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# *Diotima (Sometimes) Wears a Yellow Veil*

**Elizabeth Anne Pallitto**

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Review-Essay on: *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love* by Tullia d'Aragona. Edited and translated by Rinaldina Russell and Bruce Merry. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

In Renaissance Italy, the aristocratic court was often the site of privileged debates on the philosophical issues of the day. Translations of Plato, especially his *Symposium*, provoked debates on the problems of unity and multiplicity, immanence and transcendence.

The rise of neo-Platonism coincided with Marsilio Ficino's commentary on the *Symposium*, and opened up debates about the body-soul question. Ficino's position remained authoritative in the courtly circles which produced other dramatized discussions, such as Pietro Bembo's *Gli Asolani* and Baldessare Castiglione's *Il Cortegiano*. In both of the above works, the authoritative position is taken by the neo-Platonists, represented by the holy hermit in *Gli Asolani* and by the Pietro Bembo character in *Il Cortegiano*.

In Italian Renaissance court life, there was a certain amount of erudite discourse between the sexes, and so participants in these dialogues include both men and women. However, recent scholars such as Valeria Finucci have taken the position that this does not in any way imply equality. Finucci's argument is that although women are featured as participants in the dialogue, their roles are secondary and trivial in comparison with those of the male speakers.

Discussions concerning neo-Platonism were often dramatized as dialogues about love, or *trattati d'amore*. As such the *Dialogue on the Infinity of Love* is unique in that it was written by a woman, Tullia d'Aragona, that its author is featured as a central character and a speaker, and that she gains the upper hand by the power of her wit and intellect.

Because the conventions of the period require some sort of elaborate modesty topos, there is an introductory letter by Muzio Iustinapolitano, protesting the fact that Tullia has disguised the name of the protagonist in her dialogue as "Sabina" lest she, the author, appear immodest. In this letter, the reader is made aware that an intervention to restore "Sabina" to "Tullia" has been made by Muzio, who

functions as the Renaissance equivalent of her editor and literary agent. Whether by clever design or out of a true concordia of their two minds, Muzio professes of his infinite, and increasing, love for the dialogue's author, Tullia d'Aragona, and this functions as an elegant "proof" of her theory of the infinity of true love—courtly but not necessarily Platonic.

The participants in this dialogue—chiefly Signora Tullia and Signor Benedetto Varchi—determine whether love has an "end" or "limit." The discussion centers around two types of love: not the celestial as opposed to the earthly (by definition base), but a kind of love in which "union with the beloved" is sensual as well as spiritual, infinite in potential, and "natural." "For those things that come from nature," she argues, taking the Aristotelian line, "human beings should neither be blamed nor praised."

This line of reasoning is also to be found almost verbatim in Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi d'amore*: "L'amore è affetto volontario di fruire con unione la cosa stimata buona che manchi"—in other words, the absent presence of the beloved. Once achieved, the true union will remain, and the fleeting, less profound emotions will be evident in the lack of duration of the love affair. In other words, d'Aragona makes a case for the integrated being whose desires are a balance of passion and reason, not unlike the centaur which symbolizes the duality of the human character in Machiavelli's *Il Principe*.

The philosopher and scholar Benedetto Varchi functions as a humorously good-natured interlocutor who alternates between graciously conceding various points in Tullia's favor and playfully protesting her tactics as a logician. Remarkable for the period, the character/author Tullia is not at all out of her element in discussing classical or contemporary philosophy—nor does she take an ancillary role in doing so. The male participants in the dialogue concede her charms and graciousness while being won over by her clear and elegant logic.

Tullia makes no secret of her profession while simultaneously commanding respect for her intellectual abilities. In a sense, her role as a courtesan establishes an empirical basis for her assertions about love. As author, Tullia uses this factual "evidence" to strengthen her argument. The dialogue contains fairly overt references to Tullia's experience in love, such as the delightful response "You show yourself to be a little inexperienced in matters of love. Forgive me for pointing out that I have known a lot about such things, and still do." Although practicing her profession may have been inconvenient at times, such experience is an advantage in this debate.

The particular status of the *cortegiana honesta* is difficult to imagine in contemporary America, but as a highly educated courtesan, d'Aragona occupied a position of relative freedom and was apparently



respected for her intellect as well as her other gifts. This did not always go unchallenged, however. There exist documents in the legal records that attest to the fact that d'Aragona was to be fined for not wearing the yellow veil (indicating her profession) in public, but was "exonerated on condition of her being a poet." She was also distinguished as a musician and a lover of literature as well as a producer of it—apparently she could quote "all Petrarch and Boccaccio" by heart.

The treatise on love has a specific history in the literature of the Italian Renaissance. Various *trattati d'amore*, often in dialogue form, arose after Ficino's famous commentary on Plato's *Symposium*, the *Commentarium in Convivium Platonis de Amore*, (1469) the *De Amore*. Ficino was in a unique position to write such a piece of literary criticism, having first translated Plato from Greek into Latin and then into the vernacular. This was the first formulation of the doctrine of Platonic love in the Renaissance, with the possible exception of Petrarch's *Secretum*, an imaginary dialogue in which Saint Augustine functions as a spokesman for a Christianized Platonism. In this work, Augustine—as a literary character—urges Petrarch to give up his love for love and his love for glory in favor of greater heavenly rewards.

