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The social lives of paintings in Sixteenth-Century Venice

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Politics, Portraits, and Love

Francesco Bembo, Bianca Capello, and 'the most beautiful contemporary painting in Venice'

In this fourth and last chapter, we return to the portrait of Bianca Capello. As we have seen in the Introduction, the portrait of Capello (1548-1587), the Venetian-born grand duchess of Tuscany, was owned by a Venetian patrician, a certain Francesco Bembo (1544-1599), who, in the summer of 1586, brought it to the Doge's Palace. There, the portrait attended a dinner with the Doge and his guests; it had a private meeting with the Doge and his most trusted friends; and it spent the night in the Doge's apartments. This chapter shows that, in fact, the portrait's visit to the Palace was the climax of a process which had been going on for months, in which the painting attracted the attention of hundreds of people.

It all started on a day in March 1586, when a package was delivered at Francesco Bembo's house. As Bembo confided in a letter to the grand duchess, composed on that same day,

... after almost half an hour, I unwrapped the portrait, so strongly desired by many, and particularly by me; and I was so pleased by it, that for two whole hours I did nothing but admire it, and contemplate it much to my satisfaction, for in fact, it is very beautiful in every part, and made with particular diligence by the extremely skilful Gaetano.

Bembo continued:

Having contemplated the portrait on my own for two hours, I carried it upstairs to the Women. An after having held them back a bit, I lifted up the

cloth with which I had it covered. And as if the curtain of a scene was dropped, the people were full of admiration. When the cloth fell, these Women were left stupefied and completely and totally satisfied.¹

When the cloth was removed that had hidden the portrait from view, the admiration of the women was such that they seemed to be watching the unveiling of a theatre scene. Apparently aware of the theatrical connotations of his act, Bembo turned the painting's revelation into a real spectacle. Describing his deed in terms of a play, he made clear that the painting, too, performed a role. As has been said, this was only the beginning: over the following months the portrait was to become a venerated object with multiple social lives, as it acted as a substitute of Bianca Capello herself, both in a romantic relationship with the painting's owner and on the stage of Venetian and Italian politics.

In his letters to Bianca – he wrote many – Francesco Bembo recorded how hundreds of people came to his house to see the portrait, week after week. At the end of May, an alleged number of seven hundred visitors had dropped by. Bembo diligently recorded people's reactions to his precious possession. He described how people performed certain ritual acts in front of the painting that openly displayed people's devotion to the portrayed lady. He wrote that, on the day he received the painting, his wife tried to kiss it (he had to stop her, afraid that her kiss would damage the paint). That, when the news reached Venice that Bianca had fallen ill, many people came to her portrait to pray in its vicinity. Moreover, many of Venice's top artists, such as Tintoretto, Veronese, and Alessandro Vittoria visited Bembo's house, to view the painting and discuss with the owner the remarkable accomplishment of the painter, Scipione Pulzone da Gaeta.

The veneration of this Venetian portrait of Bianca Capello may be compared with other admired portraits of prominent female sitters, such as Isa-

¹ 'Dapoi quasi mez'hora, scopro il ritratto tanto bramato da tanti, et molto piu da me; e tanto me ne compiacqui, che per due hore intere non feci altro, che amirarlo, et considerarlo, con compita mia satisf.ne, perche in fatti è belliss.o in tutto, et fatto con particular diligenza del valent.mo Gaetano. [...] Contemplato io solo il ritratto due hore, lo porto di sopra dalle Donne; et dapoi l'haverle trattenute un pezzo, levo il panò, [con] che lo havevo coperto. et se al cader delle telle d'una scena, le persone restano amiratrice; queste Donne al levar di questa, restarono stupefatte, e appagate in tutto, e per tutto.' A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato* 5938, c. 707r-v. 'Gaetano' is the nickname of the painter Scipione Pulzone da Gaeta.

bella d'Este in Mantua or Simonetta Vespucci in late fifteenth-century Florence.² It may be understood against the background of Italian court culture, in which courtiers bid for the prince's favour, and as part of an economy of exchanging letters, knowledge, portraits, and other gifts. Also, it must be seen in the context of Petrarchism, which was already an important topic in the preceding chapter. We will take all these aspects into account; but we will also see that the veneration of Bianca Capello's portrait was, to a certain extent, unique, regarding both its scale and its importance.

The material on which this chapter is based is largely unpublished.³ The Archivio di Stato in Florence contains all the letters sent to Bianca Capello during her marriage with the grand duke, Francesco I de' Medici (1541-1587). Among these letters is a significant group written by Francesco Bembo, who in the later 1580s wrote the grand duchess with an almost obsessive regularity about her painted portrait in his possession. I have supplemented this incredibly rich and rare material with other sources, such as letters Bianca Capello returned to Francesco Bembo, diplomatic messages, and poetry. All this allows for a heretofore unattainable amount of detail in our sketch of what was truly a major celebration of a Venetian lady *in effigie*.

In this chapter, we will study the social life of the portrait of Bianca Capello. As we will see, this life was many-sided: the painting had a Platonic love affair with its owner; it was a model for Venetian artists; and it united

² Simonetta Vespucci (d. 1476) was the Platonic mistress of Giuliano de' Medici. She was much admired, and much lamented when she died only 23 years old. There are still many paintings said to represent her, but we do not have direct evidence for the ways fifteenth-century viewers responded to these paintings. See Dennis Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo: Visions Beautiful and Strange*, New Haven and London 2006, pp. 48-75. For the playful adoration of a portrait Isabella d'Este at the north-Italian courts, see Sally Hickson, "'To see ourselves as others see us': Giovanni Francesco Zaninello of Ferrara and the portrait of Isabella d'Este by Francesco Francia", *Renaissance Studies* 23 (2009), pp. 288-310. Hickson's account is mainly concerned with the visual and verbal construction of likeness.

³ In her article on Bernardo Bembo and Leonardo's portrait of Ginevra de' Benci, Jennifer Fletcher refers to Francesco and his promotion of the cult of Bianca Capello: see *The Burlington Magazine* 131 (1989), pp. 811-816, here p. 816. Fletcher refers to Karla Langedijk's catalogue of Medici portraits, in which small bits of Bembo's letters have been published, although with hardly any commentary: Karla Langedijk, *The Portraits of the Medici: 15th - 18th Centuries*, vol. I, Florence 1981, pp. 320-321. Apart from that, the only reference to the letters I have found is in Anna Loredana Zorzi's book on Bianca Capello, published under her pseudonym 'Loredana', but this belongs to the category of popular historiography, like so many writings on the legendary grand duchess (see Anna Loredana Zorzi, *Bianca Cappello: patrizia veneta, granduchessa di Toscana*, Rome 1936, pp. 266-279).

political allies. Thus, this chapter will bring everything together that has been discussed separately in earlier parts of this book: the relation between the image and its prototype, the artist and his agency, and with the owner and other recipients of a painting. The painting itself, its iconography and style, will also play an important part. But first of all, we will get acquainted with Bianca Capello and answer the question why we still know so little about her.

'A figure so notorious for evil'

'Should we not humbly ask pardon from the noble ladies of the Renaissance when we dare to bring into their company a figure so notorious for evil as Bianca Capello?' With this rhetorical question another chapter on the Tuscan grand duchess opens, written by Marian Andrews, writer of historical novels, hardly more than a century ago.⁴ In its sensationalism it is paradigmatic for much of the material that has thus far been written on Capello: either depicted as a romantic heroine or a wicked and evil witch, she is the topic of numerous novels, plays and popular histories, rather than a subject for serious scholarship.⁵ Even with the increasing interest in women and other marginalized figures that the historical disciplines have shown over the recent decades, Bianca Capello remains an outsider.⁶ How did this situation come about?

Already in Bianca's own time, the story of her life assumed mythical proportions. Originating from a wealthy, powerful and ancient Venetian patrician family, at the age of fifteen she ran away with the young accountant Pietro Bonaventuri, who had been working at the Salviati bank opposite the Ca' Capello, near S. Aponal, to his hometown Florence, where the two married. All this had happened without the knowledge and consent of Bianca's father, Bartolomeo, who even undertook legal steps against his daughter and

⁴ Christopher Hare [pseudonym of: Marian Andrews], *The Most Illustrious Ladies of the Italian Renaissance*, London 1904, p. 204.

⁵ To name just a few examples: Giovanni Sabbatini, *Bianca Capello: quadro drammatico del secolo 16*, Milan 1844; Hector Salomon and Jules Barbier, *Bianca Capello: Opéra en cinq actes*, Paris 1886; Berthe Brevée-Copijn, *Bianca Capello: tooneelspel in vier bedrijven*, Amsterdam 1918; Pierre Gauthiez, *Vie de Bianca Cappello*, Paris 1929.

⁶ A fortunate exception is Jacqueline Marie Musacchio, 'Objects and Identity: Antonio de' Medici and the Casino at San Marco in Florence', in: John Jeffries Martin (ed.), *The Renaissance World*, New York and London 2007, pp. 481-500; and see my 'Staging Bianca Capello: Painting and Theatricality in Sixteenth-Century Venice', *Art History* 33 (2010), pp. 278-291.

her husband.⁷ In the city where the Medici family ruled, however, the heir to the grand ducal throne Francesco de' Medici took an interest in Bianca and they soon started a love affair. While at first this was also to the benefit of Bianca's husband Pietro, who was rewarded with favours, he ultimately seems to have paid with his life: in 1572 he was murdered with the knowledge and, probably, approval of Francesco. The latter in the meantime had married Giovanna of Austria, scion of the Habsburg family, but this was no reason for him to give up his affair with Bianca; neither was his succession of his father as grand duke in 1574. Bianca had already given birth to a daughter, named Pellegrina after Bianca's mother; in 1576 she provided Francesco with a son named Antonio (fig. 72). When in 1578 Giovanna of Austria unexpectedly passed away, they seized the opportunity and only two months later Francesco and Bianca secretly married. A year later, in October 1579, their marriage was publicly celebrated with several days of festivities; Bianca could now officially call herself grand duchess of Tuscany.

This did not make her any more popular with the Florentine people, however. Her affair with Francesco had been common knowledge, and the Florentines condemned her for taking the place that they thought rightfully belonged to Giovanna of Austria, a devout woman who bore her husband many children and, as a Habsburg princess, had a key position in the duchy's political and economical alliances.⁸ Bianca was blamed for everything that went wrong in the city and called *strega* and *puttana*.⁹ That Francesco was not really into governing and rather spent time with his alchemic experiments did not much improve the situation.

When both Bianca and Francesco died unexpectedly and on the same day, 20 October 1587, Francesco's brother Cardinal Ferdinando de' Medici, who succeeded him as grand duke, did everything to remove his late sister-in-law from history. Her heraldry was removed from prominent locations and her

⁷ Bonaventuri was banned from the city; Bartolomeo tried to put Bianca in a monastery, but she never gave in to his wishes: see Maria Fubini Leuzzi, 'Straniere a corte. Dagli epistolari di Giovanna d'Austria e Bianca Capello', in: Gabriella Zarri (ed.), *Per lettera. La scrittura epistolare femminile tra archivio e tipografia secoli XV-XVII*, Rome 1999, pp. 413-40, here pp. 431-435.

⁸ Musacchio, 'Objects and Identity', pp. 482-483, also for sources on Bianca's impopularity in Florence.

⁹ Musacchio, 'Objects and Identity', p. 483; Luciano Berti, *Il Principe del Studiolo: Francesco I dei Medici e la fine del Rinascimento fiorentino*, Pistoia 2002, pp. 48-51.

name and portrait were omitted from Medici self-presentation.¹⁰ In fact, her death and that of her husband raise suspicion: while it has long been believed that they contracted malaria residing in their country villa Poggio a Caiano, recent medical investigations support the old story that Ferdinando poisoned the two with arsenic.¹¹ When the ambitious cardinal Ferdinando, running for pope during the conclave of 1585, was beaten by Camillo Peretti (Sixtus V), the grand ducal throne must have seemed a fine alternative. The only obstacle for him after Francesco and Bianca passed away was Antonio, at that time only eleven years old, but nevertheless rightful heir to the throne. As several authors have argued, however, Ferdinando successfully created suspicions around Antonio's birth: Bianca, who during the later years of her life indeed had not been able to produce any more offspring, would have faked a pregnancy and obtained a baby from another woman.¹² These rumours at first spread only slowly, but they would later on become the basis of the many novels, plays, and more official histories that have been written about Bianca. All this has determined historiography for a very long time.

A Daughter of Venice

In Venice, on the other hand, the situation was very different: as soon as she married the grand duke, Bianca's fellow countrymen no longer felt a bias towards her, for through her marriage with the grand duke, Bianca obtained a key position in the contacts between the Tuscan and Venetian states. Having fallen out of grace in her homeland when she ran away with her Florentine lover, she was received with open arms again the moment the news of her forthcoming wedding reached the *laguna*. This was in June 1579; immediately all sorts of festivities and ceremonies were organized: the Florentine community held a great banquet in honour of their ambassador, the Venetian

¹⁰ Musacchio, 'Objects and Identity', pp. 484–485. Sometimes 19 October is mentioned as the day of Francesco and Bianca's deaths.

¹¹ Francesco Mari, Aldo Poletini, Donatella Lippi and Elisabetta Berto, 'Heavy Metals: The Mysterious Death of Francesco I de' Medici and Bianca Cappello: An Arsenic Murder?', *British Medical Journal* 333 (2006), pp. 1299–1301. Not long ago, however, this has been contested by another team, which argues that Francesco I suffered from malaria at the time of his death: see Gino Fornaciari, Valentina Giuffra, Ezio Ferroglio, and Raffaella Bianucci, 'Malaria was "the Killer" of Francesco I de' Medici (1531–1587)', *The American Journal of Medicine* 123 (2010), pp. 568–569.

¹² Musacchio, 'Objects and Identity', p. 485.

nobility arranged regattas, and Bianca's father and brother were invited into the Ducal Palace and knighted by the Doge. Her diplomatic value was thus generously acknowledged by her native city. The most important token of that value was perhaps the title with which Bianca was bestowed: the senate declared her 'true and exceptional daughter of our *Signoria*'.¹³

The political importance of the marriage was recognized by both parties. Venice no less than the Medici court sent its ambassadors back and forth during the months of the engagement and the marriage celebrations. Family members of Bianca visited the grand ducal court, while relatives of Francesco travelled to Venice, and all those visitors, including the official ambassadors, brought lavish gifts with them. Politics kept playing an important role in the rest of Bianca's life as grand duchess. For in her person, Venice and Florence were united. Francesco Sansovino is explicit about this when he, a Florentine by birth and Venetian by choice, calls Bianca 'my Princess in the one and the other state' (*mia Principessa nell'uno et nell'altro stato*).¹⁴ It was mainly for that reason, this dual nature, that certain Venetians, among whom Francesco Bembo, tried to get in touch with her: not coincidentally, Bianca's correspondence with her Venetian friend Francesco Bembo was started around the time of her marriage with Francesco de' Medici.

That Bianca was declared 'daughter of the Republic' was an exceptional statement; the honour was only bestowed before on Caterina Corner (1454–1510), a member of the noble Venetian Corner family who married the last king of Cyprus and ruled the island after his death, but in 1489 had to abdicate under huge pressure of the Venetian state (fig. 73).¹⁵ In return she was given the village of Asolo, where she retreated and established a true Renaissance court, attracted poets and painters, so that the poet Cardinal Pietro Bembo (1470–1547) would later situate his dialogues on love and the courtly life *Gli Asolani* in her little 'kingdom'. Caterina's actions as a patron of the arts were motivated by a desire for self-preservation; her splendid court was a

¹³ '... vera et particular figliola della Signoria nostra'. Quoted from Cicogna, *Delle iscrizioni*, vol. V, p. 559. The senators were quite unanimous: of the 215 who voted, only nine were against this special title for Bianca (with eleven invalid ballots).

¹⁴ 'Percioche dovendo io riconoscer con qualche segno d'obediienza, et di humiltà l'Altezza vostra, come mia Principessa nell'uno et nell'altro stato...' Sansovino, *Venetia città nobilissima*, first page of preface.

¹⁵ On Caterina Corner, also with regard to her art patronage, see Francomario Colasanti in: D.B.I., vol. XXII, s.v. 'Caterina Corner (Cornaro), regina di Cipro', pp. 335–342.

way to compensate for the official position that she had lost. Over time, the figure of Caterina Corner came to embody everything praiseworthy in a Venetian noblewoman: chastity, modesty, and self-sacrifice in favour of the common good.

