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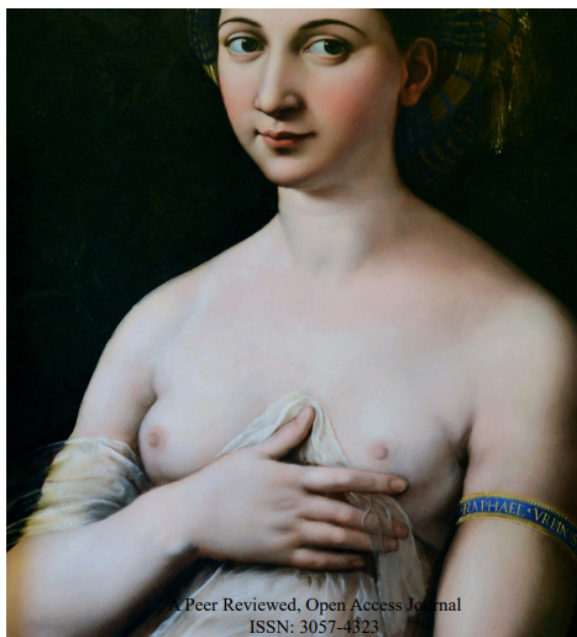
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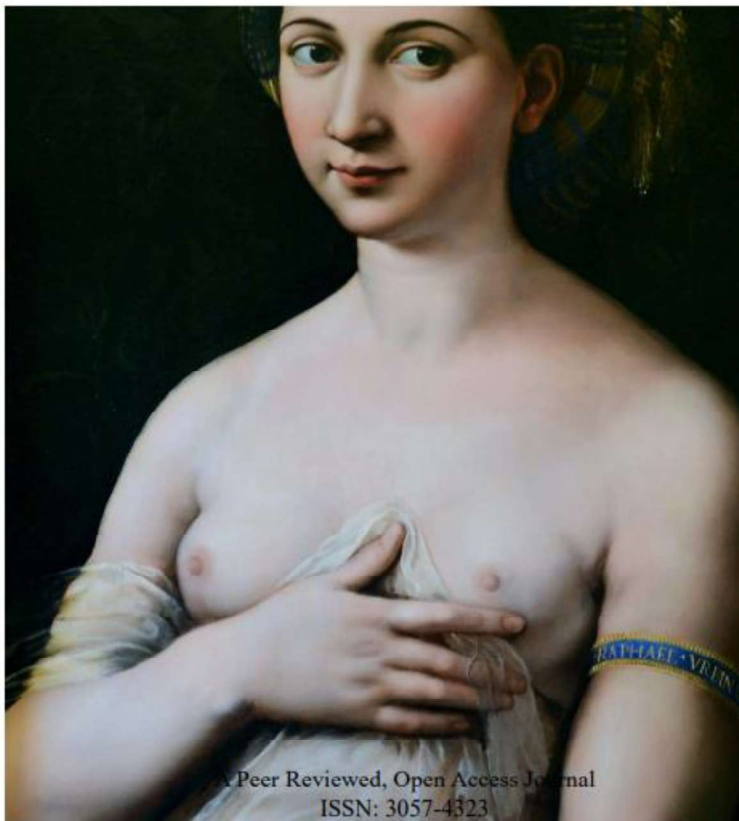
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Sappho Reborn: Portraiture of Women Poets in Renaissance Italy

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Abstract

This article examines the cultural and artistic significance of Italian Renaissance poetesses through the lens of literary history and visual representation. Drawing on feminist scholarship, it highlights the prominence of women's writing in sixteenth-century Italy and its connection to the rise of print culture and the vernacular. Focusing on figures such as Laura Battiferri, Vittoria Colonna, Veronica Franco, Veronica Gambara, and Tullia d'Aragona, the study analyzes portraits by artists including Bronzino, Sebastiano del Piombo, Michelangelo, Tintoretto, Antonio da Correggio and Moretto da Brescia. These images reveal how Renaissance artists employed symbolism and classical models to construct the poetess as an intellectual, moral and creative authority.

