



III

OF THE NATURE AND ESSENCE OF THE FEMALE SEX

Women, like men, consist of two parts. One, the origin and cause of all noble deeds, is referred to by everyone as the soul. The other is the transitory and mortal body, which is obedient to the commands of the soul, just as the soul is dependent on the body.

If we consider the first, that is woman's soul, and if we speak as philosophers, we will say that man's soul is equally noble to woman's because both are of the same species and therefore of the same nature and substance. Knowing this, Moderata Fonte, to demonstrate that women are as noble as men, wrote in *Floridoro*:

And why if their nature is shared, if their substances do not differ? . . . ¹

and subsequently goes on to show that they are part of the same species.

For my part, I do not agree with this opinion. I say that it is not impossible that within the same species there should be souls that are from birth nobler and more excellent than others, as is written by the Master of Sentences, Peter Lombard.² Given this fact, I would say that women's souls were created nobler than men's, as can be seen from the effect they have and from the beauty of their bodies. That souls differ among themselves is known by many, among them poets, who are inspired by their own ardor, which reveals to them the highest and most mysterious secrets of nature and the supreme good. This is shown by these words from Remigio Fiorentino's sonnet:

1. Moderata Fonte, *Tredici canti di Floridoro* (Venice, 1581), 4.1: "E perché se commune è la natura / Se non son le sostanze variate?" Marinella substitutes the word "natura" for Fonte's "figura."

2. Peter Lombard, *Sentences* 2.32

Among the beautiful souls intended by nature to give things life are the beautiful and rare forms that have come down to animate the beautiful and dear limbs of my lady.³

That the souls of women possess an excellence which men's do not is shown in several of Guarini's stanzas:

In your pure souls a ray shines of that sun which in heaven illuminates the blessed, so that the warmth is born which descends from you to those who are born to burn in such a beautiful fire. This is what adorns you and lights the sparks of love in beloved eyes, and this is the reason for those sighs in which lovers breathe their great desire.⁴

Not only Guarini and Remigio Fiorentino but many other poets are aware of this truth. In one of his sonnets Bernardino Tomitano shows how the Eternal Mover sometimes sends creatures who are worthier both in mind and body:

He who with infinite great government and with immense providence and art shows us his admirable virtue, holy, wise, divine Eternal Mover, you gave Lucrezia to our age so that your inner valor would resound in a thousand verses and gradually bring to life everything of yours that is light and heavenly.⁵

Padre Angelo Grillo also shows us this in these verses:

Ah who has forced the most beautiful soul to part from the most beautiful limbs and in a single flash extinguish all my light? Ah heaven and nature's greatest creation, are you too merely shadow and bone?⁶

3. Remigio Fiorentino, Sonnet in *Rime di M. Remigio Fiorentino* (Venice, 1547): "Tra le belle alme, ch'a far vive intese / Son di natura le belle opre, e rare / A dar vita a le membra e belle, e care / De la mia donna la più bella scese."

4. Battista Guarini: "Nelle vostre pure alme un raggio splende / Di quel sol, che nel Cielo arde i beati, / Onde nasce l'ardor, che da voi scende / Ne così in si bel fuoco ad arder nati. / Questo è quel, che v'adorna, e quel ch'accende / Le faville d'amor ne' lumi amati, / E questa è la cagion di quei sospiri / Ch'esalan gl'amorosi alti desiri."

5. Bernardino Tomitano, Sonnet 4 in *I fiori delle rime de poeti illustri*, vol. 8 (Venice, 1558): "Quel che con infinito alto governo, / E con immensa providenza, ed arte / Sua mirabil virtute a noi comparte / Santo, saggio, divin Motore eterno, / Vi diede a questa età, perche l'interno / Vostro valor Lucretia in mille carte / Per voi rimbombi, e viva a parte, a parte / Tutto quel, ch'è di voi chiaro, e superno."

6. Angelo Grillo, *Pompe di Morte*, canzone 2, "In morte della Signora D. Leonora Cibo." Stanza 6 (lines 16–20): "Ahi chi la più bella alma / De le più belle membra a partir sforza / E in un sol lume ogni mio lume ammorza? / Ahi del Ciel, di natura ultima possa / Sarete adunque voi nud'ombra, e ossa?"