The link between Caterina and Bianca did not go unnoticed by the latter's contemporaries. In *Venetia Città Nobilissima* (1581) Francesco Sansovino wrote that 'they adopted the said Grand Duchess Bianca as daughter of the Republic, in the manner that they adopted already Caterina Cornaro Queen of Cyprus.'¹⁶ In the preface to his book, which was dedicated to Bianca, he even constructed a family bond between the two illustrious ladies: Paolo, one of Bianca's Capello ancestors, was married with Caterina's sister.¹⁷ And the art collector Jacopo Contarini decided to hang his copy of Bianca's portrait next to that of Caterina.¹⁸ It is telling of Bianca's eagerness to establish herself that the initiative to give her this title came from the Florentine court: as she was well aware, honouring her with a title borne before only by Caterina Corner forged an explicit connection between Bianca and this archetype of female Venetian virtue.¹⁹ Both Bianca and the Venetian government recognized the potential inherent in such a construction, which for Bianca must have further legitimized her position and for Venice was a way to enhance contacts with Florence.

¹⁶ I quote the full passage: 'Co[n]ciosia che have[n]do Fra[n]cesco de Medici Gran Duca di Toscana, et pote[n]tissimo Prencipe in Italia, tolto p[er] donna, Bianca figliuola di Bartolomeo Cappello nobilissimo Senatore, comparì a Venetia, per nome dell'una, et dell'altro Principe Mario Sforza, a dar notitia di questo fatto, a Padri. I quali sentendo lo Sforza, che espone l'ambasciata con affettuose parole, si commossero di maniera, che inteneriti nell'interno da una incredibile dolcezza che si sparse per entro a petti loro, versarono lacrime giu de gli occhi. Et indi a poco, ridotti in Senato, crearono Cavaliero Bartolomeo con Vittorio suo figliuolo. Et adottarono per figliuola della Republica, la detta Bianca Gran Duchessa, in quella maniera ch'essi fecero già Caterina Cornaro Regina di Cipri.' Sansovino, *Venetia città nobilissima*, pp. 285r-v.

¹⁷ '[Vittorio Cappello] della Consorte Quirina d'antica prosapia, ripiena in ogni secolo di titoli principali nella Rep. creò Paolo, che hebbe per moglie la sorella della Regina di Cipro...' Sansovino, *Venetia città nobilissima*, second page of preface.

¹⁸ This is at least what he planned to do, as Francesco Bembo confided to Bianca: 'Il Contarini ne vuole una copia, et lo metterà à canto al ritratto della Regina di Cipro.' A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato* 5938, c. 843v. For Jacopo Contarini, see also below, pp. 249-250.

¹⁹ 'Il giorno seguente dopo desinare li medesimi senatori andorono a levarlo e condottolo in Collegio espone, che il Granduca suo signore haveva preso per moglie la signora Bianca Cappello e l'haveva voluto notificare con ambasciadore espresso, e poi furono lette lettere del Gran duca, e duchessa in questo proposito molto affettuose mostrando aperto desiderio d'esser dichiarata figliola di questo Stato.' Cicogna, *Delle iscrizioni*, vol. V, p. 559.

Bianca's Patronage in Venice

While Bianca's Florentine art patronage has been studied to some extent, her activities in that area in Venice have hardly received attention. Nevertheless, it is clear from her correspondence that she always remained very much aware of her origins and stayed in touch with her family and other Venetians; what is more, she used the arts to stress her presence in her home country.

An important step in that direction, and also the most conspicuous one, was her purchase of the Palazzo Trevisan on the Rio della Canonica, immediately behind San Marco and the Ducal Palace, for her brother Vittore (fig. 74). She bought the palace from the Trevisan family apparently already in 1577; the palace had been built in the beginning of the sixteenth century, possibly with the collaboration of Bartolomeo Bon, one of the top Venetian architects of his time.²⁰ With its polychrome marble façade adorned with bas-reliefs and colourful pieces of stone, it is certainly one of the most elegant and sumptuous early sixteenth-century palaces in the city. As such, Bianca's acquisition fits well within general Capello practice to make the family known through façades of monumental buildings. Earlier in the sixteenth century the Capellos had already placed a monument for the admiral Vincenzo Capello on the side façade of Santa Maria Formosa, close to the former Trevisan palace, and in the seventeenth century they would even place monuments for several family members on the church's principal front.²¹ Just as the male members of her family, Bianca was clearly well aware of the impact of the façade as the face of a building, especially when it was located in the republic's administrative centre and on some of the main processional routes.²²

But Bianca was also active on a smaller scale. The best evidence for this is given by the letters that went back and forth between her and her Venetian friend Bembo in the spring and summer of 1587. Writing on 7 March of that

²⁰ Giulio Lorenzetti, *Venezia e il suo estuario. Guida storico-artistica*, Padua 2002 (original ed. Venice 1926), p. 321.

²¹ Martin Gaier, *Facciate sacre a scopo profano: Venezia e la politica dei monumenti dal Quattrocento al Settecento*, Venice 2002, pp. 178-206 (for Vincenzo) and pp. 260-263 (for later family members).

²² For the link between façade monuments and processional routes, see Gaier, *Facciate sacre a scopo profano*, pp. 5-6. For the façade as face, see Monika Schmitter, 'Odoni's Façade: The House as Portrait in Renaissance Venice', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 66 (2007), pp. 294-315.

year, she asked Bembo whether he would commission two little portraits of Venetian women on her behalf:

I send to Your Lordship these two little ivory boxes so that it may please you to have them filled with two portraits, one of *signora* Labia, whom I understand to be very lovely and beautiful, the other of one of the most beautiful *gentildonne* that live in Venice, hoping that you will make sure that both of them are made by the best hand, because I want them to adorn my little room, and I have chosen to solve this matter by giving this difficult task to you, for the faith I have in your refined judgment.²³

In the months that followed, Bembo regularly reported on the proceedings of Bianca's commission. He hired a sculptor, one Battista, to portray *signora* Labia at her home, and started a quest for the most beautiful woman of Venice.²⁴ When he finally picked a woman from the Marcello family, one Marina, we do not know whether this portrait ever reached Bianca – its production was not yet started at the end of July, and only some months later Bianca died.²⁵ The portrait of Labia safely reached the grand duchess, however, together with two personal gifts from Bembo: a 'beautiful nude' for the grand duke and a Magdalene painted by Titian for the grand duchess – apart from the portrait of Bianca the two most beautiful things in his collection, as he stressed.²⁶

What does this tell us? At least it is clear that Bianca, surrounded with artists of all kinds at the Florentine court, kept an interest in Venetian art dur-

²³ 'Mando à V.S. questo duoi scatoletti d'avorio, perche le piaccia di farci mettere duoi ritratti, in uno quello della Sig.ra Labia, quale intendo esser molto vaga, et bella, nell'altro una delle piu belle gentildonne che sieno à Venetia, procurando che ambi duoi sieno fatti da bonissima man, volendo io adornarne il mio stanzino, et à lei hò preso espediente di dar questa briga per la fede ch'io hò nel suo purgato giuditio.' A.S.V., *Collegio lettere principi* 47, c. 9: letter from Bianca Capello to Francesco Bembo, dated 7 March 1586 (Florentine style). A part of this passage has also been published in Cicogna, *Delle iscrizioni*, vol. V, p. 564.

²⁴ This is not easy, as he explains, because 'vi sono molte giovanette sì, ma non belle. Stiamo male adesso a belle Donne.' A.S.F., *Mediceo del principato* 5944, c. 6v, letter from Francesco Bembo to Bianca Capello from Venice dated 4 April 1587.

²⁵ See A.S.F., *Mediceo del principato* 5944, letters from Francesco Bembo to Bianca Capello dated 4 April, 18 April, 16 May, and 27 Juni 1587; and *Mediceo del principato* 5945, letter dated 18 July 1587.

²⁶ A.S.F., *Mediceo del principato* 5945, c. 125r-v, letter from Francesco Bembo to Bianca Capello from Venice, dated 18 July 1587. For Bianca's letter of thanks, dated 1 August, see A.S.Ve., *Collegio lettere principi* 47, c. 16; it is published in Cicogna, *Delle iscrizioni*, vol. V, p. 565.

ing the whole of her lifetime: she specifically looked for portraits of Venetian women by Venetian artists. This confirms what was already known about her collection in Florence. In the so-called Casino opposite the San Marco complex down the Via Larga, she had a number of rooms which she also furnished with Venetian items, among which portraits of Venetian women; this is at least suggested by an inventory of the Casino made after Antonio's death.²⁷ But the correspondence with Francesco Bembo also raises questions. Who was this *signora* Labia, and why would Bianca want a portrait of her? Why would Bianca want to have portraits of Venetian beauties in the first place? In any case, Bianca's commission can be seen as a demonstration of masculine behaviour; it is a type of patronage usually reserved for men.²⁸

The third example of her patronage in Venice that I would like to discuss here is central to this whole chapter and concerns the portrait of herself she gave to Francesco Bembo. I will later discuss this portrait in detail; let it suffice for now to pay attention to the circumstances of the gift. In the autumn of 1585, when Francesco was on a mission to Rome and twice passed through Florence, Bianca met him in person.²⁹ Bembo showed himself fond of the grand duchess and no less of her portraits at the court; this apparently made her offer to pay for a copy that Francesco himself would have to order when he arrived in Rome. The portrait Francesco saw seems no longer extant; we do however still have its pendant, a full-length portrait of Francesco I, painted by Scipione Pulzone in that same year, 1585 (fig. 75).³⁰ It was also Pulzone from whom Francesco Bembo ordered his copy in Rome. In his letters of this period Francesco often speaks about 'the grace I receive from you in having your portrait, painted by such a great painter'; he explains that 'if I cannot see Your Highness, I can at least see your true portrait'.³¹ Bembo clearly much appreciated Bianca's gift.

²⁷ Musacchio, 'Objects and Identity', pp. 491-492.

²⁸ An exception would be certain 'honest courtesans', of whom we know that they also exchanged images of beautiful women: see Simons, 'Portraiture, Portrayal, and Idealization', p. 298.

²⁹ For the political background of Bembo's mission, see below.

³⁰ For this portrait see Langedijk, *The Portraits of the Medici*, vol. II, cat. no. 42,38, pp. 866-867.

³¹ '... et perche non vorei che alcuna cosa mi attraversasse la gratia, che da lei ricevo, in havere il suo ritratto, di mano di sì gran pittore, vengo à dirle, quanto hò in com[m]issione. A fine, che se non posso vedere l'Altezza [vostra], possa almen vedere il suo vero ritratto, che è la prima gratia, che gli hò rich[i]esta al Poggio. V.A. che sà il bisogno, sà anco ciò che hà a fare,

Intriguingly, however, not only he, but also his wife, Cillenia Bembo, was honoured with presents from Bianca. We learn this from two letters that Bianca received from her, again in the autumn of 1585. Cillenia wrote these letters to thank her, but also to express her admiration for all that Bianca had achieved: ‘we women should walk around proudly given that one of our sex has been born such a great lady full of all those graces that our lord god can give here on earth.’³² When it comes to the gifts – there were actually three of them – Cillenia modestly adds that one would have been enough. Besides handkerchiefs and gloves, she was especially delighted with a little cross containing wood of the True Cross. In her letter, she states that Bianca is ‘divine’ and has penetrated her heart.³³ In a later letter, Bianca’s importance for the female sex is stressed again, and she is thanked another time for the cross. Here, Cillenia adds that the piece of the True Cross originally had been a gift of a Pope, and that this makes it even more precious (*dono poi fatto a lei da un pontefice che radopia il dono et la sua grandissima amorevolezza...*).³⁴

Cillenia’s last observation is in particular revealing, I believe, for it shows us something of the practice of gift-giving and the value attached to it. This is relevant, for all that we have seen of Bianca’s Venetian patronage so far was actually one big ritual of giving and receiving. Bianca furthermore used the works of art and architecture she commissioned to enhance her physical presence in Venice; like Broccardo Malchiostro’s donor portrait, which we studied in Chapter Two, Bianca Capello’s portrait owned by Francesco Bembo may be seen as a part of her body outside the body; with it, Bianca distri-

per il suo s[er]tore.’ A.S.F., *Mediceo del principato* 5940, c. 1020v, letter from Francesco Bembo to Bianca Capello from Fiorenzolla, dated 5 November 1585.

³² ‘... et noi donne dobbiamo molto ben andarsene altiere essendo nata una del nostro seso tanta grandissima sig.ra piena di tute quelle gratie che puo dare il nostro sig.re jddio qua giu in terra...’ A.S.F., *Mediceo del principato* 5940, c. 901r, letter from Cillenia Bembo to Bianca Capello from Venice, dated 13 November 1585.

³³ ‘... il presente molto belo e bastava una sola cosa ma .V.A. ne ha voluto mandar tre li facioleti belisimi eli boni guanti et la Crocetta con il vero legno della santissima Croce che molto mi è carisima et mi stupischo dela gran sua cortesia verso di me che mai mi ha conuciuta, e pur mi ha tanto favorita: ma .V.A. che e divina in tuto ha penetrato il mio cuore...’

³⁴ ‘... ma io di continuo pregaro il nostro sig.re jddio che la conservi, et in questo felicissimo stato, et ancho per causa di noi altre donne, che veramente tute noi et molto piu quelle che ha giudicio, la die tenir sempre ne la memoria...’ and ‘il gran dono in particular che mi ha fato del santissimo legno dlla croce, dono poi fatto a lei da un pontefice che radopia il dono et la sua grandissima amorevolezza...’ A.S.F., *Mediceo del principato* 5940, c. 801r, letter from Cillenia Bembo to Bianca Capello from Venice, dated ‘ultimo di novembre’ 1585.

buted her personhood across her home country. Given what we know of her fertility problems later in life – they became a real obsession for her – we may even wonder whether her art was not a way to compensate for the child she could not have.

The Portrait

The portrait of Bianca Capello that Francesco Bembo ordered from Scipione Pulzone when he visited the painter in Rome can almost certainly be identified with the painting in the collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, currently on view in Schloss Ambras, Innsbruck (fig. 1, colour plate 4). The provenance of that canvas seems to go as far back as the collection of the Venetian patrician Bartolomeo della Nave, which came on the market at his death, around 1637; in 1659 the painting was in possession of the Austrian archduke Leopold Wilhelm, from where it would eventually reach the Kunsthistorisches Museum.³⁵ The dimensions of the canvas in Innsbruck, 57 by 47 centimetres, diverge only very slightly from those measured in Della Nave's collection.³⁶

The painting is characterized both by its apparent absence of idealization and by its great amount of detail, especially in the execution of hair, clothes and jewels. It only shows the lady's head and bust. We see Bianca in a life-size, three-quarter view, with her head slightly turned towards the viewers, suggesting a hint of movement underlined by the folds on the left side of her neck; meanwhile she is looking us in the eyes. She is wearing a rich blue dress, painted with costly *lapis lazuli*, lavishly embroidered with threads of silver and gold; under the dress is a collar decorated with lace (fig. 76).³⁷ The

³⁵ Alexandra Dern, *Scipione Pulzone (ca. 1546-1598)*, Weimar 2003, pp. 60-61; Langedijk, *The Portraits of the Medici*, vol. I, 320-1; Günther Heinz, 'Studien zur Porträtmalerei an den Höfen der Österreichischen Erblande', *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien* 59 (1963), pp. 99-224, here cat. no. 260. On the collection of Bartolomeo della Nave and its dispersion after the collector's death, see Ellis Kirkham Waterhouse, 'Paintings from Venice for seventeenth-century England: some records of a forgotten transaction', *Italian Studies* 7 (1952), pp. 1-23.

³⁶ Dern, *Scipione Pulzone*, p. 61; see also Waterhouse, 'Paintings from Venice for seventeenth-century England', p. 18.

³⁷ Regarding the blue pigment, Bembo wrote to Bianca on the painter's behalf: 'Dico circa il Gaetano, il quale mi diede al partir mio la occlusa memoria, che mando à V.A. , però che egli desidera haver quel lapis lazoli, come la vederà.' Letter dated 5 November 1585, as in n. 31, c. 1020v.

grand duchess has furthermore adorned herself with four strings of pearls, pearl earrings and another ornament made of pearls in her reddish hair, which is also decorated with a delicate veil. In her décolletage she carries a red carnation (fig. 77).

