

## GIULIA BIGOLINA'S *URANIA, THE STORY OF A YOUNG WOMAN'S LOVE* WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THE MYTH OF TWIN VENUSES<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** The pioneering figure to write on the woman question in Italy, Giulia Bigolina is the recently unearthed author of a prose romance *Urania, the Story of a Young Woman's Love* (1552). She is a pivotal author regarding the protofeminist literature in the early modern Italy. In the proem to the work, Bigolina depicts a scene in which her authorial persona is visited by a homunculus to urge her to produce a literary work contrary to her initial decision to passively pose for a painting in front of an artist. Likewise, the romance section focuses on the protagonist Urania who turns out to be a virtuous intellectual dealing with literature. Contrariwise, the Duchess of Calabria, who serves as a foil to Urania, has herself painted semi-nude. It is highly possible that Bigolina identifies Urania and the Duchess with the goddess Venus because the famous artist Titian employs Venus in many of his paintings such as "Venus of Urbino" and "Sacred and Profane Love" and it is known that they were contemporaries, exchanged letters, and Bigolina was familiar with his paintings. The dual representation of Aphrodite Urania and Aphrodite Pandemos refers to her double nature in the classical mythology and in the texts such as Plato's *Symposium*. Within this framework, this study argues that Bigolina employs the myth of twin Venuses as a medium to construct the protofeminist concern of her work through her identification of Urania and the Duchess with them in that their juxtaposing positioning enables her to criticise objectification of women then-current in the art of painting, to encourage them to prioritise intellectual cultivation over physical beauty and to be producers of literature.

**Key words:** Bigolina, Venus, protofeminism, woman question, art of painting

### İKİZ VENÜSLER MİTİ ÇERÇEVESİNDE GIULIA BIGOLINA'NIN *URANIA, THE STORY OF A YOUNG WOMAN'S LOVE* ADLI ESERİ

**ÖZ:** İtalya'da kadın sorunu üzerine yazan öncü bir isim olan Giulia Bigolina, yakın zamanda gün yüzüne çıkarılmış *Urania, the Story of a Young Woman's Love* (1552) başlıklı nesir romansın yazarıdır. Bigolina protofeminist edebiyat açısından erken modern dönem İtalyan kültüründe oldukça önemli bir kalemdir. Eserin girişinde anlatıcı bir cüce tarafından ziyaret edilir ve cüce, anlatıcının bir ressam önünde poz verme düşüncesinin aksine, ona edebi bir eser üretmesini salık verir. Benzer şekilde, romans kısmı da edebiyat ile haşır neşir, erdemli ve entelektüel bir

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kadın olan Urania'ya odaklanır. Ana karaktere zıt bir örnek teşkil eden Calabria Düşesi ise kendini yarı çıplak bir halde resmettirmektedir. Bigolina'nın anılan karakterleri oluştururken tanrıça Venüs'ten esinlendiğini düşünülebilir çünkü döneminin ünlü ressamı Titian da "Venus of Urbino" ve "Sacred and Profane Love" gibi çalışmalarında Venüs'ü resmetmiştir ve ikilinin birbirine mektuplar gönderdiği ve Bigolina'nın Titian'ın resimlerine aşına olduğu bilinmektedir. Yunan ve Roma mitolojilerinde ve Plato'nun *Symposium* eserinde Afrodit'in dünyevi ve uhrevi temsilini görmek mümkündür. Bu çerçevede, bu çalışma, Bigolina'nın ikiz Venüsler mitini bir araç olarak kullanmak suretiyle, Urania ve Düşes'i Venüs'ün iki farklı algılanışı ile bağdaştırarak eserinin profeminist amacını inşa ettiğini, karakterlerin karşıt konumlandırılmasının dönemin kadını nesneleştiren resim anlayışını eleştirdiğini, kadınları entelektüel gelişimlerini fiziki albeniden üstün görmeleri gerektiği ve onları edebiyat üreten bireyler olmak için cesaretlendirdiğini öne sürmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Bigolina, Venüs, profeminizm, kadın sorunu, resim sanatı