Keywords: Italian Renaissance; Women's Writing; Poetesses; Portraiture; Sappho

1. Introduction: The presence of women in the culture of the Italian Renaissance and the contemporary research

From the 1990s onward, sustained scholarly work –primarily carried out within Anglophone academia– has brought Italian women's writing increasingly into the center of critical and academic attention. In this field, Virginia Cox's works are important. For example, I refer to her studies: *Women's Writing in Italy: 1400–1650* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), *The Prodigious Muse: Women's Writing in Counter-Reformation Italy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), and her anthology of Italian women's lyric verse, *Lyric Poetry by Women of the Italian Renaissance* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013). Also, a renowned series of European texts, written by women, is *The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe*. In this series, currently in more than 150 volumes, there are many Italian authors translated into English by important scholars¹.

¹ See <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/series/OVIEME.html>.

As Alexandra Collier informs us (Collier, 2021), Cox's archival research reveals that Italian women authored seventy-nine independently published works between 1540 and 1599, followed by seventy-one additional publications in the period from 1600 to 1659. Notably, Italy witnessed the highest level of women's literary publication in the sixteenth century when compared to other European regions. This development was closely linked to the spread of vernacular languages and the advent of the printing press in the late fifteenth century, factors that significantly facilitated women's access to literary production.

Throughout their creative lives, women engaged with an impressive range of literary forms, including lyric and epic poetry², pastoral and theatrical compositions³, texts defending women's intellectual and moral worth⁴, philosophical writings (Hagengruber and Hutton, 2021)⁵, and epistolary works (Kaborycha, 2015; Cereta, 1997). Beyond authorship, they were active as performers and creators in the musical sphere, serving as singers, instrumentalists, and composers (Pendle, 2001; Stras, 2018), while also acting as prominent patrons of artistic production and members of learned academies (Strunck, 2011; King, 1998). More recently, scholarly research has also brought renewed attention to women's previously overlooked involvement in the scientific disciplines (Ray, 2015; Strocchia, 2019).

The influence of women in literature is evident in Renaissance paintings, which depict poetesses of that period. Thus, we can examine some typical cases.

2. Sappho as a model of the woman poet and some famous portraits of Italian poetesses

In *The Parnassus* (Fig. 1), a fresco by the Italian High Renaissance master Raphael, located in the Raphael Rooms (Stanze di Raffaello) of the Vatican Palace in Rome,

² We could mention the numerous women poets associated with Petrarchism in Italy (Jones, 2015). With regard to the cultivation of epic poetry, special attention should be given to the works of a notable Italian woman writer, Margherita Sarrocchi, who composed a twenty-three-canto epic poem, *Scanderbeide* (first incomplete publication in 1606 in Rome by Lepido Faci, and posthumously in 1623, in Rome, by Andrea Fei, in an almost complete version), which commemorates and glorifies the heroic deeds of Scanderbeg in his resistance against the Ottoman Turks (Ray, 2016).

³ One of the emblematic pastoral works of the Italian Renaissance written by a woman is *La Mirtillo* composed by Isabella Andreini (Riverso, 2017). Laura Battiferri also wrote pastoral works in which she employed classical motifs of this literary genre (Griva, 2019). On theatrical compositions written by women see: Cerasano and Wynne-Davies 1996.

⁴ The most notable work within this category is *Il merito delle donne* authored by Moderata Fonte (Collina, 1989). Another significant author of the Late Renaissance, who wrote in defense of women's worth and their right to freedom of choice, is the Venetian nun Arcangela Tarabotti (See her work: *Che le donne siano della specie degli uomini, Difesa delle donne*, published in 1651 under the pseudonym of Galerana Barcitotti, a response to the anonymous tract *Che le donne non siano della specie degli uomini, Discorso piacevole*, published in 1647).

⁵ Two of the most significant women philosophers of the Renaissance are Tullia d'Aragona and Sara Copia Sullam. Tullia was the author of the philosophical dialogue *Dell'infinità d'amore*, whereas Sara led a turbulent life as a result of the courage with which she articulated and defended her philosophical views (Copia Sullam, 2019).

Sappho is prominently depicted as the sole female poet among a gathering of classical and contemporary poets. She is identified by a scroll bearing her name, immediately signaling her intellectual presence and literary importance. The composition situates Sappho on Mount Parnassus, traditionally the home of the Muses, surrounded by male poets. Her figure stands out not only because of her gender but also due to her poised and serene demeanor, which conveys both dignity and scholarly authority.