Later in the Renaissance, authors did not evince as much worry as did Petrarch about the spiritual dilemma of an earthly object of love versus a heavenly one. They did, however, produce extensive writings of real and imaginary debates reflecting the social and philosophical ideals of love which were actually discussed at court. At the ducal palazzo in Urbino, for example, literary and artistic achievement flourished with great refinement, which is evident from the elevated tone of *Il Cortegiano*, as well as the many splendid examples of artistic and architectural production of the period. Castiglione's character Pietro Bembo tows a fairly standard Renaissance neo-Platonist line, yet he allows the lover and the beloved a kiss as an expression of their love (and a concession to their desire). Previously, in the medieval troubadour tradition, merely seeing and hearing and being in the presence of the beloved had to suffice.

The philosophical concern with the duality of beauty, figured as the Celestial Venus and the Earthly Venus (Pandemia and Urania) appears in the art and the literature of the Italian Renaissance, as humanist strains of philosophy contended with a neo-Platonism which had been, in part, the legacy of medieval Scholasticism. Theorists such as Umberto Eco rightly emphasize the primary role of visible beauty in medieval aesthetics, and underscore the fact that the ideas of the beautiful and the good were often already being conflated. The confusion stems from a reading of the *Symposium* in which Socrates asks Diotima of Mantinea, "Is not the beautiful also the good?" Although he is not explicitly answered in the affirmative, the conflation of beauty and goodness persists as a problem in aesthetics

for some time.

There is an irony to this assumption in the light of the dual standard of beauty and goodness when we come to the lives of the courtesans in the Italian Renaissance, for physical beauty was appreciated independently of conventional moral standards. The social and literary role of the courtesan challenged the definitions of what a woman could and could not do in a courtly milieu. The official morality of the church did not, of course, support these choices—though often the authorities gave tacit permission by looking the other way. The court case in which d’Aragona had to publish to defend her status as an intellectual rather than be treated as a common prostitute is an example of the capricious flexibility of these institutions.

This interesting incident is related in the informatively thorough Introduction by Rinaldina Russell. The biographical and scholarly information provided in the footnotes is also of interest to students of the Renaissance. As translators, Rinaldina Russell and Bruce Merry must also be credited with maintaining the freshness of the Italian in idiomatic English while preserving the courtliness which characterizes the exchanges of the period. Their task has been rendered no less difficult by the stylized court speech of Renaissance Italy, flavored by classical allusions, erudite jokes, and references to more canonical literary figures such as Boccaccio.

The question which comes to mind as one reads this intelligent and witty dialogue is why this writer’s important contribution to the Renaissance debate on Platonism has gone unnoticed, or rather unacknowledged in importance. In his often-quoted book *Renaissance Theory on Love*, John Charles Nelson dismissively acknowledges the existence of the *trattati* or love dialogues:

Bembo’s *Asolani* became one of the main sources of this stream of literature, along with the love dialogues of Marsilio Ficino and Leone Ebreo, which almost alone of that vast body of treatises have philosophical importance.

In other words, although critics and scholars knew of the existence of this dialogue, they could not acknowledge that a woman with such an uncommon point of view could be an important voice in the philosophical debates of the Renaissance. D’Aragona’s unusual championing of consummated love in an ongoing relationship is yet differentiated from even the most ardent discourses on love by male writers who also championed sensual love, such as Agostino Nifo in his *De pulchro et amore*, Mario Equicola, in his *D’Alveto de Natura et de amore* and in Pietro Pomponazzi’s works, the Aristotelian philosopher and teacher of Sperone Speroni.

Of obvious interest to students of philosophy and literature in the Renaissance, this text would be a welcome addition to any under-

graduate survey course. The general introduction to the series provides a glossary of useful terminology and a brief history of feminist concepts which introduces these ideas and makes classroom discussion possible on a much higher level. It is also a work that graduate students and professors might regularly include on syllabi for their courses. This meticulously researched and noteworthy translation, readily available from the University of Chicago Press, makes d'Aragona's text available to the reader whose Italian is imperfect, and may prompt a desire to read it in the original as well.

One takes heart after reading this strong female Renaissance voice, which both opposes the fashionable philosophical positions of the day and boldly stakes out its own territory. In her introduction, Rinaldina Russell points out that this work was written in an increasingly difficult, conservative climate which might be characterized as backlash, which makes this Renaissance treatise curiously relevant today.

Although this dialogue is a piece of imaginative fiction, in it we glimpse a world in which an intelligent woman escapes the confines of her gender and the socially constricting factors which do not always encourage equal discourse or literary production between men and women. Here, in the ideal court imaginatively constructed by d'Aragona, there exist infinite intellectual possibilities as well as the possibility of infinite love.