DEBATING AS AN AUTHORITY: TULLIA D'ARAGONA'S AUTHORIAL SELF-FASHIONING AND THE 'TRE CORONE'[1]

Alyssa M. Granacki, Dana V. Hogan*

Abstract

Often celebrated as the first woman to enter the philosophical debate on the ethics of love, the sixteenth-century philosopher, poet, and *cortegiana honesta* Tullia d'Aragona has attracted renewed attention in the past thirty years. In her *Dialogo dell'Infinita d'Amore* (1547) d'Aragona appeals to intellectual authorities to promote her own ethics of love and affirms her qualifications to insert a female voice into the male-dominated debate. This article explores the social and literary avenues for her access to a vernacular literary tradition which she then leveraged to self-fashion an intellectual identity that garnered the respect of her contemporaries. This analysis of d'Aragona's invocation of the *tre corone* (Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch) in her *Dialogo* sheds light on her means of entering the debate on the ethics of love and establishing herself as an authority within this intellectual milieu.

Keywords: Tullia d'Aragona, Authority, *Tre corone*, Authorial strategies, Ethics of love, *Cortegiana honesta*

Born in Rome between 1501 and 1505, Tullia d'Aragona was a philosopher, poet, and *cortegiana honesta*, an elite courtesan recognized and praised for her intellectual abilities. Her three publications include her choral anthology (*Rime*, 1547), philosophical dialogue (*Dialogo dell'Infinita d'Amore*, 1547), and reprisal of an epic poem (*Il Meschino detto Il Guerrino*, 1560). Often celebrated as the first woman to enter the philosophical debate on the ethics of love, d'Aragona has attracted renewed attention in the past thirty years. Recently, scholars have refuted early doubts about her intellectual

* Duke University

1 We are grateful for the support from Project Vox, especially Andrew Janiak and Patrick Duan, which made this research possible. Project Vox team, *Tullia d'Aragona*, "Project Vox*",* Duke University Libraries (2022, https://projectvox.org/tullia-daragona-c-1505-1556/).

capabilities through interpretations that highlight her philosophical prowess; rather than rehash existing philosophical views, d'Aragona brings together Aristotelian and Platonic concepts to articulate her own ethics of love and to insert a female voice into the field of philosophy.[2] Yet as an early modern woman writer, d'Aragona would have faced doubts about her credibility and gravitas.[3] Accordingly, she needed to employ both practical and literary strategies to ensure the publication and endorsement of her ideas.[4]

This article analyzes the social and literary avenues that d'Aragona leveraged to fashion an authorial identity which garnered the respect of her contemporaries and situated her among established vernacular writers. While scholars have dedicated considerable attention to d'Aragona's networks and philosophical influences, we examine her relationship to a vernacular literary tradition – especially the works of Dante Alighieri, Giovanni Boccaccio, and Francesco Petrarca (the so-called *tre corone*) – to better understand how she presented herself as an intellectual authority on the ethics of love. We begin by exploring d'Aragona's relationships with elites

2 E. Celani (ed.), *Le rime di Tulla d'Aragona: Cortigiana del secolo XVI*, Commissione per i testi di lingua, Bologna 1969; E. Pallitto (ed.), *Sweet Fire: Tullia d'Aragona's Poetry of Dialogue and Selected Prose*, George Braziller, New York 2006; L. Curtis–Wendlandt, *Conversing on Love: Text and Subtext in Tullia d'Aragona's* Dialogo della Infinità d'Amore, in "Hypatia", XIX, 4, 2004, pp. 77–98; D. Giovannozzi, *Leone Ebreo in Tullia d'Aragona's* Dialogo*: Between Varchi's Legacy and Philosophical Autonomy*, in "British Journal for the History of Philosophy", XXIV, 4, 2019, pp. 702–717; A.L. Puliafito, *"Né dottrina di cose, né ornamento di parole": Tullia d'Aragona e il* Dialogo della infinità di amore, in "Bruniana & Campanelliana", XXVII, 1–2, 2021, pp. 393–404.

3 A.R. Jones, *The Currency of Eros: Women's Love Lyric in Europe, 1540–1620*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1990, pp. 1–4; M. Damiani, *La posizione di rilievo assunta dalla donna nella trattatistica rinascimentale*, in *La donna nel Rinascimento. Amore, famiglia, cultura, potere*, *Atti del XXIX Convegno Internazionale*, Chianciano e Montepulciano, 20-22 luglio 2017, Cesati, Florence 2019, pp. 331–53.

4 C. Lesage, *Le* dialogue De l'infinité d'amour de Tullia d'Aragona *ou de l'impertinence en philosophie*, in Ph. Guérin (ed.), *Le dialogue ou les enjeux d'un choix d'écriture (pays de langues romanes)*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 2006, pp. 159–76; F. Dubard de Gaillarbois, *Il rebus di Tullia. Tullia d'Aragona e Benedetto Varchi o di una felice 'associazione per scrivere'*, in "La Rivista" V, *Actes de la journée d'études Varchi e dintorni, Université de Paris Sorbonne, 21 marzo 2016*, 2017, pp. 137–52; D. Giovannozzi, *Procedere aristotelico per approdi platonici. Il Dialogo della infinità di amore di Tullia d'Aragona*, in S. Plastina, E.M. De Tommaso (eds.), *Filosofe e scienziate in età moderna*, Fabrizio Serra, Pisa 2019, pp. 15–29; F. Calitti, *Un caso di studio: le opera di Tullia d'Aragona tra filologia e studi di genere*, in "Schifanoia", LVIII/LIX, 1-2, 2020, pp. 183–90.