Women's souls can, therefore, be nobler and more prized in their creation than men's. Now, if we wished to apply the common reasoning, we would say that women's souls are equal to men's. But the complete falseness of this opinion will become apparent to everyone whose mind is not totally committed to the opposite point of view if we consider the body, because the nobility of the soul can be judged from the excellence of the body—which is ornamented with the same character and beauty as the soul, "which such a body manifests in itself."⁷ The greater nobility and worthiness of a woman's body is shown by its delicacy, its complexion, and its temperate nature, as well as by its beauty, which is a grace or splendor proceeding from the soul as well as from the body. Beauty is without doubt a ray of light from the soul that pervades the body in which it finds itself, as the wise Plotinus writes, following Plato in this case, in these words:

There is a natural exemplar of beauty, a more beautiful rational principle in the soul, from which beauty flows.⁸

Marsilio Ficino writes in his *Letters*:

Bodily beauty lies not in the shadow of matter, but in the light and grace of form.⁹

And what is the form of the body if not the soul?

The greatest poets teach us clearly that the soul shines out of the body as the rays of sun shine through transparent glass. The more beautiful the woman, the more they affirm that it is her soul that renders grace and loveliness to her body. Petrarch demonstrates this a thousand times, especially when talking of Madonna Laura's eyes, or rather, her two bright suns. He writes:

My noble lady, I see in the movement of your eyes a sweet light that shows me the way that leads to heaven.¹⁰

Francesco Rainieri writes in one of his sonnets:

7 The phrase in quotation marks here is in Latin: "que parat sibi tale corpus."

8. Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.8 ("On the Intellectual Beauty"), following Plato's *Symposium*: "Exemplar pulchritudinis naturalis est ratio quaedam in anima pulchrior, a qua profluit pulchritudo."

9. Marsilio Ficino (1433–99), *Letters* 47: "Pulchritudo corporis non in umbra materiae, sed in luce, et gratia formae." Ficino was head of the Platonic Academy in Florence. He made translations of the works of Plato, Plotinus, and other ancient thinkers. His *Letters* were printed in 1495 but some date from as early as 1470, and his translation of Plato's *Dialogues* was completed in 1469.

10. Petrarch, *Canzoniere* 72: "Gentil mia donna, i'veggio / nel volger de'vostri occhi un dolce lume / che mi mostra la via ch'al ciel conduce."

If from your beautiful eyes in which can be seen all the beauty which nature and art can make . . . ,¹¹

and in another sonnet:

Fair soul wrapped in a flimsy veil that shines gold as if enclosed in glass.¹²

Tasso, too, demonstrates this in his sonnets:

Fair soul, whose splendor is transparent, a sun through the clouds of its hazy veil,¹³

in which he shows that the soul shines forth through a lovely, well-composed body, rather like the sun when veiled by flimsy clouds. The soul, therefore, is the cause and origin of physical beauty, as I have demonstrated. And not only the soul.

If we take our reasoning further, we will see that God, the stars, the sky, nature, love, and the elements are the origin and source of beauty. Beauty, the home of the graces and of love, is dependent on the supernal light. Platonists affirm that it is an image of divine beauty with the words:

External beauty is the image of divine beauty.¹⁴

Dionysius writes:

Through participation in the first cause, all things are beautiful in themselves and in their own way.¹⁵

Leone Ebreo reveals this to us abundantly in *De amore*, affirming that that the corporeal beauty which shines in bodies is a shadow and image of incorporeal

11. Francesco Rainieri, Sonnet in *Rime di M. Anton Francesco Rainerio Gentilhuomo Milanese*, p. 9 (Venice, 1554): "Se da' begli occhi vostri in cui si mira / Tutto il bel, che può far natura e arte."

12. Ibid. (p. 10): "Alma gentil in sottil velo involta, / Che come in terso cristal chiuso auro splendeui." (The lines Marinella quotes are slightly different: "Alma leggiadra in sottil velo involta, / Che come in vetro chiuso auro splendeui," and may have come from a different edition.)

13. Tasso, Sonnet dedicated to La Signora Vittoria Scandiana Tassona in *Scielta delle rime del Sig. T. Tasso*, part 1, p. 69 (Ferrara, 1582): "Alma leggiadra, il cui splendor traluce / Qual sol per nubi dal suo vago velo."