### 1. Introduction

The pioneering figure to write on the woman question in Italy, Giulia Bigolina (c. 1518-c. 1569) is the lately-unearthed author of a prose romance *Urania, the Story of a Young Woman's Love*<sup>2</sup> (1552). Although the work was published for the first time in 2002, the year in which it was discovered after it had remained hidden in Trivulziana Library for half a millennium, Bigolina is a leading name concerning the profeminist movement with *Urania*, which is "the first fiction in prose authored by a woman writer in Italian."<sup>3</sup> Even though there is very little information as to her oeuvre, it is known from her two extant works, *Urania* and "The Novella of Giulia Camposanpiero and Thesibaldo Vitalini", that Bigolina was attentive to meditate on women's independence, their problems, their experiences, and their willpower. Indeed, *Urania*, the focus of this study, "constitutes the first feminist entry into the debate on a woman's proper place politically, culturally, and philosophically"<sup>4</sup> in the Renaissance Italian culture.

The main plot of *Urania* narrates the experiences of Urania, a wise and virtuous woman, who leaves her hometown in despair upon being deserted by her beloved Fabio who prefers a better-looking lady to her. Even if Urania initially seems to leave Salerno owing to obsessive love, her peregrination soon evolves into a spiritual quest which helps her recover in the meantime, and documents her self-independence and worth independent of male approval. The subplot of the romance is about the Duchess of Calabria, who, again due to all-consuming love, exposes herself semi-nude

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<sup>2</sup> The original title is *Urania, nella quale si contiene l'amore d'una giovane di tal nome*.

<sup>3</sup> Valeria Finucci, "Giulia Bigolina and Italian Prose Fiction in the Renaissance," *Urania: A Romance*, by Giulia Bigolina, edited and translated by Valeria Finucci, Chicago, 2005, The University of Chicago Press, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> V. Finucci, *ibid.*, p. 2.

in front of an artist in order to attract her beloved. When Bigolina's diametrical characterisation of the self-reliant, active, and erudite protagonist, who prioritises wisdom over comeliness, contrary to that of the dependent and passive Duchess, who serves as a foil to Urania, is examined together, it is safe to argue that Bigolina employs romance both to "inspire women to take control of the way they are to be put on display, in terms of both their bodies and their talents"<sup>5</sup> and to save them from the object position they are assigned by the patriarchal culture. In this sense, considering their juxtaposing condition, I argue that Bigolina identifies Urania and the Duchess with the goddess Aphrodite/or her roman equivalent Venus. My contention firstly stems from the fact that the famous artist Titian employs Venus in his many paintings and it is known that Bigolina was familiar with them; secondly from the fact that Bigolina addresses to the mythological tale "Judgement of Paris" in which the Duchess represents Venus; and, thirdly from the fact that dual representation of Aphrodite Urania and Aphrodite Pandemos in the classical mythology and in Plato's *Symposium* reflects the double nature of Aphrodite and love. Within this framework, this study argues that Bigolina employs the myth of twin Venuses as a medium to construct the profeminist concern of the work through her identification of Urania and the Duchess with them in that their diametrical positioning enables her to criticise objectification of women then-current in the art of painting, to encourage them to prioritise intellectual and moral cultivation over physical beauty, and to be producers of literature.

## 2. The Myth of Twin Venuses

Bigolina's interest in the art of painting and her subplot in which she criticises its practices most probably stem from the fact that Titian and Bigolina personally knew each other and Bigolina was acquainted with Titian's paintings. Nissen speculates that Bigolina had Titian in mind and she intentionally created a "caricature of Titian"<sup>6</sup> or a "failed Titian"<sup>7</sup> when the unnamed painter enthusiastically promotes the Duchess' beauty only to lead her ruin in the end. It is also known that Titian had particular interest in Venus. For instance, *Venus with a Mirror* (1555) features Venus partly covered with a vine-coloured mantle soon to be bestowed with the crown of love; in *Venus of Urbino* (1538), the naked sensual Venus strikes a seductive pose to probably celebrate marriage, fidelity in marriage, and marital