and literati, demonstrating that she developed and maintained a reputation as an erudite woman in intellectual circles that were deeply engaged with vernacular literature. Next, we consider d'Aragona's invocations of Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch in her *Dialogo della infinità d'amore* [*Dialogue on the Infinity of Love*] in order to shed light on how she not only cites these authors as authorities but also references and responds to their portrayals of love. In essence, d'Aragona's authorial self-fashioning and her claim to intellectual authority drew not only from networks and sources that were philosophical but also literary, affirming her place in both a literary and philosophical canon traditionally dominated by men.

D'Aragona's social network, publisher, and close friendships with leading scholars of vernacular literature provided her exposure to the literature of the tre corone and an opportunity to shape her own scholarly reputation. Because of her status as a courtesan, d'Aragona has often been treated as a remarkable case of someone who persisted despite her social handicaps.[5] At the same time, her unstable social circumstances catalyzed her success in the published record of philosophy. Forced to seek her fortune in various cities, d'Aragona's itinerancy brought her into contact with people who offered valuable intellectual and material support. Prior to publishing her writings, d'Aragona laid the groundwork for the reception of her work by constructing an elite network which extended from Rome to Venice.[6] Before joining the Medici court in Florence, she traveled to intellectual centers throughout the Italian peninsula where she gained the favor of powerful figures who helped advance her work. Reconstructing her social and intellectual networks has demonstrated that d'Aragona's careful relationship cultivation rewarded her with both social capital and a reputation for erudition.[7]

---

5 A. Cavallino (assumed), *La Tariffa delle Puttane di Venegia* (1531), published in "Nuovo Rinascimento", ed. D. Romei, XXXIV, 2020; E. Celani (ed.), *Le rime di Tulla d'Aragona*, cit.; F. Calitti, *Splendori e miserie della 'cortigiana onesta'*, in E. Iace (ed.), *Dalla Controriforma alla Restaurazione*, Einaudi, Torino 2011, pp. 111–118; L. Casella, *Il dubbio è questo se si può amar con termino.* Dialogo della infinità d'amore *di Tullia d'Aragona*, in M. Arriaga Florez, S. Bartolotta, M. Martín Clavijo (eds.), *Ausencias: escritoras al margen de la cultura*, Arcibel, Madrid 2013, pp. 151–166.

6 On the geographic and social diversity of d'Aragona's interlocutors, see J.L. Hairston, *Out of the Archive: Four Newly-Identified Figures in Tullia d'Aragona's* Rime della Signora Tullia di Aragona et di diversi a lei *(1547)*, in "Modern Language Notes", CXVIII, 1, 2003, pp. 257–263.

7 F. Calitti, *Un caso di studio*, cit.; F. Dubard de Gaillarbois, *Il rebus di Tullia*, cit.; D. Giovannozzi, *Procedere aristotelico per approdi platonici*, cit.; C. Lesage,

When d'Aragona infamously ran afoul of a 1546 sumptuary law requiring courtesans to wear a yellow covering in public, her relationships with powerful cultural and political figures in Florence not only allowed her to escape legal trouble but also to leverage the situation to enhance her public image. Don Pietro, cousin to the Duchess of Florence, and the scholar Benedetto Varchi interceded by introducing d'Aragona to the Duchess and helping her craft a petition.[8] In May 1547, Duke Cosimo granted d'Aragona an exemption from the law on the grounds of her "rare knowledge of poetry and philosophy" [la rara scienzia di Poesia et filosofia, che si ritrova…la Dotta Tullia d'Aragona].[9] While this episode has often been treated as d'Aragona's triumphant escape from a scrape with the law in her precarious position as a courtesan, it also provided a public accreditation of d'Aragona as poet and philosopher in the same year that her *Rime* and dialogue were published.[10] Her intellectual authority was thus decreed by a ruler who was deeply invested in advancing Tuscany's cultural hegemony throughout Italy – a project which was intimately tied to the canonization of Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch and the codification of the Italian language as proposed by Pietro Bembo.

As a woman, d'Aragona would have been excluded from certain intellectual circles, but she carved inroads to the literary elite by creating her own social and scholarly gatherings. Cinquecento women were rarely permitted to participate actively in Italian academies, so the substitute for women became friendly dialogue with educated men.[11] D'Aragona not only engaged in such dialogue but shaped it; she hosted gatherings of professional and amateur literati in her Venetian and Florentine homes which

---

Le dialogue De l'infinité d'amour de Tullia d'Aragona *ou de l'impertinence en philosophie*, cit.; L. D'Ascia, *Ermafrodito amoroso e ragione senza genere. Tullia d'Aragona e Benedetto Varchi nel* Dialogo dell'infinità d'amore, in "SigMa", IV, 2020, pp. 461–505.

8 Letter from Tullia d'Aragona to Benedetto Varchi, Letter 37 in L. Kaborycha (ed.), *A Corresponding Renaissance: Letters Written by Italian Women 1375–1650*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, pp. 193–194.