One of the qualities of this remarkable portrait is certainly its verisimilitude. It has all the qualities of a trustworthy impression and is rather similar to a number of other portraits known to represent Bianca, as we will see. What is more, we know that her family members considered it as lifelike; as Bianca's brother Vittore remarked in a letter to his sister, '*s'assomiglia assai al vivo*'.³⁸ Indeed, portraits of Bianca were sometimes taken as documents of what she had looked like in the past. The Venetian ambassadors who attended her wedding with the grand duke reported back to the Senate:

Because of the increase of her years, which have passed the thirty, and because she has also put on some weight, she has changed compared to what she used to be like five or six years ago (from portraits of those years one sees that she was very beautiful).³⁹

It was not uncommon for Italian portraits to be looked at this way: especially in northern Italy, some portraits were specifically meant to remind the viewer of the depicted person's ageing (and, consequently, his or her own).⁴⁰ Although none of Bianca's extant portraits contain explicit *memento senescere* imagery, their verisimilitude (especially in Bembo's painting) openly invites comparisons between the portrait and the sitter, between past and present.

One should be cautious, however, to conclude that Pulzone's portrait is 'realistic': after all, it will always remain uncertain what Bianca Capello really looked like, for we do not have the opportunity to compare the portrait to the 'real' Bianca – a fact equally true for most of the sixteenth-century Venetian viewers. We may rather suggest that the portrait is rhetorically convin-

³⁸ A.S.F., *Mediceo del principato* 5942, c. 44r, letter dated 12 April 1586.

³⁹ '... se bene per il crescimento degli anni, che passano li trenta, e per aver anco messo più carne, ha fatto qualche mutazione da quello che soleva cinque o sei anni addietro (ché dalli ritratti di quel tempo si vede esser stata bellissima)...'. The lines are taken from the so-called *relazione* to the Senate by the ambassadors Giovanni Michiel and Antonio Tiepolo, delivered on 9 November 1579; quoted after *Relazioni degli ambasciatori veneti al senato*, ed. Arnaldo Segarizzi, vol. III, Bari 1916, part 1, pp. 276–277.

⁴⁰ On ageing as a theme in Italian renaissance portraiture, see Jodi Cranston, *The Poetics of Portraiture in the Italian Renaissance*, Cambridge 2000, in particular p. 48 and further.

cing as the depiction of a living person. With the dark and heavy brows, the somewhat pronounced and fleshy nose, and the short and plumb neck with its three chins, the portrait hardly qualifies as an idealization (fig. 78). In accordance with his reputation, Scipione Pulzone does not seem to have embellished Bianca much; rather, he has depicted her convincingly as a real and living woman including a number of flaws to achieve a certain effect of reality.⁴¹

Indeed, Scipione Pulzone was a portraitist known for his accuracy and diligence. The Florentine art critic Raffaello Borghini praised his 'portraits after nature that seem alive'.⁴² Giovanni Baglione would later write in his *vita* of the artist: 'He was an excellent painter, particularly in painting the effigies of others, ... and he not only surpassed his master, but did not have any equal in his time; and he painted them so lifelike and with such diligence, that all the hairs could be counted, and especially the draperies that he portrayed in those [paintings] seemed more true than their originals, which gave them a wonderful taste.'⁴³ Pulzone's portrait of Bianca in Francesco Bembo's collection seems to have received a similar evaluation, described by its happy owner as 'made with particular diligence by the brave Gaetano (= Pulzone)'.⁴⁴ Neither did its great amount of detail escape the attention of Venetian painters. Tintoretto, one of the Bassano's, Palma il Giovane and Veronese; they all were commissioned to paint one and sometimes several copies of the portrait of Bianca.⁴⁵ But, as Bembo wrote in another letter: 'Few, rather none of these painters will make it. Tintoretto has started one, but it turns out to be very

⁴¹ For the 'reality effect', see Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard, Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press 1989, pp. 141-148. For the problem of verisimilitude and idealization in early modern female portraiture, see also Joanna Woodall, 'An Exemplary Consort: Antonis Mor's Portrait of Mary Tudor', *Art History* 14 (1991), pp. 192-224, here pp. 207ff.

⁴² 'Ritratti di naturale [...] che paion vivi.' Borghini, *Il riposo*, p. 578.

⁴³ '... fu eccellente pittore, e particolarmente in far l'altrui effigie, così egli a' suoi tempi ritrasse gli altrui aspetti, e non solo passò il Maestro, ma nel suo tempo non hebbe eguale; e si vivi li faceva, e con tal diligenza, che vi si sariano contati sin tutti i capelli, et in particolare li drappi, che in quelli ritraheva, parevano del loro originale più veri, e davano mirabil gusto.' Giovanni Baglione, *Le vite de' pittori scultori et architetti*, pp. 52-53.

⁴⁴ 'Fatto con particular diligenza del valent.mo Gaetano'. A.S.F., *Mediceo del principato* 5938, c. 707r: letter from Francesco Bembo to Bianca Capello from Venice, dated 8 March 1586.

⁴⁵ 'Il Tentoretto ne fà due, ò tre copie; per il sig.r Pio; per la contessa; et per cà Capello. il sig.r Giac.o Cont.ni nè vuole uno, ma di man del Bassano; et sarà fatto anco dal Palma, et da Paulo Ver.se...' A.S.F., *Mediceo del principato* 5942, c. 99v.

dissimilar, for [the original] looks more like a living person than a painted one, and its diligence misleads all.⁴⁶ The Venetian painters with their large and spontaneous brushstrokes were apparently unable to imitate Pulzone's prototype, as Bembo thought. In short, one cannot easily overestimate just how special Pulzone's style was compared to the kind of painting produced in Venice in that time.⁴⁷

Seen as an example of court portraiture, Pulzone's painting becomes less extraordinary. However, compared to the average Habsburg court portrait of the later sixteenth century, among which the painting is hanging nowadays, Pulzone's portrait of Bianca Capello has enormous plasticity, unity and overall artistic quality. Also because of Bianca's eyes, which seem to follow the viewers throughout the room, the portrait's physical presence is undeniable.

The detailedness of Pulzone's painting, recognized as such by the Venetians, makes it very apt to be studied from close by (fig. 79). Its style invites the viewer to come close and see what the painter has been doing, especially since the portrait is relatively small.⁴⁸ Giorgio Vasari underlined this idea in his famous analysis of Titian's late style:

It is true that his way of working in his last pictures is very different from that of his youth. For his first works were finished with a certain delicacy and incredible diligence, and might be viewed from near or far, but the last are worked at one go, with [the paint] sloshed thickly [on the canvas] and in

⁴⁶ 'Molti voriano copia; et pochi, anzi nissuno di questi pittori la farà. il Tentoretto l'hà principiato, ma disugualiss.o riesce in fatti. perche questa ha più del vivo, che del dipinto, et la dilig.za che è in essa, smarrisce ogni uno.' A.S.F., *Mediceo del principato* 5942, c. 352v.

⁴⁷ What kind of paintings could actually be seen in Venice is another question. Venice had heavy restrictions on the import of painted goods from elsewhere, but this does not necessarily mean that non-Venetian paintings were a rare thing. See Elena Favaro, *L'Arte dei pittori in Venezia e i suoi statuti*, Florence 1975, pp. 74-77; Michel Hochmann, 'Le collezioni veneziane nel Rinascimento: storia e storiografia', in Michel Hochmann, Rosella Lauber and Stefania Mason (eds.), *Il collezionismo d'arte a Venezia. Dalle origini al Cinquecento*, Venice 2008, pp. 3-39, here p. 31. The import restrictions could also work the other way around: when Titian visited the Medici court, Cosimo I declined the painter's offer to paint the duke's portrait, according to Giorgio Vasari, 'forse per non far torto a tanti nobili artefici della sua città e dominio.' This was all the more remarkable, since 'non è stato quasi alcun signore di gran nome, né principe, né gran donna, che non sia stata ritratta da Tiziano, veramente in questa parte eccellentissimo pittore.' Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. VI, pp. 164-165.

⁴⁸ That is, when we compare it to the probable size of the official full-length portrait in Florence, from which Bembo's version was derived. The dimensions of its pendant, the portrait of Francesco I, are 119 by 143 centimetres, almost six times as large.

stains, so that they cannot be seen from near, but from a distance they look perfect.⁴⁹

And Titian, Vasari says as well, was certainly not the only Venetian painter to use large brushes. Tintoretto, to name just one other example, was widely known for his quick, spontaneous and nonchalant manner of working, as we have seen in the preceding chapter. Scipione Pulzone, however, aimed at a totally opposite effect: his portraits – and Bianca Capello is definitely not an exception – almost force the viewer to come close, pay attention, and even to grab them with her or his hands. In this way, he manages to establish a very intimate connection between painting and viewer.

Although Pulzone's portrait was thus rather atypical from the Venetians' point of view, throughout his career Pulzone seems to have found inspiration in Venetian art.⁵⁰ Not only was he attentive to the use of colour for which the painters of that city were (and still are) famous; he also copied and adapted specific Venetian paintings.⁵¹ An interesting example of one such adaptation is an *Annunciation* nowadays in Naples, Museo di Capodimonte, loosely based on Titian's treatment of the same subject today only known through an engraving of Giovanni Jacopo Caraglio (figs. 80 and 81). According to Federico Zeri the first example of what he has coined 'Zeitlose Kunst', Pulzone's scene is depicted in a sober, harmonious style, far removed from the vibrating swirl of luminous angels painted by Titian. Or, as Zeri described it, 'a radical work of revision, of trimming, of extraction of sacred potential, to the point that the image is translated in terms that oddly remind of certain Tuscan masters of the early Cinquecento.'⁵² Pulzone's work seems to stand outside time, both in the sense that the level of detail makes time stand still in the works

⁴⁹ 'Ma è ben vero che il modo di fare che tenne in queste ultime è assai differente dal fare suo da giovane: con ciò sia che le prime son condotte con una certa finezza e diligenza incredibile, e da essere vedute da presso e da lontano, e queste ultime, condotte di colpi, tirate via di grosso e con macchie, di maniera che da presso non si possono vedere e di lontano appariscono perfette.' Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. VI, p. 166.

⁵⁰ Dern, *Scipione Pulzone*, *passim*.

⁵¹ Federico Zeri, *Pittura e controriforma: L'arte senza tempo di Scipione da Gaeta*, Turin 1957, *passim*; Langillotto Mariotti, 'Cenni su Scipione Pulzone detto Gaetano, ritrattista', *L'Arte* 27 (1924), pp. 27-38 (regarding an alleged portrait by Pulzone of an unidentified nobleman, formerly ascribed to Tintoretto, in the collection of the Musée Condé in Chantilly); Erasmo Vaudo, *Scipione Pulzone da Gaeta, pittore*, Gaeta 1976, p. 21 (regarding a copy of Titian's portrait of Pope Paul III, bareheaded, now in Rome, Galleria Corsini).

⁵² Zeri, *Pittura e contrariforma*, p. 73.

themselves and in a meta-historical sense, as Heiko Damm has argued: Pulzone's images, solely confined to a religious function, seem not to partake in the increasing autonomy of art.⁵³

While in Chapter Three we have seen that the artist's agency can be an important, even decisive factor in the reception of painted portraits, Pulzone's portrait of Bianca Capello seems to present us with a different situation. In Venice understandably no discourse on the powers of Pulzone's brush was going on; instead, in our most important source for the reception of his work, the letters by Francesco Bembo, we see a constant oscillation between attention for the portrait as a representation forged by the artist Pulzone, and the portrait as a living presence of its prototype, Bianca. One moment the representational character is at the centre of attention, but already in the next sentence it may have disappeared; the portrait is identified with what it represents. In fact, Bembo seems to be very much aware of this dual nature of the portrait himself:

[The portrait] is praised by all, generally and particularly. It is praised for its two headings (*capi*), that is, that the painting is very beautiful, and the portrayed figure is very beautiful. Those who understand it best are stupefied by the great diligence of Gaetano, as well as by the beauty of Your Highness, and even more stupefied are those who have heard from ten or so people that these days Your Highness is in reality still more beautiful, especially in her eyes, in her cheerfulness, and in her whiteness (*bianchezza*).⁵⁴

The last word, *bianchezza*, is of course a pun on the grand duchess' name: not only is she praised for her fair skin, it is also her personality, her being Bianca as it were, that is admired – but this only as an aside. More interesting is Bembo's choice of the word '*capi*', literally 'heads' or 'headings'. What Bembo is saying here is that a portrait's representational character and its

⁵³ Heiko Damm, 'Review of: Alexandra Dern, Scipione Pulzone (ca. 1546–1598), Weimar: VDG 2003', *Sehepunkte* 5 (2005), no. 7, URL: http://www.arthistoricum.net/index.php?id=276&ausgabe=2005_07&review_id=6431, last consulted on 13 June 2011.

⁵⁴ 'Esso è lodato da tutti [generalmente], e particolarmente; lodato per tutti duoi i capi, cioè che la pittura sia bell.ma, et bell.ma la figura ritratta. et le più intendenti hanno stupito della diligenza grande del Gaetano, come della bellezza di V.A., e molto più quelli, à chi più di dieci fecero fede, che anche hoggidi V.A. è più bella, massime negli occhi, nell'illarità, et in bianchezza.' A.S.F., *Mediceo del principato* 5942, c. 99r, letter from Francesco Bembo to Bianca Capello from Venice, dated 20 April 1586.

overcoming that representational character – the portrait dissolves into what it represents – are two manifestations of the same thing; two sides of one medal.

This dialectic reflects, indeed, a certain dualism that was present in Pulzone's style. Even when one is only centimetres removed from the portrait of Bianca one hardly distinguishes the strokes of the brush, such is the precision and control with which it is painted; in fact, it seems not to be painted at all. But since such a manner was so unusual in Venice at the time, it simultaneously points towards itself, asks attention for itself.

There is a telling anecdote on Pulzone's ideas of authorship which may shed further light on the matter.⁵⁵ Giovanni Baglione recounts how one time the master from Gaeta was asked to repair Raphael's *St Luke*, donated to the Roman Accademia di San Luca. And indeed, Pulzone repaired it. But he did not stop there: 'Like he was used to, he inserted down under a feigned piece of paper with his name on it.'⁵⁶ When Federico Zuccari, who revered Raphael, saw this, he was inflamed with anger, as Baglione tells, and was indignant at his colleague's presumption. Although this story originates from the seventeenth century, and one should thus be careful applying it to an earlier period, it is intriguing that such an extraordinary act of appropriation is attributed precisely to Scipione Pulzone, the timeless painter with the invisible brush.

So far, we have discussed the portrait's individualized facial features, its paint handling and level of detail. But there is more to it, such as the choice of clothes and jewellery, to which we shall turn now. Their importance for the meaning of this picture becomes the more apparent when they are compared to clothes and jewels in other portraits representing Bianca (for example, fig. 82). The portrait in Bembo's possession belongs to a whole series of portraits that all have the exact same face. The series originates from the time of Bianca's marriage to the grand duke and was seemingly established by Alessandro Allori, court painter of the Medici. For examples, see, besides the image just mentioned, the portrait currently in Bologna, where Bianca wears

⁵⁵ For this anecdote and more information on the painting it concerns, see also Dern, *Scipione Pulzone*, pp. 71–72.

⁵⁶ '... come era solito nelle sue opere, vi mise una carta finta co'l suo nome di sotto appiccata.' Baglione, *Le vite*, p. 124.

a silverish dress and has a little dog on her lap; or the double portrait with Don Antonio (figs. 83 and 72, respectively). The dresses and part of the jewellery are different each time and remarkable for the meticulous detail with which they are portrayed. This confirms what was already known about Allori's working practice: he regularly borrowed dresses and ornaments from Bianca, with whom he agreed in advance on the costume he would depict, but, as far as we know, did not ask her to pose again for every new portrait.⁵⁷ This can be considered, I believe, part of a larger tendency in early modern Italian portraiture, especially court portraiture, to focus more on clothes and ornaments than on the body per se. Sometimes the hands were even painted after those of a studio model.⁵⁸ May we assume that the painter and the lady to be portrayed, picked dress and jewels carefully, with a particular purpose in mind?

