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Abstract: This article explores the divergent representations of girlhood in female commemorative biographies from the early 16th century and the spiritually exemplary biographies of secular women in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. While the commemorative biographies of Battista Sforza, Bianca Maria Sforza and Irene di Spilimbergo follow the traditional tropes of childhood representation for the genre, they nonetheless embody a fuller representation and acceptance of girlhood than that of the later, Post-Tridentine biographies of The Princess Maria of Parma, Cornelia Lampugnana Ro, and Olimpia Maidalchini. The first type portrays girlhood as light-hearted, quick-witted, delightful, and beautifully-fresh; the second type negates girlhood entirely, representing the protagonists not as girls, but women in miniature.

Errata Corrige: Upon the author's request, the following corrections were made on p. 1 of this article on September 7, 2017: The sentence starring with "This outline" is now part of the first paragraph; "The latter" replaced "This latter"; "Such a basic" replaced "This basic"; and "adult life, a narrative procedure that follows" replaced "adult life. This narrative procedure follows."

Girlhood Constructed: Portrayals of Childhood in Italian Renaissance Biographies

SIENNA HOPKINS

Biographers of the Renaissance were faced with a considerable quandary when composing a life story: where to begin, and how? This was not an easy choice, given the lack of available information about the protagonist's youth, often spent in the care of a wet nurse, or behind the closed walls of the private home. Some biographers, specifically those writing compendium pieces, bridged this gap by avoiding childhood altogether, or perhaps only mentioning the subject's parents or noble origins, much like Vespasiano da Bisticci in his *Lives of Illustrious Men,* or Boccaccio in his *De Mulieribus Claris*.[1] Biographies of only one life, however, were mainly chronological in structure, and therefore needed to address the infancy and adolescent period of the subject's life in some way, despite the lack of supporting documentation. To do this, biographers typically resorted to a basic outline of childhood, which they infused with their own narrative prowess, to somehow sharpen the hazy image of their subject as child.[2] This outline generally includes a description of the protagonist's forefathers, the protagonist's childhood disposition (generally idyllic), their commendable education, any remarkable talents they possessed at an early age, or, sometimes, portentous signs that further demonstrated their future greatness. The latter component is one used by both Boccaccio, in his biography of Dante, and Plutarch, in his biography of Virgil. Both authors detail the dreams of the poets' mothers before giving birth; Virgil's mother dreams she will give birth to a Laurel tree that will produce copious fruits, Dante's mother that she will give birth under a Laurel tree whose fruit will become the poet's only nourishment.

Such a basic outline admittedly does not emphasize childhood; instead, it quickly addresses it, and then moves on to the heart of the biography: the protagonist's adult life, a narrative procedure that follows the recommendation of Plutarch, the Renaissance's primary example of biographic excellence. Torquato Malaspina, author of the only known Renaissance treatise on biography, echoes Plutarch's sentiments that childhood "is an age when nature, not choice, dominates the person," and therefore should not be included in a biography unless it contains a portentous sign, or demonstrates a personal habit or inclination that becomes a solidified character trait over time.[3] Both Plutarch and Malaspina assert that of primary importance is always the story, and that childhood should therefore be left out unless it is thematically pertinent to that story.[4] This is, in fact, the path that Renaissance biographers generally followed–to focus on the man or woman, not the child. If childhood representations in these biographies are present, then, they are either extremely cursory, or purposefully shaped and molded, with the thematic purpose of embodying the future man or woman.

The 1578 biography of Cosimo de' Medici is a prime example of this thematic shaping. The author highlights Cosimo's illustrious family, his commendable scholarship, and the "great signs of virtue" that he demonstrated "while still a young boy."[5] He describes young Cosimo as affable, valorous, prudent, and honest–so honest, in fact, that when he overhears a conversation he is not supposed to, he promises never to repeat what he learned and holds firm to this promise even in the face of his mother's desperate pleas. Though still a boy, his description

[1] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Famous women*, ed. Virginia Brown (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[2] It must be noted that even when writing one life, some biographers still choose to avoid the childhood stage, such as Silvano Razzi in his biography of Piero Soderini (c.1502).

[3] Torquato Malaspina, *Dello scrivere le vite*, ed. Vanni Bramanti (Bergamo: Moretti & Vitali, 1991), 52. Original: "allora non s'opera per elezione ma per natura." He views Petrarch to be the biographer *par excellence*.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Baccio Baldini, *Vita di Cosimo Medici primo gran duca di Toscana* (Firenze: Nella stamperia di Bartolomeo Sermartelli, 1578). Original: "fanciullezza molto travagliata"; "gran segni di vertù"; and demonstrated "ancorche picciol fanciullo."

conforms to the ideal of what a future Grand Duke of Tuscany will be, one who will place his political and social duties first. It also follows a common chronological pattern for childhood portrayals in Renaissance biography, beginning first with the family's origins, then the protagonist's upbringing and education, and concluding with their personality or talents.

Biographies of women likewise make use of childhood to foreshadow the woman's future self. They contain similar elaborations on the nobility of family lineage, commendations of education and upbringing, anecdotal support, and general confirmation that in adulthood their protagonists would become consummate examples for all women. The narrative presumption was that childhood behavior was entirely reflective of the grown adult, a presumption made clear by Gabriele Fiamma in his 1586 hagiography of Saint Genevieve, in which he writes, "As one can judge the day by its dawn, the harvest by its planting, and the fruit by its flower, so one can judge the future man or woman by their tender days of youth."[6] The result of such a presumption is that childhood in Renaissance biographies, if present at all, is a constructed one, employed to enhance the biographer's thematic focus for his work. In the case of female secular biography, this focus generally followed one of two directions: it was either commemorative, intended to highlight a noblewoman's remarkable courtly virtues and talents, or spiritual, intended to highlight a woman's religious solidarity for the purpose of spurring the reader to greater spiritual heights.

The commemorative female biographies, in their emphasis on courtly ideals, portray girlhood as a light and joyful stage. They place particular emphasis on the *allevamento*, both spiritual and literary, of their protagonists, and frequently describe their appearance and comportment. These women fully reside in their physical bodies, albeit in traditional Petrarchan manifestations of beauty. Their intellect, though accomplished, always defers to their male superiors, and though their youth is imbued with freshness and lightness of being, they avoid the superfluous vanities of youth such as gossip or slander. Their attire is proudly ostentatious as is fitting their station, but never excessive. In essence, their girlhood is that of a perfect young princess, fitting in manners and style with Renaissance court society.

The biographies written for the purpose of spiritual exemplum, on the other hand, reject childhood almost entirely; what remains of the protagonists' early days is somber, serious, and colorless. They possess intense spiritual inclination from the start, like most of their hagiographic counterparts, such as St. Catherine of Siena, St. Umiliana De' Cerchi, and St. Catherine of Genova.[7] The lay girls in Renaissance spiritual biographies are never enticed by the dark side of life, vanity, bad company, or even typically childish pastimes.[8] Similarly, they do not inhabit their physical bodies as do the girls in the commemorative biographies; rather, they transcend them, and eventually, in adulthood, neglect them or even harm them.

This study will analyze these two divergent representations of girlhood found in female secular biographies composed in Italian between 1500 and 1689, beginning with three commemorative biographies of the following women: Battista Sforza (1446–1472), Bianca Maria Visconti (1425–1468), and Irene di Spilimbergo (1540–1549). We will then turn to the spiritual

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[6] Gabriele Fiamma, *Le Vite De'Santi* (Genova: Bartoli, 1586), 16. "Si come si suol dall'alba giudicar quale esser debba il giorno, dal seminato, quale il raccolto, e da' fiori, quanti & quali i frutti: cosi dall'età tenera de' fanciulli si può fare giudizio, quali s'habbiano ad essere huomini." All translations in this article are my own unless otherwise noted.

[7] In addition to Gabriele Fiamma's hagiographical compendium, *Le Vite De'Santi*, see Francesco Cionacci's biography of Umiliana de' Cerchi (*Storia della beata Umiliana de' Cerchi vedova fiorentina del terz'ordine di San Francesco, distinta in IV parti* [Florence, 1682]), and Cataneo Marabotto's biography of St. Catherine of Genova (*Vita della beata Caterina Adorni da Genova* [Venice, 1590]).

[8] This is not to say that St. Catherine Vannini or Teresa d'Avila represent the hagiographical norm. Most hagiographies begin much like the spiritually-focused biographies of our study, and highlight the un-childlike nature of their protagonists. See the Life of Umiliana de' Cerchi (1682), who, according to her biographer, did not not engage in childish delights or silly pastimes (4), or the biography of Caterina de' Ricci (1622), who, again, according to her biographer, avoided the jokes and company of other young children, and whose pastimes and games of her youth instead involved conversing with her guardian angel (3).

biographies of Princess Maria of Parma (1538–1577), Cornelia Lampugnana Ro (1583–1620), and Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia (1646–1684), concluding with a brief investigation into the satirical biography of Olimpia Maidalchini (1591–1657), which both defies and follows certain trends of girlhood representation for *either* type.[9]

The order of the investigation will be primarily thematic in nature, though it should be noted that the commemorative biographies were composed prior to the Counter-Reformation, while the biographies of spiritual exemplum are almost all Post-Tridentine, thus demonstrating the thematic shifts in female biography during the late Renaissance. These shifts, however, are complex and derivative, sometimes indicative of the Renaissance interest in *querelle des femmes* literature, sometimes of the Church's increasing influence in the biographic genre, and sometimes of current literary trends. This complexity necessitates a brief explanation of the ideas and influences that likely contributed to the representation of girlhood in secular biography.

