachings and advice, and as such was copied and cited by authors across the whole of Europe. From that point on, whosoever undertook the difficult and problematic task of educating young females would have not been able to do without the wise suggestions and theories of Vives, the learned and the experienced.

1.3.2. *Giovanni Michele Bruto*

The Italian humanist Giovanni Michele Bruto²³ is a case in point. In his worthy little volume entitled *La Institutione di una fanciulla nata nobilmente*²⁴, printed in 1555, he included a foreword, for the benefit of his young female pupil, Marietta (the daughter of a Genoese

20. Ivi, Book I, chap. V, par. 31 (p. 75).

21. Ivi, Book I, chap. X: “On the virtue of a woman and the example she should imitate” (pp. 116–124).

22. R. KELSO, *Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1956.

23. Cf. M. BATTISTINI, *Jean Michel Bruto, historien et pédagogue*, «De Gulden Passer», III, 1925, pp. 152–157; M. BATTISTINI, *Jean Michel Bruto, humaniste, historiographe, pédagogue au XVIème siècle*, «De Gulden Passer», XXXII, 1954, pp. 29–95.

24. Bound by close ties of friendship with the Genoese merchant Silvestro Cattaneo, Brutus, when living at Anversa in 1555, and having frequent contact with Italian merchants who operated there, felt compelled to expound upon his pedagogical theories in a booklet, inspired by well-defined moral and devotional canons, further to the education of Marietta, Cattaneo’s young daughter. All but unknown, only a few copies of this work, *La Institutione*

merchant), in which he emphasizes that to the «bellezza di spirito et a quella generosità» that nature had provided her with, her father and teacher would add the «cura et lo studio»²⁵. Although still of tender age, Marietta seemed already to possess those gifts that would make her stand out from her peers when she reached maturity. According to Bruto, she possessed «belle et più rare gratie», and «beltà», together with the nobility that she was born with, being the daughter of a wealthy family, highly placed in society²⁶. The term that recurs most frequently in this brief epistle is virtue, i.e., a particular predisposition to purity, chastity, and altruism.

This becomes a recurring topic in the “teaching manuals” written in the 16th century for female education, which was greatly inspired by Italian humanist literature. Indeed, from the very first words of *La Institutione di una fanciulla nata nobilmente* the reliance on common themes in Antiquity became apparent. First and foremost, to be born into a noble family was paramount, as it provided “fertile ground” upon which the seeds of wisdom were to fall. In other words, if her roots were hale and hearty, the young girl would be unlikely to grow into a diseased or sinful specimen. In fact, this agricultural metaphor is used more than once, a girl child being likened to a delicate flower that would need the equivalent of careful watering, pruning, weeding and protection from pestiferous influences in order to flourish. Hence the teacher was to function as a kind of farmer, constantly tending his young crops until the harvest was successfully brought in. Otherwise, «mancandole diligente et assidua cura, veggiamo languire la natia loro virtù, et esse finalmente insalvatichire [...] non essendo chi loro ammaestri et insegni a divenire quelli che essere per se stessi non possono, agevolmente»²⁷.

This is presumably why Bruto states several times that it is essential for educators and tutors charged with looking after young children to provide sufficient guarantees of their honesty and moral

di una fanciulla nata nobilmente (Plantin, Anwerp, 1555), survive to this day. Written in both French and Italian, the book is dedicated “alla gentile et valerosa fanciulla Madama Marietta Catanea”, and contains a poem by C.P. (Christopher Plantin) to the translator, 51 pages of text, and a letter “To the Readers”. For an in-depth analysis see A. CAGNOLATI, *Giovanni Michele Bruto e l’educazione femminile: “La Institutione di una fanciulla nata nobilmente”(1555)*, «Annali dell’Università di Ferrara», Sez. Filosofia, 64, Ferrara 2001.

25. G.M. BRUTO, *La Institutione di una fanciulla nata nobilmente*, Plantin, Anwerp, 1555, p. iiiii.

26. *Ibidem*.

27. Ivi, pp. 4^r-5^r.

rectitude. Beyond the merely pedagogical reflection, he reiterated that the concern for a young person's education and moral standing is useful for all state governors to train honest citizens. This idea, that an educated, virtuous child would inevitably become an upright member of society, is clear evidence of a political motivation behind the ethical advice. Bruto's theory of education draws heavily on the humanist ideal that education and politics should be inextricably linked and mutually beneficial.

As for the practical aspects of his approach to the moral education of young Marietta, Bruto advises her father (and his friend), Silvestro, to find her a wise governess that would serve as a loving, Christian guide. However, he makes no attempt to conceal the difficulty in finding such a worthy individual, someone possessing the requisites for educating a young noblewoman. These necessary characteristics he had described in a detailed portrait of the ideal governess; she would have had to be «prudente et grave [. . .] et di santi et religiosi costumi», and be able to «in brevissimo, da modi et dalle maniere della fanciulla avisata, quello che di lei si abbia à sperare, et quello che à temere»²⁸. Therefore, she would have had to be equipped to understand the very soul of her young charge, in order to guide her onto the straight and narrow, towards the firm acquisition of the essential pure and chaste ways of behaving.

Brutus was also a great fan of learning by example. He considered the great women of Antiquity ideal models for reflection, in particular the heroines of the Roma World, such as Portia, Sempronia and Lucretia, shining icons from a plentiful list of famous women well known to the European culture of the time, thanks to translations of the works of Livy, Valerius Maximus and Sallust. However, female children were not to study poetry and stories that were considered dangerous, and offensive to the cultural sensibilities of the time. This meaning that Catullus, Ovid, Propertius, Tibullus, and the sinful accounts of the passions of Enea and Dido narrated by Virgil in the *Aeneid* were strictly taboo. Classics speaking of love between mortals and the Greek and Roman deities were forbidden. Because «veggo essere opinione d'alcuni che le picciole fanciulle si debbano ammaestrare da suoi prim'anni nelle lettere; che io tuttavia in niuna guisa posso farmi à credere che bene sia»²⁹.

28. Ivi, p. 8^r.

29. Ivi, p. 20^r.