Sappho is shown holding the scroll with an air of contemplative grace. Raphael's careful attention to gesture, posture, and facial expression ensures that she exudes an aura of calm intellectuality. The lyre Sappho holds further link her to the arts and the Muses, underscoring her role as a paradigmatic figure for Renaissance poetesses. Her positioning and the surrounding iconography collectively communicate that she is not merely a historical figure but a timeless model of erudition, creativity, and moral authority for later generations of poets in Italy (Γρίβα, 2022).

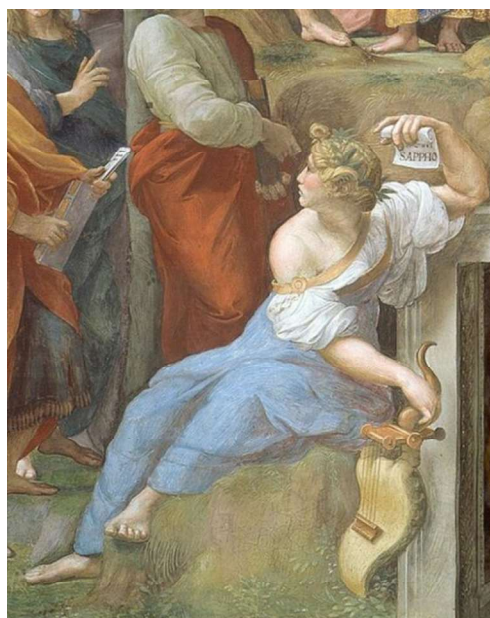


Fig. 1. Raphael, *Parnassus*, 1509–1511, Apostolic Palace, Vatican Museums, Vatican City

Why should we refer to the depiction of Sappho when our aim is to discuss the portraits of women poets of the Italian Renaissance? This reference is due to the fact that Sappho is regarded by women poets as a spiritual and artistic predecessor: many Renaissance poetesses were called “new Sappho,” “Sappho of our times,” etc. Sappho in Renaissance culture is seen as a highly educated woman, presented in paintings with symbols such as books, papyri, and musical instruments (Griva, 2020), and this same iconography is also used in paintings depicting Renaissance poetesses, as we will see below.

The poet Laura Battiferri Ammannati (1523–1589) was celebrated in her time as a “new Sappho”. A native of Urbino, she was born out of wedlock to the nobleman Giovanni Antonio Battiferri and his companion Maddelena Coccapani. Her first marriage was to Vittorio Sereni; following his death, she married the Florentine

sculptor Bartolomeo Ammannati. Through their shared artistic and intellectual pursuits, Battiferri and Ammannati became prominent figures within Florentine elite society. Her poetic works circulated extensively within Italian literary circles and even reached the Spanish court, where they were translated into Spanish. Contemporary writers and intellectuals actively sought her company, recognizing her wit and intellectual distinction (Kirkham, 2007).

In 1560, Battiferri published *Il Primo libro delle opere toscane* in Florence, dedicating the volume to Eleonora di Toledo, consort of Cosimo I de' Medici. Four years later, she issued a collection of translations of several *Penitential Psalms*, which also included a number of original "spiritual sonnets". Prior to her death, she began preparing a third volume entitled *Rime*, which ultimately remained unpublished. Her literary output was extensive, comprising nearly 550 poems, more than one hundred of which survive in epistolary form. Her correspondence with Benedetto Varchi was later published as *Lettere a Benedetto Varchi* in 1879. Among her correspondents were leading cultural figures such as Benedetto Varchi, il Lasca, Agnolo Bronzino, and Benvenuto Cellini.

Particular attention should be given to Battiferri's portrait by Agnolo Bronzino (Fig. 2). Although Bronzino was chiefly known as a painter, he also cultivated poetic ambitions and frequently portrayed fellow writers and intellectuals. This portrait has been regarded by some scholars as one of the most compelling female portraits of the period. Battiferri is depicted with delicate fingers resting on an open volume of Petrarch's sonnets addressed to Laura, thereby underscoring a symbolic identification between the poet-sitter and Petrarch's idealized beloved⁶.



Fig. 2. Agnolo Bronzino, *Portrait of Laura Battiferri*, c. 1560, oil canvas, Florence (Palazzo Vecchio)

⁶ For an interesting analysis of the style and symbolism of the portrait see: Varisco, 2009.