The most natural point of departure is Boccaccio's compendium work of female biography, the *De mulieribus claris*, a work that was consulted and emulated by a number of subsequent female biographers, such as Christine de Pizan in her *City of Women*. His work deals primarily with pagan women of the ancient past who are lauded more for their virility than their femininity. For this reason, and because of the brevity of each life, the work leaves us with scant references to girlhood–most include only references to parentage. This is not to say that Boccaccio's work is devoid of girlhood references, however, but they are found in his own personal intrusions into the text, not in the descriptions of his women as children. In his biography of Queen Ilia, for example, Boccaccio digresses considerably from his subject, discussing instead the deplorable number of Renaissance girls who were forced into cloisterhood during his time, because their parents lacked the proper dowry:

> I cannot help laughing at the madness of some people. There are certain individuals who are greedy enough to take away from their daughters their pittance of a dowry. Under the pretext of religion, they confine – or should I say condemn? – these girls to nuns' cells, sometimes when they are still very young, sometimes when almost mature, but always under force. Then the claim is made that a virgin has been dedicated to God whose prayers will advance her father's affairs and gain Paradise for him when he dies.[10]

This would seem like quite the defense for the girls so soon confined to convent walls, but Boccaccio's compassion is cloaked in disdain and misogynist tropes, as is evident in the paragraph that follows:

> How ridiculous and foolish! These people do not know that an idle woman serves Venus and is consumed with envy of the public prostitutes, whose brothels she prefers to her own cloister. When nuns see the weddings of secular women, their dresses and various ornaments, dances and festivals, and realize that they themselves will have no experience of marriage, they feel sorry for themselves. As though widowed on the doorstep of life, they curse mightily their destiny, the souls of their parents, their own veils, and their cloisters. As consolation for the sadness in their hearts, their sole recourse is to plan how they can escape from their prison or at least bring their lovers inside, trying to take secretly the sexual pleasure whose open enjoyment in marriage has been denied them.[11]

The link between idleness and female sexual depravity is a frequent theme in Renaissance literature, finding its origins in satirists such as Juvenal, who wrote that women of his time were

[9] These biographies have been selected because they contain more childhood material than other female Renaissance biographies.
[10] Boccaccio, *Famous Women*, XLV, par 5, 93.
[11] Ibid.

full of vice because they had too much time on their hands, and that when they were instead poor and busy, were able to keep their chastity intact:

> Their lowly status used to keep Latin women chaste,
> Hard work kept the corruption of vice from their humble roofs.[12]

It is likely, therefore, that Boccaccio wrote these comments in jest, but the concern was real and is reflected in many Renaissance comportment manuals as well as Renaissance female biographies, most of which emphasize the importance of industriousness for girls and the dangers of idleness.[13]

Boccaccio's quips or criticisms also extend to girls outside the convent walls. In his biography of Gualdrada, a Florentine maiden (one of only six biographies of modern women), he writes, "I decided to write this account as a reproach to the girls of our own day who are so giddy and of such loose morals that, at the wink of an eye or any gesture, they rush into the arms of whoever looks at them."[14] In either case, and whatever the comedic timbre, the theme of chastity is prominent in Boccaccio's work.

There were many other requirements for and expectations of young girls besides chastity and industriousness, however; they were also expected to be spiritual, pleasant, modest, and obedient. The sourcebook *Women in Italy, 1350–1650: Ideals and Realities* dedicates an entire section to girlhood, documenting these standards thoroughly. It culls together information written by authors of comportment manuals, literary participants in *querelle* literature, fathers of young girls, and historians.[15] Together these texts form a general idea of expectations for a girl in the upper echelons of society, and a general timeline for these expectations: as a baby she typically lived with a wet nurse in the country for about two years; upon returning home, she was allowed to play games with girls of her age, but only games reflective of her female station, such as playing with kitchen utensils. Fashionable, elaborate dolls were discouraged, as well as spending time with boys, even brothers, after the age of seven. For her literary education she was advised to read material that focused on religion or the management of household affairs, which included the arts of cooking, sewing, and hosting guests. Examples of appropriate religious reading included the Old and New Testament, commentaries by spiritual writers, historical writings (including those by biographers such as Seutonius), and hagiographies. Generally, any authors in the vernacular tongue were discouraged, Petrarch and Dante being the most frequent exceptions in that they celebrated "chaste love."[16] Many authors, however, recommend that even they be avoided. A Dominican friar once wrote to the wife of the Venetian printer Gabriele Giolito, commending her for not acting "as many unwise mothers do, who prefer their daughters to learn a love sonnet rather than a prayer." He asserts that "Female minds, especially when they are young, are like new vases […] which long retain the smell of the liquid they first contained […] Therefore get them to read good spiritual books."[17]

Other sources from this period, aimed at the upper classes but not necessarily woman of the court, discourage reading entirely: "If you have a daughter, teach her to sew and not to read, because it is not proper for a woman to know how to read unless you want her to become a nun."[18] This is not to say that these recommendations were necessarily followed by most women,

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[12] Juvenal, "Satires," *Poetry in Translation*, 2011, Book VI, 286–288, http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/JuvenalSatires6.htm.
[13] Mary Rogers and Paola Tinagli, *Women in Italy, 1350–1650: Ideals and Realities* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 94.
[14] Bocaccio, *Famous Women*, CIII, par. 8, 221.
[15] Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 94–114.
[16] Lodovico Dolce, *Dialogo della institution delle donne*, in Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy,* 103.
[17] Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, 106.
[18] Ibid, 98–103.

and it is certainly true that expectations for a woman varied by her station.[19] A Florentine businessman, for example, wrote in his 1556 memoirs that his sister was "eloquent," "self-confident," and had the "ability to read and write as well as any man."[20]

Donne di stato, who served a diplomatic role, were given more freedom than those of lesser nobility. They are praised for their elaborate attire, given more freedom in their academic pursuits, and even praised for their virility. This is the case for the women of Sabadino degli Arienti's *Gynevera delle clare donne* (c. 1500), who are commended for their political pursuits, academic versatility, and "pompous" manner of dress.[21] Arienti even praises them for reading authors like Boccaccio, a name which, in most biographies of the time, especially those following the Council of Trent, is viewed as scandalous.[22]

Arienti's work contains thirty-three biographies of varying length, many of contemporary women; two of them, Bianca Maria Visconti and Battista Sforza, will begin our investigation into the commemorative representations of girlhood in biography. A court scholar for the Bentivoglio family, Arienti dedicated his compendium of female biographies to Ginevra Sforza, infamous wife to the reputed tyrant of Bologna, Giovanni Bentivoglio. The biographies of Battista Sforza and Bianca Maria Visconti are two of the longest biographies in the work, likely because they were relatives of Ginevra: Battista Sforza was Ginevra's half-sister and Bianca Maria Visconti her aunt.

Battista and Ginevra Sforza were daughters of Alessandro Sforza, Lord of Pesaro, and therefore spent many of their childhood years together, specifically at the home of their paternal uncle, Francesco Sforza, who eventually became the Duke of Milan. Battista is known to history as the Duchess of Urbino, her profile immortalized alongside her husband's in Piero della Francesca's diptych (see fig. 1).[23]

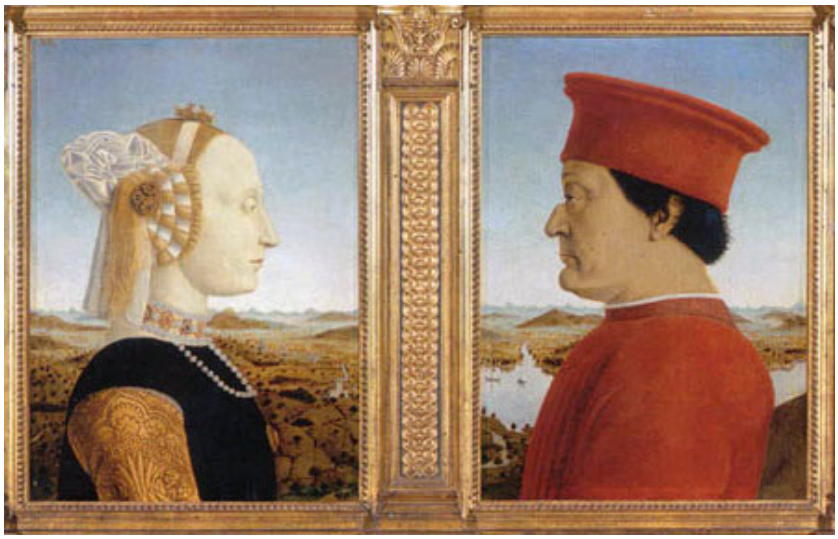

Fig. 1: Piero della Francesca, *Ritratti di Federico da Montefeltro e Battista Sforza,* Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders and obtain permission to reproduce this material.

Their marriage was apparently a happy one, and their court a flowering center of

[19] Women of the lower classes, for example, were allowed much more access to public spaces, and were never expected to be literate nor dainty, rather prolific and dedicated in their household management. See Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy*, and Margaret King, *Women of The Renaissance* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991) for further discussion of this topic. A consultation of Renaissance comedy also reveals such discrepancies.

[20] Rogers and Tinagli, *Women in Italy,* 98–103.

[21] Giovanni Sabadino degli Arienti, *Gynevera de le clare donne, di Joanne Sabadino de li Arienti, a cura di Corrado Ricci e A. Bacchi della Lega* (Bologna: Romagnoli-Dall' Acqua, 1888), 266, 299.

[22] See Arienti's biography of Giovanna Bentivoglio (Zanna di Bentivogli) in *Gynevera de le clare donne*, 116.

[23] She was also Vittoria Colonna's grandmother.

humanistic learning. It is not surprising then, that Arienti mentions the humanist education she received as a child: "She was raised generously by her father in illustrious manners and virtues, and her studies were not unworthy of the intellectual prowess and talents of her family."[24] Her education and upbringing were, therefore, part and parcel of who Battista would be, and of who her family was.