14. "Pulchritudo externa est divinae pulchritudinis imago." This is a reference to the Platonic theory of Forms (see chap. 2, note 4 above). Physical beauty is a manifestation of the divine, abstract Idea or Form of beauty

15. Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names*, 704a: "Per participationem causae primae omnia pulchra sunt pro suo cuique modo." Dionysius was a Greek writer from the fifth or sixth century C.E. who wrote on theological themes with Christian and Neoplatonic influences.

beauty.¹⁶ If it came solely from the body, each body would be beautiful, which it is not. Beauty and majesty of body are, therefore, born of superior reason as Giovanni Guidiccioni states, like a good Platonist wondering if beauty is the image of God:

The beautiful and pure light that shines in you almost awakes in my bosom an image of God.¹⁷

But Claudio Tolomei demonstrates clearly that earthly beauty is an important part of God's beauty with these words:

Of the beauty that great God possesses such a bright ray shines in you, lady, that he who is worthy to look on you sees the true source of eternal light.¹⁸

This shows, as Dionysius the Areopagite states, that the greatest beauty is given to creatures who are worthy of it, as women are.¹⁹ This is also confirmed by Francesco Maria Molza, who writes:

Lady in whose bright and divine splendor God proposed to give himself pleasure, at the time when he created both the hemispheres and whatever within them was exotic or ornate.²⁰

Celio Magno, secretary of the Signoria of Venice, also expresses this opinion in one of his sonnets:

Did not God create beauty to arouse love in us once the lustful fire has been extinguished?²¹

In a *canzone* praising the beauty of the woman he loves, and in particular her eyes, he writes:

16. Leone Ebreo, *Dialoghi d'amore* 3 E.d: "Teoria della bellezza"

17. Giovanni Guidiccioni, Sonnet in *Rime diverse di molti eccellentiss autori*, p. 154 (Venice, 1565): "La bella e pura luce che in voi splende / Quasi imagin di Dio nel sen mi desta."

18. Claudio Tolomei, *Ottava* 1 in *Rime di diversi nobili huomini et eccellenti*, vol. 2 (Venice, 1547): "De la beltà, che Dio larga possiede / Si vivo raggio in voi donna riluce / Che chi degno di quel vi guarda, vede / Il vero fonte dell' eterna luce"

19. Dionysius the Areopagite. See note 15 above.

20. Francesco Maria Molza, Sonnet 2 in *Rime di diversi nobili huomini et eccellenti*, vol. 2 (Venice, 1547): "Donna nel cui splendor chiaro, e divino / Di piacere a se stesso Dio propose, / Allor che gli Emisferi ambi dispose / E quanto hanno d'ornato, e pellegrino"

21. Celio Magno, Sonnet, "In reply to Sig. Valerio Marcellini," in *Rime di Celio Magno e Orsato Giustiniano* (Venice, 1600): "Non credè Dio bellezza, accioché spento / Sia'l fuoco in noi, che per lei desta amore."

Your other honors are miracles of nature. This one seems to have descended from God himself.²²

This is also stated by Remigio Fiorentino in his sonnets:

Lady, they [your eyes] are the image of that serenity, of that beauty, of that charm, and that divinity which His goodness alone pours into us.²³

Bernardo Rota demonstrates it also, with these words:

If from the eye of heaven the wondrous great light shines upon and nourishes both good and evil, noble lady, in you alone shines all the beauty that God sees and possesses within himself.²⁴

Guarini writes in *Pastor fido*:

Oh lady, oh gift from heaven, or rather of Him who created you both and made you more beautiful . . .²⁵

In short each writer, Platonist, and poet affirms that beauty comes from God. This is shown by Petrarch in his *Canzoniere*, 73, which begins "Since through my destiny," in these words:

since God and nature and love wished to place completely every virtue in those lovely lights on account of which I live in joy.²⁶

Divine beauty is, therefore, the first and principal cause of women's beauty, after which come the stars, heavens, nature, love, and the elements. As Petrarch writes of Madonna Laura:

The stars and the heavens and the elements vied with all their arts and put every ultimate care into that living light where Nature is mirrored—and the sun, which finds its equal nowhere else.²⁷

22. Celio Magno, *canzone* beginning "Quanto in voi Donna io miro," in *Rime di Celio Magno e Orsato Giustiniano*, lines 14–16 (Venice, 1600): "Son gli altri vostri honori / Miracol di natura / Questo par che da Dio proprio discenda."

23. Remigio Fiorentino, Sonnet beginning "Se quel seren, ch'a bei vostri occhi intorno," in *I fiori delle rime de poeti illustri*, vol. 8 (Venice, 1558): "Donna l'imagin son di quel sereno, / Di quel bel, di quel vago, e quel divino, / Che sol s'infonde in noi per sua bontade."