This portrait is widely regarded as innovative for its departure from established conventions of the period. Battiferri is depicted in profile, allowing an unobstructed view of her facial features, including her elongated, slightly aquiline nose. Bronzino accentuates this characteristic by subtly extending her forehead, thereby reinforcing the prominence of her profile. Such a compositional choice was highly unusual in sixteenth-century portraiture, as both female and male sitters were rarely portrayed in profile. Furthermore, the proportions of the figure deviate from naturalism: her head appears somewhat reduced in scale, while her neck is noticeably lengthened, a hallmark of Mannerist aesthetics.

Consistent with his broader portrait practice, Bronzino demonstrates meticulous attention to the sculptural modeling of Battiferri's face, rendering it with a pronounced three-dimensionality. Her concentrated gaze and restrained, impassive expression are characteristic of the artist's formal portrait style. Battiferri was known for her adherence to the principles of the Jesuit Counter-Reformation and was widely regarded as a devout Catholic, a reputation further evidenced by her considerable acclaim at the Spanish court. The austere composure of her posture and attire may thus be interpreted as reflecting the heightened moral rigor imposed by Catholic doctrine in the aftermath of the Council of Trent (1545–1563).

Chromatically, the painting is marked by restraint: Bronzino employs a subdued palette dominated by whites, greys, blacks, and beige tones, in contrast to the more vivid reds and blues that characterize some of his other works.

Another figure of major importance in Renaissance literature is Vittoria Colonna, an Italian aristocrat and one of the era's most distinguished poetic voices (Cox, 2021). Born into a prominent noble family, she married Ferdinando Francesco d'Avalos, Marquis of Pescara, in 1509. Their marriage was largely marked by long periods of separation, as her husband was frequently engaged in military campaigns. Following his death in 1525, Colonna composed an extensive body of poetry commemorating him⁷, alongside a significant corpus of religious verse (Prodan, 2021).

Renowned for her erudition and intellectual refinement, as well as for her intense spiritual sensibility, Colonna earned the admiration of leading literary figures of her time, including Ludovico Ariosto. She maintained close relationships with eminent humanists such as Jacopo Sannazzaro, Pietro Bembo, and Baldassare Castiglione. Her sonnets exerted a lasting influence on subsequent generations of poets, as she expanded and reconfigured the conventions of the Petrarchan lyric tradition, introducing new thematic and emotional dimensions (Copello, 2017b).

Turning to the portrait traditionally associated with her and composed by Sebastiano del Piombo (Fig. 3), we encounter a mysterious female figure who

⁷ Through her study of these particular poems, Anna Wainwright identifies their remarkable influence on other women poets of the sixteenth century (Wainwright, 2021).

engages the viewer with a direct gaze. Her left index finger gestures toward an open book, while her right hand rests upon her chest, delicately slipping beneath the bodice – an evocative gesture that may allude to inner depth or spiritual intensity. Although the sitter's identity remains uncertain, scholars have proposed that the woman portrayed could indeed represent Vittoria Colonna⁸.



Fig. 3. Sebastiano del Piombo, *Portrait of a Woman, Vittoria Colonna(?)*, c. 1520-25, oil on wood, Barcelona, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya

Colonna's connection with Michelangelo, whom she met in Rome in 1538, is widely regarded as the most significant relationship of her life. Their association was maintained through a rich correspondence of letters and philosophical sonnets (Brundin, 2017; Copello, 2017a), which attests to a deep intellectual and spiritual rapport between them. According to tradition, Michelangelo was present at Colonna's death and later composed texts reflecting on her passing⁹. Until the late nineteenth century, it was commonly assumed that Colonna functioned as Michelangelo's muse and romantic companion, a view largely derived from the emotional intensity of his poetic expressions. This interpretation, however, has been progressively reconsidered and rejected by modern scholars. Rather than occupying the role of a passive muse, Colonna exercised a far more substantial influence: she contributed decisively to Michelangelo's religious outlook, offered him patronage, and became one of his closest and most trusted confidantes.

⁸ <https://www.museunacional.cat/en/vittoria-colonna>; <https://www.thehistoryofart.org/sebastiano-del-piombo/portrait-of-vittoria-colonna/>.

⁹ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vittoria-Colonna>.