9 1 May 1547, Archivio di Stato di Firenze, published in S. Bongi, *Il velo giallo di Tullia d'Aragona*, in "Rivista critica della letteratura italiana", III, 3, 1886, pp. 89–90.

10 D. Giovannozzi, *Procedere aristotelico per approdi platonici*, cit., p. 16; F. Calitti, *Un caso di studio*, cit., p. 188.

11 C. Fahy, *Women and Italian Cinquecento Literary Academies*, in L. Panizza (ed.), *Women in Italian Renaissance Culture and Society*, Legenda, Cambridge 2000, pp. 438–452; J.L. Smarr, *Joining the Conversation: Dialogues by Renaissance Women*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor 2005, p. 15.

were later evoked in her own and others' publications.[12] Her dialogue and dialogic poems could thus be legitimized as veristic exchanges. In her *Dialogo* d'Aragona demonstrates authority as the host of the debate, and asserts her right to participate in such conversations by drawing attention to her status as a courtesan and her superior worldly experience on the subject of love. Following the publication of d'Aragona's *Rime* and *Dialogo*, the diverse and powerful network she had developed furthered her success once again by publicly praising d'Aragona specifically for her intellectual merit.[13] These testimonials gave additional credence to her claims in her *Dialogo* of women's capacity for reason and logic as well as to her qualifications to make such an argument. Through the careful construction, maintenance, and publicizing of her relationships, d'Aragona legitimated her participation in philosophical and literary domains typically reserved for men.

D'Aragona's publishing environment also furthered her reputation as an intellectual authority and granted her access to a burgeoning vernacular literary tradition. The first publisher of d'Aragona's works was Gabriel Giolito de' Ferrari, one of the most successful and prolific publishers of vernacular works in Venice, likely a strategic choice based on d'Aragona's network, content, and language. As previous scholars have noted, d'Aragona's literary connections facilitated her introduction to Giolito, a champion of women's writings during a period of increasing demand.[14] In addition to d'Aragona's texts, Giolito published works by women writers such as Laura Terracina and Vittoria Colonna. In the 1540s and 1550s, he was interested in printing literary defenses of women – a genre inspired by Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* [*On Famous Women*] – though this focus shifted after the Council of Trent as he adapted to the resulting cultural conservatism.[15]

12 Sperone Speroni, *Dialogo d'amore*, in M. Pozzi (ed.), *Trattatisti del* Cinquecento, Ricciardi, Milano 1978, 1, pp. 517, 527–528; R. Russell, *Introduction*, in Tullia d'Aragona, *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love*, trans. R. Russell and B. Merry, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1997, p. 25; M. Damiani, *La posizione di rilievo assunta dalla donna nella trattatistica rinascimentale*, cit., pp. 331–334; A.L. Puliafito, *"Né dottrina di cose, né ornamento di parole"*, cit.; D. Giovannozzi, *Procedere aristotelico per approdi platonici*, cit.

13 Poem by Niccolo Martelli, published in E. Pallitto (ed.), *Sweet Fire*, cit., p. 83; G. Muzio, *Rime diuerse del Mutio Iustinopolitano*, Gabriel Giolito de Ferrari e Fratelli, Venice 1551, pp. 31–32, 42–43; D. Atanagi, *Lettere di XIII hvomini illustri*, Giorgio de Cavalli, Venice 1565, pp. 771–772.

14 D. Giovannozzi, *Procedere aristotelico per approdi platonici*, cit., p. 18; F. Dubard de Gaillarbois, *Il rebus di Tullia*, cit., p. 139; L. D'Ascia, *Ermafrodito amoroso e ragione senza genere*, cit., p. 482; F. Calitti, *Un caso di studio*, cit., p. 185.

15 A. Dialeti, *The Publisher Gabriel Giolito de' Ferrari, Female Readers, and the Debate about Women in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, in "Renaissance and Reforma-

Giolito had also established a precedent of printing multiple editions of texts written by men on the debate of ethical love and by authors such as Petrarch and Boccaccio. Moreover, Giolito was one of several Venetian publishers who were involved in the project of replacing Latin with Italian by both translating Latin texts into Italian and popularizing vernacular works. Just eight years after the publication of d'Aragona's works, he would release an edition of the *Commedia*, which gave the text its modern qualifier *"*divina". In this context, d'Aragona was perfectly positioned to publish with Giolito, given her contacts with the social and intellectual elite, her knowledge of Latin, and her choice to write in the vernacular.[16] By the time d'Aragona composed her texts, Giolito had a well-respected brand identity that aligned with the subjects and forms she chose to engage.

In Florence, d'Aragona met Benedetto Varchi, a leading figure in the literary scene who she would depict as the main respondent to her eponymous disputant in her dialogue. This important and multifaceted relationship has been analyzed from varied perspectives.[17] Varchi's scholarly mentorship and investment lent credence to d'Aragona's work. Like her other supporters, Varchi contributed to d'Aragona's efforts to proclaim her cultural authority by publishing his own testimonials to the value of her virtue, soul, and intellect.[18] In the *Dialogo,* d'Aragona's character of Varchi reflects his

---

tion", XXVIII, 6, 2004, p. 8. On Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*, see: P.G. Ricci, *Studi sulle opera latine e volgari del Boccaccio*, in "Rinascimento", X, 1959, pp. 3–32; V. Zaccaria, *Le fasi redazionali del* De mulierbus claris, in "Studi sul Boccaccio", I, 1963, pp. 253–332; B. Buettner, *Boccaccio's Des Cleres et Nobles Femmes: Systems of Signification in an Illuminated Manuscript*, vol. 53, Monograph on the Fine Arts, College Art Association in association with University of Washington Press, Seattle 1996; S. Kolsky, *The Ghost of Boccaccio: Writings on Famous Women in Renaissance Italy*, Brepols, Turnhout 2005; R. Daniels, *Boccaccio and the Book: Production and Reading in Italy 1340-1520*, Legenda, London 2009.