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher Nissen, *Kissing the Wild Woman: Art, Beauty, and the Reformation of the Italian Prose Romance in Giulia Bigolina's Urania*, Toronto, 2011, University of Toronto Press, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> C. Nissen, *ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> C. Nissen, *ibid.*, p. 91.

affection; *Venus and the Lute Player* (1560) is a celebration of love in which the reclining nude goddess is courted by a musician; *Venus and Adonis* (1554) represents the mythological tale of Venus and Adonis from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*; *Venus Blindfolding Cupid* (1565), *Venus Anadyomene* (1520) and *The Worship of Venus* (1518) again feature the goddess; and, *Sacred and Profane Love* (1514), one of the most famous paintings of Renaissance, represents divine and earthly love featuring two women, the nude one or the clothed one identified with the double nature of Venus depending on the interpretation. Given the situation, it would be more than coincidence that Bigolina employs Venus in her romance to communicate her agenda.

Apart from Titian's influence, the dual representation of Venus/Aphrodite must have been suitable for Bigolina's aim; and, she draws her material from the two assumptions regarding Aphrodite's birth accordingly. Hesiod recounts in *Theogony* that Aphrodite's birth is the result of a castration: Aphrodite is Uranus' daughter born from his mutilated parts scattered upon the sea when Cronus chops off his father's genitals. They cause foam which, in return, gives rise to Aphrodite. Hesiod explains that Aphrodite's name stems from *aphros*, which literally means foam-born:

*"As soon as Kronos lopped off the genitals  
with the sickle, they fell from the mainland into the much-  
surging sea, so that the sea  
carried them for a long time. Around them a white  
foam from the immortal skin began to arise. In it, a maiden  
was nurtured."*<sup>8</sup>

The first tradition as to her birth shows that Aphrodite is not an offspring of a sexual union. As she is born from the male alone, she is qualified as representing pure love which does not seek physical gratification but spiritual satisfaction. She is thus associated with spiritual love and called Heavenly or Celestial Aphrodite *or* Aphrodite Urania. According to the second version, Aphrodite does not have one parent but is born from Zeus and Dione's copulation. Since she is born from a heterosexual union, she is associated with physical love and sexual satisfaction which is not concerned with mind, soul or spirit but only with the body. She is therefore called Aphrodite Pandemos or Common Aphrodite. Morford and Lenardon relate that this dichotomous origin as to Aphrodite's birth and her double nature in accord with it have not only led to archetypal conceptualization of love as sacred and profane, which, Titian also picturesquely describes, but have also

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<sup>8</sup> Hesiod, *Theogony*. <https://msu.edu/~tyrrell/theogony02.htm> (accessed: 01.04.2019).

suggested the existence of two separate goddesses of love; one ethereal, sublime, intelligent, spiritual, and stronger; the other physical in nature, more base and primarily aiming at physical satisfaction and procreation.<sup>9</sup> Plato, likewise, in *Symposium*, states that Aphrodite Urania and Aphrodite Pandemos are separate entities. One of the speakers, Pausanias, argues that “Love and Aphrodite are inseparable”<sup>10</sup> and now that there are two goddesses, there must also be two kinds of love: “If, therefore, Aphrodite were a single goddess, there could also be a single Love; but, since there are actually two goddesses of that name, there also are two kinds of Love.”<sup>11</sup> Pausanias believes that “there is a Common as well as a Heavenly Love, depending on which goddess is Love’s partner.”<sup>12</sup> In his formulation, Aphrodite Urania represents pure love because she is of solely male descent, and thus “free from the lewdness of youth”<sup>13</sup> while Aphrodite Pandemos represents physical love because she is the daughter of male and female parents. According to Pausanias, Common Aphrodite represents “the love felt by the vulgar, who are attached to women no less than to boys, to the body more than to the soul, and to the least intelligent partners, since all they care about is completing the sexual act.”<sup>14</sup> Contrariwise, Heavenly Aphrodite’s Love is superior to physical love because it is the love of soul, intellect, and virtue that seeks “pleasure in what is by nature stronger and more intelligent.”<sup>15</sup> Pausanias believes that the lover who follows Aphrodite Urania is the one “who loves the right sort of character, and who remains its lover for life, attached as he is to something that is permanent.”<sup>16</sup> Such kind of love is not concerned with sexual fulfilment but is based upon “the love of wisdom and virtue in general.”<sup>17</sup> The lover who teaches the beloved to “become wiser and better” and the beloved who “is eager to be taught and improved by his lover”<sup>18</sup> indeed follow the “Heavenly Love of the heavenly goddess.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, Pausanias relates that in a relationship the partners should “make virtue their central concern.”<sup>20</sup> Bigolina in *Urania*