24. Bernardo Rota, Sonnet in *I fiori delle rime de poeti illustri*, vol. 8: "Se dell'occhio del Ciel l'alma gran luce / Quale al rio, tale al buon giova, e risplende, / Donna gentil, s'in voi sola riluce / Tutto il bel, che in se Dio vede e possiede."

25. Guarini, *Pastor fido*, act 3, chorus (lines 30–33): "O donna, o don del Cielo, / Anzi pur di colui / Che'l tuo leggiadro velo / Fe' d'ambo creator più bel di lui."

26. Petrarch, *Canzoniere* 73: "Poi che Dio, e natura, e amor volse / Locar compitamente ogni virtute / In quei bei lumi, ond'io gioioso vivo."

27. Petrarch, *Canzoniere* 154: "Le stelle, il Cielo, e gli Elementi a prova / tutte lor arti et ogni estrema cura / poser nel vivo lume in cui Natura / si specchia e'l sol, ch'altrove par non trova."

Petrarch also demonstrates in many other places that this beauty comes from heaven. Similarly, Bembo writes:

All the love that heaven can gather was shown to me within the space of a beautiful face and courteous, humble conversation, so that all other dear beings would become vile to me.²⁸

Petrarch writes in his *Canzoniere*, 325, that beauty is created in the stars:

The day she was born the stars that produce happy effects in us were in high and elect places. They turned toward each other with love.²⁹

Tansillo, in a *canzone* that begins "Love which lives and lodges within my breast," discovers the same thing:

But when my mind leads me to penetrate the high virtue which encloses the beautiful soul, it seems to me then that the mouth, eyes and laughter and the limbs made in Paradise by the hands of the angels and God are the least cause of my ardor. Who could ever describe the high infinite graces of heaven, dealt you with a generous hand by all the best planets, Venus beauty, Mercury judgment, and the words that if heard in hell would comfort those who suffer most?³⁰

Nature's role is shown by Petrarch in this sonnet:

In what part of Heaven, in what Idea was the pattern from which Nature copied that lovely face in which she wished to show down here all that she is capable of doing up there?³¹

And finally the same author demonstrates that love is the origin and cause of beauty in this sonnet:

Where and from what mine did Love take the gold to make two blond tresses? Among what thorns did he pluck the rose and on what slope the fresh and tender frost, to give them pulse and breath? Where the pearls

28. Pietro Bembo, Sonnet 69: "Mostrommi entro a lo spazio d'un bel volto, / E sotto un ragionar cortese umile / Per farmi ogn'altro caro essere a vile / Amor quanto può darne il Ciel raccolto."

29. Petrarch, *Canzoniere* 325:60: "Il dì che costei nacque eran le stelle, / Che producon fra noi felici effetti, / In luoghi alti, e eletti / L'una ver l'altra con amor converse."

30. Luigi Tansillo, *Poesie, canzone* 3.32–44: "Ma quando mi conduce / La mente a penetrar l'alta virtude, / che la bella alma chiude. / Parmi allor, che la bocca, e gl'occhi, e'l riso / E i membri in Paradiso / Fatti per man de gl'angeli, e di Dio / Sien la minor cagion dell'ardor mio. / Chi potria mai narrar l'alte infinite / Gratie del ciel, ch'a larga man vi denno / Alma real tutti i miglior pianeti? / Venere la beltà, Mercurio il senno, / E le parole, ch'a l'inferno udite / Quei ch'han pena maggior farien più lieti."

31. Petrarch, *Canzoniere* 159: "In qual parte del Ciel, in qual' Idea / era l'esempio onde Natura tolse / quel bel viso leggiadro in ch'ella volse / mostrar qua giù quanto lassù potea?"

with which he breaks and reins in sweet words, chaste and strange?
Where the beauties, so many and so divine, of that forehead brighter
than the heavens? From what angels and what sphere did he send that
heavenly song which so melts me that by now little remains to melt?
From what sun was born the high kindly light of those lovely eyes from
which I receive war and peace, that burn my heart in ice and fire?³²

To create this rich and esteemed treasure house of beauty, therefore, it is necessary to look for it in all the most excellent and noble places, such as God, the stars, nature, the elements, and love—the minister who takes it from the different bodies and from every other source of perfection and excellence. Tasso concludes in his sonnets that every good thing in the world is contained in beauty. He uses these words:

Beautiful lady, in your fair face is seen the splendor of paradise, so that
when my thoughts dwell on you it seems to me that I see every good
gathered there.³³

So if women are more beautiful than men, who, as can be seen, are generally coarse and ill-formed, who can deny that they are more remarkable? Nobody, in my opinion. Thus it can be said that beauty in a woman is a marvellous spectacle and a miracle worthy of respect, though it is never fully honored and respected by men.