16 D'Aragona's will counted 35 Latin and Italian volumes among her possessions. Published in S. Bongi, *Rime della Signora Tullia di Aragona; Et di diversi a lei*, in "Annali di Gabriel Giolito de' Ferrari", I, Principali Librai, Rome 1890, pp. 193–195.

17 M. López, *The Courtesan's Gift: Reciprocity and Friendship in the Letters of Camilla Pisana and Tullia D'Aragona*, in D.T. Lochman and M. López (eds.), *Discourses and Representations of Friendship in Early Modern Europe, 1500–1700,* Routledge, New York 2016, pp. 99–116; D. Giovannozzi, *Leone Ebreo in Tullia d'Aragona's* Dialogo, cit.; Ead., *Procedere aristotelico per approdi platonici*, cit.; L. D'Ascia, *Ermafrodito amoroso e ragione senza genere*, cit.; F. Dubard de Gaillarbois, *Il rebus di Tullia*, cit.; F. Calitti, *Un caso di studio*, cit.

18 B. Varchi, *De' sonetti di m. Benedetto Varchi colle risposte, e proposte di diuersi parte seconda*, Lorenzo Torrentino, Florence 1557, pp. 199–200.

historical role and training as the president of the Florentine Academy.[19] In his response to the *Dialogo* Varchi approved of this character, reminding readers of the genuine friendship and authentic debates that he shared with d'Aragona. This endorsement was also a public declaration that d'Aragona was the intellectual equal of such an eminent scholar and literary authority. In addition to these benefits, d'Aragona's relationship with Varchi likely played a role in her developing knowledge of vernacular authors, as he and other members of the Florentine Academy undertook philological work on canonical authors such as Dante and Petrarch.

D'Aragona's self-fashioning as an intellectual authority succeeded; decades after her death, she was memorialized in Cristofano Bronzini's *Della dignità, & nobiltà delle donne* (1625) for her learned dialogue, rather than for her renown as a courtesan: "Tullia d'Aragona, who composed a dialogue which is very erudite and filled with noble concepts on the infinity of love" [E Tullia d'Aragona, quale compose un Dialogo molto dotto, e pieno di bellissimi concetti dell'affinita [infinita] d'Amore].[20] Her movements were foundational in permitting her access to literary and scholarly circles and crucial to the formation of her intellectual identity and public persona. Collectively, d'Aragona's network, publisher, and special relationship with Varchi not only confirmed her position in the male-dominated field of philosophy, but also allowed her to insert herself into a vernacular literary tradition reaching back to the tre corone as it gained in popularity and respect at this pivotal moment.

At the time of the *Dialogo*'s publication, Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch were recognized as foundational authors in a vernacular literary canon.[21] In 1525, Bembo's *Prose della volgar lingua* [*Discussions of Vernacular Language*] had elevated Petrarch as the model for Italian lyric poetry and Boccaccio for Italian prose. Bembo had also previously prepared an edition

19 C. Lesage, *Le* dialogue De l'infinité d'amour de Tullia d'Aragona *ou de l'impertinence en philosophie*, cit., p. 162.

20 Translation ours. C. Bronzini, *Della dignità, & nobiltà delle donne*, Zanobi Pignoni, Florence 1625, p. 118.

21 M. Santoro, *Dante, Petrarca, Boccaccio, e il paratesto: le edizioni rinascimentali delle tre corone*, Edizioni dell'Ateneo, Rome 2006; M. Eisner, *Boccaccio and the Invention of Italian Literature: Dante, Petrarch, Cavalcanti, and the Authority of the Vernacular*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2013; S. Gilson, *Reading Dante in Renaissance Italy: Florence, Venice and the 'Divine Poet'*, University of Oxford Press, New York 2018; L. Banella, F. Tomasi (eds.), *Oltre la Commedia: Dante e il canone antico della lirica (1450-1600)*, Carocci, Rome 2020); L. Fiorentini, *Petrarch and Boccaccio in the First Commentaries on Dante's* Commedia: *A Literary Canon Before Its Birth*, Routledge, New York 2020.

of the *Commedia* in 1502, just one of many, including Giolito's, that circulated in the sixteenth century.[22] On the one hand, d'Aragona was roughly two centuries removed from these early works of Italian literature. On the other, her immersion in circles of literati as well as her explicit references to Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch in her *Dialogo* suggest that she knew their literature well. One of d'Aragona's contemporaries claimed that she could recite Boccaccio and Petrarch by heart, and recent scholarship has confirmed the presence of Dantean language in her letters as well as the Petrarchan nature of her poetry.[23] But how these literary predecessors influenced her authorial self-fashioning and her ethics of love in the *Dialogo* deserves further critical attention.