Judging from examples in Cesare Vecellio's *Of old and modern clothes* (*Degli habiti antichi e moderni*, 1590), Bianca's dress as it is depicted in Pulzone's portrait is in its shape and ornamentation quite similar to those dresses worn by Venetian married noblewomen at public celebrations; compare for instance the large lace collars, the conspicuous décolletages, and the multiple strings of pearls (fig. 84).⁵⁹ With her hair symmetrically divided in two more or less vertical shapes, her hair dress is characteristically Venetian too.⁶⁰ The pearls and the flower refer to marriage and fertility, themes that were of great importance to Bianca as well. The sumptuousness of her clothes and jewels in general was perceived by contemporaries as more befitting to a Venetian than a Florentine lady: as a Welsh visitor to both cities remarked in 1549, 'The

⁵⁷ See Langedijk, *The Portraits of the Medici*, vol. I, p. 126, who cites Allori's diary: Alessandro Allori, *I ricordi di Alessandro Allori*, ed. Igino Supino, Florence 1908, for example p. 24.

⁵⁸ Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, Cambridge 2000, p. 34.

⁵⁹ Vecellio complemented his illustration with a description: 'In questa nostra età usano le spose non solo habiti superbissimi, ma ancora gran quantità di gioie, di perle, e d'ori. le vesti sono lunghe fino in terra con strascino, et con il busto così poco alto di bocca, che quasi si vedono tutte le ma[m]melle. l'acconciatura di testa è vaghissima formata davanti con capelli biondi in guisa di due corna. si cingono con catene d'oro, et usano orecchini di perle, delle quali adornano anco abundantissimamente il collo.' Cesare Vecellio, *Habiti antichi et moderni di tutti il mondo di nuovo accresciuti di molte figure* (Venice, 1598), p. 98r.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Evelyn Welch, 'Art on the edge: hair and hands in Renaissance Italy', *Renaissance Studies* 23 (2009), pp. 241-268, who recently argued that, among other items designed for the bodily extremities, accessories for the hair were valued in Renaissance Italy for the ease with which they could be adapted to express political, social and individual meanings.

Florentines' wives are nothing so gay as the Venetians. For they love a modesty in their women's apparel and, specially if she pass the age of forty, lightly she weareth but plain black cloth.'⁶¹ And Francesco Sansovino argued that the Venetians were much more proud than other Italian peoples of their particular clothing styles.⁶² As is shown by Vecellio and other costume books, Venetian women of the time could be distinguished in age, marital status, social class and geographical background on the basis of their outfits alone, so widely developed were dress codes of the time. Clothes not only kept a person warm and decent; they had a message to convey; they literally fashioned a person. This is no less true for Pulzone's Venetian portrait of Bianca: every element in Bianca's outfit tells a part of a story; her body is as a mannequin on which she displays her desired position in society.⁶³ To make this more concrete, she is not just shown as a princess, but specifically as a *Venetian* princess; as daughter of that most Serene Republic. The fertility symbols attest of her role as wife and mother, roles that became such an obsession for her during her marriage with Francesco de' Medici. By sending precisely this portrait to her friend in Venice, she knew it would enhance the reputation and presence of her person over there, and help strengthen the diplomatic alliance with Florence that her person embodied.

⁶¹ Quoted after Elizabeth Currie, 'Clothing and a Florentine style, 1550-1620', *Renaissance Studies* 23 (2009), pp. 33-52, here p. 36. For the cultural meaning of jewellery in particular, see also Marcia Pointon, *Brilliant Effects: A Cultural History of Gem Stones and Jewellery*, New Haven and London 2009, part one.

⁶² He even goes so far as to suggest a connection between the Venetians sticking to their traditions and their lasting sovereignty: 'Percioche cominciando da gli habiti indicativi dello humore delle persone, noi vediamo che gran parte de gli Italiani, dimenticatisi di esser nati in Italia, et seguendo le fattioni oltramontane, hanno co pensieri mutato lo habito della persona, volendo parere quando Fra[n]cesi, et Spagnuoli. Et certo con danno et vergogna loro, et con manifesto segno della loro poca stabilita et fermezza, poi che non si è mantenuto mai, da quegli huomini ch'altre volte hanno signoreggiato l'altre nationi del mondo, un perpetuo et saldo tenore nelle cose loro. Sola questa città s'è conservata in generale meno corrotta fra tante, se bene in ogni tempo è stata, et è tuttavia rifugio de i forestieri, i quali sogliono introdurre in casa altrui l'usanze loro. Percioche facendo i Veneti professione, fino dalla prima origine loro, di pacifichi, et religiosi, et d'essere uguali l'uno all'altro, accioche dalla ugualità ne nascesse stabilita et concordia [...]'. Sansovino, *Venetia città nobilissima*, pp. 146v-147r.

⁶³ A similar point is made by Elizabeth Currie on the clothing style of Christine of Lorraine, wife of Ferdinando I de' Medici, who in the first period of her marriage wore, and was portrayed in, French dresses in order to link herself to the French throne and thus underline the diplomatic importance of her marriage with Ferdinando; later her style gradually became more 'Florentine' (see Currie, 'Clothing and a Florentine style', pp. 34-38).

Francesco Bembo, the Poet

But why, we may wonder, did Bianca send her portrait to this for us rather obscure Francesco Bembo? And, reversely, what was in it for him? In this section, we will look at the portrait from Bembo's point of view.

Like Bianca, Francesco Bembo was a member of an ancient Venetian patrician family, the same family, in fact, that had produced the famous poet Cardinal Pietro Bembo (1470–1547). Francesco, however, would never acquire the same renown as his relative; indeed, his life ended without glory when he was beheaded on the Piazzetta San Marco in 1599.⁶⁴ As far as his connection with Bianca is concerned, we know that he corresponded with her from the time of her grand ducal marriage onwards – he seems to have been present at the festivities – and that he twice visited the Florentine court when he travelled with a group of ambassadors to Florence and Rome in the autumn of 1585.⁶⁵ Apart from that, he was active as a poet.⁶⁶

Paying some attention to Bembo's literary activities is a necessity at this point. Numerous studies have shown how the viewing of early modern portraiture was conditioned by the poetics of the time; and how poetry, in turn,

⁶⁴ Cicogna, *Delle iscrizioni*, vol. V, pp. 563–564, n. 1.

⁶⁵ See the many letters from Francesco Bembo to Bianca Capello written in October and November 1585.

⁶⁶ For Bembo's genealogy, see Marco Barbaro, *Arbori de' patritii veneti*, I, 331. See c. 325 for Pietro Bembo; the two men belonged to separate branches, both with their origins in the fourteenth century, of one of the oldest families in town. Emmanuele Cicogna argues that Francesco Bembo, son of Gaspare (as in Barbaro, see above), can most likely be identified with Francesco Bembo, the poet. Francesco, son of Gaspare, married in 1564 with a woman named Pollisena Michiel, but remarried in 1574, according to Cicogna, with a daughter of Federico Trissino from Vicenza, who had been a widow. Now, I have found an additional clue that this Francesco Bembo, son of Gaspare, is indeed the same as the poet – and that he is furthermore also the same as our letter writer.

The Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana preserves a manuscript with sixteenth-century poems from various authors, which includes a poem titled *Canzon de Magagnò in tel sposego della signora Cillinia Dressena in lo signore Franc[esc]o Bembo al banchetto che i fe in cha Dresseno*. This is to say: a poem written by 'Magagnò', nickname of Giovanni Battista Maganza, a well-known poet and painter from Vicenza, written on the occasion of the wedding of 'Cillinia Dressena', a dialect form of 'Cillenia Trissino', and Francesco Bembo. This not only confirms Bembo's marriage to a daughter of the Trissino family, but also shows that he was well acquainted with the leading poets of his day. What is more, the name of Bembo's wife, Cillenia, re-occurs in the letters written to Bianca Capello, this time not with 'Trissino' but with 'Bembo' behind it, where she writes as the wife of Francesco. See ms. It. IX. 272 (= 6645): *Rime di diversi del secolo XVI*, c. 175v.

was informed by changing practices in portrait painting.⁶⁷ In the preceding chapter we have seen how, after the death of Irene di Spilimbergo, the powers of portraiture were examined in poetry. All this is reason enough to take a look at how Bembo's poetical aspirations informed his manner of viewing Bianca's portrait.

Francesco Bembo seems not to have been a particularly prolific poet. Like most of his Venetian colleagues, writing poetry for him was not a full-time occupation; it rather was something that men active in the Republic's administration or in the church liked to do in their spare time. Poetry was truly a social business: it was meant to be performed, meant to be exchanged, and it thus helped to fashion alliances and friendships. And so it was with Francesco Bembo. Besides *The seven penitential sonnets* (*I Sette sonetti penitentiali*; 1596) he published on his own, he contributed to collections of fellow poets, among whom Celio Magno and Battista Guarini (1538-1612).⁶⁸ Also to Bianca Cappello Bembo wrote poems, about her portrait and other topics, but unfortunately, none of these seem to have survived.⁶⁹

As a writer of letters, on the other hand, Bembo was more productive. The letters that he wrote to Bianca, which came almost weekly (simultaneously with the mail service running between Venice and Florence), certainly have a literary quality – although they were not meant for publication. In any case, here I will look at them from the point of view of literature, only to study them for their political function later on.

While the poems on Bianca's portrait are lost, a few sonnets Bembo exchanged with Celio Magno on the subject of the latter's portrait, which was

⁶⁷ Bolzoni, *Poesia e ritratto*; Cranston, *The Poetics of Portraiture*; Rogers, 'Sonnets on Female Portraits from Renaissance North Italy'.

⁶⁸ For the *Sette sonetti*, see Cicogna, *Delle iscrizioni*, vol. V, p. 563. For Battista Guarini, see Jean Paul Barbier-Mueller and Jean Balsamo, *Ma bibliothèque poétique*, vol. VI, *Poètes italiens de la Renaissance dans la bibliothèque de la Fondation Barbier-Mueller: De Dante à Chiabrera*, part 2, Geneva 2007, pp. 422-426; for Bembo and Guarini in particular p. 424.

⁶⁹ When he was travelling between Rome and Florence, Bembo wrote Bianca two sonnets, one about her portrait ('vorrei che andasse per tutto il mondo') and one about a certain ring, apparently a gift, which Bembo intriguingly wanted to stay between his addressee and himself ('tra V.A. e me'). In a letter of 17 May 1586, he refers to two sonnets on Bianca's portraits, one of which she already knows; one of his visitors, Federico Badoer, asked to see them. On 16 May 1587 he refers to a sonnet, written almost two years ago by then, which is in press; could this be the first sonnet on the portrait, composed in October 1585?

painted by Domenico Tintoretto, are still extant.⁷⁰ Let us look at them to get some idea what Bembo as a poet was like. It is uncertain to what image they actually refer; as Carlo Ridolfi suggested in his *vita* of Tintoretto, it may well have been part of an official group portrait of several secretaries of state.⁷¹ The sonnet series originally consisted of four poems: a first one by Magno to Tintoretto, a second by the painter back to the poet, a third by Bembo to Magno, and the last one a final reply by Magno.⁷² That Domenico contributed a sonnet is shown by a letter of his hand; the poem itself has disappeared.⁷³ Francesco Bembo's contribution is as follows:

While I contemplate, divine Magno, and look at
 your true and living painted image,
 and together read those worthy songs, wonder-stricken
 is my soul, so much that I can hardly breathe.

⁷⁰ That Francesco Bembo's relation with Magno went beyond the strictly professional, is suggested by a remark in one of his letters to Bianca, where he refers to a dinner party at Magno's for which he is invited ('Domani dal S.or Celio Magno à cena, che à lui tocca la volta, V.A. sarà nominata a tutto pasto.' Bembo is clearly promoting the grand duchess on this type of occasion. See A.S.F., *Mediceo del principato* 5938, c. 375r.

⁷¹ 'Ne fece ancora gran quantità di Gentiluomini e Senatori veneziani [...] così vivaci e naturali che sembrano vivi. [...] i Secretarii del Senato Giovanni Scaramella, Francesco Maravegia, Agostino Dolce, Camillo Ziliolo, Luigi Quirino, e Celio Magno; sopra di che egli così scrisse: Mentre ne' tuoi color si propria miro [etc.].' Carlo Ridolfi, *Le maraviglie dell'arte Ovvero le vite degli illustri pittori veneti e dello stato*, ed. Detlev von Hadeln, vol. II, Berlin 1924, pp. 260-261. Ridolfi's account admittedly is somewhat ambiguous: did Domenico portray the secretaries all together or apart?

⁷² Magno's sonnet, 'Mentre ne' tuoi color sì proprio miro', his reply to Bembo's, 'Da te pari al gran merto ornarsi miro', and Bembo's sonnet have been published in a joint publication of poems by Celio Magno and Orsatto Giustiniani (Venice: Andrea Muschio, 1600) and, more recently, in Barbara Mazza Boccazzi, 'Ut pictura poesis: Domenico Tintoretto per Celio Magno', *Venezia Cinquecento* 11 (2001), pp. 167-175. Twice, however, the sonnet of Bembo is headed by the title 'Riposta d'incerto'. We are lucky to be able to attribute this poem now to Francesco Bembo, on the basis of a manuscript in the Marciana Library (ms. It. IX. 172 (= 6093)). This collection of letters and poems sent to Celio Magno contains a sheet including the sonnet 'Mentre Magno divin, contemplo e miro', signed by Francesco Bembo (see c. 142r-v). The accompanying letter is undated but, as the author refers to a certain Cardinal Aldobrandini, 'nepote di Sua Beatitudine', that is, nephew of the pope, we may gather that it was written during the papacy of Clement VIII Aldobrandini (1592-1605). As Bembo died in 1599, we can establish a date for letter and poem between 1592 and 1599. Domenico Tintoretto's letter, which also contained a poem for the series, is dated 22 September 1597, which is consistent with my findings. That Bembo's name was not mentioned in the 1600 edition will probably have to do with the fact that he was executed a year before, and thus *persona non grata*.

⁷³ See B.N.M., ms It. IX. 172 (= 6093), c. 69r; the letter was later published in Cicogna, *Delle iscrizioni*, vol. V, p. 251, and in Mazza Boccazzi, 'Ut pictura poesis'.

Then it seems to me, when I turn my thoughts to the glory
of whom it exalts, and of who has fashioned him so well,
that the glory of Apelles and of Alexander are extinct;
and that I, when I praise you, aspire to fame.

Thus, the pen and the brush make
the great value of both better known: the high and beautiful works
of Domenico, and Celio, and the honour of Adria.

And so, a new Apollo raises with his song a new Apelles
to the stars: and the painter
shall hear the new Apollo call him the new Apelles.⁷⁴

Bembo's sonnet is not particularly original: I find it interesting for the very conscious way in which it situates itself in a playful rivalry between painters and poets (*et ch'io, mentre voi lodo, a fama aspiro*). Domenico's depiction of Celio surpasses Apelles' portrait of Alexander the Great; but that makes Francesco Bembo, praising both of them, automatically into a greater poet, a new Apollo, a new Homer even (as Magno calls him in a later sonnet).⁷⁵ Such hyperboles are perhaps only imaginable at the end of the great tradition that was Petrarchism; they also show how much Bembo was aware of great examples: not only the ancient ones, obviously, but also Petrarch and the other Bembo.

As was mentioned earlier, Francesco Bembo belonged to the same family as the renowned poet Pietro Bembo, active in the first half of the sixteenth century. And as all Venetian patricians, Francesco must have been very much aware of his family ties, especially with so illustrious a kinsman, and with so ambitious a character. Indeed, one of his fellow poets, Battista Guarini, honoured Francesco with a comparison: 'Thus, although our Country is deprived

⁷⁴ 'Mentre, Magno divin, contemplo, e miro/ Di te la vera, e viva imagin pinta,/ E leggo insieme i degni carmi; vinta/ L'alma è sì di stupor, ch'a pena io spiro.// Parmi poi; s'a la gloria il pensier giro/ Di chi l'essalta, e chi sì ben l'ha finta;/ Quella d'Apelle, e d'Alessandro estinta:/ Et ch'io, mentre voi lodo, a fama aspiro.// Così d'ambo piu noto il gran valore/ Fan la penna, e 'l pennello: opr'alte, e belle/ Di Domenico, e Celio, e d'Adria honore.// Quinci è, ch'un novo Apollo alzi a le stelle/ Cantando un novo Apelle: et che pittore/ S'oda del novo Apollo il novo Apelle.'

⁷⁵ From Celio's second poem in the series ('Da te pari al gran merto ornarsi miro'): 'Che scarse al suo desio negar le stelle/ Nobil Poeta, e dier nobil Pittore;/A me dan novo Homero, e novo Apelle.'

of him / to whom the Greek language gave up honour, and the Latin / by you it is glorified / Bembo close to him, living image (*imagin viva*) of that other Bembo.⁷⁶ In the person of Francesco, the famous Pietro lived on, as Guarini suggests. I will argue that Francesco himself liked to think of it in much the same way, and, in order to follow in the footsteps of this famous relative, very consciously modelled his poetry, as well as his prose, including the way he treated the portrait of Bianca.

