Is Francesco Patrizi's *L'Amorosa Filosofia* a Heterodox Reading of the *Symposium*?

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**TARGET TEXT**

In a letter dated July 1577 addressed to Fulvio Orsini, the well-known librarian of the Farnese family and, from 1591, Greek language proof-reader at the Vatican Library, Francesco Patrizi da Cherso conveyed a request made by Lady Tarquinia Molza, ‘a miracle among women for her peerless knowledge of the Italian vernacular, Latin and Greek, as well as for her learning in philosophy, poetry and music, for her kindness and the other exceptional virtues of her soul, and for her unique beauty and grace,’ informing Orsini that Molza ‘is burning with a desire to renew and record for posterity the memory of her ancestor, Francesco Maria Molza.’[[1]](#endnote-1) Tarquinia, Francesco Maria’s niece, collected several of his literary compositions with a view to publishing them, and strongly promoted the project, which however wasn’t realised at the time. Patrizi met Tarquinia Molza through Modena gentleman Alessandro Baranzone at the end of the 1560s: the renowned lady, who was 29 at the time, undoubtedly made a highly favourable impression on Patrizi, and the philosopher’s appreciation and admiration for the young woman's intellectual qualities appear to have been sincere.

It was indeed not by chance that L’amorosa filosofia, the dialogue written by Patrizi in Modena between April and August 1577, became the main biographical source for Tarquinia Molza. It was also, in terms of the young woman’s educational curriculum, the main source for the biography published by Domenico Vandelli in the XVIIIth century, which was included in the volume on the life and works of Francesco Maria Molza curated by Pier Antonio Serassi. Vandelli explicitly admits, on p. 8 of this biography, that he referred to *L’amorosa filosofia* in tracing Tarquinia Molza’s intellectual profile and describing her curriculum of studies, which Francesco Patrizi himself promoted and whose development he followed. From 1575, Molza began to study Greek and philosophy under the guidance of the Cherso-born philosopher, and also acquired a rudimentary knowledge of Spanish.

Tarquinia Molza was born in Modena in 1542, the daughter of Camillo and Isabella Colombi and, as the niece of Francesco Maria Molza, was the descendant of a noble family of Roman origin. From a very young age, she showed a remarkable academic aptitude and, because of this, her education was entrusted to Father Giovanni Bertori, known as Poliziano.

Molza’s natural abilities therefore induced her parents to allow her, from the earliest childhood, to follow an educational path different from that of other girls, if what was said by Modena historian Carlo Sigonio (1523-1584), according to an account reported by Girolamo Tiraboschi (Biblioteca modenese, III, 1783, p. 146-152), is in fact true:

‘Tarquinia’s mother had her and her sisters exercise the feminine skill of sewing. Yet Tarquinia shunned it as much as she could, and even before she knew the alphabet, she was so keen on holding little books in her hand and looking at them and reading them when her mother wasn’t there, [that] she would take out a hidden book she always had with her and, laying down the needle, she would start reading (...). She was often caught out at this most noble of subterfuges by her mother, who was displeased by it, and her father, who took great pleasure in it instead. Tarquinia so frequently entreated her father to have Father Giovanni teach her what he was teaching her brothers, that [her father] was forced to acceded to her most graceful charms.’

After Molza's father's death, she was put under the protection of Cardinal Farnese and later of Duke Farnese himself, and she began to study music, showing such talent that she came to be regarded by composer Pietro Vinci as the best performer of his madrigals. On the occasion of Alphonse II’s visit to Modena in 1568, Molza’s artistic excellence prompted the admiration of the Duke of Este. As Francesco Patrizi reported in L’amorosa filosofia (curated by J. Ch. Nelson, Firenze, Olschki, 1963, p. 38-42), the duke heard Molza play ‘some of Vinci's intricate madrigals together with his chapel’s leading musicians,’ and ‘sing [accompanied] by a lute,’ and played tribute to her ability. Between May and October of the same year, Molza met Torquato Tasso, who celebrated her in the sonnet “Donna ben degna che per voi si cinga”, and dedicated many more compositions to her (among them the renowned “Tarquinia, se rimiri i bei celesti giri”) and the dialogue entitled La Molza ovvero de l’Amore.

1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)