One possible reason for this lacuna is that the connection between d'Aragona's *Dialogo* and other source material is strong; scholars have demonstrated how she draws from cinquecento treatises on love, especially those by Leone Ebreo and Sperone Speroni, as well as Marisilio Ficino's work on Plato.[24] When compared with these authors, the presence of the tre corone in her dialogue is arguably more subtle. Yet as authors who both explored love as a philosophical problem and centered women in their literature, Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch could have provided d'Aragona with a starting point for an ethics of love that privileges a female perspective.[25] Through a close examination of d'Aragona's invo-

22 G. Patota, *La quarta corona: Pietro Bembo e la codificazione dell'italiano scritto*, il Mulino, Bologna 2017.

23 R. Russell, *Introduction*, cit., p. 22, note 2; F. Dubard de Gaillarbois, *Il rebus di Tullia*, cit., p. 150; F. Calitti, *Un caso di studio*, cit., esp. pp. 187–188.

24 L. D'Ascia, *Ermafrodito amoroso e ragione senza genere*, cit., especially pp. 463–468; M. Antes, *Tullia d'Aragona: Cortigiana e filosofa. Con il testo del Dialogo 'Della infinita d'amore'*, Polistampa, Florence, 2011; M. Damiani, *La posizione di rilievo*, cit.; R. Russell, *Introduction*, cit., pp. 21–42.

25 On the philosophical nature of the *tre corone* see: É. Gilson, *Dante and Philosophy,* trans. D. Moore, Harper & Row, New York, 1963; A. Gagliardi, *Giovanni Boccaccio: Poeta, Filosofo, Averroista*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli 1999; C. Casagrande, G. Fioravanti (eds.), *La filosofia in Italia al tempo di Dante*, il Mulino, Bologna 2016; F. Andrei, *Boccaccio the Philosopher: An Epistemology of the Decameron*, The New Middle Ages, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland 2017; I. Candido (ed.), *Petrarch and Boccaccio, The Unity of Knowledge in the Pre-Modern World*, De Gruyter, Boston 2018, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110419306; C.S. Celenza, *Philology, Philosophy and Boccaccio*, in "MLN", CXXXIV, Supplement, 2019, pp. 126–137; A.A. Robiglio, *Dante 'Filosofo Romanzo*', in "Rivista di Filosofia Neo-Scolastica", CXIII, 2021, pp. 79–95; A. Granacki, *Domesticating Philosophy: Dante's Women in Boccaccio*, in "Mediaevalia", XLII, 2021, pp. 269–297, doi:10.1353/mdi.2021.0008.

cations of the tre corone and their texts, we reconsider how she develops an authoritative female voice and a new vision of love.

In the *Dialogo*, d'Aragona recognizes Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch as canonical authors by including them in a series of examples about the way virtuous and learned men are often maligned. She cites Cato, Seneca, Plutarch, and Galen (from Antiquity); Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch (from the Middle Ages and Renaissance); and finally, the more contemporary examples of Gaza, Pontano, Longolio and, finally, "our Most Reverend Bembo" [reverendissimo Bembo].[26] In this syntactical construction, the tre corone become the relevant link from Antiquity to the present day and a crucial part of the literary and philosophical canon that d'Aragona recognizes. In addition to this mention of these authors as a unit, d'Aragona also references them individually during the course of the discussion.

Petrarch emerges in the text as an outstanding poet, but d'Aragona also sheds doubt on the way his poetry is employed to make universal claims, thereby both acknowledging his authority and asserting her own. Tullia states that Petrarch "towers incomparably over all others in descriptions of the pangs of love" [e massimamente il Petrarca, al quale niuno si può comparare, né si dee, negli affetti amorosi],[27] and when Varchi laments how poets are seen as "good for nothing" [e così non sia buono a nulla],[28] Tullia supplies a counterexample to those would-be detractors, noting that Petrarch is, in fact, most revered for his poetry.[29] Petrarch is also lauded as representative of the intellectual value of poetry, but, at the same time, d'Aragona highlights his male-centric view. When Varchi presents Petrarch's poetry as evidence of women's fickleness in love,[30] Tullia interrogates his logic: why should we believe everything Petrarch has written when it includes only his perspective, that of a man? After all, she argues sensibly, how different would our image of women in love be if we could read poems written by Madonna Laura instead[31]? In this exchange, Tullia masterfully undermines the notion that the male point of view is somehow

26 All English quotations of *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love* come from the translation by Rinaldina Russell and Bruce Merry (henceforth *Dialogue*). Italian quotations come from edition of *Dialogo della infinita d'amore* reprinted in M. Antes, *Tullia d'Aragona*, cit. Page numbers are provided for the English text. Page numbers are not available for the Italian text. Here *Dialogue*, p. 73.

27 *Dialogue*, p. 84.

28 *Dialogue*, p. 86.

29 Cf. *ibid.*

30 Cf. *Dialogue*, p. 69.

31 Cf. *ibid.*

universal or objective.[32] By refusing to accept that Petrarch is the final arbiter on the experience of love, especially for women, she additionally asserts the authoritative nature of her own voice on the subject. This critique of the sexist assumptions at the core of Varchi's interpretation of Petrarch dovetails with d'Aragona's challenges to the sexist assumptions embedded in Varchi's notion of a Platonic love that would necessarily exclude women.[33] D'Aragona employs the same tactic in both instances; she demonstrates her knowledge of authoritative antecedents while simultaneously highlighting their shortcomings.