But I wish to go further and show that men are obliged and forced to love women, and that women are not obliged to love them back, except merely from courtesy. I also wish to demonstrate that the beauty of women is the way by which men, who are moderate creatures, are able to raise themselves to the knowledge and contemplation of the divine essence. Everybody will be convinced of these matters one day, and the obstinate oppressors of women who trample on their dignity with greater insolence each day will be overcome.

That women's pleasing qualities and lovely, delicate faces force and oblige men to fall in love with them against their wills is very clear. To affirm this appears to me an easy undertaking, because beauty is by nature

32. Petrarch, *Canzoniere* 220: "Onde tolse Amor l'oro e di qual vena / per far due treccie bionde? e'n quali spine / colse le rose, e'n qual piaggia le brine / tenere e fresche, e diè lor polso e lena? / Onde le perle in ch'ei frange et affrena / dolci parole oneste et pellegrine? / Onde tante bellezze et sì divine / di quella fronte più che 'l ciel serena? / Da quali angeli mosse e da qual spera / quel celeste cantar che mi disface / sì che n'avanza omai da disfar poco? / Di qual sol nacque l'alma luce altera / di que'belli occhi ond'io ho guerra e pace, / che mi cuocono il cor in ghiaccio e 'n foco?"

33. Torquato Tasso, Sonnet dedicated to La Serenissima Duchessa di Ferrara, in *Scelta delle rime del Sig. T. Tasso*, part 2, p. 24. "Bella Signora nel tuo vago volto / Si vede lo splendor del Paradiso, / Si che qual' ora il mio pensier v'affiso / Parmi vedere il ben tutto raccolto "

lovable, or truly worthy of love, as Marsilio Ficino states in these words in his translation of Plato's *Symposium*:

Beauty is a kind of human splendor that ravishes the soul, and whose nature is lovable.³⁴

Man needs to love beautiful things, and what more beautiful thing adorns the world than woman? Nothing in truth, as is admitted by all those opposed to us, who affirm that women's lovely faces shine with the grace and splendor of paradise and that they are forced to love them for this beauty, while women are not forced to love men, because that which is less beautiful, or ugly, is not by nature worthy of being loved.

I say that compared to women all men are ugly. They would not be loved by women were it not for our courteous and benign natures, to which it seems discourteous not to love our male admirers a little. Let the complaints, laments, sighs, and exclamations of men cease, therefore. They mistakenly seek to make women love them by saying that women are cruel, ungrateful, and wicked. This cast of thought can be plainly seen in men's poetry and is merely laughable. That women's beauty leads to the knowledge of God and the supernal intelligence, and shows the way to heaven, is demonstrated by Petrarch, who, in the movement of Madonna Laura's eyes, saw a light that showed him the way to heaven and caused him to add:

And through long custom within myself, where I sojourn alone with love, your heart shines almost visibly. This is the sight that leads me to do good and that shows me a glorious goal: this only distances me from the common herd.³⁵

Further down he adds:

I think: if up there—from where the eternal mover of the stars deigned to show his work on earth—the other works are as beautiful, let the prison open in which I am closed.³⁶

From these words it can be understood that Petrarch was saying to himself: "If this unique beauty that I have discovered in the graceful, sparkling eyes

34. Marsilio Ficino, translation of Plato's *Symposium* (see note 8 above). "Pulchritudo est quidam splendor humanus ad se rapiens animam, et amabilis sua natura."