These types of surface references to *allevamento* are extremely common in most Renaissance biographies; in fact, if childhood is mentioned at all, it is generally in regard to the protagonist's upbringing and education.[25] Arienti dutifully details this, but does so with a sideways glace, as if it is so assumed and hardly bears mentioning. More importantly, he recounts the marvel of Battista's intellect with rare anecdotal detail, perhaps because Ginevra, being six years older than Battista, had witnessed it first-hand and was able to recount it to Arienti herself. He tells us that Battista began reading at three years old, and at only four years old she was sent to visit her godfather, count Francesco Sforza. During her stay, she recited "a small *orazione*, which made all present marvel that such a girl, at such an age, was so graceful in speech and could express Latin so well. This, along with her other clever manners and gestures, pleased the duke so much that he did not want to send her back to her father."[26]

Here Arienti grants Battista a physical space in which she moves and enchants those in her company, allowing the reader to form a more defined physical image of her as a child. She stands in front of her godfather and impresses him with her intellectual acumen, while gesturing in what can only be perceived to be a childlike manner, given his emphasis on her young age. Such imagery and anecdotal content, quite rare to Renaissance female biography, portrays a young girl of the court who was destined to impress those in her company. This is precisely what Battista would grow up to do. Arienti writes that in adulthood she demonstrated majesty, prudence, and eloquence, and once so impressed the Pope with her abilities that he responded by writing poetry in her honor, saying that no other woman like her existed in Italy.[27]

Battista also demonstrated courage in adulthood, wintering with her husband's armies when he was otherwise occupied, and accompanying him on many of his expeditions "with steadfast virility."[28] This aspect of her character is also apparent in her childhood description when Arienti writes how her interests grew with her, and that she quickly turned her focus from literature to military study.[29] He quotes her as saying that kingdoms should only expand their empires by deposing "evil," a statement, he adds, that was "a wonderful thing to hear from such a young, virgin girl."[30] This assertion is an important one for our study and it can be interpreted in one of three ways: that for a young girl she was remarkably wise; that military conversation was unusual for girls; or both. Regardless, Arienti's praise for her military pursuits is secondary to, and predicated upon, her girlhood state of virginity.

This conditional allowance for women to engage in activities usually reserved for men is found in both Renaissance biography and *querelle* literature, specifically that of Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, composed shortly after Arienti's compendium. Known in Italian as *Il Libro del Cortegiano*, the work depicts the court life of Urbino, specifically that of Guidobaldo da Montefeltro, who also happens to be Battista Maria's son. Castiglione discusses the concept at length in the third book of *The Courtier*, or rather, his interlocutors discuss the primary attributes

[24] Arienti, *Gynevera de le clare donne,* 289. "Fu alevata generosamente dal patre in egregii costumi et virtute et in lettere, in forma non fu degenerante de le excellentie et praestantie de' parenti."
[25] This tendency is so frequent it is impossible to cite exhaustively but for examples, see any number of biographies in Vespasiano da Bisticci's compendium, specifically the biographies of Lauro Quirino and Lionardo del Bennino.
[26] Arienti, *Gynevera de le clare donne*, 290. "piccola oratione, la quale fece meravigliare ciascuno, che una fanzuletta de quella etate havesse tanta gratia de le lingue, potesse experimere le parole latine. La qual cosa piacque tanto al patruo duca, insieme cum li altri lepidi gesti et costume, che più non la volea restituire al patre."
[27] Ibid, 291, 297, 294.
[28] Ibid, 294. "cum virile animo"
[29] Ibid, 292.
[30] Ibid. "era bella cosa audire, cum fondate rasone, in una vergene polcella."

of a court lady, and whether or not virile activities should be permitted her. *Il Magnifico* does not deem masculine activities such as handling weapons, riding, playing tennis, and wrestling as acceptable for women, while Gaspar Pallacino and others counter this assertion, noting that they have seen many women perform these activities as well as a man.[31] *Il Magnifico* does not disagree with them, but reminds them that he is "fashioning a Court Lady and not a Queen." As such, he asserts that the court lady should eschew manly activities or even the semblance of masculinity when partaking of pastimes such as dancing or music, during which she risks portraying an image that is too manly in its physicality (such as moving harshly or playing instruments that require harsh movements, like drums or trumpets).[32] *Il Magnifico's* primary point throughout this conversation is that the court lady should always possess female qualities such as gentleness, daintiness, and sweetness. It would be fruitless to argue what Castiglione himself thought about the subject, given the meandering tone of the argument; what is more pertinent is that these discussions were occurring at all, and that on either side there was the assumption that the woman necessarily possess all feminine qualities before undertaking masculine activities.

Vincenzo Caputo addresses this conditional relativity in his writing on Renaissance biography, observing that some of the *donne di stato* in sixteenth-century biography were only praised for masculine attributes or activities when their feminine traits, such as chastity and purity, were not in question.[33] This is the line of thought followed by Arienti who, when awarding his female protagonist the virtues of a man, takes care to emphasize that she first fully possesses the primary virtues assigned to women.[34] He writes that Battista "was so skilled in the art of the needle, in embroidery, and in *every illustrious female activity*, that every woman and citizen would turn to her for advice and demonstrations."[35] This affirmation grants him more narrative freedom to later write about her valorous defense of her castle against Sigismondo Malatesta, who was heard to say that she defended it so well that he was annoyed at her sagacity and preparedness.[36] Arienti even writes that she could have reigned over France. He does, however, make sure to also add that she accompanied her husband to the battlefield primarily to conceive a male heir, thereby giving precedence to her role as noble matriarch and wife to that of courageous companion.[37]

Thus far, what seems like cursory information on Battista's girlhood is actually an abundance of material, at least for Renaissance biography, especially when considering that it is a compendium piece. Even more remarkable, though, is that Arienti describes her physical appearance while she was still a girl. Most biographies hold off on physical descriptions until their protagonists are fully grown and married (or in Irene di Spilimbergo's case, until the final page of her biography), but his description comes when she is in the flower of her youth and relies on the common metaphorical tropes of girlhood: "She was of average height, with skin both white and fresh like a living rose"; she also had "beautiful hands," "white teeth," and "eyes that were beyond her years and were not reflective of her child-like appearance."[38] Thus described, Battista's physical youth reflects Petrarchan idealism, especially in the intellectual maturity of her eyes.[39] This is not to say that Battista was excessively serious and, therefore,

[31] Baldessare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Leonard Opdycke (Digireads, 2009), 113. Note that they do not outright *approve* of such activities, rather say they have observed them.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Vincenzo Caputo, *Ritrarre i lineamenti e i colori dell'animo. Biografie cinquecentesche tra paratesto e novellistica,* (Milan*:* Franco Angeli, 2012), 207.
[34] Theolinda, Queen of the Lombards, is also praised first for her full possession of female qualities (beauty, manners, chastity, eloquence, piety, religiosity and grace). Arienti, *Gynevera de le clare donne*, 9.
[35] Ibid, 291. "Fu tanto perita in la virtù de l'agho, de rechami, et de ogni egregio exercitio muliebre, che ogni matron et sue citadine recorevano ad lei, per consiglio et documento." Italics mine.
[36] Ibid, 294.
[37] Battista had six daughters before she gave birth to her only son, Guidobaldo da Montefeltro.
[38] Ibid, 290. Paraphrase of original: "hebbe belli et modestissimi ochii, quali raro dimostravano non conoscere bene che fusse al suo pudico conspecto. Havea bella mano et candidi denti."
[39] See especially Petrarch's sonnet "Non pur quell'una bella ignuda mano"

unpleasant company. He writes that her speech was "sweet and kind" and that she was a pleasure to speak with, not just for her friends but for her subjects and citizens as well.[40]

The general image formed of Battista as a child is one of an agreeable young girl, precocious and bursting with fresh and beautiful life, with a sweet disposition that brought joy to anyone in her company. Tucked between these prodigious words of praise, however, is a reference to her volatility: "She was sometimes hot-blooded in both nature and complexion, becoming easily offended, but the moment would soon pass."[41] Apparently this youthful irascibility was a family trait, or perhaps Ginevra drove the women in her life to frustration, because the next subject in our analysis, Ginevra's aunt, Bianca Maria Visconti, is also described as having a temper, albeit one she could control: "Her anger and her grudges were tempered with prudence and passed quickly."[42]

Bianca Maria's girlhood portrayal is the shortest of the three commemorative biographies analyzed in our study, but she is portrayed, like Irene and Battista, as having been "raised with worthy virtues and manners, in keeping with any other daughter of an eminent prince."[43] The future duchess of Milan (see fig. 2) is a delightful young girl, physically beautiful, "majestic," prone to "sweet and chaste laughter," and eloquent above her sex. She dresses with pomp, walks with majesty, abhors lascivious company, is chaste, well educated (enjoying the company of scholarly men), and modest.[44] Though at age fourteen she was betrothed to a man twenty-four years her senior, she had "supreme judgment, [and] despite being of a *tender age*, never wanted anyone save Count Francesco, for his great valor."[45]

Fig. 2: Bonifacio Bembo, *Portrait of Francesco Sforza and his wife, Bianca Maria Visconti*. Pinacoteca di Brera. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons, Wikimedia.

Bianca Maria is, in essence, a perfect *fanciulla della corte*, but one who would also become known,

[40] Arienti, *Gynevera de le clare donne*, 290. "dolce e benigno"
[41] Ibid, 290.
[42] Ibid, 265. "Le sue ire et li suoi sdegni furono sempre cum prudentia temperati, per modo in lei non duravano." It must be mentioned that Bianca Maria and Battista were not related by blood, so this assertion is not one based upon the concept of heredity but association.
[43] Ibid, 263. "Fu alevata cum dege virtute et costume, quanto altra figliuola de eminentissimo principe."
[44] Ibid, 265. Observe here Arienti's plea for patronage: he frequently references these women's preference for the company of scholarly men, the frequency of which leaves the reader to reach the likely conclusion that he sought further compensation or audiences with the Bentivoglio family. See my dissertation, *Female Biographies in Renaissance and Post-Tridentine Italy* (Proquest, 2016) for further discussion of this topic, specifically in chapter 3, "Sabadino degli Arienti's Gynevera delle clare donne and Vita di Anna Sforza: Courtly Ideals and Veiled Admonishment."
[45] Ibid, 264. "come donna de alto iudicio, et vero lume in le humane cose, quantunque fosse in tenera aetate, altri non volse mai che 'l conte Francesco, per il suo alto valore."

like Battista, for her virility in adulthood. Arienti specifically praises Bianca Maria for her actions in the battle of Cremona, during which she stood with the soldiers to fight, impassioning them with her "virile" words.[46] The childhood descriptions of these two women, therefore, form the perfect foundation for a future *donna di stato*, one who is, first and foremost, an example of amicable grace, but who would also be occasionally permitted to enter the masculine sphere of governance and diplomacy.