D'Aragona's citations of Boccaccio's *Decameron* similarly reinforce Boccaccio's status as an authority while also restaging ethical questions about love raised in the *Decameron*. In some instances, Boccaccio's text is treated as evidence that legitimizes the claims of the speakers. Tullia refers to the *Decameron* as an example of how lovers can never be satisfied in order to support her point that love is infinite potentially,[34] and later Varchi uses Boccaccio's text to argue that there is no greater pleasure than love.[35] Alternatively, Varchi's allusion to the tale of Cimone (*Decameron* V.1) raises a series of questions about love, knowledge, and reason that intersect with the *Dialogo*'s debate regarding vulgar and honest love. Shortly after his arrival, Varchi says he hopes Tullia doesn't believe him to be "as uncouth as Cimone" [per tanto Cimone e per così rozzo][36] in response to her declaration that he has "some complex philosophical reasons for considering women less meritorious and intrinsically less perfect than men".[37] In the English translation of d'Aragona's text, the footnote clarifies that Cimone is "a youth bred in the forest by wild animals",[38] yet a closer look at Boccaccio's story reveals a complex character who troubles the boundaries of noble and ignoble behavior in love.

In the *Decameron,* Cimone is an ignorant simpleton who refuses to be educated despite the efforts of his family; he lives "with manners more suitable to a beast than a man" [con modi piú convenienti a bestia che ad uomo].[39] One day, he sees Ephigenia in the forest, falls in love, and decides

32 This idea appears as a central tenet in the work of twentieth-century feminist thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Carla Lonzi, and Luce Irigaray.
33 Cf. *Dialogue*, pp. 96–97.
34 Cf. *Dialogue*, p. 84.
35 Cf. *Dialogue*, p. 89.
36 *Dialogue*, p. 59.
37 *Dialogue*, pp. 55–56.
38 *Dialogue*, p. 56 note 5.
39 English quotations are from G. Boccaccio, *Decameron*, trans. M. Musa and P. Bondanella, Signet Classics, New York 1982, p. 368. Italian quotations are from

to transform himself into a nobleman in order to woo her. Cimone becomes eloquent, educated, and refined. Yet his treatment of Ephigenia is more bestial than ever. He employs force and violence to steal her from her betrothed without ever inquiring about her wishes. The tale ends "happily" with the two married, but the story is characterized by Ephigenia's haunting silence and Cimone's brutal conduct despite his ostensible transformation.

We could read Varchi's reference to Cimone as rooted in the opening lines of Boccaccio's tale, that is, Varchi seeks to distance himself from an uneducated man who behaves as such.[40] But d'Aragona would have known that Cimone was a more complicated figure; he is a man who has the power and the knowledge to behave rationally but instead acts like a beast, ignoring Ephigenia's experience in the process. D'Aragona's Varchi thus rejects a model of behavior which neglects women's perspectives and reduces them to objects to be loved or possessed. As with D'Aragona's invocation and critique of Petrarch's poetry, this incorporation of a Boccaccian character rejects a type of love that would silence women and their experiences, again implying the necessity of the female voice centered in the *Dialogo*.

We can also locate elements of the Cimone story in d'Aragona's discussion of honest and vulgar love. She censures those who "turn from rational men to brute animals" [brievemente diventando di huomo rationale animal brutto].[41] Cimone is emblematic of this problem since he supposedly changes from a "muttonhead" [insensato animale], to a "human being" [essere uomo] but, despite all of his supposedly noble qualities, he continues to act precisely like a beast.[42] The allusion to Cimone does not simply reprimand those who are uneducated, it censures those who would act ignobly even when they know better. By rejecting Cimone in the dialogue's early lines, d'Aragona offers an anticipatory critique of Cimone's love which contrasts with the noble, honest love that she celebrates toward the end of the *Dialogo.* D'Aragona's concept of love is therefore not only part of a philosophical tradition, but it is also in conversation with the ethical ques-

---

Vittore Branca's version of the text, available via Brown University's *Decameron Web*: https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/texts/DecIndex.php?lang=it.

40 D'Ascia considers Cimone a changed man in his interpretation of Varchi's reference: "Per quanto aristotelico, Varchi è anzitutto un lettore di Boccaccio, consapevole che amore è sinonimo di cultura e che la forza della presenza femminile, che ha civilizzato il rustico Cimone, è ancora una volta imprescindibile quando si tratta di cimentarsi in una competizione dialettica" (L. D'Ascia, *Ermafrodito amoroso e ragione senza genere*, cit., p. 461).

41 *Dialogue*, p. 94.

42 *Dialogue*, p. 373.

tions that Boccaccio poses about love in the *Decameron*. This reference both demonstrates d'Aragona's knowledge of Boccaccio's work and subtly asserts her ability to interpret this eminent literary predecessor.

Like Boccaccio and Petrarch, Dante is treated as a literary authority in the *Dialogo*; the characters Tullia and Varchi quote the *somma poeta* as they craft their arguments. Additionally, these explicit citations of the *Commedia* open up the possibility of considering how Dante's ideas of love echo in d'Aragona's text. Dante's emphasis on the importance of tempering love with reason aligns with d'Aragona's distinction between honest and vulgar love, including her focus on free will. Engaging with a canonical author like Dante, d'Aragona joined a vernacular literary tradition that paved the way for her vision of love.