<sup>9</sup> Mark P. O. Morford, and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, New York, 1985, Longman, p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Plato, *Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper, Indianapolis, 1997, Hackett Press, 180d.

<sup>11</sup> Plato, *ibid.*, 180d.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *ibid.*, 180e.

<sup>13</sup> Plato, *ibid.*, 181c.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *ibid.*, 181b.

<sup>15</sup> Plato, *ibid.*, 181c.

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *ibid.*, 184a.

<sup>17</sup> Plato, *ibid.*, 184d.

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *ibid.*, 184e.

<sup>19</sup> Plato, *ibid.*, 185b.

<sup>20</sup> Plato, *ibid.*, 185c.

employs these archetypal representations of Aphrodite and the cult of love associated with her nature to convey her protofeminist message.

### **3. *Urania, The Story of A Young Woman's Love within the Framework of the Myth of Twin Venuses***

Based upon the current discussion, it is arguable that the Duchess represents Aphrodite Pandemos because she falls in love with a portrait which does not reveal her beloved's soul, wisdom or education but simply displays his physical charm. Urania, on the other hand, represents Aphrodite Urania because she gives importance to virtue and wisdom rather than physical appearance. Even though Plato claims that pure love could flourish only between men, Urania and Fabio's love stands for heavenly love. Soon, however, when Fabio abandons Urania in favour of a more beautiful lady, he starts to indulge in vulgar love owing to his inconstancy and his disinterest in virtue and wisdom.

Bigolina starts the work with a dedicatory epistle in which her authorial persona explains the process she resolves to leave a remembrance for Bartolomeo Salvatico for whom she bears a "genuine love."<sup>21</sup> It is notable that it is her "great affection"<sup>22</sup> which encourages her to act similar to what Urania and the Duchess would do in the following chapters. She thus decides to follow the examples of ancient heroes:

*"Pondering time and again what I might do to keep some memory of me alive in you, I remembered that many ancient heroes who had performed quite marvelous deeds in their time left their images after death sculpted in marble, bronze, gold, or some other metal."*<sup>23</sup>

Soon, however, reckoning that she is not worthy enough to have a statue due to her sex and especially her lowly degree of merits<sup>24</sup> she decides to have her portrait painted by an artist: "I therefore decided to leave you my image in a painting and needed only to determine how to have myself painted."<sup>25</sup> Upon her decision, an allegorical figure appears to state that she has made a mistake. Its name is Giudizio, which collectively means *Judgment, Judge, Wisdom, or Justice* in English. It explains the reason as follows:

*"And yet just now you were using poor judgment when you thought that*

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<sup>21</sup> Giulia Bigolina, *Urania: A Romance*, Translated by Valeria Finucci, Chicago, 2005, The University of Chicago Press, p. 73.

<sup>22</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>23</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>24</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>25</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 74.

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*your painted image, presented to him, was an apt means to keep you alive in his memory after your death, giving little consideration to how much such an image is both too low for him to receive and very unbecoming and unsuitable for you to offer. Let me say how inappropriate it is ... The image being a material thing, as I have said many times, and the soul, that is, the intellect in which it needs to operate, being an essence of the spirit, the one could not work in the other if there was no other mechanism involved in the nature of either one to interpose itself ... Therefore I advise you not to send the image of your face to that gentleman, since it will not make you remembered. Rather, send him an image of your great respect and love, which will constantly keep you in his memory.*"<sup>26</sup>