35. Petrarch, *Canzoniere* 72:1 4: "E per lungo costume / dentro là dove sol con amor seggio / quasi visibilmente il cor traluce, / questa è la vista, ch' al ben far m'induce / e che mi scorge a glorioso fine: / questa sola dal vulgo m'allontana"

36. Ibid. 2:1: "Io penso se là suso / onde il motore eterno delle stelle / degnò mostrar del suo lavoro in terra / son l'altre opre sì belle, / aprasi la prigione, ov'io son chiuso."

of Madonna Laura is so worthy and deserving of respect, what must that which is in heaven be like?" and that thinking of this made him want to die. In sonnet 13 he thanks fortune, or God, who has made him worthy of seeing Laura, through whose means he has been guided toward the supreme good:

From her comes the amorous thought that, while I follow it, sends me toward the supreme good, little valuing what other men desire. From her comes fair courage, which guides me to heaven by the straight path.³⁷

In sonnet 289 he writes:

I thank her and her lofty counsel, which with her beautiful face and with gentle anger forced me while burning to think of my salvation.³⁸

Shortly afterward he writes:

That sun which showed me the straight path to go to heaven with glorious steps.³⁹

Dante, in a ballad, writes that in contemplating the face of his lady he becomes beatified, like an angel.

Since my eyes can never have enough of looking at my lady's beautiful face I will look at it so fixedly that I will become blessed while looking at her. As an angel, who, by nature living on high, becomes blessed just by looking at God, thus being a human creature looking at the face of this lady who holds my heart, I could become blessed here.⁴⁰

Caro, speaking to Love in a *canzone*, says:

Who guides us down here, who raises us to heaven? For from pole to pole dark fog envelops us. With these guides Love leads us from ardor to ardor. From one splendor to another he leads us to gaze at

37. Ibid. 13:9: "Da lei ci vien l'amoroso pensiero, / Che mentre il segui al sommo ben t'invia, / Poco prezzando quel, ch'ogn' uom desia. / Da lei vien l'animosa leggiadria, / Che'al Ciel ti scorge per destro sentiero."

38. Ibid. 289:9: "Lei ne ringrazio, e 'l suo alto consiglio, / Che col bel viso, e co'soavi sdegni / Fecemi ardendo pensar mia salute."

39. Ibid. 306: "Quel sol, che mi mostrava il camin destro / Di gire al Ciel con gloriosi passi."

40. Dante, *Ballate* 9: "Poi che saziar non posso gli occhi miei / Di guardare a Madonna il suo bel viso / Mirerò 'l tanto fiso, / Ch'io diverrò beato lei guardando. / A guisa d'angel, che di sua natura / Stando su in altura / Divien beato sol vedendo Dio; / Così essendo humana creatura / Guardando la figura / Di questa donna, che tene il cor mio / Potria beato divenir qui io." This ballad is now regarded as spurious. See *Le Opere de Dante, Testo Critico della Società Dantesca Italiana* (Florence: R. Bemporad, 1921).

the eternal sun; thus mortal beauty, which comes from him, seems to awaken us to him: thus celestial light derived from above, is honored here below. Now who is to raise us up, and who from on high look down on us if our beloved sun offers us no light?⁴¹

In one of his sonnets we read:

I see well how she inspires and how she shines, because with remembrance and desire of her beautiful eyes and her sweet smile she leads my thought so high that it draws near to her, and perceives in that beautiful face the brightness of angels, and of God.⁴²

Bernardo Tasso writes a whole *canzone* demonstrating that beauty is a stairway which leads to heaven, and then adds:

Oh noble lady, oh my shining sun, safe and solid stairway to heaven, sun of my life, sweet support: Nature gave life to you for no other reason, rare virtue, unique beauty, and sun, if not to enrich this unworthy world and show it a pattern of angelic and divine beauty.⁴³

Molza makes similar points in his sonnets, and Guidiccioni says the same thing in a very beautiful sonnet of which I will quote only three lines:

He does it so that the mind, passing from one likeness to another, unites itself with God, not for purposeless desire as others believe.⁴⁴

What poet is there, however coarse, who does not state openly that beauty is the path that guides us directly to the contemplation of divine wisdom (even though Passi, writing in ignorance, dares to affirm that beauty

41. Annibale Caro, *canzone* beginning "Amor, che fia di noi se non si sface," in *Rime* (Venice, 1572). "Chi ne guida qua giù, chi n'erger al Cielo? / Poi ch'ambi i nostri poli / Atrà nebbia c'involi / Con queste scorte Amor di zelo, in zelo. / D'una in altra chiarezza / Ne conduce a mirar l'eterno sole; / Così mortal bellezza / Che da lui viene, a lui par che ci desti: / Così lume celesto / Che di la sù deriva, qui si cole / Or chi s'inalza, e chi d'alto ci scorge / Se'l nostro amato sol lume non porge."