The primary emphasis in Arienti's adult descriptions of both women is, however, on the public perception of their rule: they are extolled above all because the people loved them–he takes every opportunity to remind his reader of this.[47] His childhood descriptions of these women, replete with references to their delightful personalities, beautiful semblance, graceful manners, and keen intellects, therefore aid him in this narrative by setting the stage for the ideal *donna illustre* each of them would become: one who is always pleasant, diplomatic, erudite, and accomplished.

The final commemorative biography of our study, that of the Venetian artist Irene di Spilimbergo, at first glance bears many similarities to those of Battista and Bianca Maria.[48] It is an encomiastic biography preceding a memorial volume in Irene's honor, complete with 381 poems composed in Latin and English written by poets such as Torquato Tasso, Lodovico Dolci and Benedetto Varchi, but also including poems written by women, such as Laura Battiferri and Laura Terracina.[49] Like the biographies of Battista and Bianca Maria, Irene's childhood is expanded upon in great detail. She died young and unmarried, around the age of twenty, which may be the primary reason Atanagi spends more time detailing her childhood than most biographers, but it is also plausible that had she lived longer, her childhood would have held the same importance because she was a child prodigy, at least according to Atanagi. The truth is, of course, pure conjecture. It must be remembered that biographies should never be interpreted as entirely true. Much relatively is at play in these works, often based upon the author's narrative purpose for the work as well as the occasional shading between the lines he may do to imbue his work with more artistic depth. As Virginia Woolf once stated, biography lives in the "betwixt and the between"; it is neither history nor literature, neither fiction nor fact.[50] With this in mind, one should approach the representation of childhood in biography with keen attention. In Irene's case, it is clear that the author molds her childhood into two separate casts: that of the ideal noble girl, but also as a precocious student of the arts who eventually inhibits the masculine sphere of accomplishment.

The shape of the first cast is relatively predictable. Irene is extolled for her *cortesia* and generosity, often helping others with writing, or making them beautiful clothes.[51] She always maintains a sweet disposition and a natural inclination for conversation during which she never gossips nor offends.[52] She is an accomplished courtly girl, who, when in the social sphere, is full of effortless charm and sweetness. This is not the case, however, when she is behind closed doors, voraciously consuming her studies. In this, she is entirely unlike all other girls, including Battista and Bianca Maria. Atanagi writes that at an early age she possessed "a quickness of spirit and a strong desire to learn," such that her tutor eventually added music to her educational arsenal, an area in which she also excelled.[53] Her talents were so remarkable that Bona Sforza, the

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[46] Ibid, 267.

[47] Ibid, 266, 273, 276, 293.

[48] Dionigi Atanagi, *Rime di diuersi nobilissimi, et eccellentissimi autori, in morte della signora Irene delle signore di Spilimbergo: alle quali si sono aggiunti uersi latini di diuersi egregij poeti, in morte della medesima signora* (Venice: Appresso Domenico, & Gio. Battista Guerra, fratelli, 1561).

[49] Also Cassandra Giovia, Dionora Sanseverina, and The Duchess of Amalfi.

[50] Virginia Woolf, *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942) 227.

[51] Atanagi, *Rime di diuersi nobilissimi*, 10.

[52] Ibid, 8.

[53] Ibid, 4. "[. . .] una tanta prontezza di spirit, e un si caldo desiderio di sapere"; "è cosa veramente incredibile a dire come tosto apprendesse le cose più difficili. In somma, in brevissimo spatio pervenne a tanto, che ella cantava

queen of Poland, was so impressed after hearing her sing a duet with her sister, that she gifted each girl with two gold chains "di molta stima."[54]

Atanagi makes repeatedly clear to his readers that Irene was different than her peers, especially in her studies: "a remarkable thing that from the time she was in her tender years, she was so naturally desirous of glory and honor, and through such pursuits, *she split away from the common path of the other girls*."[55] Atanagi echoes the commonly held sentiment that idleness is the principal vice of the female sex, and writes that even the typical pastimes chosen by young girls to avoid such a vice is considered inferior by Irene: "Because of the vivacity of her intelligence, she far *exceeded other girls* in sewing and embroidery, which so many noblewomen and ladies do in order to beautify themselves and to avoid the principal vice of their sex, which is idleness"; but Irene viewed even these typical pastimes to be "unworthy of occupying all her thoughts, so she dedicated herself to reading and writing."[56] Irene's portrayal is, therefore, dualistic. She both embodies the consummate young girl of the court, yet also supersedes and demeans that ideal (see her portrait, fig. 3).

Fig. 3: Anonymous (Follower of Titian), *Irene di Spilimbergo*, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC. Public domain, Wikipedia.

Atanagi praises Irene for reading a wide array of authors (Plutarch, Piccolomini, Castiglione, Bembo, and Petrarch) but makes sure to add that she was always deferential to men of letters during her lively discussions: "she reasoned with alacrity, but with such a modesty that *she always conceded that the greater understanding rested with the men*, for which reason she especially enjoyed their scholarly company."[57] He also assures his readers that her decorum and interaction with scholarly men was always in keeping with her station as a young, unmarried woman: "She attentively observed the praiseworthy things that she learned from their customs and manners in order to become more virtuous herself, with, however, the decorum of a young, unmarried

sicuramente a libro ogni cosa: accompangando la prontezza, del cantare con accenti si dolci, e con si honestà, gratiosa, e soave maniera, con quanta altra donzella cantasse giammai."

[54] Ibid, 4–5.

[55] Ibid. "che ella cantava […] con accenti sì dolci, e con si honestà, gratiosa, e soave maniera, con quanta altra donzella cantasse giammai;" "conciosa cosa che ella infino da suoi piu teneri anni per inclination di natura si scoperse desiderosa, nell'imprese d'honore, e di gloria *uscir dalla strada commune delle altre*." Italics mine.

[56] Ibid, 3. "parendo a lei picciolo acquisto l'arte del riccamare, e cosa da non tenervi occupati tutti i suoi pensieri; si diede da se a leggere e a scrivere." "Fu per la vivacità del suo ingegno posta molto prima delle altre fanciulle a quei lavori d'ago, e di riccami, che sogliono usarsi le Gentildonne, e Signore per loro ornamenti, & per fuggir l'otio nimico principale del sesso loro." Italics mine.

[57] Ibid, 7. "ragionava vivacemente: ma però con modestia tale, che sempre lasciava il miglior intendimento loro a gentilhuomini letterati: co quali per lo piu si compiaceva di ragionare." Italics mine.

gentlewoman."[58] Most biographers refer to childhood as a "tender age," during which proper upbringing and behavior are of primary importance, and during which a girl could easily be swayed. Irene's lively conversations with *letterati* at such a "tender age" could, therefore, have been quite frowned upon, thus Atanagi's need to assert that she always moderated her conversation accordingly.

At the age of eighteen, specifically when Irene learns to paint, the biography takes a drastic turn when Irene not only enters the masculine sphere like Battista and Bianca Maria, but she dominates it. Her eager desire for learning accelerates, becoming even more fervent than before, producing a personality trait rarely commended in Renaissance female biography: pride.[59] She grows in confidence and vanity, holding fast to the idea that no matter what new activity she takes up, no woman will ever equal her.[60] Now it is her "excessive force of nature" and "unbridled appetite for glory" that dominate the page.[61]

Though she is still referred to by Atanagi as a *donzella*, this is likely because she remained unmarried. Her ambition now has nothing childish about it and her desire to equal the great painters of her day allows her character to temporarily inhabit and dominate the masculine sphere of talent: "in only a few days she was able to do not just what a woman could do, but what a man could do in years."[62] Until this point in the biography Irene's talents have always been evaluated according to the female scale of perfection, with phrases dappling the pages like, "for a woman she painted excellently."[63] But here she is not only awarded a masculine level of skill: she is praised for exceeding it.

As Atanagi tells it, then, Irene's childhood and ascension into womanhood was a remarkable one, a journey full of determination that begins with her superiority first over other girls, then women, then men. Her description even as a young girl is layered with active verbs, such as "she devoted herself," "she learned the most difficult things," "she sang with confidence," "she read many books," and "stud[ied] continually."[64] It is simultaneously full of adverbial richness, because she did such things with "eagerness," with "astute awareness," "with intense self-discipline," and was also "desirous to learn."[65] Most girlhood portrayals from Renaissance biographies are replete with descriptive *adjectives* that bolster a girl's praise but contain very few active verbs, or if they do, they primarily refer to her preeminence in the female sphere, or her spiritual practices of oration, generosity, physical penance, and sacrifice, not her personal accomplishments or scholarship.[66] In addition, the active verbs in these biographies do not generally occur until the girl becomes a woman. Irene's childhood description then, shines brightly and distinctly as a rare gem in female Renaissance biography.[67]

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[58] Ibid. "Osservava intentamente le parti laudevoli, che scopriva ne costumi, e ragionamenti loro: per farne habito di virtù, e servirsene: con *decoro però di Gentildonna, e di donzella.*" Italics mine.

[59] If one consults other secular female biographies in the Renaissance, such as that of Irene di Spilimbergo, Giulia Bembo della Torre, Duchess Eleonora of Mantua, and the Princess of Parma, in addition to the biographies covered here, pride is never construed in a positive light, either before or after the Counter-Reformation.