Giudizio, as a symbol of wisdom, judges her decision. It states that given that an image is a material object, it cannot affect the intellect of its addressee. He, therefore, exhorts her to produce a representation of her essence so that it could operate on his soul: "send him an image of a heart and a mind."<sup>27</sup> After a lengthy discussion, it is understood that what serves as an image of the heart and mind is not a portrait painted by someone else but one's own production. Giudizio advises Bigolina's authorial persona to write a little work, which would be an emblem of her intellect:

*"Don't you know that the compositions, the inventions, and in the end everything ingeniously created are the fruits that human intellects produce ... Therefore, if by drawing some inventions from your mind you compose a little work and send it to that rare young man, you could also say that you have donated to him an image of your intellect and that what was invisible you have made appear visible."*<sup>28</sup>

In other words, Giudizio exhorts her to make visible what dwells within her by writing instead of posing passively in front of an artist who could only reproduce an object which would be ineffective for representing her spirit but would merely reflect her physical appearance. It tries to save her from the non-productive, silent, object position she sets mind on. It is arguable that Bigolina offers literature as a tool in which women could demonstrate their intellectual competence, and thus encourages them to be producers of literature by means of Giudizio's advice.

In the proem Bigolina sets forward an example through the dialogue between her authorial persona and Giudizio triggering women to produce literary works, and, in the romance section, by situating the Duchess and Urania in opposition, she emphasises her agenda concerning women and

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<sup>26</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 79-80.

<sup>27</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>28</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 82-83.

their engagement in intellectual deeds. Bigolina first communicates her message with the Duchess of Calabria. She initially appears as an independent, self-sufficient woman:

*“This striking lady was no more than twenty years old. A bit over a year earlier she had become a widow (with no child) and ruler of the state. She had little thought of remarrying, although she was continuously solicited by many noblemen and prominent princes and often beseeched by her people to do so. But having lived for two years through moments of enormous anxiety and bitter suffering with an old and very jealous husband, she had decided never again to marry, greatly fearing that she would stumble a second time, but always to live honorably in perpetual widowhood.”<sup>29</sup>*

As well as depicting the Duchess as a resolute woman, the passage also illustrates the marital practices of the age. Even though the Duchess is younger than twenty years old, the fact that she has been a widow for more than a year indicates her marriage at quite an early age; and that she lived two years with her late husband, who was an old and jealous man, evinces that she made an arranged marriage. Having been released of oppression, the Duchess desires to enjoy the state of widowhood now. The preliminary description suggests that she is an independent woman embodying a model for other women to follow. Soon, however, it is learnt that she leaves the authority and governance of her land to four counsellors. The fact that the Duchess does not take responsibility but leaves it to others indicates the message she would communicate quite antithetical to what her depiction preliminarily establishes. What is more, being a collector of portraits, when the Duchess, who does not think of remarriage, falls in love with Prince Giufredi as soon as she sees his portrait, she becomes a slave to another man due to obsessive love. The scene is described as follows:

*“The wretched lady, who had no thought of love, listening to the painter’s very appreciative words with greater attention than perhaps would have been suitable, felt her heart punctured by something unfamiliar that she had never felt before. As she gazed at the portrait, it seemed to her that a sea of fire and a mountain of ice were pouring all over her at the same time, since Love, who until then had been late in manifesting his great power over her, had hidden himself in the handsome eyes of that portrait, not wanting to defer it any longer. Although they were lifeless, when Love looked through them the eyes achieved the same effect in her, in fact a greater one, than the prince’s own live and animate eyes would have. Seeing them, she felt that her heart*

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<sup>29</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 129.

*had been pierced by two thunderbolts, or rather by two sharp arrows.*"<sup>30</sup>

It is observable that the Duchess is driven by physical love because she is attracted by his physical appearance. She is not concerned with his soul, whether he is virtuous or intelligent but is simply affected by his body. In this sense, it is seen that the Duchess, having been indulged in vulgar love not in pursuit of virtue, wisdom, or education but physicality, represents Aphrodite Pandemos. Struck by love at first sight but unable to decide how to act, she consults one of her counsellors whom she trusts most:

*"Aware that by herself and with no good advice it would have been impossible to advance such an important business, she decided to have a meeting about it with her wisest, oldest, and most loved counsellor and indeed to place the whole charge of this affair on his shoulders."*<sup>31</sup>