Michelangelo produced a portrait of Colonna (Fig. 4) when she was approximately fifty years old, while he himself was nearing sixty-five¹⁰. A comparative examination of Michelangelo's drawing and Sebastiano del Piombo's painted portrait reveals striking correspondences, such as the intense gaze, comparable posture, and shared facial characteristics, including the lips, nose, and hairstyle. These similarities point to a relationship marked by familiarity and a sensitive comprehension of Colonna's personality. Moreover, her stiff, armor-like attire evokes associations with chivalric dress, symbolically underscoring qualities of strength, moral resolve, and spiritual endurance.



Fig. 4. Michelangelo, *Portrait of Vittoria Colonna*, c.1540, ink & paper, British Museum, London, UK

The third poetess to be considered is Veronica Franco, born to Francesco Franco, a Venetian merchant, and Paola Fracassa, a woman involved in arranging intimate relationships for members of the Venetian elite (Rosenthal, 2003). Franco was formally acknowledged by her father, a recognition that secured her Venetian citizenship. She received a solid education from private tutors and early on displayed exceptional literary talent.

Although she married before reaching the age of twenty, the union was short-lived and ended in separation. Subsequently, Franco formed relationships with prominent intellectuals and literary figures in Venice. She bore six children by different fathers, of whom only three survived. Over time, she became widely known as an “honest courtesan”, achieving social prominence through her extensive network of aristocrats, scholars, and public officials.

¹⁰ See also: Forcellino, 2016.

Her literary abilities attracted the attention of Domenico Venier, a poet and the leader of Venice's most influential literary academy. Acting as her patron, Venier welcomed Franco into the academy's intellectual circle and facilitated her participation in its gatherings.

In 1575, Franco published her poetry collection *Terze rime*, a work notable for its candid treatment of her personal experiences, including her sexual life – an openness that was highly unconventional for a woman writer of the period. Five years later, she released a collection of fifty letters addressed to distinguished contemporaries. That same year, she was accused by her son's tutor of practicing magical rites and was brought before the Venetian Inquisition. Although she was ultimately acquitted, the proceedings seriously undermined her public reputation. Franco died in poverty at the age of forty-five, a fate not uncommon among courtesans.

In the portrait traditionally identified as depicting Franco (Fig. 5) and attributed to Tintoretto (father or son, or to a follower)¹¹, the viewer's attention is drawn to the sensuous modeling of her flesh and the expressive intelligence of her gaze. She is adorned with lavish garments and opulent jewelry, consistent with the appearance of elite courtesans. Nevertheless, the identification remains uncertain, a noteworthy detail supporting the association with Franco is the presence of her name, inscribed in block letters on the lining of the painting.



Fig. 5. Jacopo or Domenico Tintoretto (or follower), *Portrait of Woman – Veronica Franco*, (1575?), oil on canvas, Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts

¹¹ The portrait traditionally identified as Veronica Franco is attributed to Tintoretto (Jacopo Robusti, 1518–1594), although the painter's identity is not entirely certain. Some scholars suggest that it may instead be the work of his son, Domenico Tintoretto (1546–1635), or of a student from his workshop. In other words, the attribution remains debated, but the most commonly accepted view is that it is connected to Tintoretto's main workshop (Land, 2003; King, 2022).

Veronica Gambara was a multifaceted figure of the Italian Renaissance: a poet, stateswoman, and political authority who governed the County of Correggio from 1518 until her death in 1550. She was born in Pralboino, Lombardy, to Gianfrancesco da Gambara and Alda Pio da Carpi, within a family distinguished by female intellectual achievement. Among her relatives were her great-aunts Ginevra and Isotta Nogarola, renowned humanist poets. Gambara received a rigorous humanist education that encompassed languages, philosophy, theology, and astronomy, and from an early age she maintained a correspondence with Pietro Bembo (Martin, 2014).

In 1509, at the age of twenty-four, she married her cousin Giberto X, Count of Correggio, in Amalfi. The couple had two children. Following her husband's death in 1518, Gambara assumed responsibility for governing the county while also raising her children and stepdaughter, Costanza. Her role extended beyond political administration: she became an active cultural patron, establishing a prominent literary salon that attracted leading figures of the period, including Pietro Bembo, Ludovico Ariosto, and Titian.