[60] Atanagi, *Rime di diuersi nobilissimi*, 9. "Teneva similmente fisso il pensiero ad esser tale; che nelle cose, che ella prendeva per impresa, non le fosse alcuna donna superiore."

[61] Ibid, 13 and 12, respectively. "eccessivo sforzo di natura" and "sfrenato suo appetito di gloria."

[62] Ibid, 12. "in pochi giorni fece quello, che huomo, non che donna, non havrebbe fatto forse in molti anni." Note also that women were referred to as *donzella* until they were married, thus the term generally implies "girl."

[63] Ibid, 11 and 10, respectively.

[64] Ibid. "si diede a se," "avanzandosi nella intelligenza," "apprendeva le cose piu difficili," "cantava sicuramente," " "leggeva molti libri," and "etudiando di continuo."

[65] "prontezza," con "aveduto pensiero," "con fissa applicatione d'animo," and was also "desiderosa di sapere."

[66] See also chapter 5 of Vincenzo Caputo's *Ritrarre i lineamenti e i colori dell'animo. Biografie cinquecentesche tra paratesto e novellistica,* entitled "Per una galleria di donne illustri: le biografie femminili." He emphasizes that even for *donne di stato*, purity and chastity were emphasized above all else, and that their rule was always one governed by constancy and good judgment. Though they are sometimes assigned qualities that seem equal to those of men, the primary assumptions are that they *also* possess idealized female qualities.

[67] Though grown women from other biographies of the time were portrayed as having agency and control in their story, such as Matilda di Canossa or Eleonora, Duchess of Austria, the representation of their childhood does not.

The girlhood portrayals in these three commemorative biographies reveal girls who retain a youthful verve and perspicacity that is always reflective of their noble station and their future success as *donne della corte*. They are delightful, precocious girls, both regal and majestic, who provide pleasant company to those around them; they dress with pomp, they laugh with sweetness, they excel in female activities, and they have all been educated according to the expectations of their social standing. Though they all demonstrate a maturity beyond their age, their girlhood stands firm. Their descriptions of beauty, accomplishment, manners, and dress give them a tangible physical presence. They do not hover in the realm of "unnatural" religious perfection (as Boccaccio calls it) that negates the physicality and buoyancy of childhood. Instead, they have depth, personality, and a remarkable strength that gains force as they grow. Their childhood image is, therefore, easily replaced with a more formidable image of a steadfast and virile woman.

This is not the case for the remaining biographies in our study, all spiritual in nature, and all portraying their protagonists as mature, even as children. They do so by focusing on metaphorical images of growth more so than they do on the girls themselves, and when the girl is described, she is described as wholly un-childlike. Though these biographies are not hagiographies, they bear many resemblances to them, specifically in their negation of childhood behavior. The hagiography of St. Catherine of Siena, written by her confessor Raymond of Capua, for example, tells us that Catherine was a woman even as a girl: "under her girlish appearance there was hidden a fully formed woman. Her actions, indeed, had nothing childish, nothing girlish about them, but showed all the signs of a most venerable maturity."[68]

The spiritual biographies of the Princess of Parma, the noblewoman Cornelia Lampugnana Ro, and the first woman laureate Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia, echo this concept of woman-as-child. As a result of this narrative purpose, they contain very little physical description or references to girlish behavior; they instead employ a wide array of metaphors referring to growth, such as a stream becoming a river, a spark becoming a flame, and a sprout growing into a prolific plant.[69] The result is that the girl is almost entirely obfuscated by the very same words used to describe her. This is not to say that the depiction of girlhood does not reflect the subject's future self, however. Underneath the metaphorical layer, what remains is not the girl, but the future woman. Each woman is spiritual, chaste, generous, and self-sacrificial, prone to excessive spiritual practices. This behavior is shown in the pages of childhood by emphasizing their love for religious studies and their inherent generosity, as is the case for the first biography of this second type, the *Vita della Serenissima Infante Donna Maria Principessa di Parma* (1627).

The Princess of Parma's biography begins much like the others, with an obligatory nod to her noble family, and how the virtues of this lineage necessarily transfer to her.[70] She grew up in Spain, but was married to Alessandro Farnese at a young age, after which she took up residence in Parma.[71] The author, Ranuccio Pico (court secretary to the Farnese family), dutifully details her long line of nobility, spending a good deal of time on the accomplishments of her father (son of King Emmanuele), mother (daughter of the Duke of Braganza), and uncle (master of ceremonies to King Don Giovanni III), who represent the "seed" from which she sprouts. Pico reasons that a well-cared-for "sprout" almost always reflects its noble roots of origin, just as Maria, being born from Portuguese royalty, is a branch of this most noble plant (see her portrait,

[68] Raymond of Capua, *The Life of St. Catherine of Siena* (Charlotte: TAN books, 2013), 10.

[69] The metaphor of nurturing milk is also used in abundance.

[70] Ranuccio Pico, *La Principessa Santa, ouero la vita di Santa Elisabetta, Reina di Portogallo, con un breve disegno della vita della Serenissima Infante Donna Maria Principessa di Parma, etc.* (Venice: Giovanni Gueriglio, 1627). Note that this biography relies heavily on a biography written by her confessor Sebastiano Morales in 1578, *Vita e morte della serenissima principessa di Parma e Piacenza: Essempio à tutte le donne del vivere Christiano*. Pico's biography places more emphasis on the glory of the Farnese family and the magnanimous qualities of his subject, such as prudence and peacemaking. Morales places more emphasis on her death and her intense spiritual practices of self-abnegation.

[71] She is also known as Infanta Maria of Guimarães or Princess Maria of Portugal.

fig. 4).[72] Pico follows this metaphor with that of the phoenix, commenting on how nature's power is sufficient to take the ashes of an old temple of goodness, charity, and religiosity, and, from those ashes, form a new phoenix.

Having firmly established her noble origins, Pico dedicates three pages to Maria's childhood, in which he highlights her religious studies, and how she nursed on this milk as a young child.[73] He asserts that her intellect, the "most noble gift of the soul," was sublime, for which she was given a diligent education in *buone lettere*, including instruction in philosophy, mathematics, and science. She was therefore able to discuss such matters with alacrity, but was always modest in the demonstration of her intellect, making sure to only discuss such things with a spiritually-minded relative. Here the distinction between Maria's erudite interactions and those of the women in commemorative biographies is evident. Irene di Spilimbergo conversed with men about academic subjects and both Battista and Bianca Maria "took pleasure in virtuous and scholarly men," whom they "favored and certainly took delight in."[74] Maria, though, was more limited in her scholarly discussions, only discussing her studies with relatives. Her favorite activity was to read spiritual books, not "vain books" such as those by Petrarch or Ariosto.[75] According to her confessor, she admitted that she once read a few lines from each, but was so appalled by the vanities and superfluities of the contents that she quickly shut them.[76] The Princess is thus able to transcend the stage of youth when our "senses are the strongest," instead demonstrating a remarkable inclination for the spiritual life and desiring to "consecrate her heart, her works, and her affections to God, leaving aside the vanities of the world."[77]

The young princess is also generous. While still a *donzella*, Pico writes that she began to feel a profound compassion for those confined to debtors' prison, and labored to free them using funds from the sales of embroidery made by her own hand.[78] This is a generosity she carries with her into adulthood, along with her studious and disciplined religious nature. Pico repeatedly references these aspects, noting that she governed with charity, prudence, and Christian humility.[79] He tells many stories to support these qualities, emphasizing especially her generous spirit and her passion for the Catholic faith. One anecdote receives a good deal of attention from the author, who recounts how, while at sea, Maria commanded her captain to rescue people aboard a boat about to capsize. He initially refused, insisting that they would also capsize should they attempt the rescue, but she was adamant and, as a result, everyone was saved.[80] Pico also tells of her zeal for the Catholic faith and, by extension, her abhorrence of Protestantism. When setting sail on one of her many voyages, she refused to have any "heretics" on board her ship and, once in England, declined a meeting with the Queen because she was Protestant.[81]

The thematic focus of Pico's biography is how Maria reformed her whole house and city, "directing them towards God's glory" under her care.[82] Though information of her childhood is scant, referencing only her spiritual studies and generosity to the needy, it nevertheless sustains and reflects the image of her future adulthood as a devoted Catholic whose generosity and spiritual influence was both prodigious and courageous.

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[72] Pico, *La Principessa Santa*, 43.
[73] Ibid, 45.
[74] Arienti, *Gynevera de le clare donne*, 265. "Pigliava piacere degl'huomini virtuosi et literati, di quali fu amatrice et fautrice, et de li loro certamente haveva dilecto." See also Battista's biography, specifically at p. 291, which mirrors the above quote in what is likely a plea for patronage from Arienti to Gynevera. See chapter 3 of my doctoral dissertation for a more thorough analysis of Arienti's poorly veiled suggestions for scholarly support.
[75] Pico, *La Principessa Santa,* 45.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid, 46. "consagrare il suo cuore, le opere, e gli affetti a Dio, lasciando i vani diletti del mondo."
[78] Ibid, 47.
[79] Ibid, 64.
[80] Ibid, 49.
[81] Ibid, 51.
[82] Ibid, 8, 71.

Fig. 4: Antonis Mor, *Portrait of Maria di Portogallo*, Pinacoteca Stuard, Parma. Public domain via Wikimedia.

Ippolito Porro's biography of Cornelia Lampugnana Ro (1624) approaches girlhood in much the same way Ranuccio Pico does in the Princess of Parma's life, with references to her nobility followed by a hefty dose of metaphors.[83] A few of these metaphors will sound quite familiar, such as the following: "In her most tender age she began to demonstrate what kind of a person she would become; just as a clear dawn announces a serene day, so the dawn of her girlhood age announced the amazing sun of her subsequent life."[84] The reader may have noticed the similarity to an earlier quote by the hagiographer Gabriele Fiamma.[85] The phrase, or at least the concept, was a ubiquitous one.