But what exactly did he imitate in Pietro Bembo? Pietro Bembo is known for his *Prose on the Vernacular Language* (*Prose della volgar lingua*, 1525), a book in which he proposed the vernacular language of Petrarch as the model for contemporary lyrical poetry; but even more so for *Gli Asolani* (1505), a series of dialogues on love situated at the court of Caterina Corner (see above, p. 209), which bought him a role in Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*. Pietro Bembo more than any other writer of the Renaissance canonized Petrarchan lyric, and made the longing for an unattainable woman into an ideal, not something humiliating but rather ennobling and worth imitating, as it incites, as was the idea, the unfulfilled Platonic lover to turn inwards, towards an imagined, but more ideal replication of his beloved lady, and ultimately to a higher, spiritual reality.

As has recently been argued, Bembo not only found inspiration in Petrarch for his *literary style*, but also for his life. In the several affairs he had with women (with Maria Savorgnan and Lucrezia Borgia, both when he was in his thirties), he 'saturated his affective life with the literary heritage he so cherished', as Gordon Braden writes.⁷⁷ In a not yet fully codified Petrarchism, Bembo and his mistresses found a means to fashion their clandestine affairs.⁷⁸

This also had its impact on the way Bembo and his ladies made use of portrait images. In his two poems on Simone Martini's portrait of Laura, Petrarch claimed he liked the portrait better than the real woman, and this would become a topos in later Petrarchan verse such as Bembo's. As Petrarch famously writes in his sonnet 'Per mirar Policeto a prova fiso', Simone has risen to heaven to portray Laura's soul, freed from her body which normally

⁷⁶ 'Così, poichè di lui la Patria è priva,/ Cui cede il Greco onor, cede il Latino,/Di voi ella si gloria, a lui vicino/ Bembo dell'altro Bembo imagin viva.' Quoted after Giovanni della Casa, *Opere*, vol. III, Milan 1806, p. 175.

⁷⁷ Braden, 'Applied Petrarchism', p. 404.

⁷⁸ See also Braden, *Petrarchan Love and the Continental Renaissance*, especially p. 92 and further.

obscures her immaterial beauty (*qui tra noi, ove le membra fanno a l'alma velo*). With that 'alto concetto' in mind, Simone draws Petrarch's beloved, who now seems to listen when he speaks: 'But when I come to speak with her, benignly enough she seems to listen – oh, if she could only answer to the things I say.'⁷⁹ An attentive portrait image was surely very attractive; in a sense much more attractive than the real lady Laura. In his *Secretum sive De contemptu Mundi*, Petrarch has St Augustine dismiss the poet's idolatrous behaviour:

But what is more insane than that you, not content with the presence of the likeness of that face ... have sought to have made another likeness by the skill of a famous artist which you have with you hanging on your person everywhere you go, the theme of permanent and continual tears...⁸⁰

Stubbornly holding on to Laura's image on a little piece of paper, nothing but the most pale reflection of her soul in heaven, Petrarch condemns himself for his inability to fix his attention on higher and more worthy things.

In a passage from the *Life of Giovanni Bellini*, Giorgio Vasari made unambiguously clear just how much for Pietro Bembo portraiture and Petrarchism were related:

Giovanni thus portrayed for *messer* Pietro Bembo, before he went to stay with pope Leo X, one of his beloved ladies so lively, that it deserved to be celebrated by him, a second Petrarch from Venice, in his rhymes, just as Simone from Siena was celebrated by the first Petrarch from Florence, like in this sonnet: "O imagine mia celeste e pura," where in the beginning of the second *quadernario* he says: "Crede che 'l mio Bellin con la figura;" and that which follows. And what bigger prize could our artists wish for their efforts than being celebrated by the pen of illustrious poets?⁸¹

⁷⁹ 'Ma poi ch'i' vengo a ragionar con lei/ Benignamente assai par che m'ascolte,/ Se risponder sapesse a' detti miei.'

⁸⁰ 'Quid autem insanius quam, non contentum presenti illius vultus effigie, [...] aliam fictam illustris artificis ingenio quesivisse, quam tecum ubique circumferens haberes materiam semper immortalium lacrimarum?' Quoted after Stierle, *Francesco Petrarca*, p. 411. The English translation is from Andrew Martindale, *Simone Martini: Complete Edition*, Oxford 1988, p. 183.

⁸¹ 'Giovanni, dunque, ritrasse a messer Pietro Bembo, prima che andasse a star con papa Leone X, una sua innamorata così vivamente, che meritò esser da lui, siccome fu Simon Sanese dal primo Petrarca fiorentino, da questo secondo viniziano celebrato nelle sue rime, come in

The portrait to which Vasari refers was most likely that of Maria Savorgnan, with whom Bembo had an affair from 1500 to mid-1501.⁸² The two lovers both sent many letters to the other: seventy-seven from each side have been preserved.⁸³ And these letters were accompanied by poems and portraits; the image of Maria referred to above is an example, and was a gift from her to Bembo.⁸⁴ He responded in a truly idolatrous, Petrarchan vein: ‘I have kissed her a thousand times instead of you, and I pray her for that which I would like to pray for to you...’⁸⁵ And in a variation on Petrarch’s *Canzoniere* 78, ‘Quando giunse a Simon l’alto concetto,’ Bembo wrote in his sonnet ‘O imagine mia celeste e pura,’ turning to his beloved portrait, ‘... your style is less cruel than hers, and you do not throw away my hope, for at least when I look at you, you do not hide.’⁸⁶

At the end of his life, in the 1540s, Pietro Bembo courted Elisabetta Quirini Massola, wife of the Venetian patrician Lorenzo Massola, and celebrated her in letters to Girolamo Quirini and sent her poems. He may also have been in the possession of a portrait of hers by Titian, a number of which circulated through Venice. Giovanni della Casa, the papal *nunzio*, seems to have had one, and the collector and patrician Gabriele Vendramin as well.⁸⁷ At that time, it had become common for educated, upper-class men,

quel sonetto: “O imagine mia celeste e pura,” dove nel principio del secondo quadernario dice: “Credo che ‘l mio Bellin con la figura;” e quello che seguita. E che maggior premio possono gli artefici i nostri disiderare delle lor fatiche, che essere dalla penne de’ poeti illustri celebrati? Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. III, p. 439.

⁸² Maria Savorgnan was the widow of Giacomo Savorgnan, whose cousin Antonio would play a pivotal role in the vendettas in the Friuli in 1511. Maria was the mother of the woman who came to inspire Luigi da Porto’s *Giuletta e Romeo*, set against the background of these vendettas, the literary work which in turn would inspire Shakespeare. Pietro Bembo, Da Porto’s mentor, received a copy: see Braden, ‘Applied Petrarchism’, p. 421, and Muir, *Mad Blood Stirring*, pp. 158-159.

⁸³ See Maria Savorgnan and Pietro Bembo, *Carteggio d’amore (1500-1501)*, ed. Carlo Dionisotti, Florence 1950.

⁸⁴ Bolzoni, *Poesia e ritratto*, pp. 85-88.

⁸⁵ ‘Holla basciata mille volte in vece di voi, e priegola di quello, che io voi volentieri preghe-rei...’ Quoted after Bolzoni, *Poesia e ritratto*, p. 24. For the complete letter, see Savorgnan and Bembo, *Carteggio d’amore*, p. 52.

⁸⁶ ‘In questo hai tu di lei men fero stile,/ Né spargi sì le mie speranze al vento,/ Ch’almen, quand’io ti cerco, non t’ascondi.’

⁸⁷ For the portrait in general, and a version of it being in the collection of Della Casa, see Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian*, vol. II, cat. no. L-26, p. 204. Della Casa wrote two sonnets on the image, ‘Ben veggio io, Tiziano, in forme nove,’ and ‘Son queste, Amor, le vaghe trecce bionde’; they are also mentioned by Vasari right after the passage on Bembo quoted above (see Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. III, p. 439). For Vendramin’s version, probably covered with a depiction of

time, it had become common for educated, upper-class men, connoisseurs of beautiful art and female beauty alike, to possess portraits of female beauties not their wives, and celebrate them in Petrarchan verse.⁸⁸ Indeed, such images were exchanged and collected all over Europe, and considered tokens of value and taste. While easily clashing with today's moral boundaries, in the Renaissance it was more honourable than offensive if one's wife was celebrated in this way by other men; in fact, celebrating female beauty can be considered a strategy for male bonding, and for conscious display of men's power, aesthetics and cosmopolitanism.⁸⁹ What is more, such images, while taking a specific, historical woman as a starting point, would, in theory at least, lead the male viewer to contemplation of a more abstract, universal beauty, and thus away from the particular attraction of the wife of *messer* so and so.⁹⁰ Thus it is explained, to name the most relevant example, by the character of Pietro Bembo himself in Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, to which the actual Bembo consented before it was published.⁹¹

As Una Roman D'Elia argues, for Bembo as for contemporary writers, the project of the new *volgare* poetics had been connected to amorous concerns from the beginning.⁹² She quotes Niccolò Liburnio, another sixteenth-century Venetian writer, who composed a treatise on the vernacular language even before Bembo did: according to Liburnio, graceful language 'renders the hearts of ladies most tender to the sweet prayers of supplicating lovers.'⁹³ Pet-

the *Triumph of Love*, recently attributed to Titian (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum), see Catherine Whistler, 'Titian's "Triumph of Love"', *The Burlington Magazine* 151 (2009), pp. 536-541.

⁸⁸ For another Bembo singing the praises of a beloved lady and her portrait (Pietro's father Bernardo on Ginevra de' Benci and her portrait by Leonardo da Vinci), see Fletcher, 'Bernardo Bembo and Leonardo's Portrait'.

⁸⁹ See Simons, 'Portraiture, Portrayal, and Idealization', in particular p. 285 and p. 288.

⁹⁰ This is what Patricia Simons calls 'anonymous referentiality' (Simons, 'Portraiture, Portrayal, and Idealization', pp. 290-291).

⁹¹ See Braden, 'Applied Petrarchism', pp. 398-399.

⁹² Una Roman D'Elia, 'Niccolò Liburnio on the Boundaries of Portraiture in the Early Cinquecento', *The Sixteenth-Century Journal* 37 (2006), pp. 323-350, here p. 335.

⁹³ 'Le caute et in leggiadrezza amorse donne del resto d'Italia tosto che odone, over leggono prosa ò verso con limati et gratiosi vocaboli thoschi mescolato, pieghevoli et mansueti rendono gli lor tenerissimi cuori alle dolci preghiere de supplicanti amatori.' Niccolò Liburnio, *Le tre fontane in tre libbri divise, sopra la grammatica, et eloquenza di Dante, Petrarca, et Boccaccio* (Venice, 1526), p. 2r (English translation quoted after D'Elia, 'Niccolò Liburnio on the Boundaries of Portraiture', p. 335). Liburnio's first treatise on the *volgare* was *Le vulgari elegantie* (Venice, 1521).

rarch's lyric in the *volgare* was turned into a model for affairs of language as well as love.⁹⁴

As I have suggested, Francesco Bembo was very well aware of the great tradition of *Petrarchismo-Bembismo* that he stood in. And I believe that, just as Pietro (and Pietro's father Bernardo) had done, possibly even through Pietro's poems and other writings, Francesco Bembo took Petrarch as a model with which to give shape and meaning to his own relation with an inaccessible lady. Almost every week Bembo sat down in his study (*mezzado*) and wrote Bianca, his absent, beloved Laura, a letter of two or three pages long. Often her absence is specifically thematized, as in this letter written after he had just departed from the Florentine court, 13 October 1585:

Every time I depart from Your Serene Highness – and it has happened to me twice now – I have the fate of a shower of rain, which accompanies me all through the day, and I believe that it originates from the contempt Jupiter feels for me because I depart from such a great Lady; or perhaps because he is jealous since I am loved and favoured so much by her.⁹⁵

Bembo and his friends, he writes, use the portrait to channel their desire created by her ever longer absence from her native city; on a dinner party at his house, he noted:

... talking about you, it seemed to me as if I could see you and hear you, being present here; the same happened to my wife [...] Your Highness was brought to the table with our desire and our imagination, and everyone made you a toast, and even did we speak with you, with much gentleness, as if you had truly been there. But when everyone became aware of their mistake and their loss, we tried to correct it, and to partially undo it, by beholding, and again beholding your most beautiful painted image, which seems to speak, and which welcomes anyone who looks at it.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ See also Acquaro Graziosi, *Giordio Gradenigo*, p. 16 and further.

⁹⁵ 'Ogni volta ch'io parto da .V.A.S., et pur mi è successo due fiata, io hò una fortuna di pioggia, che m'accompagna per tutto quel giorno, et credo che q[ue]sto nasca dallo sdegno, che Giove hà meco, perche io mi parte da sì gran Donna; ò pur perche egli m'invidia, ch'io sia da lei tanto amato, e favorito.' A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato* 5940, c. 705r.

⁹⁶ '... ragionando di lei, mi pareva vederla, et udira qui p[rese]nte; il med.mo è intervenuto à mia moglie [...]; et V.A. fu portata à tavola con il desiderio, et con l'imaginatione; et ogni uno

The imagined presence of the grand duchess is substituted with a real presence of her image – but both are dependent on her actual absence.

We should be careful not to consider the portrait simply as a surrogate, however. The end of the passage suggests that there are limits to the analogy between Bianca and her portrait. Would the real grand duchess tolerate the gazes that scrutinize her features without restraint, let alone invite them? Pietro Aretino wrote to the recently widowed emperor Charles V, about Titian's portrait of his beloved, that anyone who looks at her eyes will soon avert one's gaze, warned by the signals of her modesty inherent in the image (fig. 85); during her life the empress Isabella would never look at anyone who was aware of being watched, Aretino adds as a sign of her virtuous and chaste comportment.⁹⁷ To be sure, both Bianca and her image are less modest and 'saintly' than Aretino's example, but that makes my question no less legitimate. Would the grand duchess, for that matter, allow Francesco's wife Cillenia to kiss her, as she kissed the portrait?⁹⁸ In this period, such manners rather befitted a very specific and publicly accessible class of women to which Bianca clearly did not belong – despite of what was whispered about her in the Florentine streets.⁹⁹ Her painted portrait, like that of Laura, Maria, Elisabetta, and so on, did have certain characteristics that, under specific circumstances, gave it certain advantages over 'the real thing'. The painting came to possess an agency of its own.

le fece [brindisi]; et non meno ragionavamo con lei, e con molta dolcezza; come s'ella vi fosse ver.te stata. Ma poi che del suo errore ogni uno si accorse, e del suo danno; cercassimo di emendarlo, et di rifarsi in parte, con mirare, e rimirare la sua bellissima imagine dipinta; la quale par, che parli, et faccia accoglienza à chi la mira.' A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato*, 5943, cc. 771-2.

⁹⁷ 'Le luci, che mai in tanto non aprì, o girò, che si potessero dire aperte, o girate, hanno in sé virtù tali, che chi le rimira assai o poco inchina giuso le sue quasi ammonite dal cenno de la modestia, per causa de la quale la santa giovane non guardò mai persona che si accorgesse d'essere guardata da lei.' Aretino, *Lettere*, vol. III, no. 102, pp. 121-122, here p. 121; the letter is dated October 1544. See also Édouard Pommier, *Théories du portrait: de la Renaissance aux Lumières*, Paris 1998, p. 100; for the portrait see Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian*, vol. II, cat. no. L-20, pp. 200-201.

⁹⁸ '... et mia moglie si grettò per basciarlo, quando la tenni per tema, che non le facesse qualche nocume[n]to ...' A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato* 5938, c. 707v. And see also a letter about Bembo's visit to the Capello family: 'La portai à Cà Capello la sett.na passata, e vi steti un pezzo; fu veduto volentieri da tutti, et fu dalla giovane basciato...' *Mediceo del Principato* 5942, c. 99v.

⁹⁹ On Bianca being called a whore (*puttana*), see Musacchio, 'Objects and Identity', p. 483.