Although only a small portion of her poetry appeared in print during her lifetime, her work circulated extensively in manuscript form¹². Gambara's poetic production may be grouped into four principal categories: devotional verse, politically engaged poetry, Virgilian pastoral compositions, and love poetry addressed to her husband. While the sonnet was her preferred form, she also composed madrigals, ballads, and stanze in ottava rima.

A portrait of an unidentified woman (Fig. 6) —one of the few surviving portraits attributed to Correggio— has been interpreted by some scholars as representing Veronica Gambara¹³.

¹² For a detailed bibliography that includes references to the manuscripts transmitting Gambara's works, see: <http://www.jimandellen.org/vgpoetry/vgbiblio.html>.

¹³ <http://www.museuhub.eu/en/65/graeci-project/1015/portrait-of-a-lady-veronica-gambara>.



Fig. 6. Antonio da Correggio, *Veronica Gambara*, c. 1517–1520, The Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russia

Symbolic elements within the image support this identification: the laurel tree alludes to poetic inspiration, while the ivy signifies marital or widowed status. Furthermore, the Greek word “nepenthes” (*νηπενθές*), meaning a remedy for sorrow, appears on the inner rim of a vessel in the painting, subtly reinforcing the interpretation of the sitter as a poet.

Tullia d'Aragona (c. 1510–1556) was a renowned Venetian courtesan, author, and philosopher. A prolific literary figure, while her intellect earned widespread admiration, she also endured criticism from certain male contemporaries due to her status as a courtesan. Archival records confirm her presence in several Italian cities, while literary sources allow for a partial reconstruction of her life (Hairston, 2018).

Her *canzoniere*, *Rime della Signora Tullia di Aragona e di diversi a lei*, comprises mainly sonnets, either authored by d'Aragona herself or addressed to her by Italian literary figures circulating through Florence, Siena, and Rome. Notable correspondents included Benedetto Varchi, Cosimo I de' Medici, Eleonora di Toledo, and Maria Salviati de' Medici. Additionally, her Neoplatonic dialogue *On the Infinity of Love* represents the earliest example of this genre authored by a woman in Renaissance Italy. Her epic poem, *Il Guerrino, altramente detto il Meschino*, was published posthumously by Sessa in 1560.

The portrait of Tullia d'Aragona as Salome¹⁴, executed by the Italian artist Moretto da Brescia (Fig. 7), constitutes a remarkable example of sixteenth-century portraiture that merges allegory, identity, and self-fashioning. Moretto's refined

¹⁴ The identity of the woman is disputed, but there are sources that claim the figure depicted is Tullia. (Begni Redona, 1988; Biagi, 1886; <https://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/opere-arte/schede/D0090-00081/>).

artistic language is evident in his subtle manipulation of light and color, which lends the composition a striking sense of realism and material richness. Tullia is positioned centrally within the pictorial space, commanding the viewer's attention through both her physical presence and her direct, composed gaze.

Her figure is carefully illuminated, with light softly modeling her face and upper body, emphasizing the smoothness of her skin and the delicacy of her features. The warm, earthy chromatic range –dominated by ochres, browns, and muted golds– enhances the sensual quality of the image while maintaining an air of dignity and restraint. The luxurious textures of her garments are rendered with exceptional precision: the fur-lined cloak suggests wealth and status, while the finely detailed fabrics underscore her association with elite social and intellectual circles.

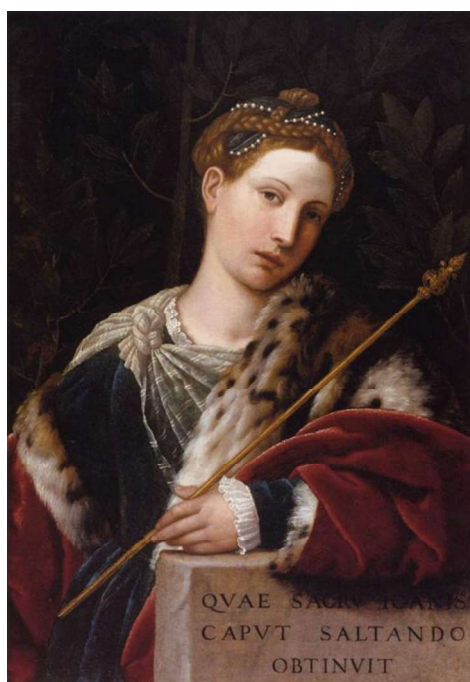


Fig. 7. Moretto Da Brescia, *Portrait of Tullia d'Aragona as Salome*, c. 1537, oil on panel, Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo, Brescia