The passage indicates the Duchess' inability to make a decision on her own. The fact that she does not have any opinion as to how she should behave about a situation that directly concerns her emphasises her passive character. The Duchess' final sentence, which reads, "you have heard all my need and desire and can understand how my life and death are in your hands"<sup>32</sup> exemplifies the worst decision she could make. It serves as a warning against women who are not self-confident or self-sufficient but who act passively leaving the control of their lives to others. Soon, the old counsellor comes up with the worst solution: "He wanted the clever painter to paint, with the greatest diligence he could muster, a masterful canvas of the judgment of Paris, that is, of the three goddesses and Paris with the golden apple, the cause of so much ruin."<sup>33</sup> He decides that Prince Giufredi should be painted in place of Paris and the Duchess in place of Venus:

*"Since he had heard many times from the departed duke, her husband, that there was nothing more beautiful in the world than the naked body of the duchess, his wife, he accordingly wanted the lady to be painted in the place of Venus with her graceful limbs partly exposed. A mantle, that is, a cover of red silk over the naked flesh, would wrap her left shoulder and coming down the right armpit would leave exposed the entire right shoulder and her bosom. To the left, her comely flank, part of the womb, the left thigh, both legs, and her most tiny feet would be shown naked."*<sup>34</sup>

The counsellor advises the Duchess to have herself painted semi-nude

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<sup>30</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>31</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>32</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>33</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>34</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 134.

because he thinks her nakedness would make the Prince fall in love with her. That Bigolina proposes a reproduction of the Judgement of Paris is significant within the framework of the plot. The Judgement of Paris is a mythological tale in which Paris is the judge and the most beautiful Olympian goddesses Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite desire to possess the golden apple which would be bestowed to the fairest one by him. Paris decides to give the prize to Aphrodite because she promises to bestow him Helen, who is said to be the most beautiful woman on earth then, as a wife. Thus, Helen is abducted by Paris, who is so inflamed with desire for her, which, in turn, leads to the Trojan War and the subsequent bloodshed and destruction. The reference to the Trojan War connects the theme to Aphrodite Pandemos in that both what the goddess offers and Paris' love for Helen represent lust and is carnal love. The Duchess, likewise, is affected by Giufredi's physical appearance, and hers is not a contemplative but an earthly love, either.

Bigolina, associating the Duchess with Paris and the Duchess and Paris with Aphrodite Pandemos, also constitutes a thematic link with the introduction and concretises the destructive consequences of putting women in an object position. That the Duchess is an object of male gaze in which her body is dismembered is also obvious from the painting. The painter describes it as follows:

*“Please, look closely here, my lord, how the gold and curly hair seems like a net to entrap a thousand hardened hearts. See the spacious and highly polished forehead, the eyes, which resemble two stars, although one cannot fully discern their natural liveliness, the lashes curly and black as ebony, the well-proportioned nose, the rosy cheeks, the small mouth, the lips that surpass the corals in beauty ... My God, how round and well-formed is this arm! I say nothing of the hand since it resembles too well the one that often controls and holds the bow, the quiver and the arrows of the boy Cupid ... Finally, whoever sees and judges from head to toe, will say that the great Master Nature never created, nor could ever create, another body more perfect in beauty than this.” (2005: 137-138)<sup>35</sup>*

It is interesting that it is the painter who praises the lady's charm. Or, is it his art that he eulogises? At this point it would be beneficial to understand the cultural implications of painting women in terms of the woman question in Renaissance Italy to grasp the reason why Bigolina is against such objectification. Agnolo Firenzuola (1493-1543) in his widely read treatise *Diaologo delle bellezze delle donne* (1542) lists the idealised features of

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<sup>35</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 137-138.