Bembo was clearly aware of this and, as we have also seen above, usually made a conscious distinction between his painting as a representation and the one who was represented: ‘Now that the copy is so much longed for, imagine, Your Highness, how much the authentic and true is desired; and may it please God that Venice can see her personally soon.’¹⁰⁰ On the day he finally received his long-desired picture, he wrote about ‘the incomparable joy that I feel when seeing it, which suggests that I see Your Highness herself, and that she talks to me. Certainly, it is beautiful, but, certainly, Your Highness is even more beautiful.’¹⁰¹ One of the most intimate views we get of his way of seeing the portrait is this:

I always keep this portrait in front of me, here where I sit and where I write. So that, while I am home, I always look at it. Yet it will never satisfy me; and that is very true. Thus, the more I look at it, the more my desire grows to look at it again, because it seems to me that I see Your Highness, though in fact you are more beautiful, and more *bianca*.¹⁰²

From the happy day that the mail servant brought him this portrait, all his letters, according to Bembo, were written with the portrait of Bianca in front of him – keeping one eye on the sheet of paper lying on his desk, the other one staring into the heavenly *lumi* of the lady he was courting.

Bianca Capello for her part contributed to Francesco’s Petrarchan script, but to what extent precisely is much more difficult to establish than in the case of, say, Pietro Bembo’s mistress Savorgnan. Of the latter we have seventy-seven letters left, which betray a considerable literary talent; of Bianca’s letters to Francesco only sixteen are known, and they are all warm, yet quite restrained in tone, certainly free of any literary aspiration. Yet, Francesco’s side of the correspondence can also provide us with insights into Bianca’s

¹⁰⁰ ‘Hora se la copia è tanto desiderata, pensi V.A. quanto sia bramato l’autentico, et vero; et piaccia à Dio, che Venetia possa vederla presto personalm.te.’ A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato* 5938, c. 174v.

¹⁰¹ ‘... la imparag.le allegrezza ch’io sento vedendolo, che mi par veder l’Altezza [Vostra] propria, e che mi parli. Certo, che è bello; ma certo che V.A. è piu bella.’ A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato* 5938, c. 707v.

¹⁰² ‘...io tengo esso ritratto qui sempre innanzi, dove siedo, et dove scrivo. si che mentre sto in casa, lo guardo sempre; nè però mai mi satio; et è verissimo. Anzi quanto più lo miro, maggior cresce il desiderio di rimirarlo, perche parmi di veder V.A., ancora che ella sia in fatti piu bella, e piu bianca.’ A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato* 5938, c. 690r.

Petrarchan attitude. First of all, she gave him the portrait, thus not only providing him with a precious object, but also with the opportunity to think himself another Petrarch, another Bembo, endlessly dwelling upon the image of his beloved Laura, his beloved Maria. Secondly, she graciously enacted the role of the unwilling and inaccessible, and thus purely Platonic beloved, also in that way providing Francesco with infinite poetic inspiration. For often do we hear Francesco complain about the sparseness of her replies, and about the fact that she would not visit Venice in person:

Not to see Your Highness – indeed, it has been almost two years since we last met – and not to have as many of your letters as would be possible: that is dying twice. And if only dying once will take one’s life, what is one to believe that dying twice can do? O, I am the Grand Duchess, and you are (*tù sei*) Bembo...¹⁰³

That Bianca died only five months after these desperate lines were written, was, no matter how cruel, the only suitable thing to happen in the end – from a Petrarchan point of view at least; but unfortunately we have no documents from Bembo after her death that would show us how he felt.

Bembo’s letters also contain passages that do not so easily fit within a Petrarchan, or in any other fixed scheme. A number of these can be found in his correspondence related to his two visits to the Florentine court in 1585. Again, it is unfortunate that there is no trace of Bianca’s part of the correspondence here, but Bembo’s letters suggest that for once, their roles had been reversed. Bianca became the supplicating lover, yearning for a sign of affection from her distant friend, while Bembo remained cool and detached: ‘the task does not allow for delay,’ as he defended his haste to get away from Florence and proceed to Rome. And anticipating their next meeting, when Bembo and his fellow ambassadors would again pass the Medici court on their way back to Venice, he wrote: ‘I beg you not to caress me so much, as it pleases you to do out of your immense kind-heartedness, in the company

¹⁰³ ‘Non veder V.A., et di già siamo vicini alli due anni; et non haver q[ua]nto è possibile sue lettere; è doppia morte. et se una sola, leva di vita, che si può credere, che facciano due? Ò, io son la Gran Duchessa, e tù sei il Bembo...’ A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato*, 5944, c. 248r.

of those noblemen...'¹⁰⁴ Such remarks come as a surprise given the normal tone of Bembo's writings.

And what to think of the expressions of affection towards Bianca coming from Bembo's wife? 'Having seen your most beautiful portrait,' Cillenia wrote, 'and that divine candle, I have fallen in love so deeply that I am forced to admire it every hour.'¹⁰⁵ And indeed, she tried to kiss it, only prevented from that by her husband. Is this Mrs Bembo forced into a masculine scheme (consciously, by that same husband, or simply because it was the only manner she knew)? Or is this a sincerely female voice, an expression of Cillenia's appreciation of this outstanding exemplar of her own sex? In the light of some of Cillenia's other writings, part of which I have discussed above, in which she refers to Bianca as 'one of our sex ... such a great lady full of all those graces that our lord god can give here on earth', the latter option seems the most likely for now. Other times Cillenia called her 'truly my *patrona*', a nomenclature normally reserved for female patron saints – in that sense it typifies Cillenia's language, dense with religious vocabulary, pretty well.

Bembo's Frame

So far, we have mostly discussed Bianca's portrait from Francesco Bembo's personal view only, and the way he applied it in his re-enactment of his romantic relationship with the portrayed lady. While this may suggest that Bembo kept the portrait all for himself, the opposite is actually true. In the months following his acquisition of the precious image, it came to play an ever more public role. This role was, I believe, nowhere more overtly dis-

¹⁰⁴ '... oltra di ciò la prego à non mi far tante carezze, come si compiace per sua grand.ma benignità di farmi, in presenza di q[ue]sti nobili...' *Mediceo del Principato* 5940, cc. 629r-v.

¹⁰⁵ 'Havendo veduto il suo bellissimo ritratto et quella ciera divina io ne son inamarata talmente che son sforciata mirarla ogni hora.' The 'ciera divina', literally 'divine wax', may have been another gift from Bianca to Cillenia. Perhaps what is meant here is a so-called *agnus dei*, a disc of wax which originated from the papal Easter candle and was supposed to have a benificent effect on pregnant women. See John Cherry, 'Healing through Faith: The Continuation of Medieval Attitudes to Jewellery into the Renaissance', *Renaissance Studies* 15 (2001), pp. 154-171, here p. 157; also Luke Syson and Dora Thornton, *Objects of Virtue: Art in Renaissance Italy*, London 2001, pp. 61-63.

played than in the portrait's frame: the picture frame came to embody Francesco's public ownership of Bianca's image.¹⁰⁶

Although the original frame has not been preserved, we can form a rather precise idea of what it must have looked like, thanks to one of Bembo's elaborate letters. As he firmly stated, the frame's design was all his own (of which he was clearly very proud). It was made of ebony and was of the so-called *cassetta* or box type.¹⁰⁷ The frame's material was rather rare because it was very expensive, owing to the cost of the veneer, and usually only applied for precious paintings of small size – just the type of Bembo's portrait.¹⁰⁸ Apart from ebony, Bembo chose more special materials to adorn the painting with, for he decorated the frame with a variety of semiprecious stones (for an idea of what such a frame may have looked like, see fig. 86). There were pieces of jasper, of agate, carnelian, and lapis lazuli, as well as rock crystal, some of them finished with gold leaf and cut in several different forms.¹⁰⁹ As if the ebony and stones were not enough, Bembo decided to have the frame adorned with four painted little figures, which were meant to be personifications of four of Bianca's many supposed virtues: Innocence, Prudence, Constancy, and Mercy. In early modern Italy, it was not uncommon to adorn a

¹⁰⁶ For a historiography of frames, see Nicholas Penny, 'The Study and Imitation of Old Picture-Frames', *The Burlington Magazine* 140 (1998), pp. 375–382.

¹⁰⁷ In sixteenth-century Italy a great variety of frame types circulated, but the *cassetta* type was certainly one of the most popular ones. It is a type which is the same on all four sides and which always consists of an inner and outer moulding, together with a flat area in between. For a typology of Italian frames, in particular the Venetian school, see Paul Mitchell, 'Italian Picture Frames 1500–1825: A Brief Survey', *Furniture History* 20 (1984), pp. 18–27. For the *cassetta* type especially see Timothy Newbery, 'Picture Framing I: European "Cassetta" Frames from the 15th to the 19th Century', *Museum Management and Curatorship* 14 (1995), pp. 103–107. Exhibition catalogues on (Italian) picture frames, with lots of illustrations, include Pieter van Thiel and Cornelis de Bruyn Kops, *Framing in the Golden Age: Picture and Frame in 17th-century Holland*, translated by Andrew MacCormick, Zwolle 1995; Franco Sabatelli, Enrico Colle and Patrizia Zambrano (eds.), *La cornice italiana dal Rinascimento al Neoclassicismo*, Milan 1992; Timothy Newbery, George Bisacca, and Laurence B. Kanter, *Italian Renaissance Frames*, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art 1990; also, exclusively with regard to portrait frames, Paul Mitchell and Lynn Roberts, *Frameworks: Form, Function & Ornament in European Portrait Frames*, London 1996.

¹⁰⁸ On ebony as material for picture frames, see Jacob Simon, *The Art of the Picture Frame: Artists, Patrons and the Framing of Portraits in Britain*, London 1996, p. 50; mostly for ebony in the northern European context Mitchell and Roberts, *Frameworks*, p. 90 and further.

¹⁰⁹ As some of these stones tend to vary in colour, we are not certain what the ensemble looked like. Lapis lazuli is blue; carnelian is red and crystal is transparent. Jasper, however, may be yellow, brown, red or green; agate is marbled and varies from red to brown to purple to white to even green.

frame with human figures, either sculpted or painted. Neither was this frame the only one to be decorated with semiprecious stones. Yet, the combination of the two was very special indeed; I have not found any sixteenth-century parallels.¹¹⁰ Thus, we can safely characterize Bembo's frame as a *patron's frame*, remarkable for its richness and idiosyncratic design, and often related to the work of art within.¹¹¹

It is precisely the picture frame that may offer us further insight into Bembo's manner of appropriating his portrait of Bianca. Let us first examine his remarks on the frame before it actually came into existence; for when Francesco received the portrait, it was still frameless. Having admired the painting for more than two hours, as he wrote, he took the portrait upstairs to show it to the women of his house – his wife Cillenia, and probably also some servants. This is the first time we hear something about framing: 'The Women, though aware that its room should be my *mezado*,' that is, Francesco's private study, 'want to keep it upstairs until the frame is made.'¹¹² As we learn from his later letters, Francesco thought it best that the portrait would not leave his house until it was framed. Significantly, the only exceptions he made were for art connoisseur and friend Jacopo Contarini – who, moreover, was ill at the time and could not come to Francesco's house – and for the Capello family, that is, the family of the portrayed lady.¹¹³ In the weeks following the portrait's arrival, many people came by to admire Bembo's new possession, but he was not fully comfortable with that. 'Yesterday, when I came back from a consultation on the frame, several noble ladies

¹¹⁰ The only example I know of besides Bembo's frame is a so-called engaged frame surrounding a late fourteenth-century Sienese *Madonna and Child*; see Newbery, Bisacca, and Kanter, *Italian Renaissance Frames*, cat. no. 3, pp. 34–35.

¹¹¹ For the term 'patron's frame', see Simon, *The Art of the Picture Frame*, p. 113.

¹¹² 'Le Donne che sanno che la sua stanza hà da essere il mio *mezado*, lo vogliono di sopra fin che se le faccia il fornimento.' A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato* 5938, c. 707v.

¹¹³ That these visits actually took place and are not only products of Bembo's undoubtedly lively imagination is confirmed by the fact that other contacts of Bianca Capello also mention the portrait in their letters to her, exactly matching the dates given by Bembo. For example, when Bembo wrote on 20 April he had taken the painting to the Capello family 'last week', there is a letter from Vittore Capello, Bianca's brother, dated 12 April, that confirms the former message: 'Il Bembo portò qui un ritratto di V.A. di man di Scipione molto diligente et fornito [...].' A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato* 5942, c. 44r. There are more letters that confirm Bembo's account: see those written by Cillenia Bembo, *Mediceo del Principato* 5938, c. 661r; another one by Vittore Capello, *Mediceo del Principato* 5942, cc. 139r–v; and by Mazzino Ebreo, *Mediceo del Principato* 5942, cc. 663r–v.

that were here to visit *signora* Bembo, asked more than one time whether I had the portrait here. I hold it in high esteem, but until it is framed, I will not show it any more.¹¹⁴ Yet, his attitude was highly ambivalent, for at the same time Bembo could not resist the temptation to show off with this new painting, in Contarini's words 'the most beautiful painting there is in Venice of the moderns'.¹¹⁵ He let so many people into his house, that when the frame was finally finished, the only person as it were who had not yet seen Bianca's portrait was no-one less than the Venetian Doge.¹¹⁶ To summarize, it seems that Francesco felt he behaved improperly when showing Bianca's countenance without a frame, except when his own women were concerned. When it came to the Doge, showing the frameless portrait was simply out of the question. It perhaps seems unnatural that a frame should make such a difference. Why was it so important to Bembo?

To start with, it may be interesting to pay some attention to his choice of words here. In his letters he made use of two words which function as synonyms: *fornimento* and *ornamento*. This is not unusual: in Vasari's *Lives*, to cite one example, these two words are interchangeable as well; both signify 'picture frame'.¹¹⁷ More relevant in this context are other meanings attached to *fornimento* in early modern Italy.¹¹⁸ Besides to a frame around a painting, the term could denote 'finish' or 'completion'. This may offer us some insight

¹¹⁴ 'Hierì ritornai à consulto per il fornim.to et alcune gentil.ne che eran ivi à visita di s.s. cl.ma dimandarono piu volte s'io haveva là il ritratto. il quale tengo in gran riputatione: ma finche non sia fornito, non lo mostrerò piu.' *Mediceo del Principato* 5938, c. 690v.

¹¹⁵ 'Dissemi il Sig.r Iac.o, Franc.o tu hai il piu bel quadro, che sia à Venetia de moderni.' *Mediceo del Principato* 5938, c. 690r.

¹¹⁶ This makes sense to the extent that the Doge was not allowed to leave the Palace by himself and as a rule never visited private persons. In accordance with sixteenth-century etiquette, people came to him: the person with the lower rank was the one who took the initiative and approached her superior.

¹¹⁷ See, for example, Vasari's biography of Baccio d'Agnolo, where he discusses picture frames made by Baccio's son Giuliano, some of which were destined for altarpieces by Vasari himself: 'Fece Giuliano un lettuccio di noce per Filippo Strozzi, che è oggi a Città di Castello in casa degl'eredi del signor Alessandro Vitelli, et un molto ricco e bel fornimento a una tavola che fece Giorgio Vasari all'altare maggiore della Badia di Camaldoli in Casentino, col disegno di detto Giorgio; e nella chiesa di Santo Agostino del Monte Sansavino fece un altro ornamento intagliato per una tavola grande che fece il detto Giorgio. In Ravenna, nella Badia di Classi de' monaci di Camaldoli fece il medesimo Giuliano, pure a un'altra tavola di mano del Vasari, un altro bell'ornamento; et ai monaci della Badia di Santa Fiore in Arezzo fece nel refettorio il fornimento delle pitture che vi sono di mano di detto Giorgio aretino.' Vasari, *Le vite*, vol. IV, p. 617 (italics are mine).

¹¹⁸ See *Grande dizionario della lingua italiana*, vol. VI, s.v. 'fornimento', p. 198.

into the role of Francesco's picture frame: the frame is the picture's completion. Without a frame, the portrait is not really finished and thus cannot be shown to the Doge yet. In the third place, *fornimento* referred to the furnishing and decoration of a room, or to fashion and clothes; a more specific sense of 'completion', in fact. I believe that this third sense alludes to Francesco's picture frame as well: he was not taking the painting outside without a frame, because it was, in a sense, naked. As I will suggest, the frame was to the painting as the dress was to the lady.