42. Annibale Caro, Sonnet beginning "O d'umana beltà caduchi fiori," in *Rime*: "Ben veggio come spira, e come luce / Che con la rimembranza, e col desio / De' suoi begli occhi, e del suo dolce riso / Il mio pensier tanto alto si conduce, / Che le s'appressa, e scorge nel bel viso / La chiarezza de gli angeli, e di Dio."

43. Bernardo Tasso, *canzone* dedicated to la Signora Ginevra Malatesta (lines 79–86) in *Rime*, book 2: "O nobil Donna, o mio lucente sole, / Scala da gir al Ciel salda, e sicura, / Sol de la vita mia dolce sostegno. / Per altro no vi diè l'alma natura / Rare virtù, bellezze uniche, e sole / Se non per arricchire il mondo indegno / E mostrarne un disegno / De la bellezza angelica, e divina."

44. Giovanni Guidiccioni, Sonnet beginning "Si come il sol, ch'è viva statua chiara," in *Rime diverse di molti eccellenti autori* (Venice, 1545): "E'l fa perché la mente oltre passando / D'una in altra sembianza a Dio s'unisca / Non già per van desio com'altri crede."

is the cause of infinite evils)? Beauty should be looked at dispassionately and without lascivious, vain thoughts, as Petrarch writes:

I gave him wings to fly above the heavens through mortal things that,
if judged rightly, are the staircase to the Creator.⁴⁵

I would not merely call beauty a staircase. I believe it to be the golden chain referred to by Homer that can always raise minds toward God and can never, for any reason, be dragged down toward earth. This is because beauty, not being earthly but divine and celestial, always raises us toward God, from whom it is derived. This is shown in the following lines by Petrarch:

From one beauty to another I raise myself gazing on the first cause.⁴⁶

This means, "I ascend from beauty to beauty," that is, from link to link, "and I base myself on the first cause." The first link of our golden chain that, descending from heaven, gently carries away our souls, is corporeal beauty. This is gazed at and considered by the mind, through means of the outer eye, which enjoys and finds moderate pleasure in it, but then, conquered by supreme sweetness, ascends to the second link and contemplates and gazes with the internal eye at the soul that, adorned with celestial excellence, gives form to the beautiful body. Not stopping at this second beauty or link, but avid and desirous of a more vivid beauty and almost inflamed by love, the mind ascends to the third link, in order to compare earthly and celestial beauties and raise itself to heaven. From there it contemplates the angelic spirits, and finally this contemplative mind seats itself within the great light of the angels, and thus of the one who supports the chain. So the soul, taking delight in Him, is made happy and blessed.

I will say no more for now of this chain, but may speak of it at greater length further on. I believe that through my reasoning I have clearly demonstrated that the beauty of a lovely face, accompanied by a graceful appearance, guides every man to the knowledge of his maker. What a gift and what a dowry these women have, and in what abundance, that with their beauty they can raise men's minds to God! Who could ever praise you enough, rich treasure of the world? I confess that if I spoke as many languages as there are leaves on the trees in the laughing springtime, or grains of sand in sterile and infertile Libya, I could never begin to sing your

45. Petrarch, *Canzoniere* 360:137: "Da volar sopra il Ciel gli havea dat'ali / Per le cose mortali / Che son scala al Fattor, chi ben l'estima."

46. The lines Marinella quotes are: "D'una in l'altra bellezza / M'alzo mirando la cagion primiera." The nearest quote I can find to this is in Petrarch, *Canzoniere* 360:142: "D'una in l'altra sembianza / Potea levarsi a l'alta cagion primiera." (From one likeness to the next he could have risen to the high First Cause).

praises sufficiently. Not only does your beauty raise cold minds to God, but it renders even the most crude and obstinate heart humble and meek. What more? Oh marvel! It adorns the primitive with pleasing habits, renders the foolish prudent and wise, and in short has moved every poet to write verses to women's beauty. Petrarch, for example, in his *Canzoniere*, 360, which begins "My old sweet cruel Lord," demonstrates that it is the cause of all his virtues in the words:

Risen to some fame only through me, who have raised up his intellect
to where it could never have raised itself.⁴⁷