D'Aragona's two explicit citations of *Inferno* create a parallel between Dante's moral system, as voiced by Virgil, and the character Tullia's. Virgil, guiding Dante through the *Inferno*, encourages him to ignore sinners who are unworthy of attention: "let us not talk of them, but look and pass" [non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa] (*Inf.* 3.51) and "to want to hear such bickering is base" [ché voler ciò udire è bassa voglia] (*Inf.* 30.148).[43] Tullia restates the words that Virgil uses to guide Dante, exhorting Varchi to leave aside topics which she considers undignified.[44] Tullia, aligned with Virgil, becomes Varchi's guide in this moment as she directs and shapes their conversation. In another instance, Varchi repeats Dante's description of Fortune[45]: "But she is blessed and hears none of it" [ma ella s'è beata e ciò non ode] (*Inf.* 7.94) to describe Tullia's refusal to hear his reasoning. But Varchi is actually mistaken. Dante's Fortune is not the blind, illogical Fortune of the classical world. Although Fortune exists beyond the bounds of human reason, Dante's Fortune is a minister of divine justice who answers to *divine* logic. This reference, then, could be understood as a tongue-in-cheek move on Tullia's part: Varchi implies that she is blind and deaf to logic, but for those who know Dante's text, d'Aragona associates the character Tullia with a higher entity: divinity.[46] D'Aragona flaunts her erudition vis-à-vis these references to Dante, and makes her character Tullia into the equal of a great, learned man like Varchi.

43 Both English and Italian quotations of the *Comedy* are from Columbia University Library's Digital Dante project, https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/. English translation is by Allen Mandelbaum.

44 Cf. *Dialogue*, p. 87.

45 *Dialogue*, p. 68.

46 Similarly, Tullia creates a parallel between herself and Diotima when Varchi dares to suggest she has Socratic ignorance (*Dialogue*, cit., p. 66).

Beyond these explicit references, the themes of d'Aragona's dialogue, especially her concepts of love, are arguably in conversation with Dante's *Commedia*. In fact, in the notes to the English translation, Russell proposes that d'Aragona's distinction between natural and human love likely derives from Dante's *Purgatorio*.[47] Although d'Aragona had access to numerous sources that considered love from a philosophical perspective, three connections with Dante emerge in the *Dialogo*: an insistence on the need for love to be tempered by reason, the importance of free will, and an acceptance physical love. The *Dialogo* offers a major intervention in the debate on the ethics of love by specifying that there are two kinds of love: vulgar or dishonest love, and virtuous or honest love. D'Aragona claims that vulgar love is motivated by a desire for physical consummation and procreation, yet she does not fully denounce this type of desire.[48] Instead, she clarifies that this love is vulgar because humans allow such desires to overcome the faculty of reason. Since humans are distinguished from animals only by their intellect and free will, they alone have the power to use their reason to seek honest love.[49] This distinction between humans and animals, as well as the distinction between a desire that is reasonable and one that errs, are major concerns for Dante as well.

In *Inferno* 5, as Dante travels through the circle of the Lustful, we learn that Francesca is not guilty of loving but rather because she and Paolo are "carnal sinners, who subjugate reason to desire" [peccator carnali, / che la ragion sommettono al talento] (*Inf.* 5.38-9). In d'Aragona's text, she similarly criticizes those who "yield to the passions of the flesh without due limit and moderation. For in doing so, they subordinate reason" [senza regola o misura alcuna si dà in preda agli appetiti carnali, sottoponendo la ragione].[50] While d'Aragona's language is not identical to Dante's, the same idea undergirds both statements: this kind of vulgar love (or lust) takes place when "ragione" is "sottomesso" or "sottoposto" to carnal desires.[51] Furthermore, both Dante and d'Aragona distinguish between a bestial appetite and the human capacity for moderation. On the terrace of the Lustful in Purgatory, Guido Guinizzelli describes his sin in the following way: "we did not keep within the bounds of human law/but served our appetites like beasts" [non servammo umana legge /seguendo come bestie l'appetito] (*Purg.* 26.83-4). Analogously, d'Aragona's description of vulgar love

47 Ivi, p. 94, note 62.
48 Cf. *Dialogue*, pp. 90, 94.
49 Cf. *Dialogue*, p. 94.
50 Cf. *ibid.*
51 Another possible analog for this representation for both Dante and D'Aragona is the iconography of Phyllis (desire) riding Aristotle (reason).

notes that it involves lowering oneself to the level of beasts. She censures "anyone who lowers himself by way of dishonest love from the level of human beings, which is perfect, to the level of wild beasts" [chiunque dal grado dell'uomo, il quale è sì perfetto, discende mediante lo amor disonesto a quello delle fere][52] In both texts, the possible perfection of human love is marred by the choice to lower oneself to the behavior of an animal lacking in rational thought. Drawing such ideas from Dante would have instilled clout and credibility in d'Aragona's writing.