Porro makes frequent use of these growth metaphors when describing Cornelia's childhood and her generosity: "I will call this a spark from that fire of charity, which was later seen to burn in her chest; *a spark that, from its inception, as a small flame, continues to grow into the flame* that is the queen of virtues, charity. It is *like a small stream that eventually floods a river with its abundance*, and marvelously irrigates the garden of the devote soul, to nourish it."[86] The theme of growth over time is strong in Cornelia's biography, with verbs like *avampandosi, andare avantaggiandosi, avanzando,* and *camminando a gran passi* decorating the page with fervent repetition. It is based upon the concept that such behavior, while innate, also needs to be nourished. In Cornelia's case, this nourishment was offered within the spiritual walls of convent life, where she was sent to live at seven years old and where, "still a little girl, she learned the basic principles of the spiritual life, and *suckled the milk* of holiness."[87]

At this point Porro's narration begins to deal in specifics and the metaphors begin to fall away. He writes that during her time in the convent she began to nurture a *fiamma* for all those things that make a bride of Christ remarkable: charity, prudence, modesty, seclusion, and abstinence.[88] At the age of fifteen (which Porro still deems young and to be the age of a *bambina*), her love for orations truly takes hold, as well as her nightly battles with Satan, during which she

[83] Ippolito Porro, *Vita e morte della sig. Cornelia Lampugnana Rò gentildonna milanese di gloriosa memoria in bontà e virtù christiane: esemplare degno d'esser imitato in tutti e tre gli stati verginale, matrimoniale e vedouile* (Pavia: Giouanni Negri, 1624).
[84] Ibid, 9. "Nella più tenera età cominciò a dimostrare, quale essere doveva, e come bella, e serena aurora annuntia un sereno giorno, cosi l'aurora della fanciullesca età sua annuntiò il gran Sole della seguente sua vita."
[85] Fiamma, *Le Vite De'Santi*, 16. As quoted previously, Fiamma wrote that a woman's greatness can be seen in the "tender days of her youth," just as one "can judge the day by its dawn."
[86] Porro, *Vita e morte*, 12. "Chiamerò io questa una scintilla di quella fiamma di carità Regina della virtù, ò pure da picciol rivolo cominciando, inonda in fiume abondantissimo, che à meraviglia irriga il giardino dell'anima divota, per fecundarlo." Italics mine.
[87] Ibid, 10. "Ancor fanciulla apprese i primi principia della vita spirituale, e succhiò il latte della Santità." Italics mine.
[88] Ibid.

demonstrates solidarity and courage.[89] Those around her marvel that such a young girl could be so fervent in her spiritual practices, and cannot believe how long she remains prostrate in prayer. She loves serving others by helping in the kitchen, washing others' hair, and she especially delights in carving figurines of saints for the other young girls in the convent. Her whole being, all of her past-times, it seems, are spent in the service of others and God.

Up until now, the biographies discussed have all shaped their girlhood narratives to enhance the protagonist's future greatness as wife and noblewoman. In this sense, Porro's would seem out of step with the trend because Cornelia's girlhood portrayal is incongruous with her future as a wife and *donna illustre*. If we read on, however, we realize that her widowhood is the true focal point. Her marriage, in fact, is portrayed as a spiritual restraint. Porro writes that her "marital bindings" were ashes that covered her golden embers, which, after her husband's death, would ignite and become a consuming flame.[90]

This is not to say that Cornelia's extreme spiritual practices did not begin until after her husband's death. While her husband was alive, she was very devout, which created conflict in her marriage and made it difficult for her to fulfill her role as wife to the *podestà* of Tortona.[91] Porro writes that her husband occasionally "forced her" to attend public festivities where dancing (an activity frowned on by most conduct manuals of the time) took place.[92] This request put Cornelia in an awkward position because if she refused, she would be disobeying her husband, behavior also frowned upon. [93] Her solution was an interesting one: she placed dried garbanzo beans in her shoes to ensure that dancing would be painful. The effects were more pronounced that she had foreseen, however: the beans became embedded in her feet and caused her such pain that she fainted. She was carried out by the servants who, when they took off her shoes, discovered the beans so deep in her feet they could barely extract them.

One can imagine that Cornelia's husband was not particularly pleased with this behavior, but he was not the only one affected by her excesses; her daughters likewise suffered. Porro writes that as a result of her practices of self-abnegation (little-to-no sleep, bodily harm, fasting, long periods in prayer), she would fall ill or experience moments of insanity. As a result, during such times, her daughters were taken from her care.[94] Cornelia's girlhood representation, then, was in no way a foreshadowing of her future role as mother and wife, but as a widow dedicated to God (see fig. 5). This is made clear in two other ways: first, the majority of the biography details her spiritual pursuits after her husband's death; second, the work is dedicated to Cardinal Borromeo of Milan, in the hopes of achieving sainthood for Cornelia.[95] Porro writes, "I truly hope to God that one day He will be pleased to grant his servant the decorous title of Saint."[96]

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[89] Ibid, 10–11.

[90] Ibid, 81. "lacci matrimoniali." He even quotes her as saying that had she remained married, she would have gone to hell in a carriage (ibid, 30).

[91] Ibid, 19, 23; 3.

[92] Vincenzo Nolfi's *Ginipedia ovvero avvertimenti per una nobil donna* is the only exception I have found. Vincenzo Nolfi, *Ginipedia; ouero, avvertimenti civili per donna nobile* (Venice: Heredi di Giovanni Guerigli, 1631).

[93] Porro, *Vita e morte*, 21–22.

[94] Ibid, 44. "gle fu levata la cura, e governo delle figlie allhora, e la tutela insieme"

[95] The very same Cardinal Manzoni featured in his *I Promessi Sposi,* and major figure of the Italian Counter-Reformation, which held its followers to much more stringent and self-sacrificial standards than in the previous century.

[96] Porro, *Vita e morte*, 7. "Ben spero nel Signore, che un giorno si compiacerà, che questa sua serva goda di quel fregio, e di quel titolo di Santa, veramente. . . " It is my opinion that his work was intended to be read primarily by girls living in convents, who were likely destined for a life of cloisterhood. Porro places high importance on the spiritual superiority of remaining a virgin, and describes how marriage for Cornelia overshadowed her spiritual gifts, and how after her husband's death, she rose out of the marital ashes to become her higher spiritual self.

Fig. 5: Cornelia Ro as depicted in the 1624 printing of Hippolito Porro's *Vita e Morte della Signora Cornelia Lampugnana Ro, Gentildonna Milanese.* Public domain.

The variation in the girlhood portrayals of the Princess of Parma and Cornelia Ro demonstrate the importance of determining authorial intent for the work. Pico's intention was to ennoble both the Farnese family and the Catholic faith. This dual purpose reveals why he spends a good deal more time on the Princess's nobility and studies than Porro does for Cornelia, whose intentions are to seek sanctification for his subject and to illustrate the positive influence of convent life. In either case, neither girl is described as young; they are not delightful, sweet, cheerful, or pleasant. The Princess of Parma is studious, serious, and spiritual. The author refers to her "tender age" on frequent occasions to assert how, as a result of her strong spiritual disposition, she was not susceptible to the pressures of youth.[97] Cornelia's girlhood is likewise tenuous, engulfed as it is by metaphorical flourishes and harsh spiritual practices. She is portrayed as so selfless that no self–or rather, no girl–remains. She does engage in girlhood activities, such as hair-washing, making dolls (wooden saints), and doing kitchen work, but they seem to be echoes of the conduct manuals we discussed earlier, rather than concrete images of Cornelia as a child.

In the final spiritual biography to be explored in this study, Antonio Lupis's 1689 biography of the first woman laureate, Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia, the image of a girl is perhaps more visible than in the previous two, but it is faint (see her portrait, fig. 6).[98] Lupis risks losing her girlhood in his metaphors of her future greatness that, by now, will seem plagiaristic in their redundancy:

> […] one could not but prophesy that her life would be crowned with holy ideas, and pure affections. *The dawn* does not deceive at daybreak, and when, from girlhood she began to demonstrate such flickers of religion and zeal, *it was a sure sign* that as she continued to grow, rays of august perfection would be conferred upon her. *It is a goodness that sets its roots in the cradle, and branches out until death.*[99]

[97] Pico, *La Principessa Santa*, 46.

[98] Antonio Lupis, *L'eroina Veneta, ouero, La vita di Elena Lucretia Cornara Piscopia* (Venice: er il Curti, con Licenza de' Superiori, e Privil, 1689).

[99] Lupis, *L'eroina Veneta,* 11. "Una lucida aurora non inganna ne i sereni campeggiamenti del giorno, e quando dalla puerilità cominciano a trasparire certi barlumi di Religione, e di zelo, *è un sicuro prognostico, che nel progresso dell'età habbiano confederarsi i raggi delle più auguste perfettioni. Una bontà, che abbarbica le sue radici nella Culla, frondeggia fino alla tomba."* Italics mine.

Of her predilections for religiosity, he states, "From these happy fore-tastes, a blessed life and death full of merits are not to be marveled at."[100] Finally, following the anecdote about her father's engravings and her subsequent paternal remonstration, he exclaims: "What a worthy prelude to her Christian generosity, with which she would repair others' weaknesses!"[101]

Fig. 6: Anonymous, *Ritratto di Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia,* from F. L. Maschietto, *Elena Lucrezia Cornaro Piscopia (1646-1684)*, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Milan. Public domain via Wikimedia.