There are some interesting parallels with the way religious cult images were framed. When it came to simple cult statues of the Madonna, for example – and much of this is still valid today – they would only be dressed by pious women, as it was believed that men were not allowed to see the Madonna undressed.¹¹⁹ Valuable icons, such as the *Nikopeia* kept in the church of San Marco, were often enshrined in gold and jewels and 'all but covered by their treasures', as Rona Goffen has it, just like relics in their reliquaries.¹²⁰ If indeed Bianca's portrait has some icon-like qualities – the painted silver and gold embroidered dress and many jewels already being some sort of enshrining for the grand duchess' body – then its precious frame, with its material value far outdoing that of the canvas itself, can easily be considered as some sort of reliquary shrine (for a provisional reconstruction, see fig. 87). In Venetian households, frames were equally an indispensable part of devotional images. Often containing a candle holder and a bucket for holy water, these frames together with the images they protected nearly were self-contained oratories (fig. 88). The frames also referred to the (Marian) images inside them with painted symbols or inscriptions, such as prayers.¹²¹ Thus, they helped to determine how devotional images were approached and used, and served as a votive gift to the depicted deity.

Indeed, several heretofore unquoted passages in Bembo's letters to Bianca suggest that he was well aware that frames, in the broadest sense of the word,

¹¹⁹ For the situation in the Venetian lagoon, see Elisabetta Silvestrini, 'Abiti simulacri. Itinerario attraverso mitologie, narrazioni e riti', in: Riccarda Pagnozzato (ed.), *Donne Madonne Dee: Abito sacro e riti di vestizione, gioiello votivo, "vestitrici": un itinerario antropologico in area lagunare veneta*, Padua 2003, pp. 15–66.

¹²⁰ Goffen, 'Icon and Vision', p. 509.

¹²¹ For frames in the context of the Venetian household, see Ronda Kasl, 'Holy Households: Art and Devotion in Renaissance Venice', in: id. (ed.), *Giovanni Bellini and the Art of Devotion*, Indianapolis 2004, pp. 59–89, here pp. 66–70.

were much more than just some physical protection to an otherwise vulnerable artefact. When he revealed the portrait to his wife and the maids, for example, he first covered it with a cloth, only to lift it up when he had their full attention, thus turning it into a theatrical showpiece, as we have seen. The cloth not in the first place served as protection; it rather enhanced the aura of the thing it enshrined, and made its viewing into a spectacle. When he finally brought the portrait to show it to the Doge, he had put it in a little box, ‘for more security’ as he wrote, but again used this protective cover to theatricalize the painting’s viewing: ‘Monday at two I brought it to the Prince, and the cover of the box being removed, His Serenity felt such satisfaction and marvel, that he kept it in front of him until half past three, and that, when he went to table, he was still praising the very beautiful painting, as well as Your Highness, who is the person represented.’¹²² Venetian paintings, especially those of devotional subjects and beautiful women, were often covered, as, for example, Pietro Aretino informs us.¹²³ In a letter to Diego Hurtado de Mendoza (1505-1575), Spanish writer and ambassador to Charles V, he wrote about an image of a beautiful lady in that nobleman’s collection ‘of which you only show the curtain of silk, that covers it in the guise of a relic’.¹²⁴ As Petrarch wrote, ‘the truth uncovered is all the more pleasant the more difficult its quest has been’; but there is also another side to the covering of female images: as the portrait can substitute for the lady, its visual access needs to be controlled, just like Venetian women would conceal themselves from public view.¹²⁵ This is of course also what was at stake with the frame.

¹²² ‘Lo portai dunque lunedì dal Principe alle quattordici hore, e tolto via il coperto della casetta, rimase s. ser.ta con tanta satisf.ne, et maraviglia, che se lo fece tener derimpetto [fin] alle quindici e meza, che si andò a tavola, lodando semp. la bellissima pittura, et [V.]A. che è la rapp[rese]ntata...’ A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato* 5942, c. 649r.

¹²³ On covering paintings with curtains, see also Victor I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, translated by Anne-Marie Glasheen, Cambridge 1997, pp. 60-61.

¹²⁴ ‘...il ritratto del quale mostrate solamente lo invoglio di seta, che lo ricopre a guisa di reliquia.’ Letter dated 15 August 1542: see Aretino, *Lettere*, vol. II, no. 441, pp. 433-434, here p. 433.

¹²⁵ Quoted after Cranston, *The Poetics of Portraiture*, pp. 24-25, who has a very informative section on portraits and their covers (p. 22 and further). For the analogy with actual women and their veils, see Goffen, *Titian’s Women*, p. 50. The classic study of covered portraits is Angelica Dülberg, *Privatporträts: Geschichte und Ikonologie einer Gattung im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert*, Berlin 1990. Interestingly, Dülberg discusses another portrait of Bianca Capello with

The portrait's frame was, different from the (ephemeral) covers, permanently displayed around the painting, not on top of it or covering the painting from view, but always interacting with it, engaged in an everlasting dialogue. One of the conspicuous items which made up the frame were the semi-precious stones. While obviously meant to enhance the frame's beauty and material value, something more needs to be said about them. In the Middle Ages, semi-precious stones were already invested with myriad meanings, beginning with those in a Christian, allegorical register. In the early modern period, the significance of stones even became more varied, and therefore more difficult to retrieve. Yet, there are ways to make sense of them. Lodovico Dolce, whom we have encountered many times before, wrote a little book about stones, in which the central question was not so much about signification, but rather about what he calls '*virtù*', power: all that mankind may wish for can be satisfied by the power of stones. Quoting the Biblical king Solomon, Dolce enumerates stones' various effects:

There are diverse virtues in stones. Some make a person acquire the grace of the Lords; some make resistant to fire; some make men beloved; others make them wise; others invisible; others throw back lightning; some render poisons harmless; some protect treasures and make them grow; others make husbands love their wives; some calm down storms at sea; others cure illness; others protect the head and the eyes.¹²⁶

In short, as part of God's creation, they are there to serve man.¹²⁷ Now, according to the survey that Dolce's book contains, all stones used in Bembo's frame (lapis lazuli, jasper, carnelian, agate, and crystal) have beneficial effects on human health. And three of the five – jasper, carnelian, and crystal – have

remarkable accessories: a portrait by Alessandro Allori, its back is decorated after Michelangelo's *Dream* drawing, originally stored in a wooden box (pp. 146–148 and cat. no. 193, p. 242).

¹²⁶ 'Diverse virtù sono nelle pietre. Alcune fanno altrui acquistar la gratia de' Signori: alcune fanno resistenza al fuoco: alcune fanno gli huomini essere amata: altre saggi: altre invisibili: altre ributtano il fulmini: alcune estinguono i veleni: alcune conservano et accrescono i thesori: altre fanno, che i mariti amino le mogli: alcune acchetano le tempeste del mare: altre guariscono le infirmità, altre conservano la testa e gli occhi.' Lodovico Dolce, *Libri tre ne i quali si tratta delle diverse sorti delle Gemme, che produce la Natura, della qualità, grandezza, bellezza, & virtù loro* (Venice, 1565), p. 19r–v.

¹²⁷ 'Ultimamente, come cosa piu disiderata dall'huomo, diremo le virtù loro, accioche conosciamo, che ogni cosa prodotta da DIO, è beneficio de gli huomini.' Dolce, *Libri tre ne i quali si tratta delle diverse sorte delle Gemme*, p. 28r.

specific effects on the female body: they stagnate menstruation, help women to conceive, and also assist during their pregnancy and birth giving; they fill female breasts with milk. What is more, jasper was believed to cure hydropsy, an illness Bianca Capello was known to suffer from; and given her general obsession with her health and her great and widely known wish to become pregnant, could it be that Bembo chose these particular stones for their expected beneficial effect on Bianca's body?¹²⁸ If so, the apotropaic effect of stones (their *virtù*, in Dolce's words) was apparently also believed to operate in connection with the patient's image, not necessarily with the patient herself. It is known that Bianca, just like many women of her time, resorted to magicians, potions and amulets in order to become pregnant; these amulets would normally be worn on the body.¹²⁹ Here, the stones in the picture frame take over that amulet function. Juxtaposed to and touching the image of the woman-patient, they were hoped to have an effect on the image's prototype.

Stones may have borne other meanings, too. Pursuing the analogy with cult images a bit further, we may also look at the stones in the frame as a type of (votive) offering. Bianca, the represented lady, has bestowed her friend Bembo with the precious gift of her portrait; framing this portrait in these semi-precious stones, full of meaning and effect, was for Bembo a way to say thanks, to show his gratitude. In that sense it is not even relevant whether the frame actually ever existed: it was there in the letters to Bianca, conjured up in front of the reader's mind's eye, and thus effective anyhow. That also many other Italian poets, following the Petrarchan tradition, used stones as metaphors for their ladies' body parts is particularly relevant in this context: the stones may have represented the rosiness of Bianca's cheeks, the sparkle in her eyes, the whiteness of her teeth, and so on, referring to the painting's subject just as the painted personifications did.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ For Bianca's hydropsy, or oedema, see Gaspare de Caro in: D.B.I., vol. X, s.v. 'Bianca Capello, granduchessa di Toscana', pp. 15-16, here p. 16.

¹²⁹ See De Caro, 'Bianca Capello, granduchessa di Toscana', p. 16. On childbirth in the Renaissance, and the many techniques applied by women to control it, see Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth*, New Haven and London 1999, chapter 5, and p. 21 for Bianca Capello; see also the publications mentioned above, n. 105.

¹³⁰ It is well-known that the Medici were fond of so-called *pietre dure*, or richly coloured precious and semi-precious stones, inlaid in the most artful compositions. Sometimes these stones depicted figures, plants and trees, sometimes they were arranged in abstract, geometrical

As Louis Marin wrote, '[t]he frame renders the work autonomous in visible space; it puts representation into a state of exclusive presence; it faithfully defines the conditions of visual reception and of the contemplation of representation as such.'¹³¹ We have seen that Bembo's frame referred to certain qualities of the person depicted within, and in a sense complemented the information on Bianca's outside contained in the painting with particulars on her character. It is likely that it also had an apotropaic function, not just as a physical protection of the representation, but as a safeguard of the body represented. The frame constructed ways of viewing the portrait; it enhanced its aura as a painting; without it the portrait was unfinished, indistinct, dangerously open, naked.

But above all, the frame referred to Francesco Bembo. As a form of livery, a recurrent practice in this period whereby people (servants, wives) were dressed by patrons (masters, husbands) in order to construct a relation of dependence, he dressed Bianca's portrait to mark it as belonging to him.¹³² For it was not a neutral agent such as an artist who designed the frame; it was, as we know, all Francesco's choice to show her in this particular manner, to stress these virtues and neglect other aspects of her person. Furthermore, it was all Francesco who, by means of this portrait in its frame decided how to present Bianca in Venice, to determine who would see her and when, and what side of her person would receive attention. The frame, therefore, was not only one of his tools to make this happen; his activities as Bianca's representative were also reflected in it; the frame was a meta-image, a representation of Francesco's ownership and social position.¹³³

patterns. It remains unclear whether the pieces of stone in Bembo's frame were actually inlaid in the *pietre dure* manner and have anything to do with the Medici family in that sense.

¹³¹ Louis Marin, 'The Frame of Representation and Some of its Figures', in: Paul Duro (ed.), *The Rhetoric of the Frame: Essays on the Boundaries of the Artwork*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 79-95, here p. 82.

¹³² See, for example, Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, p. 5; also Paul Matthews, 'Apparel, Status, Fashion: Woman's Clothing and Jewellery' in: Dagmar Eichberger (ed.), *Women of Distinction: Margret of York, Margret of Austria*, Leuven 2005, pp. 147-153.

¹³³ On frames (in the broad sense) and their relation to the metapictorial, see Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image, passim*.

A Civic Ritual

In his letters to Bianca, Bembo showed himself very much aware of social stratification. As he presented it to her, the people who came to visit the portrait did not come independently, haphazardly, but were part of clear and distinct social groups. In Bembo's account, the first group to stand face-to-face with the painting, as we have seen, were the women living in his house, among whom his wife. Other groups were artists, friends of Bembo's, *avvocati* (men working for the Venetian government), but also people from other cities such as the *vicentini* (from Vicenza) and the *bresciani* (from Brescia). 'The magnificent portrait of Your Highness is praised more every day, by anyone who sees it, and by every sort of person; besides the painters, sculptors, miniaturists, and people of similar professions, there have been many judicious persons, such as *avogadori*, senators, and others.'¹³⁴ As is suggested in Bembo's letters and also in those written by others, these different social groups neatly followed each other. It is remarkable that the complete succession of visitors showed a gradual shift from those people very close to Francesco, such as his wife and the maids, or close to Bianca, such as her brother, towards those people that both of them had probably never heard of before, anonymous visitors from Venetian mainland dominions.

In fact, Bembo's presentation of this hierarchically structured succession of people shows an interesting parallel with Venetian ducal and other processions, held so often in that city during the sixteenth century. As Edward Muir has shown, these heavily formalized and institutionalized events not only illustrated Venice's constitution and hierarchic social structure, but also helped to create that ideology anew every time.¹³⁵ In the sixteenth century, the organization of these ducal processions had become fully professionalized and in special legislation the exact position of every officer was securely laid down (fig. 89). Bembo's description of the process of people visiting his portrait of Bianca Capello is remarkable not so much because of its hierarchic structure as such; it is much more significant that he seems to have relied on patterns he knew from Venetian civic ceremonies to interpret what he saw.

¹³⁴ 'Il bell.mo ritratto di V.A. è ogni dì più commendato da ogni uno, che lo vede, et da ogni qualità di persona oltra li pittori, et scultori, miniatori, et simili intendenti, vi sono stati molte persone giuditiose; come Avocati, clar.mi et altri.' A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato* 5942, c. 352v.

¹³⁵ Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice*, p. 189 and further.

With no legislation available, no rules, nor an official master of ceremonies, Bembo *cum suis* had recourse to familiar habits and well-known rituals. As we have seen, Petrarchism was one of his models; the rites of the Venetian state were another. What is more, practicing such rituals Venetians made remarkably little distinction between people and their images.

We can make other comparisons between the newly invented ritual behaviour around Bianca's portrait and already existing rituals in late sixteenth-century Venice. In Bembo's mind, the painting was not only the centre of a procession, waiting passively, so to say, for the faithful to pass by; he also took it on several trips through the city. The first trip was very soon after the portrait's arrival, to Jacopo Contarini.¹³⁶ The second time was a few weeks later, when Bembo brought the portrait to the Capello family.¹³⁷ When the painting's frame was finally finished and attached, this was the occasion for Francesco to take his precious image on another journey, as we have seen: to the Doge's Palace, the very centre of Venice's government and society. It is particularly this trip to the Doge, elaborately described both by Bembo and another visitor of the Doge's Palace on that day in June, that we may compare to another Venetian civic ritual, namely the so-called 'coronation of the Dogaressa', in which the wife of the newly elected Doge officially entered the Ducal Palace.¹³⁸ This is not to say Bembo consciously mimicked the coronation rite when he took the portrait to the Doge; my aim is to give an impression of the ritual forms available to him through one eloquent example.

In the course of the sixteenth century, the Venetians performed the coronation of the Dogaressa only twice, mainly because such a display of power and wealth was considered a violation of sumptuary laws. The first time was in 1557, when it was re-installed by Doge Lorenzo Priuli in 1557; the second time was with the election of Doge Marin Grimani in 1595. The latter was a particularly sumptuous coronation ceremony which saw Morosina Morosini to the throne – who, incidentally, belonged to the same family as Bianca Capello's mother.¹³⁹ On the day of her coronation, Morosina

¹³⁶ A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato* 5938, c. 690r.

¹³⁷ A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato* 5942, c. 99r.

¹³⁸ For the letter by Bembo see A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato* 5942, cc. 649r-650r; for the letter by one Mazzino Hebreo, who was also present, see cc. 663r-v.

Capello's mother.¹³⁹ On the day of her coronation, Morosina was accompanied from her private palace to the Grand Canal for a boat trip ending at the Piazzetta San Marco (fig. 90). The boat in which the Dogaressa was rowed, was designed by the architect Vincenzo Scamozzi, and its decoration contained diverse allegorical elements, showing that the Doge and Dogaressa were personally elected by Saint Mark to rule both land and sea. Having arrived at the Piazzetta, Morosina passed through a triumphal arch, which even more explicitly showed the power and nobility of the Grimani and Morosini families. Both Scamozzi's boat and the triumphal arch quite literally 'framed' the Dogaressa by demonstrating her character, virtues and power. In this sense, they remind one of the frame that Francesco Bembo designed for Bianca Capello's portrait, which equally referred to the depicted person kept within.¹⁴⁰ The final stage of the Dogaressa's coronation meant that Morosina Morosini entered the Doge's Palace and visibly took possession of it by sitting on the Doge's throne in the Senate Hall.