Both authors also recognize free will as a uniquely human trait that allows one to choose reasonable or honest love. For d'Aragona, since humans are distinguished from animals only by their intellect and free will, they alone have the power to use their reason to seek honest love: "this appetite should not become unbridled and overpowering, for this often happens with human beings, who are endowed with free will, while it does not occur in the plant or animal kingdom" [pur che tale appetite non sia sfrenato e troppo strabocchevole, come si vede accader le più volte negli uomini, i quali hanno libero arbitrio; dove nelle piante, e negli animali non avviene].[53] Likewise, in her poetry, d'Aragona describes free will as "the greatest gift / that God gave in the first place" [il maggior dono / che Dio ne diè ne la primiera stanza].[54] Of course, the notion that free will is particular to human beings is not unique to d'Aragona or Dante; however, they share an emphasis on free will as a tool to temper desire, which is not, according to both authors, inherently corrupt. In *Purgatory* 16, Marco Lombardo explains this relationship to Dante:

> The heavens set your appetites in motion—
> not all your appetites, but even if
> that were the case, you have received both light
> on good and evil, and free will, which though
> it struggle in its first wars with the heavens,
> then conquers all, if it has been well nurtured.
>
> Lo cielo i vostri movimenti inizia;
> non dico tutti, ma, posto ch'i' 'l dica,
> lume v'è dato a bene e a malizia,
> e libero voler; che, se fatica
> ne le prime battaglie col ciel dura,
> poi vince tutto, se ben si notrica.

52 *Dialogue*, p. 95.
53 *Dialogue*, p. 94.
54 J.L. Hairston (ed.), *The Poems and Letters of Tullia d'Aragona and Others*, Iter, Toronto 2014, no. XXV, pp. 98–99.

Dante provides a possible antecedent for d'Aragona via this insistence on a free will which can moderate natural desires. At the end of the *Dialogo* some doubt is cast on the power of free will as Benucci, the final disputant, poses a question about a determinist view of love (which Varchi leaves to be answered by Signor Porzio, a professor of philosophy).[55] Nevertheless, Tullia's insistence on free will in the preceding pages implies a rejection of a determinist attitude on d'Aragona's part.

Another similarity shared by d'Aragona and Dante is their acceptance of natural desire and the physical urges of the body. For d'Aragona, physical union is still a component of perfect love. Tullia says that lovers "should be praised for generating offspring" [non si può biasmar cotale amore… né negli uomini ancora, anzi si può, e si dee lodare].[56] Although she concedes that vulgar love's "goal is none other than that of common animals" [il suo fine non è altro che quello degli animali bruti medesimi], in the case of honest love, the lover still wishes "to achieve a corporeal union besides the spiritual one" [oltra questa unione spiritale ancora la union corporale].[57] Such a vindication of physical love, or at least the acceptance of it, also appears in Dante's representation of two women in *Paradiso*: Cunizza da Romano, a woman famous for her sexual exploits, and Rahab, a biblical prostitute. If Francesca is condemned for submitting reason to desire, these women are saved because they, presumably, engaged in different forms of loves. In fact, when Cunizza introduces herself, she hints that she is saved at least partially because of her love, not in spite of it. She even notes that vulgar people [vostro vulgo] won't be able to understand such an attitude (*Par.* 9.32-6):

> Cunizza was my name, and I shine here
> Because this planet's radiance [Venus] conquered me.
> But in myself I pardon happily
> the reason for my fate; I do not grieve –
> And vulgar minds may find this hard to see
>
> Cunizza fui chiamata, e qui refulgo
> perché mi vinse il lume d'esta stella;
> ma lietamente a me medesma indulgo
> la cagion di mia sorte, e non mi noia;
> che parria forse forte al vostro vulgo.

55 Cf. *Dialogue*, p. 108.
56 *Dialogue*, p. 94.
57 *Dialogue*, p. 90.

The "vulgo" which can't understand Cunizza's salvation resonates in d'Aragona's "uomini volgari e plebei" who seek only dishonest love. Furthermore, Dante's salvation of Rahab, a prostitute, may have resonated with d'Aragona – especially as her own position as a courtesan became increasingly precarious throughout her life. Vis-à-vis the salvation of these figures, Dante does not condemn female sexuality or the physical expression of love; two aspects that are also key in d'Aragona's text. Physical love is still central to "honest" love, and it is d'Aragona's experiences in love that allow her to speak as an authority on the topic. Even though d'Aragona admittedly does not recall these women, aspects of Dante's portrayal of love reverberate in d'Aragona's. In both texts desire is redeemed, considered valid or honest, even, as long as it is appropriately tempered by reason and free will. It seems not only possible but probable that Dante's radical treatment of love and desire influenced d'Aragona and that invoking such a predecessor would have further legitimized her ethics of love.

How did Tullia d'Aragona – a poet, philosopher, and courtesan – lay claim to intellectual authority and enter the early modern debate on ethics of love? From her social and intellectual networks to her careful citations and references to a vernacular literary tradition, d'Aragona established and maintained a reputation for intellect and erudition. Moving between courts, she cultivated relationships with intellectuals, and she leveraged connections with poets and publishers who disseminated her writing and her ideas. These circles introduced her not only to philosophical writings and sources but to a burgeoning canon of vernacular literature. Within her *Dialogo* d'Aragona derived her authorial voice by employing the tre corone – Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch – and conversing with their treatment of love. Through these strategies, d'Aragona asserted her authorial gravitas, affirming her place in a revered literary-philosophical canon.