These metaphors follow Malaspina's theory that childhood behavior should only be elaborated upon if it can elucidate who the protagonist would become. Elena's accomplishments in womanhood were both academic and spiritual, and as such Lupis's biography is both commemorative and spiritual. It acts, therefore, as a bridge between the two distinct types. This thematic convergence creates a narrative tension that is rare in female biographies of the time that, as we have seen, followed a very specific path, either of commemorating their subject as a rare example of female nobility or setting forth their subject to be a spiritual guide for the women reading the work. Elena's biography does both: it commemorates Elena Lucrezia for her intellectual abilities, but also sets forth her life as an example of fervent spirituality. The mix of both themes undoubtedly created quite the conundrum for the well-season author, Antonio Lupis, who, if he extolled her for her academic fortitude, risked creating the image of a protagonist who was tied to the world, whose desire for terrestrial glory and honor was not spiritually exemplary. His solution to this conundrum was a creative one: he villainizes Elena's father, makes him the pursuer of glory, while Elena remains ever the submissive and modest daughter.

Elena's childhood is, therefore, infused with, and affected by, this paternal conflict, and it is precisely this conflict that gives her girlhood color. Her father's desire for her life is always at odds with her own; he wishes for her to marry, she wishes to become a nun; he wishes for her to seek glory for her intellect, she to pursue spiritual studies. She is not, however, portrayed in her filial obstinacy to be quick-tempered like Battista and Bianca Maria–that would be thematically opposed to the trends of spiritual biography, which portray a woman without stain. Instead, she exhibits the sobriety of the elderly. She is old even when young; from birth, she is studious, sensible, and wise, never prone to vanity or avarice. Lupis recounts how, as soon as she was beyond the age of swaddling clothes, she possessed "a most serious disposition, and the manners

[100] Ibid, 12. "Da questi felicissimi presaggi non poteva attendersi, che un fine beato, & una morte luminosa di meriti."
[101] Ibid, 13. "Che degno preludio della sua generosità cristiana, con cui dovea riparare alle altrui impotenze!"

of the elderly and wise."[102] Though a girl in years, she was "old and tempered by wisdom, which solicited the admiration of everyone, how such a tender bud could produce fruit so ripe with mature virtue and profound prudence."[103] He continues on this course for a good while, as the verbose Lupis is prone to do, discussing how her behavior flies in the face of nature, how most mortal things age with time, just as rubies need the long heat of the sun, and diamonds require years in the cold crags of Pegù, whereas Elena "defies the laws of nature by jumping from childhood to a virile maturity, coupling the golden fluff of first-feathers with a silvery, white-haired strength.[104] One can probably surmise by this point that Lupis is a lover of metaphors and while the other authors in our study employ a good deal of metaphorical language in regards to girlhood, Lupis outdoes them all.[105] Elena is portrayed as a young bird who chirps spiritual harmonies and runs to her nest (church) as frequently as possible; she is a ship that soars over the waters with only one stroke of an oar, a painting that grows in worth over time, and a vase that resists even the strongest hammer (her father's will).[106]

Equipped with this arsenal of linguistic variance, Lupis is able to spend a great deal of time detailing Elena's girlhood, during which she is quite un-childlike: she rarely cries, she is cautious and self-governed; her religious devotion brings her peace and calm, and despite being so young, she is always quick to sacrifice. Before she can even enunciate, she is reciting long prayers, and inciting others to follow in her example. She ignores "weak," childish literature, volumes that do not instruct one in the excellence of manners and "are only childish silliness, insipid past-times producing only ignorant idleness."[107] Such discipline and gravity shock those around her, and as Lupis is aware, we, too, are likely incredulous: "Those who come after her will likely not believe that a young girl, such a small twig, is able to extend her branches so far into the territory of piety and in the fertile countryside of zeal."[108]

To further prove the veracity of his argument, Lupis employs two anecdotes that provide us with a glimpse of Elena as a girl, in her own world, behind her thick walls of seclusion. In the first anecdote, Lupis tells us that Elena's father was redecorating his palace with engravings when she happened to hear about the great expense it was costing him: "Upon hearing the cost, she was indignant that money was used in such a fashion, to aggrandize one's pomp by beautifying a wall to simply satisfy one's vanity. Perturbed with holy disdain, she could not help but say to him, 'you should spend that gold to rescue the poor, for by so doing, you will prepare yourself a palace in the Empirium."[109] Lupis uses declarative anaphora to praise his protagonist for this paternal remonstration: "For such a little body to nurture such vast thoughts of eternity. For such a little girl to discourse with such elevation of spirit."[110] This anecdotal glimpse into Elena's life occurred when she was around six years old, but the second glimpse, one with even more

[102] Ibid, 10. "Appena dunque licentiò le fasce, che mirossi adornata della più grande indole, e saggie maniere di un senile portamento."

[103] Ibid. "Fanciulla di Ètà, mà vecchia di una composta saviezza confondeva l'ammiratione di ogni uno, come un tenero germoglio potesse produrre frutti così stagionati di una matura Virtù, e di una profonda prudenza?"

[104] Ibid, 10. "La nostra EROINA esente da i riguardi di queste leggi saltò dalla pueritia ad un virile sentimento, accoppiando con una lanugine d'oro gl'argenti di una canuta sodezza." Pegù, or Bago, is a city in Burma.

[105] The most ubiquitous metaphors of childhood employed by these authors are those of milk equated with learning, and metaphors of growth (buds, trees, gardens, etc).

[106] Lupis, *L'eroina Veneta*, 12, 19, 19, and 25, respectively.

[107] Ibid, 10. See also 12 and 13: "sì fatti trastulli, sciapiti divertimenti di un'Otio ignorante."

[108] Ibid, 18. "Stentarà la credenza de Posteri, che una donzella, un picicolo virgulto spandesse così generosamente i suoi rami nel terreno della Pietà, e nelle fertili Campagne del zelo."

[109] Ibid, 12–13. "e sentendone il costo, si stupì, come così si scialacquassero le sostanze, per ingrassare le pompe, e per compiacere all rustica vanità di una parete? Stuzzicatosi di un santo sdegno, non potte far di meno di dirli, *spendersi quell'oro in sovvenimento de poveri, che in tal maniera si havrebbe preparato un Palaggio nell'Empirio.*"

[110] Ibid, 13. "Un Corpicciuolo nodrire pensieri così vasti dell'Eternità. Una fanciulla discorrere con tanta elevatezza di spirito."

vivid imagery than the first, likely occurred when she was around ten years old.[111] It is an anecdote that thematically echoes the first, by elucidating her disdain for vanity.

On this particular day we are granted entrance into Elena's palace during the *Carnevale* festivities. Her mother is standing at the window watching a carnival procession pass by, full of parading women, floats, masks of all types, traveling theater companies, and music. She invites Elena to join her, but Elena is reluctant. As Lupis reminds us, *Carnevale* is a time when "hell sews seeds of deplorable misconduct in one's conscience, thereby gathering an infinite number of sinners into its midst."[112] Despite her hesitations, Elena obliges her mother by walking over to take a look, but she repents immediately, locking herself in her room and sobbing in despair about the vanities of the world.[113] Lupis equates this dramatic lament and concern for the salvation of those around her to a young Teresa d'Avila. This particular comparison is an interesting one, because St. Teresa d'Avila was *not* perfect in her childhood.

Hagiographies, or biographies of saints, like that of St. Teresa of Avila, were read by most young women in the Renaissance and Post-Tridentine era. The girlhood depiction of many of these women in their biographies is not, however, one that necessarily portrays perfection. The childhoods of Teresa D'Avila and Caterina Vannini, for example, are rife with temptations of the world. These two women are so drawn to temptations that their morality is nearly conquered by magnetism of them. Cardinal Federico Borromeo's biography of St. Catherine Vannini (1610) recounts the story of a beautiful woman who, from the age of eleven, began to attract suitors and who, as a result of her forays into public life and festivities (including dancing), began to succumb to the "assaults" of "the enemy."[114] Such was her enjoyment of worldly vanities (extravagant dresses, perfumes, makeup, and especially hair ornaments), that "slowly but surely, almost without realizing it, she found herself lacking that precious gem that, once lost by a young woman, cannot be recuperated."[115] She did not begin her life well at all, as Borromeo tells it, but rather grew in "malizia" as she aged, "losing her good name in the process."[116]

Teresa d'Avila fared somewhat better in her childhood, but the temptations of youth nonetheless plagued her too. One of her earliest biographers writes that despite showing early signs of intense spiritual devotion, Teresa had a love of "diabolical literature," specifically books about knights and arms, which slowly ate away at her religious fervor.[117] She also fell sway to the temptations of vanity and began to "make herself up, to decorate, or rather, to arm her hair, which served to further subject her to the devil's arrows."[118]

It cannot be argued, therefore, that the protagonists of our spiritually-focused biographies are portrayed as perfect children because that was the literary trend of their sister genre, the hagiography. Girlhood perfection also comes at a cost: Elena is deprived of her childhood in the process of achieving such perfection. In almost all occurrences of references to her childhood, Lupis subverts her girlhood. The compliments he bestows on young Elena are always for her un-childlike nature. Let us also remember that he is not favorable to childhood

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[111] This estimation is made according to the narrative rhythm of the work, which follows a relatively predictable pace. The anecdote is positioned between two instances where her age *is* mentioned, and therefore grants the reader at least an idea of chronological pacing.

[112] Lupis, *L'eroina Veneta*, 17. "Giorni, in cui l'Inferno si diletta di seminare con mascherate funtioni i più deplorabili tradimenti alle coscienze, e di raccogliere la messe di innumerabili Peccatori."

[113] Ibid, 17.

[114] Federico Borromeo, *I tre libri della vita della venerabile madre Suor Caterina Vannini Sanese* (Padua, Giuseppe Comino, 1756). Cardinal Federico Borromeo was a devoted follower of St. Catherine, as is clear in his detailed entertaining hagiography of her life.

[115] Lupis, *L'eroina Veneta*, 6–7.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Ferdinando di Capua, *Predica della vita e miracoli della B. Madre Teresa di Gesù Carmelitana.* (Per Lazaro Scoriggio, 1621), 14. "Et ecco con la diabolica lettura de libri di Caualleria svanisce à poco à poco in Teresa lo spirito della diuotione." Also of interest to our study, di Capua notes that it is at age seven that children first begin to sin (12).