In order to praise the divine beauty of Madonna Laura he composed a poem that was greatly esteemed by the world. If she had not pushed him to this honor with her beauty he might have been, as Love says in the same poem:

who now perhaps would be a hoarse murmurer of the courts, one of
the mob!⁴⁸

Sperone Speroni confesses that women give poets their voices and intellects:

so I may see you assemble the beautiful array of all your beloved
goddesses who give to poetry its voice and intellect.⁴⁹

Other poets have done the same, recognizing their obligation to praise and bow to women's beauty, which lives even when they are dead. A beautiful face can conquer the proudest, most haughty kingdom of the world, as well as the one most scientific and literate. Tasso demonstrates the greatness and majesty of this gift in *Torrismondo*:

This beauty is the particular benefit, dowry and gift of women, oh
daughter, and the particular object of praise. And this makes us equal,
even superior, to the rich, wise, fertile, industrious, and strong. And
victories, triumphs, spoils and palms are ours and are more dear and
more beautiful and greater than those boasted of by men, who are
stained with blood and overflowing with anger.⁵⁰

47. Petrarch, *Canzoniere* 360:88: "Salito in qualche fama / Solo per me, che 'l suo intelletto alzai / Ov'alzato per se non fora mai."

48. Petrarch, *Canzoniere* 360:116: "Ch' or saria forse un roco / Mormorador di corti, un uom del vulgo!"

49. Sperone Speroni: "Ch'io vi veda adunar la bella schiera / Di tutte queste vostre amate Dive / Che danno a poetar voce e' intelletto."

50. Tasso, *Il re Torrismondo* 2:4 28–36: "Questa bellezza / Proprio ben, propria dote, e proprio dono / È de le donne, o figlia, e propria laude / Et agguagliam, anzi vinciam con questa / Ricchi, saggi, facondi, industri, e forti. / E vittorie, e trionfe, e spoglie, e Palme / Le nostre sono e son più care, e belle / E maggiori di quelle, onde si vanta / L'uom che di sangue è tinto, e d'ira colmo "

In these few words he has shown the marvellous ways in which beauty works, how it has tamed the pride not only of men, but also of the ancient gods.

I would wish now to exalt and praise you, but I lack the words, and the more I spread the wings of my too audacious thoughts, the more there remain, so I would merely say with Petrarch:

Silent I cannot be, and I fear that my tongue may produce an effect contrary to my heart, which would wish to honor its lady, who listens to us from Heaven. How can I if love does not teach me with mortal words to equal divine works.⁵¹

I can even say that I diminish beauty's praises by speaking them, and that it is better therefore to be silent and bow before it and gaze at it and worship it while it stupefies me. I worship and bow before it as before something holy.

Let us conclude, therefore, that women, being more beautiful than men, are also nobler than they are. The reasons for this are first because God's power can be discerned in a blooming and delicate face, which also raises men's minds toward divine goodness; second, because beauty is lovable by nature and attracts every heart, however rigid or bitter; and finally, because beauty is adorned with and full of goodness, being a ray and splendor of excellence. As Marsilio Ficino states: "For all beauty is good."⁵² Speusippus and Plotinus say the same, and everyone clearly appreciates how rare it is for an evil soul to dwell in a pleasing, graceful body.

It is for this reason that nature, knowing the perfection of the female sex, produces a greater abundance of women than of men, as it always, or nearly always, does on occasions when objects are better or closer to perfection. Thus it appears to me that Aristotle goes against all reason, and even against his own theory that nature always, or almost always, designs more nearly perfect objects, when he states that women are imperfect in comparison to men.⁵³ Moreover, I would say that as nature produces smaller numbers of men than of women, that men are the less noble sex, since nature chooses not to produce large or copious quantities of them. And now enough of the singular nature of the female sex.

51 Petrarch, *Canzoniere* 325: "Tacer non posso, e temo non adopra / Contrario effetto la mia lingua al core, / Che vorria far onore / A la sua donna, che dal Ciel n'ascolta. / Come poss'io se non m'insegna amore / Con parole mortali aguagliar l'opre / Divine."

52. "Omne enim pulcrum est bonum." See, for example, Ficino's *Letters* 19: "Beauty follows the light of the good as its splendor." Also Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6.7: "Anyone who has seen [the good] knows what I mean when I say that it is beautiful."

53. See, for example, Aristotle, *Generation of Animals* 4.6 (775a5–15): female nature is "a sort of natural deficiency." (Cf. Marinella's Introduction, note 4, where Aristotle's misogynist philosophy is referred to by Marinella and especially the following chapter.)