female beauty. The characteristics he mentions are employed by the famous painters of the age such as Titian, Giorgione, and Parmigianino. In the paintings featuring women even though they are thought to represent ideal beauty, their individual identity is erased or is not given importance. As Simons observes, “individualism, in its anachronistic and fixed sense, does not illuminate Renaissance portraiture of women”<sup>36</sup> since the corporeal presence of women just functions as a vehicle by which the male artist can present his talent. It is conjecturable that there is a tendency to treat women as ornamental objects who serve as conduits for male gratification. Within this framework, it is obvious that Bigolina intentionally inserts the Duchess episode into the main narrative to deter women from cherishing/exposing physical beauty instead of intellectual cultivation. As Nissen argues, Bigolina is of the opinion that “women who seek to memorialise themselves by posing for paintings, by relying on a sort of passive visual display of their physical essence, will ultimately fail to make a lasting or worthy impression.”<sup>37</sup> As well as providing a critique of the commonly-held notions of her time, the Duchess episode, then, communicates the message firstly that women should not let themselves be anonymous representations of beauty but the agents of their lives giving more importance to acts that would foreground their individuality and intellectual aspect and secondly that they should always trust themselves and their competences to convey their innermost feelings.

Bigolina, in this sense, proposes literature as a solution because she thinks that an individual endeavor and the production it follows are the best means to convey one's feeling or thought, *or one's truest portrait*. Regarding literature as the manifestation of soul and intellect, Bigolina portrays Urania as “the champion of individual self-expression”<sup>38</sup> accordingly. Urania's characterisation gives the message that a woman should prioritise virtue, wisdom, and productivity over physicality. In this sense, Urania symbolises Aphrodite Urania because she is not in pursuit of physical love but gives importance to virtue, wisdom, and education. She is a woman who pursues “the high study of vernacular letters”<sup>39</sup> and who “enjoys composing rhymes and prose.”<sup>40</sup> She is a wise, virtuous, and learnt woman who hosts saloon

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<sup>36</sup> Patricia Simons, “Portraiture, Portrayal, and Idealization: Ambiguous Individualism in Representations of Renaissance Women,” *Languages and Images of Renaissance Italy*, edited by Alison Brown, Oxford, 1995, Clarendon, p. 310.

<sup>37</sup> C. Nissen, *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> C. Nissen, *ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>39</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>40</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 93.

meetings in her house. She has admirable qualities:

*“There was in that city a woman from a very noble family by the name of Urania, who, aside from being properly learned in the vernacular and having the Muses for friends both in prose and in poetry, was adorned with such a noble soul that rather than seeing a single vice come out of such a beautiful soul she would have chosen to die a thousand deaths.”<sup>41</sup>*

The passage illustrates that she is knowledgeable in vernacular literature and produces literary works in prose and verse. It is notable that there is no information as to Urania’s appearance. Neither in her introduction nor in the following paragraphs Bigolina employs blazon that mentions Urania’s physical features or celebrates her beauty contrary to the one she makes use of when she describes the Duchess. Putting emphasis on her virtue and erudition, Bigolina both removes Urania from the object position the Duchess holds and establishes a thematic connection with the proem in which Giudizio recommends the authorial persona to foreground her intelligence rather than appearance. Indeed, she is not even as good-looking as the women around: “Thanks more to such virtues than to any great beauty, this woman was loved and desired by many young noblemen of Salerno.”<sup>42</sup> Besides, contrary to the Duchess who indulges in common love, Urania “keeps herself far distant from any thought of love.”<sup>43</sup> It is innovative of Bigolina not to create a Petrarchan lady celebrated for her physical traits but to create one who is the paragon of virtue and cultivation.

Even though Urania is never inclined to physical love, she soon falls in love with Fabio due to his education and manners: “he was not only learned in Latin but also greatly adorned with good manners and with a grace given to him by heaven, which made him welcome to every virtuous heart in a way that produced wonder in all who knew him.”<sup>44</sup> It is notable that their love does not stem from physical attraction. Fabio wants to meet her “having heard many highly praise Urania’s virtues”<sup>45</sup> and Urania because of their “shared morals and virtues.”<sup>46</sup> Their love, not carnal but virtuous and divine-like, is based on intellectual dialogue and exchange of literature:

*“And he did not fail to make up for the days he could not visit with loving and learned letters, which were no less gratefully than learnedly answered*

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<sup>41</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>42</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>43</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>44</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>45</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>46</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 86.