[118] Ibid. "à far pompa della bellezza natiua ornando, anzi armando la chioma, che seruiua per arco teso al Diauolo."

activities; he portrays literature for children as "weak," writes that young girls lack "intelligence and ingenuity," and asserts that their "donnesca ambitione," gives them a proclivity for vanity.[119]

In addition to this, Lupis insinuates that most girls are prone to make decisions they will regret in adulthood. We are specifically referring to Elena's vow at age eleven, by which she dedicates herself to God and vows to become a nun. Elena's father, ever the pursuer of glory and connections, wants her instead to marry, and marry well. Much of the biography details their discord over this matter, which is quite lively, containing letters to the Pope and a letter written by Elena herself, pleading with her father to change his mind. He tells her that she made her vow at a tender age and without his consent, therefore her vow is "without any value" whatsoever and she should be released from it.[120] He eventually writes to the Pope himself, requesting she be released from her vow, and the Pope obliges. Elena is not relieved, however. She is filled with such bitterness that she cries, laments, and sobs, until her body is almost lifeless. She then writes to her father and tells him that she will never go back on her vow even if he were to force her, that her answer would always be "an absolute negative, and a staunch refusal."[121]

At eleven years of age, then, Elena knew her mind, she knew God, and she knew her destiny. None of her father's "nets," nor his avid "hunt" for her resignation, could supersede her firm commitment to maintain this promise. She is the *eroina* of Lupis's story and, as it turns out, she remains unmarried until her death at age thirty-eight. Her father does, however, receive a consolation prize for his loss: he convinces Elena to pursue intellectual studies and eventually receives permission from the university for her to take her doctoral exams.

It should be noted that this biography is undoubtedly infused with subjectivity, given its principal aim of commemorating Elena's intellect and her spirituality. The story then, should never be interpreted as "true": such was the narrow lens of expression for female biographies in the Renaissance that truth will forever be outside our grasp. We are left, instead, with brief glimpses of an individual life that we attempt to piece together only after determining the specific authorial intent and, therefore, the slant of the story. Do we gain a glimpse into Elena's childhood in Lupis's biography? Perhaps, but we are only able to see what Lupis wants us to see, what contributes to his ideal construction of who Elena was. This construction unfortunately does not leave room for a holistic childhood portrayal: nowhere is Elena joyful and vibrant, nowhere is she described physically, nowhere is she delightful. She does not laugh or sing–the closest she comes to this is "chirping" spiritual harmonies. In his story, and in those of Princess Maria and Cornelia Ro, we do not see girlhood embraced, but girlhood rejected.

As with all spiritually-focused exemplary biographies, the description of the protagonist's childhood is merely a tool used to demonstrate the woman she would *become*, a sketch of her future self, essentially, that is filled in and colored in with greater detail as the biography unfolds. The narrative result, however, is that the image of each woman in her biography is not individualistic, nor unique. Her life, instead, is constructed according to specific standards, either spiritual or noble, which allow for very little individuality. Like cardboard paintings at amusement parks that have empty cutouts for faces, these biographies portray a woman whose portrait is painted according to specific standards, and therefore allow only a small window for her uniqueness to shine through.

There is one Renaissance biography that does, however, circumvent some of these behavioral proscriptions as a result of its derogatory intentions. It is the disdainful biography of Olimpia Maidalchini, composed by the satirical Protestant historian Gregorio Leti, in 1655.[122] Olimpia, known by history as "la papessa," was the sister-in-law of Pope Innocent X, and reputedly managed many of his political and financial duties (see her bust in fig. 7). She is

[119] Lupis, *L'eroina Veneta*, 10–14.
[120] Ibid, 26. "non era di alcuno valore."
[121] Ibid, 26–27.
[122] Gregorio Leti, *Vita di Donna Olimpia Maidalchini: Che governò la chiesa, durante il ponteficato d'Innocentio X. Doppo l'anno 1644 sino all'anno 1655* (Ragusa, Giulio Giuli, 1667).

criticized especially for her influence during the latter part of his reign when she took on many papal duties, including the control of benevolences, which allowed her to amass a small fortune. Leti's inflammatory biography details and validates every rumor ever told about Olimpia, including, of course, stories of her childhood.

Of the many methods for detailing childhood we have described above, Leti follows very few, likely because these methods generally bolster the subject's praise, which was not Leti's intent for his work. Instead, he purposefully circumvents aspects that could be considered praiseworthy, such as her family heritage and education: "I will write no other thing of Donna Olimpia, but what I have seen. I will omit her descent, only mentioning that she was born of the family of Maidalchini, which at that time made but little noise in Rome. I would very willingly have spoken of her childhood and education, but she was born before me, and of them I know nothing of my own knowledge."[123] He immediately breaks this promise by detailing her behavior as a child: "Common report said that, from her childhood, she shewed an ambition to rule; so much so, that in her girlish plays among her companions, she would never give way to any one."[124] In this he adheres to Malaspina's advice regarding the inclusion of childhood, by foreshadowing her future behavior: "Thus she grew up, and thus she remained until she arrived at marriageable years."[125]

As opposed to all of our other protagonists, who preferred the virginal life to that of marriage, Olimpia "flatly refused" her parents' wishes for her to enter a convent, despite the crumbling financial situation of her family. Leti attributes this refusal to her desire to rule, and illustrates this through the use of a stereotypically combative image of girlhood, that of pulling hair: "from her girlhood she knew how to grab Fortune by the locks of her hair."[126] This one brief sentence is quite powerful in its visual representations, but Leti does not stop here. He continues by informing the reader that during her time in convent school, she was not interested in the manual virtues (like sewing) that women generally learned while there; instead she learned avaricious behavior.[127] She was also obstinate and disrespectful. The nuns of the convent continually sought to convince her that marriage could potentially bring financial ruin to her family and that continence was a better choice, to which she retorted with cheekiness that they should then speak about the matter with the giver of continence–God–and not with her.[128]

Lest the reader feel pity, along with Boccaccio, for a young girl resisting the pressures of her age to be forever cloistered, Leti follows these points with an anecdote that leaves the reader fully convinced of Olimpia's perfidy. Frustrated with the constant pressures from the nuns, Olimpia runs away to her aunt's home where she remains for six months, but she cannot escape the pressure to "monacarsi" because her confessor, at the behest of her parents, makes a personal visit and continues the barrage of persuasion. Olimpia's response to his pressures is shocking: she accuses her confessor of sexual advances, for which he is imprisoned for many years and stripped of his confessional duties, an action that Leti asserts to be one indicative of her future behavior: "the misfortune of this confessor was a clear indicator of the persecutions they would eventually receive by Olimpia during the papal reign of Innocent."[129] These girlhood

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[123] Translations for Leti's work are taken from the following abridged English version unless otherwise noted: *Biography of Donna Olimpia Maldachini: the sister-in-law and bonne amie of Pope Innocent X, and who governed the Church or Rome from the year 1644 to the year 1655 with unlimited sway* (Philadelphia, Barrett & Jones 1846), 8.

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Leti, *Vita di Donna Olimpia Maidalchini*. Translation mine. "fin dalla sua fanciullezza seppe pigliarla dalla treccia de' capelli"

[127] From the 1667 aggiunta, *Vita di Donna Olimpia Maidalchini: Che governò la chiesa, durante il ponteficato d'Innocentio X. Doppo l'anno 1644 sino all'anno 1655,* Nuovamente ristampata con un'aggiunta considerabile (Ragusa: Giulio Giuli, 1667), 6.

[128] Ibid, 7–8.

[129] Ibid, 12-13. Trans. mine. "L'accidente di questo confessore fu un indizio chiaro di quelle persecuzioni che dovevano ricevere nel ponteficato d'Innocenzio, mediante donna Olimpia."

stories clearly serve the narrative purpose of describing her future character as a woman, who would eventually equate life itself with power. Much later in his narrative, in fact, Leti affirms that "to rule was, to her, to live."[130]

Fig. 7: Alessandro Algardi, *Bust of Portrait of Olympia Maidalchini Pamphilij*.
Courtesy of Wolfgang Kuhoff, Wikimedia.

Whether the author's intent was to laud his protagonist to the skies or elucidate her deplorable character, her childhood was a useful tool in the Renaissance art of recounting a life. It both echoed common sentiments regarding educational upbringing and the transference of virtue and nobility through birth, and constructed a future image of woman to come, an image that always maintained thematic unity with the type of biography being composed. Commemorative biographies like those of Irene, Battista, and Bianca Maria, portray courtly girls who were expected to be studious, skilled in female hobbies such as sewing and singing. They were even granted permission to read contemporary literature such as Ariosto and Petrarch, and began to exhibit signs of virility at a young age.[131] Their personalities are depicted to be lighthearted, joyful, and amicable. Battista and Bianca Maria are even portrayed to be somewhat feisty. The three girls therefore inhabit physical space, in full color. Though accomplished, they are still childlike.

The spiritual biographies, instead, were written as exemplum literature and therefore embody the thematic shift in biography following the Counter Reformation. These biographies portray girls who are chaste, courageous, modest, kind yet serious, generous with others, frugal with themselves, and, most of all, assiduous in their orations. They are never silly, never vain, never lighthearted. Their girlhood is, essentially, superseded by their exemplary purpose, which is to please God, not others. In either case, these biographies and depictions of girlhood should always be read with discernment. The author's intentions are not difficult to determine, and once they are isolated, readers can apply the correct lens of interpretation to the work. In so doing, one should set anachronistic expectations aside and instead contemplate the rare glints of individuality that remain.

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[130] Leti, *Vita di Donna Olimpia Maidalchini* (Abridged English version, 1667), 20.

[131] Juan Luis Vives, *Education of a Christian Woman: A Sixteenth-Century Manual*, ed. Charles Fantazzi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 74. In his conduct manual, Vives rails against the vices of literature dealing with love or war. He writes that women who engage in such reading should be an "object of shame and hatred even to the pagans," and likewise claims that "women become addicted to vice through reading."

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