The symbolic attributes surrounding Tullia play a crucial role in shaping her identity within the painting. The regal headdress and scepter evoke authority and power, aligning her not merely with courtly femininity but with political and cultural influence. Laurel leaves, traditionally associated with poetic achievement and classical inspiration, explicitly reference her literary talents and reinforce her status as an accomplished poet. The Latin inscription identifying her as Salome –“she who obtained the holy head of John”– introduces a complex layer of meaning. Rather than functioning solely as a biblical reference, this identification suggests female agency and power over male authority, a provocative assertion within the context of Renaissance gender norms.

The overall composition balances sensuality with intellectual symbolism, presenting Tullia as a woman who embodies beauty, eloquence, and authority. The controlled posture, measured expression, and carefully arranged attributes indicate a conscious construction of identity, likely reflecting Tullia's own self-awareness and aspirations. Indeed, the painting is widely believed to have been commissioned by Tullia herself, reinforcing the notion that it serves not only as a portrait but also as a statement of authorship, autonomy, and cultural ambition.

Through this richly layered visual language, Moretto's portrait transcends mere likeness, offering a sophisticated meditation on female power, artistic identity, and the intersections of gender, intellect, and representation in Renaissance Italy.

3. Conclusion

Based on a comparison of the literary and visual evidence presented in the text, several conclusions can be drawn about how Italian Renaissance poetesses were depicted:

1. Across the portraits, women are frequently associated with books, manuscripts, and musical instruments, visually linking them to learning and artistic creation. This iconography reflects their status as intellectual and literary authorities.
2. The portraits often emphasize moral seriousness and spiritual devotion. For instance, Battiferri's austere pose and restrained expression correspond to the Counter-Reformation's ethical expectations, while Colonna's armor-like clothing symbolizes moral fortitude and spiritual resilience. These visual cues communicate the poets' ethical and religious integrity alongside their literary accomplishments.
3. Artists paid careful attention to distinctive physical and expressive traits, highlighting each poetess' personality and social presence. Bronzino's meticulous modeling of Battiferri's face, Sebastiano del Piombo's enigmatic depiction of Colonna, and Moretto da Brescia's rendering of Tullia d'Aragona convey individuality and intellect, often incorporating symbolic gestures that reveal character and social role.
4. The portraits frequently include elements that indicate influence, authority, or social status. Tullia d'Aragona's depiction as Salome, with regalia and laurel leaves, conveys both poetic prowess and a degree of control or power in social and intellectual spheres, suggesting that Renaissance poetesses could wield symbolic authority through cultural production.
5. The depiction of Sappho in Renaissance art serves as a recurring model for later poetesses. Elements associated with Sappho –such as books, scrolls, musical instruments, and a composed, contemplative expression– are echoed in the portraits of Italian Renaissance women writers. For instance, Battiferri is shown with Petrarch's

sonnets, Colonna gestures toward an open book, and Tullia d'Aragona is surrounded by symbols of poetic skill. This visual continuity emphasizes the continuity of intellectual authority from the classical past to Renaissance women, highlighting their alignment with the revered female poet of antiquity and legitimizing their cultural and literary presence.

6. Some portraits, especially of courtesans like Veronica Franco and Tullia d'Aragona, balance sensual or luxurious elements with markers of learning and virtue. Jewelry, clothing, and posture communicate social prominence and refinement, while symbolic and compositional choices emphasize intellect, creativity, and ethical stature.

In summary, the visual and literary portrayal of the Renaissance poetess constructs a multidimensional image: learned, morally and spiritually engaged, individually distinguished, and socially influential. Portraiture served as a medium to communicate both personal identity and cultural legitimacy, intertwining artistic representation with the intellectual and social achievements of women writers. Through the examination of the figure of the Renaissance poetess we can understand the position of the woman in Renaissance society and the role she had in Renaissance culture. More specifically, through the artistic rendering of the poetess's figure we can discern symbols, metaphors, and allegories that reveal the way in which 16th-century artists conceived of woman as a bearer of creation and as an interpreter of both worldly and human truth.

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