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*(since she knew how to do it well), and many times she added to the letters some very graceful and erudite sonnets with other sorts of rhymes. Within a few months, love grew so strongly between these two lovers that it seemed that they had only one heart, one will, one soul.*"<sup>47</sup>

In other words, their love is the one Aphrodite Urania promotes based on contemplation of intellectual profundity rather than physical beauty in which the partners could acquire virtue and wisdom from each other in order to spiritually and intellectually cultivate themselves. Indeed, Urania recounts that Fabio used to call her "teacher."<sup>48</sup> Their relationship shatters the connection between beauty, physical characteristics and love. After a while, though, meeting a more beautiful woman, Fabio abandons Urania. Even though she is heartsick, Urania does not lose self-confidence knowing that her worth does not reside in physical beauty but in intellectual and moral richness. She pens a letter to Fabio in which she reproaches his poor judgment and emphasises true beauty, genuine love, and the role of intellectual production in revealing them through words:

*"Tell me, I pray, how many portraits do you have which represent my beauty to you? Here is their miracle, for what your beautiful woman cannot give you for eternity nor the most excellent painters and not even the great master Nature herself, I have already given you, since every time you look and consider the many and various sorts of rhymes and prose I composed and gave to you, you will see as many portraits, even though they are different, which each by itself and all together manifest whatever beauty there is in me. Now you see that I have already taught you that the beauties you can observe every day, if you deigned to look at me and at my many portraits with your intellect, are more worthy of being loved and kept dear than any more obvious physical beauty."*<sup>49</sup>

The excerpt demonstrates that Urania gives more importance to literature than painting because she thinks that through literature one can produce various portraits that manifests whatever beauty, emotion or thought one has in soul while a portrait, which only represents a lifeless image, cannot convey more than physical appearance. Urania, in this sense, serves as Bigolina's alter-ego given that both Urania and her authorial persona emphasise the significance of literature to make one's inner self apparent. The passage also underlines the transience of physical beauty regarding women's willpower to produce literature as the most beneficial solution to reveal their soul and intellect. The work's "clear correction of

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<sup>47</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>48</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>49</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 92.

Petrarchismo<sup>50</sup> evinces Bigolina's proposition that women should focus more on their intellectual cultivation than their physical appearance.

In line with the discussion, Bigolina expresses the discontent women feel due to being restricted in terms of female education. A group of women Urania comes across when she peregrinates as a cross-dressed person reproach that they are not provided with the opportunity to cultivate themselves:

*"But considering that among us love is a great spur to virtue and that not being in love can almost be compared to having a body without a mind - which is especially true of us women- I cannot understand who we are after we remove ourselves from attending to our familiar chores. For you men prevent us from exercising the discipline of letters and the beautiful arts in order to keep all the glory for yourselves. Therefore, if love does not awaken our talents somewhat, we spend our unhappy lives empty and devoid of any pleasure and knowledge."<sup>51</sup>*

Women are upset because they are not free enough to educate themselves by being engaged in literature and sciences. It is equally interesting that women regard love as a prerequisite for virtue and it is love that stirs their literary or artistic production. In other words, Bigolina alludes to Heavenly Love as a constructive force behind female achievement and obliquely criticises the tradition that hinders female participation in science and arts.

#### 4. Conclusion

In sum, Bigolina juxtaposes the characterisation, habits and drives of the Duchess and Urania to provide an exemplum for women. She advises them to be actively engaged in literary production, through which they could present their individuality, instead of passively posing for artists, which would make them eroticised icons of beauty. The introduction, in which Giudizio proposes literature as a beneficial medium, and the dual representation of Aphrodite Urania and Aphrodite Pandemos associated with Urania and the Duchess respectively help Bigolina urge women to transcend the cultural understanding in terms of beauty, arts, literature, the status of women and the roles they are supposed to perform in the society.

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<sup>50</sup> Naomi Yavneh, "Review." *Renaissance Quarterly*, 56. 4, 2003, p. 1172.

<sup>51</sup> G. Bigolina, *ibid.*, p. 99.

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