When the portrait of Bianca Capello entered the palace, the Doge, very delighted by it, as Bembo recounts, took it to his private quarters and placed it on a little table with a crucifix and his *cornio*.¹⁴¹ As we have seen, the visit culminated in arrangements made by Bembo and the Doge for the painting's stay in the palace over night. The portrait of Bianca Capello was allowed to enter the very heart of the Republic. As the Doge explained: 'When she comes to Venice, I'm sure I can't stop myself from kissing her, and I'm allowed to as Doge, for I represent the Republic, to which she is a daughter...'¹⁴² Again we see that ways to deal with the portrait were provided for by already existing types of formal behaviour.

Francesco Bembo, a Man in Politics

Above we formulated the question: 'why Francesco Bembo?' At this point, this question is still open. We may even wonder whether it can be answered

¹³⁹ Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice*, p. 293 and further.

¹⁴⁰ By analogy, we could also consider the picture frame as a kind of triumphal arch.

¹⁴¹ A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato* 5942, cc. 649r-v.

¹⁴² 'Ma io hò a [dir] di meglio à V.A. che hà detto sua ser.ta da princ.o, mentre diceva; ò che bella Donna, [egli] dico, che disse poi. Se ella verrà à Venetia, certo non mi potrò tenere, che non la baci, et lo potrò fare come Principe, come quello [che] rapp[rese]nta la Rep.ca, di cui ella è fig.la...' *Mediceo del Principato* 5942, c. 650r.

satisfactorily at all. Over the last pages, we have gained a better understanding of Francesco Bembo's personal motives; but to Bianca Capello, Bembo may have been just as suitable a candidate to keep her portrait as any other – within the boundaries of a certain defined group, to be sure. Indeed, rather than a goal in himself, Bembo, admittedly a rather marginal figure, seems to have been an intermediary. With whom did he bring Bianca in touch? In the last part of this chapter, we will delve into Bembo's political affiliations, in order to argue, ultimately, that the cult around Bianca's portrait had a strong political dimension.

Information about the circles Francesco Bembo moved in may be retrieved from the letters he wrote to Capello during his journey to Florence and Rome in the autumn of 1585. Indeed, his mission is of seminal importance if we want to understand his political ties. What was the goal of this mission? The month of April 1585 had seen the election of a new Pope, Sixtus V, and to officially congratulate him, the Republic of Venice sent four extraordinary ambassadors to Rome: Marc'Antonio Barbaro, Leonardo Donato, Giacomo Foscarani, and Marin Grimani – who would later become Doge, as we have seen.¹⁴³ The four ambassadors were accompanied by a number of other men, of whom, at least for a part of the mission, Francesco Bembo was one. Bianca's father was also involved, in the sense that he kept his daughter informed about the mission and frequently recommended the ambassadors to her attention.

Francesco Bembo's many letters to Bianca, which he wrote during his trip, do not openly mention the mission's aim. The ambassadors seem to have had other, in reality more important tasks than to congratulate the Pope; Bembo, in turn, seems to have had a commission of his own. Several times he refers to his 'business' on behalf of Bianca, his 'first' task, of which he is glad it has 'succeeded'. Once in Rome, one of the people he visited is 'the most Illustrious Cardinal', no-one less than Ferdinando de' Medici, at that time still prince of the church in Rome, but later to succeed his brother Francesco I as grand duke. Much of the considerations in Francesco's letters of these days are about the route the ambassadors will take on their way back:

¹⁴³ Leopold von Ranke, *Die römischen Päpste, ihre Kirche und ihr Staat im sechzehnten und siebzehnten Jahrhundert*, vol. III, Leipzig 1867, p. 116. For documents regarding this mission see *Dispacci degli ambasciatori al Senato: indice*, Archivio di Stato di Venezia, Rome 1959, p. 221.

through Tuscany, including another visit to the Medici court, or via Romagna. Many negotiations took place but eventually the route through Tuscany was decided on, which led Bembo to visit Bianca once more. When the ambassadors finally returned to their home country, they went to her family to express their gratitude, as letters from her father and sister-in-law attest to, and also the Pope sent her a letter of thanks.¹⁴⁴

This may all seem rather enigmatic, but what it does teach us is that Francesco Bembo played a part in the Republic's contacts with Florence and the Holy See. This is not only apparent in his journey as such but also in the type of people he was surrounded with. His fellow travellers to Rome came from families that had intimate ties to the Papacy, were intent on concentrating power in Venice in their own hands and used their patronage, strongly inspired by Tuscan and Roman examples, to set themselves apart as a group.¹⁴⁵ The families of the four ambassadors belonged to these *romanisti*; and of course, the Bembo's themselves had strong Medici and papal connections.¹⁴⁶

What is more, Francesco Bembo had another powerful *romanisto* friend, who did not join the diplomatic journey to Rome but is all the more relevant: Jacopo Contarini (1535-1595).¹⁴⁷ Characterized by Tafuri as 'Daniele Barbaro's most interesting cultural heir', Contarini was a senator, a great collector, and a host to artists and other culturally interested figures, whom he all entertained at his house at S. Samuele.¹⁴⁸ One of his contemporaries called him a 'connoisseur of all beautiful things'; he was a patron of Palladio, Veronese, and the Bassano's, and was part of the committee that devised the new decorative programme for the Doge's Palace after it burned down in 1577.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ All these letters can be found in *Mediceo del Principato* 5940.

¹⁴⁵ Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁶ Oliver Logan, *Culture and Society in Venice, 1470-1790: The Renaissance and its Heritage*, London 1972, p. 78.

¹⁴⁷ Surprisingly, the *Dizionario biografico degli italiani* does not contain a lemma for Contarini. The most important discussions of his patronage is Michel Hochmann, 'La collection de Giacomo Contarini', *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome, Moyen Âge - Temps Modernes* 99 (1987), pp. 447-489; see also Giorgio Tagliaferro, 'Quattro Jacopo per Montemezzano', *Venezia Cinquecento* 11 (2001), pp. 141-154 and Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, p. 130 and further.

¹⁴⁸ Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, p. 130.

¹⁴⁹ It was Girolamo Porro who called Contarini this way, when he dedicated Vincenzo Scamozzi's *Discorsi sopra le antichità di Roma* to him; quoted after Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, p. 130. For the Doge's Palace and its post-1577 decorations, see above, Introduction. It is interesting that one of the other members of the committee, the Camaldolese monk fra Girolamo Bardi, was a Florentine historian.

He had also had a central part in the ceremonial entry for the French king Henry III in 1573.¹⁵⁰ Bembo liked to stress Contarini's relation to Bianca Capello, of whom Contarini supposedly was an 'old servant'.¹⁵¹ Contarini was one of the first to actually see Bembo's portrait of Bianca – apart from the Bembo and Capello families – and soon ordered a copy of it, by 'Bassano', to enhance his collection of paintings.¹⁵² He had a broad collection, of which a portrait gallery, inspired by that of Pietro Bembo in Padua, was only a small part.¹⁵³ The eighteenth-century art critic Anton Maria Zanetti may well have seen a copy of Bianca's portrait when he saw Contarini's collection, by then donated to the state: 'lower, the first on the right, a portrait of a woman dressed in the old Venetian manner, is by Bassano, an admirable thing.'¹⁵⁴ Jacopo Contarini was, by the way, not the only powerful figure in Francesco Bembo's *romanisto* circle who saw the portrait: it was also shown to Marin Grimani and Federico Badoer, among others.

It seems that this circle of *romanisti* or *papalisti* took an interest in Bianca Capello for her key position as a Venetian daughter so close to the Tuscan grand-ducal throne and the papal court. Furthermore, the *romanisti* very well understood the political powers of art.¹⁵⁵ It is against this background that we may see their celebration of Bianca Capello's portrait owned by Bembo: as the image of this woman standing with one foot in Venice and with the other in central Italy, 'princess in the one and the other state,' and painted in

¹⁵⁰ Fenlon, *The Ceremonial City*, p. 210.

¹⁵¹ Bembo wrote: 'Son stato più volte con il cl.mo s.or Giac.o Contarini [...]; il quale m'ha detto che è antico ser.re suo; et gode grand.te à sentir raccontar di lei, quando la intende, e quanto la può comprendere.' A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato* 5940, c. 826r.

¹⁵² 'Di già il s.or Giac.o instant.te me ne hà ricercata una copia, che la vuole di man del Bassano, che si è fatto molto valente in vero.' A.S.F., *Mediceo del Principato* 5938, c. 690v. Somewhat later, Bembo had also plans to take the portrait to the Grimani house; Marin Grimani, who had joined him to Florence and Rome and would be the next Doge, was an uncle of Elena Capello, wife of Bianca's brother Vittore: 'Bisognerà ch'io mandi il ritratto à Cà Grimani, e che renda il favor all'ill.mo s.or [Marin], che mi [postò] il ritratto del Papa; s.s. lo ha saputo, et non [sò] come, et fà river.za à V.A. et cosi il cl.mo s.or Giac.o Cont.ni.' *Mediceo del Principato* 5938, c. 691r.

¹⁵³ See Hochmann, 'La collection de Giacomo Contarini'. Above we already saw that Contarini planned to hang his copy of the portrait next to that of Caterina Corner.

¹⁵⁴ 'Più abbasso il primo dalla parte destra [il ritratto] d'una femmina vestita all'antica viniziana è del Bassano, cosa ammirabile.' Quoted after Hochmann, 'La collection de Giacomo Contarini', p. 467.

¹⁵⁵ Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, particularly pp. 1-13.

a characteristically non-Venetian manner, it was for the *romanisti* an ideal vehicle with which to mark themselves as a group and enhance alliances.

So who was Francesco Bembo? He was an agent who used a painted portrait to enhance contacts between a faction in Venetian politics and the Florentine and papal courts. Was he unique? Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that we know of no-one else in his circle who took such an obsessive interest in a portrait. No, because there were other intermediaries like him. One example is Maffeo Venier, like Bembo member of a prominent Venetian noble house, poet, and servant to the court of Francesco I in Florence and Popes Gregory XIII and Sixtus V. Supported and protected by Bianca Capello, whom he left possessions at his death in 1586, Venier hardly managed to be elected to positions of political significance in Venice, as the government was afraid that he would act as a spy.¹⁵⁶ Indeed, information we possess about the last years of Francesco Bembo's life confirm that such a fear was not unjust. For the only time Francesco Bembo actually makes an appearance in the history books, is in connection with espionage. As Nicolò Contarini, a seventeenth-century Doge and chronicler noted:

Among the nobility there was a certain Francesco Bembo, a vain man of little credit, [...] who in the progression of years had obtained a magistracy with which, for a certain period, he had had access to the senate. Won over by an Italian prince, he was being paid by him to leak secrets of state, and he continued in this way for the period of the magistracy, which was two years. Having resigned [from this function], he wanted to go on, in order not to lose the profit, and he did it in such a way that he asked now this person, then that person from the senate what they were doing, and having wrenched out a certain thing he would inform [the prince] of it. When he was discovered and his writings were retrieved, no longer able to deny, he confessed, and he was infamously and publicly brought to death.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Margaret F. Rosenthal, *The Honest Courtesan: Veronica Franco, Citizen and Writer in Sixteenth-Century Venice*, Chicago 1992, p. 49 and n. 110.

¹⁵⁷ 'Tra la nobiltà un Francesco Bembo, huomo vano, di poco credito, molto profuso nel senso, et angustissimo de' beni di fortuna, che nel progresso dell'età haveva ottenuto un magistrato, col quale per certo tempo haveva havuto ingresso nel senato; essendo stato guadagnato da un Principe d'Italia, pigliò stipendio da lui con propalarli secreti publici, et così continuò per il tempo del magistrato, che fù di due anni, ma uscito volendo seguitare per non perder il provento, lo fece in maniera tale che dimandando hora a questo, hora a quello del senato

Who was this ‘Principe d’Italia’ mentioned by Contarini? Gian Carlo Sivos, another seventeenth-century chronicler, has the answer: ‘[i]l duca di Fiorenza’.¹⁵⁸ No matter how small a figure Francesco Bembo may have been on the stage of Italian politics at large, here we have the evidence that he was not only active in the Venetian bureaucracy, but more importantly as an informant of a foreign court, the same court that he was in touch with when Bianca Capello was still alive, and he adored her painted portrait.

Conclusion: The Politics of Portraiture

In 1585, Pope Sixtus V already exposed portraits of Bianca Capello and her husband Francesco I in the church of St Peter’s in Rome, where that of Bianca attracted most attention.¹⁵⁹ In Venice, it were above all the *papalisti* who celebrated Bianca’s portrait. For them, the image became a token with which to celebrate Veneto-Tuscan-Roman friendship. It is this political dimension, I believe, that is the most extraordinary feature of the cult of the portrait of Bianca Capello.

The main instigator of this Venetian cult was Francesco Bembo, himself a member of the *papalisti* faction. In the many letters written to Bianca, Bembo constructed a romantic relationship between Bianca, the painting and himself, which he modelled on Pietro Bembo’s literary love affairs which the latter modelled on Petrarch. This is not to say that Francesco Bembo’s literary enterprise was a fiction: in Bembo’s world, it could affect his social status in a

quello, che si facesse insidiosamente cavata qualche cosa la. scoperto, e ritrovate le scritte, non potendo più negare, confessò, onde infamemente fù in publico fatto morire.’ B.N.M., ms It. VII. 176 (= 8619), *Delle Historie Venetiane et altre loro annesse cominciando dall’anno 1597 e successivamente del serenis. D. D. Nicolò Contarini doge*, c. 248v. See also Cicogna, *Delle iscrizioni*, vol. III, p. 283. According to Cicogna, the position held by Bembo during his membership of the senate was that of *Provveditore sopra Dazzi*, a sort of customs officer. For more on the *Provveditori sopra Dazzi*, and other positions in the Venetian senate, see Kurt Heller, *Venedig: Recht, Kultur und Leben in der Republik 697-1797*, Vienna 1999, especially pp. 417–418.

¹⁵⁸ ‘Alli 6 luglio dell’istesso anno la mattina sull’alba vidi tagliar la testa a ser Francesco Bembo [...] detto il Poeta. Fu detto per haver scritto al duca di Fiorenza le cose di stado, procurando d’esser provisionato dal detto duca.’ Quoted after Cicogna, *Delle iscrizioni*, vol. III, p. 283. It is absolutely intriguing that Jacopo Marcello, friend of Jacopo Contarini, is mentioned by Cicogna in connection with Francesco Bembo’s high treason: as an apparent accomplice, Marcello was put in jail for six years (see *Delle iscrizioni*, vol. V, p. 564).

¹⁵⁹ Berti, *Il Principe del Studiolo*, p. 68. Bianca had always had a good relationship with Sixtus – she even received a Golden Rose from him: Musacchio, ‘Objects and identity’, p. 483. About the Golden Rose, see Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, *Il corpo del Papa*, Turin 1994, pp. 115–117.

very real way. Nevertheless, Francesco Bembo seems to have remained a rather minor figure; indeed, the story of his death suggests that he reached too high. It is telling – and sad, in a way – that, in another one’s record of the visit the portrait of Bianca Capello paid to the Doge, nothing is lacking but, indeed, Francesco Bembo’s name.

At the same time, Venetians also valued Bembo’s painting as an artistic object. Praised as a product of Scipione Pulzone, the ‘diligent’ painter of ‘timeless’ works, it was recognized as a precious collectible by connoisseurs and as a model to be copied by Venetian artists. In fact, appreciation of the portrait as a presence of a beloved prototype (Capello) and as an artistic achievement of a rare painterly genius (Pulzone) went hand in hand.

And what about Bianca Capello herself? To what extent was the portrait an index of her agency? Talking about the changing role of women in Venetian public ceremonies during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Edward Muir signalled that their positions became more and more marginal.¹⁶⁰ On those rare occasions that women were still involved, they were elevated to an ideal status and became the passive subjects of chivalric fantasy. In part, this happened to Bianca Capello, too: although she was actively feeding her presence in Venice by means of the palaces she bought, the letters she sent to Venetian relatives and friends, and her painted portrait, at the same time her remembrance became the plaything of her Venetian admirers, for whom, from the spring of 1586 onwards, her painted portrait was the main focal point.

¹⁶⁰ Muir, *Civic Ritual*, pp. 303–304.

